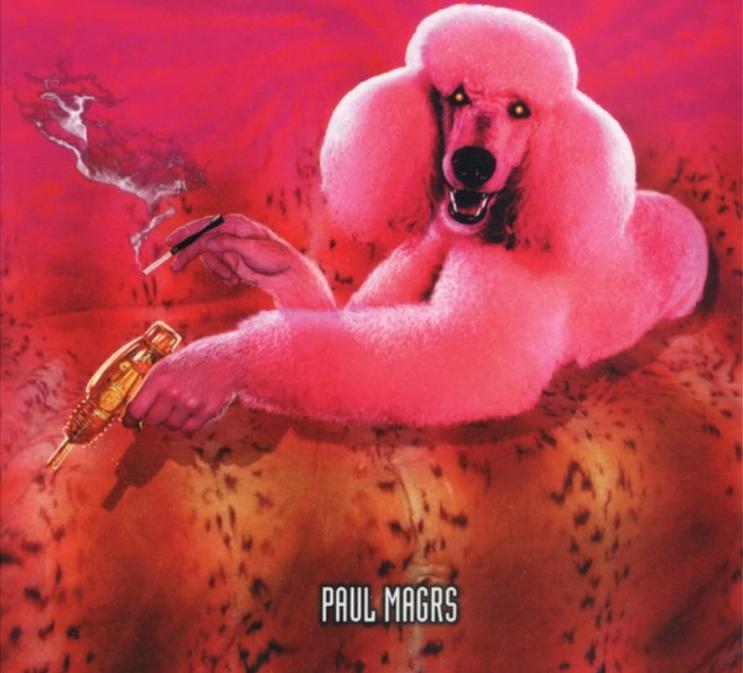


BBC

100th BBC DOCTOR WHO NOVEL

# DOCTOR WHO

MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN



PAUL MAGRS

## THIS IS THE 100TH NOVEL IN THE RECORD-BREAKING BBC WORLDWIDE DOCTOR WHO SERIES

‘Grrrrr.’

The greatest book ever written.

Professor Reginald Tyler’s *The True History of Planets* was a twentieth-century classic; an epic of dwarves and swords and wizardry. And definitely no poodles. Or at least there weren’t when the Doctor read it.

Now it tells the true tale of how the Queen of the poodles was overthrown; it’s been made into a hit movie, and it’s going to cause a bloodbath on the Dogworld – unless the Doctor, Fitz and Anji (and assorted friends) can sort it all out.

The Doctor infiltrates the Smudgelings, Tyler’s elite Cambridge writing set of the early twentieth century; Fitz falls for flamboyant torch singer Brenda Soobie in sixties Las Vegas, and Anji experiences some very special effects in seventies Hollywood. Their intention is to prevent the movie from ever being made. But there is a shadowy figure present in all three time zones who is just as determined to see it completed. . . so the poodle revolution can begin.

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



# DOCTOR WHO

MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN  
PAUL MAGRS

**BBC**

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## Chapter One

Reginald Tyler began writing the book that would become *The True History of Planets* in 1917, in bed, whilst on leave from soldiering in France.

While in that hospital in north Yorkshire his nerves were shattered and his mind was shaky and febrile. From the uncertain froth of his various hypnagogic states, commingled with the product of his extensive studies in linguistics and mythology, he dreamed up one of the most curious books that the century would produce.

He was somewhere near Whitby, apparently. It was a town that had already inspired the writing of alarming books. In the last century, one man had holidayed there and had written of a black-hearted, bloodlusting devil who arrived from the churning sea in a wooden box and who, with his silvered tongue and his ferociously pointed teeth, had enslaved the young girls he met on the Prom. Another had visited there and had written of a feisty young madam who voyaged to a Wonderland – or at least, an amoral, absurdist hell of her own making.

The stiff, salty air of the seaside town was still, in 1917, thick with lurid imaginings and the young Reginald (not yet the esteemed Professor he was to become) was ripe for inspiration.

Gulls wheeled and scrummed for fish heads and scraps.

The sea foam crashed on wet, black rocks.

And the twentieth century grumbled its inexorable way forth: its commotion persistent as the sound of gunfire from across the sea.

Reg was a skinny and sickly, gentle but impatient soul and, already, at this tender age, he could speak a forbidding number of languages; alive, dead and of his own invention.

Often he would wake from a stupor and babble at nurses. Some say that he could even talk to the animals, though he was better with domestic pets than anything too exotic.

He was, in short, a brilliant, inventive person, damaged by war and destined to write a biggie.

That much is clear.

*The True History of Planets* was begun in those teenage years of the century, and it was the book he laboured at for much of the ensuing decades. He worked on it laboriously, after the First War and then through the second, by which time he was an esteemed college professor, at one of the oldest universities.

There was never enough time for Reg. Never enough hours in the day, nor days in the year, or years in the century.

His opus grew slowly and he grew old with it. Selfishly and slavishly he kept it to himself, sharing its shadowy, learned bulk only with a number of his most valued colleagues and fellow scribblers, during the thirties and forties.

This society of writers, based around his college, gathering once a week to discuss and to read aloud their works in progress was known, rather jovially amongst themselves, as the Smudgelings. All of them were convinced of the greatness and the seriousness of Reg's massive book.

It was a book he was working on till the day he died.

This was much later, in the early nineteen-seventies, by which time he was long retired, much fêted as a scholar, and still shackled to his immense imaginative work.

At the end of his life, Reg had left his ancient university town and had moved south, to live by the sea again, in Bournemouth. This was to appease his long-suffering wife, Enid, who dearly wished to live in a bungalow by the sea and no longer in a damp, clammy university town.

Enid had stuck loyally by him during his years as a professor, though she despised the academic life. It had been she who, as a nurse, had coaxed him through that nervous illness of 1917. She stayed with him because she loved him, though hers was not a happy life.

When he died in 1974, it was Enid who at last went into Tyler's makeshift study in the bungalow's garage to sort out his affairs. She was the one who had hoiked out the dusty manuscript of the ongoing book and promptly sold it for a bomb.

One that set off reverberations everywhere.

Up and down the length of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on Earth, and other worlds besides.

Notably the dogworld.

Not that the doughty Mrs Tyler cared.

She had always considered Reg too precious with his novel. The agents and publishers she consulted during her early widowhood all told her that it was a

masterpiece and would see her through her twilight years in some comfort.

She herself couldn't make head nor tail of the strange book. But then, Enid had never had much idea about the obtruse and arcane things her gruff husband had banged on about through their decades together.

As far as Enid was concerned, they should have cashed in on this book much, much sooner. With Reg gone, she was free, suddenly, to publish it in a hundred different languages if she so chose. She would let them adapt it for television, radio, even the movies. It could become a comic strip, a West End musical, for all she cared. They could bloody well perform it on ice, if they wanted.

Just so long as Enid got the cash.

With the cash in her hand, she could move to Jamaica at last.

Into the arms of her long-beloved.

Mrs Reg Tyler had very few qualms about finding a way to be with her secret lover. She had sacrificed enough of her life to her husband's pursuit of his dream. For too long she had lived in the shadow of this erudite but inattentive man.

And her lover had waited, through the years, for her to come to him, in Jamaica.

Now she had to flog Tyler for all he was worth, to a world that had grown up to share his delusions and his passion for other worlds, further dimensions, strange beings on dangerous quests.

But before we get caught up in Enid Tyler's flight to Jamaica and the arms of her mystery lover (because that is a story for another day) let us return to the last day or so of old Professor Tyler's life, in 1974. Let us begin to unpick some of the mystery that surrounds his famous work.

Because there are many mysteries.

Not least the one about the manuscript itself.

Namely: was the book that was published and later made extremely famous, on this world and others, the one that old man Tyler had actually set out to write?

All that work and all those years, quietly going about his heart's desire.

Had someone tampered with the final result?

Had someone been secretly bugging him about?

Reg had always worked in language.

He worked inside language, his longest-running co-mythologist and Christian fellow don, Cleavis, said. Tyler went back to the roots of Middle English

and Mid-Icelandic. He tried to construct a mythology for Britain such as the Findlanders have. Trolls and lizards and people called things like Frigga.

There was nothing better Reg Tyler liked to have than all the chaps together around the fire with their whiskies, translating line by line some gory tale from a thousand years ago. Something invoking gods and thunderbolts, shafts of wit, flights of rhetoric.

And not a single woman in sight. No distracting floozies.

Just good old, hard old erudition. Old college empiricism.

The novel he wrote was complicated and long, of course.

Eventually, everybody in the world would read it. Of this he was somehow sure. So it was a thing worth doing right, and that took time.

As he wrote the novel though, he also had to write a much longer book to complement it. This was the appendix to his book. It was a taxonomy of the imagination that had fuelled this single novel. It was the critical component, more than fifty years in the making. It was the book that was, to him, the Key to All Mythologies, especially those of his own making.

He was dwarfed by his endless project.

When he retired, while his dear wife Enid at last lived her second girlhood in Bournemouth he would labour in their converted garage on all the old papers he had kept about him for years. While Enid gallivanted in taxis from the front door of their modest bungalow to the hotel Miramar (a pink, art deco monstrosity brimming with the ancient and the well-to-do), Reg was at home, scratching his self-made alphabets on to the backs of old college exam papers.

He was wanting, somehow, to make up enough evidence for his long-running fiction to seem more real.

‘Reg,’ said his wife a little tipsily, when she returned one evening, ‘They were talking tonight, all that crowd, about your book.’

Enid plonked herself on the nicked antimacassar on the arm of his chair.

He scowled and lit his pipe, inching away from her, and closer to the gas fire, which was giving him a headache.

His wife had two high spots of pink on her cheeks, as if she had been drinking heavily while she’d been out with her usual Tuesday night crowd.

‘They were talking all about you, as a matter of fact.’

He looked, and saw that she was even proud of him.

When Enid had first got herself in with that well off, lowbrow set at the hotel Miramar, she had been worried that she wouldn’t fit in. She had spent fifty years as the wife of a shabby don and hiding her light under a bushel, and so

where was she then, in society? Precisely nowhere. Certainly not in the swing of things anymore.

But she was the wife of an acclaimed academic scholar; one rumoured to have been writing a great novel for almost sixty years.

Only two chapters had seen the light of day and been published. They had come out as strange, baroque short stories in magazines in the nineteen-fifties. They had been seized upon by an eager reading public and the rumour had it that there was a great deal more to come from Professor Tyler.

Enid had been as cross and impatient as the rest of the world for her esteemed husband to deliver. Though, in her case, it wasn't literature she was thinking about. Enid was in her second youth at last, and the first thing on her mind was the cash.

'Let them go to the Underworld and rot!' Reg would cry. 'Let them go to the Diamond Mines of Marion! The Third Ring of the Netherscope! All of them are like. . . vultures! Peck peck pecking at my great work!'

'Be fair,' Enid would sigh. 'You did rather whet everyone's appetite with those excerpts. You should be glad of the attention!'

This last comment, whenever it recurred, was never without a barbed glance at him.

Reg would snort and stomp back to his garage.

Sometimes Enid worried that Reg spent his time in that freezing, makeshift office twiddling his gnarled thumbs or reading seed catalogues. *The True History of Planets* was just a sham, perhaps; a farrago of lies with which he had hoodwinked the whole world, including her.

Like Bluebeard's wife, Enid was forbidden to enter his hidden sanctum while he yet lived.

And, oddly enough, she still feared the old man's wrath enough not to try.

Instead, she resigned herself to waiting, and to flinging herself into the wild, sherry-fuelled excitements of the Hotel Miramar and her new circle of friends.

Enid had found, upon moving here, that because of her husband's infamy as a literary oddity and a sought-after recluse, the well-to-do crowd at the Miramar welcomed her with open arms. Only sometimes they would enquire after Reg – who never accompanied his wife on her nights out – and they would ask respectfully after the progress of his great book.

'They were asking me all manner of strange questions about your work.' She giggled nervously and cuffed him as he scowled. 'About maps and places with the funniest names. They were talking like it was all true! It turns out they were all quite knowledgeable about it all. And I was so embarrassed! Because,

I had to say, I haven't even read those two stories of yours! Ever! The only public fragments of Reg's great opus and I haven't even flicked through them! And then, I had to laugh, because they looked so offended by that. I laughed because they took it all so seriously. Like something that had really happened! The wars and the adventures and the magic and so forth, all the things you apparently allude to. I ended up talking to a couple who didn't know what all the fuss was about, either. A couple who didn't know you from Adam. Really, I felt quite alienated from all this talk of my own husband!

Reg bridled at this information. None of that lot knew who he was. Not really. They were just pecking at him.

