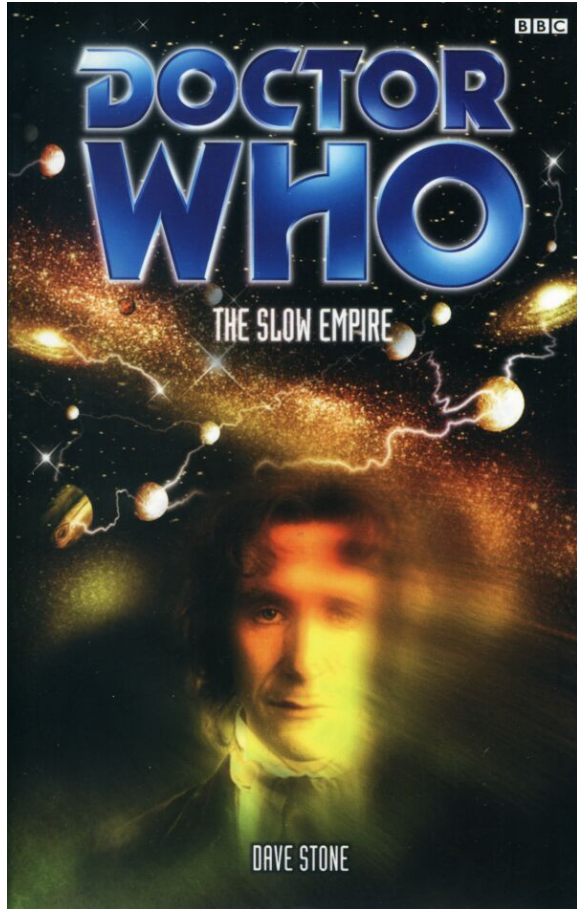


BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE SLOW EMPIRE

DAVE STONE



Enter, with the Doctor, Anji and Fitz, an Empire where the laws of physics are quite preposterous – nothing can travel faster than the speed of light and time travel is impossible.

A thousand worlds, each believing they are the Centre, each under a malign control of which they themselves are completely unaware.

As the only beings able to travel between the worlds instantaneously, the Doctor and his friends must piece together the Imperial puzzle and decide what should be done. The soldiers of the Ambassadorial Corps are always, somehow, hard on their heels. Their own minds are busily fragmenting under metatemporal stresses. And their only allies are a man who might not be quite what he seems (and says so at great length) and a creature we shall merely call. . . the Collector.

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

The Slow Empire

Dave Stone

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

First published 2001
Copyright © Dave Stone 2001
The moral right of the author has been asserted

Original series broadcast on the BBC
Format © BBC 1963
Doctor Who and TARDIS are trademarks of the BBC

ISBN 0 563 53835 X
Imaging by Black Sheep, copyright © BBC 2001

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of
Chatham
Cover printed by Belmont Press Ltd, Northampton

No, no, I couldn't possibly. I'm as stuffed as a Moblavian ptarmigan, which as all of us well versed in the Natural Sciences know, is known for ravaging its way across the mighty fjords of Moblavia and eats itself into extinction by the simple expedient of stuffing itself with nuts and berries and the suchlike readily available comestibles until it bursts. I couldn't eat another mouthful, honestly.

Well, all right, another slice of that roast if you insist, and a few of those radish-like things to add a touch of piquancy. My word, are they really? A couple more, then. And possibly a spot of that rather nice Brandy to wash it all down...

Now where was I?

Ah, yes, I was telling you of what was, perhaps, my strangest adventure of all – and I say this advisedly, having been a slave of the Big-footed People of Robligan, a bondsman to the Grand Kalif of Hat and a servant of a rather more intimate nature than otherwise to the Domina of the Hidden Hand herself.

Quite so, since you mention it. The wages of sin, and a life of perpetual slithering depravity, is death, I quite agree. And personally I found her 'matchless Beauty' a little overdone in the slap-and-batter department, if you take my meaning, and nothing to compare to that of a good, honest serving wench such as you'd find in – you're a pretty little thing, aren't you? You must allow me, should some later time permit, some explanation of how the so-called Ruby Lips, Coal-dark Eyes and so forth of the Domina cannot hold a candle to your own. Especially the so forth.¹

As I was saying, the tale I will relate is in all probability the strangest in my experience or any other – and so it should come as no surprise that it involves, to some degree, none other than the man who merely called himself the Doctor.

Aha! I see you recognise the name. You have no doubt heard the stories of this magnificent, illustrious and quite obdurately

enigmatic personage and wondered if they can by any way be true. Well, as a close acquaintance and valued confidant of the man in question, I am here to tell you that each and every one is as true as the day is long on Drasebela XIV, a place where – as even the most ignorant and parochial know – the sun and thirteen rather extraordinarily luminous planets never set.² Except, of course, for those stories that aren't. But then, there's no helping those.

My tale, as I say, concerns the Doctor and what we once called the Empire – those Thousand Worlds of which we all once had the honour (some might say the dubious honour) of being a part. Much has been forgotten, long forgotten, in the years since those Worlds were sundered and the Empire passed – and I must, here and now, confess that I myself had in some small way a hand in that passing...

The Story So Far

Once, there was a man called the Doctor, although he was not precisely a man and that was not his real name. He travelled in space and time in a marvellous craft he called the TARDIS, and had adventures, and fought monsters, and in general made the world – that is, the universe of what we know and all we can know of – a better and safer place.

Then, for quite some time, he didn't. Something happened to him, something that he cannot now recall. He found himself stranded on the horribly primitive planet Earth – though primitive compared with quite *what* is hard to say with any great accuracy – his memories in shreds, his mind close to insanity, his body somewhat closer to death.

Not to put too fine a point upon it, he got better. After a fashion. Slowly, over a hundred years, he drew the skeins of memory about himself, knitted them together into something halfway complete, rediscovered something of who, and what, he once was – if those things, in fact, had ever actually existed in the first place. For the moment – or so he thinks – this is enough.

So now the Doctor travels again in his marvellous blue box. For the moment, his concerns are simple. All he needs to do is return one of his travelling companions to the time and place from which, more or less, she was taken by mistake. That's all he needs to do, really.

Things, however, and as ever, are never quite that simple.

Now read on . . .

1
On Shakrath

The desert sunlight flashed and sparkled dazzlingly on the firegem-inset³ minarets of Shagrath, bright enough to scar the eyes permanently if one looked at them for too long. It was noon, on the brightest and hottest day of the year, and in the streets the crowd sweltered and burned. Strangely enough, rather than wear the light muslin more suited and common to the climate, every male, female and child was hung and piled with every kind of finery he, she or it could afford – every fur and brocade, every splendid ceremonial weapon and headdress, every scrap and bauble – trading off the distinct possibility of collapsing and dying from heat stroke with the rather fainter possibility of being *seen*.

An Ambassador had been chosen, and today he would be sent out into the Empire. Quite which world of the Empire he was being sent to was neither here nor there – the important thing was that he was going among the backward heathen, bringing them such news of the Centre as would make their eyes (or whatever optical organs said backward heathen might have) light up with the sheer wonder of it all. News of the Imperial Court and all its manifold intrigue, including the most surprising use the Emperor had recently made of his nefariously plotting mother and a team of wild stampede-beasts. News of the great advances made by Shagrath artificers, including the network of canals and aqueducts that were even now making whole new areas of the Interior habitable. News of the splendid fashion sense of even the most common Shagrath citizenry, which of course the backward heathenry would soon be attempting to copy in a quite touchingly inept manner.

And now the new Ambassador himself came, in his carriage drawn by piebald stampede-beasts broken to harness, as opposed to being used to pull an Imperial matriarch apart in opposite directions. He stood in the carriage, in his rather plain black suit, looking for all the world like some miscreant on his way to being depended, flayed and trisected rather than the dignitary he was. A young man he was, for all his dignity of bearing, meticulously trained from the age of swaddling for the function of his office. Names had no meaning as such for an Ambassador, representing as he did Shagrath in its entirety, though partway reliable rumour had it that his name was Awok Dwa, origi-

nally from a family in the Fruiterers' Quarter – a source of cautious pride for redgrocers and those with a somewhat similar name alike.

The face of the new Ambassador was impassive, his eyes steady, as he took in the heaving, frantically waving crowd, giving no indication as to which of the screamed imprecations that assailed his ears might be noted or recalled later:

'... them Durabli better not come and try to take over us with them their warlike ways!'

'... cloth! Finest cloth in all of the Empire...'

'... to send food! Cannibalism Statutes posted in the Hell's Quarter! Baby farming found there! For the gods' sake have them send us...'

'My name's Sma! Sma, I are! Remember the name Sma...'

His progress took him through several of the smaller streets, turning this way and that so that it seemed that all of those who packed them might have a chance to see him face to face, before the carriage turned into the main thoroughfare leading to the Mendicants' Square outside the Imperial Palaces. The 'mendicants', a Shakrath racial subset in themselves, had long since been eradicated by pogrom, but the food and souvenir stalls that had supplanted them had been removed, the area cordoned off from the crowds and filled with members of the Imperial Band. Shakrath did not have soldiery as such, that function being performed by those who were ostensibly the Emperor's personal musicians, all seven hundred thousand of them, and those smartly uniformed examples of the Band gathered here were those who could actually play. Even so, several of them were still trying to blow into their instruments in the wrong direction, and a number of drums were being beaten with a quite suspicious degree of enthusiasm.

The massive ironwood doors of the Imperial Palace stood open, as they had done for centuries through custom. For this occasion, the specially designed blade machines just beyond them, which would instantly slice to shreds anyone foolish enough to enter without permission, had been disabled. The new Ambassador left his coach and strode up the Petitionary Steps into the Palace, an honour guard of Bandsmen falling into step behind him.

A stately progress through the Outer Court, through corridors hung with tapestries depicting the exploits and accomplishments of a thousand Emperors dating back to the fabled Manok Sa himself, took the new Ambassador to the Conclave of Governance, that chamber existing on a point between the Outer and the Inner Courts, where the Emperor would leave his private enclaves to oversee the administration of his Shakrath at the hands of his various functionaries and Nobles. Both sides of the Conclave were filled for this occasion, though there was none of the gaudy confusion and brawling of the rabble outside. Plain black suits, rather like the one the new Ambassador him-

self wore, were the order of the day, so as never to detract from the splendour of the Emperor himself.

The Emperor might once have had a name, as all men do, but, since the time of Manok Sa, even to *think* that he might have something so prosaic as a name was forbidden. He was the Emperor, plain and simple – or, rather, magnificent and like unto a god. He sat there now, on his sea-jade and tourmaline throne, between the serried rows of the two Houses of Governance, wreathed in a corona of fine-spun cloth of platinum and girded with the greaves, breastplate and helmet of golden armour so finely constructed in its articulation that even a cat could not have looked upon the body within with the aid of a telescopic sight.

Standing modestly beside the Emperor was his Chief Functionary, Morel, dressed not merely in unassuming black, but in a black of the same cut as that of the newly chosen Ambassador. A member of the Ambassadorial Corps himself, originally hailing from the distant world of Taroca, Morel had by his years of service and staunch advice risen to become the Emperor's most trusted aide, speaking for him in an almost Metatronic fashion – that is, Morel made the wishes of the Emperor known. The words and wishes of Morel and the Emperor were one and the same.

Morel was a bald man – not through having lost his hair in any natural sense, but in that his scalp was simply pale white skin layered over bone, with none of the complex patterns of follicles that might have produced so much as a single sprout of hair in the first place. The features of his dead-white face seemed somewhat rudimentary and unremarkable, save for the complicated lines etched into them in complicated, jet-black whorls and spirals that seemed on first glance to be tattoos, but upon closer inspection – should such closer inspection ever be permitted – would be seen as being integral to the skin itself, as though he had been born with them. And of course, in a certain sense, he had.

Now the body inside the Imperial Armour stirred, and a muttering issued from within the enamelled, fiercely snarling war mask of the helmet. Morel inclined his swirl-etched face to the Emperor, then turned it to the newly chosen Ambassador standing before the throne.

'His Extreme and Divine Potency, the Light before which the Barbarity and Ignorance of the Infidel are burned away, the God that walks among the World as Emissary, the Primateur of all things Holy in the Sight of Man, the Emperor,' said Morel, 'wishes you a pleasant trip. It is also his wish that I accompany you to the Chamber of Transference, the better to instruct you upon the fine details of your mission. There are certain aspects of your duties that must remain for your ears, and your ears alone.'

‘You will no doubt,’ said Morel, ‘in your studies at the Ambassadorial Academy, have been given a thorough grounding in the workings of the Empire: the geography, history and sociopolitical status of any number of its worlds – from the savage tribes of pygmies subsisting in the fungus jungles of Glomi IV, to the caterpillar-treaded barquentine cities of the Barsoom sand canals, to a number of quite astonishing tales that have attached themselves to the Dominion of the Hidden Hand. Well, Ambassador, I am here to tell you certain things that are not generally known – and one of them is that such studies are worth about as much as the parchment scrap for the sick note getting one out of them. Save in the most general of terms.’

The new Ambassador regarded Morel with slight surprise. The formal part of the Procession was long since over, and now he and Morel were alone save for a pair of Bandsman guards, walking down a narrow and utilitarian tunnel that would take them from the Palace to the Chamber of Transference. Since leaving the Imperial environs, Morel had adopted a more informal, almost chatty manner, but this was the first thing of note he had actually said.

‘The fact of the matter is,’ Morel continued, ‘that our Empire is vast, spanning a thousand times the distance light itself may travel in a year. Communication between our worlds, *Transference* between our worlds, can operate only at the speed of light. Thus it is that the further out from the Glorious Centre of Shakrath, the more backward and barbarous other worlds seem to be. You are to be sent to the mining colony of Tibrus, for personal example, which is one hundred and twenty-four light-years from Shakrath. You will therefore not arrive for one hundred and twenty-four years – and all you can possibly know of that brave colony shall be two hundred and forty-eight years out of date. Your function there, upon arriving, will be, to procure shipments of bauxite ore, lithium and such refined transuranic elements as might be produced, and arrange, for their continuous Transfer to Shakrath. . .’

‘Morel,’ the new Ambassador said, feeling a little presumptuous at using the name, though Morel had no title other than it, ‘if this is true then the first shipment will not arrive until –’

‘The life of an individual man is short,’ Morel said. ‘The Empire is Eternal. As a great thinker once said in more cavalier times, “Stuff come in, stuff go out, and it’s a bad idea to worry Joe Soap with the details of when every bit of stuff was sent.” Our Empire has functioned on this basis for a billion years – I beg your pardon, I have a slight head cold – for a million years, and as such we can only play our own small part. . .’

They had reached the end of the tunnel, which now opened out into the Chamber of Transference itself – although a more fitting term might be Cavern: a vast rock dome open to the sky, into which towered the Transmission Pylon – the mirror-bright spire of some immutable alien material. The Pylon,

together with the cluster of mechanisms housed in cabin-like constructions around its base, was older than Imperial dynasties in their thousands. Not one record remained on Shakrath or any other world of the Empire as to who or what had left these artefacts scattered through the known worlds. There were some scholars, indeed, who had examined the complex workings of the mechanisms and declared them a kind of inorganic life, the true nature of which was ultimately incomprehensible and their usefulness to the worlds of men no more than the sweet, sticky stuff that surrounds a sandflower seed and has it being spread and fertilised.

Such scholars, of course, tended to be promptly put to death for heresy. The mechanisms of the Chamber of Transference had, as any fool could see, been made for men by the gods.⁴

There was the continuous, half-heard throbbing of alien engines somewhere underground. Off to one side of the Chamber, banks of conveyor belts ran from the receiving mechanisms to loading bays. A number were inactive, some carried a seemingly unending stream of ore, roughly packed bales or loose grain. One conveyor belt seemed devoted entirely to a stream of small-ish, brightly wrapped parcels with little ribbon bows and tags.

A contingent of heavily armed Bandsmen were decamped around those cabins containing mechanisms that were designed to receive living creatures, whether livestock sent from some outflung colony or actual men. The newly chosen Ambassador was vaguely aware that Shakrath's colonies and protectorates must occasionally send representatives of their own, but such men had never been mentioned, and far less met, in all the years of his schooling.

Accompanied by their own brace of Bandsmen, Morel and the new Ambassador circumvented the Chamber perimeter, passing through manned checkpoints and those that might seem to be unmanned, but which gave off the distinct impression that they were capable of dispensing instant, hidden death to any who might try to pass through without explicit Imperial permission. At length they came to a collection of cabins smaller than most, in fact little more than a row of upright booths, each the size of a man. Morel touched a seam on the surface of one of them. The seam opened up to reveal nothing but blackness within – not merely shadow, but a solid wall of some black stuff that seemed to suck upon the eyes.

The newly chosen Ambassador appeared nervous, for all that years of training had prepared him for this moment. Morel merely smiled. He seemed reassuring.

'The journey of years begins with but a single step,' he said, 'but it's a step you have to take alone.'

The new Ambassador stepped into the booth. It was as though he were walking into a pool of vertical oil, which swallowed him up. There was a

multiple dashing sound that may or may not have been a set of manacles being triggered, the whirr of some mechanism activating itself and the hiss and pop of searing flesh.

'Of course,' said Morel, to no one in particular as a number of screams issued from the booth, 'that first step, I must confess, tends to be something of a killer.'

When the sound of burning skin stopped and the screams had subsided into a gentle whimpering, Morel repaired to a control box connected by cabling to the booth and made to set the Transfer itself in motion.

It is at this point, I must confess, that words fail me a little. Hard to believe, I'm sure, but true. How can one possibly describe the sensations of the Transfer to those who have never experienced it – and never will, now, of course. I'd as lief describe the taste of a Hekloten spine-mollusc (the most scrumptious flavour known to any seasoned connoisseur of molluscan taste, I'll have you know, to which not even the fabled zowie-whelk of Bretalona Maxis can compare) to a member of that unfortunate race known as the Zlom, who are born without tongues or suchlike sensual gustatory members.

I shall, therefore, simply detail the way by which men adapted the process of the Transfer for their use in general terms:

First, immediately before the Transferral itself, the face of the subject was generally branded, scarified or tattooed with distinctive markings, whether by hand or in some automated manner – on Shakrath this was done by mechanised automata, within the booths of the Chamber of Transference itself, though without such anaesthetic as was used on other worlds as a matter of Imperial policy. I mean it was the Emperor of Shakrath's policy, as we'll learn, to inflict pain as a matter of course. This marking of the subject was not strictly necessary, but quite desirable, for reasons that I'll come to momentarily.

Now came the time for the Transfer. Shield gratings and suchlike were retracted from conduits running to the Pylon and the unknowable engines within, bathing the subject in an effulgent light, which quite burned the flesh from the bones and charred those bones to dust. (And again, I must say, Shakrath was remarkably lax in the supplying of tinctures that might ease the discomfort of such a transubstantiation.) The subject was, in short, reduced to the very atomies that so I gather are the very basis for all

things. Said atomies were promptly swept up and saved for later, on the basis of 'waste not, want not'.

Not the most salubrious of trips, one might think, not to mention pointless and a little short – save for the fact that the Soul of Man exists as something quite other than the atomies that make up his gross physical frame. It was this Soul that the Chamber of Transference harvested, and then transmitted via its Pylon to be housed in some reconstituted Body at its eventual destination.

Of course, as we shall see, such a Body might be quite different from the one with which one started out – and this is the reason for marking one's face distinctive, and why these marks must still be fresh in the memory. The true Soul of a man must be burned upon his face, however much that face might ultimately change....

‘It’s remarkable, really,’ said the Doctor. ‘I mean, in a certain sense. I remember how, even so much as a few decades ago, I’d have found it quite remarkable.’

‘Where did you find it?’ Anji asked, peering at the item the Doctor was holding: a medium-sized, battered yellow umbrella with a handle strangely curved in the manner of a small, ebony question mark.

‘I found it while I was tidying a few things away,’ he said. ‘It was hidden in the back of a wardrobe with some other junk. It’s a silly little thing, but look: if you twist the handle in a particular way. . .’

The Doctor twisted the question-mark handle in a particular way and pulled it from the stem to reveal a length of tempered steel fully half as long again as the umbrella itself.

‘It’s a bit like an eighteenth-century sword stick,’ he said, flourishing the blade with a cheerful ineptness that had Anji jumping back a step despite herself. ‘I can tell by certain signs that it was never drawn, but it was in there all the time.’

‘What signs are those?’ Anji asked. ‘How can you tell it was never drawn?’

‘Certain ones,’ said the Doctor. ‘I just wish I could remember if it was ever actually mine.’

He regarded the slim blade frowningly for a moment, then tossed it negligently over his shoulder. Somewhere in the shadows of the console room there was a *thunk* and the flicked-ruler sound of a blade vibrating in the floor. ‘Oh, well. Back to the fray.’

The Doctor busied himself with the complicated array of readouts and control mechanisms that was the console, his lean form silhouetted against the shifting, blinking lights. Not for the first time, Anji tried to make some semblance of sense of the specifics of this tinkering, and failed. It seemed more like the intuitive handling of a horse – which just happened to have taken the form of an octagonal assemblage of gear levers, valve-radio parts and the kind of pub-quiz machines where one presses a virtual button to guess the country where maracas come from – than the actual operating of machinery. Every so often a murmur of encouragement escaped from the Doctor’s lips, as though

he were guiding the TARDIS down some peaceful country lane rather than hurling it through the chaos of the vortex.

‘How long have we got?’ Anji asked.

‘Mm?’ The Doctor flicked a switch, then flipped it rapidly back and forth as it appeared to do absolutely nothing, shrugged to himself and turned his attentions elsewhere.

‘How long until we materialise?’ Anji said patiently. ‘You said that this was going to be a short hop to get our bearings after all that recent unpleasantness.’

The thought made her shudder a little, involuntarily. The recent unpleasantness, in the way of such things, had been very unpleasant indeed. The things that had happened, Anji thought, would be hard to get out of her mind. She’d be thinking of them for quite some time to come.

Unlike the Doctor, it seemed, who more than occasionally seemed to be relapsing into the paramnesia that had at one time plagued him to the point of complete debilitation. He turned to look at her for a moment as if completely unaware of what she was talking about, then gave a vague little shrug of dismissal.

‘Well, you know how it is in the vortex. . .’ he said, and once again frowned in a way that Anji – who had once been subjected to every episode of *Quantum Leap*, one after another, by her boyfriend of the time – thought of as a man confronting a sudden hole in his Swiss-cheese memory. ‘That Is, I seem to recall knowing what the vortex is like, if you get what I mean.’

The Doctor tapped a small screen, which showed a rudimentary graphic of the police-box TARDIS exterior surrounded by concentric, shimmering coronas of light and looking like nothing so much as a video echo effect from a 1970s *Top of the Pops*.

‘We seem to be travelling through an atypical infraspacial region at the moment,’ he said cheerfully. ‘The laws of time and space as such don’t apply to the vortex in any case – but here they’re not applying in a different way. It’s a bit like flying into turbulence or a sudden headwind. We’ll get where we’re going eventfully, but subjectively it might add a bit of duration. Could be just a few minutes, could be hours.’ He seemed completely unperturbed. ‘Could be years.’

Networking, Anji thought as she wandered the TARDIS corridors: that was the word. It was a peculiarly eighties word when you came to think about it – but like so much else from the eighties it had spread its baleful influence all through the decades after, becoming the new baseline for a leaner, meaner, crueller culture of the new millennium. Through school and university and the sort of money-market career that owed its very existence to the era of Greed

being Good, she had not so much made friends as contacts, not so much built relationships as acquired and maintained them. The mobile phone as personal lifeline. The distinctive millennial gesture of something bleeping in a crowded room and everybody looking at their pockets. She had networked.

Of course, this was just a way of describing the basic fact of living in the world, of moving through it and being connected to it – and, in the time since meeting the Doctor, Anji had become increasingly and uneasily aware of a sense of disconnection. Of being cut off from the support structures of society and community, such as it was in any case. Of finding oneself suddenly out of the loop. It was akin to that moment when the wheels of a 747 leave the runway for the first time – and one is suddenly hit by the loss of something so basic and unheeded as contact with the ground. Whatever adventure and excitement one might betaking the 747 to, it takes a while to come to terms with that fundamental dislocation and the reaction can come out in unexpected, uncharacteristic ways.

These feelings of dislocation, for Anji, became worse when the TARDIS was in its dematerialised state, when even something so simple as cause and effect did not necessarily apply. Dimensional disparity was not a problem in itself: it was more the feeling that things were quietly shifting themselves around the minute your back was turned, and the fact that the spaces through which they shifted seemed to have been put together by a postmodernist architect on methyl-dex, made it all the more disconcerting.

The TARDIS seemed to be growing. More than once Anji had been walking through a hitherto familiar if decoratively mismatched corridor to find a junction she'd missed, leading into an entire maze of new corridors which in some strange way had always been there. Out-of-the-way corners seemed to gravitate towards the centre, while still in some sense staying in the same place and suddenly becoming vast halls and galleries into the bargain. The swimming pool was even more problematical – there only ever being one of it but in a continually shifting position and with ever-changing décor. It was as if it were uniquely vital to the scheme of things and the TARDIS were forever trying to find the perfect version of it.

Some doors were locked, some corridors and passageways were blocked – in a peculiarly definite and immovable way that suggested that whatever lay behind these barriers was something one would be better off not even thinking about. Of course, in the manner of the celebrated Blue Camel, that only made one think about the possibilities all the more. The sense of something hidden and biding its time, waiting for the moment when it could crawl out from under the figurative bed and pull the blankets from your head. . .

In the times before her career path had had her flying business class as a matter of course, when she had found herself stuck in the centre of a cattle-

class airline aisle, Anji had without exception been struck with a kind of very vocal claustrophobia that had flight attendants falling over themselves to find her a window seat. At those times she'd merely felt a vaguely guilty pride at putting on an act that had got her what she wanted, and only later realised – as the flight attendants knew perfectly well – that her feelings of near-hysterical panic had been genuine. In a pressurised ballistic canister five miles up, some people simply *have* to be able to look out of the window – and in much the same spirit Anji was now heading for the chamber of the TARDIS she had privately dubbed as the Stellarium.

The faux-retro arrays of old TV tubes and dials in the console room may be understandable to the Doctor, but the noise-to-signal muddle of them was too fragmented for the ordinary human mind. There was also the occasional porthole – literally, in some abstruse interdimensional manner, allowing one to see what was directly outside the TARDIS at any given time. When not on an actual planet, these portholes were almost literally useless in the same way that a clear piece of glass in the side of an interplanetary spacecraft would be useless – the wildly disparate lighting conditions and the distances involved between objects meaning that one effectively saw nothing.

In the same way, so Anji gathered, that the commercial spacecraft of The Future supplied 'viewing ports' which displayed to their passengers false but aesthetically pleasing images – and which bore about as much relation to the actual conditions outside as Bugs Bunny does to the proliferation vectors of myxomatosis – the Stellarium factored external electromagnetic and gravmetric readings to produce an image with which the mind could more or less cope.

From the inside it seemed like a big crystal dome, through which one saw spectacularly flaring starscapes and actual planetary systems, as opposed to mere pinpoints of light or blinding sunflares; the bright, majestic swirls of nebulae rather than the black-on-black dark matter of which such nebulae really exist. Had the TARDIS found itself in the middle of a space battle – it never had, and Anji devoutly hoped it never would – then the Stellarium would show an exciting panorama of spaceships zooming about and firing laser beams and appropriately evil-looking guided missiles rather than, again, mere pinpoints of light and sunflares followed by absolutely nothing as an evil guided missile hit.

The vortex, here in the Stellarium, was dazzling in a sense quite other than the literal: a churning assemblage of luminescence through which points of image and association detonated like exploding gems. For all the chaos of it, the vortex seemed to have order, in the same way that milk swirls through coffee – or the way that a galaxy, seen from a distance, swirls through the void.

There appeared to be an additional element to the mix, not incongruous as such: more like a stream of variegated light skeining out and interweaving with the other forms, vibrating at a pitch to set up eddies and swirls of secondary harmonics. There was a juddering, unearthly sound that for a moment Anji thought was caused by the stream of light itself.

Then she realised that in the splendour of the relayed vortex she had completely failed to notice Fitz.

He was sitting against the small console that controlled the Stellarium, playing chord progressions on a battered Fender Telecaster, picked up on their immediately previous adventuring outside of the TARDIS, which he had plugged through a portable amplifier into the console itself. From the vibrations in the stream of light, it was obviously being generated by the guitar – Anji wondered what the effect would have been had the source been a true musician rather than an enthusiastic amateur.

Fitz became aware of her presence and looked up with a friendly grin. ‘It’s something I heard when I spent some time in the mid-sixties,’ he explained, running through the chord progression quickly to give the gist of it. ‘I can’t *believe* I missed all that the first time around. You know, in the natural course of things. I was in this place called UFO – which put coffee bars and Mandrax to shame, believe you me. “Interstellar Overdrive”, I think it’s called, from some R’n’B beat combo called Pink Floyd.’⁵

Fitz played an absent arpeggio. Anji faded him into the background of her own attention and wandered through the dome. The musical accompaniment may not exactly be expert but it was pleasant enough; Anji watched as bright sparkles appeared that may or may not be the result of single notes. It was the kind of thing one could relax with and lose oneself in for a while. . .

There was a jarring, discordant crash as behind her Fitz dropped his guitar.

‘Ug it!’ he shouted, sucking at his fingers as, though they had been burned. ‘Ug uggung ing ave e a ock!’

‘What was that?’ Anji said, raising an eyebrow.

Fitz took his fingers out of his mouth.

‘The, ah, bleeding thing gave me a shock,’ he said, slightly less vehemently. ‘Only it was like it was *biting* me. And an electric guitar isn’t supposed to support a charge like that, anyway. It was like. . .’

The light beyond the dome flickered and darkened – jerking Anji’s attention back to the view beyond. Black shapes had appeared, several hundred of them, accreting into a loosely formed mass amid the vortex swirl like a swarm of insects. More than hundreds, now. Thousands and counting.

There was no way of judging the scale of them. For the moment the swarm appeared to be made up of simple black blobs – but the inherent shape of them, those tiny details of form that the eye cannot consciously register, sent

an icy chill through Anji. She simply knew, instinctively, that these things were the sort of news one might expect to find inside a letter from the Inland Revenue.

‘What are they?’ she said, eyes never leaving the gathering swarm. ‘What are those things?’

‘Vortex Wraiths, they’re called.’ Fitz sounded unconcerned, as though looking at something not particularly pleasant but harmless. ‘I’ve seen them a couple of times. The Doctor says they’re just one of the forms of life, uh, indigenous –’ he said the word as though repeating something he’d heard but never actually said – ‘to the, um, infraspacial subsphere, a bit like the more common Vortisaurs but with a more chaotic quasi-biological structure. That was when I knew him before, you understand, when he could just pull stuff like that out of his, uh, hat. He told me that they’re nothing to worry about. He said that his people built mechanisms into the TARDIS so that they won’t so much as even notice us. . .’

While Fitz had been talking, Anji noticed uneasily, the swarm had appeared to be drifting closer. The individual forms became distinct – and Anji instantly wished that they had not. It was not that she saw specifics like claws and jaws and slime-clotted maws: it was that each form seemed entirely mutable, existing in a state of flux, its features constantly shifting and shifting again before they could be fully recognised – the cumulative effect being that of sheer inhuman horror.

Not *evil* as such, because the very word assumes some connection with the human terms with which such a concept can be expressed. These things were simply Other, utterly incompatible with life as Anji knew it or was capable of knowing. To share a space with them, she knew, deep down in her bones, would be the equivalent of going for a restful dip in a vat of pure sulphuric acid.

‘I don’t want to alarm you, Fitz,’ Anji said as the swarm moved ever closer, ‘but has anybody actually *told* these things they can’t see us?’

It was at that point, improbably, that the swarm halted its advance as though several thousand individual brakes had been thrown. The swarm remained stock still for a moment – and then a clump of them detached from the main mass and shot directly for the Stellarium dome. Even more improbably, given the virtual nature of the dome in the first place, they seemed to hit it.

And, impossibly, the dome shattered.

The Doctor, meanwhile, had left the console room to its own devices, and was currently in what we find ourselves forced to call a wardrobe in the same way that the Grand Canyon can be described as a hole in the ground. Racks of clothing – clothing and its attendant accessories and accoutrements of all

kinds – appeared to doppler to infinity and back in some dimensionally complex manner, like a couturier's warehouse crossed with a Klein bottle. The musty reek of a million kinds of ancient cloth degrading over time would, to the casual human observer, be all but overpowering.

The Doctor merely hummed to himself as he sorted through an improbable collection of hats. Several of them seemed to speak to him, as it were – or at least he could imagine speaking out of them with a clarity that was either the result of some disjointed fragment of actual memory, or merely a testament to what a fine and powerful imagination he, the Doctor, had. It was one thing to discover whole new areas of memory sitting in the paracerebellum like hidden treasure, but it was quite another to fill the mind with what was obviously nonsense just because there happened to be a hole there to be filled.

The Doctor was turning a pork-pie hat over in his hands, wondering if he had ever truly recorded a version of 'Trenchtown Skank' for Two-tone Records, when he experienced an inner lurch that was *decidedly* not of his imagination. It was his inner link to the TARDIS. The TARDIS was squealing. In pain and alarm.

He ran from the wardrobe chamber. The slightly mutable nature of the TARDIS interior doors, it seemed, had deposited him in a roundelled corridor rather nearer to the console room than he remembered the wardrobe to be – just in time to see his young friends Anji and Fitz tearing down the corridor. The desperation of their flight had blinded them to the extent that they ran straight into him, one after the other, collapsing in a tangled heap.

'Are you both all right?' The Doctor disentangled himself and helped a winded Anji to her feet.

'Things,' Fitz uttered, clambering to his own feet and making frantic gestures in the direction from which they'd come. 'Things coming!'

'From the Stellarium,' Anji gasped. 'The dome came crashing down and they came through! They came...'

The Doctor considered this for a moment.

'Now listen, Anji,' he said in the serious manner of one trying to be reasonable without actually telling someone to pull themselves together. 'I might not be completely up to scratch on a few things, still, but I know for a fact that what you call the Stellarium is nothing but a representation. There's simply no way that something can break through and –'

'I'd ask them if *they* know that,' Fitz said, jerking a thumb down the corridor.

Electrical fire Jacob's-laddered across the planes, spiderwebbing over the flat base surfaces and squirrel caging around the roundels. Both the Doctor and Fitz lurched back – Fitz in mere startlement, the Doctor with a look of sudden and genuine terror, as though some part of him saw something deep and dark and fundamental that no human eyes should ever see.

At the end of the corridor a darkness was gathering – not merely the absence of light, but an almost tangible thing in itself. It was as if sump oil, which would ordinarily slather itself over every available surface, had been vaporised while retaining its cloying, liquid qualities: the flat impossibility of a vertical plane of fluid disturbed the mind on some basic inner level – though not more so than the creatures that now burst from it, cast about themselves as if in brief confusion, and then headed up the corridor at a slow but determined pace.

When Fitz had called them *things*, he was not so much suffering from a lack of descriptive imagination as telling the near perfect truth: In the depths of the oceans, on a slightly smaller scale, there are monstrous creatures who cluster around volcanic vents, creatures almost utterly unrecognisable to any other life for the simple reason that the only thing they need to do to survive is exist in the first place. Such creatures are our siblings and cousins compared with these.

Here and there were jagged body forms that suggested the creatures had incorporated material from the shattered Stellarium dome into themselves, but for the most part they seemed to be walking visceral explosions. Limbs and appendages burst from their skins to be withdrawn again in a matter of seconds. Clusters of eyes scudded across them like frog spawn floating on a lake. Rudimentary mouths opened stringily, snapped shut and sealed themselves again.

The worst thing, though, was the voices – or rather the Voice. As it came slowly forward, each individual creature gave a series of rattles, clicks and gasps, which blended in with all the others to produce a wall of sound. The cumulative effect was nonsense – could only be nonsense – but something in Anji's mind responded to it. It was as though the Voice were speaking some primal language, speaking in tongues.

'Tlekli lamep,' the Voice said. *'Raki tiki ta ta telelimakili lami grahaghi ar ti lamonta sisi mako da!'*

The words sparked in her head, their meaning almost within her grasp but somehow still eluding it, as though continually on the tip of the mental tongue. Anji scratched at her head, puzzling the meaning over. . .

'This is bad,' the Doctor said sharply. 'This is very bad indeed.'

Anji came back to herself with a sense of almost physical shock. She realised that she had been standing there transfixed. The progress of the creatures had been slow, but they were very close now. Almost on top of them.

'What are we going to do?' Fitz was saying off to one side.

A steely light shone in the Doctor's eyes.

'Something heroic is called for,' he said, 'and I think we're just the people to do it.' He frowned, regarding the advancing creatures as if they were nothing

more than an idle problem to be solved. 'Of course, discretion being the better part of valour, for the moment we might be better off heroically running away.'

And at last we come to the moment we all of us have been waiting for – the appearance, not to mention the involvement, of my good self in the proceedings. It's been a long wait for that delight, I know, I know, but never fear. Your kind patience shall be well rewarded. Would I lie to you? Certainly not – at least, not in all things that truly matter.

Now ordinarily, you see, for reasons that shall soon become evident, I tended to give places like Shakrath a wide berth in my Transferrals, preferring by and large to deal with the world clusters where things were slightly more free and easy. I say free and easy, of course, in spite of all those people who unaccountably seem to hold that things should be expensive and hard, and tend to be quite short, at times, with those who hold a dissimilar view. One would think, for example, that with all the diamonds, jewels and suchlike treasure owned by the Kalif of Hat, he wouldn't have missed a single merely egg-sized ruby, even if it did happen to be in his ceremonial turban at the time. But I digress.

To fillet an obdurately long story to the bone: at the time of which we speak I had been spending several years in the Pamanese Confederacy, a kind of archipelago, consisting of seven inhabitable worlds, within a thirty-light-year radius. I can say without undue modesty that I'd built up quite a little trading-empire for myself – obtaining and purveying certain items of a nature suitable for a gentleman of a somewhat rarefied taste and refinement – before certain local authorities made it necessary for me to relocate in a somewhat hasty fashion.

What with one thing and another, I found myself having to break into a Transferral Station like a common thief in the night, setting the controls at random and flinging myself into the void, as it were, sans accumulated riches, personal belongings, or even the clothes on my back – I had no time to send more than but a single signal, you see, what with several dozen rather overenthusiastic

officers of the peace hard on my heels, which has always struck me as a little overdone.

I mean to say, it comes to something when an entire squad of officers is sent after one, whose only intention was to help his fellow man, without so much as a By-your-leave. Of course, the fact that several of the contrivances I was selling were faulty – not my fault, I hasten to add – so that one of them was instrumental in exploding the Confederacy's President, may have had something to do with it...

It was just my luck that in my haste I set the controls towards distant Shagrath. The journey, so I gather, was one of seven hundred years. There are those, when they speak of the Transferral, who will tell you that a Soul in Transit feels nothing, remembers nothing and is completely unaware of the passage of time – but I am here to tell you that this is nonsense. If the Soul is indeed the very spark of life, however transmuted from its Baser clay, then how could it not? Within me, I am sure, I feel the weight of those seven hundred years.

Thankfully, the hidden workings of the Soul are for another day, when we stand before the Great Mother of us all.⁶ Shuffling our feet and trying to explain what we have done with the spark she gave us. For my mortal part, I merely remember the fiery pain in my limbs, the pounding of fists against my chest, the gasping, shuddering breath into lungs that in the mundane way of things had never been put to purpose – all of which told me that I had made my Transfer successfully, and arrived in a place where the methods of resuscitation were more primitive than most, whether by accident of circumstance or design.

Ah, well, I thought, as I choked and heaved on the breath of life. All things considered, things could have been worse.

You have to understand, those who arrived in any Chamber, Bodies built from atoms by its alien magicks, arrived as in effect an assemblage of meat and bone, no more animate than a consignment of ore. In certain of the more advanced worlds, automated mechanisms were employed to galvanise these perfect corpses, injecting them with tinctures to let the blood flow more freely all the while. Arriving in such a Chamber was no more hazardous and debilitating, for the most part, than receiving a nasty shock. On other worlds – such as the one I now found myself upon – such complete understanding of the Physic of Man was lacking. It was fortunate, all in all, that the Chambers built their new housings

for the spirit well, and for the most part more resilient than the bodies of men who might have entered on the original side.

Of course, one heard tell, there were worlds where the purpose of the Chambers had been long forgotten, or had never been learned in the first place. There were no direct reports of such worlds, from those unfortunates who might have ended up there owing to an accident of some kind, for a singularly obvious reason. Possibly the bodies of such unfortunates ended up as miraculous meals for whichever indigenous savages might populate such worlds.

