



Imagine a war. A war that has lasted centuries, a war which has transformed an entire planet into a desolate No Man's Land. A war where time itself is being used as a weapon.

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They have found a way to send soldiers back in time. But time travel is a primitive, unpredictable and dangerous business. And not without its sinister side effects. . .

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

Anachrophobia

Jonathan Morris

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To Ann and George

Chapter One

As always Oake's thoughts turned to death. It would be soon, he knew; he felt it with every shudder of the van, with every cigarette-warmed breath, with every shadow that dropped to a mournful bow as they passed by.

But the thought of death held no terrors. He had heard the screams of too many soldiers for that. He had cradled someone in his arms, her skin cooling to the touch. He had pumped bullets into strangers and felt nothing as they jerked into the mud. It was a comfort, to know that soon it would all be extinguished. Oake valued his own life as little as that of the enemy. No, death held no terrors. But the means –

A bullet, its impact pulping the innards? The burn of a gas attack? A snow-blanketed corpse? These deaths were quick. Easy. No, the real horror was reserved for the new death. The death that filled every nightmare.

Oake sucked the smoke into his lungs and held it there for comfort, his body rocking. Ahead, picked out in the glare, the snow swirled towards them like a starfield. The wipers batted the slush into the corners of the windscreen. The van's engines whined as it pitched over potholes, the mountain road winding down into a forest of skeletal trees. Beyond the beams of the headlights, there was nothing. The road rolled out of a restless blackness, dipping into patterned sludge or rising into the brilliance of a fresh snowfall.

The air inside the van was freezing, bringing blood to the skin and biting the lips. The fittings rattled at every bump and the dog masks overhead nodded dolefully. The dashboard clock read five-twenty. It was nearly morning, thought Oake, though on this planet there would be no dawn. Twenty-nine hours had passed since they had left Station One. According to the clock. On this planet, in this never-ending dead of night, it was easy to lose track of time.

Oake stubbed the exhausted roll-up into the ashtray and shifted to look into the tarpaulin-covered rear section of the van. He could see eight figures in the gloom. They huddled into their thick protective suits, their eyes blanked with goggles, juddering with the motion of the van.

As they rounded a corner, Oake turned to face the road. It was blocked. The outlines of black vehicles. An enemy barricade.

For two long seconds, Oake found himself staring ahead. Then he reacted.

‘They’ll have mined the road,’ he yelled. ‘Get off the bloody road!’

The driver swung the steering wheel to the right and crunched down the gears. But the road was sheer ice and the wheels had locked into a skid. Reacting too late, the driver parried the van away, revving it hard and heaving them towards the edge of the road. For a moment the wheels were spinning against thin air, then they dipped and jolted down the incline.

The rocks beneath them flung the van from side to side. The branches of the trees thwacked into the windscreen, scraping away the wipers. The headlights went out. The windscreen shattered. The engine died. The driver dragged at the wheel, but there was nothing he could do.

Oake was not afraid. He would be free soon. He thought of the other deaths he had shared. The smell of antiseptic and corridors echoing with footsteps. Her eyes, filled with fear and wet with tears. Her skin, pale and growing cold –

The impact slammed through his body and the seat belt knifed into his shoulder. And then all was darkness.

Oake opened his eyes to find the side window was under him. Overhead, the driver’s corpse swung from its belt. The engines were dead and all was silent, bar the creak of metal. He could smell leaking fuel. He struggled out of his belt and kicked away the shards of windscreen. He grabbed a head-mask, bundled it into his pocket and, feet first, edged his way through the windscreen and out into the night.

A cold gust whipped into his body and rolled him down the incline. He spread his arms and pressed his leather-gloved hands to the ground. For a moment, he lay and listened to the wind and the bustling of the trees. Flecks of snowflakes gathered on his goggles.

Leaning into the blizzard, he picked himself up and struggled around the vehicle. The tarpaulin had detached from the framework and was flapping as though trying to escape its moorings. Oake strained to make out anything; everything was just shadows amongst shadows.

Four of the soldiers were dead. Their bodies lay piled against the side of the van, already covered in a crust of snow. Within a few minutes, they would be completely buried. Another soldier was nearly dead. His legs and arms were twisted. Oake trudged towards him, fighting to stay upright. Closer, he could see that the soldier had become impaled on one of the supporting struts. He too would soon be buried.

Of the three remaining soldiers, one limped, his left leg barely able to support his weight. The other two were unharmed but shivering in shock.

‘Names?’ Oake shouted over the roar of the wind.

The limping soldier said, ‘Combe.’

‘Heath,’ said one of the others through chattering teeth. ‘Heath.’

‘Bishop.’

Oake acknowledged with a nod. ‘We have to move. The defaulters will be here soon.’

‘Which way?’ said Combe, patting together his snow-caked gloves.

Oake surveyed the blackness, one arm sheltering his vision. The slope led down into a forest. Nothing but trees and rocks. It would provide cover, at least. ‘This way.’

‘What about the others?’ said Heath. ‘And –’

‘We don’t have any choice.’

Oake climbed into the back of the van and scabbled under the benches. He felt several heavy cylinders. He pulled out one rifle and passed it to Bishop, then retrieved rifles for himself, Heath and Combe. He checked the ammunition before clicking off their safeties and handing them over. ‘You got your dog masks?’

They all nodded.

‘Good,’ Oake instinctively patted his suit to make sure his own gas mask was at hand, ‘then let’s go.’

They made their way down into the forest. Sheltered from the storm, the wind soon faded and the only noise was the scrunch-scrunch of their boots.

Suddenly an intense light picked out the trees. There were shadows everywhere, including those of Oake and his fellow soldiers, giants dappling over the ground. A moment later and they were plunged back into the darkness.

Oake turned. In the distance, maybe thirty yards behind them, two searchlights, their beams scanning the surrounding forest. No, three searchlights. Four. The beams glanced back and forth, creating wraiths from the mist.

‘Defaulters,’ said Combe.

‘Come on.’ Oake dropped to a crouch and ran, piling bodily through the underbrush.

One of the soldiers called out, ‘Sir!’

Combe had tripped into the knee-deep snow. He pulled himself upright and stood, his silhouette haloed in the beams of a searchlight.

A shot rang out, and another. Combe’s body crumpled under the impacts and he fell, face down and dead.

The defaulters fired again, and again as Oake ushered his two companions forward. They had no choice but to keep moving. They pounded down through the forest, skidding on the scree and scrambling over boulders. Oake never looked back.

They must have been running for twenty minutes before Oake finally called for them to stop. Bishop and Heath piled up to him, gasping, as he gave the signal for silence.

There were no lights. Gunshots rang out in the distance.

‘They’ve stopped,’ said Heath hoarsely. ‘We’ve lost them.’

Oake dug into his pockets and pulled out a torch. He clicked it on, keeping the beam low.

‘Where are we going now, sir?’ said Bishop, his young face lit a ghostly white.

‘We’ll wait, and then head back to the road. We can follow it back to the nearest station.’

‘What about the defaulters?’

‘We’ll just have to keep our eyes open.’ Oake huddled into his suit. Something was making him nervous. The defaulters did not usually give up so easily.

He circled with the torch. They had reached the edge of a steep-walled gorge. The snow whirled around them, catching on their fur-lined hoods and their beards. The wind was joined by an eerie howling. The trees creaked in the breeze, their arms dancing.

The creaks of the trees grew louder as though, one by one, they were coming to life. The storm gathered in intensity. Soon it took all Oake’s strength to remain upright, and he grabbed a nearby tree for support. The wind grew stronger still. It rose to a scream. The rustle of the trees became a constant rushing.

It meant only one thing. The death that filled every nightmare. As Oake realised, his heart pounded in panic. So this was it.

‘Time storm!’ screamed Heath.

‘Get your masks on!’ yelled Oake. He dug his head-mask out of his pocket and tugged it over his face. The material of the baggy, balaclava-like hood was coarse and chafed against his skin. Next, he strapped the bottom of the mask into the neck of his suit to form a protective seal. The wind tugged at Oake’s fumbling thick-gloved hands, but, after what seemed like a lifetime, he had each strap secured. Light-headed with relief, he fastened the final buckles. This made the suit completely airtight, an impenetrable TR body-bag. He was completely enclosed in a claustrophobic, smelly world.

The clamour of the storm was replaced by the sound of his own respiration, as if he were underwater. The only taste was the bitter, clammy rubber of the air filter, a stubby cylinder that lent the wearer the appearance of a muzzled dog. His view was restricted to two narrow eye-holes. But he was safe. Alive.

Heath had not been fast enough. The wind rushed over him, pummelling him with the force of a thousand fists. The gas mask fell out of his hands and span into the night. He screamed as the force of the time storm hit him.

Oake couldn't turn away. Heath's mouth was wide open, fixed in a scream. His jacket hood fell back to reveal his tousled hair. His face was red and puffy. But then he began to change. His skin dried and shrivelled, forming deep crests across his forehead and around his jowl. His hair sprouted, snaking out of his scalp.

The colour faded from his skin as it drew back over his skull, etched in wrinkles and lines. The last silk-white hairs disappeared from his crown. His body shook, as though trying to resist the onslaught. His milky eyes turned to Oake, filled with desperation.

His skin turned a sickly yellow. It rotted from his face like old parchment to reveal wasted tissue beneath. Then that too crumbled to expose the skull. His eyeballs turned completely white. His tongue scattered to the wind like ash.

Heath's skull stared through empty sockets, its jaw open in mock surprise. The surface of the bone was covered in small pits, rapidly growing larger as the brittle bone crumbled away like sand in an hourglass. For an instant, the skull riddled with fractures. Then it shattered.

Heath's empty suit slumped to the ground and the wind rolled it away.

It had taken five seconds for Heath to die. Five seconds to die of old age.

Oake shook. But at least here, inside his TR suit, he was safe from the ravages of the storm.

Shielding his eyes, Oake cast the thin light of the torch over the rocks. There was no sign of Bishop.

His breathing heavy in his ears, Oake clambered out of the ravine. He gripped the nearest branch and wrenched himself forward, tumbling into the forest. His mind filled with panic, he ran, oblivious to the tangled, thorn-spiked bushes.

The wind was growing ever stronger. The bark peeled from the trees, rotten and black. All around him, the foliage withered, recoiling into the ground.

Suddenly, Oake felt a chill by his left ankle. His skin was damp. For a

moment he wondered what it was. His suit was letting in snow. A tear in the suit –

But there was no waking up from the nightmare, not this time.

A sharp pain bit into his knee, and rose up through his body. His leg prickled with cramps. The muscles felt strained and weak.

Oake swung around, but there was no one to help him.

The pain shifted to his other leg, and to his stomach, his arms, and his head. His whole body ached so much. So, so tired. He could hear the sound of unfamiliar breathing; the last, painful gurglings of an old man. He felt hair flowing from his scalp, his beard bristling, his nails extending. His sight blurred and clouded. His skin puckered, becoming leathery and loose. The timbre of the storm changed, becoming more deep and booming. Every movement seemed difficult. Painful. Even the effort of filling his fluid-logged lungs was too much.

As always, Oake's thoughts turned to death. And death turned to him.

'Knight takes pawn,' said the Doctor. He gave a sardonic smile as he lifted his eyes. 'Checkmate, I think?'

Anji watched from the shadows of the doorway as Fitz examined the board. She smiled as he tapped the heads of the chess pieces. He knew he was beaten, but nevertheless insisted on seeing the game through to the bitter end.

'Doctor –' Fitz paused, rubbing his red-rimmed eyes. He had the dishevelled air of someone disturbed at four in the morning. He slouched in an ill-fitting leather jacket and unironed shirt. The perpetual student. 'Would you mind going back through the game? To the point where I first went wrong?'

'No, no, not at all.' The Doctor began unpicking the game, move by move, returning the captured pieces to the board. 'How far back do you think?'

'A bit further.' Fitz stood up and scraped back the chair. 'Go back – go back to the point where I agreed to play chess with you.'

The Doctor looked crestfallen, then grinned. 'Ah. Yes. But that presents us with a paradox. To undo the events of the past, you must have first experienced the past you wish to undo and therefore you cannot have undone it.' He packed away the chess pieces and turned to Anji as though he had known she was there all along. 'Anji. You've found us.'

It was what the Doctor called the chess room. The room was small and intimate, like quarters in an Oxbridge college. An antique reading lamp and a crackling log fire infused it with a warm, homely atmosphere. As the room was part of the TARDIS, a dimensionally ambivalent spaceship that

travelled through something called a time vortex, Anji wondered where the smoke from the fireplace actually ended up. For all she knew, the smoke could just conveniently disappear once it was out of sight.

Like the rest of the ship, the chess room's walls were honeycombed with circular indentations. Here, though, each roundel was stacked with books piled at random, a higgledy-piggledy assortment of orange-and-white Penguins, manuals, annuals, manuscripts, creased novels and important-looking bound volumes, ancient and festooned with snake-tongued bookmarks. More books swamped the oak bureau, the shelves and the arm-chairs, and much of the carpet. The room smelled academic and musty like an antique bookshop.

The Doctor prodded the fire with a poker, the logs spitting in protest. 'Did you have a good sleep?' He looked at her deeply. 'You're all right?'

Anji strode into the room, the heat from the fire bringing a flush to her face. 'I popped into the control room. You know we're still moving?'

Fitz coughed to catch Anji's attention. He was dropping teabags into mugs, and gave her a do-you-want-one? look. She shook her head. 'I said we're still moving. It didn't take us this long to get to Endpoint.'

They had recently left a city in the immeasurably distant future: the Endpoint. Upon dematerialising, the Doctor had set the TARDIS controls to send them spinning back through time. That was two days ago. Since then, she had wandered the corridors and taken several long baths. And she still thought of Dave, of course, but now she didn't feel sad. The memories that came to mind were of them laughing across a candlelit table, spilling wine. And as she remembered she found herself smiling.

The Doctor and Fitz, meanwhile, had slunk into the chess room, passing the time with endless board games, books and cups of tea.

'Ah. Yes, well, it's going to take us a little while to get back,' murmured the Doctor, collecting a steaming mug from Fitz. 'The TARDIS is worn out. After all she's been through, it's the least you would expect.' He sipped and mmed. 'And it's harder work going back in time than going forward.'

'Why?'

The Doctor regarded Anji as though the answer was obvious. 'Because it's uphill.' He ran his gaze idly over the piles of books and picked up one particularly ragged-looking volume. Checking the spine, he casually slipped the leather-bound notebook into his pocket whilst Fitz was busy pouring himself some tea.

'What was that?' said Fitz, turning round a moment too soon.

'Oh, nothing,' said the Doctor evasively. 'Well, nothing much. Just something I picked up in a little book shop in London in 1938 -'

The fire gave a loud snap and a spray of embers scurried up the chimney.

The floor juddered, and Anji steadied herself against the wall. The tea in Fitz's mug swilled and pattered on to the carpet. Some of the books fluttered from their perches and slapped to the floor.

'What –' began Fitz. The Doctor shushed him.

A rumbling grew beneath their feet. More towers of books collapsed and strew themselves half-opened. The desklight dimmed; for a second the filament was visible, then it died. The floor shook, hard, and Fitz staggered against the mantelpiece for support, discarding his slopping mug. Anji tightened her grip on the roundel as her feet were buried in books. The kettle and saucers clattered; one saucer trembled off the desk and smashed. The room shuddered, and kept on shuddering. One by one, the remaining books dived from the shelves.

'Doctor –' Anji's voice shook.

There was a wheezing, groaning sound; the discordant trumpeting that normally heralded a landing. It sounded as though the TARDIS was suffering some terrible, agonising exertion. The noise grew, grinding up to a crescendo and wrenching down again.

Anji and Fitz looked to the Doctor. His expression, caught in the flickering of the fire, was that of a haunted man. His lips twitched, as though he was trying to remember something. Something terrible.

'What's happening?' Fitz gasped as he pursued the Doctor into the shuddering console room.

The mechanical grinding was deafening. The sound consumed the dark, tomblike chamber, rising up through the console, the pitch rising and falling with the central column, a glass cylinder containing rows of glowing rods that rotated and pressed together like champing teeth.

The wall circles pulsed, each pulse a little weaker than the one before. As they dimmed, the circles turned amber. In the growing shadows, the statue of Napoleon gained a sinister profile.

The Doctor had dashed to the central console and was stooped over the instruments, his fingers scrabbling across the switches and levers and buttons. Reacting to a bulb flash, the Doctor made adjustments in a unbroken sweep of action, like a pianist performing a solo. The movement was unconscious, fluent, rapid.

His stomach heaving with seasickness, Fitz held on to the console for dear life. The panels were cold to the touch. 'Doctor?' His breath formed a vapour and his cheeks prickled. It was like winter had fallen early.

The Doctor spoke in short bursts, his attention focused on the flitting dials. 'I'm not... sure. The TARDIS? It seems something –something is trying to pull her down.'

'I thought it might be good news.' Anji joined them at the console, brushing her bob of hair out of her eyes. 'What is this "something"?'

'I don't know.' The Doctor shook his head, and waved for Fitz and Anji to move out of his way as he circled the controls. 'I don't know. Some external force. But she doesn't like it. Anji – can you hold down this lever for me? The one at the top.'

The roundel lights faded out. The only illumination came from the column and the monitor, a television bracketed to the ceiling that flickered with rolling static. The three of them were now surrounded by endless blackness. Where there would normally be archways leading to the kitchen, laboratory, filing room and library, there was now absolute nothing.

'Why don't we just, I don't know, pull away?' suggested Anji hoarsely over the screeching.

'It's too strong.' The Doctor sprinted around the console, resetting switches in his usual random way, his black velvet frock coat flailing after him. One of the components exploded, sending a fizzle of sparks outwards. The Doctor snatched back his hand and sucked his finger. 'But whatever it is, the TARDIS is prepared to tear herself apart rather than materialise.'

'Isn't that a bit dangerous?' Fitz yelled.

'Only for us. I've boosted all the circuits, diverted every ounce of power... but it's no good. It's not enough.' He thumped the console, muttering. The monitor's interference flashed in his eyes. 'Come on, old thing, this isn't the time to be difficult, how many times must I apologise?'

Fitz exchanged a worried glance with Anji. It had all happened so quickly. The TARDIS was supposed to be indestructible and yet something was overpowering it.

'There's only one thing we can do.' The Doctor moved Anji aside and rested a hand on a lever. 'If this does what I think it does –' He tensed, clenching his teeth, and pulled.

'And what's that?' said Anji, leaning over the Doctor's shoulder.

'Complete systems shutdown.' The Doctor watched the central column revolve to a halt. 'The TARDIS can't fight any more. She's too tired.'

The screeching ended with a heavy crump. The floor stopped shaking. They had landed.

For a moment, they waited in the sudden, total silence. Even the ever-present background hum had stopped. Three figures alone, their breath drifting in the air.

Anji was the first to speak. 'So let me get this straight. A "something" was dragging us off course, and the only way you could stop the TARDIS from destroying itself trying to get away... was by turning the TARDIS off?'

‘That’s the essence of it, yes.’ The Doctor’s voice echoed in the cryptlike darkness, as if there was a chorus of ghosts mocking his every word. ‘Every system, every circuit, deactivated. Dead.’

‘Which means that whatever this “something” was, it has succeeded?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And this place that the TARDIS was so desperate to get away from – that’s where we are?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh,’ said Anji, ‘I see.’ She hugged herself through her chunky jumper. ‘On balance, that’s probably quite a bad thing, isn’t it?’

‘And there is one other small but noteworthy problem.’ The Doctor twisted some knobs on the console to no effect and looked up. He seemed amused and worried at the same time. ‘We can’t dematerialise.’

Fitz struggled to take it all in. ‘You mean we’re stuck here? Wherever – whenever – here happens to be?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’ The Doctor levered open one of the lockers underneath the console. He retrieved a torch, and flicked it on. A pool of light appeared, shifting over the roundelled walls and casting nightmarish shadows before settling on the exterior doors.

‘So where are we then?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I have absolutely no idea. All the instruments are dead.’ He looked up. The monitor was blank. ‘So shall we go and look?’

‘Forgive me for stating the obvious, but are you sure that’s a good idea?’ said Anji. ‘We don’t know if there’s any air, we don’t know –’

‘Good idea or not, we don’t really have any choice.’ The Doctor strode up the steps leading to the main double doors, and waved Fitz over to join him. ‘Now, without any power to open the doors, we’ll have to use brute force.’ The Doctor placed a hand inside a door roundel and braced himself against it. Fitz followed his example and gripped the surface of the other door. ‘Ready?’ Together, they heaved the doors apart, opening inwards.

An icy wind blasted into the room, sending a flurry of snowflakes across the floor and forcing the doors wide open. Faced with the biting cold, Fitz pocketed his hands for warmth, gritting his teeth to prevent them chattering. Outside there was darkness. Nothing but the rumble of thunder and the howls of the storm.

The Doctor crossed to the coat stand and bundled off two knee-length overcoats. He passed one to Fitz, one to Anji. He didn’t collect a coat for himself, although by rights he should have been freezing in his mock-Edwardian get-up; a cravat, a burgundy waistcoat and stiff-collared shirt.

Anji wrestled herself into her coat. ‘We could always just stay in here.’

Fitz found his coat cumbersome. It was like wearing a rug two sizes too big. 'And freeze our tits off?'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'I'm afraid Fitz has a point. Without the life-support systems, we wouldn't last too long.' The Doctor grinned. 'Come on. Let's see where we are. It might not be so dreadful.'

Buttoning his coat, Fitz followed the Doctor and Anji over to the doors. Looking out into the gloom, a foreboding weighed heavily on his heart. He had the feeling that leaving the safety of the TARDIS was going to prove a desperately bad mistake.

Anji's shoes crunched into the snow. Buffeted by the wind, she covered her eyes and squinted into the night. They were in some sort of forest; leafless trees stretching away in every direction. The ground was uneven and treacherous, black crests of rock jutting out of the whiteness.

It might not be so dreadful? The Doctor had to be joking.

To shelter from the wind, Anji pulled herself into the cover of the TARDIS. The Police Box sat lopsidedly, one corner wedged under the piling snow. It was little more than a mournful shape in the darkness, but it was the only reassuring thing in sight. Incongruous, and yet familiar.

Fitz staggered over to her as the Doctor locked the TARDIS door. 'We're in Narnia. We're in sodding Narnia!'

The Doctor pocketed the key, using his free hand to sweep his mane of hair out of his eyes. 'I don't think so somehow, Fitz. No lamppost.'

'Can't you land us anywhere warm for once?' said Anji. 'This is even worse than Endpoint.'

'Yes, but at least we're on solid ground,' said Fitz. 'Small blessings, eh?'

The Doctor made a series of short hops. 'Gravity about Earth normal.' He lifted his head and drew in a breath as though savouring a wine. 'Atmosphere about the same, too. Clear, thin, possibly due to the altitude. Rather bracing, all in all.'

'So we're back on Earth, then?' suggested Anji. If only they were a brisk walk from a log cabin and steaming drinks... But that was probably too much to expect. More likely, they had landed in the middle of someone else's nightmare. She shivered. The cold seemed to get right into her bones.

'I suppose we could be. But -' The Doctor had a faraway look. 'But maybe not. Curious. No, it seems... wrong, somehow.'

'Wrong?' Fitz's chin was shaking.

'I can't put my finger on it.' A worry flickered on the Doctor's brow. 'A sensation that things are out of place. Not quite so.' He broke his train of thought and looked around himself. 'Well, which way do you think we should go?'

The Doctor's torchlight drifted over their surroundings. Shapes formed in the shifting eddies of snow. To Anji, every direction looked much the same. There were no paths, no signs of life. 'Does it matter?'

'Probably not. But we'll go this way,' decided the Doctor, pointing the beam uphill. Due north.'

'How do you know that's north?' said Fitz.

'Because that way's east.' The Doctor waved to the right. 'So, logically, this must be north.'

'And how do you know that way's east?'

'Because this way's north.' He marched up the hill. 'Do try to keep up.'

'There must have been some sort of an accident,' said Fitz, huddled into his coat. His fingers were numb, his cheeks were sore and he suspected that his shoes were leaking. Exhausted after their climb, he slouched against a tree trunk. Anji halted beside him and breathed on to her cupped hands. The Doctor strode forward to examine the upturned vehicle.

The van lay on its side, half-buried. Its tyres and metalwork were caked with snow, the only exposed area being the underchassis. The axles and mudguards were encrusted in grime. The windows and wing mirrors had smashed. The rear section of the van was open, revealing a cage framework. The design of the vehicle seemed very functional and old-fashioned; like a Bedford delivery van. Fitz had seen dozens of similar vans, convoying their way through war newsreels.

'Well, whatever happened it was a long time ago,' said the Doctor, squatting on his haunches by the bonnet. He scraped some snow away to reveal russet-coloured metal. After a pause, he stood up, clapping his hands clean. 'Most, most curious. The metal has rusted all the way through. But the level of corrosion – it's quite astonishing. The oxidation process alone couldn't account for it.'

'What do you mean?' said Anji.

'This metal has not just corroded. It's been eroded. This must have lain here undisturbed, for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years.'

'Don't move, plutos!'

There was a series of loud clicks from all around them. The sound of safety catches being taken off.

'Plutos? Wha-' Fitz looked up into a stinging, brilliant beam. Beside him, Anji and the Doctor shielded their eyes.

Out of the swirling mist emerged six soldiers. Each held a bulky machine rifle. In the reflected light, Fitz could see the soldiers' uniforms, torn and spattered. One of the soldiers had a red-spotted sling; another had a bandaged forehead.

They drew nearer. Their faces were tired and gaunt. Their eyes burned with anger.

The Doctor grinned a congenial grin. 'I suppose you would like us to put our hands up?'

They had been trudging for what seemed like hours. As they made their way downhill, a fog had swallowed them, cloaking everything beyond a couple of yards. Trees appeared like phantoms, solidifying into skeletons. With no horizon, it was as if they were enclosed in a claustrophobic, murky world.

The Doctor led the way, Anji and Fitz following a brief way behind. Behind them were the soldiers.

Anji wiped her nose and shuffled closer to Fitz. They had barely exchanged a word in the last ten minutes. The only sound had been the relentless crunch of footsteps. Fitz stooped as he walked along, his hair plastered over his forehead. By contrast, the Doctor was resolutely cheerful.

As though remembering, the Doctor stopped. 'Excuse me –'

The leader of the soldiers raised his gun. 'Keep moving.'

'Yes, yes.' The Doctor started to walk. Then he stopped and turned back again. 'May I ask where we are?'

'Move.'

'Of course.' The Doctor repeated the performance. 'I don't suppose you happen to know where we're going, do you? Only, if I'm leading the way –'

The leader levelled his rifle with the Doctor's face. Then he shifted his aim to Anji. She looked down the mouth of the barrel. Immediately she could feel her heart pounding. Oh, please, she thought. Not now. Her throat felt tight, as though she were going to throw up. 'We only need one of you plutos. Shut it and get moving.'

The Doctor placed himself between Anji and the leader. 'Plutos? Who do you think we are?'

'This is our planet, plutocrat,' said one of the other soldiers earnestly. He was younger, and his voice betrayed his nerves. 'You'll get nothing out of us.'

'Plutocrat? I can assure you I am probably the least plutocratic person you are likely to meet.'

The leader stepped forward. He was in his forties, six foot tall, overweight but muscular. 'Either you move or you'll be the one defaulting on your payments.' The other soldiers gave a laugh. 'All you're worth to us is target practice. One more word and you're dead meat.'

The Doctor made an elaborate mouth-zipping mime. He turned, and then stopped to give a permission-to-start-walking-again mime. The leader raised his rifle and slammed the barrel into the Doctor's shoulder. Stunned, the Doctor sprawled into the snow. Seconds later, he rolled on to his back and clutched his chest. He gasped as if surprised at his own frailty.

'Now get up and move.'

The Doctor staggered to his feet. He put his arm around Anji and she took some of his weight. Together, they picked their way further into the haunted mist. Six pairs of boots crunched after them.

'Doctor, are you all right?' whispered Anji, ducking them under a branch.

'I feel like a canary,' he said.

'A what?'

'A canary.' He nodded back. 'They need us alive. They're using us to make sure that the way ahead is safe.'

'Safe from what?'

'I'm not sure. Gas? Mines?' He shook his head. 'No. No, it's something else...'

The forest had become a wasteground, a desolate No Man's Land of snow-flecked mud and steaming pools. The darkness seemed to stretch away forever in every direction. There was no hint of dawn. The skies were draped with thunder-black clouds, not a star in sight.

Some distance away, on the crest of the ridge, Fitz could make out the silhouettes of five or six soldiers. They were little more than two-dimensional figures caught in the torchlight. And, like cut-outs, they did not move. They appeared to be running, the mud splattering around them, but the instant had been frozen like a photograph. They were statues, their mouths open in endless, silent screams.

The Doctor observed the stationary soldiers. 'Time. Brought to a standstill.'

'A DT Zone,' breathed the leader. He patted his gun as he looked around. 'We should be careful.'

'DT?'

'Decelerated time. For them, a minute will take a thousand years to pass. They'll still be running when the war's won.' The leader coughed and spat. 'But they're dead. Fire a bullet into the zone, and it'll kill them.'

'How?' said Fitz. 'If time has stopped -'

'Decelerated. It might take a hundred years to reach them, but it'll do its work sure enough. Are you stupid, pluto?'

The Doctor stamped some feeling into his feet. 'And, and... and there are a lot of these zones about, are there?'

'You really are stupid!'

The Doctor nodded vigorously.

The leader gave him a hard look, and gave in. 'You can't smell them. Or hear them, or feel them. You could be in the middle of one and know nothing about it. You just walk right in, and once you're caught, it's too late.' He gazed at the soldiers frozen on the plateau. 'They're the lucky ones. They don't know they're dead. But with the AT storms –'

'AT? Ah! Accelerated time?' asked the Doctor.

'A hundred years in seconds,' said the young soldier bitterly. 'Your whole life flashes past you, and then you're reduced to dust.'

'I see,' said the Doctor, 'that explains the vehicle we found. Warfare based on the manipulation of relative time. May I say this is a very peculiar war you're having?'

The leader lifted his gun. 'Now move.'

The attack came suddenly.

They had been advancing through the thickening smog. Visibility was down to a couple of metres. Anji's skin was clammy and sore, her legs ached and she yearned with every ounce of her being for a warm bed.

It seemed to come from all around them. A flicker of light, incredibly bright. It happened so quickly Anji wasn't sure if it was her imagination.

'Bombardment – Get down!' The soldiers hurled themselves to the ground and squatted behind the withered trees and boulders. 'Everyone down!'

The Doctor waved to Anji and Fitz to join him behind an outcrop of stone. Their feet skidding in the mud, they crouched down beside him. Then the rumbling started; a deep, gravelly boom, summoned up through the earth.

The impact hit. The ground shook, the intensity hurling Anji off her feet. Her palms landed flat in the snow, and the vibrations slammed through her body. Everything around her seemed to be juddering. A wind blasted into her, pelting her with hailstones and sharp air. The roar was deafening; a howling that burrowed inside the skull.

The Doctor grabbed Anji's hand and squeezed. 'Hold on –'

He pressed her into his chest, his collar and cravat fluttering in her face. There was another searing flash, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

'What's happening?' yelled a terrified Fitz.

'This is our chance,' shouted the Doctor. 'Come on!'

‘What? No –’ But the Doctor had pulled them out of cover and into the storm. Even with the Doctor’s support, Anji could barely remain upright. Her shoes slipped as the wind lashed about her, battering her through her coat.

There were agitated shouts as the soldiers realised their prisoners were escaping. Their leader bolted towards them, seizing the Doctor by his coat. In his other hand he hoisted his rifle. Before he could aim, the Doctor caught the gun barrel and jabbed the butt back into the soldier’s stomach. The leader choked and lost his balance. The Doctor slammed an uppercut to his jaw, sending him sprawling into the mud.

Anji yelped a warning. Another soldier stood before them, his gun raised.

Fitz dived out of nowhere with a holler, launching himself on to the soldier’s back. The soldier swung around with Fitz perched on his shoulders, his gun firing into the fog. Fitz grasped the weapon and wrenched it back against the soldier’s neck. Only when he fell to the ground did Fitz loosen his grip.

The Doctor grabbed Anji’s wrist tightly. The mist billowed around then, curdling into a thick soup. For a moment Anji lost sight of Fitz, but then he appeared out of nowhere, breathless and grinning. With a thunderous roar, the ground shuddered, much harder this time. In a moment of clarity, Anji thought of lightning. The gap between the flash and the sound was getting shorter. The bombardment was getting closer.

‘Come on,’ said the Doctor, and they ran, disappearing into the enfolding fog.

They reached some sort of rough road. The mud had been churned up by vehicle tracks, the snow smoothing over the indentations, ice pooling in the grooves. Gunshots echoed in the distance. They seemed to be miles away, but Fitz knew the soldiers were close behind them, maybe no more than a hundred yards.

Another flash. Fitz held his hand across his eyes and stumbled over to the Doctor and Anji. They were squinting into the darkness. It was slowly getting lighter. The Doctor stepped forward, hands raised.

Two diffuse lights grew out of the fog like the eyes of an approaching monster. The beams made a haze of the mist, blanching out the Doctor and Anji’s faces. Fitz had grown used to seeing them as half-shapes in the darkness; it seemed strange to see them so clearly, picked out as white as zombies.

The beam narrowed and the two eyes formed headlights. Fitz could hear the vehicle’s engine sputtering as it drew to a halt.

It was a small, box-shaped armoured car plated in a dull green metal. The metal shielded every surface, bolted into position, studded with rivets.

The door on the passenger side slid open. A young woman with cropped grey-flecked hair and bottle-thick glasses leaned out. She wore a shapeless drab military survival suit. 'There you are,' she shouted over the crash of the storm. 'We thought we'd lost you.'

'You thought you'd lost me?' The Doctor approached her, and Fitz and Anji followed.

'You're the time expert, right?' said the woman.

The Doctor was taken aback. Momentarily at a loss for words, he stammered, 'Well... yes, yes I am, aren't I? The time expert.' He gave a eager grin.

'Good to see you,' she said, keenly shaking his hand. 'We've been waiting for you back at IS Forty. We thought the defaulters had got you.'

'They almost did,' said Fitz.

'Get in.' The woman ducked back inside the van. 'They're doing a saturation chrono-bombing.'

The Doctor swung himself in through the door and clambered into the back. Anji followed, tugging her coat behind her. Taking a final breath, Fitz heaved himself after them, taking his place on the vinyl-padded bench facing Anji. The air tasted of petrol. The benches were on opposite sides, with the passengers' backs to the bare metal walls. Fitz could make out a bundle of blankets in the far corner.

'Come on, this whole area is going to be AT. Shut the bloody door!'

Fitz tugged at the passenger door, but it was too heavy. He gave it another wrench, his shoulder aching under the strain. Thankfully it clanged shut.

The woman floored the accelerator and they shuddered backwards. She heaved the steering wheel to the right, jammed the gearlever into first and launched them forwards. The van bounced over the potholes and Fitz banged his head on the ceiling.

'I'm Lane,' shouted the woman over the throb of the engine.

'I'm the Doctor. This is my friend Anji, and the man yelping in pain is Fitz. You saved our lives.'

'You should've been more careful,' said Lane, her eyes on the road. Her voice was world-weary; bitter and yet determinedly cheerful. 'Bloody defaulters everywhere. What they're doing in this section, I don't know. Next thing our lot are launching an accelerated time bombardment with you lot slap-bang in the middle.'

'Yes, yes.' The Doctor leaned forward, examining the interior of the van. He ran an inquisitive finger over the green metal. 'We're safe in here,

though?’

‘It’s plated with TR alloy.’ She crunched into a higher gear, the engines grinding. As the van accelerated, so the clattering increased. Fitz wedged himself against the wall, every shudder of the van going right through him.

‘TR? Time resistant? Of course,’ said the Doctor. ‘What was that you called the soldiers? Defaulters? This is their planet?’

‘Are you off-world? Yes, that’s what they say. They’re squatters. It’s empire property, and they’ve reneged on their back-payments.’

‘I see,’ said the Doctor, moving back to the bench.

The bundle of blankets gave a groan and rolled itself upright. The blankets slid back to reveal a soldier, his thick insulation suit soaked with a viscous liquid. He had a fresh, smooth face – he couldn’t have been a day above twenty – but his eyes were wide and terrified. His mouth hung open, drool on his lips.

‘Are you all right?’ said Anji anxiously. ‘What’s your name?’

The young soldier looked to her, his eyes watering. ‘Bishop.’

‘Lucky boy,’ said Lane without turning. ‘Found him on the edge of sector. Got caught in an AT. Lucky he survived. Lucky boy, aren’t you?’

The blanket dropped to the floor. Fitz could see that Bishop’s suit had been torn and his left arm hung uselessly by his side. Wrinkles and pale hair covered the sinewy flesh, the skin hanging in gnarled folds. The upper half of his hand was as white as flint, all the pigment bleached out of it. The lower half had no flesh at all. His arm merely ended in a claw of bone.

His arm was centuries older than the rest of him.

Chapter Two

The clock was embedded into the concrete wall. The second hand ticked around the sepia face. The roman numerals gave it an incongruously out-dated look, Anji thought. The sort of clock you would find at a car-boot sale.

‘Five twenty exactly,’ said Lane into the intercom relay. Behind her, Anji waited and shivered with Fitz, the Doctor and the wounded soldier, Bishop. After being rattled around in the van for an hour she had bruises on her back and thighs. Too exhausted to speak, she concentrated on willing closer the moment when she would be warm and sitting down.

They had entered some sort of airlock; a heavy reinforced bulkhead had clanged down behind them and another door blocked the way ahead.

A man’s voice buzzed back. ‘And now?’

‘Five twenty and fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.’

‘ID,’ crackled the intercom.

‘Look, we’ve got a half-dead AT casualty out here, Shaw. Stop bugging about and open the door.’

The interior door clanked upwards. Lane shoved an arm around Bishop’s waist and, with the Doctor’s help, she bundled him inside. Anji forced her legs into movement and followed.

‘What was all that with the clock?’ asked Fitz.

‘To check that time is passing at a synchronous rate inside and out,’ said the Doctor. ‘Quite an ingenious system. If time was passing faster or slower within the airlock, then the clocks wouldn’t match.’

‘Oh. Like checking the air pressure is the same?’

‘Same principle,’ said Lane. ‘Hold on, Doctor. We’ll put lucky boy down here for a minute.’ She dumped Bishop into a chair as Anji stepped into the room. It was the base’s reception area, but the reception it gave was far from welcoming. The chamber was concrete and basic, lit by a bulb dangling from the low ceiling. Padded body-suits lined one wall and stared down at them through gas mask eyes. A clock watched over them from the centre of the wall. At the far end, another door led on to a passage, where

a stairwell wound down to the level below.

The room was scattered with electronic instruments, wires writhing over the floor and clumping into sockets. The instruments had valves and bell-switches, like antique radios. All the technology seemed oddly old-fashioned. There was even a television performing a shadow-play in black and white. It was all like – Anji felt ridiculous to admit it – it was like walking around in a fifties sci-fi film.

Upon entering, Fitz spotted the electric fire and gave a gasp of joy. ‘Warm!’ He dashed over to it, raising his palms to its warmth. The Doctor unstacked some chairs and positioned them around the fire. Anji lowered herself into one with a shiver of relief.

Lane spoke into a wall intercom. ‘We’re in. Close interior door.’ She crossed to a table cluttered with mugs and a stove. ‘The base is kept a clean one sec per sec. We’re chrono-insulated from AT storms but even so we have to be bloody paranoid about a breach. The consequences would be disastrous for our work here.’

‘And for you,’ said the Doctor.

‘So we have to keep one eye on the ticker at all times.’ She poured some steaming liquid. ‘Coffee?’

‘Oh, God, yes please,’ sighed Anji. Lane passed her a metal mug and Anji cupped it in her hands and inhaled. It was muddy and bitter, but she had been awaiting this moment for so long, she gulped it down. It coated the inside of her mouth with grit. She coughed as her throat burned with alcohol.

Lane handed the Doctor and Fitz their mugs, lit a cigarette and drew in the smoke. ‘Welcome to Isolation Station Forty.’

The stairwell in the corridor outside rang with footsteps and a soldier appeared in the doorway. He had sunken eyes, pockmarked skin and protruding cheekbones.

‘You’re late,’ he said to Lane as he strolled in, hands behind his back. ‘Bragg’s doing his nut. I do hope you’ve got a good excuse.’

‘We were caught in an AT. I tried to radio –’

‘We’ve had no comms for two days,’ said the soldier. He eyed the Doctor. ‘If this is the time expert they promised us, he took his . . . time.’

‘Yes, well, I’m sorry about that. But even experts lose track sometimes.’ The Doctor stepped forward offering a handshake. ‘I’m the Doctor.’

The soldier turned brusquely to Fitz and Anji. ‘And these are . . . ?’

‘His assistants,’ said Lane.

The soldier stared at Anji. She felt uncomfortable being evaluated by his sneering eyes. She folded her arms across her chest as he looked her up and down.

He nodded to indicate Bishop. 'And this one?'

'A casualty from the attack.'

'Another hard-luck case? I hope he's worth your trouble.' He smiled at Lane. 'It's good to have you back.'

Lane downed her coffee and stubbed out her cigarette. 'We'd better get our friend to the medical bay,' she said, crossing to Bishop.

The Doctor sprang to her assistance. 'Please, let me help you.' He placed an arm under Bishop's back and together they hoisted him to his feet.

'The medical bay's three levels down,' said Lane. 'This way.'

'Doctor –' called Anji.

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor. 'I'll just see to this poor fellow. I won't be long. Trust me.' He gave her a reassuring grin and lifted Bishop out into the corridor.

The soldier watched them go, poured himself a slow coffee and turned to Fitz and Anji. 'If you're both ready, I'll show you to your quarters.'

Lane lowered Bishop on to the stretcher. Coughing, Bishop coiled up as he slipped into sleep. The Doctor unfolded a wool blanket over him.

'His arm is severely necrosed,' observed the Doctor. 'The limb will need to be amputated.'

'We should wait for Hammond.' Lane took two of the handles of the stretcher. 'Help me with this?'

The Doctor took his position at the other end. 'Hammond?'

'The station doctor. Lift.' Bishop lolled and groaned as they raised the stretcher. Lane guided the Doctor towards the nearest DT unit. 'We don't know whether Bishop here is viable yet.'

'Given time, I don't see any reason why he shouldn't –'

'Viable. Whether he is *worth* saving.' They lowered the stretcher into the DT box, an eight-foot long metal and ceramic sarcophagus. Lane pressed the blankets inside, making sure every part of Bishop's body was enclosed. Then she strapped him in, pulling each fastening taut. Satisfied, she pressed a switch and the unit activated with a hum. Inside, Bishop's chest rose and fell with a rapid rhythm.

'Of course he is worth saving,' said the Doctor.

Lane twisted the dial from one over one, to one over ten, twenty, fifty. Bishop's breathing became smooth and slow motion. 'We don't know whether it would be justified. *Economically*.'

'Economically – I don't under–' The Doctor realised. 'Oh. And what if he's not "viable"?''

'He'll be terminated.'

'You mean you would let him die?'

Lane regarded the Doctor incredulously. 'What would be the point of saving him? We'll keep him alive if we get a decent return. Else, nothing.'

'This is a man's life we're talking about.'

'If he's a non-viable, then we're better off without him. We're all of us indebted to the empire, Doctor. And our lives are at risk...'

'...If we don't keep up repayments?'

'Quite.' Lane turned the dial to one over one hundred. The humming dropped to a throb. The timepiece set into the inside of the coffin held its breath. Bishop's movement was paused, or at least too slow to perceive. 'One over a thousand,' said Lane. 'That'll keep him going till Hammond gets here.'

'Until he's been evaluated, you mean?' The Doctor examined the casket, trailing an admiring hand over the surface. 'This is very clever. I'm impressed. One over a thousand... that's three seconds every fifty minutes.' He peered inside. 'Tell me, why was only Bishop's arm affected?'

'See here.' Lane indicated where the sleeve of Bishop's survival suit had been torn away. A belt had been strapped around his shoulder so tightly that it bit into the skin. 'When his suit was damaged, he must have applied a tourniquet. The rest of him was still sealed up.'

The Doctor leaned forward. 'But even so -'

'Careful,' said Lane, 'if you get a hand caught in the DT field...'

The Doctor withdrew. 'Ah, yes. That could be rather nasty.'

'He was lucky, that's all. Lucky,' commented Lane. 'ATs don't usually leave survivors.'

'But to have the presence of mind to reseal his suit...'

Caught up in his thoughts, the Doctor paced across the tiled floor. He took in the empty beds, each picked out of the gloom by a lamp, and the equipment piled against the walls. One side of the room was taken up by an observation window facing into the quarantine area. With a sudden interest, the Doctor peered inside.

Lane joined the Doctor at the window. There was nothing to see. She could make out the quarantine chamber, empty apart from two beds, a mirror and basin.

The Doctor's reflection watched her. 'Why were you expecting me to arrive?'

'You know why. Station One informed us you were on your way.'

'Yes.' The Doctor gave a frown. 'Who informed you?'

'You'd have to ask Shaw. He took the message.'

The Doctor's attention shifted to the clock on the quarantine room wall. He watched it for some seconds. 'Why did you come out to search for us?'

'You were late,' said Lane. 'And Hammond thought... we both thought you might have run into trouble.'

The Doctor turned to her and smiled. 'I'm grateful you did. Presumably it is the interference from the time storms that is preventing radio contact?' Lane nodded uncertainly. 'I'm just... concerned,' added the Doctor, 'whether they will have been informed of my safe arrival.'

'Not till the storm clears,' said Lane, 'and that could be days.' She glanced back at Bishop. 'So, until we get comms back, we don't know whether lucky boy here is going to live or die.'

They clattered down the staircase, down two levels into the depths of the base. Fitz followed the shadowy forms of Anji and Shaw through a maze of cramped corridors. The ceilings were a mass of vents, ducts and conduits, and were so low that Fitz had to stoop. Bolt-studded bulkhead doors were set at intervals along the narrow metal passages, each one ready to slam down at any provocation. It was like exploring the belly of a submarine.

Beside each door there was a clock set into the wall. They seemed to be everywhere he looked, each one tick-tocking away behind its screen, some brass, some silver, some plastic. Fitz felt his skin creep; he couldn't shake the feeling that they were watching him.

'What did um... what did Lane say your job was?' asked Anji. 'A clock-something?'

'Clockwatchman,' said Shaw.

'Oh. Yes. What does one of those do when they're not at home?'

Shaw halted. His slit eyes judged them and found them guilty. 'We live under constant threat of time-based attacks. This base must be kept sealed and time-tight at all times.'

'And that's something to do with all the clocks?' asked Fitz.

'Our early warning system. If there is a breach, some time displacement, then the clocks will warn us.'

'Oh, I get it,' said Fitz. 'In case you've got one of those go-faster or go-slower things?'

'In the event of a clock not corresponding, the base's defences would be activated. Automatically.'

'That sounds terribly efficient,' said Anji.

'The affected area would be immediately sealed off.' Shaw led them further down the corridor and waited outside a door. 'There are TR bulkheads at every corridor intersection. In the event of a breach, they close.'

'You *are* very careful,' said Anji admiringly.

'We have to be.' Shaw pressed a switch and the door swung open. Inside, a light fluttered on.

Fitz said, 'What about – what about if one of the clocks runs down?'

'That can't happen. My job is to check they all give the same time. I am clockwatchman. Here is your room.' Shaw directed them inside.

Fitz stooped through the door. The room was narrow and bare. Two beds lay on either side of a wash basin, chair and locker. 'We're sha... sharing a room?'

'I'm sorry. We can't afford luxury accommodation.' Shaw smiled. 'If you will excuse me, I advise you get some rest. The demonstration is due at eleven.'

'What demonstration?' began Anji, but Shaw had vanished. Pouting, she pulled off her coat and folded it over the chair and sat down on her bunk, giving Fitz a this-is-all-your-fault look.

Fitz shrugged off his coat and lay back on his bed. There was no pillow, so he rested his head on his arms.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Eventually Anji removed her shoes and sighed. 'Well, at least we're warm, I suppose. That's something.'

'Mmm? I am knackered,' yawned Fitz. He curled up, kicking away his shoes. He could barely keep his eyes open.

'I wonder what's happened to the Doctor.'

'Oh, I'm sure he's having fun.'

'You don't seem very concerned,' said Anji, 'considering what happened to the TARDIS.'

'I'm sure it's only temporary. The Doctor will find a way. He always does. Usually.'

'I wish I shared your confidence.' Anji closed the door. 'And where are we, anyway?'

'I don't know. Earth, I suppose.'

'You think so?' said Anji. 'Coming back, it normally feels – I don't know – normal.' She sat down. 'This doesn't.'

'After travelling with the Doctor for a while, you get swept up in all the weirdness. And then the ordinary stuff starts feeling weird. Believe me.' Fitz's eyelids shut.

'But if this is Earth, when is it? I mean, this isn't any history I know. And that woman, Lane. She was *expecting* us.' She sighed again. 'It doesn't make sense.'

'You have a point there.' Fitz let himself drift into a welcome sleep. His mind sifted through the events of the day: the chess game, the endless walk through the night, the clocks...

... after several minutes or hours had passed, he emerged back into wakefulness. He blinked open his eyes. Anji lay huddled on the bed opposite.

Over the regular tick-tock of the wall-clock he could hear muffled music. The sound warbled like an old record, but he could make out the slither and pat of drums and a melancholic theme on harmonica. And a woman, singing regretfully: 'There's a brighter day tomorrow, if we hold on for one more day...'

Lane placed the drum on Norton's chest and listened to the whoosh and thud of his heartbeat. Unplugging the stethoscope from her ears, she addressed Hammond. 'Standard condition. No depreciation at all.'

Hammond regarded her with colourless eyes and no hint of expression. His features were severe, his skin stretched taut over his cheekbones, his grey hair slicked back over his skull. He nodded at his patient, the soldier Ash, and Norton. 'Good news, gentlemen. You are both in sufficient health to participate in the demonstration.'

'Thank god for that.' Norton pulled on his shirt and buttoned it. 'If only my credit rating was as healthy, eh? Still, you know what they say, your health is the last thing you should trade in.' He coughed with laughter. 'It was my saviour's day the day I got seconded back here. Beats freezing to death on the front line, but what doesn't? It's brass monkeys out there. Don't mind if I smoke, do you?' He patted his pockets and retrieved a tobacco tin.

Ash seemed less enthusiastic. He looked about ten years younger than Norton, still slim and smooth-faced. Gazing at the floor, he sullenly pulled on his jacket.

'You should both get some rest,' said Hammond. He folded away his stethoscope and the tubing of the blood-pressure gauge. 'The demonstration is due to commence in two hours.'

The Doctor had been perched on a bed throughout, watching the examination from the shadows. 'What demonstration?' he said, swinging his legs to the floor.

Hammond regarded the Doctor. 'I am sure Dr Paterson will go over the details with you.'

'It's to break the deadlock, isn't it?' said Norton, tapping his roll-up. His face had an ugly, drooping expression, his stubble-covered cheeks lined with jowls. 'That's the half of what I heard.'

'The deadlock?' said the Doctor.

Lane snapped her equipment bag shut. 'The war.'

'Tell me about the war.'

Hammond looked at the Doctor incredulously. 'What is this?'

'What – you don't know?' Norton's cigarette dangled from his lips. He jumped down from his stretcher and approached the Doctor. 'Are you off-

world or something? You been living in a DT?’

The Doctor gave an affirmative grin. ‘I’m afraid my briefing was a little too brief. Indulge me.’

‘This planet was a colony,’ explained Lane resignedly. ‘The empire franchised out the development. In return, they would hold a lease on the property.’

‘The empire is always keen to work in partnership with the private sector,’ added Hammond.

Lane continued, ‘But the colonists failed to maintain their residuals to the empire.’

‘This is all about money?’

‘*Everything* is all about money. They defaulted, and so the planet was designated for repossession. The empire sent in receivership forces.’

‘You, you mean?’ said the Doctor, addressing Norton, Ash and Hammond.

‘That’s right, us.’ Lane scratched her shoulder. ‘And we’ve been here ever since.’

‘But now you have reached a . . . stalemate?’

‘The current position is not sustainable. Each side has access to temp technology. As a result, the environment has been reduced to –’

‘A bloody nowhere,’ muttered Norton bitterly.

‘I’ve seen it,’ said the Doctor. ‘An endless winter, and an endless midnight.’

‘Neither side is in a position to make gains. That is why Paterson’s work is so important,’ said Lane. ‘It could provide the breakthrough we need –’

The door clicked open and Shaw stepped into the medical bay. He remained in the doorway, his shadow extending across the floor. ‘Doctor. Dr Paterson is ready to see you.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Good. I’m ready to see him, too.’ He walked to the doorway. ‘If you will excuse me . . . Oh, one last thing. How long has this war of yours been going on?’

‘I’m not sure.’ Lane shrugged.

‘You’re not sure?’ He raised his eyebrows. ‘Approximately?’

‘Well, approximately,’ said Lane, ‘about four hundred years.’

‘Fitz?’

Fitz grunted and rolled on to his back. Above him a naked bulb glowed. He could smell starch and disinfectant. He coughed and spent a quiet moment yearning for a cigarette. His back and legs ached.

‘Time to wake up. They’re about to begin the demonstration.’

Two questions formed in Fitz's cloudy mind. What time was it? And what demonstration? He looked around the room, at the drab walls and floor. The brass wall-clock showed five past eleven. He had been out of it for six hours. Anji stood beside him, clasping a metal mug. She had tidied her hair and clothes and looked a picture of efficiency, as usual. 'What demonstration?' mumbled Fitz.

'I'm not sure,' she said. 'It's the pet project of some bloke called Paterson. He's arranged it for the Doctor's benefit. Drink this.' She passed him the mug.

'What is it?'

'I have absolutely no idea,' said Anji. 'They call it coffee.'

'Mmm? Thanks.' Fitz felt the hot liquid stick to his tongue and retched. But it did the trick; there was no way he could fall back to sleep now. He collapsed himself out of bed, feeling the sudden icy floor through his socks. He padded over to the sink, and splashed his face with water. He swilled and spat. 'What about breakfast?'

'I got you this.' Anji passed him an anonymous metal tin. It contained some pinkish-brown meat. 'It's not quite Nigella, but it'll have to do.'

After slipping on his jacket and shoes, Fitz sniffed it and forked out some of the paste. It tasted of nothing, but it filled the gap. 'You don't happen to know -'

'The end of the corridor. Last door on your right.'

The laboratory was a confusion of electronic equipment; oscilloscopes, banks of dials, switches and flashing indicators. Wires streamed around the floor like unruly spaghetti. A neon tube provided stark, bright kitchen illumination. Anji spotted several televisions flickering amidst the mess, each one an old valve job with a Bakelite casing and bulging screen.

A row of timepieces dominated the near wall. The opposite wall contained a window that gazed out into a reflected laboratory; a raised observation platform ran the length of the room. Anji tasted static in the air.

A short, beagle-faced man rushed over to the Doctor. He had shiny brown hair swept to one side, a rough, Benny Anderson beard and thick National Health glasses. His crumpled shirt barely contained his tubby frame. 'Doctor! Good, you're just in time. We're just about to begin -'

'Dr Paterson, this is Anji,' said the Doctor, 'and Fitz.'

Paterson shook their hands. 'Your assistants?'

'My... students.' The Doctor shot Anji a wink.

'Students? Good. Well. Well. If you would like to see the capsule... ?'

'Yes.' The Doctor beamed. 'There is nothing we would like more.'

Paterson pressed a button, and the door opposite cranked open to reveal a small airlock. Inside, there was hardly space for the four of them. Fitz jostled into Anji's back as the door behind them swung shut.

The door in front clattered up and open. They emerged into a large, gloomy chamber, the size and shape of a mediaeval cathedral. The concrete floor was strewn with cables. At the nave, a vast hole sank into the ground. Lamps were placed at intervals around the pit, each one directing its beam of light upwards. As Anji entered the chamber she felt a breeze on her legs. The air here was at a higher pressure, and was moist, like a cellar.