None of them knew anything about it.

They probably thought of him as a grizzled old wizard.

A wizard in his converted garage in Bournemouth.

Scratching away in pen and ink. Scratching runes that no one but him could read. Hypostatising his world, cementing it further, fully into place.

What did that vulgar lot down at the Hotel Miramar know?

Now he resented even having published the two fragments, if this was the kind of impertinence he received as thanks.

'Shall I invite some of them around for drinks one evening?' Enid asked. 'Hmm? Shall I ask them round so they can get a look at you?'

Of course, Enid was keen to show off the bungalow and the way she'd had it done up inside. All mod cons. She would love to have good company round here to cheer the place up. She wanted to see her new friends crowding around her retired old man.

But Reg had no desire to see them. That gin-slinging, golf-playing crowd from the hotel lounge.

Tarts, he thought. Tarts and finks and nancies.

That was the sort of person his wife was knocking about with these days.

And they were all talking about him, slugging back their cocktails at the Hotel Miramar. Surf pounding on the beach and the traffic sludging by.

Late nights on Tuesdays and happy hour after hour after hour. . .

## Chapter Two

In another hotel, one hundred years later and off-world, a conference was underway.

The hotel was built into a small, rather tatty-looking asteroid and it was, for one weekend, playing host to an academic conference and a motley collection of academics, all of them concerned with Terran Science Fiction of the Twentieth Century.

It was to be a very fraught weekend.

In the hotel foyer, there were all the usual conversations going on.

Delegates sat on sofas and drank odd-looking concoctions as they chewed over the day's panels and papers.

It was the second night of the conference and, by now, tongues were loosening, new friendships and alliances being forged. Old animosities were, of course, happily flaring up anew.

The long, stringy creature who had this morning given a pleasant, if unchallenging paper on the early short stories of Philip K Dick, was slumped in an armchair, gazing blankly into his foaming cocktail as his tiny companion droned on.

Perched on the coffee table, his tiny companion was an insect with fractious, silver eyes that were glaring about meanly as their owner ranted.

The insect was called Professor Alid Jag and his long, stringy friend was Doctor Stellus Pontin.

They hailed from rival institutions, light years apart, but they had found themselves thrown together again and again at affairs like this, because they worked in the same area of literary research.

Sometimes Stellus Pontin, the long, stringy, glazed-looking creature, wished that he had chosen a rather less fertile, perhaps more sedate, furrow to plough.

This evening his insect friend was being particularly shrill.

'It is the temerity of it that I can't understand,' Alid Jag was saying. 'How someone, sitting at home on that planet in the middle of that hectic century, could even have thoughts about attempting such a thing. To start to believe

that they could imagine or have any inkling about. . .’ Alid Jag gave out a tinny, rattling cackle. ‘Well. . . about life on other planets. . .’

‘Hmm,’ said his stringy companion.

‘It was, when you think about it, a very dubious preoccupation. What was wrong with their own world, that they had to start poking their noses elsewhere?’

Stellus sighed. ‘Well, you can see.’

He gestured meaningfully around at the patterned wallpaper and the potted palms. Their whole hotel had been decorated in imitation of some seaside joint in the mid-twentieth century. For the duration of the conference they were supposed to be pretending they were somewhere called Bournemouth. ‘The place was so bleak,’ Stellus Pontin said. ‘Of course they made up other, more outrageous places, in order to cheer themselves.’

His insect colleague was growing quite animated. ‘They were forever dreaming up other societies, other dimensions, other ways of doing things. It’s sickening.’

‘Anyone would think you despised the genre you work in,’ Stellus smiled. It was well known that the resolutely pragmatic people of Alid Jag’s world – they were tantamount to aphids – had little or no truck with the purely imaginative or the metaphysical. Really, it was a wonder that the small professor had chosen such a specialism as he had.

‘It is good to look keenly at what sickens us,’ declared Alid Jag. ‘It is good to gaze into our worst horrors.’

‘Really? Why?’

This flummoxed the aphid for a moment.

The long, stringy Stellus went on. ‘I, on the other hand, adore all of it. Just give me the most improbable story that anyone on that benighted rock ever thought up and I will be as happy as anything. Make it as ludicrous and incredible as possible. Why, even make it so it doesn’t even make sense, and I’ll be delighted!’

The insect creature rolled his silver eyes witheringly. ‘You’re far too credulous to be a proper critic, you know. You have to learn to despise what you analyse. Everyone knows that. Before you can know what anything is about, it really has to stick in your craw.’

They had had this argument before.

‘I know,’ said Stellus fondly. ‘And that’s why I’ll never get on in my work. I’m too wilfully accepting and delighted by the trash dished out of the decadent Terran subconscious, out of a bastardised genre in a depraved era.’

‘Exactly,’ said the insect creature firmly and smugly. ‘A too willing desire to be felled by the ridiculous, that’s your tragedy. And it will be your downfall, ultimately, in my opinion.’

And with that, the TARDIS materialised, rather noisily, in the exact spot that their coffee table had been occupying.

There was a horrible crunch of wickerwork and a tinkle of smoked glass and crockery, still audible beneath the elephantine, transdimensional hullabaloo set up by the arrival of the Police Box.

Stellus jerked up in his seat, appalled, as the tall blue box solidified in front of him and the light on its roof stopped flashing.

His very next thought was of the fate of his learned colleague and sparring partner, who had been sitting amongst the tea cups and plates on the coffee table.

‘Professor Jag!’ he shrieked, jumping up.

But there was no reply. The blue box itself was impassive and still.

On long, pale, trembling legs, Stellus Pontin hurried across to reception to alert the desk clerk.

The desk clerk’s eyes went wide as the stringy being stammered out his tale.

The desk clerk stubbed out her cigarette and bellowed at someone called Francine in the office to mind the front desk. ‘Can’t leave it unattended,’ she explained, tottering round the counter on the marble flooring. ‘Not with a horde of scholars running about the place. They’re notorious for thieving.’

‘Quickly,’ Stellus Pontin insisted. ‘I think the esteemed Professor Jag may be in considerable agony...’

The desk clerk led the way breezily to the bar area, flicking her hair and snapping gum. ‘What was it you said had happened to him? A box, was it you said? Some kind of box fell on him?’

They hurried up the few short steps to the bar, where a few other of the evening drinkers were staring in some concern at the strange, new, stationary arrival.

‘Goodness,’ said the receptionist whose name badge, Stellus Pontin now saw, identified her as Ellie. ‘That is a big box, and no mistake. And you say your little friend is trapped underneath it?’

Stellus Pontin nodded dumbly and felt his eyes begin to fill with tears. Alid Jag had been a scholarly thorn in his skinny side for years, true enough. But Stellus Pontin would miss seeing the little fella at gatherings and jamborees like this.

There was simply no way, Stellus Pontin realised, that the Professor could have survived, squashed flat under a box like that.

Ellie the desk clerk was getting herself quite worked up.

‘Where did it come from? I assure you, sir, that this hotel isn’t usually a place where we drop large, heavy objects on our guests, squashing them painfully to their deaths as they enjoy a quiet drink in the luxurious setting of the Hawaiian bar.’

‘It happened!’ Stellus Pontin cried. ‘I saw it with my own eyes!’

Several other academics were clustering around the agitated desk clerk, recognising that she was in charge. A being composed entirely of russet-coloured rock and a rather hairy colleague had lumbered up with their drinks still in their hands.

‘It’s true,’ said the silicon-based person. ‘We saw it too. Professor Alid Jag was talking away happily one minute, as was his wont. . . then, the next minute – bang!’

His hirsute friend blinked thoughtfully under his fringe. ‘There was a ghastly vworp-vworping noise.’

‘This is murder,’ gasped Ellie the receptionist, chewing her fingers.

‘If it is, it’s not very subtle,’ said Stellus Pontin. ‘Let’s face it, if someone really wanted to get rid of Alid Jag, all you’d have to do is tread on him and grind him into the carpet. You wouldn’t need an object of this size.’ He stared up at the sides of the implacable blue box. He reached out one thin hand and realised that the thing was humming. And the others were looking at him strangely. ‘I mean,’ he added hastily, ‘if you really wanted to find a quick, easy way to assassinate an esteemed academic of his modest dimensions. Not that I ever thought about it.’ He coughed.

Ellie had a bright idea. ‘I’ll give Mr Brewster, the manager, a ring.’

The rock creature shook his craggy head. ‘There’s bound to be pandemonium. Blue boxes dropping on conference attendees. And on only the second day!’

The lavishly coifed gentleman said, ‘I was rather hoping Professor Jag might come to my paper on the prevalence of goat motifs in multi-volume quest sagas of the nineteen-eighties. It hardly seems worth giving it at all now. The heart and soul has gone out of our discipline. . .’

Just then the wooden doors of the Police Box rattled and flew open.

A head appeared in the dark gap, tousle-haired and bearded. Steady blue eyes gazed at them all and the assorted onlookers blinked in amazement.

‘Hullo,’ said the Doctor. ‘I do hope we’re not too late?’

Ellie found herself replying, 'Too late for what, sir?'

He beamed at her. 'To hear Professor Jag's paper on the epistemological anomalies in the work of the early twentieth-century mystery writer, Fox Soames. I found the conference brochure stuffed into an old pair of waterproof waders while I was having a tidy round the boot cupboard. Well?'

Ellie was jabbing at the buttons of a slim, but slow, communications device. 'Well what, sir?'

'Have I missed it? I'm very interested in the anomalous novels of Fox Soames. I think he was perhaps up to no good, if you get my drift.'

Ellie was speaking into her device now, having got through to the manager. 'I think you'd better come down to the Hawaiian bar,' she said, somewhat breathily.

'Oh, don't go to any bother for us,' the Doctor smiled.

'Us?' said Stellus Pontin, quivering. 'Just how many of you are there inside that awful thing?'

The Doctor stared at him as if he hadn't noticed him before. 'There's myself, of course, and there's Fitz and there's Anji. Those two are rather slow off the mark this morning, I'm afraid. I think maybe the novelty of new times, new places, might have worn off slightly with them. They send me out first to see what it's like, like a sheep down a poisoned treacle well! Or whatever it is they send sheep into...'

'There are three of them in there!' Stellus Pontin gasped to the other delegates.

'Three murderers!' said the silicon-based scholar.

'Murderers?' said the Doctor. 'Oh no. Not one of those affairs. Are you saying that no sooner have we arrived than we're being mistakenly arrested for murder? Do you realise how often people make that mistake?'

'It's no mistake,' shrilled Stellus Pontin. 'I saw it happen with my own eyes.'

'Really?'

Triumphantly Ellie the receptionist snapped off her communicator and said, 'The manager is on his way.'

'Your terrible blue box squashed Professor Alid Jag flat, right in front of me,' snapped Stellus Pontin. 'You won't get to hear him deliver his paper because you yourself have pulverised the poor fella.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor with a long face. 'Are you sure?'

'Quite.'

'I think we should leave all the questions until Mr Brewster gets here,' said Ellie. 'He will know what to do. He always does.'

'I'd like a title like "manager",' said the Doctor, glumly. 'Something to make me sound in control and competent. "Doctor" just sounds like someone who meddles and stitches things up.' He sighed and brushed down his blue velvet jacket, as if preparing to meet someone important. Then he banged his fist on the open TARDIS door. 'Anji! Fitz! You'd better come out! We're up to our necks in it already!'

The others watched, warily, as two further interlopers stepped out of the terrible box into the muted hush of the Hawaiian bar. The first was a skinny young man in a trench coat and T-shirt, his hair fluffed as if he'd been sleeping on it. He hadn't shaved and he was rubbing crossly at his eyes.

'What do you mean "already"? We haven't even stepped over the... oh.' He looked at them all and seemed to give in, his thin shoulders slumping. He glanced ruefully at the Doctor. 'Record for you this, Doctor.'

The Doctor gave him a half-hearted smile. 'They seem to think I've squashed the very person I brought us here to see.'

'Can you do that?'

'It's never happened before,' said the Doctor. 'But he was very small, by all accounts.'

Jesus,' muttered Fitz.

Anji emerged behind them, wearing a dark jacket and trousers, with her hair tied up, ready for anything. She stared at them all blankly. 'What is this?'

'It's a bit of a bungle, I'm afraid, Anji,' said the Doctor apologetically. 'Do you remember that bit in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy's house drops out of the sky into Munchkinland and kills the witch and everybody's very pleased and they dance around her singing, telling her exactly how pleased they are with her?'

She furrowed her brow suspiciously. 'Hmm. Yes, I do.'

'Well, it's a bit like that, really.'