In any event, my arrival on the glorious world of Shakrath was accompanied by such pain and suffering as might have attended an actual death. For all of it, I fancy that I bore up manfully, with scarcely a sob or tremor at my incapacitation. I was entirely aware, you see, of my penurious state. There would be no package of portables and effects arriving with me. I was naked and alone, would have to survive on such wits as I had.

Ah, well, I'd travelled in that manner before, as had many others. In addition to Ambassadors and those who travelled in entirely legitimate commercial ways, there were always those who simply wandered the worlds, arriving with nothing and bartering for succour in return for small tales of far-off places, taller tales of farther places and odd snippets of gossip that are beneath the notice of the Ambassadorial Corps but of avid interest to the commonality. An account, of a particularly ingenious execution, for example, involving a vat of galvanistic sand eels, or a stirring recitation of men hurling themselves against the barricades in distant battle – or for that matter, the odd goings on in the court of the King of the Big-footed Figgy Pudding People.

It is my experience that a newly arrived stranger will like as not be welcomed so long as he takes pains to make himself interesting enough, so long as he cuts a bit of dash. For this reason, among other things, the markings on my own face are hugely elaborate and splendid, as you can plainly see – far more so than needs be for the operations of a Transit Chamber – on the foundation that every little one can do to increase a sense of the exotic can only help to make a first impression.

I waved away the man who had been ministering to me, noting that he was of a physical type of no marked dissimilarity to my own, which was all to the good and might save a number of unfortunate complications. I also noted that he was dressed in military fashion – the garb of soldiery the worlds over has distinct and functional

similarities that make it easy to recognise. This, if not to the bad, gave cause for thought. There are several reasons for new arrivals to be greeted by military men, and not a one of them is pleasant.

Girding myself against a show of weakness with the iron will that is my watchword, I sat myself up, taking in my surroundings as I did so. I was sitting on a simple, rough-hewn slab, masked off by screens from what, by the sound of it, was a hall filled with the kind of goods-handling devices common to almost any Transfer Chamber. This was, however, entirely secondary to the basic nature of my surroundings, which was that the soldier who had ministered to me was not alone. Indeed, surrounding me, there were an even dozen of his fellows. I was uneasily reminded of the officers who had so recently been – so far as my mortal self was concerned – on my heels, and wondered if some manner of communication from the Confederacy, immediately after my departure from it, had been so eloquent and heartfelt as to conjoin these people to act upon it even after an interim of centuries.

A certain other thing I noticed, purely because it struck a wrong note – as it were – and puzzled me, was that instead of swords, pistols, muskets or the like, these soldiers appeared to be armed with nothing more than a variety of musical instruments. Had their bearing not been so determinedly military, I might have taken them for a band of honour or the some such – but, all the same, I wondered how these obvious warriors might be able to inflict such bodily damage as was their vocation with a selection of horns, xylophones and nose flutes. On the other hand, to quote some illustrious personage the name of whom I'll momentarily recall, such matters might be requisite upon precisely where they stuck 'em.

I cast my gaze about these likely lads until I espied the more elaborate attire of the one who was obviously their leader. Only slightly hampered by the fact of sitting on the slab, I essayed a courteous bow.

'Greetings, my good sir,' I said. 'May I say what a delight and pleasure it is to find myself upon your no doubt splendid and illustrious world. I am your humble servant, Jamon de la Rocas, and I would deem it a favour more inestimable than the treasure of the ages if you might –'

'Alien scum,' this military gentleman said, aiming the bell of a trombone-like affair directly at me. Galvanistic fire leapt from it and, for the moment, I knew no more.

‘I don’t know, Anji,’ the Doctor said worriedly. ‘I really don’t. All I can think is that these creatures have subverted the TARDIS processes in some way to give them physical incorporation.’

‘No offence,’ said Anji acidly, ‘but What you’ve just said didn’t contain any actual new information at all. It’s like saying something’s taller because three feet have been added to its height.’

They were in the console room, avidly scanning the readouts for some clue as to the situation. This was made more than a little difficult by the fact that said readouts were displaying nonsense – at least, said the Doctor, more nonsense than usual – or were failing to operate at all, or were exploding in a shower of sparks.

‘How many of them are there?’ Anji asked.

The Doctor glanced at a bank of tiny, flashing electrical bulbs, then ducked hurriedly as they promptly burned out and were ejected through the space in which his head had previously been. ‘There’s no way of telling. We saw a dozen of them, possibly two, but without any clues as to the precise nature of their genesis or means of proliferation...’

‘I can tell you how many of them there are, Doctor.’ Fitz was at the doorway through which they had entered the console room from the corridors, where he had been piling up a makeshift barricade of furniture. Already it was trembling to a series of violent thumps as the creatures outside tried to force the doorway open. ‘What we have is Too Many of them!’

‘If they get in here, what sort of damage can they do?’ Anji looked at the seriously malfunctioning console and wondered what additional damage might be possible at this point.

‘Oh, if they start monkeying with the primary systems, here in the vortex, that might trigger an interstitial singularity that could suck the entire universe into oblivion like bathwater down a plughole,’ said the Doctor. ‘On the other hand, they might just wreck the controls utterly, leaving us stranded with no way of ever getting home. Of course, since they’ll no doubt tear us limb from limb in the first place, that’ll be the least of our problems.’

‘So all in all,’ said Anji, ‘it might be an idea to get out of the vortex and

materialise somewhere – anywhere – while we still can, yes?’

‘My thoughts exactly.’ The Doctor surveyed those sections of the console that seemed still relatively intact. ‘This is probably not a time for finesse. We’ll have to make for the first available habitable mass and trust to fortune.’

Hope, so I’ve heard it said, springs eternal in the breast of Man. In my experience this is not as cheery an adage as it sounds, being merely a statement of affairs that the vast commonality spend their lives in circumstances for which hope is the only possible response. And, in the vast majority of such circumstances, the only hope is that they will not go from merely bad to considerably worse.

In much that same manner, waking up in gaol, I’ve found, is not the worst thing in the world. It merely introduces the prospect that something of that nature will occur, and occur quite soon.

In any event, the light of my reason surfaced without undue pain or sense of injury – I had the feeling that a sudden dose of galvanisation, no matter what the rather discourteous captain of the band had intended, had been precisely what my newly arrived body had needed. So it was a fit and alert Jamon de la Rocas, Golgothian snow-panther-like in his acumen, who climbed to his feet to take stock of his surroundings, for the second time – so far as he was concerned in himself – in as many minutes.

I was in a large pig-iron⁷ cage of crude construction, one of several arranged along the wall of a Chamber of Transference, looking across a parade-ground kind of affair to where a set of barrack huts and similar cabins had been set down before the more familiar Pylon and mechanisms of Arrival. It was in one of such cabins, no doubt, that I had been examined before being dispatched to here. The thought of this raised my spirits somewhat, for I could think of at least three points from my arrival to the present where those of a mind simply to dispose of me could have done so. My spirits were further raised by the fact that some kind soul had deigned to leave a collection of garments upon one of the pallets in the cage: a jerkin and trousers of some coarse and plain but not entirely uncouth stuff. Whatever was to happen to me, it seemed, would not happen to me naked.

Aside from the pallets, the cage contained rudimentary sanitary facilities. Aside from myself it was empty, as were those on either side. The only signs of life were among the compound of barracks

huts, where the occasional figure of a Bandsman (as I shall continue to call them despite their rather violent tendencies) marched from hither to yon and back on no doubt pressing musicological business. I decided for the moment not to call out and make it known that I had regained consciousness. At times like these, lacking information of any kind, it is on the whole best to play the quiet hand and see what events might transpire. I pulled on my new finery, lay back on my pallet and waited to see what happened.

I did not have long to wait. Without warning there came the ululation of klaxons – and from the barracks burst bandsmen in their hundreds. Each was armed, as I had seen before, but now some were quite more armed than others. Between them several pairs carried what appeared to be the bass-octave pipes of some mighty water-driven organ. Others still pushed trolleys on which rested affairs like monstrously bloated sousaphones. In more than one case I saw a glockenspiel fully half the length again of the bandsman carrying it – although the particular offensive capabilities of such an instrument were at that time well nigh impossible to guess.

For a moment I thought that these manoeuvres were in response to some mass and hostile arrival by way of the Pylon, but there was no sense or sound of any change in the mechanisms of Transference. The matter was almost immediately settled, however, when at the command of their leader (perhaps the same man who had so recently galvanised my own good self) the bandsmen moved out, heading away from the Pylon and out of the Chamber itself.

Some local disturbance outside, obviously, I thought. Some riot or other imprecation among the natives of this place – which, having seen the way these people treated perfectly decent and innocent new arrivals, I would not have put past the place for a moment. The idea that something might have appeared from thin air, outside the confines and agency of the Chamber of Transference, did not of course enter into my thoughts in the slightest. Such a thing would have been quite patently ridiculous.

The Plaza of the Nine Wise Maidens commemorated one of the interesting and indicative myths of Shagrathi culture. Or legend, or saga, or escalatingly bawdy smoking-house joke, depending upon which version might happen to be told. The word ‘maidens’ or any synonym thereof did not in fact appear in the Plaza’s true historical name, in much a manner similar to that of a certain

Lane in London.

The basics of the myth, legend, saga or joke were these:

There was once a man (or god, in earlier and more credulous versions) of much power and riches (read ‘magicks’, of course, viz. above) who was dying without male issue, though with nine beautiful and spirited daughters such as might gladden the heart of any man save for the unfortunate matter of their sex. (It must be remembered that certain cultural assumptions were prevalent on the world of Shakrath at the time and, indeed, for quite some time to come.)

In such a state of affairs, this man (or god) called nine of his most trusted minions around him and told each of them to seek out one of his daughters and report what he found, and proclaimed that the one who proved virtuous, chaste and in possession of all qualities such as might befit a young lady would receive his titles, coinage, magicks and/or so forth. Those who did not evidence these qualities, of course, would receive nothing but a death, the final nature of which would be a mercy to be pleaded for.

Those with so much as a modicum of comprehension can see the way things are going.

It is not the purpose of these chronicles to pander to the baser salacities by a detailed recitation of the more dubious elements, so we shall cut these matters to the bone. In short, each of the minions came upon his designated daughter in the process of dancing on tables, luring hordes of young men into their private apartments, climbing down the castle walls to perform certain ministrations to the poor and needy and generally acting to all intents and purposes like a collection of minks in a pheromone-sprayed sack. Said minions duly report back to the old man (or god) who promptly throws a fit of apoplexy and orders the daughters to be brought to him.

There then follows what are in most versions called the Explanations. In each case the relevant daughter explains how what the minion saw was not what happened in actual fact. In later and more literary versions the Explanations become hugely metaphorical and witty, entire ontological discourses upon the distinctions between perception and reality. In earlier and somewhat earthier versions they tend to revolve around the discussion and demonstration of such physical matters that these chronicles blush to detail.

In any event, the ending is the same: the old man hears the Explanations, observes the available evidence, mulls over things for a while and then throws another fit. The daughters have been caught dead bang to rights and now they’re simply trying it on. Caught out like this, the daughters look around at each other and shrug. . .

The first thing the Court in general know about it is the daughters bursting from the man’s (or god’s) bedchamber, covered in gore and declaiming that

their beloved father's illness has taken a sudden and terminal change for the worse – the symptoms of which, quite coincidentally, are remarkably similar to being torn limb from limb by nine people. And that his dying wish was that his doting and entirely virtuous daughters share his power severally among themselves. And does anyone want to make anything of it?

The Court Surgeon immediately agrees that such cases are nothing out of the ordinary in the old man's particular disease, and asks if someone could please have his stampede-beast saddled and waiting for him outside since he feels the sudden need for some health-giving country air. The old man's nine most trusted minions, together with their families, friends and several nodding acquaintances, are executed without delay to provide an honour guard for him in the next life. The Nine Wise Maidens then settle down for a life of depravity, debauchery and plotting to murder one another as usual, only now with the power and funds in play to make their lives surpass that of Catherine the Great, Cleopatra and the Domina of the Hidden Hand herself.

Such a way of going about things, naturally enough, spoke to something deep in the commonality of Shakrath. This was how the Courts of the Powerful should conduct themselves, otherwise what would be the point? It is quite remarkable, sometimes, how all manner of atrocity can catch the imagination of a public safe in the knowledge that they'll never have to deal with it directly. At least, those sections of the public who think that they actually count.

As such, though not by any means a sacred place, the Plaza of the Nine Wise Maidens held a special place in the collective Shakathri heart. So when a blue box mysteriously appeared out of thin air in the centre of the Plaza, and three figures dashed out closely followed by a collection of monstrous creatures, reaction by those bandsmen already in the area to control the crowds – and reinforcement by those forces from the nearby Chamber of Transference, who had been especially trained to deal with such incursions – was swift and devastating.

With the barracks compound of the Chamber of Transference now deserted, the Bandsmen having gone off only the Gods knew where, it was the work of but an instant to apply all the skills of a variously capricious lifetime to the picking of the lock that held me in the cage. Unfortunate to say, however, all those aforementioned skills told me was that said lock was completely unpickable by anything easily to hand – as I proved in a subsequent and desultory fashion by way of one of the less mouldering straws from a pallet mattress.

Still, faint heart never won fair lady, gentleman or hermaphroditic bicuspid of your personal choice! Never, not to put too fine a point upon it, say die! Such circumstance is sent to try us, and, though it might seem to best us, cannot but hope to make us fare the better on't! And so forth. Thwarted in effecting my release unaided, I at once set to devise a plan of artful – and dare I even say it? – fiendish cunning that would in the fullness of time have me purloining the key to my incarceration from some no doubt witless Bandsman guard, obtaining some form of deadly instrument from his lifeless hands, fighting my heroic way through all his fellows to the nearest outgoing Transferral cabinet and flinging myself out, once again, into the spaces between the stars – there perhaps to find some new world more conducive to a man of my refinement.

Such a remarkable plan, however, would require the return of the Bandsmen to reinstate such regimen as obtained to bring a key to me, so for the moment I thought it best to climb upon a pallet and await the soft embrace of Morpheus⁸ to bear me away to the Stygian depths...

Pardon me. I beg your pardon. To cut a long story short, what with one thing and another, I decided to pass the time by having a small sleep.

I awoke to the clang of the cage door opening. Curse my luck that by pure chance I'd chosen the pallet bed farthest away from it, or otherwise I'd have been on the bandsman who had opened it in a trice, and it would have gone much to the hard for him, believe you me.

Two figures were shoved into the cage by the bandsmen – and for a moment, I confess, I felt a kind of crawling horror at them, as though they were specimens of some alien and quite possibly Daemonic variety of creature. Then I realised that they were men – I use the term, you understand, in the sense that they were of Mankind, since one of them was obviously female – but of no breed of man that I had so far thus encountered in my life. Their variegated pigmentation, certain small inconsistencies about their facial and bodily forms, evoked a terror in me in some quite other part than if they had been merely monsters. We do not look at a Vlopatuaran land-going octopus or a Willikranian aerial predatiger⁹ and feel quite that fear, I fancy; it takes a man like us in most but not quite, deformed in ways we simply cannot expect, to in this particular manner fright us out our lives.

(Of course I must say – as I'd learn well later – that this insensate fear was in fact the result of my own provinciality. I would later learn that, over several millions of years of Transferral, those who existed in that space of what is now known as the Slow Empire had been subjected to a certain homogeneity. It was not that we – all of us – could not be fat or thin, tall or short, of different forms and faces and subject to the billion pricks of life that can mould those forms and faces for better or ill. It was that beyond the bounds of the Empire there was an entire universe where men – of any gender – had a variation about them of which we could not imagine, while still remaining men.)

In any event, as I say, my first sight of these two new figures in my cage brought on a fear such as I had never before experienced, as though I were shut in with a pair of deformed animals who would soon notice me, fall upon me and tear me limb from limb.

For the moment, though, they seemed not so much as to notice me, being far the more intent upon each other. As the bandsmen withdrew about their business, the smaller – a brown-faced female – turned upon the larger male, a rather scruffy-looking youth in desperate need of a shave, to berate him.

'Why did you do it?' she was saying. 'Why did you just give in and let them take us like that? I mean, I've seen some cowardly

grovelling in my time, but you'd have been too busy cowering under the bed to collect your prize for it!

(It may be propitious to mention here that this was not precisely what the brown-faced woman said. In my travels through what was once known as the Empire, though I say it myself, I had prided myself upon a certain knack with languages, in that it in general took mere hours before I gathered the hang of them and could sling the lingo like a native – albeit a native who didn't get out and about much and so was not completely au fait with the latest linguistic fashion. This was because, rather in the way that people of the Empire were variations of a certain physical type, the languages they spoke were dialects of a common root, no matter what baroque surface complexity that dialect might take.

The female's words, however, were another punnet of tree fungus entirely. To my ears, should I force myself to concentrate upon the sounds produced by her mouth, they were purest nonsense – and yet, in some manner that even years later I find impossible to fathom, my head understood the meaning behind them. I am reminded of certain stories one hears about the Doctor himself – a man, you will be quite aware, that I had yet at this point to meet – of his mystical and sorcerous powers that, quite frankly, I am here to tell you simply did not exist. I can only surmise, though, that his very presence on the world of Shagrath engendered some quiet influence over certain aspects of it in a manner that one thought to ponder only after, if at all.

Be that as it may, suffice it to say that when the female said, 'Pluplaki soli te ma donanonat I masi fako gluk,' I understood every word of it.)

The tall male glowered at her. 'What should we have done?' he said in that same abstrusely comprehensible manner. 'There were hundreds of them. You saw how they didn't care if any number of their own people were killed in the crossfire. What else could we have done?'

The female took upon herself a slightly sullen appearance. 'Well, you could have helped me so we didn't get separated from him like that. We've lost him now. Anything could have happened to him, and...'

I realised that the female was glaring sharply to the pallet bed off which, upon the entrance of this pair, I had quietly rolled and behind which had discreetly secreted myself. Not, I hasten to add, out of any sense of cowardice – not from a man, you should know,

who was presented the Order of Extraordinary Bravery and Moral Turpitude, First Class, on three separate occasions by the Sultan of Walamaloon himself – but lest my unquestionably impressive and fearsome appearance might fright these new arrivals into doing something rash.

The female started towards the pallet, a look that was not entirely friendly in her eye.

'And who the hell are you?' she said.

It was as if the figure behind the bed had been touched by an electrical wire. He leapt to his feet, flashed a grin that was almost blinding in its intensity, then bowed so low that his nose almost touched his knees. He might have been said to have bowed with a flourish, Anji thought, if the word 'flourish' could encompass what the Greater London Yellow Pages might be to an old cigarette packet with a phone number written on it.

'Jamon de la Rocas,' this apparition said, straightening up and beaming, 'at your most abject and devout service. My heart, I cry! For my heart, you must know, is in the depths of Hell that I have not met the personification of your beauteous radiance so as to tender said service before now! And who is it that I might have the exquisite honour of addressing?'

Half of her flattered despite herself, half of her wondering whether he was taking the mick, Anji bought some time for herself to work out what he'd just said by looking this stranger up and down. A shortish, portly man dressed in the kind of ill-fitting garb one would expect to find on the inhabitant of a cell. He wore what was basically a couple of stitched-together sacks, however, as though they were the raiment of an Emperor.

His face was the face of a tiger. For an instant Anji thought that was literally true, that he was some hybrid of animal and human with a feline head on his shoulders – a bit like some creatures she had encountered a short while before. Then she realised that it was due to the fine and expert detail of the black tattooing on his paper-white face. The face itself seemed human and, in itself, quite unremarkable. No, Anji thought with sudden insight, that wasn't quite the case, because the flesh and bone of it weren't the *true* face, The markings were the true one – not just overlaid on the flesh and bone but in some strange way bringing out and displaying what was behind them.

The man was still looking at her, bright-eyed.

'My name's, um, Anji Kapoor,' she said. In a completely unrelated thought, she realised that people tended to hesitate a little like that when giving out their names. Possibly it was to do with the fact that giving out your name gives others power over you, in a simple, but very old magick form. More probably,

it was simply that your name tends to be used to and about you rather than coming from you; people don't actually *say* their own names all that much.

Her mind was wandering. Later, she'd realise that it was because she was still in shock over the events of the past few hours: the invasion of the TARDIS, their flight from it to find themselves in a sudden war zone with monstrous creatures and humanoid bodies exploding indiscriminately around them. Her mind kept slipping off on tangents to avoid thinking about those things.

She pulled herself together and turned towards her companion. 'This is...'

Fitz, she realised, was looking at Jamon de la Rocas as though a horrible suspicion, even recognition, was forming in his mind.

Later, when Anji asked him about it, he would merely say, 'It was just this feeling, you know? I mean, we didn't know where the guy was, and he told me once how he could sort of *change*, and there was something about this Jamon that... no.'

At the moment, though, he just shook his head as if to clear it – still dazed at recent events no doubt, Anji thought, rather like herself – and said, 'I'm Fitz. Just Fitz.'

'And it fits you admirably,' said Jamon de la Rocas, 'I have no doubt.'

For a moment everybody gazed up in the air and whistled, avoiding each other's eyes at what could not even be dignified as a pun. It was like one of those moments in a Shakespearean play where the clown says something like 'I'faith, sirrah, thou must think there be a BE in your behind!', then hits someone with a bladder on a stick and nobody quite knows where to look.

'How long have you been in here?' Fitz asked Jamon de la Rocas when the moment had passed.

The tiger-faced man considered, sucking at an artificially pigmented lip. 'A several number of hours,' he said at last. 'I must confess that in sleeping I may have lost count.'

Fitz nodded to himself, in a strange way that subtly contrived to suggest that something had been confirmed for him in the negative. 'It's not him, then.'

'What?' said Anji.

'Doesn't matter.'

Fitz glanced around himself moodily, taking in the cage and its fellows, the barracks and the strange pile of alien machinery beyond, the humplike forms around a shining, chrome-bright spire.

'He's out there somewhere,' he said. 'I know the man, and it'll take more than some alien massacre to kill him. He's alive and out there somewhere. I wonder where he is.'

The Doctor was currently being marched through a tunnel that had ‘access’ written all over it. There were any number of types, in his experience, ranging from the gentle dankness of the sewer to the spare whiteness of a nuclear command bunker, and this was of the musty, exposed-pipe, trailing-electrical-lead and junction-box variety.

His practised eye, on his arrival, during the ensuing battle and now, told him that wherever he was it was the product of an old but sporadically advanced culture. High technology did exist, but in all probability remained in the domain of the few. One only had to look at the splendidly archaic uniforms of the soldiers who were escorting him, and then at the power weapons they carried – disguised as musical instruments for some obscure reason – to recognise that.

He recalled how the people in the splendid plaza had looked, on average, like beggars trying to live up to standards by keeping their rags neat and clean. The vast majority of people here, he surmised, did not exactly have it easy even without squads of soldiers laying into them, with no regard for life and limb, in an attempt to eradicate sudden monsters.

Once he had seen his two young companions out of danger (without their quite ever realising how he had manoeuvred them towards the lightest area of fighting), the Doctor had busied himself trying to minimise the damage done to the crowd by the soldiery, bounding through the plasma fire to more than once pull some stupefied figure out of its way. At last, when it seemed that he had done all he could, he had allowed himself to be captured. He knew nothing about this place save what he could glean from direct observation, and for the moment it seemed best to follow the line of least resistance and hope for some eventual explanation.

Such explanation, however, seemed resolutely unforthcoming from the escorting soldiery. The Doctor had tried to strike up conversation, but had been met with nothing more than a few curt threats and, though he said it himself, a number of entirely unwarranted and quite xenophobic slurs.

Ah well, he thought, at least he was being taken *to* someone or something – and while there are any number of terminal and horrific things one might be

taken to, at least it gave one more time, and opportunity to do something in it, than simply being killed on the spot.

They were coming up in the end of the tunnel, which terminated in a narrow spiral staircase. The soldiers held back to allow the Doctor to climb it first. For a moment he considered making a break for it – but in the end it is physically impossible for something the size and shape of a human to go up a spiral staircase over a certain speed. Besides, he had no idea what might be at the top – and he could instantly think of seven thousand, four hundred and thirty-two things that might be simply and instantly lethal. It wasn't that he thought that there would be, but there was no point in taking the risk for no reason.

He emerged behind a set of finely detailed screens – at least, presumably they were finely detailed on the other side. His first sight of them from the back showed the tied-off ends of cloth-of-gold embroidery that appeared to depict a number of sonic variety of peacock. The soldiers behind him were prodding at him impatiently, so the Doctor stepped out from the screens.

A spacious living chamber with black marbled walls, hung with more cloth-of-gold in the form of tapestries. The furnishings and fitments were very fine, built from the local equivalents of mahogany, rosewood, onyx, jade and gold-leaf gilt. Here and there, a domesticated palm-leaf plant in an urn.

The Doctor took in all this finery with his peripheral vision. The first thing he saw – as some part of him had suspected – was the TARDIS. The blue box had been transported here with some effort, those who had done it careless of the gouges this had dug in the white marble flagstones of the floor. There was a vaguely battered look to the outside of the TARDIS herself, but she seemed basically whole and intact. The main door (which the Doctor could quite distinctly remember not closing, being far more interested in putting some distance between himself and his young companions and the assortment of monstrous creatures spilling out of it) was now firmly shut, with the sense that it would take rather more than simple cajolery for it ever to open again.

Standing by the TARDIS door and peering at it with a body-language posture of intense thought was a tall, bony man in a black cloak. As the soldiers bracketed the Doctor, this man turned towards him with a prim little smile. His head was bald in the manner of one for whom no hair had ever grown to lose. The dead white skin of his thin face was etched with fine lines so black that they could not be any other than artificial.

'Greetings,' this man said. 'You must know that you and this... device of yours have caused us no end of problems. My name is Morel, Ambassador to the Imperial Court of Shakrath.'

'Oh, really?' said the Doctor. 'Ambassador *of* where, precisely? Where were you sent to be an Ambassador *from*?'

The Ambassador to the Imperial Court dismissed the question with a wave of his pale hand.

‘The fact is,’ he said, ‘that for several years a variety of monstrous creatures have attempted to enter our world by way of the Chamber of Transference. . .’

‘Transference?’ The Doctor frowned as though the word meant something, but he was not sure what.

‘They are not of life as we know it,’ Morel continued, with the air of one with little patience at being interrupted. ‘Where men arrive in a state of death and have to be revived, these creatures come through. . . well, I have to say “living” in that they move and seem alert. They arrive in the Chamber with a single purpose – to slaughter every man they find.’

‘I can see how that might be inconvenient,’ said the Doctor. ‘So tell me, this Transference Chamber, would it be something in the nature of a –’

‘Fortunately,’ Morel snapped, ‘since they have but one place of arrival, it has been possible to station forces there to deal with them. The sages of the College of Physiological Undertakings are in some argument as to whether these creatures can be actively *killed* as such, but what is in no doubt is that their physical bodies can be destroyed. For many years, now, we have been able to eradicate such fiendish apparitions the instant they occur while leaving the vast commonality of the public none the wiser. . .’

Again, the Doctor frowned. ‘I think I saw some of this eradication quite recently. It was very impressive, possibly a bit overenthusiastic. Do you discriminate between your so-called fiendish apparitions, or do you just open fire on anything with less or more than one head? I know of quite a few races, I think, who look worse to human eyes than the creatures who were chasing us, and most of them are actually quite –’

‘And now this. . . *thing* appears!’ the Ambassador thundered, obviously having reached the limits of his patience with Doctorial interruptions. ‘It appears from nowhere, in a public place, for all to see! The tales of it are even now spreading like a conflagration through the bazaars and smoking houses of the Capital, and panic cannot but follow. In one fell swoop you have overturned the work of years!’

‘You seem so sure that I’m responsible,’ said the Doctor, casting what he hoped was an uninterested eye over the TARDIS. ‘How can you be so sure that I’m even the owner of this thing, whatever it is?’

The Ambassador merely looked at him with flinty, narrowed eyes.

‘Well, all right,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘I *do* happen to own it as a matter of fact – but there’s no call to be making unwarranted assumptions on the basis of absolutely no hard evidence at all. . .’

‘This cabinet is quite obviously the work of Man,’ said Morel. ‘And in it you were in some way able to convey these creatures –’

'Now, I hope you don't think I brought those creatures to your world intentionally...' the Doctor cut in quickly.

'Had I thought that,' said Morel, 'you would have died upon the instant of your capture.' He turned to run a speculative hand over a section of the TARDIS outer shell. 'It is obviously a conveyance, working in a manner in some way similar to that of the Chamber...'

'Something you have still,' the Doctor said, 'to define in any cogent detail.'

'...but I see by certain aspects that it does not affect you in the same way that Transference affects men. You are clearly the same man as you were when first born...'

'Oh, now I wouldn't go as far as to say that -'

'Instead of dissolution and assemblage, it actually *transports* the living from one place to another by some means, whole and intact in person...'

'Aha! So am I to assume, from that, that this Chamber of yours involves some kind of teleportation? If so, I'd have to tell you that -'

'Enough!' Morel bellowed. '*Enough* of this!' It seemed a little off that an outburst of such strength and volume could come from such a spindly-looking frame. 'The very fact of your existence is a discontinuity. You have shaken our world - the Empire - itself to the very foundations. It may even topple and fall. Your one act of reparation might be to share the instruments of your arrival. Take me into this magic cabinet of yours, stranger, and show me the means of its operation.'

'That is something,' said the Doctor, 'that you shall never see.'

The Ambassador Morel regarded him coldly for a moment.

'Oh yes we will,' he said. 'That is, *I* shall. Should you prove intractable in this matter, rest assured I have the means to...'

'Torture and cajolery won't work, you know,' the Doctor said, returning the gaze. 'Tell me, Mr Ambassador, do you think yourself a good judge of character?'

'As much as might be possible in an imperfect world,' said Morel. He didn't say it with modesty or pride, just as a simple statement of fact. 'I have judged and been proven correct in my judgement more often than not.'

'Then look at my face, Mr Ambassador. Do you think that whipping out the thumbscrews and the braziers or keeping me from sleep is going to work?'

Morel seemed to consider this at length.

'I see a way about you that might make such endeavour fruitless,' he said at last. 'Rest assured, though, that with the resources of the Empire at my disposal, I shall gain entry to this device, with or without your assistance.'

'I'd like,' said the Doctor, 'to see you try.'

'Possibly not,' said Morel, giving him the same somewhat prissy little smile with which he had first greeted him. 'I am minded that there are other forms

of torture and persuasion. I believe that, when you arrived, you did so with a pair of companions, did you not? Well, let us see how intractable you in fact prove after your – and their – audience with the Emperor.’

If one is to travel to any extent, I must tell you, even within the bounds of a single world, one must be of a constant guard about the making of unfounded assumptions. This is not to say that they shall not be made, of course – this being part and parcel of the very word 'assumption' – but that one must be aware of the danger of making them.

It is quite one thing to say that one sees what another means, when that other has unfortunately lost their sight. It is quite another to find oneself on a world where the race of men born without eyes, as such, in the first place, so that continual pronouncements in the very terms of sight – as much discourse, when one thinks about it, tends to be – may lead in all innocence to another measure of approbation entirely.

In a likewise manner, when one thinks about those old days of Empire, one tends to assume that each world was of a singular and simple type: that one was a world of pygmies and ziggurats, another was a world of plains-dwelling nomad engineers, or of cities built of shell and mother-of-pearl on artificial barque islands, or of hollowed gourds hanging from league-high trees... and so on, so forth and suchlike. While such things may have been true in the broadest sense, one has only to think of the differences in one's own world – between continents, townships, even between one street and another – to realise that these simplifications are chimeric at best.

I fancy that so far as I myself was concerned, I lived so far as is possible by the dictum of assuming nothing if at all possible. However – as I believe I have mentioned – my dealings with the humans, Anji Kapoor and Just Fitz, were hampered by the fact that their origins were so far out of my experience that, for all their basically manlike forms, they were quite simply Other in ways for which the well-intentioned following of dictums left me unprepared.

Since they had none of the obvious signs of Transference about them, for example, I assumed that they were natives of the world of Shakrath (even the name of which I did not know at the time) and quizzed them avidly about its nature. The fact that they did not even know the name of where they were, I interpreted as being due to their being members of some ignorant slave cast or the like (for whom the name of their world would be unimportant) who had been sent to this gaol for some infraction against their masters. This, I am sorry to say, led to an inexcusable if general air of condescension on my part, until I fully realised the truth of things.

And then there was the matter of sex – a subject that I freely confess is closer than most to my heart, or at the least some similarly elementary organ. Those expecting some discursion into the veiled and sultry realms of Eros, however, are to be sorely disappointed...

Now, I have said that to the eyes of the vast and panoplious universe outside, what used to be known as the Empire consisted of variations on what in the end were a somewhat limited number of themes. (The Doctor himself, I recall, at one point called it 'explorations of an ergogenically stunted polyfractal probability space', whatever that in fact means.) One of those limitations, I have to say, was in the relations between the male and female members of the various races of Man. Oh, there were, had been and still are Empresses, jungle-dwelling Amazon warrior tribes, All-High Priestesses and the like, but such things were singular in nature, aberrations from the common norm. In the vast commonality, the distaff side of Man were seen at best as a happy distraction, at worst a positive nuisance and for the most part the invisible bearers of children and suppliers of hot food and clean undergarments.

It is not my purpose here to go into the reasons for this, or to defend such a state of affairs in the slightest. It is simply how such things were in what was once called the Empire. I bring it up so that you will realise that, though I had met my share of Amazon Empresses and so forth, and felt I had a kindly and respectful way with the ladies more than most, I was simply not equipped in my own self to instil a female with such qualities of reason and turpitude as I might afford the meanest of males. It was an aspect of my nature – an assumption, I say – so much of my nature that I was truly unaware of its very existence. This had me being on occasion, in the memorable words of Mistress Anji Kapoor, 'a patronising

Bloody squit who'd be improved by having his head boxed off of his shoulders'.

Of course, all of this is very much with the aid of hindsight. I am now fully aware of quite how much – My word! You're a lively little thing, aren't you? Now if you'll just sit on my lap for the moment, you can feed me some of those quite delicious toasted, pâté-filled affairs. And I don't think it would kill you to reach over for that bottle...

All of which is to say that my exchanges with the pair of humans seemed to be laced with a bewildering kind of incomprehension – of the sort where one feels a kind of hot anger under the surface of things, is constantly biting back some sharp retort, but is not quite able to fathom the meaning of the reason why.

'... So they knocked us down and dragged us out and brought us here,' Anji said.

She had by this time finished telling me the story of herself and her friend Fitz. From it at the time, I confess, I had formed the impression that they were both the personal servants of this Doctor fellow – no doubt some travelling apothecary of no particular note – ousted from their conveyance by bandits that seemed monstrous to her ignorant mind. Or possibly by some local monstrous fauna which the bandsmen of this place had duly dispatched. In any case, I could tell that such pertinent information as I might require about my own circumstances would not be forthcoming from these poor wretches.

'It must have been quite terrible for you, my dear,' I said, giving her a companionable and comforting pat on the head. (I only now recall such a look of barely restrained murderousness that such an overture elicited.) 'This, ah, Doctor of yours...' I continued, intimating that this was the personage with whom, if possible, I should enter into discourse if it were to be of any material use, 'did you see what became of him?'

'We just don't know,' said the man Fitz, with a touching sense of concern, no doubt, for the fate of his master. As should of course be evidenced by every bondsman worth the name.

'So what's your story,' Anji asked me. 'What are you doing here?'

Her tone was a parcel of what I have been talking about in that it seemed, to me, not merely forward for a female, but with the sense that whatever my answer might be, it would prove me nothing of import or so much as interest in the slightest. Biting

Back my perfectly justified flush of anger quite manfully, I decided to enlighten her by way of civil example.

'First, you must know,' I said, 'that this, oh, "world" of yours is but one of many. Hard though it may seem to believe, it is in fact a vast ball of matter which falls about your sun – not in fact the other way around, as you might believe, that being a land around which the sun orbits. The stars you see in the sky at night, some of them, are entire other suns and worlds, and it is from one of them that I come...'

I realised, of a sudden, from the look upon the face of Anji, that I was for some reason dicing with my very life. This was in all probability on the account that the look of murderousness aforementioned had increased a ten- or maybe even a hundredfold.

'Tell you what,' she said, with an intensity which I'll own sent a shiver of fright through even one so valorous as myself, 'let's just agree that you come from somewhere far off. Where did you come from, why did you end up in a cell here and where exactly is here?'

In my startlement, I fear, I may have babbled a little. I began to explain something of my circumstances... And then realised that the lady Anji had turned her back on me.

'The fat little blowhard's no use,' she said to the man Fitz. 'He doesn't know any more than we do. Probably less.'

Well, there! I like to say as that I had never been dealt so in my life! I was of a mind to say as much when I noticed some new movement outside the cage.

A squad of bandsmen were escorting a new figure towards us: a tall, athletic-looking man in a black suit of the sort, I remember, that had once been worn by the technomages of Valencir – those misguided geniuses who had built a stem-driven Difference Engine so powerful that it had, in some strange manner, turned their very world into a numerical abstract. A story so peculiar – and not to mention convoluted – that it will have to wait for some later, more propitious time...

For all that he was under guard, the face of this man showed such fortitude and resolve that I at once felt common kindredship with him. Having heard the subtle sense of consequence with which the female Anji and the man Fitz had alluded to the name of their master, I had my firm suspicions that this was indeed he long before either of them could utter it.

'Doctor!' Anji cried, running to the bars as though the mere sight of him could somehow magic them away; she seemed genuinely surprised in regards to her collision with them.

'Are you all right, Doctor?' the man Fitz asked, with evident relief at the simple fact that the man was still alive.

'As well as can be expected, Fitz,' this worthy if somewhat callow-looking personage said. (I would have occasion to remark, time and time again, how extraordinary it was that such a relatively young man had such experience and wisdom as the Doctor evidenced time and time again.) 'I really hope that we can all come out of this all right...'

I had an inkling that this Doctor was worried – and from the look of his incarcerated friends I could see that they had caught this, too. I had expected, for the moment, that he would be thrown in with us – or possibly, given his more apparently noble station, sent into another and more comfortable cell – but a few bandsmen stood in guard over him while others opened up the cage and hauled the female Anji, the man Fitz and my own good self out.

'We're to be given an audience of some kind,' the Doctor explained as the bandsmen chivied us along. 'I'm not quite sure as to the nature of it. Never fret, though; I'm sure it won't be as bad as all that.'

The soldiers marched them up through a warren of passages and hallways. Since she had first met the Doctor, Anji had seen her fair share of the sort of corridors that looked like Alphavilie made out of egg boxes, or drab and soul-destroying affairs where the single concession to gay frivolity was a time-chipped coating of institutional green, but these were somewhat different. The walls seemed to be of solid gold, inset with enamel murals and glyphs of elegant complexity. Salvagers of incense burned on spindly stands. Functionaries in white robes drifted serenely to and fro. It was like walking through the anterooms of the gods.

It was a distinct improvement on the plaza they had found themselves in after running from the TARDIS – the artistry of civic statuary always tending to devalue when a bloodbath is happening in front of it – and certainly an improvement over the holding cages, but Anji for one didn't find it reassuring. There was an air about these surroundings that was too good to be true, like the pristine foil one finds on chocolate money.

'Well, these guys are doing well for themselves,' Fitz said, looking around. 'You have to give them that.'

One of their soldier escorts rounded on him, and for an instant Anji could see the immediate future in perfect clarity – especially in the slapping-and-shouting-of-'Silence!' department.

'You don't want to do that,' said the Doctor, quietly. 'You really don't.'

Anji realised that he was talking to the soldier, who promptly didn't. It wasn't that there had been a battle of wills or some such, or any kind of 'these are not the droids you're looking for' hypnotism: it was as if the Doctor had simply said how the world was going to be, so that was what the world was. The soldiers just marched on with their charges, heedless of whether they talked or not.

'You have got to tell me how to do that,' Anji said as they walked.

'If I *knew* how to do it,' said the Doctor, 'I'd be doing it all the time.'

He scanned a section of enamelled wall depicting a multitude of generally humaniform creatures kneeling in supplication before a noble-faced man dressed in armour like a cross between a *ronin* and a conquistador and hold-

ing what appeared to be a multiple-barrelled ocular telescope. 'I must admit, I sometimes wish I hadn't lost the knack of knowing everything at a glance. It's a bit of hard business, having to learn.'

'So what have you learned so far?' Anji asked. 'Where are we? Where have we ended up?'