Suspended over the hole was a huge metal sphere. It was covered in hundreds of rectangular plates, each one composed of a dark green substance, each one dotted with row upon row of bolts. Together they formed a geometrically perfect surface. It was like a giant golf ball in steel and brass. Mounted around the waist of the sphere was a series of circular port-holes, and a hatch was set into the lower hemisphere. An oily substance coated the surface, glistening in the light of the pit lamps.

It seemed unreal, or rather, it made everything else around it seem unreal.

'What is that?' Anji breathed at last.

Paterson gazed up at the sphere proudly. 'That is an RT capsule.'

'A what?' said Fitz.

As they drew nearer, Anji's throat ran dry. The capsule hung from a joist, held in place by a heavy chain, each link the size of an arm. It creaked as it revolved back and forth. The chains draped to the side of the chamber where they wound into a winching mechanism. It put Anji in mind of the head of a mine shaft.

'The latest step in my research. A means of diving back into the depths of time,' proclaimed Paterson.

Fitz couldn't take his eyes off it. 'In that thing?'

'It's fantastic.' The Doctor turned to Paterson. 'How far back can you go? An hour? A day?'

'Oh, I think you will be surprised, Doctor. Well. If you could follow me back. . .' They returned to the airlock and waited for the doors to close and open.

They emerged to find that Shaw had insinuated himself into the laboratory. He wasted no time in accosting Paterson. 'What is the reason for the delay?'

'We're only a few minutes behind. I'm very sorry, but. . .' Paterson adjusted a knob on one of the screens. The television flared to show Lane in a featureless antechamber with two uniformed men. The soldiers climbed

into padded survival suits, legs first and then tugging their arms into the sleeves.

Paterson spoke into the mic. 'Lane? Lane, status of our passengers?'

Lane's voice fuzzed back. 'Almost ready, sir. Bagging them up now.'

'There, Shaw, you see!' Paterson closed the airlock door and turned gleefully to Fitz. 'A safety measure,' he explained. 'The chamber must be entirely time-tight. In order to create the necessary impulse, we need to generate a localised AT storm.'

'How do you make one of those?' said the Doctor.

Paterson frowned from behind his glasses. 'But surely, Doctor –'

'Please. For the benefit of my students,' said the Doctor, waving towards Fitz and Anji. Anji tried to look attentive.

'Do we have time? Oh. Well. We utilise a time-active element called chrononium. You are familiar with – no? No? Oh, I think have some here.'

Paterson scuttled under one of the desks and retrieved a rusted case. He levered the case open with his elbow. Inside Anji could see a lime-green substance that gave off a modest glow.

'Chrononium. Yes. The source of our temp technology.' Paterson forced the case shut. 'The element has the property of displacing the time around it. Depending on the state, that displacement can be greater or lesser than the natural rate. In its unprocessed form, it merely slows down time.'

'As in your DT fridges,' said the Doctor.

'Yes. Yes. And in its inert state it also acts as insulation,' said Paterson. 'You will have noticed we use an alloy of it to plate our cars, vehicles – all of the bulkheads in this base. Just as radiation cannot penetrate lead, time cannot penetrate a TR field. The substance can even be woven into protective suits.'

Prompted by this, Anji looked back at the monitor. The two soldiers were now sealed in their suits and had strapped on head-masks. They strode towards a reinforced door.

Paterson continued. 'But in an active state, chrononium causes a rapid temporal acceleration.'

'Like in the war,' said Anji, 'in the time storms.'

'Indeed. Yes! Both ourselves and the... er... defaulters have not been backward in realising chrononium's potential. But this is merely scratching the surface. You see, chrononium can also be used to launch an object back through time.'

'Back through time. Right.' Fitz nodded sagely.

'Tell him how you do it,' prompted the Doctor.

'We create a localised AT storm within a DT field. The contention of the two forces creates an opposing third impulse of reverse time. However, it

requires a far greater magnitude of power to move back through time than to slow down or accelerate forward through it.'

'Why?' asked Fitz.

'Because it's uphill,' answered Anji.

'Yes,' laughed Paterson, 'exactly! And, after a certain period, the craft is returned to the present –'

The intercom buzzed. 'The passengers are ready, sir,' said Lane.

'Good.' Paterson pressed some switches. 'Airlock door opening now.'

'I realise this is a stupid question, but since no one else is going to ask it –' said Fitz. 'Why do you want to travel back through time, exactly?'

'To win the war,' stated Shaw. He stepped on to the central observation platform and rested his weight on the handrails. 'We go back and destroy the enemy... before they destroy us.'

It had all seemed so easy. Norton would lease out some time to the empire and, at the end of the freehold, he would buy his way out and settle down with Georgia. He could still see her face looking up at him, her forehead shiny with sweat.

And if she was unavailable, he could afford someone else.

That had been the plan, ten long years ago. But the empire had compulsorily renewed his contract, and given him another ten to serve. By the time his commission was over, Georgia would have moved on. The memories Norton held of her were as out of date as his photographs, frozen images of a lost past. The old days were gone forever. People change. Most of all, Norton had changed, and he couldn't step back into his old life.

And he would never go back. He knew, in his heart, that he would die out here. All that he had ahead of him was a tunnel of fear with death at the other end. So he took what small pleasures life had to offer him. Because the small pleasures were all that remained.

Through the eyeholes of the mask, Norton looked up at the capsule. It loomed over him, a forbidding globe poised over the maw of the pit. A ladder reached up to the open hatch. Norton gripped the tubular metal and began to climb.

Behind him, Ash waited. The lad hadn't spoken more than a few words since they had been stationed here. He didn't understand, but he knew enough to be afraid. Norton was afraid too, the weight in his stomach growing heavier with each upward step. But whatever lay in store, it was better than spending another minute on the front line.

Norton swung his bulk through the hatchway. As his eyes acclimatised to the darkness, he could make out panels of switches and dials. The two passengers sat opposite each other on vinyl seats. Portholes dotted the

walls. Instruments and metal boxes cluttered the rest of the cramped circular compartment.

Stooping under the ceiling, Norton felt his way over to his seat and strapped himself down. Ash climbed into the capsule and slammed the hatchway shut behind him. The clang reverberated through the bell. Ash rotated the locking wheel, and the bolts rang into place one by one. Now there was no escape.

The radio crackled. 'Atmosphere and time check.' It was the woman, Lane.

Norton ran a gloved hand over the instruments. 'Atmosphere normal.' He looked up. 'Time eleven oh five and six seconds. Seven. Eight.' He felt like a robot, running through programmed procedure.

'Time here eleven oh five and nine. Ten. Eleven.' The radio paused. 'Passengers ready to go?'

Norton gripped the arm rests. The air inside his suit smelled of rubber. The material was thick and heavy and suffocating. Norton wished he could get out of here, out somewhere he could breathe.

'Ready to go,' he heard himself saying. He flicked the switches in front of him. Then he rested back into his seat and waited.

The time capsule lowered soundlessly into the well. The floor lights slipped over its surface, then the capsule sank into the darkness and out of sight. Fitz watched as the chain continued to roll out, link by link, the power cables slithering after it into the pit.

The two remaining members of the base crew had arrived. They stood beside Shaw on the observation platform, following the descent. They were both in their fifties; the dour fellow with the narrow nose, Brylcreemed hair and autopsy gaze was the station doctor, Hammond. The other was the base's commander, Bragg. Bragg remained silent, his arms folded, his face sour.

'One hundred feet,' read Lane. 'One hundred and ten. Twenty. Thirty.'

Paterson hunched over the main bulb-flashing instrument bank, a clipboard under one arm. 'All power through-channels charged.'

Outside in the chamber, the chain rolled out, catching glints of illumination.

'Two hundred feet. And stop,' said Lane. The chain halted. 'Capsule in place. Detaching.'

Fitz exchanged a glance with Anji. She suppressed a smile at his mock doom-laden expression. With a nod, she directed his attention to the Doctor, who was studying the readings like a child memorising the contents of a toyshop window.

‘Good, good!’ said Paterson. ‘Begin countdown.’

A rumble thudded out of nowhere. The room trembled. ‘Ten. Nine. Eight.’

Paterson altered a sequence of settings. ‘Activating through-channels.’

‘Activate the ming-mongs,’ muttered Fitz in a Bluebottle version of Paterson’s voice. Anji kicked him.

‘Seven. Six. Five.’

‘All systems activated. DT field go.’ The rumble lifted to a roar and the floor shuddered. Fitz gripped the nearest desk with one hand, giving Anji’s hand a squeeze with the other. She tugged it away.

‘Four. Three. Two.’

‘Accelerated time focus.’

‘One.’

Outside, a storm billowed out of the pit, swirling the air into a whirlwind. The floor lamps rattled and dust flew up and span around the chamber. Then it dashed against the window. Fitz recoiled, automatically assuming the world was going to end.

And then, all was stillness.

‘The capsule is now in transit,’ said Lane. ‘It’s now... thirty minutes into the past and accelerating.’

The Doctor stroked his chin like an amused theatre-goer.

‘Check on the passengers, would you?’ said Paterson.

Lane picked her way through the cable-strewn floor to the mic. ‘Capsule status?’

In reply, the radio whooshed like spitting oil. A voice hissed over the static, ‘Fine.’

‘Time check.’

‘Time... eleven fifteen and five. Six.’

Anji whispered to Fitz, ‘I thought they said –’

The Doctor whispered back, ‘The time inside the capsule. As far as the crew are concerned, the same amount of time has passed for them as for... as for us. Even though the capsule itself is now –’

‘Now one hour in the past,’ said Lane.

‘Yes. Increasing power,’ said Paterson.

‘Now two hours into the past. Three hours. Transferring power.’ Another stomach-shaking rumble followed. ‘They’re now six hours into the past. Eight. Twelve.’

‘Good,’ said Paterson. ‘Maintain acceleration, please.’

Fitz slumped down in a chair and looked up at the clocks. Whilst the one marked *Absolute Time* counted second-by-second as normal, the hands on the clock marked *Capsule Time – Hours* were winding anticlockwise.

Beside that, there was another one-handed clock marked *Capsule Time – Days* and one marked *Capsule Time – Years*.

‘One day into the past,’ Lane announced. ‘The capsule is now one day into the past!’

Anji slipped neatly into the seat beside Fitz. ‘Doctor –’ she began, but the Doctor shushed her with a gesture.

Lane continued. ‘Two days. Three. Five. Ten. One month.’

Fitz looked up. The *Years* hand had started moving now.

‘Two months. Five. Nine. One year.’

‘A year?’ muttered Fitz in awe. ‘They’re a year in the past?’

‘Time check?’ said Paterson, ticking his clipboard.

‘Capsule status,’ spoke Lane into the intercom.

Static crashed back. The words were faint. ‘Cap...’

‘Time check.’

The voice broke up into white noise and then returned, shuddering with turbulence. ‘El...ven sixt... five seconds.’

The Doctor caught Fitz’s eye and indicated the *Capsule Time* clock. It read eleven seventeen and thirty seconds. The Doctor strolled swiftly over to Paterson. ‘A word, Dr Paterson –’

‘Capsule is now two years into the past,’ read Lane. ‘Three years.’

‘How far back are you planning to send them?’ said the Doctor.

Paterson peered over his spectacles. ‘You’ll see.’

‘Five years. Ten years. Twenty years.’

Fitz held his breath. Beside him, Anji frowned. Even Bragg and Shaw seemed uncomfortable.

‘Thirty. Forty.’

‘Do another time check,’ insisted the Doctor.

‘Fifty,’ said Lane.

‘No. It’s not necessary,’ said Paterson irritably.

‘Please,’ said the Doctor.

‘Seventy.’

‘Please,’ repeated the Doctor, placing himself between Paterson and his desk.

Paterson boiled for a moment, but then backed down. ‘Oh. Well. Well. Lane –’ he called.

Lane understood. ‘Capsule. Time check.’

The reply was distant, as though it were coming from deep underground. ‘...eleven sixteen... and... thirty...’

But the *Absolute Time* clock on the wall read eleven nineteen. With a rush of adrenalin, Fitz realised something was wrong. He felt like he was dropping through the floor –

'Stop the craft now,' said the Doctor.

'What? What do you mean –' protested Paterson.

'Stop it! There is –'

The radio gave an ear-shredding hiss. A distant voice cried out, 'Help – help us. . .' It turned into a scream of gurgling terror. And then the intercom cut, dead.

Lane gasped. 'We've lost contact, sir. We've lost them. One hundred and fifty years –'

'Get them back,' yelled the Doctor.

Paterson made some frantic adjustments to the controls and shook his head in disbelief. His face dripped with sweat. He looked on the verge of tears. 'I can't. It's out of control – I can't bring them back.'

'What do you mean, you can't bring them back?' said the Doctor.

Paterson twitched, and brushed aside his fringe. 'Tell. . . tell him, Lane.'

'Usually we halt the capsule at a point in the distant past –'

'When?' The Doctor gripped Lane by the arms. 'How far back do you send them?'

'I don't know – a depth of about one hundred and twenty years.'

'One hundred and twenty?'

Lane nodded dumbly. 'Well, yes. That's as far as we can manage. Anything further and –'

'And?'

Lane gestured towards the main bank. Along the top sat a row of bulbs. 'These indicate the control responses of the craft.' One by one, they blinked out. Lane looked up at the clocks. 'They're at two hundred and fifty years now. Bloody hell.'

The Doctor frowned at the controls, as though they should explain themselves.

'So you can't bring them back, can you?' said Bragg.

Paterson wiped his mouth with his sleeve, blinking rapidly 'Um. I don't think so, sir. They're dropping out of range now. Ah. No. There's nothing we can do for them –'

'We can,' said the Doctor softly.

'What? How?' sputtered Paterson.

'These lights only indicate a return signal. The outward control signal may still be reaching them.'

Lane glared at him. 'But we have no way of knowing if we're getting through –'

'It's worth a try.' The Doctor dashed over to Paterson. 'Now, Paterson my dear fellow, how do you bring them back?'

Paterson hugged his clipboard and stammered, 'We normally remove the DT contention to create a forward impulse. But –'

'I don't like sentences that begin with "but".'

'But we can't do that, can we? They're *still diving*. The through-channels would overload. It's too dangerous, Doctor. Not just for them. No no no. For us. If there is a power blowback –'

'We have to try.'

Fitz felt his nerves jangle like a discordant note. Above him, the *Years* clock now read three hundred. Three centuries into the past. It was a horrible thought. It wasn't like popping back in the TARDIS where you were here one second and there the next. No, the capsule was rushing back through time like a bullet down a gun barrel, the years whooshing past in a blur.

'All right,' conceded Paterson, his jaw trembling, 'we'll give it a try. But if there is any chance –'

'I understand.' The Doctor grinned encouragingly and patted his shoulder. He turned to Lane. 'Lane, would you be so kind as to prepare a power boost? Fitz, Anji, I'll need your help.'

Fitz bounded to his feet. 'What do you want us to do?'

'Anji, keep an eye on the clocks. Fitz, I need you here.' He waved Fitz over to one of the flashing-bulbs-and-knobs units. 'We're going to have to be rather quick.'

'They're three hundred and fifty years into the past,' Anji called out.

The Doctor stretched his fingers, about to perform. 'We need to gather a storm.' He placed Fitz's hands on a lever. Lane and Paterson stood ready at their desks. 'Now.'

The Doctor's fingers darted over the panel, making fleeting but precise adjustments. A hum rose through the floor to fill the lab with a loud, grating throb. 'Transferring power.'

Outside, in the main chamber, the storm picked up again and dust began to spiral around the central pit.

'Four hundred years,' said Anji.

'We need more power,' urged the Doctor. 'Fitz, second lever on the left. Now. No, the other way.'

'You'll overload the –' protested Paterson.

The throb became a deafening wail. All eyes turned to the window. A funnel of cloud coiled out of the pit, whipping up dust. The Doctor yelled, 'It's going to blow – get down!'

Fitz dived to the floor Anji crouched. Lane and Paterson took cover. . .

Taking advantage of the distraction, the Doctor sprinted over to Paterson's controls and slammed down every switch. The room shuddered,

sending the Doctor sprawling. He picked himself up, dusting his sleeves. 'Anji?'

'Four hundred and five years,' read Anji. 'They're slowing down. You've done it!'

'Not quite. Throwing a vehicle into reverse when it's at top speed is not exactly the best way of changing direction. . .'

'So what do we do now?' shouted Paterson.

'Four hundred and ten,' said Anji. Getting back on his feet, Fitz stared at the brass display of the *Years* clock. The single hand drew to a halt. A few moments later, and the *Days* and *Hours* clocks followed suit.

'They've stopped,' gasped Lane. 'Thank God.'

'Now we'll see,' said the Doctor.

The hand on the *Hours* clock began to move. Forward, this time, with gathering speed. Then the *Days* began to rotate, and the *Years*. . .

'You've done it,' said Fitz, giddy with relief. He laughed. 'They're coming back.'

'Four centuries,' said Lane. 'No one's ever gone that deep before.'

'We're not quite home and dry yet,' said the Doctor. 'We need to reduce their rate of ascent. Lane, we'll need a DT to slow them down.'

Lane nodded and made the necessary adjustments.

'Three hundred and fifty years,' said Anji.

Paterson dabbed his forehead. 'I don't believe it. Well, well. A successful dive to four hundred years. This surpasses my previous achievements -'

'Successful?' The Doctor gave him a withering glance. 'I remember you were going to give up.'

'Three hundred years,' said Anji

'Capsule rising at rate of ten years a second, and falling. Nine years a second.'

'Two hundred and fifty.'

'Six years a second,' said Lane. On the bank in front of her, the indicators flashed into life one by one. 'They're back in radio range.'

'Try regaining contact,' said the Doctor.

Lane nodded and activated the radio. It gave a swoosh of hard static. 'Calling capsule. Please give status. Calling capsule.'

But no reply came.

'Four hours,' said Anji. 'Three hours.'

'Any response yet?' questioned the Doctor.

Lane shook her head. 'Still nothing. Just static.'

'They're slowing down, though,' said Paterson. 'Fifteen minutes a second. Increasing DT level.'

Bragg made his way down the platform steps, hands clasped behind his back. He approached the Doctor. 'It seems you have proved your worth, Doctor. You have saved us from a . . . loss.'

'That's one way of putting it,' said the Doctor without looking round.

Lane gave up on the radio, rubbing her eyes. She stretched her arms. 'I'm gonna get suited up. We need to get the passengers out and into isol. Hammond?' Hammond tilted his head in understanding.

'Isol?' said Fitz.

'Isolation. Quarantine. Just a precaution. Temp travel has been known to have . . . side effects.'

'What sort of . . . side effects?'

'We anticipate every eventuality,' clipped Hammond, and followed Lane out of the laboratory.

'One hour,' said Anji. 'Forty minutes. Thirty. Twenty.'

Fitz checked the *Hours* clock. The hands drew to a stop at eleven thirty-five, the same as the *Absolute Time*. For a moment they were both still, and then they ticked forward simultaneously. There was a unanimous sigh of relief.

'They're back,' smiled the Doctor.

'Attach the chain,' said Paterson. 'Let's please get them out of there, hmm?'

Lane patted her hands over her orange-and-grey TR suit, checking the seals. Her mask in place, she took an experimental gulp of air through the filter.

The airlock chamber was walled with featureless chrononium alloy. One bulkhead door led to the medical bay via the quarantine chamber. The other door opened on to the travel chamber.

Hammond stood beside her. She could hear his breathing through her earphone. 'Final check.' He turned around so that she could test the seals on the back of his suit.

'They're back,' said the Doctor tinnily in her ear. 'Ready?'

She turned so that Hammond could check her suit. He patted her shoulder to indicate all was OK. She took in another gulp of breath. 'Ready. Open.'

The bulkhead door drummed open. Through the circle of metal, the chamber awaited. The floor lamps were submerged in dust and thick shadows painted the walls.

The time capsule hung from its chain, glistening in the half-light. The surface was covered in a green, gluelike substance that slicked over the metal and drooled down into the shaft.

Without speaking, she and Hammond entered the chamber, their boots patting into the dust. Together they collected the ladder and raised it to the capsule's door. Lane gave it a tug to test it was sure, and climbed.

The gluelike substance was slippery and thick. Lane wiped it away from the locking wheel set in the centre of the hatch. When enough of it was cleared, she began to turn the wheel.

They had congregated around the radio, where the Doctor stood, his face fixed in concentration.

'I've found them.' Lane crackled back. 'Oh –'
'What is it?' said the Doctor. 'What's wrong?'
There was a long pause before Lane replied.
'Anachrophobia.'

Chapter Three

‘Calling Station One.’

The radio hissed. Bragg adjusted the dial. ‘Calling Station One.’

Nothing. Bragg switched the radio off and rubbed his eyes. The AT storm had cut them off. There was no way of knowing how close the defaulters were. One mile away or ten.

A map took up the wall above the radio, depicting the wilderness as a looping fingerprint of contours. To the north lay the sections occupied by the defaulters. According to reports three days old.

Bragg lifted himself out of his chair and heaved himself over to his locker and the waiting gin bottle. He collected a mug and poured. Raised to his lips, he could smell the liquid’s fire. He drank and his body numbed with warmth.

Bragg studied his reflection in the locker mirror. He didn’t recognise the man who stared back. He still half-expected to see the man he had once been. But that young man had grown old and tired and scared.

He had never been handsome, of course. Even when he was young the sight of his reflection had filled him with contempt. He was repulsed by the feelings the sight created in him. But in his uniform, he became anonymous. Bragg remembered his fellow soldiers at the beginning of duty. Young and ruddy-aced, with clean-pressed uniforms. They had been the handsome ones.

That was all too long ago. Since then, he had dedicated himself to trying to forget who he was. He had become the Empire’s machine.

A cough came from the doorway. Bragg turned to see Shaw, his portable chronometer clutched in one hand. Shaw entered. ‘Still no comms?’

‘Nothing.’ Bragg poured himself another drink. ‘There’s been no let up in the storm.’

‘According to our instruments, it will get worse over the next two days, sir,’ said Shaw. ‘The whole sector will be AT.’ He scrutinised the wall-clock. ‘No one will be able to get in or out.’

‘And with no comms, we can’t even call for help.’ Bragg watched the

liquid swill in his mug. 'We're on our own. Just you and me, Shaw.'

The Doctor peered through the window into the quarantine area. 'Anachrophobia?'

Lane retrieved a cigarette tin from her pocket. 'Anachronism phobia. The fear of temporal displacement.'

'Of being in the right place at the wrong time?' said the Doctor. 'I know the feeling.'

'I doubt it,' said Lane. She tapped the end of a cigarette and lit it. 'Anachrophobia is a mental condition but with a systemic response. It's a reaction against, well, against temporal travel. The brain can't handle the transition.'

'A form of post-traumatic stress?'

'A bit more than stress. Take a look at them.' She nodded into the isolation area. Inside the dark chamber, there were three figures. Norton sat hunched in his shirtsleeves, Ash lay outstretched on the other bed. The third figure, Hammond, was enclosed in a TR suit. He moved cautiously, like a diver through water, his breath rasping through the radio link. He unpacked a blood-pressure gauge and wound it on to Norton's arm before inflating it.

Norton shivered, sweat beading off his skin and into his shirt. His mouth hung open, his lips a pale blue. He breathed as though gripped by some fever. As Hammond took his reading, Norton doubled up retching and coughing.

The Doctor watched. 'No, I agree. Those men are suffering something much worse.'

'The brain can't readjust to the new temp zone. End result, extreme neurological disturbance.'

'It reminds me of... decompression sickness?'

'Same principle.' Lane drew on her cigarette. 'The effects of coming back up to the present too fast. Yeah, that's it. Poor bloody sods.'

'You've seen this before?' The Doctor drummed absently on the window.

'Symptoms vary. Cyanosis, hypertension. Sometimes paranoia, memory loss... in some cases complete breakdown, mental, physical. Depends on the individual. And the depth, of course.' In the chamber, Hammond signalled that he had finished his tests. Lane pressed the airlock control and the access door inside the quarantine area swung open. Hammond climbed in and Lane sealed the chamber. 'But these two have gone back further than any others.'

The Doctor turned. 'Others? So I'm to assume this isn't the first time this has happened?'

Before Lane could reply Hammond called through the intercom, 'Sterilisation procedures complete.'

'No, it's not the first,' Lane said. The airlock opened and Hammond emerged into the medical bay. He unstrapped his dog mask to reveal his drawn, solemn face. 'So. What's the bad news?' Lane asked.

Hammond considered. 'They are the most severe cases I've come across.'

'I was right then?'

'Yes. They are lost.'

'Lost?' said the Doctor.

Hammond unfastened his body-suit. 'In this condition, the higher centres of the brain fail to resynchronise to the present,' he said matter-of-factly. 'They become dislocated in time.'

'I see. Lost.' The Doctor patted a bed, trying to gather his thoughts. 'And this is what usually happens, is it? After a time-dive?'

'Yes.'

'And you still proceed with the experiments? No, don't answer that.' The Doctor took a deep breath. 'How long did it take your previous... *volunteers* to recover from the experience?'

'They don't recover,' answered Hammond.

'What?'

'It is an irreversible condition. All past participants have suffered similar aftereffects. As a result, their economic prospects were considered, on balance, to be irredeemably compromised. So they were terminated.'

'How many?' said the Doctor angrily. 'How many people?'

'Twenty-six,' said Hammond. 'All soldiers requisitioned from the front line. Don't worry, they were all... expendable. There is always a plentiful supply of non-viables, you see.' He smiled reassuringly. 'We are well within our budget.'

The officers' mess consisted of some chairs, a table and a rudimentary kitchen. The oven was chipped white Bakelite. It reminded Anji of her grandmother's house, full of fifties furniture, sliding doors and linoleum. Her mother had repeatedly failed to make her redecorate. In the end, the cooker and the rest of her kitchen had ended up in the street for the council.

It even smelled the same. Anji turned and watched Fitz rummage through each of the cupboards, collect a bottle and slouch into the nearest chair. Of course, for him, all this retro was state-of-the-art.

Fitz poured himself a drink. 'To the hero of the hour. The Doctor.'

'It's a good job he was here to sort things out.' Anji paced around the small, drab room. Some fading photographs were pasted to the wall. The

pictures were of soft-focus starlets, all peroxide and cleavage. 'If it wasn't for him those soldier-boys would have been, well, lost in the past.'

'I know,' said Fitz deliberately. 'It's all a bit convenient, isn't it?'

'In what way?' said Anji in her best Angus Deayton voice.

'That the Doctor happens to turn up just when he's needed. What you said last night, about us being expected. . . This time expert Lane said she was looking for. Maybe it *was* the Doctor. Do you think she knew?'

'Knew what? About us?'

'Maybe not all that, but. . . I don't know.' Fitz shrugged.

Anji laughed. 'Is it National Paranoia Day and no one told me about it?'

'Coincidence, then. But I'm still not happy, about the Doctor –'

Footsteps approached down the corridor outside. Anji and Fitz fell silent as Shaw materialised in the doorway.

'Out watching your clocks, cock?' said Fitz.

Shaw examined their wall-clock. Satisfied, his attention shifted to Anji. 'In two hours it will be our. . . rest period. You may wish to return to your room.'

'But I only just got up,' complained Fitz.

Shaw ignored him and took Anji to one side. 'Some of your time.'

'What?'

'I would value it most highly.'

'Why? What do you want to talk about?' She had dealt with enough Shaws at the office back in the City. Creeps with too much money and too much of an opinion about themselves. Overgrown public schoolboys who thought the best way to sweep a woman off her feet was to get her legless first.

A smile trickled over Shaw's lips. 'I am prepared to make you a most generous offer.'

'An offer I couldn't refuse?' said Anji. 'Er. . . No thanks. You couldn't afford me.'

'Oh, I think I could. Everyone has their price, in my experience.'

'No.' Anji folded her arms. Shaw stared at her indignantly, turned and left the room.

Fitz puzzled. 'What was all that about?'

'Don't even go there.' Anji poured herself a drink. 'What were you saying? About the Doctor?'

Fitz sighed. 'Oh, I don't know. After all that business with his heart – sometimes I think he needs protecting.'

'Who from? Sabbath?'

'From himself.'

Anji laughed at Fitz's doom-laden expression. 'I think if anyone needs protecting, it's us. The Doctor is more than capable –' She paused as more footsteps approached down the corridor.

The Doctor peered into the room, a grin across his face. Anji brushed a hair out of her eyes. 'We were just talking about you.'

The Doctor looked concerned. 'Really? I hope I haven't missed any juicy gossip.'

'We were wondering – when are we getting out of here? The –'

'I haven't forgotten,' the Doctor admitted. 'No, I haven't forgotten. I know you're worried. But at the moment I'm rather more concerned with what's going on here. This experiment of Paterson's . . . it's very interesting. I'm about to look over the capsule. Fitz, if you're not busy, would you –'

Fitz suppressed a yawn and got up. 'No, not at all.'

'And me?' said Anji.

'Anji. How is your bedside manner?'

Norton eased himself off the bed. He had a cramp in his right leg and his arms tingled with pins and needles. He studied the room. The clock, the sink, the toilet, the mirror. Ash lay on the other bed, slurring in his sleep.

A window filled one side of the room, looking out on to a hospital ward. He could make out rows of empty beds. And a ghost looked back at him. The ghost had tired eyes, its mouth hung open.

How had he got here? He felt numb, as though he was under an anaesthetic. He shivered with a sudden cold. His head throbbed.

He could hear the hissing of his own breathing. He was wearing a padded survival suit and looking out through goggles. The floor juddered. The whole metal chamber seemed to be shaking itself apart. His gloved hands scrabbled across switches.

A woman's voice spoke to him through a radio. 'D'you know where you are?'

Norton looked away from the glass. The bed by the far wall was occupied by a young man he didn't recognise, his body hunched into a foetal position,

'Do you know your name?'

Where was the voice coming from? Norton turned back to the medical bay. There was a woman in there, alone, perched on one of the far beds, a cigarette in one hand. Her smoke curled up to the ceiling.

The far door opened and another woman strode into the ward.

'How are they?' she asked Anji.

‘Quiet.’ Lane glanced over to the isolation chamber and shuddered. Norton stood motionlessly behind the window, staring out at them. In the reflected ward light, he looked a pallid, transparent figure.

‘What’s his name again?’

‘Norton,’ said Lane. ‘He’s somnambulating. It’s not uncommon with anachrophobia.’

‘When I first heard that name I thought it was something to do with spiders.’

‘Your friend the Doctor called it a sort of time-travel bends.’ Lane turned away from the chamber. The sight of Norton made her uneasy.

‘I wonder why we don’t get it,’ Anji muttered.

‘What?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ said Anji. ‘You know, your friend Shaw –’

‘You don’t have to whisper, you know. The isol chamber is soundproof, airtight and time-tight. Nothing can get in or out.’ Anji regarded her curiously.

‘What are you scared of?’

Lane paused. What *was* she scared of? She gave the textbook response. ‘Time can have a mutagenic effect on viruses. Can’t be too careful.’

‘But these two are all right, aren’t they?’

‘Hammond hasn’t found anything. Yet. They’ve come up clean.’

Anji took another look at Norton. ‘Can I talk to him?’

‘Go ahead.’

Anji walked to the window. They were, Lane thought, about the same age. But, unlike Anji, she had grown old before her time. She lived with the constant nausea of regret. She had lost her value.

Anji pointed at the intercom. ‘I speak into this thing here, do I?’

‘The switch.’

Anji held down the bell-switch and spoke calmly into the mic. ‘D’you know where you are?’

Norton did not respond. But his eyes shifted as though following something moving across the room.

‘Do you know your name?’

Everywhere was darkness. Fitz tried to straighten up, but the ceiling pressed against his shoulders. Moving forward, he banged his knee against something sharp. The ground creaked as the capsule paused and changed its direction of rotation.

The Doctor clicked on a torch, lighting up Paterson’s concerned face and shining glasses. ‘Here. You’d better have this.’ He handed the torch to Fitz.

Fitz let the torch-ghost drift around him. The portholes flashed as the light moved over them. The sloping metal walls were reinforced by struts and dotted with rivets, all moulded in dark green paint. Two seats had been welded to the floor on opposite sides of the main control unit, a steel box covered in switches and indicator lights. Above it the torch picked out a row of clocks identical to those in Paterson's lab.

'Over here, please –' The Doctor squatted down beside Paterson and levered open the top of the control unit. Fitz shifted forward and shone the light inside to reveal a bird's nest of wires and circuit boards. The Doctor reached in and unscrewed a valve. 'Well, well. . .' He rotated it, dragging a finger over the surface. 'Tell me, Dr Paterson, what do you think happened?'

Paterson removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. 'I'm not sure. As far as I can tell, everything seems to be functioning. There was no. . . no reason for it.' He looked pained. 'It shouldn't have happened.'

'But it did, didn't it?' The Doctor tapped a finger on the connections. His breath clouded in the chilly air. 'You're right though. This all seems to be. . . in order.'

Paterson pulled himself to his feet. 'What we need to do, I think, is to test the capsule –'

'No.'

'But a controlled descent into the past, maybe only a few days. A few hours. Just to check the systems are still –'

'No. No more time-dives, Paterson.'

Paterson stammered, 'but Doctor –'

'Something terrible happened to those two men,' said the Doctor gravely. 'And until I know what it was, no one else is to enter this capsule. Is that understood?'

'If you insist –'

'Those are my instructions. I *am* the time expert.' The Doctor swiped a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his hands clean. 'And as for sending those poor men on a dive when you knew the likely consequences –'

'All losses have been accounted for, Doctor.'

'Accounted for? *Accounted* for?' The Doctor stared at Paterson in disbelief. 'You don't realise, do you? You can't see you've done anything wrong?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean –' The Doctor raised his hands. 'It doesn't matter what I mean, what's done is done. What is more important is finding out what happened to them.'

Fitz handed him the torch. 'What do you think, Doctor?'

'I'm not sure,' muttered the Doctor, 'but I have some rather... unsettling ideas. Fitz. When did you first notice that the capsule was out of control?'

Fitz ummed.

'The clocks, remember?' the Doctor prompted him. 'Time inside the capsule was lagging behind time in the laboratory. Now, what does that tell you?'

Fitz shrugged. 'Time inside the capsule was slowing down?'

'Yes! But the capsule was accelerating back through time, so –'

'Yes?'

'Perhaps there was a breach.'

'That is impossible,' said Paterson, 'the capsule is chronoinsulated, the shell –'

'Maybe it isn't quite as impregnable as you think.'

'But you're suggesting that time –'

'– was being sucked out of the capsule? Yes,' said the Doctor. 'And that's not all.' He made his way over to the hatch. 'Come on, I think we've finished here.'

Anji had spent ten minutes trying to get through to Norton. She'd asked the standard questions you're supposed to ask. 'What is the last thing you remember?', 'What is your name?' and so forth. And Norton had just stood there.

And then Norton strolled calmly over to the window and gazed back at her, as still as a statue. 'I know who I am,' he announced, 'my name is Norton.'

Behind her, Lane scurried to the window. Anji pressed the intercom switch again. 'Do you know where you are?'

The speaker crackled with Norton's laughter. 'Isol Station Forty. The quarantine area.' He spoke as though it were obvious.

Anji and Lane swapped worried glances. 'Norton, d'you know who we are?'

'Of course I do.' Norton turned to Lane. 'Your name is Lane.' He turned to Anji and smiled. 'And you're Georgia.'

'Wha–' Anji shivered. 'Who?'

Norton's smile dropped. 'What is this, some sort of a game?' Before Anji could reply, he yelled at her with frightening force. '*Why am I locked up here?*' He smashed his fists against the window. '*Why are you doing this to me?*'

Lane and Anji backed away. Norton launched himself against the window, thudding his shoulder hard. He howled with pain and slipped to the floor. As he doubled up, tears dribbled from his eyes. He looked up at them

wretchedly. 'Let me out of here. Please. *Please.*' He crawled over to his bed and slumped on to his back.

Lane pressed the switch. 'Norton.'

There was a long pause. 'What?'

'Do you know who we are?' said Lane.

Norton screwed his eyes shut. 'I. Don't. Know.'

'But –' said Anji.

'Short-term memory loss,' Lane interrupted. 'Where are you?'

'I don't know –'

'Who is in the room with you?'

Norton gave Ash's form a cursory glance. '*I don't know.*' He turned towards them, his chest heaving, his face a half-grimace, half-smile.

The room that Norton had shared with Ash was another drab cell. Anji glanced over the drawers and wall-clock before spotting what she was looking for. Someone had pasted the corner wall with photographs.

Anji sat on a bed for a closer look. The black-and-white pictures showed faces and groups. She couldn't tell where they had been taken; the backgrounds were a blur. One of the photos featured a young man in his new uniform, a woman shyly smiling beside him. Anji peeled it carefully from the wall. It must have been taken a decade or more ago. Norton was slim and clean-shaven, and they had the glow of summer about them. Pocketing it, she skimmed through the other photographs, and found a creased picture of Norton's regiment. She peeled it off and folded it into her pocket.

Lane was at the quarantine room window when Anji returned to the medical bay. She smiled brave-facedly as Anji entered. 'He's still talking. But he's depreciating rapidly.'

'What do you mean?' whispered Anji. Inside the quarantine area, Norton sat coiled on his bed, his gaze directed to the floor.

Lane buzzed the intercom. 'Norton, what year is it?'

'I don't know,' snapped Norton. 'I don't know.' He stood up and pressed his hands against the window. 'Let me out of here.'

Anji unfolded the photos from her jacket, and selected the one of Norton's regiment.

'What are you doing –' said Lane.

'An idea. To see exactly how bad his memory is,' Anji took over. 'Norton,' she said, flattening the photo against the glass. 'Look at this.'

Norton stared at it for some seconds.

'Do you recognise anyone?'

He frowned and shrugged. 'No.'

A horrified feeling began to creep up on her. Anji replaced the photo with the one of Norton and the girl. 'What about this?'

Norton studied it and his lips twitched into a smile. 'That's Georgia,' he breathed, his eyes glistening. 'That's Georgia.'

'Who is she with?'

'I'm not sure –' Norton frowned at the picture through the window, trying to remember. 'I don't know.' Tears streamed down his cheeks. 'Who is he? *Who is he?*'

'Unstuck in time? What is that supposed to mean?' Fitz scraped his way through another tin of ersatz meat. The base's medical bay reeked of disinfectant. It looked half derelict, the walls shelved with electronic instruments, a grimy ceramic sink and wooden workbenches. Oddly, a row of fridges lined one side of the room. Large, coffin-sized fridges. Upon entering, Fitz had glanced inside one, only to shudder at the sight of Bishop lying still and dead. The Doctor had reassured him that Bishop had merely been decelerated in time. Put on hold, as it were.

'Norton no longer has any sense of the "now",' the Doctor explained. 'He's lost the ability to discern the past and present.'

'He's losing his memory, too,' said Anji.

'Anachrophobia.' Lane stoked up another cigarette. 'Classic symptoms.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'But there might be something more to it. I think he may have been... affected by their exposure to time.'

'And how, exactly, are we supposed to check for this?' said Lane. 'Hammond's gone over them and found nothing.'

'It may not be detectable by the usual means. I have a theory I would like to put to the test, Miss Lane. May I borrow one of your TR suits?'

'Be my guest.'

The Doctor unhitched a protective suit from beside the quarantine airlock. He removed his own coat with a flourish and handed it to Fitz. In his shirtsleeves, he climbed into the baggy suit, strapping himself in as he unfolded the legs up to his waist. Soon the Doctor was completely enclosed apart from his head.

'May I?' said the Doctor, indicating a small brass timepiece and stethoscope. Lane shrugged. The Doctor deposited them in a pocket, and then pulled on a rubber head-mask and disappeared inside the airlock. 'One two, one two.' His voice hissed through the intercom.

'Sterilising airlock,' said Lane. 'Complete.'

Through the window, Fitz saw the inner door swing open. A survival-suited figure emerged, his blank gas mask eyes searching from left to right.

At the other end of the quarantine area, Norton and Ash lay on their beds, shivering in uneasy sleep.

‘What’s he playing at?’ whispered Fitz.

The Doctor checked the time on the brass clock, jammed the stethoscope drum into the back of the timepiece, and plugged the stethoscope ears into the suit mic socket. After a sharp snap, a steady clicking came through the intercom. The ticking of the clock. Fitz tapped his fingers in time to the clicking.

The Doctor approached the two soldiers, the clock held at arm’s length.

Fitz’s tapping started to slip out of synch. Either he was losing his sense of rhythm or the clicking had slowed down. He kept his fingers still and listened.

It was definitely slowing down. Each tick seemed to be drawn out, as though each second had been stretched to twice its normal length. The pauses between ticks grew larger still, to three seconds, five...

The Doctor rested the clock on Norton’s bedside.

The clicking halted. Fitz could hear nothing but static.

Very gingerly, the Doctor picked up the clock and stepped away from Norton. Immediately, there was a rapid ticking as the clock rushed to regain the seconds it had missed.

As the Doctor returned to the door, the tick-tock returned to normal.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Lane. ‘They’re slowing down time.’

‘You think they’ve been contaminated?’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor, bundling his TR suit on to a shelf. ‘A little time can be a dangerous thing.’

‘Something to do with this chrono-nonium stuff?’ Fitz couldn’t understand how the two soldiers could be at a time-standstill, while he could still see their chests rising and falling. Shouldn’t they be motionless, like Bishop in his fridge? And what was a DT zone, anyway? He’d imagined it as a place where the air had turned to liquid. The Doctor could move through it, but only because of his special time-resistant suit. But... but whenever Fitz thought he was close to understanding, he lost his thread.

‘Chrononium? They seem to be exhibiting some of its properties,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘But, no, I don’t think it’s that simple.’

‘Never is, is it?’

‘Anji – you observed that Norton’s memory was deteriorating?’

‘Yes,’ said Anji. ‘Half an hour ago he knew who Lane was. Now he can’t even recognise his own face.’

‘Sometimes I don’t recognise my own face,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘Those little white lies –’ He tugged on his coat, brushing his mane free of the

collar, and turned to Lane. 'You said he was drifting back through his life. But that doesn't explain why he no longer recognises certain things –'

'Well, if he's at a point before it happened,' said Lane. 'he wouldn't, would he?'

'That's an interesting theory,' said the Doctor. 'Interesting but quite wrong. Because it doesn't tell us why Norton's amnesia is *increasing*. It doesn't tell us why he has permanently lost all recollection of parts of his life.'

'How do you know it's permanent?' said Lane.

'Because, it's not just the memories he is losing.' The Doctor paused theatrically. 'He's losing his past.'

'That's stupid. How can you lose your past?'

'In the capsule, time was being drawn out. They were *losing time*,' said the Doctor. 'And what we're seeing is the result. The erasure of months, maybe whole years of his life.'

Fitz shuddered. He had a uneasy sense... a sense that some of his own memories had clouded over. Of course, some names and faces were bound to become a little vague with time. But he couldn't remember what his childhood bedroom had looked like. He could see the sun breaking in through thick burgundy curtains, but everything else was just a mist.

'He is not forgetting his past,' the Doctor said, 'because, you see, bit by bit, he no longer has a past to remember.'

Bragg had called a meeting. The crew of the base sat wearily around the officers' mess. Anji watched from the corner with Fitz as the Doctor stood at the centre of the room, tackling questions from every direction. He was fascinating to watch, Anji thought. The way his eyes drew in each person to his arguments. He should go into PR.

'So you believe it is an infection?' Bragg took a sceptical sip from his drink.

'Not in terms of a virus, no,' the Doctor told him. 'But if you're asking if there's something terribly wrong with them, then yes. Definitely yes.'

'I examined them both,' said Hammond. 'There was no trace of disease. They are merely suffering from acute anachrophobia.'

'As I have explained, it can't be detected by the usual means –'

'They're displacing time,' Lane interrupted.

A derisive laugh sputtered from Shaw. 'What?'

'It's true,' said the Doctor. 'They exist outside the normal flow.'

'And what is that supposed to mean?' said Bragg.

The Doctor turned to Hammond. 'You said they were becoming temporally dislocated. But it's not just their psyches. It's their whole bodies. Time

cannot pass through them.'

Paterson leaned forward. 'And you think this is a result of the dive?'

'Yes.'

'But, but Doctor, we found no evidence of a breach –'

With a flick of the wrist, a handkerchief appeared in the Doctor's right hand. He opened it to reveal a metal valve. 'Look.' He held it out for inspection. 'This was removed from the inside of the capsule.'

Anji leaned forward. The valve was coated with a glowing glue.

'Chrononium gel,' breathed Paterson.

'Yes.' The Doctor pocketed the handkerchief with a flourish and collected a coffee from Fitz. 'The problem is, you've been looking at anachrophobia as a reaction to time travel. But it isn't. It is something far greater.'

The room held a long silence whilst the Doctor drank from his mug. Anji, used to prompting the Doctor, said, 'What sort of far greater something?'

The Doctor swallowed. 'When those two men were in that capsule, time wasn't only being sucked out.' The Doctor turned to them each in turn and gravely pronounced, 'I think something else may have got in.'

Anji shivered. The room temperature seemed to drop.

Hammond rose smoothly. 'Doctor, I have evaluated the two soldiers. Regardless of any infection they may or may not possess, they are both non-viables and should, I suggest, be terminated forthwith –'

'No.'

'Maybe it'd be for the best,' suggested Lane, 'if we don't know what we're up against?'

'No. I would not allow it.' The edge to the Doctor's voice was hard and undisguised.

Bragg coughed and narrowed his eyes. 'So this disease. You don't know how contagious it is?'

'No, no,' the Doctor admitted. 'No, but I think we should be very careful. Very very very careful. For the time being they should remain in strict quarantine. No one should approach them without a time-resistant suit.'

'So we could be dealing with something transmittable through the air?'

'That's a possibility which I cannot rule out.'

'And it'll kill them?'

'Oh, yes,' sighed the Doctor. 'Certainly. They're losing their histories. Soon they will have nothing left. The trauma of this loss – what you refer to as anachrophobia – will lead to a total mental and physical breakdown.'

'I see.'

'They must be terminated,' said Hammond. 'I demand –'

'No,' Bragg barked him down. 'No. Let's keep them alive. We may be able to utilise this... disease. We may be able to use it on the defaulters.'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea...' protested the Doctor.

'You wanted them kept alive, Doctor,' said Bragg. 'So they will be. And if what you say is true, they could make their own valuable contribution to the war effort.'

Norton awoke. Straining his eyes, he could make out the clock above him, suspended like a moon in the near-darkness. He watched the hands twitch around the numbers. Tick-tock, tick-tock. It seemed to resonate inside his head.

He lowered his bare feet to the icy floor. On the other bed, a young soldier lay unconscious, sighing, his face submerged in his blankets.

Norton padded to the sink and splashed his face with water. He rubbed his cheeks and eyelids to wake himself up.

Outside, the ward was in gloom. He could make out the outlines of the beds and DT units. And a figure standing in the bulb light, his features blanched to white. A man with a bony face, slicked hair and a white coat. The man advanced smoothly, his gaze fixed on Norton, his eyes showing no emotion.

A female voice crackled. 'Calling capsule. Please give status.'

The whole room rammmed and shook. Norton's stomach was sick with the jolting and his belt cut into his waist. Engines rumbled and shrieked. Circuits fumed and blew. Norton groped for the controls, but he couldn't hold the switches with his gloves. The capsule rolled hard to one side, forcing him back into his seat.

Ash remained strapped into his seat opposite, clutching at the armrests. Norton could hear the boy's terrified screams.

He must reach the controls... Norton examined his glove straps, and began to undo them. He pulled his bare hands free and reached forward.

He pressed against the cool window. The glass dripped with condensation. Outside, the ward was empty.

The medical bay door swung silently open and framed a figure's silhouette. The figure walked across the medical bay, winding its way between the beds. As it drew closer, he realised the figure was a woman, dark-haired, slim, in a thin summer dress. She had warmth in her eyes and a bright, welcoming smile. She held out a slender arm.

Norton called out hoarsely. 'Georgia -'

She gave no reply. Instead, she placed her hands gently on the glass.

'Georgia.' Norton dashed over to the intercom and yelled into the grille. 'Georgia!'

But when he turned back the ward was empty. And someone was in his bed. A frail woman in a plain gown, her breathing a guttural rasp, her hands clenching the sheets.

Norton moved up to her. He recognised her face from photos. She was beautiful, her cheeks wet with perspiration, her hair straggling.

She had died when he was two months old.

Lane's room was bare and economical. Above her, ducting tubed out of the concrete and across the ceiling. She flicked the door switch and it clanged shut after her. Unbuttoning her uniform, she dragged off her shirt and replaced it with a sleep-vest.

After the meeting, Bragg had declared he would return to his office and check on the radio link. To drink himself stupid, more likely. Paterson had excused himself, followed by Anji and Fitz. Shaw, of course, left to stalk the empty corridors in the company of his precious clock, and Hammond had gone to check on the isolation area. And the Doctor? She remembered him in the shadows, stroking his lips. But when she looked again, he had disappeared.

Crossing to the sink, she washed and swilled. The muddy water drained anticlockwise. Behind her, the door clanked open.

Lane looked up to the mirror. 'What do you want?'

He stood in the doorway, his slit eyes appraising her reflection. 'I don't want anything,' he said, leaving a loaded pause. 'Why, would you like me to make you an offer?'

Lane dried her hands and face. 'No. Bugger off.'

'I could have you.' Shaw turned to leave. 'But you're not worth it any more.'

Fitz prowled the room. His fingers had a lack-of-cigarette itch. Eventually, bored with prowling, he slumped down on to his bed. Anji sat on her bunk, propped against the wall. She had discovered a battered orange-and-white paperback novel. *The Worlds At War*. 'Go to sleep,' she said without looking up.

'I can't,' said Fitz. 'I've only been awake five hours. My cycles are all out.'

'That's odd,' said Anji, 'you don't normally find it difficult. Five hours. That's quite a big day for you.'

'And that's another weird thing – what number weird thing are we up to now? – we don't normally get jet lag, do we?' Fitz stretched. He had felt muzzy and sluggish earlier, but now he was supposed to sleep, he found that he was utterly awake.

Anji slapped the book shut. 'Well I'm going to sleep. I got about ten minutes with your snoring.' She held the top button of her blouse, paused and gave Fitz a meaningful look. 'Excuse me.'

Fitz coughed shyly. 'But I've seen you naked –'

'And I've seen you too, and it's not an experience I want to repeat.'

'I'll find the Doctor,' he replied diplomatically, pressing the door bell-switch. It clanked open and he left without another word.

Norton rotated the tap and clinked a mug into the sink. It filled. Swallowing the icy water, he turned back to Georgia.

She rested on the bed, her legs swinging. Just as he remembered her.

The room had grown darker. Blackness closed in around them. He could make out the gritty surface of the walls, but the only remaining light centred on Georgia, and the clock. Norton hesitated. He didn't recall there being a clock over their bed. This was wrong –

Georgia turned towards him, shining in the moonlight.

Norton sat on the edge of the mattress, and cradled the back of her head. His fingers twined in her hair and slipped down to stroke the smoothness of her neck.

The snow crunched under his weight. He coughed, his breath rasping through the filter. Snowflakes clouded his goggles.

He struggled on to his knees, skidding in the churned mud. Around him skeleton trees disappeared into the distance, picked out in dancing beams of torchlight. The beams flashed over the descending snow, capturing moments of stillness. The torches were held by his fellow soldiers, identical in their body-suits, advancing through the forest, trudging through the knee-deep whiteness.

A brutal explosion of gunfire rattled through the night. He saw two soldiers lurch backwards.

His heart thumping, his radio gushing static into his ears, Norton ran on through the darkness, blinded by the fear and the cold.

The snow lay its soft blanket over the corpses.

There was one more body, draped from head to toe in a sheet. It had been placed on a bed in a small, concrete room.

Norton folded back the sheet. He remembered her face from photos. Her grey eyelids were closed. Her lips were as pale as her skin.

He collapsed, retching with grief.

And behind the window, the white-coated figure stood, watching.

Shaw found the Doctor in one of the upper corridors. He was looking out through a porthole, his body hidden in the shadows. The porthole revealed

the barren wilderness that surrounded them. Distant trees bustled and raged. Snow billowed. And, even here, the rumble of thunder could be heard.

Shaw approached. Through the thick glass, the Doctor's reflection watched.

'Can't sleep?'

The Doctor considered the question. 'No, I can't sleep.' He answered as though stating a fact.

There was a long pause.

'That thing you said got into the capsule. What do you think it is?'

'I don't know.' The Doctor turned, his hands deep in his coat pockets. 'I daresay we will find out. In the fullness of time.' He returned to the porthole and his reflection. 'There's a storm approaching.'

'The AT storm will reach us in the next day or so,' said Shaw. 'What are you looking for?'

'I'm waiting,' said the Doctor. 'For my stage call.'

Fitz spiralled up the stairwell, up to the top level of the base. He had wandered through empty corridor after empty corridor. The base was at rest.

And everywhere he looked a clock stared back at him. In the silence of night, their ticking seemed louder and faster, their mechanisms whirring and clacking. Fitz found himself humming the song from *Children's Favourites*, the one about the grandfather clock that had stopped, never to go again, when the old man died. He had always felt there was something creepy about that song, about the idea of a someone's life being linked to a clock. Why *did* the clock stop short when the old man died? Or maybe the old man had died because the clock had stopped?

The stairwell opened on to a familiar corridor that led back to the reception area. Fitz's fingers itched. He couldn't remember whether Lane had left some cigarettes there.

His nocturnal walk had dulled his senses. So it was only when Fitz stepped into the reception area that he realised that a breeze was ruffling through his hair.

The airlock door was open. And beyond that, the exterior door was also open to reveal the cavernous night outside. He could make out the ice-pooled ground, the rocking trees and the snow as it gusted into the airlock.

Fitz shivered and hugged his arms. The survival suits stared down at him with gas mask eyes. He sensed something shifting in the corner of his vision –

And, after a hard thump to the back of his neck, Fitz collapsed.

Norton awoke. As he moved his head, he felt a sharp pain and his vision clouded. It hurt even to blink.

On the clock above him, the minute hand jerked forward with a loud clack that ricocheted in his ears. He could hear the timepiece's motion inside his mind, a relentless tick-tock, tick-tock. He had heard it in his sleep, the endless whirring and trundling. It blocked out all other sound. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Like a heartbeat.

He placed his feet on the icy floor. The other bed was occupied by a young soldier who mumbled and fidgeted in his sleep.

Norton glanced back at the bed he had vacated. It was occupied by a man lying flat on his back, the blankets pulled tight to his neck. The man inhaled with a drawn-out gurgle, then exhaled, his chest rattling with the effort, the wheeze softening to an exhausted sigh.

The man's features were familiar. He had prominent jowls and a lop-sided expression. His skin was as dry as parchment, etched with a thousand lines. Black scabs and tumours speckled his bald pate. His frown held a deep furrow.

The man's eyelids rolled back and he looked up at Norton. His dry lips parted. His expression changed, almost imperceptibly, to recognition. A jittery hand extended upwards, and the bony fingers touched Norton's cheek.

Norton knew who the man was. He reached out to hold the old man's hand. . .

But first he had to remove his gloves. He unstrapped each wrist, his whole body jolting with the hurling motion of the capsule. The engines grated in his ears and Ash screamed at him through his earphone. Tugging off his right glove and then his left, he lunged forward and gripped the switches.

Now the bed lay empty, and Norton walked over to the sink. Water dripped from the tap in a steady rhythm and dribbled down the stained plughole.

He glanced out into the ward, but there was nothing to see. The naked bulbs illuminated unoccupied beds and DT units. The reflection of the quarantine room was brighter, and he could make out his bed and the woman slumped over it. And the man hunched over her, his body heaving with emotion.

Norton remembered the scene. That man had been him once.

Georgia looked up at the man, her forehead shiny with sweat. Her cheeks ran with tears, and she shook with fear, desperately talking, talking

too much. The man brought his fist back. Watching, Norton felt the rage boil up inside him once more, the rage that had consumed him and made him blind.