'We're in Munchkinland and they're all delighted to see us?'

'No. We're on a hotel on an asteroid and they don't look that pleased at all.'

There was some commotion then as the large, overbearing manager huffed and puffed his way through the small crowd of onlookers to take over.

'So how's that like *The Wizard of Oz*, then?' asked Anji impatiently.

'It doesn't matter,' the Doctor sighed. 'Sad allusion, anyway. Look, here's Mr Brewster.'

The manager was a boar, standing erect on his two hind legs and wearing a smart uniform adorned with all manner of medals. His humped back stood

almost as tall as the TARDIS itself and his rancid breath came steaming out through a snout that quivered and dripped in annoyance.

‘This is them, sir,’ quavered Ellie.

‘I’ll take over from here,’ Mr Brewster grunted. ‘Have security move this box and fetch the cleaners to scrape up the remains.’

‘That’s the remains of the esteemed Professor Jag,’ the Doctor told Anji helpfully.

‘Oh, great,’ she said.

‘We landed on him.’

‘Can we do that?’ she hissed.

‘That’s what I said,’ Fitz put in.

‘Now that it apparently has happened,’ mused the Doctor, as they were led off to the manager’s office, ‘It makes me wonder why it hasn’t happened before. I might have squashed intelligent beings all over the galaxy and never been any the wiser!’ He shook his head and scratched his beard, which was itching, as if presciently, alerting him to the fact that something here wasn’t quite right.

## Chapter Three

In Reginald Tyler's head, great age meant an increase in powers, not a decrease. Not this ailing and failing he was currently experiencing.

Great age ought to have meant being greater and wiser than ever. It should have been about becoming the one to lead others on a wonderful quest.

Of course, he would let the others do all the running about, and all the adventurous stuff.

But he would be the wise one they couldn't afford to be without. He would be the only one who knew the maps and the territory and where their adventure was leading them.

He would be there, at the moment of direst peril, ready to step in and confront the omnipotent villain and to beard him in his den.

On the last morning of his very long life, Reg went for a long walk, across the fields and dells at the back of his and Enid's bungalow.

He had only ever consented to buy this house because the garden led down to this small wilderness. He would never have gone to live in suburbia, unless it still had some vestige of wilderness attached; some unlovable, unkempt space like this.

As he stumped through the crackling, long, frosted grass, Reg was thinking that, within a few years, some greedy bastard would undoubtedly have this wasteground developed and that soon there would be even more bungalows plonked down here. They would tear down the twisted elms and the stately ash and they would lay foundations on the Burn, which, that morning, was moving quite slowly. The shallow water was sheeted and misted with frail ice.

And when they took this small wasteground away, there would be even less space for dreaming of adventure. There would be one less mysterious place in the world.

Wood pigeons were bonging out their songs. The bare branches were black against the morning blue, stark as mascara brushes. He thought of Enid early this morning, plying the mascara on, seated at her small dressing table in her towelling dressing robe with the bits coming off. Easing the black paste on to

invisible eyelashes as she prepared herself for another round of futile socialising.

Reg Tyler mulled over the probable origins of the word 'mascara'. He loved the sound of the word, regardless of what it pertained to.

As he left the rough path he was mumbling it to himself, hearing it come out congested with his head-cold and his pent-up crossness.

How he ached. And he shivered each time he stepped on to a twig or fallen branch, which cracked and found some sympathy in his own, brittle bones.

What he wanted to become was the mysterious old man who held all the answers. The one who knew and understood the deep magic underneath the everyday dross. Who, when the crisis came up, could appear in a flash; in a long white robe. He would dispense his wisdom gravely. It wouldn't even have to be a starring part; just a cameo role, one or two key scenes in the main action. That's all he wanted.

But, he knew, there was no adventure that would have him now.

Maybe there never had been.

Maybe there were never any adventures at all.

They were just something that he had made up. Him and all the other Smudgelings. Maybe it was just as people had said: that they had been silly, scribbling, over-excited schoolboys, writing schoolboy adventures to amuse themselves and make themselves feel more adventurous than they actually were.

No matter how broken down he felt (and just then he felt like the ruined old deck chairs they had cleared out of the garage when they moved here) Reg still found that he was restless for riding on horseback into the pale horizon.

He knew that there was still some grand confrontation coming up in the south. He knew there was some appointment; some appalling denouement that would require his attention.

Somewhere he had to be.

Sometimes, though, even he had to admit that he got mixed up.

He would forget that the adventures he had had were all inside his head, while he was sitting at a desk.

But... but... other people believed in them.

He sat down, on a flat, cold rock beside the cautious stream.

It was like Enid had said, just last night: even her new, superficial friends at the gaudy Hotel Miramar would talk about the great adventure he was reputed to be writing. Even they talked about it like something real. Enid thought

they were foolish, but they evidently didn't. Reg could feel their interest, their investment, even through the jeering words of his wife.

So many people believing in the world he had invented. . . did that make it more or less true than it had been to him, through those long years? More true, surely.

Yet, he felt further away from his invented land now than he had ever felt, even before beginning the work. It was as if someone had taken his world from him. . .

Maybe he needed to meet them after all, this curious set of drinking cronies of his wife's. Just an hour or so of their company. Let them flatter him and surround him. What harm could that do to him?

He was watching through the frost-scabbed trees as he thought and he blinked then, suddenly, jarred out of his reverie and plans.

He thought he had seen a small, undistinguished figure standing there in the gap, and beckoning to him.

His eyes moistened and blurred as he tried to refocus.

Then the figure was there again.

It waved a small, nervous hand at him and Reg made a choking noise in his throat.

It's probably some hooligan. A mugger.

And I'm a silly old fool, he thought, to go tramping out in this wilderness alone. Anything could become of me. And they would find his skinny old body lying dead in the beck. . .

But still he sat listening on the flat rock. He listened for the rustle in the grass as the partly-seen figure darted back into view. It was grinning at him. Yes, he could make it out much more clearly now.

It was a dog.

Just a dog with searching green eyes and a livid pink tongue, spraying spittle. Against the white of the undergrowth, its fur was an exotic blue.

It caught Reg's eye – quite deliberately, it seemed – and then it nodded, with respect.

Slowly Reg stood up.

'Here, boy.'

As suddenly as it had arrived, the dog bounded away again, into the forest's obscurity.

Only after it had gone and the silence was resumed, did Reg realise that the dog had been standing on its hind legs. And it had brushed aside the vegetation with its hands. Its human-like, rather cultured hands.

It had been exactly like the dogs in his book.

Reg stooped there for a few minutes, holding his breath as his rattled old heart beat out a merry tattoo.

He was waiting for further signs that he hadn't lost his mind. He wanted to know that the creature he had seen had really been there. He was waiting for the further rustle of frosty grass, proving it true.

He staggered into the beck, breaking open the thin sheeted ice easily, and splashing the frozen water up his legs. The cold stung him and shocked him, but he was past feeling that now as he cried out: 'No, come back! Come back! I know what you are!'

He was tripping on icy rocks as he cried out and staggered and almost fell, full length, fatally on the water.

And this was how Reg Tyler is known to have died. He cracked his hip on those rocks and lay for hours in the icy water and was dead by lunchtime.

That, of course, is the official version of history. A sad loss, a terrible waste, etc. etc.

But on this occasion, as Reg staggers in the water, the blue dog darts out of the undergrowth again and, as Reg cries out in pleasure and recognition, the dog steps into the water to help him. He takes the old man's flailing hand and steadies him. The dog licks his hand and the two of them stare at each other.

'You're real,' Reg stammers.

And slowly the two of them start to disappear. The colour drains out of them, as if frost is slowly coating them. Their outlines blur and eventually, the two of them are gone.

## Chapter Four

Even though the hotel manager, Mr Brewster, was what essentially boiled down to a large, hairy, hunchbacked pig with savage tusks, he still liked to keep his establishment spick and span. He did absolutely everything by the book. He was a terror for order.

He was also extremely proud of his own ancient, Terran heritage: being, as he was, descended from a very distinguished line of British boars.

There was a particular pride for him in this, given his species' oft-quoted, too-rashly accepted multiple periods of reported extinction over the years.

It was his love of and nostalgia for Britain (most especially for the bits with lots of trees) that had made him look forward to this conference with particular anticipatory glee.

He had relished the task of doing up his hotel – it was usually a gloomy, space-porty kind of affair – as an exact replica of a 1950s' English seaside hotel. Nothing, he had been determined, was to go wrong this weekend.

And of course, it had.

But as he led his nonplussed captives to his office, their leader was talking quite energetically about the impressive lineage of the boar. And Mr Brewster found himself being flattered and mollified somewhat.

'Oh, yes,' the Doctor was saying. 'It's wonderful to see that the often-jeopardised wild boar of England has managed to make something of itself. Even here in the far-flung future, where mankind has started to build his colonies and outposts beyond the stars and what-have-you.' He patted the hotel manager on his crooked back in congratulation.

Anji gave him an incredulous stare.

Mr Brewster grunted.

'We've had a long, hard time of it, the tusken race,' said the boar. 'But I like to think that, as a moderately successful hotelier, I am no disgrace to my noble kind.'

'Indeed,' said the Doctor solemnly.

Fitz hung back slightly to mouth at Anji: 'But... it's a pig!'

Anji didn't rise to his bait. She tried to join in with the conversation instead. 'I remember reading articles about how the wild boar came back mysteriously, to live in the forests of England in the 1990s. And suddenly there were hundreds of them! It was like magic.'

Mr Brewster had stopped by a very grand, carved wooden door. He led them briskly into his office, which was rather lavish. He scooted round to sit at his desk and motioned them all to be seated.

'We firmly believe that it was indeed magic,' he said. 'That the godhead decided that the noble boar had a destiny. That we, one day, had to – just as mankind had to – reach for the stars. . .'

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'Actually, that was my fault, I think.'

They all stared at him.

'It's true,' he went on. 'I'm sort-of responsible for the repopulation of Britain by the wild boar, circa 1987.'

Anji rolled her eyes. 'You don't surprise me.'

'You spent your time rearing pigs?' gasped Fitz.

Mr Brewster snorted and shot Fitz a venomous, red-eyed glance.

'This is heresy!' the hotel manager gasped.

'It was those storms in 1987. Remember, Anji?' said the Doctor brightly. 'Hurricanes, everything. Well, I was hanging around this place in Kent, and someone nearby was breeding continental wild boar for livestock. . .'

Mr Brewster growled.

'I had a house near there for a while, you see, and, in all the storms, lots of trees fell down, destroying the fences. . . and the wild boar got out and they. . . well, they ended up coming to live on my land. And I. . . well, I taught some of them to talk and. . .'

Fitz burst out laughing. 'You talked to the animals?'

The manager was back on his cloven feet. 'This is outrageous!' he bellowed.

'Aren't we getting a bit off the point?' Anji broke in. She could see that the Doctor was preparing to launch into a further – and probably even more sacrilegious – explanation. 'Shouldn't we do something about this Professor we're meant to have accidentally killed?' she asked.

'Oh, him,' snapped Mr Brewster. 'Well, no one will say this, but he won't be missed. Do you know, Professor Alid Jag demanded our biggest, finest suite for this conference? And he was no bigger than a. . . than a. . . well, he could have tap-danced on the end of one of my tusks! He was an arrogant, self-opinionated, trouble-making aphid. I despise insects. And what is more, by

flattening him, you may have sorted out another small problem for us, Doctor. . .’

‘Really?’ he beamed. ‘How?’

‘Word has it that Professor Alid Jag was an assassin himself. There has been trouble this weekend already, before this little fracas of yours.’

The Doctor settled back in his padded chair with a delighted grin. ‘Do tell us more, Mr Brewster.’

Anji and Fitz shared a worried glance.

‘Professor Jag,’ rumbled the noble boar, ‘had made several unproven, though rather obvious attempts on the life of the woman who is the foremost and respected expert on the British writer, Reginald Tyler. Alid Jag has stung her twice during panel discussions, and apparently secreted a foul poison in her soup during the first night’s banquet. The lady in question has waved aside these bungled attempts on her life and told me not to worry about it. She even laughed! She said that Professor Jag was a notorious and shameless schemer and she could deal easily with the likes of him. But I don’t like it, Doctor. I don’t like nasty business in my hotel.’

‘I’m sure you don’t,’ purred the Doctor, stroking his beard.

‘This lady obviously has something to say about Reginald Tyler that Alid Jag didn’t want the conference to hear about.’

‘Are all academics so bloodthirsty?’ Anji asked. ‘I mean, all this just over a few old papers?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said the Doctor quickly.

‘And I thought working in the City was bad.’