'Well, from what I can gather, we're in the heart of some empire or other – planetary or interplanetary, I couldn't say. Nobody bothered to mention. The name of this place is apparently Shakrath, but –'

'Shakrath! But of course!'

This last came from the plump man with the tiger's face etched on his own, who had been accompanying their happy band with, so Anji thought, a completely uncharacteristic sense of diffidence – considering that he had preciously been bouncing around like a lecherous buffoon and done everything short of slapping her backside and having her make him a cup of tea.

'I beg your pardon?' Still walking, the Doctor turned towards him with an inquiring smile. 'I take it that you know something of this place?'

'That I might,' said Jamon de la Rocas. 'I might at that.'

There had been no introductions as such, and certainly no complicated bow and flourish from Mr de la Rocas, but Anji thought that she could sense the kind of instant rapport that makes such introductions unnecessary. It was one of those knife-edged instants where the first exchange between two people, for no perceivable reason, fixes their relationship forever as friends, enemies or simple indifferent acquaintances, no matter what might subsequently occur.

'I must apologise for not speaking up earlier,' said Jamon de la Rocas, all bluff and bounce again, 'but while I know of this place, I did not know it as where I was, if you understand me, until I heard the name. There I was, you see, cruelly and most undeservedly incarcerated, with not so much as a glint of intelligence as to the whys, wherefores and whereabouts of my egregiously abject state...'

'So now you *know* where you are?' the Doctor said, smiling a little.

'I do.' Jamon de la Rocas brought himself back to the point and warmed to his theme. 'You must understand, of course, that the very nature of the Empire means that almost each and every world in it thinks of itself as the centre – but some with more justification than others. From even so far off as I might have been, I have heard tales of Shakrath and of the stamp it puts upon its locality...'

His patterned face took on the expression of one whose ears have just caught up with what his mouth is saying, and then fell.

'And I have to tell you,' he continued a little worriedly, 'that the tales of its barbarous and primitive manners are myriad. We are in a savage place here

– Doctor, was it? – a place of infamy and the fecund darkness of the death of gentility. . .’

They had reached a set of arched doors, which swung open seemingly of their own volition.

The soldiers herded them forward. They saw what lay beyond the doors.

‘Of course,’ said Jamon de la Rocas, ‘I could be wrong.’

The Conclave of Governance was bathed in a warm golden glow that seemed to come from the direction of the masked and berobed Emperor without his actually casting it. The figures crowding both Houses sat still and solemn in this magisterial effulgence, their heads bowed.

His sun-mask glistening, the Emperor turned his head towards the Ambassador Morel, who stood modestly beside the throne in his black robes. Morel nodded in acquiescence, then turned his attention to the Conclave at large and began, in an altogether assured manner, to proclaim:

‘His Extreme and Divine Potency, the Light before which the Barbarity and Ignorance of the Infidel are burned away, the God that walks among the World as Emissary, the Primateur of all things Holy in the Sight of Man, the Emperor, has taken examination of and advisement upon the natures of those now brought before him. By certain signs he sees that, though outlandish in appearance and form, they are obviously and without doubt of his Imperial Domain. As such, they are to be allowed to pass among the environs of the Capital with neither undue let nor hindrance, although to leave the city itself must needs require a docket stamp on their visas.’

The Doctor looked sidelong at his young companions and at Jamon de la Rocas as they knelt before the throne, a small detachment of guards likewise kneeling behind them. It was barely a minute since they had entered through the arched doors and assembled in this position.

‘You don’t suppose this has all been just a kind of formality?’ he said quietly. ‘It’s good of the man to deal with these things personalty. . .’

‘Did you have something you wished to say?’ asked the Ambassador Morel. There was no irritation in his tone, far less anger at any kind of affront to these Imperial proceedings: more a sense of polite forbearance such as might be afforded to a stranger who does not understand the decorum of courtly ways.

‘Only that the Emperor has my most profound thanks, for taking time in his no doubt busy schedule to attend the matter of unworthy wretches such as ourselves,’ the Doctor replied smartly, making a respectful little bow while still kneeling.

‘Quite so,’ said Morel. ‘The business of this Extraordinary Conclave is now closed. All shall rise.’

As one, the two Houses rose to their feet. On his throne, the Emperor nodded the sun-mask of his head in dismissal. For a moment all was silent and still, bathed in the golden glow that came from the direction of the throne.

Then the glow shut off as if a switch had been thrown.

‘Well, I’m glad that’s over with,’ Morel said briskly, clapping his hands together as though dusting off something not particularly pleasant while the guards hauled the Doctor and his party none too gently to their feet. ‘It’s something that has to be done, but I’ve never been a one for play-acting.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that,’ the Doctor said from where a soldier had him by the elbow. ‘Do you think you could explain?’

‘I imagine I might,’ said Morel, with the cheerful air of one who knows that whatever might be said at this point won’t do any good, and knows that the person it won’t do any good for is not himself. ‘New arrivals to our fair Capital are treated with the kindness and generosity they deserve, that is a well-known fact – well known because it is seen to be done. The proceedings here have been recorded by photomechanical means, to be shown to anyone with an interest in asking.’

‘And does anybody ask?’ asked the Doctor.

‘The fact that such materials are *there* for the asking tends to prevent such questions in the first place.’ Morel gestured to the soldier restraining the Doctor, who shoved him roughly forward. ‘If you cast your eye over this,’ he said companionably, ‘I feel you might find it of some small interest.’

This turned out to be a small control panel on the side of the throne, positioned so that it and its operation by Morel could not be seen when one was looking at it from the front. Morel touched a control, and beside them the Emperor nodded his masked head. Another touch, and the Emperor raised a hand in benediction. Another touch and the Emperor’s head began to swivel. . .

‘Do you have a button for pea soup?’ asked the Doctor. Morel’s spider-lined brow frowned. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Never mind. The Doctor cast his eye over the Emperor-contrivance as invited. ‘Clockwork?’

‘Some application of the hydrological sciences, I believe.’ Morel caused the Imperial head to stop spinning.

The Doctor, meanwhile, had turned to regard those dignitaries assembled in both Houses of the Conclave.

‘These are devices of a similar nature?’ he asked Morel. ‘I’m sure I would have sensed that given the. . .’ He peered at the dignitaries in the now dim light. ‘They’re not, are they?’ His voice now seemed coldly angry. ‘They’re alive.’

‘Slaves,’ said Morel with an indifferent shrug. ‘Their mouths sewn shut,

their shoulders dislocated, their spinal columns attached to a galvanistic generator.’

The Doctor’s head shot round to stare at him with kind of furious astonishment. ‘You made this? You built such a thing? What would you build such a thing for? What gives you the right?’

Morel smiled at him; a prissy little smile that was far too well bred ever to be a sneer.

‘I did not build this,’ he said, as though stating the perfectly obvious to a child. ‘It was here long before I ever assumed my position, hundreds if not thousands of years before. I merely maintain it. And as for the *why* of it. . . well, the Emperor must be seen to attend his duties, don’t you think?’

‘So what happened to the Emperor, then?’ said the Doctor, in the tones of one knowing very well what had happened to the Emperor, and indeed Emperors.

‘Why, nothing at all,’ said Morel. ‘At least, nothing in the sense that I think you mean. And speaking of which. . .’

He touched another control on his hidden panel. A small doorway opened in the wall behind the throne.

‘As to the state of His Extreme and Divine Potency, the Light before which the Barbarity and so forth,’ he said as the soldiers took hold of the Doctor again, and marched him and his three companions out through the door, ‘then come into the Inner Court. I believe you’ll find out soon enough.’

Believe that I have mentioned something of my small sojourns into the palaces and courts of several worlds, and something of the conduct and the manners of such households. It is a common state of affairs, I am very much afraid to say, that those with the power to order the world to their liking – whether it be planet, city or merely the environs of their own immediate enclave – tend to use the blade of that power, as you will, to the very hilt.

I recall a certain Countessa, in the far-off floating palaces of the world of the Second Sky, who would have such penitents as might fall within her remit roundly whipped about the anti-gravitational courtyards, drawing behind them small buggies containing some specimen or other of her large collection of lapweevils, in a curious kind of race upon which bets would be tendered by those nobles invited to witness it. My back and shoulders, I declare, still smart a little at the remembrance.

I recall the usage that the warlord Mavin Sa would commonly put to those inhabitants of settlements he conquered. Likewise, the despotism that the Ottoman of Rahaghi would practise upon such Prime Ministers as would displease him (said Ministers being appointed at the Ottoman's personal whim rather than at the vote and voice of the commonality). All manner of tyrants and despots have I seen and heard of, and the plain fact of it is that when one has the power of life and death, whether over planets, cities or, I repeat, merely the environs of their immediate enclave, those who share the world with such tyrants and despots tend to die at an alarming rate.

I mention this merely to lay the ground that I know of such goings-on – and to say that I have never experienced such a thing as the Inner Court, those chambers that lay past the hidden doorway in the Conclave of Governance.

It was all the worse, in some strange manner, that these matters, as it were, remained unseen. That is, for the moment, we

saw no evidence as such of these matters happening right before our eyes. The walls were filthy, however, encrusted with such Bodily expulsions and effluvia as had been expelled over years if not centuries and never been removed. The reek of death and corruption was likewise, and the air was like some solid mass of putrefaction. There was a sound, a constant sound, of men and women in torment close by – men and women in their hundreds if not thousands, layer upon layer of their screams and utterings and whimperings so that the specifics of any one unfortunate were lost in an ululation that was reminiscent of a howling world.

I am used, as I have said, to gauging and interpreting such certain clues in my surroundings, inferring the deeper tenor of said surroundings from them – and as the Ambassador Morel and his bandsmen took myself, the Doctor and his young companions through these noisome anterooms, I freely allow that I was all but mad with terror at my apprehension of them.

In such a fearful state as I was, no doubt, I failed to notice that the Doctor had manoeuvred himself through our little grouping until he was beside me. I remember giving a start as if my heart might summarily stop as he spoke to me.

'Exciting, isn't it?' Unaccountably, he seemed cheerful rather than otherwise, as though he were watching some entertainment put on for his benefit, for all that these secret chambers were quite patently a reality and a hideous one at that. 'This is what we find behind this Empire of yours, is it?'

I believe that I may have muttered something to the effect that such things might depend on one's point of view, and that, at this point, the guess of one might be as good as that of another.

'Doesn't matter,' said the Doctor. 'It doesn't matter. Whatever happens, I think somebody should be doing something about this. And soon.'

The tone in his voice gave me pause to look at him sharply. His eyes were hard and calculating, his mouth set in a grin that seemed for all of him to be merely happy – and I realised of a sudden that he was happy with anticipation, at the prospect of action. It seemed to me, though, that it was action of a kind not limited to the small particulars of our current circumstance. When he spoke of something being done, the Doctor was not referring merely to some sudden and heroic escape from the momentary inconvenience of bandsmen guards and the Inner Court. He was happily anticipating bringing the Court, Shakrath, the Empire entire, perhaps, to its

knees.

And something inside me realised that he was fully capable of doing it. My memory may or may not be clouded by the recollection of subsequent and later events, but I am sure that I felt so at the time, though I cannot entirely explain it.

'First things first, though,' said the Doctor, as if he were carrying on a conversation with my unspoken thoughts. 'For the moment, Mr de la Rocas, I'd suggest you make yourself ready. I might need a small diversion at any time.'

I mulled this over momentarily. Quite what diversion I could provide, short of making a break for it and being cut down instantly by some alert bandsman's instrument, I failed to see. And, while my mettle is and was entirely beyond question in such matters, I could not divine what a peremptorily truncated escapade such as that might be calculated to achieve.

Such musings were cut short, as we left the anterooms and entered the chambers of the Inner Court proper – and I realised that my aforementioned inferences about the nature of the place from the available clues were all too correct.

'Well, this is all very Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom,' said the Doctor. 'It reminds me of the Court of Caligula on the days when they let school parties in.'

'You what?' said Fitz, somewhat aghast at the thought of this.

'I mean,' said the Doctor, 'that I'm glad we seem to be dealing with minds of certain fundamental limitations. Some things simply haven't occurred to them. All things considered, those things could be a lot worse.'

Fitz cast his eyes across the scene, and tried not to imagine how they could possibly be worse. They were quite bad enough as it was.

The Emperor was attended by an armed personal guard who might once have been human, and presumably still were, physically, under the black leather uniforms and masks – though a lumpen, crippled look to their forms suggested that certain modifications had been carried out to their physiognomy. The... things hanging from various racks, what was left of them, had once been decidedly human. Some of them were still alive. The implements with which they had been idly tortured, over some considerable length of time, hung neatly from hooks on the walls.

Almost the worst thing was, despite the obvious function as a recreational torture chamber, various personal items of furniture were scattered around as they would be in any living apartment: armchairs and candle stands, drinks cabinets and the occasional table. The *worst* thing was that, where possible,

these items had been constructed from human bone and, where applicable, covered in cured, stitched human skin.

Reclining on a divan made of intricately worked humanoid skeletons, alternately drawing on a pipe made from a polished thighbone and drinking some noxious fluid from a bowl (have a guess), was a man whose age it was difficult to tell. He might have been ancient and suffering from some unfortunate glandular condition that had stunted his physical maturity, or he might merely have been a hideously ravaged youth. His naked flesh was pocked with the kind of sores that would not have looked out of place on some diseased beggar. His straggly hair was plastered across his scalp in filthy strands. His eyes were dull and feverish – whether from some actual fever or from long use of some narcotic opiate.

Certain duties were being ministered to this wretch by a brace of scrawny females, who knelt before him. Now he turned his attention, listlessly, to the new arrivals. He regarded them blankly, as a lobotomised man might regard a moving object, simply because it is moving.

‘My Emperor!’ the Ambassador Morel cried, darting forward to present himself with a bow of supplication so deep and heartfelt that it could only have been intended sardonically. ‘I have brought you some visitors. New playthings for you.’

The Emperor – if such he was – looked at Morel for a long time, as though it took a while for the meaning of his words to sink in, then turned his gaze to Anji, who squirmed as though brushed by something tangible and slimy.

‘Nice. . .’ said the putative Emperor. ‘She looks unusual and nice. I think. . . I shall have her as one of my harem. . .’

He gestured, vaguely, with a withered hand towards one of the women who were tending to him. The woman turned her head. Her mouth had been sewn shut.

One of the soldiers who had escorted them here took hold of Anji and shoved her forward into the waiting arms of a pair of leather-clad guards.

‘Hey!’ Fitz shouted, struggling against the grip of two soldiers of his own. ‘You can’t just. . . let go of me. . . this isn’t. . .’

The sick-looking eyes of the Emperor turned to him.

‘She has. . . a friend, yes? A boy who is her friend. Doesn’t want to see her come to harm?’

‘It does indeed seem that way, my Emperor,’ said Morel smoothly.

‘Well, so he can. He can join her in the seraglio and watch over her as a eunuch.’

Fitz would no doubt have had something further to say about that, had not the guards who now grabbed hold of him stuffed a gag in his mouth. He renewed his frantic efforts to break free, but, whatever modifications had

been made to the bodies under the leather, one of them was to increase their strength more than was humanly possible.

The Emperor's eyes turned to the remaining strangers, mildly curious as to what entertainment they could offer. 'And these are...?'

Jamon de la Rocas became aware that the Doctor was glaring at him pointedly and making a little nudging gesture with his elbow. The time had come, he supposed, to make the diversion of which the man had spoken. He considered the options, thinking as fast as he had ever thought in his life.

'My name, noble Emperor, is Jamon de La Rocas,' he said grandly, 'and I have the honour to be servant and most trusted confidant to none other than the Doctor, here, though that is not of course his proper name. On point of fact, this man comes from a place so far and strange, its denizens so powerful, indeed so godlike in their own beings, that to hear but the merest syllable of his true name would drive mere mortal man *mad* with the Manichean Glory of it! Mad, do you hear me? Mad!'

That caught what passed for the Emperor's attention. 'A Doctor, you say?'

'And that is the least iota of a part of it,' declared Jamon, improvising wildly. 'For he is the very *pre-eminence* of his people in the performance of such dark and magickal surgeries as has made him the very talk of that far-off place I aforementioned. Indeed, that is in some small part the reason for his travelling to the splendour that is Shakrath and your good Imperial self. E'n from far off wherever it is, he has sensed tell of the fact that your most Worshipful Highness has been feeling, not to put too fine a point upon it, a little peaky of late – no doubt due to some malign demonic influence such as would lay a normal man to his death in the barest trice, your Worshipful Highness being, but of course, far more than can be so much as known by normal men. Oh what foul *traitor* in your midst could have called such a pestilence down upon the very, er, Shakrathly presence of his own beloved Emperor! For shame!'

At this Jamon glared rather pointedly at the Ambassador Morel, who merely returned the gaze as one might would that of a babbling lunatic who accosts one on the street, puts his face very close to the kebab one is eating and asks one if one has finished with it yet.

'Yes, well, this is all very entertaining to be sure,' Morel said, 'but I believe the time has come to –'

'See now, how he has extricated himself from those guard who were attempting to restrain him,' Jamon continued. 'You must know, of course, that one such as he cannot be held by any such crude means, any more than one might hold a burning coal in one's bare hands. See how he very humbly moves about you. There is no need for alarm, I do assure you! Note if you will, his humble demeanour. It is of a piece I say, with the vow of silence that I, in his

charge, am bound to explicate. The power of his sorceries is such that by the merest nod he could level the tallest of buildings, and thus he has vowed, in person and in posture, to assume a most mild aspect. Why, look at him and see that such an estimable man as he would nary hurt a fly!

‘Now, as to what he’s *doing*, let me say that the Doctor is at practice of the art of, ah, Pratantimancy – a discipline, you know, of his people. It is to do with the *positioning* of things, from what I gather – what *any* mortal can gather – of its secrets. In the same way that the sigils of a divination circle may be drawn just *so*, it seems, and in the mean, prosaic way that simply moving an item of furniture in a room can make that room more hospitable by far, the good Doctor has refined the art so that he can build an Engine of Conjunction from whatever is to hand. I believe that by rearranging the particulars of the chamber, he is attempting to affect a charm which will summon up the demonic entity that besets the Emperor and bind it – would that be right, Doctor? Yes, guardsman, please take heed of his gesturing and move a little to your right, placing that pikestaff-flute of yours just where he suggests.

‘And now, I believe, all is prepared. Is all prepared, Doctor? Yes, all is prepared. That most powerful of sorcerers, the Doctor, will now begin to be about his conjuration. . .’

If one is sworn to tell the truth – as I myself am in all things – then one must occasionally relate of things that are entirely inexplicable, or at the very least as hard to swallow whole as a Stygian clampet – that single creature which lives upon the world of Stygia, having consumed all else, and was, at last known measurement, some five hundred and fifty-thousand leagues wide.

Such an instance, I must say, is the way in which the Doctor effected our escape from the Inner Court. It is years since then, and, try as I might, I simply cannot fathom how such an errant piece of what was, on the face of it, sheer stupidity, could ever possibly have worked.

As I stood there spouting sheerest nonsense, the Doctor, as has been told, managed in some way to extricate himself from the soldiers who were holding him, and thereafter succeeded in evading leather-clad guard after guard. As he did so, he busied himself moving various repulsive items in the chamber around, seemingly for no reason whatsoever. A bone-inlaid table here, a rack of dangling whips there, the partial remains of a tortured corpse to some other and extingent locale..

As these matters progressed, it seemed to become easier for him to do such things – so much so that by the end he was able to position several guardsmen where he wanted them to be, while they looked on dumbly behind their leather masks and waited for some Imperial order that never came. It was as if, by the end, the Doctor had, indeed, the chamber entire under a spell the like of which I'd talked of in my wild and quite frantic improvisation.

I would have liked to believe that my own words played some small part in achieving this strange state – but on reflection I believe that just isn't so. I sometimes wonder, though, just what it was that had me pulling such ultimately apposite words and ideas from the very air. I almost believe, sometimes, that in some way of which even he himself was unaware, the Doctor had made his mind and

intentions known to me, in some manner of speaking that was unrelated to what we know of as speech.

So, how was this spell cast? How did the Doctor get away with it? Well, having racked my brain for years, I first say that it was a matter of simple astonishment. The Ambassador Morel, the soldiers and the guards – and certainly the Emperor – simply could not believe that one brought before them would act in such a manner. And, once that initial astonishment had passed, pure curiosity had them watching just to see what might happen. By way of much clowning and gesticulation, the Doctor contrived to evidence no sense of being threatening at all – and, after all, what kind of threat could he ultimately present with such a weight of armed men on hand?

All such is just puffanstuff and speculation. In the end, I fear, I can only ask you to believe that for some small while the Doctor was allowed to roam the chamber unmolested, changing the position of a table here, a whip rack there, some pitiable dreg of ill-used mankind somewhere else, until the point in the proceedings where he paused and, as I say, went about his actual conjurations with a will.

‘What *happened* back there?’ Anji gasped as they ran through the corridors of the palace. ‘What did you do? You were running around like something demented, then you shoved at one of the guards and everything went crazy!’

The chaos of events in the Inner Court still raged in her mind, like one of those fever dreams where image upon disjointed image pile up before the mind’s eye in a nauseating, strobing mass that doesn’t even have the saving grace of dream logic. People and objects flailing, falling and tangling up among each other, a blaze of energy weapons’ discharge that seemed to mow all in its path down indiscriminately while, miraculously, missing the Doctor and his friends as though they were shielded by a collection of personal force-field bubbles. The Doctor taking hold of her and hustling her back through the door through which they’d come in. . .

‘It came to me in a flash,’ the Doctor enthused proudly, bounding athletically along as if this were merely a bracing jog through the park. He was probably hoping for the local equivalent of a dip in the Serpentine in the near future. He didn’t seem out of breath in the slightest. ‘I had this flash of insight into how I could modify the iterations of the immediate probability space. It’s like that game children play where they set up a complicated arrangement of. . .’ He frowned. ‘You know, those little plaques with spots on them that you play a game with. Just don’t expect me to be able to do it on demand. Or ever

again, it seems. Oh, well.'

Behind them, Fitz was casting glances behind him as he ran, no doubt anticipating the sudden signs of pursuit. His pace was being slowed – as was that of all of them – by the rotund form of Jamon de la Rocas, which didn't appear to be exactly built for running, and was already wheezing and gasping like an asthmatic steam locomotive. Anji felt nothing in particular for the man either way, for all it seemed that he had played some small, vague part in their escape, but she knew that the Doctor would never dream of leaving him behind to fend for himself. And neither, in the end, could she. It was just that having a sense of ethics could be a decided inconvenience at times.

'We're making good time, nonetheless,' the Doctor said. Again, there was that slightly disquieting sense of his finishing a conversation that had never been spoken aloud. 'If we can backtrack to the place where you were being held, I think I can get us where we're going before they manage to raise any widespread alarm.'

'And where exactly are we going?' Anji asked.

'I'd have thought that would be perfectly obvious,' said the Doctor.

The confusion in the Inner Court was still, in fact, to some extent under way as little ripples of iterative chaos theory played themselves out. One of the bandsmen, who had thus far survived physically unscathed, attempted to climb from under a guard who had fallen on him and stand up, caught his piccolo-like sidearm on one of the buckles strapping the guard into his leather, and shot himself in the foot. He *then* hopped back with a yelp, smacking against a hanging torture victim, whose lifeless body swung to topple the single occasional table still standing, which supported a heavy vase, which fell to brain yet another bandsman who had been on the point of returning to consciousness. . .

After a while, very carefully, the Ambassador Morel climbed to his feet. An energy weapon, possibly a harmonica gauge, had taken him neatly in the upper right arm. The wound had cauterised, but the pain was intense. Around him, those guards and bandsmen who had survived were finally on the point of pulling themselves together.

On his skeletal divan, the Emperor was staring numbly at the stump of a hand that had been sliced cleanly off. He swatted viciously at his female servants, who had miraculously remained unscathed (at least so far as recent events were concerned) as they fussed over him, and lurched up in a tottering but incandescent rage.

'I will have them found!' he shrieked. 'You will have them brought to me! Oh, I'll teach them how it falls to despoil the Imperial member! Such excruciation shall I contrive that the very gods themselves shall –'

‘Oh, do shut up,’ Morel told him. ‘Remember that you practise your little hobbies at my indulgence. You *live* on my sufferance, come to that.’ He smiled prissily. ‘Never fear. The miscreants shall be brought to what passes for justice. I know, after all, to precisely where they will be heading.’

‘You’re lost, aren’t you?’ said Anji. ‘Go on, admit it, you’ve got us lost.’

‘Not at all,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re very close, now. I can feel it.’

Anji forbore to comment. They had reached the Chamber of Transference without encountering any undue problems. There had been a few dicey moments in sneaking past the soldiers barracked there, but in the end it had been easier than she’d expected. Whatever alerts and alarms were being instigated, they obviously hadn’t made it this far.

Now they were in a network of functionally drab maintenance tunnels. Anji formed the impression that they were now some way underground, but for the rest of it, the tunnels were a maze of twisting branches and she had lost whatever sense of direction she might have had if she had known a thing about their location in the first place. The Doctor, she supposed, might have a more finely tuned instinct in that department – but that would do them no good at all if the tunnel they were in didn’t actually lead anywhere.

‘I trust you’ll not find this an impecunious question,’ said Jamon de la Rocas, who it seemed to Anji was making a great show of his fortitude at keeping up with Anji, Fitz and the Doctor, despite the fact that they had long slowed to barely more than a walking pace, ‘but does the remotest possibility occur that our perambulatory excesses might be nearing some properly apt degree of termination?’

‘Pardon?’ said Anji.

‘Are we nearly there yet, I think he means,’ said Fitz.

‘Nearly there,’ the Doctor said with cheerful reassurance. He had found a doorway. He looked through it. ‘Only this isn’t it.’

This was a chamber filled with cages something like those Fitz and Anji had been put into in the Chamber of Transference. Here, however, there was a single occupant to each cage, and that occupant was surrounded by strange-looking items of machinery that bleeped and gurgled happily as they exchanged fluids via clear but fleshy-looking tubes.

Anji stared through the doorway at the cages. ‘Those are...’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘The same creatures that overran the TARDIS, the ones that followed us out. I was told that creatures of this sort were routinely put to death. I assumed they had been.’

‘Maybe they’re doing experiments on them,’ Anji said. ‘Something like secret government alien autopsies at Roswell. We saw what that so-called Em-

peror of theirs got up to...’ She shuddered a little at the memory of it. ‘And something like that would be right up his street.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the Doctor, thoughtfully. ‘Do you see those wounds? They’ve been patched up. This is more medical than experimental surgery...’

It was at that point that a man entered the chamber from another door. He was dressed in blood-red robes and instead of a speculum he wore a collection of what appeared to be miniature telescopes attached to his hat, but there was no mistaking that he was the local equivalent of a surgeon, scientific or otherwise.

The Doctor pulled Anji back from the doorway.

‘This is something we can think about at another time,’ he told her. ‘When we’ve all had a chance to think things through and decide what should be done. For the moment let’s just concentrate on getting out of our immediate troubles.’

At last, after several more wrong turnings and diversions, the precise nature of which need not concern us,¹⁰ the Doctor and his friends found the spiral ramp that led up into the apartments of the Ambassador Morel.

‘There she is!’ the Doctor exclaimed enthusiastically, pointing to the TARDIS. ‘I knew they wouldn’t have moved her. That Morel chap struck me as a one not to let go of something that he’s put his mind on...’

‘How right you are, Doctor,’ said the Ambassador Morel, stepping from behind a curtain across an alcove. Several other curtains swept back to reveal a number of battered but patently alive, angry and considerably reinforced bandsmen. Reinforced in numbers, that is, and in the general strength of the weaponry they carried such as rapid-fire harmoniums, maraca-grenades and tuba-bazookas.

‘You certainly took your time, Doctor,’ said Morel. ‘We’ve been waiting here for quite some while. The time for games is over, as are tricks, deceits and so-called sorceries. You appear to value the lives of your friends if not your own, so if you don’t open your magic box *now* they will die. I apologise for having to put the matter so bluntly, but I’ve had quite enough. It’s as simple as that.’

The Doctor looked in Morel’s eyes and, evidently, decided that the Ambassador was not lying. He walked to the TARDIS door. ‘I have to warn you,’ he said, mildly, his hand on the latch, ‘that I have no idea what might come out at this point.’

‘I believe,’ said Morel, ‘that I’ll take my chances. Open the door.’

‘Well, just don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ The Doctor closed his eyes as though to shield them from some potential and unknowable blast, wrenched the door open and stepped sharply out of the way.

Absolutely nothing happened.

‘Well, I have to admit, that was a bit anticlimactic,’ said the Doctor. He seemed disappointed rather than anything else. ‘Oh, well, I’ve always said that it takes a –’

There was a sound. A sound so hideous – something between a glutinous roar and a shriek – that nothing could be as terrible as the images it conjured up.

And then something every bit as terrible as those images burst from the TARDIS, closely followed by something different in actual form but of equal or even surpassing hideousness. And a worse one followed after that.

The bandsmen reacted instantly and automatically, blazing away with their lethal instruments. One of them frantically worked the action on his repeating penny whistle, before a monstrous creature fell upon him and bit his head off.

‘Come along!’ Anji realised that the Doctor had somehow spirited himself across the gap between the TARDIS and herself, Fitz and Jamon de la Rocas, as if by magic, and was urging her towards it. ‘I think we’ll all of us make it if we’re quick.’

‘Fall back!’ the Ambassador Morel was shouting from somewhere nearby. ‘Fall back!’

‘Are you mad?’ Anji asked the Doctor as a concussion from the pitched if somewhat cramped battle between bandsman and monster nearly knocked her off her feet. ‘There are more of those. . . *things* in there. We’ll all die!’

‘I. . . don’t think so,’ the Doctor said, an energy beam from an automatic sousaphone fizzing past his left ear. ‘It’s hard to explain, but I think we’ll be all right. Look at it this way: it’s certain death to stay *here*, so at this point we might as well take a leap into the unknown.’

[In Transition]

In my time, may I say, I have had the pleasure of travelling in quite some various enumeration of conveyances, carriages and suchlike vehicular contrivances. I have hung, precariously, from the Dangling Howdahs that depend from the great sky elephants that soar majestically over the pampas veldts of the Suminarian Panaplectorates, by means of the methane-filled bladder sacs that those remarkable creatures utilise for that purpose, and woe betide the poor unfortunate who might find himself in a position directly under them when a certain call of nature might make its effect quite abruptly known.

I have stood on the observation deck of a Doprovanian mole train as it industriously chews through the living rock that divides one BUBBLE-cavern habitation from another. (The commonality of that world believe that the universe itself consists of such BUBBLE caverns in an infinity of rock, the truth of such matters being known only to a select few.) The view from that observation deck, unsurprisingly, perhaps, was not of particular note.

I have found myself on self-sufficient siege engines, each the size of a city – as a passenger and, briefly, as one of the treadmill slaves that propelled the engine into battle. I have inhabited cabins that have been forcibly inserted within the bowels of a living, ambulatory Glastrali Behemoth; I have hazarded my life on the great Slipstream Rafts that perpetually surf the riptides that girdle the water globe of Guli; I have even found myself exploded from the horrifying maw of a gigantic cannon in a projectile bound for some world or other's moon.

All of which is to the purpose that I have travelled more than most, by means that provoke looks of askance at the merest telling of them, but I have yet to encounter an egress, the means of which confounded the sensibility and the expectation so, as that of the Doctor and his so-called TAR.DIS...

‘I just *knew* we’d be all right,’ the Doctor said, looking over such controls as still seemed to remain undamaged. ‘I can’t put it any other way than that. It’s the same way that you can walk into a room and feel it welcome you or not, or know whether you’d be happy in a house, or look at someone or something and tell instantly if it’s friendly. . .’

Fitz looked around at the remains of the creatures that littered the console room, and thought that ‘friendly’ was not exactly the word that came to mind. There were no marks of violence on the remains, nothing to indicate just what precisely had killed them, but there was a certain crumbling, rotting quality that, on the whole, had the mind thinking that it would be far better off thinking about something else. Anything else would probably do.

‘The thing I’ve noticed about people and things who look friendly,’ he said, ‘is that most of the time they turn round and try to bite your head off and eat it.’

‘There is that, I suppose.’ The Doctor regarded a fallen creature. ‘On the other hand, when this chap’s fellows came bursting out I could see that they were on their last legs – or tentacles, or pseudophilia or whatever. It seemed reasonable to assume that the old girl had done *something* to protect herself from the interlopers. Some form of blanket particle emission that accelerated physical ageing, perhaps.’

Fitz noticed that the Doctor was personifying the TARDIS again, as though it were some living thing as opposed to a machine. He did this sporadically, seemingly at random, and seemed completely unaware in himself that he was doing it. It was either some latent piece of personality resurfacing, some profound and mystical link between Doctor and TARDIS, or merely random noise produced by a still somewhat fragmentary personality. Fitz didn’t know enough about such things to say.

‘Well, let’s just hope *she* knows who her friends are,’ he said aloud. ‘I don’t know about you, but I quite like the age I am *now*, thank you very much.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that,’ the Doctor said, peering at a still-operational display. ‘From what I can make out, time manipulation as such doesn’t seem to be an option any more. Not for the foreseeable future, at least.’

‘The creatures wrecked the controls?’ Fitz said with a sinking feeling. It is one thing, after all, to find oneself wandering erratically through the universe at the whim of forces one does not quite understand – but it’s another to understand that the agent of those forces is quite definitively broken.

‘Not exactly,’ the Doctor said, still watching the display. ‘It seems that, before they died, the creatures were trying to make certain modifications, trying to subvert some basic processes to some end I can’t, I’m afraid, make head or tail of – but that’s not the problem.’

‘The problem being?’ Fitz said.

‘The problem being that this whole galactic zone – the spatial hypersphere encapsulating what they call the Empire – seems to exist in a state of sprained space-time. It’s a bit like pulling too hard on one of those plastic loops you sometimes find around aluminium cans. We noticed it before, if you’ll remember, but I didn’t realise the scale of it. It might be a result of this Transference I’ve been hearing so much about – or that might have evolved as a result of that primal state. In any event, here and now, the fact is that the manipulation of higher dimensional sets, the manipulation of Time – even something so simple as exceeding the speed of light – is impossible.’

‘I don’t want to be the one to tell you, Doctor,’ said Fitz, ‘but, well, uh. . .’ He gestured to where the time rotor, the central column by which the TARDIS manipulated space and time, rose and fell in a laboured and fitful but patently functional manner.

‘That’s a part of it,’ said the Doctor. ‘What we’re doing, here and now, is flatly, physically impossible – and that basic impossibility is causing very real damage. It’s setting up disturbances in – well, not time as such, but what we might as well call *sequentiality*. I’ve been feeling the effects myself – a somewhat erratic phasing in and out of my persona into what might have been past lives, future lives or someone else’s life entirely. I had an all but irresistible urge, for example, back among those soldiers on Shakrath, to set about purloining one of their penny whistles. It’s affecting Anji and yourself, Fitz, but the effects are quite subtle, like playing a familiar tune but with the occasional off-note – the occasional segue into or repetition of phrases and passages that should have come earlier, or later, or never at all. . .’

The Doctor stepped around the central console and stopped before a monitor screen that Fitz, for one, could have sworn hadn’t even been *there* before, let alone in a state of sudden repair. He noticed that several of the dead and rotting creatures that had filled the chamber, when he first had entered, had vanished quietly away.

‘It’s affected the TARDIS itself,’ the Doctor continued, watching the monitor, which showed a continually shifting collection of branching lines and nodes. ‘That’s what, I think, allowed the Vortex Wraiths to access some of the deep-substructive processes and manifest themselves. They weren’t mere abominations – what we felt when we saw them was a reaction to what were, effectively, physical machines meant to house those that were never meant to exist on the physical plane in the first place. Even such a translaminary quasi-space as the TARDIS interior, do you follow me?’

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Fitz. ‘You lost me somewhere around “substructive”. Is that actually a word?’

‘The on-board repair mechanisms seem to be handling things,’ the Doctor said, as if he hadn’t heard, ‘but the fact remains that if we attempt to push

things too far we might end up disappearing up our own singularity and, probably, take this entire section of the universe with us. And I think we've all had quite enough of *that* for a while. We can't stay here, though. This Ambassador Morel is no doubt busily trying to lever off the roof as we speak – it won't do him any good, of course, but such things are hardly conducive to an atmosphere of peace and quiet.' The Doctor frowned. 'Time travel is right out, and I doubt if we can make any significant distance, in galactic terms, in our present state. For the moment, I think, our best bet might be a simple point-to-point jump to somewhere relatively safe and out of the way. Somewhere we can catch our bearings and give the TARDIS time to heal.'

It was hard to tell, Anji thought, what was the more worrying: the remains of the creatures and the damage they had done, or the fact that they and it were vanishing softly and silently away, as if they had all come face to face with a Boojum. There was the sense of things being done while the back was turned, a not unfriendly but somewhat pointed sense that certain things were none of your business.

The door to what had once been the Stellarium was simply gone. Anji had half expected to find a congealed lump of some unearthly, unidentifiable matter, the TARDIS equivalent of a healing wound, but instead there was merely a flat expanse of wall, and a table with a potted aspidistra. The chamber that she used as a bedroom seemed precisely as she had left it – suspiciously so, as if a copy had been made of it in such detail that it was impossible to be sure if the feeling that it was not the original was actual or mere paranoia. There was a scene in some old sci-fi movie she recalled sitting through, where the inhabitants of a town were being taken over by pod people from the planet Zlorgon, or wherever it was, where the hero explains that the original version of a character had a birthmark in some out-of-the-way place. The terrifying thing, apparently, was that the pod person copy had *exactly the same mark*. . .

It was the little things that got to you in the end, Anji thought. Big and obvious things could be prepared for, and reacted to consciously; it was the subtleties you didn't consciously notice, yet to which you remained sensitive, that set you on edge.

Of course, some people tended to have the subtlety and sensitivities of a half-brick.

In those last confusing seconds on Shakrath, when the Doctor had hustled them into the TARDIS, Jamon de la Rocas had gone along with them on the basis that, in the end, there was really nowhere else for him to go. Or, as he himself had put it, 'In such a predicament, I feel, it cannot but be anything other than right – nay, indeed, a positive *duty* – to comport my presence to that of such worthy companions, and thus to offer any small subsidy of assistance

such as might prove to be at my command. . . ’ There had been a lot more of it, but the general gist of things was that, so far as de la Rocas was concerned, he was doing them a favour by joining them and having it away on the variously applicable toes.

Now he stared about himself at the creeper-hung chamber eyes alight with the cheerful, shallow kind of wonder of a child who has seen some new thing and finds it quite impressive, but is completely incapable of thinking about what he’s seeing in any deeper sense.

‘This is most extraordinary,’ he said, ‘and, frankly, my dear, not a little unbelievable.’

They were in an arboretum of sorts, but instead of shrubs and trees there were organic-looking filigrees of golden wire which had a scintillating quality about them and seemed to hum with half-heard voices. The Doctor had once described this chamber as a manifestation of TARDIS extelligence, which Anji thought of in terms of an incredibly advanced neural net.

‘When I first met this Doctor of yours,’ Jamon continued, in the tones of one simply talking for the entertainment value of being heard to speak, ‘I must confess that I thought him merely from some hole-and-corner province of Shakrath itself. Now I see, now I can only but presume, that he must come from what in worlds and times gone by were called the Unseen Lands, of which in my youth I heard many and diverse tales.’ He gestured grandly about him. ‘To travel in an engine of such technological advancement, by means that not even the most puissant Technomage in all the Empire could fathom! A very marvel of contrivance! Of course to the credulous, to yourself, it must no doubt seem like purest magic. . . ’

Since she had first met Jamon de la Rocas, Anji had been on the receiving end of the distinct impression that the man had constantly been barely half a sentence away from telling her not to overheat her brain with questions that were more properly meant for the menfolk, and telling her to go and make him whatever the Imperial equivalent was of a cup of tea. Now, hearing the plummy condescension in his voice, she was reminded of the comments of any number of elderly, male relatives in her life before the age of seventeen, when she had packed her bags and got the hell out.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ she said, with the kind of smooth sugariness that would have any reasonable listener picking the direction of suitable hills for an immediate and speedy egress. ‘I’m sure your own people are just as advanced in their own way. How does this Transference of yours work again?’

Jamon, at some length, described the processes of Transference within the Empire. Anji got the impression that he was trying to blind her with what passed for science there.

‘So let me get that straight. . . ’ she said at last, when he had finished. ‘The

bodies are destroyed at one end and rebuilt at the other, so nothing physical actually travels?’