Norton's heart collapsed at the sound of her whimper. His eyes burned and his throat choked. He pressed himself against the glass and screamed, 'No! No! No!' He thought of the apologies he had made, the bitter words, the frustration and the terror. And he wept, the tears dribbling down his cheeks and salting his lips. Was he crying because he had lost her? Or through anger at himself for driving her away? He had never hated her, but he hated that man, the man hunched over her like an animal.

Norton dropped to a crouch and remained there, moaning. Wishing he could turn back the clock and not be the man he had been.

Eventually, Norton lifted his eyes from the floor tiles and inspected his reflection in the window. He examined his own pathetic eyes, his own gibbering mouth. And, gradually and gently, the reflection faded away, and he was left staring at a shining blackness.

Tick-tock, tick-tock. The sound grew louder and echoed in his ears, drowning out all thought. He looked from left to right, trying to work out where the sound was coming from, but it seemed to be everywhere. It seemed to come from inside his head.

Norton pulled himself to his feet and rested his back against the window. On the far bed, Ash stirred. He gave a low groan and shifted, sending his blankets slithering to the floor. He lifted himself upright and swung his legs over the side of the bed. His mouth hung open and his eyelids remained shut. He mumbled, the pitch rising and falling as though he were arguing, but the words were incoherent.

Ash climbed off the bed, his head lolling, and shambled towards Norton.

And behind him, the wall-clock glowed, its hands moving in a precise, measured pattern. The second hand twitching restlessly forward. The minute hand slowly revolving around the numerals. The hour hand, apparently still but advancing nevertheless.

Norton crossed to the sink and looked up to see his reflection in the mirror.

But where his own face had been, a clock face now stared blankly back.

Norton's heart pounded in shock. He stared, unable to comprehend. The clock was of polished brass, with roman numerals on weathered paper.

He brought his hands to where his nose and cheeks should be. But instead they pressed against glass. He scrabbled over the smooth surface, failing to find his eyes or mouth. Instead, he felt the circular outline where the metal ended and his own skin and hair began. The clock face – it was set further back into his head than his own features had been.

And the second hand on the clock face in the mirror moved forward in time to the sound in his head.

Tick-tock.

Tick-tock.

Tick-tock.

Chapter Four

A pain throbbed behind his eyes. Fitz mumbled into the starched sheets and blinked awake. He squinted and the world around him swam into focus.

Overhead, a bulb glared so brightly it stung his eyes. As he turned away, his head throbbed again and the afterimage smeared in his vision. Thankfully the rest of the room was in darkness. He could make out beds, and fridges and boxes of electronics.

‘Did you have a good night?’

Fitz struggled to sit upright and then struggled with the question. The best he could manage was a befuddled groan.

The Doctor rested a palm on Fitz’s forehead and held his wrist in his other hand. ‘Mild concussion, but you’ll live. You’re healthier than you look. Anji, a mug of water for the patient, I think.’

‘Doctor?’ Fitz probed the back of his neck. A bruise twinged.

He had been in the reception area. He remembered the eyes of the gas masks. He had been cold, the hairs on his arms on end. Snow had swirled in from outside. The airlock had been open. And then –

Fitz pressed the bruise again, and winced. ‘Doctor – what happened? I –’

‘Don’t worry about it, Fitz.’

‘But – but, I was in – the airlock –’

The Doctor tapped a forefinger to his lips and glanced meaningfully across the medical bay. Fitz shifted on his elbows to follow the Doctor’s gaze, and spotted Hammond shrugging his arms into the sleeves of a TR body-suit and strapping his ghoulish face into a mask.

Anji returned with a mug and Fitz sipped at the icy water. He swung his legs over the side of the bed. ‘How long was I out for?’

‘Not long. About eight hours. It’s almost twelve,’ said the Doctor.

‘And there was me having trouble nodding off.’ Fitz gulped the rest of the water and transferred his weight to his socked feet. He spotted his jacket hanging over a nearby chair, and padded over to it, the floor freezing

his toes. 'So did I miss much?'

'Not a great deal,' said the Doctor. 'Our friends in quarantine had a quiet night, so it appears. Shall we?'

Fitz was in no state to disagree. He slipped on his shoes and jacket and trailed after the Doctor and Anji. He ruffled his hair to wake himself up and tapped his fingers against the window. It was refreshingly cold and wet.

The airlock door inside the isolation chamber swung open. Hidden within his grey-and-orange TR suit, Hammond emerged and approached the two beds. The soldiers were sleeping, the only movement their fitful breathing.

Hammond retrieved a device consisting of an extended tube and an analogue gauge. He took a reading. 'Airborne bacteria check,' Hammond said through the intercom. 'Nothing.' He circled the tube around him. 'Isolation chamber sterile.'

'So it isn't carried through the air,' said Anji.

'We can't assume that.' The Doctor spoke into the grille. 'Check for temporal displacement.'

Hammond unpacked a small chronometer and approached the sleeping figures. 'The amplitude of the displacement is... increasing. DT one over two thousand.' He moved nearer. 'One over five thousand. Now out of range.'

'They're getting worse, then?' said Fitz.

'They've not got much time left,' muttered the Doctor.

'You mean, to live?' Anji said.

'No. Well, yes. Well, no. I mean, they've not much time left to lose. It's running out, like sand in an hourglass.' The Doctor paused. 'But to answer your question, Fitz, yes, they are getting worse.'

Shaw stretched out on his bunk, his head resting on his arms, and calculated. It was all a question of selecting the outcome with the greatest reward. That was the *plutocratic ideal*.

We live to accumulate. Every other consideration is irrelevant. 'What is not material is immaterial.' Only wealth matters. Wealth brings power and whatever you desire.

The plutocratic ideal provides the basis for every decision. Whatever action brings the greater return is the correct action. The ideal has a purity to it, a logic. We are all allotted our time and we should spend that time wisely. No, not spend. Invest. Time should bring maximum return. Time should be made to pay.

Time is money.

But Bragg didn't understand this. His judgement had become soaked in sentiment. That, more than anything else, revolted Shaw. Oh, if loyalty brought remuneration, then he could be loyal. But if it held no reward, then it was without value. He owed the empire his life, but his duty was to himself and himself alone.

Bragg's stock had fallen. Soon Shaw would be in a position to tender his own bid for the franchise of commander.

Shaw's thoughts turned to the other crewmembers, how they had also depreciated, how they had failed to reach their potential. How they deserved nothing but his contempt. Bragg, Norton, Paterson. Lane – the thought of what he had done with her disgusted him; not because he was ashamed of his weakness, but because of the *waste*.

Shaw was not lonely. Instead, he took comfort in how much more valuable he was than everyone else. Emotional attachments were an unnecessary burden. He would not allow himself to be compromised. No matter what the cost.

The hands of the wall-clock drew together. Midday. Shaw climbed out his bunk and dressed. His watch was due to begin.

Lane had been lying awake for hours, familiar restless thoughts nagging at her mind. The endless struggle to make ends meet. The degradation, the long, fear-filled nights and mornings spent hunched over a red-flecked sink. Her years as a medic, her throat retching at the sight of the skeletal, shrivelled casualties. Her eventual transfer to Isol Forty, her last desperate attempt to redeem her life. But in the end, that hope had died like all the others.

Climbing out of the sheets, she fumbled for her glasses and crossed to the mirror. A pale, mousey-haired woman stared back. Older and more tired, as always. Opening her jaw, she checked her gums for infection.

There was a nervous tap on the door, Lane pulled a shirt over her vest and dug through her pockets for her cigarette tin. She lit up. 'Enter.'

Paterson peered inside nervously. 'I'm not disturbing you?'

'No, don't worry. What d'you want?' She offered him a smoke, but he shook his head.

'I need someone to speak to,' he said, sitting down on a bed. 'It's all over, you see.' He removed his spectacles and brushed back his fringe. 'The project... it's finished.'

'Why d'you say that?'

'The Doctor said... It doesn't *work*, you see.' Paterson gave half a smile. His hands fluttered to his tie. 'It doesn't work. Nothing works.' His eyes watered and closed. 'Sometimes, I think, everything I touch falls apart.'

'Come here,' said Lane, throwing her cigarette into the sink.

Paterson rose to his feet. 'I'm afraid, I can't –'

'Don't worry about it. It doesn't matter.' Lane put her arms around his shoulders and drew him closer. She hugged him and stroked the back of his head. She felt his hands rest on her shoulders. 'It's all right,' said Lane softly. 'It's all right.'

'It should work,' said the Doctor, jiggling a saucepan over a hissing stove. 'The principle behind it is intriguing, if not entirely convincing. But he was right about one thing.'

'Who was right?' asked Anji, stirring her steaming drink. After leaving the medical bay the Doctor had been gripped by a sudden enthusiasm, ushering her and Fitz upstairs to join him in the officers' mess. The object of his enthusiasm turned out to be breakfast.

'Paterson. The capsule had not been breached. So how did something get in, hmm?' The Doctor scooped the cooked meat on to two plates and delivered one to Anji, one to Fitz.

'Are you asking me?' Fitz was seated and rested his plate on his knees. 'Because if you are, I shall assume you're only doing so through a combination of sarcasm and cruelty.'

The Doctor presented him with a coffee. 'What happened last night?'

'Oh god.' Fitz drank. 'Last night – hang on, this is quite good.' He seemed surprised. 'Anyway. Last night. I thought I'd take a walk around the base. I was looking for you, Doctor. So I found myself in the reception area place. And the airlock door was open.'

'What?' said Anji. She forked the meat into her mouth and discovered that, after adding the contents of half a dozen anonymous tins, the Doctor had created something that tasted like fried bacon.

Fitz said, 'I could see outside. There was snow blowing in and everything.'

'But the time storm –'

The Doctor corrected Anji. 'No, there was no storm last night. Go on, Fitz.'

'Well, that's about it, really. The next thing I know, I'm waking up and you're saying I'm healthier than I look. And I've worked that one out now, by the way.'

'I still don't get it.' Anji deposited her plate in the sink. 'If both doors of the airlock were open, then anyone could have got in –'

'Or out, the Doctor agreed vigorously. 'Yes. The base would be vulnerable. But I don't think that was a consideration. The airlock is operated from the inside, you see. The only way that one person could leave the base

and return unassisted would be by keeping both doors open.’ He paused gravely. ‘I don’t think everyone here is quite what they seem.’

‘Oh.’ Fitz handed Anji his empty plate. ‘So what happened next? To me, I mean?’

‘I found you,’ the Doctor replied. ‘You were on the floor of the reception area.’

‘And the airlock?’ Fitz drained his mug.

‘Closed. I would imagine that you disturbed whoever it was who was popping outside.’

‘But who? Why?’ said Fitz.

‘Our first priority, however, is the time capsule.’ The Doctor plucked his handkerchief from his pocket and rotated the glinting valve in his fingers. ‘What really happened to those men, I wonder? There is one way of finding out, of course –’

‘And how do you propose –’ began Fitz, then realisation dawned. ‘Oh no...’

‘You’re not going on a dive?’ said Anji.

The Doctor grinned.

‘After what happened to the others? You must be crackers,’ said Fitz.

‘No way,’ added Anji. ‘You are not going to do it.’

‘Don’t worry, don’t worry. I’m sure it’s perfectly safe.’ The Doctor returned the valve to his pocket, studied his cuffs and looked up. ‘I’ll only go back a hundred years or so. Hardly any time at all. At the first sign of trouble, I’ll turn back. I promise.’

‘You really think you’ll be all right?’ said Fitz.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, in that case, I’m going with you.’

Anji gave Fitz a look that unfortunately did not kill him.

The Doctor raised his hands. ‘I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.’

‘You said it would be safe, so what’s the problem?’ said Fitz. ‘And if it’s not safe, then I’m afraid it’s totally out of the question. Your choice.’

The Doctor sighed. ‘I suppose the company will do me good.’

An infection that couldn’t be detected but which delivered a sure and rapid death. Bragg leaned into his seat, picturing the defaulters stumbling into the snow and mud, oblivious to their fate. He looked at the faded map, tracing its whorling contours. Soon it would change. Soon the empire forces would advance and wipe the bankrupts from the face of the planet. It would all be over.

He poured himself a gin. Because, at the back of his mind, the dread still lingered. The defaulters were out there, advancing through the gloom,

and every minute could bring a fresh AT bombardment.

Bragg drank and felt the warm numbness return. He gathered the microphone and switched on the radio. The wood-cased speakers crackled as they had crackled for the past three days. The time storm had them surrounded and there was no one within range. But out of habit and desperation, Bragg revolved the knob through the frequency bands.

‘Calling Station One.’ He made an adjustment and the radio whistled. ‘Calling Station One.’

‘... is Station One. Please identify.’

Bragg jolted with shock. His heart thud-thudded and for a moment he was lost for words. ‘Station One? This is IS Forty.’

‘Forty? We thought... lost you.’ The voice, almost buried in the interference, had a drawling, mocking quality. An officer, educated and with inherited status.

‘What do you mean?’ said Bragg.

‘Defaulter forces... in your sector. Almost on top of you.’

Bragg’s back prickled. It was as if they were in the room with him already. He could feel them all around him, closing in. ‘Request assistance.’

‘Not possible,’ crackled the officer. ‘If you sit tight, that should...’

Bragg clutched the microphone. ‘Please. We’re on our own out here.’

‘Best to keep a watch... though. Status?’

Bragg cleared his throat, anxious to announce his news. ‘The time expert you sent over –’

‘Sorry about that. Departure... postponed because of the AT storm. As soon as it clears, he’ll be on his way.’

It took some seconds for the sickening truth to sink in. So, the Doctor was a defaulter. Sent to work his way into the base, gain their confidence and sabotage their research. He had put his trust in the Doctor and the Doctor had betrayed him. It was the Doctor who had discovered the disease. So, he would use it to destroy them. He would kill them all.

Anger and hurt wrenched his insides. His hands trembled, but the more he tried to stop them, the more they shook.

‘What... did you say?’ said Bragg.

‘He’s still here... hasn’t left Station One.’ The officer’s voice faded into static, as if he was moving away. ‘... someone on... though. An auditor... should be with you –’ The radio whooshed, and the voice was gone.

Bragg reached for the dial and flicked the modulation switches, attempting to recapture the signal. But the more he tried, the louder and harsher the static became. He tried every switch, but to no effect. The hissing grew louder. And no matter how hard Bragg listened, he couldn’t make out any more words.

Defeated, he switched off the radio and wrenched a drawer open. He scabbled amongst the papers for his service revolver. The metal was cold and it weighed heavily in his hands. He checked the chambers were loaded and pocketed some more bullets.

He downed the dregs of his gin and staggered to his feet, falling against the filing cabinet with a dull clatter. Blood rushed to his head. Balancing himself, he pulled himself over to the door and stumbled out into the corridor.

He had to stop the Doctor.

The hatchway clanged shut. The Doctor twisted the wheel set into the door and the metal bolts slammed into place, trapping them inside.

Sealed inside the padded suit and restrained by straps and belts, Fitz could hardly move. It was an effort to breathe through the filter; gulping in each stale mouthful of air. The whole suit reeked of sweat. The goggles limited his field of vision; much of the capsule was hidden in shadows, but he could make out the Doctor as he clambered through the confines of the cabin.

They had donned their suits in the laboratory, Anji helping to strap him inside while the Doctor outlined his instructions to Paterson. They would remain in constant contact throughout the dive, and if at any point they lost the link, the capsule was to be brought back to the present immediately. Paterson had nodded at the Doctor's words without comment, but his watery eyes betrayed an uncertainty.

The Doctor buckled himself into the seat opposite. His features were obscured by a gas mask. 'Ready to go, Fitz?' The Doctor's voice spoke through a tinny speaker by Fitz's left ear.

'I'm not sure this is such a great idea,' said Fitz. His own words echoed back at him after a delay.

'It's not too late to get out.'

'No,' said Fitz. 'I'm staying. Wouldn't miss this for all the tea in China.'

The Doctor engaged some switches. 'You know, this whole set up is astonishingly primitive. I'm amazed it works at all.'

'Doctor, I would find it a lot easier to cope if you didn't say things like that.'

The radio snapped and crackled. 'Capsule status. Fitz, Doctor, can you hear me?' called Anji, from the other end of what sounded like a bad telephone line.

'Yes. Is everything ready?' said the Doctor.

There was a long pause. Fitz licked his dry lips.

'Paterson says yes,' said Anji. 'Time check.'

'One oh two exactly.'

'Same here,' said Anji. 'So. You ready?'

'Ready to go.'

There was a loud rattling and a sudden, sickening jolt. Fitz had the sensation of descending rapidly. The chain above them clanked out at a heart-stoppingly loud volume. Fitz could feel the capsule's motion as it rotated and swayed from side to side.

Fitz twisted in his seat to look up through a porthole. The lights flashed over the glass. Then the utter blackness of the pit consumed them.

'Two hundred feet. And stop.' Paterson rubbed his sleeve across his soaked forehead and shambled over to the main desk where the indicators blinked on and off in unison.

Anji remained beside the radio. 'What's next?'

Paterson flicked a series of switches. 'Detaching chain.' A heavy clank sounded through the speakers.

'What was that? Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,' yelled Fitz, his voice crackling.

'Don't worry, that was just the chain,' Anji told him. 'We're just about to begin the countdown.'

'You're just about to begin the countdown and you say, "don't worry"?'

'Quiet, Fitz,' said the Doctor.

'Good. I think we're ready,' said Paterson. 'Good.' Anji felt an ominous rumble through her heels.

'Where's Lane, by the way?' asked Anji casually, in an effort to ease Paterson's nerves.

Paterson shot her an offended look through his thick-rimmed glasses. 'She... she had to see to...' he struggled for words, '...the previous passengers. Hammond was up all night with them, you see. Hmm?'

She had touched a nerve. 'OK. Not a problem,' said Anji gently. Paterson coldly returned his attention to his instruments. 'Begin countdown.'

Anji looked up at the row of clocks, and watched the *Absolute Time*. 'Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven.'

'Activating through-channels. DT field go.'

Anji shivered as she pictured Fitz inside the capsule. What were the Doctor and Fitz getting themselves into? For that matter, what was she doing helping them?

Paterson gave her a prompting stare. 'Sorry,' said Anji. 'Sorry, er, four. Three. Two.'

The floor shuddered and the rumble of machinery grew to a deafening roar. Anji gripped the desk and held her breath.

'Accelerated time focus.'

Anji couldn't hear herself say, 'One.' She turned to the window.

The air around the pit blustered into a whirlwind, the dust cloud whipping around the chamber, the lamps shaking themselves frantically.

There was a boom of thunder, then silence.

'They're now in transit,' said Paterson. He peered up to the clock marked *Capsule Time – Hours*. 'Ten minutes into the past and accelerating.'

'Defaulters? Are you sure?'

'I am. In here.' Bragg ushered them into the officers' mess. Hammond stooped as he entered. Shaw followed silently.

'The time expert they sent hasn't left Station One,' said Bragg as he transferred his pistol from one sweaty palm to the other. 'So they are saboteurs.' He laughed humourlessly. 'They have been sent to, sent to –'

Shaw leaned on the wall. 'Sent to do what?'

'Can't you see?' Bragg's skin had turned a livid shade of red. He wiped his soaked lips. 'Their plan – the Doctor's plan – was to steal Paterson's research. But since the appearance of this, this virus, they will take it instead. Can't you see? *They will use it against us.*'

'But the Doctor recovered the capsule. If it wasn't for him –'

'That is what he wanted you to think, Shaw! He wanted to get your trust. And you fell for it.' Bragg steadied himself on the table and heaved in some air. 'They're working for the defaulters. They're outside the base, waiting for their moment to attack, and they're inside the base, conspiring against us.'

The old man had finally snapped, thought Shaw. The alcohol and depression and responsibility of command had been too much. Now the paranoia had taken him over. In this state, he was unpredictable, a dangerous liability. And, Shaw thought, deeply pathetic.

But if the message had been genuine... Shaw rested his hand on his own gun, just in case he had to use it.

'And an auditor is due here shortly?' said Hammond impassively.

Bragg nodded. 'An auditor.' He spat the word. 'We don't need some... some person checking up on us. Going through the books. Making sure we're cost effective.' He staggered suddenly, and gripped his gun.

Shaw backed away cautiously. 'Where is the Doctor now?'

'I don't know,' said Bragg. 'Somewhere.'

'The medical bay?' suggested Hammond.

Without a word, Shaw switched on the wall intercom. Lane replied. 'Medical bay. What is it?'

'Lane,' said Shaw. 'Are the Doctor and his people with you?'

‘No,’ Lane replied. ‘Um. They’re with Paterson, I think. They’re doing another time-dive.’

Lane listened as the intercom switched off. Shaw’s arrogance was irritating enough, but something about him made her flesh creep. He had a hollowness in his eyes and an unresponsiveness in his manner, like a fanatic. A complete lack of body language.

She was due to do another examination of the two men in quarantine. They remained in their beds, still asleep. Norton was hunched on his side, wheezing and muttering. Occasionally he let out an agitated cry, lifting his hands in protest.

Lane collected a TR mask, scraped back her hair, and fitted it over her face and glasses.

She gave the soldiers one more glance then flicked the airlock control over to *Manual*. With Hammond asleep, she would need to operate it from inside.

The door swung open and she stepped in. After wrenching the door shut after her, she turned on the sterilisation filters. A short buzz gave the all-clear. She pushed open the inner door and stepped into the isol chamber.

The two soldiers remained on their beds, their features becalmed in the half-light. It felt eerie to be on the other side of the glass, a captive looking out rather than in.

She collected a hand-held chronometer from the side and lifted it to the light. The second hand had frozen. The clock had stopped ticking.

‘Sixty years. Sixty-five.’ Anji’s attention fixed on the *Capsule Time –Years* clock, where the slow movement of the hand described Doctor and Fitz’s progress into the past. They were descending at a rate of months every second.

Paterson dabbed at his cheeks as he studied the gauges and blinking indicators. He nodded to himself. ‘Good, good. Well, everything seems to be working as normal.’ He smiled tensely. ‘Transferring power.’

The *Capsule Time – Years* clock now read seventy years. It was hard to imagine, the idea that the Doctor and Fitz were dropping back through time.

‘I’ll bring them to a halt at one hundred,’ said Paterson. ‘You might, um, want to check on them again.’

Anji spoke into the microphone. ‘Doctor. Fitz? Capsule status.’

The Doctor’s voice emerged from the speaker, fuzzy and indistinct. ‘Anji?’

‘Are you all right?’

There was a long agonised moan.

‘I think Fitz is feeling a little off colour,’ said the Doctor. ‘But everything’s fine. Tell Dr Paterson we’re enjoying the journey.’

The shuddering of the capsule had turned Fitz’s stomach to jelly. The straps dug into his shoulders and the bruises on his calves and knees painfully made their presence felt at every opportunity. His wrists ached from gripping the armrests so tightly. The ground lurched away beneath him, shoving him to one side, as the cabin began a groggy spin, the centrifugal force pressing the air out of his lungs.

The heavy thud and grind of the engines echoed in his ears, pounded into his brain, becoming indistinguishable from his headache. Outside the capsule, he could hear the wind rushing past. The ear mic spat static into his left ear.

The room dipped again, Fitz closed his eyes and swallowed his rising nausea. What had happened to that guy who went over the Niagara Falls in a barrel? Wasn’t he drowned, or dashed on the rocks?

The interior of the capsule spun in his distorted vision. The portholes looked out on to nothing but blackness and shaking reflections of the deck lights. Opposite, the Doctor leaned forward to adjust settings on the central panel.

Anji spoke into his ear. It took a while for him to work out what she was saying over the din. ‘... The time here now is one fourteen and thirty seconds. Thirty-two seconds.’

He looked up. According to their *Absolute Time*, it was one thirteen and fifty seconds. Fitz frowned as a worry coalesced in his mind. He felt distant, as though he was watching events from another perspective, from somewhere outside himself. Anji’s clock must be running fast. Or their clock must be running slow. Or –

‘Oh bugger.’ Fitz heard the echo of his frightened voice in his left ear.

‘Anji.’ The Doctor spoke urgently and clearly at the top of his voice. ‘Tell Paterson to halt our descent immediately. The time in here is... one fourteen exactly.’

‘What’s going on?’ said Fitz. ‘Hello?’

‘Time inside the capsule is slowing down,’ shouted the Doctor. ‘We’re *losing time*. Anji –’

Fitz could hear only static, the grinding of the engines and the crash of the wind outside. And his own voice yelling in fear.

Above him, the hands on the *Capsule Time – Years* cartwheeled backwards, revolving anticlockwise at an ever-increasing pace. The hands on

the *Days* clock were spinning, while the *Hours* hands had jammed, twitching back and forth between eleven and twelve.

They were still dropping deeper and deeper into the past. One hundred years. One hundred and five. One hundred and ten. 'Doctor!' Fitz screamed. 'In case it's escaped your notice – we're still moving!'

'I know. Anji? Anji, can you hear us?' yelled the Doctor.

There was nothing to hear but dead static.

'Anji!'

But there was no reply.

Boiling with frustration, Anji stabbed at the buttons on the radio, twisting every knob, even checking the plug connections. The static grew angry, louder and snappy. Her voice was hoarse as she called again. 'Doctor! Fitz! Doctor!'

She turned to Paterson. His mouth had parted in shock, his shaking gaze on the clocks. The *Capsule Time* was now at one hundred and twenty years, the hand still winding backwards.

'It's happening again,' whispered Paterson. 'Don't you see, it's happening again. . . We've lost contact.'

Anji gave up on the radio and strode over to Paterson, grabbing him by the arms. 'Stop the capsule. Do whatever you have to do.' Paterson didn't seem to understand. She shook him. 'Paterson. Stop it!'

'I –' Paterson stared dumbly at the main instrument bank where the bulbs were going out, one by one. 'I don't know what to do.'

'Well, what did the Doctor do?' urged Anji.

'The Doctor?' Paterson seemed to wake up and he hurried back to the controls. 'If we remove the DT contention – yes. They're not too deep yet. I can do it.' His fingers scrabbled over the buttons. He hesitated, then plucked at a switch. 'Transferring power – now.' A electronic hum started, and rose to an ear-shredding throb.

Anji glanced back at the *Capsule Time*. One hundred and thirty years.

'I only hope the through-channels don't burn out.' Paterson wiped his face. His whole body was trembling. 'If there is a blow back –'

The floor vibrated. Anji dashed over to the window. Outside in the chamber, the storm rose, the dust swirling.

Paterson screwed his eyes shut and slammed down every switch. Smoke wisped out of the joins in the control bank's casing. With a loud crack, a valve blew. And another. The smoke became a billowing stream of grey. Anji smelled melted plastic and her eyes stang.

One hundred and thirty-two years.

'Move away from the controls.'

Through the smoke Anji could make out Bragg framed in the laboratory doorway. He held a gun aimed at Paterson's back. Shaw and Hammond followed him in. Shaw also had a pistol. He jumped on to the observation platform to gain the best vantage point.

'What the hell are you doing?' Anji was shocked at the anger in her own voice. She mustn't give away how scared she felt. She was angry at herself for being close to tears.

'Silence, defaulter,' Bragg snapped, his gun levelling in her direction.

Anji felt her muscles tense, her heart skip and a familiar sick sensation.

Bragg directed his weapon back on Paterson. 'I said, "move away from the controls", Dr Paterson.'

Paterson turned and raised his hands. He blinked rapidly, his eyes streaming, and coughed, the smoke still rising around him. 'But the Doctor and Fitz. They're on a time-dive. If I don't help them now –'

Bragg prodded the air with the gun. 'The Doctor is a defaulter agent. As are his assistants.' His jaw trembled. 'Let them die.'

The bacteria detector passed over Norton's body. The soldier slurred and rolled on to his side, one arm flopping against Lane's suit. His fingers gripped the material.

Startled, Lane jerked away, her back thudding against the glass.

Norton groaned and his eyelids fell open. He heaved himself into a sitting position and turned towards Lane.

Lane backed along the window, feeling her way towards the airlock. Her gloves slipped on the wet surface. Her heart thumped in her ears.

Norton shifted and his blanket slithered to the floor. As Norton planted his bare feet on the ground, Ash's eyes flicked open and he pulled himself out of bed.

Lane stumbled towards the door, one hand patting the wall for the activation control. Her gloved fingers hit concrete.

Norton gave a smile as he approached. The blood had drained from his skin. Ash's pale blue lips hung open, his breath frosting in the air.

Still the switch eluded her. Forcing herself to look away from the soldiers, Lane spotted the control and punched it. The airlock door creaked open.

She had to look back. Norton and Ash shambled towards her like sleepwalkers.

Lane dived into the airlock. Giddy with adrenaline, she activated the door mechanism. It guillotined shut behind her. She manually locked the door from the inside.

Overtaken with relief, she slumped back against the concrete wall, gasping. She felt as though she was going to pass out. She had to get out of this TR suit.

She turned on the airlock sterilisation filter. Once it had finished its work, the far door unlocked automatically. Lane pushed it open and something tugged at her leg as she emerged into the medical bay.

With the inexorable dread of a nightmare, she turned back towards the window. Ash and Norton stared out at her. They pressed their white palms against the glass. Then, as one, their gaze shifted downwards.

Lane looked down. Something grey and orange fluttered by her left knee. She bent down to find that some of the TR material of her suit had torn away. The rip was only a couple of inches long. For a horrible moment she thought it had happened while she was in the chamber. But then she remembered her leg catching on something as she left the airlock.

A whooshing filled her ears, like air rushing into a vacuum.

The bacteria detector passed over Norton's sleeping body –

To her horror, Lane realised she was back in the quarantine chamber.

'For the last time. Move away from the controls,' Bragg yelled, shaking. 'Or I'll kill you.'

Paterson reluctantly stepped back from the desk. Under Bragg's watchful gaze he shuffled over to the corner.

Anji was about to move, but Shaw levelled his pistol at her. 'Don't try it.'

Anji tried to sound calm. Reasonable and businesslike. 'Please. The Doctor and Fitz –'

'Saboteurs,' spat Bragg. 'Stuck in the past!'

Anji looked up. The *Capsule Time* had halted at one hundred and thirty-four years. They had stopped falling. That was something at least.

Folding her arms, Anji slowly mounted the platform and approached Shaw. 'What are you talking about? The Doctor is here to help, he's a time expert –'

'I've been in contact with Station One,' said Bragg. 'The time expert is still there!'

Anji took a deep breath, weighing up the various options. What should she say? What could she say? 'We're not... defaulters. We're not spies or anything like that. The Doctor really is an expert on time stuff. And you really do need his help.' She looked to Paterson. 'Tell them.'

Paterson turned away.

Bragg leaned on to some equipment and coughed hard and long. 'You'll be placed in a holding cell, pending evaluation. There's an auditor on his

way. He can decide what to do with you. And –'

A crackling came from the radio and silenced the room. The Doctor's muffled voice called out. 'Anji. Anji? Can you hear us?'

Anji was about to move when Bragg trained his gun on her in a 'halt' gesture. She paused, desperate to reach the microphone but not daring to move.

'It's the Doctor. Anji, please answer.'

The floor rocked as the capsule listed on its moorings. Outside, a low, haunted wind whistled and moaned. The capsule's framework creaked like a ship cast adrift.

'Anji! Please answer.'

Fitz struggled out of his seat straps. Of the overhead clocks, the *Capsule Time* had stopped, but the *Absolute Time* ticked onwards. Fitz hoisted himself to his feet and peered out through a porthole. There was nothing out there but inky, infinite darkness. He moved closer, and started as his gas mask reflection loomed back at him out of nowhere.

The Doctor had also unstrapped himself and had moved to the control panel, his gloved hands flicking distractedly at switches.

'It's no good,' said the Doctor. 'Either we're out of range or they're not answering.'

'Which would you prefer?' said Fitz. A wintry chill ran down his spine. They were stuck here, in this nothingness, with no escape and no means of calling for help. There was nothing they could do. He wedged himself against the side of the capsule as it dipped and rose. 'Doctor. Where the hell are we?'

The Doctor wiped a porthole glass with the back of his glove and glanced through. 'I don't know. Somewhere? Nowhere –'

A clang boomed out and the walls and floor shook. The capsule creaked under the impact.

'What was that?' yelled Fitz.

The clang sounded again, this time coming from underneath. The capsule swung heavily to one side, sending Fitz and the Doctor sprawling into the walls. It was like being inside a tolling bell.

'There's something out there!' said the Doctor. 'It's trying to get in!'

The clang repeated, transforming into a murderous hammering, coming from every direction, above and below.

Fitz looked again through a porthole. 'I can't see anything –'

The ear-radio gave a crackle. 'Calling the capsule. This is commander Bragg.'

'Bragg, bring us back –' demanded the Doctor. 'You must get us out of here!'

'No,' said Bragg. 'I don't think so.'

This shouldn't be happening, thought Lane. It can't be taking place all over again. But it was, exact in every detail.

Lane flattened herself against the quarantine chamber window. Her heartbeat thumped in her ears.

Norton's eyes flicked open. He lifted himself into a sitting position and slowly turned toward her. Behind him, Ash moaned and stirred awake. As one, they discarded their blankets and dropped their feet to the floor.

Lane's left leg felt strangely cold. She glanced down. The material on the body-suit flapped loose at the knee. The tear was four or five inches long and exposed her leg to the air.

The small brass chronometer in the corner of the room began to tick. The ticking accelerated to a frantic rattle and the face of the clock cracked and fractured. It fell to the ground and smashed.

This isn't how it happened, thought Lane. This can't be real. But the wheezing of her breath told her otherwise. She patted the window and felt its damp coldness through her glove. This was no dream.

She had no choice but to make for the airlock door. Still looking at the soldiers, she fumbled blindly for the activation control.

Norton and Ash smiled as they walked towards her.

This was ridiculous. She knew where the door control was from last time. *So why couldn't she find it?* Frustrated and angry, Lane turned away from the soldiers and found the door bell-switch. She flicked it and the door swung open.

But she couldn't stop herself from turning back. Norton and Ash shambled towards her.

And instead of faces, they had clocks.

Lane froze.

Where Norton's features should have been, there was a brass-rimmed timepiece face, protected by a convex glass cover. Two ornate hands pointing to the minute and hour. Seven minutes past one.

Beside him, Ash turned towards her with a bronze clock face. Inside, Roman numerals circled around sepia paper. His hair flopped over the top of the frame, and she could see where the metal ended and fused into the pallid skin at his neck, ears and forehead. The clock was set deep into his head, behind where his features would have been. She could hear the whirring and ticking of the internal mechanisms.

The two transformed men approached. They reached for her.

'Look, arrest us or whatever it is you want,' said Anji, gripping the rails of the observation platform. 'Just please, bring them back.' Her cheeks were wet and her voice weak.

Bragg switched off the radio and placed his gun on the desk beside it. He strolled over to Paterson. 'There's no way they can operate the capsule?'

'No,' said Paterson. 'All of the systems are remotely guided from here.' He indicated the banks of switches and lights.

'Good,' said Bragg.

Anji glanced back at the radio. Bragg's gun remained on the desk, about four yards away. She could go down the steps and reclaim it before anyone noticed. Shaw had his pistol pointed at her, but he was watching Bragg. But, as Anji tensed to move, he turned back to her with his suspicious narrow eyes.

The wall intercom crackled and Lane yelled through the speaker. 'Help – help me! You've got to help me –'

Shaw dashed over to the intercom. 'What's the matter?'

This was her chance. While the others were distracted, Anji slipped down the steps.

'In the isol chamber,' gasped Lane. 'They. . .' She let out a scream.

Anji reached the bottom of the steps and picked her way through the trailing wires. She kept her eyes on Bragg, Hammond and Shaw, ready to freeze in an instant. She noticed Paterson was watching her. He knew what she was doing. He could raise the alarm. He looked terrified.

But he said nothing. Anji backed towards the desk and picked up the gun. It felt heavy and clammy. She brought it round to her side.

The intercom switched off with a click. 'She's in the medical bay,' said Shaw. 'I think –' At this point, his eyes drifted over to Anji. She decided, in an instant, to do a *Pulp Fiction*. She quickly aimed the gun at Shaw. 'Don't move!' she screamed. 'Don't move! Drop your gun now. Or I'll fire!'

Shaw considered, as if he was mocking her. Then he let his gun clatter to the floor.

Keeping her gun pointed at Shaw, Anji picked her way back up the steps. 'Now move away. Slowly. Don't make any sudden moves.' She winced at her selection of words.

Shaw joined Bragg at the main desk. Anji squatted down and recovered Shaw's discarded gun. Straightening, she levelled it at Bragg. Bragg stared at her, his sweat-soaked cheeks quivering with rage.

Anji beckoned Paterson forward with a gun barrel. 'Now. Bring the Doctor and Fitz back.' She paused. 'Please.'

Fitz grabbed hold of a ceiling beam as the floor dropped away beneath

him. He glanced over to the hatchway. The clanging had concentrated on the other side of the door.

‘Doctor –’ yelled Fitz. ‘What are we going to do?’

The Doctor climbed the near vertical floor, and attempted to reach the central unit. But the capsule juddered again, and he slipped backwards.

‘Calling... capsule. Doctor... Fitz!’ Anji’s distant voice crackled... you all right?’

‘Anji,’ gasped the Doctor. ‘Get us out of here. We don’t have any time –’

There was another crash and the capsule lurched away. Fitz closed his eyes and, by an effort of will, managed not to throw up inside his mask. Instead, he turned back to the hatchway. The wheel in the centre of the door had started to turn anticlockwise. It squeaked at the slightest movement.

‘Paterson’s on to it,’ said Anji. ‘He’s... not long...’

The locking mechanism inside the hatchway gave a series of clangs as each bolt was drawn out of its lock. The wheel continued to squeak and turn. In a second, the hatch would open... .

A guttural mechanical clanking started. The clanking grew until it filled the small chamber.

‘Doctor,’ Fitz shouted, ‘we’re moving! Oh sweet Jesus we’re moving!’ He twisted around to look at the *Capsule Time* clocks. One hundred and twenty years in the past. The *Years* hand began to roll forwards. One hundred and eighteen. One hundred and sixteen. Fitz muttered a prayer of thanks. His eyes watered with relief.

‘The attack has stopped,’ the Doctor shouted back. Fitz suddenly realised that whatever had been outside of the capsule had given up: The hatchway remained steadfastly shut.

‘You mean it’s gone? Whatever it was?’

‘I think we’ve lost it, yes, Fitz, yes,’ said the Doctor. He clambered over to Fitz, and gripped him by the shoulders. ‘You know, I think we’re going to be all right!’ He let go. ‘Perhaps we had better strap ourselves in. We’ve still got a bumpy ride ahead of us...’

‘A bumpy ride I can cope with, it’s being dead that I have a problem with.’ Fitz clambered his way over to his chair. ‘Anji, here we come.’

It took another fifteen minutes for the *Capsule Time* to wind its way to zero years, zero days, and zero hours.

Above them, there was a dull series of clangs and the rattle of a chain. The winching mechanism locked in place, and Fitz jerked into his seat as the capsule began its ascent. Again, it swayed and rotated, but Fitz was more concerned about getting out of the capsule, out of his sweaty suit and mask.

Eventually, the portholes flashed with the reflections of lights as the capsule lifted clear of the pit. For some minutes they hung there, listening to the creak of the motion of the capsule. Then a heavy clank announced that the ladder had been locked into place.

‘We’re back,’ said Fitz. ‘We’re back. Never again.’

The hatchway wheel turned and the hatch swung open to reveal a survival-suited, head-masked figure. The figure held a gun.

Even from inside the suit, Fitz recognised Bragg’s voice. ‘You are now seized as assets of the plutocratic empire.’

Chapter Five

The first thing Lane had seen when she woke up was Hammond looking down at her. For a moment, she'd wondered why he seemed so disappointed, so mournful; and then her memory had returned in a rush. In a sudden panic, she had stumbled over to the quarantine window. Inside, the soldiers had returned to their beds and were unconscious. The airlock door was shut. The brass chronometer was on the shelf where she'd left it, unbroken.

But it *had* happened. It had been real. Or at least it had seemed so. She could still picture Ash and Norton as they glided towards her. Everything after that was a blank.

According to Hammond, she had screamed for help over the intercom.

Hammond was studying the gauge on the bacteria detector. 'Nothing.' He clipped a stethoscope into his ears and placed the drum against her chest. 'Standard condition.' He nodded curtly and folded away his instruments.

Lane glanced down at her leg. The fabric of her trousers had ripped clean through. Hammond must have noticed but, for some reason, had chosen not to comment. But, she reminded herself, her TR suit had torn *after* she had left the chamber. Yes, she remembered that much.

Hammond washed his thin bony fingers. 'What do you remember?'

Lane felt a twinge of a headache. 'I don't know. I thought one of the soldiers had woken up. But it was nothing.' She cleared her throat. 'Fatigue, I suppose.'

Hammond regarded her coolly. 'I see.'

Lane lifted herself off the stretcher-bed. 'Don't worry, I'm fine. What, um, happened with the dive?'

'You will be informed.' said Hammond. 'You must excuse me.' He strode out of the room, the door clanging after him.

Lane buttoned her shirt and walked to the window. As she watched the sleeping Ash and Norton, a horrible thought occurred to her. Her heart racing, she grabbed a clock and held it in her hand. The second hand ticked

around the face. She compared it to the wall-clock. They moved in unison. She was not affecting time.

Lane closed her eyes and exhaled with relief.

The Doctor said, 'Anji. Tell me again. *Why* do they think that we're spies?'

'I don't know.' Anji stretched her arms. 'Bragg just got it into his head. Oh, he mentioned something about a call from Station One.'

They had been taken down to the lowest level of the base and shoved in a storeroom. Metal shelves of dusty cardboard boxes extended away into the darkness. Fitz sat propped against one wall, picking at his nails. He had barely spoken since the dive.

The Doctor paced distractedly around the drab room. Under the single bulb, his stark shadow darted back and forth. Then it paused. 'That's interesting,' muttered the Doctor. 'A call, a call, a call, a call...'

'And now they're going to have us killed,' said Fitz. 'I knew it was too good to last. I remember thinking to myself, "Fitzy", I thought, "no one's trying to kill us, this is too good to last".'

'Yes. Back to the old routine.' The Doctor shot him a wide, encouraging grin and sat down.

A silence descended on the room. Anji's thoughts turned to the events that had led to their imprisonment. As she remembered she felt a flush of anger, of frustration at herself.

It had all been going so well. Back in the lab, she'd had them all at gunpoint; Shaw, Hammond and Bragg. Paterson had resumed his work at the main desk and the *Capsule Time* clocks were winding forward. She was riding the adrenaline rush, she was in control. So far so good.

Then Hammond had reminded her about Lane.

Lane had been screaming for help. And, to her shame, Anji had completely forgotten about her.

It had been a snap decision. Shaw had volunteered to go and check on Lane, and Anji had agreed. She couldn't just do nothing, could she? Lane *had* saved her life. But looking back, it should've been obvious that Shaw was up to something.

She had been so relieved to see the capsule rising out of the well that her concentration had wavered. And a cold gun barrel had pressed into the back of her neck. Before she could react, Shaw had locked an arm around her and knocked the gun out of her hand.

But there was no point in going over it again, Anji told herself. Move on.

'What happened', she asked to break the sullen silence, 'on the dive?'

'We were attacked,' said Fitz flatly.

‘What? But you’re both all right, aren’t you? You’ve not got. . . ?’

‘No. We’re not suffering from anachrophobia, if that’s what you mean,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re fine. We’re the first.’ He walked to the obligatory wall-clock and rested his hand on it. The timepiece continued its ticking unabated. ‘See? No effect.’

‘So why didn’t you get infected then?’ said Anji.

‘Infected?’ The Doctor got to his feet, brushing down his coat and trousers. ‘I’m not sure. . . we were never exposed to any contamination. But, but –’ his hand waved in the air, as if hurrying on his thinking process. ‘Fitz. Describe to Anji what happened.’

Fitz lifted his head. ‘What happened?’

‘In the capsule, Fitz.’

Fitz shuffled. ‘There was something outside trying to get in. Banging on the capsule nineteen to the dozen.’

Anji was intrigued. ‘What was it?’

‘No idea. Luckily you got us back before it could open the hatch.’

‘Exactly,’ said the Doctor, capturing the thread. ‘Now. What does that tell you?’

‘I don’t know, almighty all-knowing Doctor,’ said Fitz. ‘What does that tell me?’

The Doctor paced forward, span on the spot, and paced back. ‘Three things. Number one. Whatever it was, it had a physical presence. It would have to, to be able to open the door, it stands to reason.’ He span again. ‘Number two. It had the intelligence to open the capsule hatchway.’ The Doctor paused.

‘And number three?’ said Anji.

‘Put one and two together. . . I don’t think it is an infection we’re dealing with at all.’

‘So what is it?’

The Doctor halted, his face caught in solemn shadows. He lifted his gaze, and raised his eyebrows curiously. ‘Oh, something far more serious, I should expect.’

‘You didn’t think they were defaulters?’ said Bragg.

Paterson was too scared to look up. Instead he shifted in his chair and rubbed his knuckles. ‘How was I to know? We didn’t know. You didn’t know.’ He looked up. ‘The Doctor. . . he is an expert on time travel, he knows more than me. More than anyone.’

The rage took over. Bragg snapped and swung a fist into Paterson’s face. Paterson sprawled back heavily.

Paterson looked pathetic as he rubbed his reddening cheek. The sight of him filled Bragg with contempt. A weak, flabby, cowardly waste of a man. 'You're on their side, aren't you? You're one of the enemy. You *betrayed* me. You're against me!'

'No. No,' gibbered Paterson. 'I'm not.'

'You were helping them. You brought them back.'

'Only because Anji was holding a gun to my head. You were there. *I didn't have any choice.*'

Maybe he was telling the truth, thought Bragg. Maybe he could be trusted. He recovered his breath and jabbed a finger at Paterson. 'I could have you shot for breach of contract. But, no, the auditor can decide whether you're worth more to us alive or dead.'

'I'm sorry.' Paterson removed his glasses and wiped them. 'I'm sorry, sir.'

'In the meantime, you will be confined to your quarters.' Bragg felt suddenly tired. He took a step back and lost his balance, stumbling against the wall. 'Go. Go!'

Paterson paused in the doorway. 'What will happen to them? The Doctor, Fitz and Anji?'

Bragg could barely keep his eyes open. He shook his head. 'The... the auditor -'

The wall intercom buzzed twice. Bragg answered it with an irritable, 'Yes?'

It was Shaw. 'Sir. The auditor from Station One. He's here.'

The control room monitors flickered and rolled with static, each displaying a view of the wasteland that surrounded the base. One showed trees labouring under the weight of the storm. Another was filled with eddying snow. But the screen that held Shaw's attention looked out on to nothing but billowing thick fog.

The fog parted to reveal a silhouette. A man in a bowler hat was walking through the mud, checking something from a clipboard. He wore a black suit and had an umbrella tucked under one arm. His face was hidden in darkness.

Shaw watched the auditor approach. Hopefully, his arrival would bring about some changes. He would have Bragg replaced by a younger, more profitable commander.

Shaw sipped at his coffee. Sitting in the control room was like stepping into Bragg's mind. The room was a dark, drab mess, dominated by the map charting the defaulters' advances. It reeked of the man, of his sweat and tobacco, his paranoia and depression.

The auditor appeared in the airlock monitor, viewed from above. His features were obscured by shadows and his bowler hat.

Shaw flicked a switch and the airlock door trundled down behind the figure. A buzz confirmed that the hatch had sealed. The auditor was now chrono-insulated from the outside world.

'ID,' said Shaw into the desk microphone.

'Auditor.' The man's voice was hoarse but cheerful. 'I am expected.'

'Time check,' said Shaw, looking up at the clock. Five minutes to three.

'Five minutes to three. And five seconds.'

Shaw watched the hand of the clock twitch forward. 'And now?'

'And ten seconds.'

'On my way down,' said Shaw. He activated the interior door mechanism. As the metal box beeped its response, he swung out of his seat. It was a short walk down the corridor and up the stairwell to the reception level.

He entered the reception area as the inner airlock door was closing. The auditor was brushing snow from his otherwise immaculate suit. Puffing and rubbing his hands for warmth, he removed his hat and placed it on to a table, beside his clipboard and umbrella. He poured himself a mug of coffee and, raising it to his lips, he turned to face Shaw.

The auditor had a cheerful, round face, his eyes magnified by glasses. His slicked-back hair had streaks of grey. The skin around his eyes and cheeks were creased through a lifetime of smiling.

He offered Shaw a handshake. 'Hello,' he said. 'My name is Mistletoe. Mr Mistletoe.'

Lane's headache had grown worse. She lay back on her bunk and tried to ignore the pounding inside her skull.

The more she tried to remember what had happened to her, the more vague her memories became. She kept on losing her train of thought. She had left the airlock, she knew that much. Then her suit had torn and she was back in the chamber. Events had replayed themselves like a record needle jumping back a groove.

But things had happened *differently*.

She remembered her fear as the two soldiers had trapped her in the corner of the room, their arms reaching towards her neck. She remembered the ticking. The clock faces.

But when she had seen them afterwards, they had returned to normal. Maybe she had dreamed it. Maybe, she thought, it really was fatigue.

There was a curious, muggy gap in her memory. Trying to think back felt like a tongue searching for a missing tooth and finding an unfamiliar

emptiness. No matter how hard she thought, there was nothing there.

The clock chimed three o'clock.

Lane glanced up and watched the second hand tick-tock around the face. She found herself fascinated by the constancy of the motion. She reached out towards the glass of the clock face.

The second hand stopped.

Instinctively, she snatched back her hand. The second hand on the clock chattered forward. Then it clicked forward, once per second, as steadily as before.

Lane touched the clock again, her palm resting on the glass. Again the second hand halted. She withdrew and again the second hand rattled to recover the time it had missed.

A terrible dread filled Lane's stomach. What had happened to the two soldiers from the capsule – it was happening to her. She was displacing time.

She was infected.

Lane rolled over to face towards the wall, and cried. She couldn't believe it. It was too real, too huge to comprehend, like a great, dark emptiness. She had a day, maybe two left to live. Her past would be eaten away until she was nothing. What should she do? She desperately wanted to call out for help, but they would have her thrown in quarantine with the soldiers. That or have her terminated immediately. Maybe that would be better. There was nothing she could do.

Her rational mind told her that the first step was to avoid infecting anyone else. Maybe she could get away from the base. Or maybe she could just stay locked up in this room forever.

She heard the familiar clang of her door opening. With a start, Lane sat up and turned around.

'Lane,' said Bragg, stepping across the threshold.

Lane froze. He was in the same room as her, sucking in the same air. Even now, he had probably become infected. It was a horrible sensation, to see a man contracting a death-sentence without even knowing it. She wanted to warn him, to say something. But it was already too late.

'Yes, sir?' she said.

'The auditor has called a meeting. You will... reconvene to the mess immediately.' Bragg seemed unfocused and slurred his words.

'I can't go.' Lane struggled to think of an excuse. 'You'll have to let me out. I'm too... tired. I –'

'Too tired? Too tired to meet the auditor?'

'Yes, sir.'

'This is the final straw, Lane. The final straw. You have let me down for the last time.' Bragg left, the door slamming behind him.

Lane fell back and hunched into her sheets, her eyes welling with tears. What had she done? If Bragg had the virus, then soon so would everyone else. She had condemned them all to death. If only...

A loud whooshing sound came from nowhere.

She heard her door open. With a start, Lane turned around. Bragg was stepping through the doorway. 'Lane.'

'Yes, sir?' she found herself saying.

'The auditor has called a meeting. You will... reconvene to the mess immediately.'

'I can't go. You'll have to let me out. I'm too... tired. I -'

'Too tired? Too tired to meet the auditor?'

'Yes, sir.'

'This is the final straw, Lane. The final straw. You have let me down for the last time.'

Mistletoe entered a room silent with anticipation. Bragg stood by the door, his hands clasped behind his back. Hammond sat with his hands resting on his legs. And Shaw leaned against the sink avoiding contact with either of them.

'Good day. Good day.' The auditor bustled in, clipboard under one arm. He harrumphed as he transferred the board from one hand to the other and clicked a pen in readiness. 'If you will wait one moment -' He scrutinised the paper in front of him and folded it over. 'Yes. Yes.'

'Did you have a good journey?' said Bragg. The pleasantries sounded awkward coming from him.

'No, I did not. Most un-pleasant.' Mistletoe jotted something down. 'The time storm presented certain... difficulties to passage.'

'The defaulters?'

'No more than a couple of miles distant, I am very much afraid. My transport was stranded and I was forced to conclude my journey on foot. A most troubling situation.' He brightened and pulled up a chair. 'Enough. To business. Gentlemen, if we could begin with a brief recapitulation of your work here?'

'We're studying time.'

'Of course, yes. How particularly fascinating,' said Mistletoe. 'Whereas I study both time *and* motion.' He giggled. 'And you have met with some success, as I understand it?'

'Yes,' said Shaw. He poured himself a coffee and offered one to the auditor. Mistletoe refused, patting it away with a wave of a chubby hand.

'We have managed to send a capsule back a century or more. But –'

'But there have been problems? Drawbacks? Complications?'

'The passengers developed a sort of... infection. We have two casualties from the last dive here –'

'An infection? How un-desirable.' Mistletoe beamed from behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

'It's undetectable and possibly highly virulent,' stated Bragg. 'I thought... it could be useful. In the war.'

'I see.' Mistletoe ticked. 'Yes. Yes, it could prove most advantageous. I should rather like to see these two soldiers for myself.' He craned around to face Bragg. 'Now, you also mentioned some spies.'

'Three of them.' Bragg folded his arms. 'Defaulter agents. They got in the base by pretending that their leader was the expert we'd requested. But we – I found them out.'

'I see.' Mistletoe nodded. 'And you have them captive, I presume?'

'Yes,' said Shaw. 'We –'

'They were attempting sabotage,' Bragg added. 'Two of them went on an unauthorised time-dive.'

'Oh dear.' Mistletoe stood up and folded his clipboard under his arm. His pen returned to his jacket pocket. 'Oh dear oh dear oh dear. Sabotage. That is most dreadful. I see. And they were infected also, I take it?'

'No,' said Hammond. 'They were not.'

'Now that *is* an interesting development. And rather a suspect one too, is it not?' Mistletoe made his way to the door. 'I think until I have concluded my audit it would be wise to avoid any more of these... time-dives. No more experiments are to proceed without my explicit permission.' He straightened his tie and grinned congenially. 'Now, I should like to go and question these saboteurs. I imagine I will find it most illuminating...'

'So Lane said she was attacked?'

Fitz was rummaging through the boxes. Most of them were nests of wires, gauges and valves. There was nothing of any use, but he felt better for looking.

'I think so,' he heard Anji reply. 'I wasn't really paying attention. I was too busy saving your neck.'

'She was on duty in the medical bay. I wonder, I wonder... ' The Doctor trailed off.

Fitz peered into another dusty box, but it just contained survival suits. Down at this end of the room, the darkness was total. And so cold. Rubbing his arms, he gave up and made his way back into the light.

The door opened with a hollow clank. The doorway framed Bragg, Shaw and another man. He was dressed in a well-tailored black suit, snug to his stocky frame, and wore a bowler hat. He clasped a clipboard to his chest.

'Here they are,' announced Bragg. 'The defaulter agents.'

'I see.' The businessman ducked through the door and passed his hat to Shaw. 'Good day. So you're the Doctor?' He noted something on his clipboard. 'And Fitz and... let me see. Anji?'

'And you're?' said Fitz.

Mistletoe looked at him like a headmaster querying an errant pupil. 'My name is Mistletoe,' he said. 'But you may call me Mr Mistletoe, defaulter.'

'We're not defaulters,' said Anji.

'No?'

'We just arrived here,' grinned the Doctor, 'by mistake.'

'We had a breakdown,' added Fitz.

'I see. How discomfiting for you.'

'They assumed I was this time expert and, well, I hated to disappoint them.' The Doctor gave a disarming smile. Then he winced, as if suffering a twinge of indigestion.

