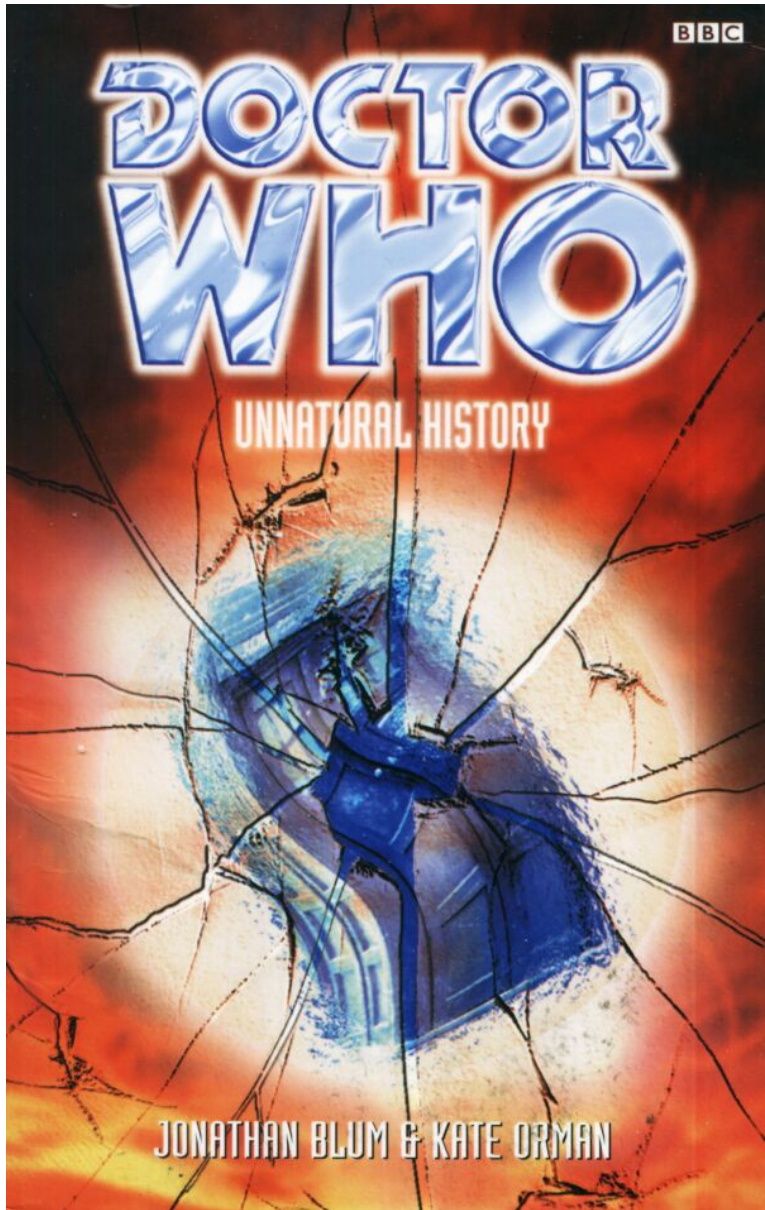


BBC

DOCTOR WHO

UNNATURAL HISTORY

JONATHAN BLUM & KATE ORMAN



‘They called it the Millennium Effect,’ said the Doctor. ‘But the millennium was only beginning.’

San Francisco has changed since the start of 2000. The laws of physics keep having acid flashbacks. There are sightings of creatures from outside our dimensions, stranded aliens and surrealist street performers. The city has become a mecca for those who revel in impossible creatures – and those who want to see them pinned down and put away.

Sam’s past is catching up with her – a past she didn’t know she had. The Doctor is in danger of becoming the *pièce de résistance* in a twisted collection of creatures. And beneath the waters of the Bay, something huge is waiting.

With time running out, the Doctor must choose which to sacrifice – a city of wonders, or the life of an old and dear friend.

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

DOCTOR WHO

UNNATURAL HISTORY

JONATHAN BLUM AND KATE ORMAN

BBC

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Dedicated to Jon's grandmother, Evelyn Kaitz,
for putting up with watching all those *Doctor Who*
episodes with him years ago. Who knew?

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Day Zero Minus Three

Look at that! San Francisco when it was still inhabited! Amazing. . .

The Doctor
(conversations that never happened)

Chapter One

I Was a Teenage Paradox

London, November 2002

‘Who the hell are you?’ asked Sam Jones.

A tall, slender man wearing fancy dress stared back at her through the chain on her door. He was lean, hippie-haired. The crumpled outfit looked natural on him, as though he wore it all the time.

He gave her a brilliant smile. ‘Samantha Angeline Jones,’ he said. ‘Born on the fifteenth of April 1980. Daughter to Allan and Margaret. Educated at Coal Hill School, Shoreditch.’

Sam looked at him. ‘That’s fine. I asked who *you* are.’

The smile was replaced by a look of intense sincerity. ‘You’ve got to come with me. There’s not much time.’ He was dry, she saw, as though he’d walked between the raindrops. Outside the grungy block of flats, it was coming down in buckets.

‘I’m called the Doctor,’ he said.

‘I’ll just bet you are,’ said Sam. She slammed the door shut.

She rested her forehead on the wall for a moment, her dark hair hanging down into her face. Had he followed her home? He must be from the video shop – the customers were always trying it on. She reckoned she would have remembered this one, though.

She looked around the bedsit for something to thump him with, just in case. All she saw were the fold-out kitchen table with its overflowing ashtray, a bag of rubbish that needed taking out, the cardboard boxes under her bed. A cockroach was meandering down the grey tiles. It disappeared behind the electric kettle.

Sam pressed her ear to the door, but she couldn’t hear anything. He must be gone. He’d better be gone.

She laughed, shoving her hair out of her eyes. Why was it always the good-looking ones?

* * *

He was waiting for her outside the block of flats, sitting on a bench, his back to the traffic at the intersection.

'Bugger off!' she shouted, as he bounced up to her. Startled, he backed away.

Sam pounded down the pavement, checking her watch. It was drizzling, car lights shining through the grey noon. She hunched beneath her umbrella.

Oh God, now he was following her. 'You're not supposed to be here,' he said. She couldn't place his accent. 'You're not supposed to be living this life.'

'What's wrong with my life?' Sam glanced around – there were plenty of people about, thank God. Her rape alarm was shoved in a pocket, as always, but she felt too embarrassed to get it out. 'Did my parents send you round?'

'No, no. You're supposed to be with me.'

She looked at him, almost jogging along beside her. 'As chat-up lines go,' she said, 'you're crap, but at least you're original.'

'There's so little time.' The eyes stared back at her, piercing. He was getting so close he was almost under her brolly. 'You've got to come with me.'

'What, you're going to carry me away from all this on your white horse?'

'No no,' he said. His eyes blinked, as if at a sudden pain. 'In my time machine,' he said softly.

'Bullshit,' said Sam, startling him again. 'Bugger off and stop annoying me.'

'Look, I know how this sounds,' he said, 'but you're not supposed to be living in London. You're supposed to be travelling through time and space with me.'

Sam stopped. Rain sprayed from her umbrella. 'Look, what is this – are you selling something? Get to the point.'

'We've been travelling together for years,' said the Doctor. 'We stopped the smugglers of Nephelokokkugian and the Dalek invasion of Tuvalu.' His eyes were burning. Every word was true. 'We battled the tyrant queen of Hyspero and we returned a lost Triceratops infant to its mother. Side by side we righted wrongs and bought T-shirts on dozens of worlds.'

Sam gulped a mouthful of air. She'd forgotten to breathe.

'Actually, you bought most of the T-shirts,' admitted the Doctor. Wistfully, he added, 'And you're supposed to be blonde.'

Sam turned and walked away, fast. The bus stop was just a few yards ahead, her bus was just pulling up.

She glanced back. He was watching her go. 'Sam!' he shouted, breaking into a run.

Sam bolted. His footsteps pounded down the pavement, gaining on her.

She grabbed the pole and swung herself up on to the bus, panting.

She caught a glimpse of his face, a look of helpless frustration as the bus shot past him. Then he was gone.

At the video shop she buried herself in the shelving until she could forget about it. Dave was on her back for showing up seven and a half minutes late again, but she eye-glazed her way through his lecture until he ran out of steam.

It was a busier day than usual, 'cause the new releases had just arrived. After stacking them all on the shelf, she set aside a copy of the latest straight-to-video sci-fi flick from Empire.

She was looking forward to tonight. She'd ring Mark, Marilyn, the usual gang. Instead of going out clubbing, they could stay in, take the piss out of a movie or two. Rob was always skint, so he'd say yes. She grinned. Bad film, good friends – sorted.

Dave was yelling again. It was Mummy Dearest, on the phone at the front counter.

And she had on her earnest voice, the one she used when trying to Reach Out to her daughter. Sam always wondered if that was the voice her mum's social-work cases heard.

She sat down on a stool, squeezed between the register and a box of polystyrene chips.

'Samantha, oh, Samantha, it's Mum, and we've got to see you as soon as possible. It's absolutely crucial. Oh, I'm sorry to bother you like this.' Sincerity level cranked up to eleven. 'A man phoned your father's office today. He said he was working with the military and he has to speak to you. He'd be stopping by your flat –'

'Oh, sh-' She bit it off. Dave would pounce if she swore within customer earshot. 'Look, Mum. Mum, listen. He did come by, and he's a nutter. Whatever he told you –'

'Samantha. Please. *Listen* to your mother.' Sam made herself go silent. 'He... knew things... and we have to tell you about them. We... we should have told... ' Christ, she really was choking up on the other end of the line. 'We'll be right over, all right, sweet thing?'

'Not here!' said Sam. She rummaged for her smokes while her mother panicked in her ear. 'No, I'm not leaving work early, got to make the rent, remember – Mum, *after* work! See you then, all right? I'll come to you. Bye, Mum.'

She rang off, slammed the cash drawer violently, and stepped out into the chill for a shivering cigarette.

Five hundred grey minutes later she was sitting in her parents' lounge, while her mother clutched at her hand and her father gravely offered her the first postcard from the stack in his lap.

'The first one arrived about five years ago,' said Dad. His grey hair had thinned out even more since the last time she'd seen him. 'Back in ninety-seven.'

It was a hologram card, a really good one, slick to the touch and lifelike as a window in her hands. It showed a panorama of a vast alien city – great Hollywood-quality stuff – with pretend alien writing floating in the foreground. 'Greetings from Fleeble 14,' no doubt. Clever. She flipped it over.

The scrawl on the back was her own handwriting: *Dear Mum & Dad, I know this is going to be hard to believe, but please try.*

Suddenly her throat was tightening up. *You've always said you trust me to take care of myself,* the scrawl continued. *Well please trust me now. I've gone travelling, with a man called the Doctor. More details to follow once I can figure out how to make them believable.*

The words were blurring, she had to struggle to take each one in. *I'll be back soon. Maybe I'm back already, and you never even –* And that was it, her whole body was knotted up and she had to turn the card back over, hide the words, but that left her staring into the alien city and feeling like she was about to pitch face first through the postcard and into the other world.

'Oh Jesus,' she said, 'it's not real.' She looked around the room, at the familiar, faded pattern of flowers on the carpet, the modern art print on the wall, just slightly crooked. 'It's a fake.'

Dad sighed his I-know-I'm-right-sweetheart sigh. 'We thought it was a practical joke at first. But they kept coming.'

'What?' Sam stared at the stack of cards in his lap. 'How many?'

He handed her another card, and another, postmarked from all around the world. San Francisco. Auckland. A letter dated London 1894, with 'Do not deliver until 1 August 1997' written on it.

Some of them weren't from Earth. A triple sunrise on a silver desert. 'Come to Kursaal – A World of Surprises'. A photo-booth postcard from Paphos, a blonde-haired *God no* version of herself, grinning evilly *Christ she looks just like me* with an arm thrown around the man who'd knocked on her door *it's me, it can't be me, it is.*

'They started coming about the time we had the fight,' said Mum tightly. Funny, thought Sam, it looked like Mum'd had her hair done for the occasion. It curled around her wide, sharp-chinned face in a soft bob. 'For a while we

thought it was your way of telling us how unhappy you were. But you weren't around any more to ask...'

It was just like Mum to bring that up, use it like a weapon. Sam resisted the sudden urge to throw the cards in her face.

'And then the man from the army came by. He said you'd been... sighted in San Francisco. With the Doctor. You'd asked the army to get in touch with us.' She frowned a little. 'When we told him you were still here, he didn't seem surprised. He said we mustn't say anything to you, it would cause some sort of problem. So... we couldn't tell you. We really couldn't.'

'So you just bought it,' Sam managed.

Dad leaned forward, chin in hand, awkwardly burying his grey beard behind his fingers. Trying to hide as much of his face as he could. 'Well, it was around the Mars '97 mission,' he said. 'People were willing to believe anything for a while there.'

'We've never known exactly what to think about it,' said her mother. 'But... even though the postcards kept coming, life went on as always. Nothing really changed.'

Her eyes fell back on the first postcard. *Maybe I'm back already, and you never even knew I was gone. But just in case I'm not back, I want you to know... I've thought about it hard, and this is what I want to do. I'm having the best time of my life, and I wouldn't have let this go for the world. Any world. Love,*

Sam

P.S. No, I'm not on drugs. Honest!

She had to smirk at that last bit. No wonder they'd wanted to believe it. It was easier for them to deal with time travel than to face the fact that their daughter had already shot smack three times by then.

And who wouldn't rather believe in a daughter on the far side of the galaxy who wrote loving postcards home, than one just around the corner who never called?

Dad shifted in his seat, leaning towards her, eyes peering from behind his round specs. 'Oh Sam...'. It was like he was using his chin to hold his hand in place, otherwise he'd reach out to her. He hadn't given her a hug, hadn't touched her for a long time. Probably hadn't dared. 'We're so sorry.'

'Yeah,' she said dully.

There was a tap at the lounge door. The Doctor leaned into the room. 'Can I come in yet?' he said.

Sam stared at him.

Mum took a deep breath. ‘Well,’ she said, smoothing her dress, ‘I suppose we’d better leave you to him.’

The Doctor wouldn’t tell her his name, insisted it was just ‘Doctor’. He said he had something to show her, a place. But there was no way she was ready for anything else just yet. So she let him lead her to a tiny café in a side street, near her parents’ house.

The fluorescent light inside bleached everything in sight, brought out every blemish on the face of the bleary counter chick who took their order.

‘I appreciate your trust,’ the Doctor told Sam.

She glanced sideways at him, reading the menu chalked behind the counter. He hadn’t scared her this morning, she thought – pissed her off more than anything. He looked soft in his fancy dress and girl’s hair. Nothing she couldn’t handle.

‘I dunno about trust,’ she said. ‘I just want to find out more about those postcards. I want to know what’s going on. All right?’

She had to interrogate the girl behind the counter on whether there was any meat hiding in the pasty she ordered. Right now that was the most important thing in the world. She could focus on that; so long as she could sort that out she’d be fine.

The girl was already thrown by all the unexpected questions. Then when the Doctor smiled and asked her how she was doing, she just stared for a moment. Sam hid a smile. Too much human interaction for someone in retail-zombie mode to manage. When someone went outside the routine script for your job, actually acted as if you or they were alive, you couldn’t handle it.

The girl mumbled something and fled with their order. Now the Doctor was turning those too-friendly eyes on to her. ‘Still a vegetarian?’ he asked.

‘Whadaya mean “still”? You think I’d just give it up after twelve years?’

‘No, I mean since you changed,’ he said. ‘That’s one detail that still matches my Sam. I don’t suppose you ran your school’s Amnesty chapter?’

I didn’t change, she thought, this is bollocks. ‘I wrote some letters for them,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Still do, once in a while.’

‘You never spray-painted a billboard?’ he asked. His eyes were like a couple of pins. ‘Never stopped a pack of school bullies by setting off the fire alarm? Never planned to run off to Africa and build houses for Habitat for Humanity?’

The rain of questions was really shaking her up – she was fumbling for words. She’d thought of all these things at one point or another, never done any of them. Too far outside her life.

'I work in a video shop,' she managed. Angrily, at least.

Thankfully the girl behind the counter came back with their food, and they settled at one of the plastic tables near the shopfront window. He was still trying to talk to her, but she couldn't take any more input. The fluorescents were too loud, the light too white, sucking the colour out of the walls, out of faces.

Christ, I must look like the counter girl, she thought. I feel like someone else's past is catching up with me.

'I tried to spray-paint that billboard,' she said, cutting off whatever he was saying now. 'Something about anorexia and the waif look. I was sixteen... I was up there, and I realised I could fall. So I gave it up before I did. And I slipped on the ladder going down and broke my arm.' She picked a cold pea out of the pasta. 'Stupid.'

'You tried, then,' he said. 'I suppose that's something.'

'That kind of crap doesn't make any difference anyway,' she muttered. 'I had to hold a job. Pay the rent. Have a little fun with what I could get...'

'But for a while,' said the Doctor softly, 'you thought you could change the world.'

She stared sourly back at him. 'Yeah. When you're a kid you believe that. Then you have to live in it.'

'You've never stopped believing it,' he said. 'You've just been too tired to try any more.'

She leaned heavily against the window. On the other side of the glass was the empty street and the dusk.

'Yeah,' she said. 'Sure.'

It was around then that she figured it out.

She went with him to the junkyard anyway, just to see how it was going to play out. What other lines he was going to try to feed her. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still an angry dark grey.

The Doctor stood at the weather-beaten gates, fiddling with the padlock. Automatically Sam took a couple of steps back, eyeing the street, but there was no one there to see them. The place was really quiet, just the noise of night traffic in the distance.

Did she really want to be here with this weirdo? She half smiled. At least her parents knew where she was.

'So, what's she like?'

'Who?' said the Doctor.

‘My evil twin.’

‘Oh.’ The Doctor thumped the lock on the gate, making the old iron bars boom and rattle. ‘She’s very nice,’ he said cheerily. ‘She makes me think of me, sometimes. Injustice breaks her heart. She talks a great deal. We both like omelettes for breakfast.’

I get it, thought Sam. *I’m* the evil twin. ‘What does she do? I mean, what’s her job?’

‘Job? She doesn’t have a job.’ He took a step back from the gate, holding his chin in his hand while he stared hard at the lock. ‘When we first started travelling together, she wasn’t quite seventeen years old.’

Sam couldn’t keep the amusement out of her voice. ‘Is that legal?’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. He poked the lock with the tip of his finger. It split open and clattered on to the concrete. ‘As I think you’re aware. But you – she wasn’t actually intending to leave home, not permanently. She wanted me to return her a few moments after she’d left, so no one would even know she’d gone. Circumstances got in the way.’

He swung the gate aside, and held it open for her.

She wandered into the junkyard, watching her feet. The place smelled like rust and refuse. Stacked sheets of metal, furniture under torn plastic covers. There was no one here.

‘It all happened here,’ said the Doctor. She still couldn’t place his accent. A bit Scouse, maybe. ‘That first day. Some petty drug merchants from your school had the idea they’d murder you for reporting them.’ He sort of flicked his hands, like a magician. ‘I intervened.’

Sam dragged on her cigarette, feeling cold. ‘D’you mean Baz? I remember that.’

The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder, beaming with delight. ‘You do?’

‘I remember some weird story about how the police got him. In a junkyard.’ She’d bought some smack from Baz once, but it turned out to be mostly aspirins. She’d never have been stupid enough to grass on him, though.

The Doctor looked like a kid who’d been given socks for Christmas. ‘Sorry,’ said Sam. ‘That’s why we came here, isn’t it? I’m supposed to remember all of this, because I’m her.’

‘I was hoping it might trigger some recollections,’ admitted the Doctor.

‘I’m not her.’

‘Yes, you are,’ said the Doctor. He was right in her face again. ‘Yes, you are. Same name, same background, very minor changes to the genotype. Your

biodata and hers are virtually identical. It's the principle of conservation of propinquity, you see.' He reached out to touch a few strands of her hair.

Sam said a few choice words which made the Doctor jump. 'Talk English, not technobabble,' she added.

The Doctor sighed. 'We'd landed in San Francisco,' he said. 'We were investigating a dimensional anomaly. And, well... it got her.'

'You mean your Sam fell into a great big swirly thing?'

'No no no. There's no swirly thing. We were in an unstable area –'

'Unstable how?'

'I thought you didn't want technobabble.'

'Just enough to make it convincing,' said Sam. He didn't realise that she'd already worked out what was going on. 'Go on.'

The Doctor had picked up an old toy, a monkey with a drum. He turned it around in his hands.

Sam said, 'You don't know, do you? You're not really sure what happened.'

The monkey burst into life, pounding erratically on the drum, the noise echoing off every surface in the junkyard. He switched it off and put it down. 'The point is, the anomaly swallowed her and spat you out. A different version of the person I know – living in London, of course, because *you* never left it.'

'How did you find me?'

'Look!' said the Doctor. 'A mannequin.'

Sam scowled at the back of his head while he examined the dummy in intense detail. Right, I've had enough of this. 'I'll bet she doesn't use dirty words.'

'Not very often, no,' said the Doctor. 'Though quite spectacularly when she does...'

'Smoke?'

'No.'

'Drink? Do any drugs?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'She was very health-conscious.'

I'll just bet she was. 'But no job,' said Sam. 'That's a bit of a surprise.'

The Doctor peered at her. 'Why is that?'

'And she was a blonde, right?'

'That's right, a natural blonde,' said the Doctor.

'Oh?' said Sam, raising an eyebrow.

'So she told me,' said the Doctor hastily. 'What are you getting at?'

'I'm on to you, mate.' Sam stabbed a finger into his chest, and ash drifted across his waistcoat. 'This is a really stupid, really weird practical joke. Like *It's a Wonderful Life*. My mum blubs her way through it every time it's on the

telly. Invent a perfect version of me, convince me how much better her life is, because they're still pissed off at me for doing the sorts of things they stopped doing around 1969.'

The Doctor was gaping at her. Caught you! thought Sam. She looked around the junkyard. 'So where's Lisa Riley? Where are the hidden cameras?'

'Sam,' said the Doctor intensely, 'this is not a joke. This is not some sort of con job. This is absolutely genuine. I need your help.' He touched her, just his fingertips on both arms. 'I need you to come with me, to San Francisco.'

His gaze was X-raying her. Sam's heart was suddenly thumping around in her chest like it wanted to get away. Jesus Christ – her parents had sent her down here on her own with a lunatic. What was he going to do?

'Sam,' he said again, his voice going right through her. 'You've got to believe me.'

Every word of it was true.

'Screw this,' she said, and kicked his left leg out from under him.

She could hear him rattling the gate as she sprinted down the alley. There was a crash as he started to clamber over it. While he had been holding his leg and going 'ouch', she'd got the padlock back on to the gate. She'd be halfway to the tube before he made it out.

The rush-hour crowds had thinned out, leaving her with just the dimmed shopfronts and all-night laundrettes and grey gutters filled with leaves and fag ends. The street was narrow, squeezed by grimy old buildings on both sides.

Her eyes kept flicking around, urban paranoia scanners on maximum, but there was no one in sight. Just keep moving, get home, get somewhere normal and it would be all right.

'Scuse me, um...'

She nearly ploughed into the little boy. She hadn't seen him until he'd stepped right in front of her. About eleven or twelve, blue jeans, black hair, dark skin, maybe part Asian or even South American.

'It's just, um, I think I'm a bit lost, and –'

'And you want the tube fare.'

'No, it's just – could you tell me how to get to Basil Street?' Was that all? Blonde Sam would probably have picked the kid up and carried him to the nearest police station so he could phone his mummy.

She crouched down to reach his eye level. 'I've just come from there. You go back that way, take the first left –'

‘Nah, don’t bother,’ he said, and there was something in his hand and it was a knife.

She tried to back away, straightening up, and the knife was suddenly at her belly.

Why not? Why not, after everything else that’s happened to me today?

‘C’mon,’ said the little boy.

She sighed, and took out her wallet.

‘Not that, Sam,’ he said. He sniggered when she jumped at her name. ‘You know what I really want. Don’t you?’

Her throat was a knot. ‘I don’t –’

‘Nice little paradox, you are. All ready to be tied up in a pretty little bow. And we’re gonna take care of that right now.’

He smiled, like a kid pouring boiling water down an ant hill. His cheeks hadn’t quite lost their baby fat.

She felt her back bump up against the door of a shop. She couldn’t see his face, only the knife.

‘You’re coming with me,’ he said. ‘Bitch.’ The last word was like showing off a new toy.

The blade of the knife gleamed as he advanced towards her.

‘Let her go.’

They both looked up.

The Doctor stayed outside the light of the street lamp, all the colours of his clothes lost in the shadow. He was keeping his distance, but closing in, wary and confident. As if he did this sort of thing all the time.

‘I said, let her go.’ His voice was strong and cool and angry.

‘Back off,’ said the boy. He took a step back from Sam, pointing at her with the knife. ‘She’s ours, you know that? Marked.’

‘I don’t care,’ said the Doctor. He stepped into the light, closing on the boy. Suddenly he was standing between them, filling up the doorway, looming over the boy, arms folded. Sam was frozen, pressed against the door, staring at his back.

‘Now,’ said the Doctor. His voice had been made for grabbing people by the collar and shaking them. ‘I don’t know who you are, or what you want with her, but you are not going to harm her. You’re just not. Do you understand that?’

Sam held her breath. The little boy was looking around, as if he was getting ready to run. It was going to be OK.

But the boy's arm swung back and shot out, and the Doctor was yelling, voice echoing hard from the empty buildings. The boy didn't stop to see. His footsteps were slapping away down the block, and Sam was clutching the Doctor as he sank to his knees in the doorway. Her fingers closed over his as he grabbed at his left side, at the darkening tear in his shirt.

'Oh God, oh God, just hold on, I'll phone for an ambulance.'

'No. No doctors.' He shook his head violently, his face bent away from her. Somehow he'd flung an arm over her shoulder. His weight fell on her. 'No hospital. Not that bad.' Blood was running down her fingers.

'All right, then, whatever you say. We'll get you back to my flat. I'll get a taxi.'

He looked at her. His eyes were wide with pain and surprise. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Am I...? Yeah, fine. Thanks. Let's get you home.'

Slowly she clambered to her feet, pulling him up. He leaned on her hard, his face angry as he pulled a handkerchief out of a pocket and pressed it to the wound.

'Is it OK? You're sure you don't want -'

'It's just the surface, nothing vital.' He let out a shaky breath. 'Just first blood.'

'I wasn't expecting that,' said the Doctor.

'You tried to stare out a crazy kid with a knife and you didn't think he might... You're a frigging headcase!'

'Well, I try.'

The Doctor was sitting on the corner of her bed, his shirt and coat balled up on the milk crate Sam used as a bedside table. She applied the last of her sticking plasters to the wad of gauze over the six-inch cut in his side.

'You need stitches,' she said. He shook his head, smiling. His skin was so perfect, milky and soft, as though he was new. Just out of the packet, she thought. He looked too good for this dump, this cramped and badly lit bedsit reeking of Benson and Hedges and vanilla-scented room freshener. There were little spots of mould on the bottom of the fridge. She'd have to get that, later; she didn't want that in her home.

'Thanks,' she said again. 'You saved my arse. I mean, I think you saved my life.'

'It was nothing.'

'This isn't nothing,' she said, pressing down a loose plaster.

'Ouch! To be honest, Sam, I was surprised you hadn't taken care of him yourself.'

She felt a profound kick of embarrassment in her guts, and looked away.

A twelve-year-old kid. Maybe she should have tried to get the knife, or just kicked the crap out of the little bastard. She would have known what to do, that other Sam.

Maybe she'd have known how to get the knife if she'd done that self-defence course, or gone to karate with Marilyn. If she'd done anything for the last couple of years besides watch movies and get stoned.

If she'd taken the self-defence course, or the first-aid course.

If she'd gone to Africa with Habitat for Humanity, building houses.

If she'd run off to see the universe.

'So,' she said at length. 'How do we get to San Francisco?'

Chapter Two

If You Can Remember the Future, You Weren't Really There

San Francisco was not quite feeling like itself.

There was word of a herd in Golden Gate Park, white horses that no one could catch. In the Haight a wandering tribe had spread its carpets outside the music stores and eateries. A huge bird was seen perched atop the Transamerica pyramid at dawn, golden wings scattering the sunlight.

There were alligators in the BART system, and wild Mandelbrot turtles slithered down gutters like forgotten leaves. Even the Bay was uneasy, strange waves boiling across the water like something turning in its sleep.

Down these surreal streets went a man who was not himself surreal – though he was making a pretty good stab at it nonetheless.

‘So,’ said Fitz Kreiner from beneath his fedora, ‘I understand you know a few things.’

The small man from large Appliances twitched. ‘About what?’

‘Oh,’ said Fitz, ‘all sorts of things.’ He leaned across the counter, pinning the glossy brochures with his elbows and the little man with a shadowy smirk. ‘The kind of things that are going on in the city at the moment. The things no one will talk about. They say you know a lot, Walter. . .’

‘Look, who are you?’

Fitz tilted his fedora. ‘Call me Fitzwilliam Fort,’ he said, fighting to keep his accent from sliding across the Atlantic and colliding with Sam Spade. He had to admit that the trench coat was a bit much, even if it did keep out the San Francisco chill. ‘Professional investigator.’

Walter eyed him. ‘Oh yeah? Investigator of what?’

‘Phenomena,’ said Fitz. ‘Lights in the sky. Mysterious animals. Lost civilisations. Spontaneous human combustion. Subliminal messages in Disney films.’

Walter’s eyes dashed around. ‘Look, keep it down, all right? I just made assistant manager.’ He motioned Fitz towards an isolated corner behind the fridges.

Fitz slouched after him. He'd been perfecting his San Francisco 2002 slouch for the past few days. You had to keep an eye out when trying to fit into a new time and place, how to walk and talk and dress. Was it a swaggering or a slouching or a sidling kind of time? Get the moves right, and no one would notice you were just visiting the planet.

Walter cast a furtive glance at a middle-aged couple studying a nearby Kelvinator. 'I'm just into the UFO side of things, you know?' he murmured. 'But I've noticed all the stuff that's been happening lately. Everyone's noticed. Even the ones too mundane to admit it.'

'That's why I need your help,' said Fitz, giving him a conspiratorial smile. 'We both know the papers are keeping a lid on it, the telly –'

'They can't stop us from seeing it.' Walter was nodding enthusiastically. 'But they don't want us to think about it. We've got everything from green lightning to mutes. Sightings are up by three hundred per cent. Planes have been forced down at SFO. I can get you profiles, raw visuals, anything you want.'

'I knew I'd come to the right man,' said Fitz. Walter smiled up at him. 'What about last Saturday?'

'Oh,' said Walter. 'Saturday. That was a dragon. Not really my field, you know?'

Fitz bought a bag of doughnuts and swung himself up into a cable car, squeezing on to one of the wooden seats. When the cable car went the wrong way and deposited him near the aquatic park, he lurked around until he found one going back up the hill.

You got a great view on one of these trips. The city had been built right over the hills around the water, flat streets crisscrossing roads that undulated up and down like ski jumps. Long streets swept down to the Bay, giving you sudden views of the sea and the sky as the cable car rolled past. The buildings were old-fashioned, painted in clean colours, purple and blue and brown. Here and there, trees were flashing with autumn colours.

So this was the Future. This was the world that made Sam Jones, in all its hi-tech, remixed-and-sampled glory. Oh, he'd had a taste of it for a day or two, back in Sweden, but this was it.

It wasn't 1984, not even 2001 (bloody hell, both of those were the past now). This was more like the past sped up to 78 r.p.m. The Bakelite touch-tone phone in his hotel room wouldn't have looked out of place in his 1963 flat. A fashion statement, not a way of life. Hmm, that ought to be his slogan.

It made his job so much easier. If the world still dug beatniks and Beatles, film noir and *Stranger in a Strange Land*, he already had the cultural know-how to pull off any role he liked.

His squiggly hair blew around his face as he watched the city go past, catching flashes of detail every time the cable car passed a cross-street. For the most part, San Francisco looked pretty much normal. Not ordinary, thought Fitz happily, as he jumped out again at the edge of Chinatown.

There! A pair of stately nomads, arguing vociferously as they led their three-humped camel along Powell Street. They wore long, embroidered robes and ragged sandals. They didn't notice as a tourist took half a roll of snaps.

In the days since the Doctor had left, Fitz had gone to meetings in cafés and school halls, read underground 'zines run off on wilting photocopiers, sat through a slide show on Atlantis, rung unlisted numbers, meditated on top of Mount Tamalpais, browsed through thick infestations of fliers and posters in bookshops and second-hand-record shops, and filled half of his little black notebook with names and places and numbers.

In the end, the list had boiled down to three individuals. The three people likely to know the most about what was happening to San Francisco, and to tell him all about it. Or, rather, to tell Fitzwilliam Fort, fearless finder of freakish phenomena.

The rain had stopped for a bit, and he was carrying the trench coat over his arm. He had on black jeans and a black yin-yang T-shirt. Little round sunglasses like the ones John Lennon was still wearing in the posters in the record shops. Funny how all the Lennon and Hendrix memorabilia carried the exact same images he'd seen a few months ago in 1968. Gordon Bennett, hadn't they done anything *else* in the past thirty-four years?

For that matter, hadn't *anyone*? Nice to think 'his' decade was now looked back on as some kind of golden age, but they'd been a bit slack in building the Future. Where were the robots? The jumpsuits? The jetpacks?

He'd spent enough of his childhood in that Future. Rocket ships with knobby control levers, roadways in the sky. It had got him through more tedious maths classes than he could remember. It *deserved* to be real.

Ah well. Maybe some things were just too good for this world.

'Saturday, right,' said Eldin. 'The papers said it was a freak occurrence, of course. All the other papers. We covered every theory we could think up. Ball lightning, secret navy experiments. Nobody thought of a dragon, though.'

‘Not my idea,’ said Fitz. He took a final drag on his cigarette and flicked it away. ‘One of my contacts.’

Eldin Sanchez was almost as tall as Fitz. His receding hairline was balanced by a glossy black pigtail that reached the small of his back.

They were strolling along the waterfront. A bunch of sea lions were sunning themselves down on the pier, fat slugs honking like slowed-down geese. A little boy in a home-made robot costume stood on the street corner, face painted silver, buzzing a noisemaker in his mouth in time with each mechanical movement. Fitz tossed him a quarter – or maybe a nickel, he never could work out these American coins.

‘Next issue we’ll be covering all of the San Francisco stuff, plus this great theory that Elvis was rescued from death by a vampire gang. It explains all those sightings.’ Fitz never knew whether Eldin’s lopsided grin meant he was a true believer or thought it was all hilarious. ‘The *Interesting Times* can always use more writers – music, arts, opinion, visitors from outer space, whatever – if you’re up for it.’

‘Maybe, possibly.’ Fitz scribbled some more in his little black book.

‘Lemme give you something for a start,’ Eldin said. He gestured to a small shopfront across the street. A sign above the newspapered windows was hand-painted in curling foreign script. ‘What language is that?’

‘Arabic,’ guessed Fitz.

Eldin grinned again. ‘Nope. I’ve been checking. Not Tamil, not Burmese, not anything. Nobody’s ever seen writing like that. Except them, I guess.’

He nodded in the direction of two tall men in overcoats and fezzes who were rounding the corner. As Fitz watched, they disappeared into the shop.

‘Have you tried asking them?’ he said.

‘The guy behind the counter said something about a travel agency,’ said Eldin. ‘None of them speak much English. Whoever they are, they’re not telling.’

Fitz stared at the sign. “‘Humans need not apply’?”

“‘If you can read this, you’re on the wrong planet’? I’ll tell you something else. Since I noticed that one, I’ve spotted a couple of other places round the city with those same signs. There’s a bunch of those guys around. . . it’d make one hell of a story for the paper.’

‘I’ll see what I can find out,’ promised Fitz.

They’d reached the pier where Eldin worked his day job, making bookings for a water taxi. They stopped to buy ice cream from a push-cart on the corner.

Mountain Blast? What the hell flavour was that? Ben and Jerry’s had been the same. The Doctor had insisted they go there as soon as they’d landed.

Sam had groaned when she saw the shop sitting on the corner of Haight and Ashbury, but she'd liked the ice cream anyway, and when she –

Say something about something else, now.

'Umm,' he said, as one of the Mandelbrots slithered over his foot. There was a little flock of them, flat turtle bodies glissandoing with colour as they munched on rubbish. 'Anybody got any idea of where these things come from? What are they?'

Eldin shrugged. 'Digital pigeons, I guess.'

Fitz had the sneaking feeling that what the Doctor really wanted him to do was to be exposed to as many of the Things Happening here as possible. In the vain hope that something bizarre and wonderful would leap out and dazzle him. And then his cynical shell of Fitzness would shatter, and he'd be overwhelmed with that particularly fluffy Doctorish kind of awe.

Well, sorry, *Herr Doktor*, but I've managed to keep my cool in the face of the miracles. Even when I looked up to the horizon and saw one of those weighty, fluttering blurs that might just possibly be a dragon, and the cigarette fell out of my mouth. All I felt was sorry for any poor sod who might be standing under the thing.

He got off the electric trolley bus at the corner of Market and Powell, and stared at the arcane mantra 'www.yahoo.com' printed on the rear advert panel as it pulled away. Just the third contact left, less than a block from his hotel.

He passed the street juggler in his usual place by the creaking cable-car turntable, performing his silent, mysterious tricks with the glass balls. He cut a dignified figure in his top hat and white face, the rainbow braces his only concession to showbiz garishness.

Fitz sauntered up Powell Street – this was definitely a sauntering kind of street – and joined the less-than-a-crowd of potential buyers hovering around the tables in Union Square. He wandered around the tables for a few minutes, fiddling with plastic bags of herbs or knitted pouches.

An old woman was selling snake kites. Fitz watched a man buy one for his little girl. Was that a real snake, wriggling on the end of the string as it floated up into the sky, trailing along behind her in the breeze? What was normal here, and what wasn't?

That had to be her, third table from the end, behind the display of hand-wrought Celtic jewellery. She had a windswept mass of black hair with just a touch of grey.

Play it cool. Tilted fedora, hands in pockets, full gumshoe-stroke-mysterious-stranger routine. Make her think you know something she doesn't, when it's really the other way around.

'Kyra Skye?'

'Yeah?'

'Fort. Fitzwilliam Fort. I was referred to you by a mutual friend.' She smiled, the corners of her eyes a web of wrinkles. 'What are you looking for? I've got a special on these pewter triskeles.'

'I need something less tangible,' said Fitz. 'Your expertise in matters of the ethereal.'

'I see,' said Kyra. She looked him up and down. 'Well, I can certainly help you there, Mr Fort.' She stood up and grabbed a spare chair from behind her table.

Fitz slouched into it. 'So is it true you can read minds?'

Kyra's smile broadened. She reached across the table, and pressed her palm against his forehead. The skin was cool. She was wearing a matching pair of chunky silver rings, one on each hand.

Fitz wondered what the hell she was doing, but it wouldn't look right to ask. He closed his eyes. They sat like that for a minute, until he opened one eye to peek at her.

Kyra took her hand away. 'You have to talk yourself into it, don't you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Here's the world-famous private eye on the case, sauntering nonchalantly down the street...'

Ouch. Caught red-handed. He pulled off the fedora and scratched his scalp. 'Well, it worked for Snoopy.' He started to get up.

But Kyra was grinning. 'What can I do for you?'

Fitz pulled his chair closer to the table. 'I need information,' he said sincerely. 'About what's happening to the city. I really was told that you were the person to ask.'

The conversation paused for a minute or two while a young girl rummaged through the jewellery, reaching around Fitz. Finally she wandered off again.

'All right, then.' Kyra could be as serious as he was. 'If you want a crash course in what's going on, come over to my place tomorrow night.'

She picked up his notebook and scribbled an address in it. 'People are dropping in and out all the time. You can have dinner with us. It's got to be at night – the ley lines are at their most powerful then.'

'Ley lines?'

'I'll show you a chart, tell you all about it. Now scat – you're scaring off my customers.' She shooed him out of the seat.

Fitz glanced back at her. 'You can't really read minds, can you?'

'Do you think I'd let you in my apartment if I didn't know something about you?' said Kyra, deadpan.

Riiight. 'Something else I've always wondered.'

'Yeah?'

'If Snoopy was just pretending to be a World War One flying ace all those times, how come his doghouse kept getting shot full of holes?'

'Psychokinesis. See you around, Fitz.'

Outweirded, Fitz tipped his hat to her and wandered off, wondering if the women of the future liked younger men.

The little boy was waiting for him on the steps of his hotel, just opposite the cable-car turntable.

The kid had been hanging around in the doorway all week, turning up at odd hours, bending Fitz's ear with little-kid reports of the weird things happening in the city. He'd been the first one to tell him about the Saturday Dragon; he'd brought him a sandal from one of the nomads. He was actually one of Fitz's better sources of information. Maybe kids were just more receptive to this stuff.

At first, Fitz had thought he belonged to the street juggler; there was something out of place about him, something Fitz couldn't put his finger on. He looked ordinary enough, really, skinny arms sticking out of a black T-shirt, jeans, running shoes without socks. Nothing you could point to and say, hey, you're just doing that for effect.

'Hey, Fitz,' said the boy.

'Hey. Seen anything for me?'

The kid's dark face opened up, showing a grin like shark's teeth. 'Just the usual.'

He held something out to Fitz, something long and thin, dark and shiny. Fitz reached out for it, but the boy snatched his hand away, teasing.

'Looks like a feather,' said Fitz, as the boy traced lines in the air with it.

'It is a feather,' said the boy. 'A dragon feather.'

It looked oily, rough, like a scale pulled out of shape. 'Where'd you get it?'

'Here and there,' said the boy. 'There and here.' He held it out again. Fitz hesitated. 'Go on. There are plenty more where that one came from.'

Up in the little brown hotel room, the message light on the phone was blinking. After wrestling with a bunch of boop-beep-boop buttons, Fitz was rewarded with the Doctor's voice. 'Everything's going according to plan,' said the message, 'approximately. I've found Sam, and we'll be arriving in San Francisco at about eight a.m. tomorrow morning, your time. The Sam I've found is very, um...'

'What?' said Fitz.

'Oops, that was the boarding call.'

'Gaah!'

'See you soon.'

Fitz put the phone down.

For just a moment he let his whole body slump face first against the wall where he stood. The fedora fell to the floor, unnoticed.

OK, now don't think about it too much. Keep on sliding down the surface of what you're doing, get that report together for the Doctor, don't worry about how it's going to feel tomorrow. It'll be just like meeting an old friend who you've never seen before.

He sat cross-legged on the bed and started staring at the notes in his notebook.

Day Zero Minus Two

Let's face it, folks, these days San Francisco's biggest industry is San Francisco. We've got eccentricity down to a fine polish – neatly packaged, like Jefferson Airplane on a reunion tour playing 'White Rabbit' for the six thousandth freakin' time. We're a franchise, just trying to keep the formula going. It's damn hard to find the corners of the city where the real creativity is hiding any more, among all the remixes and remakes and repetitions.

But they're still there. Round that corner is a band that doesn't sound like anyone else at all. Down that basement café are people who really do their own thing, not just the prescribed alternative thing. The possibilities are still there.

And if you look up, you might even spot a dragon overhead.

– Eldin Sanchez, *Interesting Times*, 7 November 2002

Chapter Three

Second String

‘Good morning, everyone. We’ll be landing in San Francisco in about an hour’s time.’

Sam unstuck her eyelids. ‘There is a God,’ she mumbled.

‘Looks like a cool but sunny day for our arrival, with a high around fifty-three degrees. I’ll be talking to you again shortly before landing.’

Sam blinked down at the Doctor. He was leaning on her, his soft chestnut hair curling on her shoulder. She could just hear his gentle snoring over the unending growl of the engines. She was going to shrug him off when she decided she didn’t mind all that much.

It felt as though someone had been chewing on her head. The constant noise of engines and air conditioning had kept her from nodding off for more than a few minutes in the last twelve hours.

The Doctor had been even worse, swapping his window seat for her aisle seat and then back again, leaping up to get little paper cups of water or magazines, or standing hunched at the back door, staring out of the window. It had been annoying at first, then perversely amusing, but as his pent-up energy got more and more out of control it began to get scary. He just couldn’t stand being cooped up in one place for so long.

He told her about the other Sam, all their adventures together on different planets, or at different times in history. He told her about Fitz Kreiner, his other travelling companion, who came from 1963 and was half German on his father’s side. Fitz was ‘doing some research’ in San Francisco while the Doctor went to London to collect her.

He told her about being President Elect of the High Council of Time Lords, Keeper of the Legacy of Rassilon, Defender of the Laws of Time, and Protector of Galloway. Or something.

‘A thousand years. . .’ she’d said. ‘You must be so *over* everything.’

He’d shrugged, and managed a fleeting smile. ‘I think I’ve just got over being over things.’

They were bringing the breakfasts around now. The flight attendant smiled when she saw the sleeping Doctor. Sam smiled back, taking his plastic container and wedging it next to hers on the little fold-down tray.

She'd wanted to know why they were stuck on this plane instead of travelling in his time machine, but he'd kept changing the subject when she tried to ask him about it. The same thing happened when she'd tried to ask how he'd got her a passport so quickly. Or how he'd persuaded Dave to give her time off work.

But he wasn't trying to con her. She was sure about that now. He believed every word of what he was saying. She kept remembering that moment at the bus stop, that absolute cold certainty for just one moment when she'd believed every word of it too.

Fifteen minutes to go. The Doctor was fidgeting in his seat, looking about ready to run screaming up and down the aisles.

Here and there, little wisps of cloud were hanging above the landscape. The Golden Gate Bridge was a huge stripe of red across all that blue and green. A thought occurred to Sam. She said, 'Why isn't it -'

'"Golden Gate" is the name of that bit of water,' said the Doctor, fiddling with the strap on his belt.

'Oh,' said Sam. She glanced back out of the window. She was already sounding like a dumb tourist, asking stupid questions.

'There's no such thing,' muttered the Doctor.

'As what?'

'As a stupid question,' he said.

The plane was dropping steadily. The water underneath them was starting to roll past faster and faster -

Something huge and black shot past the window, blocking out the sun.

The plane turned, hard, so that she could see the ground through the windows opposite. The engine roar leapt up as the plane dragged itself back up into the sky, throwing Sam back into her seat.

'What is it?' shouted Sam. 'What's happening?'

The Doctor put a finger on her lips. 'Shh,' he said. 'Everything's all right now.'

The plane was already levelling, the engines quietening. She could hear the frightened chatter of the other passengers, all around them.

'Near miss,' said the Doctor.

'We nearly hit another plane?'

‘Something like that,’ he said. He stared past her, through the window.

Sam shut her eyes, clasping her hands together. They were shaking. She was certain that, for just a moment, she’d seen a yellow eye looking into the cabin.

She opened her eyes. The Doctor grinned at her. ‘Welcome to San Francisco.’

The airport minibus pulled up outside the hotel. Sam unfolded herself, almost banging her head on the low ceiling. She felt as crumpled as her shirt and denim jacket.

The Doctor helped her down from the minibus and hefted her bags. She realised, for the first time, that he wasn’t carrying any.

She looked blearily around the foyer while the Doctor did stuff at the check-in counter. A narrow carpeted staircase, an old-fashioned cage lift, a table with free herbal teas. A skinny guy was sitting on an overstuffed sofa, reading the paper.

‘Two rooms,’ she told the Doctor.

‘Of course,’ he said, a little surprised.

Sam unzipped her money belt just a little and pushed her thumb inside. The voucher for her return ticket was still safely there, next to her passport. She could leave any time she wanted.

The guy on the sofa was watching them, she suddenly realised. Just wide grey eyes, appearing in the slit between the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the black hat.

‘Doctor...’ said Sam. Oh shit, the skinny guy was coming over! What should she do?

The Doctor turned from the counter just as the guy reached him. He stuck out a hand and poked the Doctor in the chest with a bony finger.

‘You left me here to investigate. You even left me the car so I could get around.’

‘Er,’ said the Doctor.

‘Next time, the car *keys* would help.’

‘You’re Fitz,’ said Sam. His thin face sported a few days’ growth of stubble, and his hair was a straggling mess, looking as if it was still growing back after a really severe cut. His skinny body made him look as if he was made out of pipe cleaners.

‘Don’t worry, he’s harmless,’ said the Doctor. ‘He’s from 1963, so consider all cultural misunderstandings explained ahead of time.’

Fitz had been staring at her the whole time. Suddenly he stuck out his hand. She shook it. Like meeting a distant relative at a Christmas party, she thought,

when you were both stuck with being nice to each other.

‘Good to meet you again,’ said Fitz. ‘Oh, and please don’t bother making any *Cracker* jokes. You made them all months ago.’

‘Harmless?’ Sam asked the Doctor.

Fitz raised an eyebrow at her. ‘Don’t believe everything you hear.’

She looked him in the eyes. ‘Harmless,’ she repeated firmly.

The corner of Fitz’s mouth twitched. ‘Ooh, I like this one, can we keep her?’

Sam took a long, long hot shower. The water didn’t run out, even after twenty minutes. The air conditioning was goose-bumping cold when she got out.

The hotel bathroom was amazing, absolutely spotless. Fluffy white towels were stacked on a rack above the pristine loo. There was a basket full of little plastic bottles next to the sink, free shampoo and bubble bath and hand lotion.

She unzipped her duffel bag and pulled out some fresh undies and a clean T-shirt, the snug sky-blue one. Then she went back into the bathroom to get the little bottles and the extra soap. If they were free, she was taking them with her.

She was just picking up the basket when someone knocked at the door. She nearly dropped it.

‘Yeah?’ she shouted through the closed door.

‘Room service,’ called an American voice. Sam peered through the eyehole. It was a bellboy in a red uniform.

She opened the door. ‘Um, I didn’t order anything.’

‘Dr Bowman sent this up for you, ma’am,’ said the bellboy, pushing a trolley into the room. He was a thin black kid, the red cap pushed down on to a shaved head. ‘There’s a note with it. He also asked me to give you this, ma’am.’ He handed her a large paper bag.

Inside was a heavy woollen jacket, dark grey, the tags still attached. Sam pulled it out, gaping at it. It was really nice, must have cost him a fortune. She could leave her threadbare denim jacket here in the room.

The bellboy was hovering, as if waiting for something. ‘Oh, yeah, right,’ said Sam. She picked up the money belt from the bed and unzipped it. The Doctor had left her a handful of notes for tips. She gave the kid a five. He smiled and left her alone.

Sam pulled off the tags and tugged on the jacket, admiring herself in the mirror. It looked fantastic, just her size.

Sam pulled the cover off the plate. It was a sandwich – plus crisps, a pickle, and more little bottles, tomato sauce and mustard this time. The note was

propped up against the ketchup, a folded bit of hotel stationery, written in neat running writing: *One cheese-salad sandwich on sourdough, no margarine. Just the way you like it – I hope. Have a sleep. We'll meet you at the cable-car turntable when you're ready. PTO.*

Sam turned the note over, picking slices of tomato out of the sandwich.

P.S. Wear the jacket, it's cold.

'How is she?' said Fitz. He sat cross-legged on the Doctor's hotel-room bed, holding his notebook.

The Doctor was pulling off his velvet coat. 'I hate planes. You end up feeling dried up and sticky at the same time. Like an old lolly found in your pocket. She's fine. She's dealing with all of it wonderfully.'

'No,' said Fitz. 'I mean, what's she like?'

The Doctor sat down on the chair and started to tug off his shoes. 'Different,' he said. 'The same. A believer, but she keeps it to herself. A little more defensive. She hasn't been through all the things Sam has been through. But she's been through quite a bit.'

'Does she remember anything? About you – about either of us?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'This Sam never met me, never left Earth in the TARDIS. But there still could be connections. We'll see, this afternoon. Better let her finish her nap first.' He flung his socks at the desk. 'What's the surrealism report?'

Fitz took the dragon feather out of his pocket and handed it to the Doctor. The Time Lord turned it around in his hands, slowly. The light splashed off it in dozens of colours.

Fitz spread out his map of the city, turned the pages of his notebook. 'The plants in Golden Gate Park are growing at five times the normal rate – it's closed to the public. Lots of unconfirmed cryptozoological sightings, including an alleged vehicle theft by Bigfoot. Oh, and would you believe Lombard Street has gone straight?'

'Well,' laughed the Doctor, 'as long as *Castro* Street hasn't gone straight. . .'

'Seriously, it's your best-case scenario,' said Fitz. 'Strange visitors, weird occurrences, but nothing too bizarre. Nothing to stop life going on as normal. There hasn't even been much in the press.'

The Doctor nodded, struggling with the knot in his cravat. 'I phoned General Kramer from the airport, just in case.'

'That UNIT woman? What did she say?'

‘She said, “You’re phoning me up at two in the morning to tell me that strange things happen in San Francisco?”’

‘You forgot the time difference. Again.’ Fitz had to laugh. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the mind of a Time Lord.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Adrienne explained it to me in considerable detail. But what’s happening here is both too large and too small for UNIT. It’s just the three of us. For now, at least.’

Fitz closed his book. ‘Yeah. The three of us.’

‘She’s not dead,’ said the Doctor.

‘I know, I know,’ Fitz said hastily, getting up and turning away. ‘It’s like last time: she’ll be along any minute, just as soon as we give up hope. I mean, it sounds like missing presumed dead is almost her default state anyway...’

‘She’s still here.’

‘She’s not, you know,’ said Fitz. ‘You can’t just...’ He didn’t turn around.

‘I know,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘I know what you mean. Go and relax for a while. If I don’t have a bath this instant, I’ll perish.’

The first thing Sam saw, really saw now that she was wide awake, were the flowers.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold. The hotel was near the base of an incredibly tilted street, the buildings sticking out of it, straight up.

A lot of the buildings were old-fashioned, like the hotel they were staying in. Others still showed signs of the renovation they must have gone through, after the Little Big One hit a couple of Christmases ago. But, old or new, all of them seemed to be covered in flowers. Pots and balconies were overflowing with red and purple and gold blossoms, brilliant in the clear, blue-white sunlight.

Crowds were moving on the pavements, up and down the slope of the street. Here and there, more of the flowers were pushing their way up through the pavement like weeds, only to be trampled.