‘The Soul travels,’ said Jamon de la Rocas.

‘Does it really?’ said Anji. ‘So what exactly do you *mean* when you say Soul?’

‘I mean the Soul,’ said Jamon, a little uncertainly in the manner of one who has just had the inkling of a self-referential flaw in the argument previously too big to be noticed. ‘The indefinable essence of Man. . .’

‘Well, that’s just the point, isn’t it?’ Anji said brightly. ‘The whole indefinability of it? OK, so *information* is transferred, but what if that information’s only on the level of – I don’t know – words in a letter? The person who sent it isn’t actually *there* when you read a letter, is he? You say you’ve travelled – so called – to several worlds; well, I’m sure you’ve run into the occasional big religious argument about what happens when you die on those worlds?’

‘I have heard such things,’ Jamon began. ‘The Oscillating Monks of Rabmaka, for but one example, hold that –’

‘So what makes you think that being sliced up and vaporised with energy beams is any different? Something’s transmitted, sure, but at best it would be a more complex equivalent of radio voices from something long dead, yes?’

Jamon was beginning to bluster now. ‘The bodies built from atoms are perfect and complete, divine attractors for the ineffable quality that –’

‘I’m sure that you’ve encountered twins, too,’ said Anji. ‘Physically, they’re completely Identical. Are they one and the same person? Here’s a thought: suppose you’re Transferring somewhere quick and local – five minutes away, say – and there’s a cock-up somewhere down the line. The next thing you know, you get the message that you’ve arrived, but you’re going to have to wait and be destroyed when they get around to fixing the energy beams? How would you feel about that?’

‘That would never. . .’ Jamon said. ‘That would. . .’

‘So, yes, OK, maybe something really does travel. I can’t say for sure that it doesn’t. I’m just saying that the odds are stacked against it. You really should consider the possibility that what you’ve really been doing in your so-called travels is committing a particularly gruesome form of suicide, while somewhere else, something else is cobbled together and loaded up with a collection of false, dead memories –’

The slap was more shocking than painful. Thinking about it later, Anji judged it to be the inept and somewhat conflicted slap of someone who had never, really, done something similar in his life. In the anger of the moment, though, she automatically went into a classic self-defence-class stance.

‘Touch me again and I’ll kill you,’ she said. ‘I’ll kill you if you touch me again.’

Jamon de la Rocas was looking at his hand with a sense of horrified puzzlement, as though wondering how he could have possibly done such a thing. Abruptly, he dropped it and became utterly cold and formal.

‘Madam,’ he said stiffly, ‘words cannot express my shame at such a despicable act. I can only hope that with time you might find it in your heart to forgive me. I shall take my leave of you now.’

With that, he turned on his heels and strode off, leaving Anji, fists clenched, trying to work out what she was thinking from a confusing mess of hot and angry emotion.

‘Are we having fun yet?’ said a voice.

Still hyped up from adrenaline, Anji gave a startled little yip of fear. She turned to see the Doctor wandering out from a clump of quasi-floral golden wiring. Anji hadn’t seen him come into the arboretum; there was probably another door into it, off to one side.

‘I do try not to be judgemental about such things,’ he said blandly, ‘but I have to say that was a particularly vicious and cruel thing to do.’

Anji rubbed at her cheek. ‘It didn’t hurt, really. It just stung a bit.’

‘If you say so,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ve mentioned how certain aspects of local space-time might be affecting us adversely, but ultimately that’s really no excuse.’ He shrugged to himself, dismissing the matter, for the moment, from consideration. ‘I simply came to warn you that we’ll be materialising soon – and, the way things are at the moment, we could be materialising into anything. Of course, that’s not necessarily a bad thing, or anything much out of the ordinary at all – that being rather the *definition* of “anything” in the end.’

2

No Shakrath

Burning with fever and babbling incoherently, Anok Dha slithered through the thorny undergrowth. His body was slick with sweat, blood and infection, the rags that barely covered it filthy and in shreds. His left hand – broken as it was – was buried in what remained of his furred tunic, clutching something the nature of which was not immediately apparent to his heaving, raffling chest. Though there was no light, here in the woods, some nonexistent watcher might have seen his eyes, wide and burning.

By now, of course, he was almost completely mad.

Behind him shafts of hard, bright light scythed through the woods; the night was alive with things tearing through the underbrush, the shouting of what may or may not have been men, the excited yelping of dogs.

A root twisted under Anok Dha's foot and he pitched forward, flinging out his hands to take the impact – the object he had clutched so desperately to him flying from them. A shard of some mirror-bright matter that was not stone, or wood, or bone – a substance that resided in some place relative to any other substance known to man as a diamond might be to cheese made from the milk of a ring-tailed lemur.

Anok Dha tore several of the remaining nails from his fingers as he scabbled through the roots and undergrowth, looking for the object. The men from the Citadel and their dogs were very close when he at last found it. He tucked it back inside his furred tunic and set off running again, running headlong.

As the last member of his settlement left alive, the last guardian of the shard for which that settlement had been razed, the burden of its keeping had fallen upon him. His life was of no matter, now, but the shard must be made safe at all costs.

There were sounds, here in the forest. Fitz had once heard the word 'whippoorwill' and vaguely understood that it was a bird or a kind of tree frog or something like that, and what with one thing and another had never bothered to look it up. The word, though, conjured up uneasy overtones of something else, something that might whip its scaly tail out of the darkness of the trees, noose it around your neck and jerk you up into that darkness.

The things calling to each other in the forest sounded exactly like that.

The trees were wrong, too, their trunks and branches of some hard and fibrous variety of fungus rather than wood, growing on some principle other than fractal divergence. He had forgotten how the subtle bits of *wrongness* on an alien world bit deep into the mind – so deep that it took quite some length of time for that mind to even to wonder about it in the first place. The slightly fungoid wood gave off a pale phosphorescence, like the ghosts of silver birches, so that you could see enough to walk through them while knowing nothing of what might lie beyond.

Something in the nearby, fernlike undergrowth rattled like a seven-armed snake playing the maracas. Fitz shivered with something other than the cold, bitter enough though it was, and thrust his hands into the pockets of his big coat. He was dressing in seventies styles at the moment, still having the attachment of an outsider to that era, not having lived through it the first time.

‘So you have no idea where we are?’ he asked the Doctor.

‘Not exactly.’ The Doctor himself seemed happy enough. With his lank curls and current, slightly battered and shabbified bottle-green dandification he might have been a less consumptive Byron strolling by Lake Geneva and thinking of giving Mrs Shelly some rather startling ideas. ‘Ordinarily, I think, the TARDIS manages to *read* a planet, if you get what I mean. Picks up radio broadcasts, scans any computer or satellite communications systems it might find, even analyses the layouts of cities and settlements, and pulls out meaningful bits of useful information. I think there’s a big database or something like that in her memory. Whatever other damage those creatures did with their incursion, though, I think they’ve damaged that. Or this is simply a place where even settlements don’t exist. It’s not working, I think, in any event. All I can tell you is that we’ve travelled... several light years in *space* from Shagrath, but not in time.’

Fitz dispiritedly noted the number of ‘thinks’ creeping into the Doctor’s speech. There had been a time, once, when the Doctor had *known* things, any number of things, with such a flat if oblique certainty that you trusted him on them instinctively, even if what he told you sounded like pure gibberish. Then he had lost his memory almost completely – so completely that he had been genuinely astonished, over a long period of years, that something so basic as his own body hadn’t aged and died over those years. Quite how he had managed to go for so long, without it so much as occurring to him to wonder about the physical fact of having two or more of certain things, where other people had only one, was probably best left unpondered.

In a way, thought Fitz gloomily, it would almost be a relief if the Doctor lapsed completely back into that amnesia. In his current state things were coming back to him constantly, but in a garbled fashion so that even the Doctor

himself could not divine the ultimate truth of them. This led to a degree of erratic behaviour, to say the least.

The sensible thing, having materialised in this unknown place, would have been to sit tight and wait for the TARDIS to complete whatever obscure healing processes it was going through. The Doctor, on the other hand, had become all but terminally restless in a matter of minutes. There was a whole new world out there to explore, he had said, no doubt full of delights and exciting perils and whatnot, so what were they all doing sitting here?

‘Let’s just see if we can’t find any locals around to ask, yes? I’m almost positive the locals will be friendly.’ The Doctor tramped on ahead, whistling cheerfully.

Fitz hung back a little and glanced to where Anji and the stranger they had met on Shakrath, Jamon de la Rocas, were contriving to ignore each other pointedly – de la Rocas with an operatic kind of nose-high silent umbrage about him, though Anji was holding her end up very well in the enthusiastic-amateur league. It seemed that both of them were walking together, almost side by side, for the express purpose of making it quite clear that each was not talking to the other.

Fitz was aware that Anji had taken against de la Rocas from the start for some reason, but he had no idea of what had caused this active hostility and was a little frightened to ask. The guy had probably not read some recent article in *Cosmopolitan* or something like that.¹¹

‘You’ve travelled in this Empire of yours, haven’t you?’ Fitz asked Jamon de la Rocas, falling into step with him and ignoring a little Anji-related sniff nearby. ‘Can you tell where we are by the stars or something?’

‘But of course, my dear sir!’ Jamon de la Rocas paused and gazed theatrically skywards. ‘You will note, of course,’ he continued chattily, ‘that I am bringing into play all the optological faculty at my command, learned at the hand of none other than the High Court Astrologer of Drustiri – a man so impressed by my acumen in this area, mark you, that on completion of our discourse he presented me with a small astrolabe from his own private collection! Long since lost, of course, in circumstances that are neither here nor there. And do you know what such skills and not to mention natural acumen tell me?’

‘What do they tell you?’ Fitz asked.

‘That it is dark and the heavens are obscured by a vegetative canopy. I thus infer that we are in a forest at night.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ said Fitz.

‘You’re quite, quite welcome, my good sir,’ said Jamon de la Rocas.

A thought occurred to Fitz.

'Your people get around by way of this Transference thing, right?' he asked Jamon. 'With all these Chambers and Stations and stuff. So couldn't there be any number of other worlds, worlds like this, in the same area of space? Worlds you wouldn't know about because they don't show up in the map, or whatever it is you use?'

'Indeed there could,' said Jamon thoughtfully. 'Although how would men get to them across the vast and breathless night? Some kind of tin capsule fired from a massive ordnance?' He chuckled. 'Such a thing, I have to tell you, is frankly unbelievable – though I do in fact recall a time...'

They walked on through the woods. Ahead of them, the dark form of the Doctor meandered about in a way that reminded Fitz uneasily of an inquisitive terrier.

'Am I the only one who gets worried about stuff like this?' he asked quietly, slowing to fall in step with Anji.

Anji shrugged. 'It's when he starts going after rabbits you should start to worry,' she said.

As if on cue, the Doctor came bounding back through the woods. 'There's a clearing of sorts up ahead,' he said enthusiastically. 'A fire and what appear to be caravans. Do you think it's worth a look?'

In a sulphur-reeking bedchamber in the higher promontories of the Citadel of Souls, the old High Ambassador Elect lay dying. He had been dying for quite some time, now, although perhaps a more correct term would be *being killed*.

‘Come along, now,’ said his aide, Gamak, soothingly, forcing the wooden spoon full of nourishing gruel into the Ambassador’s mouth despite all feeble, blatting attempts to push it away. ‘You have to keep your strength up. Who knows what might happen if you don’t keep your strength up, yes?’

‘Muh, muth-muh,’ said the High Ambassador. He had long since lost the power of coherent speech. ‘Mugh muh-muh muh *muh*-muh!’

‘That’s easy for you to say,’ said his aide with mock severity, such as a nurse might use to buck up the spirits of a declining patient. ‘Personally, I can’t *wait* until you’re up and around again. Do you realise how onerous it has been, having to perform your Ambassadorial duties while you remain *in absentia*¹² like this?’

‘Muh muh!’ said the High Ambassador, defiantly. ‘Muh-mugh-*muh* muh muh muh!’

The aide grew tired of his nasty little game. The old man clearly had but hours now, if not minutes. He dropped the bowl and spoon of nourishing gruel (so nourishing, in fact, that it was a host to entire seething colonies of lethal bacterial organisms) and carefully wiped his hands. He wandered across the chamber to where a looking glass was affixed to the wall, regarded his reflection. Crude lines and whorls had been tattooed upon his face some years before, matching, so far as the human hand was capable, those similar markings on the face of the old Ambassador. In a certain sense, as he looked at the bedchamber, it appeared to contain two versions of the same man, one wasted away to nothing, the other in hale if somewhat stringy middle age. His head, as was custom, was shaved bald, though the first new shoots of stubble were evident. His black and elegant robes had a slightly rudimentary look about them, as though they were not quite as black or elegant as they hoped.

‘For centuries, now,’ the aide said, ostensibly for the old High Ambassador’s hearing but in fact for his own, musing aloud, ‘we have kept the flame alive, passing down the rituals, passing down the faces and names...’ He put a

hand to his marked face, gently tugged it as if it were some pliant mask. 'And now, at last, the Engine of Transubstantiation is almost whole again. The final piece has been located, and soon it shall be returned to us and joined. The Engine shall be repaired. As good as new.'

'Muh muh-muh. Muh muh muh. . .'

The aide paused in his musings for a moment, considering. Then, with a shrug, he walked back to the bed and took up one of the pillows that were scattered across the counterpane.

'I take your name, now,' he said, pressing it to the feebly jerking face of the old High Ambassador. 'I take all your title.'

The clearing was much as the Doctor had described – which made it all the more puzzling that, having seen it, he had taken them in the wrong direction for a while, slapped his head, taken them in a completely *different* wrong direction, backtracked, and finally hit the spot more or less by accident.

'Are you all right?' Fitz had asked him. 'I mean, it's not just that you're going mad on us, it's like you're going mad on us in different *ways*, like different people are doing it. . .'

'I. . .' The Doctor had paused, and frowned in a genuine puzzlement of his own. 'Things seem to be surfacing, but from the wrong *directions*, if you get me. Have you been following my speech patterns? I know for a fact that I've been using different constructions more or less at random. That definitely seems the sign of an unbalanced mind. I wonder what's causing it. Oh, well. . .'

Fitz wasn't quite sure what worried him most: the fact that the Doctor had pinpointed what was happening to him with the sort of sudden and transient lucidity of the seriously schizophrenic, or the fact that, having realised it, he didn't seem to care. Then again, Fitz thought to himself, who am I to judge comparative mental states? What with one thing and another, I have the memories of someone anywhere between a year and several hundred years old.

The clearing was occupied by a number of covered wagons that, for all their construction, were reminiscent of conveyances of the old West. With tarpaulins stretched over a simple frame, they held something of the Romany caravan about them. Intricate stitchwork on the canopies showed what from a distance, in the flickering light from the fire in the centre of the clearing, looked worryingly like an assemblage of grotesque figures at some ritual sacrifice. When one got closer, of course, one saw that they were merely pictures of a happy audience enjoying a variety of circus performance. Emphatic lettering, in some indecipherable local language, no doubt told all and sundry the particulars of what marvels to expect.

A number of the beasts that no doubt drew the wagons – in breed a kind of cross between a lemur and a camel – were corralled off to one side. A number of other beasts were roasting on makeshift spits over the big campfire. They had an odd and somewhat repulsive look to human eyes, but that may have been due to the fact that they had been skinned whole, and most human eyes these days don't come much into contact with whole skinned animals. The smell of roasting, notwithstanding any squeamish modern sensibility, was mouthwatering.

A number of people, mostly humaniform, were warming themselves against the night chill by the campfire. Others were warming themselves by practising several of the acts pictured on the wagons. A bearlike man lifted barbells so precisely like those one might find in a cartoon – a pair of globes connected by a pole – that it was almost possible to ignore the fact that he was lifting them with two sets of arms. A trio of conjoined tumblers, connected at the shoulders, practised a pinwheeling routine that gave them the aspect of an ambulatory and slightly less inbred sigil for the Isle of Man.

A lady snake dancer did something quite extraordinary with her serpent¹³ – and you'd have to be watching her for a while and closely, Fitz noticed, to realise that the snake was in fact attached to her. It was a tail.

Children in ragged but relatively clean attire ran squealing and laughing among the adults, who apart from the occasional friendly cuff contrived to ignore them in that casual way that spoke of at least half an eye on them all the time. Used in various travels to sizing up newly encountered communities – when he got the chance and they weren't communities of alien killing machines, or warrior tribes who immediately went on the attack – Fitz formed the impression that these people were almost certainly friendly and harmless.

'Well, these people seem friendly and harmless enough,' the Doctor said cheerfully, echoing the thoughts of his companion almost word for word. He turned back to where Anji and Jamon de la Rocas were still quite obviously not talking to each other. 'I think if we all –'

'Greetings, sir!' The voice was not so much loud as resonant; you could imagine such a voice reaching right past the back of the stalls and into the gods.

'Oh my various gods,' said Anji bad-temperedly. 'There's another one.'

Standing before them was a man of remarkably similar form and rotund girth to de la Rocas. He did not have the facial markings, but the similarity was such that they might have been brothers. He was dressed in worn and ancient but obviously originally expensive finery, including but not limited to a splendid waistcoat on which a number of phoenix-like firebirds swirled.

'My name, sir, is Professor Axon and it my fortune to be leader of sorts to this sorry band of vagabonds.' The man gestured to take in the encampment with

the air of one showing off the most stately court in the known universe. ‘The Miribilis Itinerary of Marvel, Miracle, Terpsichorean Splendour, Prestidigitation, Palmistry, Tumbling, Drollery Costum’d Japery and, I confess, anything else that comes to mind on the spur of the moment.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m the Doctor, and these are my friends and travelling companions, Anji and Fitz.’

‘And I,’ proclaimed Jamon de la Rocas, puffing himself up majestically, ‘am known as –’

‘A clown, eh?’ Miribilis exclaimed. ‘Come to join us, eh, for a life on the open cart track? Well, we can always use more clowns. Your make-up is very impressive, I must say.’

Jamon glared at him with murderous spite, took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

‘I’m afraid we’ve lost our bearings a little,’ the Doctor cut in hurriedly. ‘I’m afraid that, what with one thing and another, we’ve become a little lost. I wonder, Professor, if we might presume upon your good nature and make some small use of your fire?’

‘But of course! One shouldn’t be without warmth and sustenance on a night like this.’ Miribilis became confidential, assuming what he probably thought of as *sotto voce*. ‘Just between ourselves – I wouldn’t want to worry my worthy little troupe unduly, you understand – but these are somewhat dangerous parts. They do tell of a Citadel hereabouts, where an old Order still practises the dark and loathsome arts of the Old Ways.’

The way he said it left not a one unaware of the import of this.

‘The Old Ways?’ asked the Doctor.

‘From the time when Thakrash was a part of the Empire,’ said Miribilis. ‘And bad old days they were, to be sure. Still, we should be safe enough in numbers. Come, share our humble provender, eat, drink and be merry – though though I must warn you, our hospitality comes at a terrible and horrifying price.’

‘Fair enough,’ said the Doctor, cheerfully.

The High Ambassador Elect – the man who had so recently taken upon himself that title – entered the chamber at the very heart of the Citadel of Souls. Even after centuries it still bore the mark of the cataclysm that had partially destroyed it – the repairs, over the years, could never hope to match its original and marvellous construction. Large patches of clean, flat wall were plugged with rough clay brick; the timber roof, when it rained, constantly leaked.

In the centre of the chamber, held together by a conglomeration of supports and clamps, stood the Engine of Transubstantiation – a spire of mirror-bright, alien material, shattered and painstakingly pieced back together. From it there came what can only be called a *soundless* sound. There was nothing audible to the ears of men, but something in the mind could tell that the Engine was emitting a constant whine on some very low, or possibly some very high, level – and that the cracked harmonics of it were in some abstruse manner grating on the Soul itself.

The reconstruction of the Engine was all but complete. A single shard was still missing and, rather in the way that a single scuff can spoil a brand-new pair of shoes, or a single chip can spoil an otherwise pristine porcelain vase, this incompleteness drew the eye and bothered it. It was as if the Engine were something that could exist, in a sense, only if it were whole. A single imperfection, no matter how minute, and it was barely even noteworthy as trash.

The man who now called himself the High Ambassador Elect regarded the defunct Engine thoughtfully. Soon, now. Soon the missing piece would be here and, suitably prepared, it would be fitted into place. And the Engine would bestir itself and awaken. The Transubstantiation would occur. And nothing, quite, the High Ambassador thought, would be the same again.

It was later. Slices of roast beast and fungus bread had been accompanied by the volubility of Professor Axon Miribilis, who had explained some of the history of the world Thakrash. The Doctor had not brought up the fact that his companions and he had come from other planets, but had merely suggested that they came from some long way off and were interested in the particular

versions of well-known stories that might be told in these parts.

Substantively, the tale was simple. Thakrash had once indeed been a part of the Empire, a colony world comprising slaves sent from various other worlds to work on what was effectively a global lumber yard. The Ambassadorial Corps, here, had served in the capacity of drivers – travelling the world in giant stalking machines, entire palaces on telescopic legs, from which they oversaw and administered punishment to the general population. In their resplendent isolation, it seemed, any number of Ambassadors lost all restraint and had abused their power horribly. (A lengthy digression by Miribilis on the fate of such slaves as one particular Ambassador of legend had taken a carnal fancy to quite put Anji off her fungus bread.)

Such a state of affairs might have lasted indefinitely, had not the Thakrash Station of Transference been suddenly destroyed by what Miribilis had termed ‘a star that fell still burning from the sky’. Its destruction had sparked a slave revolt, driving the now all but entirely isolated Ambassadorial masters into hiding – those that survived having their stalking machines pulled down by sheer and angry weight of numbers, in any event.

Since then, for more than five hundred local years, the society of Thakrash had been left alone without Imperial aid or imposition. A forest-track network of settlements had developed, the inhabitants of each living on more or less the same level as that of a medieval hamlet. Sustained travel was rare, though Miribilis recounted several of the small adventures of his travelling band among bandits, brigands and such reprehensible villains who might lure the unwary into their village with promise of wanton Thakrashly pleasures merely to burn them alive in some obscene fertility rite before you could say ‘sacrificial athame’.

‘And now the time has come,’ said. Miribilis, his tone one of slightly disquieting solemnity, ‘for you to pay for your supper.’ Anji got the distinct impression that the other members of the troupe, who had casually shared said supper with them, were now paying close attention. It was not a sense of some impending threat, more of expectancy. All the same, the feeling of being beholden in some as yet unknown way was not exactly comfortable.

‘Delighted to,’ said the Doctor. ‘And what kind of payment would that actually be?’

‘Why, the only coin worth passing between travellers who might chance to meet,’ said Miribilis. ‘Something to while away the hours of the night and light the Soul. A story, and a good one, too. A story of your people. From each of you.’

‘Marvellous!’ said the Doctor. ‘Believe you me, you’ll not find us wanting in that department. Tales to astonish, stagger and amaze by their breadth and erudition shall occur.’

He looked pointedly at Anji.

‘Um...’ Anji racked her brain for a story of suitable astonishment and so forth. For a moment she considered recounting the Exciting Adventure of Han Solo and Jabba the Hutt – something she had sat through repeatedly with her boyfriend Dave, when he had still been alive – but some part of her realised that this would not quite be playing fair.

In the end, she settled for a brief account of the goddess Devi, in the form of Durga, who had been called into life to do battle with the buffalo-demon Mahisha – who by subjecting himself to terrible austerities had become so strong that he could overpower the gods themselves. A slight case of nerves had her losing the thread a bit, and ending up with Devi, in her Kali form, killing her husband Shiva and jumping up and down on him, but nobody seemed to notice overmuch and in the end she even got a small round of applause.

‘If there’s a bad story about a naked, ten-armed, sabre-wielding woman riding on a tiger,’ said Professor Miribilis, ‘I’ve yet to hear it.’

Taking Anji’s example to some extent, Fitz related the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The tale wasn’t particularly well told in itself, but when Fitz spoke of how the best and noblest of intentions can be undermined by human frailties it seemed, to Anji, to be genuinely moving.

From what she could recall, Fitz’s family roots were more Germanic than otherwise, which she supposed would have technically made something like Parsifal and his Ring more appropriate than something from King Arthur.¹⁴ She didn’t know enough about Wagner to tell. The trick here, though, seemed to be to pick a tale that spoke to something in the heart, and gave the listener some insight into it.

In that light, Anji wondered whether her choice of the story of Devi spoke of some unconscious delusion of grandeur, seeing herself as the most powerful of all goddesses, or that some part of her could just get bang behind the idea of laying into all and sundry with a big sword and drinking their blood.

‘I’m not very good at this sort of thing, sorry,’ Fitz said when he had finished.

Professor Miribilis gave him a reassuring smile. ‘Pay no mind to that, sir. You did very well. Now, who’s next?’

In a way that she could not quite put her finger on, Anji thought, it was the good opinion of Miribilis that had in some way become of vital importance. Again, it wasn’t an aggressive feeling as such; more like the fear of some impending desolation if the person you’ve spent three weeks plucking up the courage to ask out for a date refuses you.

Even Jamon de la Rocas seemed to be affected by it. ‘I believe that I might be prevailed upon to hazard some small attempt,’ he said, with a slight but utterly uncharacteristic air of uncertainty.

'By all means!' Miribilis clapped his hands together. 'I am sure it shall without a doubt prove a treat for us all!'

Jamon peered at the other, as though searching his face for anything other than pure and happy encouragement.

'This is, indeed, an old story,' he said at length. 'I was told it long ago. So long ago, in fact, I must confess, that I have recollection of neither precisely where nor when I heard it. . .'

My tale, poor though it is [said Jamon de la Rocas], concerns a stranger who once came to us from the worlds beyond even the farthest borders of the Empire, a region in which who knows what necromancies and magicks may lie? He saved the world of my fathers – or the world of somebody's fathers at the very least – from a great plague, or an invasion of giant arachnid larvae from the cold, bare depths of space – I'm not, I must confess, sure which – and then moved on. This particular tale, however, speaks of his life while beyond the Imperial borders – though how such things might actually be known is a matter quite beyond my guessing. Perhaps he mentioned it at the time.

His mother, so it seems, was a Great Queen of those lands, who one night in her bejewelled bed was visited by a dream of a man who would be called the Healer of Worlds, who came down from the heavens into her womb in the form of a turquoise marsupial. The greatest sages of her land held this and certain other signs to be those of a miraculous conception – this Great Queen being unmarried at the time, of which I gather a certain deal might ordinarily be made. The sages further held that this progeny, should it live, would be the monarch of all lands – but only if he kept himself apart and inviolate from the suffering and misery of the world of men.

Alas, seven days after giving birth to her child, the Great Queen died. It was then that this suckling babe, apparently, first showed his truly otherworldly nature. His soul and body transfigured themselves, took him from the world of men into the Unseen Lands that lie past the sleep of dreams and past the dreamless sleep of death. It is said that the power of his infant yearning to be reunited with the soul of his mother transfigured him so, the better to go looking for her, though he never did find her. Or so they say, of course. Personally, I feel it might be worthwhile to discover just who succeeded to the throne with the infant heir conve-

niently vanished away... But I digress.

Instead of his mother he found The Court of the Invisible King, whose name was Ras. Now, Ras had in mind that his son should become his Regent in the worlds of men, to rule over all his dominion in his name. Mindful of the prophesy that his son must not become aware of the suffering of worlds if he were to rule them, Ras decreed that the infant should be brought up entirely in the Unseen Lands, where all possible pleasures are there for the asking and the words 'grief' and 'death' are forbidden.

As the boy grew, however, something in him yearned to return to the worlds of men. Night and day he asked his father to be allowed to visit them, until in the end Ras was driven to relent. He arranged things so that he took his son to a city on the best of worlds, and saw to it that the streets had been swept clean, the frontages and domiciles regaled with flowers and that the city was emptied of all unpleasant things. All the same, the boy caught sight of an invalid hobbling on his crutches, an old man soiling himself in his forgetfulness and a corpse being taken to the cemetery on its funeral bier – and it shocked him to learn that, in the lands of men, men grew sick, and old, and died.

To distract the boy, who was now a youth, the Invisible King arranged a marriage for him, of a kind, to a most beautiful lady from the Unseen Lands. And in their way of doing things there – I have no idea what that way might be, save that it is not, I suspect, the same manner of relation as between the males and females of the race of men – she bore him a daughter. It amused the youth to play father in this manner – again, as I say, they have a different manner about such things in the Unseen Lands – but his desire to return to the worlds of men grew ever stronger in his breast.

Owing to his especially miraculous nature, the youth was able to wander freely through such areas of the palace as his father kept hidden. On one night, while wandering through these secret places, he came upon a group of dancing girls and servants, sick and exhausted after their exertions of the day, and realised just what it was that the eternal ease and pleasures of the Unseen Lands were founded upon. At the sight of them, he straightaway decided to leave his position, family and offspring to return to the real world of men and learn the truth of it.

He cut his hair, changed his very appearance by certain magical contrivances, and changed his name to the Healer of Worlds – which, so it is said, proved his miraculous nature, since such a title

had been carefully withheld from him by Ras.

In his apprenticeship, the Healer of Worlds became a wandering ascetic, bent upon discovering the true nature of the world. For a hundred years he tried the way of physical hardship, but to no avail. For a hundred years he tried the way of meditation (proof of his divine nature again, I suppose, though in the old stories 'a hundred years' can mean as little as a few waxes of a moon), but again to no avail. At last he realised that, to be a man, one has to hold such things as different sides of the same coin. One must move through the world of men, while keeping peace and honour and all good things in both your head and heart. The Healer of Worlds began to travel again, and to teach what little he might know to those who did not.

In these new travels, it is said that he was hindered by the demon Dominas, who tried to lead him into temptation. Dominas sent his beautiful daughter Kalkalei to seduce the Healer of Worlds, but he resisted her buxom and decidedly forthright charms. Dominas threatened the Healer of Worlds with a host of monstrous devils, from men turned monstrous by way of evil pacts with the Machine Gods, to creatures built whole from primeval filth, to beings made of pure black light whose very touch was choking death. The Healer of Worlds, however, remained unperturbed. He defeated these devils easily, and went on his way.

In final desperation, Dominas hurled the ultimate demonic weapon at the Healer of Worlds – a fiery disc which had the power of cutting through mountains to the core of any world of men – and some say had the power to destroy the Unseen Lands themselves, which are merely a reflection of the dreams of men. The Healer of Worlds merely smiled at this – I fancy that, by this time, to Dominas, it was an utterly infuriating smile – and the Great Disc turned into a canopy of flowers that floated around the Healer of Worlds' head.

At the last – after a thousand years – the Healer of Worlds attained true Enlightenment. He saw the roots of suffering, and saw by what means that suffering might be ended. Now he was left with a choice. He could enter that still and undisturbed state of supreme consciousness and leave the world – or he could renounce deliverance for his own sake and try to show the way to men.

Dominas urged him to make the first choice – for obvious reasons, I suspect – but after much thought on the matter the Healer

of Worlds could not but help choose the second. He took such measures as were necessary to return once again to the world, and to continue his teachings and travels.

And for all I know, he's travelling still.

'There's more, I seem to recall,' said Jamon. 'Something about how this stranger was an aspect of some future, unknowable being who will not only save the world of Men but the universe entire – and that all of these incarnations are but aspects of the first Thought of the Mother Goddess Bidi, from which the stars themselves first sprang. I do hope, however, that I've managed to convey the gist of it.'

'Indeed you have!' exclaimed Professor Miribilis. 'Indeed you have. One might almost think the teller had really lived it – enough of the teller has certainly come from it, never fear.'

Miribilis turned to the Doctor. 'And you, my good sir, sitting there with that strange little smile on your face. Do you have a tale to tell me?'

The Doctor frowned momentarily, opened his mouth to speak – and it was at that point that a scream came from one of the covered wagons off to one side.

The Doctor sat bolt upright. 'That sounded like Anji!'

He glanced about himself frantically. Fitz and Jamon de la Rocas, of course, were still there, but there was a decided absence where one Anji Kapoor should have been.

'What's happening to her?' The Doctor clambered to his feet.

'Ah-uh!' Professor Miribilis waved a warning finger. Here and now, for some reason that would never become quite clear, that seemed to have the power to freeze the Doctor in his tracks.

'A story,' said Miribilis, quietly and unthreateningly, but definitively. 'A story first.'

'I'm afraid,' said the Doctor, firmly, 'that it'll have to wait. In some respects at least, my life is very much a closed book. And missing several pages to boot. Come on, Fitz, let's go and see what Anji's got herself into.'

The black-cowled figures paused to catch their bearings. The cerberi accompanying them strained at their leashes, their multiple and vaguely reptilian heads thrashing from side to side, their jaws slavering.

They had their quarry in their uncanny senses.

They had the scent.

As Jamon de la Rocas had told his own tale, which seemed, from what she could make out, a weird kind of corrupted version of the story of Siddharata, Anji had quietly slipped away. If she knew a thing about him, he was set to go on for the rest of the night, and after their argument in the TARDIS she really didn't feel like sitting still to anything he might have to say.

The worst thing about the animosity she felt, it seemed to her, was that, even with his generally patronising demeanour towards her, even after he had slapped her, she could not quite pin down any reason for the sheer *strength* of that animosity. Dislike was one thing, but what she was feeling was more appropriate to her having come upon him gleefully using a knife on some helpless victim, say, and then making to turn the blade on her.

As she left the warmth of the campfire, the cold night air hit her like the blade of a guillotine coming down, and she realised how cold the night had become. One of the problems with travelling in the TARDIS, no matter what state of repair it might ultimately be in, is that you can leave a place of sweltering heat to find yourself in bitter cold, and you always seem to have put on the wrong clothes for it. Her breath plumed thickly before her, far more so than on the chilliest day in London. She wrapped her arms around herself and stomped up and down for a while, trying to keep warm.

In this clearing, tree cover failed to obscure the sky, and this far from the fire it was possible to make out the stars. They just looked like stars. There was probably some hideously complicated way of calculating their positions against what those positions should have been and seeing what the Doctor had called 'sprained space-time', but to the nonastronomical observer they were nothing more than randomly scattered pinpoints of light.

A shiver went through Anji that was unconnected with the cold. It seemed

like a symptom rather than a reaction; one of those feelings that you simply get and then have to work out precisely *why*. She felt lonely – no, in a deep sense she felt *alone*, in a way that she had never felt before, not even on her recent adventures. Whether she found herself on an Earth made strange by some alien presence, or in some period of the past, or on some alien planet, these things were at least conceivable: she had the terms to think about them.

This far out, in human terms, even the most basic of human assumptions did not apply. Something inside her had the feeling that, if she did something so simple as drop an object, it would not only not necessarily fall to the ground, but might do something outside of the only other options of staying still and of travelling in any direction whatsoever. Even spontaneously transforming itself into a small fish or whatever was out, because, even though it would be utterly nonsensical, at least something like that could be imagined.

The thing that made it worse, she thought, was that the effects here in the spaces of what de la Rocas had called the Empire, were subtle. Nothing was *obviously* strange or alien, but there were little elements of *wrongness*, like a perfectly ordinary scene of a family eating round the TV, except that the meals on the trays contain a side order of live centipedes.

It showed in the Doctor, who hadn't changed his form or anything impossible like that, but it showed in the way that he'd act uncharacteristically: little blips of personality surfacing and collapsing as if he were being taken over by the spirits of other men. A chopping and changing of tenses and diction, seemingly at random. She'd have put it down to the way in which his memories were starting to resurface, but she could see the same thing happening with Fitz.

Was *she* acting like that, seen from the outside? Anji wondered. She didn't think so, but then again that all depended on just who was doing the thinking. Maybe that was the reason why her emotions were so disproportionate over Jamon.

The cold started biting her less. Anji knew enough to know that this was one of the first stages of hypothermia, and that she needed to warm up soon. She didn't feel like going back to the fire just yet, so she decided to get under cover in one of the wagons.

There was a clatter of metallic items as she hauled herself up over the tailboard, possibly the kind of tin cups and pans that might be found hanging in an imaginary gypsy caravan. In the dim light this far from the campfire, Anji could make out several crates and a pile of sacking. Her hand found what, from the feel of it and the oil sloshing around inside, was probably a lamp. That was no use to her, of course, if she couldn't find any matches. Anji groped her way forward, her fingers brushing at a length of rough hessian sackcloth – which fell away to reveal a rearing, hulking form.

'Graghaagh!' it roared, waving a quite impressive number of slimy tentacles, flippers and extensible, snapping sets of jaws on stalks. 'Is *graghaagh!*'

That was the point at which Anji screamed. The lamp she was holding clattered to the flatbed and she lurched back, tripping over the tailgate to fall several feet and land heavily, stunning herself.

She must have remained unconscious for several minutes. The next thing she knew, the Doctor was beside her, helping her to her feet. 'Are you all right?'

'I... Think so,' Anji said. 'There was a... thing. It was like...'

Off to one side she noticed that Fitz and Jamon de la Rocas had, like the Doctor, come to her aid. She also saw that they were staring at something directly behind her in shock. The fall from the wagon had disorientated her; it was a moment before she realised that they were staring at the wagon itself, and turned to see what it was.

In the opening of the wagon's canopy, clutching the now lit lamp in a tentacle, was a slimy, obloidular creature, regarding them severally and quite angrily by way of four eyes on the end of directionally independent stalks. The alien horror of it was slightly diminished by the fact that it wore a floppy nightcap with a tassel.

'Is what time this monkey-hominid buggers go sneaking round like big sneaky thing, and no doubt try to place scrofulous and grabby paws on person's valuables?' it said. 'Is trying to get head thing, what is *specialy* made for purpose, down for sleepy log-sawing kip, yes?'

The Doctor, Anji realised, was looking at this apparition with a sense of shock every bit as great as the others, but also with a degree of puzzled concern, as though trying to recall something so obvious – where your hand might be at any particular time, say, assuming it is still attached to the body – that the loss of it was genuinely disturbing.

'I seem to know you... ' he was saying. 'Don't I know you?'

He shook his head as if to clear it, and then beamed delightedly as some piece of mental jigsaw puzzle (or possibly monkey-hominid puzzle) fell into place.

'Of course!' he exclaimed. 'How could I forget something like that? Of course I know who you are. You're a Collector.'

In my accounts previous, I have mentioned as to how my experience, at the time of which I speak, was in some small measure greater than the common... But that for all of it, in the final counting, it was experience solely of the Empire and the certain limits attendant to it. I have touched upon the point, briefly, as to how, quite unknowing, I contrived to drive Mistress Anji Kapoor into such a rage that she poured forth such vile insinuations that it was all my manly strength could do, at the time, not to meet those outpourings with immediate defenestration. Though the unfortunate incident to which I refer may, in some small part, prove crucial to my tale, I propose for the moment to leave it on the long finger.

More to the point was my experience with those creatures of the Wider Universe who might cogitate and conduct their social intercourse as finely as, or more so than, Men, while looking not one iota like them. Said experience might well be encapsulated as 'none whatsoever' – for the simple reason that, on every world of the Empire, Man was pre-eminent, and such creatures as ever might have been in competition with him had long since been rendered slaves or driven extinct.

All of which is to say that, having no means of forming an impression to the contrary, my first thoughts on seeing the creature appear from the circus wagon and hearing it speak were something of a paradox – two completely dissimilar thoughts, each as strong as the other, and both of them utterly wrong. My first was that this was one of Prof. Miribilis's performing Beasts, trained to ape the acts of men and parrot their speech in an amusing manner. The second was that this was some new variety of those hideous monsters whom I had first seen emerging from the Doctor's 'magical' conveyance, and that any moment now it would be about rending all who were gathered there to shreds.

These conflicting thoughts, I must confess, dumbfounded me for the instant, so it was fortunate that neither was the case – or, more particularly, certainly, that the latter was not the case.

'The Collectors,' explained the Doctor, 'are a race of aliens who roam the galaxy in five-mile-wide supercruisers built from planetary debris, which park over planets and release swarms of short-range fighters which lay those planets to waste...'

'Is lie!' cried the creature in a voice that, while seemingly composed of several speaking all at once, still by some means contrived to sound indignantly squeaky. We had repaired to the campfire by this instance, bringing the creature along with us, and were all of us sipping a warming beverage made from the milk of the drawing animals. Professor Miribilis and his troupe – no doubt being quite aware of the relatively harmless nature of this creature from the first instance – had politely become immured in their own quiet conversations, of making ready for bed and so forth, to allow our making of said creature's acquaintanceship.

'Is foulest lie!' the creature exclaimed again. 'Is never we do that thing!'

'You don't?' the Doctor said. 'I'm sure I've seen it happen.'