This precipitated more scribbling from Mistletoe. 'Would you mind enlightening me as to from where your party hails?'

'Yes,' breathed the Doctor. 'I would mind.'

'So you offer no account as to your presence?' Mistletoe clicked his pen. 'Un-accountability disappoints me. It is most counterproductive. Please. What is your evaluation? What is your duty index? Your taxation stamp issuer?' He spoke more slowly. '*Who are you?*'

'Look,' said the Doctor, 'if we were spies, we would have a half-way decent cover story, wouldn't we? But we haven't. We are just amateurs. Showing a philanthropic interest.' He walked around Mistletoe and glanced down at his notes. Mistletoe hid them like a child concealing an exam paper. 'The defaulters had us prisoner. Lane rescued us. Ask her.'

'Lane is indisposed,' said Shaw.

Fitz exchanged a concerned glance with Anji. What did he mean, 'indisposed'?

'In the absence of a satisfactory alternative explanation, we must assume that you are enemy agents,' concluded Mistletoe. 'Philanthropists? How quaintly and implausibly non-numismatical.' He smiled without warmth. 'You saw your opportunity and interpolated yourselves in order to make mischief. And you must be allied to the defaulters. They control all routes into this area.' Mistletoe strode up to the Doctor. 'You went on a time-dive and yet suffered no ill effects. Why?'

'We held our noses,' said the Doctor.

'No, no, no, Doctor. Try again.'

'We were brought back in time. Just in time. Something was about to enter the capsule.'

Mistletoe was intrigued. 'And what sort of "something" would that be?'

'Unfortunately we didn't find out,' Fitz answered snidely.

'I have a very good mind to have you all terminated.' Mistletoe abruptly collected his hat from Shaw. 'But I should like to make a more detailed assessment before issuing the necessary invoices. I am a stickler for the paperwork, you see.' He waited for Bragg and Shaw to follow him into the corridor. 'I should like you to show me these... infected soldiers.'

'What about us?' said Fitz.

'You? You will remain here. Pending.' The door slammed shut.

Hammond was waiting for them in the medical bay. His solemn features did not lift as they entered. He merely nodded and conducted Mistletoe and Shaw to the isolation window. Meanwhile, Bragg paused against one of the DT units. He was too exhausted to feel angry any more. It seemed as though events were rushing on around him and he had become a bystander. He no longer had the strength or will to care. All he wanted was to lie down and escape from his insistent, drilling headache.

Mistletoe peered through the glass. 'These are the casualties, I am to presume?'

'Yes,' said Hammond. 'No tone, no reflexes. All neurological signs are absent. The final stages of mental shutdown. Physical shutdown imminent – brainstem death, followed by complete respiratory collapse.'

Bragg pulled himself upright and joined them at the window. He could make out the two soldiers inside, their skin pale and glistening wet.

'So they *are* still alive?' said the auditor. 'Oh. I'm quite disappointed.'

'Liver failure, renal collapse... general systemic failure has begun. They do not have longer than an hour left,' said Hammond.

'And I see, misfortune upon misfortune, that their clock has stopped also.' Mistletoe pointed with amusement.

'The subjects are causing a localised temp stasis.'

'Oh. I see. Most curious. But you don't know *how* infectious this condition is?' As he spoke, Mistletoe turned to address Bragg.

'No. No, we don't know.' Bragg heard himself say. He sounded apologetic and sluggish and distant.

'So you don't know whether it is transmitted through the air?'

'No. The Doctor said –' said Shaw.

'I am not interested in the words of an enemy agent, Mr Shaw,' snapped Mistletoe. 'It is of utmost pertinence to find out how this infection spreads, is it not?'

'Yes. But how do you intend –'

Mistletoe strode down the ward. His gaze alighted upon one of the DT units. The one containing the soldier that Lane had saved.

'Oh, I have... an idea.'

Anji had the uncomfortable sensation that whilst they were stuck in this gloomy backroom events outside were spiralling out of control. Things had a habit of going terribly wrong when they were locked up out of the way. What had happened to Lane, for instance? Anji couldn't help feeling responsible.

And the new man that Bragg had brought in crept her out. Some management consultant type. Though what an old-fashioned city gent was doing wandering around in the middle of a war, she had no idea. The whole set-up was odd. No, it was past odd. Odd was the planet of the talking poodles. This was downright *weird*.

'So what do we do now?' said Fitz.

'Patience, Fitz, patience,' said the Doctor. 'There's not a great deal we can do.' He grinned. 'No ventilation shafts.' He tapped the door and muttered as an aside, 'Not even the sonic screwdriver will get us out of this one.'

'And in the meantime –' said Anji. 'For all we know, out there –'

She held her words. Footsteps approached. There was a pause and the door clanked open.

It wasn't who she had expected.

The room seemed to be closing in. Lane desperately wanted to unlock her door but she was too frightened to move, let alone leave. Whatever was happening in the rest of the base, she didn't want to know about it. Bragg would have infected the others by now. They could all already be dead. She could be the only one left alive. Or maybe they had discovered the truth and sealed her in her quarters. Leaving her alone to die.

She sat on her bed, watching the clock with a fear pressing in her stomach. Each tick and tock echoed in her ears like a distant gunshot. Her headache had grown worse; as though her skull was in a vice that was clamping shut.

Without warning, an abdominal pain hit her and she doubled up over the sink, coughing and retching. Red dots appeared on the steel. She revolved the taps and icy water rushed into the bowl, turning pink and

gurgling down the plughole. She splashed her face and drank some of the water. The nausea passed but the headache remained, as strong as ever.

Returning to her bed, she lit a cigarette for comfort but didn't inhale. The room around her grew darker. She looked up at the bulb as it dimmed to a sickly orange.

A figure huddled on the bed opposite, buried in a grey sackcloth robe, its face cowed. It sobbed wretchedly, hugging its belly and rocking back and forth. From below came the steady rumble of a ship's engines.

More people littered the floor of the metal-walled hold. Some slept, curled up in their rags and blankets. Others wailed through the night for those they had left behind or what was to come.

She had been sold into a hell. Poverty and desperation had snatched her away from her family. The future seemed hopeless. At the end of this journey she would begin her military sentence.

And the sackclothed figure lifted back its hood to reveal an old man, tears soaking his dry, wrinkled face.

Gunshots fired in the distance. The latest casualties were being wheeled into the hospital tent, the roof tarpaulin bulging in and out with a crack as the storm raged outside. Thunder boomed and rain crashed. Medics yelled out instructions and victims whined for help. Every few moments there would be a yowl of pain.

The soldier had been caught in an AT. His skin had cracked like a dried-up riverbed. His lips drooled and patted together and he reached up to her with the fused remnants of a hand. Lane shrank back in disgust.

The engines thundered beneath her. The other refugees had succumbed to sleep. Lane swallowed. This would be the moment. She must not disturb them. She fumbled through her baggage until she found what she was looking for. She retrieved the knife and folded away her bags.

She let the despair rise up inside her and take over. She let it guide her shaking hand. The knife jerked across her right wrist.

Lane threw her finished roll-up into the sink and glanced down at her bare arms. They had healed but still bore the crisscross weals at both wrists. A constant reminder.

The sound of the ticking was overpowering now. It was indistinguishable from the throb of her headache. She couldn't think or move. All she wanted was for it to end.

When she looked again, Paterson was sitting on the bed opposite, looking at her with helpless eyes.

Mistletoe observed as Hammond adjusted the dial settings on the DT unit. Inside the cabinet, the wounded soldier began to writhe slowly.

Bragg was the other spectator. He leaned on the cabinet, forcing himself to remain awake. His neck ached and the dull throb in his skull had not abated. He felt oddly disorientated. For a moment he wondered where Shaw was, then he remembered that Shaw had excused himself to make another clockwatch patrol.

‘One over ten.’ Hammond gave the dial another twist. ‘One sec per sec. Temporal parity.’ Hammond deactivated the DT unit.

‘Now show me,’ said Mistletoe.

Hammond drew back the blanket to reveal Bishop’s hideously wasted arm. Bragg winced. The soldier’s skin had rotted and crumbled like old fruit. And instead of a hand, he had a nub of gristle ending in fingers of bone.

‘Evaluation?’

‘Extensive AT-induced necrosis and local septicaemia,’ stated Hammond. ‘Without intervention, he will inevitably and rapidly develop peritonitis and terminate due to subsequent subacute bacterial endocarditis.’

‘So, a non-viable,’ said Mistletoe gleefully. ‘But he may nevertheless yet prove to be of some use.’ He nodded. ‘Proceed with the experiment.’

Hammond and Bragg heaved the stretcher out of the cabinet and on to a nearby bed.

Bishop moaned and his eyelids blinked open. He looked around uncomprehendingly. As he noticed Hammond, his eyes widened and he struggled against his bonds. ‘What – what are you doing?’

‘Subject conscious and paying attention. Good.’ Mistletoe made a note on his clipboard. ‘We shall now place subject within the quarantined area. We will then be able to ascertain the effects of exposure to the disease.’ A smile dripped from his lips like melting wax. ‘We will soon find out how “infectious” it is.’

Together, Hammond and Bragg placed Bishop in the airlock. Bishop became more agitated, struggling and gasping in alarm.

Hammond donned a TR suit and joined him inside the airlock. The door closed behind them.

Mistletoe ran a hand over the controls. ‘Sterilisation complete.’ His fingers hovered over the main switch. ‘Now opening interior door.’

It was a small, concrete chamber, lit by a single bulb and walled with shadows. A figure in an orange-and-grey body-suit dragged Bishop out of the airlock, rasping through an air filter. The figure bundled him on to the cold floor tiles. Instinctively, Bishop reached out with his good arm, but a savage pain cut into his other shoulder. The pain did not go away. It rushed over him like a fire. The agony was too much to endure.

He looked up. He must have blacked out, because the suited figure had gone and sealed the airlock door behind it. He was alone. No. In the dim luminescence, he could make out two bodies stretched out on beds at the far end of the room. The corpses gave off a pale glow.

Bishop shifted around to face the window. On the other side, he could see three figures staring in. A man in uniform. A thin, grey man in a white coat. And a portly man in spectacles and a bowler hat.

Bragg rubbed his forehead. It dripped with sweat. He could not stay awake much longer. The throbbing in his head was unbearable. He licked his dry lips and swallowed the hot, bitter taste of gin and vomit.

'Nothing is happening,' said Mistletoe testily.

'Yes. The subject appears to be asymptomatic,' observed Hammond. *'No signs of anachrophobia.'*

Bragg stared at his ghostly reflection. He felt a familiar loathing for the old, fat figure. A hatred burned inside him. Then the man blurred and faded away. Bragg blinked to see the timepiece ticking inside the chamber. At first Bragg did not realise, but then he croaked in shock.

'Oh,' remarked Mistletoe. *'But I see their clock is working again.'*

Hammond frowned. *'I do not understand it. Time is moving –'*

'I don't care whether time is going forward, backward or standing on its head singing light opera,' snapped Mistletoe. *'Why isn't he infected?'* He jabbed out a finger. *'I want him to catch it, catch it, and he's just sitting there!'*

Bragg peered in. The wounded soldier just sat hunched in the shadows, shivering and sobbing.

Mistletoe leaned into the microphone. *'You there. Be a good fellow and go and move nearer to the soldiers, will you?'*

Bishop looked up, but did not move.

'Perhaps the process is not instantaneous,' Hammond suggested. *'Or the infection may be based on skin to skin contact.'*

'In which case, it will not be a great deal of good to us, will it?' snapped Mistletoe. *'It will be completely useless, Bragg!'*

The anger rushed back like a memory. Bragg breathed in through his teeth and turned to Mistletoe. More than anything, he wanted to smash that smug, complacent smile off his face. This was his base, his command. He wasn't going to let some auditor walk in and steal the credit. His fingers tightened into a fist. . .

The wall intercom sounded. *'Commander Bragg.'*

Bragg answered. *'Yes, Shaw?'*

'The defaulter prisoners sir.' A static-filled pause. 'They've gone. I went to check. Someone must have set them free.'

Bragg gave a yell and thumped the wall. Someone in the base was a defaulter agent. Someone had betrayed him. 'Shaw. Find them. Kill them all!'

'Yes, sir,' said Shaw.

Mistletoe raised his eyebrows and tilted his head. 'A most undesirable development.'

His chest heaving, Bragg turned to Mistletoe and Hammond. He unbuckled his gun and clicked off the safety catch. 'We will get them. You can be certain of that.' He staggered towards the door. Who had set the prisoners free? The rage in his mind gained a sudden clarity. That pathetic, risible weakling. He had been helping them, he had collaborated with them on the time-dive.

'Paterson, you are a dead man,' hissed Bragg.

The buzz-buzz of the intercom roused Lane from her sleep. She pulled herself upright and rubbed her face. She felt muggy and half-awake, with only the jabbing of her headache to tell her she wasn't dreaming.

Bragg screamed through the intercom. 'Lane. Lane!'

The room had sunk into complete darkness. Lane blindly tapped a hand along the wall until she reached the reply switch. 'Yes, sir?'

'Lane. The defaulter agents. They have escaped,' said Bragg. 'Dr Paterson has betrayed us.'

'What?' mumbled Lane uncomprehendingly. Agents, Paterson? She was too tired to absorb what Bragg was saying. She turned off the relay and slumped back on to her bunk.

Before she could sleep someone rapped impatiently at the door. It swung open and a man's silhouette materialised in the doorway. She couldn't make out his face, but she recognised his apprehensive breathing.

'What d'you want?' she heard herself say.

He stepped in. 'I want... some of your time.'

Fitz didn't dare breathe; a drifting condensation cloud could give them away. He crouched in the unlit recess, Anji's warmth pressed against his chest. The Doctor stood beside her, beaming like a kid on a school outing. And beside the Doctor was Shaw.

There hadn't been time for Shaw to explain why he had released them. He had barely begun to outline Mistletoe's plan before the Doctor had them bounding up the stairwell to the medical bay. They had halted a short

distance away from the door and ducked into the shadows. At the Doctor's suggestion, Shaw had called Bragg to announce their escape.

The distraction worked. Bragg charged past them and thundered up the stairs to the crew quarters.

'Come on.' Shaw dashed to the door, readied his pistol and ducked inside. The Doctor hurried Fitz and Anji in after him

They had barely entered when Shaw screamed, 'Hands up!'

An astonished Hammond and Mistletoe turned away from the window and raised their arms. 'This is mutiny, Mr Shaw,' said Mistletoe indignantly.

The Doctor secured the door behind them and sprinted over to the window. Fitz and Anji followed, slowing in dismay at what they saw. Inside, the soldier from the van lay sprawled awkwardly on the floor, his chest heaving, his face a light blue and beaded with sweat.

Mistletoe laughed. 'You're too late!'

Shaw rounded on him. 'Who *are* you? The whole area is surrounded. You couldn't have got through –'

'I did. My presence is evidence of that. I am... the auditor.' Mistletoe took a step towards him. 'Do you really believe I am a defaulter spy, Mr Shaw? I would be *most* interested to learn your opinion.'

'No,' said Shaw. 'No, I don't know what you are, but you're no defaulter.' He rubbed his chin. 'And nor is the Doctor. He's the only one who knows what's happening with this... thing.' He indicated the isolation chamber. 'Which means he is worth a great deal. More than you.'

'That's... er... very generous of you,' said the Doctor dubiously. 'Anji, would you please do the honours?'

Anji nodded and collected some rolls of bandage. At Shaw's gunpoint Hammond and Mistletoe backed towards the far wall. Anji twisted Mistletoe's arms behind his back and started to wind the cloth around his wrists.

'Please be careful, my dear girl. I have a delicate medical condition,' said Mistletoe.

'Really?' said Anji, tugging the bandages tight. Mistletoe winced. She secured him to a metal wall-brace and began on Hammond.

Fitz turned back to the window and placed a hand on the glass. 'Doctor. We've got to get him out of there –'

'We can't,' said the Doctor. He paused sadly. 'Look.'

Ash and Norton had opened their eyes. They lifted off their blankets and swung their legs to the floor. Together, they advanced on Bishop, their faces as blank as sleepwalkers.

It was all a judgement on him, thought Paterson, his head in his hands. The more he tried the more he failed. Every life he touched was spoiled and

tainted forever. He cursed himself and sobbed in self-pity.

The door crashed open and Bragg staggered in, a gun in his trembling hand. He levelled it at Paterson.

Paterson got to his feet and fumbled for his spectacles. 'What is it, sir?' The room gained a sudden focus as he put his glasses on.

'Where are they? *Where are they?*' snarled Bragg. He breathed through gritted teeth, his face drenched. 'The prisoners.'

'I don't understand.'

'You, you let them escape.' His trigger finger twitched. 'You should die –'

Paterson's throat dried. His pulse thumped in his ears. Every muscle tensed. 'I d-don't know what you're talking about,' he jabbered. 'I've been in here all the time, sir. I wouldn't free them.'

Bragg stumbled back against the wall. 'You *did*. You must have.' He screwed his eyes shut in confusion and fear.

He had to say something to stop Bragg from killing him. Anything. But only one thing came to mind.

Paterson said, 'But I think I know who did –'

Bragg lowered the gun. 'Who?'

Paterson swallowed his guilt like a pill. 'Lane.'

And as the word left his lips, a whooshing filled his ears.

Anji tested Hammond's bindings. Hammond seemed indifferent to his plight and stared into the distance. By contrast, Mistletoe fidgeted and glowered. Anji retrieved his bowler hat and planted it on his head.

Fitz gasped. Anji turned and dashed back to the window. Inside the chamber, Ash and Norton were striding towards Bishop. Their faces displayed no emotion, as calm as embalmed corpses.

Anji activated the intercom. Immediately Bishop's distorted, pitiful screams filled the room.

'We can't just do nothing –' breathed Fitz.

Ash and Norton placed their hands on Bishop's face. Bishop's final scream cut out and he slumped to the ground.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'It's too late. What's done can't be undone. The past is irrevocable.' He slammed a fist against the glass and glared at Mistletoe. 'I hope you're pleased with yourself.'

'Yes, I am. It has proved a most enlightening experiment,' said Mistletoe. 'I don't see what you're so uppity about, Doctor. The subject was transparently without worth, was he not? This way he has been most... valuable.'

‘Without worth?’ The Doctor closed his eyes and frowned as though suppressing a sharp pain. His breathing shortened and one hand reached to his chest. The moment passed and the Doctor recovered. He spoke with soft menace, ‘No one is “without worth”. No one deserves what you have done –’

‘And what have I done?’ Mistletoe’s gaze moved smugly towards the window.

Anji turned back. Inside, Norton had crouched down and was busy releasing Bishop from his straps. Then he straightened and, in unison with Ash, turned his back to the window. They paused, perfectly still, like two mannequins. Bishop remained on the floor, his tear-soaked face screwed into a grimace.

‘What’s happening –’ said Anji.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Anachrophobia?’ His tone dropped. ‘No. I think. . . *we are seeing the infection itself.*’

The intercom gave a sudden snap. Then another, repeated. Snap, snap, snap. The ticking of a clock half-consumed in crackling static.

Anji stared into the chamber. The wall-clock had stopped. So where was the noise coming from. . . ?

The ticking gained an echo. Two clocks running almost in synchrony. Tick-tick. Tock-tock. Tick-tick. Tock-tock.

Ash and Norton turned to face them. But they had no faces. Instead they had antique clocks; blank, faded circles of numerals set into a brass frame and covered by convex glass. At the pivot of each circle, three hands spiked off. The second hands tapped steadily around their faces.

Anji couldn’t believe her own eyes. The two transformed men surveyed their surroundings and gazed impassively out at her, the Doctor, Shaw and Fitz.

A third clock joined the rattling chorus. Tick-tick-tick. Tock-tock-tock.

With an agonised groan, Bishop rolled over to face them. He too had the face of a clock.

Lane screwed the blankets around her and waited, alone in the blackness, listening to her own breathing and the ticking of the clock.

‘Still no comms from Station One,’ said Hammond. ‘That time expert should have arrived hours ago.’

Lane sighed. ‘I’ll take a van out. See if they’ve got held up.’ The all-pervading smell and taste of the base was getting to her. Everywhere was stale tobacco, sweat and oil. She longed for a cold, fresh breeze upon her cheeks.

'If you are sure,' said Hammond. 'Bragg is worried the defaulters may have captured –'

'Don't worry. I could do with a bloody break. Which route are they coming in on?'

She climbed out of her bunk and crossed to the sink. It had been spattered with blackish fluid. Her wrist stung. It had been bound in rags. Lane leaned on the bowl and looked into her reflection in the mirror. Her face had become drawn and sunken, her skin ashen, her hair flecked with grey. The floor vibrated with the shudder of the ship's engines. How long had it been? Months? Years? She had lost track.

Her door opened. In the mirror, Shaw appeared in the doorway. He breathed expectantly.

'What d'you want?' she heard herself say.

He stepped in. 'I want. . . some of your time.'

Lane splashed her face and turned. For an eerie moment, she noticed that her wrist had stopped hurting. It wasn't bandaged, and she could see the familiar scar-lines. She put it out of her mind.

Shaw had sat on the opposite bed.

'How much?' she said hoarsely.

Shaw looked her up and down with his slit eyes. He smiled. 'You know how much. However long it takes. I can afford you.'

Lane steeled herself and began to unbutton her uniform. Her skin crawled and she felt nauseous. The room grew darker still, the shadows snaking up the walls and across the ceiling ducts.

She ignored the part of her mind telling her to stop. She avoided Shaw's eyes as he studied her, leaning back on his palms, licking his lips in anticipation. He watched as she pulled off her shirt, his expression unchanging. Then, when she was finished, he began to undo his own shirt.

Lane's eyes prickled with tears and she collapsed into her bed and stifled her sobs. She was alone and frightened. Her chest heaved. What was happening to her? *Why couldn't she remember?*

The next time she looked in the mirror she saw a clock where her face should be.

She gave a scream even though she had no mouth. She reached a hand to her lips, but it touched only glass. In front of her, the second hand tick-tocked its course around the numbers. Each tick echoed in her head.

A panic consumed her like drunkenness. Lane forced open a drawer and pulled out a knife. She had used this knife before. She knew what she had to do. There was only one way out now.

She lay her wrist over the sink. Holding it there, she rested the blade against a vein. She rocked the knife back and forth, building a rhythm. Her

skin goosepimpled under the pressure.

And then she swiped, hard, digging into the flesh. Forcing the knife in, twisting it deeper, dragging it across her arm.

But the pain didn't come. In desperation, she slashed, again, cutting deeper still, jiggling the blade into the gash and tugging it back and forth.

She looked down. The skin at her wrist had cleaved apart. She dropped the knife and gripped the flesh, peeling open the wound.

The skin parted to reveal a mass of whirring wheels, pinions, governors, coils and springs. An intricate system of cogs and gears spinning in perpetual motion.

Chapter Six

The darkness had expanded to consume the walls and floor gratings. The glimmer of the bulbs barely kept the gloom at bay. The walls had narrowed and the ceiling pressed down, an upsidedown river of writhing conduits and ducting protected by chicken wire.

Paterson was numb inside, numb with cold and guilt. He had given Lane's name to save his own skin. It had been an automatic response, born out of panic and cowardice. All he had cared about was stopping Bragg. Lane had shown him kindness and, as always, he had taken that trust and killed it.

Ahead of him, Bragg heaved himself forward by the bulkhead handles, slurring with the effort. His bootsteps clanged and echoed.

A woman sobbed. Her distant cries carried down the passage towards them. Paterson's heart twisted in recognition at the sound he had hoped never to hear again. The woman was sobbing not out of regret, but out of anger.

Bragg halted at the door to Lane's quarters. As he did, the sound stopped.

'Did you hear that?' said Paterson.

Bragg gave him a loathing stare. 'No.'

Paterson mumbled an apology. Exhaustion must be making his imagination play tricks. He felt half-awake, as though he were walking through a dream. He needed to return to his room and change his uniform. His shirt had glued to his back, the sweat freezing his skin.

Bragg readied his gun and shoved the metal door open. Inside was darkness. Bragg leaned in and clicked the switch; a fluttering electric light flooded the room.

Paterson stooped as he followed Bragg inside. The quarters had been wrecked. The mirror had been smashed and a black liquid filled the sink. The two beds were buried in rumpled blankets. Lane's books, ration papers and photos lay scattered across the floor.

Bragg righted the wooden desk. 'She's not here.' He quivered with rage

and searched through the cabinet, banging the drawers free and emptying them on to the bed. He scrabbled through the desperate mess, before hammering a fist against the wall in frustration. 'Where *are* they?' He turned to look at Paterson –

– but Bragg had no face. Instead there was a round, antique clock face in wood and brass. It looked laughable and horrifying at the same time.

Paterson choked with fear and backed away.

'What is it?' Bragg's voice had gained a guttural, clicking, mechanical quality. His transformed face swung left and right. 'What are you looking at? *What is it?*'

Paterson retreated through the doorway, gathered his nerve, and ran for his life.

Fitz rubbed his jaw, rough with two days of stubble. 'What's happening to them?'

'I wish I knew,' the Doctor admitted. 'They appear to be undergoing some form of metamorphosis.' He looked down, lost in his thoughts. 'But clocks? Clocks? *Clocks?*' He shook his head as if trying to dislodge inspiration. 'Or maybe... what we see, Fitz, is not what we *think* we see?'

'That's an answer for everything,' said Anji plainly.

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'It is, rather.'

A snort came from the other side of the ward. Fitz turned to see Mistletoe, his stomach and shoulders jiggling with laughter. His cheeks streamed with tears. 'Oh, this is too rich! Too rich indeed! He's caught it,' shrieked Mistletoe. 'A chronic illness! Chron-ic! Do you see? Not only a most lucrative contagion, but a pun into the bargain!'

Anji shot him an acidic glance. 'You little –'

'As a wise woman once said, my dear, "business is business",' said Mistletoe. Spittle scurried down his chin as his manner turned sharp. 'And I am in the *business* of seeing that we win this war as cost-effectively as possible.'

Fitz realised that he was listening to a hiss of static. The loud ticking had stopped but, oddly, he hadn't noticed. In the isolation room, Ash and Norton had returned to their beds, their faces back to normal. Their chests rose and fell peacefully. Bishop remained on the floor, his body hunched away from the window. He shivered in his sleep. It was as if nothing had happened.

'Never mind him, Anji, he's not worth your time. Whereas, we...'
Seized by a sudden enthusiasm, the Doctor dashed over to the shelves and dragged out a stubby gas cylinder. He rotated the cylinder in his hands, reading the label, muttering to himself.

Shaw watched suspiciously. 'What are you doing?'

'Hmm?' said the Doctor. He propped the cylinder by the airlock door and grinned. 'I'm going in. To take a closer look at them.' He unpacked an orange-and-grey body-suit and unfolded it on to a bed. Then he whirled out of his frock coat and passed it to Fitz.

'In there?' Fitz held the coat incredulously. 'With them?'

'In, as you so rightly say, with them. I have a theory I would like to put to the test.' The Doctor climbed into the suit. 'Don't worry I'll be fine. This suit is time-resistant and made, I believe, by the best tailors the plutocratic empire has to offer.'

'And if they attack you?' said Anji.

The Doctor shrugged his arms into the sleeves and strapped his waist, gloves and neck into the suit. He tugged the hood over his mane of hair and retrieved the cylinder. 'That is where this comes in. Halothane. Normally used as an anaesthetic. If I release enough of this into the air in the chamber _'

'You're going to knock them out?'

'Yes, Fitz,' said the Doctor. 'Just enough to keep them under whilst I conduct my examinations. I may need some... assistance, though.' He beamed innocently.

Fitz gave him a I-hope-you're-not-looking-at-me look. The Doctor turned to Anji.

'Oh. Right.' said Anji, resignedly. She unpegged a TR body-suit. 'It's not quite my colour, but I suppose that's not important right now.'

'Anji,' the Doctor said, 'you're a wonderful person. I don't tell you that often enough.'

'I know, I know,' said Anji, donning the body-suit. After checking every seal was tight, Fitz handed her one of the gas masks. She flinched at the smell, then strapped it on.

The Doctor fitted his own mask and activated his comms unit. 'Pass me Hammond's bag, would you?' His voice crackled cheerily through the grille.

Fitz passed him the medical kit bag and watched as Anji and the Doctor took their places in the airlock antechamber. The door closed after them with a very final clang.

Shaw reset another switch. 'Airlock sterilised. Now unlocking inner door.'

Fitz wiped a porthole on to the glass as the Doctor and Anji emerged from the airlock and into the isolation room. The Doctor revolved the valve on the gas cylinder. It made no sound.

A horrible thought occurred to Fitz. What if the soldiers had become immune to the gas? But then Fitz felt guilty, as if thinking it might somehow

bring it about.

‘Let’s hope they don’t catch it too. . .’ Mistletoe chuckled behind him.

‘Shut your mouth,’ snapped Shaw, swinging his gun round. Mistletoe fell indignantly silent.

The Doctor passed Anji the cylinder, unpacked a stethoscope from the bag and plugged it into his suit mic. He squatted down beside Bishop and rolled him carefully on to his back. Bishop’s mouth dropped open but he did not wake up. The Doctor unbuttoned Bishop’s shirt to reveal a pallid, skinny chest. He placed the drum on to Bishop’s heart and listened.

Fitz glanced over to Norton and Ash. They were still unconscious, but Fitz couldn’t help feeling that any second they might wake up.

The Doctor folded away the stethoscope and collected a scalpel from the bag. He rotated it in his hand. ‘More gas, please Anji.’

Anji nodded and gave the cylinder wheel another turn.

The Doctor rested the blade at the base of Bishop’s sternum.

Fitz gasped at what happened next.

The Doctor stabbed the scalpel into Bishop’s chest and wedged it deeply into the skin. Then he dragged it down to the stomach, jiggling it as he cut. But there was no blood. He sliced twice more, perpendicular to the first incision, to create an ‘H’. Then the Doctor put the knife aside and gripped the two folds of Bishop’s skin. He peeled them apart like thick, grey rubber.

Inside was a rectangle of glass, running vertically up the centre of Bishop’s body. It was set in mahogany, and fitted in place with neat brass screws. And behind the glass, a pendulum rocked steadily back and forth.

Bragg stumbled into the control room as the tube light buzzed on and suffused everything with a flickering greyness. He slumped down into his chair with a sigh of defeat. Every muscle in his body ached. He could hardly keep his eyes open.

But it felt good to be back in safe, familiar surroundings. Even though the half-darkness gave the map and the monitors an unearthly, malevolent quality. The swirl of the map loomed over him like a threat. And it was so, so incredibly cold.

Bragg focused on the screens. Bushes and bracken sprouted, writhed and recoiled into the earth. Trees formed into skeletons and crumbled into the snow. Time outside was accelerating at a rate of tens of years a second. Anyone who left the station without a survival suit would be dead before they could draw breath.

Bragg poured himself a gin. The fiery texture of the liquid helped to soothe over his fear and doubt. Somewhere out there, somewhere in the base, were the Doctor and the other traitors. Bragg felt the hurt of betrayal

but he no longer had the will to feel angry. He no longer had the strength to fight or run. He didn't want to leave this room. He didn't want them to find him here. All he wanted was to be left alone, alone with nothing but the cold and dark for company. He gripped the glass tightly.

The face in the locker mirror stared back at him. The flabby cheeks and dewy eyes. The auburn hair swept across his forehead. Bragg looked at the smooth-chinned young soldier and felt ashamed at what he saw. The lips were too thin, the brow too deep. He was wretched and ugly. In a uniform and brushed up, he made a passable soldier, but Bragg wanted more. He wanted to look in the mirror and find that man handsome.

He closed the locker and as he turned he realised he was not alone. A soldier sat in the far corner of the officers' mess, his face and upper body concealed in the shadows. He had been there all along, watching. Bragg felt a rush of embarrassment at having been found out. He opened his lips to protest or explain, but didn't know what to say.

The soldier spoke. 'Bragg.'

Bragg couldn't make out any features. The figure's head was a black shape.

'Yes?' said Bragg.

The soldier stood up and his head emerged into the half-light. He was in his twenties, his features perfectly proportioned, his golden hair slicked back. His skin was flawless. His eyes had a knowing, mocking quality, as though he knew all of Bragg's secrets and found them amusing. His lips pursed into a sardonic smile as he stepped towards him.

'What do you want?' said Bragg, unsure of himself. His heart pounded.

'I think you know,' said the soldier. He was only a yard or so away from Bragg now. The soldier reached out and put his fingers on the back on Bragg's neck, drawing him forwards with the lightest pressure. Bragg felt a nervous tightness in his throat, but stood up. He let his hands move around to the soldier's shoulders, and they kissed.

For a moment, Bragg closed his eyes, feeling a certainty, feeling a relief. Then the soldier pulled his lips away.

The mocking quality in the eyes had turned into something evil. He was still smiling at Bragg, but it was a violent, brutish humour.

Bragg didn't understand, and dumbly reached for him again.

The soldier bared his teeth into a smile, and jabbed his fist into Bragg's stomach, knocking the air out of him. He smashed his other fist into Bragg's jaw, knocking him off-balance. Bragg collapsed, his stomach wedging against the desk, and he clattered heavily to the floor. The soldier looked down at him with contempt and aimed a hard kick into his stomach. And another. And another. Bragg felt his guts collapse under the

onslaught.

But what hurt him most was the soldier's mocking laughter.

Bragg pulled himself upright on the back of the chair, knocking it over. A rage consumed him like a blast of furnace air. He grabbed at the bottle and swung it into the locker mirror, the glass cracking into a spider's web of fractures. Then he turned his attention to the monitors. He tugged one free from its cable. It sputtered and there was the smell of burning plastic and dust. Bragg shoved the monitor off the desk and watched it bang to the floor.

Bragg seized the next monitor and brought it down on the radio. It crushed through the wooden frame, exposing the valves, coils and wires. Bragg smashed them again and again.

He clutched the drawers and pulled them out. They were full of telegrams, lists of military orders. Dictates from Station One. They had betrayed him too. He clenched a bunch in his fist and threw them across the room. He reached up at the wall map and ripped it down.

Then, suddenly, he found the anger had vanished. He dropped to his knees and fell under the desk, down amongst the grimy cables and store-boxes. He climbed into the darkness, and hunched, his body spasming with sobs of fury, fury at himself, fury at a lifetime of shame and fear.

The stairwell wound down a shaft of painted concrete and steel and mesh, down into the forbidding darkness of the lower levels of the station. Paterson half-ran, half-tumbled down the steps, one hand on the damp handrail, his shoes skidding on the latticed metal. He had to find Lane and warn her and then maybe, maybe they could stop Bragg. The memory of what had happened in Lane's room made Paterson's stomach churn with horror.

Bragg hadn't been aware of what was happening to him. That was the most frightening part of all.

Paterson reached the corridor that led to the medical bay. The passage had dropped further into a clammy sort of darkness. The air smelled more like a crypt than a research station. Water dripped from the overhead pipes and pooled on the floor. Footsteps rang out, echoing back and forth through the catacombs.

'Paterson.' She whispered his name. Her voice was thin from the hours of crying and arguing. Paterson knew who it was. Charlotte. As he thought of her, all the tortured emotions came tumbling back as if he had lost her only yesterday. The choking guilt, the pleading and the self-hate.

Paterson turned a corner. Blocking the corridor ahead of him, picked out in the bulb light, was Lane. She stared back at him with a clock face. It looked incongruous, the round plate of brass and glass instead of eyes,

nose and mouth. And yet he could recognise her from her short, grey-flecked hair, her ears, her neck. Her shirt had been unfastened to reveal her emaciated, ribcaged chest.

She took a step forward. Her face shone. Roman numerals and three spiny hands, the second hand jittering forward. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Frozen to the spot, Paterson gawped in shock. Then, slowly, he backed away.

‘Paterson.’ Lane’s voice had become a combination of clicks and rattles. She put out a hand. Paterson noticed that her wrist had been severely lacerated, with the skin flapping open. ‘Some of your time?’

Consumed with panic and terror, Paterson turned and hurtled down the corridor, a stitch jabbing into his midriff, tripping over his feet, down the dim, clattering tunnels until, at last, he found himself back in his laboratory. He hit the door control and thankfully it rattled shut and locked behind him. He let out the giddiest sigh of relief.

Paterson removed his spectacles to clear his eyes. His headache pounded with a constant rhythm and his vision, streaked with tears, blurred in time to the pounding. He climbed on to the observation platform and hunched over the railings, gulping for oxygen and wiping his drenched forehead. The adrenaline curdled in his veins, and he found he was trembling with delayed shock.

He turned and let himself sink to the floor, his head in his hands. What had happened to Lane? Like Bragg, she had been transformed. Turned into a hybrid of a human and a timepiece. But a small part of Paterson’s mind said that didn’t make any sense. People just didn’t turn into clockwork machines. No infection could do that.

They hadn’t been infected. They had been possessed by time itself.

Shaw paused for the all-clear buzz, then flicked the switch. The bolts inside the airlock drew back, the door cranked open and the Doctor and Anji emerged. The Doctor dumped the bag to one side and ripped off his head-mask. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

‘Will he be all right?’ said Fitz, helping Anji free herself from her mask.

‘No,’ said the Doctor briskly. ‘The man who was Bishop is dead. His whole past has gone. Erased. Forgotten.’

Anji’s gas mask dropped free. She wiped a straggling hair out of her eyes. ‘Never again. I thought I was going to suffocate.’ She threw the mask away in disgust. ‘So, silly-question-from-Anji time, but if they’re dead, who’s that in there now?’

'It's very curious.' The Doctor squinted. 'It's as if something is taking them over. Reworking them into its image.'

'So,' said Fitz, 'they're being taken over by grandfather clocks from outer space?'

The Doctor considered the question like he was appreciating a vintage wine. 'Possibly. We can't rule it out.'

'I forgot, you're not very good at sarcasm, are you?' said Fitz.

'Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit. As someone once said. I'm not sure who it was, but I expect he was just being ironic.'

'But it can be caught, like a virus, right?' Shaw glanced over at their bound prisoners. Mistletoe had fallen into a sulk, while Hammond watched proceedings with a dour, disinterested air.

'Yes. But my guess is that it is more a process of auditioning new hosts.'

'Oh, right,' said Fitz. 'They're after second-hand bodies. Second-hand, get it?'

Anji made a point of ignoring him and turned back to the Doctor. 'So why don't they look clocky all the time?'

'Clocky? I don't know,' shrugged the Doctor. 'Maybe it's our perception. Or maybe the transformation is inconstant. Maybe they need to pause to recuperate. I don't think they exist within time as we do, you see, Anji. They are... temporal outsiders. Remember the dive. The attack came when Fitz and I were in a transitional state.' His smile darkened. 'But it's just a theory, and not a very good one, I'm afraid. I've never seen anything like this before.'

The intercom buzzed. 'Medical bay,' called a muffled Paterson. 'Calling medical bay. Is anyone there?'

Shaw pressed the bell-switch and addressed the mic. 'Shaw here.'

Paterson sighed with relief, his sigh crackling through the speaker. 'Thank God. Shaw, who's there with you?'

Shaw looked around. 'The auditor. And Dr Hammond.' He looked at Fitz, Anji and the Doctor but said nothing.

'Good,' said Paterson desperately. 'Shaw, you've got to help me. Please.'

'What's happened?'

'It's Lane. And Bragg. They've been... infected by something. Possessed.' There was a long pause: 'Their faces, they were clocks.'

Shaw exchanged a worried glance with the Doctor. The Doctor nodded in agreement. The infection must have broken out.

'What are they doing now?' asked Shaw, pinching his temples. He could feel the opening twinges of a headache.

'They're after me ... ' said Paterson. 'Well, Lane is after me. Bragg is somewhere too, I don't know where.'

‘Where are you?’

There was another long pause. ‘I’m in the, the laboratory. I’ve sealed myself in,’ said Paterson. ‘I –’ The link cut. Shaw toggled the switch, but the line was dead.

‘So Lane and Bragg have been infected too?’ said Fitz.

‘It’s not an infection, but, putting that aside for a moment, yes,’ said the Doctor.

‘But how?’ said Anji. ‘I mean –’

‘That’s not immediately important,’ said the Doctor. ‘What is important is that they’re out there, and given the opportunity they will pass on their condition to others. *Us*.’ He strode around the ward searching for inspiration. ‘Now, the door’s sealed, so we’re safe here for the moment. . .’

‘What about Paterson?’

‘Yes, I’m thinking, Fitz, I’m thinking.’ The Doctor continued, ‘Now, if Lane and Bragg are out there –’ He paused and raised his eyebrows. ‘Well, that doesn’t leave us any choice.’

Anji’s mouth opened hesitantly. ‘You don’t mean –’

‘There’s only one other way we can get to the laboratory,’ said the Doctor. ‘Back through the quarantine area.’ He indicated the door in the far wall of the dark isolation chamber. ‘That airlock leads directly to the time-travel chamber.’ He unfolded his gas mask. ‘Anji? As you’re dressed for the occasion. . .’

‘All right. I’m coming with you.’ She collected her mask. ‘Tell me I’m wonderful.’

‘You’re wonderful. Fitz?’

Fitz looked around. ‘I’ll, um, stay here and keep watch. You probably need someone to stay here and keep watch, right?’

‘Good idea,’ grinned the Doctor. ‘Good idea.’ He pulled the hood over his head. ‘Come on, Anji. Let’s go.’

The crying had resumed. A succession of indignant sobs, the sobs of someone angry at herself for showing such fragility. The sobs that come instinctively and uncontrollably, the raw sobs choked up from the inside, continuing even when there are no more tears left to cry.

Charlotte looked up at him. Her eyes were red-lined and glistening and furious. Her hair had tumbled into a mess and her skin had creased, puckering around the lips and eyes.

He loved her, Paterson knew that much. He could feel the lumpiness in his heart, the ache that choked him from within too. Usually love was considered a worthless and sentimental attachment. But he knew what it meant to love so much that it physically hurt. To see her like this, all he

wanted to do was to put things right. To comfort her and make amends. He would give anything for that. But things couldn't be put right. There was nothing he could do.

Charlotte sniffed and gathered herself. 'How could you?' she trembled. 'How could you do it to me?' She winced, holding back another spasm of tears. 'How *could* you?'

The truth of it was, there wasn't a reason. He loved Charlotte. He had always done, from the miserable rain-soaked day they had met as students. Their marriage had been the only success, the only positive thing in his life. She had held him through the long nights reassuring him that everything would be all right. She had supported him through the endless days of study and the weeks spent away from home locked in a research lab. She had always been there for him. But he had let her down.

And for no reason. The girl had been a student. He had been flattered by her admiration. His ego had responded. But he didn't know her, he didn't love her. He didn't really want her.

The worst part of it was, he did it in the sure, sober knowledge that it was the wrong thing to do. He could have turned her away, he could have walked away. He could have stopped things at any point. But he didn't. He didn't. He did the unforgivable, and all the time he was thinking of Charlotte. Because she was the only woman he had ever cared for.

Charlotte was still looking up at him. Her body heaved with anger.

Paterson realised he was weeping too. He wiped his glasses and looked away. 'I thought,' he began, half-stammering, each word falling clumsily from his lips. 'I thought I was a good man.' He paused. 'I was wrong.'

She shook her head and turned away.

And at that moment he realised it was over. He gulped and choked and sank to his knees.

Paterson stayed there for some minutes, amongst the cables and fizzling monitors of the laboratory, sobbing in the electric gloom. He laughed at his own pathetic self-pity. His heart was still empty ten years later. The pain and guilt had not faded, it had grown like a cancer.

Everything I touch falls apart, thought Paterson. If only I could go back and make it not happen. Go back and undo my mistakes, I would give anything for that. I would give my wealth and my life just to not have destroyed Charlotte. To not see her cry. To not throw away the one thing in my life that mattered.

Anything but that.

A whooshing sound greeted his ears.

For the second time Anji followed the Doctor into the airlock. Her deep-

sea-diver breath hissed through the filter. Her vision was restricted to two goggle-holes. It was like peering through a narrow tunnel.

‘Sterilisation complete,’ said Shaw in her ear-mic. ‘Unlocking inner door.’

A clang rang out. The Doctor nodded to Anji to make sure she was ready, and creaked open the door.

Maybe it was a trick of her memory, but the room seemed to have shrunk. The blackness had swallowed up everything but the three soldiers, each giving off a pale glow. Bishop lay where they had left him, his glass-case chest exposed. Ash and Norton were shrouded by thin sheets, like corpses in a morgue.

The Doctor gave the halothane valve a twist. It gasped.

Shaw and Fitz gazed in through the window. They were semitransparent and Anji could see her own reflection through them. Fitz gave her an encouraging wave. Anji didn’t feel encouraged.

‘Doctor,’ she said. ‘What are we going to do when we find Paterson?’

‘We help him,’ said the Doctor in her earphone. ‘And he helps us, I hope.’ He motioned Anji towards the far door, its outline barely visible in the shadows. But first they would have to get past the beds, or rather, the occupants of the beds.

Anji walked forward, measuring each step, holding her breath, keeping her attention fixed on Ash and Norton. . .

And, heart-stoppingly, their eyes snapped open. They flung aside their sheets and climbed out of their beds.

‘Get out,’ Fitz yelled, thumping on the glass. ‘For Christ’s sake, get out!’

The Doctor rotated the valve on the gas cylinder, directing the nozzle at the soldiers. They lifted their arms to protect their faces but continued their sedate advance. The Doctor thumped the cylinder in frustration. ‘It’s empty!’

‘Back to the airlock?’ Anji said through the radio speaker.

But it was too late. Behind her, Bishop had dragged himself to his feet, steadying himself on the wall.

‘Quick!’ the Doctor shouted, sounding oddly distant for someone standing so close. ‘The other door!’

‘But –’ said Anji, but the Doctor had already made his move. He hurled the cylinder at Norton. Surprised, Norton caught it.

The Doctor gripped a bed by the foot-rails and swung it around into Ash’s legs with a harsh clatter. Ash gave a mechanical rasp of hatred and shoved the bed contemptuously out of his way.

A clock lurched out of the darkness to obscure Anji's view. Hands fumbled over her, pinching at her through the padding of the suit. Another pair of hands clutched at her arms. She felt a tug at her mask as something began to undo the straps. She screamed.

In a confusion of movement, she felt something take her by the waist. She fought against it, trying to twist herself free, but it was too strong. It dragged her through the blackness, holding her so tightly it hurt.

'It's me, Anji,' said the Doctor. I've got you. It's *me*.'

He had wrestled her over to the door. He gripped the handle, and turned. And it didn't open.

'Fitz!' yelled the Doctor. 'The. Door. Is. Locked!'

Shaw jiggled the switch back and forth. 'It should work –' He frowned, and prodded the switch again.

'What are you doing out there?' screamed Anji.

'Shaw,' said Fitz, trying to steady his voice. 'What's wrong?'

'I don't know.' Shaw tried the switch. Something clanked promisingly and he looked up.

Inside the chamber, the Doctor had levered the handle and the airlock door swung open. He piled himself and Anji inside and slammed the door shut behind them.

In slow motion, Ash and Norton reached for the handle.

'Lock it!' said Fitz.

Shaw had already pressed the button. There was another clank. 'It's locked.' He coughed. 'That was a bit close, wasn't it?'

As one, Ash and Norton and Bishop smoothly turned and made their way towards the window.

Fitz shrank away from the glass in horror. They were all staring directly at him. A hatred burned in their eyes. In unison, they launched themselves on to the glass. It clanged under the hammering of their fists.

'Don't worry,' said Shaw. 'It's reinforced chrononium alloy. They won't be able to break it.' He didn't sound certain.

'I hope you're right.' Fitz moved gingerly back to the mic. 'Doctor? Anji? Are you OK?'

There was a long, tense hiss. Then the Doctor replied. 'We're fine. We're both fine.'

'We had a bit of trouble with a sticky lock,' explained Fitz.

'Really?' said the Doctor flatly.

'Fitz,' said Anji. 'We're moving down the airlock now. We'll talk later, all right?' The intercom turned off with a snap.

Anji emerged into the underground cathedral. The ground crunched, coated in a snowfall of silvery green dust. Some of the lamps had fallen over, sending their beams across the sparkling ground. Other lamps picked out revolving galaxies of dust in the air.

The time capsule dominated the chamber, rotating on its chain and glistening eerily. It would, thought Anji, make the ideal glitterball for a funeral.

She trailed after the Doctor, her feet disappearing into his extended, dappling shadow. Her skin prickled with chilling sweat. She could still feel the adrenaline in her veins and the smell of rubber was making her gag. 'Doctor –' She reached for the neck strap. 'Can you help me out of this thing?'

The shadow halted. 'No,' hissed the Doctor in her left ear. 'Keep the suit on. We have... company.'

At first she thought it was a trick of the gloom. A figure stood, waiting at the edge of the shaft. As they drew nearer, she realised who it was. Paterson. He was peering down into the chasm, one hand on his forehead.

She was about to ask what he was doing in the chamber, when he turned towards them. With a white plastic clock face.

Anji froze to the spot. 'Doctor –'

The Doctor moved towards him. 'Paterson?'

'Doctor.' It was still recognisable as Paterson's voice, though it was made up of the whirrs and chitters of a clockwork mechanism. He put out a hand. 'Please, you must help me –'

The Doctor took another step closer. Anji wished that he wouldn't. 'That's what I'm here for,' he said.

Paterson ran a shaking hand over his glass-covered face. 'What is... *what is happening to me?*'

'You're ill,' said the Doctor. 'Something is... affecting you.'

'I feel... ' He glanced back down into the pit. 'I thought I was a good man, Doctor. I was wrong.' He laughed hollowly. 'Time is the harshest punishment of them all.'

'Time?'

'The past is just a dream, Doctor. It is not real, it cannot be revisited or changed. But the memories remain to tempt us that things could have been different. Remind us of every choice where we let our lives slip away. Why do we regret? We regret because we wish we could go back.'

' "Call back yesterday, bid time return." You can't undo the events of your own past,' said the Doctor. 'That's how time works, I'm afraid. It's the second... no, first, rule... '

'But I thought I could find a way,' said Paterson. He paused. Anji wondered where his voice was coming from now that he had no mouth. 'And I

have found a way,' Paterson continued. 'I can go back.'

'What?' said the Doctor. He was now only a couple of metres away from Paterson. 'You mean the capsule –'

'No, Doctor,' said Paterson. 'Not the capsule. I personally have been given the ability. I can. . . travel back through my own history.'

'What has given you this ability?'

'It. . . wants to help me.'

'It's not helping you, Paterson,' said the Doctor fiercely. 'It's possessing you. Taking you over. You must listen to me –'

'No,' rasped Paterson furiously. 'No!' His tone softened, weak and frightened. 'Yes. I can feel it inside me. The wheels turning. The pendulum ticking.' He straightened. 'But it's not taking me over, Doctor. Oh no. You see, I am being *replaced*.'

Like a thunderstorm, it was approaching. He could sense it in his body. There was an excitement in the air. A vibration.

Bragg rolled on to his back. His headache had gone. He tried to think back to before, but there was no before. The past was an empty space, stretching away into impenetrable darkness.

He crawled out and picked his way through the debris. Documents and payment books were strewn across the floor. A wall-mounted map had been torn. The desk was stacked with monitors, some dead, some casting light across the room. A radio had been smashed.

Bragg steadied himself on a locker. He glimpsed his reflection in a cracked mirror. He didn't feel any surprise at the clock-faced apparition that stared back. He felt only acceptance. It was the beginning of something new and wonderful.

He dug and sifted through the papers and found his gun. He clicked through the barrels, checking each was loaded. Then he staggered over to the door. His limbs felt numb, awkward and unfamiliar. Pins and needles fuzzed up his arms and legs.

Bragg took in the room for a final time. He remembered crossing it, but before that there was nothing. He felt the weight of the gun on his belt, but couldn't remember picking it up. He couldn't remember anything. There was only the present.

A single moment in time.

The ticking grew louder, and a whooshing filled his ears. It sounded like radio static.

Bragg wanted to cry, but he had no eyes to cry with. He had no mouth to scream with. He had nothing. . .

He never even noticed when he stopped being Bragg any more.

The soldiers in the quarantine chamber stared out of the window. They seemed to be waiting. Each of their faces had become a timepiece, each different, each giving the time as ten minutes to four. They breathed even though they had no nose or mouth. Fitz had tried the quarantine intercom and a deafening tick-tocking had burst out of the speaker. He had hurriedly switched it off.

Fitz paced back across the ward. 'Try again,' he urged Shaw.

Shaw spoke into the mouthpiece. 'Shaw calling laboratory. Shaw calling laboratory.' He flicked the knob. No reply.

'I expect they're all dead,' said Mistletoe from the far end of the ward. 'Most un-fortunate, but an acceptable loss in the midterm.'

Shaw tapped his gun impatiently in his palm, and walked up to Mistletoe. 'Who are you? *Really?*'

'As I have informed you, Mr Shaw, I am here to act in a . . . non-executive capacity.' Mistletoe looked around disparagingly. 'And I must admit to being most un-derwhelmed at being discommoded in this manner. You have acted most improvidently. It will all go in my report. I shall be very candid, oh yes, I shall.'

Fuming, Shaw returned to Fitz. 'Right. Right. That's it. I can't bloody take any more of him,' he muttered. 'I'm going to make a move. No matter what.'

'You're going to the lab?'

'We can't just sit here on our arses, Fitz.'

'But what about Lane? And Bragg?'

By way of an answer, Shaw gathered up two more TR suits. 'We should be OK in these,' he said, 'and there's always this.' He indicated his gun.

Fitz nodded. 'OK, OK, I'm with you.' He stepped into one body-suit and hoisted it up to his shoulders. His hands in the gloves, he secured the seals and tightened the hood.

Shaw had already put on his TR gas mask. He passed Fitz his, and helped strap it on. Then he tapped a sequence of buttons on the locking unit, and the door clanked open. Shaw stepped out into the corridor, and nodded an all-clear.

'Excuse me. What about us?' protested Mistletoe, wriggling against his bonds, Hammond silent beside him. 'You can't just leave us here -'

'Oh, yeah? Watch,' said Fitz, and left.

Paterson looked from Anji to the Doctor, his neck moving stiffly like an automaton. 'I can go back, Doctor. Time's past can be changed.'

'You're wrong,' the Doctor told him. 'You're *wrong*. History is immutable. It is our past, after all, that makes us who we are.'

Anji looked down at Paterson's feet. His shoes rested on the edge of the pit where the concrete crumbled away into depths of utter blackness.

'Is that what you really believe, Doctor?' whirred Paterson.

'Yes. Yes. We are the sum of all our days. If the past could be changed then it would have no meaning. We would have no meaning.'

'Take away a man's past, and you take away the man?' said Paterson.

'Yes,' said the Doctor. He hesitated as though some memory had been disturbed. 'Yes, I suppose so, to some extent. The one is dependent on the other.'

Paterson considered. 'But I *can*... go back.'

'Back to where? What d'you remember, Paterson?'

'I... I...'

'Where were you born, Paterson? Do you remember your parents when they were still young? Do you remember your first summer? Well?' demanded the Doctor. 'Your first kiss? Your mother's maiden name? *Your first name?*'

Paterson struggled. 'I don't know -'

'Because it's all gone, hasn't it? There's nothing there. You can't return to the past because you no longer have a past to return to.'

'Darkness,' Paterson choked. 'I can feel it. Like a shadow falling across me. And there is something here...'

'What -'

'It's cold. So cold. And empty,' said the transformed Paterson. 'So much pain. Blackness feeding. No!' he screamed. 'No! No!'

'Hold on,' said the Doctor. 'Please -'

'*I am lost,*' said Paterson. He turned his body towards the pit and half-stepped and half-toppled over the edge. For a moment he seemed to balance in midair, then he dropped. He gave a hideous, long scream which echoed away to nothing as he fell.

Mistletoe glared down at his shoes as though it were all their fault. He tested the bandages, but his hands were secured fast against the piping. He could tap his slippery fingers together, but that was all. It was, he felt, an intolerable imposition. And his chest ached as though with a bad case of indigestion. Occasional shivers thrilled his spine and brought perspiration to his forehead.