The receptionist had said the cable-car turntable was down the bottom of the street, right next to the hotel. There was a bunch of people down there, watching a street performer. Sam spotted the Doctor’s brown curls sticking up out of the crowd and headed down the hill towards him.

Sam eased her way through the crowd. She brushed past a guy in white robes, a woman with a pet monkey clinging to her shaved head. Were they normal? Were the flowers? How was she going to tell what was strange around here, and what wasn’t?

Fitz was there, too, flashing her a grin. She said, ‘Doc-’

The Doctor held up a hand for silence. He was frowning in concentration as he watched the juggler who was performing for the crowd. The guy held one hand level in front of his white-painted face, staring deep into three glass balls as he rolled them in a circle in his palm.

He extended his arm, and then, with a flick of his fingers, he sent one glass sphere rolling up his arm, over his shoulders, and down the other arm into his waiting hand.

Applause rippled through the crowd.

The Doctor's frown deepened. 'Excuse me,' he said, stepping through the crowd and right into the magic circle of empty space around the juggler.

The juggler didn't see the Doctor coming, concentrating on keeping the spheres in flight. With a flick of his fingers, the Doctor intercepted one of the glass balls.

The juggler stared at him in astonishment, without missing a sphere. The Doctor rolled the stolen globe smoothly back and forth between his wrist and elbow, as though testing it.

'What's he doing?' Sam hissed. Fitz just shrugged. She stood on tiptoes to try to see better.

The Doctor offered the sphere back to the juggler, who shrugged comically at the crowd and took it, then sent another one spinning at the Doctor. There was a smattering of laughter from the crowd as the Doctor stumbled to catch it.

Within moments they were passing the spheres back and forth, fingertip to fingertip, in a silent, circling dance.

Finally the Doctor stopped, with a single sphere in his hand. He spun it on the tip of his finger, perfectly balanced.

Then he took his hand away.

The glass ball hung in the air.

Sam gaped. It wasn't falling: it was *drifting* down, the way a snowflake drifts. The crowd stared, none of them daring to make a noise.

The juggler caught the ball just before it settled on to the ground. The crowd burst into applause. Coins chinked into his basket.

The Doctor made a silent half-bow and withdrew, leaving the juggler on centre stage. The crowd parted around him as he made his way back to Sam and Fitz.

'So what was that all about?' said Fitz.

'Just checking the weather,' said the Doctor. 'Come along. It's time. Time we visited the cause of all of this.'

With a flick of his fingers, he produced one of the glass spheres, and handed it to Sam.

The Doctor had explained most of it to her on the plane, while everyone else was watching the movie.

'It all began at midnight on December the thirty-first, 1999,' he murmured. She had to lean towards him to hear. 'When a singularity opened in San Francisco.'

'A black hole?' said Sam.

'A close cousin,' said the Doctor. 'I won't go into the technical details.'

'Oh yeah, thanks.'

'Well, they're not very interesting.' He smiled. 'The effects were slight at first, building up over a period of a few hours. It snowed in Hawaii. The Bay swelled and spilled. And then – around the globe, just for a few seconds, time went out of control. Day turned to night and night to day. And, in the end, the entire Earth was forced through an opening the size of a bathtub.'

Sam stared at him.

'And then, as you can see, it was spat back out again.'

'How come nobody noticed?' Sam said.

'Paradox,' said the Doctor. 'Time was wound backward, the disaster was prevented. The Earth was both destroyed and not destroyed.'

Sam leaned in close and murmured softly in his ear. 'Bollocks.'

He looked at her. 'Remember the postcards,' he said quietly. 'You both left Earth, and stayed on Earth.'

Nice little paradox, the boy had called her. The knife kind of gave his words more believability.

The Doctor was walking up one of the tilted streets. Fitz and Sam were already puffing, trying to keep up. The street was getting steeper the longer they walked – at first, Sam had thought she was imagining it. It was like climbing a concrete mountain.

'On the plane,' said Sam, 'you said the damage to space could make all sorts of things happen.' She was rolling the glass ball around in her hands. 'Like one of these hanging in midair?'

'Sudden gusts of gravity, or the reverse,' said the Doctor. 'Freak weather patterns. It's a sort of temporal cicatrix. Space-time tried to heal itself, but it didn't succeed. They called it the Millennium Effect – but the millennium was only just beginning.'

‘So how come San Francisco only got strange in the last few weeks?’ said Sam.

‘The integrity of space-time has been slowly eroding around the scar. About a month ago it reached a critical level of exposure.’

Sam caught the thick scent of coffee from one shop doorway, beer and smoke from a pub further on. For a moment she heard an English accent in the crowd, tourists as far from home as she was, but by the time she’d turned she’d lost them.

‘How do you know all of this?’ Sam demanded.

The Doctor looked faintly embarrassed. Fitz said gleefully, ‘It was his fault.’

‘In a sense,’ said the Doctor. ‘I was certainly intimately involved.’

Sam said, ‘So you want to put everything back the way it was.’

The Doctor blinked at her. Then, slowly, he raised his arms outward, throwing them wide, and leaned his whole body back.

He should have fallen over backward, tumbled right down the hill to the cross-street below, but instead he sort of hung there with his coat dangling out behind him.

Sam felt her eyes twist just trying to take it in – he was standing at right angles to the pavement, a perfectly normal way to stand on a city street, but this street was tilted at maybe thirty degrees from where level ground should be.

And he just hung there, at a mind-boggling angle, and grinned like a kid with a new toy.

‘Change it back? Why on Earth would I want to do a thing like that?’ he said. ‘A little local colour is good for tourism. I’m sure a lot of people expect San Francisco to be like this anyway. No, the real problem is very different.’

With a sudden dancing flip of his feet the Doctor snapped himself back up to a more conventional angle, and started back up the hill again.

Sam and Fitz stared at the spot where he’d been standing. ‘Thanks for leveling with us, Doctor,’ said Fitz.

He made that happen, Sam thought. She looked back down the hill, at the buildings, the people, the water glittering in afternoon sunshine. All of it was reflected in the glass ball she held in her hands.

He changed the whole city. He touched it and turned it impossible.

‘The scar acts as a sort of lodestone,’ the Doctor was continuing. They hurried to catch up. ‘It’s drawing all sorts of people to San Francisco, either out of curiosity or just because it’s mucked about with their normal forms of interdimensional travel. Most of them are harmless. Relatively.’

‘But he left me here to look for signs of anything that wasn’t,’ said Fitz quietly.

The Doctor nodded slowly. ‘It’s only a matter of time before something *really* nasty comes along.’ He turned suddenly, looking back down the hill at the city under its haze of drizzle. ‘And I don’t think any of us are ready for it.’

She was sure it was colder in here than it had been on the street.

The alley opened up to a loading area, stacked with crates and rubbish dumpsters, surrounded on three sides by the backs of shops. Washing hung from lines between the buildings, strung from dirty second-storey windows. There was no one around, metal awnings rolled down in the doorways.

Fitz was leaning against the damp wall of the alley, arms casually folded, looking like he wanted to be somewhere seriously else but didn’t want either of them to know it.

Sam stepped a little closer to the scar. It hung in the air, close to the back wall of the alley, about level with her face. It looked like... like the air was really glass, safety glass like in a windscreen, and it had been cracked.

The Doctor had taken what looked like a TV remote control out of his pocket. He was pointing it at the scar, peering intensely at the device.

‘What’s that thing?’ she asked.

‘It’s a sort of stabiliser,’ he said. ‘We came here to heal the scar, to stabilise space-time. I’m just taking a few readings.’ He frowned at whatever the device was telling him.

‘Shouldn’t you put up a sign or something?’ she said. ‘What if someone walks into it?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘It’s harmless,’ he said. ‘To almost everyone. Go closer, there’s more.’

Tentatively she stepped forward and *was striding confidently towards the scar, lean and certain, waving the Doctor and Fitz back. ‘Better stay clear – Christ knows what this thing could do to a Time Lord’s timestream. You really should do better at picking up after yourself, you know...’*

‘Well, yes,’ he called. ‘But then I’d be perfect, and we don’t want that.’

‘Heavens, no. You’d be bored silly.’

‘And I wouldn’t need you to take care of things either. And then where would you be?’

‘Bags the Caribbean.’ She grinned and raised the stabilising device, but felt something throb in her head and stood frozen, a hand reaching to her temple, the world swaying around her.

‘She’s here,’ she breathed.

‘This is where it happened,’ said the Doctor, from right behind her ear. ‘It was so sudden. . .’

She was much closer to the scar, though she couldn’t remember walking. Her legs felt like giving way. The Doctor danced round in front of her, coaxing her onward. ‘Come on. One more step. We need to know what happened. Come on. . .’

Another step towards the scar, the Doctor’s stabilising device wavering in her hands. *It looked like a hobbyist’s home-made remote control. Behind her Fitz was asking, ‘What if this doesn’t work?’*

‘Then we’ll still have to find a way of muffling the scar’s energy pulses,’ said the Doctor. ‘We can’t risk letting it attract – Sam? Are you all right?’

‘Yeah.’ Though her ears were pounding and her mouth had gone cotton. ‘I’m just. . . getting flashes –’

Closer again to the scar now, like a step-zoom. Her ears were pounding and her mouth had gone cotton. Not so cool and perfect now, are you, Blondie?

The web of fractures filled her view, just a metre or two away. Now she could see individual filaments, streaks of air that bent the light and left her seeing sideways through them. And in the centre, something –

A glimpse of blue. Straight lines bent at tortured angles, folded and mangled till you could barely catch a glimpse through the prism of the scar. Something trapped in the centre. Somehow she knew it was screaming.

‘There’s something –’

‘My TARDIS.’

‘But why did you –’

The words came in a blizzard. ‘She’s muffling the energy surges. Her dimensional framework is wrapped around the wound in space-time. But she can’t take it much longer, she’s getting close to breaking up –’

‘But why didn’t you just –’

‘I couldn’t stabilise the scar. We didn’t know what had happened to Sam, we might need it to get her back, so I put the TARDIS there as a stopgap. Please, Sam. We’ve got to hurry. I need to know.’

‘Right.’ She took a breath and thought blonde and *stumbled and dropped the stabiliser and waved Fitz’s supporting hands away. The gale in her head was drowning her out. ‘It’s those dreams I had. About the other me. The one in King’s Cross. I’m seeing –’ Her eyes twisted and the scar was inches away now, everything she could see bent and shattered through it.*

She dreamed about me. I never dreamed.

‘Can you see her?’ insisted the Doctor. ‘Can you reach her?’

She answered, 'I can't,' but the Doctor hadn't asked anything and she could feel herself the dark-haired herself brushing against the scar and feeling her blonde self brushing against the scar, a man dreaming he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man, and she was pitching face forward into the shattered prism and felt herself somehow pushing her other self out of the way, and distantly she could see another dark-haired her about to hurtle in and push her back –

Oh God.

'You bastard!' she shouted, and swung at the Doctor's face.

He leaned backward, easily, her fist sweeping past his nose. She kept on shouting, 'You wanted me to fall in, didn'tcha? And push her back out instead.' She grabbed his lapels, shoved him against the wall. He held the stabiliser in a death grip, holding it up, away from her. 'That's all you wanted me for!'

'No no no! I just wanted to find out what –'

'Don't you get it?' Sam yelled. '*She's* the freak! *She's* the mutant! I'm the real one!' Her arm was already swinging back. She was going to smash his face in and run all the way to the airport.

Fitz grabbed her from behind in an awkward bear hug, trying to pin her arms. They lurched about together. *The Doctor made that scar he changed the whole city he'd change me the same way –*

'Let her go,' said the Doctor.

Suddenly she was free. She turned to sprint for the main road.

The mouth of the alleyway was blocked by a solid wall of little men in grey uniforms.

Sam froze. 'Oh no, who are you?' she said.

'Run for it!' shouted the Doctor.

Sam turned – no other way out of the alley – turned back, stumbling backward as the grey men advanced. There were half a dozen of them, all looking pretty much alike, medium heights, medium builds. Their faces were rounded, vague. They were like a row of nobodies.

Some of them were carrying what looked like nets.

Sam yelled and ran straight for them, smashing into one with her shoulder. A hand snatched at her arm, spinning her around. Two were grabbing at Fitz. Two others were struggling with the Doctor. She had a glimpse of his super-science machine, cracking open as it smashed against the wall.

Sam elbowed her assailant in the face. She yelled as the other one grabbed her hair. Swearing, she struggled in her jeans pocket for her rape alarm. *There!*

She shoved her thumb hard into the on-switch and threw the thing at the wall. The alley was suddenly screaming, the sound loud enough to hurt, echo-

ing back from every surface. The grey man went for the alarm, dragging her by the hair, but she swung round and bit his arm.

She saw the Doctor push two fingers hard into the chest of one of his opponents. The man toppled backward, as though stunned.

Sam took the glass ball from her jacket pocket, aimed carefully for the other man's head, and let it fly.

She missed. But the ball shattered right next to the guy, startling him, and the Doctor tripped him up and snatched the remains of his remote control.

Something landed on her from behind, with incredible force. She went down, her head smacking on the road, her skull making an ugly crunching noise.

The rape alarm shut off at last, but her ears were still ringing, her whole head was ringing. She felt like she was going to be sick.

The Doctor grabbed her, picked her right up off the ground. 'No!' she yelled, trying to fight, but he was too strong and she couldn't see because something was running down her face into her eyes.

'God, no!' She clawed at his coat. 'Don't throw me in, God, please don't –'

But he was running, carrying her in his arms. Through the stuff in her eyes she got a glimpse over his shoulder, the grey men chasing after them as they ran out of the alley.

The ringing in her head was so loud she had to shut her eyes to stop it.

Chapter Four

Bird of Paradox

The Doctor's face swam in front of hers, his eyes inches away from her own. 'If there's a concussion, it's only a mild one,' he murmured.

'You sure?' Sam asked. The hotel room was an uncertain haze, brown wallpaper and generic landscape paintings just out of focus. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to jump out of the walls and attack her.

She was sitting in a little chair, the Doctor kneeling beside her. His fingers stroked a damp face cloth across her forehead, wiping away the dirt and dried blood. He was gentle and tender and it still hurt like hell.

Fitz sat cross-legged on the bed, fiddling with the broken machine. Its hi-tech metal case had split open, and something that looked like blancmange was oozing out. 'This thing has beeped its last,' he said mournfully.

'Oh *no*. No, not now.' The Doctor swung round to grab the device and frantically started checking it. 'Without the stabilising device, I can't heal the scar or extract the TARDIS.' She could see his hands shaking, the frantic intensity as he peered at the controls. 'The toolkit I brought from the TARDIS isn't enough. I could fix anything else, but the core's been smashed.'

'What happens if you can't get the TARDIS out in time?' asked Fitz quietly.

The Doctor balled up the face cloth. 'She'll be crushed. We've got a bit more than two days. Of course her plasmic shell, her dimensional skeleton, will probably bind the scar. Permanently. It won't be able to cause any further problems.'

Fitz's mouth twitched. 'And we'll be stranded here.'

The Doctor gripped the device until his knuckles turned white, as though he could squeeze the life back into it.

Then he made himself put it down. 'First things first,' he said. He took out a sticking plaster and carefully applied it to the cut on Sam's forehead.

'Ow,' she said. The room was starting to come back into focus, as if she was waking up from a bad dream. 'What are we going to do about those guys? Should we call the police, or what?'

‘Could you describe them?’ said the Doctor. ‘Think for a moment.’

Sam opened her mouth and closed it again. ‘It’s the knock on the head,’ she said. ‘I can’t quite remember. . .’

But the Doctor was shaking his head. ‘Sam,’ he began, ‘I don’t think there’s a word in any Earthly language for how sorry I am that you were hurt –’

‘Sure. Right.’ She pulled away sharply, and waited a moment for the room to catch up with her. ‘Not that you would have minded me getting *killed*, though.’

‘What?’

‘You wanted me to fall into the scar.’ But that wasn’t true, was it? He had a great chance to throw her in, and he didn’t. ‘You wouldn’t have cared if I had. You’d have got *your* Sam back.’

‘I didn’t think of it as dying,’ said the Doctor softly. ‘Just being put back, ah, the way you should be. . .’

‘Yeah.’ The anger was a sticky black mass in her throat. ‘Well, I’ve never been too interested in how I *should* be. I’m just who I am. Right now.’

The Doctor put down the face cloth. ‘Sam, if Sam were in your shoes –’

‘You realise how stupid that sounds?’

‘– she wouldn’t hesitate to have herself turned back.’

Sam laughed an ugly laugh. She pushed herself out of the chair, leaned against the windowsill, her back to them.

‘You really think if you told Little Miss Perfect she was supposed to smoke a pack a day, you think she’d want to change into me? And then try telling her I get *high* and watch her have a coronary.’ The words piled out of her mouth before she could think about them. ‘And that’s before we get to the crap job and the crap little bedsit and the undesirable friends. She might be thick enough to do it on principle. But do you really think, if she *knew* me, she’d want to *be* me?’

‘I’m not talking to her right now,’ he said plainly. ‘I’m talking to you. And I’m saying I’m sorry for the way I treated you.’

He reached out both hands to her face – his fingertips touching her cheeks, just for a moment. Her mouth was suddenly dry.

‘I want to do something to make it up to you,’ he said. ‘How does dinner sound?’

Sam glanced out of the window. She could just see the juggling clown, surrounded by his audience, balancing increasingly improbable numbers of balls on top of one another as they hung unsupported in the air. As she watched, he threw his top hat on to the pile.

He knew how to handle it all.

'I should just go home,' she said. 'Get on the next plane and go back to work and forget the whole thing. Never know what in hell's going on with my lifeline, and end up getting knifed on the street by a little kid who wants me dead for some reason I don't have the first clue about.' She let her forehead rest against the glass. 'Dinner's fine.'

'Hang on,' said Fitz. 'What little kid?'

'Pulled a knife on us in London,' said Sam. 'Weird little foreign boy, maybe eleven, twelve. Called me a paradox.'

'Dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin, weird grin?'

The Doctor and Sam turned and stared at him.

'Oh shag,' said Fitz. 'I think he's been here all along.'

Sam was lying on the bed, cradling her head in her arms. The aching had diminished to a distant throb.

The Doctor had insisted on making his phone calls first, trying to get his stabiliser thing fixed. What she wanted to know was when they could go out and do a bit of GBH on that little brat with the knife.

'You're just about our last hope, Adrienne,' the Doctor was saying. He'd put the phone on to speaker. 'We need cutting-edge technology. ITAR seem to have lost most of their funding after the atomic-clock débâcle.'

There was a knock at the door. Sam wandered over and let Fitz in.

'I don't know if UNIT have got the kind of technology you're after,' said General Kramer's gravelly voice. 'I'll make some calls. But don't rely on us. If there's anyone else you can contact...'

'Possibly,' said the Doctor. 'Maybe. Thank you, anyway, Adrienne. You can always call us at this number, leave a message.'

'How're you doing, Sam?' said Kramer.

'Oh, fine,' said Sam, before she realised that the general was talking to someone else entirely.

'Good to hear you're still with us,' said Kramer, with a knowing smile in her voice. 'Keep an eye on him for me. He's hopeless at taking care of himself.'

'Yeah,' said Sam. 'Yes, of course.'

'You take care of yourself, too.'

'I will,' said Sam. 'Thanks.'

The Doctor rang off, and put his head in his hands.

'I've warned all my contacts about the grey men,' said Fitz. 'They'll get in touch if they see or hear anything.' He looked down at the Doctor, whose face was still hidden. 'I gather you didn't have much luck either.'

Sam sat up. 'When are we going to do something about the boy?'

'Soon,' mumbled the Doctor. 'First things first.'

'No luck?' asked Fitz.

'I've called everyone I know in the entire Bay Area,' said the Doctor. 'Even the ones who don't know anything about high-energy physics.'

'So that's it then,' said Fitz. 'We're stuffed.'

'There is someone who could help,' said the Doctor between his fingers, 'but none of the phone numbers I have for him are working. He's probably not even in the area any more. I'm down to my last option.'

'What's that, then?' said Sam.

He sighed. 'Both of you – please wait outside.'

'What's he doing in there?' Sam stared at the closed door to the Doctor's room.

Fitz had taken up residence in the doorframe on the opposite side of the hall. 'I think he's contacting his people for help.'

'Right.' Sam lit up, ignoring the This is a non-smoking floor signs. 'So who are his people?'

'The Time Lords,' declared Fitz. The look he gave her over his sunglasses spoke of untold mysteries.

'I know that. But who are they?'

A pause. 'Bugged if I know.' Fitz shrugged and settled his hands in his pockets. 'He usually changes the subject when they come up. But it sounds like turning to them is like ringing up God and asking for a spot of divine intervention.'

'Or ringing up your parents and begging for a handout. No wonder he wanted us out of there. I wouldn't be caught dead –'

'He hasn't got much choice,' said Fitz. 'If he loses the TARDIS... I saw him when she nearly died, a few weeks ago. It wasn't pretty.'

'Listen,' said Sam. 'The Doctor and that other Sam. Are they shagging, or what?'

Fitz looked as though he'd been hit round the head with a two-by-four. 'Well,' he said, after a few moments. 'Well, I can't say I've ever actually caught them at it.'

'You think they are.'

Fitz pushed his hands even deeper into his jacket pockets, as if he was fishing in them to find his composure again. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'Maybe that's why she's always been able to resist me. Though I suspect that's just her good taste at work.'

Sam laughed, blowing out smoke. 'Her taste can't be all that good,' she said. 'Yeah, well,' he said. 'Hmm.'

'Catch!' called the Doctor.

Sam jumped, nearly losing the cigarette. The Doctor had appeared in the doorway, and he'd just tossed a large white cube at her.

Her hands leapt up to catch it, but in midair it twisted and vanished.

'Time Lord message pod,' he explained.

He began pacing the hall with the energy of an expectant father outside the delivery-room door. 'I've told them everything. I've asked, I've called in favours, I've made vague threatening remarks, I've even come as close to grovelling as I ever hope to in this lifetime. It's the only way, I'm not proud. Well not really. Just so long as they send their reply to the space-time co-ordinates I gave, I'll be happy. I really will.' Maybe he even believed it too, but she caught a flicker of real anguish on his face, and he was pacing so fast like he wanted to leave the whole subject behind.

'So when'll the reply get here?' asked Fitz.

The Doctor took out his pocket watch and flipped it open. Sam had a glimpse of dials and crystals spinning inside. 'Later tonight,' he said. 'Once the epistopic interfaces of the space-time continuum are properly aligned.'

'So it's OK? It's going to be all right?' said Sam.

The Doctor tucked his watch away. 'Yes,' he said. 'I think.'

'One problem down,' sighed Fitz, 'several thousand to go.'

'Then we'd better get started, hadn't we?' said the Doctor.

The Doctor and Sam were squeezed together in the space behind a rubbish dumpster, behind the hotel. He was pressed between her, the wall, and the pile of discarded boxes behind them. The air smelled of wet cardboard and rotting fruit.

She could barely make out the approaching voices. 'Just down this way.' That was Fitz. 'His car's parked at the end of the alley.'

'He may be armed,' whispered the Doctor. Sam nodded. For just a moment she thought she shouldn't be able to believe this – it was too wild for her life. But around him you just found yourself accepting almost anything.

Fitz had almost reached them.

'Sam,' whispered the Doctor, 'number fifteen.'

She turned to ask him *what?* but the Doctor just let out a tremendous yell and charged. Sam ducked as he shoved past her.

He was hurtling towards the boy, who stood rooted to the spot. Fitz jumped back a pace, blocking the way they'd come.

But the Doctor veered off – circling the boy, just out of reach, the kid turning with him until his back was to Sam. The Doctor's prolonged war cry was beginning to run out of breath, edging into the ridiculous. He shuffled slightly, like an actor who'd missed his cue.

Why didn't he just grab the kid?

The boy bolted down the alleyway.

She screamed and shoved the stack of boxes. They fell away from the wall, thumping down into the boy's path, knocking him off balance, and she lowered her head and rammed him.

Her shoulder caught him in the middle of his back. He crunched face first into a wooden crate with a satisfying noise. She was on him in a second, dragging his arm up behind him, forcing her elbow into place in the kind of headlock she used to use on her little cousin Peter.

He twisted his head around, grabbing at her arm, and she got her first good look at his face. He had a livid black eye, and his mouth was open in shock.

For one wonderful moment, he was frightened.

Then he saw her eyes on him, and he smirked. 'How 'bout picking on someone your own size?'

She yanked him back, hard, pulling his feet off the ground for a moment. 'You pulled a frigging knife on me,' she said. Then Fitz was there, holding the boy from the side, shooting her a look which said *don't let him rattle you*.

She tightened her arm across his throat. 'Do it again and I'll break you in half –'

'Enough of this,' said the Doctor.

He was pacing towards them, his eyes fixed on the boy's. He'd picked up a stained cardboard gift box from the scattered mass. He held it up to the boy's face as he closed in.

'Now then,' he said, in a low voice. 'Inside this box there is a monster that eats little boys. I want you to tell me who you are, and what you're doing here.'

The boy snorted. 'I'm too old for that monster crap! There's no such –'

'There you're wrong,' said the Doctor. 'There *is* a monster that eats little boys. She's called Time. And no little boy can escape her.' He pushed the box closer, snapping its lid open and shut, nipping at the boy's nose. He flinched. 'She didn't eat me because I did a deal with her. And I want to know who *you've* done a deal with.'

'Time!' sneered the little boy. 'I got that bitch wrapped around my little finger.' He wriggled up against Sam's body.

'You said you wanted me because I'm a paradox,' she said, bending him back a little further. 'Why? What for?'

The boy laughed. 'It's our thing.'

'Whose thing? Who are you? How do you know about me?'

'Oh, you've been asking *all* the wrong questions.' The boy twisted round, trying to stare her in the face. 'We've been keeping an eye on you. It's all 'cause of Save the Whales Girl. We checked up on her background.' She could see he was smiling. He was *enjoying* this. 'We found out where she came from. One Sam, two Sam, blonde Sam, you Sam. We found out how you got *turned*.'

'How?'

'Ask him.' The boy tilted his head towards the Doctor. 'Tell her.' Instead, the Doctor said, 'Your henchmen attacked us. The ones in the grey uniforms. What do you want us for?'

The boy sniggered like a playground bully. Sam had to fight to keep from slamming a knee into his back. 'Oh, wow,' he said. 'You haven't got a clue, have you?'

'Enlighten me,' said the Doctor.

'You've got no idea,' said the little boy, 'and you know what? I like it that way. The big bad Doctor doesn't know the first thing about me. Guess what. I'm sixty-two years old.' Sam stared at him in astonishment. 'Nah. I'm six hundred million years old. I'm a sorcerer, I know all sorts of time-travel-magic crap.'

The Doctor began, 'You don't –'

'No, that's not it – I've got alien friends who stopped me from ageing. No – I just don't give a damn about growing up. Long as you don't know me, I'm anyone I want to be. I'm the man, I'm the plan, I'm Peter Pan living in a garbage can. The only thing you know about me is that I can hurt you.'

Sam tightened her grip across his chest, realising she was smiling. 'Not me,' she said. 'Not any more.'

The boy shouted, 'Gotcha!'

The Doctor gasped and doubled over.

Behind him – behind him was the same little boy, a look of glee on his face, his fingers still digging clawlike into the knife wound in the Doctor's side.

Sam felt her arms wrench. The first boy had twisted free in that moment of shock. He ran past the Doctor to stand next to the other boy – the same boy.

They shoved the Doctor, slamming him into Sam, and he fell in a pile at her feet. One arm was wrapped across his body. His other hand held the mangled remains of the box, crushed under him when he fell.

Sam knelt down and picked the Doctor up. Fitz was moving towards the boys. They drew identical knives, stopping him in place.

‘Sorry,’ the Doctor gasped. ‘Sorry, wasn’t ready for that.’

‘Scar’s still pretty tender, huh?’ said the second boy. Their clothes were different, but the black eye was the same – a couple of days less livid on the second boy. She could feel a faint crackle in the air around the two of them: a pressure, like an oncoming storm.

‘Look,’ said the first, ‘I figure I’ll give you this much for free. I’m not running the grey men. You got other problems than me. I’m just here to keep an eye on things.’

‘Maybe give ’em a nudge to make sure they go my way,’ said the second. ‘I’ll be waiting around when you need me. You know how to get in touch.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I don’t want to be anywhere near you when the laws of time catch up with you,’ he said raggedly. Sam helped him as he pulled himself to his feet. ‘You couldn’t be there to free yourself, because you hadn’t been freed yet. That’s –’

‘A paradox, huh?’ smirked the first boy.

‘Yeah,’ said the second. ‘Ain’t it?’

And they turned and left.

Sam started after the boys. ‘No,’ said the Doctor. He caught her, sagged against her. ‘No, Sam. Not just yet.’

Chapter Five

Licentious Moments

There's an order at the heart of the universe. The law of cause and effect. Event always follows event.

Well, actually, time travel makes the idea of 'follows' rather complicated, but even so. Nothing happens without being caused. On that level, if no other, the universe is simple. Elegant. Stable.

There are those who see this order as the handwriting of God.

But, wherever there's a god, there are those who wish to overthrow that god.

They're called Faction Paradox. They're nechronomancers. They summon into our timestream things that never were, things that were never meant to be. They revel in paradoxes, causal loops, anything that tangles the Web of Time more and more, until the order of the universe is lost in a mass of exceptions and impossibilities.

These are people to whom the whole reason for linear existence is to see that existence transcended.

Or, as we would see it, destroyed.

There are those who say the Faction create their paradoxes through the use of... *other* Spirits. Then again, there are those who say they're just a bunch of jumped-up charlatans putting on an impressive act.

Then again, they say the same thing about me.

The Doctor lay back on the hotel bed, folding his hands on his stomach. 'Then again,' he said, 'they say the same thing about me.'

Fitz turned to look at Sam. 'No wonder they want you. You're already playing fast and loose with reality. Only your hairdresser knows for sure.'

'Are you sure you're OK?' said Sam. The Doctor had closed his eyes, breathing slowly, as though meditating. She sat down on the end of the bed. 'What are we going to do about this Fiction Faction, or whatever?'

'For the moment,' said the Doctor, 'don't spare Faction Paradox another thought. As their representative said, they're not our real problem. The scar

is. And whoever is behind our nondescript attackers. So many questions to answer. And Sam, that was *not* a number fifteen.'

'Any chance of telling me what a number fifteen is, then?' she shot back.

'I get his attention and stay out of range, you tackle him from behind –' The Doctor's eyes opened. 'Oh, what am I *talking* about? Of course, you don't know that. I'm sorry.'

Fitz said, 'You – they worked out that list of moves ages ago. I thought it was a joke at first.' He sat down on the edge of the desk. 'Well, true believers, what's our next brilliant move?'

'At least there's one question I can find an answer to right now,' said the Doctor. He bounced up off the bed and grinned at Sam. 'Italian? Chinese? Indian?'

Sam watched the city go past from the window of the Bug. The Doctor was driving, humming tunelessly to himself. For once, he was quiet, wrapped in thought. That suited her fine. At last she had a chance to just sit, and think, and get her breath back.

You're asking all the wrong questions, the little boy had said. So what were the right questions?

It would have been so easy to fall into the scar. She could feel her other self in there, ready to be displaced, pushed out back into the real world. Like waiting to be born.

But that couldn't be right, could it? There weren't two Sams, just two versions of the same Sam. There could be only one of her at a time.

But why weren't there thousands of her? Millions? All the different possible variations. . . and there were just two. Like a switch you could turn on or off.

'Why are there two of me?' she asked the Doctor. 'Why not one? Why not more than two?'

'You appear to have a second timeline,' said the Doctor. 'An alternative written into your biodata.'

'Is that normal? I mean, how many sets of biodata does everyone have?'

'Just the one,' said the Doctor. 'Normally.' And that didn't actually make any more sense out of how you got from 'running into a scarred bit of space-time' to 'having your timeline toggled', she thought. He went on, 'I'm not entirely sure where your second set came from. . .'

'Not *entirely* sure?' she said.

'Ah!' said the Doctor brightly, turning the wheel. 'Here's the restaurant!'

‘I want to make sure I get back after they do,’ Fitz said.

Kyra was spooning camomile flowers into a miniature strainer. ‘You’re curious,’ she said. ‘That’s understandable.’

He’d expected a jumble of cats and books. Instead, Kyra’s flat was almost prim; the only clutter was the collection of house plants scattered against walls and windows, and the thick layers of paper on her kitchen noticeboard.

‘I’m the opposite of curious,’ said Fitz. ‘There are some things man is not meant to know. What the Doctor does after his dinner dates is near the top of the list.’

Kyra’s laugh had been worn to a bark by years of the combined smoke of pot, tobacco and incense. ‘He sounds like quite a character.’

She’d fed him tofu stew powerfully flavoured with sage, while ambient music warbled from a recycled tape deck on top of the fridge. The meal had been constantly interrupted by visitors. A skinny kid with tattoos had wolfed down a bowl of the stew. A pair of twins with matching pentacle T-shirts bought satchels of herbs. Kyra’s ex had dropped by to visit the iguana.

‘And they took the Volkswagen,’ said Fitz. ‘Here’s a quarter, kid, take the bus to the movies.’

She pushed a cracked china cup across the kitchen table. ‘Try this,’ she said. ‘Very good for the nerves.’

Fitz took a tentative slurp while Kyra put on her glasses. She grabbed her hair and yanked it into place behind her head with a rubber band. ‘My little-old-librarian look,’ she said, shuffling through the papers she’d strewn on the table. ‘I’m going to look fabulous with a head of grey hair. I’ll look like a serious crone. The mad old woman at the end of the block, with kids daring one another to knock on my door. Ah. Ley map.’

She turned it around so he could see. It was a tourist map of the centre of San Francisco, covered in thick black dots. Each dot was connected to several others with a black line, creating a spider’s web of interconnections, apparently at random.

‘I’ve been charting it for over a year,’ said Kyra. ‘I’m damned if I can see a pattern.’

‘What is it?’ said Fitz, turning the map around. The city was almost invisible under the knot of markings. ‘And how do you chart it?’

‘Pendulum,’ said Kyra. ‘I’m useless with dowsing rods. Those are lines of energy crisscrossing the city. The pattern has never been this dense or complex, not until now. Look, here’s a map from five years ago. Only a handful of nodes.’

‘Sorry,’ said Fitz, ‘I’m still back with the pendulum. Exactly what do you do?’

'I use it to sense changes in vibrational frequency.'

'Riiight,' said Fitz.

'I've been doing this for thirty-five years,' said Kyra, hauling herself out of the chair. 'I figure I know what I'm up to by now.'

Whoops. 'You don't look a day over thirty.'

'Flatterer,' said Kyra. 'Pull yourself together, sceptic boy.' She hefted a picnic basket. 'I'm going to show you what I'm talking about.'

Sam was sure everyone in the restaurant was looking at them. Everybody was wearing a tux or evening gown, jewellery flashing, waiters bowing and scraping. Between the Doctor's fancy dress and wild curls, and her jeans and jacket, it was as though they'd beamed down from Mars.

A tuxedoed waiter had already breezed up with a wooden board of freshly baked bread, pouring iced water and rattling off a list of elaborate special dishes before leaving them with the menu. There was a small forest of knives and forks and spoons and glasses spread out on the table in front of them.

This is crazy, thought Sam. We're getting out of here. She reached for her jacket, slung over the back of the chair.

'Places like this always make me nervous,' murmured the Doctor.

Sam looked up at him. He was staring at the row of cutlery, a piece of bread held in one hand. 'I can never remember the etiquette,' he confided. 'The differences between twenty-first-century America and the planet Quinnis in the fourth universe. Which knife do you use for the butter?'

'Probably the butter knife,' said Sam. She pointed at the breadboard. The Doctor smiled bashfully.

She watched him as he squashed butter all over the bread. He was out of place here too, she realised: it wasn't even his planet. He was just pretending to be human, in a way, and sometimes he wasn't all that good at it.

She gulped water, clutching the menu. 'Can we really afford this?'

'Of course we can,' said the Doctor. 'Only the best. Trust me – the finances are all taken care of.'

Fair enough. 'So is this your usual method of pulling?' she said lightly. He stared at her, butter knife hovering, looking vaguely bewildered. 'You know... impressing a girl. Taking her out for some posh nosh.'

'Oh no no no,' said the Doctor.

'Oh.' said Sam.

'No, if I really wanted to impress someone, I'd take them to the Perspective Centre run by the Halergani, outside the galactic plane. They've got a glassed-

in floor with a stellar magnification grid in it, so you can see the whole galaxy spread out underneath you.'

He was grinning like a little kid. 'And it all looks close enough to touch. It's just amazing. But I'm afraid that's all beyond my reach now.' He sank slightly in his chair, his eyes looking into the distance at something she couldn't imagine, and let out a resigned breath. She saw the years growing back on to his face. 'So, dinner.'

'I was eighteen years old when I came to San Francisco. I arrived with the Summer of Love and I've been here ever since. But the place never felt this strange.'

'You were a drop-out,' said Fitz, frowning. 'A real live hippie.'

'Still am,' said Kyra. 'I've never had a regular job. It used to be tough, but I've made my own way. Just dressing up isn't enough. You have to live the philosophy if you're going to make a difference.'

'Mm-hmm,' said Fitz.

Kyra's picnic hamper bumped against her leg as they crept through the darkness in Golden Gate Park. The whole place was closed off, police cars wandering around the periphery. They didn't see anyone, San Francisco's finest or otherwise, but Fitz was sure he could sense curious eyes pinned to them as they pushed through the trees, a random branch knocking his hat off for the second time.

The park was choked with plants. You could almost hear them growing, tree limbs creaking and oversized flowers breathing in the night. Every time they crossed what had once been a meadow, they were knee-deep in blossoms, the air full of perfume. Fitz stifled his sneezes in case of cops. Kyra just plodded on, steering them around hidden ponds and through thickets tangled with creepers, as though she did this sort of thing every day.

So this was how the next generation turned out, he thought. Eighteen in sixty-seven... Kyra had been born in 1949, thirteen years after him. By the calendar, he was almost old enough to be her dad. By their actual ages, she was old enough to be his mum.

Kyra stopped at last in a small clearing. As far as Fitz could see, it was no different from anywhere else in the park. She looked around, picked out a tree, pulled out a torch.

'What about you, Fitz?' she said, peering at the circle of light as it crawled over the bark. 'What's your bag, dad?'

‘I did the rebellion thing for a while,’ he said. ‘Found a cause I really believed in. . .’ *Really* believed in. How much brainwashing had it taken? How ready had he been to just accept, just follow? ‘Let’s say I just picked the wrong one.’ He slid on his hat. ‘I think I’ll stick with superficial for a while.’

Kyra pointed at the tree. There was a symbol painted on to the bark in dark red.

Fitz stared. ‘Blood?’

‘Red ochre,’ said Kyra. ‘What do you take me for?’

She set the hamper down on the ground, took out a measuring tape. ‘Hold this.’ Fitz took the torch, turned it around so she could see what she was doing.

Kyra measured from the marked tree out to a distance of precisely five feet and seven inches. She put a green candle on the spot in a fat glass jar, cupped her hand around the flame as she lit it. ‘Kill the flashlight,’ she said, as the lime-coloured flame wavered into life, its light amplified by the glass.

Fitz looked around nervously as she took more stuff out of her hamper. The tiny candle was throwing up big, dim shadows, Kyra’s outline dancing along the trees as she bent over her collection of equipment.

‘I’m going to do this the quick way,’ she said. ‘It’s all we need for a demonstration.’

In one hand, she held a compass. In the other, she was holding a dirty big knife. Ulp, thought Fitz. ‘You’re sure that was red ochre?’ He couldn’t see her expression in the flickering light.

Kyra walked away from him, peering at the compass. The little candle flame jumped between them. She pointed the tip of her knife at him. ‘Stand still where you are and don’t move,’ she said.

She pushed the compass into her pocket and raised the knife high.

‘The video shop isn’t much,’ Sam was saying, but it made a hell of a difference. I’d spent a bit of time on the street. I was living in half a room at Rob’s place, watching TV all day for something to do. My parents thought it was the end of my “teenage-rebellion” phase – Dad actually said that. They thought I was going to move back in. Even *I* thought I was going to move back in.’

The Doctor smiled, scooping chocolate ice cream out of his crystal bowl.

She took another swig of wine. ‘It’s not much. But I’ve got my own money and my own place. I’m doing OK. I’ve worked damn hard to make that life.’

The Doctor’s eyes met hers over the table. ‘My Sam – that is, that is, the Sam I knew – had a similar experience.’

My Sam. Sam took another gulp of the wine. ‘She was on the street?’

‘We were separated,’ he said. ‘She found herself on an unknown planet with nothing but the clothes on her back. She spent three years fighting to survive, to find work that she valued.’

His gaze was so intense, it made the back of her neck burn, as though he was looking right through her. As though she was the only person in the universe he trusted with this secret information.

Maybe it was just the wine.

‘In the end, when I found her, she had to choose between the life she’d made and travelling with me.’

‘Is this going to be a sales pitch?’ she said tightly. ‘A hundred good reasons I should turn back into her? I can fake it if you want. Dye my hair, put her clothes on. Will that make you happy?’

She expected him to shout at her. Instead, he put down his spoon, looking at her sadly. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I wish I knew how to prove to you that you can trust me.’

Sam put her head in her hands. ‘It’s just – everyone wants to save me. Unless they say I can’t be saved.’ She rolled up her sleeve, showing the scattering of blotchy needle scars. ‘They see these, and they think they know everything about me. I’m just a throwaway, I’m just rubbish. Same story all the sodding time.’ She looked up at him. ‘Why should you be different to anyone else?’

The Doctor pushed the chocolate ice cream around in his bowl, mournfully. ‘Short of pushing you into the scar and hoping for the best, I wouldn’t know how to change you back. I don’t have the technology to edit biodata. And even if I did, I wouldn’t use it.’

‘What does all that mean?’ said Sam.

‘Biodata,’ said the Doctor. He closed his eyes. ‘Hmm. Think of it as a sort of computer program. It records everything about you. Everything that happens to you in your life, everything you do. Your whole timestream. Change the biodata, change the person,’ he was saying. ‘Change their present, change their past. In theory, you could edit out certain events in their life, or replace them.’

He opened those brilliant-blue eyes again. ‘Haven’t you ever thought what it would be like? Changing into someone else, becoming a completely new person? Wiping away all of the hard times you’ve been through? Forgetting?’

‘You’re doing it again,’ said Sam.

‘You don’t understand.’ The Doctor was shaking his head. ‘Predicting the side-effects of such a change would be almost impossible. It would be no less dangerous than any meddling in history... besides, the bad experiences are part of what makes us who we are, as well as the good.’

Sam snorted. ‘This isn’t some bollocky *Star Trek* I-need-my-pain thing. Give me a chance to lose *my* pain and I’d be there like a shot. That time when I was six when Anya started a rumour that I’d wet my pants, and the whole playground ended up laughing at me? Did that make me who I am, make me a better person? No way! Wipe it out!’

She had expected him to look disapproving, shocked. Instead he was quietly listening, spooning up the last of his chocolate ice cream.

‘But I don’t get the choice, anyway,’ she said. ‘I get to be someone who’d feel sick just at the thought of being someone like me.’ He looked crestfallen. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t mean. . . well, you must miss her a lot.’

The spoon clattered out of the Doctor’s hand. He froze in place, staring, piercingly, at the nothing right in front of his face.

Kyra traced a star in the air with her knife, then held it high. ‘Hail, Eastern Guardians, Spirits of Air!’ she said. ‘By the winds that are Her breath, I call you. Be with us!’

After a moment she lowered the blade, pointing it at the ground, and moved clockwise around the circle.

‘Hail, Southern Guardians, Spirits of Fire!’ she said. ‘By the blazing flame of Her spirit, I call you. Be with us!’

Fitz quelled his urge to make a smart remark. Personally he’d always thought ley lines involved the words ‘What’s a nice girl like you. . .’, but this seemed much more effective.

She did it again at the west side of the clearing, and again at the north, calling the Water and the Earth. Then she pointed the knife up to the sky, paused for a moment, pointed it down to the ground.

‘Right,’ she said, rolling up her sleeves. ‘This is all a bit rough and ready but it’s all we really need.’

She raised her arms, and called out:

Goddess of Morning and Evening
Mother of mountains and seas
Hear us!
Goddess of Midday and Midnight
Mother of forests and rivers
Speak to us!
Be with us!

Fitz glanced up at the sky, frowning. Were the clouds moving around up there, moving towards them? It must be the strong breeze that was blowing up.

Father
Show us your shining face!
Brother
Show us your hidden face!
Thunderstorm
Hunter
Blacksmith
Encircling arms
Wildfire
Hear us!
Speak to us!
Be with us!

There was a ferocious flash of lightning, sharp enough to light up the whole clearing in black and white. A heartbeat later there was a real live clap of thunder, a single, deafening sound like something enormous snapping in two.

'Bloody hell!' said Fitz. 'Did you do that?'

'No,' said Kyra. 'I wish I'd brought an umbrella.'

'What –'

'Shh.'

The Doctor was breathing fast. His mouth hung open, forgotten, as though every scrap of his mind was busy staring at whatever he could see.

Suddenly his right hand shot out and grabbed at the air.

Sam jumped. The Doctor threw himself back in his chair, still flailing away, trying to catch hold of something that kept slipping through his fingers. 'Purple,' he said. 'Purple things.'

His water glass went flying, spraying her with droplets. She could feel the ripples of confusion, of *attention* zeroing in on them from all around. That's it, she thought, this is where it turns out he really is crazy.

His words kept tumbling out. 'Can't you see them? Floating in the air, all around me. They're solid, don't you understand? *Solid.*'

And then she knew what to do. She leaned across the table and gently caught his shoulder, feeling him jump at the touch, and spoke as calmly and sincerely

as possible. 'It's all right. It's all right. The purple things aren't going to hurt you. You got that? They're just going to go away again. They're just gonna go away...'

'Can you hear something?' said Fitz.

'Not yet.' Kyra didn't look up from her pendulum. 'Here, right here.'

Fitz came over to her side. She was crouched next to the candle, the bit of metal and string swinging wildly in her hand. It reminded Fitz of one of those toys, a magnet on a bit of wire suspended over a bed of hidden magnets, jerking every which way.

'I'm not doing that,' she insisted softly. 'Put your hand on my arm, it's completely steady.'

'You're right,' said Fitz. 'OK, but what does it mean?'

The candle flame suddenly gushed up out of the glass, making them both jump. The flame curled around itself like smoke, and finally stood up straight, a line of hot light hovering two or three feet above the top of the glass.

'That hasn't happened before,' said Kyra casually, but Fitz could sense her excitement. 'The energy is getting stronger all the time.'

'The scar,' Fitz muttered under his breath.

Somewhere in the distance he could hear the echo of a million hoofbeats.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor.

Sam shrugged. 'It was just like handling Maria's flashbacks. 'Cept they didn't happen in posh restaurants, as a rule.'

They were sitting in the Bug, in the car park beneath the restaurant. 'That must have been one hell of a plum sauce you had,' said Sam.

The Doctor shook his head and sighed through his teeth. 'It wasn't the food. Or anything else for that matter. I keep a very close eye on my biochemistry – if there was anything mind-altering in my system, I could probably tell you what it was right down to a molecular level.'

'Well I'm impressed. I can't even pronounce some of the stuff I put in mine.'

The Doctor almost smiled. 'Be that as it may, clearly something was affecting my mind. It's got to be some kind of direct stimulation.'

'Telepathy, then?' she said. It astounded her how easily these ideas rolled off her tongue. 'Someone trying to send you a message?'

'Well, if they are, they're making a bit of a dog's breakfast of it.' The Doctor was trying to start the engine. He stopped, one hand still gripping the keys, and stared at her as she lit up.

'Sorry,' she said, 'you want one?'

He watched, eyes huge, as she took a long drag on the cigarette. 'Oh, come on,' she said, 'you must have seen us Earth people do this before.'

'I gave it up six or seven lifetimes ago,' said the Doctor. 'I could never quite understand the attraction.'

'I haven't had one all day, all right? Don't give me any trouble over it, because I'm too tired and too freaked out to argue.'

The Doctor was holding his chin, stroking his thumb across it. 'I could cure the addiction,' he said. 'That's if – Forgive me, I – It's entirely up to you, of course.'

'You could what?'

'Cure the addiction,' said the Doctor. 'I brought a medical kit from the TARDIS.'

'Would it hurt?' I can't believe I'm saying this! 'I mean, what would you –'

'Derm,' said the Doctor, leaning towards her. There wasn't a whole lot of room in the car. 'A sort of sticky patch. One dose.' She could feel his breath on her neck when he spoke, looking deep into her eyes.

'But then I wouldn't have anything to do after sex,' she murmured.

The Doctor turned away sharply, staring out through the windscreen. Words started tumbling out every which way. 'It's as if someone's just poking at one individual centre in my brain. Somewhere in my visual cortex. Sending a little jolt through the bits associated with a few concepts. Purple. Solid. Floating. Threat. The rest of my brain believes it and fills in the gaps. Yes, that's it! Thank you, Sam.'

She blinked. 'What for?'

He caught her by the shoulders, stared her in the eyes, and grinned. She braced herself for the kiss.

'If I hadn't tried to explain it to you, it would never have made any sense to me either.'

Just as quickly, he let go, and started the engine with a single twist of the keys.

Sam leaned an elbow on the open window as they bounced down the garage ramp and into the night. So that's what he keeps us around for, she thought, blowing out a long cloud of smoke. He can't think in a straight line without us.

Did he even realise what he was doing to her?

Someone's trying to send you a message, Doctor, and it's me. Are you receiving?

Kyra stood facing the south side of the clearing, her hands raised. The knife was tucked in her belt. 'Thanks and farewell, Spirits of Fire!' she said. 'Bring your blessings to us again.'

She sank down into the overgrown grass, looking drained. 'That's the lot,' she told Fitz. 'Give me a cookie, would you?'

Fitz found a paper bag of chocolate-chip cookies in the picnic hamper, and handed her one.

'There's something coming,' said Kyra. She rubbed at the centre of her forehead with the heel of her hand. 'Could you feel that?'

'Um, no,' said Fitz. 'Not really.'

'Something big,' said Kyra. She bit into the cookie, chewing thoughtfully. 'You know, I had a funny feeling just before the Little Big One. The sort of thing you don't recognise until afterward, when you look back. Gimme another one.'

Fitz handed her the bag. 'Is this the same thing, then?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. The feeling was coming up, out of the ground. I don't know where this is coming from. Nowhere. All around us.'

There was another peal of thunder. A fat drop of water hit Fitz's upturned face. 'We'd better get out of here.'

'There's no running from this,' said Kyra. She pulled herself to her feet, gathering up her equipment. 'Whatever's on its way, it's too big. It's bigger than the city.'

Fitz stared at her. 'I just meant, before it starts raining.'

'Let's get that shirt off,' said Sam. 'We'd better check on that wound.'

'It's only a small cut,' the Doctor protested. 'It should be mostly healed by now.'

The Doctor gave up the fight and sat on the edge of the hotel bed, fumbling with his clothes. 'Let me get that,' she said. Gently. She started undoing buttons.

'Sam,' he murmured into the top of her head, 'there's something I ought to tell you.'

She paused halfway down. 'What is it?'

'It's about what the little boy said. In the alley. It's about where you might have come from.'

She went back to the shirt. 'I know all about that,' she said.

'You do?'

'The mummy and the daddy love one another very much -'

‘When I first met you, years ago... I’d only just regenerated.’ He’d talked about that on the plane, she hadn’t known whether to believe it or not.

‘For my people, regeneration is a moment of profound... power.’ His voice was soft, even awed. ‘It’s a jolt to every fibre of your body. Your whole being turns inside out. For one moment, that sudden release of energy twists your universe into an entirely different shape.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Sam. ‘I’ve been there a few times.’ She brushed his shirt back from his shoulders.

He didn’t quite seem to be paying attention. She tugged his sleeves off, threw the shirt on the pile with his cravat and waistcoat.

‘But it’s more than that. Time Lords are deeply, uniquely, connected to the vortex. Regeneration is the moment when our biodata is rewoven in the fabric of space-time.’

‘You make it sound so poetic.’

‘Oh. That’s just to keep it from sounding technical,’ he said. He *really* wasn’t paying attention.

She was carefully peeling back the gauze pad over his wound. The cut had already smoothed itself over, leaving just the fresh, pink line of a newborn scar.

‘Biodata isn’t just you,’ he said: ‘it’s your intersection with everything else. My biodata is part of my body, part of my mind, part of the time vortex itself.’

‘C’mon,’ she said. ‘Lie down for a minute.’ She pushed him gently, rolling him on to his stomach.

‘Faction Paradox make use of biodata in their rituals,’ he went on, undeterred. ‘It’s their way of reaching into the vortex, through the lifeline of an individual.’

‘So it’s like Fitz said.’ She knelt beside him on the bed, and began gently massaging the tight muscles in his lower back. ‘They’re interested in me because my biodata’s all messed up.’

‘It’s rather worrying,’ he said. ‘Given access to your biodata, they could resequence your history, rearrange your consciousness – do to your lifeline all the things human beings do to fruit flies. Er...’ Half a puzzled frown peeked out from the pillow as she trailed her fingers down his spine. ‘What are you doing that for?’

‘It helps your circulation. Promotes healing.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, as I was saying...’ His muscles were loosening under her hands as his body gave in to the back rub. ‘What was I saying?’

‘You were explaining about where I came from.’

‘Ah. Yes. At the moment of regeneration, as I mentioned, everything changes. All the elements of my existence are woven into something new. For just that

moment, my biodata is naked to reality.’

‘Another scar?’ she said. He turned to look. ‘No, I mean, like the one in the alley.’

‘More like a bunch of threads tied into a knot. Normally, it has no effect on the local reality. But, in some cases, the biodata strands remain... loose. Unsettled...’

For a moment, she had the image of him trailing his loose threads everywhere he went. Barging into her flat, pacing through it, a bunch of thick strands sending cups crashing off surfaces, tipping over chairs, leaving her knotted in the middle of a cat’s cradle – upsetting things wherever he went. Not being able to do a thing about it.

‘Why did you stop?’ he murmured.

She pushed in slow circles with the heels of her palms, using her weight, loosening the knots. ‘Go on,’ she said.