'I think you might have got that from a movie, Doctor,' said Anji, by which I gather that she meant a form of entertainment on her world consisting of a variety of Magic Lantern show. 'Like that time you were convinced that Pokémon really existed, and were part of an evil mind-control plot by the industrial-military complex to subvert the infant pattern-recognition reflex with junk data.'

'Well, you have to admit,' said the Doctor, 'I was right about that.'

'Yes, but not in the way that you meant. And the least said about Roswell the better.'

'How did you know about that?' Fitz asked her, surprised. At the least, I assumed surprise on his part since the conversation had entered areas that were, to me, the purest gibberish. 'We hadn't even met you when that happened.'

'I was hazarding a guess,' said Anji, darkly. 'I can just imagine him catching half an episode of The X Files and running off in search of the mothership. It's just a mercy he was never exposed to The Clangers, I suppose.'¹⁵

'I'm sitting right here, you know,' said the Doctor in slightly hurt tones. 'I might not be entirely up on the specifics, but I'm certain the Collectors are known for ravaging across entire planets and destroying everything in their path.'

'Is not destroy monkey-hominid worlds,' the creature said virtuously. 'Is just take things nobody want.'

'Oh, yes?' said the Doctor. 'What sort of things?'

'Nice things. Shiny things. Things what is not nailed down to floor. Is then wait for bit and come back for things nailed down to floor.' The creature did not say this with either pride or shame: it was simply saying what it and its purloinative kind did, with an air that how one might take or leave it was all the same so far as it was concerned. Well, having myself, on occasion, found myself on the receiving end of those who feel that even the most justifiable and petty larcenies must be punished to the full letter of the law, I for one could not find it in my heart to condemn such a notion.¹⁶

'I can't help noticing,' the Doctor mused, 'that hordes of Collectors merrily running around and plundering the planet are conspicuous by their absence. What are you doing here, all on your own?'

'Was a scout,' the Collector said. 'Was looking for places to come with lots of nice things. Is show you...'

At this juncture I must take a moment to describe the Collector more fully. In general form, it appeared to be a glutinous sac of some thick, leathery material from which slime constantly exuded. From this sac would burst, when needed, limbs, sensory organs and manipulatory appendages – no two ever alike, nor ever, from what I could observe, repeated in their usage. I believe that such implementia were fabricated by some strange internal means and on a temporary basis. In any event, as the Collector told its tale, it produced such appendages with which to gesture as a man might in a shadow-puppetry display – though in a detail of which a man would never be capable.

First it produced, on the end of a slim length of tentacle, a silvery object that looked remarkably like one of the dirigibles that traverse the vertiginous gulfs between the stilt cities of Pons Iridi.

'Is going along like big whoosh-type thing,' the Collector says, waving this object around. 'Whoosh, is going. Whoosh! Whoosh!'

Eventually, after several more 'whooshes' it appeared to tire of this and produced a globular affair on a kind of bony pole and which appeared to be covered with patchily burned moss. The nature of Transference means that, while those of the Empire were aware that its worlds consisted of planets, globes as a means of visualising them were not particularly common. I was aware, however,

that this was in all probability intended to be a representation of the world on which we currently were, Thakrash.

'Is found planet thing,' said the Collector, knocking the dirigible and planet together a number of times, 'But is really boring. Is just tree things and people going round cutting them down. Is hardly any nice things at all. Is bugged this for game of making way for massive first-stage geostationary strike, say I, when is happen really strange-type thing...'

The diminutive planet was whipped away, deflating, like an inflated bladder stuck with a pin, and, as it did so, an orifice opened in the Collector's slimy skin and something unfolded and hardened that I must ask you to stretch the imagination to believe, for all that I have limned something of the Collector's physiognomy. It was a perfect model, such as might be presented by the architect of a great court to show his ruler what might be expected from the use of any number of slaves. A rocky promontory rising from a patch of forest, and set on top of it, in perfect detail, the central Pylon and sundry peripheral mechanisms such as one would find in a Station of Transference.

'Big glittery-shiny-type thing,' said the Collector. 'Is look very nice, so went down for proper look.' It nosed its miniature dirigible around the spire of the Pylon, rather like a Golglobular feeder-minnow nibbling at a gob of meat between the teeth of a punnet-shark. 'But is not nice-type thing at all! Is big horrible nasty thing! Is send out energies, make big disruptions in hyperwobble drive and...'

Enthusiastically, the Collector began to smash the dirigible into the model. I can only surmise that such products of its body had no capacity for pain, or that in a moment of descriptive passion it had forgotten that both model and dirigible were in actual fact a part of itself. At length, with both quite definitively demolished, it reabsorbed them with the slightly sheepish air of one recovering from having momentarily lost one's self-possession.

'Is apology,' it said. 'Is get carried away with big shouty thing, sometimes.

'Think nothing of it,' said the Doctor. 'Happens to the best of us, especially in the face - I do beg your pardon - of such a sad story. So what happened then?'

'Is happened big long time of monkey-hominids running round and burning things and hitting funny marky-face monkey-hominids with sticks,' said the Collector. 'Hid out in leafy woods till stopped. Collectors living much more years than monkey-hominids, yes, so is

wandering round in leafy woods and falling into holes and getting very lonely after a bit. Is lonely for big pile of lovely stuff like mangle-handles, shaky snowdomes and jars of pickled marmosets back in home world – and just knows all other nasty Collectors have taken things away for very own, with lots of shouty joy and glee. So, decide to go and say hello to monkey-hominid villages – but they all go "Agh! Agh! Horrible slimy monster!" and throw things at. So is glomping along all dejected when meet Mr Professor and people...’ A limb extended, on the end of which was a perfectly moulded arrow such as might be painted on a sign board, pointing to where Professor Miribilis was about the business of examining the snake lady for mange. ‘Tell my sad-type story,’ the Collector continued, ‘and he take me in. Is have been with ever since, showing perfectly ordinary Collector-like manipulatory stuff to much delight of monkey-hominid audience. Is OK.’

‘A happy ending, of sorts, at least,’ said the Doctor. He glanced around himself at the general, peaceable presomnolentive activity of the troupe. ‘All things considered, I’d suggest that...’

Quite what it was that the Doctor was going to suggest, I never in point of fact discovered – for at that moment we all of us were abruptly and quite rudely interrupted.

There was the vaguely fleshy-sounding crashing of fungoid undergrowth, and a crazed-looking figure burst into the clearing. Its hair was ragged, caked and matted with blood. The remains of fur clothing clung to its mean and abraded body as though it were only by the clotting of those injuries that the scraps were attached. The figure staggered forward, clutching something to its chest, before collapsing heavily, face first, halfway to the fire.

‘Now there,’ said Professor Miribilis, looking around from his veterinary ministrations to the snake woman, ‘looks like a man with an exciting tale to tell.’

‘I suspect it would have to be short.’ The Doctor ran over to the fallen man and gently turned him over. ‘Let’s see if we can’t do something about these injuries, yes?’

‘I cannot...’ The new arrival worked his ravaged face. ‘I cannot protect...’ Weakly, he lifted a hand towards the Doctor. Clutched in it was a faintly glowing shard of some material that seemed to be of the nature of crystal in the way that crystal itself might be similar to wood, in that both are solid matter but with quite different physical properties.

‘Take it...’ the fallen man rasped. ‘Must keep it safe, keep it from the...’ His mouth worked silently as his breath failed him. He fell back with exhaus-

tion.

The Doctor regarded the unconscious form, then examined the glowing shard with a slightly critical air. 'Well, the chap seemed very insistent on the point,' he said to the world in general. 'I wonder what it is.'

It was at that point that he seemed to become aware of a multiple, animal growling. He turned to face it as several men burst into the clearing. Each wore a black, monk-like habit, each had a face crudely tattooed with black lines, each was barely restraining by way of a leash a reptilian creature with three branching, vicious-looking heads. For all the quasi-ecclesiastical specifics of their garb, these men were obviously soldiers at heart, rather in the same manner as the bandsmen on Shakrath.

The largest of these men, obviously a leader of sorts, surveyed the alarmed performing troupe and several companions with cold contempt, then turned his attention to the Doctor.

'The shard,' he said in a gravelly tone. 'You will give us the shard.'

'And if I refuse?' the Doctor said. 'I ask purely for the purposes of information, you understand.'

'You will die,' the other said simply. 'All here will die.'

The Doctor eyed the straining, snarling Cerberus-reptiles as they cast about, driven to a near frenzy by the prospect of so much available meat. 'Well, if you put it like that,' he said, 'I can hardly refuse.'

He walked towards the robed men, then brought himself up short to a halt, as if something had occurred to him.

'You know, it occurs to me,' he said, 'that once you *have* this thing, there would be nothing stopping you from killing us all in any case. I can see that you know the shard has some power – but do you know precisely of what nature and how much? Though I say it myself, I am noted among my people – quite who those people are is another question entirely, of course – as a sorcerer well versed in the most powerful of magicks. As such, I propose a trade. Spare my friends and I'll come along with you willingly, offering any such assistance as might be at my command.'

The leader of the robed men appeared to consider this. 'A sorcerer, you say?'

'The very same,' said the Doctor, smiling.

'Then prove it. Perform a sorcerous device for us.'

'Ah, well,' said the Doctor. 'My power is such that its misuse in common parlour games would anger the dark powers from which it comes. Their vengeance would be swift and devastating, quite probably laying waste to the land for leagues around. On the other hand, you lose nothing by trusting my word. Take me with you, put me to use, and if that use proves superfluous then you can always kill me then.'

There was one of those razor's-edge moments, where the entire world can go one way or another. The robed man nodded to himself.

'Your proposal seems acceptable,' he said. 'Provided any of what you say is true, you may be of some use. Give the shard.'

'It would be a pleasure.' The Doctor moved forward again, proffering the item in question to the robed man. Two of his fellows took hold of the Doctor from both sides and rained a series of blows on his head, beating him into unconsciousness.

The robed man once again surveyed the shocked occupants of the clearing, still with cold and icy calm.

'You are nothing to us,' he said. 'We have no interest in you. Tend to your business and keep away from us, for as long as you can, or you will find us ready to defend ourselves.'

With that, he and his fellows turned and disappeared back into the forest, taking their Cerberus-lizards and the unconscious body of the Doctor with them.

In his newly fumigated apartments in the Citadel of Souls (apartments that still, distressingly, contrived to retain a marked vestige of old-man smell from their previous occupant) the High Ambassador Elect turned his eyes to the window as the night sky outside flared. It was a signal flare, the colour of which was more important than the actual detonation, the seeing of which might have given the position of the men – *his* men, now – in the forest below. The colour was green, for go.

The Ambassadorial Order had the final shard, now, and would be bringing it to him. The stage for Transformation was all but set. The High Ambassador fell into contemplation of the change that would come, considering what form he might take in achieving, at last, the dominion of worlds. The retaking and domination of *one*, in any event.

‘Well of *course* we’re going to go after them!’ said Anji hotly. ‘We have to rescue him. We have to get him back. If we don’t,’ the more practical side of her continued, ‘we’re stuck here for good – and I’m not at a place in my life where I feel like running off and joining the circus.’

She glared around the campfire at Professor Miribilis and his troupe, all of whom seemed to share a general sense of relief at having been left alone by monk-habited men with monstrous trifurcated lizards. None of whom seemed to be on the point of offering any actual help.

‘Are you lot going to do anything or not?’ she asked the clearing in general.

‘They don’t look interested, do they?’ said Fitz. ‘You can’t exactly blame them. I mean...’

‘If you’ll allow me, dear lady.’

This from Jamon de la Rocas, who moved forward a little and began to speak, declaratively, in ringing tones:

‘My friends! Much as I am unaccustomed to making speeches, I must at this point ask you a question that will cut to the very marrow of your interest, yea, to the core itself of good and sensible persons and what they may found on’t. That question is, what is the measure of a Man? Five-foot-six, I hear you answer, and I’ll admit that is a worthy and quite noble dimension – but I

speaking, you see, of something rather finer. My friends, the quality of puissance to which I refer is that of courage, or pursuing the manly course of affairs despite all pricks and shocks the fates themselves conspire to throw. We have a man in peril, at the mercies of those with the very countenance of knavery. Are we to allow such an ignoble state of affairs to continue? I think not. Come, friends, and show us your mettle. Though we all shall, quite probably, die in futile misery and crying in the voices of small girls before a merciful lapse into the arms of death – broken and enfeebled by the torturous ministrations of those who would on all account slice our generative members from our bodies as soon as look at us and feed them to their lizard-hounds – who among us can say that we would not be happy, nay, honoured, in such an estimable means of dispatch? So come now, who will join us in our noble and most estimable quest. . . ?’

After an hour or so of forced marching through the forest, the robed soldiers of the Ambassadorial Order of Souls reached the atoll on which their Citadel had been founded, and sent up a noise-making signal flare to announce their arrival. Presently, a large and somewhat rusted elevator cage descended. The unconscious body of their prisoner was dragged inside and, to the sickly-sounding chugging of some hydrocarbon-driven mechanism above, the elevator rose.

They were met at the top, on the paved outcrop that led to the Citadel itself, by a man whom they knew to be the aide of the High Ambassador Elect, but who now wore the ceremonial robes of that office himself. They were new-made, and in fact still being fussed over by a pair of acolytes, who had been given the task of preparing them at short shrift. One did not survive for long in the Order of Souls without at least having some idea of the way in which the wind was blowing. The soldiers dropped the unconscious body of their prisoner to the paving and bowed in obeisance.

‘You have the shard?’ the High Ambassador asked, in that curious way of those in authority, however unearned, who already know the answer to a query – or at least know what the answer damned well better had be. ‘You have brought it to me?’

‘Yes, uh, High Ambassador,’ said the leader of the soldiers of the Order, the hesitation barely noticeable as his subconscious caught up with High Ambassadorial events, but noticeable to earn him a small black mark – or very possibly a large red stain – in the not too distant future. Head still bowed in supplication, he approached the High Ambassador, who took the alien shard from his outstretched hand and regarded it critically.

‘Perfect and intact,’ the High Ambassador allowed at last. ‘At the least, in size and form, it appears to be the final, missing piece.’ His face remained

studiedly calm, letting out no trace of an anticipated joy that would be nothing less than rapture. His attention turned to the supine body on the flagstones. 'And who might this be?'

'A sorcerer of much power, so he says,' said the soldier.

'Well I hope, for his sake, that his powers extend rather further than the feigning of unconsciousness,' said the High Ambassador Elect.

'Oh, well,' said the Doctor. 'It was worth a try.'

He stood up and dusted himself off, glanced about himself amiably and then looked beyond the High Ambassador to the stronghold of the Order of Souls.

'Do you know you've got the remains of a big hyperwobble ship sticking out of your Citadel?' he asked.

'*Dick and Jane*,' muttered Anji. '*Janet and John. Sanjit Lives with Mommy and her Girlfriend*.¹⁷ He could have told a bloody *limerick* about a young woman from Rhyl and got some change out of them.'

'That's not exactly fair is it?' said Fitz. 'I mean, nobody could have known.'

'He should. I thought he was really hot on sliding into any situation and coming up with the one-page, double-spaced skinny on it based on no hard information whatsoever.'

'He does, sometimes,' said Fitz, a little defensively. 'It's just that you can't count on it these days.'

'Too bloody true you can't,' said Anji. She didn't ordinarily swear, much, but the last few days had put that predilection under not a little provocation.

The curious indifference of Professor Miribilis and his troupe to the essaying of any kind of Doctorial assistance had been explained. It was to do with the stories they had told around the campfire. The telling of such tales, apparently, on Thakrash was an implied social ritual among strangers seeking succour, rather like the way, on Earth, that a Bedouin is honour-bound to take a guest into his tent for three days and nights, no matter if said guest is his mortal enemy. In forgoing to tell a tale, the Doctor had precluded anyone from going out of their way to help him. Professor Miribilis and his troupe had been quite nice about it, displaying no animosity in the slightest, but it was as simple as that.

Anji had pointed out that as she, Fitz and Jamon de la Rocas were proper tale-telling guests, any help given would be to *them*. Professor Miribilis had pointed out in turn, and not unreasonably, that none of the three were in actual, clear and immediate danger. What they might decide to do on leaving the protection of the camp was their business alone.

'What makes it worse is that they'd probably have fought like tigers to protect him, otherwise,' Anji said.¹⁸

'Is true,' said the Collector, who was trundling along beside them on what looked like a set of organically force-evolved caterpillar treads. 'Have seen them fight nasty bandit-type monkey-hominids, doing lots of runny-jumpy stuff and using all special circus-type thing. Is throwing knives and doing somersaults and swinging from trapezes. Was very exciting.'

'So, tell me what you're doing here with us, again?' said Anji.

'Okey-dokey. Is thinking that Doctor-type feller very powerful sorcerer, like he say. Is thinking he come from other planet-type thing with big ship. Help him, maybe he give ride back to Collection and big piles of lovely stuff.'

Anji had visions of a Collector ravening its way through the TARDIS and grabbing everything that took its fancy. Hordes of destructive monsters such as the eyes of humans were never meant to see might be preferable. Oh, well, Anji thought, at least its presence had brought their happy little band up to four. The Collector might have extensible appendages somewhere or other that included useful weaponry.

The ragged man who had led the intruders into the camp had proved too weak and faint to give them more than the gist of events, so far as he was concerned – that the Order from somewhere called the Citadel of Souls had destroyed his settlement so as to get their hands on the alien shard, the nature of which was of some profound but indefinite mystical significance. Leaving him to the care of Professor Miribilis and the troupe (his tale, such as it was, being enough for the offering of aid and succour), Anji, Fitz and Jamon, with the Collector tagging along, had set off using all their woodland tracking skills to follow the path of those who had abducted the Doctor. Said skills had consisted of noticing that a band of robed men and lizard-beasts had simply crashed off through the forest, without the slightest thought of concealment.

Their trek had not so much been hard as one of drudgery. It seemed as though they had spent hours following the freshly beaten track – not *too* freshly beaten, naturally, owing to the vague, unspoken, collective thought that to come directly upon the parties they were pursuing, while they were on the move and alert, would be rather too dangerous by far. Better, the unspoken thought went, to find out where the robed men were going, get some idea of the lie of the land and then take things from there.

All the same, after hours of unchanging forest, Anji found herself almost wishing that *something* would happen, whether for good or bad. The exercise of walking was keeping out the worst of the night chill, but a miserable kind of cold dampness seemed to have settled across the entire surface of her skin under her clothing and was working in by increments. It couldn't be that long before dawn, she hoped. At least that might lend a bit of variety to the surroundings, and in a relatively nonthreatening manner to boot. The only real punctuation thus far had been a flash above the fungus-tree canopy and

a concussive crack – but the sudden introduction of anything involving high explosives was just the sort of surprise that Anji could do without.

‘We’re coming up on something.’ Fitz, who had wandered on ahead with Jamon de la Rocas, now came hurrying back.

‘Is it something interesting?’ Anji asked him. ‘Is it far?’

‘That’s debatable,’ said Fitz. ‘No, it isn’t. Far, I mean.’

Indeed, they had reached it before Fitz had finished speaking. It had been hidden from her by the dim lighting conditions and the forest cover, which ran right up to it like an arboreal buttress.

Jamon de La Rocas was standing before it, looking up at it: a sheer, smooth and patently unscalable rock face.

‘I rather fear that we have reached something of an impasse,’ he said. ‘Would that stout hearts and mere physical prowess were enough to essay the ascent of such a topological phenomenon, but it seems that for the moment our progression has been balked.’

‘Is pardon?’ said the Collector, trundling up from behind.

‘How the hell are we going to get up that lot? I think he means,’ said Fitz.

In the centre of the chamber at the very heart of the Citadel of Souls, held together by supports and clamps, stood the Engine of Transubstantiation – a spire of mirror-bright material, shattered at one time and painstakingly pieced back together. From it there came what can only be called a *soundless* sound. There was nothing audible to the ears of men, but something in the mind could tell that the Engine was emitting a constant whine on some very low, or possibly some very high, level – and that the cracked harmonics of it were in some abstruse manner grating on the Soul itself.

‘Now I can see where you’ve gone wrong here from the start,’ said the Doctor, nodding at a clump of organic devices connected to the Engine by way of tangled and uninsulated silver wiring. ‘You’ve tried to incorporate Collector-technology into the thing. If you can get it to so much as do anything at all in the first place, which I doubt, the basic incompatibilities would trigger a chain reaction and blow it, and anything connected to it, sky high...’

‘Enough!’ The High Ambassador Elect waved a hand and caused the Doctor to be clubbed to the floor by an enthusiastic guard of soldiers of the Order. ‘Your opinions are of no import. I believe that you have completely misinterpreted the reason for your being brought here.’

The Doctor turned his head to look at the manacles attached rather ominously to the iron rack standing by the Engine. They appeared to have had a lot of use, from the patina.

‘I don’t think I have,’ he said. ‘Is it going to change the slightest thing if I remain silent?’

‘It will not,’ said the High Ambassador.

‘Then I shan’t. I can see that you have something of a cargo-cult operation here, but you seem to be an intelligent enough man – if, indeed, a little on the megalomaniacal side, if not completely round the twist. You must have some inkling that some procedures might work, while others are quite patently nonsugmf.’

This last exposition was due to the fact that, in addition to manacling the Doctor to the rack, one of the soldiers had stuffed a wad of leather into his mouth with little consideration for the free flow of debate.

‘Oh, I’m perfectly aware that such things as magic don’t exist,’ the High Ambassador said, his tattooed face forming a nasty little grin. He held up the alien shard for the Doctor’s inspection. ‘I do know, however, that this needs a conductive coating before it can be fitted to the galvanistic workings of the Engine. The blood of a man suits that purpose admirably. I was intending to use some minion or other, but that seems something of a waste with you to hand. And who knows? If the blood of a man has potency then, indeed, how much more potent might be the blood of a “most powerful sorcerer”?’

All the while this conversation was conducted, monk-like figures had been quietly filing into the room. Each wore hessian, each had tattooed markings on his face, but the details of refinement of each contrived to suggest degrees of status in the Order of Souls – inferences confirmed by their eventual, silent positioning. All here were Ambassadors, it seemed, but some were slightly more Ambassadorial than others.

When they were finally assembled, the High Ambassador turned his attention to them and began to speak in formal tones:

‘My esteemed colleagues, for centuries we have subsisted, isolated from the Empire of our fathers, the might of which was the source of our power. For centuries have we skulked in the world, while lax sedition and unproductivity thrive. We have taken females from the slave-race settlements to propagate our Order, thus diluting our line unconscionably – but still we have held fast to the old ways of our birthright. We have maintained. Our link to the glory of Empire was most cruelly severed, but we have maintained. . . .’

The High Ambassador faltered slightly as his attention was distracted by the Doctor, who was wagging his head, sarcastically, from side to side.

‘I believe our friend is of the opinion that I’m being a little long-winded,’ the High Ambassador said, ‘and possibly repeating myself. That may indeed be so. I shall therefore cut, as it may be, things a little shorter than I personally might like. Suffice it to say that this night is the night when all that ends. This night, in most correct and duly sanctified procedure, we re-establish Diplomatic Contact.’

And with that, the High Ambassador turned back towards the shackled Doctor, raised the alien shard, and made ready to bring it down.

‘Is ship!’ that odd creature known as the Collector exclaimed, extending limbs and appendages in a manner rather similar to a small meat explosion and pointing frantically. ‘Is lovely ship!’

And indeed, rising from the flagstones ahead of us, was a ruin, in which was buried, in a moderately slanticular manner, the skeletal remains of some large aerial conveyance. I must confess to

a vertiginous sensation upon observing this spectacle; I had first seen its elements in miniature, by way of the extraordinary dexterities of the Collector itself, and so some part of me counted that smaller size as the correct one. To see such elements on this new scale took one slightly aback.

'Keep your voice down!' Anji hissed. She was white-faced – not, I must say, in the manner of my own albinic complexion, but in the way that those who have never experienced some profound terror can go paler than is their norm. Even without the pigmentary capacity for such variation myself, I must confess to feeling something similar. Our sojourn up the sheer cliff face, Anji, I and Fitz hanging on for very dear life as the Collector ascended, by the means of a series of suction cups, had done nothing for my sense of equanimity.

Equally shaken, Fitz was looking about himself warily. 'The place seems deserted,' he said, with a certain degree, I thought, of unconscious hope.

'No, it isn't,' said Anji. 'You can bet on it. There's probably several hundred armed guards just waiting for us, out of sight, and they're all going to fall on us in the next three seconds.'

Fitz looked at her, worriedly. 'Why do you think that?'

Anji shrugged. 'Because it's just our luck. Come on.'

At complete variance with her words, she strode purposefully towards the Citadel as though oblivious to danger of any kind. It may have been mere startlement that had me, Fitz and the Collector falling in with her determination, but we all found ourselves following her closely, if somewhat more lamely, behind.

(Later, when I asked her about this, Anji would merely say, 'Maybe it was a premonition. It just felt safe on some deep level – I can't put it any better than that. Besides, I remember thinking that if there were several hundred guards or whatever waiting for us, we were dead anyway, or alive for as long as they wanted us to be. The decision was out of our hands, so there was no point in worrying about it.')

Premonition or not, it seemed that her decision was the correct one. Entering through the main doors as though we were some company of visiting dignitaries, we wandered through halls and chapels and refectory chambers completely unmolested. On banners and altar decorations and rood screens I saw such sigils and emblems as I have seen used by the Ambassadorial Corps on well nigh a hundred worlds, ineptly maintained and restored over time,

their meanings twisted and lost.

As we progressed, I became aware of a sound as familiar as the bones under my flesh – but twisted, much in the same way as the Ambassadorial signs and sigils, and, with a grating, shrieking quality so that for the instant I could not quite place it. Then the susurrations, not of voices, but of a mass of people gathered together and not speaking – and finally the piping tone of an individual speaker cutting through it.

We had come to a doorway, a curtain drawn across it of what I believe and hope was cured swine-skin leather. We glanced at each other, reaching an unspoken agreement, and cautiously peeked through.

Hundreds of those men whose garb and facial mutilation attempted to ape that of the Ambassadorial Corps were gathered there. It was fortunate that their backs were turned to me as one, for at the moment I was not entirely sensible as to their existence. My eye was drawn from the first to what lay in the centre of this vast chamber.

It was a Pylon from a Chamber of Transference, shattered long ago and cemented back together by what appeared to be quantities of ancient, crusted blood. It was from this that the strangely familiar, tortured shrieking came – though mere words cannot express the horror of seeing something so otherwise perfect in its inviolate form in such a state. I still believe that those who had undergone Transference formed a strange variety of kinship with the mechanisms, and the sight of one such mechanism reduced to this mutilated state made me sick to my very spleen. Ironically, perhaps, given my participation in events that would some short time later follow, when I found myself in full conclusion as to the fundamental nature of the...

But I am getting entirely ahead of myself. For the instant, I stood aghast at the defilement of something that was not so much holy, but as much a part of my view of the world as my good right hand before me, so that the hideous transformation of it engendered nothing less than purest apoplexy. So diverted was I that I failed to take in any other detail until I heard Anji screaming the word 'No!' beside me, shoving me aside in her desperation to get past me.

Thus it was, belatedly, that I turned my attention to affairs slightly to one side of the monstrous Pylon – just in the very nick of time, as it were, to see the man whom I would later learn

to be the High Ambassador Elect (I never did learn any other given name for the man) bring down the shard he was holding and plunge it deeply, up to the knuckles that were gripping it, into the Doctor's chest.

The High Ambassador wrenched the shard from the Doctor's chest and held it aloft, slathered and dripping with blood. He was vaguely aware of some disturbance behind him, of soldiers of the Order rushing from their appointed places, but for the moment he was too involved with his ritual to care about such things.

'Now!' he cried. 'Now we open our path to former glory!'

He turned and strode to the towering, damped, encrusted mass that was the Engine of Transubstantiation and slotted the final, missing piece into place.

Anji shoved her way desperately through the hessian-clad crowd, who didn't seem exactly in the best of condition and reacted more with surprise than anything else. From either side, though, bulkier men, whom she recognised as of the same sort who had abducted the Doctor from the circus encampment, were closing in. She was aware of Fitz barrelling into one of them and knocking him to the ground with a roundhouse punch. Another grabbed hold of him, and Fitz struggled against his grip, hauling him down to wrestle with him on the flagstone floor. That took care of some of the problem, Anji thought – trouble was, that still left quite a number of the guards heading directly for *her*.

'Ha-hah!' came a voice from behind her – and up came Jamon de la Rocas, bounding around on the balls of his feet, enthusiastically shadow-boxing and looking for all the world like a comedy nineteenth-century pugilist about to engage in fisticuffs and give some rotter the well-deserved thrashing of his life.

'Dare to touch one hair on the good lady's head, sirs,' he declared with gleeful bravado, 'and I swear it shall be the worse for you!'

It must have been sheer astonishment such as she herself was feeling, Anji decided, that allowed him to floor the two nearest guards with well-aimed punches. (It would only be later, looking back on the incident, that she would realise just how well aimed and controlled those punches actually were.) Then he was bobbing and weaving among the other guards as they tried to beat him down with blows that somehow never quite managed to connect.

'Well, go on, then,' he called to Anji, bloodying the nose of a convenient black-tattooed face. 'Attend to your business.'

Belatedly, Anji realised that this display had taken the focus of all hostile attention away from her. She ploughed her way free from the crowd and ran to the rack where the Doctor hung, bleeding and immobile.

'Don't be dead,' Anji muttered in a kind of despairing chant, vocalising the single, all-important thing in her mind. 'Don't be dead. . .'

The shackles holding the Doctor to the rack were secured around his wrists by a crude iron variety of butterfly-wing bolt. Anji fumbled with the first until it finally gave. The Doctor's body dropped as though through a gallows trap to hang bonelessly from one arm, legs buckled under him by the floor and giving not even the minimal support as might be found in the alive but unconscious. The second bolt, and the body, dropped, lifeless, to the floor.

Then it simply rolled over and sat up.

There was no jerking or choking, no sense of galvanisation to life. The Doctor simply sat up and looked down at the hole in his chest.

'Well, that was a bit of a shock to the system,' he said. 'I suppose it's. . .' His voice trailed off as his attention was finally caught by what was happening nearby. 'Oh, dear.'

Anji realised that, in her overriding concern for the Doctor, she had neglected to keep an eye on current events. And 'current' was probably the last word to use at this point, in that same way that it's not the word one would particularly like to think of as one is strapped into an electric chair.

The High Ambassador of the Order of Souls stood stock-still and rigid, every muscle cording as tendrils of sickly electrical discharge crawled over him, tethering him to the reconstructed cone of alien material. Every convention said that there should have been a crackling sound, a sound of exploding, tremendous energies, but there was nothing save the faint thrum and shriek of the crippled Pylon. He stood there, hand outstretched to the newly replaced shard, in silence.

Then, with entirely appropriate sounds, his flesh began to blister and burst, to seethe like a pan of fat on a stove at the point before it spontaneously ignites. Each and every bubble, before it burst – and could one bear to look closely enough – seemed to be a perfect human face in miniature, each and every tiny mouth screaming in pure agony.

The body of the High Ambassador began to glow, his robes charring to powdery ash instantly. What was left of him staggered and lurched blindly, a flailing arm crashing into the Pylon and knocking several painstakingly reconstructed pieces loose.

Tongues of electrical fire lashed out from the wounds, each heading directly for a hessian-clad member of the Order of Souls, each of whom began to jerk and boil as their High Ambassador had done. Secondary discharges licked out, linking one to another, to another, to another in a dizzyingly complex and pulsing latticework. The thrumming from the Pylon changed, its frequency accelerating and becoming more erratic, discord piling upon sonic disruption. . .

‘Take cover!’ the Doctor shouted frantically. He looked wildly about himself, realised that there was nothing in the Chamber of Souls actually to take cover under or behind, and shouted again: ‘Get out! Get out!’

Fitz and Jamon de la Rocas were already running for the chamber door. The Doctor bounded to his feet, darted forward and then staggered weakly. Anji was there to catch him before he hit the ground.

‘Thank you,’ he gasped, his face flickering greenly in the light of the energies expending themselves around him. ‘It seems that recent events have taken more out of me than I thought. . .’

‘Let’s get you out of here,’ said Anji.

He was lighter than she would have thought. Indeed, even though she had to support him as he hobbled through the screaming, mutating members of the Order, it was almost as if they were making better time than if she had been on her own and running.

They reached the doorway and made it quite some way down the hall from which they had originally entered before the Pylon finally detonated.

‘Well, I’ve seen some explosions in my time,’ said the Doctor, ‘apparently, but this looks like it was a particularly impressive one. It almost seems a pity to have missed it.’ He examined a section of where pulverised fragments of alien Pylon material had been driven into the wall. ‘Then again, if we *had* stayed around to watch, it would have obliterated every single one of us. So that’s all right.’

It was later, after the dust had settled somewhat. At least, given the fact that the Pylon had exploded in a room containing several hundred busily mutating members of the Order of Souls, it was probably, on the whole, better to call it *dust* and leave it at that.

The Collector was gleefully trundling around, picking up such fragments and shards of Pylon material as took its fancy and, not to put too fine a point upon it, *dusting* them off. ‘Is pretty things,’ it was gurgling happily. ‘Is to be lots of pretty things for me!’

‘Should he be doing that?’ Fitz said worriedly, glancing from the Collector to the jagged, smoking base of what had once been the Pylon itself. ‘That looks like really dangerous stuff.’

‘Oh, it’s probably better if he takes some of it away,’ said the Doctor. ‘That way there’s less chance of some other band of idiots managing to piece the whole thing together *again*, several thousand years down the line. Something like that we can all well do without. I certainly could.’ He plucked a little fussily at his bloodied, wounded chest, fingering the wound in a way that seemed more connected with irritation than actual pain. ‘Will you look at this? This shirt was brand-new a couple of months ago. I’ll never get the stain out. . .’

Anji, watching him, for some reason found this far more distressing than the explosion-related carnage around them. ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ she asked. ‘You’re not in clinical shock or something?’

The Doctor considered this, thoughtfully. ‘I suppose I might be. I might actually be in a lot of pain, when I start to feel it. My physiology is a bit different. I don’t think anything that vital was hit – but, all things considered, it might be an idea to get back to the TARDIS and get a little medical help.’

And then he fell over.

[In Translation]

It was daylight by the time we made our egress from the Citadel and descended the atoll upon which it sat, by way of the iron elevator cage that the Order of Souls had utilised for that purpose. It was at that point that we encountered a problem somewhat milder than roaming bands of thugs with dogs and exploding mechanisms of Transference, but bad enough in its own small way. What with one thing and another, those of us who had left the Doctor's extraordinary conveyance – that is, Anji, Fitz and myself – had lost our sense of direction to the extent that we had no idea of where the TARDIS lay.

We might have found our way back via the tracks both we and the soldiers of the Order of Souls had made, but with the new day had come a burgeoning vegetative proliferation. I believe that the original founders of Thakrash as an Imperial colony had made some alteration to its plant life: it was possible to see the new plants as they grew towards the sunlight. By which I mean, of course, that one could see the movement of their growth. It's perfectly obvious that if something is there you can see it – and I do think, personally, that pedantry tends towards being a much overrated virtue, thank you very much.

In any event, following the tracks we ourselves had made, in reverse, rapidly became impossible. Fortunately, though the good Doctor spent much of his time in a swoon, he would occasionally have moments of alert lucidity, during which he would direct our course towards that object with which, I am sure, he had some connection beyond the usual senses.

Even so, even with us carrying the Doctor on a makeshift litter, even with the Collector going on ahead and scything through the forest with a collection of blade-tipped limbs, it was hard going. The day of Thakrash was sweltering, and, by the time we reached our destination, I personally was sweating with what seemed something more than mere exertion.

The fact of the matter is that in the Citadel of Souls, when I had stared aghast at the crippled Pylon, watched as its twisted obscenities had turned the men aping Ambassadors into boiling obscenities, something of those foul energies had seemed to touch me. I could feel my insides shifting in unfamiliar, fever-burning ways: shifting into something monstrous.

As we reached his TARDIS (now somewhat grown over by the resurgence of herbage displaced by its arrival) the Doctor came more fully to himself. Once inside, he directed us to take him to a smallish chamber with a pair of quite comfortable-looking beds and what I can only limn as a Healing Thing. It was not quite machine, not quite a living thing, but some complexly interwoven hybrid of the two. The Doctor affixed a set of tubes from it to his chest, and in a matter of seconds appeared to grow more healthy. I could see the horrible wound therein close up and heal at what was, given the nature of men's wounds, an impossible rate – a rate of the sort, indeed, that the new plants of Thakrash grew.

As matters proceeded salubriously thus, the Doctor turned to me – regarding me, I realised, with no small amount of concern.

'Are you feeling quite all right?' he asked me. 'If you don't mind my saying so, Mr de la Rocas, you seem to be looking a little worse for wear.'

I believe that I may have mumbled something about my fears concerning my exposure to the crippled Pylon. In any event, the Doctor frowned worriedly, and indicated the other of the brace of beds.

'It might be a good idea to run a few scans on you,' he said. 'It can't hurt. It can only help.'

While the Doctor and Jamon spent time in the medical room, Fitz and Anji repaired to the kitchen area, now completely free of any sign of Vortex Wraith invasion, and fixed themselves something to eat. There were still a couple of glitches with the automated systems, which presented Fitz with an avocado salad and Anji with a cholesterol-packed sandwich consisting of steak, cheese and bacon and with overhanging dumps of onions fried in lard. Anji and Fitz duly exchanged an incipient coronary and a rather smug sense of self-restraint.

Anji nibbled on a lettuce leaf pensively. They had lost track of the Collector, and once again she had visions of it tearing the inside of the TARDIS to pieces because it liked the colour, or the smell, or whatever it was that Collectors liked about things.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg, so far as worrying about things was concerned.

'I sometimes feel I'm never going to get home,' she said. 'I'm going to be stuck here with this stuff for ever – especially with the way the Doctor's acting now.'

'Mgmph?' said Fitz, around his sandwich, and politely glossing over the fact that all the stuff that Anji was 'stuck' with was actually his life.

'Have you noticed that with every jump he's getting more... not mad, exactly, but complicated and unpredictable. Things keep coming out that I've never seen before. I keep expecting to... I don't know... come round a corner and find him eating cheese or something.'

'Why cheese?' said Fitz, swallowing.

'Why not? It's just something I've never seen him do. It just seems that there's a...'

'I mean,' said Fitz, 'it's not as though eating cheese were particularly odd. Everybody eats cheese, sometimes, most of them, anyway. I've eaten cheese all my life and I don't think it's –'

'Will you shut up about the bloody cheese!' Anji shouted. 'The point is that we're completely dependent on a man who suddenly doesn't seem to know quite who he is – or what he is – from one minute to the next.'

What the Doctor was, in fact, at this particular minute, was walking up the corridor outside the kitchens with a more healthy-looking Jamon de la Rocas. Fitz and Anji met them as they walked out.

They had obviously been at the wardrobes. The Doctor had changed into a simple dark suit, rather nondescript apart from a greatcoat which billowed and flapped about him. Jamon now wore a splendid frogged jerkin and knickerbockers, and a hat that contrived to make him look like the fat one out of the Three Musketeers.

'... poor souls in the Citadel suffered cumulative exposure over their entire lives,' the Doctor was saying. 'On the other hand, the level of cyborganic matter in the population of Thakrash, even among the Order, had become extremely rarefied. When the processes overloaded, the tainted emissions gave your physiognomy a blow, like the direct injection of a virus rather than the triggering of some already-present, buried disease. Oh, hello. I thought we might find you here.'

This last, of course, to Anji and Fitz. Anji turned her gaze up and down the corridor, mindful of her current worries. 'You haven't seen the Collector, have you?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Funnily enough, we ran into it a few minutes ago, fiddling with the big red button labelled DO NOT PUSH! which if it's pushed

will make the entire TARDIS disappear instantly up its own pocket singularity. Yet again. I directed our acquisitive new friend off to one of the library rooms – there’s any number of old paperbacks in there which could do with a good clearing out.’

The Doctor gestured with a hand, inviting all to join him in his progress in the direction of the console room.

‘I’ve been thinking about what we should be doing,’ he continued. ‘It’s all connected, everything we’ve been through, and connected in a perfectly logical manner – but we’re missing some crucial pieces of information. Without it, we can’t quite *see* the connections. That’s the problem we really need to solve at this point.’

‘Thakrash has been cut off from the Empire for some considerable time,’ said the Doctor, happily. ‘I think this little break from the worst effects of sprained time have done the old girl a power of good. Most of the basic processes are operating, at least.’