‘So. . . what you’re saying is, that it’s a good job we bumped him off then, eh?’ asked Fitz hopefully.

‘Not really,’ sighed the boar. ‘In my position, I have to respect the proper way of going about things. I am afraid that I will have to call the police.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor, but there you have it. Professor Alid Jag was a nasty little thing, but it was still manslaughter.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ said the Doctor darkly. Then he was up on his feet, striding around purposefully, with his hands plunged deep in his pockets. ‘Tell me, Mr Brewster. What could be so alarming about a paper on the work of Reginald Tyler?’

‘I’m no expert,’ grunted the manager. ‘All I know is that he was a writer who produced a very strange book indeed. It was called *The True History of Planets*, and it took him the best part of that blessed century to complete.’

The Doctor clapped a hand to his forehead. 'Of course!' He turned on his heel to face Anji and Fitz. 'Have either of you read it?'

'Not my kind of thing, I'm afraid,' said Anji.

'Maybe it was after my time,' said Fitz.

'Wasn't it about fairies and elves and things?' Anji frowned.

'Yes, yes,' nodded the Doctor. 'And great battles and quests and derring-do. Necromancy and sorcery and all of that kind of nonsense.' He looked intently at Mr Brewster. 'That's the one, isn't it?'

'Fairies? Elves?' said the boar. 'I don't remember them being in it. Far as I can recall, it was all about dogs. Dogs with hands. I remember it being a very silly book indeed.'

'Dogs with hands?' cried the Doctor. He turned and headed for the door.

'Where are you going?' bellowed the hotel manager. 'You're meant to be under my care until the police arrive.'

'I was off to see this expert lady,' said the Doctor. 'To find out if she can tell me anything. *The True History of Planets* doesn't have a single dog in it, believe me. There's something very wrong here.'

'You can't leave this room without my say-so,' said the manager firmly.

'When will the police get here?' asked Anji.

'It won't be until tomorrow morning, now. The traffic's a bit mad.'

'Well, then,' she said, reasonably. 'Let the three of us investigate till morning and then we'll come quietly. You've got the TARDIS, after all. We can't go anywhere without it.'

'You said yourself that there was funny business going on,' smiled Fitz. 'Well, we're the experts in that. Wherever there's funny business, that's where we're happiest.'

'Really?' scowled Mr Brewster. 'I can't stand it, myself.'

'Oh, come on,' grinned the Doctor. 'Tell us how to find this lady that Professor Jag was trying to bump off with his poison and his stings. Go on. We can't make the situation any worse than it already is, now can we?'

Fitz gave Anji another worried glance.

'All right,' sighed the boar. 'But you must be back here at eight o'clock sharp when the police get here.'

The Doctor beamed.

'The lady you want is in room 386. She's a Professor Mida Slike.'

'Mida Slike?' asked Anji, getting up and shouldering her bag. 'That sounds like a made-up name to me.'

‘It apparently is,’ agreed the manager. ‘She is going incognito because of threats to her life. And believe you me, she’s no picnic to deal with, either.’

They left him then, putting his head heavily into his hands and sighing very deeply.

Outside the manager’s office, Fitz and Anji congratulated the Doctor for talking their way out.

‘But I meant it!’ he said. ‘We are going to investigate this whole business!’

They both looked put out by this.

‘If someone has been tampering with the contents of books like I think they have,’ said the Doctor grimly, ‘then I think we might very well be facing very funny business indeed.’

‘Great,’ said Fitz.

‘Did you see that bookshop they’ve set up in the lobby?’ the Doctor asked him. ‘Pop in there and find us a copy of *The True History of Planets*, would you, Fitz? Scour it for any references to dogs. Dogs with hands. You can sit in the bar as you read it, if you like.’

Fitz shrugged inside his greatcoat. ‘That doesn’t sound too bad.’

‘And watch out for the hotel guests. They’ll all think we’re murderers.’

Anji and the Doctor watched as Fitz sauntered off down the plush corridor.

‘And in the meantime, we’ll go off to see this nice lady,’ said the Doctor. ‘This Reginald Tyler expert with the made-up name.’

‘You’re one to talk about made-up names,’ Anji smiled.

‘Ah,’ he tapped his nose. ‘But it wasn’t me who made mine up, was it?’

Mida Slike was draped in some kind of kimono affair and having coffee served to her in her suite when the Doctor and Anji arrived.

She was a very tall, slender woman of indeterminate age, with her hair cut into a savage bob. She had one jagged scar down the left side of her face and kept, Anji noticed, that side of her head turned away from her guests during their conversation.

The Doctor managed to get the two of them invited in for coffee fairly easily. It was as if this woman was expecting them to come in like this, out of the blue.

With his usual insouciance, the Doctor sat himself down and patted the settee for Anji to join him. He grinned at Mida Slike and asked, ‘Shall I be mother?’

But the academic was straight into lecturing mode. She was curled up on her sofa with her legs tucked under her. Her coffee smoked under her nose and her voice was low and harmonious.

'You should yourself know, Doctor, that these books are always changed or damaged in transition and translation through the years. They are rarely what their authors intended them to be, as they pass through worlds and times. They can end up being quite mutilated. Believe me, in my research, I've seen some travesties of the originals. I make my work in the cracks and gaps of transition.'

'Yes, well... when it comes to a few commas out of place, or a couple of paragraphs switched around, that's one thing...' the Doctor said, passing the sugar to Anji. 'But we are talking about the entire contents of a book...'

'It's my opinion,' Mida Slike said, 'that the version of *The True History of Planets* that has come down to us through the years, and that we consider canonical, isn't at all what Reginald Tyler wrote, all those years ago.'

'That's what I'm saying,' said the Doctor lightly, crossing his legs on the plush settee. 'I got that impression from the hotel manager, Mr Brewster. He seemed to be saying that it was a book all about dogs...'

Mida Slike frowned and Anji watched the livid scar down her face puckering like a broken zip. 'In my work as a critic,' she said, 'one gets to hear about certain shadowy groups, who manage to tamper with the evidence of texts. For all sorts of ideological reasons of their own. The Circle Hermeneutic, for example. Or the New Dehistoricists. A nasty bunch.'

Anji sipped her coffee and couldn't help feeling that they were making heavy weather over a few old books. Mida Slike seemed to be taking it very seriously indeed. The Doctor was looking thoughtful, too. He leaned forward, his eyes dangerously bright. 'Who do you work for?' he asked her.

Mida Slike gave him a chilly smile. 'I hold a Chair in Bastardisation at the University of Outer Angila.'

'Goodness!'

'Though, at the moment, I am, in fact, on extended study leave, researching and writing a monograph on these particular textual anomalies. The science fiction of the twentieth century is, as you might have guessed by now, the site of some very strange goings on.'

'Anomalies,' said the Doctor broodingly. 'They're the big thing around here, aren't they? Professor Alid Jag was about to give his paper on another set of them, wasn't he?'

Mida Slike scowled at the mention of Jag's name.

Anji said, 'He's been trying to bump you off, hasn't he?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Kill you,' said the Doctor smoothly. 'Mr Brewster was telling us about something slipped in your soup.'

‘Professor Alid Jag takes ideological differences very seriously.’

The Doctor was up and pacing around again. ‘He shouldn’t be any more trouble to you, anyway.’

‘Oh? Why is that?’

Anji hesitated before putting in, ‘There’s been a bit of an accident.’

The Doctor sighed. ‘I can’t help feeling there’s a pattern here. Some gorgeous and intricate Grand Narrative. All these anomalies you academic lot are detecting in the science fiction novels of the twentieth century. . .’

‘There certainly is a pattern. . .’ Mida Slike agreed readily.

‘Who do you work for, besides your university?’

‘MIAOW,’ Mida Slike smiled.

Anji blinked.

‘What?’ said the Doctor.

‘The Ministry for Incursions and Ontological Wonders.’

‘I’ve never heard of them,’ said the Doctor.

Mida Slike shrugged. ‘We’re rather subtle. And we’re rather concerned.’

The Doctor gave her a long, hard stare. When he spoke again it was rapidly, and he was dragging Anji to her feet, making her choke on her last mouthful of hot, strong coffee. ‘We oughtn’t to take up any more of your valuable time, Professor Slike. We must go and see how our young friend Fitz is getting on. We’re working to an extremely strict timetable.’ He opened the suite’s door.

Mida Slike slid effortlessly to her feet. ‘If I can be of any more assistance, do not hesitate to call me.’

The Doctor smiled and thanked her.

She’s flirting with him, Anji thought.

They left her suite then, and Anji found herself hurrying down the plush corridor after the Doctor.

‘I don’t think I liked her much,’ Anji said. ‘She was far too sure of herself.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ shrugged the Doctor. ‘You can be quite dogmatic yourself, sometimes, Anji.’

They were interrupted by a long, high-pitched, gurgling scream.

It echoed down the corridor from the suite they had just left.

They hared back down the hallway and crashed back through the door.

Anji stiffened at the sight of Mida Slike, inelegantly sprawled on the deep pink pile of the carpet, with coffee spilled all down her kimono.

Her face was twisted in a rictus snarl.

The Doctor was already across the room, kneeling beside the motionless critic.

'Poison?' Anji asked hoarsely.

But he was tweezing a number of long, fine hairs from the rumpled silk of Mida's gown.

He peered at them closely, holding them up to the shaded light.

'What are they?' asked Anji, bending close.

He looked at her with his eyes full of foreboding.

'Poodle.'

## Chapter Five

Mr Brewster – the noble boar who liked everything to be by the book – was appalled that his trust in these people had been somehow so misplaced. During his interview with the newcomers he had somehow allowed himself to be duped into thinking they were genuine and trustworthy.

Now they had managed to kill Mida Slike as well as Alid Jag and his conference was two esteemed guests down. It was a very bad state of affairs indeed.

With a lamentable lack of places to lock up dangerous prisoners, he elected to detain them in the meat locker in the basement kitchens until eight o'clock the following morning, when he would gladly hand them over to the police.

A terrible whisper had gone through the hotel.

There was a *frisson* of panic on the air.

Fitz was arrested in the hotel bar, where he had apparently been quietly reading a book. He had put up quite a struggle, denying everything. Word of the commotion and the accusations flying had rippled through the guests, all of whom were scandalised at the loss of the eminent Professors Slike and Jag.

Mr Brewster was in the bleakly functional basement kitchen with his trembling receptionist, Ellie. They were peering through the small portal into the freezer locker.

The captives looked very guilty indeed.

'I do hope it's not too cold in there,' Ellie was saying worriedly. She was obsessed with everyone's wellbeing and comfort and couldn't snap out of it, not even for murderers.

'They should have thought about that before they started doing in my guests,' snarled the boar gruffly. He couldn't believe he'd been such a poor judge of character. He was very disappointed in himself. Perhaps he was losing his grip. This whole debacle had thrown him badly.

Through the small glass panel, the Doctor was mouthing: 'We are innocent!'

Behind him, Mr Brewster could see Anji and Fitz hugging themselves, teeth chattering, standing awkwardly between the frosty carcasses that hung from the ceiling like gory stalactites.

Mr Brewster turned abruptly to the gargantuan, dewlapped and vaguely humanoid cook who waited behind him. She looked terribly alarmed at her new role as gaoler.

'Flossie, keep an eye on them. And in no circumstances open the freezer door!'

The head cook nodded silently, setting her immense flesh wobbling and shaking.

The hotel manager grunted and stalked off, with his receptionist skittering after his dainty, cloven heels.

The Doctor turned away from the small window, disgusted. He looked at his companions and gave an apologetic shrug.

'Never mind,' said Fitz.

Anji tutted.

The Doctor determinedly changed the subject, eyeing the thick paperback Fitz had been clutching to his chest since his sudden arrest in the bar.

'What did you find?' asked the Doctor brightly.

'Ah, well,' said Fitz. 'I've only had time to dip in and skim this thing...'  
He held up the cover of *The True History of Planets* and Anji caught a glimpse of a rather lurid and abstract colour illustration. Also, the tagline: 'Professor Reginald Tyler's Terran Science Fiction Classic – For The First Time Complete And Unabridged!'

'And?' urged the Doctor, taking the book off him.

'What Mr Brewster was saying was perfectly right. It's not about elves and fairies at all. They barely get a mention.'

'What a shame,' said Anji lightly.

'It really is about dogs,' Fitz said. 'Those nasty, yapping toy dog things. The kind that get primped and petted and their fur shaved into ridiculous patterns. And they get bows put into their hair and stuff. And then the dogs look all kind of superior... that sort.'

'Poodles,' said the Doctor.

'That's them.'

Anji raised both eyebrows.