‘When it happens, for a brief while, everything is, ooh. Vulnerable. All sorts of jumbled signals pouring in. Things that happen in the world can, aaaah, influence who I am. And vice versa.’

‘But what does this have to do with –’

‘When I met you, less than a day later, the threads of my being were still in a ragged state. Mmm. You’re really good at this!’

‘Yeah, I know.’ He wriggled, catlike, a blissed-out smile spreading across his face. Defender of the Laws of Time, Protector of the Galaxy, and the biggest back-rub slut she’d ever seen.

‘It’s possible,’ he said, ‘just possible, that my unsettled biodata came into contact with yours. And changed it. Regenerated you, past, present and future. Turned you into the Sam I knew.’

Her hands slowed, halted. ‘So *you* did it.’

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Not deliberately.’

She tucked her hands under her armpits, suddenly cold. ‘You changed me.’ Walk away, said a voice in her head.

‘I needed a friend. I was in a bad way, I needed someone who was...’

‘Nice?’ You can’t trust him. Walk away from him.

‘Safe. Non-threatening.’

Walk away.

She put her hands back on him, pushed harder this time. He made an incoherent sound as she loosened the muscles at the base of his neck.

‘Got more than you bargained for, didn’t you?’ She grinned.

'It wouldn't have glllll. Been conscious. My subconscious wurgggg. Working on an entirely instiiiiiihinctive level. Oogah.'

Sam laughed throatily. 'At last, Time Lord, I have you at my mercy.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'Somehow I knew we'd be getting to that.'

He rolled over underneath her and lay there for a moment, head thrown back against the pillow, looking utterly ravished.

Then he hugged her, hands wrapping across her back. 'Thank you, Sam, that was utterly delightful.'

She waited.

He just beamed up at her.

'Oh, for Christ's sake,' she said, and snogged him.

She let the weight of her body press against the Doctor's. His hands were still on her back. With her eyes closed she could smell the clean sheets, the sandalwood scent of his hair. His skin felt cool through her T-shirt.

At last she raised her head, gazed down at him.

'Ah,' he said.

Oh God, she thought. Let's just be friends, I think of you as a sister.

'I think perhaps you'd better think about this a little more,' he said. His eyes were suddenly very serious, even as she stroked the side of his face with her fingertips. 'Think about it, Sam. You barely know me.'

'You don't have to play the gentleman with me,' she murmured. 'Not with me.'

'I'm old enough to be your great-great-great... to be your ancestor. I have done some very terrible things. A lot of people have died because of me. I have killed people, Sam. Think about that.'

He hadn't said anything like that on the plane. 'I don't care,' she said uncertainly.

'Don't you?' said the Doctor. 'Do you really not care who I am? You should be afraid.' He took hold of her hand. 'You should be afraid of what might happen to you because you're with me.'

'It's a bit late for that, isn't it?' She kissed him again, just lightly, took the pressure of her body off his.

'You think about this a little more,' she murmured.

There was a knock at the door. They froze, like two children caught raiding the biscuit tin.

Then the Doctor smiled, and Sam broke into silent laughter. 'Room service?' she said.

'Hello?' called the Doctor.

There was a loud throat-clearing noise. 'It's me. Fitz. I'm back from Kyra's with some serious information. Unless this is a bad time?'

Sam opened the door. Fitz was hovering in the corridor. He raised an eyebrow at her.

'I'm going back to my room,' she said.

'Cold shower?'

'Something like that,' she muttered.

The Doctor appeared in the doorway, clothes miraculously arranged and buttoned. 'Ah, Fitz. How was dinner?'

Sam wiggled her eyebrows at Fitz suggestively. He said drily, 'I don't usually take part in an occult ceremony on the first date. Kyra's got a map of energy lines running through the city. She showed me some pretty serious stuff. You'll want to have a look at it.'

The Doctor nodded and clapped his hands together. 'The more we can tell the Time Lords, the better.'

'Hey,' said Sam. 'When is that cube thing coming back?'

'About now,' said the Doctor. 'Catch!'

Sam's hands leapt up to catch the cube.

Nothing happened.

The Doctor's eyes stayed fixed on where the cube should have appeared. The rest of his body slowly came to rest, like a wind-up toy whose spring had finally run down. He managed a couple more tentative steps, and finally sagged against the wall. All he could manage was a tiny shrug.

'Well,' he murmured. 'I'm open to suggestions.'

Day Zero Minus One

The ones who aren't scared of the idea of aliens tend to see them as being above us somehow. Ancient sources of knowledge and wisdom, who can solve all our problems – or give us the punishment we deserve. And I can dig that. They want Daddy in the sky, that great unreachable father who towered over them when they were kids.

But then all the other Big Daddy baggage gets attached to that. What you know, what you can do, you figure none of it can measure up to him. Daddy's better than you 'cause he's older, right? He's more significant. He's bigger than you.

Well my daddy couldn't run a word processor to save his life. I knew stuff he'd never understand, just like he did for me. And so I got to have a life he didn't – not worse, just different. How come people forget that our own life, our world, can be just as interesting as Big Space Daddy's?

And yeah, my daddy was an alien too. From Tijuana.

– Eldin Sanchez, *Interesting Times*, 7 November 2002

Chapter Six

The Unnaturalist

Fitz walked up the hill, into position. He was learning to pace himself on these steep streets. Chinatown was full of detail, full of ornamentation, just like in London; street lights dressed up as red lanterns, curved wooden thingies on the corners of roofs, characters picked out in gold on red signs.

The others should be almost ready. They'd dropped him off a couple of blocks away, said they'd give him ten minutes to hit his mark before they made their move.

Early morning, not many people, not much going on. Fitz stopped outside a restaurant, pretending to examine the menu taped to the window. The reflection gave him a good view of the street, the alleyway that led back between two shops.

The menu caught his eye for a moment, handwritten in rich, complex strokes. He'd never learned to read Chinese, not properly, even after months in the Collective. He grimaced, pushed the memory to the back of his mind.

There was a row of newspaper vending machines lining the pavement. Fitz pushed a quarter into one and took out the paper, still watching the alley.

He'd left the trench coat and fedora in the Bug, and put on a ghastly blue-and-yellow Hawaiian shirt and a vast pair of sunglasses. With his unkempt hair free of the hat, he was about as disguised as he could get without theatrical supplies.

It wasn't until he leaned casually against a wall and started pretending to read that he realised the paper was in Chinese too.

A few minutes later, the Doctor quietly parked the Bug in a narrow street which formed a cross with the alley.

Sam had already spotted Fitz loitering out on the main street, at the mouth of the alleyway. 'He stands out like a sore thumb,' she told the Doctor.

'You have to admit,' said the Doctor, 'he doesn't look much like the man the grey men attacked yesterday.'

‘Right,’ said Sam. ‘What do I do?’

The Doctor opened the door, leaving the engine running. ‘You speak very nicely to any police officers who happen to come along, and assure them your uncle will be back in a moment to move the car.’

‘And if a dozen guys in grey turn up?’

‘Honk the horn,’ said the Doctor. ‘But not too early.’ He shut the door behind him.

Sam turned in her seat, trying to see in all directions at once, and wondering if she could manage to drive the Bug if she had to.

In the alley, the back of a shop was open, workers chatting while they opened crates of fish and vegetables.

The Doctor strode past them, towards the back wall, towards the scar. It bent the space around it, softly; he could feel those invisible curves as he walked, like a gentle pressure, pushing him to the side. You wouldn’t be able to walk right up to the scar, touch it, unless you knew it was there and aimed yourself at it.

Which was exactly what Sam had done, of course.

The Doctor stopped, a few feet from the scar. It hadn’t destroyed her, he reminded himself again. It had changed her, brought different aspects, different possibilities to the fore. It was little different from the renewals he underwent at unpredictable intervals.

Three years ago – as the clock chimes – he had lain bleeding in this alleyway on a cold and dangerous December evening. Hours later he had shed one cold skin for another, stumbling out into a new life, tangled in a shroud.

A day after that, the Eye of Harmony deep inside the TARDIS had opened wide, and the damage to space-time had begun, like a small snowball beginning its swelling roll downhill.

He could see the TARDIS, locked deep inside the labyrinthine structure of the scar. He could follow the way space was crumpled and crinkled in there, like an old handkerchief, the way the TARDIS’s structures were bent and warped to reach every corner of the wound, to bind it together, hold it safe. All her strength diverted to her police-box plasmic shell, trying to hold herself together.

He’d known she wasn’t ready for this, he’d known. When he’d first set course for the San Francisco anomalies he’d detected, he’d felt the shaky vibrations in her floor under his feet. She’d been so badly damaged at their last port of call, she needed more time to heal. In the end he’d made her hold off, and they’d

spent weeks doing nothing more strenuous than tracking down and gathering the flotsam they'd lost into the vortex when she'd been ripped open.

But now she was being torn apart. Again. This time because he'd put her there.

Her cries. . .

The TARDIS's cries were like a constant aching in the back of his skull, like a headache that threatened but wouldn't come on. She hurt, she hurt, she was outraged at this treatment. Wasn't he going to save her? When would he save her?

'Soon,' he whispered. 'Today. I hope.'

He was lying. He'd let her die, if it came to that. If freeing her meant putting the city at risk from what was coming.

'No,' he said, but they both knew it was true.

The alley around her was too grey for comfort, the walls too close. Sam kept twisting and turning in her seat, trying to watch the Doctor, the street, everywhere, feeling grey eyes on her. Ready for a quick getaway. Her stomach was clenched with excitement and a little fear.

This is kind of fun, she thought. But imagine doing it every day.

She craned her neck to look at the Doctor, who stood before the scar like a mourner at a funeral. His face was too young to look so lost. It didn't have enough lines to bring it out.

She'd almost reached out and gently touched his arm as he'd got out of the car, but she'd thought better of it. Somehow it felt like that would only be adding to his problems.

It had all seemed so simple the previous night – the angry bits of her and the scared bits and all the other bits had all wanted the same thing. Now in the cold morning light, as he stared at the bit of space he'd warped and mangled, she couldn't shake the sense that she'd almost done something really *dangerous*.

Better just let that one pass.

Sam turned the rear-view mirror and pulled the sticking plaster off her forehead. The cut was surrounded by a yellowing bruise. She wondered if it would leave a scar.

Something in the reflection caught her eye. That had to be a bit of grey, closing in on them from the end of the cross-street.

Come on, hurry up, try to grab us. This was taking too long for her nerves to stand.

Fitz peered over the top of his paper for the fiftieth time.

There was a grey-uniformed man across the street. He was standing at a postbox, turning a letter around and around in his hands, as though trying to decide whether to post it.

It wasn't really a uniform, thought Fitz, so much as just very dull clothes, hard to describe. He'd been trying hard to blend in all week, but these guys could blend in with a wall.

The man just stood there, fiddling with the letter. From time to time he raised his grey head, glanced towards the alley, then across the street. Then back to the postbox, turning the envelope in his hands as though he was stuck in a loop.

Fitz watched as the man looked across the street again. What was he – There! Another one of them, leaning on a big grey van, flipping through the pages of a street directory.

'They don't know where we are,' the Doctor had said back in the hotel, while Fitz tried to unstick his eyelids and wondered how the Doctor had got into his room. 'But they found us at the alley. That means –'

'They know about the scar,' said Fitz. 'They were watching it.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Now it's their turn.'

The Doctor came striding back out of the alley, fast, and slid into the Bug. A moment later the Bug pulled out and raced away.

A moment after that, the grey men's reinforcements showed up. A man walking down the street, slowly, eyes down. Two more silently emerging from a bus. This must have been exactly what happened the last time, thought Fitz – they spotted us, they sent for their friends, and then they clobbered us. Only this time we knew they were coming, and watched for the watchers.

The grey men milled around a bit, like ants who've lost the trail. Fitz watched them from behind his newspaper, hoping he didn't catch their attention as they grouped and regrouped, taking turns to stare down the alley.

Five minutes later, Sam walked up to Fitz. She was wearing his fedora, crammed down over her dark hair, and a denim jacket buttoned down the front to keep the wind out.

'There are six of them,' he murmured.

'What are they doing?' said Sam.

'I don't know, really. They've just sort of been wandering around.'

'Didn't they try to follow us?'

Fitz shrugged. 'They started but gave up. It's like they only had half a set of instructions. They don't know what to do next.'

An elderly woman was unlocking the door of the restaurant. ‘There’s nothing to do now but wait until they go,’ said Fitz. ‘See where they lead us. Fancy some tea?’

The Volkswagen’s brakes whimpered a little as he rode them the whole way down the hill. But, while it might squeak a bit, it never really complained. A real trouser, the old Bug was, and it fitted the Doctor like a comfortable slipper.

There was still one more chance, one more person who may be able to help. If I could find him, he thought.

Sam would be fine. Fitz would take care of her. Good at keeping himself out of danger, he’d keep *her* out of danger, too. Find out more about the grey men, follow them home, but stay clear of trouble.

The Bug was the perfect car for a time traveller. You could drive it on any road on Earth throughout at least half a century and not look out of place.

Focus on what you’re doing. Focus.

He’d start his search at the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. Perhaps someone there would have a forwarding address, a half-remembered phone number, a hint, a clue. It was worth a try. At this point, anything was worth a try.

The screeching started halfway down Powell Street. For a moment he thought it must be the car. Loud metallic jingling in his left ear, drilling its way through his head to the other side. He gritted his teeth, gripped the wheel, insisting it was *not there* as it burrowed through. His eyes stayed fixed on the road.

Finally it faded, and he exhaled and tried to piece together the broken crockery of his thoughts.

His right hand jerked sharply, suddenly, spinning the wheel. A car on the other side of the road blasted its horn and swerved away. The Doctor spun the wheel back hard with his left hand as his right hand marionetted up and down.

At the first chance he pulled over. Turned the wheels to the kerb, pushed the gearstick into neutral, waited for the symptoms to subside. His right hand was still clenching and jumping. The tremors, the sharp reds, all the different signals passing through his body, as someone poked at his brain. Like an experimenting child. *Hey, what does this button do?*

Concentrate on something. Anything that wasn’t part of all this. Three point one four one five... So twice five miles of fertile ground... A Delphonian, a Tythonian and a Tersuron walk into a bar... The punchline was spiralling away from him, lost.

He clambered out of the Bug and stared at its customised Y2K number plate until it stopped bending into the fourth dimension.

Finally it was over.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped the cold sweat from his face. He was going to have to rely on the tender mercies of public transport. Let them do the driving – he'd devote every bit of his mind to saving the city.

To a bus stop, then.

Better turn the engine off first. At least he hadn't had the presence of mind to lock the door when he'd got out.

He stumbled towards the nearest Muni sign. The whole world seemed to be rotated at an odd angle. Then again, he was on a hillside.

The next bus was heading down towards the Transbay terminal. That was good. The bus driver gave him an odd look as he climbed aboard. That was bad. He paid the fare with something or other and settled into a seat.

He leaned his face on the glass of the window. Rain was just beginning to bead on the outside of the glass, running down in chaotic lines.

What was he going to do if there were no leads at Berkeley? He'd think of something. He'd have to think of something.

The Doctor moved over as someone sat down in the seat next to him. He sighed, leaning his face against the cool glass. San Francisco slid past, its colours glowing in the rainy weather. Tarnished, thought the Doctor. Not as beautiful as it once was, but still beautiful.

The man who could save the TARDIS was out there, somewhere. And the Doctor was going to find him.

He glanced up at the passenger sitting next to him. It was a pepper-haired gent in a grey tweed suit. The man's craggy face lit up.

'Oh, hello, son,' said the man, in a Scots rasp. 'Are you here for the space-time anomaly too?'

'The thing about the Doctor is, he's got that unique ability to look you in the eye and lie like a dog,' said Fitz. 'I've always admired that.' Then he froze. 'They're moving,' he said, and Sam nearly spilled her tea.

He'd already paid the bill. They'd been sitting there for a quarter of an hour, with a cooling pot of clear green tea. Trying to pretend they weren't watching the street.

The door jangled as they pushed through it, making her jump. 'We'll need a taxi,' said Fitz.

‘No,’ said Sam. ‘Look.’ Four of the grey men had formed a little knot, and were walking up the street to the intersection.

‘Come on,’ said Fitz, but she was already walking.

The men turned the corner, joined the crowd of pedestrians flowing down Jackson Street. Fitz and Sam stayed well back.

‘I can’t see,’ protested Sam.

‘I can,’ said Fitz smugly, looking down at the top of her head. ‘They’ve split up – making themselves less conspicuous. Now they’ve –’

He stopped, and Sam nearly bumped into him. The crowd streamed around them as Fitz turned his head back and forth, pulling off his sunglasses.

‘What is it?’

He didn’t say anything, just started striding down the hillside. Sam was almost jogging to keep up, weaving in and out of the crowd.

She nearly walked right into a three-humped camel.

The animal raised its lumpy head to look at her dolefully down the length of its nose. She hadn’t even seen it until she was nearly standing on its foot. The camel was laden with dozens of small leather bags, like a bizarre, organic filing system, slung between its three slender humps. It smelled like dung and straw and joss sticks.

A tall woman in an embroidered cap and gown stepped out from behind the camel, gathering its leash in one hand. She glanced at Sam over the top of an expensive pair of sunglasses, eyes bright in her dark face.

Then she and the camel were swaying down the hill, just part of the colourful crowd.

Sam was still staring after them when Fitz made his way back to her. ‘They’re gone.’ He looked bewildered, hair sticking out in all directions. ‘They just . . . melted into the crowd. I just couldn’t see them any more.’

Sam stared down the hill, into the constantly changing cast of thousands. She shook her head. ‘Bugger it. Let’s go back and see if the van’s still there.’

It wasn’t.

The Doctor ordered a pot of Darjeeling. The man in the tweed jacket ordered a café latte. ‘Have a muffin as well,’ he said, but the Doctor just shook his head. ‘Go on, son, they’re marvellous. Marvellous little place, this. And you look like you’ve had a shock. You need the complex carbohydrates.’ His voice had the amiable growl of an old bear who’d long since settled comfortably into the zoo.

‘I’ll be all right,’ said the Doctor. ‘Really.’

They had a window table in the little café, a view looking down the hill into the Bay. A stuffed alligator hung from the ceiling on orange ropes, its dead eyes glittering like rubies. There was a pleasant buzz of conversation, a rich smell of coffee and pot-pourri. The Doctor relaxed back into his chair, stirring his tea.

‘Did I mention I’m back at Berkeley?’ The man had a neatly trimmed white beard and creases round the corners of his eyes from squinting. There were patches sewn on to the elbows of his suit jacket.

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m surprised they let you back on to the campus.’

‘Oh, they don’t know it’s me.’ The man’s eyes sparkled. ‘I’ve changed my name again. I’m Professor Daniel Joyce these days – freshly arrived from Ithaca, New York, where I had a distinguished and totally illusory career in the Cornell University physics department. It’s amazing what having a few friends in the right places can do for you.’

‘Joyce,’ echoed the Doctor. ‘It suits you.’

Joyce beamed. ‘Besides, all that fuss was nearly twenty years ago. No one will remember me.’

‘How goes the Project?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Still plenty to do,’ said Joyce mildly. ‘I’m a little worried about this anomaly of yours, though.’

‘You can’t just blame me for it,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s not exactly *my* anomaly...’

‘I think you’d be surprised,’ said Joyce.

Before the Doctor could ask what that meant, the waiter arrived with a muffin. Joyce smiled and took the plate, setting it down on the table. There was a shadow just inside the cuff of Joyce’s sleeve, the hint of a tattoo.

‘So it’s all going swimmingly,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m glad someone’s life isn’t peppered with hiccups.’

Joyce smiled ruefully. ‘We had to throw out half of our readings from yesterday.’

‘Oh? Why was that?’

‘There’s a power source somewhere that’s interacting with the scar,’ grumbled Joyce, ‘and we can’t pinpoint it. Actually, I wondered if you might know something about that.’ He gave the Doctor a pointed look.

The Doctor sat back in his chair. ‘You can’t locate it? With your technology?’

‘Don’t be cocky, lad,’ said Joyce. ‘The best equipment in the universe won’t help you if you don’t know what you’re trying to find with it.’

‘I might be able to help you,’ said the Doctor.

‘With what? Without your TARDIS, you don’t have anything more sophisticated to work with than a needle and thread.’

‘The best equipment in the universe –’

‘All right, point taken. I suppose you’ve been in worse scrapes than this.’

‘Much worse,’ said the Doctor. ‘Besides, I’ve got my toolkit.’

Joyce was shaking his head. ‘If you can find the power source –’

‘Yes?’ said the Doctor.

‘I’ll be happy to do you a favour in return,’ admitted Joyce.

The Doctor took the shattered stabiliser out of his pocket and pushed it across the table. Joyce picked it up and turned it around in his hands. ‘Still using masking tape,’ he noted with amusement.

‘Needs must,’ said the Doctor. He took a long drink of the cooling tea. ‘The advantage of that datagel is that it’s very compact, but if you rupture the cell your computing power oozes out through the cracks.’

Joyce used a spoon to lever the device open, gingerly. ‘Shouldn’t be too difficult to replace it. I’ll have my assistant whip up a new batch of goo for you.’

‘Make it quick,’ said the Doctor. ‘The scar is a potential disaster for the city. The longer it’s there, the greater the danger.’

‘Hmm. It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good,’ said Joyce. ‘Your anomaly has given the Project an opportunity to put its mathematics into applied practice. It’s not often that you can study this sort of phenomenon within a bus ride of a decent coffee.’

‘Not for much longer, I’m afraid,’ said the Doctor. ‘If you can fix it, that is.’

Joyce prodded at the goo inside the casing, and it wobbled alarmingly. ‘It would have to be tonight of all nights,’ he grumbled. ‘My wife and I have tickets for the theatre.’

‘This is important,’ protested the Doctor.

‘So’s my night out with Anne. We don’t get enough of them.’ Joyce gestured with his coffee cup, warming to his theme. ‘So’s stopping them from mining uranium in Kakadu National Park, but I don’t see you dropping everything and –’

‘Please, please.’ The Doctor held up both hands, trying to block the flow of words. ‘My TARDIS is trapped in the dimensional web.’

‘And, if it breaks down normally, it seals off the scar. Problem solved –’

‘If it breaks down normally. Do you want to take that risk?’ The Doctor fixed his eyes right on Joyce’s. ‘You know what’s going to come here if it doesn’t.’

Joyce was suddenly quiet, staring at the swirls in his latte.

Finally he wrapped the leaking stabiliser in a napkin and slipped it into his pocket. 'All right, all right. You're right, of course. This poor city has got itself wrecked far too many times as it is.' He glanced up sternly at the Doctor. 'But I don't work miracles any more. You'll have to come by tomorrow morning and see how far I've got.'

The Doctor's face broke open into a grin. 'Wonderful. Now I only need to worry about finding that power source, working out who's affecting my brain, what the Faction wants with me, why the little grey men want to grab me, and any other problems I stumble across in the city.'

'Should be child's play for you,' Joyce said, smiling. 'Now you finish that muffin, and then I'll be off to glue this thingummy back together. Oh, listen.' He rummaged in his pockets, took out a huge keyring. The Doctor looked at the cluster of keys. 'They tend to accumulate,' said Joyce, shrugging.

With an effort, he got one of the keys off the ring. 'This is the key to our house,' he said. 'The address is on the tag. If you need a place to stay –'

'I don't think that will be necessary,' said the Doctor.

Joyce put the key into the Doctor's hand. 'You never know, son. I just want to make sure you know you have somewhere to stay. If you need to stay.'

The Doctor looked down at the key in his palm. 'That's very kind of you,' he said softly.

Sam and Fitz sat side by side on the wooden bench of a cable car, watching the crowds as they rattled up a hill. 'We're never going to spot them,' said Sam. 'They're too good at this.'

'How'd they do it?' said Fitz. 'Back in Chinatown, I wasn't sure how long they'd been there before I noticed them.'

'Let's hope our clever disguises are enough to fool them, then.'

Sam fingered the sleeve of his Hawaiian shirt. 'So is this what all the best-dressed guys are wearing in 1963?'

'Very funny,' said Fitz. 'I'm dying to get out of this thing.' Sam smiled and raised an eyebrow at him. 'And back into something less nasty,' he said hastily.

They got off the cable car on a corner. 'I know a short cut back to the hotel,' said Fitz. He was playing with his lighter. He kept flicking the top open and knocking it shut again, or twiddling it between his index and middle fingers, as if he was practising a magic trick.

She dug out her pack of Benson and Hedges as they crossed the street. 'Want one?'

'Nah.'

‘Go on.’ She lit up, took a deep drag. ‘You’re itching for it.’
He shook his head, his lip curling. ‘Just call me Nicotine Fitz.’

‘Since when have you quit?’

‘Well. . .’ His eyes were hidden behind the shades. ‘Since I saw *you* doing it. All right?’

‘Huh,’ she said. ‘So now I’m giving people sudden attacks of morality. Never knew I was such a poster child.’

‘It just *looks* wrong. Some things are fundamentally against the nature of the universe,’ he gabbled. ‘Rain falling up. Sunshine at midnight. Sam Jones smoking.’

‘You actually *liked* her.’ Sam grinned. ‘Goody two shoes and all.’

‘Well,’ Fitz said, ‘on alternate Thursdays.’ He put the lighter away and took a chocolate bar out of his shirt pocket and started playing with that instead. ‘Maybe.’

They turned into a narrow side street choked with parked cars. ‘I wouldn’t have thought you’d go for the vestal-virgin type,’ said Sam.

‘Yeah, well maybe there’s more to her than that.’

Time to squelch this, right now. *I’m* not going to be impressed by *you* being sweet and wholesome.’

‘This isn’t for you,’ he shot back. ‘This is for the Doctor.’

‘What’s that supposed to –’

‘It’s the Law of Conservation of Niceness,’ he said. ‘It’s a fundamental principle of the universe, like Schrödinger’s cat or Heisenberg’s knickers.’ He twirled the chocolate bar in his fingers. ‘The Doctor’s always got to have someone around who can be fluffy and sympathetic. With your alter ego gone, for the safety of the cosmos, I have to make the supreme sacrifice. Give up smoking. And practise saying “Gosh wow!”’

She followed him around a corner, waiting until he’d wound down. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Just keep in mind she’s not me.’

He wasn’t listening. He wasn’t even looking at her. She reached out, wanting to grab him, shake him, drag him back into the real world and make him listen.

There was a unicorn in front of them, big as a Clydesdale horse.

Bigger. Filling up the narrow alleyway in front of them. The horn was a spiralled lance of ivory as long as her arm, solid as a piano leg.

Its cream coat was streaked with grime, the tufts of hair above each hoof dirty and chewed-looking. Hard muscles rippled under the muddied skin as it began to clop towards them. It looked as though it could kick the buildings down.

The unicorn gave a low, rolling snort, looking from Fitz to Sam and back again, then moved closer. Zeroing in on her now, lowering its head to her level.

'You have *got* to be taking the piss,' said Sam.

The tip of its horn was right in her eyes now. She pulled backward as the point came on, and the unicorn snorted again and lowered its horn even further, tossing its head, forcing her to the side. She caught a glimpse of Fitz, almost hidden by the creature's bulk. There was no way he could reach her. Then her back smacked into the alley wall and the horn was right across her throat, pinning her there.

'C'mon,' demanded the unicorn. Its voice was a deep growl, gravel at the bottom of the ocean. 'Hand it over.'

Sam swallowed, felt the horn press against her voice box. 'What?' she managed.

'The food. Hand it over now!'

Fitz unfroze, tugged the wrapper off his chocolate bar, and awkwardly pushed it into the unicorn's mouth. Huge grooved teeth closed on the chocolate, nearly taking his fingertips with it.

'It's all we've got,' said Fitz.

The unicorn chewed. With each chomp Sam felt the horn pushing against her neck. It only had to toss its head to draw blood, probably tear out her throat. All she could do was stare down the length of the horn, watching the giant nostrils flare, breathing the blasts of musky breath.

At last the unicorn backed off, nearly crushing Fitz into the opposite wall. The alley was too narrow for it to turn around.

Its head flicked back and forth, keeping its horn pointed at them. 'Now get out of here,' it growled. 'Tell anyone and we'll kill you, understand? We'll kill you!'

The unicorn squeezed out into the wider alley on the other side, turned, and was gone.

'You OK?' Fitz asked.

Sam nodded. She didn't feel like speaking yet. They both stared after the unicorn, until finally Fitz let out a small laugh.

'This is Fitz,' he said. 'This is Fitz Kreiner's life encapsulated in an instant.'

The Doctor stood at the base of the Transamerica Building. Its tight pyramidal needle shot up into the sky, dizzying from ground level.

He had brought a signalling device from the TARDIS toolkit, just a sort of crude tuning fork for overband transmissions. He took it out of his pocket,

still craning his neck to see the tip of the building, and turned the knob on the palm-sized box.

When he'd asked for directions to this building, Professor Joyce had rattled them off without a second thought. Since he'd settled in this city, the professor must have grown to know the area like the back of his wife's hand.

A few years ago, the Doctor thought, he could have chosen that kind of life. To see a place the way Joyce did, in a way a perpetual tourist never could. To actually *know* everything you needed to, instead of living off guesswork and lots of randomly gathered scraps of knowledge. Like the mention in Fitz's notebook that had led him here.

But he'd never been able to stay in one little corner and focus on it. There were always so many things just clamouring for him to learn them, all right *now*. So much of his knowledge was encyclopedic, but only in the real sense of the word – he knew something about everything, but not nearly enough about anything. It still bothered him somehow that, on almost any subject at all, there was someone out there who knew more than he did.

It was infuriating sometimes. Made him want to climb the walls. He actually glanced at the facing of the Transamerica Building for a moment, before deciding that even with a good running start he wouldn't get more than a metre off the ground before gravity took over.

Good thing there was another way up, then.

He waved the transmitter in the direction of the sky. The wave it sent out was undetectable by the eye, the ear. No radio or television would pick it up, no radar screen or satellite would notice its constant pulsing whine. The Doctor knew it was working only because a little red light came on to tell him so.

The bird arrived a few moments later. It perched on top of the pyramid, spreading its wings wide. They flashed golden in the afternoon sun, as though the tip of the building was on fire.

Tourists and passers-by were already stopping, pointing, voices raised in surprise. The Doctor shielded his eyes from the glare as he stared up at the bird. Sparrows and pigeons and seagulls were flapping and fluttering around it, like moths drawn to a flame. It was difficult to judge, but the golden bird looked too large to be an eagle, at least the size of a man.

The bird launched itself from the tip, a streak of golden light, spiralling down towards street level. People backed away, muttering nervously, suddenly aware of the size and immediacy of the thing. Horns tooted as drivers slowed down to crane their necks out of the windows, staring up.

The bird spiralled up again, lazily, gaining height.

Then it shot down like an arrow, grabbed the Doctor in its talons, and plucked him from the pavement.

He nearly dropped the signalling device as the bird dragged him up into the sky. Its talons were like great, hard fingers, easily encircling his arms. He had a dizzying, swooping view of the street, the diminishing cars and people.

He let out a shouted laugh as his stomach gave a roller-coaster twist, and looked up, past the golden bulk of the bird.

They shot past the tip of the pyramid. A hole opened in the air, sliding like a garage door, revealing a vast, metallic space.

The bird carried him up into the docking bay. The sky rolled shut beneath them.

Somewhere else in the maze of alleys, the unicorn banged its head into a dumpster. There was still something edible down there. He could almost taste it. But every time he tried to get his mouth to it his horn wedged itself against the back wall of the metal box, and every time he tried to spear it he banged his skull on the top.

After the fourth or fifth time, he'd almost kicked the thing over in frustration. Now he didn't even have that in him any more.

He backed out of the dumpster, ears scraping the edges of the square hole, and shook a blackened banana peel off his horn. His left front fetlock was still throbbing, sending jolts up his leg when he moved. He was unsteady with hunger. His stomachs had shrunk into a lump.

He'd have to move on. There wasn't anything left to live on here.

But the traffic in the main streets never seemed to stop, not even in the middle of the night, and he didn't know where to go, anyway. The natives would pick him up in an instant. He'd be shot or stuffed into a cage or sacrificed to some primitive god before he found anywhere else to hide.

He didn't fancy trying to teleport again. Moving against the whatever-it-was that had drawn them here was like swimming across rapids.

The unicorn's nostrils flared as he caught the scent of another being, close by. Too close to hide from. He turned, horn lowering, ready to fight. Or steal another morsel of food, if he could. He wanted sweet flowing water and sweeter grass, mouthful after mouthful. But a doughnut, an apple, a sandwich would do.

The man was walking towards him, apparently quite unafraid. 'Don't,' warned the unicorn, levelling his horn.

'Hmm,' said the man. 'An interesting specimen.'

He opened the box he was carrying, and put the unicorn inside.

Chapter Seven

Kraken Up

Down at the marina the seagulls were bustling around Eldin's feet, snatching up crumbs and cigarette butts with raucous glee. He sighed and turned the pages of the water taxi's booking schedule. When the boat was actually out, there wasn't much for him to do but sit beside the little booth, jotting down notes for his next column or listening to KSOL on his portable radio, hoping that a customer would relieve the boredom.

'Eldin Sanchez?'

A guy in a retro-Regency coat was beaming at him. The man was dwarfed by a hulk in a dark overcoat, topped by a fez.

'Your office said you would be here. I'm a friend of Fitz Kreiner. I'm called the Doctor.'

'Ohh –' began Eldin. He stopped himself.

'I believe you've, ah, expressed an interest in my friend here.' He plopped himself down on one of the pilings at the edge of the pier. 'He's called –' he let out a sneeze – 'and he's the commander of a Basardi cargo transport.'

'Please meet you,' frogged the man in the fez.

'From space?' said Eldin faintly.

'Yes.' Bored with the piling, the Doctor clambered to his feet and began pacing back and forth. 'From space. Their ship is parked in hyperspace, hovering above the city.'

'You're joking.'

'I've just been there,' said the Doctor. 'They make a mean cup of mint tea, let me tell you. The Basardi hyperdrive has a fault which causes it to interact with certain types of higher-dimensional energy. There's a concentration of it in real space in San Francisco, so of course, one by one, a flotilla of their ships has been stranded here. And so –' he sneezed again – 'has set up a sort of reception committee for new arrivals. Finding them places to live. Helping them get settled in.'

‘Oh. The travel agency. Yeah.’ Eldin realised he was staring at the man in the fez, the odd curve of his skull, turning sharply upward just before the round red hat hid the rest of the shape from view. . . . ‘So, uh, they told you all of this?’

‘I’m from space as well,’ said the Doctor. Eldin started to laugh, then thought better of it. ‘I also gave them the number of an admiral in England who might be able to help them get home. And they agreed to talk to you – perhaps even do an interview. You see, they keep track of where the other people, ah, creatures too, that have arrived in the area are living, and they could use some help in spotting –’

Eldin leapt to his feet, scattering seagulls. ‘Fitz wasn’t bullshitting!’ he almost shouted.

‘And as for myself,’ added the Doctor, ‘I’m just looking for some information about a group of grey men. . . .’ He trailed off.

‘Greys?’ said Eldin. ‘That’s a bit out of my territory. . . .’

But the Doctor was just ignoring him, staring at the seals – no, the water. The tide was battling sluggishly at the pilings, whumpwhump against the wood. ‘Tidal changes,’ said the Doctor, as though his train of thought had suddenly derailed itself into the Bay. ‘Of course.’

‘Wh-’

The Doctor whirled around and grabbed Eldin by the shoulders. ‘Please, this is very important. Have there been any disruptions in the Bay recently? Sudden high water? Tidal waves? Anything.’ The Doctor stared at him. ‘Think, man! This could be vital!’

‘Well, yeah! Couple of days ago. Dennis from the aquatic park got there in the morning and found some of his paddle boats thrown up on to the pier.’

‘Oh dear. . . .’ The Doctor let go of Eldin’s shoulders.

‘Why?’ said Eldin. ‘What does it mean?’

The Doctor was suddenly backing away, staring past him. Eldin looked around in bewilderment.

‘I’ll have to catch up with you!’ shouted the Doctor. He started to run.

Someone ran right past Eldin, almost touching him, the seagulls exploding in an angry white cloud as he cut through them. It was a man, wearing something grey – where had he come from?

Eldin sat down, weakly.

The man in the fez sat down next to him and smiled a meaty smile. ‘Greetings, Earthling,’ he rasped. ‘We come in peace.’

The Doctor glanced back as he pounded along the pier. The man in grey had

gained on him. He needed an exit, now.

Boat. Dead ahead, stuffed with tourists. He had an audience as he covered the last yards. 'Wait for me!' he shouted.

A skinny man was casting off, dragging a fat loop of rope from a pylon and tossing it on to the boat. The man jumped on after it, and pulled the ramp aboard as the boat backed away from the pier.

The Doctor didn't even slow down. One part of his brain started madly calculating velocities and trajectories. Another part started advising him strongly against this course of action. Another part was sticking its arms out and making aeroplane noises.

The Doctor leapt from the pier. There was a moment, almost a silent moment, when he was sailing free through the air, unconnected to anything.

Then he was vaulting easily over the railing of the ship, landing smoothly on his toes on the other side.

The tourists on board the boat burst into a round of applause. The Doctor broke into a smile, and gave a little bow, letting them take photos.

'You wouldn't be smiling if you'd fallen into the propeller.' The skinny man looked ready to throw him overboard, but instead scowled and said, 'That'll be twenty-eight dollars.'

The Doctor fumbled for notes, pressed some amount into the tour operator's hands, and squeezed through the admiring crowd. At last he sank into a seat, letting out a sigh of relief. The shore was receding as the boat cut a frothing wake across the troubled waters of the Bay.

'Heck of a jump,' said a voice. 'Specially in this gravity.'

The Doctor turned. Another man in grey was sitting next to him.

'Shy and gentle, my arse,' Fitz muttered. 'Something with a horn that size, you tell me why it hangs around virgins.'

Sam trailed along behind him, said nothing as he opened the hotel room door. When she reached for the doorknob she felt her hands floating, fuzzy and unresponsive, out of focus.

She sank into a chair. Fitz picked up the phone and spent several minutes scribbling down messages.

'Yeah. "Swinging single horn seeks virgin. Must have comfy lap. Chocolate bar an advantage."' Sam didn't move in her chair.

'Well, come on,' he said. 'Something I've said in the last twenty minutes must be worth a chuckle. Or at least a grunt.'

'I want to get plastered,' she said. 'Nah. I want to get so stoned I can't speak.'

Fitz blinked. 'Fab,' he said. He was staring oddly at her – maybe amazed that those words could come out of that oh-so-innocent mouth. 'Maybe afterwards we can check out the town a bit. See what's around.'

'Don't want to go out.' She pulled her legs up on to the wooden chair, knees to chin. Going out meant getting mugged again. Next time would be even crazier.

Three times in two days, boy with knife, men in grey, unicorn. Less than two days, since she'd left work and gone home to read the impossible postcards. . . Less than forty-eight hours. . . Oh screw it, she'd lost count.

Guess that's what it meant to time travel.

Fitz was hovering, awkwardly. He wanted to put an arm around her, but didn't quite dare. 'Hey,' he said. 'It's all right. You didn't get hurt –'

'This time,' she muttered. 'I still want to get off my face.'

'Well, one thing at a time,' he said.

She'd had enough. She wanted it to stop. She and her mates had joked about needing it, needing a little pill just to get back to being human. Sam was not the same without an E, she'd said. It was just a joke, of course. But her little voice was yammering again, adding to the din in her head, *go on, you've been off the hard stuff long enough, you can handle it no problem.*

'Can't believe it,' she said. 'Can't believe I chose this.'

He shrugged, smiled in a way that was supposed to be faintly ironic. 'You did say it was your choices that made you you. Celebrate your uniqueness. All part of life's rich pageant.'

'No,' said Sam. 'I meant running off with a headcase and getting beaten up in a foreign country.'

'Ah,' said Fitz.

Bob was working his way through a packet of crisps, leaning back in the chair. The Doctor was peering out at the water, looking for any sign of disturbance. Neither of them was paying any attention to the tourist chatter of the boat's Tannoy.

'What happens now?' asked the Doctor absently.

'With a bit of luck,' munched Bob, 'I nab you when we get off the boat.'

The Doctor glanced at him. 'And if you don't?'

Bob shrugged. 'No point in worrying about it now. Might as well enjoy the ride.'

The odd thing about Bob, thought the Doctor, was that, as soon as you looked away from him, you more or less forgot what he looked like. You were left with

a general impression of dark hair, average height, average build, grey clothes. . . In fact, Bob was one of the most nondescript people the Doctor had ever met.

‘Where are you from, Bob?’ he asked.

‘BioHazCorp,’ said Bob. ‘We were supposed to be delivered to the war zone on Teso Peope. We ended up here by mistake. When the crew realised they’d arrived at a populated, low-tech world, they dumped us and ran for it.’

‘So you’re stranded too,’ sighed the Doctor. ‘You’re a Hench, aren’t you?’

Bob’s head bounced up and down. ‘Guess what model.’

The Doctor looked him over. ‘Five?’

‘Flatterer,’ said Bob amiably. ‘Four point one point two.’

‘Well, you’re certainly thoroughly forgettable.’

Bob said, ‘That’s because we’re in plastic mode.’

‘Plastic?’

‘None of our optional extras have been activated,’ said Bob. ‘So we haven’t been set to specialise in any given task – soldiers, guards, clerical assistants. Just some of our wide variety of uses.’

The Doctor said, ‘But if you’re functional at all, you must have imprinted on someone. Like a duckling learning to follow its mother.’ He looked out at the shapes of the city’s buildings. ‘Someone here. Another castaway?’

Bob shrugged again. He crumpled the plastic bag up in an average-looking hand. ‘Here comes our first stop.’

The Doctor stood up as the boat began to slow. There was a row of the grey men waiting on the pier.

Without hesitating, he jumped up on the railing and flung himself into the water. He heard more cameras snapping just before he hit.

Fitz had made some coffee with the hotel’s little electric jug, but Sam was just ignoring it. ‘I don’t get any control over any of it. Not ever, really.’ Distantly, she noticed how small her voice was getting. ‘All this craziness. Can’t even choose to go mad.’

Fitz shuddered, purely reflexively. ‘No. No. Don’t even think that way,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ve seen madness. It doesn’t help.’

He knelt down in front of her, next to the desk, trying to get his face close to hers, his eyes skittering around as though he was making a determined effort at eye contact but didn’t quite know how. ‘You’ve got to remember, whatever gets thrown at you, it might be weird but it’s not crazy. Just believe that, all right? It makes sense to someone, even if you don’t know the rules yet. It’s not crazy. It’s not –’

The phone rang, right next to them, and he snatched it up. 'Hello. Yes. OK. Where? All right, whatever you say.'

Fitz put down the phone. 'That was the Doctor,' he told her. 'He wants us to meet him in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge.'

The taxi driver insisted on letting them off on the shoulder just before the bridge. He made Fitz pay his return fare before roaring off. God only knew how they were going to get back. That was the Doctor's problem, she decided. Let him pull off another throwaway miracle. That was what he was there for.

They could just see him, far ahead, at the highest part of the bridge's arc, looking off into the distance from the edge of the pedestrian walkway.

The bridge was huge, making you crane your neck to look at the tops of the towers, the bright orange-red glowing against the green of the bay and the land in the distance. The wires and cables sang in the wind.

Sam looked out as she and Fitz half walked, half jogged along the walkway. It would have been a stunning view, except for being overcast and dull-grey and chilly as hell frozen over. A little to her right there was nothing for sixty-odd metres straight down.

She didn't look. It wasn't fun being close to the edge like this. *Go on, jump, just 'cause you're not supposed to.*

'OK?' puffed Fitz. 'You're OK?'

She gave him a little nod. OK for the moment. Until the next whatever was dumped on her. He nodded back.

The Doctor was staring through a battered pair of binoculars, the sharp wind blowing his coat unnoticed behind him. He stood quite still, expressionless.

'Well?' she said. He handed her the binoculars. Sam suddenly realised that he was soaking wet, but it didn't seem to bother him.

'You can't really see it from ground level,' he said gravely. 'Not yet. Look out in the Bay. Just past Alcatraz, to the right.'

She started looking, struggling with the focus knob.

'What happened to you?' said Fitz.

'Our grey friends are still taking turns jumping in the water to look for me,' said the Doctor. 'I hitched a ride with a fishing boat and doubled back.'

She kept looking through the anti-suicide fence. There wasn't anything – no, she could just make it out, a sharp change in the water. A line, running from near the waterfront, disappearing behind Alcatraz Island and stretching almost to the opposite shore. Along the line, the texture of the water changed from

broad wide ripples, becoming choppy, churning. The grey surface was flecked with white, roiling like a wake that refused to dissipate.

Almost the whole width of the Bay.

She looked questioningly at the Doctor.

'I said that something really nasty would come along,' he said. She knew she had to ask. But she didn't want to. Asking would make it real.

She raised the binoculars to take another look, but he put his hand on top of them, meeting her eyes. 'That turbulence is caused by a very sharp change in depth. There's something very big down there, and that line is one edge of it.'

'And the other edge?' asked Fitz.

Sam tried to find it, but it was pushing the limits of the binoculars. Maybe another quarter of a mile away? She tried to move her fingers, and couldn't. The wind was so cold they'd seized up on the focus rings.

The Doctor took the binoculars out of her hands, and she tucked them under her armpits, stamping her feet to try to get the blood flowing again. 'Call it a Kraken,' he said quietly. 'It comes from the higher dimensions. It floats in the void, twisting itself through the folded space in ways we can barely comprehend.'

He offered the binoculars to Fitz, who shook his head. 'I don't want to know. Are they intelligent?'

'No. Vast, implacable brutes, who exist only to sense food – and to reach it.' His voice was soft, like someone talking in a church. Someone a bit frightened. 'They graze on exotic matter, on plumes of raw cosmological power... features which are undetectable in our space, but fountains of energy in the upper reaches.'

'And the scar?' asked Fitz, hugging himself.

'Sounds like one large dinner gong.' The Doctor pulled a smile on to his face. 'It must have rotated itself into these dimensions just before we used the TARDIS to muffle the beacon. That's what it was following, you see. It can sense the energy pattern of the scar.' He looked out over the Bay. 'As long as that signal is blocked, the Kraken doesn't know where to find the food – but it hears enough echoes to know the food is here. It knows. And so it waits.'

'And then,' said Fitz, 'when the TARDIS finally gives up the ghost, if we're not lucky then that thing can hear the beacon again loud and clear.'

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'It will follow it, and it will devour it.'

'Crunchy,' said Fitz. 'And a dirty great lump of San Francisco gets mashed by its slime trail on the way.'

'Oh, no slime,' said the Doctor offhandedly. 'Just the Kraken. That's enough.'

Sam stared at the two of them, her eyes streaming in the wind. They were taking it so calmly – hang on, *she* was taking it so calmly. She hadn't even said a word about it. There was a sea monster down there, and the only thing in her head was the blaring of the traffic and the distant low rolling of thunder.

'How long?' asked Fitz.

'About a day and a half,' said the Doctor. 'Except...'

'Oh boy,' said Fitz. 'There's an except.'

'Except that, as the TARDIS gets closer to dying, pulses from the beacon will leak through, more and more frequently. That might be enough to wake the Kraken. Or it might not.'

There's a frigging man-eating city-crunching sea monster down there, Sam told herself, just to see if there was any reaction.

The Doctor had swept her along from one impossibility to the next, without even a moment to consider it, until she'd stopped feeling as though she had any say about what was happening to her. No more than she had a say when Dave cancelled her pay rise because his stomach was playing up.

It was always the same – they were driving, she was in the back seat, and there was no way off the road when you were in the middle of the bridge.

The thunder was growing, louder, unbroken, closing in on them. It sounded like hooves, like uncountable hooves.

The Doctor looked up. 'Oh no,' he said, snapping into the present. He shouted, 'Hold on –'

And the rumble was right there and she felt it lift her off her feet and there was nothing to hold on to and she was running, running with thousands pressing into her on all sides – glimpses of fur feathers scales all crowding her view – a stampede along the bridge, full of hounds and men and bulls and more. Half-lion-half-eagles, half-man-half-lizards, wolves with glittering implants and ruby-laser eyes, catsandratsandelephants and anything else she could imagine, all running with the speed of panic. Flooding her with the smell of sweat and struggle. The sound of running cramming her head full of noise and music and thunder. The current swept her along the edge of the bridge, tried to pull her over because they had to *move*, *that* way, no matter what, the fury pulled them on. And so many different people jostling and shoving inside her skin and trying to tear out and run on their own, till she couldn't feel what was herself any more and it wasn't going to stop and she couldn't stop and she HAD – TO – STOP –

They found her down by the toll plaza, clinging to the guard rail till her palms

bled and screaming her throat raw.

Chapter Eight

The Memory Cheating Ain't What it Used to Be

'That was the first pulse,' said the Doctor.

They were driving and she was in the back seat. The Doctor had left Fitz to look after her while he brought the car, saying don't move her, don't let her move. She didn't know how long it had taken. He must have decided it was OK to move her then because they had laid her down on the chilly vinyl, trying to make her comfortable, but there wasn't a lot of room in the back of a Bug. The Doctor had shed his coat and laid it over her.

Now he was a million miles away, in the front seat of the Bug.

'They'll happen more and more often as we get closer to the end,' he said. He glanced at her in the rear-view mirror. 'If you hadn't managed to pull yourself free, the wave of energy would have swept you all the way back to the scar.'

'And once she hit that. . . ' said Fitz.

Sam said nothing.

The Doctor went on, 'It's part of the healing process, the process of forming new structure over the damage to space-time. The energy surge closes in on the scar from all around, like a ripple in reverse. That ripple becomes the beacon, pulsing in the higher dimensions. Not a pleasant thing to be caught in the middle of. . . '

Sam said even more nothing.

The toll-booth man had a phone in there. He was complaining about the bicycle race that had just come charging through without warning – there wasn't one scheduled for today, was there? Nah, someone else was disagreeing, it was a protest rally, a big demonstration.

So why did it look like the Wild Hunt to me?

She said nothing.

Out the opposite window she could just see the vast ripples in the water below, spreading outward across the bay as something big stirred in its sleep.

'I didn't see anything,' Fitz said, as they drove on. Just a split-second... sense of a lot of somethings going past. And then I looked up, and you'd just vanished.'

He twisted in his seat to look at her. His face creased in concern.

This is it, she thought. When you feel like you're a dot on the back of your own skull, looking out through your own eyes from a distance. This is what it's like to lose it. You can see it there in front of you, but you don't really feel like you need to reach out and get it back.

'There's something else,' said the Doctor.

She turned her head, and his face drifted into view. He was waiting for her to prompt him. *What?* she wanted to say.

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'coming into contact with the scar was what disrupted our Sam in the first place. It seems to have a destabilising effect on her biodata for, ah, some reason which I'm not really clear on at the moment. ...' The Doctor paused. Sam felt the car slow as he braked at a stoplight. Maybe he was waiting for her to ask for those reasons.

Finally he turned to look at her, his face gently concerned. 'To cut a long story short, each time the disruption wave from the scar passes through, it has the same effect on you.'

What? she thought. *What?* she shrieked. 'What?' she mumbled.

'You're not quite the Sam you were five minutes ago. Little bits of your biodata, your history, have been banged around.'

'How do you know that?' said Fitz.

'It's elementary physics,' the Doctor snapped. Sam jumped, but only on the inside. 'What I was learning when you would have been playing with building blocks.'

'All right,' said Fitz, 'point taken.'

She managed, 'I've changed again. ...'

'Well, a little bit. A detail here or there.' The wheel spun in the Doctor's hands as he turned a corner. He kept glancing back at her, but he couldn't really look, and that made it harder for her to be sure she was still there. 'A few little things that don't quite fit with what the rest of the universe remembers.'

So I'm not real, she said, but the words didn't make it out.

'But I remember. ...'

'Of course you do.' He nodded calmly. 'It's just that what the rest of the world remembers about you is different to what you remember about you.'

He wasn't a person. He was a machine for dumping bad news on her. Pushing her ever further away from the front of her head.

He was still babbling in the front seat, talking to Fitz now. ‘Most of the changes are bound to be minor ones. She can’t be diffracted into any really radical alternatives. It’s always got to be a Sam who would have been here at the same time, the same place.’

She was trying hard to answer.

‘Except for the first time it happened?’ said Fitz.

She was trying hard to scream, to kick the back of the seat, to pull the Doctor’s hair, to smash the windows.

‘Yes, well, our Sam was a bit of a special case. As for the chance of this version happening to turn back into her, well, it’s about as likely as her turning into Margaret Thatcher, really. . .’

She cried. She didn’t have to make any effort to cry. It just fell out of her.

The Doctor squeezed the Bug into a parking space opposite the plaza. He reached back to Sam, touched her face with his fingers, lifting her head until she couldn’t look away.

‘Sam,’ he said. Gentle. Relentless. ‘Sam, listen to me. I need you to tell me about where I took you to dinner last night. Sam? Where was it? What was it like?’

‘Garlic. . . that garlic place,’ she mumbled. She could barely see him, through the distance, through the haze. ‘Pasta. I had pasta. You had ice cream.’

‘What kind of ice cream?’ he insisted.

‘You had garlic ice cream!’ She sat up. ‘Heh. That’s disgusting!’

His face was in focus at last. He nodded thoughtfully, looking relieved. ‘Thank you.’

Fitz was hanging over the back of his seat. ‘So does that tell you how far she’s been knocked off her old timeline?’

The Doctor looked baffled. ‘What good would that do? No, it’s just that she was dissociating.’

He slid out of the Bug, tugged the seat forward, and offered her a hand to climb out. ‘I just needed to get you to connect with your memories. With the world around you.’

‘But what if they’re not true?’ she whispered.

He smiled. ‘Then I got you to engage your imagination.’

They crossed the street to the plaza, and the Doctor set her down gently on the rim of a splashing fountain. The air was crisp with spray. She felt here, now, almost back to herself. Whoever that was.

Fitz knelt on the ground, trying to get into her line of sight, but before he could say anything she saw his eyes move from her face, along the arm the Doctor had around her, up to the Doctor's body pressed close beside her. He lowered his head and looked away.

'Look,' said Fitz, 'I've got to go and ring up some of my contacts, see if they've got any leads on the men in grey. The ones we didn't get to when we were... well, see you in a few minutes. Just...'