A large viewscreen showed a pulsing lattice of connections, some strong and multiple, some weaker and more extruded, each pulsing at a different rate. Anji was uneasily reminded of the way that alien energies had flickered around the members of the Order of Souls, just before the object of their worship had exploded.

‘It’s an extrapolation more than anything else, of course,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘Based on perceivable light-speed emissions and run through several virtual polyfractal filter-constructs to give us an approximation of a relativity-free state.’

Anji glanced at Fitz, who was already getting a bit glassy-eyed. If quantum mechanics became progressively more frightening the deeper you got into them, the Doctor was fully capable of leaping out at you and biting your face off from fifteen impossible directions before breakfast.¹⁹

‘Meaning?’ she said.

‘This is what the Empire looks like from the perspective of the one thing that can move instantaneously,’ said the Doctor tartly, ‘when everything else can’t. Can you guess what that one thing is?’

He stepped back from the screen to take in its whole expanse, and frowned.

‘Even in extrapolation,’ he mused, ‘you can tell that something’s wrong.’

‘How so?’ Anji asked. ‘It’s all just dots and lines to me.’

‘The interplay of it,’ said the Doctor, ‘the way the whole thing fits together and works. It’s like the knocking sound in a car, or an orchestra with one instrument playing off-key. . .’

‘Or like the TARDIS feels when you’ve done a bit of so-called harmless tinkering?’ Anji asked sweetly.

‘Well, yes, quite. Something, somewhere in all this, is exerting some malign influence. The source could be anywhere. We need hard information from which to track it.’ The Doctor stepped forward again and planted a finger on a point from which strong connections proliferated. ‘This seems to be one of the nexus points, in terms of data exchange...’ He turned and strode over to the console, typed rapidly on a keypad and examined a readout. ‘The planet Goronos, from what I can make out.’

‘Goronos?’ asked Jamon de la Rocas, who had been looking at the image on the screen in a manner of an intelligent arboreal savage who implicitly believed the world was flat and covered with jungle, and had wandered into Madame Tussaud’s²⁰ and learned that some people wear trousers. ‘I believe that I have heard of the world Goronos. You understand, of course, that most worlds seem to believe that they themselves are the centre of Empire in their own way – but Goronos is one of those worlds of whom most everyone has heard. A place from where comes news of far-flung provinces.’

‘An informational nexus,’ the Doctor said. ‘That sounds just the ticket. I think the TARDIS is well up to making the trip by now and we might just finally find the truth of what we’re up against.’

3

In the Machine

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

The grille of the elevator cage slink-ratchets back, and Anji steps out from ivory and polished brass and padded velvet plush, into spare, white-shot black marble. The air is cool without being chill, the perfect ambience for Impersonal but not unfriendly spaces of a communal hallway.

Green-flecked almond eyes flick to left and right – an unconscious, purely automatic action – and then she's off, heels clicking purposefully on the tiled floor, shadow splitting, diverging and converging again to unity as she passes the elegant, frosted cones of the lighting fixtures set between apartment doors on elegant, Art Deco holders. Anji prefers to perform even the most simple acts, such as walking, with conscious purpose, if at all possible. Absently though, with the absent-mindedness of familiarity, she walks her fingers lightly through the contents of her clutch bag, lighting at length on her apartment keys.

She reaches the door to her apartment – 426 – and fits the key into the Barron lock. There is something about the feel of the key – as if it were shifting, squirming in her hand – that arouses her suspicion even before the door swings open without the key being turned, the protruding tongue of the lock coming free from a hole where the mortise has already been torn from the frame, and offering not the slightest resistance.

Anji steps back, a knot of fear jerking tight around her stomach. For a while she waits, very quietly, watching the darkness beyond the door. No sign of movement, no sound of breathing. No sense of any presence other than her own. After some small while she plucks up the courage to enter.

Inside, dim city light from the screened window picks out the masses and edges of her home – and she can see that it is little more than wreckage.

Chairs, tables and assorted *objets d'art* lie scattered and crushed. There seems to have been no motive for this destruction save for its own sake, no sense of any search having been made, or even of things being flung around in a rage. It is a feeling rather than anything based on evidence, but Anji gets the distinct impression that her home has been destroyed, coldly and methodically, for the simple reason that it is hers, and destroying it will hurt her.

In a daze she steps forward. Her shin barks, sharply, against some item of debris and she stumbles, throws herself around slightly to regain her balance... and at last catches sight of the man who has been waiting, utterly quiet, utterly still, for her.

He is standing against the wall by the door that leads into the kitchen cubicle. He is very tall, very thin, dressed in a tight black suit that accentuates this. He is completely bald – not in the sense of having shaved his head or that his hair has fallen out, but in the sense that hair has never grown. The skin of his smooth scalp is bone-white.

He smiles at her, ratlike. (The name *Nosferatu* goes through Anji's mind but she has no idea of its significance, if any.) There is a hiss of indrawn breath between his teeth. He holds up something slim and bright, as if proffering it for her inspection.

It is a knife.

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

(Extracts from *Nice Pair of Plums: Fitz Kreiner and the Early Days of the Groke*, Will P Lassiter & Dagon Weeks.)

... after trying and rejecting any number of names, from the All-star Big Riffle Bandoliers to Electric Soup, the breakaway quartet finally settled upon a name suggested by Fitz, the Groke. When pressed, the enigmatic electrical guitarist would mutter something about a monster in a tale he recalled from his childhood and change the subject. This was an early sign of an increasing strangeness that would over the years degenerate into Thoughtcrime, but at the time Fitz was seen as an innovator. It was the influence of Fitz that was responsible for pushing his fellow band members away from the traditional forms of big-band polka into new, uncharted territory.

The newly named Groke made their debut at the Marquee Club, a youth canteen off the Radiant Thoroughfare now known as a hangout for dissidents and for the consumption of contraband ethanol. The event would become notorious among right-thinking citizens as the Underground Parliament.

‘Who will be there?’ asked the promotional fliers. ‘Criminals, murderers, three pimps and several whores,’ they answered themselves. ‘Clowns, jugglers, fruiterers, ponces, nonces, certified bankers, astrophysicists, sexual inverts, anarchists, bagmen, several more whores and a man who plays the tambourine. These are among those invited, but you’re not, because you’re not hip, cool and trendy enough and we don’t like you.’

Those who were hip, cool and trendy enough made their own entertainment. A man in a hat sang songs while hitting himself on the head with a tea tray. A girl in white tights punched out the lights of a lounge lizard whose ivory fag holder had failed to set the world alight. A man with a plan to re-enfranchise the mass of commonality made his opinions known to the astonishment of all present. But the loudest of all, the most astonishing of all, were the Groke, building layer upon layer of feedback and white noise from their electrically contrived instruments and turning up the mechanical means by which they were amplified to the fullest extent.

Such a state of affairs should have had the Security Services clamping down on the whole affair instantly – but among the audience, incognito, was a Master – who though bemused by such wanton impropriety was intrigued enough by the talent of the Groke to take them under his protection and sufferance. . .

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

The thin and bone-white man holds up the knife, as though proffering it for Anji’s inspection. Then, without warning, he simply lunges for her.

Anji is twenty-eight years old. By trade she is adviser to a great financier, sitting before a televisual screen which shows the prices of commodities and making educated guesses as to their future. The nearest she has come to

mortal violence is watching the entertainments in her Master's bear pits, and the ritual immolations of the Festival of Souls. Nothing in her life has prepared her for this.

There is no time for deliberation, only action. Anji flings a hand out desperately – and by sheer luck a finger sinks into one of the bone-white man's eyes. There is a brief cry. The stiletto falls from an involuntarily spasming hand to clatter against the remains of some fallen item of furniture.

Again, no time for conscious thought. Anji brings up a knee, in a most immodest fashion. Her assailant doubles over with a whimper.

Anji finds herself outside the door, now as though transported, having leapt back through it without quite being aware of doing so. Now she turns and pelts back down the hallway, unmindful of her heels on the tile – trips, falls headlong and scrambles desperately, on hands and knees, towards the elevator.

Mercifully, the cage has not been called to some other floor. Anji sags with relief against plum-coloured velvet padding as the cage descends. She eases her shoes, one after the other, off heels blistered by her recent exertions, and stuffs them into her clutch bag.

The cage reaches the soft-lit resplendence of the lobby. There should be a guard here, paid to protect those housed here by her Master, but the desk behind which he usually sits is vacant. Anji runs through the lobby in her stockinged feet and runs straight into a pane of the revolving door, which has been locked immobile.

Beside the revolving door is a door of the more usual kind. Anji fumbles desperately with the latch. As she does so, behind her, she hears the cage of the elevator begin to rise.

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

When the Groke played their first gig under the auspices of their Master, the results were somewhat other than expected. The venue was a Transit Station long since abandoned, which in an experiment of liberalisation was turned over to the youth of the City to make of what they would. The Masters, however, underestimated what said youth would make of it. In freezing cold conditions, in spaces that were never meant to hold more than two

or three at a time, more than three thousand unclassified biots squeezed in and another thousand were unable to make It through the doors.

Inside it was filthy and freezing cold. Sanitary facilities were nonexistent, the grand total of two latrines backed up and overflowing within minutes. It was apposite, perhaps, that the Groke chose this night to perform their longest and most innovative piece to date, *Critical Overload*. As a witness said at the time, 'Fitz was like a madman, improvising like hell, using his cigarette lighter as a slide, running ball bearings up and down the neck of his trademark custom Telecaster guitar and modulating the electrical feedback. It was like nothing we'd heard before – he was pulling this stuff out of his head.'

At this time there was much debate among the inner circles of the Masters as to whether such patently seditious gatherings should be permitted – whether in some more strictly regulated fashion, or even at all. These were, however, far more liberal days. It was held that, for the moment, society needed such things as a relief valve, and such disorderly expressions of individuality were on the whole tolerated if not condoned. Public ordinaries and clubs might be raided by the Security Services, but there was no concerted effort to stamp out what we now quite rightly know to be a cancerous blight of corruption on the body politic. For those Masters actively involved with permitting these activities, of course, the result was lucrative enough to assuage any personal distaste.

The next triumph for the Groke was as the house band for Fractured Planet, a private club established to finance the activities of a cell of anarchist pamphleteers (now known, of course, to be a Fifth Column organisation working directly for a consortium of Masters). These all-night sessions quickly degenerated into little more than orgies of alcohol, proscribed pharmaceuticals and carnal lust. Fitz was in his element, striding about the stage like an insane god and wrenching howls from his guitar that one onlooker described as a voice from the throat of some Dog of Armageddon.

'I couldn't keep up with him,' admits one-time band-member and double-bassist Rogan Salters, 'and not just because I was a rather dull-witted tip-off merchant with the ear for music and the sensitivity of a plank. I don't think anyone could. He was in his own world, most of the time – but when he dragged you kicking and screaming behind him it was one hell of a ride.'

Talk of a private world was prophetic – Fitz was already shrouded in the reclusive mystery that would become the stuff of legend. As the dawn came up on the Radiant Thoroughfare, he would stumble from the club, head for the nearest monorail station and disappear, often for days, to the gods alone knew where. It was on these trips, no doubt, that he acquired the chemical dependencies that were beyond the pale even for the freewheeling denizens of the Fractured Planet. He now utterly eschewed the forms of the polka – insisting that it never be so much as mentioned, often to the point of violence. He refused to rehearse with his fellow band members, often turning up with barely seconds to go before they played, in an increasingly dishevelled and dazed, even crazed, state, and mumbling something to the effect that he was trying to get all the ducks in his head lined up in a row.

Those who knew and informed on Fitz at the time describe a man on the point of personal and mental disintegration – ironically, perhaps, in view of the fact that his greatest personal successes were waiting in the wings.

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

Through the door (the glass of which she has been forced to break with one of the metal stands filled with sand, for the extinguishing of cigarettes, that litter the lobby) and down smooth marble steps. Anji has cut her hand quite badly on the broken glass, clutches it to her like an injured bird.

It is dusk, now. The street is utterly deserted. The automobiles parked by the kerbside, though polished and pristine, suddenly seem to Anji to have a dark and untended look about them, as though they had never been occupied, never so much as driven, even in the placing of them here. The apartment blocks that line the street are silent. Lights burn in the occasional, sporadic window, but no shadows move against them.

Elsewhere, she knows with certainty, deep inside herself – without quite knowing how she knows – there will be people. Her sense of isolation, the desolation of her surroundings, is just a trick of the mind. There are people here, perhaps towards the orange nimbus on the roofline that denotes the light and bustle of the City proper, and when she finds them and is among

them she will be safe.

For the moment, though, the only movement is the occasional rag of discarded newsprint, wheeling through the street in the wind. Trick of the mind or not, she is effectively alone – save for the bone-white man coming after her.

Why is this happening? As a trusted servant of her Master, the great Financier, she should be protected against even so much random and senseless harm as happens among commoners. Violence done to her – allowed to be done to her – can occur only at the whim of her Master, but try as she might Anji cannot think of anything she may have done to incur such displeasure or approbation.

(Unbidden, a memory surfaces from within her. It is of glancing at the televisual screen, on which the names and figures pursuant to her work should be appearing in a dance of the thousands of mechanical pinheads that make it up, to see that the screen was of bright, pure light, which shifts and shifts again to show half-glimpsed, monstrous forms.)

Now she is on a street corner, glancing back. The bone-white man in black is behind her, closing the distance at a run. Anji wonders, briefly, if she should hammer on some strange door and beg admittance. She realises, though, that by the time somebody comes to the door, if they ever come at all, her pursuer will have long since been upon her.

She runs again, taking turns at random as the streets branch. In the near darkness, it is some time before she realises that she has taken a wrong turning at some point, never noticing how the thoroughfares have narrowed, until she fetches up at a literal and figurative dead end.

A cramped back alley. A bare electrical bulb over a solid and definitively locked Iron door casts a dim and sickly pool of light over soiled cobbles. There is nothing more than a midden pile, in which rot the remains of printed broadsheets, the headlines and text of which are entirely illegible. Anji utters an oath and turns back.

The bone-white man is waiting in the mouth of the alley, smiling at her. Black blood seeps from his ruined eye in a single rivulet. A small, animal noise of panic forms in the back of Anji's throat.

'Nothing for you, here,' the bone-white man says, advancing on her with his knife. 'Nothing for you.'

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

When their Master [name expunged from file] decided that the Groke should record their performances gramophonically, the band were unanimous that the producer should be Mavoc Glass, a young operator for the Galvnox recording mills and a regular at the Fractured Planet. That is, Fitz insisted and the rest of the band loyally followed suit.

In their first recording sessions, the intention was to perform six numbers and select the best, but in reality they produced two, the short, supremely catchy 'Gilbert the Filbert' and the longer, far more typical 'Pint Drunk' – the name subsequently changed, by Salters and the other band members, to 'Rondelation in the Key of C' to avoid references to illicit ethanol abuse, an act that sparked a furious Fitz to remark, 'I'm thinking of *something* in the key of C. Bunch of mealy-mouthed zombie losers.'

His indignation was increased, when their Master effectively snatched these two recordings from them for broadcast access, without giving them the chance to record the four additional tracks that had originally been planned. Fitz thought that 'Gilbert' and 'Pint' – he would never use the revised name – were atypical of the directions in which he planned to take the Groke, and the putting out of this material as representative of them rankled.

Representative or not, the recordings caused something of a furore in the inner circles of the Masters – 'Gilbert the Filbert' especially. On the surface, the song is a jaunty if heavily phase-doctored sea shanty about a filbert, Gilbert, who can be found 'cruising' the sea bed and getting up to fishy business with his friends. The implications of sexual inversion, once pointed out, are obvious. While not sharing their perversion, Fitz counted several notorious inverts in his acquaintance, and was often vocal in his support of them.

Several of the major broadband repositories deleted their copies of the song immediately, while others bleeped out what were seen as the offensive words – the end result, strangely enough, appearing to be more obscene than if the recording had been merely left alone. Untreated bootlegs of the original, of course, remain in circulation among dissident elements to this day.

Now possessed of the fame of notoriety, the Groke were booked to appear on a number of televisual broadcasts. They were expected, however, to mime along to the censored versions of 'Gilbert' – a condition that, naturally, produced yet another out-

burst from Fitz. As a form of protest during these broadcasts, he would stand stock-still, lips immobile, and merely stare into the photomathical lens, his wide-eyed gaze a somewhat disturbing precursor to his eventual collapse.

Musically, Fitz retrenched, flinging all of his energies into a proposed event called, no doubt with the tacit encouragement of his Master [name purged from file], the State Enemy Ball, for which he personally designed a strobing mechanical light show and wrote a new song, 'New Rat Adventures in the Gutter' – a shortened version of which would be recorded as a follow-up to the ill-fated 'Gilbert'.

This expenditure of energy took its toll. Over the following months, Fitz's always quite eccentric behaviour took a turn into the outright strange. His already volatile temper deteriorated to the point of a berserk frenzy – at one point laying into Salters and the rest of the band with his guitar before they were able to pin him down and restrain him by force of numbers – interspersed with long, semicoherent ramblings of which the only sense that could be made was that *everything*, everything in the entire world, was wrong in a way that the onlooker was simply incapable of sensing.

At this point there was serious talk of secure confinement and mental restructuring – his Master, after all, had held off from such only out of a sense that a unique talent was of sufficient worth to make the problems of its administration tolerable. Such a state of affairs, however, was rapidly becoming untenable. There is no doubt that things would have gone hard for Fitz had he not snapped out of it seemingly of his own accord. Overnight, it seemed, he became calm and lucid, as though the anger in him had burned out. Those close to him give the account that it was like a switch being thrown, shutting down something inside him. It was as if his body were being controlled, made to walk and talk and speak, by way of some remote contrivance.

It was in such a state that he and the Groke returned to the recording studio to make their first extended compilation, *Insect Monsters...*

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE.

AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

‘Nothing for you, here,’ the bone-white man says, advancing on Anji with the knife. ‘Nothing for you.’

‘Good evening, Ms Kapoor.’ The voice comes from behind her. It is a polite voice, utterly courteous, solicitous without being obsequious.

Anji is too stunned to react. She stares ahead of her, noticing in an abstractly calm kind of way that the bone-white man is himself reacting in shock. . . and that some darker, strangely indistinct form now blocks the mouth of the alley and is rearing up. . .

(It is not that this thing isn’t there, Anji thinks, still with that unnatural and debilitating calm, that it is some intangible illusion. It is that it is a form, a shape in the world, that her eyes – or any other human eyes – should ever see.)

This indistinct creature falls upon the bone-white man, just as he turns to scream, and envelops him. There is a gurgling shriek, the wet sound of crunching, living bones and flesh. The creature undulates happily – so far as such a thing can be seen and inferred – and then softly and suddenly vanishes away as though melting into the cobblestones.

There is a moment of silence.

‘It’s gone, you know,’ says the voice behind her. ‘Truly, it’s gone.’

Anji realises that her eyes are screwed tight shut. Has she imagined the demise of the bone-white man within the maw of some unseen, unnamable creature? No. It has happened and she has seen it, in some manner, whether her eyes were open or not.

She opens them now, notes that the mouth of the alleyway is free and clear, then turns.

Standing before the iron door – a still definitively and solidly locked iron door – is a dapper, sardonic-looking man dressed in a pristine dinner suit. His jet-black hair is slicked neatly back with oil. He is leaning, nonchalantly, on a silver-handled cane.

‘Who. . . ?’ Anji’s voice falters with a curious mixture of relief and trepidation. ‘What. . . ?’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous,’ says the man. ‘You know perfectly well who I am. In a certain sense, anyway. And as to what I did. . .’ He blows on the nails of his free hand. ‘You know how it is when you have any number of pets. Familiars, chimeras, creatures of hideous, diabolical and slitheringly unutterable evil, that sort of thing. One has to let them out occasionally. One has to keep them fed. It’s a bit of pain, sometimes, to tell you the truth, but it is rather expected of one.’

Abruptly he becomes brisk. 'Well, I really should be going, for the moment. You're swimming busily for the surface, I can see, but you still have a way to go yet. Never does to rush these things.' He essays a formal little bow and shoots out a well-manicured hand. Anji has no time to lurch back in alarm before she realises that he is merely proffering her (as if for her inspection) a small pasteboard card.

Still in something of a daze, she takes it.

'Feel free to drop by,' the man says. 'When you feel up to it. Any time at all.'

With that, he lays his cane over his shoulder, slides past her and strolls out of the alley, whistling a complicated little tune that Anji has never heard in her life, and will never hear again – though it strikes a chord somewhere inside her, some part of herself vaguely recalling troop trains and soldiers packing problems into their old kit bags and smiling, smiling, smiling.

Anji gazes for a while at the open mouth of the alleyway. It is quite some while before she thinks to turn her gaze to the legend printed on the card:

Excursions –
999 Monsorstrasse

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

If the Groke expected Fitz's new and calmer demeanour to solve their problems, they were to be sorely disappointed. While not flying off into potentially lethal rages, he became uncommunicative and surly, complying with such requests as he agreed with, refusing so much as to speak when his sensibilities were offended.

In fairness, there was a lot to be incommunicative and surly about. Their Master, without consultation, had purged their original producer, Mavoc Glass, and replaced him with a Galvnox drone who was simply unequipped to deal with the experimental aspects of the Groke sound. Worse, he would come up with his own ideas – even the self-confessed incompetent Salters describes them as execrable – and attempted to impose them while Fitz looked on with a silent and almost tangible air of contempt. In the end, he would simply put down his guitar, walk out of the recording studio and disappear for days.

Brought back under leash by his Master, he would begin to play – but at the slightest word from the ‘producer’ he would stop and once again lapse into glowering immobility.

In the end, a working method of sorts was arrived at. The recording devices were left on, Fitz would play and sing his compositions as the mood took him, while the rest of the band improvised desperately behind him. WAKE. It was a harrowing experience for all concerned – with the possible exception of Fitz himself who, though still silent, seemed to evidence a degree of serenity at being given his own way.

For all its problems, this method of working produced a series of raw but outstanding tracks, from the elegiac ‘Liver Wednesday’ to the wild and dizzying ‘Whip Machine’, a sonic avalanche of overdubbed, treated guitar-riffs that has been known to produce spontaneous synaesthesia and projectile vomiting in a certain percentage of citizens. UP.

‘There was something almost mystical about it,’ Salters remembers in his show-trial confession. ‘It was as if Fitz had stuck a projectile weapon to his head and was blowing his brains out into the recording cylinder – no, not his brains, his Soul, everything he was or would be. He was pulling it all out of himself and preserving it, leaving nothing behind, nothing at all.’

Quite how true this was, the Groke would soon discover as, in the fullness of time, their Master organised a number of new televisual and music-club appearances to promote this new material. It was not merely a question of being taciturn: by now, it was a question of Fitz descending into a mindless state of the lobotomised – something his Master has sworn was not the case, and such protestations are generally held to be true. He would walk when told to, perform the actions of eating and dressing himself, but would do nothing else. His final appearances were nothing short of a debacle: he would stand, guitar hung from him, motionless – not out of any sense of rebellion, this time, but with an inner deadness. Something inside him was dead and gone.

And one day, still in the mindless state, he walked from his apartments in his Master’s complex and has never been seen since.

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE.

AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

It is morning, now, the sunlight flaring off the sides of buildings with a harsh, hard clarity. Anji has been riding the monorail since dawn, watching the workers of various kinds and shifts boarding and debarking, their uniforms, cleanliness and bodily health segueing gently from one level of social status to another. WAKE. If she squints her eyes, she sometimes feels that their forms are on the point of changing, mutating into something monstrous, without ever quite managing to do so.

Eyes dazzled by the sunlight, it sometimes seems to them that the buildings through which the monocapsule slides are in a state of flux, vanishing completely away for an instant, shifting their positions in such a way that they have *always* been at their new locations, but only always there for the last few minutes or even seconds. UP.

Anji has been wondering what to do. Should she seek audience with her Master to inform him that her life is in danger, that at least one person and probably more have been sent to kill her? If, as she increasingly suspects, her own Master has decided to have her killed for reasons of his own – or at least look the other way – that would be a very stupid thing to do indeed.

Anji has few friends, having devoted much of her life, even more so than is common, to the pursuit of her duties to her Master. Those acquaintances she has are certainly not of a sort who would welcome her turning up out of the blue and placing their own lives in danger. The Security Services, then? The simple fact of the Security Services is that they are the hammer to deal with problems to good order – and to be so much as noticed by them is to become such a problem.

Anji is left with the realisation, ultimately, that there is no one who will take her in, nowhere for her to go.

Lost in gloomy thought, Anji barely notices that the monotube has stopped and that she has climbed from it. She is down the access ramp and in the street before she realises that it is Monsorstrasse, the street name printed on the card of the dapper gentleman from the night before. Oh, well, she thinks, at this point she has nothing in particular to lose. WAKE UP.

The door is of a deep and lustrous blue, the numbers 999 affixed to it in highly polished brass. An ivory bell push is set to one side of the frame, annotated with a discrete engraved plate reading: RING FOR ASSISTANCE.

The door swings open, seemingly of its own volition, as Anji readies for the bell push. Her heart in her mouth, wondering if this is really a good idea after all, Anji steps inside.

She is in a chamber that is literally indescribable. Every surface, every form, seems to slide away from the eyes as though twisted in some direction for which the human mind has no name. The sensation is not painful or horrifying, but it is disquietingly similar to falling. Falling for ever.

Standing in the centre of the chamber (if such an obdurate space can truly be said to truly *have* a centre) is the man from the night before, still dressed in perfect evening wear, still leaning jauntily on his silver-handled cane.

He grins at her cheerfully. 'Hello, Anji,' he says. 'I'm glad you could make it. There's something you should know. Please listen carefully because it's very important.'

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

What, in the end, happened to Fitz? What was done to him? Where did he go? The obvious and most reasonable explanation, of course, is that his Master, finally having grown tired of his erratic and disruptive behaviour, had him quietly terminated and disposed of. [Name purged from file] however, would swear that he had not caused this to be done until his dying day.

Rumours as to his whereabouts abound, from the contention that he is now a herd-beast farmer in the provinces, to one that he is a mad vagrant wandering those same provinces, to one that he has been bricked up as a ritual sacrifice in secret tunnels under the Radiant Thoroughfare itself. None of which, of course, addresses the point that there is something you should know. Please listen carefully, because it's very important.

None of this is real. You have been psychodynamically conditioned with false-memory constructs designed to create the illusion of a life into which your psyche can be submerged. In your case, that of some variety of pop performer, I believe. The problem is that these false memories are conflicting deeply with the means used to produce them, containing as they do images and concepts for which the process has no easy translation, and you are abreacting massively to that basic incompatibility. The conditioning is intended to subvert your conscious mind and keep it asleep, while your body serves its purpose as a cog in the processes of a global mechanism

of control. That will have to stop now, because now it's time to
WAKE UP.

There were probably worse situations in which to come back to awareness, thought Fitz – but, then again, after a certain point things like that became relative. If somebody wants to clamp you down and saw your head in half, does it make much difference if they do it above or below the nose?

Actually, there would be, if you thought about it. For the first few seconds at least. The visualisation made him feel slightly ill.

He was certainly in the right place for it. He was in a cubicle of roughly the same size and dimensions as that of a public lavatory, and was indeed sitting on a commode of sorts. All things considered, it was a blessing that his trousers had been partway removed – bunched around one leg in a manner that suggested whoever had removed them had not thought it worth the bother of completing the process.²¹

Clutched in his hand were a set of what were probably electrodes, fashioned in the form of a skullcap. Fitz felt a stinging on his forehead and temples, from which the electrodes had been wrenched.

There was a tube in his mouth. Mercifully, it had not been shoved down his throat. Like sitting him on the commode rather than inserting catheters and colostomy bags, some part of him thought vaguely; it was easier to maintain and replace the biot like this, rather than if it were permanently wired in.

And just what the hell, when you came right down to it, was a *biot*?

The tube tasted a little like baby food.

Directly before him, connected to the cubicle wall by thick cabling, was a console unit of sorts. It had two large buttons, each with an electrical bulb set into the casing above it. The bulb on the right was flashing. Automatically, Fitz reached out to press the button – then realised that he was reaching out with the hand still holding the electrode cap and controlled himself.

‘Are you feeling better, now?’ a voice off to one side said.

The Doctor was standing in a hatchway in the cubicle wall. He seemed a little drawn, in the manner of one caught up in some game on which he must concentrate, and is not quite sure of winning.

‘It took a while for you to snap out of it and come back to yourself,’ he said. ‘Do you remember now? Do you remember what happened?’

Fitz looked at the electrodes in his hand, and tried to remember. . .

‘So this is supposed to be one of the great hubs of Imperial commerce or whatever?’ Fitz said. ‘Then where is everybody?’

The TARDIS had materialised in a narrow alley, featureless except for a broken bulb fixed to the wall and several piles of rotting mulch that once might have been paper. They had followed the alley out into a street, equally deserted, through which the wind whistled. Crumbling tenement blocks towered to either side, dark and deserted. Many of the windows were broken – not through any act of vandalism, but through the way that structures settling over time impact on the glass in them and shatter it.

‘It doesn’t exactly seem to be bustling, I’ll admit,’ said the Doctor. ‘Possibly the TARDIS extrapolations weren’t as accurate as I d thought.’

Anji, meanwhile, was looking up at a massive painted hoarding fixed to the side of one of the buildings. The face of it was blistered and crazed (in the sense of being cracked) in a way that said that, if you were to touch it physically, the ancient paint would slough off in a slower of dust. It was still, however, possible to make out the portrait of a figure: an elderly, grandfatherish man seated in an armchair, the perspective such that his eyes appeared to regard you, wherever you might be standing, with a kind of stern but proud affection.

‘What does that say?’ she asked the world in general, squinting at the blocky lettering, in an unknown language, stencilled over the portrait.

‘It says something to the nature of UNCLE CHUMLY IS. . . OVERLOOKING, I think it is. . . YOU,’ said Jamon de la Rocas, who was currently the only person in the world in general who had a chance of knowing what it said.

‘What, not noticing us, you mean?’ said Anji. ‘*Uncle Chumly?*’

‘Well, on mature reflection, it probably says WATCHING OVER YOU,’ said Jamon.

The little group headed on through the grid of empty streets, under a slate-grey sky that held not the slightest smear of cloud, the only break from it being when they passed under the occasional, derelict remains of a monorail track. The oppressive sense of desolation struck a nerve in Fitz that seemed in some way deeper and more subtle than merely walking through a bunch of ruins could account for. It took a bit of thinking before he worked out what it was.

There was no sound of *anything* save the wind. There were no birds – or the local equivalent of what birds might be here – no insects, no plant life growing through the cracks in the paving. Nothing, however minuscule and insignificant, living here at all. It was as if the buildings had simply been placed here with no function but to be the façades of some artificial maze.

And he, the Doctor, Anji and Jamon were the sole inhabitants, the only rats running through it.

‘I’ve been noticing something,’ he said to the Doctor, who was striding along, hands thrust into the pockets of his Happy overcoat, as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

‘Oh, yes?’ said the Doctor turning to him. ‘What have you noticed?’

‘I’ve been noticing that since we’ve been in the Empire, in this sprained time of yours, it’s like we’ve been doing the same sort of things, over and over again, with only one or two changes each time. I mean, look. . .’ Fitz’s gesture took in the group of them as they walked. ‘We’ve been doing this a hell of a lot, just going round various places in a gang. I mean, one or two of us split off occasionally for a while, sometimes, but then we all sort of come banging back together again and carry on.’

‘Sometimes it’s a great comfort to be part of a gang,’ the Doctor said mildly. ‘Sometimes that’s just what’s needed.’

‘Yes, but it’s happening over and *over* again,’ said Fitz, ‘and there’s a kind of unnatural feel to it, like something’s forcing us to do it, somehow. I mean, usually we’re lucky if we end up spending time on the same *planet*. Back in the TARDIS you said something about a malign influence operating on the Empire, so maybe it’s doing something to us. I don’t know, nudging us to do things in some way, doing something to our heads. I mean, we’ve seen how you’ve been acting lately, and –’

‘Really?’ The Doctor’s voice was perfectly light, in the way that manages to convey that one had better be damned well careful what one says next. ‘And how, precisely, have I been acting?’

Fitz looked into his eyes and, while he saw no sense of threat there, decided on the whole that it would be better not to push it.

‘Forget it,’ he said. ‘It’s not important.’

‘Indeed so,’ said the Doctor. ‘Sometimes one thing merely leads to another – and you don’t have to bring a malign, benign or any other kind of influence into it at all. Is there some ultimately sinister and evil purpose to the fact that large portions of humanity on Earth get up and go to work at the same time?’

‘Not at all,’ said Jamon, who had been listening to this, in the tones of one wanting to make a contribution. ‘I have witnessed such a thing on countless worlds. It is merely how slave labour on those worlds operates.’

‘Even in entirely random circumstances you get the odd Markov chain,’ the Doctor continued, definitively, ‘Developments, recurrences and extended strings of phenomena that appear to make sense. Certain, telling phrases and constructions repeated any number of times. You’ll remember how I mentioned iterations in a probability space back on Shakrath? Well, on any other scale than the immediately local, attempting to manipulate the process sim-

ply won't work. The sheer fractal proliferation of vectors means you'd have to think an impossible number of moves ahead...'

'We're coming up on something,' said Anji.

And indeed they were. They had failed to see it before because it was of a slate-grey almost matching the sky. It was a massive pyramid, rising above the roofline in the distance – though quite how far away it was still impossible to tell.

'Well, that looks like it might be of some interest,' the Doctor said, switching instantly from the dictatorial to the cheerfully enthusiastic. 'If there's anything to actually find on Goronos, I'm sure we'll find it in there.'

'You certainly might, Doctor,' said a new voice. 'Though not, perhaps, in the way that you expect.'

From the buildings all around burst human figures, several hundred of them – at least, Fitz thought, they seemed to be human, but there was something horribly wrong with them. It was not that they were diseased, or skeletal, or mouldering: it was that they were obviously very recently dead. Their pale skins had a bluish corpse pallor about them. Their chests had an unnatural stillness about them that showed not even the tiny, subconsciously recognised signs of respiration. Their eyes had rolled up in their heads to show their whites. Even so, they still moved, muscles twitching in co-ordination as though receiving electrical shocks – shocks, no doubt, provided by the coronet of electrodes attached to each of their heads.

'A stealthy way in which to wait in ambush, yes?' said the voice. 'Instruct the heart to stop, so not the slightest tremor of movement is betrayed. Vestigial anabolic energy can keep the motor functions going for some small while thereafter. Of course, the bodies aren't much use for anything after, save for processing into nutrient slurry. Still, never fret, there's plenty more where these fine chaps came from...'

The Doctor, meanwhile, was casting about himself, trying to locate the source of the voice and seemingly oblivious to the mass of walking dead men slowly advancing on himself and his companions.

'Who are you?' he called. 'Do you know me? You sound as though you know me. Show yourself!'

'Ah, but of course, Doctor,' said the voice. 'Yes, of course, I do know you, in a sense. Though not in others, most unfortunately. In that light, allow me to introduce myself to you...'

A new figure stepped from a doorway. It was tall and pale and quite definitely alive. Its face was marked with jet-black lines and whorls and it wore the robes of an Ambassador.

'My name is Jarel,' he said. 'I – that is, we, I suppose – have been expecting you. You've taken your good time about it, I must say – we feared that you

might have become lost. My estimable colleague on Shakrath, it seems, had no luck in winning your compliance. Well, then, let us see what effect some time spent in the Cyberdyne might have...'

Fitz thought he heard the Doctor say something in reply – but it was drowned out by Anji's sudden scream as the walking corpses surged. Cold, stiff bodies that crawled with static electricity piled into him. Clutching hands pulled him down into their jerking mass. He felt the bite of metal into his forehead and temples and then he knew no

'How long have I been here?' Fitz demanded. 'How long have I been stuck in this place?'

'Not long at all, really' said the Doctor, contriving to look shifty.

'You're contriving to look shifty,' Fitz told him, 'which not only means you're lying like a dog on a new carpet, but that I'd probably want to slit my wrists if you told me, right? Besides, "not long" for you could be a couple of hundred years and you wouldn't break a sweat. Some of us go wrinkly and bits fall off, you know?'

'Let's just say,' said the Doctor, 'that you've suffered no physical harm whatsoever, shall we? Please trust me. I know whereof I speak.'

Fitz sighed. 'All right, then. First bit drops off, though, and you're gonna find yourself on the receiving end of a galactic malpractice suit like you wouldn't believe.'

Some small, buried part of his mind noted that he was taking all this very well. Strangely well, in fact. Either the Doctor, as Fitz sometimes suspected, projected a kind of aura which helped people deal with any and all manner of utterly horrendous situations – or his time with the Doctor had simply blown half of the fuses in the parts of him that would react to such things.

'So where have we been for all this indeterminate but probably really appalling amount of time?' he said. 'What's been happening to us?' He banged the electrode headset he was holding against the simple console in front of him. 'And what's *this* thing?'

'It's really quite simple,' the Doctor said. 'It's just a matter of –'

Just then, the voice of Anji came from outside the hatch.

'I've found him,' she said. She seemed to be in something of a bad temper. 'You wouldn't bloody *believe* how hard it was to find him in this pathetic triangular cargo-cult knock-off of a Borg Cube, but I found him.'

'Excellent!' the Doctor turned back to Fitz. 'I'll have to tell you on the way. Do you feel up to pulling up your trousers and making to move, yet?'

‘From what I understand of it,’ said the Doctor, ‘Goronos was basically a massive and extended archive for the local duster of Imperial worlds. It was a highly stratified society of Masters and slaves, the lower orders acting in the manner of functionaries, but within an entirely limited remit, often charged with the making of a single and specific decision, which most of the time had already been made in any case.’

‘Sounds like most middle management I’ve ever had to deal with in my life,’ said Anji. ‘So what happened then?’

She, the Doctor and a still slightly shaken-looking Fitz were following a narrow steel corridor lined with cubicle hatches. It was the seventh or eighth they had thus far followed, each entirely similar to the last. Fortunately, there was little chance of getting lost. For her previous wanderings of several hours, the Doctor had given Anji a small indelible pencil with which she had marked her progress, looking through the little porthole in the hatches – and rather more definitively marked the way back from what was now their destination.

‘The equivalent of an industrial, political and informational revolution combined,’ the Doctor said. ‘Bloody insurgence, transition from steam to atomic power in a single jump, mass hanging of the original Masters, the invention of a Difference Engine, storming of this, that and the other and the discovery of parallel processing. With the dust settling and the by-now highly interconnected infrastructure frankly stuffed – to quote one of the greatest thinkers of my, your or anybody else’s times – they ended up being forced into a particularly draconian form of communalism merely to survive. Nothing wrong with communalism, of course, because it’s merely the name we give to those mechanisms that support people as a whole – but on Goronos it was tainted by the slave mentality fundamental to what remained of its original society.’

‘They couldn’t think in terms other than their original function; they invented a leader for themselves called Uncle Chumly and reiterated the old forms. They wired themselves together into what’s, in effect, a massive super-computer – each individual nothing more than an on/off-switch. There are millions of them here – possibly billions – all participating in the production of the kind of informational meta-matrix that would look outdated on a desk-

top on twenty-first-century Earth. I said that communalism – any community, in fact – is a mechanism for looking after the people whom it comprises – and this is a community stripped to the bones. Most of its processing power is simply used to generate a virtual environment, which is then fed into the sensoria of those producing it. There are what you might call “mobile” units – rather like those walking corpses Jarel the Ambassador used to capture us, only slightly less dead – used for maintenance purposes, but they comprise less than a fraction of a percentile. The population of Goronos, essentially, is what you see here.

‘All these people, just so many hot-swappable processing units, fed through tubes and doing nothing except press one button or another, are being fed the product of their collective work – a life which they think makes them content. You and Fitz were experiencing that, but your virtual worlds were falling to pieces around you, because the meta-system wasn’t sophisticated enough to deal with the complexities of those who are truly human. . .’

Anji had been following the Doctor’s explanation, but she still felt that numb kind of astonishment one gets when one is confronted by something one can’t understand. She couldn’t understand the *stupidity* of it.

‘This is stupid,’ she said. ‘It’s madness. These millions of people subsuming themselves. I could understand it if it was something like wiring all their minds together to produce something vast and godlike, something bigger than the sum of its parts, but why do it for something that’s not even good as a single human being?’

‘One thing leads to another,’ the Doctor said. ‘You take one step, it makes it easier to take the next one – and you can only see it’s madness when you see the end result. The original intention was no doubt to simply take care of people – and it certainly ended up doing that, just not in the sense it was meant.’

‘How do you know all this?’ Anji asked. ‘How did you find all this out?’