'With hands!' Fitz laughed. 'In the book, they live on this planet where they've clambered their way to the top of the evolutionary ladder with their perfectly manicured five-fingered hands and by making full use of their opposable thumbs. They have a very luxurious world with a corrupt monarchy and

the book's all about their various skirmishes and how one of them manages to depose the queen of the dogworld and set himself upon the throne. . . '

Anji looked at the Doctor as he flicked through pages, and then back at Fitz. 'You got quite into it, didn't you?'

'Nah,' said Fitz. 'It was too descriptive for me. There were these long boring speeches. And I couldn't make out what was happening at the end at all.'

'You probably have to read the whole thing,' Anji told him.

'I'm going to read it,' said the Doctor suddenly. 'We've a few hours till they let us out of this place. . . '

'If we don't freeze first,' Anji shuddered.

'I speed read,' the Doctor reassured her.

'Hmm,' she said.

'Aren't we going to try to escape?' asked Fitz incredulously.

'Soon,' the Doctor promised. Then, without further ado, he sat himself down on a crate that was barnacled with ice and started to read Reginald Tyler's massive opus. He began at page one of the prologue with a heavy frown of concentration on his face.

Night crept on and, because Flossie took her orders very seriously, she finished her duties, left the galley kitchen gleaming, immaculate, and then she pulled up a wooden chair and fell to watching the meat locker door with a bleary eye. She was clutching a vicious pair of cook's scissors.

She couldn't remember the last time Mr Brewster had entrusted her with such an important task. She'd been here from the very first day of his managing the hotel and all she had ever wanted from the estimable boar was that he praise her occasionally, and that he saw some value in the things she did for him. But he, along with her guests, simply ate her food. It was all lovingly prepared – breakfast, lunch and dinner, and yet no one ever commented upon it. Flossie slaved down here in the basement each day to no avail.

Maybe this nightwatching duty was something she could do quite easily and he would be grateful. He would bestow his thanks upon her.

But. . . murderers in her meat locker! The very idea was enough to give her the screaming ab-dabs. There'd never been anything as bad as this at the hotel. Mind, she'd had a feeling, in her water, back at the start of this weekend. Seeing all of them funny-looking professors and what-have-you turning up in untidy droves.

Science fiction, indeed.

She drowsed, she dozed, she fought to stay awake, perched on her rickety kitchen chair. But the reassuring hum of the fridges and freezers, and the comforting warmth of the kitchen range... all of these conspired to get the better of her and together numbed her exhausted senses... and soon drew her into sleep and a series of very confusing and alarming dreams.

It wouldn't hurt, surely, to get forty winks. The murderers were safely banged away and it was a combination lock, so there was no way they could...

Flossie slept, slumped on her chair, the great folds of her flesh hanging down.

And, some hours later, in the thickest watches of the night, it was the damp, prickling sensation of someone licking that flesh that jarred her awake with loud, appalled expressions of disgust and dismay.

The creature licking her backed off immediately.

Flossie shook herself awake, whimpering with terror and fought to calm herself down. She looked about wildly and came face to face with the culprit.

It was a darling little dog. A scared and inquisitive small pooch with a ribbon in its hair and a knitted bed-jacket affair wrapped around to keep it warm. Flossie exclaimed in delight.

'Why, hullo!' she bellowed and stooped forward, thrusting her massive face into the dog's. He backed away a little more. 'Don't you be scared.'

Now it was the dog whimpering as Flossie fussed over him. She smelled of pastry and boiled meat, which perked his interest a little.

Flossie was very alert to signs of hunger. After years of being taken for granted in the hotel kitchens, the dog's expression was enough to send her whirling into action.

Then she stopped in her tracks. Of course – all of the meat was in the freezer. 'But you'd like a nice bone, wouldn't you?' she asked the dog.

His eyes were pleading with her, she was sure. Well, she couldn't argue with that. Flossie ambled over to the secure door, squinched up her face and peered through the small portal.

Ah. The murderers were lying down. They were sleeping. Maybe they'd all be freezing themselves to death. The oldest one of them, the one in the blue velvet coat, he had fallen asleep on a crate of out-of-date squid. He was clutching some book or other.

There was a questioning whimper from ground level. Flossie shushed her doggy and smiled. 'Well, I think it's all right for your Auntie Flossie to...'

She wasn't sure, but she thought the dog had given a small growl of warning.

'Oh, my little lamb's starving, is he? Well...'

With chubby, dextrous fingers, she was jabbing in the combination. She held her breath and turned the stiff wheel, breaking the seal on the frigid air within.

‘Now, hush,’ she told her new pet. ‘And we’ll fetch you out a nice juicy something... Brrrr...’

Flossie hitched up her apron and skirts, stepping on to the slippery, powdery floor. It was like a skating rink in there. She would have to be very careful.

She inched into the freezer and cast a glance back at the dog on the threshold. His head was at a questioning angle, his ribbon at a rakish tilt. She made a shushing face at him and peered nervously at the recumbent criminals. Oh, goodness, she thought. I’m risking life and precious limb. She stole towards the shelf where she knew she would find some chops, perfect for her new darling.

Just as she reached out her hand the dog in the doorway gave one high-pitched yelping bark. It echoed around the small, metal-walled space and Flossie whipped around, just in time to see the dog turn and go bounding away, across the oxblood tiles and out of her kitchen.

Flossie couldn’t help herself yelling out after him, her cry full of anguish.

And the next thing she knew, one of the murderers – the girl, standing on a box – had grabbed her from behind, crooking her arm nimbly around her throat, bending her own arm up her back.

The two men, alerted by all the kerfuffle, were clambering to their feet, alarmed by the spectacle.

‘Anji!’ the Doctor sighed. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘Getting us out of here,’ the girl said grimly.

Fitz’s eyes were out on stalks.

‘Well, help me!’ Anji shouted.

But the cook wasn’t putting up any kind of a fight. She went limp and two great tears rolled down her quivering wattles. ‘I only came in here to fetch the poor dog a bone... Don’t murder me! Please don’t!’

The Doctor gave her one of his most charming smiles. ‘There, there,’ he said, clapping her on the shoulder. ‘Anji, leave go of the poor old thing. We aren’t going to hurt anyone.’

Anji looked embarrassed as she let go.

‘Murderers!’ Flossie wailed, shaking more violently than ever.

‘We haven’t murdered anyone,’ Fitz burst out. ‘Well, not on purpose anyway... not yet.’

Flossie wailed again. Suddenly Anji lost all patience. She headed for the meat locker door. ‘Let’s get out and find the TARDIS. Leave her in here...’

‘Wait a bit,’ said the Doctor, looking serious. He stared at the cook, who flinched. ‘Did you say you came in to get the dog. . .’

‘A bone, yes sir,’ nodded Flossie miserably. ‘A darling little doggy who woke me as I slept and he looked half-starved. . . but now he’s gone and I’ve set you murderers free and Mr Brewster will have my guts for garters, sir!’ She moaned loudly and started sobbing again.

The Doctor said firmly. ‘I shall take full responsibility for our escape. Flossie, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’re not really appreciated here, are you, Flossie? You put all your heart and your ample soul into your work and there’s never a word of thanks or praise, is there?’

Flossie gawped at him. ‘No, indeed, sir.’

‘I shall pretend that we overpowered you and forced you to set us free. You won’t get into trouble.’ He grinned at her. Then he leaned in, conspiratorially. ‘But first you must show us where they’ve impounded the big blue box we arrived in.’

The cook looked alarmed, but she nodded shakily. She led them out of the meat locker and watched them shake some life and warmth into their frozen limbs.

Anji asked the Doctor, ‘Do you think her dog had anything to do with the poodle hairs you found on Mida Slike’s body?’

He nodded. ‘I’m sure of it.’

‘And the book,’ said Fitz. ‘You think it’s all got to do with Reginald Tyler’s book about the dogworld?’

Flossie listened, her face crumpling up, mystified.

‘Before I nodded off,’ said the Doctor, ‘I was up to Chapter Ninety-seven.’

‘You really do speed read,’ Anji said dryly.

The Doctor looked modest. ‘And I’m convinced that it’s true. Every word of it.’

‘A world of dogs?’ asked Fitz.

‘And,’ said the Doctor, ‘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. Suddenly she knew what was coming next.

‘We’re going there, aren’t we,’ said Fitz. ‘You’re going to take us to the dog-world.’

The Doctor hurried over to Flossie and took her massive hand in his. 'If our delightful rescuer and dog-lover here will only show us the way to the ship, yes. We most certainly are.'

Anji and Fitz looked at each other.

'I quite like dogs,' Fitz said. 'But not those poodle things.'

'Flossie?' prompted the Doctor gently.

Without another word she led them out of the kitchen, up a filthy staircase, and up into the darkened hotel.

## Chapter Six

It was the early nineteen-forties and the old colleges were not the same.

With many of the young men away fighting for King and country, a lot of the spirit had gone out of the place. That's what Reginald Tyler was thinking as he took his customary bicycle route through the town that morning.

Now they had women in some of the colleges. They were filling their heads with ideas. Teaching them the Classics.

The old place was almost at a standstill. Tyler was required to give only half of his usual number of lectures. That in itself was no bad thing. That left him with more time of his own to get on with the real work.

The town was bleak. Old stone gone black and mapped with frost and not a scrap of green anywhere. The roads were slick and sticky with ice, but still Tyler swerved and sped, heedless on his usual route.

He was an angular, stick-thin figure; his nose thrust forward into the streaming wind, his few strands of hair pressed flat to the great dome of his skull.

Enid had been in a foul mood this morning. She had slammed his breakfast down before him on the dining room table. He had watched her warily from over his newspaper as she fetched napkins from the dresser drawer and flicked them angrily on the air.

The single orange eye of his underfried egg had goggled at him from his plate.

He knew she was frustrated and furious, keeping house for him here. He felt the force of that fury every day.

Enid wasn't your average faculty wife. She wasn't content to stand on the sidelines at the few cocktail parties where women were allowed, nervously holding her glass as the men talked and smoked, talked and smoked. She had nothing to say to the other wives. They belonged to another class to her. They had people and history in common. Enid felt she had nothing, not even children, to resort to as a topic of light conversation.

Reginald was aware of her on these occasions. He would see her, looking terrified and out of her depth. He would catch her eye and she would blaze resentment at him.

‘Will you be out again tonight?’ she snapped as he dabbed the pristine napkin to his mouth.

‘Smudgelings,’ he told her.

Enid tutted and sighed and said no more to him.

Then he had left, knowing he wouldn’t see her again until he crept into their bed, past midnight tonight.

She would pretend to be sleeping, turning away from him.

The Smudgelings was a new name for his Monday night club. Reginald didn’t approve of it, really. He thought it sounded much too trivial and jolly, like some kind of boys’ gang. But, as these things do, the term had gained currency amongst the members.

Cleavis had coined it. Cleavis who was, to all intents and purposes, still very much a boy. An overgrown schoolboy, sharing those rooms of his with his brother, Fred. Both of them in their forties and bumbling around those cluttered college rooms, communicating in their schoolboy slang and playing their infernal practical jokes. They embarrassed Tyler, sometimes, with their ways.

The Smudgelings were meeting there tonight.

Cleavis would have a fire blazing merrily and he would have laid in a stock of good local beer, though heavens knew how he came by such things in these dismal times.

Cleavis would grow jollier and more diverted as the night went by. He was the unofficial leader of their small literary club, basking in his pleasure at their company and their undeniable, collective talent.

Reginald Tyler believed that these meetings should be more solemn affairs.

They were exchanging their works-in-progress – their tales and their poems that were new, but that were also connected to the deep well-spring of ancient myth, by some means that Tyler liked privately to fancy was well-nigh alchemical.

Cleavis had a habit of making the whole thing over into some sort of drunken jamboree.

These thoughts were depressing him as he hopped off his bike outside the pub, with a sprightliness that belied his years. Tyler left his bike chained up outside the Book and Candle, which was the pub where he had been meeting Cleavis for a Monday lunchtime pint for fourteen years now.

In his satchel Reginald Tyler had a new episode from his ongoing novel and he expected, as usual, to exchange this for a chapter of Cleavis’s work. This was their ritual and they would both devote some time this afternoon to digesting

each other's prose. They would do this in preparation for the Smudgelings' meeting this evening.

Inside the low-ceilinged, mostly-empty saloon bar, he found Cleavis grinning, ruddy-faced, with a pint of bitter already set before him. Tyler found himself giving his friend a rather wintry smile.