Mistletoe shuffled himself around to address Hammond. 'So. What do you think has happened, Dr Hammond?'

'I am not sure,' replied Hammond. 'It would appear that the quarantine has been breached and that some personnel have become contaminated.'

‘Yes, yes. Precisely my thoughts,’ agreed Mistletoe. ‘This station has been terminally compromised. I will recommend immediate cessation of all involved parties.’

Hammond didn’t reply.

‘Lane must have been the first, of course,’ continued Mistletoe. ‘Then Bragg. Then the rest. . . If we are not careful this valuable opportunity may slip through our fingers. We are in agreement that this infection may prove to be most useful to the war effort?’

Hammond nodded.

‘However, the problem we are presented with is this: we are unable to evaluate this disease here. So what, I ask myself, are we to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Hammond.

‘We need to take a sample to Station One. They will have the proper investigative facilities there. Of course,’ he licked his lips, ‘we should have to make sure the sample was contained with, say, a DT field. To prevent any further accidental outbreaks, you understand.’

‘But,’ Hammond stated, ‘we cannot move.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Mistletoe. He gave a long sigh. ‘Yes, I am beginning to tire of this little game.’ Mistletoe brought his hands round to his front and the bandages slithered to the floor. After untying Hammond, he straightened his cuffs and tie, corrected his bowler hat and *ahem-ed*. ‘If you will indulge me, Dr Hammond, I fear for my health –’

Hammond walked over to his bag, collected a stethoscope and plugged it into his ears. He placed the drum to the left of Mistletoe’s chest, and listened. He repeated the process on the opposite side. ‘Standard condition. No depreciation.’

‘Oh, that *is* good news,’ said Mistletoe. He picked up a cylinder of halothane and proceeded to the quarantine window. Inside the three soldiers stood, motionless.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘to collect a sample.’

Fitz and Shaw arrived at a bulkhead door. Fitz almost jumped out of his TR suit at the sound of ticking before he realised it was just one of the wall-clocks. He laughed at his own nervousness and stepped through the bulkhead to a passage where a figure silently waited for them.

A figure in the shape of a soldier. A figure with a clock for a face.

‘Get back!’ Shaw hauled Fitz through the bulkhead.

Fitz inhaled deeply three times and swallowed. ‘Is there another way round?’ he asked.

Before Shaw could reply, the ground shuddered. Floor gratings clattered under the vibration. Fitz put out a hand to steady himself as the rumble

throbbed away.

‘What the hell was that?’ Fitz yelled.

‘The opening barrage,’ said Shaw. ‘We’re under attack.’

‘What?’

‘Come on.’ Shaw pulled Fitz back down the passage towards the stairwell. ‘We’ve got to get as deep as possible. It’s our only chance.’

The laboratory seemed somehow dead without Paterson. Just a mess of hissing monitors and dust-encrusted cables. It looked as if it had lain undisturbed for years.

The Doctor swiped a finger over a desk and glanced up at the *Absolute Time*. It solemnly chimed out the hour. Four o’clock. Then the silence returned. The *Capsule Time* clocks read zero hours, zero days and zero years.

‘What now?’ said Anji. She absently picked up and examined a small brass chronometer. The clock had multiple dials, indicating the second, the minute, the hour and the day, allowing its alarm to be set to a specific minute of a specific day. ‘Back to the medical bay?’

The Doctor activated the lab intercom. ‘Laboratory calling medical bay. Fitz. Fitz?’

The speaker crackled and spat, but no reply came. The Doctor gave it a few more seconds, then turned it off.

‘Well, we can’t go back the way we came.’ The Doctor walked over to the lab door and activated the unlock mechanism. The door clanged open.

The corridor outside was empty.

Anji made her way down the passage after the Doctor. In the illumination cast from the lab, she could make out a few metres’ worth of wall, floor and cobwebbed ceiling pipes and nothing else.

‘Stay close to me,’ said the Doctor. He patted her hand, and led her into the blackness.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The floor clattered.

‘What was th—’ said Anji.

The bulkhead door slammed down behind them, sealing off the lab and plunging them into utter blackness. Not even the vague hints of shadow. Complete nothingness, in every direction.

Anji gave a startled scream and turned back down the corridor –

– where an antique brass timepiece stared back at her, shining like the moon. The body beneath it wore a grey military uniform. Bragg. He loomed out of the darkness, reaching for her with incongruously human hands.

The lamps in the stairwell fluttered and faded. Water cascaded down the central well and into the abyss. Fitz felt himself lunging forward, and grasped the hand rail, swinging himself back. He panted, suddenly suffocating. He couldn't go on.

There was another rumble. The stairs jangled and creaked, shifting on their moorings. The whole base seemed to be shuddering.

'The defaulter bombardment. It's getting closer,' said Shaw. 'Come on!'

Fitz clutched the railing and began to heave himself back up the stairs.

'Where are you going?' yelled Shaw.

'The Doctor... and Anji,' said Fitz through clenched teeth. 'I've got to find them.'

'Forget them!'

'I can't -'

'Come with me.' Shaw raised his gun. 'Or I'll kill you.'

The medical bay lay dark and silent in anticipation. The two figures behind the window also waited. Gazing out into nowhere.

The door swung open and Lane entered. She surveyed the ward with her expressionless clock face and moved calmly between the beds to the quarantine area.

Tick-tock.

Lane arrived at the controls and adjusted some switches. The inner airlock door opened and Ash and Norton moved into the airlock and pulled the door shut after them.

Tick-tock.

Lane adjusted another switch and the outer door gave a clang. Seconds later, it opened and Ash and Norton emerged into the ward, flexing their hands and turning their clock faces left and right in a steady rhythm.

Tick-tock.

They walked up to Lane and nodded in greeting. And together they spoke, their voices transformed into a guttural clockwork parody of humanity.

'We have arrived.'

Chapter Seven

Fitz had made something of a habit of being held at gunpoint. And the reason it had become a habit, rather than a one-off, was because he had also made a habit of doing whatever the person with the gun told him to do. Which in this case involved hurtling down a stairwell as the entire station shook itself to pieces.

His gloves slipped on the railings, his boots skidded on the grille steps. He could hear a gigantic rumble that juddered him from the insides out. Lamps flickered, some snapping from their brackets to swing by their cables and send sparks fizzling over the damp metal.

Then all the lights went out and Fitz found himself falling into pitch darkness.

Water sloshed over his legs and arms. He scrambled around himself, arms outstretched, until eventually he hit a metal wall. He followed it along to reach the bottom of the stairwell.

A torch snapped on and the tunnel was picked out in grey. Through the water that had collected in his goggles, Fitz saw his own shadow stretching across the ceiling. Water gushed out of one of the overhead pipes, flooding the passage. The reflected torchlight bobbed with the motion of the murky water, sending rippling patterns across the walls and ceiling.

Shaw splashed over to Fitz and holstered his gun. 'You all right?'

Fitz coughed and nodded.

'Come on,' said Shaw. The torchlight swept down the corridor to where the water swirled and frothed. Shaw waded in up to his waist.

'Where are we going?' breathed Fitz.

Shaw's reply was lost in a jarring howl, a howl that made the heart thump. An air-raid siren.

'- breached!' yelled Shaw in his earphone. 'The further down we are, the more TR barriers we've got between us and the -'

Fitz didn't understand. He turned to go back to the stairs, his boots dragging under the torrent. 'But the Doctor -'

'Look,' said Shaw, and the torchlight picked out the wall-clock.

Fitz looked. The hands on the clock were rattling round, the minute hand crossing over the hour hand. The spinning accelerated. The rattling became a drone, rising to a buzz, then a whine.

‘There’s a breach. Accelerated time displacement,’ yelled Shaw. ‘Quick, you idiot –’

A gust of freezing air hit them. A storm rushed down the stairwell and howled through the tunnels. Fitz leaned against the battering wind.

There was a metallic creaking from above them, as though the base itself were coming to life. A bulkhead slammed down.

Fitz remembered Shaw’s speech about the base’s defences. At the first sign of a time-based attack, every bulkhead in the affected area would shut. . .

The storm died as quickly as it had arrived. The hands on the wall-clock halted. Overhead, some bulbs sputtered and sent cascades of sparks into the water.

Fitz shivered. He was wet, cold, and trapped with a lunatic with a gun. But he was alive.

Anji felt the vibration first in her legs, then in her stomach. Something was approaching. Then the wind blasted its way into the corridor.

The Doctor gripped her by the arm and shoved her against the wall, shielding her with his own body. The storm ripped past them, pressing the clammy material of Anji’s body-suit against her skin.

The hands on Bragg’s face rattled around excitedly. He shuddered under the force of the gale like a washing machine on spin cycle, staggering but not falling, and held out his hands to grasp at the rushing air. His upper body swung back and forth and he gave a mechanical gurgle of pleasure.

‘What’s happening?’ yelled Anji.

‘The base is under air attack,’ the Doctor shouted back through her ear-piece.

Bragg slumped against the wall. Anji could have sworn he was laughing drunkenly. His whole head had transformed. It had become a wooden box, lined with mottled brass, with a decorative carved ridge across the top. The only part that hadn’t changed was the dial at the front.

‘The increase in time has accelerated the metamorphosis,’ said the Doctor, breathlessly intrigued.

Bragg lurched over to the wall-mounted clock and flattened his hands against it. The clock’s hands wheeled around. Bragg’s chest heaved with joy and his palms patted and smoothed over the glass surface.

‘This is our chance,’ whispered the Doctor.

As the storm battled about them, Anji and the Doctor edged past Bragg and into the blackness. Anji's eyes started to form their own shifting patterns from the darkness.

Several thudding clangs echoed down the corridor. Anji looked back to see Bragg straightening up. The wind dropped as though under his command.

Then he rang. He tolled out a series of sombre chimes, like a grandfather clock, each separated by a deathly pause. The final gong reverberated and Bragg strode towards them.

The Doctor tugged Anji's hand briskly and dragged her away. As Bragg's bootsteps echoed after them, they broke into a run. Anji had never felt more claustrophobic, sealed inside her gas mask, unable to escape the sound of her breathing and thumping heart. Anji's arm twisted as the Doctor brought them to a stop. Before she could ask why, she realised that she could make out a shadowy shape in the gloom ahead of them.

A bulkhead door had sealed off the corridor. They were trapped.

Fitz followed the to-ing and fro-ing torch beam down the corridor. The water swept around him, making his legs numb, the speeding currents shoving at his knees.

A reinforced metal door blocked the way. Shaw twisted the knobs on the panel beside it. 'It's on an automatic circuit,' he explained. 'Each section is chrono-insulated. But if I check whether the time rate on the other side of that door is the same as in here...' He lit up the clock. 'It's about point ninety per sec, nothing you'd notice.'

The pipes above them continued to chug out water. 'And then what?' Fitz shouted back over the roar.

'Then, if it's more or less synchronous, I can manual override,' said Shaw. He muttered something incoherent, followed by '... less temp parity.' He thumped a button, and nothing happened.

'No power?' suggested Fitz.

'No bloody power.'

Fitz found his arms becoming heavier as the water surged over them. The cramplike numbness rose through his body, up to his neck. His goggles speckled with water and gave a distorted, swimmy view.

The lights flittered on, and the bulkhead jerked upwards.

Fitz yelped in surprise and clutched at the wall as the water sluiced under the opening door. The tunnel beyond hadn't flooded and the water surged through in a smooth curve. His gloves failed to find a purchase, his boots slipped and he found himself being hurled into the darkness.

In a jumble of arms and legs, Fitz slid down the tunnel, lost in a torrent of spray. Around him, cables and electronic fittings snapped loose, creating explosions of sparks. The gush of the water and a metallic reverberation consumed his ears. He put out a hand to try to steady himself and gripped a vertical strut. It held, and he pulled himself towards it.

The flood died and Fitz found himself lying in about a foot of muddy, foaming water. He struggled to pull his bruised body upright. A figure sloshed towards him, hidden behind a blinding beam.

‘You all right?’ said Shaw.

Fitz started a nod and the shivering took over. ‘I’ll live. For another five minutes at least.’

Shaw’s torchlight picked out a door. He pressed the controls and the door swung open. The ridge at the base of the portal frame kept out most of the water. Shaw grabbed Fitz and shoved him inside, banging the door shut after them.

Fitz found himself in a storeroom, like the one he had been locked in with the Doctor and Anji. Shelves lurked in the gloom, each filled with boxes, crates and gas cylinders.

Shaw checked the wall-clock and unbuckled his mask. He ripped it off and took in a deep breath. ‘I think... we’ll be safe here for a minute.’

Fitz removed his gas mask and sniffed the freezing, damp air. ‘Safe?’

Shaw listened, but there was nothing to hear. No rumbling, no distant thunder or explosions. Silence. ‘The barrage’s passed.’ He rubbed his sunken cheeks. ‘The defaulters are targeting this sector. Once they’ve AT’d the whole area, they’ll be sending in ground troops and a recovery team.’

‘And how does that make us “safe”, exactly?’

Shaw turned towards him. ‘Well, we’re alive aren’t we? What would you call it?’

‘Trapped and about to die,’ replied Fitz.

Shaw disapproved. ‘We were lucky to be wearing TR suits. And to be on one of the lower levels.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I wouldn’t like to have been upstairs when the attack hit. Where your friends are. Were.’ He laughed hollowly. ‘We’re the only ones left, Fitzy. You and me.’

The bulb glowed into life. Anji blinked to clear her eyes. The Doctor was attacking the switches, resetting them apparently at random. Her attention turned to the wall-clock. The hours were whirling past in a blur.

The Doctor swore in some alien language. ‘It won’t let us through.’

‘What?’

‘There’s a cutout. Time is running at a different rate on the other side,’ he indicated the door, ‘and the circuit won’t allow it to open. A safety feature, presumably.’

Anji looked back down the passage. The walls sank back into darkness, but then reappeared in the distance beneath a pool of light. And striding towards them through this illumination was Bragg.

He moved smoothly, his head held level, as though he was drifting along on casters. Every step was measured and unhurried. His face scanned to the left and right.

‘The problem with safety features is,’ muttered the Doctor, fiddling with renewed urgency, ‘that they’re very difficult to override. They are supposed to be tamper-proof. Another safety feature, I suppose. But sometimes you need to tamper, and if you can’t, then they become rather dangerous –’

‘Doctor –’ said Anji. Bragg continued his inexorable glide towards them, his hands raised.

‘And then they become danger features.’ The Doctor hit another button and was met with a harsh grinding. The bulkhead groaned and began to rise.

‘Quick!’ The Doctor bundled Anji under the door, even though it had only opened to waist-height. Anji ducked through and emerged into another stretch of corridor. The Doctor dived after her and rounded on the door controls. He rapidly jammed down a series of bell-switches. The door clanked down behind them.

The Doctor made some final adjustments and fumes began to snake out of the panelling. ‘There,’ he said, wafting away the smoke, ‘now that safety feature really *can’t* be tampered with.’

‘He can’t get out?’ ventured Anji.

‘No,’ the Doctor said. ‘There’s absolutely no way that door can be opened from the inside.’ He glanced over to the wall-clock, which ticked away as normal. ‘And now we’re out of the affected area –’

Something hissed in Anji’s ear. A malfunction with the radio? Like waves crashing, or a whoosh of static. . .

There was a harsh grinding. Anji looked back at the bulkhead door as it groaned and slowly lifted.

Bragg emerged from under the door whilst it was still at waist-height.

‘He’s turned back time,’ said the Doctor. He sounded simultaneously impressed and terrified. ‘Come on –’

Fitz stared at the mask in his hands. It returned his stare. He didn’t want to think about what had happened to the Doctor and Anji. They would’ve been wearing TR body-suits, he reminded himself. They would be fine.

‘So if the attack’s over,’ said Fitz, ‘we can move?’

‘I think so. Yes.’ Shaw pulled on his head-mask.

‘Or we could just stay here and sit on our arses?’ said Fitz. Shaw had, seemingly, saved his life, yet Fitz found that he didn’t feel any gratitude towards him. Instead, he felt suspicious. Why had Shaw saved him? What was in it for Shaw?

After waiting for Fitz to fit his mask, Shaw unlocked the door.

They sloshed back to the stairwell, Fitz’s legs regaining their familiar numbness. The surface of the water bobbed at Fitz’s waist, the surface covered in oil and chemical froth. Now that the electricity was back on, he could make out all the fluttering cobwebs and musty ventilation ducts. Distant, sinister clanks carried down the tunnel. More than once Fitz slipped and had to stop himself plunging into the soup.

Eventually Fitz’s boots hit metal stairs. One hand on the rail, he dragged himself up the first few steps and slumped against the curved concrete wall, exhausted. Shaw waited beside him, checking his gun.

The stairs creaked worryingly above them. Fitz could make out bulbs dangling from their cables like fruit. Water rained down the centre of the well, causing some exposed wires to phut.

And, without a word, they climbed.

Anji wasn’t sure what would kill her first; the transformed soldier with the wooden clock face, or her calves.

She rested against the wall, watching the Doctor stabbing furiously at the switches in an effort to close a bulkhead behind them. Her survival suit seemed to have grown heavier and she was panting from the effort of climbing the stairwell.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Anji after she had caught her breath. ‘You said he turned back time...’

‘... to the point where the door had just been opened, yes yes,’ gabbled the Doctor in his usual rush. ‘But it only went back for a small section of corridor. Just the part with the door in it. A localised temporal... reiteration.’

Anji knew the Doctor was only using jargon to disguise the fact that he had no idea what he was talking about. She’d done it often enough herself. ‘So what’s the point of us closing this door,’ she said, ‘if he can just nip back again to when it wasn’t locked?’

‘Because,’ the Doctor paused, ‘that gives us a little more time.’

‘How so?’

‘Because whenever our friend out there has to draw back time, he has to go back a little further. Now this, of course, must take a deal of effort –’

‘Because it’s uphill?’

‘Because it’s uphill, yes. So there may be a limit to how far back he can go.’ There was a clanking and the bulkhead began to slide shut. The control panel fizzed and its cover fell away in a fizz of sparks. ‘It’s only a theory, mind you. And I’ve been wrong before.’

Anji pulled herself upright. ‘So where now?’

The Doctor patted his side as he thought. ‘The control room, I think. Yes.’

Anji took one last glance through the doorway before it closed. And shuddered. There were three figures, gliding up the stairs, their arm and leg movements in perfect unison. All with clock faces looking expectantly upwards at her. Bragg, Ash and Norton.

The corridor disappeared into darkness in both directions. Shaw cast his torchlight over a wall-clock. Its hands rolled forward.

‘An AT,’ said Shaw. ‘Between us and the lab. Bugger.’

Fitz glanced nervously in the other direction, towards the medical bay. There was no one there. Then he followed Shaw into the accelerated time sector.

His skin prickled in anticipation, but there was no sensation of moving through anything other than thin air. The suit allowed him to move outside of time, entirely unaffected. But he couldn’t escape the thought of what would happen to him without the body-suit’s protection. He would be dead within minutes, a wizened, white-haired skeleton. It was like walking through an invisible fatal gas.

They turned the corner. A shape waited in the shadows. A small, thin man. No, Fitz realised, as the shape slid into the light. It was Lane.

Her head had been replaced by a brass timepiece mounted in a mahogany carriage case, slightly smaller than her head had been. Her drab uniform flapped open to reveal a window plate fused into her chest. Within, a pendulum swung back and forth.

Shaw raised his gun and fired.

Lane staggered backwards. The glass plate smashed into a thousand fragments. She reached down to the wound and a bloody pulp spilled out over her hands. She fumbled, as though trying to hold something in, her hands and shirt becoming coated in the red gunk. She spluttered mechanically.

Shaw fired again. And again.

The first bullet hit Lane in the midriff, and a spray of blood splashed across the wall behind her. She clutched her chest, doubling up in agony. The second bullet hit her head. The clock shattered and the wooden box

splintered, the casing bursting apart. Fitz could make out a complex array of cogwheels inside, all soaked thickly in a black gel.

Lane slumped against the wall and down to the floor. She left a smudge of blood on the wall behind her. More fluid poured out of the holes in her chest. Inside her, springs uncoiled and pistons jammed. The whirring and ticking stopped.

For what seemed like an hour, neither Shaw nor Fitz spoke. Fitz just stared at Lane's corpse, the gunshots resounding in his ears. Her body was still and silent.

Fitz could hear Shaw's rapid, shallow breathing in his earpiece. He turned to see Shaw levelling his gun again. He aimed it at the corpse and fired twice.

Lane's body spasmed under each impact, as if momentarily returning to life, before falling back into its expanding puddle. The head casing split into small fragments.

'She's *dead*,' said Fitz. Looking at the corpse, he felt a rising nausea. He swallowed and tried not to think about it.

Shaw approached the body, keeping his gun trained. When he was a foot away, he straddled the corpse, and put the barrel to the mashed remains of her head. He fired one final time, ripping apart the remaining wood and metal.

Fitz looked away. 'I don't believe it,' he muttered to himself, laughing bleakly. 'They can be killed with bullets! For the first time ever, we're up against a bunch of alien weirdoes who aren't immune to being shot –'

His ears whooshed. And they were turning the corner. A shape slid into view. Lane. Her head had been transformed into a timepiece. Her drab uniform flapped open to reveal a pendulum swinging back and forth inside her chest.

'Jesus,' choked Fitz. 'What on –'

Shaw raised his gun. The gun clicked emptily. 'Shit –' He rolled the barrel. The gun clicked again. 'But it's... impossible.'

'She's alive. She's *still alive*,' said Fitz, beginning to back away. Lane walked towards them as though nothing had happened.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Anji pounded after the Doctor, her legs aching, her heart thumping.

The Doctor counted as he ran. 'Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three –' Before Anji could ask what he was doing, he had halted beside a door and started on the panel. 'Twenty-four, twenty-five –'

The passage behind them was empty. But for how much longer? No matter what they did, no matter how fast they ran, Bragg and the others

would catch them up. No wonder they didn't feel any need to hurry.

The door swung inwards. 'I'm getting quite good at this,' muttered the Doctor, urging her inside.

Anji stepped into the blackness and reached for the light switch. She found it, but nothing happened. The Doctor clanged the door shut after them, and swiftly prodded a sequence of buttons. A bolt hammered into place. 'It's locked. From the inside,' muttered the Doctor. 'Which is nice. For the time being, we're safe.'

Anji wanted to scream at him. In a couple of minutes the soldiers would be outside the door, and they would be completely trapped. The soldiers would draw back time and they would have nowhere left to run. So why was he so infuriatingly cheerful?

Remembering her anger management, she turned away from him, her eyes becoming accustomed to the near-darkness. The only illumination came from a black-and-white TV. It showed nothing but static and snow and cast a grey glow over the desk and upturned chairs.

The control room had been wrecked. Several monitors lay smashed on the floor, and the radio, which took up one side of the room, had caved in and splintered. Above it, a map draped down from the wall where it had been torn. Drawers had been removed from their cavities, emptied and dumped; documents, receipt books and folders carpeted the floor. A bundle of black clothes lay in one of the shadowy corners.

Anji picked her way over to the locker. The mirror screwed to the inside of the door had shattered. Her reflections gazed back, unrecognisable in their coveralls and gas masks. She couldn't even see her own eyes. The creature that looked back didn't even seem human.

The Doctor was counting again. 'One twelve. One thirteen. One fourteen.' He retuned the fuzzing monitor. The picture melted into brilliant white. He angled it towards the wall-clock. 'One second per second. I think we can take our masks off now.'

'What?' said Anji. 'With that lot out there?'

'We'll be fine, Anji,' he said. He unbuckled his mask and lifted it free of his face. For the first time in hours, she could see his sparkling eyes, his hair plastered to his forehead. He grinned rakishly. 'Trust me.'

Anji reached for the clasps at the back of the hood. Her hands fumbled, and the gas mask slipped away from her face. She took in a mouthful of air. It stank of tobacco, but after the rubber and oil it seemed as fresh as a January Hyde Park breeze.

The Doctor casually threw off his gloves and peered inquisitively into the radio.

'Doctor,' said Anji. 'I realise it's my job to ask stupid questions, but –'

'This will never work again,' said the Doctor sadly. 'So. We can't get any word out.' He looked up. 'You're wondering why I think we're safe here.'

'No. I mean, yes.'

'We've been in here for over two minutes. I don't think they can draw time back that far.'

'How do you know that?'

'Well, I don't for sure. But when Bragg was after us, why didn't he just go back to the point when we first met him? Why doesn't he do that now?'

'I don't know.'

'Because,' said the Doctor brightly, 'travelling backwards through time is very difficult and energy-intensive. It's not the sort of thing you do if you can possibly help it.'

'So?'

'Anji, these creatures are only going to turn back the clock when it is a matter of life and death. And as we're not going anywhere, it would hardly be worth their effort, would it? They can wait for us to come out.' He grinned again. 'They do have time on their side, after all.'

Anji laughed despite herself. 'But this is just a theory. How do you know you're right?'

The Doctor regarded at her quizzically. 'Because if I was wrong they would have come in and killed us by now.' He indicated the clock. 'Four minutes. We're way out of their depth.'

The corner of the room coughed. Anji turned. The pile of black clothes shifted and pulled itself awkwardly off the floor. It looked at them shamefacedly, clutching its bowler hat to its chest.

'Ah,' said Mr Mistletoe. 'Hello. I see you've found me, then.'

Fitz hammered down the corridor. The TR-suited figure held the medical bay door open for him, and he dived through. Shaw locked the door after them.

His pained gasping in his ears, Fitz doubled up, resting his hands on his knees, and stared at the tiled floor. Looking up, the ward clock seemed to be ticking as normal. Fitz watched it for some more seconds. The time here was running at a normal speed. At *last*. He began to pull at his mask straps.

Then he noticed that the quarantine door was open.

Fitz approached the window cautiously, letting Shaw lead the way. As they drew nearer, he noticed that the inner airlock door was also open. You could walk straight into the isolation chamber. Inside, blankets lay crumpled on the floor. The beds were unoccupied.

Shaw ripped off his head-mask and threw it aside. 'They've gone,' he said, tugging at the collar of his suit. He rubbed his sweat-soaked forehead. 'The bastards have gone.'

Fitz removed his mask. 'They must have broken out.'

Shaw regarded him as if he was an idiot. 'That can't happen.' He examined the gauges and dials on the airlock instrument panels. 'No. No, someone helped them.'

'But who'd do that?'

'I don't know. Lane or Bragg?' Shaw narrowed his eyes. 'Or *someone else*.'

'Why would anyone want to set them free?'

'This disease could alter the course of the war, Fitz. Either side would kill to get hold of it. The plutos or the defaulters. It's valuable, believe me.' He stared into the distance. 'The financial rewards would easily outweigh the sacrifice of a few lives. . . that would be an *acceptable* loss.' He slammed a fist on the control panel.

'But it's passed that point, right? I mean, it's got out. End of story. None of that money stuff matters now. All that's important is that we stay alive and try to stop this thing spreading.' Fitz shook his head. 'It's over, can't you see? This infection isn't going to win any war for you -'

'Only wealth matters,' repeated Shaw. 'The plutocratic ideal is the only way.'

'And you're prepared to let people die, just for the sake of a few bob? You're sick, mate.'

'You don't understand.'

'Too right I don't,' said Fitz. 'Money can't buy you everything. And it isn't going to be any use to you if you're six feet under. Or if you've. . .' he struggled for a phrase, and said sheepishly, '... turned into a clock.'

Shaw gave him a cool look.

'Well, what would you call it?' Fitz gave up, and went to investigate the airlock. It smelled of chlorine and disinfectant. He stepped into the isolation chamber. It felt strange, looking out through the glass from the inside. He swiped a hole in the condensation and moved to the other airlock door.

'It's locked,' said Shaw through the intercom. 'They didn't get out that way. And don't worry, no one can get in either.'

'I wouldn't be so sure about that.' Fitz returned to the ward and crossed to the sink. He poured some water and splashed his face. 'I mean, what happened with Lane -'

Shaw looked haunted at the memory. 'I killed her. I put a bullet through her clockwork face.' He turned to Fitz. 'I didn't imagine it, did I?'

'No, you didn't.'

‘But then. . . then she was alive.’ Shaw’s brow twitched. ‘It’s impossible.’

‘Yeah, well, in my experience the impossible has a habit of turning out to be all-too-bloody likely,’ said Fitz. He dried his cheeks and looked around the gloomy ward, at the empty beds and DT fridges. ‘I don’t know how we’re going to deal with them, though. We can’t kill them, because if you try to shoot them –’

‘They just rewind time to a point before you shot them.’

‘Yes,’ admitted Fitz. ‘Yes, that makes sense. So they can always undo whatever you do to them. We can’t outrun them, we can’t trap them –’ Fitz stopped, as he gazed at the shelves beside the sink. And the bandage on the floor. ‘Hang on. Where’s Mistletoe gone?’

‘What are you doing here?’ said Anji.

Mistletoe shifted on the spot. A smile rose and fell. ‘I thought perhaps it would be prudent to try to contact the relevant authorities. To inform them as to how events have regrettably transpired.’

The Doctor had picked up a folder of loose-leaf orders. He sorted through them abstractedly. ‘That the infection has escaped and we’re all doomed?’ he said without looking up.

Mistletoe glared at the Doctor, then turned to Anji and softened. ‘Not to put too fine a point on it, yes,’ he admitted. ‘To inform them that the venture has become irretrievably compromised. That, in my view, the situation is un-salvageable.’

‘So that’s why you came here?’ The Doctor winced, as though suffering momentary heartburn.

‘Yes.’ Mistletoe stepped into the light, and his perspiration sheened. ‘But unfortunately it transpires that the comms unit is out of order. How very calamitous. Oh dear oh dear oh dear.’

‘That’s very public-spirited of you,’ said the Doctor. He handed Anji a sheet of paper. She could barely read it in the half-light. It was roughly and smudgily printed like a telegram, and headed *IS Forty Invoice*. Below was a timetable of troop movements, giving details of dates, numbers and positions. *Day four one one eight. Target sector nine-four. Requisition four hundred units.* The numbers continued down the page, and were repeated on the attached carbon copy.

‘How long d’you think they would have given you to get free, before they razed this place to the ground?’ the Doctor asked, as if making polite after-dinner conversation.

Mistletoe sniffed and ignored the Doctor’s question. ‘And, given the pertinent realities of the situation, I thought the optimum course of action would be to relocate myself to a place of safety.’

‘And hide in the control room?’ said Anji.

‘Yes,’ said Mistletoe. ‘Though I dislike the word “hide”. It has negative connotations.’

‘One more question.’ The Doctor handed Anji the folder and turned to Mistletoe. ‘How did you manage to get free?’

The intercom in the wall crackled. ‘Doctor!’ It was Fitz. ‘Anji. Are you there? Doctor?’

The Doctor answered the call. ‘Fitz! You’re all right?’

‘Yes.’ Fitz paused. ‘I’m fine. And Anji?’

‘She’s here, she’s fine too,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re in the control room. Mistletoe is here too; he sends his regards.’

‘We’re in the medical bay. Me and Shaw.’

‘Shaw. Good, good. Fitz, when the attack –’

‘We went down to the basement and, um, sat it out.’

‘Yes, I thought Shaw would see that no harm came to you.’ The Doctor glanced up at the map. ‘Fitz, we’re a little bit trapped at the moment. I was wondering, would you like to help get us out?’

‘But how?’ whispered Anji. ‘If these things can draw back time –’

The Doctor shushed her. ‘Well, Fitz?’

‘I don’t think we can, Doctor. We’ve met one of them. Lane. Shaw shot her. But then, well,’ said the intercom, ‘it sounds ridiculous, but she...’

‘...she drew time back,’ the Doctor finished. ‘Then Shaw hadn’t shot her after all?’

‘Something like that. So there’s nothing we can do is there?’ A desperate note sounded in Fitz’s voice.

The Doctor winked at Anji. ‘I think there is a limit to their abilities.’

‘What sort of limit?’

‘I think they find it exhausting to pull back time. It’s not something they do lightly. And they can’t take it back very far, no more than a couple of minutes or so.’

‘Two minutes,’ said Fitz. ‘Right.’

‘So how does that help us?’ said Anji.

‘What we need to do is to look at the problem from a different angle,’ said the Doctor. ‘I have a cunning idea.’

Fitz didn’t understand the Doctor’s cunning idea, but this made very little difference.

They had pulled their masks back on. Immediately Fitz’s skin began to itch and he had the uncontrollable desire to ruffle his hair. But instead he had to follow Shaw out into the corridor, back out into the forbidding, lonely darkness of the station.

The passageway was deserted. The Doctor had mentioned something about Lane and friends regrouping to somewhere with accelerated time to recover their strength. However, there would almost certainly be one of them waiting on guard outside the control room door. And that was where Shaw and Fitz came in.

They arrived at a storeroom. Fitz waited until Shaw had gone inside and the light had flickered on before entering.

High shelves lined the narrow room, cluttered with metal junk and cardboard boxes. Shaw worked his way along, pulling and shoving at crates and checking their dusty contents. Eventually he found what he was looking for. He dumped the tin box on a nearby bench.

He forced the rusted lid open. Inside were a dozen or so studded metal spheres, each about the size of a cricket ball. Each had a small, brass-rimmed dial set into one side.

‘Clockwork grenades,’ explained Shaw. He threw one to Fitz.

Fitz caught it gingerly.

‘Don’t worry, it’s not primed,’ said Shaw. He indicated the winding mechanism. ‘You set it for how many minutes and seconds you need to get clear, release the key, then that’s it. Bang.’

Anji folded over the *Isolation Station Forty Receipt* and checked it against the *IS Forty Invoice*. The invoice listed troop movements and gave requisition orders whilst the receipt reported the losses in the field. The numbers matched in every column. She flicked further through the folder, and checked another receipt against an invoice. Again, the figures were identical.

‘This doesn’t make sense,’ said Anji, passing the Doctor the sheet and pacing across the room. ‘The plutocrats seem to know every movement the defaulters make. They know everything down to the last nut and bolt. And they have all this temp technology at their disposal.’

The Doctor ran a curious eye over the sheet. ‘What doesn’t make sense?’

‘This,’ said Anji. “*Day four two nine one. Sector seven-zero. Defaulter activity, temp capability, two hundred units.*” So they know the enemy has a stronghold in sector seven-zero. Now, hang on, here we are. The invoice for the next day. “*Target sector seven-zero. Requisition six hundred units.*” They’re sending six hundred men to attack. But then it specifies, “*no temp resistance capability required*”.’

Anji glanced at Mistletoe, and he avoided her gaze. She returned to the papers, and lifted another to the light of the monitor. ‘Later the same day, *IS Forty Receipt*. “*Target sector seven-zero. Five hundred and eighty two units debit. Eighteen units unaccounted. Net loss six hundred.*”’

‘Six hundred men sent unequipped into a battle they could not possibly win,’ said the Doctor.

‘Exactly. But that’s not all. The next day, they get an intelligence report that the defaulters have abandoned sector three. So they move one hundred men and all their temp weapons there. Where they’re no good to anybody.’ Anji frowned. ‘I don’t understand it. I mean, I really don’t understand it. These orders just *don’t make sense*. They’re just deliberately stupid. I’ve seen plenty of business plans like this – usually dotcoms – but this is supposed to be a war they’re running here.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Anji collected another *Strategy Information* telegram. ‘Here. “*Defaulters in sector nine-twelve. Five hundred units. Temp capability exhausted.*” And yet there’s a pluto force of four hundred sitting not half a mile away, up to their elbows in AT capability. But do they get the order to attack? No. They get shunted back into an empty sector.’ She threw away the paper. ‘It’s so, so *pointless*. So arbitrary. If I didn’t know better, I’d say the plutos weren’t trying to win the war at all.’

The Doctor flicked through a hundred documents in a matter of seconds. ‘Maybe that’s it,’ he said. ‘The plutocrats have had any number of opportunities to press home their advantage. I’ve seen war fought badly, but never quite *this* badly before. Mistletoe, what do you have to say for yourself?’ The Doctor turned to the auditor.

Mistletoe removed his glasses and scrubbed them indignantly. ‘I have no wish to comment on confidential market information.’

‘According to these files, this war has been going on for years,’ continued Anji.

‘Centuries,’ the Doctor corrected her. ‘The two sides have been locked in a stalemate for four hundred years. With neither side making any progress. And that is, I imagine, precisely what the plutocrats intend. Their strategy is not to achieve victory, but to preserve the status quo.’

‘But that’s ridiculous,’ said Anji. ‘Think of the waste, for a start. All those hundreds of thousands of lives –’

‘I know,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s obscene. Some people give the orders,’ he brandished the file of papers, ‘and other people die for them.’ He threw it on the desk in disgust. ‘Now,’ he turned back to Mistletoe. ‘Either your commanders are incompetent in the extreme, which I do not believe, or this conflict is being deliberately prolonged. Why?’

Mistletoe sniffed. ‘I am merely a humble auditor –’

‘You know why, don’t you?’ The Doctor fixed him with his clear blue eyes.

‘My function is purely to inspect and survey the individual stations, to

see that each station is managed as cost-effectively as possible. I make *recommendations*. I suggest how greater profitability may be achieved and how losses may be most fruitfully adjusted.’ He paused to lick his lips. ‘But I am only accountable to my masters within the plutocratic empire, the actuaries. I know nothing of their long-term goals or business strategies.’ He smiled wetly. ‘Mine is not to reason why. Mine is but to do or die.’

‘...Into the valley of death rode the six hundred’,’ said the Doctor, snapping into anger. He slapped the file of papers against Mistletoe’s fat chest. Reports and receipts and invoices slithered out. ‘And this is no blunder,’ the Doctor yelled, barely controlling himself. ‘This is a calculated, premeditated massacre!’

Mistletoe glared indignantly at the Doctor, but didn’t reply.

Suddenly calm, the Doctor turned back to Anji. ‘However, there’s one thing that doesn’t fit. This station.’

‘This station?’

‘They were conducting research into time travel. They thought they would use it to break the deadlock.’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘But why? Why develop time travel to help win a war you don’t want to end? No, the research here was for another purpose entirely. I wonder –’

The intercom buzzed. ‘Doctor?’ said Fitz. ‘We’re ready... there’s one of them outside your door right now. I think it’s Norton.’

The Doctor nodded to Anji. She prepared her TR mask. Mistletoe picked up his survival suit and began to pour himself into it.

‘You know what to do,’ the Doctor told Fitz.

‘Yes,’ said Fitz. ‘When I say run, run.’

The soldier waited in the shadows, his wooden-box head turning left and right as he surveyed the surroundings with his clock face.

Shaw ducked behind the bulkhead and squatted beside Fitz, patting his shoulder. ‘Ready?’

Fitz nodded. ‘I hope this works.’

‘So do I,’ said Shaw. He retrieved one of the clockwork grenades from his TR suit pocket. It was awkward to transfer it between his thick, gloved hands. He managed to give the winding key two twists. Two minutes.’

‘Two minutes. Right.’ Fitz handed him another grenade.

Shaw leaned forward to check on Norton again. He was facing the other way. Shaw lifted one grenade into his field of vision, and wrenched out the key. Two minutes and counting. He repeated the process with the other grenade. Then, gently, he tossed one grenade down the corridor.

The grenade rolled across the floor, bouncing against the wall a yard or so from Norton’s feet. The second grenade scuttled to a rest beside it.

Shaw returned to the shadows and motioned to Fitz to shift further down the passage. Then they huddled, and waited.

A minute slowly passed.

'How much damage will they do?' muttered Fitz.

'Enough,' said Shaw. He counted in his head. Thirty seconds to go.

From this position, he could see Norton, backlit in a halo. The soldier turned towards them unseeingly. He did not notice the two explosives nestling at his feet. His head revolved away from them.

Ten. Nine. Eight –

There was a sudden flash and a deafening crack. A blast of hot air roared around them.

The corridor billowed with oily flame and thick black smoke, the fire licking hungrily over the walls. The wall paint bubbled and popped under the intense heat.

Impossibly, Norton was still standing. His uniform hung raggedly from his charred, glistening body. His chest had been torn open to expose a skeletal framework of smouldering wood and metal, his ribcage housing a system of wheels and cogs and a central pendulum, everything coated in a dripping tar of black flesh. His head remained as a wooden box, but the clock had smashed, the glass melting. The numbered paper face had crinkled up and blackened.

He looked left and right, staring uncomprehendingly at the fire that feasted upon his blistering arms and legs. Then he gave a long, hideous scream of agony, a guttural moan, and lurched forward, his legs giving way to send him crashing to the ground.

There was a sudden whooshing.

The fire vanished. Norton reappeared by the door, exactly as before. And, at his feet, there were two grenades about to detonate.

Norton took one long look at the grenades and turned and fled.

'Now! Run!' shouted Fitz.

The door swung open and three orange-and-grey body-suited figures emerged. One by one, they began to walk towards Fitz and Shaw.

Ten. Nine. Eight –

'Come on!' Shaw stood up and waved to them. The three figures broke into a slow jog. Shaw and Fitz reached out and grabbed them and piled them forwards, and down to the floor. . .

There was a sudden flash and a deafening bang. Hot air blasted over them, the flames sucking at the air, the paint on the walls blistering.

But it had worked.

The Doctor offered Anji a mug of steaming coffee. She clasped it gratefully,

her hands warming. The medical bay was cold and grim; and the gloom, the bare concrete walls and the condensation on the quarantine window made it seem colder and grimmer still. After they had secured the door, the Doctor had removed his TR suit and rattled through the drawers and supplies. Eventually he emerged with a coffee jar and five chipped mugs.

Fitz and Shaw had pulled up chairs. Mistletoe sat to one side, his pride deflated. 'Are they still outside?' said Fitz.

Anji shivered involuntarily. On their way down the stairwell, they had spotted four figures standing on the level above them, watching. Ash, Norton, Bragg and Lane. They had turned their wooden faces to each other as though conversing. They had begun to make their unhurried way down the stairs. Their footsteps had chimed in unison.

'I don't know,' said the Doctor. He sipped and grinned.

'So we're trapped again,' muttered Shaw. 'I don't see that this has got us –'

'They can't get in. They can't do us any harm.' The Doctor looked around the ward. 'And whilst we're in here –'

He fell silent as the intercom crackled. Something rasped. 'Doctor.'

The Doctor answered casually. 'Yes?'

At first, Anji didn't recognise the hissing, gravelly voice. But then as it continued she realised it was Lane, her voice slowed down, each syllable accompanied by ticking and whirring. '*You can run. You can hide. But you cannot escape.*'

No one spoke. Anji and Fitz exchanged a horrified glance. Shaw shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Mistletoe fiddled with his cuffs, his face a picture of pure terror.

'Soon. You will all become like us. Your time will come.'

Chapter Eight

Fitz shivered and pulled his jacket around him. The disinfectant air made his skin crawl. He hated that starchy, scrubbed hospital smell, he remembered it from his childhood. But that wasn't what made him uncomfortable, it was the reminder of his own mortality. The gloomy shelves filled with surgical instruments, prosthetic limbs, drip feeds and oxygen masks, each one a testament to human frailty. Just the thought of it made Fitz feel clammy and ill. He swallowed with some difficulty.

Shaw had lit a cigarette and leaned against one of the DT units. He glowered into the distance like a condemned man as his smoke meandered away into the air. Mistletoe sat in the far corner, dabbing at his face and muttering petulantly to himself.

Anji had curled up on one of the beds, her feet tucked beneath her, her shirt crumpled and stained. Her eyes were closed and she looked peaceful, but Fitz could tell she wasn't asleep.

And the Doctor paced about the room, occasionally pausing as if on the tip of some realisation only to shake his head and return to his pacing with renewed vigour. He wore a dark, haunted expression. This business had got him rattled. Which scared Fitz even more.

He glanced up at the clock. They had been stuck in here for forty minutes. He imagined Lane and the others standing motionless in the darkness of the corridor outside, like shop-window dummies at night, their clock faces whirring away. Counting out the minutes until they would snap into life again. Tick-tock, tick-tock. He shivered again.

Fitz looked to the Doctor, searching for some flicker of hope. The Doctor shook his head and coughed, hard, putting a handkerchief to his mouth. The Doctor's skin had become ashen; he had grown visibly weaker over the last half hour, ever since he had spoken to Lane over the intercom. Or at least, with whatever had possessed Lane.

The Doctor had listened to Lane's threats, shuffling on the spot patiently, before asking, 'What do you want?'

Lane had rasped back loudly through the speaker. *'To be.'*

'To be? To be what?'

'To exist.'

'Ah, I see. You have no bodies of your own. You need hosts.'

'You will become like us.'

The Doctor looked troubled. 'And what happens to the poor unfortunates you take over?'

'They are no more,' Lane stated.

'You mean they're all dead,' said Fitz. The Doctor held up a hand to quieten him.

'They gave themselves willingly,' said Lane.

'How?' said the Doctor. 'I don't think you asked, did you? What was it? You offered them the opportunity to change their pasts... No, you gave them the *ability*, didn't you? Which meant that they would negate their lives...'

'How does that work?' said Anji.

The Doctor turned to her. 'Negate. Cancel. *Undo.*' He gestured as he explained. 'Our lives have meaning because of the immutability of our pasts. We are who we are because of what has happened to us, what we have experienced, what we have done, correct? So if we destroy our pasts, it follows that we destroy ourselves.'

'But they can go back and change stuff... ' said Fitz.

'Exactly. They can... regress through their own time streams.'

Anji said, 'And so anyone who they give this ability to will go back until they find something they want to change -'

'And, as they change it, they cease to be,' nodded the Doctor. 'They become a shell. A hollow, vacant shell, to be occupied.'

'So it's like in the paradox you mentioned,' said Fitz. The Doctor frowned, so he explained. '“To change your past, you must have first done what you want to change, and so therefore you can't have changed it...”'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes. Well, almost. It's the corollary. If you can change your own past, then everything that has ever happened to you is negated. You become an... unperson.'

Anji said, 'And these things are unpeople?'

'No. I don't think so.' The Doctor returned to the intercom. 'What are you? Where are you from?'

The radio hissed. *'You would not understand.'*

'I might. Try me.'

'We come from the darkness. The cold. The outside.'

'The outside? The outside of where?'

'*Time.*' Lane's voice gained an edge. *'You have no choice. You will leave sooner or later. We will be waiting for you.'*

'But you can't get in,' said the Doctor derisively. 'You can't draw time back that far, can you? You can't undo that particular error?' But the intercom cut off with a snap and crackle.

Shaw got up. 'So we just sit here for the rest of our lives?' he said sourly. 'Great plan, Doctor.'

The Doctor ignored him. 'There must be a way,' he whispered. 'There must be.'

'A way out?' said Fitz.

'A way to *stop* them,' said the Doctor.

'But surely, if we know how they take people over, we're all right?' said Anji. 'As long as *we* aren't tempted to go back and change anything in our pasts –'

The Doctor regarded her ruefully. 'Is there nothing in your past you wouldn't want to alter?' He fixed her with his pale blue eyes. 'No opportunities missed? No wrong decisions? No mistakes?'

Anji's eyes watered but she said nothing.

'No regretted parting words? No loved ones you wish could be saved?'

Anji wiped away her tears. She took in a long breath, closing her eyes. 'That's *not fair*,' she muttered.

'I'm sorry, I understand –' began the Doctor.

'No, you don't understand, do you? How can you say that?' She burst into anger and yelled at him. 'You don't know what it feels like to care, to really *care*. . . you heartless bastard.'

The Doctor was shaken. 'I still have one heart left, you know.'

Anji shook her head furiously 'With Dave, with Dave. . . I know I shouldn't have trusted Silver, I made a mistake, how many times have I got to say sorry –'

The Doctor smiled sadly. 'Exactly. We have all made errors. That's what makes us who we are. We make mistakes and we live with them. But it is also human to want to go back and make amends. That is what regret *is*. And sometimes we can never forgive ourselves.' He walked around the ward. 'But these creatures. . . they will use that regret to control you. They will take you back to your worst, your blackest moment and give you the chance to do things differently. Nobody would be able to resist that.' The Doctor looked at Fitz, Anji, Shaw and Mistletoe. 'Nobody. Not even me.'

Anji turned away, sniffing, and walked over to the sink. Fitz watched her go, his own thoughts preying on his mind. Everyone had something they regretted. Fitz could think of dozens of examples from his own life. Too many failed romances. He had convinced himself that was not a problem; he was Fitz-about-the universe, after all. He was young, doing the whole James Bond bit, breaking the girls' hearts. But really, he knew, he couldn't

pretend not to care for ever. All those one night stands were starting to look like too many wasted opportunities.

The Doctor was right, thought Fitz. The urge to go back and do things differently was irresistible. It was always there, a nagging sense of regret, a part of him. He had too many ghosts.

She wasn't going to get any sleep. The footsteps scuffing, the electronic hum of the Bakelite fridges and the constant, laborious tick-tock of the clock. Her stomach had become upset by the constant anxiety and tension, and she had a dullish, persistent headache. 'Doctor.' Anji pulled herself upright, and slid uncomfortably off the bed.

The Doctor smiled. 'Anji.'

Anji looked around to check no one was listening. Mistletoe sat gloomily, his bowler hat in his lap. Shaw stared at the wall like a dead robot. Fitz hunched over his knees. He snorted with a jolt and fidgeted in his sleep. 'I've been thinking,' she said softly, taking the Doctor to one side. 'About this war.'

The Doctor grinned back conspiratorially. 'Yes?'

'Let's assume the plutocrats are trying to prolong the war. That they've been deliberately making the wrong moves just to maintain the stalemate. But we don't know why they're doing it.' Anji adjusted her shirt, tugging it over her belt, and leaned against the rough concrete wall. 'But the point is, this is a *plutocratic* empire, isn't it? So the objective isn't victory *per se*.'

'It's to make a profit,' filled in the Doctor.

'So what if all that stuff about the defaulters breaking the terms of their contract is just a trumped-up excuse?'

The Doctor was curious. 'Go on.'

'Could they be making the war more protracted because they *need* it? Because it's good for business?'

'Because it makes money.' The Doctor considered, then shrugged. 'A war economy? But —'

'But it fits,' said Anji, determined to press home her point. 'Look, wars are always good news, commercially speaking. There's the massive investment in defence industries, for a start.'

'And in technological research,' mused the Doctor. 'War accelerates the rate of scientific advance. Computers, atomic energy, antibiotics. Given a long enough war, they could even develop time travel, I suppose.'

'Exactly.' Anji nodded. 'And it gives a huge boost to manufacturing industries and self-sustainability, because you have to grow your own food and create your own goods. Every war sees huge investment in infrastructure.' She stroked back a stray hair. 'Economies never run more efficiently'

than during a war.'

'So they artificially engineer a conflict, just to reap the economic and technological benefits?' said the Doctor. He put his hands in his pockets. 'That seems a little harsh.'

'But that's exactly what they are doing. The financial rewards are *huge*. Think about it. All of the inefficiencies in the economy are wiped out – you have rationing, so you can control what people eat, what they wear, cut everything back to the bare essentials. After all, if there's a war on, people expect a little hardship. You can keep wages low, drop the standard of living. In fact, it's good for morale. During peacetime you'd never get a workforce to submit to those conditions. But if it's for a war, if it's for God, King and country, then people will sweat every waking hour for monkey nuts. They'll surrender their savings for war bonds. Whole families will go to work in the factories, and they'll be grateful for the opportunity.'

The Doctor stared at her doubtfully.

'After all, what's the alternative?' said Anji. 'The workers can't protest or strike, because they'd be seen as collaborating with the enemy.'

'I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of you during a business meeting, Anji.'

'No, you wouldn't,' she said with a quick smile. 'But just because I know how the system works, doesn't mean I approve of it. I don't. The system sucks. But there's not much you can do about it, is there?'

'So,' said the Doctor. 'A phoney war lasting centuries just to keep the account books ticking over. But ... ' he paused. 'What about the loss of life? I mean, all the soldiers' deaths can't benefit the economy –'

'Yes, they can.' Shaw strolled over to them casually. Anji stared at him in disbelief. He had heard every word. 'The soldiers are conscripted because they are in debt to the plutocratic empire. Because they're an unnecessary burden on the economy. The unemployed, the destitute and the bankrupt, they're the ones who end up on the front line.' He dragged on a cigarette. 'If they had any funds, they'd buy themselves out. But they can't.'

'What?' said Anji.

'All the soldiers who are sent to their deaths are non-viables,' said Shaw. He looked her up and down. 'The plutocratic empire is wiping out its bad debtors. Cutting away the dead wood.'

'But doesn't that worry you –' said the Doctor.

'No.' Shaw smiled, revealing bad teeth. 'Because they wouldn't kill me, you see. I'm worth too much.' He took another drag on his cigarette. 'It makes perfect sense. The empire wants to cut its losses.'

'But all the soldiers being killed –'

'So what?' said Shaw 'The *plutocratic ideal* is the only way.'

Anji glared at him and crossed the ward to where Mistletoe was sitting. He looked up at her, a satisfied smirk glued to his lips. 'Yes?'

'You know all about this, don't you?' said Anji. 'About the war? About all the people being sent to their deaths for profit?'

Mistletoe wiped his waxy forehead. He stood up, placing his bowler on to his head. 'I am merely a servant of the *powers that be*. A humble auditor, my dear.' He took a slow step towards her. 'Yes. I was wondering how long it would take you to work it out.' He looked over at the Doctor. 'A means of divesting the empire of surplus labour. A means of increasing productivity. A means of generating wealth whilst also... *downsizing*. Streamlining. Disposing of unwanted bad investments.'

'That's horrible,' said Anji.

'Is it? It's pure business. You, of all people, should understand that.' His eyes gleamed. 'There are no ethics in business, my dear, only profit margins.'

'That's not true,' Anji said.

'You can make either the ethical choice, or the most profitable. The two are... mutually exclusive.'

'You're wrong,' said Anji. 'There is always another way.'

'You're sentimental, my dear, and delude yourself.' Mistletoe smiled. 'You have no stomach to see things through to their logical conclusion. I can live with my conscience. Can you live with yours?'

The Doctor rounded on him. 'Their logical conclusion? So you are utterly amoral –'

'Amoral?' Mistletoe almost laughed at the novelty. He approached the Doctor. 'And what is your morality worth, in hard currency? Please tell me. Because then I could balance it against a man's life.'

'You can't put a value on people's lives... ' said the Doctor. As Mistletoe walked up to him, the Doctor stopped to cough, wincing at a sudden twinge of pain.

'Oh, but you can. Everyone has their price. But "morality"... morality has no value. It is a worthless luxury. Mr Shaw, remind me, what is the *plutocratic ideal*?'

'Whatever decision gives the greatest reward is the correct decision,' said Shaw automatically.

'Exactly,' agreed Mistletoe. 'An undeniable and universal truth.'

'So if you don't believe in morality,' said Anji, 'what do you believe in?'

'Oh, I believe in lots of things, Miss Kapoor. I believe in firm leadership. I believe in taking a strong lead. I believe in rationalisation of the workforce. I believe in accurate stock-taking. I believe in fiscal studies. I believe in balanced budgets. And above all I believe in market forces.' Mistletoe

smiled beatifically. 'I believe they deliver... *efficiency savings*. That is the beauty of the private sector, you see.'

The Doctor coughed and doubled up, heaving with the strain. Fitz watched him nervously, unsure what to do. On the other side of the bed, Anji rubbed the Doctor's back.

With a frown, the Doctor cleared his throat. His forehead was soaked in perspiration. He rested gently back on to the bed, and Anji loosened his cravat. He looked up at them weakly. 'It's odd,' he said. 'I don't normally get ill, do I?' He attempted a smile. 'I'm sure it will pass. Don't look so worried, Fitz. I'll be fine.' His head fell on to the pillow, and his eyes closed. 'Given time.'

Fitz rested his hands on the back of the chair and pressed his fingers into the Doctor's velvet coat. Ever since London, a shadow had fallen across the Doctor. He had changed. The enthusiasm was still there, the inquisitiveness, the eager grin. And for a while he had seemed joyously unaffected. But soon it became apparent that he had lost something. Not just his heart, but a part of who he was. The part that made him extraordinary.