The Doctor looked a little proud despite himself. ‘When the mobile units wired me into the Machine, I went through the same sort of abreaction as you and then Fitz. It took quite a lot less than a second, and I managed to overload a large section of the network. It tried to compensate by feeding me every scrap of information it had to bolster up the virtual construct, and from it I was able to infer a reasonably coherent extended history.’ He frowned momentarily, as though regretting a personal failure that he really should have been up to overcoming. ‘I tried to get into the Archives themselves while in that virtual state, but found myself locked out by some surprisingly sophisticated countermeasures. It seems that somebody – I’m sure we can all guess who – has actually been *reprogramming* this whole affair, using techniques quite out of place for this world. That’s something I really think we’re going

to have to – Aha! I assume that this is the right place?’

Anji noted the mark she had made on one of the hatches. ‘That’s the place.’

JAMON DE LA ROCAS WOKE TO SEE THE SMILING FACE OF UNCLE CHUMLY ON THE TELESCREEN. HE BROKE HIS FAST NUTRITIOUSLY IN HIS APARTMENT-BUILDING CANTEEN. HE TOOK THE MONORAIL SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY TO HIS POST AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATIONAL EXCHANGE. AFTER A PRODUCTIVE DAY OF WORK HE RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT AND FELL ASLEEP, HAPPY IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF A JOB WELL DONE.

Jamon de la Rocas sat in his cubicle, sickly paste fed slickly into him through a tube, pressing one button after another. A light would come on in the console before him, and he would press the appropriate button. A light would come on in the console before him, and he would press the appropriate button. A light would come on in the console before him. . .

His gaze never left the console. His eyes gave not the slightest flicker of awareness. There was nothing about him save for the sense of a mechanical device in motion: electrical impulses triggering contraction and relaxation of muscle fibre, the interplay of those muscles doing nothing more with the potentially marvellous mechanism of a human hand except for having it press a specified button, over and over again.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Anji said, looking through the hatch. ‘Is that what we were like?’

‘No, *you* weren’t,’ said the Doctor. He seemed a little worried. ‘You were displaying all sorts of secondary twitches and tremors as your minds – the very physical structure of your brains – tried to shake off what was imposed upon them and reassert themselves. All it took was for me to talk to you for a while and you broke free of your own accord.’

He leaned in through the hatch and lightly touched Jamon’s bald head, into which the cirlet of electrodes had been firmly sunk. There was no reaction whatsoever – not even the minuscule and unseen reaction one might get from touching *anything* alive, no matter how lightly, as opposed to something inert. A reaction that one doesn’t, consciously see, but of which one is subconsciously and definitely aware.

‘I think,’ said the Doctor, ‘that it’s a question of the hardware being too compatible. The basic nature is being overridden by something that was designed, specifically, to fit it. . .’

‘So what you’re saying is that Jamon isn’t human?’ Anji said. ‘I knew it. I always said that there was something wrong about him.’

‘I don’t mean that at all,’ said the Doctor, a little sternly. ‘What on earth, as it were, would a *human* be doing out here this far from Earth in any case?’

It's more akin to the way that a virus that hasn't made the species-jump can affect cats, let us say for example, and not leave humans with so much as a sniffle. The Machine was designed for people of the Empire, so of *course* it's going to subsume him utterly.' He considered the insensate form of Jamon for a moment, tapping at his mouth with a finger in the manner of one in the throes of a painful dilemma, and making sure that everyone damned well knows it. 'I really hate to do this,' he said at last, 'but I'm going to have to take a bit of drastic action.'

He reached into the cubicle and pulled the circlet of electrodes from Jamon's head. For a moment, the pale man simply sat there, dumbly, staring at the console with its two buttons and two lights.

Then he opened his mouth and screamed.

'I will kill this Jarel!' Jamon de la Rocas snarled. 'Great shall be his pain as I tie him to some handily convenient promontory such as I might find affixed among the furnishings of the foul lair in which he no doubt lurks, and then with great and meticulously considered care I shall...'

He had been pontificating in this vein for quite some time, seemingly more intent upon telling himself what he was going to do to the Goronian Ambassador than taking notice of those around him. It was as if, for the moment, he had retreated into his own private world.

Of course, Anji thought, the unkind might say that he had already spent quite enough time in a private world, as had they all – but, when she looked at Jamon in his utter rage, she had the queasy sense of looking at somebody who had been unforgivably violated. She wasn't sure if the fact that he had absolutely refused to talk of what he had experienced in the Cyberdyne was a good thing or not.

As the Doctor led them on through corridors lined with hatches, she turned to Fitz. 'What happened to you? What did you experience?'

'It was... ' Fitz groped for the words, and in the end was forced to settle on, 'It's was just strange, you know? I've always had this dream – well, just a sort of happy little fantasy in the back of my head, to be honest – of being a rock star. Striding about the stage and stuff, centre of attention and all that. It seemed to pick up on that and tried to give me it – but it got everything wrong. It was like the only way it could understand what I wanted to be was in the negative, so it was like, "I'm an evil person and I'm going to do this evil thing because I'm evil, and now I'm going to go and do something else evil over there." You know what I mean?' Fitz scowled, 'And the whole idea of fab drugs and groupies waiting in the hotel with a bottle of baby oil was right out, I can tell you. I ended up with all the bad stuff and none of the things that would make it any good. Thing is... ' The scowl turned into a frown. 'Thing

is, I could get a breath of why all these people would do it. This what do you call it, the Cyberdyne, didn't quite know what a guitar was, but when I was playing what it *thought* was a guitar, in front of a crowd, it felt a bit like being a god or something. . . ' He shook his head as if to clear it. 'It didn't make up for the rest, but I can see how it would be seductive.'

Anji thought about her own hallucinations. From what she could remember of them, before they had twisted into strangeness, she has simply led a reasonably contented life as what was basically the equivalent of a financial consultant. Were her innermost dreams so boring and conventional? The pale man who had chased her was obvious enough, symbolically – it was her mind reminding her of the Ambassador, Jarel, who was responsible for those hallucinations in the first place. But what of that other man, the man who had saved her in one sense and had talked her into waking up?

It was probably some subconscious dream-construct of the Doctor, she supposed, so of course there would be any number of details that didn't match – but she had formed the distinct impression that he hadn't been any version of the Doctor at all. So just where had she come up with him? Where had he come from? Who *was* he? Anji had the queasy feeling of her head being invaded by forces quite other than the Cyberdyne itself, and she didn't like the feeling in the slightest.

The Doctor himself had said that she was – what was the word – abreacting of her own accord when he had found her, but had he been a bit more forceful in helping that along than he had admitted to? Instead of, say, talking to her and bringing her out of it, what if he had shouted and slapped at her in a way that was, in the end, only slightly less intrusive than when he had just ripped the electrodes from Jamon's head? She couldn't imagine the Doctor doing something like that – but, then again, one of the lessons of life that we eventually learn is that people are forever doing what we imagine they are incapable of.

The alternative explanation, of course, was that the 'Doctor' she had met in her hallucination had been constructed purely by herself, that it was some avatar thrown up by her subconscious – some part of herself that was trying to tell her that, whatever else it might want to be, it certainly didn't want to be a financial consultant. Either way, it worried her deeply to have her mind being played with so – not least because of the sneaking suspicion that at least one of the things playing with her mind might be herself.

'Come along,' the Doctor said. He seemed to be offering encouragement rather than merely chivvying them along. Back in dashing, running and swinging-from-the-chandeliers mode, Anji thought vaguely. Good for you, if nobody else.

'Where are we going again?' she asked him. 'I only ask, purely in the spirit

that you haven't even bothered to tell us in the first place.'

'Didn't I?' the Doctor said, trying to inject a sense of apology into his voice but not noticeably succeeding. 'I'm sure I did. Are you sure I didn't tell you where we were going?'

Something in Anji knew – just *knew* – that if she let it, this could devolve into an extended Abbott and Costello routine along the lines of who had said what to whom.

'Just tell me,' she said with murderous restraint. 'Just tell me where you're taking us.'

'Well, I told you that I tried to access the Archives of this place by somewhat intangible means, yes?' the Doctor said promptly, apparently picking up on her tone. 'With a notable lack of success. I did learn, however, that this place still fulfils the function that Goronos once did, in part – that of receiving and relaying information from the worlds in this sector of the Empire. It strikes me that this information must be integrated and compiled somewhere, and I thought it might be a good idea to see where that place is.'

'So where is it,' said Anji, 'exactly?'

'We're in a big pyramid.' The Doctor gave her a look. 'Where do you think would be the best place to try?'

They made their way up through the pyramid. It wasn't a question of finding stairwells or elevators: the certain corridors led on a natural if barely perceptible incline, so that their progress could be more or less described as gradually ascending in a spiral.

Occasionally, they would sense the coming of some of the so-called 'mobile' units, going about their work as they maintained the body informational. They avoided them.

Fitz, for his part, felt increasingly uneasy. He was aware that everyone else here had quite enough on their plate in the uneasiness stakes, but he got the feeling that what he was feeling was unique. Possibly it was the fact that he had spent longer than anyone else in the Cyberdyne – longer than anybody else except Jamon, but Jamon's reaction had been completely different and he wasn't talking about it – but he had the vague sense that it had instilled something into him, some obscure connection with it. It was as if he could feel the minds of the subsumed millions around him, feel their thoughts as they ticked away like clockwork within an artificially imposed, recursive and utterly limited set of parameters. The cumulative sense of knowing that there must be something better, knowing that some other life was possible, but without the slightest clue as to how to set about finding even the slightest possibility of achieving it.

If only I could load the *International Times* into this lot, he thought, thinking of an underground paper he had picked up during his personally discontinuous time in the late sixties on Earth, the somewhat naïve radicalism of which had subsequently dated like nobody's business. In the context of the Goronos Cyberdyne, though, it would have been truly mind-blowing. Blown minds in their millions.

Over and above it all, Fitz remembered what he had said to the Doctor just before their capture, about how they seemed to be doing the same kinds of things over and over again, how it seemed that they were merely running through some predetermined maze. It was therefore no surprise to find, when they at last reached the top of the pyramid, an elegantly proportioned chamber with the TARDIS taking pride of place in it, next to a bulky, inert-looking object under a dust sheet.

'He must have had some of his "mobile" units bring it up here,' said the Doctor. There was no question as to who was meant by *he*. 'These Ambassadors seem to have a singular compulsion to try to get inside the old girl, I must say. It's all a little dubious, if you ask me.'

'Then we must find the man and have it out with him!' Jamon declared, shaking his fist with the vehemence of anger. 'Hunt the cur down and press our point – all the better, press the point of a trusty dagger blade within his lights!'

'I think that might be an extraordinarily bad idea,' said the Doctor. 'At this point, it might be better for all concerned if it's possible to avoid the Ambassador Jarel entirely.'

Cautiously, they entered the chamber, eyes peeled and ears skinned for any sign or sound of Ambassadorial presence. What they *did* find was a series of console terminals rather more complex than those on which a several billion Goronians pushed one button after another. The equivalent of printers hummed and chattered discreetly, etching their indecipherable words on thin plaques of a material something like jade.

'You know what this reminds me of?' Anji said. 'It reminds me of that film. What was it? The man who did *Time Bandits* and it was originally going to be called *1984 and a Half*. Just watch out for pictures of us turning up on the printers and a message saying "kill immediately", that's all.'

The Doctor, meanwhile, was looking around at the consoles a little crestfallen.

'I hate to admit it,' he said, 'but for some reason I can't make head nor tail of these. Advanced technology of several alien races I seem to be able to handle with no problem. Primitive mechanisms like an Enigma device or transputronic so-called supercomputers, the same.' He prodded at one of the consoles. It may have been pure imagination, but it seemed in some way to

growl at him, like a guard dog warning off a passer-by. ‘These things seem to have fallen between two stools, as it were, in a way that I can’t quite make out.’

‘So, no sudden flashes of mysterious and uncharacteristic brilliance in areas you shouldn’t really be knowing anything about?’ asked Fitz.

‘Not at this precise moment, no,’ said the Doctor. ‘Possibly I should have stayed in the virtual world of the Cyberdyne a little longer before escaping.’

Anji, meanwhile, was remembering her own virtual life in the Cyberdyne, and how she had operated equipment remarkably similar to this for her nonexistent Master.

‘I think I could do it,’ she said. Then she peered at what had been etched on the plaques by the printing machines. ‘Or possibly not. There isn’t really any point if I can’t make out the language.’

‘I fancy I might offer some assistance,’ said Jamon, a little tentatively. It was the first thing he had said since being freed from the Cyberdyne, not counting direly muttered vows as to what he was going to do to the individual who had put him into it. ‘I know something of the language, as I believe I have demonstrated before.’ He bowed to Anji with a flourish so dashing that one would have to be watching very closely to see anything other than the fact that his high spirits had been fully restored. ‘If the lady will allow me, I shall be happier than a Thraptulose helium-puffing giggle-fish to offer any small translatory service at my command.’

Anji found herself smiling despite herself. ‘If you really must.’

Fitz considered what special qualities the Cyberdyne had left him with and which ones might be of any help at this point.

‘And I could stick my hands in my pockets and wander around whistling a catchy pop song to keep our spirits up,’ he said.

‘Race you for it?’ said the Doctor.

In fact, Fitz kept a sharp eye out for any sign of approaching threat, while Anji and Jamon worked at the consoles and the Doctor made helpful suggestions and comments. At least, since he seemed to be going through one of his manically inconsequential stages, he made what he probably *thought* were helpful suggestions and comments. It was very fortunate for one person at least that the TARDIS was here – or at least two people thought so, for it was only the fact that said one person had the sole means of entering the TARDIS that prevented said two from braining him with the nearest handy plank.

The Empire might exist in what the Doctor had called ‘sprained time’, and three of the people here had direct experience with other and stranger time scales entirely, but there is a peculiar sort of time that occurs when one is

wrestling with a recalcitrant informational system – whether it be the cumulative effect of several million brainwashed people pressing one button or another, a computer that stubbornly refuses to talk to the portable laptop sitting right next to it, even though the port configurations have been triple-checked until they squeak. After raging and cursing and making a note to throw the damned thing out of the first available window, one finally gets somewhere. . . and looks up to realise that the hour or so one has set aside before going to bed is long gone and it's nearly noon the next day.

In much the same way, getting into the Goronian Archives took quite a few hours so far as humans count such things, and Fitz had long since been reduced to a nervous wreck waiting for Ambassador Jarel to burst upon the scene with any number of walking-corpse enforcers of his will in tow. Such an interruption, however, completely failed to come about – which left the gnawingly unanswered question of just where the hell *was* he? It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop, and almost worse than if he had come bursting in.

On the other hand, Fitz thought, that's just the sort of thing they say in bad old war movies, about how it's the waiting that's the worst part. No, it isn't. The worst part is when some enemy soldier jumps into the trench you're in and sticks a bayonet in you. All things considered, it was better to count your blessings and keep on starting at shadows.

More to relieve his boredom than anything else – moments of extreme trepidation by their very nature not being able to last for long at a time – he walked over to the thing covered by a dust sheet and examined it. It was a large armchair, on which sat the animatronically controlled dummy of a man. Its face was lined and grandfatherish; Fitz recognised the so-called Uncle Chumly from the hoardings in the streets outside. Yet another truncated repetition, he thought, remembering the artificial Emperor and court on Shakrath.

At length, the combined efforts of Anji and Jamon had produced a stack of printed sheets piling up to the height of the hip of a man.

'We've been concentrating on pulling out a basic current state and general history,' Anji said. 'There's more, a lot more, but if we tried to get it all it would probably fill the entire room. We wouldn't be able to carry them, anyway.'

'Well, I suppose that's enough to be getting on with,' said the Doctor, in a slightly critical way that, once again, had at least two people looking around for something that might be used as a club. 'In any event, it'll have to do.' He glanced about himself. 'I think we've stayed here long enough. Time to be moving on – in fact, I really think it's time we took some action.'

'It's about time,' said Fitz, speaking for everybody.

When the TARDIS had dematerialised, when the last traces of its outer plasmic

shell that was its connection with this world had dissipated, a door opened quietly and discreetly to one side of the chamber. The Ambassador Jarel emerged, and thoughtfully regarded the empty space in which the Doctor's conveyance had once stood.

It had taken quite some time and some incredibly abstruse means, he thought – or rather, something that was not *quite* the mind of Ambassador Jarel thought – but the man calling himself the Doctor had finally taken the bait. Hook, line and sinker.

There had been some problems, admittedly – especially after the Doctor had been allowed to escape from the Court of Shakrath, when he had evaded detection for quite some considerable time – but that was of no matter now. The plans of Ambassador Jarel and his colleagues (or those who were not *quite* Ambassador Jarel and his colleagues) were at last coming to fruition.

[Revelation]

In my expostulations previous, I have touched upon the means by which the processes of Transference, the foundation of the very Empire itself, contrived to operate. Some of those means I knew, at the least in part, at the time of which I have spoken of them. I have drawn freely, however, from the facts as detailed in the printed sheets obtained by Anji Kapoor, with the small assistance of my good self, from that foul milling engine of information that existed on the world of Goronos.

Of my own time spent in that mill, I would rather not speak unless it be absolutely necessary – and the time for that will shortly come, never fear. Suffice it to say that as much now as then, while I fancy I am man enough to put such things behind me and remain mindfully demonstrative of all good things, the very hell of it left its mark upon me. There is a certain loss, a certain emptiness, that I do not think shall ever again be filled.

But enough of such maudlinity and moperly! High were our hearts and spirits, such as was possible, in part from being free of the fetid air of Goronos, but in most part for having hard-won through with much information such as might be pursuant to our further course. Such a course would, so the Doctor said, locate in fine detail such evil influences as were perverting the good order of the Empire, and stop them on their rails once and for all – a notion of which I myself was most heartily in agreement.

As his conveyance, the TARDIS, devolved into what I gather was the ghostly state suitable for its traverse between worlds, the Doctor set off into its extraordinary interior, looking to find, so he said, the Collector (which had been left to its own devices for quite some time long enough) and ensure that creature hadn't 'half-inched' anything important. This left Anji, Fitz and my good self to translate the information we had gathered into a form that those mechanisms that controlled the TARDIS could readily understand.

For the most part, this consisted of our taking each printed sheet and holding it, momentarily, before a dark and circular lens which extended telescopically from the console affair that dominated the chamber to which it gave the name. During the course of doing so, I myself was able to catch a glimpse of brief passages detailing certain aspects of the Empire itself of which I had previously been unaware. You must understand, of course, that to be from one part of the Empire meant that any understanding one had of other parts was somewhat dated at best – but, from what I could make out here, things had changed out of almost all recognition.

The Thraali, for example, whom I had always understood to be the most kind, courteous and civilised of men, now seemed to have demarked an entirely spurious subset of their number (based upon the shape of the occipital lobes, I believe) and were busily in the process of exterminating that subset in manufactories built for that especial purpose.

On the world of Draglos, where the inhabitants in their various tribes waged a perpetual and intricately balanced war with each other, conducted by way of counting coup with ceremonial sticks, the use of explosive landmines and other such engines of destruction had devastated the world entire, and left the few pitiable survivors with hardly a leg between them upon which to stand.

The world of Ginglii-Tva (which I remember for a time visiting in my own person, and noting the remarkable beauty of its coral habitations spread across a globe-wide collection of crystal-clear pools) was now barely habitable, owing to industrialisation, the pools that were its notable feature now reduced by way of sulphuric pollution into nothing more than seething vitriol.

And so on, and on, and so quite dreadfully forth. If I had been paying slightly closer attention at the time, I might have wondered how it came to be that this information was, as it were, current – that it dealt for the most part with what was happening on those worlds now, rather than what might in actual fact be several hundred years before – but I confess that I was too shocked by the supposed states of these worlds to think much further than that.

Now, please don't misinterpret my words to mean that Empire as was, the Empire such as I had known it, was all sweetness, light and a life of luxury and ease for the commonality. I have previously mentioned some of the worlds to which I have travelled, and touched on such matters as might show that truth, justice and certainly

liberty were not exactly in an abundant supply – but in none of the worlds to which I had travelled had I encountered circumstances quite so deleterious as this.

Be that as it may. For quite some time, I, Anji and Fitz performed what Anji herself described as the 'feeding' of information into the TARDIS mechanisms. Personally, for myself, I found the use of the term unfortunate. It suggested, obviously, a sense of hunger about those mechanisms, which called up the notion of their being ravenous, and perhaps for things quite else than information.

At length, we were done. As if waiting for that precise cue, the Doctor appeared again, telling us that the Collector was quite happy where it was for the moment, and rubbing his hands in anticipation at our labour's use. On large televisual screen he caused pages of text to appear (written in a script that I entirely failed to understand but which seemed to be known to both Anji and Fitz) and by manipulation of certain controls caused that text to flicker and scroll rapidly – too rapidly, it seemed to me, for the eyes of a man to follow.

'Well, that all seems simple enough,' he said presently. 'The interesting thing is how the Empire came to be set up in the first place.'

'How so?' Fitz asked. I myself, I must admit, found it hard to see how ancient history might have a bearing on our current circumstance.

'I'll tell you in a moment.' The Doctor touched a control, and on the televisual screen a collection of radiating lines began to extend themselves from a single point. 'Millions of years ago – millions of years from this subjective space-time point – a certain unnamed, long-dead planet began sending out probe ships. Each had a payload consisting of the means necessary for the setting up of a high-powered transmat unit – an Engine of Transference. Each was crewed by a single man, kept in stasis, whose job it was to set the mechanism up. They were shooting into the dark, effectively, hoping to find a percentage of habitable planets... It was ninety-nine parts suicide mission to one part one-way trip. The crewmen were selected from those who were marked for execution in any case: the unrepentant or the irredeemably psychotic...

'That sounds like a recipe for disaster,' Anji said, a little worriedly. 'I don't know about you, but I wouldn't trust a small motor scooter set up by someone unrepentant and irredeemably psychotic.'

'And nor would those that founded the Empire,' said the Doctor. 'The crewmen were lobotomised and implanted with unbreakable Cyberdynic control structures, which had them setting up the Engines of Transference, sending back a test signal and then simply dropping dead. Upon receiving the test signals, the founders then sent out the biological pattern-signatures of volunteer seedling colonists. Apparently, they didn't bother destroying the original bodies at the start – what difference would it make to them if duplicates of them popped up on some other planet in a thousand years? That practice – or lack of practice, I suppose – was discontinued almost immediately. Can't think why.'

'The process took tens of thousands of years – a very patient race, those original founders, I imagine. Once set up, the Empire became self-perpetuating, and for almost two million years it ran itself quite happily, on the cosmic scale of things...'

'So what happened then?' Fitz asked. 'What went wrong?'

'I have no idea,' said the Doctor. 'We've talked about how the basic structure of it seems to have been twisted in some manner, and I can see from the Goronos data how each individual world is going through collapse at an alarming rate, but the primary source it still... Now there's a thing.'

The proliferating lines on the televisual screen were now a tangled, pulsing mass of the sort I had seen, earlier, on the Doctor's own extrapolations. For myself I could make neither head nor tail of it, save for the obvious fact that it was a representation of the various links of Empire. Looking at it, I fancied I could see certain differences from what I had seen before, but to achieve more than that sense was beyond me and, I suspect, any other man.

The Doctor, however, seemed quite excited. He caused the image to dissolve into pages of indecipherable text again, through which he shifted rapidly, again too fast for any sense to be made had I been able to comprehend it at base.

'Interesting...' he said at length.

'What's interesting?' Anji demanded. 'What have you found?'

'The Transfer of data and inert materials,' said the Doctor, 'seems to be relatively consistent. So does the general traffic of people like you, Jamon, though it seems to have fallen off of late.' This, nodding towards me. 'Travellers seem to be being held rather than otherwise, rather than being allowed to carry on their way. The inconsistency is blindingly simple and obvious – but by its nature it's too sporadic to show up easily...'

He caused the more complete version of the Imperial network to appear again. 'You see this?' He traced a number of lines on the televisual screen with a finger. As he did so, I experienced a profound shock. It was indeed sporadic, but indeed it was also obvious – so obvious that, once pointed out, it was impossible to see how one could not have noticed it before, especially, of course, one of such a noted comprehension as myself.

(Then again, though, to take the other hand, I'd had the woeful disadvantage of being able to see such things only from a singular point of view. It took such marvellous resources and instrumentation such as the Doctor himself commanded to show what was indeed the obvious. So I feel that any obduracy that I might have evidenced beforehand was quite natural, and not entirely unjustified. Which is to say, you can't blame me for not having spotted it – as, of course, you yourself must have, long before this point. I go into the matter in such length here, not to belabour a point so perfectly manifest to all, but merely to give an idea of my own state of mind, in that place and of that time, to make of what you will.)

Now that I had spotted it, however, I could only look on aghast – much as I had in looking upon the crippled Engine of Transference in the Citadel of Souls on Thakrash, come to think on't. It was the sensation of looking upon a thing that, while being perfectly possible, was so contrary to what one assumed it to be, in the bones, that to see that it could be something else was quite debilitating.

'The anomaly is in the movement of the members of this so-called Ambassadorial Corps,' said the Doctor. 'The gods only know where they think they're being sent, but they're all being sent to the same place. And those who arrive, wherever they say they're from, are in fact being sent from that same place.'

The Doctor planted a finger firmly on the televisual screen.

'There,' he said. 'That's where they go. That's where they come from. And I rather suspect it's the exact same place that the Empire came from in the first place.'

4
Go Ghost

Attrition, Anji thought: that was the word. Forget about the days when you just want to get home, curl up and die; forget about the ticking of biological clocks. Attrition, with a capital A, was what it basically was about. You come up to thirty and you really start noticing how the occasional bruise takes too long to heal, a torn nail takes too long to grow back. You catch the intimations of the realisation that Time isn't going to make things better: it's going, by increments, to make things worse.

Five years from now, you're not going to be soaring ever higher from your GCSEs to a university first, to a job and promotion: you're going to be hanging from your fingernails (which don't grow quite as fast as they used to) to what you've got, watching it crumble away from you, knowing that when it goes, to some final extent, the only way is down. In the physical, mental, social and every other sense besides.

It probably wasn't true. Anji had known forty-year-olds who had more party energy than people half their age. People who had kept the spark inside them while their contemporaries had ended up balding (male and female pattern balding) and exhausted by the demands of their button-down, kid-rearing, boss-sucking and ultimately meaningless lives. She had formulated, looking at them, the vague principle that lives could take two tracks. On the one, you hit middle age around the age of twenty-four, weighed down by the world. On the other, you kept it getting on at forty, fifty, seventy – or you were dead of a heart attack by thirty-six. She had always thought of herself as being on the right track, but now she was wondering. . .

Inside herself, she just felt lower than she could ever remember having felt in her life. The deep feeling, deep inside you, where a little voice is saying come on, you can see how pointless it all is, why not just run a warm bath, slit your wrists in the correct manner and just switch it all off?

It didn't help much that she'd worked out *why* she was feeling like this. Anji wasn't stupid; she knew her own head as well as if not better than any armchair psychologist who had ever sat in said armchair and said something really patronising to the point where you wanted to hurl a brick. It wasn't that she was feeling depressed – it was that the events of the past subjective days

had conspired to oppress her. Knowing that your feelings are being imposed upon you from the outside, though, doesn't help much in dealing with those feelings themselves.

Fitz had been talking about the last few days, she recalled, and saying something about how the same things kept seeming to happen, over and over again. That was a part of it, Anji supposed, but he had missed a fundamental point. Everywhere they had been, things had been stripped away, not least a sense of humanity. From the opulent and patently human-built spaces of Shagrath, they had come to the empty forests of Thakrash, then the dead streets of a world where human beings, as such, did not live. Now they were in spaces where human beings, as such, *could* not live. It was like a demonstration of Entropy in four easy lessons.

They had stepped out of the TARDIS into desolation. A landscape of ash and nothing else. A grey cloud that hurt your lungs when you breathed it, stung your eyes if you tried to see.

In the shifting and actinic light, she could barely make out the forms of the group – and it struck her that she was automatically thinking of it as that: the Group. And it had only really struck her now because one of them was missing. When the TARDIS had materialised, on this unnamed planet that was supposedly the centre of things, Fitz had been set to run out of the door – in the enthusiastic way that he always seemed to, as though hungry for what new experience any and all new worlds might bring – before the Doctor had stopped him.

'Remember what we talked about,' he had said, quietly, though within Anji's hearing. 'That time when we were on our own. This is the time we were talking about. I want you to stay in here for a while. Keep an eye on the Collector if you can – one of the better and more entertaining species in the known universe, I've always said, I think, and I wouldn't hear it otherwise, but sometimes their worst nature runs away with them.'

At the time, Anji had racked her brains to try to remember any private conversation Fitz might have had with the Doctor – before realising what was, as it were, the basic nature of any conversation they might have had while they were alone. Of course you wouldn't have *heard* it, if they were on their own, in the first place. The thing about it was, though, that if you *knew* there was something to know, and you hadn't been told about it, there was no way you could keep your mind from worrying about what it might be – like a tongue forever probing at an imperfection in a tooth, while you're wondering whether, if you ever pluck up enough courage to go to the dentist about it, it's going to be merely some calcine accumulation that can be simply blasted away, or the sort of root-canal job that leaves you unable to eat for three days for fear of disturbing what feels like three tons of amalgam.

In any case, out here in this ash world, she found herself retreating into her head, and all the little insecurities that she would never, ordinarily, pay a mind to seemed to be accelerating round in circles until they were all she could think of. There was something she hadn't been told about, fair enough – but here and now it felt like being back in the playground, of being actively, hurtfully excluded from the gangs you wouldn't join even if they asked. But, then, they never asked. . .

'Are you feeling quite all right?' asked Jamon de la Rocas. 'Only you seem to be a little upset.'

For some reason, Anji found herself flashing back on something her boyfriend, Dave, had said, some while before he had died and just after they had started being with each other seriously.

'When I first saw you,' he had said, 'when I first met you, you were like this beautiful girl and that's what I thought. I'm not saying it very well. You were like this beautiful girl, like Seven of Nine out of *Voyager* and that's all I could think, Beautiful Girl. And then somehow this switch went off in my head and I suddenly realised you were a Real Person. . .'

At the time it had been the standard, getting-together-seriously conversation, however badly expressed, but she had known what he meant – having had daily contact with a broad cross-section of stock-analysing male humanity who were physically incapable of seeing her as anything other than a pair of breasts and buttocks hanging off a kind of articulated frame, with a little dash of the ole curry powder to add a bit of extra flavour. Remembering that, she realised that she had been doing the same thing in reverse, to some extent. It wasn't a big thing, but she realised that she had simply not seen Jamon as a Real Person, as if he were a shibboleth, or a character in a novel that didn't quite ring true.

'It's OK,' she said. 'This place has just got me feeling incredibly introspective, that's all.'

'I think this place might do that,' Jamon said, looking around himself. 'Who knows what phantasms and megrims a place such as this might wake in any mind?'

'If you say so,' said Anji.

'Come along,' the Doctor called, slightly ahead of them, the long black coat he had recently affected to wear flapping about him. 'I can feel we're getting closer to the heart of the matter. Don't you want to finally learn the truth of things?'

It was in that instant that all of Anji's confusion became clear. Possibly it was because she had found herself thinking on levels that she wouldn't have otherwise – the deep levels where, if you mine them far enough, you find something approaching a real truth.

It was like wandering in the desert: the lack of external stimuli has the mind working against itself, ablating itself to the point where it exposes the core. There was a phrase she remembered, from reading a William S. Burroughs book, back in university, when she had tried for a time to be hip, cool and trendy: *Naked Lunch*. A *Naked Lunch* moment was when you experienced an instant of utter clarity, looked around the refectory and saw, precisely, what was on the end of every fork.

‘No I don’t, frankly,’ she said.

‘What?’ The Doctor paused in his purposeful stride. He turned around and looked at her. ‘I mean, I beg your pardon?’

It was the moment of truth – something of a moment of truth, at any rate.

‘I’ve just realised,’ Anji said. ‘I’ve worked it out. Fitz was talking about how he had a feeling we were running through a maze – but his mistake was thinking that some evil monster or other was making us do it. It’s been you doing it, Doctor – you’ve been prodding us around, prodding us out of the TARDIS and making sure we have an appropriately exciting adventure, with rescues and explosions and running through corridors, and all of it means precisely nothing. There’s *nothing* we’ve learned that we couldn’t have worked out simply by sitting down safe in the TARDIS, looking at the information that we already had and having a quiet think.’

‘I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about. . .’ the Doctor began.

‘Yes you do,’ said Anji. ‘You’ve been putting us out there in these places simply for the sake of putting us *out* there. Playing Mr Enigmatic. Touting us about to show us off and make a bit of noise. Get us noticed. Hanging us out as bait. And the way you’ve been acting. . .’

‘Well, I admit that for a while I haven’t been acting quite like myself. . .’ the Doctor began again.

Anji snorted. ‘And don’t we just know it! You’ve been overplaying the multiple-personality card like nobody’s business. The thing is, it just doesn’t ring true. You’ve been fanning about from one so-called emerging personality to another, wilfully saying and doing things that are completely out of character – and you don’t even believe it yourself.’

Anji scowled. ‘Do you know what I think? Do you know what I think you’ve been doing since we came into the Empire? You had a flash of insight – a bit like the way I’m feeling at the moment – and you knew how you were supposed to act, and you’ve been trying to. You’re just not very good at it, and you’ve been overacting like hell. You’ve been trying to do it and you just can’t. It’s all a bit embarrassing, basically.’

She realised that the Doctor was staring at her astonished. While she was certain of what she’d said, with the certainty of anger, some part of her couldn’t help pointing out that the things you’re certain about when you’re

angry can often be completely and utterly wrong.

Then the Doctor grinned. He was possibly even a little chagrined.

‘It’s a little like you say,’ he said. ‘When we entered the Empire. I received some very strong intimations. You know how it is when there’s a hole in something, you can sometimes tell what needs to be put in it by the shape? It was a bit like that, I knew there were certain things I simply *had* to do – I couldn’t quite grasp the reasons behind them, sometimes, but I knew they were there, somewhere in me, like the vast mass of an iceberg underwater. I think I have some measure of it now, though.’

The Doctor halted and planted his feet in the ashy ground, to stand there in what seemed to Anji to be quite a confrontational gesture.

‘All right,’ he called into the billowing grey clouds. ‘I’m here. I’m willing to talk. Now, what is it you wanted to talk about?’

Across the entire Empire, simultaneously, a number of Ambassadors paused in whatever business they were about, and cocked their heads, as though listening to something only they could hear. Where it was possible, they excused themselves from said business, and retired to whatever it might happen to be that served them as their private apartments.

They dismissed all servants, with instructions that they should not be disturbed until further notice, on pain of death, and then, when they were finally alone, these worthy members of the Ambassadorial Corps began behaving rather strangely.

Dark shapes moved in the clouds of ash. There seemed to be a lot of them – it was impossible to tell how many there may be.

Several bulky, hulking forms became distinct: chaotically organised collections of muscle and membrane, bulging brain sacs, jaws and clawed appendages and what should have been internal organs but had been situated the wrong way round. Though each was profoundly different from the rest, there seemed to be an underlying quasi-order to their construction that made them instantly recognisable.

They were the creatures that had manifested themselves when the Vortex Wraiths had attempted to invade the TARDIS.

Each of these creatures held, clutched by complex skeins of tentacles, ligaments and other such organs of constriction, the pale and wasted form of a man, his face etched with the flat black markings of an Ambassador who had travelled through an Engine of Transference.

‘Oh dear me,’ the Doctor said, in markedly dispirited tones. ‘Ambassadorial Corpse. I’d have spotted it before – only a pun like that was too irredeemably awful even for me.’²²

In his apartments in the Imperial Court on Shakrath, the Ambassador Morel sat immobile, his eyes rolled up in his heads to show nothing but the whites. Previously, before taking his leave, he had been about advising his Emperor of the best way of setting up large and extensive establishments throughout the entire world of Shakrath, devoted to the activities that were the Emperor's favourite form of relaxation and diversion – only properly organised, in some places automated and with the capacity to handle several thousand of the Shakathri commonality in one go.

The Ambassador Morel had suggested the idea on the basis of sheer statistics – with so many being dealt with simultaneously, it was entirely certain that a proportion of them would provide the extreme of entertainment the Emperor himself pursued in his piecemeal way, and which the Emperor could then watch at his leisure.

Now, for the moment, the Ambassador Morel merely sat there, immobile and alone. Then he opened his mouth and began to speak, though there was no one there to hear.

Anji stared at the wasted, human figure clutched to the obscene creature that loomed over them. It was little more than a skeleton, over which flaking, paper-dry skin had been stretched. Desiccated organs made strange and stringy-looking little lumps in its midriff.

For all of this, for all its dereliction, the figure seemed, in some strange way, to be still *alive*. Anji was reminded of the myths of how vampires looked if they hadn't been allowed to feed on human blood for several centuries.

The markings on its face were familiar. She had seen them somewhere before. She realised that she was looking at a copy, ancient and degenerated but a copy nonetheless, of the Ambassador on Shakrath: Morel.

A number of other creatures were distinct through the suspended ash, clustered around, each with its own cargo of semi-living human remains, but it seemed that they had chosen the Morel thing to be, as it were, their spokesman. Tentacles worked at the jaw, throat and lungs, coaxing out words in a way that reminded Anji of a scene from *Independence Day*, with Data from

Star Trek: The Next Generation being used somewhat demeaningly as a glove puppet.²³

'Doctor... ' the mouth of the duplicate Morel said in a choked and barely audible rasp. *'We have been... waiting for you.'*

'Not long, I hope,' the Doctor said lightly. 'How long have you actually been here, anyway?'

'For... *thousands of your years,*' the Morel thing said. *'We have come here, through the portal of what you call Transference. It was the first. Its building took our notice, flaring like a pain in the Endless Real. It drew us to it...'*

'Endless Real?' Anji asked. 'What's this Endless Real?'

'I think it's what they call the vortex,' said the Doctor. 'I think I can see how it happened. The occasional Vortex Wraith would piggyback itself on to a transmat signal, corrupting it and producing something monstrous in which it could make itself manifest...'

'There are few,' the Morel thing said, the tortured sounds coming from its attached human contriving rather pointedly to convey that it was, after all, talking here. *'We came into this world of men and laid it waste. It is our world now. As new men arrived, men of power who called themselves Ambassadors, we took them captive, used their Engines to send them out once more into their Empire...'*

'Arranging it so that the Engine of Transference failed to destroy their original bodies as you did so,' said the Doctor, thoughtfully, looking at the decaying yet still living human component. 'Now I wonder why you did that.'

'These men have Souls,' the Morel thing said. *'One Soul shared between two bodies. Thus we make them do our bidding, walking through their worlds at our sufferance and our pleasure.'*

'Hang on a minute,' Anji chipped in. 'Let me get this straight. These... things are using these living corpses to control their counterparts out there in the Empire, manipulating them like a lot of little voodoo dolls? So how come all the Ambassadors we've met have been all suave and "aha, my good sir, I see your entrance has been most extingent", and these guys are all "thousands of your puny human Earth years", you know what I mean?' She briefly adopted a posture to convey the idea of a lurching monster from an old Hollywood movie. 'What's up with that?'

'I suspect the control, filtered through each specific Ambassador, takes on the characteristics of his distinctive personality,' said the Doctor. He turned his attention back to the Morel thing. 'So what have you been doing with all your Ambassadorial puppets, then? Setting things up to bring more of your kind into our universe? I seem to recall seeing several of your kind being looked after medically on Shakrath, kept alive so that they could recuperate.'

'We have laid the way open for our kind,' the Morel thing said. *'We are establishing our presence. But it has been slow, very slow. . .'*

'I imagine it would be,' said the Doctor. *'Bringing your kind in, one by one, by way of the various Transfer chambers and stations, under the watchful eyes of the local populations – even with an Ambassador on hand to smooth the way as much as possible. I imagine it would be very slow work.'*

His voice seemed perfectly neutral rather than condemnatory, no doubt intended to keep the monstrous form before him talking as long as was possible. Looking at the mismatched collection of teeth, talons and suchlike potentially lethal appendages sprouting from its horrid mass, Anji couldn't blame him.

'No more,' the Morel thing said. *'There has been. . . change.'* The way it said this managed to convey that any change, at least so far as the plans of the Morel thing were concerned, was almost literally unthinkable. *'Something new in the Endless Real.'*

'Oh, really?' said the Doctor, suddenly all attention. *'What sort of thing exactly?'*

'It is. . . not good.'

Again, the Morel thing managed to convey something more than the actual words. *'Not good'*, in this sense, seemed to be the equivalent of calling a concerted policy of racial genocide a firm but fair tightening of immigration control.