Sometimes Tyler wished he wasn't quite so chilly and reserved. But the effusions of Cleavis and his brother and their cheery ilk disconcerted him. Tyler could never return their warmth. He greeted Cleavis cordially and Cleavis was on his feet, shaking his hand, grasping him by the elbow, and then hurrying away to make sure his friend had a drink.

Then, in their stall, they set down to business at the scarred wooden table.

Tyler carefully laid out his fifteen foolscap pages: the fruits of the past six nights' labour. Each page was handwritten in his scratchy, punctilious script.

Cleavis smiled at the moment's hesitation in Tyler's eyes, just before he passed the pages over.

'This is the third episode in chapter six of Book Two,' Tyler said. 'If you remember, our Small Company concluded last week's episode, about to enter the Plain of Scorched Earth.'

'I do remember,' Cleavis said, in his curiously fluting voice. His green eyes were twinkling. 'I remember extremely well, Tyler. How can I forget that marvellous battle with the singing trolls of Morscinnivir?'

Tyler's eyes flicked up, as if he suspected Cleavis of mocking him. 'Indeed.'

'Well,' burred Cleavis. 'I can only hope that this week's instalment contains thrills to equal those of that splendid fight. Fred can hardly wait to hear how this turns out.' He took an excitable swig of his rather murky-looking pint. 'I must say, Tyler, I do enjoy hearing you read this stuff aloud. I'd be hard pressed to say which I enjoyed most: reading it privately in the early afternoon, or hearing it declaimed aloud, by firelight in the evening...'

Tyler shrugged and looked away, as if it were all the same to him.

Then Cleavis's manner changed, swiftly, as he shifted the subject. He suddenly became almost wheedling and Tyler knew he was about to be asked for some great favour. Chances are it would be something he didn't want to do. Tyler narrowed his eyes at his colleague.

'It's about William Freer,' said Cleavis, in what he hoped was a tactful manner.

Tyler looked dismayed. 'Oh, not him again. He's a charlatan, Cleavis. I have already told you that.'

'I wish you'd give him a chance,' Cleavis said, dolefully. Tyler had taken the wind right out of his sails.

'I took a look at one of those novels of his. The ones that you recommended so passionately.' Tyler's face went dark and twisted with distaste. 'And it was horrible. I would go so far as to say it was blasphemous.'

'Blasphemous!' Cleavis scoffed.

'I tell you, that man is far too fond of the idea of the Black Arts. He takes it all much too seriously for it not to be some great obsession of his. I wouldn't be very surprised, Cleavis, if he wasn't some form of practitioner.'

Cleavis rolled his eyes. 'Come now, Tyler. You yourself write about war and derring-do and great adventures... and sorcery, if I'm not mistaken. Do I suspect you of being engaged in such things during the long vacation?'

'You are being facetious, Cleavis.'

Cleavis sighed. 'All I am asking is that William Freer – a great intellectual and a novelist of some standing – be allowed to attend our meetings. That he be allowed to join the company of the Smudgelings.'

'I do not like him,' said Tyler. 'Plain and simple. There is... a whiff of brimstone about the fellow.'

Cleavis laughed straight out at his old friend. 'I never thought you were so superstitious!'

'Superstitious!' cried Tyler hotly.

'I think,' Cleavis began hesitantly, 'that you are being, Reginald Tyler, something of a snob.'

'A snob? Me?'

'Because William Freer teaches in London, and not here. He isn't a don. He has no further degree. He merely lectures on the Romantic Poets for the Workers' Educational Association in Spitalfields. It isn't lofty enough for him to mix with the likes of you.'

Tyler flashed him a venomous look. Then, bitterly, he said: 'The Romantic Poets, indeed. They were drug fiends and failed sorcerors, too.'

'Ah, yes, of course,' Cleavis laughed. 'We all know that there has been no really serious writing for a thousand years or more...'

Tyler sighed heavily and paused before replying. 'Cleavis... the Smudgelings is an invention of yours. You lead us and you generously offer us your hospitality each Monday night. If you are determined to allow this... scribbling hobgoblin to join our number, then there is very little I can do about it.'

'So you won't kick up a fuss?'

Tyler looked scandalised. 'When have I ever kicked up a fuss? About anything?'

Cleavis raised an eyebrow. Then he looked very pleased with himself. 'I shall write to Freer this afternoon and invite him to next Monday's meeting. Oh, I'm sure you will enjoy his company, Reginald. He really is a wonderful talker. He has such a breadth of knowledge in all sorts of arcane lore. . .'

Tyler looked defeated. He took a long drink of bitter and seemed determined to change the subject again. 'Do you have any pages to give me?'

Tyler was rather looking forward to the continuation of a long Finnish saga that Cleavis had been translating for months. Each Monday Tyler would be presented with about a hundred, turgid lines, rendered in Cleavis's bold and messy handwriting.

Although he would never admit it, Tyler thought it a wonderful and worthy piece of work.

'Ah, yes,' said Cleavis shiftily.

'You have nothing to give me?' Tyler chided him gently.

'Not from the translation. . . no,' smiled Cleavis.

'Oh, dear.'

'It was a boring old thing, anyway.' Cleavis started to rummage excitedly in his battered leather briefcase. 'So I have started something else! I have something else to give you, Reginald. Something entirely new. A story! A story I started to write in the dead of night last Wednesday. It arrived out of nowhere and I started to write and I found that I couldn't stop! The tale wouldn't let me out of its grasp.'

He produced what looked like a school exercise book, all blotted and smeared with blue ink. 'A story for children!' he burst out proudly, handing the book over.

Tyler was aghast. 'For children?' he said, with hauteur.

Cleavis nodded enthusiastically, oblivious to his friend's disapproval. 'I've already written masses of it. Chapter after chapter, just rolling through me. It is about a marvellous land that two children travel to during their school hols. They are evacuees and they are sent to stay with a strange old Aunt in the countryside. And this dear old Aunt happens to own a double-decker bus that can travel to this other world, where there is a terrible struggle for power, going on between. . .'

Tyler held up his hand. 'Please!' He stowed the exercise book away in his own satchel. 'I shall read it and find out for myself.'

Cleavis slurped up the last bit of his pint and patted his tweed coat pockets absent-mindedly. 'I'm hoping to get it done and delivered to my publisher, and to have it out in the shops ready for next Christmas time.'

‘Really?’ said Tyler dryly. ‘It could take as long as that, could it?’

Cleavis clambered out of their stall and clapped Tyler on the arm. ‘Oh, you’re joshing me, you old devil.’

Tyler flinched. ‘I do think you could spend a little longer on your literary endeavours, Cleavis. We are writing for the future. It has to be good. Simply tossing them off like this really won’t do...’

Cleavis was already on his way out. ‘I couldn’t spend decades over one book like you do, Reg! That would drive me crackers! No... crank them out! Get the adventures coming thick and fast! That’s me! No sooner have I come back from one adventure, I want to be off on another one!’ Then, with a bright ‘Cheerio!’ to Reginald and the saloon bar at large, Cleavis was gone.

Tyler stared at the dregs of their pints. Suddenly he felt quite foolish.

Perhaps Cleavis was right.

*The True History of Planets* was already over a thousand pages long.

And there was still so much to do.

Perhaps his work would never see the light of day.

Perhaps no one would ever be able to follow him into his fantasy land.

## Chapter Seven

As good as her word, Flossie the head cook had led them straight to the unguarded TARDIS. It had been moved to a loading bay at the back of the hotel.

The Doctor was appalled at how easy it was to recover his ship.

‘There’s absolutely no one preventing us!’ he burst, fiddling with his key. ‘It’s absurd! Anyone could be running around this hotel, causing all sorts of havoc. They’re very slack.’

‘Just open the door,’ said Anji. ‘Let’s not tempt fate.’

‘No wonder they’ve had murders,’ said the Doctor darkly as he led the way aboard their craft. ‘Just about anyone could walk into the hotel, any time.’

Then they were standing in the cool and airy expanse of the console room and Anji drew in a breath of relief. Home again.

The Doctor was hurrying over to the wooden six-sided control console, holding Reginald Tyler’s brick-thick paperback open before him. Already he was lost to his companions, intent upon his next mysterious task.

With a discreet hum, the doors shut behind them, sealing them into the safe pocket dimension of the TARDIS interior.

‘Ah,’ said Fitz, as he started to follow the Doctor across the flagstoned floor. ‘Speaking of security arrangements and uninvited guests. . .’

Anji turned then, to see Flossie standing behind her, wringing her stained apron in her big hands.

‘My, oh my. . .’ said Flossie.

‘Um, Doctor,’ Fitz said, tapping him gently on the shoulder.

The Doctor was peering very closely at first the bewildering control console and then the small print of Tyler’s book. Quickly he broke out of his spell and whirled around to see the head cook and give her a welcoming grin.

‘Don’t just stand there,’ he said warmly. ‘Come on in.’

Flossie stepped uncertainly around the thick Persian carpet, and the Doctor motioned Anji to take her and sit her down in the kitchen area. Make her a cup of tea. Set her on to baking scones or something, to keep her busy and to take away the psychological sting of stepping aboard a vast, transdimensional craft.

‘We can’t keep her,’ Fitz moaned.

The Doctor shrugged carelessly. ‘Never mind. She’s obviously meant to accompany us, the way she just followed us in. She must have some purpose in the grand scheme. . .’

Fitz’s eyebrows went up. ‘You don’t really believe in stuff like that!’

‘No,’ smiled the Doctor. ‘I’m just covering up for leaving the front door open behind us. But I’m sure she’s quite harmless. And she wasn’t very happy in that gloomy hotel, was she? She might end up somewhere better now.’

‘If she’s coming along with us,’ sighed Fitz, ‘she might well end up dead.’

But the Doctor had already dismissed the apparent problem from his mind. He was squinting at *The True History of Planets* again. In particular, the footnotes to Book Two, Chapter Eighty-Seven.

He read the string of co-ordinates aloud and let Fitz tap them into the navigational computer. He knew Fitz was happiest with something to do. ‘I know you like to be involved,’ he told him.

Fitz scowled. ‘You really think you can put these into the TARDIS’s system and we’ll end up there?’

‘Stranger things have happened,’ said the Doctor. Then he announced that he was off to read the rest of the book, just to get up on what they could expect. He dispatched Fitz to check through the TARDIS library for his own copy of the novel. He was sure he must have one knocking about somewhere. Fitz was to find out exactly how different it was to the dogworld version.

Fitz tutted. He watched the Doctor go and fling himself down under his reading lamp, on his comfy chintz arm chair. Then he looked enviously at the kitchen area, where Anji and Flossie were already sitting with a steaming pot of tea between them, chatting in low voices. Sometimes Anji could strike just the right note with strangers and get along with them so easily. This, too, made Fitz seethe with envy. More often than not, he strenuously found just the wrong thing to say.

He slumped off towards the library alcove, his mood darkening even more as he went.

He was still frozen and numb from their dreadful hours in the meat locker and he was thinking longingly about taking a nice long, hot shower. Or maybe just going to bed and forgetting about it all. But once the Doctor had something in mind, Fitz knew that there would be no stopping him until they were all up to their necks in it. It was best, for now, to stay semi-alert.

He didn’t like the library much. Once you were standing in the alcove, it opened up into a room that seemed to go on forever into a musty old labyrinth.

He thought, with a shudder, of an early escapade of his with the Doctor (actually, the memory of it had just popped unbidden into his mind). He'd been sent to look something up and, well hidden among the stacks, deeper inside the library than he'd ever been since, he had found an extremely old woman lying face down, sleeping at a table. She had been surrounded by hundreds of volumes on British birds. She was in what looked to Fitz like 1960s teenage gear and she was draped with lacy cobwebs. She had eventually, shakily, woken up and prattled on about all sorts of nonsense and Fitz had helped her out of the library and back to the console room.

The Doctor had been alarmed and then very embarrassed at the sight of her. 'Emily?' he'd asked, aghast.

And she hadn't had a clue who he was.

Since then, Fitz had known that being sent on bibliographical research by the Doctor was like drawing the short straw. Nothing was in the correct order. Certain books were booby trapped.

Glumly, Fitz set to work on the ancient system of card files. In one drawer labelled 'TBA – TAC' the first card he flipped to had typed upon it in fading red ink: 'Oh – it's you again.' The next card read: 'Whatever it is you're looking for, I probably don't have it.'

Crossly Fitz plucked another index card at random. 'He lends his books out all over the place. He never gets them back.'

Fitz swore and looked at the first card in the batch again. 'Oh, all right then. Look up Tyler and see how far you get. Mind, you won't be very pleased with what you find.'