He hesitantly took hold of her free hand and met her eyes. 'Don't break,' he said simply. 'You don't have to. All right?'

Fitz got up and headed for the entrance of the shopping centre. 'I mean, if *she* was tough enough not to lose it, *you* should have no problem.'

'I'm not her.' Her voice was almost lost in the splash of the fountain. 'I'm not me either,' she murmured.

The Doctor was staring at her, his pocket watch clasped in his hand. 'What on Earth makes you say that?'

She didn't answer for a while, watching the fountain play, jets splattering inward towards the mermaids in the centre. Where the water hit the water it was constantly churning, a mass of conflicting ripples. Never still. Never the same.

'You said I'm a different version now to what really happened,' she said. 'So some of my memories are *lies* -'

'Which memories?' He grasped her by the shoulders and fixed her with a wide-eyed stare. 'Who did you invite to your sixth birthday party?'

'Uhh -'

'What did you wear to work on the Tuesday before last? Five minutes ago, was your pulse rate seventy or seventy-one? You could change all of those things, and not even you would notice. Why would that make you not still you?'

The words were so rapid-fire, she couldn't get a thought in, but she had to hit back at them or else. 'You think not knowing is supposed to help,' she said. 'You don't get it. I don't have clue *one* any more -'

'How long have you been a vegetarian?'

'Twelve years -'

'Good, because that's what you said the other day. See?'

'And how am I supposed to know?' she snapped. 'Do I have to rely on you to know who I am? 'Cause I'm not going for that. But I've got no facts at all! Not about what's real, about my past -'

'Oh, who *cares*?' cried the Doctor.

She jumped as if she'd been slapped.

'Sorry, sorry, I'm still not very good at this patience thing.' He raised his hands to her face, pressing gently against her cheeks. 'I don't mean to say it's not disorientating, or big, or scary,' he said, gently again. 'But it just seems so *obvious* to me, it doesn't *matter*.'

He leapt to his feet, to start pacing – hang on, he'd put his feet down on the wrong side of the rim. He was striding right through the middle of the fountain. 'Whatever history you have in your head right now, the next time the Wild Hunt comes through, it's all going to change again. So why pay attention to it at all?'

Sam looked around, but no one was giving them a second glance. The Doctor was so hyped up, he probably wasn't even aware that he was sloshing through a few inches of water. Besides, he was still too damp from before for it to matter.

'Look,' she said, 'you've got to know the past matters. You – you time travel!'

'Just because I live in the past doesn't mean I live in the past.' He turned on his toes and leaned in close to her – challenging her, cajoling her. 'A while ago you said you just are who you are, right now. . .'

'Did I?' she asked pointedly.

'What does it matter? Do you agree with it?' The Doctor threw his arms wide with frustration. 'Because all that isn't who you are, it's who you *were*.'

Sam stood up, wobbling on her feet. The Doctor was reaching a hand to her from the middle of the fountain. His voice had gone quiet and firm. 'It doesn't matter what you were doing fifteen minutes ago. You've got one moment, right now. It won't last. What are you going to do with it? Well?'

I am who I am, she thought. Whoever the hell that is. Well, it does sound like the kind of thing I'd say.

She took a step forward and splashed into the fountain. The Doctor's hand caught her as she stumbled in. She felt giddy, not quite attached to the ground. But she was still here, could still walk and talk – and still kick a big splash of water right at the Doctor.

'So can I choose which of my memories are the fake ones?'

He shrugged, grinning, shaking water at her. 'While you're here – why not?'

'All right, then, my boss. Dave. And his lousy taste in ties too. I don't believe in him any more – he's just a bad dream.' She heard herself beginning to laugh. Maybe Dave would be waiting for her after all when she got back to London, but for now he just didn't matter. She was with the Doctor.

'That's the spirit,' he said. 'One nice solid possibility is worth a million airy-fairy facts.' And he leapt aside and with a laugh sent a huge sploosh of water

right back into her face.

By the time Fitz got back, both of them were drenched to the skin and grinning like idiots. Sam was trying to chase down a lone Mandelbrot, which was paddling frantically around the sculpted turtles in the fountain.

'Hello, children,' he said, dodging Sam's splash. 'I've just been talking to Walter Markowitz, the Frigidaire king of Adeleine Street. He's just seen two Henches.'

'Where?' said the Doctor.

'Berkeley. I rang his carphone – he's tailing them now. Everybody out of the pool.'

The Doctor leapt out, sprinting for the Bug.

Fitz called, 'What about towelling off first?'

'We can swing by the hotel.' Sam walked a few steps, squeaking and leaking. 'I think I need a new pair of shoes.'

Walter met them in Berkeley, in front of a science-fiction bookshop. They crouched behind Walter's car, across the street. 'It was about half an hour after the place closed,' said the little salesperson. 'I was sitting in the car outside Mickey D's, and I saw two of them come out. They took a taxi here. I saw them break in. They did something to the door... I'm pretty sure they didn't have a key. Two of them.'

Sam stared through the car window. The brightly lit shop was empty. 'So where are they now?'

'They went into the back room,' said Walter. 'I've been watching the whole time. God knows what they're doing back there.'

'I think it's time we found out,' said the Doctor. 'Fitz and Sam, you come with me. Walter, you'd better stay here.'

Walter smiled nervously. 'I was kind of hoping you'd say that,' he said.

It took the Doctor thirty seconds to pick the lock. 'Slow,' murmured Fitz. The Doctor raised an eyebrow at him and softly pushed the door open.

He shut it behind them without a sound. Sam's hands had curled into fists. She expected the grey men to appear from behind the bookshelves, raving as they tried to grab her. But the shop was silent.

The Doctor strode up to the door at the back of the shop, still somehow managing not to make any noise. Sam found herself following him. He was

just going to walk into the danger. She wanted to be with him. Fitz was following, too.

The door wasn't locked. He pushed it open.

The room inside was dark – there was a desk, some shelving, a wooden staircase leading down. Sam started – no, it was a dummy, dressed in an elaborate costume.

The Doctor indicated the stairs – there was a faint light coming from below. Sam nodded tightly. She wished she had some kind of weapon. They followed him down into the darkness.

She was halfway down the stairs when someone put their hand on her shoulder.

Sam screamed, the sound jerking out of her of its own accord. She pulled forward, but the hand was still there, holding her in place. Wait, stop, *how many fingers were there?* Another hand descended on her other shoulder, like a leaden spider.

Fitz shouted, 'Walter, you bastard!'

She hadn't felt wrong. There were too many fingers – too many fingers – and he wasn't just touching her, the fingers were going *under her skin* –

She screamed again, reaching down to Fitz, who was coming back up the stairs to her. He looked past her at whoever was dragging her up, reeling her in.

One of the Henches tackled Fitz, bringing him down hard on the concrete stairs. He made an ugly noise as the air was bruised out of him. Behind him, she could see the Doctor, dazed against the wall, the other Hench slipping a blindfold over his eyes.

Sam tried to kick, to hit, to do anything to get loose. She couldn't turn, she couldn't see who had hold of her, she could only feel those cold hands reaching through her skin, fingernails scraping her bone.

'Try not to damage yourself,' said a man's dry voice in her ear. And with his third hand he pushed the blindfold down over her eyes.

Chapter Nine

Abducted by Aliens

Think of me as a person.

That's what the women did in the kidnap movies. Chat with the man, make him see you as a human being, so he won't dump your body in a ditch somewhere.

Trouble was, Sam couldn't think of anything to say.

She scrunched up her face, trying to take the pressure of the rag off her eyeballs. The Henches had tied it tight before shoving them in the van, and tightened it before unloading them here. Wherever this was.

The blindfold moved a fraction, and this time she almost got her eyes open before the pain stabbed in. She swore.

'Sam?' called Fitz, from somewhere behind her. 'Talk to me. Let us know what's happening to you.'

The blindfold fell back into place as she flinched. It was hopeless. If she moved her head even a fraction, that sharp tearing line of pain lit up in the bone of her forehead. It was as if her skull was nailed to the metal frame she was lying on.

Five nails. Her hands and feet were pinned the same way.

'At least keep talking so we know you're still there,' Fitz went on. 'Just tell us – Oh no. Oh no. He's –'

She heard a sharp strangled intake of breath, a scream being sucked inward. 'Fitz!' she shouted. Don't turn your head, remember you can't turn your head –

She listened, but there was nothing but the hum-buzz-tick of machinery.

'This is madness!' the Doctor shouted, somewhere to the right. 'If there's something you want from us, why don't you just ask?'

The man's dry voice drifted across the room. 'I'm afraid this is a matter in which simple-subject interviews will not suffice,' he said. 'Particularly when the specimen in question is as notoriously, er, notoriously *inaccurate* as you are. My results must be unambiguous.'

'Christ Jesus,' whispered Fitz.

Sam called, 'You OK?'

'Nnh.' Barely audible. 'Blacked out for a moment.'

'What happened?' No answer. 'Well?'

'It was. . . weird. . . I can't –'

'Ow,' said the Doctor.

She had to fight to keep her breathing steady. Breathe too hard, and your head'll only pull against that pin-nail-needle.

'Listen to me,' said the Doctor's voice. 'Judging by this thing, you've got some kind of higher-dimensional technology. Which means you must have noticed what's happening to this city. What's already arrived –'

'Yes. The Kraken.' The voice was close to her ear now. 'The second most interesting specimen in the area, I must admit. One moment.'

Something opened up inside her spine.

The cold ripping pain made her heart stop, made her head fill up with blackness. Did she scream?

'You should stay still,' advised the voice in her ear, 'and quiet. This does require a certain amount of concentration.'

The pain wasn't in her back. It was where she was pinned, 'cause her whole body was tightening in a reflex, pulling against the pins. She forced her head back into place. The pain in her forehead went away, and all she had to do was stay still, rigid, as something crawled around inside her spine.

It didn't move, it just – it was there, and then there, then there, without actually going from one place to the next. Just a tiny point of something wrong inside. It hadn't even broken her skin.

The Doctor was saying, 'With technology like that, you could stabilise the scar in an instant. You could solve all our problems –'

'I'm afraid not. That would disrupt the habitat.'

She couldn't feel the thing in her back any more. The inside of her cheek hurt like hell – she must have bitten it. The trembling made her forehead throb.

'Oh please,' snapped the Doctor. 'It'll disrupt the habitat a bit more if some vast raving monster from outside reality flattens a path through the no stop that *stop* I SAID STOP IT –'

'Interesting. So that's what that one does.'

'Stop. Give it back.' The Doctor's voice was high, shaky. 'Give me back the violet.'

'All right, they're prepared. Take them away.'

And there were hands all over her, holding her arms down as they unpinned her hands from the frame, and then tying them together again, and the Doctor

was crying out, 'Give it back! Now!' as they lifted her, and she asked whoever was there, 'Look, what are you doing?' as they jostled her forward, a louder 'Just tell me what you're going to do,' as the bodies pressed in on all sides, herding her along, and it all burst out in a final scream of '*Just tell me what are you doing!*'

The voice didn't answer.

She was squeezed between two big men on the seat of the van. There were more, crowded all around.

'Fitz –' she said.

'Here,' he said raggedly. She could hear the Doctor muttering to himself.

The driver started the van's engine and put on a CD of treacly piano ballads from before she was born, cranked up to disorientating levels. He'd pulled the same trick on the trip there. Now, even if the Doctor or Fitz was sitting right next to her, she'd never hear what they said.

She reached out in front, to where she thought the Doctor's voice had last come from, and found a pair of bound hands. She clutched on to them. They held on to her, just as desperately.

Finally the van stopped, and the CD mercifully stopped along with it. The men shovelled them out through the door, Sam clinging to the Doctor's hands like a lifeline. And then she heard the van roar off.

After a few seconds she slid her hands down his wrists and started fumbling with the old rope that tied them. He reached up and unknotted the rag that was squeezing against her eyes.

Her eyes sprang open in relief, but the dark didn't go away. After a moment's panic she realised it was night – it had been daylight when they were grabbed. They had been dropped back outside the bookshop.

The hands turned out to belong to Fitz.

He gave a faintly embarrassed smile as he untied her wrists. 'You all right?' he asked.

'Bloomin' marvellous,' she muttered. She just wanted to hold on to him, or the Doctor, or anyone really. But no way was she going to break down now. '*Fine*. How about you?'

'Oh, fine. No, really, just fine. Promise.' His hands were shaking against hers.

'Oh, this is charming,' snapped the Doctor. 'Look. They left this.'

He'd shaken off the rope so quickly it was as if he'd never been tied up. Now he was pacing past them and clutching a copy of *Manilow Sings Sinatra*. 'They

didn't want me to hear any passing sounds that might help me puzzle out where they took us. But this –' he waved the album – 'is just adding insult to injury!'

Sam plucked the CD out of his hands. 'Oh, for God's sake –'

'There's something in my neck,' quavered Fitz.

He was standing frozen, one hand to the back of his head. Her fingers leapt to her own neck, and found it – just below the base of her skull, a small metal button, flat against her skin.

As though someone had pushed a drawing pin right into her spine.

Without thinking, she pulled at it, trying to get her thumbnail under the edge. Immediately she felt that tiny point of wrongness lodged in her spinal cord, ready to rip its way loose to the surface.

'The connection's folded into a higher spatial dimension,' said the Doctor quietly. 'Look.' He pushed his hair aside and showed her the button in his own neck. The matt-black disc was etched with circuitry. He pressed the skin down at its edge, so they could see underneath, see that the disc wasn't actually attached at all.

'All right,' said Fitz shakily, 'what's it for?'

'Specimens,' spat the Doctor. 'Unambiguous results. Not disrupting the habitat.' The words flew out in random directions. 'Don't you see? We've been tagged.'

'Christ, you're right,' said Sam. 'He let us go so he could observe us in our natural habitat. This thing's probably a transmitter.'

He nodded frantically. 'Telling him where we are.'

'Maybe letting him see what we're doing.' The disc was a cold circle under her palm.

'More than that. These things reach straight into our central nervous systems. He's the one who's been doing strange things to my mind – and now he'll know exactly what he's doing to me. I'm a perfect experimental subject now.'

'Give me back the violet,' said Sam.

The Doctor nodded. 'This time he made a real change. A permanent one, not some transitory hallucination. He made me colour-blind.'

'What?' said Fitz.

'What?' said Sam.

'Indigo, violet, all the shades of ultraviolet – all gone,' said the Doctor. 'They all just look... *black* to me. But what is it *for*, what is he *doing*, what does he *want*? Ah, Fitz?'

Fitz was staring off down the alleyway, at the skyline. Sam followed his eyes to a small roiling mass of clouds, suspended over the Bay. 'I dunno...' he

began. 'D'you think these attacks on your mind might have to do with the ley lines, or something?'

'I've believed sillier things before breakfast,' said the Doctor. 'Why?'

Fitz pointed in the direction of the clouds. 'Well, it's just that's what happened when Kyra was doing her ceremony last night –' The words hit the Doctor like a lightning bolt. He spun round almost in midair to stare at Fitz. Fitz sped up to get it all out before the Doctor talked all over him. '– when you had your first attack, but this time it seems to be staying around, like it's been pinned –'

'Fitz, that's... it's... yes! You may have just saved – if *that's* – you've –'

He gave up on the logjam of words and grabbed Fitz.

'Ohh no,' said Fitz, and turned his mouth away. The Doctor just nearly lifted him off his feet with enthusiasm. Then he turned on his heel and bolted for the Bug. 'Come on!'

In the car she heard the hooves approaching.

'Oh God, not again.' She reached out towards the front seat. The Doctor was driving – no hands free – so she grabbed Fitz's hands again, and held on.

Just let me remember who I am, she thought as the Wild Hunt closed in, shrieking pounding clattering drowning out the engine, and her head split
second later it was gone, like a blink, leaving just a lingering sense of sweat and stampede.

Fitz was exhaling with relief, in time with her. 'And remember,' he said. 'Always wear your safety belt, in case an extradimensional force tries to drag you screaming through the streets of San Francisco.'

She grinned, nearly laughed. Two minutes ago maybe his jokes would have been grounds for justifiable homicide, but for who she was right now they were just what she needed.

What were the odds of getting a really freaky roll of the dice? One where they'd be able to tell there was a difference?

'Are you all right?' asked the Doctor from the front seat.

'My name's still Sam Jones,' she said. 'And I still want a cigarette.' She fumbled in her pocket for her Benson and Hedges. 'Anything beyond that, I'll worry about later.'

'This is very wrong,' said the Doctor.

They were in a clearing in Golden Gate Park. The Bug was parked in a street somewhere nearby – it had been easy to slip into the park, despite the

curfew. Fitz had rummaged in the Bug's boot until he'd found a torch. He'd kept switching it on to check where they were, off again in case they were seen.

Despite that, it hadn't taken him long to find the place where Kyra had gone all mystical, and now the Doctor was standing there, staring worriedly at nothing they could see.

He raised a finger. 'Look. There.'

Now she could just make out the thread in the moonlight. It was just a faint reflection, maybe a foot or two long, about a metre off the ground. A taut strand of spiderweb hanging in the air, not attached to anything.

'What is it?' Fitz asked.

'It's only partially rotated into three dimensions,' he said. He pushed his finger right through the glimmering line, without affecting it. 'That's why it looks one- or two-dimensional. The rest is still perpendicular to what we can see – woven into higher space, or the time vortex...'

'Yes,' said Fitz, 'but what is it?'

'It's what your friend mistook for a ley line.' The Doctor was scuttling around the silver thread, peering at it from every angle, getting more and more agitated. 'It's part of the fabric of space-time itself. What DNA is to your genetic code, this stuff is to biodata. And it's all just exposed here now. Personality, history, memory, perception, all vulnerable...'

'I'm going to have to ask you again, aren't I?' said Fitz.

The Doctor said, 'It's me.'

And Sam felt the answers burst in her head. It all made sense – she couldn't believe it – and the wave of connections was spreading outward through her brain faster than she could give voice to them. 'Christ! Yeah! Y'see?' she blurted. 'This biodata – it's the stuff of mine that got rearranged to turn me into the other me. And this is the Doctor's, and it's been pulled into real space where anyone can have a go at it.'

'So it's his timeline?'

'Nah, more than that – it's also connected to who he is right now. It's wired straight into his brain. That's how they can mess with what he sees.'

The Doctor was glowing with excitement. 'Yes, yes, exactly! When it's exposed like that, the biodata can be disturbed by certain psi phenomena. Or by someone who can reach into the higher dimensions. Like our friend back there.' He mimed plucking the thread, like a guitar string.

'He could change your *past* the same way,' added Sam.

'Well, it'd be a little more tricky, but –'

The rush of thoughts kept coming. ‘Cause it’s all the same moment, really – the past, the present, they’re all. . .’ She pressed her hands to her forehead. There was more, more that made sense, but she couldn’t reach the words.

‘Easy,’ said Fitz, putting a hand on her shoulder. ‘You’ll pull a neuron.’

Less than a minute, and she’d had more real thoughts than she had in four years of sorting video boxes. And she hadn’t even found the limit of how much this made sense yet.

The Doctor exhaled. ‘So, Fitz, does that answer your question? Mine is: how did it get out here?’

And she had an answer for that, too. ‘It broke into real space when you regenerated. Like you said.’

‘Yes, but only at an infinitesimal point. It shouldn’t affect the rest of the world. . .’

‘Except in really weird circumstances, you said. So something –’

She saw the light bulb go on in his eyes. ‘Such as having a black hole open up right next door. Of course! It must have stretched my biodata like – like cheese on a pizza.’ He mimed wildly. ‘Who knows how far.’

‘And it might even have to do with why Blondie turned into me,’ she went on. ‘I mean, if it was touching your biodata that created her in the first place, then no wonder she got changed again when she ran into a big clump of it. It makes sense. There must be a lot of those strands in the –’

‘Stop!’ the Doctor shouted. Sam flinched.

‘Don’t say it. Don’t even *think* it. We don’t know if he can read our thoughts, remember!’ His hand poked frantically at the metal stud at the back of his neck. ‘That’s what he *wants*.’

‘To know what your biodata is?’

‘No. To know where it is. Imagine if he found the anomaly itself – all those threads in the one place – the whole ball of string. He could turn me into whatever he wanted. Past or present.’

Sam couldn’t help it. ‘Looks like the shoe is on the other foot,’ she told the Doctor.

His shoulders slumped. He said nothing.

Chapter Ten

Somewhere, Just Out of Sight, the Unicorns Are Being Gathered

‘A little lower and to the left,’ said the Doctor. ‘Yes, right there, that’s it!’

I feel, thought Sam as she squatted on her haunches, like an utter prat. She arched her back, trying to keep her balance as she leaned left. Somehow expecting to feel that intangible string when it touched the back of her neck.

‘Good. Down just a hair more. . .’

She hunched and stopped. The sharp tug started inside her spine. It wouldn’t let her go any lower.

‘That’s it,’ she said. ‘I’ve got it.’

‘So have I,’ said Fitz, crouched next to her. He looked as uncomfortable as she felt. Out of the corner of her eye she could just see the silver thread running between them, under his hair, lodged between the back of his neck and the button of his implant.

‘Good,’ said the Doctor again. ‘Now start rocking your heads from side to side. Gently!’

She did. He swayed dizzily in front of her. The wrenching feeling in her nerves tightened. Somewhere behind her, at right angles to the space she could see, the hidden connection between the button and its spinal anchor was scraping across the knife edge of the biodata strand.

‘What if the thread breaks?’ she gritted.

‘It can’t,’ the Doctor declared. ‘It’s a philosophical impossibility.’

‘Couldn’t it be a scientific impossibility instead?’ muttered Fitz through clenched teeth. ‘I’ve got more confidence in those.’

She could feel the disc pulling. The more she filed through, the more it was bent out of place, the more her back and neck were catching on fire. Maybe this thing has pain capabilities, maybe he knows what we’re trying to do because he can read our minds, maybe he can –

Her head jerked forward. The button hit the grass with a muted thump.

She nearly fell face first to the ground, but the Doctor caught her shoulder. He retrieved the disc, flipped it like a coin. She held out her hand automatically, and it landed in her palm. 'One transmitter down, two to go,' he said.

She reached for the back of her neck. It felt like there ought to be a bit of mangled circuitry sticking out. But the skin was untouched, the damage must have all happened in dimension seven or something.

Fitz was still sawing away. 'This isn't doing anything bad to you, is it?' he asked the Doctor, grimacing.

The Doctor waved irritably. 'I'm fine. It's not affecting me at all. So long as you keep the rhododendrons away.'

A tearing rasp of metal, fingernails down the blackboard of her eardrums. Fitz's button fell away. He groped for it in the dark, while the Doctor took up his position on the thread, kneeling in the grass and stretching his neck backward.

'Interesting,' he breathed, as he moved his head softly from side to side. 'Hitting different points on the strand seems to have different effects. Like stimulating different areas of the brain during surgery... This time I'm getting sudden, vivid memories of being ten years old. Getting caught skinny-dipping with a pretty female cousin of my acquaintance.'

He frowned. 'Except that I don't think I ever was.'

'What?' said Sam. 'Skinny-dipping, or getting caught?'

'Or ten years old?' put in Fitz.

The Doctor flashed a smile from an odd angle. 'Well, my people do frown on all three...'

Fitz was comparing their implants. 'Look,' he said, squinting in the moonlight. 'Yours is more complicated.'

Hers did seem to have a lot more fiddly electronic bits etched across the surface – and somehow she knew the Doctor's would be at least as complicated as hers.

'I wonder how much he knows about my biodata,' she muttered.

'Probably quite a lot,' said the Doctor. He didn't seem to care about looking daft as he shimmied against the thread. 'He probably came here knowing all about the biodata. If he can perceive and manipulate higher spatial dimensions, then he's uniquely suited to studying it.'

The button tore off. He pitched over backward. Somehow, his dignity remained unscathed.

Fitz said quietly, 'Kyra said she'd been mapping these ley lines all over the city.'

The Doctor slowly gathered himself up, instantly serious. His eyes searched through the still darkness of the park. ‘The whole city must be a web of vulnerable points. . .’

Sam found herself looking out over the landscape, thinking of the skyline beyond, all those tiny, glittering points of light.

When she looked back, something else was glittering in the forest. The Doctor and Fitz were staring at something, a shape emerging from the trees. She caught a hint of pale movement, a glimmer as the moonlight reflected from something long and sharp.

The Doctor was suddenly running – right at the creature – as though he had known it was about to turn, to bolt back into the trees. Fitz switched on the flashlight and waved the tiny circle of light across the forest, uselessly, picking out the vanishing unicorn, the Doctor plunging into the woods after it.

A is for Ant.

The man known as Griffin was in a library, just before closing time. A fine thread of biodata ran through the back wall of the building, an n-dimensional line of information spun out finer than the finest skein. It ran at an angle, crossing the car park, passing harmlessly through trees and light poles and a snuffling dog, puncturing the building.

Griffin sat at a table in one corner of the library, a children’s picture book clutched in his lap, an arm’s length from the thread. When he chose to, he could look through the wall, see the dog shiver, nosing around at something mysterious in the empty space. The lower species did have some capacity to sense the higher reality, the real world of which they were a tiny, flattened outpost. But not much capacity. The dog went on its way, its encounter with the thread already leaking from its three-dimensional brain.

B is for Bear.

Four-dimensional, if you thought in terms of space-time.

C is for Cat.

He had come here to tie off the string.

That would be all it would take. A single knot in the biodata. One continuous stimulus, jolting the Doctor’s nervous system till he was unable to function. It would have to be a proper n-dimensional knot, but Griffin could tie one of those as easily as tying his shoelace.

The thread hung in the air, stopping part-way across the room, poking out of a bookshelf. Browsing readers took even less notice of it than the dog had,

but Griffin could see how it twisted up and out, rejoining itself in three-space elsewhere in the city.

Griffin had been astonished when the signal from his tags had stopped. He sent tracers out along the signal pathway, which only confirmed what he suspected: the Doctor and his fellow creatures had found some way of removing or destroying the tags.

He had hoped to study the effects of the extruded biodata *in vivo*. So far, he had been operating indirectly: plucking a string here, pulling a thread there, observing the results second-hand through feedback in the biodata stream. The tags would have allowed him to watch the Doctor's responses in real time.

He had learned something from the Doctor's response, however.

He was dangerous.

Not in the way that any specimen might be a little hazardous, with its snapping teeth and its biological poisons. Truly dangerous. The Doctor, it seemed, understood a little of the nature of reality.

D is for Dog.

Only someone who comprehended the higher dimensions could have removed those tags. Griffin had a fair idea of how it might be accomplished, using the biodata strands themselves.

Griffin had never before encountered a specimen who had caught his attention in this way. Who, in some small measure, was like a *person*. He had even suggested Griffin *ask* for the information he wanted.

He contemplated the fragile thread. Dust motes were dancing and whirling around it in the artificial light.

No. There was too much of a risk. If he snarled the biodata here, there might be permanent damage to the geometry of the network. Better to leave it untouched, for now, better to find more effective ways of dealing with these new and fascinating creatures.

D is for Doctor.

The Doctor ran full tilt through the forest as though the trees weren't there, as though he'd been running through forests all his life. His hands pushed against bark, low branches brushed past him like cobwebs. He laughed, just once, easily.

The unicorn was slipping through the forest almost as easily, but it was heading for open ground, where it could accelerate its broad bulk to top speed. It didn't have his ability to slide between the trees. Its horn was getting caught in the branches.

The unicorn burst into a meadow. He followed it, seconds later, watching it gallop away, barely leaving hoof prints. He put his hands on his knees, gathering his breath, and then he followed it across the moonlit grass, his hair and his coat flashing behind him.

He plunged into the darkness of another stretch of trees. He didn't expect to catch the unicorn.

Instead, it caught him. When he hit the next clearing he skidded to a halt, sending up a spray of leaves. The unicorn was facing him, sides heaving.

There were twelve of them. They slid into position, surrounding him.

The one he'd been chasing stepped forward. The horn was like a challenge, a barrier. I dare you to cross this line.

Every detail was right, thought the Doctor. He turned slowly, fascinated. They were shaped like horses, had the size and the muscle of horses. But they were artiodactyl rather than perissodactyl, their cloven hooves scraping at the ground as they watched him. Their tails thrashed, long white whips tipped with a tuft of golden hair, the tails of lions.

The horns were a metre long.

He had seen unicorns once or twice before. These were different. He had the sense of ferocious energy being held in check, their wrath forced down while they considered him. At any moment all that power could erupt in a white explosion of killing, a dozen spiral horns piercing him like the victim of a bungled sword trick.

He raised a hand. The unicorn he'd chased was still snorting and panting, the heat of its body coming off in sweaty waves.

It stared at him along the length of its horn as his fingers came up. He put his hand on its face, softly. It was solid, flesh and bone under his touch.

'Don't be frightened,' he murmured. 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

Griffin had taken the book from the library, pleased with its solidity, its simplicity. It reminded him of his first ever bestiary, the gift of his older brother. The same simple illustrations, simple labels, but to him a revelation.

He was playing a gramophone record, for similar reasons. A flat, black disc, the simplest of shapes, but with a hidden complexity that allowed it to warble out 'Abba Dabba Honeymoon' all by itself. The music echoed heavily from the brick walls of the storeroom.

He had spent most of his apprenticeship on survey expeditions with his brother, measuring and mapping. His spare time had been taken up with long,

lonely rambles, exploring at random, admiring the little creatures he encountered for their beauty or their strangeness.

But that first book had been a revelation. Now he could begin to understand how the life forms related to one another. The book explained that beings from the same biosphere had common genetic origins, and hence common traits. Griffin had spent many happy hours examining those lower creatures, comparing limbs and organs and genes against one another and against his book.

It wasn't long before he began to collect the beings he encountered. It was too difficult to remember which of the thousands of entities he had already encountered and identified; he began to bring them home with him, carefully preserving and labelling them.

His brother thought he was wasting his time, though he was careful not to say so directly. It didn't matter. Griffin was fascinated – and, in the end, his hobby had led to his current employment.

He had sent the Henches out to Golden Gate Park, more in the hope of keeping the Doctor and company on their toes than of successfully capturing them once more. No, they'd be alert now, cautious. But he wanted to see what they'd do.

The Henches were like pets, like the lower creatures that his brother and some of the other surveyors had kept about their persons for affection or entertainment. They had bonded to him, so powerfully and so quickly; they were desperate for a master, an owner, someone to give them shape. Griffin felt great compassion for them, great loyalty to them.

The gramophone recording scratched to its end. Griffin reached over, bent the entire device through a few extra dimensions, and started the record playing again. There, that sounded better, more *authentic*.

That had been what Griffin had liked best about the book. Without his guide, the natural world had seemed like a great tangle of forms and colours, a jumble of species without names or identities. He couldn't tell them apart, couldn't keep track of which creature came from what biosphere. Sometimes he couldn't tell where one organism ended and another began.

With the guide, each creature fell neatly into place. You knew its name, its genome, its provenance, its past and future. You knew precisely what it was.

G is for Goat.

Griffin looked at the chimera. The great bulk of the monster was crammed into a cage just barely large enough to contain it. Muscles rippled beneath her tawny, shimmering coat.

Both heads glared back at him, two sets of yellow, reptilian eyes flashing with hate. A nanny goat's head rose from the chimera's back, just behind the heavy head of a lioness. A thick, scaly tail thrashed angrily, rattling the bars.

Three strands of disparate biodata, elegantly braided like a triple helix. Mere genetics could never produce such a perfect fusion.

He had gaffer-taped the chimera's mouths shut to stop her singeing the floor and walls with her bad-tempered fire. The beast had scorched her own tongues several times before it had learned.

Griffin plucked a test tube from a wooden rack. Inside, a golden fluid was shining with a pale light. He held it up to his eyes, observing its slow movement inside the glass.

G is for Goat, L is for Lion, D is for Dragon. GLD is for... Chimera?

There's no such thing, thought Griffin. He got up, and went to work.

When Sam and Fitz caught up with the Doctor, he was feeding one of the unicorns a sugar cube.

The great creature hesitated, eyes rolling up from the Doctor's outstretched hand to confront them as they ran headlong into the grove. They skidded to a halt.

The little clearing was full of unicorns. Sam counted perhaps a dozen of the glinting horns. The Doctor stood in their midst, like a figure from an extravagant tapestry.

'What do we do now?' hissed Sam.

'You're asking me?' said Fitz.

'I was following *you!*'

'It's all right,' said the Doctor mildly. Sam didn't know whether he was trying to soothe the unicorn, or them. 'We've had a little chat. We're all friends now.'

The unicorn rasped the sugar cube from his palm with a mighty tongue. The Doctor patted its hairy cheek, absently, and motioned to Sam and Fitz that they should sit on the grass.

'We were talking,' growled the unicorn, 'about the grey men, and the man who leads them.'

'The bloke who kidnapped us,' said Sam. The unicorns were a wall of white.

The Doctor nodded. The unicorn said, 'He's a collector. He collects people.'

'People?' said Fitz.

'Animals, creatures, people, whatever we look like to you. He's snatched up mome raths and nightbumpers. He got some of the Mandelbrots, and we know he got that chimera that was tearing things up in Sausalito.'

‘Has he succeeded in capturing any of you?’ said the Doctor.

‘One of us went missing,’ said the unicorn. ‘We don’t know for sure...’

‘I promise you,’ said the Doctor. ‘If we can, we’ll free him.’

‘What about people?’ said Sam. ‘I mean, humans. Or dogs and cats. Ordinary animals.’

‘He’s not interested in them,’ said the unicorn. ‘Only the newcomers.’

‘He’s not a naturalist,’ said the Doctor. ‘More of an unnaturalist...’

The unicorn shook dust and twigs from his yellow mane. ‘We were on our way to Pippali to gather the rare spices when we were... Your language hasn’t got the words. We were torn loose. We fell, here.’

‘Not here,’ said one of the other unicorns. ‘On the streets. It took us a long time to find *here*.’

‘When his grey men began hunting us, we thought he’d brought us here for that purpose. But then we realised how many other beings have been dragged off course by the... weight in the air. We don’t dare teleport now. Only run.’

‘You can teleport? Fascinating. How do you –’

‘Doctor,’ said Sam. ‘There’s a mad scientist after our arses. Can the nature lesson wait until later?’

‘Very well. You should be safe here,’ The Doctor told the unicorn. ‘You’re well hidden, and there’s plenty to eat.’

The unicorn lowered his head, his horn pointing straight forward like a lance. Sam’s heart pounded, and she found herself getting to her feet. ‘What is it?’

‘The grey men,’ said the unicorn.

In an instant the unicorns were moving, dissolving into the trees like cream into coffee. ‘Come on,’ said the Doctor.

They had enough of a head start over the Henches that they made it back to the Bug without breaking a sweat, or interrupting the Doctor’s enthusiastic burble for a moment. ‘It’s astounding,’ he said, ‘Unicorns, jithretani, a chimera – so many species have leaked through from across the dimensional barriers, thanks to the scar. I could spend a year here studying them and not run out of things to find. They –’

He yelped. Something was staring at them with tiny red eyes from the roof of the Bug.

It scolded them and darted off, chittering, vanishing across the road and into the park. Sam stifled a laugh. ‘It’s just a squirrel,’ she said.

‘You never can tell,’ said the Doctor.

Once they got the car moving, the Doctor's stream of words abruptly dried up. Sam leaned against the window, cool glass against her cheek. She was so tired her head felt as though someone had been chewing on it.

'So now where?' asked Fitz.

The Doctor's mind was lost in the traffic. 'We can't go back for the TARDIS – the stabiliser's still not ready yet.' He sighed. 'What does he want? What does he truly want?'

'He's like a kid collecting insects,' said Sam. 'He just wants a jarful of insects to take home.'

'You think there's more to it than that,' said Fitz.

The Doctor drummed his fingers on the wheel. 'The unicorn said he'd been here for weeks, maybe months. Sorry, Fitz. But what's he been doing in all of that time?'

'Sorry?' asked Fitz.

'I said but what's he –'

'No, I mean you just said you were sorry.'

'Oh, I was terribly rude to you earlier, after the first Wild Hunt hit Sam, I just wanted to apologise. Maybe he's just been preparing for my arrival...'

She could almost hear Fitz's gearbox grinding as he tried to shift. 'Oh. Think nothing of it,' he said.

The Doctor frowned. 'If he's been planning something for me, I probably *should* think something of it...'

'Never mind,' sighed Fitz, with a hint of a smile. 'He's probably just been busy collecting other creatures. He couldn't have known for sure you'd turn up, even if he could tell you'd arrived from your biodata somehow.'

'How come your contacts never noticed him?' said Sam suddenly. 'If the unicorns know about him, how come they don't?'

'Maybe he hasn't been trying to collect them,' said Fitz. 'He's after unusual specimens, remember, not the locals. Even the weird ones.'

The Doctor said, 'We've got to understand him to know what he'll do next. Think. What would we do if we were in his shoes?'

Fitz froze. 'Oh shag,' he said. 'We *are* in his shoes.'

The Doctor turned to look at him. Fitz said, 'You're stuck in an unfamiliar city, looking for someone who's hiding from you – what do you do? Ask people who might have an idea where he is.'

Sam closed her eyes. 'And he's been asking exactly the same people we have.'

'Yeah. Experts on weird incidents. Impossible creatures.'

‘That’s why they didn’t mention him,’ said Sam. ‘Your whole network – it’s compromised.’

‘And, when he wanted to reel us in, he had Walter lead us right into a trap.’

Opening her eyes again was an effort. The Doctor was looking right at her, a frown furrowing the lines of his face.

‘But what does he *want*?’ he said.

Three smaller cages flanked the large, empty one. Griffin opened the door of one of them. He gently lowered the newborn kid to the floor of her new home. The little animal shivered in a mixture of confusion and acceptance.

The lion cub tried to growl, wobbling on her baby paws. The sound turned into a mew. Only the dragon had not been reduced to infancy, coiled in a fat black heap in the third cage, filling it to the top. Or perhaps she had; there was still so little known about the creatures from the more exotic three-spaces.

The dragon would go in Griffin’s box. She was now precisely the sort of creature in which the Society would be interested. The other two were of no consequence; he could release them in some nearby wooded area. The fact of their existence was enough.

There. He had shown it could be done: the separation of one of these component creatures into its constituent biodata. The information – biological, ontological, historical – was discrete rather than additive. Any fanciful being, any combination of species, could be reversed, could be distilled back into its original essences.

Put right. Put back to the way it *should* be.

Griffin regarded the three cages, the empty large cage, with the quiet satisfaction of a collector whose collection is in order.

Chapter Eleven

Kyra

Sam let Fitz knock on the door. He knew this woman, he'd made the phone call, he should handle the explanations. She stood back and smiled as a dark-haired, middle-aged woman appeared, blinking at them.

Was this what it was like to be on the other side of the door?

'Ah, sorry, Kyra,' Fitz began, 'I hate to disturb you at this hour –'

'It's vitally important!' Oh great, jump right in there, Doctor. 'We need to know about someone who's come to you. It's a matter of life and death!'

Before anyone could stop him, he'd barged through the door and started whirlwinding through the lounge. His flapping coat knocked the stack of newspapers on the coffee table out of kilter.

'Hey! Wait! Who?' shouted Kyra.

'Ah, um, friend of mine,' Fitz improvised. 'Sorry about this, he's being badly affected by disturbances in the ley lines.'

The Doctor had gusted into the kitchen. Sam, Fitz, and Kyra followed by default, the door slamming shut behind them.

'I don't care what you're being affected by,' said Kyra to the Doctor's back as he stared at her notice board. Her hair was a tangled explosion around her head. 'Don't you come stomping into my home like –' She caught a coffee cup as the Doctor turned sharply, elbowing it off the table.

The Doctor stood suddenly, perfectly still. He raised a finger. 'What does he call himself?'

Kyra planted her hands on her hips, shooting Fitz a fiery glare. 'To whom are you referring?'

'He came to you because you'd been recommended.' The Doctor swept up a pile of plates from the table and stacked them lopsidedly in the sink. 'Because he'd been asking questions. Asking around. All the people interested in fairies and filksongs and little green men, the world one step away from reality.'

The Doctor hefted something from the back of the kitchen chair. Sam stared – it was a big, chunky lizard. ‘And when he started asking about the “ley lines” they sent him to the expert in the field. They sent him to you.’

It was an iguana, Sam realised, almost a metre long. The big reptile clung sleepily to the Doctor’s arm as he zapped Kyra with his best hot-blue stare.

‘Griffin,’ said Kyra.

The Doctor looked at the iguana, puzzled.

‘He called himself Griffin,’ she said. ‘You’d better sit down before you knock anything else over.’

‘Black,’ said Sam.

‘White with two sugars, please,’ said Fitz.

Kyra’s kitchen was thickening with the percolator smell. ‘What about you, Doctor?’

He shook his head, trying to get the iguana to latch on to the curtain. Sam didn’t want to imagine what he’d be like on a caffeine buzz.

‘Mr Griffin told me he’d come here to study the strange wildlife people keep spotting. The dragons and such.’ Kyra was conducting a bizarre bit of alchemy with her own cup, adding a pinch of this and a teaspoon of that.

‘And gryphons,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘I don’t suppose the name he gave you sounded even the slightest bit questionable, did it?’

Kyra shot him a look. ‘I’ve got friends named Raven Moonstone and Venus O’Willendorf. Why should I care what he calls himself?’

‘Never mind.’ The Doctor had discovered the iguana’s home, a tall cage filled with climbing shelves. He tried lowering his arm into the cage.

‘He’s doing a study. Classifying and sorting out the impossible creatures. Accounting for them, he said.’ She brought a tray of cups to the table, where Fitz and Sam sat.

‘Funny thing was,’ she said, ‘he wasn’t good at telling the imaginary ones from the real ones. He took my poor little pet for a dragon. I had to show him picture books before he got the idea.’

‘He’s not from Earth,’ said the Doctor, deadpan. Which is difficult to do with a lizard on your arm, thought Sam.

‘Ah,’ said Kyra. ‘Well, that would explain a few things.’

‘He means it,’ said Fitz.

‘I’m sure he does,’ said Kyra. ‘Griffin did tell me to keep an eye out for someone like you. You’re a rival scientist. Or something. Right?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m a specimen. One he’d like to account for in as permanent a fashion as possible, I suspect.’

Kyra took a deep breath. ‘I see.’

‘I want to impress upon you what a serious matter this is,’ said the Doctor, pulling a face at the iguana. ‘We need your help. This Griffin, this unnaturalist, has already led us into a trap. Now it’s his turn.’

Kyra sat back, folding her arms. ‘Which of you am I supposed to believe?’

‘Us, of course,’ beamed the Doctor. With his free hand, he swept up their empty cups from the table and headed for the sink.

Kyra just watched him. The Doctor paused, a bottle of washing-up liquid in his hand.

‘Do you know why he’s interested in dragons?’ he said, softly. Kyra shook her head. ‘He collects them,’ said the Doctor. He turned back to the cup.

They sat there for a few moments, in silence except for the splashing in the sink. The Doctor put the mugs on a wooden rack to dry. Kyra said nothing.

‘You know,’ said Sam, ‘I was just thinking – a few days ago, I was in your place. In my flat, with the Doctor spouting all of these bizarre things at me. But you’ve got to understand. It’s all real. It really is all real.’

‘I know that, girl,’ said Kyra irritably. ‘I’m a goddamn witch.’

‘Good,’ said the Doctor, cruising back. ‘Excellent. Have an iguana.’ Kyra peeled her pet from his arm. ‘Here’s the plan.’

Kyra had fed them lentil soup from a huge old iron pot. ‘Guaranteed newt-free,’ she had said. Sam had eyed her plateful suspiciously.

Now the Doctor was in the kitchen, tinkering with the tags. He was using a combination of jeweller’s screwdrivers and cutlery from Kyra’s kitchen drawers, fiddling with the five-dimensional innards of the flat metal discs.

Sam was idly wondering where the witch kept her stash. She lay back on the sofa, trying to let the exhaustion sink out of her into the worn fabric.

Fitz was clenched like a fist at the other end of the sofa, watching Kyra make *the* phone call. Kyra sat on a wooden chair, elbows resting on a round-end table, the phone clutched between her ear and shoulder.

She had dialled a long, long weird number. ‘You can hear all of these clicks and clunks,’ she said, ‘like your call is being rerouted via Alpha Centauri.’

Fitz started to say something, but Kyra held up her hand for silence. ‘Yeah? Hello? Hi, it’s me.’

Sam tried hard to relax, but her heart was jerking, her hands and feet and skull remembering. Kyra said, ‘I’ve got something new for you, if you’re inter-

ested. Yes. A new node. It's an area I hadn't explored before. Up in Mount Tam National Park. You still got that map I gave you? OK, hang on, here are the co-ordinates.'

She waited. Sam imagined she could hear the unnaturalist's voice worming through the telephone. Could he see them through the wires? Could he reach right through the phone and get them?

Kyra said, 'Could you not bring those grey men of yours? Look, they frighten the hell out of me. They always look as though they're just about to pull off my arms, or something. Yeah. Yes. How's noon? Yeah, OK. I'll see you then.'

She put down the phone. Fitz partly uncurled. Sam reached her feet out along the length of the sofa, pushed her toes against him in a tiny gesture of comfort.

Fitz flustered, 'Well? Is it OK? What did he say?'

'He'll meet me there,' she said. 'He bought the Mount Tam thing – it's miles away from the leys, but he doesn't know that. It should be nice and quiet there.' Kyra sat back, smoothing her wild mass of hair into place. 'This is more like it,' she said. 'Like the old days.'

'The old days?' said Fitz.

Kyra pointed at a framed picture on the wall. 'See that?'

Fitz got up. 'The painting?'

'A friend of mine did it. Look. It's based on the news photo – see the smaller frame next door?'

Fitz turned to look at the newspaper clipping. It was framed behind glass, neat columns of text dangling from a big photo of people struggling. student protest turns violent, said the headline.

The painting was kind of abstract, until you looked a bit closer. You could start to make out people in those swirls of colour, a face distorted with anger here, a raised fist there, a couple of people carrying something.

'That's me being strangled by the policeman,' said Kyra.

'Nice,' said Fitz, staring at the clipping.

'People cared back then,' said Kyra. 'We cared. The kids these days, being a hippie, to them it's a fashion. They dress up like rebels. We *were* rebels.'

'I went on a violent student protest once,' said Sam, yawning. 'At least, that's what the paper said it was. Somebody broke a door handle, I think.'

She was pleased when Kyra gave her a look of veiled surprise. She leaned back in her flared jeans and size-too-small T-shirt, doing her best not to look like the radical high-school type. 'They have to package you like that,' said Kyra. 'If you're violent students, you're just kids acting up. Maybe they admire

your principles, in a vague sort of way. But they've got to pigeonhole you. Otherwise they might have to take you seriously. God forbid, you might even really challenge what they think.'

'Oh, right *on*,' Fitz snapped, out of nowhere. 'After all, if the students did take over, everything would be suddenly cool, right?'

There was a sudden abrupt silence on all sides. Sam started to ask him where on Earth that had come from, but before she could the Doctor emerged from the kitchen, pleased with himself.

'There's a definite pattern to the biodata,' he announced. 'At first I thought the distribution of strands and nodes was random, but there's some sort of strange attractor at work.'

'Speaking of strange attractors,' said Sam, pointing. Kyra's pet had returned to the Doctor's person, and was draped sleepily over his shoulder.

'If Griffin hasn't worked out the maths,' the Doctor said, 'we have a great advantage. We should be able to work out where any unmapped nodes are hidden away.'

He reached out and took Kyra's hand. 'Now we have your help, we have a real chance of resolving this. Not just Griffin – with your maps and your ability to interact with the biodata, we may be able to fold the entire web of biodata back on itself. It could be a way of healing the scar.'

'And putting Cthulhu back to sleep,' said Fitz.

Kyra gave him a sharp look. 'What's that all about?' she said.

The iguana leapt from the Doctor's shoulder, landing on an overstuffed chair. It whipped its tail back and forth, angrily.

The Doctor's body snapped into a rigid line, his arms thrown up in front of his face as though to ward off some unbearably bright light. Sam leapt out of her seat, but Fitz snapped, 'Don't touch him!'

'Wayzgoose,' said the Doctor, with absolute clarity. His hands clenched into fists, and he bent double, as though something was tugging irresistibly at the lines of his body.

At last he fell, taut limbs going loose. Sam was in time to catch him.

Kyra was putting a towel on the end of the bed when the Doctor woke up. 'This city *really* hates me,' he said.

'Hello,' said Kyra. The room was dark. It sounded like the kids were settling down, out in the living room.

'Oh, my head.' The Doctor struggled to sit up.

'Careful,' said Kyra. 'Your aura is still faint.'

‘That hasn’t happened before,’ said the Doctor. ‘It was the biodata strands – the leys – but something else, something far more intense. . .’ He pressed his hands against his eyes.

‘You said I had the ability to interact with the leys,’ said Kyra. ‘Obviously I’m not the only one.’

The Doctor was shaking his head. ‘It wasn’t Griffin. Not this time.’

He looked up, caught her staring. ‘What is it?’

‘Your aura,’ she told him. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

She knelt down beside the bed, taking his hand. His skin was very soft, very smooth, as though it was immune to the wear and tear of life. She stared into the lines of his palm in fascination.

‘You’re the missing piece of this puzzle. You’re not just a scientist. You’re not just watching the city change, watching the strangeness. You’re part of it. You’re important.’

‘That was why you helped Griffin,’ said the Doctor. Kyra looked up at him, nodding. ‘Because he had a connection to what’s happening.’

‘I’ve been here for most of my life,’ said Kyra. ‘It’s my town. I’ve taken sandwiches to starving people in the park and I’ve chanted to raise energy against earthquakes. I remember what happened at midnight on New Year’s Eve two years ago, even if most people don’t. Whatever’s happening to San Francisco, I have to be part of it.’

‘I understand,’ said the Doctor.

‘When you go to confront him,’ said Kyra, ‘I’ll go with you.’

‘It could be very dangerous,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘My companions and I count for something in Griffin’s eyes. He’ll treat us with care. He won’t see you in the same way.’

She got to her feet. ‘The city should have a voice. I’ll be there.’

‘Time for you to get some shuteye,’ Kyra told Sam.

‘Nah,’ said Sam. ‘The jet lag’s working in my favour now.’

‘Well, there’s no point in staying up. He’s not going anywhere.’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Sam. She glanced towards the guest bedroom, where the Doctor was sleeping – they hoped it was sleep – among the crammed bookshelves. They’d had to take Kyra’s bicycle off the bed, neatly laid out on the blanket, before they could tuck him in.

‘The best way you can help him is by keeping yourself in good shape,’ insisted Kyra. She was rummaging through her linen closet. She pulled out a battered

old pillow, and a chewed quilt. 'Hand-made by my friend, Monster. When she went all domestic,' she said, smiling.

Fitz had already snagged the sofa, stretched out under a throw-rug patterned with funky designs in light blue and green – VW symbols, apples, smileys. He looked dead to the world.

She curled up on the floor below him, not quite having the energy to reach up and turn out the light yet.

Now there was nothing but the clock ticking, and the endless faint whirr of the refrigerator, and the slowly growing sound of hooves.

Oh, not *again*.

She lay like a lump as the sound drowned her out. She wasn't moving – no chance – not even all the forces of time and space could get her out of this time it had barely felt like a blink.

That was it. Keep your balance, stay low. She couldn't stop it affecting her, but she didn't have to be dragged along with it.

In the dark at the other end of the house, she could just hear the Doctor shuffling back to work at his maps. Picking up as though that last attack had never happened.

Maybe it hadn't. If the Wild Hunt did this to *her* biodata, and his was woven through the whole of everything round here, who knew what it was doing to *him* when they weren't looking?

But how could you tell? If the present moment was the only thing that stayed fixed when the Hunt passed through, then if he was telling the truth he had hundreds and hundreds of years' worth of life that could shift around.

She rolled over, her elbows poking the floor. Maybe it was like cracking a whip. The present held more or less where it was, but the other end – the distant past – lashed all over the place.

But that would mean the earliest bits of his life would change the most. Which would mean maybe his parents could be different, and that was a load of bollocks, wasn't it?

Had her parents changed when she changed? Had their parents changed when she changed? What about her great-grandparents (she couldn't remember their names)? Maybe they were different people from the ones whose names she couldn't remember before.

Maybe this went on all the time.

Maybe the whole universe revolved around the present moment, and everything outside that, past and future, was up for grabs.

Maybe she should get some sleep.

She reached up to turn out the light, and saw that Fitz was awake, staring into space and chewing on a pen. He was holding it between his first two fingers.

‘Want a light?’ she asked.

The pen hastily exited his mouth. ‘Ha,’ he said. ‘Nah. Just thinking.’

‘Yeah.’ She settled her chin on the armrest, a few inches from his face, and looked past him into the middle distance. ‘He’s got the cure, you know.’

‘For what?’

‘Smoking,’ said Sam. ‘He said he’s got something in his medical kit.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ said Fitz. ‘But would you really want the mad professor messing with your biology? On second thoughts,’ he added slyly, ‘don’t answer that.’

Sam stuck out her tongue at him. He lay back on the sofa, folding his arms behind his head. She didn’t really feel like turning out the light just yet, so she sat there and let her mind wander through half-formed ideas.

‘It’s all rubbish,’ he said, suddenly. Her eyes focused on his face. ‘What she said. Being a real rebel, being a hero who makes a difference – like it was something you should *want* to do. But I’ve been through it, I’ve seen it.’

‘I thought so,’ she murmured.

She let the conversation hang there. He hunched over on the sofa a little, drawing inward, trying to disappear under the throw-rug.

He scowled. ‘Go on. Ask. You know you want to.’

‘You don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Oh, but surely that’s your cue to start picking at it. Probing my inner pain.’ He snorted. ‘Prying at me. Just like always.’

‘Like always,’ she repeated.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘*She* would.’

Eventually he gave a wry smile and filled in the silence. ‘And I was all braced for it, too. Having to tell her more stories from my sordid past.’

‘Bet you had the speech all worked out.’

‘Oh, I’d have left a lot of it out, talking to her. I wouldn’t have to remind her that the last time I was in Kyra’s years of peace ‘n’ love, I spent eight months in China as a nicely brainwashed little Red Guard.’