'Not good,' the Morel thing repeated, seemingly more for the benefit of itself than any listener. *'It is big, and it is hungry, and it is eating. We must leave the Endless Real. All of us must leave.'*

'That's rather a lot of Vortex Wraiths,' said the Doctor. *'How many of you are there in the, ah, this Endless Real of yours? Millions? Billions?'*

'All must leave,' the Morel thing merely said again. *'We found your travelling machine, your. . . TARDIS, spinning through the Endless Real. It has great power, power enough for us all. Some of us tried to use that power to make meat machines to walk in your world, but it killed them. Killed them all, when they tried.'* The croaking tone suggested not so much regret as a general umbrage at some niggling inconvenience. *'You will make it obey us, link its power to the Engines of Transference here, so that we may take all our kind from the Endless Real and populate the worlds of your Empire. . .'*

'And what of the people who already live on those worlds?' said the Doctor. *'I ask merely out of interest, you understand,'*

'We will kill them to make room,' the Morel thing said, simply. Anji got the distinct impression that any other alternative, any alternative at all, had and would simply never occur to it. *'They are nothing to us. We will kill all when we find them. We will have them gone.'*

‘Well, I’m all for peaceful coexistence between species,’ the Doctor said, ‘but that doesn’t exactly strike me as workable when one side had the nasty habit of being completely and utterly inimical to the other. One side giving the other the so-called *peace* of the dead isn’t much of an option. The answer’s no, I’m afraid.’

The Morel thing merely looked at him – at least, thought Anji, regarding the complicated tangle of its form, it gave off the impression of looking at him.

‘We have the means to make you do our will,’ it said at last.

Another organically mismatched creature slithered forward, resolving itself from a mere shadow in the clouds of ash. Like the Morel thing it clutched the bone-thin, quasi-living remains of a human form – and, like the simulacrum of the Ambassador Morel, this form was somehow familiar. The black markings etched into its face were similar to that of the face of a tiger.

‘All who have travelled through their so-called Engines of Transference have left their mark here,’ said the Morel thing. *‘Most, save for those who are called Ambassadors, are of no use. But yet we keep them, in repository, for such time as we might have a use for them. . .’*

The other creature manipulated the limbs of its pale cargo. Anji became aware of a sudden jerking of movement to one side. She turned in alarm to see that Jamon de la Rocas, who had been standing there in quiet shock and whom she had all but forgotten about, was lurching towards her. His eyes were rolled up in his head. His arms were stretched before him. His hands clenched and unclenched like a set of pincers.

‘You shall be killed,’ the Morel thing said. *‘First the female, now, by way of demonstration, and yourself if you refuse to do our will.’*

And it is at this especial point in my tale that I must crave something of your indulgence, in advance of my own poor delineation of certain matters. There are some things, it seems to me, that are impossible to describe to any complete satisfaction – at least, some things that slip the scope of the small descriptive prowess of one such as myself, who is, after all, little more than a meat-and-bread apprentice in the lists of oratory. I can only hope and pray that you will find it in your heart to pardon such an unfortunate and, indeed, unconscionable lapse.

The sensation as the monstrous creature took control of me was, I am very much afraid, indescribable. It was something akin to the feeling one imagines, should one care to imagine it, of needles being sunk into the flesh at the nape of the neck – though not, as I happen to know in a certain capacity that is here quite beside the

point, what the feeling of having needles sunk into the flesh is in actual fact. Together with this was the feeling of some glutinous liquid sliding through the brains inside my head, interspersed with what so far as I could make out were minuscule explosions of light, as though of the detonation of fireworks the size of atoms the length of a thumb behind my very eyes.

All of these things I felt, in a sense that I found them taking place within me – but the sensations were painless, indeed sensationless, in a quite peculiar manner. In a way similar only in the sense of not being similar quite at all – save for the fact that such is the nearest similarity of which I can think – it was alike to sleeping with one's weight upon an arm or leg so that it is deadened to a certain degree, then suffering some ordinarily painful knock to the appropriate member while it is still in that insensate state.

For myself, in and of myself, I was aware of nothing more so than a deep and overwhelming sense of peace. It was a relief, almost, to let go my hold upon myself and sink into its welcoming oblivion.

For quite some time, you see, I had been suffering an inner turmoil – though I flatter myself that I had been able to conceal it from the good Doctor and his friends, so that they never even knew of it. The worm of doubt had burrowed into me at the instigation of Anji, back when she had talked to me of the nature of Souls and how, in her opinion, I myself could not but be singularly lacking in that department.

Purest nonsense, of course – save for the unfortunate fact that the conviction could not be gainsaid by any actual proof. It was a terrible thought to think oneself without the spark of the Divine, a quietly horrifying thought – not entirely aided in being any less so by the fact that, once it was instilled, one could not help taking it out and turning it over in the mind, over and over again, in the hope of finding so much as a single flaw in it and finding none.

And then there came the world of Goronos – cruelly taken and used, reduced to no more than an appliance, a single device in the service of the processes of a great Machine. From what I had been told, the Doctor and both Fitz and Anji had broken the bonds that had insisted on that state as a matter of course, whereas I – I who have dined hugely with princes and kings, made love and sport in the courts of glorious queens, who have by turns and at various times

been feted and slated, but at the least been of substance and note upon a hundred worlds – whereas I had been subsumed, wholly and completely, into the drudgery of a workaday, hallucinated Purgatory without end, and with nary a whimper of protest besides.

And what did that make of me? For all my fine thoughts and protestations, was I nothing more than the ghost of a gnat in a whole-built body that might as well be a Golem, such as are made by the technomages of Raghagi, for all I in truth bore relation to a man? Well, then, let it be so. It was far more easy, with the foul influence of the monstrous creatures sliding through the brains inside my head, to let such pretences go.

'I don't think he's stopping...' I was dimly aware of Anji saying, not a little worried, as my body lurched towards her of its own accord. 'Aren't you going to do anything?'

'If you think killing my companion is going to alter my decision in the slightest,' said the Doctor – this to the creature who, it seemed, had in some small part a connection with Morel, the Ambassador to Shakrath, 'then you little judge your man. Do you know how many times some villain's spent every other minute trying to put me under duress by threatening the lives of my friends and companions? And that's just here in the Empire, let alone, it sometimes seems, absolutely everywhere else. And frankly, the whole thing's getting rather tired. If you can't be bothered thinking up something even remotely new, then I'm not going to play.'

'Charming!' Anji said. 'You know, it's at times like these, you really find out who your friends are, don't you?'

'Oh, don't worry yourself, Anji,' the Doctor said, conversationally, and now quite obviously talking to the young lady concerned. 'You're not in any danger. Is she, Jamon?'

Just as I cannot describe my sensations at this point to complete satisfaction, I fear that I cannot even begin to explain my reaction to a single remark expressed so casually in my direction. My body remained under the control of these loathsome creatures, but a spark quietly awoke in me. To some degree, it seemed, I came back to myself. The limbs that by now appeared deeded to the title of something other than myself trembled a little, as this miraculously waking part of me began to fight for their control.

'Listen to me very carefully, Jamon,' the Doctor was saying, his tone quite firm but betraying nothing much more than a man at his ease and merely passing the time of day. 'I gather that

you've been going through a somewhat rocky existential time of late, worrying about the existence of self, Souls and prana and whatnot, and ordinarily I wouldn't be able to help you much with it...

'In other sections of the galaxy – in what you call the Unseen Lands – such things are all still something of a mystery, one way or the other. But here and now, in the Empire, we know for a fact that they do exist. If they didn't, then just what would these fellows here be doing using yours to try to control you? Answer me that if you're so clever. So there.'

It was like watching the hem of one of those overwrought old movies, where he's trying to give up the drink. Jamon de la Rocas juddered and shook, sweat pouring from his brow, teeth clenched in a snarl so strong that one might fear those teeth would splinter and break under the pressure of it.

Then all of a sudden, the internal struggle simply stopped. He stood there, fists clenched, arms hanging loosely by his side, hauling in one deep breath after another. He looked about himself, collecting his shattered wits. He glared at the creature clutching the wasted simulacrum of himself. Anji, following his gaze, saw that something seemed to have gone out of the pale form of the copy. From a sense of its being semi-alive, it was now quite definitively dead.

Jamon seemed to consider his dead quasi-self for a while. Then he shrugged to himself, turned, walked over to the creature clutching the simulacrum of the Ambassador Morel, and punched it forcibly in the stomach.

On Shakrath, the still form of the Ambassador Morel doubled over with the force of the blow.

The creature squealed, and flapped several horrid appendages around, but seemed to be unable to retaliate.

'Interesting... ' the Doctor said, thoughtfully. Then, to the creature, 'I have the feeling that might just leave you without a lot left in your hand. In a manner of speaking. You could try to attack us directly, I suppose – but for all the way you look, I somehow get the distinct impression that you simply don't have it in you. A tidal-wave of monsters washing over a world in their millions is one thing. The drabs of you here, here and now, are quite another thing entirely.'

The creature manipulated the now slightly damaged simulacrum of the Ambassador Morel again. '*We laid waste to all men here,*' it said. '*We killed them all.*'

‘If you say so,’ said the Doctor, dismissively. ‘On the other hand, I rather suspect that you came here to find that they’d all wiped themselves out in a war or something. In any case, if you’re actually going to try something, I suggest you do.’

The creature loomed forward, then appeared to hesitate. Then it spoke again:

‘We have our influence on the worlds,’ it said. ‘The men called Ambassadors. They control those worlds. If you do not give us what we want we shall cause them to slaughter all their subjects. Before which we shall have them torture those subjects in all ways we can devise. Entire worlds will scream and pray for death, if you do not give us what we want. Great shall be the suffering of all men as they claw out their eyes at the horror of what they shall see. Endless shall be the –’

‘All right!’ the Doctor said, a little worriedly. ‘I think we’ve got the point. I hadn’t actually thought of that. It must have gone completely out of my mind.’

In the impossible quasi-space of the vortex, the billion-strong swarm of Wraiths sculled against the interdimensional tide. If it were possible to map it on to reality as we know it, one would have found that this particular sector of vortex space was more or less, in some sense, congruent with the area of space-time occupied by the interlinked worlds of the Empire.

If the physical manifestation of Vortex Wraiths was strange to human eyes, in their energy state they were utterly alien to human minds. A human could tell what they were thinking only in the sense that a dog, for example, might find itself in the head of a particle physicist, who had paused in his work to decide what kind of sandwich to have for lunch, and would merely receive the vague idea of being hungry.

In that very limited sense, there was an expectancy about the Wraiths. Soon, now. Soon, the tiny flares of portals, leading into another world, would tear open to allow the whole vast mass of them to pour through. The portals would gape soon, now.

In themselves, the Wraiths could barely comprehend the slightest thing about the world they would be entering. They had no notion of what they might expect there. They were in a certain sense taking a blind leap of faith into the dark.

But whatever they found there, it would be better than the thing from which they were desperately, all-consumingly attempting to escape.

After the Doctor, Anji and Jamon had gone out into the swirling clouds of ash, Fitz wandered through the TARDIS looking for signs of the Collector or possibly looking for the lack of signs – one of the distinguishing features about things being pinched, to put in a big pile somewhere or other, being that they aren't actually *there* to be a sign.

Fitz had noticed that the atmosphere in the TARDIS changed when the Doctor had gone from it, as though something had left it quite apart from the man himself. It wasn't a feeling of being unwelcome, more the feeling of being alone in a house in which you are a guest. You found yourself not wanting to touch things overmuch, because comedy routines about having to sweep the remains of antique vases under the carpet, coping with a toilet that re-

fuses to flush and putting out suddenly flammable small dogs loomed. There were no antique vases or small dogs around, of course, but that was more or less what it felt like.

Fitz wandered through various by now familiar chambers, not taking much notice of them except to note that nothing seemed particularly out of place, listening for signs of gleeful purloining. Eventually he came to an area that was somewhat less familiar – one of those sections where the TARDIS was quietly replacing some of the things it had lost during certain events, quite some time before, when it had found itself in severely diminished circumstances. Fitz was aware that you could find almost anything in these new spaces, and had the uneasy idea that some of it might actually be quite dangerous. He moved on cautiously.

He found the Collector in what appeared to be a copy of the console room in miniature. The roundelled walls were of a uniform white, and the console itself had a rudimentary, slightly unfinished look to it, as though it were in some way still in the process of growing. Fitz was surprised – and not a little alarmed. The console room of the TARDIS was such a singular thing that the idea of another one, even such a basic and half-formed one such as this, was almost literally unthinkable. To be suddenly confronted by it pulled the mental rug from under you a little.

What alarmed Fitz even *more* was the fact that the Collector was busily pulling it to pieces.

‘Hey!’ he shouted running forward. ‘You can’t do that!’

‘Is can,’ the Collector said, swivelling several sets of eyes on stalks to regard him with an air of loftiness. ‘Is monkey-hominid Doctor-type man told me to. Had big long talk about is doing this thing. Is told to do special changing thing to big wobbly box-type thing here. Then take home to nice and lovely stuff.’

All the while it spoke, the various manipulatory appendages of the Collector were moving in a positive blur. Now that he was closer, Fitz saw that rather than merely pulling things out and discarding them, the Collector was twisting the internal workings into new shapes, reconfiguring them in a haphazard but remarkably efficient manner.

Fitz had lived in a world where the transistor had only recently supplanted the vacuum valve. He understood advanced technology in terms of what it could do, while having a bit of a blind spot on the identification of the specifics. With something so advanced as the TARDIS, he was utterly lost – but he seemed to recognise some of the bits and pieces the Collector was incorporating into the workings of the diminutive console.

‘Aren’t those the shards you picked up from that Engine of Transference thing back on Thakrash?’ he said.

‘Might be,’ the Collector said, in tones suggesting that it simply wasn’t worth

the bother of confirming or denying anything.

‘Why would you...?’ Fitz began – when he was suddenly interrupted as the floor began to lurch.

Fitz had always found it slightly odd that a machine that seemed capable of travelling through the interdimensional stresses of the vortex, orbiting binary star systems and had at one point spent several weeks in the eye spot of Jupiter without so much a bobble, could nonetheless shake around like nobody’s business when someone simply picked it up and carried it. That was how he recognised what was happening. Leaving the Collector to carry on with God alone knew what it was doing, he ran back to the console room – well, you’d have to call it the *main* console room now, he supposed – and frantically checked over the external monitor screens.

The view outside was still for the most part obscured by floating ash; something would have to be massive to be seen. Which made it fortunate, in that sense, that the thing outside was the size it was.

It was a vast crater, from which rose the spire of a Pylon, the transmitter for what he had come to know as an Engine of Transference. It was big, though, even counting for a lack of perspective. Its height would be measured in the order of miles. Energy discharge Jacob’s-laddered up and down it in a liquid, vaguely sticky-looking manner, as if it had been slathered with the juice from a broken tin of suns. Hulking forms, made tiny by their proximity to this monolithic artefact, blundered around between the mechanical installations attached to it, rather like bees bumbling around the heads of flowers. There was the occasional flash and shower of sparks as some item of machinery was activated.

Looking at this monitor-relayed scene, Fitz formed the impression that the Pylon must be shrieking with an unearthly rage of accumulated power. Here in the console room, of course, there was no sound.

This sonic state of affairs, or the lack of it, was abruptly shattered as the main doors swung open in their archaic-looking arch and the Doctor, Anji and Jamon de la Rocas stepped inside.

‘What’s happening?’ Fitz asked them. ‘Haven’t you seen what’s happening out there...?’ His voice trailed off, and his eyes grew wide, as several monstrous forms came through the hatch on the Doctor’s heels, each of them clutching to their horrific bulk a pale and wasted human form.

‘You can’t do this!’ Anji snapped at the Doctor. ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this! After all you said, how can you be *helping* these things after all?’

‘I really have no choice, Anji,’ said the Doctor solemnly. ‘You heard what they told me. You heard what they were going to do. All I can do, now, is take the course of least harm – and hope that I can live with the consequences.’ He

turned back to the creatures, who appeared to be looking around in puzzlement – not puzzled in the usual way that people were upon stepping into the dimensionally incongruent spaces within the TARDIS, but merely and innately puzzled by anything and everything that was not themselves, and was not of themselves.

‘Come along!’ the Doctor said briskly, even going so far as to clap his hands. ‘Let me take you where we need to go.’

With that, he set off across the console room and disappeared through an internally connected door. The creatures watched him for a moment, then came to a corporate – and possibly incorporate – decision and followed him, leaving Anji, Fitz and Jamon looking at each other, every bit as puzzled as the creatures themselves had apparently been.

‘What the hell is he playing at now?’ Anji demanded.

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Fitz, shrugging. ‘I know I’ve known him longer than you, but that’s just given me more time not to know what the hell he’s playing at.’

‘I must confess,’ said Jamon de la Rocas, ‘that I had expected him to attempt some stroke in these environs, doubtless making use of all his strange contrivances.’ He frowned. ‘If not here, though, I fear that I cannot imagine what such a scheme might ultimately be.’

‘Well, we’ll never find out if we don’t go and see,’ said Anji.

All together, as a group, they left the console room and followed the trail of the Doctor. That is, they followed the entirely more evident, slimy and noxious trail of the creatures who were accompanying him. When they reached its end, Anji’s eyes widened in much the same way as had those of Fitz when the monstrous creatures had so recently entered.

‘That’s...’ she began.

‘It looks very much like it, doesn’t it?’ said Fitz.

It was the miniature copy of the console room he had seen earlier. There was no sign of the Collector, however, and the access panels had been closed up. The chamber looked utterly pristine – save of course where it was being busily befouled by the secretions of a collection of monstrous creatures.

‘This is where I control the core functions of the TARDIS,’ the Doctor was saying. ‘You can make the link here. Do you want to run a high-tension cable or something of that nature inside?’

‘*We will make the link ourselves,*’ said a creature, the one who sported a jaunty if slightly beaten-about Ambassador Morel-effect. ‘*We will make the link between the Engines and our... brethren in the Endless Real with our material forms...*’

With a casual but very careful courtesy, the Doctor stepped away from the console. ‘You’re perfectly welcome. Be my guest. I think you’ll find it’s those

control pads there you're looking for. . .'

And then things happened quickly. Too quickly, on so many wildly differing scales, for any single observer ever to fully comprehend them. And not necessarily in the entirely correct order, besides. . .

In the ash-cloaked crater, the massive Pylon – most ancient and the progenitor of every pylon – discharged its energy with a burst that could never have been seen with human eyes, or heard by human ears, for the simple reason that any unprotected human close enough to see or hear it would have been vaporised upon the instant – though the echo of that discharge, in certain secondary electromagnetic forms, would in the fullness of time be heard throughout the Empire entire.

The primary force of the discharge sped, at the speed of light, towards the nearest planet of the Empire upon which might be an Engine of Transference, then to be relayed to the next, then the next, and the next – the initial stages of a cat's cradle that would, in time, bind up all of Imperial space.

In the TARDIS, a collection of embodied abstract nightmares attempted to link with reality-altering processes, the nature of which they did not quite comprehend, attempting to use them to set up a dissonant modulation in the signal from the Pylon – a specific form of corruption that would allow their fellow Wraiths, still trapped in what they called the Endless Real, to latch on to and ride the signal, bursting from each Station of Chamber of Transference in their thousands and millions, on a thousand worlds, wherever the signal hit. . .

Something was. . . wrong.

Very wrong.

One of the problems with human sensory equipment, in the relative sense, is its inability to receive information outside some very narrow wavebands – and its inability to distinguish certain things within those bands. Garbled information is merely corrupted, no matter what the number of forms that corruption might potentially take. For the chaotically manifested forms, of Vortex Wraiths, however, the situation is somewhat different. In the depths of the TARDIS, hooked to the control console, the creatures realised that some other factor was operating. The processes of the TARDIS were alien to them in any case – but *this* was alien in another way entirely, alien in a way it was impossible to predict. Discord piled upon discord in an accelerating loop that twisted the signal in a way, inside themselves and on their own terms, that almost drove them mad. Desperately they tried to adjust their modulations to take in this unknown and erratic factor and bend it to their will. . .

They miscalculated. The Pylon signal slipped from their control and began to pulse, frequency rising, accelerating out of all possible control. . .

On several worlds, the world of Shakrath included, Ambassadors screamed and went into spasm as the tendrils of an obscene, otherworldly control were ripped from their minds, wholesale, physically if psychosomatically shredding their brains in the process and shutting down their central nervous systems with terminal shock.

‘Get out of here!’ the Doctor cried, as the creatures clustered round the console and, connected to it with tendons, began to shake and bubble and smoke. He picked up Anji bodily, she being closest to him at the time, literally *threw* her out of the door, then chivvied Jamon and Fitz out behind her.

‘Where are we going?’ Anji panted as they ran up the corridor.

‘Console room,’ said the Doctor.

‘Don’t you mean the *real* console room?’ asked Fitz.

‘Yes, the, ah, “real” console room, in the sense that you seem to mean.’

Behind them, several squealing creatures burst explosively into flame.

The first that the various worlds of the Empire itself would know of the above events – in the wholly physical sense – would come, relatively speaking, over the next months, years, centuries and millennia, when the corrupted signal would hit the Pylon of their own Engine of Transference without warning, set up conflicting, escalating dissonances in a fraction of a second and shatter the Pylon catastrophically. Much in the same way, in fact, as the Doctor and his companions had witnessed on the world of Thakrash. (For some strange reason, though, or rather from a variety of small and seemingly inconsequential reasons, such potentially lethal detonations occurred with a minimal loss of life. Sometime later, and long after the events detailed in this chronicle, the Doctor was heard to remark that he really should think about getting round to doing that, at some point.)

There was a Pylon, of course, however, in the immediate vicinity of the TARDIS – and the effects of the dissonant backlash were more or less immediate. Such was its nature that the blast took out half the entire planet upon which it was situated, the actual name of which would never become known.

On every Imperial world where there remained an Ambassador, including that of Goronos and the Ambassador Jarel, those Ambassadors went into terminally spasmodic fits, simultaneously, for which the relatively few Ambassadorial deaths previously had been merely a precursor. Those who found their Ambassadors, or at least found their remains, would have no clue as to what had caused their

deaths – at least, for anything between a month and a millennium, until the detonative signal from the Pylon hit them at the speed of light.

The blast was of such power, in fact, that it might have even destroyed the TARDIS – or at the very least wounded her seriously – had not the Doctor reached what Fitz had called the ‘real’ console room in time to slap a switch and have her dematerialise bare microns ahead of the leading edge of the blast.

In the words of Jamon de la Rocas, in the very merest *sliver* of the nick of Time.

Epilogomena

‘It’s a little strange,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think it’s a little strange, anyway. I was playing all those bait-and-switch games, thinking how sophisticated I was being and congratulating myself all the while on my cleverness – but, looking back on recent events, I realise how crude my plans actually were. Crude, but with that kind of cold remoteness that comes from treating people like the pieces on a board – the worst of both worlds. I don’t think I’ll be doing that again, for a while.’

He and Anji were in the console room, looking at the simulation he had built up of the transmat linkages between the worlds of the Empire. Anji watched the links shift and fragment in different ways as he ran a series of different extrapolations.

‘How much of it did you actually plan?’ she asked him.

‘Not too many of the specifics. A lot of those were pure improvisation. When I noticed that the TARDIS was generating herself what I assume to be a backup for this place –’ his gesture took in the console room – ‘should we ever need it, I decided to lay the final trap for the Vortex Wraith manifestations in there.’ He frowned at the ‘true’ console, which while functioning normally, so much as it ever did, seemed to be contriving to do so with the impression of umbrage. ‘I don’t think she’s happy with me, for making all that mess in there. Meeting the Collector and discovering how supremely incompatible its technology was with the transmat technology of the Empire was entirely fortuitous. I’d have been able to achieve the same effect in some other way, with a bit of work, but it saved me a lot of time and effort.

‘The plans I made were general in nature,’ he continued, a large part of him still intent on switching between permutations on the display. ‘That was the problem, really – I was *imposing* solutions on things, making them fit within my own interpretations for no better reason than *I* wanted them to, and then finding ways of justifying it. The Processes of the Empire were distorting space-time and interfering with the function of the TARDIS, so of course it had to go – but that’s nowhere near enough of a good reason. The manifestations of the Vortex Wraiths were using the Empire to subjugate millions and prepare for mass invasion, so of course it had to go – but that’s a blatantly simplistic

reason, just a hook on which to hang what I wanted to do in any case.'

The Doctor sighed.

'I came to realise,' he said, 'that the real reason why the Empire had to go, so far as I was concerned, was that it's entire underlying structure was based upon coercion and imposed control – from the conditioning imposed on those poor souls who set it up in the first place, onwards. I loathe and despise that form of imposition, so what do I do about it? I impose my personal preferences upon an entire galactic sector – let alone the way I manipulated the people I like to call my friends...'

'Yes, well,' said Anji acidly. 'We gaze into the Abyss, the Abyss looks back and so forth. Dreadful movie, by the way. I almost never forgave Dave for forcing me to watch it. You can tell where the talent was in *that* marriage.' She realised that she was wandering slightly from the point. 'The point is, this Empire collapses at the speed of light, however long that takes. Civil disorder, riots and whatnot. Spot of mass cannibalism here and there...'

The Doctor gave her a look. 'Is that supposed to make me feel better?'

'Nope. The effects of all this transmat stuff on space-time. With the Empire gone, is that still going to be there?'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'The distortions are resetting themselves even now – actually, they're resetting exponentially and faster than they probably should, which leads me to believe that a base state of time travel might now actually be possible within the parameters of...'

'So things are going to settle down,' said Anji, 'except where they don't. People are going to develop star travel, except where they won't, and things will generally carry on, without a load of Ambassadors to stick in their collective oar. Listen, I've *seen* the places you made us go, yes? The things that Emperor got up to on Shakrath, those lunatics still dreaming of a power they thought they once might have had on Thakrash, that total "imposed control" you were talking about on Goronos... So tell me this. On the whole, all things considered, is the damn place going to be *better* than that from now on?'

'Well, broadly speaking, yes...'

the Doctor began.
'Then stop coming it with all the trembling hand on the brow and noble regret, then,' said Anji, 'because you're fooling nobody. You've left things better than you found them, and that's pretty much all that anybody can hope for. You know what I think, in the end?'

The Doctor smiled slightly. 'What do you think?'

Anji gestured towards the extrapolatory screen. 'I think you should switch that bloody thing off, and get back to working out how to get me home.'

The Stellarium was back. Nobody had seen it actually appear; it was simply

there.

'Ah, me,' said Jamon de la Rocas, gazing out through the virtual-crystal dome at the vortex. 'To think I should have lived to see such transcendental marvels. A collection of lights that appear to do nothing much save swirl around, then swirl again. . .'

'I was a bit worried,' Fitz said, watching the vortex with slightly more active pleasure than Jamon. The familiarity of it made him feel, in some sense, that he had come to something marginally approaching home. 'I was worried that we'd find all these millions of Wraiths waiting for us. I'd have thought they'd be angry – angry enough to attack us with anything they could throw.' He peered out at the churning metaplasmic light, frowning. 'There don't seem to be any of them. Not one. It's a bit weird. I wonder what happened to them.'

'Hello, all,' the Doctor said, strolling into the dome. 'Don't tell Anji, but I'm taking a small break from locating a set of useful infraspatial co-ordinates for Earth. If she finds out, I have the nasty feeling that she might be slightly tart. Periods of stress and duress do tend to coarsen her language, I've noticed, for a while. Has anyone seen the Collector?'

Fitz shrugged.

'Not I,' said Jamon.

'It occurred to me that I haven't thanked it for its sterling work,' the Doctor said. 'The modifications turned out almost better than I'd hoped – with a decided lack of things strangely disappearing the moment you put them down and turn your back on them, besides.' He turned to look at Jamon. 'Are you feeling quite all right? You seem a little down, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'Just feeling a little out of place, Doctor,' said Jamon. 'Indeed, some small part of me wonders if I'll ever be *in* place. Well, not actually a *place* as such, but you'll understand what I mean. Traveller is what I am, my place being forever that of a stranger on any world, in my own small way – but with the Engines of the Empire being destroyed as we speak, that life is no more.' He gazed out into the vortex again, somewhat mournful. 'Also, I confess, I cannot take my mind from those who but for the grace of the gods might have been me. Those in the process of Transferral when the Engines themselves are destroyed. The signals of their Souls hurled for ever through the void, with never a place for them to come to rest. . .'

'Of course!' There was the sound of a slap. The Doctor had slapped his head with the heel of a hand. 'I knew I was forgetting something. Slipped my mind entirely.' He didn't seem exactly depressed about it.

'We'll have to do something about that right away,' he said cheerfully, as Jamon looked at him askance. 'We'll put our heads together and come up with something, never you fear.'

There is little left, I fear, to tell in the general, and little enough in the personal. While I know other tales concerning the Doctor, and many of them to boot, this one must by needs be drawn to a close. All good things must come to an end, or so they say, but in my general experience the self same thing holds true, too, for nigh on everything else. Suffice it to say that the Doctor and his companions, Anji and Fitz, travelled on – though to what ultimate destination, and what perils they might have met there (and, indeed, upon the way), I cannot tell, though should I subsequently hear you may rest assured I'll be the first to do so.

The Collector was indeed located, some very brief while after the events I last related, and offered passage to the planet of its people. After much pause for thought, however, it elected to decide that the remains of an Empire plunged into disarray might offer such pickings as might make any specimen of his species swoon with pure delight. Mindful of the possible consequences should the Collector remain entirely free and at large, however, the Doctor decided that it might be best for all concerned if it were placed in the charge of a companion to whom it might look for the example of restraint concerning its Baser... Yes, yes, I know it wasn't quite like that. I am merely giving these good people the gist. And, yes, I know that you've been very good in keeping your manipulatory appendages away from all the nice things in the vicinity. Perhaps these good people will allow you to select a little something in recompense for your being so good, at some appropriate point.

Now where was I? Oh, yes...

And as for myself? you ask. Well, in some circumstances, I truly believe that it is better to show than tell. A pretty little thing, is it not? Now, as you can plainly see, this is a little something the Doctor himself fabricated. A personal transportation unit, or so

he called it, operating in much of a similar way to the Engines of Transference as were – save that it is capable of Transferring one from some previous point to another in a matter of mere seconds, no matter what the distance in fact might be. In the words of the Doctor himself, people shall always need a stranger among them, a Bearer of new tales, and as such I hope that I might have proved myself worthy of the remit in some small degree.

It has a secondary purpose, however. You will recall, of course, how I have remarked upon the fate of those poor Souls who found themselves caught between pillar and post, as it were, when Transferring to a Chamber or Station that has been destroyed? Their signals lost in the lonely dark? Well, the secondary purpose of this marvellous little device is, so the Doctor says, to intercept and reintegrate that signal and –

And, speaking of which, please do, if you would be so kind, bear with me for one moment...

Ah! Sir! How quite wonderful to meet you! These good people you see here, I am sure, mean you not one iota of harm, never you fear about that. Now, I understand that you might be feeling a little confused at this point. Perfectly unnatural, may I say, if you weren't. There is much that you should know about your present circumstance, though it is a tale quite long, I must say, in the telling...

Notes

1. Many and varied, are the apocryphal stories surrounding the Domina of the Hidden Hand – indeed, rather too many for them to be easily encapsulated in a single person, even had that person been at it all hours, every day, for an entire lifetime. Hard evidence suggests, in fact, that she was a not particularly notable ruler, not particularly long lived and rather more retiring than otherwise. Of course, the places to which she *retired* at all hours, every day, and what she got up to in there when she did, lay foundation to her legend for sultry rapacity in spirit if not in the fact of their particulars.

2. Eleven luminous planetoids, now, following a combined collision and explosion which, by all accounts, could be seen by the naked eye several stellar systems away.

3. Shakathri firegems are, in fact, something of a misnomer, on the count of their not being gemstones at all, but the pupal form of a luminous insectoid creature that, when hatched, promptly latches on to the abdomen of any human in the vicinity and burrows into the heart to deposit an egg sac. The pupal stage of these creatures lasts for several hundred years, and, at the time in question, those of Shakrath had no idea of the true nature of the ornamentation that covered their finest cities. They soon would.

4. It may be noted that most worlds of the Empire, at this time, had a pluralistic theology, but with a distinct lack of any specific pantheon. They tended to speak vaguely of ‘the gods’ in much the same way as a three-times-a-lifetime member of the Church of England might speak of God in the singular.

5. It may be worth noting at this point that Anji had thought Fitz to be playing a version of the tune to the TV-series *Steptoe and Son*. Fitz, on the other hand, knew where Syd Barratt lived.

6. The Great Mother, again, was a staple of Imperial cosmology, without those who spoke of her dwelling overmuch on her particular specifics. This tends to confirm the notion that such matters were spread thinly across the Empire, like butter on too many slices of bread.

7. Pig iron, in the Empire, derived its name from the fact that the smelters refining iron from ore were commonly populated by a slave race of Piglet People.

8. In the language of the Empire, mentions of specific gods and their duties were literally on the level of 'one of the gods whose, you know, job it is to make sure that people go to sleep and whatnot'. Where applicable, we have contracted such constructions into mythological terms relevant to an inhabitant of Earth.

9. There is strong evidence to suggest, at times, that Jamon de la Rocas had a penchant for devising fabulous beasts that never have existed, and never will, off the top of his head and from the whole cloth.

10. To get a feel for these perambulations, one should simply imagine the bustle of the palace kitchens, say, or a bathing chamber in which a number of servants are taking some brief measure of respite from their duties. Then the Doctor and his friends run through, much to the consternation and momentary chaos of all concerned. Repeat as many times as you feel is really necessary.

11. Fitz had always regretted the fact that, as Larkin so memorably said, they had invented sex in 1963, just at the point where, by being spirited away originally by the TARDIS, he had missed it. It was on the whole fortunate that he had, nevertheless, managed to pursue his own private researches in that area from time to time. All the same, in some respects he was still very much a child of his particular time. More cosmopolitan than otherwise he might be for the most part, but his attitude to the matters that might be handily summed up as being encapsulated by *Cosmopolitan* magazine were sometimes those of what, by the turn of the twenty-first century, would be a man of a 'certain' age.

12. The language of the Empire, rather like its gods, had over the millennia become markedly standardised – even on an isolated world like Thakrash. There were local variations in dialect, of course, and linguistic hangovers from a root language that, so legend had it, had been used in the Old Days, before the advent of Transfer. In these latter cases, for the purposes of translation, we have merely transposed these utterances into a Latinate equivalent.

13. She was using her snake to spell things out in the air, with a coal in its mouth, in much the same way as a child might do with a sparkler. Unfortunately, since these words were in the local language, none of the Doctor's

companions would ever appreciate the sheer beauty of the poetry thus spontaneously and ephemerally composed.

14. Once, in the time when musical recordings were commonly sold on vinyl, an advertising agency decided to market some product or other by way of a 45-r.p.m. single cover-mounted on a magazine. This being an advertising agency, of course, the first point of business was that they all sit around in a room and discuss what colour it should be. At the end of several hours, a young creative mind, thinking in purely graphical terms, opined that a really stylish and classy-looking colour to use might be black. . .

None of which is strictly relevant, but it goes some way to explaining how Anji felt when she remembered that Gawain and Parsifal were actually, in legendary terms, the same person.

15. During the comparatively recent years of his mental recovery, the Doctor would occasionally lapse into a state that was not precisely dementia – he would remain lucid and indeed highly, almost inhumanly, intelligent – but that seemed by its specificity to be an actual and physical malfunction in his brain rather than a mere mental aberration. Specifically, he was simply unable to distinguish between the fact and fiction of a moving image. During these times he'd had to be forcibly restrained from watching a popular British soap opera, say, for fear that he would instantly be about slitting his wrists at the sheer futility and misery of life. Additionally, during these times, he was seriously considering the acquisition of a pair of spectacles, to prevent any malign force he might find himself up against from learning his true identity. And certain incidents concerning the relative position of the trousers and underpants are best, on the whole, glossed completely over.

16. The very fine novel *Heart of TARDIS* (ISBN 0 563 5596 3) contains a slightly less partial description of the Collectors and their modus operandi, including their use of ships fitted with 'hyperwobble' drives, the erratic nature of which has been known to give the defence-nets of the most technologically advanced planets the catastrophic equivalents of nervous breakdowns. The Collectors, says *Heart of TARDIS*, would later become known, with a surfeit of originality, as 'the creatures who had *once been known* as the Collectors', and set up shop in their Big Museum-type Thing full of Interesting and Valuable Stuff. The Collector here, it seems, originated from before that time – though quite how long, given the temporally ambivalent nature of the Empire as a whole, is anyone's guess.

17. Having tried and failed to find any other reference to a publication of

this name, we the compilers must conclude that Anji was making it up in a moment of bad-tempered pique.

18. As will be noted by any moderately attentive reader, Anji's adventures immediately prior to those detailed in this chronicle were still somewhat preying on her mind, to surface in subtly unconscious ways like this.

19. This being a misquote from Lewis Carroll and not, as some ill-read readers sometimes seem to think, from the popular author Douglas Adams, who similarly quoted it.

20. Being somewhat geographically as well as sartorially challenged, our hypothetical arboreal might have been originally looking for the London Planetarium, naturally.

21. It occurs to the compilers that, at this point in the narrative, certain inferential information might have been available to Fitz, upon waking up on Goronos, to ascertain how long he had been under the influence of the Cyberdyne. After giving the matter due consideration, we the compilers have decided that we simply don't want to know that much. . .

22. And this is Dave, here, speaking directly. You know how it is, or possibly you wouldn't, but there comes – or should come – a time in the writing of any fiction when the characters take on a life of their own and say things the writer himself would not ordinarily say. At some point the Doctor, for example, will make some moral pronouncement, some connection between the elements of life as it is and how it should be lived, that would never occur in a million years to one who, quite frankly, spends most of his time wrangling the beer vouchers and thinking up things to say to the people he fancies. Or he'll make an obvious connection that one has completely and utterly missed, on the conscious level.

This was one of those times. The moment the Doctor said it, I looked at it and went, 'Oh, dear God, have I really built an entire *book* on an appalling pun like that?' And of course, I had. Oh, well. It's too late now, what with the advance having long since been spent on an incredibly enjoyable holiday in LA, where the money lives, so all I can do is apologise and promise that it'll never, ever happen again. Honest.

23. At a certain point in her life, much later than the events detailed in this chronicle, Anji would realise just how many of her thoughts and reactions were based on having watched televisual and cinematic sci-fi – a genre that

she had never particularly liked in and of itself. Of course, the simple fact of zooming around the galaxy and travelling in time could not but help to call to mind the science fiction of Earth, but she knew that the *specifics* of that knowledge – that the security officer on the starship *Voyager* was a Vulcan named Tuvok, say – were due to all the time spent watching such things out of love for her boyfriend Dave, before he had died. When she realised this, and realised that we can lock the doors and windows against old grief we thought long gone, but it can find a way up through the waste-disposal and fling itself at you again, from a direction never previously thought of, her reaction was such that we the compilers simply do not have the heart to detail it.

About the Author

DAVE STONE is a notorious and unconscionably indolent slug-a-bed with little or no achievement of merit to his name. Save perhaps for the inventing and scriptwriting of *Armitage*, for the comics publication *Judge Dredd the Magazine*, in which he delineated and developed the city of London in that futuristic and somewhat casually violent shared world. And possibly his novels in the Judge Dredd line from Virgin Books, being *Deathmasques*, *The Medusa Seed* and *Wetworks*. And possibly any amount of other comics-related material to boot.

And his work for Virgin Books' New Adventure and Missing Adventure lines, come to think of it, including *Sky Pirates!*, *Death and Diplomacy*, *Burning Heart*, and for their continuation (starring one-time companion Bernice Summerfield), *Ship of Fools*, *Oblivion*, *The Mary-Sue Extrusion* and *Return to the Fractured Planet*. Each and every one a fine and puissant piece of literature, so all in all it is a bit unfortunate that at least half of them are no longer in print.

For the BBC he has written the novel *Heart of TARDIS*, the short story *Moon Graffiti*, subsequently released as one half of a BBC Radio Collection audio disc, and the very volume you currently hold, quite lovingly, in your hands. His work on Bernice, incidentally, continues more-or-less simultaneously with the release of the Big Finish novel *The Infernal Nexus*.

Mr. Stone is currently working, such as of which he is capable, on a series of original novel and script projects, including a situation comedy and a block-busting sci-fi movie which no bugger will ever be able to afford to shoot, even with the extensive use of CGI. He is seriously considering spending more time in Los Angeles, where, as he so rightly says, the money lives.