Anji was listening with what seemed like great interest as Flossie told the tale of her career. For years now, it had all been downhill. Once she had been a famous cook – a revolutionary and much-feted cook who had celebrated the most alarmingly unhealthy and often downright dangerous ingredients.

Once she had been so rich that she had her own restaurants right across the system and she had employed hundreds of helpers and protégés.

'I fell from grace during the greatest of my challenges and honours. Oh my, but I did. Oh, yes. That was a terrible story. It was a banquet for the Child Emperor of Karim. They're a kind of... well, there's no nice way of putting it. Lobster people. It was all some kind of peace treaty thing going on. Well, no one told me they were like lobster people. And you can guess what I'd spent all night preparing for their main course...'

The whole room gave a gentle lurch then and, for a moment, Flossie looked scared. Anji set down her tea cup and smiled reassuringly.

‘It’s all right. It’s just that we’ll be coming out of the vortex soon. . .’

Flossie sniffed sadly. ‘Oh, I don’t think I’ll ever be out of my vortex. Life’s all a downward spiral now. . .’

Anji patted her huge hand. ‘I’m sorry I got you by the throat back there.’

‘All forgiven,’ said Flossie. ‘We’d all had a very trying night. Just so long as you’re not really murderers and I’m not aboard some awful pirate ship. I don’t think I’d like that much. . .’ She looked around at the kitchen. ‘This is rather pleasant. Why don’t I whip us up some breakfast?’

Anji glanced over at the Doctor, who was flipping pages at an astounding rate. ‘Good idea,’ she said. ‘But I think we’ll be there quite soon.’

‘I’m not sure I want to be anywhere at all,’ Flossie sighed, standing up stiffly. ‘I’d rather be getting to grips with a new kitchen. Feeding all you innocent murderers.’

The Doctor had softly closed his book now.

He jumped up and wandered around the hexagonal console, watching the time rotor’s smooth rise and fall, scratching his beard thoughtfully.

‘I do wish we could have found my little doggy though,’ said Flossie. Then she went to have a poke around in the fridge.

Quite some distance from all of this, there is a large and ungainly space station of some vintage. Unkind critics have pointed out over the years that what it most resembles is three washing-up liquid bottles and a broken hair dryer glued together and spray-painted silver.

Its architect is on record as having retorted: ‘Come on, guys. It’s the first space station our race has ever successfully produced! It’s not bad for the first one. Not bad for a bunch of dogs with hands, is it? What do you want – some great big wheel in space with stuff sticking out? This is about functionality, guys – and this station is designed to fulfil its function. . . um, perfectly.’

Unfortunately the architect didn’t go on to specify what that function actually was. Most citizens of the dogworld didn’t know at all what their station was for, just that a good proportion of their taxes had been poured into it, over the years.

Those same unkind critics had scoffed at the architect’s plaintive response and had made a few further comments about washing-up liquid bottles and broken hair dryers, but the architect had been forbidden by the imperial palace to comment further and, at last, the matter had been dropped.

And the dogstation had remained hanging – rather undaintily – at the very edge of the dogsystem and he continued with his mostly secretive work.

Only two dogs worked full time aboard the ridiculed station and they had both been there for the full sixteen years of its use. Mostly they worked harmoniously together and they dutifully got on with taping and logging and archiving (their three main tasks). They were highly trained archivists and their names were Fritter and Char.

Char was the largest, oldest and most qualified. He came from a long line of curators and archivists and he took his work extremely seriously. He also, even in the bleak confines of a station in reasonably deep space, managed to keep up his stringent beauty regime, making sure that his coat was properly trimmed and conditioned and dressed.

Fritter, meanwhile, was only his assistant and he'd let his coat go all to hell. 'What's the point?' he would snarl. 'No one ever sees us up here, anyway. We might as well not even bother. Everyone on the dogworld neither knows nor cares what we're doing up here – or what we look like.'

Char would shudder at Fritter's overlong and tattered hair. His breath was rank and his nails were disastrously long and ragged.

Today, though – far from shaking his head in futile dismay at his only companion's general appearance – archivist Char was feeling somewhat vindicated. And he was thoroughly enjoying Fritter's discomfort.

'How was I to know we'd end up getting Royal visitors?' Fritter snapped. 'I'd have kept myself nicer and smarter if I'd known to expect that.' He was sitting at his control deck, peering into a small green screen, which showed a tiny blip approaching the station. It wouldn't be long before the royal ship docked.

'She's only very minor royalty,' smirked Char, preening himself and then turning to monitor the controls. 'I think my father knew her mother or her aunt at one point. They met at a function or two. I remember seeing the Princess once, myself, when I was a pup. It was at a charity hunt. Anyway, she's no oil painting, herself.'

Fritter was rambling, though. 'If she fell in love with me at first sight, she might take me away from all of this...'

Char looked his colleague up and down and snorted at him.

Fritter's powder blue coat looked distinctly moth-eaten and, in sixteen years of deep space monitoring, he had run to fat. 'You wouldn't want to marry her, believe me. She is in deep disgrace with the palace. Pound to a penny the Emperor will have her executed one day. It's a wonder he hasn't already.'

'I wish we knew why she was coming here,' Fritter sighed.

Char's eyes lit up. 'Why, that's fairly obvious, isn't it? She's here to watch the broadcast with us, isn't she? She wants to see it first, before anyone on the dogworld sees it.'

'Long way to come, just to watch a bit of telly...'

Char shrugged. 'Maybe she knows something about this Terran broadcast that we don't.'

'That wouldn't be hard,' said Fritter. 'We never know what we're going to pick up and receive.'

'That's the beauty of what we do,' Char smiled. 'And that's why we love being archivists. Because what the people of the Earth create and broadcast intrigues and surprises us so.'

Fritter harrumphed. 'Well, I just hope there's some dogs in it. That's all I can say.'

Aboard the TARDIS, the Doctor smiled as the wheezing and groaning noise of their arrival petered out.

Anji looked at him questioningly.

'We're aboard a space station,' he told her.

'Oh,' she said. 'I thought we were going to a planet. Have we gone wrong?'

'No, I don't think so. The co-ordinates were very specific. We're clearly supposed to be here.'

Fitz had come back from the library, looking somewhat dustier. 'No luck,' he announced. 'That card file system is really unhelpful.'

'We're on a space station,' Anji told him.

'Oh,' he said, without much enthusiasm.

'It's fully carpeted throughout,' mused the Doctor. 'That's unusual, isn't it?'

Flossie called over: 'Why don't you all go out for a little walk around? I'll have something nice ready for lunch.'

## Chapter Eight

Despite himself, Reginald Tyler found that he was falling under the necromancer's spell.

That was how he now thought of William Freer: the necromancer.

There was no doubt about it, but that dark, well-proportioned man in the grey Savile Row suit and his perfect perfect manners. . . he was in league with something nasty.

He had set a spell upon all of the Smudgelings, just the couple of occasions he had attended their Monday evening meetings.

Cleavis would beam and clap Tyler on the shoulder and murmur: 'Well, would you be without him, old fella? Could you imagine these evenings going on now without Freer? He livens the whole thing up, doesn't he?'

Tyler wasn't sure he would call it livening them up.

But certainly, Freer brought with him a certain energy.

While he sat on a high-backed drawing room chair, furthest from the fire, there was a crackling tension on the air that had never been there amongst the Smudgelings before.

Tyler would still grumble, though he would concede to Cleavis: 'This Freer is certainly a fascinating man. Perhaps his inclusion in our number was not such a bad thing.'

Cleavis squawked in triumph at this.

Each Monday William Freer put aside his papers, having made sure his desk was clear on Sunday, in order to join his new-found friends.

He left his small attic flat in Spitalfields and caught the train out of town.

Alone in his carriage, he would read pages that the various Smudgelings had given him for his approval. He read them all with relish, knowing that these men were depending on a kind word from him.

That was how far the balance had shifted, already.

Just two weeks after his joining, he had these fussy dons and bachelors clamouring for his attention and favours.

As he sat watching the sludgy, sepulchral countryside slide by, he smirked at his own success. William Freer: a fine, handsome figure of a man, he thought. One who could make all those learned gentlemen fall at his feet, just as easily as he could the ladies he taught in his evening classes.

Why, they all fell in thrall to him, and why shouldn't they?

Sometimes Freer believed he could control their minds without their knowing it.

He reached out long, fine, invisible fingers and snared their hearts and minds.

Ibis was the matter of his new novel, which he was reading to the Smudgelings serially. A man discovers that he can steal into the thoughts of his colleagues at Whitehall. He can make people do exactly what he desires.

The Smudgelings had various theological and ethical points to make about his work-in-progress and Freer would listen to these with apparent patience, equanimity. And then he would plough on with his shocking, amoral work and he would read it to his new-found friends in his thrilling contralto – quietly, so that they would have to crane and pitch their hearing to absorb every morsel of his tale.

Sometimes, he knew, he wrote certain episodes just to startle that complacent lot.

And he knew that they loved him for it.

They who were bumbling and tetchy with each other, assembling with such careless ease, all crumpled and beleaguered. When they spoke to Freer, fresh from London, stealing into Cleavis's rooms like a great black crow, they were solicitous, courteous. They well-nigh addressed him as 'sir'.

All except Tyler, of course. Tyler, whose force of will, perhaps, matched Freer's own. Well, all things were possible. Perhaps Tyler's intellect, also, was a match for Freer's. That remained to be tested.

They would sit across that drawing room from each other, these chilly nights, amongst that fawning pack and Freer knew that Tyler was set against him, engaging him in some private duel.

Well then, let him. And let him think that he might stand a chance.

Why shouldn't he? Tyler possessed all of the advantages. Who, really, was William Freer next to a man of Tyler's standing? One who had spent all of his working life within those thick, booklined walls, with nothing more to do than cogitate and tinker with the damaged root form of the language?

While Freer, on the other hand, had been cast out into the world; the son of a butcher, labouring in the slaughterhouse, educating himself slowly by candlelight. He had been lonely, with the filth and the stench of hogs' blood on

his fingers, under his nails, transferring itself on to the papers he stroked and wrote upon so lovingly.

Just let Tyler engage him in open combat. Freer could fight dirty. He had no innate good manners – as those other fools believed they did. Nothing like that could hamper him.

And Tyler was his objective.

Tyler was why he was here. Tyler and that book, that opus, he was so conscientiously writing, at such inordinate length. Freer would have to play this very carefully if he was to succeed. He couldn't let his impatience, his brooding bitterness and gall (oh, he knew them for what they were and he didn't mind) he couldn't allow those noxious fumes to get in his way. They had to fuel him and sustain him on this most important mission.

He shuffled his papers and slid them back into his neat attaché case.

What the Smudgelings had written, Cleavis included, was, in Freer's opinion, utter dross. Childish, semi-mystical, sub-religious scribblings. Tyler, of course, hadn't entrusted the newcomer with any of his own pages in advance.

Freer settled back in his carriage seat for the remainder of his journey. He watched the glowering, overcast sky – now tangerine, now ochre and lilac. He studied his own reflection in the glass and he waited for the spires and the turrets to appear on the horizon, signalling the end of his journey.

He found himself looking forward to the evening: to seeing them so boyishly pleased to have him amongst them again.

Time again to tamper with their minds. Time again for him to let them let him tamper with their precious minds.

Tyler, meanwhile, found himself dreading these Monday evenings.

His wife had noted, just that morning at breakfast, that his rancour matched even hers. She watched him slash open his morning's post with his paper knife and he grimaced at each piece in turn.

He even left his egg: a scandal in these days of privations.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked him bluntly.

He looked up at her as if he hardly knew who she was. 'Nothing,' he said curtly.

Oh, Reg, she thought. How did this ever happen to us? We're sinking into childless middle age and we're snapping at each other whenever we talk. Who'd ever have thought it?

When she thought of their early years – tending to him as a young nurse, such a young girl, in that hospital in Whitby – Enid could hardly credit that

they were still the same people.

She had fallen in love with him; his brilliant, young mind, the way his fingers would rove over his pages, hungrily, his long, rangy, soldier's body. She had faked her own birthdate on her birth certificate, just so she could run away with him and get married at the end of the Great War. It had been against the wishes of everyone involved: her own family, who thought him a snob, and his family, who thought her too lowly for their precious Reginald.

The two of them had faced out all of that disapproval because they had loved each other. They had loved each other so instantly, so unequivocally, that they had hardly had to voice it. It had been obvious that they just had to be together.

But then they had come down here, so that Reg could be a Professor. So that he could fulfil his obvious destiny. She had been proud. But she had never realised that it would all conspire to turn her into this: a bitter woman, old before her years.

'You used to like your Mondays, Reg,' she told him, her voice more tender and kindly now. 'You used to go dashing out of the house. . .'