He was quick to tire, and given to irritability, even sudden explosions of anger. He would try not to show it, but he no longer had the stamina he once had, and would seem surprised at his own pain and exhaustion. It took longer for him to recover. Ever since that terrible day in the Kingdom of Beasts, the Doctor had become almost human. With a human's frailties.

Anji fussed over the Doctor. She had prepared an oxygen mask, tube and cylinder just in case. The Doctor's chest rose and fell as she unbuttoned his shirt. It opened to reveal the scar that ran across the right side of his ribcage. The ridge of tissue that had healed over the wound.

That would be the one thing I would go back and change, thought Fitz. And, looking at Anji's concerned face, it was probably true for her. And the Doctor too. That would be the irresistible temptation.

'I do hope his condition hasn't depreciated,' called Mistletoe from across the ward. He chuckled lightly. 'That would be most unfortunate.'

Anji glowered at him, before returning to Fitz. 'What's wrong with him?' she whispered, indicating the sleeping Doctor.

'I don't know. It could be anything. He just needs some rest, I think.'

Anji's eyes widened. 'You know that's not it. Ever since he lost his heart —'

'His spare heart, you mean,' said Fitz. He shivered involuntarily. His memories of what had happened in the Kingdom were muggy and indistinct, as if half-remembered through a veil of darkness and hysteria. The enemy had been gathering outside, and a heady sense of fear and anticipa-

tion had filled the air. The Doctor had been laid out on the stone slabs, his skin a bloodless white, his limbs thin and wasted. He could barely speak or move.

And then Sabbath had come. Fitz could still picture his face. His pale skin, his shaved skull, his twinkling eyes set deep into his jowly features. His thick trenchcoat draped about him like a demon's wings. His expression of sneering amusement.

The Doctor had screamed. But had the Doctor screamed before, or after? Fitz wasn't sure. He couldn't remember the operation, but there must have been one. He wanted to discuss it with Anji, to check that his memory of events was correct, but he had always been afraid to ask. Reluctant to revisit that particular point in history as if it would bring it back again. Even as Fitz remembered, the sick sensation of terror returned.

After the operation, before or after the scream, Sabbath had reached into the Doctor's chest cavity. A black slime sluiced out of the wound, displaced by Sabbath's rubber-gloved hand. He held it there for some seconds, then lifted his fist out of the Doctor's ribcage, and raised it to show to Fitz, Anji, and the others assembled in the chamber. His arm dripped in an oily bile.

He had the Doctor's black heart. Glistening. Pulsing with life.

'It's bound to make some difference to him,' said Anji. 'We know it's made a difference.'

Fitz didn't reply, but he knew Anji was right.

'It's hard to say *how* exactly but. . .' Anji brushed away the Doctor's hair from his brow. 'I wonder, sometimes, just what it was that was taken. I mean, how would you feel? To have an empty space inside you.'

'To become mortal,' muttered Fitz.

'That's it,' said Anji. 'That's the word. *Mortal*. Looking at him here, he seems so *vulnerable*. Not like the Doctor at all.'

'He's still the Doctor,' said Fitz, but he was unconvinced. 'D'you think he can live without it? Really?'

'I don't know,' said Anji quietly. 'Sometimes, he's just back to how he was, and I feel sure. . . it seems that everything's all right again. Like it never happened. But when he's like this. . .' She trailed a finger across the Doctor's scar. 'I don't know.'

'So what are we supposed to do? Get the old one back?' said Fitz deliberately. Anji looked at him as though he was an idiot. 'Or go out and get him a new one?'

'It's up to him, if he even wants two hearts again,' said Anji. 'It's always up to him, isn't it?' She folded his shirt back over his chest, and put a

hand on his forehead. 'I think you're right. He just needs some time.' She unfolded a blanket over him.

The ward smelled of stale cigarette smoke that fogged the air. No one had spoken for hours, everyone lost in their own thoughts. The Doctor hadn't woken up. Fitz watched him, watching his chest rise and fall. He found the Doctor's calmness somehow reassuring.

'We can't stop them, can we?' Shaw loaded the barrels of his pistol. 'Whatever we do, they'll just undo. Lane's right. They'll get us in the end.' He laughed hollowly. 'They're just biding their time.'

Anji stopped her pacing to glare at him. 'There must be a way.'

Mistletoe leafed through his clipboard notes. 'That would appear to be rather un-likely, my dear. But groundless optimism is such a comfort, is it not?'

'We can't harm them. We can't get out,' muttered Shaw. 'We can't call for help. What do *you* suggest we do?'

'I don't know,' said Anji.

'Right. They're indestructible.' Shaw steadied his gun and moved to the door. 'We may as well walk out now –'

'Indestructible?' said the Doctor. He opened his eyes and sat up. 'No, I don't think so.' He coughed and patted his chest experimentally. All seemed to be in order, so he fastened his shirt and swung his legs to the floor.

'But I shot Lane,' said Shaw flatly. 'I put six bullets into her. And it made no difference.'

'Yes.' The Doctor collected his coat and shrugged into it. 'But there is something very obvious we've overlooked. Fitz, Anji –'

Fitz stepped forward, and the Doctor took him and Anji into the quarantine chamber. The room was dark and uninviting. Just two beds and a stained steel sink. Fitz exchanged a wary look with Anji.

The Doctor crouched down and collected something from beneath one of the beds. He showed it to them. The halothane cylinder.

'Gas?' said Anji.

'When the soldiers were in here, we used halothane to keep them asleep.'

'Yes. Then they woke up,' Fitz pointed out.

'No. Well, yes, but only because the halothane had run out. Before then, they were *affected*.'

'Oh,' said Anji. 'So you're going to use it to knock them out now?'

'No, Anji. No, I'm afraid that it wouldn't be enough.' The Doctor pressed the cylinder into her hands and sprinted back to the medical bay. Fitz and

Anji followed doubtfully, emerging as the Doctor rushed over to Shaw. 'This is a military isolation station, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Shaw.

'And presumably you would have a supply of armaments with which to defend yourselves?'

'We've got everything we need to drive off a defaulter attack. Small mortars, clockwork grenades, incendiaries, AT shells...'

'Chemical weapons?'

Shaw shrugged. 'There's a few cylinders of mustard gas in the basement.'

'Mustard gas...' muttered the Doctor. He nodded vigorously. 'Perfect.'

'You think you can gas them?' said Fitz.

The Doctor grinned. 'Yes. Yes, I think I can. All we need to do is release it into the station's atmosphere.'

'But what'd be the point?' said Anji. 'They'll just draw back time, won't they?'

'I know,' said the Doctor. 'But mustard gas, you see, is a relatively slow-acting toxin. It takes a while before it gives symptoms. There's a *delayed effect*.' He gestured excitedly as he explained. 'After exposure to the gas, an hour, maybe two, passes before the victims are even aware of what has happened to them. And by that point, it is already *too late*. Cell damage has already occurred, the agent has already been transported into the heart and lungs. They are effectively already dead.'

'That's horrible,' said Anji.

'Yes. But in this case it's exactly what we need.'

Fitz suddenly realised. 'Hang on. So even if they go back two minutes, they won't be able to do anything about it?' he said. 'It'll be too late? They'll still die?'

'Exactly, Fitz. They could go back a whole hour and it wouldn't make a difference. By the time they realise what's happening, they'll have passed the point of no return. They won't be able to rewind time and prevent us from releasing the gas. They won't be able to escape.'

'I don't want to rain on your parade,' said Anji. 'But doesn't mustard gas, um, smell of mustard? They'll notice it, surely?'

'Pure mustard gas is odourless and colourless. It is completely undetectable.' The Doctor turned back to Shaw. 'Well?'

'Ingenious,' Shaw said cautiously. 'It could even work.'

'Good, I'm glad it meets with your approval.' The Doctor grinned. 'And the supply is located in the basement?'

'Yes. But it's flooded. And you'd have to get down there first.'

'That won't be a problem.'

'I've thought of one,' said Anji. 'What if they leave before the gas takes effect?'

The Doctor stared at her quizzically. 'Yes. Yes, you're right Anji. How to keep them in? I hadn't thought of that.' He frowned and looked at Shaw expectantly.

'It can be sorted,' said Shaw. 'There's only one way in and out of this base. The main airlock. And it's on a dualmotive circuit – if you know what you're doing, the mechanism can be jammed. Temporarily, of course.'

'Really?' The Doctor was delighted. 'Good. Mr Shaw, if you would be so good as to explain to me how to jam the airlock, Anji and I will go and deal with it, while –'

'We have to put these suits back on?' said Anji, grimacing.

'I'm afraid so.' The Doctor addressed Shaw. 'In the meantime, you and Fitz will go and release the gas. Then we'll meet back here. Any questions?'

Fitz looked at Anji, who looked at Shaw, who shook his head.

'I have one query,' piped up Mistletoe. He strolled over to them, wiping his spectacles with his handkerchief. 'What is to be my role in this enterprise?'

The Doctor sighed. 'You stay here.'

Mistletoe's fat chin dropped and quivered. 'But but but,' he sputtered, 'you intend to leave me alone, with those... things out there? I should consider such a course of action to be highly improvident. Would it not be better –'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'I've had more than enough of you. You will remain here, you will lock the door and you will not let anyone in until we come back. Do you understand?'

Mistletoe put his glasses back on. 'With icy clarity, Doctor, icy clarity. Though in my opinion this entire action is most imprudent and ill-advised.'

Shaw levelled his pistol at the auditor. 'Can't I just shoot him now?'

'No. We need someone to make sure this room is kept secure.'

'And you trust him?' said Shaw incredulously.

'I think I can trust him not to leave the room, yes,' said the Doctor, and waited for Shaw to pocket his gun. 'Right. I think that's everything, shall we –'

'Doctor,' Fitz interrupted. 'These clock things. Are you sure there's no other way to defeat them –'

'No, I can't be sure. But it's our best chance. All I know is that some people have lost their lives and that countless more will die unless they are stopped.'

'How are we going to get out, if they're waiting for us?'

Beside Anji were two anonymous figures in TR suits and expressionless head-masks: Fitz and Shaw. Mistletoe watched them from the far side of the room.

'D'you have any of those clockwork grenades left?' the Doctor asked. Shaw tossed him one before taking his position at the door controls.

The Doctor studied the grenade. 'Ten seconds,' he said, twisting the mechanism. 'Now, I am going to pull out the pin as you open the door. Ready?' He tugged his TR mask into place. 'Ready?' his voice hissed into Anji's ear.

'Ready,' hissed Shaw. He flicked some switches on the panel. A bolt drew back –

The Doctor pulled out the pin.

Shaw gripped the door handle and hauled it open.

For the briefest moment, Anji made out four figures in the shadows outside. Each with a different timepiece for a head, each staring blankly forward. All perfectly motionless.

The Doctor bowled the grenade through the door. It landed at the feet of the creature that had been Bragg.

Shaw slammed the door shut and hit the switches. With a clank, it locked –

A sudden, incredibly loud explosion crashed through the air. Rather than hearing the bang, Anji felt it judder in her stomach.

The door creaked open of its own accord to reveal the four figures. They stood amidst billowing smoke, flames snapping at their smouldering flesh. Their clothes blackened and curled up. Their skin became a spitting, bubbling fat which peeled away to reveal incongruously hollow ribcages. They screamed, hideous gurgling clockwork screams, screams from a nightmare, their wooden box heads shaking frenziedly.

The screaming was replaced by a sucking, whooshing sound, like a tape spooling backwards.

'Ready,' Anji heard Shaw hiss. His hand flicked some switches. A bolt clanked back –

The Doctor nodded, but didn't remove the pin from the grenade. Instead, he pocketed it casually.

Shaw heaved the door open. Outside was an empty, gloomy corridor.

'Shall we go?' said the Doctor.

How long had it been since they had first entered the reception area and huddled around the electric heater? It seemed like years, but the place hadn't changed at all. The muddle of cables that straggled and bunched

around the floor, the television, the body-suits staring down with unseeing goggle eyes.

‘Where are they?’ whispered Anji as she followed the Doctor. She could hear her muffled, nervous voice in her earphone. Her shallow breathing was amplified within the confines of the mask, and she could feel the tight thump of her heart.

‘We should be careful.’ The Doctor approached the main controls, a wall-mounted unit covered with knobs and bulbs. He gripped the side and levered the front free. The box contained a mess of thick wires, valves and transistors, all frosted in dust.

As the Doctor began to tug and twist at the electronics, Anji circled around, not daring to breathe. The airlock door looked heavy and imposing, its rivets smoothed over in greenish-grey paint. The clock set into the near wall tocked and ticked as normal. Three chairs gathered around the dead heater.

Something creaked above her. The Doctor replaced the cover and flicked down every bell-switch. Each corresponding light blanked. ‘It worked,’ he announced. ‘Shaw knows his stuff. The airlock is locked-off. No one can get in or out.’

‘So now we really are trapped?’ said Anji with a bravado she didn’t feel. She headed back to the door, and stepped into the corridor. Emptiness stretched away in both directions. They were alone. Now all they had to do was get back to the medical bay.

‘Doctor?’ said Anji, turning. But there was no one behind her. Her insides fluttered with the first suspicions of terror. ‘Doctor?’ She retraced her steps, back into the reception area. But the room she returned to was empty. Just shadows and the doleful eyes of the TR suits.

‘Doctor, where are you?’ she whispered. He must be able to hear her through the suit’s radio. He must. ‘Doctor!’

Sensing a presence, Anji span around, facing the airlock door. But it remained unmoving. She turned again, back to the hollow, deflated TR body-suits, then edged back to the door.

He had vanished.

He could hear them ticking. It wasn’t his imagination. He wished it was.

Fitz halted on the stairwell, and stared down into the crisscrossing shadows and flickering lamps. Droplets of water streamed into the bottomless darkness.

On the level below them there stood four figures. They were on the far side of the stairwell, their backs to the concrete wall. They were absolutely motionless, their bodies frozen in the sickly orange glow, and stared blankly

with their round dial faces. They did not breathe. They did not look up. They simply waited. Their heads ticked and tocked and ticked and tocked.

‘What now?’ gulped Fitz.

‘I don’t think we have any choice,’ Shaw answered in his earphone.

‘We go back.’

‘No,’ said Shaw. ‘We go on.’

‘What?’ And Fitz realised Shaw wasn’t joking.

Shaw began to move down the stairs. Fitz swallowed his nerves and followed. Perhaps these creatures were in some sort of dormant state. Recharging. It didn’t seem very likely. It seemed much more likely they would spring into life and reach out their corpse-white, human hands –

Fitz watched Shaw intently, matching him step for step. The four figures were on the outside of the steps; he and Shaw would have to walk down on the inside, where the descent was steeper and the footholds were little more than a few inches.

Fitz held his breath. A few more steps and they would draw level with the creatures. They would be within arms’ reach. But the transformed soldiers had not looked up. They had not shown any reaction to their approach.

They maintained their pace of descent. Fitz gripped the railing tightly, working his way down, hand-over-hand. He looked over the creatures. The one that had been Norton was on the same step as him. His clock face appeared to be looking straight through him. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Tick-tock.

Fitz slowly took his first step down and away from the creatures. Relief surged over him. The creatures had not moved. He took another step downwards, and another. Gradually, he relaxed his grip on the central rail and returned to the outside of the stairwell.

But he had to look back. He glanced back up to where the creatures were standing.

As one, they turned to look at him.

Anji found herself in a nightmare. The survival suit made her every movement sluggish, and her knees and ankles ached. Her breathing was restricted to gasping in rubbery, filtered air. Her TR gas mask rubbed and pinched her skin. Her back itched with sweat, running down inside her shirt. All she could make out through the goggles was a narrow tunnel.

She wanted to rip off the mask, get out into the real air and scream. But she couldn’t. Her heart thudded out rapidly and she felt sick with adrenaline and panic. She was alone. She had lost the Doctor, and she had no idea where she was. All the corridors looked the same.

'Doctor,' she yelled hoarsely. 'Doctor, where are you?' She collapsed against a wall, her eyes swimming with tears. Her vision had become streaked and distorted, but she couldn't even rub her eyes.

She blinked away the tears and took some slow breaths. Get a grip, she told herself sternly. She had to concentrate on keeping her mind clear. Gradually, as she counted to twenty, the panic subsided.

She had ended up in another dark, metal-walled passage. Now she could see and think clearly, she recognised it and knew she could find her way back to the stairwell. She would go back to the medical bay and wait for the Doctor there. That was the plan.

The icy water came as a shock to Fitz as he waded in up to his waist. He slogged his way through it, shoving the scummy, foamy liquid aside and hauling himself forward by struts set into the wall. His legs immediately numbed and each step became heavy and laborious, the water dragging on his TR suit. The splashing reverberated in the tunnel, forming an eerie whooshing in the gloom. Above them, pipes drummed and gurgled.

After an age of darkness and cold they reached their goal. Rows of shelves appeared out of the blackness, each lined with boxes and crates.

Shaw moved deeper into the storeroom, grabbed on to the shelving framework and lifted himself out of the water. Fitz climbed up after him, panting with the cold and the effort, his joints rigid with pain.

By the time Fitz had regained sensation in his hands, Shaw had found the mustard gas. A dozen or so anonymous cylinders, their brown labels crinkled and illegible.

'This is it.' Shaw rotated the rusted wheel at one end of a cylinder. The cylinder hissed sharply and a jet of cloud steamed out of the nozzle. The mist furled and ebbed over the surface of the water, wisping away into nothing.

Fitz inhaled cautiously. The gas mask would filter out the poison, he knew, but it was still a terrifying prospect. Any exposure to this atmosphere would mean certain death.

Even before she entered the medical bay, Anji knew something was wrong. The door had been opened and a weak light strayed across the corridor floor. As she drew nearer she felt an oppressive horror, a sinking sense of the inevitable. But she had no choice but to step through it.

The creatures were waiting for her. Two figures, one waiting between the beds, the other standing on the opposite side by the sink. Each in a drab military uniform and each with a ornamented wooden box for a head. They

turned towards her and she found herself staring at two whirring clocks. They jerked into movement and strolled forwards.

Anji looked around in desperation. She was on her own. Her mind racing, she turned to leave. But a third soldier was waiting next to the door. He moved quickly to block her exit.

Panicking, Anji backed towards the quarantine area. As she tried to open the airlock, she found it wouldn't budge. She glanced in through the window –

Mistletoe was inside, his clipboard clasped to his chest. He stared back at her with an expression of utter alarm.

Anji dashed over to the control panel and pressed the door switch. Nothing happened. She tried again, but to no effect. She leaned into the intercom.

'Mistletoe, let me in –'

She turned. The three transformed soldiers advanced steadily towards her, shoving the beds out of the way. She moved back towards the airlock. 'Let me in,' she screamed. 'Mistletoe!'

The soldiers reached out their wasted, pallid hands.

There was a grinding and the door behind her swung open. Anji fell into the airlock and the door slammed shut.

The inner airlock door cranked open and she found herself in the isolation chamber. The wall-clock seemed to be behaving as normal, so she unstrapped her mask and took in several lungfuls of the cool, disinfected air.

'You took your bloody time,' she rounded on Mistletoe.

'I can only offer my heartfelt apologies.' Mistletoe watched her carefully. 'Your condition has not depreciated, I am to presume?'

'What happened?' she said, catching her breath, too tired for anger. 'What are you doing in here?'

'I regret to inform you that the medical bay became compromised, which necessitated a strategic withdrawal,' he indicated the bare, dismal room. 'I managed to configure the circuits to be secured from within.'

Anji looked out through the window. The thing that had been Bragg began to prod at the control panel. Ash and Norton walked up to the glass and flattened their hands against it. Anji stepped back, her mouth drying.

'May I enquire as to the status of the Doctor?' asked Mistletoe innocently.

Anji struggled to piece together an answer. 'We got separated. I don't know what happened.'

'Oh dear,' agreed Mistletoe. 'Oh dear. That is most un-fortunate.'

Anji glared at him. 'I didn't know you cared.'

‘After due consideration and review, I have arrived at the conclusion that the Doctor is of... *inestimable value*. Quite, quite priceless. And although his conduct has left much to be desired, I am prepared to be magnanimous...’

‘Yes, well,’ said Anji, ‘you know what they say. His heart is in the right place.’

Mistletoe was momentarily taken aback, then he beamed. ‘Yes. Yes, it is.’

Chapter Nine

'Anji?' The Doctor whispered. His voice whispered back after a delay. He walked down the corridor, through the brooding shadows, through the greenish-grey bulkheads. Past the wall-clocks; some stationary, some tick-tocking, some whirring with accelerated time. The base was as dark and silent as an abandoned mausoleum.

It had happened all-too fleetingly, like a sleight of hand. He had rewired the airlock mechanism as Anji kept watch behind him. But as he had turned, he had found himself alone. She must have wandered off. Why did they always have to wander off? He'd called out her name and searched down the corridors. The radio had crackled and swooshed in his ear but there had been no reply.

But she couldn't have left the room without him noticing. She would have responded to his calls.

'Anji?' To his left was the door to the officers' mess. The Doctor stooped inside. He recognised most of the shapes in the blackness. The chairs, the stove, the fridge, cupboards and sink. The Doctor reached for the light switch and it flickered on hesitantly.

The hands on the wall-clock span at a rate of a day per second.

The Doctor opened a cupboard. Inside, the labels had peeled away from the tins, crinkling to a yellowy-brown. The tins themselves were tinged with rust that expanded over the metal, eating away at it like an acid. The contents of the tins – powder, dried fruit, pastes – became a furry white mould before drying to dust. Rot spread over the surface of the cupboard, stripping away the paintwork and cracking the wood.

The sink contained a fungus, which withdrew into the plughole, crisping away at the edges. The seat covers mildewed and disintegrated. The Doctor opened the Bakelite door of the fridge; almost immediately, all of the fruit and meat paste turned to powder.

One by one, photographs peeled and fluttered away from the wall. The Doctor picked one up. A sepia image of a starlet with an airbrushed smile. Then the image faded and the photograph crumbled in his hands.

Fugit irreparabile tempus, thought the Doctor. Years, possibly even decades had passed in this room since the attack. He turned to leave –

The creature that had been Lane stood in the doorway. The hands on her face span hungrily. She took a step forward.

Anji rubbed her goosepimpled shoulders. She had removed her TR suit and taken to one of the beds, bundling up the blankets and piling them over herself. But the cold still managed to cut a way through.

Condensation trickled down the window. On the other side, she could make out the three figures watching her. The figures with the bodies of uniformed soldiers and the heads of antique clocks.

Anji remembered visiting her grandmother's house, where a similar clock had lurked in the gloom at the top of the stairs, ticking away to itself and chiming out the quarter-hours with a jarring melancholy. She remembered that, as a young girl, she had always dashed past it without daring to look at the face. Even then, she had sensed it was alive and watching her.

Mistletoe remained in the corner of the room, rotating his bowler hat in his hands. 'You... disapprove of me?' he muttered.

'Not disapprove. Disapprove isn't a strong enough word,' said Anji. 'You remind me of people I once knew. I didn't think much of them, either.'

Mistletoe stared at her. 'My dear, I don't think you fully comprehend the pertinent realities of the situation.'

'Oh, I understand only too well.' Anji huddled under the blankets. 'This whole war of yours... all those people sent to their deaths just so your precious empire can turn a profit. You can call it cost-cutting, or efficiency savings; you can use any euphemism you like, but it's still *wrong*.'

'Wrong? My dear, the plutocratic ideal states –'

'–that you should do whatever brings the greatest reward'. Yeah, I know. But this is... evil.'

'I would most strongly refute that.' Mistletoe approached her, smiling pleasantly. 'The plutocratic approach is a force for *good*.'

'That's a rather naive viewpoint,' Anji said.

Mistletoe raised his eyebrows as if she had said something amusing. 'Let me present you with a choice, my dear. Take a system in which all non-viables are eradicated, but in which those who work hard are rewarded. A system which is efficient, prudent and robust.'

'Now, take the alternative,' Mistletoe continued, turning away, 'a system without such... incentives. Where people are rewarded irrespective of their productivity. In such a system, the burden of non-viables will ultimately prove too great, and the system will collapse, and *all* will be eradicated.'

‘That’s a very simplified way of looking at things.’

Mistletoe shook his head. ‘It represents the un-derlying hard, economic truths. Either you have a society which minimises waste and which prospers, or you have a society which suffers the wasteful and fails. Plutocracy is. . . the lesser of two evils. It is about taking the long term view.’ He smiled smugly.

‘You’re twisting things to support your argument.’

‘Oh, would that I were!’ he said. ‘In your experience, have there not been occasions where a decision you have made, to safeguard your own profits, has meant that others will lose their livelihoods?’

‘No. Not if there’s any alternative.’

‘But so often there is not an alternative, is there?’ Mistletoe sat on the bed beside her and whispered, ‘Would it not be more humane, instead of consigning them to poverty, to simply eliminate them? To put them out of their misery?’

‘Humane?’ Anji pulled away from him. ‘Your people have arranged a war for profit and you call that humane?’

‘That is correct. Profit is not without honour.’

Anji glanced out of the window at the three unmoving soldiers. ‘But you don’t see any of this profit, do you? So where does all the wealth go?’

Mistletoe turned cold. ‘That does. . . not concern us. It is enough to know that money is being made. Because money is liberty. Money is hope. Money is power. Money is. . . the only sacred thing. There is nothing quite so wonderful as money. Money makes the world go around. My dearest, dearest Anji,’ he smiled, ‘Don’t you know? It’s a rich man’s world.’

‘That’s it.’ Shaw checked a valve on one of the cylinders. The spray of mustard gas had thinned out to nothing. ‘They’re all exhausted. We’re done here.’

They had been waiting in the darkness for over half an hour. They had released the mustard gas from each cylinder, one by one, until the last vapours had dispersed. Now there was no sign of it. Fitz knew he could remove his mask and take in a lungful of air and not notice anything amiss, but by doing so he would be consigning himself to a certain, painful death.

‘What if they rewind time now?’ said Fitz.

‘It wouldn’t matter. Two minutes ago we’d already released most of the gas. And besides, they won’t notice it for an hour yet. We’re safe. All we have to do is get back to the medical bay, lock ourselves in and sit pretty till it takes effect. There’s no way they can escape it now.’ Shaw laughed. ‘They’re dead and they don’t even know it.’

‘Assuming they can be affected.’

Shaw clanged his way across the shelf towards the door. 'In which case, we're the ones who are dead. We'll find out soon enough.'

'And just hope they don't get us in the meantime.' Fitz followed him. 'Shaw, why did you save me? Earlier, I mean. During the attack.'

Shaw paused. 'Isn't it obvious?'

'You thought I might be worth something?'

'It's nothing personal,' Shaw said. 'I'd expect you to treat me the same. And I am worth a *great* deal, Fitz, remember that.'

'But that's all it comes down to, money?'

Shaw splashed down into the scummy water, sinking up to his waist. 'What else is there?'

'I don't know,' said Fitz lamely. 'Friendship and stuff.'

'Emotional attachments are without value. I can't afford to spend my time on causes which aren't going to pay.'

Fitz dropped into the water, feeling the numbing chill rise through his legs. 'Friendship isn't a waste of time.'

'Anything which doesn't bring remuneration is a waste of time. And time is money.'

'You're a cheerful sod, aren't you?' said Fitz, sloshing after Shaw. 'Just shows, money can't buy you happiness.'

'If something can't be bought, then it's not worth having.'

'Yeah, right, you might enjoy being a bloody robot. But I'd rather be happy than rich any day.'

'You'd enjoy starving to death, would you?' Shaw snorted. He disappeared through the bulkhead door.

'No, I wouldn't,' muttered Fitz as he joined Shaw in the flooded tunnel. 'But life's not like that.'

'You're wrong. That's exactly what life is like.'

The Doctor backed away from the clock-headed figure, feeling his way along the wall until he reached the sink. He watched Lane as she strode into the room, her movements perfectly regular. She turned from left and right. As she faced the Doctor, he could see the hands spinning on her mahogany carriage-case clock. She was gazing directly at him, but gave no sign that she had seen him. Instead, she proceeded to the centre of the floor.

'What do you want?' said the Doctor gently as he edged round her.

Her hands lifted, her fingers sensing the air around her. She spread her arms upwards. The tick-tocking accelerated to a drone. Then she gave a sonorous chime. The note sounded and reverberated muddily, as though underwater. She chimed again, the note's pitch wavering eerily.

'You're *feeding*,' whispered the Doctor. 'You need more *time*. Of course. The energy ratio. It's harder work going back than it is going forwards.' He inched past her towards the door. 'To go back two minutes, you would need to use up days, weeks, even months. It must really take it out of you. No wonder you need to recharge.'

The creature that had been Lane turned towards him. She brought her hands to her head, pressing her fingers against the convex glass. She rang out again, her clock hands whizzing in a blur.

The Doctor stepped out into the passage. From here, he would work his way back to the stairwell and return to the medical bay. With any luck, Anji may already be there.

The wall-clock read nine. Hugging the blankets around her, Anji padded over to the sink. She filled her hands with water and drank. It tasted of iron.

Outside, the three soldiers stood no more than a metre away from the glass. Ash and Norton were so close she could read the numbers on their faces and follow the spindly hands as they twitched forward. They both read nine o'clock.

But they did not breathe. And if they did not breathe, how could they be affected by the gas? Anji shuddered at the thought and relegated it to the back of her mind.

The creature that had once been Bragg had removed the cover of the airlock control panel and revealed a spiky nest of wires, transistors and valves. Slowly, deliberately, it examined the circuits, and began to test the connections.

It re-set the switches into a new combination. The airlock door gave a clang but remained locked. It was trying to override the airlock mechanism. It was trying to get inside.

Anji checked the intercom was deactivated before speaking. 'How much longer is it going to take?'

Mistletoe perched on one of the beds, smirking behind his thick glasses. He double-clicked a pen and jotted on his clipboard. 'One is led to wonder as to the efficacy of Messrs Kreiner and Shaw. And, indeed, as to the whereabouts of the good Doctor.' He smiled distantly. 'A man after my own heart.'

'The gas must have reached here by now,' said Anji with a shiver. 'It's been forty-five minutes.'

'Indeed, indeed. However, such is the insidious character of the gas, it will not delight us with any effects for another hour at least. That is,

assuming that your friends succeeded,' said Mistletoe, 'and assuming that these creatures do not possess some strange immunity.'

Thanks a lot, thought Anji. She turned to see Bragg unwinding a section of cable. His hands were as bloodless as a corpse. 'Another hour? I don't think it's going to take them that long to get in.'

'Yes. Yes, we are in a most troubling predicament.'

Anji looked up at the air vent. 'There's no way the gas can get in here is there?'

'Oh, no no no *no*. The atmosphere here is perfectly sterile, and we are completely sealed off.' He chortled. 'It is a *quarantine* chamber, is it not?'

'So we're all right. Until they get the door open, that is.' Anji returned to her bed and drew her legs underneath her.

Mistletoe laid a clammy hand on her shoulder. 'Don't worry, my dear.' He patted her and brought his fingers to her neck to play with her collar. 'I'm absolutely certain that no harm has come to the Doctor.'

'Come on,' Shaw was shouting. He clanked up the stairwell, his long shadow chasing him up the concrete wall.

Fitz forced himself to climb, dragging himself up by the safety rail. His survival suit had never felt so heavy. His gas mask was suffocating. He had half-convinced himself that the filter had failed and he had already taken in a lethal mouthful of the mustard gas. With every upward step a pain knifed through his calves.

As they reached the next level, Fitz noticed that the air had taken on a muggy quality. Like a drizzle hanging in the night air. The orange glow of the lamps diffused and streaked in his goggles. The lattice stairwell gathered droplets that dripped down into the abyss. Condensation from the mustard gas. Any contact could prove deadly: one touch and the poison would be absorbed through the flesh.

Shaw led Fitz through a bulkhead door and into the gloom of a corridor. The fog made what little illumination there was weaker still and as it gathered and coiled it created phantoms out of the shadows. Fitz was guided by the sound of Shaw's footsteps as they headed towards the medical bay.

Something shifted behind him. Fitz span around, squinting into the blackness, but there was nothing there. He took a step forward. A figure appeared, standing perfectly still. It was wearing a baggy orange-and-grey TR suit, its features obscured by a head-mask.

'Doctor?' said Fitz. 'Is that you?'

The figure turned away abruptly.

'Doctor!' Fitz called out.

The haze thickened and the figure faded away. Fitz ran forward to where he thought the figure had been standing. He banged a wall with his shoulder and swore. He stumbled and fell to the floor.

'Fitz,' hissed a voice. 'Fitz!'

Fitz heard the clatter of approaching footsteps. Something grabbed at his shoulder and rolled him on to his back. Standing over him was a figure in a survival suit.

'Fitz, it's me, Shaw.'

Fitz put out his arms and Shaw pulled him to his feet. Fitz gasped in some rubbery air. 'The Doctor –'

'What?'

'I saw the Doctor,' mumbled Fitz. 'And... and...'. His mind struggled to piece together what he had seen, but his memory was as vague as the mist that surrounded them. He swallowed and tried to regulate his breathing. 'He was here. You didn't see him? You must've –'

'No.' Shaw looked around. 'Maybe it was a ghost.'

Fitz closed his eyes. 'No, I was certain –'

Shaw gripped him by the elbows. 'Come on,' he said. 'We've got to get to the medical bay quick. Before these clock creatures realise what's going on.'

'What? Why?'

'I think things are going to get nasty.'

It's a cliché to say you're sick with fear, thought Anji, but it's an accurate description. The gnawing sensation inside; the rapid heartbeat. The flushes and adrenaline and nausea. Terror so overwhelming that it leaves you unable to think. The dread upon learning of the death of a loved one. The shock of a car crash. The numb horror of a war bulletin. Anji remembered her nightmares after watching *Threads*. To be sick with fear, she knew, is to feel utter powerlessness in the face of your own mortality.

She crossed the room. Mistletoe remained perched on one of the beds, hugging his clipboard and muttering to himself. As far as Anji could tell, he was reciting a stream of bureaucratic gobbledegook.

Outside in the ward, Bragg replaced the cover of the panel and began to re-set buttons and knobs. The airlock door clanked ominously.

Anji swallowed, waiting for the door to swing open. It would be over, any moment now. First the mustard gas would pour in and her lungs would fill with poison. But then, before it had time to kill her, the soldiers would enter and transform her into one of them. She considered putting on one of the TR suits, but realised it would just be postponing the inevitable. She would still be trapped.

A minute dragged by. The wall-clock ticked to nine-twelve. Then nine-thirteen.

The creature that had been Ash gave a short rasp. His timepiece head wobbled, as though startled. He doubled up, coughing, staggered against one of the beds and raised his hands to his face. Both hands were covered in blisters. He drew back his sleeves to reveal more scarred, raw flesh.

Norton began to shudder. He tugged at his collar, pulling his shirt open to reveal a chest covered in blotches and lesions. He slipped to the floor, his legs twisting in pain.

Bragg backed away from the controls and inspected his own hands. The skin had scalded and was covered in bubbling sacs of liquid, as though it had been brought to the boil.

Through the intercom, Anji could hear his clockwork mechanism begin to clatter violently. A crack appeared in the glass of his face. An instant later it shattered into a spray of faultlines. Some of the shards dropped to the floor and smashed. The paper within the clock was flecked with foam and dark blood. The blood spilled down on to his shirt and hands.

'It's working,' said Mistletoe gleefully. 'Oh, this is simply delightful! It's working –'

Ash collapsed and fell still. Norton's twitching abated. Bragg gave a final, traumatic shriek and thudded to the ground.

They were all dead. Absolutely motionless. Their ticking stopped.

A whooshing filled Anji's ears. The hands on the wall-clock wound back to eleven minutes past nine.

Like a jump-cut in an old film, the soldiers suddenly returned to their old positions. Their drab uniforms were unmarked and Bragg's face was undamaged. Bragg was replacing the cover of the control panel, just as before.

'It's no good,' laughed Mistletoe. 'You're all dead and you can't do anything about it!'

'Fitz, what are you doing?'

Fitz leaned against the wall, a pinching pain in his side. 'It was the Doctor I saw, I'm sure of it, I've got to go back.'

'We can't.' Shaw readied his gun and clicked off the safety catch. 'When these things find out what we've done, they'll kill us.'

'I'm not going to leave him.'

Shaw grabbed Fitz by the shoulder. 'No one is worth dying for, Fitz.'

'Maybe not economically, no.' Fitz sighed. 'Look, you go on. Don't put yourself out on my behalf.'

Shaw released his grip and shoved him away. 'It's your loss.' He gave Fitz one last look and strode down the passage. The swirling darkness swallowed him up.

Fitz began to retrace his steps. He could only feel his way forward by patting one hand against the wall, each pace taking him deeper and deeper into the nothingness. He had never felt so alone.

His hand reached the space at the end of the wall, as the corridor turned to the right. He turned the corner. A short way ahead, a bulkhead door had stuck half-way down. A figure stood in front of it, the overhead light creating a silhouette with a long, narrow shadow.

'Doctor?'

The figure turned its wooden head towards him. It was Lane. She sprang into life and lurched towards him, her movements awkward and stiff. She wheezed a rattling, clockwork wheeze.

Fitz backed away in horror.

He could see the scorchmarks on her arms, hands and neck, and the places where the skin had peeled away to reveal the glistening flesh beneath.

Her face had shattered, the clock dial hanging open. Within, he could see the workings; the spinning cogs and governors, the springs and the pulleys.

Three figures entered the reception area. Ash and Norton paused in the centre of the room as Bragg attended to the airlock controls. He pressed the necessary switches and waited. None of the indicator lights responded.

'The airlock will not open,' breathed Bragg.

'The mechanism has jammed?' asked Norton

Bragg wrenched the covering panel from the controls and examined the mess of wires and transistors within. *'It has been locked-off The circuit has been broken.'*

'You can repair it?' Norton asked.

'We do not have sufficient time!' Bragg hissed angrily, smashing a fist into the panel. It exploded into sparks.

'Take it back,' whispered Norton. *'Take us back. We can prevent it happening.'*

'No.' Bragg shook his head. *'It is too far in the past.'* He upturned the table, sending mugs and instruments crashing to the floor. *'We cannot undo the damage. We cannot escape!'*

There was another whooshing sound. The hands on the wall-clock wound back to eleven minutes past nine.

The three transformed soldiers appeared out of nowhere. Ash and Norton stood to one side as Bragg replaced the control panel cover.

Mistletoe shook with laughter. 'Here we go again!'

'How many times can they keep on drawing time back?' said Anji.

'One cannot be certain, my dear,' said Mistletoe. 'But presumably they cannot reprise time indefinitely. It is a finite resource, after all, irrespective of the direction it is applied. I should imagine they are... running out of options. Exhausting their alternatives.'

Outside in the ward, Ash gave a deep, choking cough, and his clock face fractured outwards. He turned away from the window, and with a gulping retch, he vomited foam and thick, dark blood over the tiled floor. For a moment he steadied himself on a bed, then he collapsed, dead.

Anji couldn't take any more and looked away. 'They don't realise what's happening to them. It's horrible.' She blinked back her tears. 'Instead, they just go through it again and again. Trying to find a way out. But they can't.'

Mistletoe discarded his smile. 'What would you have us do? Show these creatures mercy?'

'I don't know,' snapped Anji. 'But they were people once. Maybe they could go back to how they were before.'

'I rather much doubt that, my dear. And even supposing it were a possibility, it would not afford them any reprieve. Human or not, they would still be very much dead. Look, my dear...'

She looked. Ash's corpse had changed. The clock had vanished and she could see Ash's face. It was a livid mass of blisters. His unseeing eyes were glazed in terror and his jaw hung open in a silent scream. Blood-flecked foam bubbled out of his tear ducts and from between his lips.

Mistletoe checked his clipboard and his smile returned. 'Yes, the Doctor has been *most* efficient in that regard.'

'He didn't have any choice,' protested Anji.

'Oh, but my dear, I applaud him. I *appreciate* efficiency.' Mistletoe raised his eyebrows. 'I should have thought that our little victory would have pleased you.'

'I'm glad we've won,' she said. 'But it doesn't make me happy to see them suffer.'

'No? Well, then avert your eyes.'

'That's not what I mean and you know it.' Anji turned back to the ward. Norton sprawled across one of the beds, lying in a pool of froth. Bragg coughed, his fluid-logged lungs gurgling like a drain, and his head started to rattle uncontrollably. The clock cracked and a black glue gushed out of the front.

The whooshing returned. And the three transformed soldiers were alive and standing at the window once more.

Shaw rounded the corner. Ahead of him lay the door to the medical bay. Three figures emerged. They were little more than shadows in the blackness, but he could make out that each had a squared-off, wooden timepiece for a head. He could make out their clumsy, angular motion. He could hear their clockwork sputtering.

Shaw levelled his gun and fired. There was a splattering, crunching sound and the first figure slid to the floor. Shaw aimed again, fired, aimed again, fired. The other two figures reeled under the impacts and fell juddering on to their backs. They stopped ticking.

Shaw dug into his pocket and felt dozens of reassuring cylinders. He collected three more bullets and reloaded his gun. He clicked the chambers into place and aimed at the door. He would be ready for them, next time – ‘Come on!’ he yelled. ‘Have another go!’

The whooshing returned and the three bodies vanished.

Lane’s head jerked to the left and right. Her gears cranked and clacked, and her tick-tock was an irregular stutter. She coughed hard. The glass of her face spattered with fluid. It trickled down the inside of the pane, welling up at the bottom. Then the glass shattered and the blood and phlegm sprayed out. She dropped to the floor.

Time whooshed back.

Lane reappeared beside the half-opened bulkhead. She stumbled forward, wheezing, her skin inflamed. ‘*Help me –*’ she yelled. ‘I can’t.’ Fitz shook his head fearfully. ‘I couldn’t, even if I wanted to.’

She stared uncomprehendingly at her raw, scarred hands. ‘*What is happening to me?*’ She slumped against the wall. ‘*It burns. It burns so much. . .*’ She bent double and gave a glugging cough.

‘It’s too late.’

‘No,’ sobbed Lane. ‘No!’ She looked up at him. The clock had gone. She was weeping, tears streaking over her blistered skin. Her pupils had shrunk to pinpoints and her corneas were heavily bloodshot. Fitz could tell from the way that her eyes searched from side to side that she had been blinded.

She frowned, as though willing herself to find some strength. ‘I can go back. *I must. . .*’

Fitz waited for the familiar whooshing. It didn’t come.

Lane let out a short gasp of defeat. ‘. . . *No!*’ Her body convulsed, and she gagged as her mouth overflowed with froth. She screamed, a scream of whirrs and chimes, and dropped to the floor.

Fitz approached her cautiously. Her brass-rimmed clock face had returned. The second hand twitched forward. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick. The hand paused. The gears ground to a rest.

She had stopped short, never to go again.

The process was accelerating. On each occasion the soldiers drew time back, the more rapidly the mustard gas seemed to take effect. Barely thirty seconds had passed since their previous attempt. Their time was running out.

'It is curious,' observed Mistletoe, 'how rapid and dramatic the onset was, is it not? Presumably the exposure was cumulative, or temporally advanced in some way?'

Anji checked the wall-clock; nine eleven. But time had only been rewound for the clocks and the soldiers. As far as everything else was concerned, time continued to roll on apace. The mustard gas thickened and gathered, its droplets beading the window, its mist hanging malevolently over the beds outside.

Bragg turned towards them. His face had reverted; jowly, heavybrowed, with slicked-back hair. Both of his eyes had been burned away to leave charred, gaping sockets in the flesh. He stared unseeingly into the isolation chamber.

'Anji.' His gravelly voice, relayed through the Intercom, had lost its mechanical quality. 'I am... Bragg. They have... left me.'

Anji approached the intercom.

'Anji,' Bragg's voice crackled. 'You can save us. There is a way.'

'What is it?' Anji leaned into the mic. 'What should I do?'

Bragg drew in a ragged breath. Blood seeped out of his eye holes and dribbled over his blackened lips. 'Let me into the... quarantine chamber.'

'No,' whispered Mistletoe. 'No, it's a trick.'

'What?'

'Isn't it obvious? He knows that whatever happens the game is up. But if he can infect one of us -'

Anji's thoughts suddenly turned to the Doctor, Fitz and Shaw. They were still somewhere out there. 'But what about -'

Mistletoe patted her hand. 'Your friends are perfectly safe, my dear. These creatures transmit their... condition by taking the subject back a minute or so in time. And at the moment,' Mistletoe giggled, '*they don't have that much time left.*'

Anji spoke into the intercom. 'There's nothing we can do.' She forced herself to remember that the real Bragg was dead. What was it Lane had

said? *They are no more.* Whatever it was that was standing outside, it wasn't Bragg. It was his killer. 'I'm sorry.'

Bragg stared at her and bared his teeth. Then, in a sudden jump-cut, his head had turned back into a clock. He swung himself away from the window and, with a furious scream, grabbed hold of a steel bed and shoved it, sending it clattering across the floor.

Beside him, Ash began to shake wildly. He staggered backwards and slammed into a DT unit. He collapsed, his limbs contorting in agony.

The glass of Norton's face cracked and foam surged out, covering his uniform. He sank to his knees and retched, a low, click-clicking gurgle, and howled. His head splintered as it hit the floor.

Bragg roared and launched himself at the glass. His hands scrabbled and banged at the surface, but no avail. He rang out discordantly. The note reverberated and slurred, dropping in pitch, like an unplugged record player.

His head casing fell open, springs uncoiling, foam and wheels and pulleys and lumps of wet meat spilling out from where his mouth would have been. A bloody froth sprayed across the floor. The gears inside the time-piece jammed and his body froze. He dropped, suddenly inert.

Anji watched the three corpses and waited for the whoosh as time wound back. The minute hand on the isolation chamber clock shifted to nine-fourteen. Then, a minute later, to nine-fifteen.

'It's over,' said Mistletoe. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. 'It's all over.' He harrumphed proudly. 'Now we can get back to business!'

Fitz looked down at Lane's corpse. A viscous liquid coated the shattered glass of her face. Her limbs rested at odd angles, twisted as she had fallen, covered in weals and burns.

She gave a short, mechanical stutter. Fitz flinched, but she did not move. Some spring inside her must have released, that was all. The thin clock hands remained still. She neither tocked nor ticked.

So the Doctor's plan had worked. Lane had been unable to avoid her death, no matter how many attempts she made at her dying minutes. Because, in the end, whatever she did made no difference.

But Fitz still felt unnerved at the sight of the creature. Not because it held any threat, but because of its hideous otherworldliness. The very idea of a human turning into a clock-creature; it defied all logic. It had no place in a rational universe. It was like something from an insane, gruesome dream, a surreal representation of something unknowable. What was it? What had it wanted? Each question just made him realise how little he

knew. What these creatures represented was a horrible blank space. A blankness filled with every nightmare and dark thought.

'Fitz?' a voice called from down the corridor.

Fitz looked in the direction of the voice. He could make out a shadowy figure huddled on the floor, not far from the door to Paterson's lab. A figure without a mask. Fitz could make out long, straggling hair.

'Doctor!' Fitz dashed over to him.

As he saw Fitz, the Doctor grinned weakly and his eyes filled with tears. His skin had blistered around his lips. 'Fitz?' He coughed, his eyelids half-closed. 'You're alive? Good.'

Fitz hunted around the passage. The Doctor's TR gas mask lay discarded a few yards away. Fitz grabbed it and handed it to the Doctor. 'Put this on. Let me help you –'

The Doctor frowned in bemusement. 'No respiratory bypass, you see. Very odd. I felt sure. . .' He painfully cleared his throat. Fitz helped him into a sitting position. 'Did it work? Are they all gone?'

'Yes, it worked.' Fitz brought the TR suit hood over the Doctor's head and placed the gas mask on his face. He checked the straps were tight, then he dragged the Doctor to his feet, taking his weight on one shoulder. 'Come on,' said Fitz. 'And don't you dare die on me.'

It was twenty minutes past nine and still none of the creatures had moved. Anji watched them from the window, scarcely able to believe they were finally, finally dead. She half-expected to hear a whoosh and to see them snap back into their old positions.

Mistletoe drummed his chubby fingers incessantly on the glass. 'No, they are all quite dead, my dear. They have used up all their second chances.' He straightened his tie and put on his bowler at an informal angle. 'On the whole, this outcome, whilst obviously incurring some material losses, has not been entirely un-propitious. I am, without recourse to hyperbole, *delighted*.' He beamed. 'Not least because my own viability remains blissfully un-compromised.'

'So what happens now?' said Anji.

'That would rather depend on. . . oh!' Mistletoe fell silent as a figure in a survival suit appeared in the ward doorway. The figure held a gun, levelling it to cover every direction, and cautiously approached Ash's corpse. Keeping the gun pointed at the chest, the figure kicked Ash's head. Froth fizzled out and it rocked lifelessly back and forth.

The figure squatted down and pressed a gloved hand against Ash's chest, feeling for some pulse. Apparently satisfied, it walked over to Norton and repeated the procedure, the gun kept always ready. Then it turned its

attention to Bragg. It wiped the foam away from Bragg's face and pulled at the smashed clock. The shards fell out of the metal frame.

'They're dead.' The figure wiped his hands and turned to the window. Shaw's voice came through the radio. 'We did it!'

'Marvellous, marvellous, marvellous!' exclaimed Mistletoe, jiggling up and down. 'Your comportsment has been exemplary, Mr Shaw. You are a verifiable asset! Your contribution will not go unrewarded!'

Shaw did not reply.

Anji pushed Mistletoe out of the way and addressed the intercom microphone. 'Where's Fitz?'

'He went back for the Doctor,' Shaw stated.

'The Doctor? What happened? Where was he?' said Anji anxiously.

'I didn't see him. Fitz did.' Shaw approached the airlock controls, running a hand over the buttons and switches. 'They've almost over-ridden the entry circuit. You're lucky they died when they did. Another minute and –'

Two more TR-suited figures suddenly lurched into the medical bay, one supporting the other. They staggered towards the isolation chamber airlock as Shaw hurried to assist them.

'Fitz? Doctor?' said Anji.

'It's the Doctor,' crackled Fitz. 'He inhaled some of the gas.' Shaw took the Doctor's other arm and together they guided the Doctor over to the door. 'Open up. Open up!'

Anji turned to Mistletoe, who was gaping uselessly. She punched his arm. 'Open the airlock.'

'Of course.' Mistletoe blinked and bumbled over to the door controls. Two flicks of switches later and the airlock clanked open. Fitz and Shaw helped the Doctor inside.

Mistletoe pressed more switches and the outer door slammed shut. A few long moments passed as the airlock was decontaminated, then the inner door swung open to reveal Fitz, Shaw and the Doctor.

Fitz tore off his mask and threw it to one side. Anji ran to help him and Shaw haul the Doctor into the chamber. They carried him to one of the beds and set about releasing him from the survival suit. Anji struggled with the fastenings, which seemed to be doing their best to frustrate her, but eventually the straps slipped free.

The Doctor's gas mask lifted off. His features beneath were as pale as death.

An hour later, they had transferred the Doctor to a bed in the ward. Shaw had vented the atmosphere of the base, releasing the mustard gas out into the night and sending a fresh breeze whistling through the tunnels. He had

returned briefly to check on the Doctor's progress, before leaving to begin work on repairing the exterior airlock.

The air was as cold as a blade, but Fitz was thankful to be able to breathe properly at last and to be back in his jacket and shirt. For a while he had thought he would spend the rest of his life stuck in a sweaty TR suit. They couldn't leave the ward without body-suits, of course, as much of the station was still filled with pockets of accelerated or decelerated time, but, for the moment, they didn't want to leave.

It felt calm for the first time in what seemed like months. With help from Mistletoe, Fitz had removed the three corpses, laid them out in the quarantine chamber and sealed it off. Mistletoe had complained and blustered throughout. He was at the sink now, washing up some mugs and clinking some spoons. In a surprising fit of generosity, he had offered to make them coffee.

Meanwhile, Anji had cleaned and dressed the Doctor's burns, wrapping the worst affected areas around his lower arms and hands in bandages and compacts of ice, then covering him with blankets. Fitz had reassured her that the Doctor's condition wasn't as bad as it looked. The burns were not that extensive. He couldn't have taken in that much mustard gas. He was the Doctor, he would pull through, he always did.

But now the rules had changed. The Doctor could get ill, the Doctor could tire and become irritable. And, looking at him sleep, he seemed as frail as any human.

While Anji had been distracted, Fitz had collected a small brass chronometer from a shelf and laid it on the bed beside the Doctor. It tick-tocked as normal. At least the Doctor was not infected.

The last hour had taken its toll. Anji had fixed her hair and washed, but her eyes were red-rimmed and dulled. She looked as tired as Fitz felt. He had thought to shave to help wake himself up, but with only cold water and a lethal-looking razor available, he decided he was already awake enough.

They had not spoken about the creatures or the events of the previous hours. All they talked about was the Doctor, how he was going to recover and what they would do next. They would find a way back to the TARDIS and find a way of getting it working again. They would leave.

The Doctor mumbled and sat upright. Fitz and Anji waited on either side of his bed, mugs of water at the ready if he needed them. Fitz put a hand on the Doctor's back to steady him.

The Doctor smiled softly at him. 'Fitz?'

'You'll be fine, Doctor.'

The Doctor retched, grimacing in pain, his hand on his chest. Anji passed him a handkerchief, and he used it. 'I *know* I'll be fine.' He frowned,

rubbing his forehead. 'What happened?'

'You can't remember?' said Anji.

The Doctor gave her a wan, apologetic look. 'Nothing after we locked off the airlock.' He stared into the distance. 'It's all a bit... vague, I'm afraid.'

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

'No? No, no no. It's most strange. I felt... where did you find me?' The Doctor inspected the bandages on his arms, pressing them tentatively

'You were outside the lab. You didn't have your mask on.'

The Doctor coughed again. 'I don't have any *recollection* of taking it off. But I suppose I must have done.' He fidgeted in the bed, patting the blankets to get more comfortable. 'Why did you come looking for me, Fitz?'

'I thought I saw you, before.'

'What was I doing? Did you notice anything odd about me?'

'No.'

The Doctor looked at him with hard, azure eyes. 'No?' He retrieved the chronometer from under the blankets. 'But better to be safe than sorry, eh?' He handed it to a sheepish Fitz, taking the mug of water in return. He finished it in one swig. 'And Anji. Did you see me, after we'd finished in the reception room?'

Anji shook her head. 'You just... went. I looked for you.'

The Doctor buttoned up his collar, swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, keeping the blankets wrapped around him. He walked slowly over to a chair and sat down. He winced and let out a sharp sigh. 'I believe you,' he said. 'So the creatures have gone, then? My scheme worked?'

'Yes,' said Anji.

'They're all dead,' said Fitz. 'Bragg, Lane, Ash, Norton.'

'Good, good,' agreed the Doctor absently. His gaze drifted across the room to the DT units. He padded over to them, tapping each ceramic coffin in turn. And then he stopped, gazing at an eight-footlong rectangular mark in the floor dust. 'Excuse me, but where is this decelerated time cabinet?'

Anji and Fitz looked at each other and shrugged.

The Doctor span. 'Mistletoe?'

Mistletoe looked up from the sink. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'I've just remembered something simply dreadful.'

'Just remembered what sort of something simply dreadful?'

'Dr Hammond. He put the third soldier, Bishop, into one of those things... he was going to take him to Station One. So they could run tests on him, I should imagine.'

'When?' said the Doctor. 'When did he leave?'

'About six hours ago.'

Chapter Ten

Outside, the snow blustered and eddied in the storm. Dead trees flitted past, their shadows reaching out like skeletal fingers. The lane rolled out of the shifting darkness, more of a muddy track than a road. Ice spattered the windscreen only to be batted into a crust by the wipers.

Inside, the engine groaned in protest as the van jolted up the incline. The dials on the greenish-grey dashboard flitted. In the centre of the dashboard, a wooden chronometer ticked and tocked. Two minutes past eleven.

The driver kept his goggle-covered eyes fixed on the road. His body juddered as the vehicle thumped over potholes but he did not flinch. He did not shiver even though the temperature had dropped below freezing. Hammond concentrated on the journey ahead, at one with the machine.