‘Christ.’ She was no history student, but she knew enough to know that was bad. ‘You mean the little red book, and everything?’ He nodded, lip curling. ‘So, um. . . do I really want to know what you did?’

He hesitated, then gave an embarrassed smile. ‘Banged a tambourine and sang songs in praise of Chairman Mao, mostly.’

She just stared at him, trying to picture this. ‘Bloody hell. You *were* brainwashed.’

‘They were students, mostly,’ he said, with a half-hearted shrug and a stare at the wall. ‘Students who got taken seriously. Organisers of spontaneous demonstrations. Burners of books. Providers of peer pressure to all and sundry in the name of Mao.’

‘Not death squads, then. . .’

‘Nah, not our department.’ Sam wasn’t quite sure if he was joking. ‘You don’t want to kill the enemies of the people: you want to change them. Reshape them so they fit in with the way the world’s supposed to be. You only really win if they agree you’re right.’ No matter how much cynicism he heaped on the words, it was still a bit scary how easily they rolled off his tongue.

‘But you’re back with the Doctor. You got out before it was too late, right?’

‘Yeah, yeah. I turned away from the path of darkness, and I’m a better person for it. Sure.’ He unscrunched, finally meeting her eyes, facing her head-on. ‘But in the *weeks* since I saw the error of my ways, I’ve already almost managed to get an entire species wiped out, all by myself. Just ‘cause I thought I was doing the *heroic* thing.’

He gave a small, shaky laugh. ‘So you can see why I think I’d better not get involved for a while.’

Christ, this was real. This wasn’t *imagine* if I was brainwashed, *imagine* if I nearly got a whole species killed. What was she supposed to say?

He was pretending to be cool about it. That was like a layer, over the bitterness. He added another layer with a wry smile, another layer with a little shrug. ‘Pah. Danger to myself and others, that’s what I am.’

She reached out and squeezed his hand through the throw-rug.

Somewhere behind them, the Doctor’s chair scraped. They heard him pace, stop, talk a bit of gibberish, probably to the iguana.

‘It’s all his fault,’ Fitz said suddenly. ‘All the impossible heroic bullshit, he *does* it. So you try to do it. You try to be a hero, and it blows up right in your face, because you’re not him.’ He gave a tired smile. ‘I try to be Frodo, and the best I can manage is – well, Sam.’

‘I thought that was my job.’

‘Nah, I mean Samwise. *Lord of the Rings*. Y’know?’ Sam shrugged, she’d missed the movie ‘cause it looked too crap even for the video gang. ‘The eternal sidekick.’

‘Oh, you mean like Robin.’

'Yeah. The hero's best friend.' The corner of his mouth crinkled, and he leaned his own chin on the armrest, a few inches from her own. 'The one who never gets the girl.'

'Thought that was *him*.'

'Like I said, I wouldn't know.'

For a moment, the layers weren't there: his eyes were sad, nothing else but sad and lonely. Eventually he was going to kiss her. Inevitable as water going down the plughole.

'So,' said Sam, 'what would *she* do now?' He raised an eyebrow. 'After she'd got you to bare your soul.'

He snorted. 'She'd be so bloody *understanding*.'

'Yeah,' she laughed. 'Yeah, sounds like her. "I feel your pain", right?'

'You got it. Why would she want to feel my pain? *I* don't want to feel my pain.'

He settled back against the sofa. Their fingers were still gently interlocked.

'Well I won't make that mistake, then,' she said.

'Nah, don't worry, you're doing fine. Course, you are doing exactly what she'd be doing. Getting me to talk my lips off.'

'For someone who doesn't want to talk about it,' said Sam, 'you've certainly turned talking about not wanting to talk about it into a great chance to talk about it.'

She reached out and ruffled his hair. 'My ghastly secret, revealed,' he said. 'Come on, let's get some sleep.'

The Doctor stopped with the key in the lock.

The house was one of San Francisco's painted ladies, one of a row of slender homes, their Victorian ornamentation and their window edges painted pristine white. The front door was reached from the street by a flight of steps, a yellowish light burning above the entrance.

He had left his companions sleeping at Kyra's house. They needed the rest, but the intense attack had left him full of nervous energy. And curiosity, about something Kyra had said.

He shouldn't quite be here. But that seldom stopped him from going anywhere.

He turned the key. The front door to Professor Joyce's house swung open, silently.

He had been expecting to find Joyce and his wife at home. But the house was dark, except for a lamp on a table in the front hallway.

The Doctor carefully shut the front door. He brushed his fingers across the pile of papers on the hallway table. There was a paperweight, a glassy globe of liquid. When he picked it up, tiny stars swirled through it, glittering in the dim light.

He put the paperweight back where it had been, carefully. He didn't want to leave too many traces of his visit, too much disarray.

The door to the front room was open. A quick look around wouldn't hurt.

The Doctor slipped inside. He reached for the light switch, thought better of it, and instead turned on a lamp on an end table.

The front room reminded him at once of the console room – smaller, of course, but with the same sense of home, of familiar comfort. Thick curtains were drawn across the three windows facing the street. There were neat rows of books packed into a pair of matching cases, an upright box for newspapers and magazines, polished leather furniture. Here was a forgotten glass next to the easy chair, there was a pair of Anne's shoes under the coffee table.

The Doctor sat down in the easy chair. His body sank into it, his eyes closing of their own accord.

He imagined the comfortable evenings spent here. The radio on the bookcase playing softly. The magazines, filled with thoughtful commentary, good fiction. Or the little pile of letters, donations to be made, notes to be sent to Senators and Representatives.

He could already see the rest of the house. The well-equipped kitchen – Joyce had always liked to cook – with its orderly cupboards and drawers. The soft colours of the bedroom. Perhaps a study or library, more books, old favourites and sturdy works of reference.

You would always know where to find something in this house. Not because it was obsessively orderly – Joyce liked order, but only because it made life easier. The soup ladle or the paperclips would always be in the same place. Or your car keys, thought the Doctor. He had once spent a week searching the TARDIS for the keys to the Bug.

What would his house be like? He would have to start from scratch, his books and his equipment and his centuries of souvenirs all destroyed with the TARDIS, gone down with the ship. Daniel and Anne could help him pick out furniture.

'I've been here for most of my life,' Kyra had said. Just a few decades. But in that time she'd become part of the place. Not the concrete and paving. The mountains and the salt water, the harmony of languages, the constant bubbling of tourists and newcomers, the famous places and the forgotten people.

He could do that. A lifetime to Kyra Skye was only a handful of heartbeats to him. He could become this city's protector, the way that she thought of herself. Come to know it intimately, its quirks and rhythms. Keep it safe from earthquakes and edacious extraterrestrials.

But he would have so much more time than Kyra ever could. He bet Joyce knew what to do in a quake, where to meet with dissenters and dreamers, where all the best restaurants were.

He could have Carolyn and James over for dinner, go cycling with Grace. Long chats about new books and old adventures at a favourite bar. Would Fitz stay here as well? Would Sam? Would they work together, fending off alien invasions and defeating mad scientists?

The Doctor climbed out of the easy chair. A little too easy, he thought. He inched back the curtains, looked out at the city lights, thinking of fireworks over the Bay.

Day Zero

Aliens are the new underclass, man. They're our Them, the ones who are gonna rush over our border and overrun our comfy middle-class life. The DW Griffiths of today can't get away with having hordes of rabid blacks out to violate our women – but if you make 'em so they take 'em to a ship in outer space, you can have 'em probe their naughty bits to your heart's content. And they'll impregnate our women with their twisted alien DNA, too, if you don't keep an eye out for them. Can't have 'em polluting the race with their half-breeds. Gotta fight that future.

But it's different this time, right? It's not the Blacks, not the Reds, it's the Greys, man.

– Eldin Sanchez, *Interesting Times*, 31 October 2002

Chapter Twelve

Stuffed and Mounted

Professor Daniel Joyce strolled across the grass towards the physics building, devoting his mental powers to nothing more strenuous than wondering whether the morning drizzle was heavy enough to warrant putting up his umbrella. It was a good feeling, to put all the plans and procedures and things-to-do aside, even if only for a little while.

One of the things-to-do was standing under a tree ahead. For a moment Joyce was tempted to change course to avoid him, but the Doctor had spotted him and was already bounding over.

‘It’s not –’ began Joyce.

The Doctor talked right over him. ‘Hello, Professor, how was your night out? What did you and Anne go to see?’

‘Beautiful,’ he said. ‘*La Traviata* at the Opera House.’ In fact he and Anne had had a wonderful evening watching a dinner-theatre production of a knockabout farce, but it never hurt to mislead someone a little every once in a while.

‘How was the food?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Hmm?’

‘At the dinner theatre.’

Joyce snorted. ‘Never you mind. It was delicious. Your device still isn’t ready yet.’

‘Ohh –’ The Doctor screwed up his face. ‘Gobstoppers!’

‘These things take time,’ said Joyce. ‘You’ll just have to have patience, Doctor.’

‘Very, very funny. There’s less than a day left –’

‘I know, I know. It’s not as if either my assistant or I wasn’t working on it for most of the night,’ he added grumpily. ‘In between trying to squeeze in all the other experiments we have to finish before you heal the wounded space-time.’ In fact, those Advanced Research Project experiments could probably have been finished a week or two ago, except that there was no way he would have let them take priority over his paper for the Indian-Pakistani antinuclear-initiative conference. That was just the way it was; when his particular corner of the

world's problems was in need of attention, then for a while all the cosmic stuff could just go hang.

He grumbled his way up the steps to the physics building. 'Two years' worth of painstaking enquiry, and it all has to get wrapped up in a day –'

'My TARDIS is dying in there,' said the Doctor, 'What if it were your –'

'Oh, spare me the tasteless analogies,' growled Joyce. 'It's still your mess you've got into, and I'm just helping you clean it up. Again.' He prodded a finger into the Doctor's chest as they headed down the hall. 'Who do you think had to rush over to get that prattling fool Wagg a spare beryllium chip?'

'Oh, is *that* it? Well did you know I spent a whole *week* cleaning up the after-effects of your visit to Youkali –'

'That was ages ago –'

'Or how about the time –'

Each stopped and motioned for the other to finish what he was saying. They ended up just staring at each other for a moment, then both burst out chuckling. Joyce slapped the Doctor on the arm.

'Come along,' said Joyce, 'I'll show you – excuse me, son, could you hold that for us?'

The student he'd called out to held the lift door open for them.

'I shouldn't have even had to bother you about this,' muttered the Doctor, pacing in the confines of the lift as it rose. 'If the Time Lords had ever responded to my message, I still don't know why they didn't. . .'

'Maybe they want you to be stranded,' said Joyce.

The Doctor wheeled around, gaping.

'Well think about it,' Joyce went on. 'You must make them very nervous. You topple governments on a spare weekend. . . What do they think will happen if you ever turn your attention back home?'

'Ridiculous.' Joyce winced; the Doctor had nearly taken the student's head off with one of his expansive hand gestures. 'I'm a personal friend of the President. They would never dare –'

'Oh? Who is President there nowadays?'

'Flav– No, Rom–' A frown creased his forehead. 'Do you know, I'm not entirely sure.'

The lift doors opened, and the student exited as quickly as possible.

'If worst comes to worst, this isn't such a bad place,' Joyce said as they rounded the corner to his lab. 'I've got settled here.'

'This is for you.' The Doctor took a sealed plastic container out of his pocket. 'Sounds ghastly.'

Joyce took the box. Inside, the hyperdrive from the Basardi spacecraft was glowing softly, like some particularly long-forgotten leftovers. 'Why? What's the matter with it?'

'I mean, getting settled sounds ghastly. Not my cup of tea, milk, two sugars, and a couple of digestive biscuits, if you know what I mean.'

'You can't tell me you haven't thought about it,' said Joyce.

'I don't want to think about it. Not until I have to.'

Joyce sighed to himself; the Doctor just couldn't grasp it. He'd get so much done in the space of just a few days – you couldn't deny that – but he just couldn't seem to handle the concept of staying in one place. Working on one corner of a problem, over the course of a lifetime. Having restaurants you ate in regularly, instead of once in a blue moon.

Ah well, the Doctor made that sort of life impossible for himself, just by being who he was. No place would *dare* stay the same around him.

'If only I could get to the TARDIS laboratories,' sighed the Doctor, wandering through the lab and leaving a little trail of disarrayed objects in his wake. The benches were littered with badly disguised anachronistic equipment. The Doctor stooped to stare at a four-space vibrometer disguised as an oscilloscope. There was a wild signal waggling across the screen. 'The feedback from the hyperdrive?'

'Almost certainly,' said Joyce.

The Doctor nodded, curls flopping. 'I had a long chat with the navigator trine aboard their ship. The scar's signals distorted the membranes inside the drive – so in turn it's been sending out its own dimensional warbling.'

'Like a distress beacon gone wrong,' said Joyce.

'Take a recording of it before you shut it down,' said the Doctor. 'You should be able to correct your distorted readings from the data.'

'My very thoughts.' Joyce eased the Tupperware container into a locked chemicals cupboard and turned the key.

The Doctor was still rummaging on the bench. 'Is this a remote force transmitter? Mind if I borrow it?' he said, slipping it into his pocket.

'Be my guest,' said Joyce drily. 'We have dozens.'

'I thought you might. Wait a moment,' said the Doctor. 'What about this?' He ran his fingers over the grey-green metal case of an outdated chemical balance. The front came away easily, revealing a small, sparkling alien device. It was a

perfect, glassy sphere, unreflecting, its surface studded with dozens of slender crystal spikes.

‘Oh, the thingummy?’ said Joyce.

The Doctor brushed some of the spikes with his fingertips. ‘It’s still warm,’ he said. ‘You ran this last night, didn’t you?’

Joyce said, ‘There are some aspects of the anomaly we still don’t fully understand. There were one or two tests. . .’

‘You must have known what this would do to me,’ breathed the Doctor. ‘You must have paralysed the entire network of biodata strands. Like freezing a river.’

‘Just for a few seconds,’ said Joyce. ‘Would you like to see the printouts?’

‘You knew,’ insisted the Doctor. ‘You knew that it was an extrusion of my biodata.’

‘I had my suspicions,’ said Joyce. ‘You’ve never needed to have things spelled out for you. You’re bright enough to work them out for yourself.’

The Doctor leaned across Joyce’s desk. ‘Is this what happens when you stay in your own little corner of the world?’ he said. ‘Everything else – everyone else takes second place to your concerns?’

‘I’ll thank you, of all people, not to lecture me on those grounds. What with you torturing your TARDIS and all. You know what’s necessary sometimes –’

‘Oh yes.’ The Doctor’s mouth twisted. He advanced on Joyce around the desk, reaching out his arm towards him. ‘I’ve still got spots of blood on my shirt cuff. See? From a few weeks ago, the last time I had to do what was *necessary*. And after that, “necessary” is the last thing I’d want to settle for.’

He stopped inches away from Joyce’s face and lowered his voice. ‘Now I want you to look me in the eye and tell me – was what you did necessary?’ His eyes flicked upwards, locked on to Joyce’s. ‘Or was there a better way?’

Joyce took a long, slow breath.

‘Yes,’ he said flatly. ‘Yes, it was necessary. I wish we could have given you a bit of warning, but you’re very difficult to keep track of.’

‘Then tell me what you’re doing,’ breathed the Doctor.

What I’m doing, thought Joyce. What I’m doing is trying to find a little part of the universe to call my own, and keep it neat and tidy. That’s all. It’s just that sometimes cleaning up your own back yard means having to work on cleaning up the bigger messes. Especially the messes you had a part in creating.

‘When you’re older,’ he said. ‘Now, let’s see if we can get some work done on this gadget of yours.’

Sam was sitting in Kyra's lounge, watching Fitz pacing back and forth on the balcony. He'd said he needed a breath of air after Kyra put on that Kathmandu album. He had a smoke in his mouth, but he hadn't lit it. Not yet, anyway.

Kyra had fed them pancakes with maple syrup – 'Real maple syrup, not that imitation rubbish' – until they could hardly move. Sam had settled on to the couch to wait for breakfast to wear off. Now it was – what? – ten o'clock, and the Doctor still hadn't turned up.

She'd taken off her money belt last night, before drifting off to sleep. Now she was thumbing through the contents, vaguely checking that everything was still there.

She took out the return voucher, turning the bit of paper around in her hands. It was covered in chunky computer writing. You just took it to the airport, and they gave you a ticket in exchange. It was like a door marked EXIT, she thought.

Kyra wandered in, carrying her iguana. Sam said, 'Do you think we should –'
'He's fine,' Kyra said. 'He'll be back here when he's ready. Want to help me spray him?'

There was a knock at the door. Sam jumped up, stuffing the voucher into her jeans pocket. Kyra was already unlocking the door, the lizard draped across her shoulders like a fur.

The Doctor spilled into the flat, followed by three huge weird-looking guys, each wearing one of those red Turkish hats. Kyra's iguana started to wiggle, so she took it back into the kitchen.

'It's time to deal with Griffin,' said the Doctor. 'These chaps are going to keep an eye on things. Just in case our unnaturalist friend decides to bring his Henches along after all.'

'Um, Doctor,' said Sam, 'are they... you know? From up there?' She pointed at the ceiling.

He looked up, as though contemplating the flats above. 'They're from the planet Basardos in the Basar Cluster.'

'Tourists,' said one of the men in a deep voice. The others smiled at the joke.

'Look at this,' said Sam, jerking her thumb at Fitz. He was still standing on the balcony. 'He hasn't even noticed.' She went up to the sliding door and knocked on the glass. 'Get in here!'

Fitz jumped, stared into the flat, and slid the door open. 'Just as I was about to give in to temptation,' he said, taking the cigarette out of his mouth. 'These are the heavies, are they, then?'

'Actually,' said the Doctor, 'they're a trine of poets. But they look wonderfully intimidating.'

‘Scary,’ croaked one of the men, smiling. Sam thought that maybe his teeth had been sharpened.

The Doctor grinned, putting a finger to his lips. ‘Whatever you do, don’t let Griffin know.’

Kyra was pulling on an ancient army jacket. ‘Let’s go,’ she said.

The rendezvous was just a grassy patch by the side of the road up to Mount Tamalpais. They drove Kyra’s battered old van along wet, curving roads. Silver-green trees became receding, twisted shapes in the mist.

They drove a mile or so past the spot, not pulling off the road until the van was well out of the sight of anyone at the rendezvous point. For a moment they sat in the sudden silence, the rain pattering down on the roof. The Basardi were looming shapes in the back, their fezzes touching the ceiling.

They all piled out of the van and followed the Doctor back through the cold afternoon light, crunching over fallen leaves and wet grass.

When they reached the designated area, the Doctor walked around it once, then pulled out his watch.

‘Fitz, Sam and I will watch from the trees,’ he said. ‘The Basardi will stay out of sight – over here. I don’t want you to get involved unless there are Henches about.’ The Basardi nodded, their red hats wobbling. ‘I’m going to create a large, triangular area with the tags. Kyra, all you have to do is get Griffin to step into that triangle.’

He took the modified tags out of his pocket. Kyra looked at them, dubiously. ‘And these little things will stop him getting out?’

The Doctor grinned. ‘No. *This* is going to stop him getting out.’ He took a small machine out of his pocket. ‘It’s a remote force transmitter.’ To Sam it looked a bit like a radio with the outside taken off.

‘There’s much more to Griffin than meets the eye, quite literally,’ the Doctor explained. ‘He comes from our three-dimensional universe, but he’s also at home in the higher dimensions. Four, five, six... He’s like a sphere visiting a world full of circles. We can perceive part of him – to us, he looks like another circle – but he also sticks out above and below our sheet of paper.’

So that was why he seemed to have too many hands, Sam thought. How he could move stuff around inside them.

‘So our current understanding is wrong?’ Kyra was saying. ‘Normal space isn’t three-dimensional?’

The Doctor waved his hand, the wires in the device rattling about. ‘It’s a bit more complicated than that,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry, the basic maths will

be worked out in a century or two.’ Kyra nodded, as though that was that taken care of. ‘Ordinary walls wouldn’t be able to hold him – he’d find a way, the right angle to just slide out of any cage, any cell.’ He handed the device to Kyra. ‘Once Griffin is standing between the tags, just press this button. That will supply power to a dimensional field created by the tags, one which he shouldn’t be able to penetrate. It would be like trying to walk through a hurricane. But only for Griffin – the interference will only be broadcast in the higher dimensions. You can safely step through.’ He smiled suddenly. ‘You know, I’m fond of having a captive audience.’

Sam crouched on the forest floor, leaning against Fitz. Both of them were shivering, despite the parkas they’d picked up on the way. Beside them the Doctor was balanced on the balls of his feet, poised and still as a cat readying to pounce. Somewhere, out there in the mist, three huge aliens were watching. Like bodyguards in a film, thought Sam.

Kyra sat by the edge of the road on a rock, under a wide, multicoloured umbrella. She was right in the centre of the Doctor’s triangle, the tags pushed into the ground. Once, a car went past, slowing down to take a look at her. She waved cheerily at it, and it sped off.

Sam had been expecting Griffin to drive up. Instead he came walking along the road, almost invisible in the fog. She saw him only when he was almost there, coming out of nowhere, strolling up to Kyra.

He looked young, and thin, and pale. He looked like he needed a decent feed and a good haircut. Sam was sure it was some kind of illusion. The hands that had grabbed her in the bookshop had seemed painfully strong, the voice that had murmured in her ear old and confident. Or maybe he was like the Doctor – much, much older than he looked.

He was wearing simple, dark clothes, a bit old-fashioned – a buttoned suit, a shirt with a high collar. Sam wondered if he had researched the clothes before coming to Earth, but had got his time period a bit wrong.

‘Hello, Miss Skye,’ he said to Kyra. Sam jumped at the sound of his voice.

‘Hello, Mr Griffin,’ said Kyra. She had the device in her lap.

‘What do you have there?’ Griffin reached out a hand, although he was still several feet away from her.

‘Let me show you,’ said Kyra. Casually, she pressed the button on the machine.

For just a moment Sam saw the wall, a sudden glassy slab distorting the fog.

Griffin turned sharply, reaching backward, snatching his hand away. 'He's aware of the walls,' breathed the Doctor. 'He knows we've got him. Stay here.'

The Time Lord stood up, and strode out of the forest. Kyra was backing out of the triangle, fast. Griffin watched her go. Sam wished she had binoculars – she wanted to see the look on his face.

'Hello,' said the Doctor. His voice came clearly through the fog. 'Please don't be alarmed, I don't have any intention of harming you.'

Oh, go on, thought Sam, harm him a bit.

'But I can't allow you continued access to my biodata,' the Doctor went on. 'And I certainly can't allow you to go on imprisoning and experimenting on sentient beings. It's against every galactic law.'

Griffin raised a hand to his mouth, as though politely covering a laugh. 'I never know what to say in these situations.'

Kyra was standing just outside the triangle, watching him. But Griffin seemed to be interested only in the Doctor.

'I know you,' said the unnaturalist. 'I know how you fit in. How you're *supposed* to fit in. A Time Lord of the planet Gallifrey, with all the standard augmentations. Binocular, bipedal, two hearts, respiratory bypass system, no other unusual features allowed. Overgrown student rebel, burning desire to get involved, incipient messiah complex. It's all there, reflected in your biodata.'

'I'm called the Doctor.'

Griffin stared at him, as though surprised that he had a name. 'You must understand how infuriating your biodata is. I have located and catalogued fifty-three per cent of the extruded web, and have found no fewer than seventeen conflicting streams.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Well, let's not go into that.'

'You oughtn't to leave it lying about,' said Griffin, covering his mouth again, 'if you don't want people to look at it.'

'Enough,' said the Doctor. 'Are you operating alone? Where are you from?'

'Alone,' said Griffin, settling himself on the rock Kyra had just left. 'My expedition was partly sponsored by the Society. I hope to earn the remaining cost through the specimens I return with.'

'A freelancer, then,' said the Doctor, prowling outside the invisible wall. 'A specialist in taking weird and unusual creatures and explaining them away. Pinning down butterflies. Stuffing and mounting the White Rabbit.' There was a harsh edge to his voice. 'It must give you tremendous satisfaction.'

The unnaturalist bowed his head graciously. 'As to where I will return to... I'm afraid I can't explain it to you.'

'I think I have an idea,' said the Doctor. 'We've been aware of you for some time.'

'We've been aware –' said Griffin, sounding puzzled.

'Rumours. Here and there. Dimensional disturbances. Disappearances. My people are aware of the whole of space and time, Griffin, even if they seldom choose to interfere in it. We've suspected that people like you might be traipsing about the cosmos. Stuffing their pockets with beetles.'

The Doctor stepped closer to the wall around Griffin. 'And now here's one of them, in his own little box. With the lid on.'

Griffin folded his hands behind his back. He said, 'Before I encountered you, it would never have occurred to me to involve a specimen in its own investigation. But you comprehend the higher dimensions!'

He stood and took a step forward. 'We could work together. You could answer my questions. You've got me intrigued, Doctor. I want to understand you. Make sense of you.'

'Pin me down?'

'Your biodata is such a clutter, such an admixture. I could sort all of that out. It would be fascinating.'

'Fascinating to take me to pieces,' said the Doctor.

'And put you back together again,' said Griffin. He took another step, nose to the hidden wall, inches from the Doctor. 'Not multiple, conflicting pasts, muddled possibilities. Just one past, one life, one explanation.'

Sam glanced over at Fitz, and saw him scowling, his eyes miles and years away. She reached for his hand.

'So few people have the chance to be totally understood,' the unnaturalist was saying. 'Inside and out.'

'Don't,' said Kyra calmly. She stepped up beside the Doctor, locking eyes with Griffin. 'Don't you dare touch him.'

'Just as you say,' said the unnaturalist.

Without moving, he reached through the invisible wall and killed Kyra.

They rode back to the hotel in shaken silence.

The Doctor drummed his fingers non-stop on the wheel. Sam couldn't work up enough annoyance to tell him off.

He'd moved on already, worrying about the next moment. But *this* moment hadn't let go of her yet.

The game had changed. *Now* was a moment in which people *died*.

She didn't know what had happened. When Griffin reached out to Kyra –

She didn't know what had happened, she didn't see. When Griffin reached out to Kyra –

She didn't know what had happened, exactly, because she had curled up into a ball, buried her head in her stomach, her knees and her elbows between her and what was happening by the side of the road. She hadn't listened to the shouting, to the silence, she hadn't looked when Fitz had picked her up and dragged her across the clearing.

There had been a point at which she had become aware that she was in the back of the van with the Basardi, that they were driving much, much too fast, that they were somewhere back in the city.

The Doctor had got them back to where the Bug was parked, a couple of streets away from Kyra's place. He handed the van's keys to one of the Basardi. 'Get out of here,' he told them. 'Don't look back.' They didn't need telling twice.

No sooner had he got Sam and Fitz into the hotel lobby than he turned on his heel and headed for the door. 'Stay here,' he said, quietly. 'I'm going out now.'

'And you may be some time?' murmured Fitz.

The Doctor stopped in the doorway. 'Yes, actually, it'll probably be a few hours.' His eyes were very hard – Sam hadn't seen that before. 'I've got to meet someone. It's best that you stay out of the way.'

'Yeah. . . I think you're right.'

'Don't worry, it'll be fine.'

'Uh-huh,' said Fitz.

They went back to Fitz's room, together, a lonely pair. Fitz shut the door and leaned against it, head hanging low. He looked spindly.

'Did you see what he did?' he said. 'He just flicked away those stupid little discs. Just walked out through the force field. It was a *joke*.'

Sam settled on the corner of the bed. 'You all right –' she began, and broke off. Stupid question.

She hadn't looked when it happened. Except that she'd seen, just for a moment.

Fitz meandered across the room. 'Yeah. Fine. It's not that much of a blow, really. I mean, I knew her for maybe three days.' He ended up in a corner by the window, talking shakily to the wall. 'It's not like I knew what she did for a living. What she did at school. How she came to live in that house. What she put in her coffee. The name of that bloody iguana.'

'Hey.'

She got up, choking down the lump in her own throat, and walked over to stand right in front of him. He didn't look at her, he stared at the carpet.

She reached her hands behind his head, leaned in, and gave him a slow, deliberate kiss.

It didn't sizzle. Her knees didn't buckle with lust, or anything – it was just a perfectly competent kiss, with a minimum of fumbling on either side. She had to lean up on her toes because of the height difference. His lips parted smoothly, and they spent a few moments just getting used to each other's rhythm and taste.

When she closed off the kiss, he spent a few moments blinking slowly, his hands resting against the small of her back. 'Well,' he said. 'I wasn't expecting this. Why?'

'Cause you're human,' she said.

She saw the flicker of suspicion cross his face, felt his hands hesitate against her back. 'I'm not the consolation prize, am I?'

Sam tried to suppress a wry smile. She must have failed, because he went into a frantic back-pedal. 'I mean, not that I'd be complaining. I think. I –'

She leaned up and kissed him again – a nibbling movement, drawing him in. Making it a promise.

The picture went across the surface of her mind again. This time she could look. Look at Kyra, turned this way and that, turned inside out and back to front, just like one of those Picasso paintings, eyes on the same side of her face, just like a Picasso.

She let the picture rise and fade, rise and fade, until it was less intense than the feel of his mouth, the brush of his stubble.

'Cause you're human,' she said. 'Cause you're not going to pull any nasty surprises on me. 'Cause you're not going to get me killed. 'Cause we've both had a bugger of a day.'

He just kept looking at her, at Sam Jones, up and down. 'This is too strange.'

'What gave it away? The unicorns?' Sam laughed. 'We're looking at a couple of hours with nothing in them but worrying and feeling bad. We both need something better to do.'

For a while she just held on to him, feeling him breathe, his jacket brushing against her through her T-shirt. Then she looked him in the eye. 'Shall we?'

He gave that shrug, he smiled a glimmer of a smile. 'Yeah.'

The Doctor had walked a little way from the hotel until he had come across a park, somewhere in the Tenderloin. Perhaps it was a bit reckless to be out now,

where anyone could see him. Perhaps he was feeling a bit reckless.

He sat down under a tree, his back to the thick bark, the strong trunk. For a moment he let his body sink down, into the grass, into the wood, as though all the energy was draining out of him and into the soil. He closed his eyes, limp as a rag.

He didn't know how Griffin had managed to collapse the dimensional field. The mathematics had been dancing in his head, on the long journey back to the city, up until now. For Griffin, it wouldn't be a matter of numbers, of abstract concepts. It would be more like breathing. Or eating. Or swatting a fly.

The Doctor made the numbers stop, made himself remember. Kyra's face and body distorting, tearing, as Griffin grabbed and turned her through directions she shouldn't have been able to go. She would have been dead in moments, like a puppet whose strings had been tangled, then broken. He hoped she had had no idea of what was happening to her.

Griffin had sent her away, once he was done.

The Doctor sat up. There were some children playing a little distance away, their high calls echoing through the park. No one else was nearby.

He reached into his coat pocket and took out a bottle of beer. The glass was still damp. He set it on the grass and rummaged in the pocket for a bottle opener.

He couldn't find one. Should have picked one up in the liquor store. The Doctor sighed, concentrated just a little energy in the tips of his fingers, and flicked the lid off with a bright, metallic sound.

'This is for you, Kyra,' he said. He tipped the bottle, pouring it back and forth. The beer hissed as it hit the grass and sank into the ground. 'I hope it's the right sort of thing.'

He waited for a few minutes, once the bottle was empty. He wished he could conjure her up, bring her back to life for just a few minutes, just long enough to say all the things that he wanted to say. That the city seemed somehow smaller, tonight. That he wouldn't give up.

But he supposed she was busy right now, somewhere, in a birthing centre, or a warm cardboard box filled with mewling and purring. Or perhaps an iguana hatchery. Yes.

It was time to get on with it. The Doctor got up, put the bottle and lid into a rubbish bin.

At the edge of the park he looked back at the trees, all the growing things. 'If you could put in a good word for me. . .' he murmured. 'I think I'm going to need it.'

* * *

Griffin sat in his brick-walled laboratory, safe among his iron machines. He had an old-fashioned telephone, long black stalk, receiver dangling in its metal socket.

‘No? Well, thank you, anyway,’ he said.

He replaced the receiver, precisely, and picked up the hotel directory again. He had retrieved sufficient small clues from Kyra Skye’s biodata. Now it was just a matter of slow, patient research, the kind he was best at.

It had been a simple matter to collapse the field intended to cage him. The Doctor had run away at once, of course, probably to protect his companions; Griffin had not been able to catch him in time. No matter.

He had been careful to erase the cadaver, rotating it perpendicular to this three-space; if the Doctor’s species really was aware of his people, he would have to be cautious about leaving any evidence of his expedition.

But the unnaturalist was certain of one thing. His report to the Society would guarantee his membership, with full honours.

He picked up the phone again, and began to dial.

Chapter Thirteen

The Book of Lies

Perhaps the most wilfully perverse of the known esoteric religious texts is the Book of Lies, produced by the group known as Faction Paradox. Though it is ostensibly a secret book of arcana only to be shown to higher-level initiates of the Faction, a number of academics believe that it is in fact a hoax – even a practical joke which the Faction has played on the entirety of known space. The book itself is even known to suggest on occasion that it is a hoax, although considering the context, this is perhaps the best evidence available that it isn't.

Physically the Book of Lies is a dynabook, but one with its textual generators interfaced to a few inexplicable pieces of Faction technology. The book claims that its text is directly interfaced to the unstable nature of reality in all its alternatives, or possibly just to a random-number generator. In either case, the net result is that the book itself is different in numerous subtle ways each time it is opened, and at times even when flipping back to previously read pages. This makes annotation rather difficult, and indexing an existential nightmare.

It is indicative of the Faction's philosophy that, where most religious texts offer a fairly straightforward explanation of what Is, the Book of Lies is a maddening ramble through what Isn't. Its tales (usually) include bits of detailed alternative histories, scandalously rewritten versions of historical events, fractal poetry, carefully ominous foreshadowing, and the occasional apparently accurate bit of historical truth. Whether the latter are included to lend verisimilitude to the other material, or to discredit by association the certainty with which we treat those accepted facts, remains unclear.

A common refrain throughout its text is that the events being described never happened. In fact, this note is repeated to the point of appearing to protest too much – perhaps deliberately. Whether this 'never happened' refers to historical fact or official denial is therefore left as an exercise for the reader.

To the Faction, these contents could all well be true.

Among the passages which the copy of the Book of Lies in the university library on Dellah is fond of including, we find. . .

– *Introduction to Quantum Esotericism*, 2nd Edition, Watkinson & Thripsted, page 274

The Doctor screwed up his face as he slid the needle into his arm. Amazing, he thought between ouches – he was thoroughly used to people inflicting pain on him in a variety of creative ways, but that didn't make it one bit easier to inflict something as small as this on himself.

He withdrew the two c.c.s of blood and emptied the syringe into the beaker of distilled water, setting the pale solution on the grass in front of him. Above it glinted the bare thread of biodata, almost invisible in the daylight.

With reverential slowness he measured out the potassium permanganate. He'd spent the afternoon scrounging for the substances he needed.

'*Exotica arcana esoterica*,' he intoned. '*Dominus ad nauseam, reductio ad absurdum*.'

'Don't screw up!' the little boy shouted in his ear.

The Doctor didn't so much as flinch. '*Iam amore virginali totus ardeo*,' he said, stirring the stuff into the solution.

The boy stepped into his field of view, watching approvingly. He probably didn't understand a word of the incantation, but the words weren't what made the ritual work.

Words were linear – they needed too much history and context to lend them meaning. You needed a past to grasp words. But sounds and emotions were now. The sort of thing a cult devoted to breaking out of linear rationality would be drawn to.

'So,' said the Doctor, between verses of the chant. 'Are you just going to stand there and watch me try to summon you, or would you like to give me a hand with it?'

The boy grinned, wolf-cubbishly. 'Nah, you go right ahead.'

The Doctor nodded and began reciting an obscure verse from Leviticus about cleaning fungus off walls, as he dripped in exactly three drams of iodine.

He was braced for the sharp poke the boy delivered to the scar in his side. He gritted his teeth, but he didn't miss a drop.

'By the face that stops the clocks, by the power of the broken mainspring and the pendulum that tocks before it ticks, I summon thee, *tempora nullius, alakazoom!*'

With a sizzle, the solution turned milky white.

The boy applauded mockingly. The Doctor stayed unswervingly solemn, picked up the beaker, and presented it to the boy. 'Extract of biodata. An

offering to the spirits of Paradox.'

The boy sniffed at the beaker. 'Damn,' he said. 'You got it right.'

'Sorry to disappoint you.'

'If I'd stopped you from making the offering that summoned me, it would have been *way* acausal. Sweet.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'I know. Why do you think I wasn't startled?'

'Damn, you're good!' The boy sat down on the grass, facing him. 'Even this young, you're good. You know, I'm a big fan of your early stuff.'

The Doctor rubbed the dull ache in his side. 'You've got an odd way of showing it.'

'Not of *you*. Just the stuff. You haven't got cool yet.'

The Doctor busied himself with the reagent jars, gathering them up one by one and popping them back inside his shopping bag.

Eventually the boy said, 'I know what you want from us. If you want it, you'll have to come with me.'

The Doctor looked up at him. 'What's your price?'

'Same thing as always,' said the boy. 'You.'

'I only want a little bit of help.'

'Then we'll only take a little bit of you.'

The Doctor put the bag of chemicals safely on the floor in the back of the Bug. The boy was already in the front, idly picking at the loose vinyl at the edge of the dashboard.

'Go east on Lincoln,' he told the Doctor. The Doctor drove.

San Francisco was becoming a mecca for seekers of the strange. And Golden Gate Park, officially off limits, had become a mecca inside that mecca. He had encountered a dozen souls rambling through the giant flowers in the freshly grown jungles, speaking in soft, awed voices, taking photographs of the Heisenbugs.

He frowned. They were so unaware of the dangers, it was the Summer of Love all over again. In the distance, the Wild Hunt was rushing through the streets, the Kraken was dreaming deep in the ooze.

'Which "early stuff" of mine are you such a fan of?' he asked the boy.

The kid gave a crafty smile. 'Oooh, how about the way you're going to -'

The Doctor screeched the car to a halt against the kerb. 'No spoilers,' he said. 'I'm not playing any of your paradox games. Tell me *anything* I haven't done yet, and the deal is off here and now.'

'Jeez. OK, grandad.'

The kid went back to destroying the dashboard as the Doctor slipped back into the traffic. 'I just meant the games you've already started playing with time. Leaving notes for yourself.'

'That was a bad habit, long abandoned.'

'The whole post-destination thing with the Vervoids. The way you tricked the Dalek Empire into tangling their timeline so bad that their history collapsed under the weight of the paradoxes. Elegant.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor smoothly. 'That was clever of me, wasn't it?'

'And most of all,' said the boy, 'what you've already done right here.'

The Doctor glanced at the boy. Old eyes watching him, far too old, far too focused for the face they looked out from.

'When you scarred this place, you changed everything,' said the boy. 'That was your birth cry, wasn't it? Barely a day old, and the first real thing you do is reach for the timelines and grab, twist and pull. Tying knots on a cosmic scale. Temporal grace, temporal orbits – you blew causality right out of the window. All your way of saying you'd *arrived*.'

'And I'm still learning the consequences,' said the Doctor.

'Oh, that was just the beginning,' the boy went on. 'In the last few years, you've met more people from your own past and future than you ever have before. You've ridden the Ouroboros in the Emindian war. After all those years you spent being so careful about the timelines... you're getting more and more out of line. I don't think Grandmother Time is too happy with you these days, is she?'

The boy was just trying to provoke him, unbalance him, gain the upper hand. The Doctor said nothing, concentrating on the late-afternoon traffic.

'And this is just the beginning of the fun. Whether you like it or not, wherever you go, the universe gets knocked into a new shape around you. Like with Sam.'

'Like with Sam,' repeated the Doctor.

The boy made him park outside a small church in the Mission District. It seemed deserted – no other vehicles in the car park, no one in the garden grounds. The boy led him inexorably towards the old wooden doors.

The boy wasn't casting a shadow, the Doctor saw. All of the Faction's agents had lost theirs, or so the legend went; it was a reflection of their liberation from cause and effect, which they regarded as an outdated set of aesthetic principles far more limited than their own. Or something like that. It was probably just a careful bit of showmanship on their part, part of the effect they tried to engineer.

‘You wanted her to go with me, didn’t you?’ said the Doctor. ‘You staged the attack in London. So that I could rescue her and bring her here.’

The boy grinned at him, putting a hand to the doors. They seemed to wrench open at his touch. The space inside was cool, pitch-dark.

‘And then, here in San Francisco,’ said the Doctor. His spine itched, the kind of itch inside that you can’t hope to reach. ‘You wanted our attention. You spent all that time with Fitz, just so we’d track you down.’

He followed the boy into the church. Somehow, in here, the Faction had switched on the night – the sunlight stopped dead at the windows, leaving the rows of pews enfolded in darkness. The detail of the apse seemed blurred, distant.

The doors closed behind them.

‘But do you know why?’ asked the boy.

‘You wanted me to come to you for help,’ said the Doctor. He was looking around the church, frowning.

‘Relax,’ said the boy. ‘We haven’t done anything to the staff or the congregation. We just moved their church a couple of femtoseconds into the future.’ He glanced around. ‘They might be crowded in here saying mass right now, we’d never know about it.’

‘You wanted me to come to you for help,’ said the Doctor again.

‘I’m your greatest fan,’ smirked the boy.

‘But what it has to do with Sam. . . ?’ He trailed off, muttering ideas to himself again.

‘You want to know?’ asked the boy slyly.

‘I’m not paying you for it,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s not worth my blood.’

There was movement in one of the pews. The Doctor turned sharply to see the little boy sitting up – he must have been lying down on the wooden bench, out of sight.

‘Hiya,’ said the second boy. He leapt over the pew, strode up to his twin, and, before the Doctor could move or speak, slapped palms with him.

They grinned smarmily up at him, seeing his astonishment. ‘How?’ he asked the boy who had brought him.

‘How can we touch without shorting out the energy from the time differential?’ answered the second boy. ‘You think there’s something that says we can’t. Called the Blin-o-vitch Lim-i-ta-tion Ef-fect.’

‘Blinovitch Blinovitch Blinovitch,’ said the first boy, repeating the word playfully to himself. ‘Blinovitch Blinovitch Blinovitch Blinovitch Blinovitch. . .’ He

kept reciting the syllables till they lost any sense of meaning, reducing them from an idea to a collection of silly sounds.

'It's all a handwave,' said the other boy. 'Truth is, Blinovitch was one of us. Didn't you know?'

'Ah, no, actually,' said the Doctor. 'I think you're just playing tricks.'

'Bet you'd still love to know how we do it,' said the other one. 'Go on – for free.'

They took him to a room at the back of the church. When they pushed the door open, the air was suddenly full of streaking electricity, white arcs so bright they seared his eyes, making it impossible to pick out the details of the huge machine they came from.

Somehow the spacious room itself remained dark, confining the flashes to the air right around the machine. In normal time, this place was probably a library, perhaps a lounge. The boys had removed everything, all the books and furniture, even the carpet had been torn up. The machine sat in the centre, reaching to the ceiling, grinding in the blackness.

Remember, the Doctor told himself, all of this is for effect. All to make the moment as impressive as possible.

It was still a moment he'd rather not be in.

His eyes were adjusting. It was a great iron wheel, with what looked like a standing stone in the centre of the metal. He wondered what ancient site they'd plundered to get it.

The stone and the wheel were covered in components and ornaments, intersecting smaller wheels at crazy angles, metal shaped and twisted into loops and spirals and *trompe l'oeil* motifs. The Möbius strip was everywhere, the lazy eight of infinity, of contradiction.

Figures were plodding with the wheel as it rotated, each holding on to a protrusion from the rim which looked uncomfortably like a human femur.

Cords of lightning shot from their hands right to the centre of the machine, illuminating metal and bone and rock, catching each of the plodding figures in the syncopated flashes of light. And each of the figures was the little boy.

The Doctor watched as one of the boys broke formation, walking through a stone archway that stood in the centre of the room. He vanished. A moment later, another little boy emerged from the other side of the portal and took his place at the wheel.

'Oh, very clever,' said the Doctor. 'A Blinovitch generator. You use a time portal to send yourself back in time, wait five minutes, then go back to your

original point in time – and keep on doing it until there are a dozen of you, all existing in the same moment. Then you use this thing –’ he waved at the contraption – ‘to drain off the potential energy built up by crossing your own timestream. Using the excess energy both to sustain the portal, and to allow you to do various nasty things to causality to boot.’

‘Simpler’n using biodata samples,’ said the boy on his right.

‘They won’t let you play with needles, will they?’ said the Doctor. ‘Very sensible.’

The boy on his left glared up at him, the whites of his eyes standing out in the dark. ‘*They* let me do whatever I want.’

‘I don’t believe that for a moment,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re just a baby Brother, aren’t you? A novice.’ Now both of the boys were glowering with prepubescent umbrage. ‘This is probably the first time they’ve let you out on your own.’

‘Is not,’ the right-hand boy said tightly. ‘Don’t push it. The Spirits’ll get mad.’

‘You don’t believe in the Spirits,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re only in it for the lies.’

All of the little boys turned to look at him at once.

‘You just like knocking things over. Don’t you? And history’s as good a thing as any. And you like getting to play with people’s minds. And *that’s* what this whole show is for.’

He raised his hands and applauded slowly. ‘Typical Faction work. A retro-bootstrapping time machine, powered by its own impossibilities. Classic irony-punk. But take away the technovoodoo, and what’s left?’

More and more of the boys were turning up, crowding around him, from the portal, from elsewhere in the church. Excellent. Show you’re not intimidated, and we’ll sort this out with a minimum of fuss.

‘Just a celebration of your own cleverness,’ he finished. ‘Nothing more than that.’

One of the boys said, ‘Looks like we gotta teach you to respect the Spirits.’

All around him, the boy drew his knife.

‘Oo-er, how evil,’ said the Doctor. ‘Yaah boo scary. Satan, *Sataaaan!*’

One of the boys was closing in on him. He could see the glint of what looked like a set of brass knuckles, a sharp spine sticking out along each finger. A biodata sampler.

The boy raised the spines, to just under the Doctor’s eyes.

‘Playing with needles is the fun part,’ he said. Two of the boys held him down as another tightened the leather straps around his left wrist. More of the

boy scuttled around, on all sides – staring, poking, sniggering, tightening the clamps that held his head rigidly in position.

‘You don’t need to bother with all of this,’ he said. ‘I came here by choice. I’m hardly going to run away.’

The boy wearing the sampler shook his head. ‘It’s for your own good. We don’t want you moving suddenly when I’m inside.’

All the other iterations of the boy stepped back, well clear of the chair. It was installed in the centre of a spacious kitchen. Others of the boy sat on the counters, leaned against the cupboards.

He’d got only a glimpse before they’d shoved him into it, but it had looked like an old electric chair. Knowing the Faction, it was probably the chair used to execute John Wilkes Booth in some distant alternity. Just for effect. Just for the moment.

‘You must think it’s really important to stop this guy, if you’re willing to deal with us.’ The boy stepped behind the Doctor, just out of sight.

‘I think I know what he wants with me,’ said the Doctor. ‘And I think I know what he wants with Sam. I don’t think I can let that happen.’

‘Whatever you say, grandad.’

‘Why do you keep calling me that?’ he said tightly.

He could hear the smile in the words. ‘Cause it pisses you off something chronic.’

He felt the point of one of the spines pressing into his temple. His fingertips flexed, his whole body itching to tear loose from the chair. No matter how he strained his eyes, they couldn’t reach far enough to see the boy, see the needle.

‘Just one moment’s worth,’ he said. ‘One moment of my life. That’s the bargain. A fact for a fact.’

The needle broke the surface.

He felt it sliding impossibly through skin and bone, burrowing through the soft matter underneath. Not pain. More like a vague memory of pain, a mental ache.

‘I could take it all,’ whispered the boy.

‘Tear out my biodata now, and I won’t be there to do all those future things which you’re so looking forward to.’ The Doctor sighed again. ‘Can we get on with it? This is starting to tickle.’

‘Make it something old,’ said the boy. ‘Something obscure.’

The fruity scent of karmine pudding, the clink of cutlery, the rattle of adults in conversation.

Young eyes rounding a corner, looking up at a dining-room table taller than he was.

I'm in the Great Hall of the family House. My father is there, at the table, with his friends. They're talking about grown-up things – they're always talking about wars, and great projects, and big things that have to be taken care of. He'll be leaving again soon.

How old am I? Barely a Loomling.

I've just been up on the mountain, and I've caught a cobblemouse, its wings have just begun to sprout. I've got to show it off to them, right this instant. You know what it's like to be young – there's no concept of time, just of right now.

They're not listening to me. They're too busy being important.

So I let the cobblemouse go!

It runs right down the table – this live animal suddenly charging right through the middle of all their plans and points and resolutions. Mr Saldaamir looks like he's about to spontaneously combust!

'Sweet,' said the little boy. 'That's my favourite of your origin stories, too.'

The Doctor opened his eyes. He had been laughing, he realised, he felt that lightness in himself. The boys had all moved away, behind him, leaving him facing the empty dark of the warehouse.

'What do you mean?' he asked. His voice sounded very small.

'Is this the version where they banned all mention of his name, and yours, for consorting with aliens? Or the one where he got every record of himself deleted from the files?'

'Feel free to believe either of them,' snapped the Doctor, 'or both of them, or neither of them. If you're curious about my past, I want there to be as many wrong answers as possible.'

'Memory's funny,' said the boy. His face crept into the Doctor's vision, a blur at the extreme right. 'You remember something one way.'

'And then someone tells you it happened a different way,' said the boy, from his left.

'Are you remembering what happened?'

'Or are you just remembering remembering it?'

'And then it sleeps in your mind. Until one day. . .'

He felt the needle flex inside him.

'All gone,' said the boy.

'Did you –' The smell of karmine pudding, the. . . Did you take –' The smell of. . .

‘What’s gone?’ he asked, in a small voice.

Somewhere behind him, one of the boys sniggered. The sound echoed around the crowded kitchen, set off more voices, until a whole chorus of the little boy were jeering at him behind his back.

He waited out the sound.

‘Your turn,’ he told the boy wearily. ‘The location of the unnaturalist’s hide-out. That’s all I need.’

‘Coming right up.’

The boy’s hand reached into the corner of his field of view, unclipping the vials from the sampler still deep inside his head, snapping an already-filled set into place.

The ping of a trigger spring. The needle slid out of his skull.

‘You cheated,’ he said. ‘I already knew the address. I remember tracking one of the Henches to the old music shop.’

Giggling. ‘Memory cheats,’ said a boy.

‘But it happened,’ said the Doctor. ‘You didn’t just implant a memory. You changed my biodata. You changed my past!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘It’s impossible,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s impossible for my people. Our past is unreachable. What’s written can’t be unwritten.’

‘Who said your history can’t change?’

Another boy answered, ‘Someone from his history.’

And another: ‘Maybe it’s the second-biggest lie in Time Lord history.’

‘Maybe it changes all the time.’

Someone giggled. ‘Let’s play pin the tale on the donkey.’

‘Maybe you didn’t use to have a father.’

‘Maybe you’re living in the middle of a time war. Maybe there’s an Enemy out there –’

The Doctor shouted, ‘I’m not listening!’

‘– who’s rewriting you when you’re not looking!’

‘Maybe you weren’t always half human.’

‘But now you’ve *become* always half human.’

‘Maybe you weren’t always a Time Lord.’

‘But now you’ve *always* been a Time Lord.’

‘Maybe you originally came from some planet in the forty-ninth century. Fleeing from the Enemy who’d overrun your home –’

‘I said I’m not listening! Laa laa laa laa laa –’

‘– and you’ve just been written and rewritten and overwritten, ever since.’

‘Pin the tale!’

‘How d’you know it’s not true?’

‘How *could* you know it’s not true?’

The voices crowded in. ‘How would you know, huh?’

‘How would you know?’

‘How would ‘How would you ‘How ‘How would you know? you know? you know? know?’

‘Why would I *care*?’ shouted the Doctor.

The boy fell silent.

‘Now, are you going to let me out of this?’ He pointed with his eyes at the clamps holding his head in place. The boy on either side started to fumble with it. ‘Oh, never mind, I’ll do it,’ said the Doctor, reaching up with his freed right hand.

He turned his head, taking in the gloriously startled look of the boy on his right. The next dozen iterations were all staring at him, trying to work out how he’d got his hand free. Well, good. Let them wonder.

He went on extracting himself. ‘I’m sorry if you were hoping for a tormented scream of “Who am I?” Even if I’m only whoever I am at this particular moment, I’ve got enough other things to worry about besides the nature of reality.’

There was no wound on his temple, no puncture mark. Nothing.

He sprang to his feet, gave the boys a brief bow, and walked away.

He was halfway to the front door of the church when he saw the white hypercube, lying there, abandoned on the floor.

He was still staring at it when the boy came up behind him. ‘I sent this,’ said the Doctor, and his voice was shaking, for the first time since he’d entered the church. ‘They’re impossible to intercept. I sent it to Gallifrey, asking for help. How did you get it?’ He wheeled. ‘*How?*’

‘Maybe there’s no one home on Gallifrey,’ said the boy softly. There was just the one of him.

The Doctor looked at him, cupping the small white cube in his hands. The boy said, ‘Maybe they all left. Or maybe the whole planet’s being destroyed, and undestroyed, and destroyed, and you just caught them at the wrong moment.’

‘Enough,’ said the Doctor.

‘Or perhaps someone wanted us to handle it.’

‘Flapdoodle,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘You’re a menace to space-time. The Time Lords are more likely to quietly erase you from history than do a deal.’

But the cube was there, in his hand.

‘Let me tell you a story,’ said the little boy.

Once upon a time, says the *Book of Lies*, Life came back to Gallifrey after ten million years of winter.

The Great Grey Eminence, fast asleep in his tomb, didn’t like it. He didn’t want any of this *passion* in his nice, sterile world. They were taking a little too much licence with his favourite reality. So he took a little licence himself.

He did a deal with the Devil to make things unhappen. The Devil’s minions changed everything back, just the way he wanted. And then they took the one who brought Life back in the first place, and they folded his timeline back on itself – pinning his past down, the way they wanted it, making him what they said he should be, nothing more. Pinning the tale on the donkey.