The radio crackled to itself. Urgent voices carried out of the static only to cut off before their words became clear. Lost conversations of the night filled with fear and loneliness. Due to the temporal distortion, some of the voices would be from soldiers who had died years, possibly centuries ago. Ghosts calling out to the living.

An eight-foot-long casket dominated the rear section of the van, ropes securing it to the bodywork. The ceramic casing of the casket looked a dark grey. It thrummed with electricity.

The casket held a motionless body. His eyes stared out blankly, his mouth twisted into a gape. He did not breathe but he was not dead. For Bishop, time had been brought to a virtual standstill.

Hammond did not study the map. The journey that lay ahead would be long, monotonous and dangerous. But, after another forty hours at the wheel, he would arrive at Station One.

The Doctor jiggled the gearlever and floored the throttle, and the armoured car shuddered up the slope.

In the back, Anji sat on a hard, vinyl-covered bench, forced to stoop under the low ceiling. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since they had made their journey to Isolation Station Forty in this car. She had wedged an arm against the wall to prevent herself from banging against the sides and

heaped blankets over herself for warmth. Although the car was chrono-insulated, it was as cold as the most biting winter.

Mistletoe occupied the seat opposite, his bowler removed to reveal his thinning, slick black hair. Beside him, Fitz shivered into his blankets. The remaining bench and floor space was taken up with body-suits and battered boxes.

Shaw was in the passenger seat. He unfolded a map and illuminated it with a torch. 'We should be reaching the edge of sector.' Anji leaned on the back of Shaw's seat. The view ahead was restricted to a window about three feet across and six inches high. Rain splashed against the glass so thickly that they appeared to be underwater, except when the wipers briefly swiped the wash away to reveal a steep mountain road, trees flashing by, the sky heavy and thunderous. There were numerous blind bends at the edge of thousand-foot drops, as if the road were doing its utmost to hurl them off. Yet the Doctor looked unflappable. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Only the paleness of his skin, the blisters on his cheeks and the bandages on his forearms and hands attested to his recent infirmity.

They had left Isolation Station Forty twenty minutes ago. After hearing about Hammond, the Doctor had leapt into action, ordering Fitz and Anji to collect equipment for the journey while he helped Shaw repair the main airlock. It would take at least half an hour, he said.

The half hour had passed rapidly. Fitz rummaged through the shelves and discovered a small amount of tinned food. He then spent far too much time searching for a tin opener. Anji filled flasks with water until the tap gurgled dry. She discovered and packed a half-finished bottle of gin. Next, they collected half a dozen blankets and folded them into another box.

They had barely filled their third box with bandages and medicine when the Doctor returned to announce that he had opened the airlock and it was time to go. Shaw had already gone to check over Lane's armoured car and refill it with diesel.

As Anji and Fitz climbed into their survival body-suits, Mistletoe tentatively approached the Doctor. 'Doctor,' he said gingerly, 'given the circumstances, I must admit that I am disinclined to remain here alone. If you would allow me the opportunity to accompany you, I should put my considerable resources at your disposal. I would, I feel, prove a valuable travelling companion.'

Before Anji could object the Doctor passed Mistletoe a TR suit. 'The more the merrier.'

The thought of being stuck in the car with Mistletoe made Anji uneasy and it was with some reluctance that she helped Mistletoe into his TR body-suit and gas mask. She tightened the straps until he squeaked.

The Doctor informed them that the station's toilets had escaped the time attack and that anyone who wished to use them should do so while they had the chance. It was one of the weirder experiences of Anji's life. Walking into the cubicle in a bulky, padded survival suit. Struggling to remove the suit just to sit on the unwelcoming, icy lavatory seat. And then putting the body-suit back on again afterwards.

Eventually she followed the Doctor, Fitz and Mistletoe out of the airlock and into the grim night. Rain crashed down, the wind whipping it against their suits, the sound of it drumming on her hood, filling her ears. Her feet sank into ankle-deep puddles.

After a long and difficult trek to the armoured car they clambered inside and the endless thud of the rain stopped. Shaw slammed the door shut, they removed their suits, and the Doctor gunned the engine.

They had a long journey ahead of them.

'Are we there yet?' moaned Fitz.

The Doctor laughed, turning the steering wheel hand over hand, and they lurched around a sheer corner at a suicidal speed. Fitz, Anji and Mistletoe held on to the ceiling straps for dear life as boxes slid across the floor. 'How far is it to Station One, Mr Shaw?'

'About nine hundred miles. Flat out, with no breaks, you could make it in two days.'

'Two days?' said Anji. 'Oh my God.' She had been hoping for another half hour, tops.

'That's assuming Hammond's taken the direct route,' said Shaw. 'It's bad terrain all the way and puts us through defaulter-controlled sections.'

'We're not going to be stuck in here for two days, are we?' Fitz pulled his blankets closer.

'No.' The Doctor checked the dashboard, a series of dials set into dark-green metal. In the centre of the controls, a clock counted out the minutes, hours and days. 'We only have to catch up with Hammond, remember.'

'But he has a seven hour head start. . . ' said Mistletoe.

'Yes. Yes, that's interesting. Very interesting.' The Doctor called over his shoulder. 'Now, why didn't you mention his departure earlier, I wonder?'

'I confess it slipped my mind. There seemed to be more. . . pressing matters for my attention. Besides,' Mistletoe added petulantly, 'no one asked.'

Now Anji thought about it, it had slipped her mind too. It seemed ridiculous, but until Mistletoe had reminded them, she had never even noticed that Hammond and Bishop were missing. It must be the tiredness and the stress, playing tricks with her memory.

'I did, however, make strenuous efforts to persuade him not to go, Doctor,' Mistletoe went on.

'I don't doubt that for a moment,' said the Doctor drily.

'We'll never catch him,' said Fitz despondently. 'Not in these conditions –'

'Hammond is facing the same weather as us. The only difference is that you have *me* in the driving seat.' The clutch grated painfully as the Doctor changed gears and threw them round another bend. 'Mr Shaw. Tell us about Station One.'

'What d'you want to know?' said Shaw. 'It was the original colony town. The plutocratic empire requisitioned it to use as their main base, they stuck a protective dome over the top...'

'What's its population?' interrupted the Doctor.

'I don't know,' said Shaw. 'About fifty, sixty thousand...'

'So you see, Fitz. We have to catch him, don't we?'

Anji was so exhausted she could cry. For the last forty minutes, the car had shuddered and swerved through the mountains. Whenever she was about to relax, the car would suddenly brake and reel heavily to one side and her heart would halt as she expected them to plunge down a ravine. Then, at the last possible moment, the wheels would grip and the car would heave around the corner.

Outside, the rain had drizzled itself away to become a billowing fog. The Doctor gazed ahead, full of enthusiasm, pom-pomming his way through the back-catalogues of The Beatles, Mozart, Erasure and Rogers and Hammerstein. Fitz gave occasional snores from beneath his heap of blankets.

Anji dug out a box from under her bench and unscrewed the gin bottle. She took a swig, her hand shaking with the cold. The taste was bitter, but the warmth spread inside her. 'Doctor –'

'None for me, thanks,' said the Doctor casually. 'I'm driving.'

Anji smiled despite herself. 'If we don't reach Hammond in time, d'you really think these clock-things will take over everyone in Station One?' Anji offered the bottle to Shaw, but he didn't respond. Mistletoe shook his head.

'I don't know,' said the Doctor. 'There's always the chance that they'll be sensible and keep Bishop isolated.'

'You think that's likely?'

'It may be *optimistic*, certainly. And these things have managed to find a way out of quarantine before. No, no, Dr Hammond doesn't realise what he's dealing with. That's why we have to reach him before it's too late.'

The memory of what they had been through at Isolation Station Forty was bad enough. Anji had barely recovered from the shock of seeing Bragg and Lane transformed into clock-headed monsters. But the same thing happening on a scale of tens of thousands. . .

The Doctor continued. 'However, at the moment, Anji, I'm also rather concerned about the defaulters.'

'You think they'll attack us?'

'Possibly, but that's not what worries me. I'm worried that they may attack Hammond.'

'Oh. You mean, if Bishop is released from the cabinet. . .'

'Then the defaulters will be infected. Well, transformed. Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Of course, it may have already happened. It's hard to tell when the passage of time is so. . .' he stiffly changed gear, '*temperamental*.' He indicated the *External Time* chronometer. Its hands were a blur.

Anji peered through the windscreen. The bushes and trees were *writhing*. It was like one of those stop-motion photography sequences from *Wildlife On One*.

Snow fell thickly. The road was encrusted at least a foot deep and progress was slow and halting. The engines grunted and stuttered. The wipers fought a losing battle against the slush. The forest had withered away to a muddy wasteland, the horizon a nightmare of black crags. Fitz caught occasional glimpses of barbed wire and abandoned turrets.

A group of soldiers emerged from the darkness, running by the road, caught in the headlights. Fitz started, but then realised the soldiers were not moving. The *Exterior Time* clock had halted. The soldiers appeared to be fleeing, the mud churning at their feet, but were frozen. Frost gathered on their faces. A moment later and they sped past into the gloom.

Fitz wanted to have a cigarette and to get out of this tiny, cramped cabin. He had forgotten how it felt to be warm. Nobody had spoken for about three hours. In the back of the car, three sleeping bodies lay huddled under blankets.

The Doctor gasped and the car dipped forward as it braked. He gritted his teeth and put a hand to his upper chest.

'What is it?' said Fitz.

The Doctor swallowed with some difficulty as the pain passed. 'Nothing. I'll be fine.'

'Bollocks. What is it?'

'My *heart*?'

Fitz shivered. 'Your heart?'

'It seems to have been... playing up recently,' considered the Doctor. 'Presumably it's the strain of doing the work of two...'

'But you'll be all right, won't you?' said Fitz. 'I mean, really.'

'I wish I knew.' The Doctor frowned. 'I've never met anyone qualified to give me a diagnosis. Mostly, I feel fine, but...'

'What causes it?' Fitz looked at him. 'What brings it on?'

'I'm not entirely sure. It comes and goes.'

'You need some rest. You're not superhuman, you know. Not... any more.'

The Doctor looked at him as though this were a ridiculous notion. 'We have to stop Hammond, Fitz.'

'I know, but... what if Hammond has already got to Station One? What then?'

The Doctor shot him a reproving look.

'One day our luck's going to run out, you know.'

'I make my own *luck*.' The Doctor hit the accelerator and they wheeled forwards. 'Until we know the worst, we should hope for the best.' The Doctor gazed ahead distractedly. 'And anyway, I don't have any choice. I can't turn back.'

'What do you mean?'

'This storm is getting worse,' noted the Doctor. 'We can't escape it. We can only hope to see it through to the end.'

'Anji, wake up.' The hand rocked her shoulder. She lifted her head painfully. The Doctor was in the back of the car, rummaging through the boxes. Shaw and Mistletoe were curled up beneath their blankets on the opposite bench.

Anji straightened her crumpled shirt and realigned her bra. 'What is it?' The wind rumbled eerily outside, but the car was silent. 'Why've we stopped?'

'I think we've, er... found them,' said the Doctor darkly. He collected two TR suits and two masks.

Anji stumbled into the front of the car, her fingers feeling the metal ceiling above her. Fitz budged along the seats to allow her to sit, and he handed her a flask of water. She drank and looked out of the front window.

A low mist undulated over the road. On either side, the trees snarled, their leafless branches coiling into brutish shapes. Hammond's van had overturned a few yards from the road bank. Its tarpaulin flapped in the spiteful wind, the metal cage exposed beneath.

'What d'you think happened?' Fitz whispered.

'I'm afraid they may have been the victims of an ambush.' The Doctor passed Anji one of the body-suits. 'Here.'

‘What’s this for?’

The Doctor indicated the dashboard chronometers. The second hand on the *External Time* had halted. ‘This whole area is at a standstill,’ he said. ‘And I want you to come with me.’

‘What about me?’ said Fitz. ‘I wouldn’t mind getting out too.’

‘I want you to keep an eye on Shaw and Mistletoe,’ said the Doctor. ‘Until we know what’s happened, I’d rather they weren’t. . . disturbed.’

The Doctor jumped out of the armoured car and slammed the door quickly, before the interior could be affected by the slow-moving DT zone. He clicked on a torch and shone it towards the truck. ‘OK?’

‘Never better.’ Anji looked around at the evil snake trees. The cold cut straight through her TR suit.

The Doctor approached the van, the torchlight pooling over the white-crusted road. Anji kept a pace or two behind him, the snow squeaking under her boots. The van rose out of the night like the corpse of a giant metal animal.

The Doctor headed for the cabin, crouched and wiped the snow from the windscreen. ‘Empty,’ he said curiously. He led Anji towards the rear of the van.

In the back, the torch illuminated a large, ceramic coffin, lying at an angle, its mooring cables snapped. The Doctor passed Anji the torch, and she aimed it as he made his way towards the DT unit, his shadow shrinking around him. The wind slammed the tarpaulin back against its cage and beat it.

The Doctor peered inside the sarcophagus. ‘Bishop’s gone,’ said his voice tinnily in her earpiece. He checked over the wires and cables. ‘But the DT unit is still operating. It must be the cause of the time stasis.’

Anji waited for the Doctor to come out. ‘Where do you think they went?’

‘Either they’ve been taken, or. . . torch torch torch.’ Anji passed the Doctor the torch. He swung it accusingly at the trees. ‘Or they can’t have got far. Come on.’

‘What? Where are we going?’

The Doctor trudged to the side of the road. ‘Look.’ The misty torch beam reached the woods where the shadows slithered away behind the branches. Further in the trees, there was a soldier, a gun clasped to his waist. He seemed to be running, but was paused in his motion, like a freeze-frame.

They approached. The soldier didn’t blink as their light swung over his glistening eyes. His mouth hung open, as if calling out a warning. Snow flecked his lips, uniform and hair.

The Doctor circled around him, twigs snapping. 'A defaulter, I think. Now, where was he going before he was *interrupted*?' He followed the soldier's gaze, and crumped deeper into the wood. The snow concealed thick roots. 'Careful, careful!' said the Doctor. 'If your suit is punctured...'

'I know. Are you sure this is a good idea?'

'Here.' The Doctor ushered her forward. Ahead of them was another soldier, ducking as he ran. He had levelled his gun at some target but turned away at the last minute. His mouth had been frozen in an endless scream. He must have realised, too late, that time was slowing down.

The forest opened into a clearing. Two bodies lay half-buried in the snow. The first face to be lit up was Bishop's. His eyes were closed tight as he grimaced in pain or fear. He had been struggling, his one good hand clinging at the air.

The Doctor turned the torch to the other body. Hammond. He must have dragged Bishop here, away from the crashed van, in an attempt to elude the defaulters. Then he had stumbled backwards into some bracken and become impaled on the thorns. His head lolled, facing away from them.

But then the torch shifted down to his chest. No, Hammond had been shot. The bullet had torn through his uniform and ripped a hole in his stomach about a foot wide.

There was a crackling, phutting sound and Hammond's head swivelled towards them. His eyes snapped open. 'Doctor. Anji... Help me.'

There was no blood. His fake, rubber skin had been blasted apart to reveal metal plating, cylinders and wires. Thick, bunching wires, transistors, transformers and valves filled his twisted metal ribcage. Bulbs flashed and tapes spooled back and forth. In place of a heart, he had a large, tubular battery. It reminded Anji of the innards of an old computer, back in the days when they were the size of living rooms and scientists had horn-rimmed glasses.

A circuit sputtered and sent out a plume of fizzing sparks.

Fitz rubbed his sore eyes. All he could make out ahead were the outlines of the van and the forest and the snow. A shiver thrilled his spine. He had lost the Doctor and Anji. He had watched their torchlight flit over the van and then the two gas-masked figures had disappeared. They'd been gone five minutes, according to the *Interior Time*. And no time at all according to the other timepiece.

Then the *Exterior Time* clock ticked. Fitz squinted at it. The second hand hadn't moved, or at least, he couldn't remember where it had been before it had ticked. But he couldn't be certain of anything any more.

Fitz rummaged in the glove locker and found some stale, paper-wrapped biscuits. The biscuits were like the ones he'd had as a kid, under rationing. Anji had laughed when he'd told her he was sixteen before he'd seen a banana. He remembered biscuits from Saturday mornings in the flicks, watching *Flash Gordon* and endless newsreels from the Russian front.

It was odd, he could remember that, but he couldn't remember his school. . .

A gun barrel pressed into the back of his neck.

'He's a *robot*,' said Anji, looking down at Hammond. 'An android.' Hammond jerked his arms awkwardly, the motors whining. He pressed against the bracken, attempting to pull himself upright.

'Yes, an automaton of some sort, evidently,' the Doctor replied via her radio. Hammond's wide, glassy eyes followed him as he approached. 'But the technology seems. . . astonishingly primitive. An artificial construct, based on valves and transistors? I wouldn't believe it –'

'But you would believe in clockwork people?'

'Yes, well,' said the Doctor, 'but.. this is entirely different.' He squatted beside Hammond and took his hand. The fingers spasmed.

'He doesn't seem to mind the DT leakage,' said Anji warily.

'No, no, he doesn't.' The Doctor peeled back the sleeve of Hammond's jacket. His wrist skin flapped open to reveal more metal plating. 'Chrononium alloy. He's time-resistant. Very clever.'

'But it doesn't make sense. Who made him? Who's he working for?'

'Maybe we should ask him.' The Doctor leaned close to Hammond so that he could be heard through the mask filter. 'Dr Hammond? Dr Hammond?'

Hammond cleared his throat. His chest rose and fell as though he were breathing shallowly, but his exposed innards revealed this to be the fakery of electric motors. One of the tape spools chattered into life. 'Doctor. You must. . . help me. I. . . the defaulters attacked.' He turned to Anji. 'They forced me off the road.'

'I know,' the Doctor said.

'I managed to get Bishop away. . . but the defaulters. They. . . shot me. And then. . .' Hammond's voice slurred and wobbled like a chewed-up tape. He coughed and looked desperately at the Doctor. 'How bad is it?'

The Doctor considered his reply. 'How long have you been here?'

'I'm not sure. An hour or more. . . It hurts, Doctor. *Help me.*' Hammond looked down at his open wound, reached into the wires and took out a fused circuit. He turned it over in his fingers uncomprehendingly.

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor softly, taking the printed circuit and replacing it amongst the wires and flashing bulbs. 'You'll recover.'

'But the blood. . .' Hammond closed his eyes and slumped back.

'What?' said Anji quietly. 'I can't see any blood.'

'He's not aware that he's a robot, Anji,' whispered the Doctor.

'But –'

'He has been programmed to believe he is human. He has been programmed to see blood and flesh where we see circuits and. . . wires.' The Doctor tapped Hammond on the shoulder. 'Hammond. You see the soldier over there?' The Doctor flashed the torch towards the defaulter.

Hammond open his eyes and nodded feebly.

'You can see that he's not moving?'

'Yes.'

'That's because this is a decelerated time zone. But you have not been affected. D'you know why?'

'I don't understand.'

'You were shot in the stomach an hour ago. You're a doctor, you know you should have died of blood loss by now. So *why haven't you?*'

Hammond blinked. One of his hands revolved. 'I don't. . . understand. The. . . pain. I can't take the pain. Please.' His head fell back.

'You see,' the Doctor said sotto voce to Anji. 'He can't comprehend anything outside the remit of his programming.'

'It's horrible.' Anji kept her distance from Hammond. A yard or so away, Bishop remained motionless, one hand grasping ineffectually at the mist.

'Yes, well, I don't know how much help he will be to us. I don't think even he knows who he's really working for.' The Doctor tore open Hammond's shirt, folded back the ersatz skin and prised open the twisted ribcage. Anji tried not to look. 'The bullet's punctured his battery's TR shielding, but the short-out has been postponed because of the temporal deceleration. He's lucky that time stopped when it did, if lucky is the right word.' He straightened up. 'If time was running as normal, well, he would –'

'*Turn around!* Slowly,' someone suddenly barked in Anji's earphone. She shook with surprise and looked to the Doctor. Together they turned.

A figure in a TR suit was aiming a pistol at their heads. He approached, waving them away from Bishop. 'Move back. Back!' He trudged over to Bishop, grabbed him under one arm and dragged him to his feet.

'Mr Shaw,' said the Doctor. 'What do you think you're doing?'

Shaw halted, keeping his gun trained on the Doctor. 'I'm indebted to you, Doctor. For a while there, I thought we'd lost our last carrier. But now, Bishop is my property.'

Anji stared at him in disbelief. 'I don't understand,' she stammered, 'what do you want him for? You know he's infected...'

'I would've thought that was obvious,' sneered Shaw. 'That's precisely what makes him so *valuable* to me.'

The Doctor stepped forward. 'Shaw, I realise you're a defaulter agent, but...'. Now Anji stared at the Doctor in disbelief. If he'd known all along...

'Agent? I have an *agreement* with them,' Shaw hissed. 'A contractual obligation. They're paying me to provide them with a sample of this disease. It will be of inestimable value to the war effort.'

'You're a traitor,' snapped Anji.

'No.' Shaw laughed at her and dumped Bishop's body into the undergrowth. 'I believe in the *plutocratic ideal*. Whatever action brings the greatest reward is the correct action. But I don't believe in *loyalty*, if that's what you mean. My judgement is unclouded by worthless sentiment.'

'Just greed.'

'Wealth is all that matters, Anji. The defaulters have made me a substantial offer.'

'So you just go to the highest bidder and sod the consequences?'

'I make the most of my opportunities. And, of course, it's much more profitable to be in the employ of both sides.'

'And what happens if the defaulters win?' said Anji. 'Where will you be then?'

'It's immaterial.' Shaw approached them slowly. 'A plutocratic empire is a contradiction. A paradox. Don't you see? You can't have a society based on commerce, because the most successful and powerful people will always be those who *don't believe in society*.'

'Because there's no such thing. There are only individuals and families, after all,' the Doctor sighed.

'Quite. So a plutocracy will inevitably self-destruct. All that matters to me is my own credit rating. And, with Bishop, I can name my own price.'

'You're blinkered by your ideology, Shaw. It doesn't matter how much you're worth, it won't save you. You know what the infection does. You know you can't stop it, it's no use to you or the defaulters.'

'You're wrong,' said Shaw. He turned his gas mask to Bishop. 'I'm not bloody stupid. Bishop'll be restrained. And in his present state,' he kicked him, 'he's harmless.'

'I'm not so certain.'

'Yes, well, Doctor, we have unfinished business, don't we? You see, I can't let you live. It's a shame, you're a valuable commodity. But, on

balance, it's a loss I'm prepared to accept.' Shaw clicked his gun's safety catch off. 'In times of hardship, we all have to make financial sacrifices.'

'Why didn't he kill us?' Fitz craned himself around on the bench. His wrists had been bound to the seat frame, his feet bandaged together beneath him.

'I should imagine we are his insurance policy,' Mistletoe said delicately. All Fitz could see of him was the glint of his spectacles.

'What?'

'He is contracted to deliver one host of the infection. But, should Bishop prove. . . problematic, I daresay one of us would suffice in his stead.'

'Oh great.'

Of course, with hindsight it seemed so obvious. Shaw had been placed in the base by the defaulters, presumably to steal Paterson's research and prevent the plutocrats getting time travel. That's why he had freed them from the cell; he'd known all along that they weren't spies, and he thought the Doctor might have some market-friendly information.

And, Fitz realised, it had been Shaw who had sneaked out of the base and knocked him unconscious. Shaw, the expert on jamming the airlock mechanism. He must have been out arranging the bombardment – the attack that would provide him with the cover to escape with one of the infected soldiers.

Shaw had saved his life, but only because he needed someone to carry the infection. Someone who was otherwise disposable. Thanks a bundle, thought Fitz.

A distant rumbling lifted Fitz out of his introspection. The storm rushed and whistled as it approached. Just the sound of it made Fitz feel colder.

There was a flash so instantaneous that for a moment Fitz thought he had imagined it. Then, five or six seconds later, an explosion boomed out of nowhere. The car rattled.

'What the hell was that?'

'A time storm,' said Mistletoe. 'Look.'

Fitz followed his gaze to the *External Time* clock. The second hand ticked forward. Then it ticked again, and again.

'I don't particularly care whether you kill us,' the Doctor shouted rapidly. 'Just don't hand Bishop over to the defaulters. The infection will *spread*, Shaw. Thousands of innocents will die, replaced by those. . . clock things.'

'So what?' said Shaw.

'"So what?" The infection has no military value. Quite the reverse, it's a *liability*. The defaulters couldn't use it against the plutocrats. Think about it. They would just be replacing them with another, stronger enemy.'

'No.' Shaw's gun was unsteady. 'You're wrong.'

Anji shivered as a breeze creaked through the trees. The ground rumbled beneath her feet. Something terrible was approaching.

The Doctor put out a hand to Shaw. 'Bishop is... worthless. You're better off without him.'

'No, you're wrong...' said Shaw falteringly.

'Listen, I can help you. You know we're not part of the war. You know that I have valuable knowledge. Look at Hammond. Look at him!' The Doctor pointed to the corpse, its chest open, revealing the innards of a fifties computer. 'He's a robot. Who do you think made him?'

'I'm not interested,' Shaw snapped. 'Goodbye, Doctor -'

Behind Shaw, the frozen defaulter soldier began to move, slowly but inexorably. He closed his mouth, lowered his raised foot and drew himself upright. His fingers flexed as he lifted his gun to aim at Shaw.

'Shaw,' Anji said suddenly, walking to one side to draw his attention. 'You said you wanted some of my time. I'm prepared to accept your offer.' Shaw turned towards her and lowered his rifle. 'If you let me live, you can have me -'

The defaulter fired. The explosion was sluggish and bassy, like a slowed-down record. It took some seconds to echo and die.

'No -' Shaw twisted round and realised what was happening too late. The bullet impacted with his stomach. His body-suit was punctured and he jerked back suddenly, flailing through the air. The back of his suit split as a fleshy pulp splattered out.

Anji could hear Shaw's scream through her earphone. He hit the ground and the scream cut short.

The defaulter turned towards them, his movements becoming more fluid as time accelerated.

The Doctor grabbed Anji's arm. 'Come on!' The Doctor guided her out of the clearing, her legs tripping over bracken, gnarled, looping branches swinging at her goggles. They ran through the darkness, the Doctor's torchlight creating ghosts from the mist.

She looked back. Bishop had started to crawl clumsily, desperately away from the soldier. He cried out an incoherent protest as the defaulter took aim and fired. Bishop dropped into the snow, dead.

Hammond screamed an electronic, distorted scream. His bulb lights and valves fizzed and burst into flames. Spools jammed and rewound and tape slithered out of his stomach. The skin on his face blackened and melted away to reveal synthetic eyes searching left and right and a metal jaw chomping mechanically. His arms swung and clutched helplessly as the fire ate away at him, exposing a scorched skeletal frame of metal and wire.

His chest battery detonated and a fireball blasted through the clearing, feasting on Bishop and Shaw's corpses, the dead trees and the defaulter soldier –

The defaulter screamed and lifted his hands to his dribbling, blinded eyes, his skin blistered and red. He stumbled backwards, patting his arms, his uniform alight. Then he slipped to the ground. 'They're dead,' gasped Anji, shaking.

'They're all dead.'

'You're forgetting something,' said the Doctor.

Amidst the spit of the fire, the thunder and the hiss of her earphone, Anji heard a familiar, hideous whooshing. The shloop of time winding backwards.

The fire ate itself and vanished. In a jump cut, Hammond reappeared, unscalded. The defaulter reappeared.

But this time Bishop bent down to pick up Shaw's rifle. He turned it on the defaulter. The bullets rattled out, their thunder shredding the air, and the defaulter twitched backwards, his uniform tearing and his skin rupturing.

Bishop turned towards the Doctor and Anji. He smiled calmly, discarded the rifle and began to walk towards them. And, as they watched, his eyes, mouth and nose faded to be replaced by a clock.

Behind Bishop, a fireball exploded. Hammond.

The Doctor and Anji ran.

The Doctor brought them to a steep slope. Trees writhed out of the rocks on either side. Above them, the forest thinned out and Anji could see the spilling snow and heavy clouds.

'What do we do now?' she breathed.

'We get back to the car,' said the Doctor. 'If my sense of direction is right, it's not far this way. . . .' He scrambled up the slope, levering himself forward by the tree trunks.

'Then what?'

'I have no idea.' The Doctor hauled her up the incline, almost wrenching her arm from its socket. Behind her, something crunched and brushed through the undergrowth.

Anji found herself at the top of the slope, back on the road. As she left the shelter of the forest, the storm suddenly grew in strength. The Doctor held on to her to stop her being thrown back down the bank. The blizzard shrieked around them, the snow a dark, overwhelming nightmare.

They staggered down the road, forcing their way into the wind. Anji didn't dare look back.

The road turned and they were trapped in a blinding glare. Two headlights stared out brilliantly, the mist and snow seeming to exist only in their beams. Anji covered her eyes. The lights belonged to a van driving steadily towards them.

Before Anji could react, the Doctor had shoved her into the cover of the roadside bushes. Anji fell flat into the bracken, her knee hit a painful rock. The Doctor landed beside her.

'Which side are they on?' whispered Anji through chattering teeth, wiping the slush from her goggles.

'They're plutons, I think,' the Doctor shouted back. 'They're – Oh no.'

Anji looked up.

The lorry had halted twenty metres away. And Bishop stood in the bath of the headlights, walking confidently towards it. He clasped his ancient, dead arm to his chest. His face had returned to normal, but wore no expression.

Anji watched in horror as Bishop approached the truck. Staring directly into the lamps, she couldn't make out what was happening. Until the van's engine started with a triumphant roar.

Anji and the Doctor watched, powerless, as the van sped past them and disappeared into the gloom. Leaving them alone on an empty road.

Fitz started in surprise as the door to the armoured car clanged open. The roar of thunder burst in, followed by a flurry of snow and two TR-suited figures. They clambered into the front seats and slammed the door on the storm.

The figure in the driving seat unstrapped its mask. 'Hello.' The Doctor grinned at Fitz.

'Doctor, what happened? Did you find Bishop, and Hammond? And Shaw... I'm sorry –'

'I know,' said the Doctor, shrugging off his survival suit. 'He was a defaulter agent.'

Anji wrenched off her head-mask, took a deep gasp and ducked into the back of the car. Fitz shuffled around to give her access to his wrists. 'Was?'

'Shaw's dead. Hammond's dead.'

'He was a robot,' added Anji. The bandages loosened.

Fitz brought his hands round to his front and rubbed some sensation back into his fingers. 'A what?'

'An automaton. An artificial construct.' The Doctor opened the glove compartment and rummaged through the maps. 'We also found Bishop.'

'So where is he then?'

'You saw the van that passed this way, ten minutes ago?'

'A plutocrat personnel carrier,' said Mistletoe as Anji freed him from his bonds.

'Yes. He's on it.' The Doctor inspected a map. 'And heading... for Station One.' He tossed the map to one side and turned the ignition. The van sputtered unwillingly.

'Oh dear oh dear.' Mistletoe wrung his hands. 'What a un-propitious circumstance. It would appear the situation is irredeemable.'

'No.' The Doctor tried the ignition and again the engine guttered.

'So what're we gonna do now?' said Fitz.

'We go on. We have to get to Station One and warn them. It's our only chance.' The Doctor winced momentarily, closed his eyes and held his chest. He shook his head to lose the pain. In the torch glow, the Doctor seemed very pale. His burns hadn't healed and his eyes were red-rimmed.

'You think we can do it?'

'Station One is still a day away, and they've only got ten minutes on us.' The Doctor thumped the wheel, jerked out the choke and twisted the ignition. The engine revved heartily. He slammed down the accelerator and they lurched forwards. 'Of course we can still make it.'

Ten long hours had passed. The car hurtled down the lane, the trees whipping past in a blur. Fog rolled sleepily through the night. The patting of the wipers on the spotted glass was hypnotic.

Anji rubbed her hair. She hadn't washed or changed her clothes for what, three days? She needed a steaming bath, she needed scented candles and bubbles and something rubbishy and girly to read. More than anything, she wanted not to feel terrified.

The rocking motion of the car lulled her into a half-slumber. She closed her eyes and listened to the burr of the engine. Beside her, the Doctor steered. In the back, Fitz and Mistletoe were asleep and silent.

They had never caught sight of the plutocrats' lorry. It didn't make sense. The Doctor's driving had been relentless and bordered on the manic. It didn't make sense, but nothing did. Maybe it had taken another junction somewhere.

She snuggled into a more comfortable position. 'How much longer?'

'You made me jump,' said the Doctor gently. 'Not much further now. We're only fifty miles from the plutocrat border.'

'We're here.'

Fitz stretched his shoulders, made his way to the front and leaned on the back of Anji's seat. 'Where's here?'

'Passport control.' The Doctor switched off the engine.

Fitz peered blearily out of the windscreen. The road ahead glistened under spotlights. A barbed wire fence cut through the desolate wasteland, heaped with sandbags. Soldiers in TR body-suits wielding heavy machine guns stood on either side of the improvised barrier. Beyond the boundary, the squared-off silhouettes of lorries and trucks. 'I see they've put out the bunting.'

The Doctor tapped the *Exterior Time* chronometer. 'It's more or less normal time out there. At least we won't need to suit up. Everyone ready? Anji?'

'As ever.' Anji gripped the door handle and swung it open. A chill night breeze filled the car. Anji jumped outside, followed by the Doctor. As he emerged, Fitz was relieved to escape the smell of oil, feeling the refreshing, stiff air on his cheeks. Mistletoe huffed as he climbed out.

The Doctor strode confidently up to the soldiers. Fitz tried to keep up, Anji and Mistletoe hanging back.

The soldiers watched their approach through the dead, glassy eyes of gas masks, their guns readied. The Doctor halted a couple of yards from them, grinning, his breath misting. 'Hello. I'm the Doctor.'

The soldiers did not respond.

'I'm here to help you,' said the Doctor loudly and clearly. 'There's a truck on its way. One of the soldiers on board has a highly infectious disease. It is extremely dangerous. You must put it in quarantine the moment it arrives.'

One soldier lowered his gun and nodded to his fellow guard. He pressed a large button on the barrier mechanism. Soundlessly, the barrier swung open. The first soldier waved the Doctor forwards. Fitz, Anji and Mistletoe followed.

They were taken to one of the trucks. Fitz couldn't make out any details in the blackness. It was the best he could manage not to trip on the rough, snow-crisp ground.

The soldier indicated that they should climb up into the rear of the van, a cage hooded with a tarpaulin.

'You're going to take us to Station One?' said the Doctor. 'To meet your leaders?'

The soldier nodded.

The Doctor gripped the hand-rope and hauled himself into the back of the lorry. He put out a hand and helped Anji then Fitz climb up after him. Mistletoe passed Fitz his bowler hat before heaving his ungainly bulk over the threshold.

The interior was pitch black. Fitz squinted, trying to distinguish shapes in the darkness. There were two wooden benches. Two rows of four soldiers each sat on the benches, all facing inwards, their hands on their laps.

Each wearing a TR body-suit and dog mask.

Fitz sat on a bench, the Doctor beside him. Anji and Mistletoe took the places opposite.

The lorry shuddered into motion, driving forwards and passing into the glare of a spotlight.

For a moment, the inside of the van was illuminated and Fitz could see the Doctor. The Doctor gave him a reassuring smile. And Fitz could see the soldiers, identical in their orange-and-grey suits. As one, the eight soldiers turned towards them.

As one, they reached up to the back of their heads and unbelted their gas masks.

As one, they revealed their whirring, ticking clock faces.

Chapter Eleven

They shared the back of the lorry with eight clock-faced soldiers. The soldiers remained silent apart from their constant ticking. Their only movement was a slight rocking in response to the van. Occasionally the van would pass a spotlight, and Fitz would see their padded TR-suited bodies and glinting glass face-plates.

The creatures had not even acknowledged their presence. They had not attacked, nor attempted to transform them. They had done nothing. Except once. When the vehicle had been slowing, Fitz had had a crazy idea about jumping for it, but, before he could move, the soldier to his left had placed a restraining hand on his arm. He hadn't thought about escaping since.

Opposite him sat Anji and Mistletoe. Anji had a look of weary exhaustion and Mistletoe seemed quite indignant in his misery. On Fitz's right sat the Doctor, wearing the expression of one approaching the guillotine. Maybe they were going to die, but Fitz couldn't bring himself to believe it. The journey had taken over an hour, and he couldn't sustain his despondency for that long. Cruelly, hope always found a way back in.

The view out of the back of the truck was unchanging; they passed through wasteland and ruined villages and towns. They passed through two more floodlit checkpoints manned by gas-masked figures. They passed through snow, mist and rain. The night never ended.

Until, eventually, Fitz found himself waking up. First, he wondered how he had managed to fall asleep. Then he realised he could see his fellow passengers, the soldiers, the Doctor, Anji and Mistletoe. A dim light suffused from outside, as though it were late evening.

He looked out of the back of the truck and saw the most incredible, horrifying scene of his life.

Station One.

Anji had been expecting corridors and tunnels. Instead, Station One was a whole town. It had been the original colony, Shaw had said. It looked as though it had stood for hundreds of years.

They passed down wide, gloomy streets with buildings four or five storeys tall on either side. The buildings were of rough brick, the narrow terraces squashing the windows and doors together. Like Victorian townhouses, the ground floor door was accessed up a short flight of steps between decorated pillars. Another flight sank down behind some black-painted railings to the cellars. But now the plasterwork had crumbled, the paint had flaked, and many windows gaped, or had been boarded up. Everything had the same dusty, brownish-grey colour, the faded, morose outlook of a seaside town in winter.

Everywhere there were people going briskly about their business amongst the shadows. They all wore drab, plain clothes, made of cheap, functional fabric. Greys and browns. The men wore caps, overcoats and overalls, the women wore headscarves and long dowdy skirts. There were even children, playing ball or running with hoops. They all carried small cardboard gas mask boxes. Everyone was astonishingly thin and pale.

There was something else odd about the bustling crowds. No one spoke, or shouted, or called. There was no conversation. Their movements were smooth, minimal and regular, as though they were running on invisible rails. Each person seemed to be on a predetermined path, oblivious to everyone else. The cumulative effect being that of a robotic imitation of real life.

As the truck rumbled by, some of the people stopped and turned to look.

They all had clock faces. Every man, woman and child.

They sported a variety of clocks; some were ornate chamber clocks, others had small, brass dials, others were imperious grandfather clocks. Some heads still retained their hair and ears, but most had been completely transformed into oblong boxes of brass and wood. Some much larger than human heads, others shrunken on wide shoulders. They turned to the left and right as they walked in an automatic, unhurried fashion. Still adorned with caps and headscarves.

Anji could hear them ticking, but the ticking was that of dozens, hundreds, thousands of machines, a clicking and whirring in every direction. Some ticks were soft taps, others were chimes, others were the sombre clacks of a pendulum. The effect reminded Anji of walking into an antique clock repair shop. The more she listened, the louder the ticking seemed to become.

They passed shops. A clock-faced man glided into a newsagents and purchased a paper from a clock-faced vendor. Dial-faced women moved into butchers' and bakers', only to stand motionless as if posed in certain postures. The exchange of monies and goods was mechanical. They passed schools, the playgrounds filled with dozens of wooden-headed children,

some running back and forth, others propped against the stone walls in their duffel coats. They swung around a corner by a public house, *The Beanery*. Men in flat caps sat hunched and unmoving at tables, the air curdled with smoke, the only sound their tick and tock. They did not drain their glasses nor play the domino games set out before them.

Billboards lined the dark streets. Some featured slogans over images of smiling families and countryside. *Wealth is happiness. Look after your pennies! Never forget your debt to society. Credit where credit's due.* Others shouted in stark black-and-red-and-white. *Time Is Money. A penny saved is a penny earned. Reckless Spending Costs Lives. Better dead than in the red.* And finally, there were the advertisements, old 1940s-styled graphics in what had once been colourful designs, for radiograms, *Fletcher's Soup*, reprocessed milk, ale, tobacco, soap, cigarettes and *Bluebird Matches*.

Anji held on to the metal bar as she watched the streets glide jerkily away from them. The air smelled bitter with sweat and oil. It was as cold as a winter morning. Opposite, both the Doctor and Fitz watched the road; Fitz gaping, the Doctor's features lit up with a keen curiosity. The gas burns had left purple and white scars on his cheeks and neck.

They drove further into the town. Anji noticed soldiers guarding the streets, some in plain uniform, others in padded survival suits, masks hanging from their belts. They held guns, casting their blank gaze over the civilians.

Next, they turned past a bank, a large, imposing building with a Roman façade, a wide staircase rising up between pillars. Dozens of Mistletoes clustered around it; bowler-hatted men in immaculate black suits clutching clipboards, all walking to and fro and getting nowhere. All clock faced.

There were other vehicles on the road. Several Bedford vans, delivering goods or transporting soldiers and flat-capped civilians. But also some private cars: Ford sedans and Model Ts, Austins and Wolseleys, all with battered paintwork. In the distance, Anji spotted a tram, running perpendicular to their route, brimming with more of the inert clock people. Mostly, though, people travelled by foot or on bicycles. Anji watched as their truck was followed by one man, pedalling steadily, a wooden clock for a head. His bicycle bell jangled and he turned away into the throng.

One more thing unnerved Anji. The whole town was incarcerated within an immense cryptlike chamber. Above them, covering an area several miles in diameter, loomed a vast ceiling of concrete and steel. Lamps dotted the underside of the dome, casting the town in a weak, dismal twilight and lending everyone stark shadows. Smog undulated in the light beams. The roof itself was utterly black, with only a few cross-girders and buttresses visible in the darkness. Some pigeons or bats fluttered. The

dome was supported by hundreds of sheer columns of concrete, burying themselves in the ground every few hundred metres along the roads. The view over the rooftops was that of a gigantic forest of such pillars, each one cross-braced with girder branches, each one ten times the height of the tallest building. The vastness of the construction was terrifying. The echoes of the traffic boomed around them, creating a constant rumble.

Anji felt as though she were travelling through some surreal dream. Everything was so mundane, so familiar and yet. . . and yet everything was so strange.

‘We were too late,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘We must have been caught in some time distortion. I imagine Bishop arrived here weeks, maybe months ago.’

‘You think the whole station has been transformed?’

The Doctor nodded darkly. ‘The insulation on our car must have been breached somehow. Then, as we passed through a DT, we would be affected, but without being aware of it.’

‘So how are we going to get rid of them?’ whispered Fitz. ‘Gas?’

‘We can’t gas a whole city, Fitz. It might work for four or five people in an enclosed base, but here. . .’ The Doctor frowned. ‘There isn’t anything we can do. They’ve taken over. They’ve beaten us.’

The truck slowed. Here, the buildings hid behind high walls and wrought iron gates. Some sections of the street had been demolished, half-fallen walls enclosing rubble interiors, the remnants of a long-forgotten attack.

They waited at the entrance to a factory. Or a prison: barbed wire snaked along the tops of the walls and the windows were narrow and bleak. Anji looked up. A huge chimney stretched up to the dome, branching out into ducts that spread across the concrete rafters.

A siren filled the air with a loud wail. At that moment, the factory gates creaked open. Within, Anji could see row upon row of workers, all identically dressed in drab suits, each facing ahead. They chimed out the hour. Six o’clock. She heard the discordant noise of a thousand bells clanking and jarring. They clanged again, five more times. Then, as one, they began to march out of the factory in formation, row after row after row. They split up into groups and made their way back to their homes.

As the last echoes of the ringing died away, the truck rumbled into movement again. Anji noticed that there were clocks everywhere. They were welded to the stands of street lanterns. They were set into the brickwork beside each doorway. In the distance huge mounted iron clocks stared out over the city in four directions. Looking into the passing bookshops and offices, Anji could see a timepiece in each room.

She noticed one soldier holding a chronometer and comparing it to a lantern-mounted clock. A clockwatchman. There must be hundreds of them in this town, constantly patrolling the streets in case of time-based attack. But now each of them had been transformed into a timepiece too.

The truck finally halted outside a large, powerful-looking building, with a façade of balconies and pillars which had been elegant in better days. Gas-masked soldiers in survival suits guarded the doors from behind sand-bag barricades. A long flag draped down the front. The town hall, thought Anji.

The barrier at the back of the van was dropped and a soldier indicated that they should get out. The Doctor jumped out into the street and helped Anji down.

Outside the van, the strangeness of it hit Anji anew. All around them, the people and soldiers went about their clockwork lives. Each staring blankly with a circle of brass, glass and paper. Each whirring and ticking. Each gliding along leisurely, as if he had all the time in the world.

Above them, the metal sky, a huge canopy suspended on a hundred vast trunks. It resembled a colossal cathedral, the pillars filling every horizon. The ceiling searchlights dimmed to announce the artificial night.

The TR-suited soldier approached them and waved them towards the town hall with a rifle. Up the steps and in through the huge main doors.

The Doctor grinned at Anji and Fitz, his breath frosting in the air. He put his hands deep in his black-velvet coat pockets. 'I think they want us to go inside.'

Mistletoe looked up at the town hall in awe, his bowler on his chest. 'The *central register*.'

'This is the plutos' main HQ?' said Anji. Mistletoe nodded reverently.

The Doctor walked up the steps, Fitz at his heels. Anji glanced back down the street. A black-and-white poster instructed *Waste Not, Want Not*. The crowds thinned as people returned to their homes.

Anji turned and followed the Doctor into the building.

'Doctor,' said Fitz. Their footsteps scuffed over the marble. 'What do you think these things want? Why haven't they...'

'...tried to convert us?' The Doctor whirled on the spot. They had entered an art-deco foyer, the walls of panelled oak, two staircases rising to greet a far balcony. Spider plants decorated the gloomy, solemn hall. Misted glass doors led to anonymous offices. Overhead, a chandelier remained unlit. The place had a mustiness, like the backrooms of a museum.

The double doors swung shut behind them. Fitz noticed the edges of the doors were padded in rubber to seal the building from attack.

The soldier in front of them removed his head-mask to reveal a grandfather-clock head. He directed them up the stairs at gunpoint.

'I'm not sure, Fitz,' said the Doctor. 'They have no reason not to, that much is certain. But then, they have no reason to hurry. We are at their mercy.'

'This place freaks me out.' Fitz shivered and pulled his jacket around him. 'It doesn't make sense. These creatures are just acting like, I don't know, normal people.'

'Going through the motions, yes.' The Doctor casually pulled open a side door and peered inside. 'Ah –'

The office was fogged with a hazy light. Fitz heard the rush of static and the chatter of teleprinters. There were rows of wireless operators seated at desks. The women all had blank, glass-plate faces and headphones wired into the exchanges.

The Doctor clicked the door shut and proceeded up the stairs. 'So this is the centre of operations, Mistletoe? Where all the important decisions get made?'

Mistletoe heaved himself up by the banisters. He dabbed his cheeks with a handkerchief. 'Yes. The central register dictates all market strategies and policy initiatives. It is... head office. The locus of the management structure.'

'The war office?'

'The war comprises part of its portfolio, yes.'

'So who's in charge, then?' said Anji.

'The *actuaries*,' puffed Mistletoe pompously. 'As a humble and obedient auditor, I bow to their authority. Mine is not to reason why –'

'You talk like a tit,' said Fitz. 'Has anyone ever told you that?'

Mistletoe shot him an indignant glare. 'Manners cost nothing.'

The soldier led them up another flight of stairs and along a concrete corridor to a door, again sealed with rubber. The soldier ushered them through. They found themselves in a dark waiting room with another frosted-glass door opposite. The soldier closed the door on them. Something buzzed and the door locked automatically.

Some chairs and a table had been provided. There were even mugs and a coffee dispenser. Fitz poured four drinks. He took one of the seats beside Anji and offered her a mug. She clasped it and inhaled appreciatively.

It was like the room outside Fitz's headmaster's study. Or at least, it created in him the same feelings of dread. It even had the same painting of a man with an apple floating in front of him. Beside it, a wall-clock stared down forlornly.

Fitz's ears filled with a whooshing and he got unsteadily to his feet. The Doctor and Anji were speaking, but Fitz couldn't make out a sound. He swallowed.

'...we're in an airlock. Repressurising. Don't worry,' the Doctor finished. Fitz's ears popped and he could hear clearly again.

Mistletoe spoke into the intercom by the inner door. 'Time check. Six twenty-four and five seconds.'

The door creaked open. Fitz, the Doctor and Anji followed Mistletoe inside.

They emerged into a long, windowless room, brooding with shadows. Vast maps covered the walls with their grids and whorling contours, each one bathed in a sepia lampglow. The air hummed and crackled like an untuned radio. Map tables were set at intervals down the hall. Flickering TV sets, filing cabinets, pigeonholes and radiograms occupied the shelves. A balcony looked out over the chamber from the far wall, reached by a winding iron stairwell.

The room brimmed with activity. Dozens of figures in black suits and bowler hats and clock faces gathered around the tables decorated with flags and die-cast vehicles. They pulled levers on clacking calculators the size of typewriters, scribbled notes on clipboards and exchanged sheaves of forms and invoices. Others then pressed the paperwork into folders or placed it in metal canisters to be fired off down message tubes to other parts of the building. The men glided efficiently and devotedly back and forth through the musty gloom in an intricate dance of bureaucracy. Each one tick-tocking.

'So this is the main control room?' said Fitz. They remained by the door, afraid to intrude on the choreography.

'No. This is merely the central audit bureau. My old office. The...'

Mistletoe stumbled forwards, staring at the automata in disbelief. 'Mr Fleetwick? No, not Mr Fleetwick!' The featureless figure ignored him. 'Mr Dourman... Mr Grange! Oh dear oh dear. Mr Pottersby...'

Mistletoe dodged between the shuffling clock-men, shaking his head. 'Even old Mr Hardchester.' He turned back to Fitz, Anji and the Doctor. Tears streamed from behind his spectacles and shined his fat cheeks. 'They've all gone, haven't they? They've all been transformed!' He bunched his fists. 'Oh, this is simply insufferable!'

'So you've met the actuaries before?' said the Doctor. In the middle of the balcony there was an unremarkable frosted-glass door with an *Actuarial Bureau* nameplate. Ducts and cables crossed the ceiling into the oak-panelled wall. Below, the bowler-hatted auditors flowed amongst the tables in shift-

ing mathematical patterns.

Mistletoe sniffed. 'They are our masters. All our instructions and imperatives come from', he indicated the door, 'this room.' He wiped his eyes. 'Even young Mr Bickerstaff!'

The intercom beside the door buzzed and an electronic voice snapped, 'Would the Doctor and his colleagues please make their way into the Actuarial Bureau?'

The door opened on to a circular room. Dust pirouetted in the beams falling from the skylights. Tall shelves encircled the walls, piled high with thick, leather-bound volumes. More books and folders stacked themselves higgledy-piggledy round the edges of the faded carpet.

The colour had also faded from the warped wall panelling. Cobwebs the size of sheets fluttered from unmoving ceiling fans. The room had the musty smell of something which had lain undisturbed for centuries. Anji was put in mind of an old lawyer's chambers.

A circular desk dominated the centre of the room. Seven figures sat around it. They wore moth-eaten business suits, half-rotten and peeling away, cobwebs draped from their shoulders. The air thrummed impatiently with electricity. At first Anji expected them to be more auditors transformed into clocks. But as she drew nearer she realised these figures had never been human in the first place.

To begin with, thick cables extended out of their backs and plugged into power points in the wall. Their arms ended in metal hands with pincers for fingers and instead of heads they had boxes decorated in tortoiseshell. The sloping face of each tortoiseshell box consisted of numbered round buttons, like an old-fashioned manual calculator. Above the buttons there was a register, upon which numbers rolled up and down. As Anji watched, one of the figures pressed some of the buttons on its face. Its internal mechanisms clacked summarily and chinged up an answer.

In front of the automata were piles of writing paper, ink wells and quills, plus one wooden abacus each. They stooped over their desks; three of them motionless, the other four wearily scratching out lists of numbers and measurements like mechanical Scrooges. Having completed an invoice, one figure rolled it into a message cylinder, dropped it into a tube and pinged a brass bell.

'Counting machines,' breathed the Doctor. 'They're *counting machines!* Glorified cash registers.'

'They are the actuaries,' said Mistletoe, removing his bowler hat. He blew his nose.

'So this is where all your commands come from?' said the Doctor. 'These... things are the organ grinders to your monkey?'

‘It is my privilege to serve them.’

Fitz’s eyes ran in the dusty air. ‘What are they? Computers of some sort?’

Anji walked over to the nearest actuary and tasted static in the air. The figure’s suit had moulded away to reveal a metal skeleton encasing bunches of wires and valves. ‘It’s a robot. Like Hammond.’

‘Yes. So now we know who he was working for.’ The Doctor circled the room angrily. ‘So. The war is being *stage-managed* from this room. The heart of the plutocratic empire – machines tolling up the proceeds of human suffering. But why?’ He trailed a hand over the grimy books. ‘Why go to such lengths?’

One of the counting machines weakly turned its panel of buttons towards the Doctor. ‘Doctor?’ It spoke in a frail old-man wheeze of static. ‘The objective is profit. Yes, ahem, that is our function.’

‘Profit?’ The Doctor swiped a pile of papers off the desk. They fluttered through the dead air.

‘You remember what I said,’ said Anji, ‘wars are good for the economy. They mean greater investment, scientific progress, lower labour costs –’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘But it *wouldn’t work*. A war is an inherently unstable system, you would need to control –’ He trailed off and turned to the nearest actuary. ‘But, of course, you do control both sides, don’t you?’

‘We direct the plutocrats, yes, yes,’ admitted another counting machine, its head creaking towards the Doctor. ‘And we direct the defaulters too.’

‘You have your agents – your other *Hammonds* – in both camps, to make sure your instructions are followed? Yes, you give both sides the same levels of temporal technology, you direct the troop movements to maintain the *status quo*...’

‘The fiscal imperative mustn’t be jeopardised.’ The counting machine returned to its work. It pressed the buttons on its till-head and scrawled out an instruction on the paper in front of it. ‘War is profit. Profit mustn’t be curtailed. Oh dear me no, a dreadful thought, the very thought!’

‘So you set up a *perpetual* conflict? Just to keep your balance sheets healthy?’ The Doctor opened one of the binders and threw it to Anji. She caught it. Inside there were hundreds of receipts and invoices. Lists of handwritten orders to send thousands of soldiers to their deaths.

‘I still don’t get it,’ said Fitz. ‘You can’t have a war that lasts for ever.’

‘Why not?’ said the Doctor, boiling with anger. ‘Given a constant supply of new recruits... Have you ever seen a computer play itself at chess? Eventually you’re left with two kings waltzing around the board. Never checkmate, never stalemate.’ The Doctor rounded on the actuaries. ‘So you create a system whereby you *reap* all the rewards of a war but with

none of the drawbacks, because, of course, you can never lose. You create a system where you send hundreds of *thousands* of innocent people to their deaths just to generate revenue, just because they're surplus to your requirements. . . . ' The Doctor halted, his voice falling to an enraged whisper. 'You haven't answered my question. What is it all *for*?'

The actuary hummed hoarsely. 'We'd, ah, rather been hoping you would tell us, Doctor. Before we cease trading for good.'

Fitz wandered around the actuarial bureau, hands in his pockets. This place was too weird. It reminded him of somewhere he had once visited, but, oddly, he couldn't recall where. Outside the beams of light, the bookshelves loomed in austere darkness.

'What do you mean, *you don't know*?' the Doctor's voice was rising indignantly.

The actuary welled its quill and turned towards him. 'This franchise operation no longer appears to be worthwhile.'

'We must remember to adjust our losses!' suggested a colleague hoarsely.

'Yes, yes, we must make loss adjustments. Loss adjust -' The actuary keeled forward, slumping over its papers. Now only three of the actuaries were left.

The Doctor pressed one bandaged palm on his heart. 'You're doing this for a reason,' he breathed with some effort. 'You must know who you're working *for*.'

'Hammond didn't,' interjected Anji.

'The actuaries were brought in by the empire,' said Mistletoe. He strolled over to the Doctor. 'It was felt by the. . . powers that be that they would streamline the management process. That only automata could be sufficiently unconstrained in the pursuit of finance.'

'Humanity is inefficient and sentimental, you see,' mumbled the third actuary. 'It makes *compromises*. We do not compromise. Oh dear no, the very thought! It makes decisions based on emotion. We have no emotion. We are prudent. We are *economy*.'

'The ultimate expression of the plutocratic ideal,' said the Doctor, frowning in pain. 'The counting machines making all the decisions, with life just another resource to be exploited.'

'Don't you mind', Fitz asked Mistletoe, 'being ordered about by a machine?'

'Not at all.' Mistletoe sighed, his oily hands clasped behind his back. 'I can only aspire to their example.'

The Doctor ran his eyes over one of the actuaries' unfilled forms. 'So the actuaries were brought in to run this war four centuries, or so, ago. To put it on a more sound financial footing. But who gets the profit?'

'We can't remember,' said the first actuary apologetically.

'You can't *remember*?' snapped the Doctor incredulously.

'It has been four centuries, you know,' said Mistletoe snidely under his breath. 'I doubt you could remember more than a quarter of that.'

'No, we can't remember,' the actuary continued. 'No, oh dear, no, no.'

'But the money must go somewhere,' said Anji. 'Shareholders? You must pay dividends to someone.'

'Must we?' The second actuary turned to her. 'Yes, I suppose we must.'

'Profit isn't just an end in itself,' Anji added forcefully.

'Isn't it?', said the first actuary. 'Oh dear. We'd rather hoped that it was, you see.'

'No, the profits were definitely supposed to go somewhere,' said the second actuary. 'I remember that! But it has been such a long time since we actually had to deal with anything like that the precise details of who we actually dealt *with* have slipped our minds.' It hummed. 'But the profits have been held in reserve. I believe they are quite extensive.'

'Very considerable,' said actuary number three. 'We are pending further instruction from the plutocratic empire.'

'And?' The Doctor winced at another twinge.

'We haven't received further instruction. Indeed, we've received no communication at all for. . . ' The actuary trailed off.

'It's been a while, hasn't it?' said actuary number two.

'It certainly has, oh dear me yes. Four years, isn't it?'

'No, a while longer,' said actuary number three. 'Five years!'

Fitz felt a shiver as though a ghost had walked through him. So the actuaries were as cut off as the soldiers had been in Isolation Station Forty. He lit a cigarette for consolation.

'But what about reinforcements –' the Doctor began.

'Oh, we haven't received any military units for five years either. Not since we lost contact, you see.'

'As you will observe, Doctor,' said Mistletoe, a frost descending on his manner, 'we're on our own.'

The Doctor glared at him and turned back to the actuary. 'What d'you mean, you've lost contact? You –'

'We have made mmm. . . attempts to communicate with them by radio. Many attempts. Lots of attempts.' The actuary paused sadly. 'But they don't respond. The empire has gone, it seems, or at least it seems to have gone, yes.'

‘What?’

‘There isn’t a plutocratic empire any more,’ Mistletoe announced acidly.

‘Maybe it was never there in the first place,’ muttered Anji. ‘Maybe you just dreamt it.’

The Doctor ruffled his hair. ‘So let me get this straight. You’ve lost sight of... you’ve *forgotten* why you’re making a profit, the empire has vanished and you’re stuck on your own?’ He paced around the room, his rage rebuilding. ‘But nevertheless, you’ve continued with the war, haven’t you? Continued accumulating wealth. Continued sending men to their graves.’ He stared at the three remaining actuaries, eyes narrowing. ‘It’s all been for nothing, hasn’t it? Totally and absolutely pointless!’

‘No, no, no,’ disagreed the second actuary. ‘There is a good reason. Our programming tells us that.’

‘Really?’ hissed the Doctor.

‘Oh yes, certainly. We wouldn’t be doing all this if we didn’t have a very good reason.’

‘So what is it, then?’

‘We’ve forgotten that too. At least, I think we’ve forgotten. I don’t remember forgetting, but I suppose we must’ve done, or else we should remember, shouldn’t we?’ He turned to his fellow actuary. ‘If only we could go back and remind ourselves, eh?’

‘That’s no excuse... It’s what’s happening here and *now* that’s important.’ The Doctor thumped a book to emphasise his words. ‘You can’t spend your whole life searching for answers in your past. The past is dead and lost and gone. You have to wake up, wake up and deal with the present.’

‘Doctor.’ Anji approached him. ‘What you said earlier, about the war being a stable system... If the supply of new recruits has been cut off –’

‘Then it wouldn’t be stable any more, yes yes yes,’ said the Doctor hurriedly. ‘You’d run out of people to kill...’

‘And that is precisely the problem facing us today,’ Mistletoe swooped into the conversation gracefully. ‘The war is suddenly no longer a viable proposition. It has outlived its usefulness. The actuaries, in their wisdom, quickly realised that as soon as the supply of debtors dried up then foreclosure would be... inevitable.’

‘They knew it would be the end?’

‘For them and for all of us. Business would be over within a few short years.’ Mistletoe circled the room, puffed up smugly. ‘So the actuaries found themselves in rather a quandary.’ He brushed the cobweb from one of the dead counting machines. ‘They suddenly had *no future*. No reason for existence at all. But they knew that they had been told the purpose

of their work. Once. They knew that they had known, once, what all the profit was for.'

'But,' said the second actuary doubtfully, 'we forgot. Or, at least, I think we did. Did I already tell you that? Oh deary me.'

'So the actuaries decided there was only one option left open to them.' Mistletoe turned to the Doctor and smiled. 'They *would* seek their answers in the past. Because the past is not dead and lost, Doctor. Not if you possess a time machine.'

'What?' Fitz almost choked on his cigarette.

'They decided to redirect the plutocrats' scientific temporal research.' He pointed forward then backwards with his index finger. 'So that their chosen nominee, Hammond, could travel back in time and discover the actuaries' *raison d'être*. Find out to whom the profits were due. Find out what all the centuries of bloodshed had been in aid of.'

'And alter the course of history and prevent the collapse of the empire too, no doubt?' said the Doctor. 'Capital investment is so much easier if one can choose the future –'

Mistletoe smiled an *of course* smile. 'But, much to our dismay, Paterson's research did not bear fruit. The actuaries' last hope proved un-successful. And, in the meantime, the hourglass has run out of sand. Supplies have been exhausted. The war is no longer the prudent course it once was.'

'We must adjust our losses. Downsize. Reduce costs. Loss...' grumbled the third actuary. It lolled over its desk, spilling ink across its papers. Its head rested in the black liquid as though dead and bleeding.

'And, of course, this business with the clock-creatures hasn't helped matters...' added Mistletoe.

'Indeed. Indeed. Our remaining assets have depreciated,' said the first actuary woozily. 'Functions are no longer viable... We are *dying!*' Its head drooped and fell silent.

'So the war is over?' said Fitz. 'You're calling it off? Just like that?'

The final actuary laboriously rolled up a final sheet of paper, placed it in a message cylinder and dropped it down a tube, pinging its bell. 'We have contacted the defaulters to inform them of our decision. The lease of the property will be released to them in perpetuity. All losses and outstanding costs and residuals will be written off. All rights will be surrendered.'

'You're handing the planet over to them?'

'Indeed, indeed. The defaulter representative is due to arrive shortly for the exchange of contracts.' The actuary's voice slurred and wobbled like a tape player out of batteries. 'We are terminating. Deactivating! We are... closed for business. Oh –' The actuary's hum stopped and it crashed forward. Its desk bell rang out.

Fitz stared uncomfortably at the seven dead robots draped in cobweb shrouds. He circled around the silent room, finishing his cigarette. 'So, that's that then,' he said. 'It's all over.'

The Doctor shook his head and leaped into action. 'No, Fitz. Don't you see? At the moment the clock... things have only taken over this station. Station One. But as soon as the defaulter representative arrives, he will be infected...'

'And he'll go back to his people,' said Anji, horrified. 'And then their lot will be transformed too.'

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. He dashed over to the actuaries' desk, heaved one of the dead machines out of the way and sifted through the piles of papers. 'But if we can warn him in time, we may be able to prevent it spreading. Now, the instruction must be somewhere... here.' He flourished a sheet of paper. 'A carbon copy of the contract.'

'So when is the defaulter bloke due?' said Fitz.

The Doctor ran a finger over the contract. 'Not for a while yet. We still have a chance, Fitz!'

The door to the central audit bureau slammed open and the Doctor ran out on to the balcony, Fitz, Anji and Mistletoe at his heels. He rested his hands on the safety rail and surveyed the hall. The transformed, bowler-hatted auditors continued to glide from table to table, not speaking a word. But the room seemed to have grown darker and more oppressive in the time since their last visit. The air felt heavy and tasted thick with dust.

'What about all the clock-people here?' said Anji. 'What do you propose to do about them?'

She had a point, thought the Doctor. He frowned, rummaging through his memory for some clue he had overlooked. But there was no way these creatures could be defeated. All he could do was try to prevent the spread, to save as many of those who remained as possible.

He turned to make his way down the staircase and faced a figure rising towards him as if on an escalator. A soldier in a plain uniform, his head transformed into a wooden, lacquered timepiece. His face replaced by a round, brass-lined clock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The soldier's left sleeve had been torn away, revealing a severely necrosed arm, the gnarled flesh bleached a deathly white. Instead of a hand, the soldier had a skeletal claw. Fingers of bone.

Bishop.

'Quick!' urged the Doctor. 'Back!' He waved Fitz, Anji and Mistletoe back through the doorway.

'Doctor I have been waiting for you.' Bishop's voice was a guttural, mechanical rasp.

'I hope I didn't keep you long?' The Doctor backed towards the door.

'Sixteen days.'

'But you've kept busy in the meantime, I see. Had a recruitment drive?' The Doctor stepped back through the door and reached for the door knob. His fingers fumbled over its smooth, wooden roundness. He gripped.

'You cannot escape us,' said Bishop. *'It is too late for you.'*

'It's never too late.' The Doctor slammed the door hard in Bishop's clock face. He held the door firm and flicked the switches on the door control panel. The door buzzed and locked.

Through the door's frosted window, he could make out Bishop, distorted into a thousand fragments, his appearance twisting and shifting like glue as he moved from side to side.

'There's always –'

A whooshing filled the Doctor's ears.

'What do you propose to do about them?'

He was back out on the balcony. Bishop was gliding up the stairs, his bloodless hands outstretched, his face rattling and clicking hungrily. His clock face grew large and blurred, filling the Doctor's vision. The second hand crept forward. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Tick-tock.

Anji ran back into the auditor's bureau, followed by a shaken Fitz and a petrified Mistletoe. The Doctor backed through the door after them. Anji watched his fingers fumble for the door knob. He slammed the door in the face of the Bishop creature and locked it with a flick of a switch.

'It's never too late.' He turned towards them –

A man in a long black-velvet frock coat with a high collar and a silk cravat. A man with long, flowing, chestnut-brown hair and high, imposing forehead. A man with no eyes, no nose, no mouth. A man with a clock where his face should be. Roman numerals on yellowing paper, three narrow hands tap-tapping forward.

It spoke: the Doctor's voice, transformed into a gravelly clockwork rattle of whirrs and chimes and ticks.

'There's always. . . time.'

Chapter Twelve

Anji stumbled back, horrified. A calm had fallen over the Doctor, his movements relaxed and unhurried. He turned his clock face towards her as though concerned. She could see the twitching second hand and the scratches and fingermarks on the glass. His skin had fused into the brass frame, his long hair curling over the top. *'Anji?'*

She took another step away from him, her arm catching on something soft and clingy; one of the actuary's cobwebs. The-dead robots lay face-down to either side of her, leaving her nowhere to run. Her heart thumped and her throat dried. *'Doctor. Your... face.'*

He halted, his shape indistinct in the shadows. He paused, not speaking, ticking and tocking. Observing her without expression.

'My face? Anji Kapoor, you take issue with my face? What is the matter with you?' He clicked mockingly.

Anji swallowed, rubbing her shoulders. *'What's the matter with me? What's the matter with me? Look in a mirror.'* Please don't come any closer, she thought. Please, don't come any closer.

The Doctor turned slowly to Fitz, the light glinting on his glass. *'And you, Fitz Kreiner?'* Fitz opened and closed his mouth but was unable to reply. The Doctor surveyed the room with his plate face, taking in Mistletoe and the actuaries. Then he reached into his black velvet jacket and took out a silver-backed mirror. He raised it to his own face.

With a gasp he pulled back, his head twisting as if trying to escape its own reflection. He dropped the mirror and staggered over to the wall, his face in his hands.

Keeping her gaze on the Doctor, Anji crossed over to Fitz.

'They want me,' breathed the Doctor, his back to them. He spoke with some effort, pushing out each syllable. *'They want me to become one of them. Or rather, one of them wants... to become me...'*

He turned and uncovered his face. The Doctor's own features had returned. He kept his eyes screwed shut in concentration. *'I don't know if I can fight it. Fitz, Anji...'* he waved blindly, *'I want you to get back to the*

TARDIS. Mistletoe will help you. If the worst comes to the worst... you'll be safe there.'

'But, Doctor –' Fitz protested.

'We're not going to leave you,' said Anji. 'No matter what.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You might not have any choice in the matter.' He grabbed a bookshelf to steady himself and pressed the door control. The door buzzed and creaked open.

Bishop stood outside. Motionless. Waiting.

The Doctor smiled at them weakly. '*Goodbye.*' He walked over to Bishop. The door closed and locked after him.

Fitz sprinted over to the door and rattled the knob, trying to force it open. He banged a fist against the glass. 'We've got to stop them –'

'And how, may I enquire, do you intend to do that?' enquired Mistletoe.

'I don't know.' Fitz thumped the door again.

'Why do they want the Doctor first?' said Anji. Her throat tightened, and her eyes began to mist. The Doctor couldn't be infected. He couldn't. 'What about us? Why don't they want to turn *us* into clock things?'

'I daresay our time will come, my dear, in due course,' said Mistletoe, picking over each word. 'But if I were in the position of these... creatures, I should want the Doctor first. He would, after all, make a most dangerous opponent.'

The colour had died, leaving only greys. Everything seemed cold and lifeless. The shadows were thick and black. He seemed to be walking through a heavy fog.

The auditors had frozen in their tracks, some clutching clipboards, others in the process of transferring folders. Each one in a black suit, tie and bowler. But their heads were different; some were squared-off boxes, others were round, some were functional dark wood, others were carved with patterns. As the Doctor passed, their clock faces distorted in his bowl vision, growing larger, bulbous and slipping away.

Bishop led him into the waiting room. The Doctor closed his sore eyes. A headache held his brain in a vice, the pain surging in response to any movement. And inside his brain, he could sense the wheels turning. Tick-tock, tick-tock.

How could he see, thought the Doctor, with no eyes? He could still breathe, could still smell and taste the musty air. And yet if he brought his fingers to his face, he could feel round, convex glass where his eyes, nose and mouth should be. There must be a inconsistency in his own perception. Like a man who has lost an arm still being able to sense movements in his fingers. Like a man who still sometimes feels the beat of a second heart.

The corridor echoed to the clink of footsteps. The Doctor allowed himself to be led up another flight of stairs, through some more doors, down another passage. Until he found himself in a small, plain office.

The office had lain neglected for weeks, if not years. Opposite the one door, the narrow window looked out on to a dark, ghostly reflection of the room. The window was sealed with rubber. Around it, the wallpaper peeled away from rough concrete.

The Doctor slumped down into the chair facing the empty writing desk. Behind him, Bishop hovered. The Doctor glanced up at the clock set into the wall. It returned his stare.

He listened to the tap-tapping inside his mind. The hours to come would, he imagined, be an interesting experience. An opportunity to learn about these creatures. Find out what made them tick, so to speak.

Someone was speaking, an earnest, enthusiastic voice echoing in the darkness. 'So if we destroy our pasts, it follows that we destroy ourselves?'

'But they can go back and change stuff,' said a familiar voice. Fitz? How had he got here? He stood in the corner, hidden by the shadows. Slouching with his hands in his pockets, as usual.

'Exactly. They can. . . regress through their own time streams,' the Doctor heard himself reply.

Anji appeared beside Fitz, flicking back her hair. She looked concerned, frightened. 'And so anyone who gets this ability will go back to something they want to change -'

The Doctor nodded gravely. 'And then, as they change it. . . they cease to be.'

'You should face facts, my dear,' said Mistletoe, prickling. 'The Doctor's situation is un-salvageable. I regret the loss, truly I do. The Doctor was a highly valuable commodity. But now he has. . . cashed in his chips.'

'You don't know what you're talking about.' Anji told herself that the Doctor would be all right, that they would all get through this alive, that things would return to normal. She had to hope, but still she felt the nagging hollowness, the dread, the panic.

It felt like a nightmare. One of those nightmares where you try to force yourself to awaken but can't. Trapped in a looking-glass world where everything gains a sinister aspect, every insecurity becomes distorted and exaggerated, where memories return to make your guts wrench with remorse.

The Doctor's transformation had been so sudden she still couldn't quite believe it had happened. It had hit her like a car crash, leaving her struggling to reconcile the *before* and *after*. It didn't seem real. But then the image of the clock face returned. The Doctor was infected.

What she didn't need was Mistletoe gleefully prodding at her doubts. 'If I had a pound for every time I thought the Doctor was dead, only for him to bloody turn up grinning,' said Anji, 'I'd have enough to take us for a curry.'

'And I'd have enough to buy the restaurant,' added Fitz, jiggling the doorknob. 'The Doctor always finds a way. We just have to find him.'

'And then what do you propose to do?' said Mistletoe, circling. 'You don't know how to stop the infection taking hold.' A smile waxed his lips. 'I am touched by your confidence, my dear, truly I am, but I am inclined to bow to the Doctor's recommendation. We should reconvene to a place of safety.'

'Sod that. And sod you,' said Fitz. He sleeved the sweat from his forehead and rubbed his hair as he searched the room. He sprinted over to the nearest actuary and began to lift the robot from its chair. 'Anji, don't just stand there –' Anji ran over to help him. Together they heaved the heavy counting machine over to the door.

They swung the actuary hard at the door, just below the window. It banged through the wood, splintering it, and smashed the window. Fitz kicked the door, clearing a larger hole through the strips of wood.

They ran out to the balcony. Below them, the hundreds of clock-headed auditors trundled about their business. Anji squinted. The room had grown darker and the crackle and whoosh of static had become louder.

'Right,' said Fitz. 'Now where the hell has he got to?'

The Doctor wore a padded survival suit, the sweat gluing his shirt to his chest. 'Paterson?'

The scientist stood on the far side of the office, only his white plastic face outside the shadows. 'The past is... just a dream. It cannot be revisited or changed. But the memories remain to tempt us that things could have been different.' Paterson turned away sadly. 'Why do we regret? We regret because we wish we could go back.'

The Doctor heard the ticking of a clock. He turned. In the other corner of the room, Bishop stood, watching them.

'"Call back yesterday, bid time return." You can't undo the events of your own past,' the Doctor said, striding around the desk towards Paterson. 'That's how time works, I'm afraid. It's the second... no, first, rule...'

'I can feel it inside me. The wheels turning.' Paterson straightened, still facing the papered wall. His words were broken with fear. 'But it's not taking me over, Doctor. I am being *replaced*.'

The Doctor crouched down, opened the bag and took out a stethoscope. He plugged it into his suit's intercom socket and immediately something

hissed into his right ear. Then he squatted down beside the body and rolled it on to its back.

Outside the quarantine chamber, two figures gazed in, their bodies transparent. Fitz and Shaw. Fitz looked terrified; Shaw showed no emotion. The Doctor frowned and squinted through his goggles. There was a third figure, indistinct, standing behind them. A soldier with a clock for a face. Bishop.

But Bishop was laid out in front of him, his mouth gawping open, his eyes screwed shut. The Doctor unbuttoned the corpse's shirt to reveal a bloodless, rib-ridged chest. He placed the stethoscope drum on to Bishop's heart and listened.

Tick. Tock. The sound of a pendulum swinging.

The Doctor folded away the stethoscope and collected a scalpel. 'More gas, please Anji.' Anji, standing over him, nodded. The Doctor placed the blade on Bishop's sternum and inhaled deeply.

Bishop's eyes flicked open. He looked up at the Doctor and smiled. '*You could kill me now.*' His voice had a harsh, mechanical quality. '*Kill me now and the infection will not spread to Station One. You would save thousands of lives.*' He reached up and gripped the Doctor's hand. '*Some mustard gas would do it. It would be simple. Easy.*'

'No.' The Doctor shook his head. 'That isn't how it happened.'

'*But it could be,*' said Bishop. Now he stood in the corner of the office. The Doctor was alone, crouched over an empty section of worn carpet. '*You can change the past.*'

'Why would I want to?'

'*You have made mistakes,*' tick-tocked Bishop. '*You have caused others to die.*'

The Doctor didn't take his eyes off the transformed soldier. He straightened his frock coat. 'I can live with my conscience. My past is what makes me who I am. I'm not going to give that away.' He sounded stronger than he felt. His headache throbbed relentlessly, his burns and bruises ached and his lungs had still not recovered from the mustard gas.

'*"But it is also human to want to go back and make amends. And sometimes we can never forgive ourselves."*'

The Doctor heard his own voice. 'These creatures will use that regret to control you. They will take you back to your worst, your blackest moment and give you the chance to do things differently. Nobody would be able to resist that. Nobody. Not even me.'

The laboratory hummed tensely. Paterson's forehead and shirt dripped with sweat. He sputtered behind his glasses, on the brink of tears, claspings his clipboard. 'What? How?'

The Doctor strode over to the main panel and indicated the row of bulbs. He waved. 'These lights only indicate a return signal. The outward control signal may still be able to reach them.'

'But we have no way of knowing whether we're getting through –' protested Lane, flustered.

'It's worth a try.' The Doctor turned, taking in the room with a sweep of his eyes. Shaw and Bragg. Fitz, Anji, Lane and Paterson. All frozen, not blinking. And standing in the corner, Bishop. He glided forward, ticking. '*You brought the capsule back, Doctor,*' said Bishop. '*You brought Ash and Norton here. It was you, your intervention. You gave us a way in.*'

'I did what I believed to be right at the time.'

'*You could stop it now. Ash and Norton would be lost.*' Bishop walked across the room, slipping between Fitz and Anji. '*Lane would never become infected. Nor Paterson. Nor any of the others.*' Bishop paused. '*You, Doctor, would not become infected. You would not be here now.*'

'I don't fool that easily.' The Doctor strode over to the office window and stared into the utter blackness outside. Into his reflection's eyes. 'Because you would still replace me, wouldn't you? All you need is for me to negate my history. It doesn't matter if I prevent your arrival in the process, or what I do, because I would be creating a paradox, a contradiction – to undo the past, you must have first experienced it and therefore. . . and therefore that past must *still have occurred*. You would still have me, one way or another.' The Doctor turned to Bishop. 'No. No, that isn't the way out.'

'*There is no escape. You will become like us. One way, Doctor, or another.*'

'We don't know where we're going,' said Anji between gasps. 'He could be anywhere.'

She was right, of course, but Fitz felt certain that the Doctor was close by. He couldn't explain it, but he seemed to know his way around even though he had never been here before.

'I still consider this action most ill-advised.' Mistletoe dabbed his cheeks with his handkerchief.

'No one's keeping you, mush.' Fitz led them down the passage, trying each door. Most were stubbornly locked, but some swung on to rooms of boxes and sheet-draped furniture. This section of the building had not been visited for years. The wallpaper had faded and dried as though touched by autumn. It smelled of dust and the temperature had plunged below freezing. A draught shivered through Fitz's jacket.

He reached the final door. It creaked open on to an unkempt office containing nothing more than a chair and desk and a window.

Fitz stepped over the threshold. He could make out a body lying on the floor, flat on its back. With a leap of hope, he realised it was the Doctor. With, thankfully, his own face. The Doctor's eyes were closed, his frown twitching. A murmur escaped his lips, as though he were dreaming. His skin was as pale as death.

Anji knelt down and took the Doctor's hand. She felt for a pulse, then pressed an ear to his chest. 'Well, he's alive,' she said uncertainly. She felt his forehead. 'He's very cold, though.'

Fitz glanced around the room. Bishop stood in the far corner, watching them, whirring and ticking. He hadn't reacted to their arrival. He just stood there, like a box-headed sculpture.

The Doctor whispered something. Fitz moved back to listen. 'And for... you.'

Lane poured some coffee into a chipped mug. 'So we have to keep one eye on the ticker at all times.' She offered a mug to Anji. 'Coffee?'

'Oh, God, yes please,' sighed Anji. Lane passed her a mug and filled another two. She gave them to the Doctor and Fitz and unpacked a cigarette. 'Welcome to Isolation Station Forty.' She paused, her smoke frozen mid-curl.

'You will yield, Doctor. Eventually. It is just a matter of time.'

The Doctor sipped his coffee. As bitter as he remembered. He paced around the reception area, avoiding Bishop's gaze. 'Maybe. But maybe I have time on my side.' He rubbed his forehead. The headache had grown worse. The ticking snapped in his ears. It took an effort of will to fight the urge to change events, however fractionally.

'Time is on our side. The urge will become irresistible,' said Bishop. *'Soon, you will not wish to resist.'*

'I'm not so sure. It doesn't matter where you take me,' said the Doctor through gritted teeth. 'There is nothing I would change. Not one breath or motion. All I have done, no matter right or wrong, has brought me here, to this moment, to make me the man I am now! I will not throw my existence away on a regret, on a might-have-been, on a second chance!' He yelled in an indignant fury. 'You'll have to do better than this!'

Bishop returned smoothly to his corner. The Doctor circled, staring at the writing desk and the soldier. Then he began to rummage through his pockets, arranging their contents in front of him. A shoelace, some coins, a toy car. An apple core. 'I'm not sure quite what I have that might be of use to you.'

The two tall, hairless guards picked over the mess. Their scruffy robes and rusty spears made them an incongruous sight in the small, gloomy

office.

‘See anything that takes your fancy?’ the Doctor asked hopefully.

The Endpoint guard picked up the apple core and examined it.

‘This is new. What is it?’

No, thought the Doctor. No. He screwed up his eyes and turned away, leaning against the wall. The pain increased, the throbbing filling his mind. Exhaustion clouded the edge of his senses. But he would not intervene, he would not rewrite a single line.

But he could feel his strength of mind weakening.

‘A world of dogs?’ said Fitz incredulously as he emerged from the gloom.

The Doctor grinned. ‘And, in a footnote to Chapter Eighty-seven, hidden away at the bottom of the page, in the tiniest, smudgiest print possible – there’s a set of what looks to me suspiciously like intergalactic co-ordinates.’

‘Oh,’ said Anji, non-plussed.

‘We’re going there, aren’t we,’ said Fitz, resigned. ‘You’re going to take us to the dogworld. . .’

The Doctor reeled back as though punched in the chest. He grabbed the chair for support, but fell, outstretching on the clammy, stone-flagged floor. A sudden heaviness pressed down upon him, squeezing the air out of his lungs. A cramp twisted across his right shoulder and down his arm. His breathing was short and weak but echoed in the vast amphitheatre. Or echoed in his ears. He smelled incense and tasted bile on his lips.

A black cloud passed over the Doctor’s vision, and he flitted through unconsciousness. The ticking grew louder. He looked up, up at the plaster ceiling. Bishop stared down at him. ‘*You could prevent this. . .*’

The wrenching sensation in his chest became unbearable. He wanted to scream, to yell in furious pain but the weight upon him was too great. His gasps and the tick-tock were joined by a new sound. The flapping, rushing thud of a heartbeat.

Bishop stepped back to make way for another figure. A shaven-headed man, heavy-set, with glistening eyes and a military-style greatcoat.

One after another, screams began.

Sabbath’s hand pulled away from the Doctor’s chest, clutching something black and oily, something palpitating.

The Doctor wanted to reach up. To take his heart back. He could do it. All he needed to do was lift his arm –

Fitz shuddered at the sound of the Doctor’s mumbled protests. Then he fell silent.

Anji stroked the Doctor’s hair. ‘He’s having some sort of a nightmare.’

'I feel so bloody useless,' muttered Fitz. 'We should get him back to the ship.'

'I would counsel against such action.' Mistletoe sat in the chair and removed his bowler, dusting it dismissively.

'He's got a point,' Anji admitted. 'We don't know where it is, and even if we could find it, could we get it to work? No.'

Fitz straightened up. 'I know. But we should still get him out of here –'

Bishop blocked the door. He had moved silently, unnoticed, across the room. His timepiece head swivelled to address Fitz. '*Your time will come shortly,*' the creature rasped. '*You will all become like us.*'

He could *travel through time!* Not simply through history, but through his own *life*, through his own experiences. As he rushed forward the minutes and hours became a blur of impressions, sensations and, most vividly of all, emotions. He felt again the fear, the joy, the pain and exhilaration, each whirling by in the briefest of instants. Days flashed by in a matter of seconds. Then, by an act of will, he slowed his ascent, bracing himself against the momentum he had gathered, and brought himself wholly into his past.

The capsule bucked and creaked, the floor shuddering under the strains of the engine. The panels and instruments clattered. Outside, the wind whistled and howled.

He was reliving each moment as it occurred. It felt like a memory, but with a beguiling clarity. Everything he had remembered and much, much more. Inconsequential details were richly familiar. He could taste the TR-filtered air. He could hear the rumble of the engines. He could even sense the thoughts he had been thinking. Everything was exactly as he had remembered, but more so.

But he was not merely reliving the past, the Doctor reminded himself. It was real, it was happening, it was here and now. He was simply drifting forward through his own history at a rate of one second per second. Living his life as a back-seat driver. But he could still direct his actions at any moment, if he chose. Do things differently. Prevent mistakes –

And that was the temptation to be avoided.

'Anji! Please answer,' he heard himself yell. He glanced up at the ceiling-mounted clocks. The *Capsule Time* had halted at one hundred and thirty-four years.

Fitz unstrapped himself from the seat opposite and lumbered over to a porthole, bracing himself against the wall as the capsule swung suddenly to one side.

The Doctor pulled away his belt and tried the radio. It spat angry static. 'It's no good,' he told Fitz, his voice crackling back through his earpiece. 'Either we're out of range or they're not answering.'

'Which would you prefer?' said Fitz. 'Doctor, where the hell are we?'

The Doctor clambered over to a porthole and wiped it clean. Outside he could see only his gas-masked reflection peering into the capsule. 'I don't know. Somewhere? Nowhere?'

There was something out there. A shape in the gloom. A sensation of a presence. Something large, terrifyingly so, tearing its way through the void. The Doctor couldn't see it but he could feel its power. It was pulling at him, dragging him through the shadows.

Suddenly the Doctor found himself suspended in the blackness. He seemed to be floating; he had no sensation of weight or motion, but it was cold, as cold and empty as space. As cold as death. The chill goosepimpled his skin.

A fear gripped his stomach. An approaching, all-consuming fear, like a scream rising to a howl of anger. And pain. A pain that ripped through the nothingness, a pain that threatened to engulf him.

He was not alone. Figures, the shape of men. Each one with the head of a clock, shining like the moon. Some square-headed, some round-headed, some in wood, some plastic. Dressed in drab brown and grey overalls, each one staring directly ahead as they marched forward. Tick-tocking in perfect unison. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

'Darkness,' Paterson choked. Inches from his feet, the shaft plunged away into gloom. A two hundred foot drop. The capsule hung above them, revolving on its chain. It made a sinister pendulum, its surface glistening, the reflections of the floor-lamps skidding over it. 'I can feel it. Like a shadow falling across me. And there is something here...'

'What -' said the Doctor.

'It's cold. So cold. And empty,' breathed the transformed Paterson. 'So much pain. Blackness feeding.'

Of course, the Doctor realised. The capsule had created a breach in the passage of time, like a bullet tearing a hole through fabric. Tearing a portal into somewhere else, somewhere *outside* time. And these creatures were passing through it, drawing their power from the fissure. Co-existing both within the void and within reality, within those they possessed.

They depended upon the breach. It was their lifeline.

The blood had drained from the Doctor's skin. He turned to Anji and grinned weakly, his eyes half-open. 'You found me, then?'

Anji smiled through her tears and sniffed. 'We couldn't leave you, you big heroic idiot.'

The Doctor's gaze shifted to Fitz. 'It's no good, you know.' He coughed, wincing at the pain. 'There's nothing I can do to prevent it happening.'

'Prevent what?' Fitz asked.

The Doctor frowned, considering the question. 'The *metamorphosis*, Fitz... I'm trapped. Trapped within my own history. I can go back, days, months even...'

'You can move through your own past?'

'But I cannot *escape* it.' The Doctor cleared his throat. 'I think... I know where they're drawing their power from. The time-dive, at Isolation Station Forty, created a rupture in the skin of time, a weakening of the fabric...'

'So can you seal off this rupture thing?' said Anji.

'I'm not sure. Possibly. I don't know.'

'Then we'll go back to Station Forty,' Fitz decided. 'And –'

'We can't, Fitz,' sighed the Doctor. 'It would take us two days to get there. I don't have that long left. I –' The Doctor grimaced. 'My time is running out, I'm afraid.'

'Well, well, if you can travel back through your own life, why don't you go back two days, to when we were at Station Forty?' Fitz said earnestly. 'And close the rupture then?'

'Because that would mean a change to my past... and as soon I do that, they will have me.'

'But if you knock them out at the same time –'

'Time doesn't work like that, I'm afraid. I wish it did. If I do anything which would result in me not being here, like this, now... I would negate all that has happened to me. I would be as nothing, an unperson. I would become one of them.'

'So there's no way round it?' said Anji.

The Doctor nodded and closed his eyes. His voice hushed to a whisper. 'I don't think... I can resist... Anji?'

'Yes.' She leaned closer.

'What time is it?'

Anji checked the wall-clock. 'Almost three o'clock. About ten minutes to.'

Snow whirled in the headlights. The windscreen wipers battered it into crusts. The slush on the road sparkled as it unrolled towards them. The Doctor crunched down gears and the car grunted its assent.

He breathed in. The air was cold, oily but refreshing. He had left the office and launched himself into the past. It took a huge effort to con-

trol his descent, pushing against the surging thrust of time, diving deeper and deeper through his own history, the wind crashing in his ears. Events flashed by, brief snapshots and claps of sound and abrupt, snagging fragments of emotion. The actuaries draped in cobwebs gathered around their desk. 'We'd rather hoped that it was, you see.' Then a gulf of blackness. The drive through the city, through streets of clock-faced civilians in caps and coats. Another giddy rush of nothingness. Hammond, twitching in the snow, his chest ripped open to expose a metal ribcage, bunched wires and valves.

The concentration required was intense, to clutch the fragments of time as they whistled by and not become swept up in the rush or drop back into reality. The Doctor couldn't resist much longer. As his mind became dulled with tiredness it slipped into moments of panic and unreason. Moments of fear. He knew he had it in his power to stop Bishop, prevent the spread of the infection. To save everyone in Station One. Save himself. But if he did that... He must not, although every instinct told him that he couldn't just stand back and allow evil to prosper.

Fitz sat in the seat beside him, shivering sullenly into his jacket. In the back of the car, Anji, Mistletoe and Shaw huddled under blankets. No one had spoken for three hours.

A man appeared in the headlamp glare, standing in the middle of the lane. The beams passed through him to whiten the slushy road. His circle face shone. He walked, no, floated towards the van, his pace even and measured. The Doctor didn't swerve or brake. The man grew larger. In a moment they would hit.

Bishop sat on the seat beside him instead of Fitz. He turned to the Doctor, his neck clicking with the motion. '*You can go back, Doctor. You can... run. But wherever you go, I will follow.*'

The Doctor's gaze returned to the road, watching as it tunnelled through the trees. 'I don't think so, Bishop. I'm travelling back through my own lifetime, whereas you... you can only draw time back a couple of minutes. You're way out of your depth.'

'This was less than one day ago...'

'No, time is relative. Particularly on this world. Because, for you, this was *sixteen days ago.*' The Doctor laughed. 'You may be able to follow. You can watch. But you can't stop me.'

'You cannot escape your history.' Bishop paused. His mechanisms chattered gravely. '*And I will be with you. Always.*'

The TR filter amplified the sound of his breathing. The Doctor strode into the reception area, the surroundings bulging in his goggled perspective. To

one side, a group of chairs congregated around the electric heater. Body-suits hung from the wall opposite.

‘Where are they?’ whispered Anji in the Doctor’s ear.

The Doctor remembered entering this room, that much was familiar, but what was to come was a blank, a gap in his memory. ‘We should be careful.’ He approached the airlock control unit; a box laden with knobs and switches. He levered the front of the casing free to reveal a grimy nest of wires and transistors.

It was a difficult, fumbling process to rewire the airlock, his glove fingers thick and insensitive and the colours all becoming grey in the near-darkness. But he remembered the instructions that Shaw had given. He had to break the main transformer circuit and fuse the capacitor relay, locking off the mechanism.

Something clanged above them. The airlock had jammed shut.

The Doctor replaced the cover and toggled off every switch. ‘It worked. The airlock is locked-off. No one can get in or out.’

‘So now we really are trapped?’ said Anji apprehensively.

The Doctor smiled ruefully, but then the smile dropped. This was it. He had taken his one chance. Whatever he did from this point on, he would risk altering his own history. He would be rewriting an earlier chapter of his life. If he influenced the events of his future in the slightest detail, he would be lost. From now on, he was gambling with his entire existence.

Anji headed out to the corridor. The Doctor followed a few paces behind and then ducked behind the doorway. ‘Doctor?’ Anji turned and walked back into the reception area. ‘Doctor?’

The Doctor waited for her to go, then examined his TR suit’s communications system. A small radio, wired into his suit. He tuned it to a dead frequency and static washed back through his ear. Now all he would be able to hear would be his own voice.

Fitz and Anji hadn’t moved. They crouched beside the Doctor, watching his troubled, shallow respiration. Occasionally his eyelids flickered and his lips muttered, but no words came.

‘*The Doctor has chosen to intervene in his past,*’ Bishop announced. Fitz looked up, squinting to make out shapes in the gloom. Bishop stood half in shadow, his glass face glistening eerily. In the silence, his tick-tocking seemed snappy and loud. Mistletoe remained seated, finger-dusting the writing desk with a glum air.

Fitz’s heart became heavy as he abruptly realised what Bishop meant. The Doctor would become one of them. One of the clock-creatures.

And that left him, Anji and Mistletoe. Without the Doctor, they had no hope. They would be next. They would be sent back into their own pasts, made to endure the worst days of their lives, over and over again, the moments of torture and regret, until they attempted to correct something. Then they too would be transformed.

The clock on the wall clicked to five minutes to three.

The Doctor backed away from Lane, feeling his way towards the door of the officers' mess. The hands on her carriage-clock head span wildly. She spread her arms and her ticking accelerated to a buzz. She chimed. The note reverberated groggily.

'You're *feeding*,' the Doctor realised, inching towards the door. 'You need more *time*. Of course. The energy ratio. It's harder work going back than it is going forwards.' Now he knew that from hard experience. He felt so exhausted he might collapse at any moment. 'To go back two minutes, you would need to use up days, weeks, even months. It must really take it out of you. No wonder you need to recharge.'

The Doctor stepped out into the passage and ran to the stairwell. The base was as gloomy and still as the grave. He had only the ever-present background hiss in his ear for company.

He climbed down the stairs, his TR suit boots clanking on the metal and echoing dimly down the concrete shaft. The safety rail was slippery with condensation. The air had clouded and become a drizzle. The orange glow of the safety lamps streaked and diffused.

The mustard gas. This atmosphere was lethal. He was walking through a mist of poison.

The Doctor reached the level with the medical bay. Even in the dimness, the shape of the corridor was familiar. The ducts overhead, the walls of dark greenish-grey. The fog grew thicker, blurring his goggles. Then he heard something. Footsteps approaching.

He turned to see a figure in a baggy TR suit, its features obscured by a mask, striding towards him –

The Doctor ran. He reached the bulkhead which had been stuck at half-way and ducked beneath it. The figure didn't follow, but the Doctor didn't look back. With some relief, the laboratory door appeared out of the haze. He hit the opening switch and it clanked open.

The Doctor stumbled over to the control panel and leaned on it, gasping in some filtered air. He could feel himself weakening. His mind clouding. Soon he would be dragged tumbling back to the future. He had only two minutes or so left.

Looking up at the clocks, he noticed that the *Absolute Time* was still

ticking at one sec per sec. The laboratory had been unaffected by temporal displacement. That was good news, at least.

Gathering his strength, he reached under one of the shelves and scraped out a rusty case. Forcing open the lid, inside he found a glowing, lime-green powder. Chrononium. The Doctor cast his mind over what he knew about the substance. In its inert form it merely slowed down the passage of time. But given a sufficient, not to say explosive, burst of energy, chrononium would create a localised temporal acceleration. A hundred years compressed into a few seconds, gushing out and expanding in an instant. . .

The Doctor pulled out half a dozen similar boxes, each one made heavy with the substance. Then he glanced through the window, into the time-travel chamber.

The black sphere of Paterson's RT capsule loomed over the pit like an omen.

Fitz's reflection had darkly rimmed eyes, three days' worth of stubble and a tangle of unwashed hair. He tried to open the window, get some fresh air, but there was no latch. He wanted to smash the glass. The fear had given him a rush of restless energy, but nowhere to direct it. All he could do, as Anji had reminded him, was wait.

'The Doctor is attempting to close the breach,' said Bishop. Fitz watched as the reflected Bishop turned towards the window. *'A futile gesture.'*

Fitz didn't look round. 'How's he doing it?'

'He is loading the time capsule with chrononium. If the substance is accelerated whilst in transit it will cause a localised temporal saturation –'

'And seal the breach? Then that's you buggered, mate. . .'

'It is of no concern. The moment the Doctor's actions diverge from his past, he will become one of us.'

'You mean he hasn't actually changed his past yet. . . ' said Anji slowly, hope resurfacing.

'Then,' said Fitz, 'what the hell is he playing at?'

The lab door clattered upwards. The Doctor dragged himself out into the corridor, his gloved hands scrabbling over the walls for support. The gas had grown thicker and soupier and swirled around in him in the darkness. He staggered forward. His work was done, and he felt tired. So tired.

He was not alone. Bishop blocked the passage, watching him. His head ticking.

'You can't undo what I've done,' the Doctor said with some difficulty. 'At the moment you're in a van about forty miles away, as I recall.'

'You have lost, Doctor,' said Bishop. *'You are no longer able to resist.'*

'I know,' admitted the Doctor. 'I'm very aware of the fact.'

'Whatever you do you will become one of us –'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Well, no. No, you see, I've found a way out.' He smiled and brought his hands round to the back of his head. He found the straps holding his gas mask in place and pulled them free. The mask dropped to the ground.

The Doctor felt the cold, lethal air on his cheeks. He blinked. He couldn't taste or smell the mustard gas, but he knew it was there. He coughed and his eyes began to stream. Then, holding down the pain, he approached Bishop. Grinning defiantly.

'I go back into my past. . . and kill myself!'

He took in a deep breath, filling his lungs with the poison. He had to metabolise as much of the gas as rapidly as possible. He felt himself gagging, choking, but then he sucked in more air, in and out, in and out, till he was hyperventilating.

His lungs began to burn. First he felt a warmth, then a searing heat. He undid the clasps on his gloves and tossed them aside. He retched and doubled up, tasting foamy phlegm and blood on his lips. His legs buckled.

The shock would help disguise the amnesia that would result from his temporal intervention. In a few minutes, he would wake up in the medical bay and assume that the gaps in his memory were an aftereffect of the gas. He would survive and recover, just as he had done so before.

The icy metal floor pressed against his cheek. As he slipped into unconsciousness, he allowed himself to ascend. To float back to the future like a swimmer surfacing after a long dive. Coming up for air.

Anji noticed the Doctor's eyelids flutter. He groaned, cleared his throat, and pulled himself into a sitting position. All the life had been washed out of his face. 'Anji?'

Anji felt a surge of relief to have him back. 'Doctor, are you all right?'

The Doctor considered the question. 'D'you know, I'm not entirely sure –'

'Did you change your past?' Fitz asked.

'No.' The Doctor brightened and coughed. 'No, I haven't. Or, at least, I have done nothing to stop myself ending up here now.' He spoke slowly, reflectively: 'I haven't done anything to avoid becoming infected, or to prevent the spread of the infection. . . I haven't created a paradox.'

'So you've beaten them?' Anji said hopefully.

'No, not quite.' He closed his eyes and dropped back with a sigh. His voice hoarsened to a whisper. 'I can feel. . . the approaching darkness.' He

looked up at Fitz and Anji one last time. An apologetic smile passed over his lips. 'I'm sorry. I've let you down.'

He exhaled with the weariness of centuries and lost consciousness. His features blurred away to be replaced by a clock.

A long, bleak silence passed. A silence punctuated only by the ticking of the wall-clock, Bishop and the Doctor.

'The Doctor,' said Anji at last, gulping back her grief. 'He's gone –'

'We've lost,' breathed Fitz, hysteria rising. 'This is it. This is really bloody *it*.'

The clock on the wall struck out the hour sombrely. Bishop and the Doctor chimed too, marking each passing second in unison. One. Two. The hands on the clocks snapped to three –

– and at that moment over a hundred miles away in the laboratory of Isolation Station Forty, a small brass alarm clock rang. There was no one to hear its urgent, insistent clamour. But the vibrations rattled its body and sent it shaking down an improvised slope made from a tin lid.

The clock dived clumsily off its shelf and dropped to the floor. The string attached to it, however, tightened around a pulley and tugged on a small bell-switch, clicking it to a new setting.

The laboratory hummed into power. The lights on the panels lit up, one by one, and a powerful throbbing filled the air. Outside in the time-travel chamber, chains clanked into smooth motion and the spherical capsule descended into the pit.

As the capsule reached the bottom of the shaft, another brass chronometer rang. The clock had multiple dials, indicating the second, the minute, the hour and the day, allowing it to be set to a specific moment of a specific day. It also shuddered down a slope and dropped, tautening another string and activating a second switch.

The throbbing rose to a drone and the *Capsule Time* clocks began to wind backwards gradually.

Anji wiped her stinging eyes. She was more furious than upset. 'I can't believe it.' The Doctor had stopped breathing. The only movement was the twitching second hand on his face. She wanted to shake him, shake some life back into him, but she knew, with a horrible reality, that there was nothing she could do.

Bishop gave a sudden, horrified shriek. A clockwork gurgle, the sound of gears click-clicking out of joint. He turned to the left and right. '*No!*' He lurched forward unsteadily and aimed his pistol at Fitz. '*Go back, Doctor. Stop it happening, or I will kill him –*'

Fitz looked up in abject fear, gawping.

‘Stop *what* happening?’ said Anji, moving between Bishop and the Doctor.

‘*The time capsule at Isolation Station Forty. It is diving!*’

‘What? Now? But how –’

‘*The Doctor set it to launch by a time-delay mechanism! It was launched by... clockwork!*’ Bishop clicked off the safety catch. ‘*Doctor, you must stop it –*’

But the Doctor lay silent and still.

Inside the capsule the rumble of the engines was deafening and it reverberated like the interior of a struck bell. The fittings shook as it plunged deeper and deeper into the welling blackness of time. Beside the central control rested five open boxes, each glowing with chrononium.

The glass cover of the *Capsule Time – Years* clock had been removed. A wire, leading from the power supply, had been duct-taped to the clock’s hand. Another wire had been taped to the side of the clock, leading to a broken light bulb nestling in one of the chrononium cases. Another wire trailed back to the power unit.

As the *Years* clock reached four hundred and ten the two wires touched together and, with a spark, completed the circuit. The filament, exposed to the oxygen in the atmosphere, glowed white and flash-exploded. In an instant, the chrononium detonated and the capsule vaporised in a burst of compressed time.

In the time-travel chamber, a mushroom of flame billowed out of the shaft, swirling as it was caught in the whirlwind. Thunder boomed with a vengeful, heavy roar. The metal framework buckled and the ground shattered into a maze of cracks.

The instruments in the laboratory sputtered and leaked greasy smoke. Wires melted and valves popped under the intense heat. The air wobbled. Then, with a vast crash, the observation window broke and the accelerated time storm burst in with a searing flood of fire.

The clockwork soldiers advanced through the wasteland, gliding forward with a strict regularity. Then their bodies shook, as though gripped in a sudden, silent wind, and their arms flailed as though in protest. They chimed discordantly and screamed, a hollow, retching scream. A scream that carried through the haunted night.

Within the streets of Station One, the clockwork people also began to scream. Their voices joined in a rattling, howling cacophony. Their bodies

twisted to and fro erratically, stumbling. Others crashed to the ground or skidded off their bicycles.

'Doctor –' Bishop's body tensed as though he sensed something terrible was approaching.

Anji dived forward and piled into Bishop's side. He swung around, but he was too slow, too clumsy. She knocked the gun out of his hand and it clattered to the floor. Fitz collected it neatly.

Bishop shoved Anji aside, and she banged her thigh on the chair and slipped to the ground. Then Bishop stumbled backwards blindly, hitting the door. His wooden head swung about furiously. He clicked and stuttered, the wheels inside him crunching painfully.

He rang again, the note slurring and dropping like a dying record player. He screeched a hideous drawn-out gurgling screech of agony. His glass face shattered. The hands span in a blur. He coughed, his whole body convulsing in the agony –

For a moment, Anji saw Bishop's face. His human face. His eyes wide in terror, uncomprehending. Looking at her, pleading.

Bishop staggered, lost his balance and dropped to his knees. The coughing and spasming grew more pronounced. Then his wooden, oblong head broke open like a jack-in-the-box, spilling a mess of red-soaked wheels, cogs and springs and lumps of flesh over his twitching uniform. He clutched at the gore but it slipped through his fingers.

He collapsed, gave a final, muted clang and became still. Dead.

Anji felt a giddy surge of relief. They had won. They had won. The Doctor had done it. The Doctor –

The glass plate on his face vanished smoothly to reveal his eyes closed in contented sleep.

Anji almost sobbed with relief. 'He's alive.' Anji smiled at Fitz, who tentatively returned the smile. 'He's in some sort of, I don't know, a coma, I think, but he's alive!'

'He did it,' sighed Fitz in awe. 'He did it. The clever sod.' He laughed. 'That's another quid towards the curry house.' He got up and examined Bishop's body from a distance. Anji followed his gaze. There was very little left of it, a disfigured corpse leaking a black pulp from the neck.

Anji turned away and swallowed. 'I suppose we'd better –' Her words stopped as she looked up at Mistletoe.

Where Mistletoe had been standing, there now stood another man wearing Mistletoe's clothes. A man immaculate in his black suit and tie and bowler hat. A tall, thickly-built man, with a jowly chin and an accusatory brow. His eyes glistened with a dark, infinite intensity, like stars

in the midnight sky.

Anji heard herself gasp, and as she did Fitz looked round and sputtered in alarm. The man smiled at her and straightened his suit, brushing away non-existent specks of dust.

‘Wh-what are *you* doing here?’ said Anji, folding her arms accusingly.

Fitz backed away to take his place beside Anji. ‘So it’s you. *You*. You were Mistletoe. Just play-acting.’

The man nodded like a teacher congratulating a pupil. ‘Surprised? A necessary deception for my purposes. An amusing grotesque. A theatrical device. A facet of my being, as viewed through a looking glass, you might say.’ He took off his bowler to reveal a shaved scalp and dabbed the beads of perspiration from his brow.

Anji stared at him. She felt a giddiness, as though she were looking over the edge of a cliff. ‘Your “purposes”?’

‘Miss Kapoor, I have not been idle. I have acquired some... business associates, shall we say? Some very *influential* business associates...’

‘Who?’ interrupted Fitz bluntly.

The man smiled politely to evade the question. ‘All you need know is they are at *conflict* with another power within the time continuum. Another race. A race with whom you have recently made an acquaintance.’ His smile could have frozen nitrogen.

‘The clock-faced people?’ said Anji.

The man nodded and strolled around the room as he spoke, as though conducting a lecture. ‘My associates requested that I facilitate the disposal of this... race for them. And, I thought, what better way to do so than to enlist the assistance of the Doctor?’ He paused to clear his throat. ‘The heroic, faultless, moral Doctor? When it comes to the elimination of threats he is without rival. And so I... I arranged a little scenario. And moulded your perceptions according to my needs.’

‘What?’ said Anji.

‘You both provided much of the inspiration. From your own memories, personalities, experiences...’ He fixed Anji with his burning, knowing eyes. ‘And your insecurities.’

Anji refused to be shaken. ‘So none of this was real?’

The man raised his palms and shook his head. ‘Oh, no, it is all real. Please, do not doubt that for an instant. No, it is all a question of... perception. I may have modified the emphasis a little, here and there, that is all.’ He paused to re-gather his thread. ‘As I was saying. I arranged a... situation whereby this race would become a threat to the Doctor, and his friends, and to his *sentimental* outlook on life.’ Another nitrogen moment.

'Then, with a little manipulation of circumstances... the Doctor would destroy them for me.'

'But these clock-creatures, they were taking people over,' protested Fitz. 'They were invading!'

'No, Mr Kreiner. The creatures were *evacuating*. They were attempting to escape the... ' For a moment, Anji thought he was going to drop a name. '... my business associates. But now, thanks to the Doctor's rapid and expedient intervention, they have been eradicated, exactly as required.' He looked down at the Doctor. 'I am impressed by his efficiency. It is un-impeachable.' The man smiled at some private joke and removed his suit jacket to reveal a long military-style greatcoat, much larger and bulkier than the jacket that had concealed it. 'My associates and I now control the continuum. All other dwellers within the domain have now been successfully expelled.' He strode across the room to a door that hadn't been there before. A door padded in plush, scarlet velvet with a polished silver doorknob. 'I'm extremely grateful to the Doctor, and to you both, for your co-operation.'

Anji looked down at the Doctor's sleeping frame. Looking like death. 'You *used* him?'

'And he exceeded my expectations,' said the man who had been Mistletoe.

'And now you've finished with him, he's going to die,' said Fitz with unconcealed hostility.

The man paused at the door. 'Oh no no no. My associates take a special interest in the Doctor... and he is too valuable to me to be allowed to die.' His expression softened in reaction to the concern written on Fitz and Anji's faces. 'He will survive, I assure you. It may take a few weeks, but he will make a full recovery. In the meantime, here you have food and water, shelter, transport back to your craft... which will be functioning once more, of course.' His glittering eyes shifted to the Doctor. 'Yes, he will survive. I have not finished with him yet.'

'A few weeks! But he's in a coma – we don't know what to do!' yelled Anji.

The man opened the door. There was the bassy boom of a great, throbbing engine and the shriek of apes. 'We will meet again, I am certain of it. Goodbye, Mr Kreiner. Goodbye, Miss Kapoor.' He closed the door after him.

Fitz ran over to the door and pounded his fists against it, but they met only blank wall. The door had vanished without a sound. As though it had never existed.

Fitz turned back to Anji, his chest heaving. They exchanged a worried,

desperate look.

They were alone. Alone in a cold, empty room, alone in a cold, empty city, in a cold, empty world.

With the Doctor lying lifeless on the floor.

Stepping over Bishop, Fitz walked over to the office door. It creaked open on to a dark corridor. 'So where do we go from here?'

'You heard him,' said Anji. 'We stay here. We wait for the Doctor to get better. Then we go back to the TARDIS.'

'And then?'

'And then?' said Anji. 'And then I don't know.'

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Aged six, Jonathan Morris spent all his spare time making up *Doctor Who* stories. Twenty-two years later, and sadly little has changed.

His previous *Doctor Who* novel, 'Festival Of Death', was voted the 'Best Past Doctor Novel Of 2000' by readers of *Doctor Who Magazine*. Readers of *SFX*, meanwhile, voted it 7th in the 'Best TV Tie In/Novelisation Of 2000' category. Its ISBN is 0 563 53803 1 and it's still available from all good bookshops.

He lives in north-west London and works for the synth-pop duo mentioned on page 176.