But the Devil did it all for his own reasons. He wanted to teach the Great Grey Eminence the ways of Paradox. And the Devil knows that if he can get God to break the rules. . . he wins.

‘A charming fairy story,’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s about Sam,’ leered the boy. ‘Think about it. If the old guy in the tomb didn’t want any hanky-panky on Gallifrey, don’t you think he’d want to make sure you were paired up with a good little girl, who’d never dare to screw you?’

The Doctor decided not to dignify that with a reply.

‘It’s about the naturalist, too,’ said the boy.

The boy was just a shadow among the shadows in the church. The Doctor wondered if they were standing, ghostlike, in the middle of the congregation.

‘He wants to pin down the butterfly and list it in his book. You gotta be just exactly what he knows you are. Nothing more. They all want you to behave. But you don’t have to.’

The boy’s voice was becoming a silky whisper. ‘Be a kid,’ he said. ‘No past. No future. No rules. No ’sponsibilities.’ He reached out a skinny hand.

The Doctor stared at the impenetrable hypercube, feeling small in the face of what he didn’t know.

I usually get on so well with children, he thought shakily.

He murmured, ‘When I was born this time around, for a time, I had no idea at all who I was. What I was supposed to do.’ He drew a ragged breath. ‘And I was *happy*.’

‘Yeah,’ said the boy. ‘That’s it.’

Slowly the Doctor drew a deep breath. Then he shrugged. 'The thing is, a lot of the time I've been just as happy since then.' He turned away. 'Sorry. Maybe next time.'

And he went out through the dark, leaving the boy singing mockingly, a chorus of jeering child voices in the distance, twisted playground words for a song he'd known all his life.

Sing the past to me, 'cause I'm the one who wrote the song,
I made it up next week so all the words will come out wrong,
The past won't keep you warm tonight, the future's blown to bits,
And everything that you believe is really full of –
The door slammed shut behind him.

Chapter Fourteen

Hero in Use

For now, there was nothing outside the room they were in. And even the room was negotiable when his eyes were closed.

All Fitz could do was curl himself around her, feel her head and shoulders and breasts (bloody hell, Sam's breasts) pressed against his ribs, and try to shush the little voice that was gloating, just *waiting* for something to go wrong.

He trailed a lazy hand down along her back, around her side, down past the slight curve of her lower belly.

'Hang on,' he said. 'Where did your piercing go?'

'What piercing?' she murmured.

'What do you mean, what piercing? Little gold stud.' He traced his hand back upwards slightly. 'Right there.'

She wriggled. 'Tickling! I never got it pierced. . .'

He chuckled. 'You bloody well must have, I nearly caught my tongue –'

'The Wild Hunt must have come through,' she said.

'Oh,' said Fitz.

'Sall right. I didn't even notice. Doesn't matter.' Her back was suddenly tense, her voice lost, drifting.

A million words piled up in his mouth. Which ones should he let through?

'Must've been a couple of hours ago now,' he managed. 'We'd have to have been pretty distracted to miss it. They must be coming more frequently now. . .'

He trailed off. The little voice had finally found something to attach itself to.

He pulled his hand sharply away from her, sitting up, trying to disentangle himself from the sheets. Talking fast, not looking at her. 'I'm sorry – if you're not the same one I started out with, I shouldn't be –'

She leaned up and caught his shoulder, holding him there. Her blue eyes were staring into his, without hesitation. 'If I hadn't wanted to, I wouldn't have pushed you on to the bed.'

He blinked. 'You didn't.'

‘Gordon Christ.’ She drew in a slow, shaky breath. He could see the thought of it running through her as she sagged back on to the bed.

‘Sorry,’ he said, and he didn’t know why.

After a while he tried, ‘Hmm?’

‘Just thinking about tomatoes,’ she mumbled. She rolled over on to her side, facing away, curling inward. ‘Mum always said I used to like them in salads, till I was about six years old. Then suddenly I hated them. Like I’d never liked them. Never even remembered liking them, until she mentioned it one day.’

‘When you’re a kid, you just change your mind in a moment.’

‘I’m sick of sodding moments,’ she said thickly. ‘I’m sick of them not adding up. I want to remind you about *this* some day, and have it be true. . .’

He started to say something, but his throat blocked it and told him to shut up and hug her. He rolled on to his side and wrapped himself around her from behind – feeling the smooth curve of her back pressing against his chest, the line of knots along her spine. She smelled like sweat and flowers.

He was so much taller – they must really look mismatched. But she was relaxing as he held her, one arm across her breasts holding her to him, the other stroking her hair. He felt a hand reach back to wrap around him, her fingers resting against the small of his back.

‘It’s all right,’ he murmured, letting the words fall out. ‘It’s all right, I’m still here.’

He felt the arm across him tighten, holding him to her. ‘I just never thought I’d have to wonder if *I’d* still be here in the morning,’ she said.

Fitz splashed water from the sink on to his face, then just watched the bewildered expression staring back at him from the mirror. Wondering what on Earth he’d done to earn this.

‘Cause you’re human, she’d said. Well, it would have been more flattering if he’d had some kind of edge over the other five billion people on the planet.

Not that he was complaining, mind you. But he felt like the coyote who’d finally caught the roadrunner, who could only turn to the camera with a what-do-I-do-now? look on his face.

He turned off the tap and headed back into the room. She was sitting up in the bed, flipping enthusiastically through the room-service menu, casually showing more of Sam Jones’s skin than he should ever have been allowed to see.

‘Ooh, Lo Han Chai,’ she said. ‘I want. Might as well, if you-know-who is paying.’ She must have caught his expression as he settled on to a corner of the

bed. 'Something wrong?'

'Oh, nothing,' he said. Oh, that was weak, anyone could see through that. He took a deep breath and forced his eyes to meet hers. 'Just wondering if it was *you* who was the consolation prize.'

'You mean instead of her?' He nodded.

She reached out an arm to him, resting her hand on the outside edge of his thigh. She didn't seem to be afraid in the slightest. 'Well, was I?'

He looked away, glanced down at her arm. He could just see the couple of blotchy black scars nestled in the crook of her elbow.

Now that he thought about it, she'd felt different from what he'd imagined Sam would feel like (and he'd imagined it a few times). She didn't have the muscles that came from running three miles through the TARDIS corridors every morning before he'd even started to fumble with the coffee maker. She didn't have the high-tension cables that were always there in Sam's shoulders, that aura of keyed-up-ness that always hung around her.

Instead she was soft, smooth, with a hint of flab around her belly. The gentle looseness of the arm she'd draped across him. If blonde Sam's body had been a temple, dark-haired Sam's was a bit of a run-down church hall. Maybe the kind that had local bands playing in it at weekends. He'd always felt comfortable, performing in places like that.

'Nah,' he said. 'You weren't.' Even he could hear the hint of surprise in his voice.

'Right answer,' she said, reaching for him.

Somehow, he thought distantly, he'd accepted her as a person in her own right. Not just Sam with the settings changed, someone more like... him.

It was funny, but it sort of made him want to be more like she had been. Maybe it was just a sudden attack of chivalry, but he couldn't help feeling that she needed someone like that. Who really cared and believed in things, who would take care of them. That wasn't him. Maybe it could be him. If *he* changed a little.

This time, he heard the hooves coming.

'Oh, Christ,' she said, and her hand tightened on him. 'Not again –'

And he reached for her as the noise and shouting swelled, and she was falling away from him as the room rushed up and –

Oh, bloody hell, he'd just fallen off the edge of the bed.

He gathered himself up as the noise receded. 'Well, that was stylish...' His laugh trickled away.

Sam was lying propped up on her elbows, squinting at him as if the light was hurting her, a glassy hostility in her eyes.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘You’re kidding.’ Her voice had a weary rasp to it. ‘I haven’t had a fix in three days. What do you friggin’ think is wrong?’

By the time he had taken in what was going on, she was half dressed, stumbling across the room to find her shirt. She was bent at the waist, one hand to her stomach, pushing him away with the other.

‘Let me out of the sodding room, will you?’

She staggered towards the door, tangled up in her shirt. He stopped her, automatically. She was in no shape to go out.

‘When I said I’d come here, he said he’d let me see the city, but you kept me locked up. Get away.’

She shoved an elbow at him, pulling the shirt on. He caught just a glimpse of the arm – the new scars that had spread like spots of mould along her veins, the dark swollen lump in the elbow. His stomach tightened.

He got between her and the door. If she got away, they’d never find her.

‘Can’t keep me here,’ she croaked. ‘This is kidnapping.’

‘You said you agreed to come here –’

‘Nuh. It’s kidnapping. He dragged me out of my flat, took me out of the country, cold turkey the whole way – he broke into the loo when I’d just had a hit and took my works away, gotta be a law against that –’

She tried to shove him aside. He caught her arms and pushed back. Her nails tore into the back of his hand, and her face – that face, but contorted with fury now – kept shouting at him a foot from his own.

‘You said you’d been clean for three days!’

‘That hit was scrapings! Empty packets, barely took the edge off. He told me he’d stop it for me. That’s why I said I’d come here –’

‘So he didn’t kidnap –’

‘I believed him,’ she whimpered, ‘He said he had a way out for me, but he’s left and he’s not coming back –’

‘You’re not making any sense!’ He resisted the urge to grab her, shake her. ‘What are you talking about –’

She shrieked, ‘You keep lying to me!’

She pushed around him, but she’d been leaning on him, and she pitched face first into the door. Something *cracked* as it hit the doorknob.

She crumpled, tried to push herself back upright, but could only curl up around the pain in her guts. And all he could do was look at her – at *Sam* – bent double in a heap against the wall.

‘You hit me,’ she said weakly. ‘Right ’cross the face.’

‘I didn’t –’

‘You smacked my head into the door.’ She started to sob, dry and pinched.

Fitz’s shoulders slumped. In her head, what had just happened was whatever she felt like saying.

‘You want to go,’ he said. ‘You can go later. But right now you’re in no shape. Let’s just get you feeling better, OK?’

She nodded, the fight gone out of her. He reached down and lifted her to her feet, and half carried her back to the bed. ‘At the very least,’ he said, ‘you can try to get your story straight.’

She said she’d had a fever, and chills, so he had no idea whether that meant he should keep her warm or cool. He tucked her back into the bed, wetted a face cloth and pressed it across her forehead. She didn’t complain, and she relaxed a bit, but he knew there was a lot more he should be doing – if he only knew what.

Eventually he ordered room service, soup for her and a whacking great BLT for himself. He remembered to get dressed before the food got there.

This *Sam* hadn’t reacted at all to his being naked. What did that say about what she remembered doing with him?

In the end, he just sat there and listened to her.

‘We’re not supposed to give a shit about life,’ she said, in that too-familiar voice. ‘People like us. Like me. Well, that’s crap, innit? This is a life. And you gotta really work at it.’

‘Right,’ said Fitz vaguely. He was mesmerised by the tip of her cigarette. It was quivering slightly as her hand rested on the pillow, threatening to dump its ash at any moment. He wanted it, he was disgusted by it, he had to keep fighting to keep his hands off her now that he’d just got used to being allowed to touch her.

She laughed curtly. ‘Yeah. Right. It’s hard work keeping yourself this screwed up. But I take care of it. Every morning I get up, there’s something I want, and I get it. Every day.’ Another drag. ‘Bet *your* *Sam* can’t say that. Bet she gets up and does stuff she doesn’t give a shit about. Ev-e-ry sin-gle day. Can’t remember *wanting* anything...’

‘Bet you can’t remember wanting anything else,’ he muttered.

Her face twisted with scorn – no, wait, she was about to cry. Or maybe it was the nausea.

She shook her head, and her voice was thick but still somehow defiant. ‘Look, I know who I am. This is me.’

His throat had gone dry. ‘You don’t have to be.’

‘Nuh. You don’t get out of this.’

‘My Sam did.’ She squinted at him, confused. ‘I mean, my dark-haired Sam,’ he said.

‘She got out early. Once it’s your life, you don’t get out, even if you clean up for a while. That’s just a holiday. You’ll be back in the life before you know it.’

‘Shh,’ said Fitz. He picked up the bowl and gently fed her a little more soup. ‘Just remember,’ he told her, holding her hand. ‘It’s not always going to be like this. The change will come through soon, and then... then it’ll all be over with.’

For a moment he thought she’d nodded off again. Her face was turned away from him on the pillow. ‘So what?’ she slurred.

‘But you’ll be back to –’

‘Yeah, you keep on saying.’ She shifted a bit under the covers, her body a contorted heap. ‘What makes you think the next one’ll be any better’n me?’

He couldn’t answer, he just held her hand harder.

‘I keep hearing this every time,’ she said listlessly. ‘And why should I care if some other Sam feels better? I’m never gonna remember her.’

‘You keep hearing this...?’

‘Yeah, you told me the same thing, the last couple times it came through. I remember.’ Slowly she opened her watery eyes, almost looking at him. ‘Cept that didn’t really happen, did it?’

‘Maybe it did,’ he said with a faint shrug. ‘Somewhere.’

‘Yeah. Maybe I’m not the one who’s changing. Maybe you all keep moving.’

‘I dunno.’

He just sat there, feeling as if he could vanish at any moment.

She finally raised her eyes to him. Her voice had got smaller. ‘Where do you think I’m gonna go? When it happens?’

‘I don’t know,’ he murmured.

He felt her curling up inward, as if she was disappearing already.

If this Sam was just a temporary twist of Sam’s biodata, then the question of where she was before or after meant nothing, in this universe anyway. Just a blip, and she’d be gone. A passing lifetime of sickness and anger. But if she was

a glimpse of some other universe out there, or something... He couldn't look at her and convince himself she wasn't real.

'Look,' he said, trying to be firm. 'Maybe you're going to vanish in a puff of blue smoke in a few minutes' time, but you might as well live like you're going to make it. And the symptoms will pass too – they won't go on for ever. You can even kick this.'

He dabbed briskly at her forehead with the face cloth, trying to keep moving. 'Just try to believe it, all right? You can change.'

'Change?' It was almost a laugh. 'Got no choice, have I?'

'I mean you. Not the Wild Hunt. *You* can change you.' He couldn't believe how tinny the words sounded coming out of his mouth. He'd never believe this stuff himself. Right at the moment, though, he wanted to.

She leaned up to look at him, with a battered corner of a smile. 'Thanks for trying. I must say, you're the best you I've run into yet.'

'Shh,' he said. 'I think it's coming.'

'I'm scared,' she whispered.

He felt the tremor as she gripped his hand, and as the pressure built up he couldn't help but blink –

And she was still lying there, a bewildered look on her face, trying to focus on him.

He looked down from the hand he was holding. The scars on her forearm had retreated to something close to their usual pattern.

He sagged forward. 'What?' she asked as his forehead came to rest on her shoulder. He felt her arms reach around him, hesitant and bewildered, but there.

'So who was I this time?' she asked.

'Jesus. *Jesus* Christ.' Sam's face looked almost as glassy and stunned as the other one had. 'I never thought I would, I mean I knew I could, but I didn't, so I thought...'

He watched her, one hand resting on hers. She'd sipped at the leftover soup, picked up the pack of cigarettes from the tray and was now fiddling with it. Fortunately her irony sensors were sufficiently developed that she didn't light up. He thanked any passing gods for that – if she'd opened the packet, he'd have inhaled one whole in a heartbeat.

'Least it wasn't very likely,' she said. 'I mean, if it was easy to twist my life so I got hooked, we probably would have had one turn up before...'

'I dunno about that.' He stood up, looking down at the bed. 'It only turns you into a different you that was in the same time and place, right? But most of the times it's hit you you've been out of this room, and none of those Sams would have been let out of here. We don't know how many...'

He trailed off, because she was shaking again. This time he was back on the bed giving her a hug before he had to kick himself into doing it. They just held on for a while.

'Y'know, the worst of it was, the bitch was right.' Her voice shook in his ear. 'What you told me, about me not having anything to get up and look for. Christ. She couldn't have known better how to hurt me if –'

'– If she was you?' He felt her nod. 'Well she was a fine one to talk,' he muttered.

She let go of him and brought her hands up to the sides of his face. Looking him straight in the eye, she kissed him firmly. He raised a mildly stunned eyebrow at her when she let go.

'For taking care of her,' she said.

Eventually they got dressed again. Fitz was still realising that this was *his* Sam back, dark hair and all, or someone very close to her. As though he'd made himself accept the other one, as though she'd always been, always would be.

It just hit him, he wasn't feeling cynical or angst-ridden about anything at the moment. Anything at all. And that was so profoundly weird that he had to snog her again to stop thinking about it.

They smiled, foreheads leaning together. They were all just as real as one another, thought Fitz.

She disappeared into the loo, and he leaned against the wall, savouring the fact that that bloody little voice of doom in his head had finally shut up.

The doorknob clunked.

He froze up all over again. *Go to the peephole, idiot.* He pushed himself to the door, looked through, and there was a hallway full of Henches, the unnaturalist looming up in front of the fish-eye view, his fingers moving methodically down near the doorknob, and he heard the bolt sliding back so he must be reaching *through* –

The chain. He fumbled with the slider, slipped it into place and the door was pushing open, pulling the chain taut but stopping. But the shakes kept running through him. 'Sam! They're here! The Henches –'

The door clicked back shut. Something unseen began to push the chain slider back and out.

He bolted towards the window 'Come on, they'll be in –'
– no fire escape –

He turned in mid-step, tangled his feet and nearly fell. Back to the door. He tried to hold the chain slider where it was, but the hand on the other side was too strong. Grab the doorknob – but the bolt could move on its own.

And the door from the bathroom was opening.

'No! Stay in there, lock the –'

– they'll just open it –

Just stay where you are! Keep quiet and they won't –'

– they can hear you shouting to her –

The chain tumbled loose. He grabbed it, tried to push it back in place, but he could feel the hand blocking its rails. Hear fingers scrabbling at the bolt again.

– got to keep them away, lead them away from *Sam* –

The phone on the desk right near him. He leapt for it and kept shouting, into the receiver now, screaming at the dial tone.

'– they won't track you down! I mean it, stay where you are – if you come in here they'll get you!'

The door crashed open and the Henches piled in.

He kept shouting, 'cause they could definitely hear him now. 'I mean it, Doctor, take Sam and run! Don't either of you come back to the room, there's too many of them, you two just go –'

They heard him. They barged right past the bog without checking. He kept shouting down the phone line, Doctor this, Sam that, till he hit the disconnect button just before they got close enough to grab the phone. And then he kept shouting – help, kidnap, somebody – as they picked him up and muffled him, with a Hench arm shoved across his mouth. Already he could hear curious voices, doors opening across the hall, and they dragged him past the loo again and out as fast as they could – my God, they'd bought it, they thought there was no one else there – and as they carried him down the fire stairs at the end of the hall he felt a surge of elation that she was safe, she was *safe*.

And then it sank in that *he* wasn't.

Night Zero

'Cause being half-and-half makes you lesser, you know. You can't just be happy living that way. Even on *Star Trek*, you gotta fight to keep one side or the other under control. (Usually the alien side, too, 'cause it's the human one that makes you better.) You ask a guy who's half-Chinese how he keeps his inscrutability under control, see how fast he decks you.

People can't figure out how having a mixed background could be anything but a defining trauma – either you're angsty, or you're a slavering hybrid mutant on *The X-Files*. They figure that's the natural order – the price you gotta pay for blurring the racial boundaries.

But for me, in my real life, it's no biggie. Even though every seven years I gotta eat a burrito or die.

– Eldin Sanchez, *Interesting Times*, 31 October 2002

Chapter Fifteen

Anything Not Nailed Down is Mine

They might still be there.

Sam sat on the bathroom floor in the dark, curled up against the door, trying not to breathe too much.

There wasn't any sound out there, not since Fitz's voice had faded into the distance, but they could still have left someone waiting in the room. Waiting for her and the Doctor to come back. Springing the trap that she was already sitting in the middle of.

She'd have to run.

She gathered herself off the floor, fighting to keep her breath under control. Christ, her legs were shaking, she could hardly stand. She gritted her teeth in frustration – stop being such a wimp, you're one of the Sams who have it easy. If they'd come before the last Wild Hunt, she would never even have been able to try to run for it. Even if Fitz had still pulled that –

Fitz. They'd got Fitz. She'd *let* them get –

She grabbed the doorknob – better run before you think any more.

Quietly she began to turn the –

No, hang on, you've got to think. Where in hell are you running *to*? You've got a moment here before they know you're around, better use it 'cause you won't get another.

Can't run out of the main door of the hotel – even if they're not in the room, they'd have to be watching the front. The fire stairs, then. At least that had a chance of being unguarded.

And then? Head for the garage down the street, hope the Doctor parked there again when he got back from wherever he was.

And then?

Her head wouldn't stand still long enough for her to think any further than that. Her legs were starting to shake, again. What if she froze up? What if she couldn't run?

She yanked the door open and ran.

And she couldn't hear anything over her own noise, as she charged towards the door to the room, banging into the wall on the way, rattling the knob open as fast as she could. Maybe that sound behind her was a startled Hench – she didn't take time to turn around. She was through the door and belting down the plush beige-carpeted hall, and the end of the hall was moving so slowly towards her, they had to be catching up.

She crashed into the concrete stairwell, almost pitching face first down the stairs. Her breath was rasping already after the first flight down. She exploded into the alley, sprinting on asphalt, bursting into the crowd on Powell Street. In the jostle, no one really noticed her.

No one came running out after her. She wound down the hill, letting the crowd carry her. She saw the juggler in his spot at the bottom of the hill.

She made herself look back, twice, three times. The third time she spotted a pair of Hences, lurking across the road from the hotel, eating bagels out of paper bags.

Her whole body jumped with panic like a snapped guitar string. But they couldn't see her, they couldn't see her. She continued down the hill, one head of dark hair bobbing among dozens of heads, invisible.

The thunderstorm feeling that accompanied the Wild Hunt was still lingering. She could feel it in the crowd, things were on edge, something big was just about to happen, around the corner, just out of view.

The crowd around the juggler gasped and started chattering in rising panic. Sam craned her neck to see. The juggler's face was contorting, as he fought to turn his look of horror into one of pantomime bewilderment, convince them it was a part of his act.

In his hand the glass ball softened and spread, and oozed through his fingers like melting ice cream.

She hid in the garage until the Doctor drove in, a million years later.

She was sitting against a concrete pillar, her back aching with its cold. He saw her the moment he stepped out of the Bug, his young face terribly serious in the fluorescent light.

He strode across to her and picked her up off the floor. Her whole body was shaking and stiff. She leaned on him, heavily.

'Fitz,' she gasped, and it hadn't been a million years: it had been less than ten minutes, because she still hadn't caught her breath. 'They've got Fitz.'

His arms tightened around her. 'It's all right,' he said firmly. 'We'll get him back.'

* * *

OK, so he'd done it. For once in his misbegotten life he'd pulled off being a hero. Just as long as that didn't mean he was now expected to die happy.

Fitz was standing blindfolded, feeling Henches jostling him. They'd stopped herding him along, and were waiting (somewhere) for he had no idea what.

He scrunched up his nose until his blindfold inched up. Now he could just make out a dark brick storage room, patchily lit by a motley collection of bare-bulbed lamps. Three wrought-iron hulks – probably the racks he and the Doctor and Sam had been pinned to – stood half-shadowed against one wall, and the distance was filled with uncertain glimpses of humming and whirring alien machines. And two or three silver glinting threads of the Doctor's biodata, crisscrossing the room.

The unnaturalist was standing in the midst of it, his fingers playing over a small wooden box from his pocket. He opened it and extracted an identical box from inside. Except that the other box was the same size as the one that contained it: they were two halves of the same whole, fitting together without a join. And now the unnaturalist was sliding *another* drawer out of the side of that box, doubling its size again, and again.

When it got too big to hold he laid it on the floor, and continued to unfold it until it was the size of a big old-fashioned wardrobe.

It stood there, shuffling slightly. Two dark wooden doors on the front of this mahogany elephant, like haunted-house doors, the kind of doors boys would dare one another to open.

But, when Fitz looked again, the front of the cabinet was a set of oddly sized drawers instead of the doors – no, *at the same time* as the doors, somehow. And there were more drawer handles visible on the other sides of the box as well – more drawers than could possibly fit in the space inside.

The unnaturalist reached for one of the drawer handles. Fitz could have sworn the cabinet backed away from him, but its master caught the handle firmly and dragged the drawer out. It slid out to more than six feet long, three times as deep as the cabinet it extended from.

Then he crooked a finger in Fitz's direction.

Suddenly Fitz felt Hench arms grabbing him, stumbling him towards the unnaturalist. Before he could convince his legs to try running for it, the Henches had manhandled him up to the cabinet, hoisted him off the floor, and laid him into the drawer.

He could hear them moving around, see shadows moving in the half-inch of vision he had. Footsteps were coming towards him.

And the unnaturalist was standing over him, holding a foot-long knife in his spidery fingers. Griffin had overlapping silhouettes thrown by the scattered lamps, a spidery mass of darkness with far too many arms and hands and fingers. He'd hooked a small metal spike on to the blade, jutting out at right angles near the hilt.

Fat Hench hands pushed Fitz down against the drawer. The unnaturalist's fingers flicked in a way that was impossible to follow. Now he was miming holding the knife, but the blade was nowhere to be seen.

And then the unnaturalist stepped up near Fitz's head, and the knife-hand came stabbing down.

Fitz couldn't help it, he screamed.

He heard the thunk as the knife embedded itself in the wood beneath his head. Saw the hand an inch from his forehead, still grasping the invisible hilt. It *twisted*, and suddenly he could feel the sharp line of pain pressing against the inside of his skull.

And the unnaturalist was staring down at him, clinically. Long fingers reached down to finger the displaced blindfold.

The unnaturalist sighed. 'This is why I provide the blindfold. You do more damage by flinching.'

'What...?' managed Fitz.

'If you stay still I'll tell you. The fastener's designed so that when it's rotated back into your dimensions, it lodges at two points. Embedded in the drawer, and at the point of fastening.' He demonstrated by flipping another knife into invisibility and stabbing it into the side of the drawer above Fitz's head, right in his field of view. Then he made that twisting motion again, and Fitz could see a tiny line of metal – the tip of the side spike – hanging in the air.

'That point was calibrated to lodge in the bone of your skull, where it would do minimal damage,' the unnaturalist grumbled. 'But you flinched. So now there's a two-dimensional line of steel just *inside* your skull, pressing directly against your cerebrum. I don't suggest you move.'

Take it out, he wanted to say, for God's sake take it out. But he didn't dare open his mouth. Don't speak, don't move. Could he stop himself from blinking? Was it all right to breathe?

The unnaturalist gave a slight nod and went on staking down Fitz's hands and ankles.

'You can breathe, and speak if you must,' he said, conversationally. 'You yourself are not a very distinctive specimen...'

‘Thanks.’ Well, that wasn’t much of a riposte. He should have said, I think Sam Jones might say differently. That would have moved too much.

‘... but you are useful – at the moment. I believe the effect your capture will have on the Doctor and Miss Jones will be significant. Presumably they’ll want you back alive.’

I’d like to think so, he thought.

‘But if I decide that you’re not worth the trouble of keeping, and if I rotate the third dimension of the fastener back into your space...’ He reached for the extra fastener lodged in the drawer above, twisted again, and the rest of the blade reappeared. ‘... then *that* will be running through your brain. Now I do hope you’ll be quiet.’

It was dark by the time they pulled into the block of old Victorian row-houses. Sam’s legs had finally stopped shaking, but now it felt hard to lift her head.

Fitz was shouting at her again. Those frantic words from the other side of the bathroom door as she stood there frozen, the note of panic that crept in as the door to the room banged open, her curling up in a ball on the floor as his cries for help passed inches from her ear on the other side of the wall.

Some kind of hero.

‘Nothing to feel bad about,’ the Doctor said out of the blue. ‘You did perfectly well, considering. I’m sure you’ll handle it better the next time.’

‘You think so?’ she muttered.

He nodded, curls flying. ‘I know so. Of course you will.’

She said nothing. The Bug pulled up outside a run-down row-house that was almost indistinguishable from the ones on either side. She stared at the Music & Arts Center sign hanging outside the building, feeling no urge to move at all.

‘We’ve arrived,’ said the Doctor.

‘Wonder where the owners are,’ she said.

‘Oh, I’d guess they were early additions to his collection.’ He unfastened his seat belt and began to open his door. ‘All right. To work.’

She stared at him for a moment, his hands in his pockets as he studied the approaches to the building, as casual as you liked. This was a man, or creature, for whom this sort of stunt was as natural as brushing his teeth. She was so far out of her depth.

But he’d said she’d do better. He was sure she could make it this time. He knew what he was talking about, and if he believed she could do it she could.

‘Right,’ she said, reaching for her door handle. ‘Let’s go.’

He caught her hand, and his eyes were horribly polite.

‘Er,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you’d better wait here.’

Fitz was trying to work out what would happen when the unnaturalist folded the box back up again, imagining his body rolling up like a window shade. A trickle of sweat was worming its way into the corner of his eye, and the tip of his nose itched madly. Oh, God, what if he had to sneeze? His head jerking forward, that tiny steel blade slicing through soft grey matter –

‘I’m afraid the higher dimensions aren’t very wide in three-space terms,’ said the unnaturalist. ‘We’re going to use fractal dimensional compression techniques on you. The effect is disorientating, I’m told.’

‘Stop,’ said someone.

It took Fitz a moment to recognise the Doctor’s voice. He held very still, biting back the urge to shout out.

‘Take that knife out of Fitz’s head, Griffin,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ve got information to trade. If you don’t have it, you’ll be dead within a day.’

He could hear them moving around. A scuffling sound. He strained his eyes downward, tried to get a glimpse, but he couldn’t, he couldn’t tell what was going on. . .

‘I’m not going to give up such a useful specimen,’ said the unnaturalist. ‘Not yet.’

The Doctor started, ‘This entire city –’

‘I know about the Kraken,’ said the unnaturalist. ‘Very likely I know more about it than you do. Hold on to him!’

The sound of a struggle, thought Fitz. His hands tried to leap up, the pins tore into them. It almost felt like there was another one through his chest. He was nearly crying with the pain.

‘Listen to me,’ said the Doctor. ‘His biodata is absolutely normal and ordinary. He’s no specimen. Why not save that drawer for something more interesting?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Griffin. ‘It’s time to put your friend away safely, Doctor. Bear in mind that only I have the key.’

‘Fitz –’ said the Doctor, but something cut him off.

Suddenly the unnaturalist was looming over him, and the drawer was moving, the room receding as the cabinet closed in around him. ‘And then,’ the unnaturalist went on, ‘you and I are going to settle you, once and for all.’

And the drawer shut, and almost everything stopped.

Chapter Sixteen

Anything I Can Pry Loose is Not Nailed Down

The clock wouldn't shut up. It was an old analogue one, each tick a heavy clunk, and Sam could feel it getting louder and louder till she wanted to tear it out of the dashboard and smash something with it.

The keys were in the ignition, ready to go. He'd left them so if – when – he came charging out of that building with Fitz in tow, she could have the car started before he reached it.

But he wasn't coming out.

The keys were in the ignition, ready to go.

Time to just get out of here. She let the thought fill her head, trying to let it convince her. Without the Doctor there was nothing she could do: the city was about to get trashed no matter what. She should just take the first plane home, back to the video store and whichever Sam's life was waiting back in London, and, if the Faction or the unnaturalist tracked her down again, well it would be the same as having to fend for herself here. . .

'Cept she couldn't. The money belt with her ticket voucher was on the floor of the hotel room – no way could she get it, they'd be waiting for her there. Even going to the cops was right out – the only two people who'd ever believe her story were the ones who were trapped in there.

She slammed her head against the headrest, trying to drown out the clock.

It was all that bastard's fault for being a hero.

If he hadn't been heroic back in London she'd never have gone with him. If Fitz hadn't been a hero in the hotel room. . . well she wouldn't have got away and had to feel guilty about it. And, if the Doctor hadn't decided to heroically rescue Fitz, he wouldn't have got captured himself.

And now they were all staring at her, expecting her to be a hero to save them. Bastards.

You're crazy, Fitz screamed at her through the bathroom door. Look how bad you've screwed up already.

No choice. Never any choice.

She punched the dashboard a few times and started trying to think.

He could just about bear being extradimensionally nailed to the rack again, thought the Doctor. Except that there was an itch right below his wrist, just past the fastener, and it was going to drive him utterly mad.

The unnaturalist was folding Fitz up. It was ridiculous to see it that way, considering he'd already been rotated at right angles to space-time as they knew it, but the Doctor couldn't help but feel it as the unnaturalist bent and collapsed the heavy wooden cabinet.

Heavens only knew what Fitz was seeing in there. He'd given a split-second cry as the drawer began to shut.

Somewhere outside, the Doctor could hear another wave of thunder, as the latest ripple of disruption crashed through. They were coming faster, closer together. There were only hours left.

'We really should pool our resources, you know,' he told the unnaturalist. 'If you could throw together something like that box – that kind of stabilised dimensional field would be a much better bandage for the space-time scar. And one without my TARDIS's sometimes infuriating tendency towards self-preservation, which is what's keeping it from being a perfect fit in the first place –'

The unnaturalist turned away, picking the box off the floor. 'I'm afraid that's outside the purpose of my expedition.' He continued to twist and collapse the box, like wooden origami.

'Oh, I don't think it'll help your specimen hunting when the Kraken flattens – oh no. You *wouldn't*.'

'Wouldn't what?' enquired the unnaturalist.

The Doctor pulled against the restraints, shouting, 'You're going to try to capture a Kraken, aren't you! That's what this is all for.'

He could see the unnaturalist blanch from across the storeroom.

'Tempting as it may be as a specimen,' said Griffin faintly, 'I believe that, in the case of a Kraken, discretion is the better part of scientific enquiry.'

'I'd love to see you try,' said the Doctor. 'You're just a boy running around with a butterfly net. Just wait till you try to catch a rhino with it.'

'The Kraken will soon pass,' said the unnaturalist. 'In a few hours, it rises. Shortly after that, it devours the anomaly and returns whence it came. But merely to record its passing...' His eyes glittered. 'Records of a confirmed sighting alone will cement my reputation in the Society.'

'Well not if you're a smear on the cement after it rolls over you...'

The unnaturalist paid him no mind. 'And it is only one specimen among the many which have been drawn here by the anomaly. Creatures from outside my people's limited reach into the higher dimensions.'

Griffin picked up a metal instrument. 'Even now my Henches are collecting the remaining specimens, including those they've now gathered from the Basardi records, and those you reported to the *Interesting Times*. Higher Concepts and *rarae aves*. Basilesques and Mockatrices from the adjacent three-space planes. Curiosities and rarities of a thousand sorts.

'And you.'

'Fascinating, aren't they?' the Doctor murmured. Think of me as a fellow scientist, not a specimen. 'I only wish I had the time to get to know them better.'

'Indeed,' said the unnaturalist. 'I've even sighted a Sidhe.' There was a hint of wonder in his dull voice. 'If you can only imagine how a worm must feel when it watches a bird fly freely through the air, so I felt when I – bound to this plane while reaching above it – saw a Sidhe moving freely through the eleven dimensions.'

'Was it beautiful?' the Doctor asked quietly.

The unnaturalist paused. 'Enviably. But it is not my place.'

'Oh, I've never been one for staying in my place.'

'So I've gathered.' Griffin turned away to one of his devices, some sort of biodata entry console. He turned a handle, and cogs and gears went to work, calculating genetics, worldlines, probabilities.

'You see, it's all a matter of classification,' he went on, grinding away at the device. 'All these creatures, even the ones from other three-spaces, fit into a recognisable taxonomy. We members of the Society determined the system ages ago. Any creature can be put in its place.'

'You don't know everything.'

'Everything that matters.'

'How very boring for you,' said the Doctor. 'What if you find someone that doesn't fit?'

The unnaturalist paused in his task. 'Then it's apocryphal. I handle it. I definitively resolve any contradictions.'

'You kill them.'

Griffin glanced at him, as though surprised. 'They're still alive. Just... simpler. And then everything is as I understand it to be.'

A bit of punched card popped out of the biodata machine. He studied it for a moment, then reached for a tool case sitting on the edge of the console.

‘Which brings me back to you,’ he said.

He opened the case. A dozen pieces of metal glinted in the dim light. The Doctor felt his toes cramping with fear.

‘Ah. . . This really isn’t necessary,’ he began. ‘If you’re one of those types who simply want to listen to souls in torment, I’ll be glad to put on a performance for you. I’m quite fond of amateur dramatics.’

The unnaturalist was searching methodically through the case, picking up implements and examining them. Surgical steel glistened in his long fingers.

‘You want to find out what it takes to make me scream?’ the Doctor went on. ‘A good stubbed toe will do it, actually.’

‘It won’t hurt if you don’t struggle,’ Griffin said absently.

‘Oh, at least try to put some conviction into it,’ called the Doctor.

The unnaturalist turned towards him. In his hand was a thin steel rod, wider than any syringe needle the Doctor had ever seen. The sterile wrapping crackled as he peeled it off.

‘I’m going to take a DNA sample,’ he said as he closed in. ‘It should all be over rather quickly.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid –’ The unnaturalist’s hand snaked out and grabbed his jaw, forcing his mouth open, pushing down till he could feel the tendons stretching. Except that the hand wasn’t even touching him – he could see it still a few inches in front of him, even as he felt the fingers pressed against his chin.

He couldn’t even move to fight it.

The unnaturalist reached the steel rod into the Doctor’s mouth, and rubbed it across the soft inside of his cheek, rolling it slightly. He held it up, peering at the traces of saliva and sloughed skin cells. Satisfied, he let go of the Doctor and took the rod back to the console.

The Doctor blinked and swallowed. ‘That’s all?’

‘Well, it was just a DNA sample,’ said the unnaturalist.

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor. The restraints tugged at him as his body slumped in relief.

The unnaturalist turned around again, and his fingers were covered with shiny metal spines.

‘And now for the deep sample,’ he said.

The pile of sheet music was starting to crackle nicely. Sam briefly considered throwing a few violins on for good measure. Instead she pushed a stool into the kindling. Flames shot up between its rounded legs.

Next she hurried into the loo and set fire to the second pile of paper, bog rolls and crumpled Mozart. Her lighter flared, orange flames reflecting back from dusty tiles.

She slipped back out into the shop. The first fire was crackling nicely. Why hadn't the alarms gone off? Maybe he'd done something to them.

She ducked down behind the counter, hidden from the shop.

A moment later she heard the sound of footsteps. The Henches burst into the burning shop, milling and shouting. She peeked around the counter. They were trying to put the fire out by stamping on it, and then hopping around, holding their singed feet.

The unnaturalist appeared like a cold shadow. 'Stop that,' he told the Henches. 'Use the extinguishers.' He looked around. 'There is a second fire behind that door.'

Sam slid out from behind the counter, keeping low, hoping the smoke would keep her invisible as she tiptoed down the stairs.

The Doctor was stuck on one of the big metal frames. She couldn't see anything holding him down, but she knew the invisible pins would be there, maybe through his wrists and ankles. His head hung down loosely, unpinned.

Sam went up to him, pushed the hair out of his face. She could hear him breathing, raggedly, like it hurt.

There were five neat holes in the front of his waistcoat and in the shirt underneath. She brushed her fingers across the cloth, expecting blood, then tugged open the buttons. Nothing – the skin of his chest was smooth, unscarred.

His eyes opened, lines at the edges. 'About time,' he said hoarsely. 'Get me off this thing.'

'Don't push it,' she said. 'I almost left without you.' She tugged at the thing that looked like a knife handle hovering a few inches in front of his left wrist. No luck. 'Where's Fitz?'

'In Griffin's pocket,' mumbled the Doctor. 'You don't want to know, really. There's a toolkit on the floor in the far corner. But if you wanted to try a number five why didn't you warn me ahead of time? I could have helped...'

Number five? Oh, that list of potted distractions he'd worked out with blonde Sam. Nice to know they had the same brilliant ideas. She started casting about for something she could use to pry the fastener loose. Wait, he'd just said there was a toolkit in the far corner. She dashed over to it – those had to be footsteps outside; they must be coming back by now – and dragged the battered steel case over to him.

‘Perpendicular pliers.’

She grabbed a tool. ‘This?’

‘No. That.’ He tried to point with his nose.

She picked a likely-looking ‘that’ and held it up. He nodded. She brought it up to the nearer of his pinned wrists, and closed its jaws on the empty space between the hilt of the knife and his wrist. It grabbed something, she could feel it, and she started to twist the small pair of pliers anticlockwise past his frantically pointing hand.

‘As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted. . .’

It was the unnaturalist’s voice, right behind her ear.

She froze. The Doctor’s hand closed over hers.

Another scar, she thought. As if she hadn’t collected enough already.

The unnaturalist had got her pinned up in less than a minute. She’d fought, but he just seemed to have too many hands, damn it, clutching and sliding and holding. Then he’d brought out a set of brass knuckles with needles on them, and sucked something out of her arm.

It felt like something more solid than blood. For a horrible moment, she thought he’d cut away part of the muscle, taken a chunk out of her. But her arm felt fine – it didn’t even hurt, except for the perfectly circular white scars, just above the crook of her elbow.

Griffin had put the sample into some kind of old-fashioned machine. Sparks and bubbling noises had come out. He’d left whatever it was to cook, while he turned and addressed the Henches standing behind her. ‘Everything’s secure now. You can join the others in gathering the remaining specimens.’ All she could see were their silhouettes on the wall in front of her, shapes with hats turning and filing out.

The unnaturalist went back to his machine, and started turning a handle. She heard gears moving. He reminded her of an organ-grinder, or something. A piece of her was in there, going round and round.

‘What’s that for?’ she asked queasily.

‘He wants to make us simpler,’ came the Doctor’s exhausted voice. ‘He’s not interested in specimens that don’t confirm the theories he already knows. None of this messy ambiguity or complexity.’

‘Lovely. He should get a job in talk radio,’ said Sam.

She stared at the Doctor. While the unnaturalist’s back was turned, the Doctor was silently going berserk – mouthing something at her, gesturing towards

her with his face, pointing back at himself with the fingers of his pinned left hand.

'Is that it?' she called, trying to keep the unnaturalist distracted. 'You want to turn us into good little boys and girls? We're too rebellious for you?'

'Believe me, I couldn't care less whether you're a rebel,' said the unnaturalist. 'So long as you're *just* a rebel.'

'Oh yes, I see,' said the Doctor in a mocking upper-class lisp. 'As I was just telling Tubby Rowlands down at the club, those rebels have got to know their place.'

The unnaturalist turned sharply, and the Doctor stopped his frantic gestures in an instant. 'I just want you to pick a role and stay in it,' said the unnaturalist as he advanced on the Doctor. 'You're an overgrown university student who still wants to change the universe. Or who left home to wander because he was bored. Or you're a hero with wild ideas about a quest. It doesn't matter to me. Just so long as you don't start going outside your category.'

They've got to pigeonhole you, thought Sam. Otherwise they might have to take you seriously.

'What a load of bollocks!' she shouted.

The unnaturalist had turned to her, his gaze falling on her like a particularly clammy hand.

'You take one look at us and think you know everything, like you've got us all worked out, we're just labels. Classifications. Junkies and street kids and – and throwaways.'

Behind him she could see the Doctor nodding enthusiastically. Keep him talking. . . But the unnaturalist's eyes were already drifting away.

'Well maybe I'm not nailed down either,' said the Doctor. 'Maybe my past changes when you're not looking. Maybe on Tuesdays I'm a god who's dressing down, and after hours I'm a mad professor who thinks he's an alien.'

'You don't really believe that, do you?'

'Well I'm beginning to see the attractiveness of it,' said the Doctor. He managed a bared-teeth smile. 'That being, it gets right up your nose.'

'It's impossible,' the unnaturalist said wearily. 'There's no evidence for it.'

'What, not even if I say so?'

'Of course not.'

'Not even if my biodata says so?' The Doctor's voice was almost teasing. 'You've looked at it. . .'

'Even then. It contradicts the data I've gathered so far.'

‘Well that’s rather the point, isn’t it? Maybe there *are* inconsistencies. Maybe there *are* things that change.’ He raised his head, and those blue eyes were looking right into the unnaturalist’s grey. ‘It’s still a good story, isn’t it?’

The unnaturalist turned away in contempt. ‘And you call yourself a scientist.’

‘Well, yes. But one with more interesting questions to ask. Why not look at what all those creatures *are*, what they’re doing, not just how they fit in your little case?’

And the Doctor was trying again to signal to her, this time bending his left hand flat, pointing straight at her, nodding his head in the direction of her – no, of *his* hand, making her look at it, see the handle of the perpendicular pliers peeking out of his sleeve. . .

He’d kept them, the sneaky bastard had palmed them and she hadn’t even noticed.

But the unnaturalist was walking back to him now – he couldn’t do anything or he’d see. ‘You’re just trying to hide your single true origin,’ said the unnaturalist. ‘The role you play, which I need to understand. . .’ Her heart leapt into her mouth as he came up close to the Doctor’s arms: he was bound to spot the tool.

‘Well hey,’ she blurted. ‘If that’s what you wanted to know about, why didn’t you just ask *me*?’

The unnaturalist froze. She had no idea what the hell to say next. Slowly he turned, fixed those fish eyes on her. ‘How would you know anything about him?’

‘I was on a plane with him for thirteen hours,’ she said. ‘You think he could stay quiet for that long? He told me his whole life story before we passed New York.’

The unnaturalist started to turn away dismissively. ‘He’s just established he wouldn’t tell the truth –’

‘He wanted to show he trusted me. Told me everything the other Sam knew. And she knew a lot.’ She was losing him. ‘About Gallifrey. The Time Lords. And the *real* old days.’

He paused, considering.

Sam could just see over his shoulder. The Doctor had the pliers out, and was frantically twisting his wrist to turn the invisible blade. Almost reaching –

The unnaturalist stepped up close to her, blocking her view, and she almost screamed with frustration.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘Sure. He’s the one foretold in the ancient prophecies of his world. The One who will lead his people out of the Time of Darkness, and unite them against the great evil that will face the universe. . .’

‘Undoubtedly. That doesn’t tell me about his pedigree.’ He lowered his face to the rack, his eyes fixed on her from beside her head. ‘Tell me something useful,’ he murmured insistently. ‘How can I classify him?’

‘Well he’s a hybrid, you know that. A Gallifreyan not born of Gallifreyan, the one who unites the two races and brings good old human niceness into their alien society. Aliens need that, y’know.’

‘A human hybrid.’ She saw the contempt in his curling lip. ‘Pseudoscientific nonsense. There’s no evidence,’ he repeated.

‘He’s allowed to be different. He’s got a prophecy and everything.’

‘Is he?’

‘Yeah,’ she said, her eyes wide. ‘He’s cosmic, man. And he’s got a wise old spirit who guides him –’

She regretted that last bit before it even made it out of her mouth, but the unnaturalist was already lost in thought. ‘Hybridisation could explain certain biodata irregularities. . . Not that I’m saying it’s possible, you understand. But half-human on which side?’

‘His mother’s,’ she guessed.

‘But there’s more to him than that.’ His face was closing in, and she couldn’t twist away: the pins kept her locked there as he stared. ‘What is he on his *father’s* side?’

‘A Time Lord, of course.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I suppose. . .’

‘No. Not good enough,’ he said hotly. She had a sudden image of him taking a bite out of her cheek. ‘There’s still room for ambiguity. I don’t care which answer it is, but I need to know. . .’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘The story ends here.’

His voice was low, raspy, defiant. The unnaturalist turned, and she could see the Doctor standing in the far corner, leaning heavily on the bank of Gothic clockwork. Neither of them had seen him move.

Already amber and red lights were starting to flicker on the Doctor’s face, as the machine went out of kilter. ‘I don’t know what you were doing with our biodata samples,’ he said flatly. ‘But if you don’t get over here and fix what I’ve done right now, they’ll be well and truly cooked.’

And he smiled. And Sam felt a hot shivery feeling building in her, as the Doctor ducked out of the panicked unnaturalist's way and ran towards her, loosening the fasteners that held her down.

Now she was running with him, keeping pace with his every step, leaving the unnaturalist working frantically at his console behind them. She was running, the way he'd run after the unicorn, charging past the tubas and guitars and through the door. Within moments they'd piled into the Bug, and the Doctor had kicked it into gear, and she could feel the laughter bubbling up 'cause she never thought it would happen but she'd made it out *alive*.

'You did it,' she started to say, but he cut her off with a look.

'Thank you,' he said.

And the words that made it out of her mouth and worked their way back to her brain were, Jesus, 'We did it. Whoa. Not bad.'

He grinned and shifted gears for the hill. 'Well I was impressed. That was a textbook number eleven, Sam. Death by exposition. And where did you learn all that?'

She didn't answer. When she'd sat down in the passenger seat, she'd felt something jammed in the pocket of her jeans. Now she'd finally got it out, and unfolded the wadded piece of paper. She just stared at the return ticket voucher, trembling in her hands.

So she'd had a choice all along. And if she'd known that she'd never have chosen to rescue him, would she?

She'd never chosen anything. She'd just sort of come across things, her job, her friends, where to get pissed on a Saturday night. She would have got on the plane, telling herself the whole way back to London that she had no other choice.

That Sam had never chosen to start shooting up every day. She would've just sort of drifted into it.

'I said, where did you learn all that?'

She jumped. 'All what?'

'About the prophecy. What you told him in there.'

'Oh, that. *Babylon 5*.' He looked blank. 'I pinched it from an episode I saw a while back.'

'Oh.' For a moment he looked relieved. 'Never mind, then.'

'Wait a minute –'

'We've got to get to Berkeley immediately!' said the Doctor. 'We lost a lot of time while we were in there. My TARDIS is getting close to breaking point.'

'But Fitz –'

'Is in no more danger in there than he would be outside. There's no more time for another rescue attempt right now. We can free him properly once we've dealt with the scar.'

And it was true, she realised. Those little twinges she'd been feeling every half-hour or so lately were the Hunt, moving through her more quickly than ever before. The pendulum was swinging faster, and she had to accept he knew what he had to do.

What *they* had to do.

Overhead the clouds were a solid wall, moving inexorably from all sides towards a single point ahead of them.

Chapter Seventeen

What Lies, Behind Us

Eldin woke with a start. The phone was trilling in his ear and his arm had gone to sleep.

He fumbled for the receiver with his left hand, dragging his right arm around like a dead weight, and knocked the alarm clock off the bedside table. It glared 23:11 at him from the floor. *'Bueno?'*

'It's Sam Jones,' said the phone. 'I've got a message from the Doctor.'

'Wha— Oh, the Doctor! OK, I'm awake.'

'You could be in danger,' said Sam. 'We think someone's after the creatures. I just called the Basardi and no one answered. We need you to —'

'Whoa, wait, hold on,' said Eldin. 'If something's going down, I want to talk to you about it face to face, you know? I gotta meet up with you.'

'We don't have time —'

'Look, just tell me, where are you? Where can I find you?'

Sam hesitated. 'We're at Kyra Skye's. Bye.'

She hung up.

Eldin fell back on the bed, massaging his tingling arm.

She'd known, somehow. She'd sounded scared. Not panicked, but hurried, angry. There was no way they were at Kyra's: that had been a brush-off.

No point in phoning it in, then.

He closed his eyes, lying diagonally across the bed. It had sounded like a simple favour for a useful source, the sort he did every day. Let him know where he could find someone. First point him to the Basardi, then this Doctor. But that voice on the phone just now had sounded far too serious about it for comfort.

He pulled himself back upright and groped for the phone, figuring he could call her back, find out what was happening. But he slowed to a halt, as it sank in that he didn't have any way of reaching them. He didn't know. He couldn't know.

What would have happened if he'd got their location? Would he have followed Mr Griffin when he went to find them, tried to sniff out a story? Or would he not have given it a second thought?

Slowly he sank back into the bed, his thoughts becoming muddy again, feeling more and more lost as he drifted back to sleep. Something big was happening, and he didn't have the first clue what it was.

Or what he'd done.

'Another Griffin in sheep's clothing?' asked the Doctor from the next payphone over. Sam nodded and fumbled for more change, craning her neck to watch for Hench silhouettes.

She was running out of people from Fitz's notebook to call. Her first call had been to some bloke called Carl, who'd hung up in fear after hearing the Doctor's name. When she'd called the Basardi safe house, the phone had just rung and rung.

'I think he blew the Basardi network,' she said. 'They knew where to find the other creatures –'

'So they've been rolled up,' said the Doctor, almost dancing with impatience at his phone. 'Probably literally.'

Finally she heard someone answer on the other end of the Doctor's phone line. 'Is it ready?' he asked without preamble. A two-second pause, and he hung up and threw back his head in frustration. 'Gaaaaaargh!'

'I guess the stabiliser's not fixed yet,' she said.

With a sharp sigh the Doctor turned and headed for the Bug. 'We've got the time now – we might as well go and warn the unicorns ourselves.'

'I ought to drive,' she said, matching his pace. 'In case he starts pulling your strings again.'

He shook his head. 'If he was going to, he would have started long before now. Which is rather worrying, because if he's not using such a direct weapon his attention must be focused on something else. Something worse.'

'Worse?' said Sam. The Doctor nodded. 'I don't want to know how he's going to top that...'

The unnaturalist sat at his desk, writing in his journal in the thin electric light of the storeroom. The distorted gramophone was warbling through a song in several directions at once.

His scientific machines were also at work, grinding and clicking on the workbench. One mechanism was at work analysing the Doctor's biodata. Once he

fully understood it, Griffin would be able to use it to control him. There would be no more tricks, no more escapes. And no risk of damage to a valuable specimen.

Another device was linked to the first. Its crystal tubing was lit up from within as it produced drop after gradual drop of a golden fluid.

It had only been recently Griffin thought, that he had realised how his brother had struggled to support the pair of them. After the collapse of their father's business ventures, they had been thrown on to their own resources.

Fortunately, Griffin had enjoyed their surveying work thoroughly. And in between their sessions of measuring and mapping there was plenty of time for him to ramble at random, collecting specimens or simply observing them.

Just think. If they had been well off, content, he would never have turned to the study of the lower life forms, never have made his expedition to the lesser regions. He would never have had this chance to impress the Society.

Indeed, he might never have detected the unusual damage to space-time without his experience of surveying the lower dimensions. He had this realm pretty much to himself, and plenty of time in which to collect the specimens that would help restore his family's status.

For now, all he had to do was meticulously write up his field notes, while his loyal Henches took care of the next step.

'Right,' said Sam as they hurried through the park. 'So what's number seven, then?'

'Oh, that's frying an electronic brain with the Epimenides paradox, or the square root of two, or something,' said the Doctor. He fished in his pockets, handed her a torch. 'Never works. I'm sure it was this clearing. Or the next one over.'

Sam jumped back violently. One of the grey men had stepped out from behind a tree. She froze, not knowing whether to fight or run for it.

'Bob,' said the Doctor, strolling up.

'Hi,' said Bob. He held a long, slender rod in his hands, pointed at both ends, flickering with electrical energy trapped inside. Like lightning, thought Sam, like he's holding a piece of lightning.

'Unicorn hunting?' said the Doctor.

'Uh-huh,' said Bob. 'Only, we're supposed to get you as well, if we see you.'

The Doctor nodded, folding his hands behind his back. 'Fair enough,' he said.

'What!' said Sam.

Bob shrugged. A silvery net was rolled up and thrown over his shoulder. 'Just doing what I do,' he said. 'Whatever job I'm given. You know. Nothing personal.'

'Don't you have any say in what you do?' said Sam.

'No, I just do it,' said Bob. 'Don't you?'

The Doctor coughed. Sam realised he wanted her to be quiet. 'But how about giving us a head start?'

'Well, I –'

'Number four, Sam!' said the Doctor. 'Now!'

He didn't have to tell her twice.

Sam sprinted for the trees. She could hear Bob stomping along behind her. Didn't sound like he could run all that fast. She'd already lost sight of the Doctor.

She found herself grinning, suddenly. Number four was one of the tricks the Doctor and Fitz had described to her. It was simple: we'll both run away, then I'll double back and nobble our pursuer.

She stumbled over a mushroom the size of a milk crate, rolled in the grass, got back up and kept running. Bob was puffing after her, waving his spear, falling behind. She leapt over another mushroom.

Oh my God, she thought. I think I'm having fun!

And when all this was over? Dave and the video store would be waiting. It would be easy to go back, score another hit of real life and slide back into the habit before she knew it.

What other choice was there?

She glanced over her shoulder. Bob couldn't run and throw the spear at the same time – could he? Where was the Doctor?

There, a flash of movement –

'Sorry about this, Bob,' said the Doctor.

He reached forward and gripped the Hench just beneath the ear. Bob fell over like a lump of Plasticine and lay on the grass.

Sam was reaching for his net and spear when the Doctor gently put a hand on her shoulder. 'You don't want to play with those,' he warned. 'Let's just try to get on.'

Two more Hences were converging on them, cutting them off from the Bug. Further off in the dark, they could just see the rest of the grey figures spread out in a line, a systematic dragnet slowly sweeping its way across the park towards them.

'Number one?' asked Sam.

‘Number one,’ agreed the Doctor.
And they ran like hell.

When the Hunt came thundering up from all around, Sam had to drag herself to a halt, even with the Henches closing in from behind. She grabbed on to the nearest tree and held her ground while the stampede of possibilities swept over her. And then she had to sprint again to make up the lost time.

The Doctor wasn’t far ahead. She could see the slight awkwardness in his gait, each step jarring the wound in his side. It wasn’t much. Just a lingering disadvantage. Just enough that it meant the Henches were gaining on them.

Oh God, she’d go back to the video store, anywhere but back to that lab.

The Doctor grabbed her elbow and yanked her aside, through a line of trees.

She stumbled to a halt. The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder.

Ahead were the unicorns, gathered in knots of conversation like socialites at a cocktail party. And there were others – the leathery oily dragon, elegant humanoids in embroidered veils, a half-giraffe, half-Lego set. One large patch of darkness that her eyes couldn’t quite focus on, which appeared to be reading a comic book.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor. ‘The gang’s all here.’

‘Oh, no!’ muttered the nearest unicorn.

The creatures were all edging away from them, the dragon rustling its wings, the big dark thing bumping nervously in the night.

The Doctor didn’t miss a stride. ‘We don’t have much time,’ he announced to the throng of things. ‘The Henches are close behind us. All of them, I think. If we –’

‘Whoa,’ growled a unicorn. ‘Whatever you’re up to, we want nothing to do with it.’

‘I beg your pardon!’

‘You’re too dangerous for us. That nightbumper over there was lurking in the Basardi safe house when the grey men came. He heard. They’re on the hunt for *you* now. Every freak in the city that the unnaturalist has paid off is looking for you.’

A Heisenbug added, ‘And we don’t want to be anywhere near you when they catch up.’

The Doctor looked as though he was about to lower his head and charge. He shook himself, spoke in a low, low voice.

‘You don’t want to get involved,’ he said. ‘Well, I’m afraid it’s rather too late for that. The Henches were systematically searching the park. *Systematically.*’

Every one of the creatures was spellbound, keeping perfectly still as he turned to survey his audience of monsters. ‘They started long before Sam and I escaped. We’re just a bonus. They came here for you.’

‘What makes you think we matter to him the way you matter to him?’ asked a furry furphy.

‘Just look at him,’ Sam called out. ‘He’s one of you!’

The Doctor looked at her. ‘And so are you, Sam. None of us fit into his narrow map of reality. We’re all impossible creatures. Each of us has got to be defined, explained, and shut away in the appropriate drawer. When he’s got me and Sam, you’ll be next.’

He spun, suddenly, shouting at the trees. ‘You can come out! We can see you!’

The Henches stepped out of the shadows, scattered, surrounding them on all sides. They looked tiny against the trees, but their spears and nets glowed softly. They began to close in, hesitating just a little, unsure whether to press the attack without the advantage of surprise.

The Doctor stood between the monsters and the nets, a ringmaster about to command the act to begin.

‘You’re evenly matched in numbers,’ he told the creatures. ‘But, if you take into account size and strength, you effectively outnumber them two to one. If you run, you can outrun them, but if you scatter they’ll pick you off one by one. And, if you let them leave, they’ll only come back again.’

A unicorn said, ‘But –’

The Doctor clapped his hands for silence. ‘I’d advise you to take prisoners, rather than escalate this further. But since you don’t want to be associated with me... I’ll leave you to it.’

He turned sharply and walked towards the waiting Henches. Sam hurried to follow him.

One of the Henches raised a spear, tentatively. The Doctor snapped, ‘Lay a finger on us, and they’ll be on you in a heartbeat. I’d surrender now, if I were you.’

But the Hench wasn’t looking at them, his grey eyes fixed on the creatures behind them. She could just hear a rustling of wings, a few preparatory snorts from the unicorns, the nightbumper bumping threateningly.

They passed the Henches, reached the trees, and no sounds of battle came.

As they stepped through the trees and into the clear, the Doctor let out a tremendous sigh and seemed to shrink about three inches. A huge, disbelieving smile spread across his face.

‘Good heavens, it *worked!*’

And right at that moment she knew she wanted to stay with him.

The problem was, would he want her?

As they rattled on to the Bay Bridge in the Bug, right at that moment she knew *again* that she wanted to stay with him. For the fifth time in the past fifteen minutes. And once again her mind ran screaming from the thought.

Leaving all her mates, that was right out. If having an adventure meant never getting to have a night with Rob and Mark and Aditi and a crap video and a bottle or two, then it wasn’t worth it.

But if crap movies meant never seeing Fitz again. . .

Fitz wouldn’t want to stay. Getting pinned down to a life in London again was the last thing he’d want. She would have to be the one who packed what she could carry, and left everything else behind.

But the Doctor wouldn’t want her in her own right. He just wanted his squeaky-clean better-than-life friend back. Arranging daring escapes, teaching her his little tricks – her *wanting* to learn his little numbered tricks. . . Never mind the blonde hair dye, he *was* turning her into his version. And making her love it.

But it was all a sham, ’cause he wouldn’t associate with the likes of her otherwise, would he?

Partly not thinking about it, partly very deliberately, she lit a cigarette and filled her lungs. She rolled the window down just a crack to let the smoke out. Outside, the city was lit up in neon.

‘So,’ she said. ‘Wonder if your friend’s got any of Berkeley’s most famous product on hand.’

The Doctor looked puzzled. ‘UNIX?’

‘Nah. LSD.’

He cast his eyes heavenward. ‘At a time like this?’

She laughed. ‘Yeah, well, plan for the future, that’s my motto. Well, it is now. I just figured while I’m in town, you know. . . Go to the source, my friends always say.’ She settled back to watch him squirm.

‘The last time I dropped acid was back in 1968,’ he said.

She nearly dropped her cigarette with surprise. He said, ‘I needed an altered state of consciousness to contact a discarnate entity. But I was almost transformed into a psychopathic Aztec god.’

She stared. ‘Now that is a bad trip.’

‘Well it does tend to put one off the experience, yes.’ He pulled the Bug around a corner at speed. ‘And then there was the hallucinogenic venom I used with the Snakedancers on Manussa. Nearly killed me that time. . .’

‘Ooh, riding the snake. Very Jim Morrison.’

The Bug crashed through a huge pothole. Her ciggie flicked out of her fingers and disappeared through the window into the slipstream outside. The Doctor was grinning, like at some private joke. Git. She almost laughed.

‘In any case,’ he went on, ‘I’ve got precise control over my blood-brain barrier, so usually nothing affects me in ways I don’t want it to. I could pour us each a glass of nice strong mushroom tea, and then walk out of the door while you’re still figuring out how to stop the wall from running away.’

He paused, considering. ‘On the other hand, Jo Grant once gave me one of her hayfever tablets, and I had flashbacks for decades. . .’

She burst out laughing. And she knew for the *sixth* time that she wanted to stay with him.

Christ.

Griffin sat quietly in the back of a taxi, his hands folded in his lap. The human driver was chattering away. The unnaturalist ignored him, watching the city slide past through the rain-speckled window of the vehicle.

He was thinking about the first time he had encountered one of the beings of the lower planes. It was a hazy memory, a child’s recollection.

The creature had been something like the dominant species of this world, with minor variations. It had been part of the garden ornamentation at his uncle’s dwelling. Uncle had a suitably large garden, in the section of the Needle closest to the singularity at its heart. The privileged region where their kind had first evolved. Here in this garden, the boundaries between the dimensions were at their least defined; to his child’s eyes it seemed he could see further, reach further, perhaps even fly.

Uncle had temporally frozen the creature, turning it into a permanent display. Standing with his brother and his father, admiring Uncle’s new acquisition, he was sure the being’s angry, frightened eyes were looking at him, glittering with vengeance.

Once they had returned that night, to their much more humble dwelling further down the length of the Needle, he had dreamed that the creature came walking to their home. At first he heard its footsteps, growing louder, nearer. Then the footsteps ceased, with a deep thud.

In the dream, he knew the being was out there, just outside the dwelling. What if it wanted to come inside?

Each time he had the dream, he would wake, lying absolutely still and silent. He would reach out beyond the walls of the dwelling with his senses, probing frightenedly for his uncle's ornament, never finding anything. Eventually, reassured, he would fall asleep again.

The first specimen he ever collected was a creature not dissimilar to the one his uncle had displayed in his garden. A childish part of him found it a great comfort to place the being safely in its box, to take it to pieces later on, studying its simple body. He had smiled, wondering how even a child could think such a humble creature could ever pose a threat to him.

The taxi driver was still babbling on. Griffin glanced at him, through him, seeing his every detail in an instant, like that first dissection.

The taxi drove on.

The Doctor pushed open the door and led Sam into the office, remembering to knock only once the door was half open.

'Come in,' called the man in the corner. The Doctor swept past a neatly organised desk and towards the workbench.

A grey-haired man was bent over the bench, amid a web of computers, oscilloscopes and what looked like an IV drip bag filled with white goo. Sam saw that it was attached to the Doctor's stabiliser device. A fluorescent light flickered overhead.

'Professor Daniel Joyce, I'd like you to meet Samantha Jones. And vice versa.'

The grey-haired man got up from the workbench and stood tall over the both of them. He smiled and shook her hand. 'A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sam.' His gravelly Scots brogue made the last word sound like 'Sham'.

'Well, it's been lovely, but we have to go now.' The Doctor reached for the stabiliser.

Joyce slapped his hand. 'It's not ready yet.'

'What!' The Doctor wheeled around and started pacing frantically across the room, hands pressed to his temples. 'Not ready? We've only got about two hours –'

'I know,' Joyce interrupted him, a bit defensively. 'The nanocircuitry web hasn't finished regenerating.' He tapped a computer monitor. Sam could see a complex 3D diagram slowly sketching itself in, labelled in maths symbols, or maybe Greek.

'You *assured* me it would be ready in time.'

'I had to stop work for an hour or two. The head of department came by for her inspection. I couldn't be seen to be working on anything too odd.'

The Doctor started leafing through the papers on Joyce's desk. 'Afraid you're building another atomic bomb, are they?'

Sam blinked. 'Another?'

'It was only a small one,' said Joyce mildly. Sam found herself looking around the lab, in case it was still around. 'Just a demonstration of how easy it would be for some lunatic to get hold of the components. It certainly convinced my students.'

'I'll bet it did,' said Sam.

'You'd think the antinuclear movement would have thanked me!'

'Please!' The Doctor cast Joyce's papers down in a dishevelled mass. 'I need you to get it finished right away.'

'Another half an hour.'

'I don't have half an hour!'

'You said you have two hours.' Joyce carefully squared the papers on his desk.

'Well, yes, I've got two hours, but I don't have half an hour!' The Doctor was pulling books from a shelf, glancing at their titles for possible answers, pushing them back into place. Joyce followed him a few paces behind, wearily reordering whatever the Doctor left in disarray.

'It'll take that long for the last of the circuitry to flow into place,' insisted Joyce.

The Doctor spun around and grabbed him by the shoulders. 'I'll help.'

'It's a one-person job.'

'I can monitor the -'

'I've got it under control.'

'There's nothing I can do? Nothing?'

'Nothing. Honestly.'

'Oh, all right, then,' said the Doctor, and wandered out to look at the stars.

As soon as the Doctor was gone, Professor Joyce called in his assistant, a serious young woman with reddish-blond hair. 'Larna, could you keep an eye on the nanocircuitry web for me, please? Thank you.' The woman settled into Joyce's chair at the workbench, casting a worried glance out of the window at the Doctor on the patio outside.

Professor Joyce stretched, and looked at Sam with a twinkle in his eye. 'It's still a one-person job, but I didn't say I had to be the person.' Sam returned his smile. 'Tea?'

'I'm more the coffee type.'

'As am I. Fortunately, I happen to have some of the instant variety which I guarantee is only mildly toxic.'

Sam followed him to his office across the hall, a narrow room jammed with shelves and cupboards. He took cups from a neatly ordered shelf, then pressed a switch on a small jug kettle. Sam flopped into a fraying grey easy chair beside the desk.

'He's always in such a hurry,' Joyce told Sam as he took a coffee jar from another shelf and spooned shiny granules into the cups. 'I don't know, sometimes I wish that old banger of his would pack up for good. Maybe without his TARDIS he might learn to appreciate the value of putting his feet up for a while.'

She stared at his right forearm as he poured hot water on to the granules and added milk. She'd spotted the dark blotches when they'd shaken hands – for a moment she thought they were needle tracks. But now she could make out that they were a tattoo, scarred in a botched attempt at removing it, a lengthy serial number in blue-black ink.

But Joyce looked maybe sixty. He'd have been an infant in the concentration camps. If that.

'You're one of them, aren't you?' she said. 'One of the Doctor's lot.'

Joyce chuckled. 'My dear Miss Jones, it's been a long time since I was one of anyone's "lot".'

'You know what I mean. A Time Lord.'

Joyce shook his head. 'I'm afraid I don't have that honour. Though I have had some dealings with them in the past.' He sat down opposite her, putting the mugs on the corner of the desk. 'No, I have, ah, *other* responsibilities. Smaller ones in some ways, bigger in others.'

'Like banning the Bomb?' she said.

'Like banning the Bomb.' Somehow that felt out of place; somehow she'd thought that sort of thing was supposed to be beneath people like him. 'Oh, they'll talk about the sanctity of the Web of Time, about how you have to be careful, but to tell the truth I've never been very good at the whole "do I have the right?" sort of thing.' He leaned forward towards her, his eyes alight with almost too much conviction. 'The way I see it is, do I have the right not to *try*?'

'Hmm,' said Sam.

‘Exactly,’ he agreed emphatically. ‘The present is what we make of it. And so is the past, for that matter. After all, a couple of years ago I wasn’t even Daniel Joyce.’ That she could deal with; maybe two hours ago she hadn’t been Samantha Lynn Jones. ‘We’re defining what is as we go along. That’s what we’re here for. We don’t need to be bound by the way things are, or were, or are supposed to be.’ He set the cup back down and rubbed his forearm, as if massaging that scar. ‘Though I’ll admit my enthusiasm’s got me into a little trouble in the past. . .’

He was clearly warming to his theme, the way old people did, so she sat back and just let him talk. Her eyes wandered over his desk. There was a small framed print of an elaborately gowned, slightly plump redhead in the far corner, beside a larger family portrait of Joyce with his wife and a daughter in her thirties. That made sense. If his girl was grown up, no wonder he was talking to her like this – now he must be wandering about in search of someone to be a father figure to.

Suddenly Joyce was giving her a knowing look. He’d noticed that she wasn’t paying attention. ‘You’re thinking of running off with him, aren’t you?’ he said. ‘Well. . . yeah, I suppose I am.’

Joyce sighed ruefully. ‘He collects them like. . . like bottle caps.’

Slowly he stood and began to walk across the room. The change in his manner was abrupt, absolute.

‘They all think they have to go with him to have a worthwhile life,’ he said quietly. ‘But they don’t. There’s so much to do right here. The Doctor doesn’t know what he’s missing out on. Imagine if he concentrated all his efforts in one place, one time.’

‘You mean, imagine if he was like you,’ said Sam.

Joyce was still lost in his train of thought. ‘He just keeps *collecting* them, one after another. As though he’s compelled to. It must be something in his biodata,’ he muttered.

She shrugged. ‘I suppose he must have put some of it in my biodata, then.’

Joyce’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he asked her what she meant. It took quite a while, and the rest of her cup of coffee, but she managed to get out an explanation about how the Doctor felt he had changed her biodata.

‘Well, it’s an interesting theory.’ Joyce finished his own cup. ‘Except, of course, that it’s nonsense.’

‘It is?’

‘Well, I admit the basic concept’s far from unheard of. But without your timestreams ever having crossed? Painstaking modifications to the worldline

of someone who wouldn't otherwise ever have been within a mile of meeting him? When there were bound to be hundreds of other people whose timestreams were already closer to intersecting with his, and wouldn't need so much meddling? Doesn't that sound the tiniest bit implausible to you?

'I've just been mugged by a unicorn after discovering I've got an evil twin,' said Sam. 'This week, nothing sounds implausible.'

'Well, take my word for it,' said Joyce, amused. 'He can't be responsible for your condition. Not without some more, ah... direct, intimate contact between his biodata and yours.' He raised an eyebrow. 'You haven't had that, I trust?'

'I don't *think* so,' said Sam. 'So who's responsible, then?'

Joyce shrugged. 'In the end all that matters is who's responsible for what you do next.' He gathered up the coffee cups and headed for the staffroom with them. When she followed, he caught her in the doorway for a moment, pointing a stern finger at her. 'And it had better be you.'

It took her a while to spot the Doctor. He was sitting on a lawn near the Physics building, watching the clouds behind the bell tower. The moment he'd been told there was nothing to do, it was as though a switch had been thrown.

She sat down beside him, and he reached an arm around her shoulders to protect her from the chill.

'Look,' he said, pointing upward.

'Clouds,' she said, raising an eyebrow. 'Next?'

'No. I mean look.'

Sam looked. Long grey streamers were pouring across the sky, westward. 'They're heading towards the scar, aren't they?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'But I meant, *look*.'

If he's going to point out the one that looks like a hippo, thought Sam, I'm out of here.

But instead she just followed his gaze. Clouds moving, clouds mating, clouds dividing. The more you looked, the more you saw. Puffy shapes expanding and dissolving into other puffy shapes, long strings thinning out until you couldn't see them any more.

They were quiet together for a while.

'I can hear her crying out,' he said.

'The TARDIS?'

He nodded. 'All this time. She's been holding on to her link with me. I think she wanted me to feel this.' His face looked still and hollow in the orange-tinted

street light. ‘She wants to know... how could I do this to her?’

Probably the same way you can risk my life, thought Sam. And most of the time convince us both that we don’t mind it.

‘She’s like a person – like an old friend, isn’t she?’

‘Oh, we’ve had our differences, especially lately. She’s been getting so head-strong – very clear ideas about where she wants to go...’ He shook his head, looking down at his toes. ‘I wanted to come here weeks ago, but she’d been badly injured. She still hadn’t fully recovered by the time I...’ He trailed off shakily.

‘By the time you had to do it,’ she said, ‘or you’d never know what happened to your friend.’

He gave a faint smile, grateful for the attempt to let him off the hook. ‘I only took the TARDIS to low-risk places while she recovered... dropping the T’hiili off in one of the yellow dimensions, that sort of thing. But that wasn’t what she wanted at all. All those easy trips, she fought me every step of the way. But when I set course for here... it was as if she wanted to go here all along. I don’t know why.’

‘Maybe she was curious.’

‘Perhaps...’ He trailed off, watching the clouds stream endlessly on. ‘I might have to get used to this sky,’ he said. There was a tremor in his voice which she hadn’t heard before.

Sam just held on to him. This was a bloke who could die and then get up and walk away. About the only thing he could really sacrifice was his freedom, or a friend. And if the TARDIS died he’d lose both.

‘I could have stayed here,’ he murmured. ‘Here in San Francisco. A few years ago, the opportunity to settle down presented itself.’

‘This could’ve been home,’ she said.

‘But I left. I always do. After a while I stopped thinking about it, stopped looking back. There were always new adventures, new places, new people... After a while I hardly saw anyone from the old days at all. And in all of that time I never knew about the mess I’d left behind here.’ He sighed and pulled his knees up under his chin. ‘I feel as though my past is finally starting to catch up with me.’

‘At least it’s your *own* past,’ she said.

‘Good point.’ He managed a slight curl of a smile. ‘There’s just so much of it sometimes. I try not to be as old as I am. Usually it works.’

She raised her hands to his face, then gently lifted it till his eyes couldn’t help but meet hers. ‘Look,’ she told him. ‘If worst comes to worst, and you’re

stuck here – what’re you gonna do about it? Are you gonna curl up and die? Or do you think you’ll just find enough things to get caught up in right here?’ He still looked shaky, and she swallowed hard, feeling a sudden spikiness building up in her throat. ‘You still believe all that stuff you told me about living in the moment, right? ’Cause if not, I’m a bigger sucker than I ever thought I was. . . ’

‘No, you’re right,’ he said simply. ‘I’m just not very good at not getting to do what I want.’

‘If you’d settled down here, would you ever have met Sam?’

He shook his head. ‘And I wouldn’t have dragged you into this.’

‘And we wouldn’t be sitting here talking right now.’

He nodded, and slowly raised his eyes to the scene around them. The bell tower stood out against the sky, white and gold. Across the road, steam drifted upward from a heat vent, like the breath of a dragon sleeping under the ground.

‘True,’ he finally said, and she could feel some of the tension ease from his shoulders. He grinned suddenly, and it was as if the clouds had broken. ‘It’s funny. I only used to be able to have this sort of conversation with cats.’

She reached out and messed up his hair. ‘Tell you what,’ she said. ‘If you end up stuck for a place to live, I could squeeze a spare bed into my flat.’

‘Ah,’ he said softly. ‘But where would Fitz sleep?’

‘Um. . . ’

‘Unless the spare bed is for Fitz,’ he said thoughtfully.

‘Oh, behave,’ said Sam, giving him a mock slap in the arm.

Behind them, Professor Joyce cleared his throat.

Sam jumped away from him; the Doctor just turned, raising an eyebrow at the physicist.

‘It’s ready,’ said Joyce.

Forty-seven seconds later, once the Doctor and Sam had bolted out of the door with the stabilising device, Joyce settled back alone at his workbench and methodically began to pack the exitonic circuitry away.

A few minutes later, the door to his office crept open. Joyce kept working, carefully, precisely, even as the slow tapping footsteps closed in and the shadow with too many arms crept over him.

‘I was wondering when you’d get here,’ Joyce said quietly.

The footsteps slowed to a halt behind him.

‘I’m grateful for your patience, sir,’ said the unnaturalist.

Joyce stood and sauntered slowly over to the unnaturalist, putting his hands in his pockets, a burly figure beside the gaunt Griffin. 'I understand you've been making some trouble for the Doctor.'

'I'm sure you'll agree he's a singular specimen,' the unnaturalist said politely.

'Oh, quite so. Which is why we'd like you not to disturb him.' Joyce's face creased into a smile. 'And you know it's a good idea to listen to us. You'll earn your place in the next life that way.'

'He's one of yours?' asked the unnaturalist.

'Not at this stage,' said Joyce.

'But he's unique. There is nothing in the city to compare with him. Under our agreement –'

'I don't think you're listening, son,' said Joyce. 'The Advanced Research Project's grants to your Society are contingent upon you providing us with appropriate biological data from your expeditions. And I wouldn't consider a dissected Doctor to be appropriate.'

Griffin gave a little bow, but he had that fixed look in his eyes. Joyce could almost hear his words bouncing off, unable to break through that wall of single-mindedness. He sighed.

Joyce stood over the unnaturalist and stopped just short of jabbing a finger into his chest. 'You're not to take the Doctor's biodata. Don't try to do it behind my back, because I'll find out. You're not to tamper with the concentration of his biodata at the scar, or any of the other exposed strands. And you're not to do to Miss Jones's biodata what I suspect –'

'The scar?' interjected the unnaturalist.

'– you plan on doing. *Especially* the scar. Now, do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, thank you, sir,' said the unnaturalist. He'd suddenly gone all quiet, even humble. 'I believe you've told me everything I need to know.'

Chapter Eighteen

Coming Unstrung

They'd made it back to the scar with less than an hour to spare. The Bug had left skid marks as they'd rounded the corner into the alleyway, and now they were standing right next to the little twist in the air.

While the Doctor adjusted the stabilising device, Sam looked into the centre of the scar. You had to know where to look, the way the light just seemed to bend around it. . . In the middle of the glow, surrounding the twisted blue shape, she could just make out the fine, tangled patterns of the uncountable threads of the Doctor's biodata.

'I think I've got it. Stay back.' He reached out an arm and pushed her back to a safe distance. He levelled the little remote at the scar and pressed the biggest button.

Nothing continued to happen.

'I think the rubber band broke,' Sam said.

'Oh, not again.' He rummaged in his pocket and produced a rubber band.

Sam stared at it open-mouthed. 'I thought I was joking,' she said.

He grinned – 'You were; so was I' – and zinged the rubber band past her ear. Then he went back to staring at the mangled space in front of him. 'It'll only take a little while longer. Just hold on.'

'I am holding –'

'Hold on,' he repeated softly, and she realised he wasn't talking to her.

She looked up at the slice of sky visible above the alley. The streamers of cloud were converging from all sides on a point directly above the scar. They twisted, bent down, went *out* somewhere, and more and more of the clouds followed the same path.

Slowly the scarred space began to glow, the dark orange of barely molten steel. The rumble of the Wild Hunt was growing in her bones, closing in from all around. And with a grinding whoosh of air being pushed aside something began to come together.

At first all she had was the idea of something being there. One by one other ideas attached themselves to it. Blueness. Squareness. Solidity. Call-here-for-help-ness. It was pulling itself together out of pure concepts, lines, squares, cubes, wood, paint, glass. The air was full of a whirring, grating sound.

And the Wild Hunt swept up, and she braced for the disloc

ation when it hit

with

staggering force

of a hurricane pushing her towards

the scar one step

then another

wave kept hitting over and over

her head the sky was glowing

orange scar inches from her face

now pulling her –

‘No!’ shouted the

shouted the Doctor and he switched off the device and crumpled back against the front bumper of the Bug, staring with horror.

The police box gave a final metallic shriek and crumpled back into the scar.

‘Sorry,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘I’m sorry.’

She ran to him. He was shaking. ‘It doesn’t work,’ he gasped. ‘Just was – pulling the TARDIS out. Not healing the scar.’

‘And without the TARDIS there –’

‘It’s not *working*,’ he blurted, even more frantic than before. He looked away and screwed up his face, trying to think. Or maybe trying not to think.

The Kraken comes, thought Sam. The Kraken devours the scarred space-time. The scarred space-time contains the Doctor’s biodata, the fabric of his being.

She was scared to broach the subject, for his sake. ‘When the TARDIS does break down. . .’

He tightened up as if he’d been cut.

‘. . . how likely is it to seal off the scar as it collapses?’

‘Don’t know. I don’t know.’

So, if he made this sacrifice, he’d have to do it without even knowing whether it would make a difference. She wondered if she’d ever have the nerve to try, knowing that. She watched him pushing the heels of his hands into his eyes, as if trying to grind a fresh answer out of his brain, and figured she’d never dare.

And wondered about the man who'd given them the device, and said he'd almost wished the Doctor's old banger would pack up for good.

'The pulses weren't even this strong or this frequent before I put the TARDIS there. I've just aggravated it,' the Doctor muttered. 'There's no time, no time. . .'

The endless cascade of thunder had faded back to a constant low rumble, the glow was down to a dull orange again, but the storm abated only a bit. She could almost feel the light and sound regrouping, preparing for the final assault.

Then came the slow, measured footsteps.

He was behind the scar, behind the orange glow. He was an outline, a silhouette, a huge spider with arms that stretched into impossible dimensions. Fingers reaching for them even as he neatly folded his hands in front of him. With his sombre face, his dark, old-fashioned clothes, he looked like something out of Dickens. An undertaker, come to take them under.

The Doctor buried his head back in his hands for a moment. 'Oh, not *another* one.'

He wasn't moving and Griffin was almost on them. Sam pushed herself to her feet, now, before she had too much chance to think about it, and put herself in the unnaturalist's path. 'Sorry,' she said from what she hoped was a safe distance. 'The Doctor's busy right now. You'll have to take a number, behind the Kraken and the TARDIS and -'

She felt fingers brush across her skin, suddenly shove her aside. She stumbled sideways out of his path. By the time she got her balance, he had almost reached the scar. 'Wait! Don't!'

But the Doctor was on his feet, stomping towards the unnaturalist with an out-of-control anger on his face. 'Oh, go away!' he shouted. 'The sheer gall of it, expecting me to devote some of my precious time to stopping you. . . Why should I even have to *bother*? Don't you have anything *better* to do with your life? Just go *away*!'

'I don't think so,' said the unnaturalist mildly. 'This is just what I've been looking for.'

The Doctor said, 'Don't even -'

Griffin dipped into the wounded space with his supple fingers and *twisted*.

The Doctor fell back against the Bug, his head and shoulder smacking into the metal. His mouth and eyes were open, huge. A ripple went through his body, not a shudder, but a *ripple* as though he was made from water.

He crumpled on to the ground and lay very still.

Sam shot over to the Bug, ignoring Griffin, crouching down beside the Doctor. For a moment she didn't even want to touch him, in case the unnaturalist had done something horrible to him, twisted up the lines of his body into some new and hideous shape.

'Sam,' murmured the Doctor. She reached for his shoulder. It seemed solid, normal under her hand.

'Yes. . .' Griffin breathed, 'I see it now. The scar was hiding it from me. But the nexus I was looking for was here all along.' He raised his voice slightly, giving a scientific lecture to the semiconscious Doctor. 'There are only two such points where all your biodata is open to me at once. Your actual place of regeneration, which remains a mystery to me. . . and right here.'

He produced from his pocket a small glass bottle, filled with a golden fluid that sparkled in the glow from the scar. Almost reverentially, he turned his back on them, raised it to the edge of the twisted space.

'Don't,' said the Doctor. Sam could see him pulling himself together, straightening up against the side of the Bug, but he'd never make it to the unnaturalist in time.

Griffin paid him no mind. Slowly he began to unscrew the lid of the bottle, ready to pour its contents into the scar itself.

'You shall be. . . understood,' said Griffin.

Sam lowered her head and rammed him in the back.

The unnaturalist gave a thin scream, turning to grab her. Sam yelled back, smacking his face, and then punching it, and again, her hand singing with pain as her knuckles crunched into his skull.

She screamed and swore, kicking him, punching him wherever she could hit him. He staggered and fell, a bony, skinny body sprawling on the concrete. Sam dropped on to him, straddling his back, hitting and hitting, utterly panicked because at any moment he was going to reach for her with some of those hands and simply turn her inside out –

'Don't touch her.'

Something in the Doctor's voice made Sam stop and look.

The Doctor was standing over them, wobbling slightly, aiming the stabilising device down at the unnaturalist's head.

'This thing can reshape space-time,' said the Doctor. 'It's very useful for extradimensional repairs. So what do you think it'll do to the bits of your body that protrude into the higher dimensions, hmm?'

Griffin looked up at the Doctor. She hadn't even bruised him. Calmly he folded his arms beneath his chin, as though getting comfortable, and gave a

patient sigh.

'The bottle,' said the Doctor. She patted down the unnaturalist's pockets till she found it, then pulled out a small jar of golden liquid. But the Doctor had already found the bottle on the pavement behind him, where the unnaturalist had dropped it after he'd fallen. She looked from one of the bottles to the other.

The Doctor was looking intently at his bottle, the stabiliser still carefully aimed at the unnaturalist.

'What is it?' said Sam. She climbed off Griffin, stood up.

'Biodata in a bottle,' breathed the Doctor. 'Unless I'm very much mistaken.' He tilted the bottle, examining the glittering, golden liquid inside. 'Think of it as a computer virus. Attaching itself to my biodata, copying itself, coursing out through each and every strand. Rewriting. Editing. Corroding away the bits our friend here doesn't care for.'

'So what's this one for?' she asked, hefting the identical bottle in her own hand. 'Is it a spare?'

'Oh, that one's for you,' said the unnaturalist.

Sam stared at it, gripping the vial so hard she became scared it was going to break. 'What?' she said.

'Your own biodata is also overcomplicated,' lectured the unnaturalist from the ground. 'Though it has only a fraction of the complexity. Since yours is entangled with his, it can be reached through this same point.'

'Oh my God,' said Sam. 'This. This is –'

'I'd be remiss if I didn't simplify you as well.'

'This is it!' Sam looked at the Doctor, wildly. 'Don't you get it? This is where it all begins!'

'Sam –'

'Don't you see?' she shouted. 'Change the biodata and you change the whole lifeline, past and future. This is when it first happens!' She held the bottle high, her hands shaking with fury. 'This is where she's *created!*'

The thunder was closing in again, trying to drown her out, ready to lose her in the noise.

Pushing her into being someone she wasn't.

She smashed the bottle to the ground.

Blonde Sam scattered across the pavement, a splatter of gold and broken glass.

She'd expected the Doctor to be angry – she'd known he wouldn't understand. She had expected another outburst, enraged shouting.

She hadn't been expecting the deathly paralysed silence. The Doctor stood over Griffin, the stabiliser held tightly in his hand. He stared down at the fragments of glass, the leaked fluid, as though he was staring down at a corpse.

This is it. You've blown it. He's not going to want you with him, not after this.

She looked at the gunk on the ground. If he doesn't want me, it's his loss. I'll find my own way from here.

She met his eyes full-on. 'If it was me in the bottle, she'd have smashed it too. Not 'cause she's evil or stupid. 'Cause she's me. She wouldn't want to give up her life for a different one any more than I would.'

'You may well be right,' the Doctor said with ice in his voice. 'But I also think it's a bit much to imagine she'd be proud of you.'

'She is me,' said Sam. 'We keep talking about her like she's a different person. But look. She was just a computer program. Just a modified version of me. You haven't lost her. She isn't gone. I'm right here.'

The Doctor didn't say anything, head bowed, like a mourner at a funeral.

'What about the other bottle?' said Sam. She gave the unnaturalist a kick in the side. 'What were you going to do to the Doctor?'

The Doctor looked at the vial again. 'All the bits of my lifeline that don't quite fit, wiped away,' he said. 'A simple origin. Just a Time Lord. Nothing more.'

'No,' said Griffin. 'Human.'

The Doctor stared at him, mouth open. 'Just human,' Griffin went on. 'Once you've been... resolved, you might as well be. It doesn't matter to me which category you fit into, human or Time Lord, just so long as you're definable. Only one thing at a time.'

'What about him, then?' Sam asked the Doctor, pointing at the vial. 'Go on, pour him in.'

'What?' said the Doctor. He was staring at the vial, holding it at arm's length, as though it was deadly poison.

'Doesn't he deserve to live?' she said. 'Would he do the same for you?'

'All right,' said the Doctor very quietly. 'You've made your point.' He pocketed the vial.

No use crying over spilled me, thought Sam. 'So what do we do now?'

She tried to read his face and couldn't. It was lost in shadow, lit from behind by the smouldering glow from the scar. Behind him she could just hear an echo of the TARDIS's desperate grinding wail, just make out the shards of shattered glass spread across the pavement.

'I'm going to get Fitz back.'

* * *

They travelled to the music shop in silence. Sam spent the trip twisted in her seat, gripping the stabiliser, trying to watch Griffin. She kept expecting the unnaturalist to try something, but Griffin sat there calmly, staring from the back seat with his pale eyes.

She wondered if the Doctor really would use the device on the unnaturalist, if push came to shove. Would it really do anything to him, anyway?

‘How did you get free?’ said Griffin.

Sam jumped. The Doctor glanced at the unnaturalist in the rearview mirror.

Sam said, ‘I was kind of wondering that myself.’

‘Oh, I just undid the restraint.’

‘That’s impossible,’ said the unnaturalist. ‘The restraint passed through a fourth and fifth spatial dimension.’

‘I had the perpendicular pliers.’

‘No you didn’t.’

‘Yeah, he did,’ said Sam. ‘I gave them to him, when you weren’t looking.’

‘There’s no evidence of that,’ said the unnaturalist.

Sam took a slow deep breath.

He was still going as the Doctor herded him through the music shop, towards the storeroom. ‘The fact remains, there’s no proof that you gave him this hypothetical tool. . .’

‘The proof is that I got free!’

‘Which is impossible,’ the unnaturalist repeated smugly, as if that proved his point.

I give up, thought Sam. I could probably say I was born in 1980 and this guy would dismiss it as too round a number. She just shoved past him through the doorway.

The storeroom was empty.

The Doctor turned to the unnaturalist. ‘Box,’ he demanded.

‘Do you mean this?’ Griffin reached for his coat pocket.

‘Carefully, now,’ said the Doctor, keeping the stabiliser trained on their captive. The Doctor looked slightly ridiculous, thought Sam, like he was threatening to change the unnaturalist’s channel. She hoped Griffin didn’t see it that way.

Griffin slowly took a polished wooden box out of his pocket.

‘You had it with you?’ said the Doctor.

‘Of course,’ said Griffin. ‘It’s too valuable to leave lying around.’

'Set it up,' said the Doctor. 'Now.'

Griffin quietly did something to the box, something like unfolding origami. As she watched, the box got bigger, and bigger, till he had to place it on the ground and keep unfolding.

'You still have to come up with a better explanation for your actions,' he said with a sour look. 'Breaking the normal laws of nature is simply not acceptable.'

Now the box was the same size and shape as her parents' stereo cabinet. It stood on an indeterminate number of legs. 'He's in there?' asked Sam.

'Open it,' said the Doctor.

Out of nowhere, Griffin was sliding open a drawer. A drawer full of Fitz.

He lay in the box, hyperventilating, staring up at them with wild eyes. Sam's stomach wrenched. There was a knife stuck right through his head.

Fitz was vibrating, as if he didn't dare move or speak. His wrists and ankles were pinned down with more spikes. His eyes stared pleadingly at her.

The Doctor glared at Griffin. 'Get those pins out.'

The unnaturalist nodded, then reached down and flicked his fingers around the hilt of the knife till it disappeared. 'Come on,' the Doctor muttered. Without speeding up in the slightest, the unnaturalist raised his hand, and Fitz let out a strangled sob as he remembered how to breathe.

With another conjuror's flip of his fingers the knife was back in Griffin's hands. With a polite nod he passed it to the Doctor.

'You're taking too long,' snapped the Doctor, elbowing the unnaturalist out of the way. He adjusted settings on the stabiliser, placed it against the pin sticking out of one of Fitz's wrists, and thumbed the stabiliser's button.

The pin twisted sharply and shot across the room, crashing against the wall. Fitz cringed. The Doctor reached across him and blasted the other three pins away.

Sam took Fitz's hand. 'It's OK, you can sit up now,' she said. 'It's all over.'

Fitz grabbed and hugged her fiercely, which kind of threw her. She didn't have any idea why.

He picked up on the stiffness with which she was letting herself be held, and let go, embarrassed. After a confused moment she gave him a hand to clamber out of the drawer. 'What did you see in there?' she whispered.

'Nothing,' he said quickly. She could feel him shaking. 'Nothing.'

'Sam, give me a hand with this,' called the Doctor. He was already over in a corner, where a small cluster of translucent strands glistened like spider silk against the bricks. 'I need some help to undo it.'

'You can't,' stated the unnaturalist. 'It's not possible.'

The Doctor worked feverishly at the strands. 'Not possible. Not acceptable. You like tying things in knots, don't you? Especially my biodata. Hold this.' He passed her the knife as she got up close.

Now she could see the one strand that was bent away from the others, held at an angle by something invisible. There was a painful-looking crimp in it, with a gouge in the wall right behind. The Doctor was running his fingers through the space between the two points. 'Knife. There.' He pointed, and she pressed the tip of the fastener against the gouge. She could feel it resting against something tense, some sort of invisible restraint pulling the strand out of place.

She grimaced for a moment as another jolt from the Wild Hunt ran through her.

'You want everything to be simple and true,' muttered the Doctor. He was feeling around the crimp, his fingers passing right through the bent strand. 'Substituting equation for metaphor. Even if you have to bend the truth to do it.'

And with a sharp motion he reached up and twanged the strand. The unseen restraint jerked against the tip of her knife, and suddenly the strand snapped back to its normal position.

The Doctor gasped, then let out a relieved sigh. 'I've got the violet back.'

Only from her angle could she see the other two-dimensional pin he'd hidden up his sleeve, which he must have used to pry loose whatever upper-dimensional hook was holding the strand in place. But from any other angle, it still looked like magic.

Griffin shook his head in disgust. 'You're being impossible again. Stop it.'

The Doctor crouched down beside the box and tried to shift it. He couldn't – God only knew how many creatures were inside that thing. While he struggled, Sam saw Fitz standing a bit away, looking shaken. She hurried over to him, grabbed him, and gave him a full-bodied kiss. When she let go, he looked even more bewildered for some reason. As if her snogging him was a surprise by now.

'Just wanted to thank you for saving my life,' she told him. 'Back in the room.'

He just stared. 'I think I've heard that before,' he muttered. 'Or rather, I said I heard it. Never mind. Long story. The gods of cosmic irony are just playing with my head again. As always.' He paused, raised an eyebrow. 'Feel like thanking me again?'

She reached out to pinch his arse, then stopped. She could feel the stop-motion juddering in her arms as she moved. A chain of little jumps and disconnections, tiny jolts one after the other, slowly building up inside her again.

'The Hunt,' she whispered. 'It's not going away.' She turned and shouted to the Doctor. 'I think this is it!'

He stood up, face grim. 'We're leaving. Now. Bring the box.'

'I think not,' said the unnaturalist. The Doctor stared. 'First I think it's time you told me what I'm getting out of co-operating with you.'

The Doctor gaped and raised the stabiliser. The unnaturalist folded his hands. 'If you shoot me, you won't be able to move the box at all, will you?'

'I've got no time for this,' shouted the Doctor.

'Which is precisely why this is the best opportunity for me to put my question to you,' the unnaturalist said, with deliberate, infuriating slowness. He eased the drawer Fitz had been lying in back into the cabinet and gave the Doctor a patient look.

'How long?' Fitz whispered to her.

'Maybe fifteen minutes,' she guessed. 'It's building up to the big one.'

'Well?' asked Griffin.

Abruptly the Doctor dashed past the unnaturalist, around the side of the cabinet. 'I don't care,' he snapped.

Suddenly he spun round, grabbed a low drawer and shoved it outward, catching the unnaturalist in the back of the knees. As Griffin buckled, the Doctor caught his shoulder, leaned him backward into the drawer, then rammed the drawer shut and slammed the cabinet behind him.

Then he turned and charged for the door.

Fitz was right on his heels, but Sam hesitated for a moment before running after them. Already she could hear fingernails scrabbling on the inside of the cabinet.

'He'll just climb right back out,' Fitz shouted at the Doctor's back.

'I know. I'm relying on his single-mindedness. Come on!'

'Why the hurry if you can't –'

'I have to be there.'

The Doctor drove like a man possessed. Sam could hear the engine redline as he forced it up the hills, the gearbox grind and clunk more and more with each shift. The whole car was rattling, screeching, shaking as if it was going to fall apart, but the Doctor just stared furiously ahead and whipped it harder.

Fitz was holding tightly on to her hand. Maybe he figured that, when the next Hunt hit, that would mean she could only shift into another Sam who would have reason to be holding on to him. Or maybe it was just to help keep her from flying all over the back of the Bug as the Doctor crashed around corners.

Somewhere behind she could hear the rumble of hooves, closing in on them.

‘Almost there,’ said the Doctor through his teeth. ‘Almost there. Hold on...’

He floored it even harder as they raced across the cross-street at the top of the big hill. They were just above the top end of Chinatown now; it was all downhill from here, and the wheels left the road as the street dropped away beneath them.

But something felt wrong: they weren’t falling back down to meet the road fast enough, and it must be a pocket of ungravity, but if they were moving further out from the slope because of it that meant when they did fall they had further to –

Her neck snapped forward, her head banged on to the headrest in front of her, with a thunderous crunch all around her. The Doctor was yelling, wrestling with the wheel as the Bug shimmied madly from side to side on the road. He kept screaming angrily at the car, as if a bent axle was a personal betrayal.

Bits of metal scraped along the pavement. The violent pounding from the undercarriage forced every other sound out of her head. But the Doctor wasn’t slowing down.

The alleyway was coming up on the right. The Doctor was spinning the wheel furiously, stomping on the brakes, trying to get the car to turn hard enough to make it. The wall of the alley filled their view. She heard her voice and Fitz’s crying out, the screech of skidding sideways, and the Doctor wasn’t – he was –

Her whole body jerked with the crunch. The Bug had cannoned into the bricks, metal screaming. Sam grabbed at the seat in front of her, shouting, oh God, they were going to die. She heard the whining sound of the car’s left side being reshaped, ironed out, the door popping out of the frame as they scraped at last to a shuddering halt.

By the time she cleared her head the Doctor had kicked open his warped door and was clambering out. He was howling, turning to pound on the roof right over Fitz’s head, incoherent with fury at the car for failing him. For getting itself destroyed. For his having gambled and its not paying off.

His voice cracked and shredded. He gave the wreck a hopeless kick and stumbled away towards the scar.

Fitz was sitting frozen; he looked like she felt. Finally he snapped into action, shoved the seat forward, got out so they could catch up with the Doctor. When

they reached him he leaned an arm across each of their shoulders, letting them support him. He guided them a few paces down the alleyway, towards the scar, leaving the car behind. She heard a hubcap fall off and roll feebly away.

We should still be running, she thought. He shouldn't have stopped for that, shouldn't be moving so slowly now, come on, we've got to hurry and fix it. But then she saw the hollowed-out look on his face and realised that this was all he'd been running for. Not to save the day. Just to be with the TARDIS at the end.

She didn't dare say anything, but for a moment she just wanted to hug him and make everything all right.

Ahead the scar was throbbing with an apocalyptic orange glow. The spiral of wind in the sky above had reached the ground – she felt it tear through as they approached the centre. Over that howl she could also hear the ceaseless grinding of the TARDIS, but now juddering, broken. Sobbing.

The Doctor stopped. He turned, shielding his eyes from the light. The wreckage of his car behind him, the death rattle of his TARDIS in front of him, the shattered glass of the Sam bottle under his feet. Flanked by her and Fitz, for whatever that was worth.

'I got another deal for you,' said the little boy.

She spun round. The boy was sitting on an abandoned oil drum, watching the show. 'Wanna know what really happened with blonde Sam?'

He was smiling, like he'd just robbed the biscuit barrel. There was a smear of thick golden liquid around his mouth. He wiped it away with a finger. Sam decided she didn't want to know.

'Go away,' said the Doctor emptily. He didn't even look away from the scar.

'You wanna know?' said the boy.

'Never mind if he does, I do,' said Sam. 'You've got a price?'

'The car.' The boy smirked. 'We take it back to seventy-six and melt it down, and make sure its own steel is used to build it. Nice little paradox.'

She glanced at the Doctor, but he was lost to them, staring deep into the scar. Her eyes slid past him, to the mangled remains of the Bug. She had to know. She didn't dare. She started to ask Fitz, 'You think he –'

'I don't think even he could fix it after that,' said Fitz. He reached out to touch the Doctor on the arm.

'I don't care,' the Doctor said dully. His face didn't move.

She took a deep breath and turned to the boy. 'Deal.'

'All right, then.' The kid got up and grabbed a piece of the shattered bottle. 'This wasn't where Blondie came from. All this stuff does is corrode away bits

of biodata the unnaturalist doesn't like.'

'So?' asked Sam.

'So think about it. You think he'd care whether you're a good girl or a druggie loser? He doesn't care what your lifeline is like, so long as you've only got one of them...'

She felt something go hollow in her. 'You're saying -'

The boy rolled his eyes. 'He's doing this 'cause you've already got two biodata strands. He wants to get rid of one of them. He'd never *create* a second string of biodata for you - that's the kind of rule-breaking he wants to stop.'

'Just go away,' the Doctor said again.

The boy looked like he was about to say something jeering, but the look on the Doctor's face in the scarlight must have told him not to. The cries of the TARDIS were growing louder, drowning out the wind.

'All right, see ya round,' the boy said with a sneer, and walked off. As he passed he tossed the piece of broken glass towards Sam. She had to stop herself from trying to catch it.

So she hadn't changed anything. All that grandstanding, and she hadn't fixed it. Even he couldn't fix it. Neither of them could do anything, except stand and watch as the scar grew louder and fiercer, as things went on happening no matter what they did.

She could barely see now for the light and the wind. The Doctor's eyes were pinched shut, and he was muttering something under his breath. Last rites, maybe, or apologies, or he was telling himself one more time why it was necessary. She thought she heard something about easy chairs.

'It'll be over soon,' Fitz said. He was trying to sound gentle, but he had to shout over the storm.

Those were tears squeezed in the corner of the Doctor's eyes.

Sam couldn't hear anything for the hoofbeats, the howling, the roaring wind.

The TARDIS's wails built up to a final, scabbling shriek.

The Doctor's hand leapt upward. His fingers stabbed at the stabiliser controls.

And the scar erupted with light as the whirlwind ripped through them, and the TARDIS noise limped into a regular rhythm as the Doctor summoned it.

'What are you -'

'You can't -'

'There's a chance,' shouted the Doctor. 'I don't care. There's a chance.'

She could see its beginnings in front of her, tenuously blue, but the squareness and the solidity weren't hooking up quite right somehow, and surely this

wind could tear such a fragile pile of concepts apart. The Doctor was staring into the maelstrom, gripping the stabiliser, as though trying to pull the TARDIS back together through the strength of his own arm muscles.

She couldn't take her eyes off him. She didn't even pay attention to the jolts of the Wild Hunt, as it battered her repeatedly like waves against a cliff. This was all that mattered.

'Oh, Christ!' Fitz was shouting at the Doctor. 'We're done for. You should've left it! You should've let go!'

But the Doctor was beyond listening, and as soon as the flickering shifting pile of polygons showed something like a door he was pushing it open.

He grabbed Sam's hand. 'Get inside! Come on! Inside!' he shouted, pulling her after him.

Sam walked, stumbling, through chaos, through flying shapes, through a sudden nothingness that made her ears ring. Was Fitz following them? She felt him bump into her, tried to grab his hand, but he was hunched over, covering his head with his arms, shouting obscenities.

And suddenly they were over the threshold, and *inside*.

And out in the Bay something old and deep began to rise.

Freeze-Frame

Her footsteps made no sound. Her feet would have to be touching something for that to happen.

The TARDIS was something like a huge building. Or more like the plans for a huge building – lines, ideas, possibilities, shimmering walls and floors, faintly grey. The only colour came from the thin trickle of butterflies that drifted aimlessly through the hallways.

It couldn't always be like this. Could it? How could you live in a place like this, with its ghost walls and shifting rooms? How would you ever find anything? The TARDIS must've been thinned down to this dreamy space.

Whatever she was walking on had only the vaguest sense of floorness, and if the TARDIS stopped bothering to maintain it she'd fall through into... what?

The butterflies meandered sadly, flecks of life with nowhere to go. Sam felt sorry for them. She knew just where she was headed.

She'd crossed the threshold and been faced with this nothing. There were all sorts of things here, everything from library shelves to a water cooler, but your eyes just slid away from the spaces between them.

The Doctor had charged ahead with his arms shielding his face, braced to ward off anything aggressively surreal. She could understand, she'd expected an acid trip too. But if anything he'd seemed more scared that nothing was jumping out at them.

'This is bad. This is very bad,' he'd muttered, dashing round the big fuzzy blur that somehow suggested a control console. If the TARDIS isn't generating a convincing environmental metaphor, we should be seeing lots of weird things. Its functions are incomprehensible to the human eye. But, if we're not seeing anything, then most of its functions must be dead...'

The time in the wounded TARDIS was as tenuous as the space was. The Doctor had explained as he coaxed the Ship into a juddery slow-motion take-off: until the TARDIS healed a bit, gathered its strength, the next moment simply couldn't happen in here. Right now the Ship was too weak even for that.

She wondered briefly how much power it took to keep time moving forward, had an image of a gargantuan clock-motor forcing a second-hand to creak and groan forward a notch.

So, even though in real terms the TARDIS would be returning to the world a mere few seconds after it had left, in here each second dragged through several minutes. And, since the Doctor had grabbed everything he needed for whatever he was going to do next, in the first few moments he'd been inside the TARDIS, that meant there wasn't even anything she could help him with.

So for now there was nothing to do but think. And that was the last thing she needed.

She'd left the Doctor running his hands over the console, gently trying to mould it back into shape. Fitz had mentioned something called the butterfly room, but that hadn't really sounded like her kind of thing. There was something else she wanted to see. The Doctor had pointed her towards it, then went back to coaxing the circuits back to life, silently pleading with the controls to forgive him. The console remained mute and withdrawn.

There's a chance, he'd said. But what if there hadn't been? Would he really have let the TARDIS die in front of him? She couldn't have. She'd have got in, set course for the other side of the universe, and curled up in a tiny ball of not-coping-ness till she stopped picturing what the Kraken would do to everyone in its path. Or till the Kraken swallowed her biodata whole and she just stopped, whichever came first.

'This is mad,' Fitz had shouted. Still breathing hard from the sprint, he'd stared furiously at the Doctor across the haze of the control panel. 'I don't believe this. You're risking our lives – you're risking thousands of people. And what for? Just 'cause you don't want to give up the freedom of having a TARDIS.'

The Doctor had started moving around the console, grasping and massaging bits of its greyness that she couldn't make out. Fitz had followed, still grabbing for his attention, not daring to actually touch him.

'Me, I could settle down here,' he'd gone on. He was standing right next to her when he said it; she'd felt the honesty with which he'd looked at her. 'It's a good enough time, we've both got people here. If our other choice is near-certain death, I'll take San Francisco any day. But you just –'

He'd broken off – the Doctor's face had snapped upward to stare at him. His eyes were wide and fierce.

'I will not be pinned down to one place and time,' he'd said flatly. 'And I will not lose another friend. I don't have to. I'm the Doctor. I win.'

So either he'd made that decision in a moment of strength, or maybe one of weakness, she couldn't tell.

The third sort of door-ish space on the left.

It swung open at her touch, or maybe it just dissipated, she couldn't be sure. Even more than when she'd bolted into the TARDIS, she had a sense of crossing a threshold, going into someone else's space.

It was filled with old oaken furniture in a vague sense of disarray – books in piles, clothes dumped on the four-poster bed like their owner was about to walk in and clean them up. It all looked impossibly homey surrounded by the nebulous walls – a stage full of props, but with the barest hint of scenery.

So this was her room. Just the way she'd left it.

The corner of the bed was wrinkled, in just the spot she always sat on at home. A tangle of cords and clips that was either rock-climbing equipment or bondage gear lay in a heap beside the bed. An acoustic guitar was propped up against the wardrobe.

I'd always meant to learn the guitar, she thought. And get outdoors more.

On the old-fashioned writing desk, a holographic photo of some bloke who looked a bit like Fitz but a lot more cute. *Jane Eyre*, with an Amnesty International bookmark about six pages in. An old *Star Trek* novel, the bookmark two thirds of the way through. An ecology textbook and a biography of Simone de Beauvoir.

A few blank postcards, never sent.

A scrapbook. Sam opened it at a random page. A train ticket, a torn bit of greenish paper, a newspaper clipping. We are not alone: UFO conference comes to Newbury.

It was like reading someone else's diary. Sam closed the scrapbook, guiltily. She turned helplessly around, looking at the room, feeling the weight of all her *things* pressing in on her.

'If you don't want to stay in here,' Fitz said hesitantly from the doorway, 'There's some space in my room. . .'

He was hesitating just outside, so she reached out a hand for him to join her. 'She's done so much. . .' she whispered.

'She's always starting things,' Fitz said, wandering into the room. 'But they don't finish. She's been talking about another rock-climbing trip to Grimsbridge for weeks now, but something always comes up. And this. . .' He hefted the

guitar by its neck. 'I was teaching her a few chords. Just for fun, you know, someone to play with. And it was a gas. She said she'd always meant to learn it. But after a while, we never seemed to get back to it. . .'

'Maybe someday,' she said.

They sat down next to each other on the bed, sitting thigh to thigh, eyes meandering around the room rather than daring to look at each other. A lone butterfly randomed in and settled on the desk, wings heaving.

'He needs her,' Fitz said. His voice was gentle, but somehow resolved. 'Sam, I mean. He needs someone who really believes in the things he does. I think that's why I've been trying to clean up my act lately. I don't know how he'd hold up if his only friend was a cowardly cynical old sod like me. . .'

She gave him a stern look. 'If you keep saying things like that, I might have to snog you again.'

'My point is, he needs a Sam Jones. And you're doing a better job at being Sam Jones than I am.' He exhaled sharply through his teeth, and bugged his eyes out. 'For one thing, if I don't have a smoke soon I'm going to eat my own head.'

Now it was her turn to feel shaky. 'I don't think I'm good enough.'

'You're good enough for me.'

They had enough time for a brief kiss, and then Fitz said he was heading back to the console room. She could understand: the bedroom was freaking him out. But she wanted to stay a little longer. She wandered over to the writing desk, flipping through the scrapbook just once more.

Maybe someday, she'd said. She hadn't thought about what it would mean when she'd said it.

Except that when she walked through that door, the Hunt would be sweeping through pretty much constantly. Whatever version of her made it back here – if any of her did – might not even *want* to go with them. No matter how sure she was what she wanted, it might just be true for this one moment – even if that moment in here was stretched as long as she could manage. She still couldn't shape the future.

Unless.

She stood there, staring at the things on the desk. Somehow she could feel the seconds ticking again, louder and louder, faster and faster. Closing in.

Finally, she picked up a postcard. She sat down on the corner of her bed and began to write.

Chapter Nineteen

Buying Time

There was dark, and wild water, and the Hunt all around. Anything else was up for grabs.

She was standing next to Fitz near the base of the Golden Gate Bridge – he in a knee-length leather coat, she in her denim jacket. Ahead of them the Doctor’s coat whipped in the wind. A series of posts linked with waist-high chains marked the edge of the land.

You couldn’t see the water, but you could hear it, and you could feel it. Great waves were slapping up against the rocks, spraying their faces, spilling up on to the road. Was the tide coming in, or going out? The waves crashed together, black water fighting itself in confusion.

To their right, to the east, San Francisco was a shape made of lights, curving around the shoreline. Somewhere in there, the scar was wide open.

The Wild Hunt was moving through continuously now – not starting and stopping, just ebbing and flowing. It made Sam think of trips to the seaside, standing out in the water, the steady lift and suck of the waves. She kept her feet firmly planted, riding out each rushing ripple.

The Doctor had brought something from the TARDIS, something he had dragged across the floor, and then gingerly lifted out and carried down to the edge of the water. Now he bent down, unwrapping layers of black cloth from the shape. It was a triangle, a thick wedge, about three feet tall.

He handed bunches of black silk to Fitz and Sam, the long scarves whipping in the wind. Sam scrunched hers down, trying to keep a grip.

It looked like a huge metronome, made from frosted green glass, filled with swirls of white. Sam crouched down beside it. Two triangular panes of glass, with a heavy pendulum trapped between them, some kind of complex mechanism beneath it. The Doctor ran back to the shattered blur in the night that was the TARDIS, trailing the mass of black silk.

She glanced up at Fitz. He said something that she couldn’t hear. She turned, following his gaze out into the Bay.

The Kraken was coming up out of the water. She could barely make it out – it was still far away, but she knew at once what it was. The impression of something rising – the sense of a tentacle, stretching itself against the sky.

You couldn't see it with your eyes, not really. It didn't exist to be seen. Any impressions your brain attached to it – huge, dark, *threat* – were just an accident, your mind trying to get a handle on something it couldn't imagine. Not like the TARDIS shell, pulling a neat bundle of friendly-looking strings in your brain to give you a sense of making sense. This thing had its masks down.

But when it turned like that, you knew just what it was. It was the A-bomb. It was Godzilla. It was the Big One. It was an Act of God.

The Kraken was the city killer. It was going to smash buildings, gouge up roads, flood streets, send cable cars torn loose and rolling.

She turned back to the TARDIS. The Doctor emerged, carrying two great cables, each as thick as his arm. He pushed his hair out of his face as he fought his way through the wind and back to the metronome.

The tips of the cables weren't plugs, but huge crystals, covered in facets and spikes. The Doctor dragged them to the green glass machine. He rested for a moment, and then lifted the cables and touched the crystals to the glass.

The crystals broke into thousands of tiny pieces, melting into the glass, running back along the cables. The connection flared with light, the metronome beginning to shine with a ghostly green hue. The water picked up the glow in flecks and arcs, scattered out across the Bay.

The metronome began to tick. With the first sound, solid and heavy as wood, a great ripple of light shot out from the device in all directions. Tock. Sam felt it pass through her, like a breeze. Tick. How far did that signal reach? Tock.

The Doctor was staring out at the water. 'The bulk of it is still in the higher dimensions,' he shouted. 'But there's more than enough of it in our three-space to flatten downtown San Francisco on its way to the scar.'

He stood straight, his hair flying back, his face set with determination. She could hardly believe that ten minutes ago he'd been bent with despair. 'We can't distract it from the scar for ever. But this signal will confuse it. Eventually, after a bit of wandering back and forth, it will make its way to the shore here and devour the machine.'

'What about the TARDIS?' shouted Sam.

'It's just providing the power,' the Doctor replied. 'The Kraken shouldn't be interested in it.' He looked down at the water sloshing around his ankles. It might get a bit damp with the doors open, though.'

Someone laughed. It was a high, sneering sound, carrying on the wind. They turned.

The little boy was watching them, leaning on one of the posts and grinning like a gargoyle.

The storeroom of the music shop was far from the wind and rain. There was no noise, except for a slow, painful sound of twisting wood.

The unnaturalist's cabinet was uncurling itself, twisting in corkscrews and spirals. Hidden drawers and sliding shelves popped open as the box's shape distorted and heaved.

At last a single drawer slid open. Griffin's long fingers gripped the polished wood as he lifted his slight body out of the cabinet, panting.

He spent a few minutes carefully checking the cabinet, running his hands obsessively over the wooden surface, packing the drawers away. They slid smoothly into position, just as they should. He went on folding the cabinet until it was small enough to fit into his pocket, and slid it into his coat.

Then he stood still for a few moments. There was something dreadfully wrong with the city – he sensed it at once. The moiré of conflicting higher-dimensional signals made his fingers tingle and ache.

He stalked out into the battered store, went to the window that looked out on to the street. Outside, a storm was raging, rain lashing at the glass and tearing past the buildings in hard waves. The water was lit up in the higher dimensions, brilliant sheets of green and white.

There were no humans to be seen, no other creatures of flesh and blood. They would all be sheltering inside the buildings, the best they could. But the surges of energy pulsing towards the focal point, he could see them now. To him they spoke of hounds and monsters, rushing past the window over and over, an undefinable cloud of barking and howling and screaming and legs and feet, running along, swept along.

The Doctor had done this. He had turned the peaceful, orderly city into this chaotic maelstrom. He, with his undisciplined thoughts, his irresponsible unclassifiability, his logic-defying escapes (for which there was still no real evidence, none at all, lies and fabrication all of it). . . He had violated the laws of nature, laughed at logic, refused to make sense.

The unnaturalist understood at once. The storm, the chaos, this Wild Hunt, they were all a manifestation of the Doctor's own mind. His instability, his madness, made real by the web of his biodata. San Francisco was caught up in the net of his nonsense.

Only Griffin could stop him. He knew exactly what to do. Oh yes. Only Griffin could put everything back the way it was supposed to be, everything in its place. No loose ends, no randomness, no ambiguity. Pinned down, for ever.

There was a yawning sound, and then the glass exploded inward. Griffin allowed it to harmlessly pass through his body.

Then he set out into the storm to stop the Doctor.

‘You’ve got yourself into such a mess,’ said the boy. ‘This’ll buy you ten, maybe fifteen minutes.’

‘At least an hour,’ said the Doctor.

‘You’re kidding yourself. Besides, look at the storm – traffic’s stopped throughout the city. People are stuck in their cars, or they’ve left ’em and run for shelter. How fast can you get to the alleyway, huh?’

The Doctor walked towards the boy, looking as though he wanted to strangle him. ‘You –’

‘We can make it all go away.’

‘What?’

The boy straightened up, putting his hands in his pockets and strolling right up to the Doctor. He said, ‘We’ll enfold all these events in a paradox so it never happened. The city is saved, all those thousands of people get to live. Everything is put back the way it’s supposed to be.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor.

‘Sounds like a good deal!’ shouted Fitz, through the rain. ‘We don’t have –’

‘No,’ the Doctor yelled. ‘Because there’s –’

‘There’s a price,’ said the boy.

The Doctor stared. Fitz and Sam stared. The Wild Hunt rolled on, ever louder.

The boy said, ‘We want Sam.’

Chapter Twenty

The City Killer

Fitz grabbed Sam's hand, shuffling slightly in front of her. Putting himself between her and the Doctor. The look she caught on his face said he'd much rather be hiding behind her. But he was holding tightly on to her hand.

No way, thought Sam. She watched the Doctor, getting ready to fight or run.

'No deal,' said the Doctor.

Her heart leapt. The boy's face contorted, denied sweets. 'Why not, huh?'

'Because I know who you are.'

The Doctor took a sudden menacing step towards the boy. Sam found herself getting out of their path as quickly as she could. She was sloshing through water, nearly as deep as her ankles.

'Oh, not your name – even *you* don't think that's important,' the Doctor went on. 'But I know everything that matters.'

He was bearing down on the boy, a tightly controlled fierceness in every step. The boy stumbled away backward, but the Doctor's words were relentless.

'You're from somewhere poor. Doesn't matter where – probably South America. You cut yourself off from your family, if they could even be bothered with you. You had a gang of people who you called your friends, but when it came down to it they just cared about themselves, really. You lived a lone-wolf life, with no one who really cared if you were alive or dead. A *throwaway*.'

The boy looked as though the Doctor had grabbed and shaken him.

'And you liked it. Never thought about the future or the past, never thought about getting out of that life. Didn't try. Didn't care. You just played the wild child. Never showed anyone any other sides of you. Never *had* any other sides. And that's why a man in black with a really scary skull mask turned up in your bedroom one night and offered to make you just like him.'

The Doctor was drowning out the thunder. He pushed onward, backing the boy up towards the chain fence, and the drop to the black churning water beyond it.

'That's why the Faction wanted you. Not because you're anything special. Just because you're a *type* that's easy for them to recruit. Just another boy from a barrio who figures he'll never live to see a future. Why should you care about time and history when you don't think you've got any part in it? It was a perfectly *ordinary* recruitment for them.'

'Nuh-uh,' shouted the boy, his voice cracking. 'It wasn't –'

'Oh, it was. There are lots and lots of people just like you. *Exactly* like you.'

The kid grabbed for his knife, but the Doctor wrenched his hand away. His arm stayed pressed against his side, shielding his scar. The knife flashed, tumbling towards the raging water, then it was gone. The kid screeched, twisted, tried to bite, but the Doctor pinned him against the chain and leaned in close, firing a final barrage of words.

'There's nothing to you. Nothing beyond the simple explanation. You think you're special because you're a monster, but that just makes you no different from every other monster out there. *That's all you are.*'

The boy howled.

Sam saw him fold up, sliding down the railing into a heap at the Doctor's feet, sitting in the water. His cry had broken into sobbing gasps, desperate bits of is-nots and not-trues trying to form between the tears.

The Doctor stood over him, calm and certain again. 'Sam Jones is more than that. And that's why I will *not* let you have her.'

Fitz put an arm around her, steadying her. God. She was shaking.

The Doctor wants me, she thought. I mean, he wants me to go with him, he'll take me with him. If I want. If I decide.

'I'll be back soon,' said the Doctor, looking down at the boy. 'If you want to talk.' He turned on his heel and started back towards the road.

Sam looked down at the damp heap of boy. Now was when she was supposed to feel sympathy for him, and give him a hug and make everything better.

The boy grabbed for her. Sam jumped back, splashing, nearly losing her balance. She planted the toe of her boot in his chest and pushed. The boy sat down in the water, hard.

The little bastard was actually smiling up at her, lip curled. 'Not always so pretty, is he?' he snarled. 'When's it gonna be your turn?'

She turned her back on him and, hand in hand with Fitz, followed the Doctor's coat through the dark.

By the time they caught up with the Doctor, Sam had got used to the heavy walk she had to use. On every sloshing step she felt the force of the Hunt,

trying to pull her up and along, dragging her who knew where and bending her into who knew who.

The Doctor was braving the storm upright. Fitz was bent into a question-mark shape against the wind, clutching his fedora to his head. 'We've still got a problem,' he was shouting over the din. 'How do we get back to the scar in time?'

'That's where Sam comes in,' said the Doctor.

She stumbled and nearly lost her grip. The Doctor was looking at her with his serious face. 'Oh come on, you can't mean –'

'It's our only chance.' The Doctor reached for her hand. 'If we hold on to you when you start out, we should be swept into the Hunt with you. Then all we need to do is pull ourselves out just before we hit the scar.'

'Is it safe?' Fitz asked.

'Of course not,' said the Doctor. 'Come on.'

Her legs were going rubbery. They'll all be waiting for me in there, she thought. Spend enough time in there and I could come out the addict, or someone who'd snapped –

Don't give yourself time to think about it. Catch a wave. Go ego-surfing. *Go on, Jump.*

Blonde Sam's a runner, she thought. Well this would outdo even her.

She stepped

The i Doctors

into the surge of animal and human bodies, all dragged along by the wave, a stampede of impossibility. Sandwiched between the foaming snout of a white hound with red ears and the oily sweat of a half-horse, half-steam-engine. All the things she'd never thought she could imagine were here, pushing her along. Making her keep up or be trampled.

It's just your mind, Sam. It's just your mind trying to put some kind of understandable face on the force trampling through your lifeline. A face for the force. All these animals were just a metaphor somehow, but they were overwhelming, filling every sense till any other thoughts were squeezed out.

She'd already lost her grip on Fitz and the Doctor. They could be anywhere in the crush of creatures. Her body strained to keep up, even as the ground flew by beneath her faster than she could ever run. Caroming off buildings, channelled along the streets, hoping to God there wasn't a cliff between her and the end of the road.

And she was vibrating like a tuning fork inside. She could feel it battering at her biodata, bending detail after detail back and forth. Her guts were twisting with the nausea of withdrawal, now they hadn't been, now she couldn't even remember what she'd just been feeling a moment ago. Any sense of who she was beyond this moment was being drowned out by the hooves, the running, the endless roar.

Even the things around her were becoming less distinct. Glimpses of faces, breasts, arms, wings, hooves. Flashes of building and pavement. Pushing. Stumbling. Running. A body, her own, somewhere. A faint idea that she was here to do something, something, but it was lost under the rising tide.

And the Doctor.

He was there, just ahead of her. Half clambered on a unicorn, clinging to its mane to keep from falling any further off. That mad coat flapping behind him. She could see his eyes ablaze with the fun of it all. Not just being swept along by the Hunt, but riding with it, leading it, celebrating it.

She kept her eyes (her *eyes*, she still had them) locked on him. It was hard to focus – he was a dazzling blur. Where he was, even his face and body, nothing

stayed fixed long enough for her to be sure of it. The possibilities and the details of his past must be thrashing around like mad, shifting and overlapping. He was every single Doctor you could ever imagine at once.

But he was still there. Even without a fixed face or name or body, even if his past contradicted itself from moment to moment, that didn't matter. There was still something there, not just un-pinned-down but impossible to pin down. Something that even *revelled* in the fact that he couldn't be easily understood. That said more things were possible than a simple explanation would allow.

Something laughing.

She followed it. She ran with the laughter. The rest of the animals faded even further, but that was all right 'cause they were just different ways of looking at the same thing. Still a face for the force. But this whole force from the scar was just the Doctor leaving his mark on this city. Just the Doctor.

All this was him, this was what he did, charge through and leave everything overthrown and different as he passed. He changes everything he touches, and he's touched *me*.

More and more of the impossible creatures were joining the Hunt, converging from all sides, following the Doctor. The race was sweeping downhill to its final destination, into the alleyway with the great jagged tear in the sky ahead, and Sam grabbed for something, anything, to stop –

Chapter Twenty-One

Impossible Creatures

Fitz was holding on to her by two handfuls of her jacket, his eyes squeezed shut. He'd stopped himself by holding on to her. He'd lost his hat somewhere in the chase, and his hair was a tangled mess.

Sam discovered she had stopped by holding on to the Doctor. She was gripping his arm with both hands, so tightly it must hurt. But he smiled at her as she let go.

'You OK?' she asked Fitz. His hands slid over her until he was holding on to her properly. She returned the hug. "S OK. Get your breath back. We're here.'

'Bits of us are, anyway,' he gasped. She could feel his heart hammering against her side. His eyes were still screwed tight.

Ahead of them the scarred space filled their view. The light from the tear pulsed, soft one moment and searing the next. It was beautiful, but it made your eyes water, left a huge black blur hanging in front of you as you blinked.

'I've been waiting for you,' said the unnaturalist.

'Oh, no,' said Sam softly.

'Oh, good,' said the Doctor.

Here we are again, she thought. He'd just come right back for another go, and what was it the Doctor had said? Relying on his single-mindedness –

Griffin was holding his wooden box. He flicked it outward like a man unfurling a handkerchief, and suddenly it was full-size.

'All ready,' said the unnaturalist, his voice a worn cackle. 'Ready for you. All of this is going to end. Now.'

'Delighted to see you again,' said the Doctor, bowing suddenly. He'd tucked an arm behind him as he bent, and Sam could see the stabiliser in his hand, his thumb frantically fiddling with the settings. He was waving it at her, offering it to her. She stepped up behind him, palming it.

He straightened up, whispered to her, a frantic aside. 'You know how to –'
'Yeah.'

‘Good, good,’ he said, casting her a distracted glance, not daring to take his eyes off the unnaturalist. ‘Number eighteen.’

And he walked away from her, towards the unnaturalist. She stood there, frozen.

Griffin waited. His silhouette was like an immense, patient spider.

‘Well come on,’ Fitz stage-whispered. ‘Go on and –’

‘He never taught me number eighteen,’ she said.

Pier 39 was already partly underwater as wave after fat wave spilled out of the Bay, running along the Embarcadero, turning it into a new river.

At their moors, boats were disappearing, held under the water by their own anchor chains, or disintegrating in the seething water. The bodies of sea lions and seagulls peppered the dark waves, drifting around the half-sunk buildings on the pier. Seaweed was stuck in treetops and wrapped around flagpoles.

All over the city, in homes and restaurant kitchens and cinema toilets, water exploded up and out of sinks in spurting, gurgling jets. Showers misfired, bathtubs began to fill. People yelled and jumped backward as their plumbing coughed out water, as though the water, all the water, was displaced by something, was trying to escape something.

The few people who were still outside, the emergency workers and the police, the ones trapped in the traffic jams and the ones with nowhere to go, saw the Kraken as it began to pull itself up and out of the Bay.

To some of them, it looked like a tidal wave. To some of them, it looked like a giant, ghostly monster, tentacles spiralling out from its ethereal bulk.

A sodden bag lady who had crawled into an abandoned Mercedes saw it as the grim reaper, standing over the city and looking at them all with empty eye sockets.

The submerged tip of the pier crumbled as something weighty touched it.

‘You’ve got to listen to me,’ said the Doctor, stepping up to the unnaturalist. His hands were spread in a gesture of peace.

Desperately Sam aimed the stabiliser at Griffin and pressed the button. Nothing happened, the Doctor had changed the settings.

The Doctor ducked under Griffin’s grasp. The unnaturalist reached out to trip him, casually, and the Doctor tumbled on to the ground.

‘For Christ’s sake, what do I do?’

‘I don’t know, we –’ Fitz was as panicked as she was.

Griffin lifted the Doctor with invisible hands. The Doctor's back arched as the unnaturalist twisted his body. He grabbed at Griffin, but couldn't reach.

Sam saw a bright patch of blood spreading across the Doctor's shirt. The wound, she thought, the cut in his side. Griffin has opened it up. He's tearing him apart.

The silent air of the alley echoed with the Doctor's muffled cries. There's only one person who knows what a number eighteen is. But she doesn't exist.

Time should be slowing down, she thought wildly. There should be a long moment where everything hung in the balance and she had to actually think about making a choice. But there was no time for that: he was getting torn apart right in front of her. Right this moment.

It's not fair.

She grabbed Fitz's arm. 'Tell him,' she said. 'Make him feel like hell for this.' She ran straight at the scar.

Like running in a nightmare. Time stretching, covering the distance in slow bounds, lifting up from the asphalt in heavy arcs.

The scar, opening up to swallow her, opening up to embrace her. It was a crack to squeeze through, a doorway to step through. It was a library, crammed to the brim with lives, pages fluttering around her in an explosion of possibilities. It was a computer program, lines of code scrolling past, ready for editing. It was her mother, her father, her grandparents, all that genetic material in one body after another, like Russian dolls. It was the Doctor, opening his hands to let the cobblemouse skitter down the length of the table.

He was stretched thin as wire, his biodata reaching every corner of the city. The unnaturalist was twisting him, tearing him, the lines of his being taut with agony.

He was woven through every building, every street. He was woven through every part of her. He was there when she shot up for the first time, he was there when she made love for the first time, he was there when she emerged into the light for the first time and screamed with shock.

Time came to a halt. Fitz, frozen behind her, shouting. Griffin and the Doctor in their lethal dance.

She reached into the web of her own life. A sharp pain ran through her body, ran right back through every moment since she had been born, as she split herself down the middle.

This isn't fair

Get out of there. Go on! Get out there and save him. Get out and save them all.

Oh God, it's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair –

Fitz was shouting, 'No!'

Sam emerged from the other side of the scar, undamaged.

She ran past the Doctor, still struggling in Griffin's grip. The unnaturalist was laughing, each cackle shaking his gaunt frame as he crushed the Doctor's life in his million fingers.

Sam stopped at the unnaturalist's cabinet, turning the stabiliser in her hands. She thumbed the control.

She stepped backward as the box exploded open. Drawers and panels were sliding and swinging. Dozens of pins were shooting out through the solid wood and crashing against the alley walls, blasted out by the force of the stabiliser. The box was getting bigger, expanding in every direction, like a balloon filling with air, filling with light from the scar.

Now the specimens were dragging themselves loose, every one of them, more than Fitz could keep track of. Bog wraiths and serpentoidians, a black flock of Mandelbrots, a man with three eyes, a few hypnoredips and the odd robo-destroyer, a leopard woman, a mass of Basardi, Mutant Marvin the Two-Horned Unicorn, and one very irritated dodo.

Most of them ran for it, in panic at their sudden freedom. But a crowd stayed behind. Horns lowered, mouths opened, deep voices growled.

Griffin saw them as they started to circle around him. With a start, he dropped the Doctor.

Fitz couldn't see Sam at all. The Doctor lay still on the ground, almost hidden by the crowd of creatures. They were stepping over his body, uninterested. All they were after was the unnaturalist. Griffin had his back to the scar as the monsters closed in on him.

Now he could see her! She had her shoulder against the box, shoving it along the ground, a bit at a time. It was still huge, but light now, hollowed out, more space than wood.

Griffin stood at the edge of the scar, off-balance. The monsters weren't even touching him. At any moment, thought Fitz, there would be a rush, teeth and claws and horns and beaks all working together. He didn't want to see, but he couldn't look away.

There's only one person who'd reach out to you now. Pity you've just battered him into unconsciousness. Pity you wouldn't believe in him even if he was there.

One tiny Mandelbrot leapt forward, scolding the unnaturalist in an outraged squeak. Griffin startled, took a step backward.

The scar seemed to expand, its yellow light reaching out to him. Suddenly there was no more ground beneath his feet.

With a high, thin scream, he tumbled backward into the tear and was gone.

Fitz slumped against the wall. Wait a minute, he thought – what about the – He turned around.

The Kraken was looming above them.

Fitz screamed, he couldn't help it.

For a moment, he thought it was right outside the alley, that it had already crushed buildings and streets to get to them. But it was rising up behind the buildings, masses of water gouting down where it intersected with three-space.

Somehow he knew it was looking, shuffling this way and that, sending tidal waves across the Bay. Looking for them, seeking this way and that for the rich food of the scar. As he watched, it locked on to it with every sense and began to descend on to the city.

With a roar of effort, Sam shoved the box over the threshold and into the scar.

Sam looked down at the Doctor. 'Hello?' she said.

The Doctor opened his eyes. 'Sam!' he shouted.

He sat up, much too quickly, and wobbled around. Sam grabbed hold of him. 'Slow down!' she laughed. 'The crisis is over. Get your breath back.'

The Doctor looked at her with a mixture of delight and astonishment and panic and loss. He took a deep breath and said, 'Are you all right? You're not hurt?'

'I'm in better shape than you are.' She ruffled the Doctor's hair. 'But take a look at this.'

She lifted his blood-soaked shirt, carefully. 'Nothing,' she said. The wound was gone, nothing left but a thin pink scar.

Sam looked around. A couple of the creatures were watching them, but most of them were quietly leaving, slinking off into the night. Something metallic spread sharp-edged wings and took flight, screeching.

'What do you remember?' said the Doctor.

She turned back to him. 'Not much.'

‘Sam, please –’

‘Well, number eighteen, all right – go for the second most obvious target. The box is like the TARDIS, right? Lots of extra dimensions. When it fell in the scar, it collapsed, the way the TARDIS was going to. It sealed it up.’

‘What about the rest of it?’

Sam shrugged. ‘I’ll let you tell me all about it if you buy me a smoothie. I tell you, I’ve pulled half a dozen muscles shoving that box around like that.’

She looked over her shoulder and grinned at Fitz. He unstuck himself from the alley wall. ‘Hey,’ she said. ‘We won again.’

‘Oh, God,’ said Fitz. He threw his arms around her. After a moment he let go and just sat on the asphalt, staring at her.

‘What is it with you two?’ Sam stood up, running her fingers through her short, blonde hair.

Day Zero Plus Seven

I think I did a bad thing the other day.

It was a simple little favor – some guy asked me to let him know if another guy turned up in town. Which I did. No biggie – little bits of news are what this paper’s for, anyway. Then I found out later some other people were in trouble, and it was probably because of what I said.

There’s a lot of things that go on in this city, just out of your sight. You can’t see the threads that join them. You don’t know the choices you’re making till after you’ve made them.

So I think I did a bad thing. And I don’t think anyone’s ever gonna tell me.

Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve gotta go feed the iguana I just inherited from a late friend.

– Eldin Sanchez, *Interesting Times*, 14 November 2002

Epilogue: The Other Woman

‘So that’s it, really,’ Sam said to Marilyn across the chip-shop counter. ‘The Amnesty guy rang up the New York office, they started on the paperwork, and they offered me the job right away. I leave for New York in a couple of days.’

‘Whoa. Cool.’

Sam remembered Marilyn from school as a dedicated member of the chemical generation – someone she’d vaguely got along with, but never had much time for. But her number had been in dark-haired Sam’s address book, so she was one of the ones she had to tell the story to. The London twilight and overhead fluorescents left her looking pale, as if she’d aged a lot more than five years since school.

‘I still can’t believe that guy would offer you a job, like, in another country,’ Marilyn went on. ‘And just ’cause he liked you from volunteering. . .’

‘Yeah, well,’ Sam said with a careful sidelong glance, ‘there’s a little more to it than that.’

That Marilyn could buy, and Sam was able to steer the conversation through the minefields of personal chitchat from there on. Now and again little bits of dark-haired Sam would surface in her mind, hints, impressions, memories. Enough so that Marilyn didn’t notice the difference.

How much of dark-haired Sam was still inside her?

Finally she told Marilyn to make sure to tell the friends she hadn’t reached with the news, said her goodbyes, and made her escape to where Fitz was slouching outside the doorway.

On her way out, Marilyn called, ‘Oh, by the way, I like the hair.’

Sam hesitated. ‘Thanks. I’m not quite sure that it’s me, though.’

‘Was that the lot?’ asked Fitz.

‘Yeah.’ Sam nodded. ‘She was the last one.’

It was raining in London, just as it had been when she left – a week and a half ago.

Fitz and Sam were sharing a black umbrella. Sam walked carefully, watching out for the puddles, careful where she put her feet. She felt new and light as a sheet of paper.

'Pretty sorry bunch, if you ask me,' said Fitz. 'Just think, if you'd stayed, that could've been your idea of a best friend –'

'Sam thought she was pretty dim too,' Sam said flatly. 'She just didn't judge her on it.'

'Sorry, sorry.' Fitz raised his hands to ward off more words. 'Thought it would make you feel better, that's all.'

In the days since they'd flown back to London – leaving the Doctor in San Francisco to nurse the TARDIS back to health – she'd been feeling like a ghost haunting the wrong house. They'd spent their time walking in dark-haired Sam's footsteps, sifting through the details of her life, even as they erased any trace of them. Closing up her bedsit. Leaving her job. Telling the same lies to everyone, even the friends she wished she could get to know for real.

'The bad-movie bunch are the ones I really didn't want to blow off,' she said. 'Those video nights sound like a scream.'

He nodded. 'And they loved your story about quitting your job...'

She managed a smile. 'Yeah, I knew just what she thought of Dave, and didn't have any reason not to tell him.' She shrugged her jacket tighter around her. 'I suppose I like to think she'd have appreciated it.'

'You could always invite them over for a farewell,' he said.

She and Fitz were staying in the smoky familiarity of the place in King's Cross. She'd known the place instinctively, had even walked in and breezily put her keys down on the counter the way she always did before she'd realised this was her first time there. She'd had dreams about this place, little fragments for years now.

There was only the one bed – still rumpled – and Fitz had hesitantly and awkwardly assigned himself the floor to sleep on. He'd been rubbing his sore neck all day today. She kept wanting to give it a good massage, but she wasn't quite sure how he'd take it. Or how she'd take it.

'I said you could always –'

She shook her head. 'I couldn't keep the act up that long. I'd have to start smoking, for one thing.' She'd noticed she hadn't seen Fitz smoke around her since she'd got back. Which was considerate of him, if a bit out of character.

Not that she had room to talk about being out of character.

'So that's it, then,' Fitz was saying, pretty much to himself. 'Just make your apologies and slip away quietly. Like none of it ever happened.'

‘That’s assuming any of it did,’ Sam said.

The sun was still high over San Francisco, and the basilisks were basking on the hills across the bay. Professor Joyce ambled across the lookout area at the base of the Golden Gate, towards where the Doctor stood gazing out at the water.

He was just behind the police-line tape, which filled in for the stretch of railing that had been demolished in the sudden storm the other night. Some of the piers were still underwater, and heavy ships were scattered over the harbour, winching up the sailboats that had sunk in the storm.

‘I thought I’d find you here,’ Joyce called out cheerily. ‘I just wanted to –’

‘Shh,’ said the Doctor, and pointed. An old man on a park bench was feeding the Mandelbrots, whorls of colour gathering at his feet. In the far corner a pair of nomads appeared to be haggling intensely with a Basardi, with much gesturing in the direction of the Golden Gate Bridge.

‘Now that the scar’s healed, the ones who want to leave can take off,’ he said. ‘But I think some of them aren’t interested in going. Do you know, I could actually learn to like it here. . . .’

‘Now he decides this,’ Joyce said to no one in particular.

The Doctor grinned. ‘Of course. I could hardly like it if I *had* to be here, could I?’

Beside him stood a shifting mass of coloured panes, glittering in the sunlight. A plaque at its base identified it as *Blue*, a modern-art kinetic sculpture provided by the National Park Service. Even as Joyce watched, a few more bits resolved themselves into their usual police-box shape.

‘Just wanted to thank you before you left, son,’ Joyce said more quietly. ‘For the Henches. It’ll take a while to redirect their conditioning, of course, but with a little training they’ll be quite a help round the lab.’

‘My pleasure,’ said the Doctor. ‘I couldn’t resist the chance to give your team some hench-backed lab assistants. But I’m not leaving yet: I’ve got one more important thing to take care of.’

Joyce raised an eyebrow at him. ‘You mean Dr Holloway, don’t you?’

‘Ah, no. Actually I called on her the other night.’

Joyce waited. ‘Well?’

‘Please.’ The Doctor gave Joyce a somewhat miffed look, and fussed with the lapels of his jacket. ‘I’m sure you of all people appreciate the value of discretion.’

Joyce chuckled. With a final jangling the police box twisted itself into place, and the TARDIS stood there contented in the winter sunlight. None of the

people nearby so much as blinked. The Doctor leaned over and hugged its battered wooden frame, closing his eyes and resting his cheek on its corner pillar.

He straightened up. 'No, what I need to take care of is a bit more serious.' His face darkened further. 'And I also need to look for a new car.'

'You shouldn't replace one with another so quickly,' said Joyce. 'Give yourself time to mourn, at least.'

'It's still a big universe, isn't it?'

'But getting smaller every day,' sighed Joyce.

'You're right.' The Doctor nodded slowly. 'The unicorns have all left the park. Gone back to their own three-space, I imagine. There's no room for them anywhere here...'. Finally he shrugged and turned to go. 'Ah well. Maybe there'll be room in the next universe.'

'Well, I'll see if I can put a word in,' said Professor Joyce.

Molly's was gone, as if it had never been there. Fitz just stood there for a while, hands in his pockets against the wind, looking at where the steps down to the basement club had been. Neither of them had to say anything. Sam gave him a hug, and he hesitated, not sure where to put his hands.

So there wasn't a trace of the place where Fitz Kreiner had played guitar thirty-nine years ago, the night she'd first met him. Just a restaurant, and a lumpy National Farmers' Union building in its place. That was just time doing its usual work, she supposed, but it only made her memories feel even more tenuous. There wasn't any room for her in this London. No sign she'd ever been here.

She felt like such an impostor, sleeping in dark-haired Sam's bed. All these years she'd half wanted to go back and see her parents and friends again, but had never done it. Maybe this was why. On some subconscious level, maybe she'd known she wasn't a part of this world.

Or maybe it was the other way around. The Doctor had explained over tea in San Francisco that Time hadn't quite finished restitching the causality around these events. Once they left in the TARDIS, if she came back here in a week's time, chances were she'd find the flat had been rented to someone else for years. That her parents only ever remembered her the way she was now. That none of the friends she'd just tracked down remembered a dark-haired Sam Jones at all.

She'd read the Doctor's TARDIS logs once, and they were full of discontinuities – on one page they'd say he'd done something, the next he hadn't, the

page after that he'd done it a long time ago. She'd put that down to the Doctor's reliability, or lack thereof – but maybe that was just what time travel did. Maybe your past was changing all the time, and you could notice only if you stepped outside the game long enough to see the difference. Maybe this present was gone the moment you left it. Or maybe he'd just caught the habit off Iris Wildthyme.

Still, she owed some kind of explanation to these people, anyway. Or maybe just owed it to dark-haired Sam's memory – the memory probably no one else would have in a week's time.

She'd known she had to do this, from the moment she'd ventured into the TARDIS and seen the postcards, in her handwriting, stacked on the corner of her bed.

OK, I don't know what kind of me will be reading this. But my name is Sam Jones. I'm probably not the person you thought you were, I bet I made some choices you wouldn't (and vice versa) – but that doesn't matter. You can't change my life, any more than I can change yours.

I don't think I've got much time till I walk out of that door. But the Doctor's going to need my help, and I don't want to let him down. Whatever happens, I just want you to know who I am and what I want. Wanted. Whatever.

Fitz had shrugged off his passing angst and was just breezing cheerily off. 'I spotted a pub back at the roundabout. We've got time for a bite and a guzzle before we go on with the tragical history tour, am I right?'

1), the card had continued. *Fitz.*

They settled in at a table near the window. 'Gin again?' Fitz asked with a knowing wink.

She shook her head. 'And wake up in your bed again, convinced we'd indulged in carnal lust and debauchery?' That night at Molly's had been one of the few times she'd got totally off her face. All she'd done was not think for a moment, listen to that inner voice that said, Go on, it won't matter. 'Nah, I couldn't stand the embarrassment.'

It was a good reminder, for when she thought about some of the other Sam's... lapses of judgement. She had it in her, too.

The ghostly scars in the crook of her elbow still creeped her out. But they made sense somehow. A while back, all her own scars – even her vaccination – had been erased by some overenthusiastic nanotechnology. More signs of her past, wiped away. Now she had them back, and then some. Thinking about it that way made it more palatable.

Their ears pricked up when someone put a new song on the jukebox. ‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘An oldie.’

‘Yeah. A whole five years now, I guess.’ Fitz did a cartoonish take when the intro led into a different song than he’d been expecting. It was a track from her day, right around when she’d left London. Except that since they’d been to the late sixties, now she knew it was a remake of a Buffalo Springfield tune, one of those stick-new-rap-verses-on-a-sampled-chorus jobs. Fitz had heard only the original. That was the nineties: everything remixed, sampled, rearranged without quite being really remade.

Her look seemed to be in this year. There was a girl at the bar, buying a round for her friends, who could have been her if she’d never left London. Another woman with a more lined face, looking in their direction from a corner table, who could be her at thirty. She should write a letter to herself at thirty, or thirty-five. . . just so that older Sam would have a way of remembering what she’d really been like way back then. See what she’d cared about, make her wonder if she was still passionate about it.

But she wouldn’t know where to post it to. Somehow the idea that a few years from now she could be *anywhere*, doing *anything*, no longer felt so exciting.

‘Listen,’ Fitz was saying. ‘I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while now. About me and Sam.’ He smiled, stopped smiling, fiddled with the cutlery. ‘When you were her, she and I, we. . .’

‘Shagged like rabbits.’

Fitz blinked. ‘You mean you *remember*?’

‘Well. . .’ She had a sneaking suspicion she did, actually, but she wasn’t going to ask him for details to confirm it. These sense memories could just be her brain playing tricks, inventing a memory ’cause she knew she should have one. Time did things like that to you. ‘She wrote me a note so I’d know, just in case.’

For all I know, maybe you can’t stand him. But he cares about me (or you, or whoever) something stupid and wonderful. He talks a good game about not being a hero, but he stayed with me when I was hurting. That’s too damn rare. And he was smart enough to save my life. Keep reminding him of that. If it was up to me, I think I’d try to stay with him. But it’s not.

‘Oh good,’ said Fitz, his shoulders slumping with relief. ‘I thought you’d think I was joking again.’ He really had changed: the Fitz she’d first met would have been gloating. He leaned towards her, a hand shielding his mouth, as if he was trying to keep the other Sam from overhearing him. ‘So, um. . . What did she say?’

She leaned in closer. 'That you saved her life.'

'Well. . . yeah.' He sounded surprised to hear himself saying it. She could see a hint of pride beginning to gather in his eyes. 'Yeah. . . I suppose I did.'

'And she said I should thank you for it.'

Suddenly he was a deer in her headlights. 'Oh. Well.'

She looked straight into his eyes. 'Thanks,' she said.

The moment deflated. Fitz's mouth turned down at the corners. 'And that's all she wrote?'

'Pretty much.'

'I suppose I was nothing to write home about.'

'Suppose not.'

In fact, the note had also said, *He's pretty damn good for someone from before they discovered the clitoris*, but she wasn't sure she wanted to give him any ideas.

'Never mind,' Fitz said, desperately nonchalant. 'It was just a one-nighter. Nothing more than that.'

'Yeah. Only a moment.'

'Uh-huh. Neither of us was out for anything more.'

'Right.'

'I mean, I certainly wasn't.'

'Nah. I figured.'

He was slouching in his chair now, looking as uninterested and blokey as he could possibly manage.

You've got to tell him. Even if he gets ideas. No matter how scary the thought of screwing up a friendship, even if you know he's a lousy cook and his breath will smell like smoke.

She reached out to his cheek, running the edge of her fingers down along it. 'I know. . . you're hurting really bad right now,' she began, trying not to sound shaky. 'You feel like you've lost her. But if you give things a little time, you never know. . .'

She trailed off. She could see the gates sliding down in front of his eyes. She took her hand away, but it was too late.

'So bloody understanding,' he said quietly, and lit a cigarette.

Morning had broken inside the church. Whatever the little boy had been using to maintain an affected bit of night indoors, he'd now switched off. In the distance the Doctor could hear the endless grinding and sparking noises, now faltering, running down.

He stood at the end of the aisle and watched the boy make his way warily towards him.

Once upon a time there was a lion cub with a thorn in its paw. It thrashed about and lashed out at anything around it. A little mouse came along, and happened to realise what was making the lion hurt. He hopped up on the lion's paw – and then, because the lion had clawed at him and his friends, the mouse pushed the thorn in deeper and twisted for good measure.

It had stopped the lion, for a moment.

'I was hoping you'd want to talk,' the Doctor said gently.

The boy stared sullenly back at him. 'Nah.'

The paw had already closed up, forming a scar with the thorn still inside. He'd hardened too much to even try to get it out now. There was nothing to do now but worry about what the cub would do when he grew up.

'All right,' the Doctor said bluntly. 'Then I just want my shadow back.'

He turned in the light of the nearest window, showing the boy. The light was reaching the floor behind him completely undisturbed.

'Oh, don't worry,' said the boy. 'There'll be plenty more dark coming to make up for it.'

'You tampered with my biodata when it was exposed, didn't you?' the Doctor said.

'Did we?'

'But what do you stand to gain from it?'

'Who says it's down to us anyway?' The boy didn't seem to want to play any more. 'The *Book of Lies* says there's a great darkness going to fall over the universe.' He turned and began to walk away. 'So we're nicking all the light bulbs.'

'And this darkness –'

'Well, more like *greyness* –'

'What does it have to do with me?' No response. 'Is this part of what you had in mind, for if I'd given you Sam?'

The boy stopped, turned back around, slowly showed his teeth. 'You did give us Sam.'

The Doctor froze, hands spread in astonishment.

The boy walked closer again and stared up at the Doctor. 'You did just what we wanted. Blondie couldn't have been created unless Sam came into direct contact with your biodata. . .'

'Which she did at the scar.'

‘And that made the second strand possible. And once she created it, it changed her whole lifeline forward and back.’ The boy began to back away, up the aisle, enticing the Doctor further into his territory. His smile sharpened. ‘This is what made her blonde to begin with.’

‘But Sam would never have come to the scar and created her if I hadn’t gone looking for her in London. And I wouldn’t have gone looking for her if I hadn’t known blonde Sam.’

‘Which makes it all...’ prompted the boy.

‘... a paradox.’

‘And a really cool big one.’ The boy’s smile got rounder. He’d almost forgotten to be menacing, he was so in love with what they’d done. ‘We got her whole life tangled up in it. And a good chunk of yours, too.’

They’d reached the back room, now a dowdy social hall. Dozens of the boy were swarming like ants over the sculpted generator, removing pieces, forming a column marching to the flickering stone time portal. There they vanished, to be replaced by another column of the boy coming out the other side to carry on the work. They moved with perfect precision, all knowing exactly what he was doing. There was even a certain poetry to the four-dimensional maths involved, behind the sight of an insane clockwork stripping its own gears.

‘So you arranged all this? From the beginning?’

The boy laughed and shook his head. ‘You’d have done it all without us. All we had to do was make sure you didn’t screw it up.’

Of course, thought the Doctor. That’s why the Faction could trust a child with the job.

‘Then who started the cycle? Who shaped blonde Sam?’ The boy didn’t answer, just watched him and waited.

So the Doctor wheeled round and grabbed a boy from the line. They fell like dominoes, their rhythm shattered. The boys kicked and struggled to their feet as the Doctor held one and shook him by the collar. ‘Who was it?’ he demanded. ‘The Time Lords? Some ancient evil? Was she shaped by Sam’s idea of what blonde Sam would be like?’ He stopped, abruptly, and stared straight into the boy’s eyes. ‘Or was it me?’

‘Could be any of ’em,’ said a boy from over his shoulder.

‘Could be all of ’em,’ said the first boy.

The boy in his grip smiled slowly. ‘You ain’t never gonna know.’

There was silence, except for the dying crackle of the generator. Slowly the Doctor let go of the boy, gathered himself up, and wiped his hands down his jacket. ‘I think I can live with that,’ he said.

'Yeah. It's more interesting if you don't know for sure.' The boys were forming a circle around him, two or three deep, throwing words at him from all directions. 'But that was a pretty cool trick you pulled.'

'Telling Sam to do something which you must have *known* only Blondie could do.'

The Doctor stared. 'You think I...'

'Making it urgent.'

'And putting her right next to the thing she needed to change herself.'

'Real clever of you.'

'You're making this up,' said the Doctor. 'There's not a shred of a reason to –'

'Doesn't matter.'

'It could still be true anyway.'

'Couldn't it?'

'Couldn't it?' said the Doctor, raising an eyebrow.

The kids stopped in their tracks, looking up at him. 'Clever of me, wasn't it?' he said, folding his arms. 'I get back my original companion. I take care of Griffin and the scar in a single move.'

One of the kids let out a long, low whistle.

'Or I could be lying,' the Doctor added. 'I do that, you know. But keep guessing. In the end I'm the only one who knows me, and I think I like it that way.'

The first boy smirked. 'Good, you're learning. You'll be one of us yet, grandad.'

The other boys were falling back into place, picking up the rhythm of their disassembly line. The Doctor stood and watched, deep inside himself in thought.

'Face it,' said the boy. 'We win.'

'No,' said the Doctor. He let out a breath. 'No. Sam wins.'

She locked the flat for the last time, and turned and walked away. No more past, no more impostor. I just am who I am right now.

Her last lie was in her pocket. A lie of convenience, of omission mostly.

She took it out and looked at it again. It was a postcard: *Dear Mum and Dad, I'm safe and well, but you won't be seeing me for a while.* And when you next see me, she thought, I'm going to be blonde.

If you're even the same ones I'm going to see, when I come back once time's settled down. For all I know, you're completely different people from my parents – which would make facing you even harder.

Soon, Dad and Mum. But not yet. Not quite yet.

She took out the postcard her dark-haired self had written for her. You could tell it was the same handwriting, even at a glance: *You can't change my life, any more than I can change yours*, it said.

But you have. You made mine. And you gave me the chance to be more than you were. The other Sam had never built a house, drunk coca tea on Nephelokkugian, dangled in a climbing harness halfway up the side of a mesa. And she had.

(Had she?)

Didn't matter, she could. And dark-haired Sam wouldn't even have thought it was possible, if not for her.

From this point, she thought, we can go anywhere.

And from their gathering places in the Eleven-Day Empire, the Mothers and Fathers of the Faction looked down upon the boy's work and pronounced it good. His methods had been crude at times, with little of the long fingered elegance favoured by his elders, but his results were a thing of spiralling beauty.

And as they watched, still more fractal possibilities began to blossom. To their quiet delight, they could see how these events would lead to further glorious recursion. The Doctor himself was nearly ready, as the threads that had begun weaving through his history lifetimes ago tightened inexorably into a knot.

This one was so close to being ideal for them. . . the joy with which he upset the established orders, his desire to leave his past behind, all fitted their aims precisely. Even so, he still wasn't ready to embrace the glory of Paradox; he was less interested in the beauty of the pattern, than in that of the one little girl's life contained therein.

But he would still be useful.

Eyes glittering in the darkness, the Mothers and Fathers of the Faction leaned forward as one, to watch as the final moments of this timeline played itself out.

Except that they didn't.

Because none of this ever happened.

– *The Book of Lies*, page 347

In fact, details from the title on down reinforce the theory that the supposedly secret Book of Lies was in fact intended for an audience outside the Faction. Faction Paradox is known for embracing and exploring alternate possibilities for the universe, to the point where their concepts of 'truth' and 'lie' are vague to the point of

meaninglessness. The use of these terms in the book, and the insistence on absolute falsehood, suggest that it was written as an exercise to lead noninitiates into embracing the Faction's way of thinking. It pulls the reader through a hedge maze backwards, as it were, until they are left questioning their assumptions about fact and linear reality. (Such sowing of doubt among believers is a common proselytism technique among deconstructivist religions – cf the writings of the Dada cult.)

Therefore it seems likely that the contents themselves were concocted for this purpose, and do not in fact represent secret knowledge of the Faction's at all.

– Introduction to *Quantum Esotericism*, 2nd Edition, Watkinson & Thripsted, page 275i

Bollocks, this whole entry was copied word for word out of the Book of Liesitself. Don't believe a word of it. But then, why should you listen to me?

– anonymous yellow sticky note found affixed to page 275 of *Introduction to Quantum Esotericism*

The postcard thudded to the bottom of the empty pillar box. Sam hesitated for just a moment after letting it go. She was getting too good at slipping away quietly. Too good at saying goodbye.

'Hello,' said the Doctor from behind her.

She turned around, a big grin spreading across her face. They put their arms around one another and hugged.

After a few moments she leaned back, looking up at him. 'Got the old man sorted out?'

The Doctor grinned back at her. 'All loose ends duly tied up,' he said. 'Although San Francisco will never be the same. . .'

'It never was the same,' said Sam. They started walking back, side by side. 'Yeah, I saw something on the box this morning. About a dragon at the airport. The mainstream media have finally started to notice.'

'Mmm. The changes are going to take some getting used to.'

Sam said, 'You must miss her a lot.'

The Doctor stopped for a moment, touched her hair, ran a gentle hand through it.

'Think we could import one of those dragons?' said Sam. 'Maybe London could use a few fabulous creatures.'

‘Perhaps we should stay, then.’

Sam slapped his arm, laughing. ‘Oh, behave!’

Their steps quickened as they approached the tiny scrap of park down the street. Ahead was the TARDIS, parked beside the old wooden roundabout. Fitz was sitting on the roundabout, pushing himself back and forth with his foot, idly. He jumped up when he saw them.

There was something a little smug in the smile he gave her. What was he thinking? I know what your body feels like? You’re alive thanks to me?

If it was enough to get him smiling again, she decided, then she didn’t mind.

2), the postcard had gone on, *The Doctor*.

The words were an even more desperate scrawl by that point; she must have known her time was running out: *Don’t know if I really want to go with him. If I’ll have the choice. But even if you don’t – whatever you do, don’t go back. Please. I mean it. Burn down the flat if you have to. Just don’t end up back in the same old life. You can do more. Remember that. THERE IS MORE OUT THERE.*

If his magic’s good for anything, that’s it.

Got to go

The Doctor took the TARDIS key out of his pocket. ‘Where now?’ he asked Sam, his eyes sparkling.

She smiled back at him, and looked up at the sky. ‘Somewhere else,’ she said.

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