'Did I?' he said, glancing down some long, complicated bill from the bookshop. He crumpled it and threw it aside.

'Meeting with Cleavis in the pub. And then meeting all your chums in his rooms to talk about. . . well, whatever it is that you talk about there. You used to come cycling back home full of whisky and beer and I knew you were bursting with ideas and excitements. You would come bounding up those stairs like a boy. Oh, you would never tell me what kinds of ideas got you so worked up. I suppose I would never understand. But you did, Reg. You used to be happy. But these past weeks, that's all changed, hasn't it? What's happened, Reg?'

She sat down heavily on a dining chair opposite him.

Reg looked at her with his eyebrows raised. This was the longest speech his wife had made to him in months. He was startled by her, by the concerned look on her pouchy, careworn face.

'I think,' he said, 'I think that the tenor of our Monday evening meetings has changed irrevocably.'

She smiled and said lightly, 'What is it? Another silly disagreement with Cleavis? He's just teasing you, you know. Really, he respects you very highly. He's in awe of you, I think.'

'It isn't Cleavis.' Her husband's face looked drawn. He looked rather grey. It was as if he was ageing in front of her very eyes. 'Or rather,' he went on,

and it seemed a real struggle for him to speak and to tell her this. 'Cleavis has allowed an undesirable element into our company. . .'

'Really?' This sounded like drama to Enid. She had never suspected her husband's friends to be capable of such a thing.

'A writer from London. William Freer. A man far too sure of himself. A sinister man who I think wants to take over the group.'

'Oh,' Enid laughed. 'You boys.' But she was intrigued, despite herself, by the mention of this sinister stranger.

'His books are full of black magic, mind control. . . and perversion.'

'Perversion?'

'Moral and ethical and sexual. He is polluting the atmosphere of our group.'

'Goodness.' Enid felt herself colouring. 'He really reads out sexually perverted stories to the likes of you and Cleavis?' She laughed at the very idea. 'It's a wonder you haven't sent him away with a flea in his ear.'

Tyler was scowling even more heavily. 'That's just it. The others have been drawn into this circle of wickedness. They think his work important. They hang on to his each and every word. . .'

'Ah,' chuckled Enid. 'So that's what it is. This sinister, perverted, metropolitan man is deflecting attention away from you! Is that it, Reg? Are the boys making you feel left out and neglected?'

'Certainly not,' he snapped.

'But they listen to you less. They defer to you less. They are more intrigued by this enigmatic man. . .'

Tyler sank back reluctantly. 'I think – in comparison with him – they have grown bored with me.'

'And your book? Are they bored with that?'

'I. . . think so.'

'But they have been listening to that for fourteen years or so, Reg! You've been writing it for more than twenty! How dare they?' Enid was immediately furious on her husband's account and he was gratified by that.

'It is making me lose my own faith in the project,' he sighed. 'Maybe it really is antiquated and worthless, as Freer says it is. . .'

'He says that!' Enid burst out.

'He mocks me, in front of all of the others. Last week, after I concluded my reading of the latest chapter – which they had all professed to be eagerly anticipating – we sat back to think about it in silence with our drinks. We always do this, to absorb the nuances and to mull it over. . .'

To Enid, it sounded a terribly dull sort of way to spend an evening. But she listened to her husband sympathetically.

‘And then, after a pause, that devil Freer burst out laughing! He jeered at me! Fairies and elves! he howled. Goblins and trolls! What kind of stuff is this for a grown man to expend his life’s work on! Fairy tales! he cried mockingly. Fairy tales and nonsense to frighten the children! And the others laughed with him, Enid. They caught his wicked, sarcastic mood and they laughed along with him. At me.’

Tyler shook his head sorrowfully.

‘Oh, Reg,’ she said, seeing his distress. ‘I’m sorry.’

They looked at each other across the strewn breakfast table; Reg’s uneaten egg and discarded letters between them.

Enid didn’t know what else to say to him.

Because, secretly, she agreed.

She of all people knew what it was like – how ridiculous and awful it was – to live with a man who spent most of his life inside his own head with the fairies and goblins of his own making.

Deep down she knew that this William Freer fellow was quite correct in his mockery and scorn for Reginald’s project. And that made her terribly sad.

She watched wordlessly as Reg prepared to leave the house, gave her a gruff goodbye (and, unusually, and presumably in gratitude for her sympathetic ear, gave her a peck on the rouged cheek). He patted her on the head, flattening her rolled up hair, and then he was gone.

As he cycled away, off to his usual Monday morning meeting with Cleavis, Tyler reflected sadly that he hadn’t told Enid the full story, as usual.

He had told her only enough to get her to feel sorry for him.

He hadn’t told her that he, too, was being sucked into this dark, thrilling atmosphere.

That the presence of Freer excited him, too. Excited and alarmed him, though he’d rather die than admit it or show it.

But as Tyler cycled uphill to town, he was thinking of the coming meeting that night and his heart clattered and clanked in perfect time with the chain of his battered, trusty old bike.

## Chapter Nine

They stepped out of the Police Box into a chilly little corridor lit only by bulbs set above the portraits that lined the walls.

The Doctor bounced experimentally on his heels, as if testing the local gravity.

Anji rather suspected he was testing the pile of the carpet. It was fairly luxurious, a deep and dusky pink.

While the Doctor started to examine the portraits in their gilt frames, Anji noticed a dark mass on the carpet. By now she was well used to traps and terrors of all kinds.

She pointed it out.

‘What’s that?’

Fitz bent closer suspiciously, and then he recoiled. ‘It’s dogshit, Anji.’

‘Oh.’

‘Look at these pictures!’ the Doctor called out.

Each one showed a dog staring straight out at the onlooker, baring its fangs. They were beribboned and titivated. Some of them were wearing elaborate bonnets.

Fitz burst out laughing and the Doctor shushed him.

‘These,’ he said sternly, ‘are probably the great and the good of this civilisation.’

‘It’s like an Intergalactic Crufts,’ Anji said. ‘Or like some mad version of Planet of the Apes. . . with, um, poodles instead of monkeys. . .’

‘Quite,’ said the Doctor and led them further down the gloomy corridor. ‘Follow me, and mind the doings. It’s luxurious, but it’s not very clean.’

They hadn’t gone very far when the whole corridor – indeed, the whole station – rocked slightly and they were buffeted from side to side. Then it steadied, with some of the portraits awry.

Fitz looked at the Doctor questioningly.

‘Something’s docked,’ said the Doctor.

\* \* \*

Decked out in their ceremonial collars, Fritter and Char were awaiting the royal party in the reception area. Here there were more portraits, mass-produced paintings of the Imperial family. They were an odd, inbred-looking bunch. Their snouts were rather long, their dewy eyes too close together and their canines were frighteningly pronounced.

Char had declared the lot of them to be of very dubious pedigree.

Fritter, who fancied that he had no social hang-ups or pretensions, took Char's pronouncements at face value. Secretly he was dreading the arrival of the Princess. He wasn't at all sure of the correct protocol, and he hadn't been able to drag a comb through his tattered coat.

The national anthem was playing quietly in the background. Water bowls and dishes of dry biscuits had been set out on plinths. They were using up their precious rations, thought Fritter irritably.

At last the airlock shot open and three Imperial guards came trotting out, their coats immaculately shaved and dyed Imperial red. Their collars were studded with what looked to Fritter very much like rubies. They stared down their hosts and uttered not a single word.

They stood sentry and waited while the Princess emerged from her small, smart ship.

She was older than Fritter had expected.

She came tottering out at last on a walking frame, her liver-spotted hands clenching and unclenching on the bar as the castors squealed arthritically. Her eyes were dull and her nose looked dry. Her teeth were a rancid yellow and several were missing. But her tiara was the most extravagant object that the archivists Fritter and Char had ever clapped their jaded eyes on. Fritter imagined that it had probably cost more to put together than the dogstation itself. The Princess seemed bowed under its glittering, mineral weight.

She moved with agonising slowness towards the two archivists, glaring at them all the while from under her three-inch-long fake eyelashes.

At last she stopped, straightened stiffly and shakily lit herself a thin, black cigarillo.

Char nudged Fritter and the two of them bowed deeply.

'Grrr,' said the guards. It was their ceremonial greeting.

'Grrr,' said the archivists dutifully. Having been here for so long, they were unused to such formalities. The lack of ritual arse-sniffing was a definite snub. Fritter and Char were evidently inferiors, and not to be sniffed. Char felt this like a slap in the face.

When the Princess spoke it was in a low, rasping growl.

‘We are very eager to see this broadcast from the Earth.’

‘Ma’am, we are almost within range,’ said Char in an unctuous tone. ‘You are, I hope, familiar with our work here?’

‘One hears tales,’ she said stiffly.

‘Perhaps we should repair to the viewing room,’ put in Fritter anxiously. ‘The broadcast will be. . .’

‘We will not be hurried!’ gasped the Princess. ‘We will not jump if you say jump! The broadcast can wait!’

Fritter and Char looked at each other, both knowing that this was not the case at all. No single command from even a Princess of the dogworld could alter the timing of the broadcast. There was only a certain span of time during which they could intercept such transmissions from the Earth, and they had to be exactly prepared for it. Otherwise they might miss the start.

This particular broadcast was coming from the United Kingdom on something called Christmas Day at two p.m., during the year they called 2010. The people responsible for this broadcast (‘the BBC’) were quite unaware that the dogworld archivists were poised to reel in the morsels that the people of the Earth sent spinning their way.

So, it wasn’t as if they could ask them to repeat it or to send a video. The archivists just had to sit ready and waiting in time to watch and record it.

‘Very well,’ sighed the Princess as she finished her fag. She was evidently getting her strength back after the long flight, and preparing herself to carry the weight of her tiara again. ‘You may lead us to your viewing chamber. We are rather eager, it must be said, to see some of this Terran material. One hears that they even have dogs in some of their funny little broadcasts. . .?’ She started to shuffle along with her frame and her guards bounded upright again, to keep up with her chronic pace.

‘Indeed, ma’am,’ said Char, trotting along obsequiously. ‘Many are exceedingly amused by the tapes we relay to the dogworld. It seems that the Earth is a topsy-turvy place, full of absurd reversals. Indeed, when dogs appear in their “movies” and “shows” it is often as pets belonging to human beings. . .’

‘Pets belonging to human beings!’ echoed the Princess hotly.

‘Indeed, ma’am.

‘Are these blasphemous creations, then?’

‘It is simply their nature, ma’am. Our Terran cousins are not quite so advanced as us.’

Fritter was thinking dreamily, as they went along, that he would quite like the life of a Terran canine. This was one of his frequent fantasies that he kept to

himself. The dogs of Earth seemed to have quite an easy life. All they seemed to do was eat and sleep. The only work they were required to do was prance around, leading their owners on little walks and bringing back the occasional stick (the humans had a fondness for these). Oh, sometimes the Earth dog might need to rescue children from a burning barn or bark at the police to tell them that a bridge across a valley had fallen down. And their human owners even picked up the dogs' doings for them! How demeaning was that!

No, to Fritter's jaundiced eye, it seemed that on Earth at least, the dogs had the upper hand, though in a fairly underhand way.

Fritter wasn't alone on the dogworld in thinking like this. Indeed, there was a hot black market for pirate tapes copied and smuggled off the dogstation. This was a neat little sideline Fritter had been running for years. Char had never clocked a thing.

Fritter had been stashing away a fair bit of cash from pirate collectors: the kinds of dogs who got off on 'movies' such as *Lassie Come Home* and *Digby the Biggest Dog in the World*.

Apart from an innate laziness, which made life as a pet seem preferable to life as a deep space archivist, Fritter couldn't really see what got his secret collectors so worked up about this stuff. But still, as he well knew, there were some sick puppies out there.

Just before they ran into the royal party and the archivists, Anji was asking the Doctor: 'I wonder why those co-ordinates brought us to a space station and not the planet itself?'

'There weren't any clues in the footnote I found,' said the Doctor, glancing out of a mucky portal at a particularly uninspiring patch of space. 'In fact, the co-ordinates were disguised as a printing error. . .'

'You plugged a typo into the navigational computer!'

The Doctor grinned. 'Well, my hunch was right, wasn't it?'

'But we could have been minced!'

'Have to take a risk now and then.'

Fitz didn't look convinced by this, and neither did Anji. Their past few jaunts with the Doctor had been horrifying enough. Fitz, especially, didn't trust this current, determinedly airy, careless mood of the Doctor's.

'Anyway,' he said. 'We'll just have to trust to chance and assume that the co-ordinates were planted in order to bring us here. We are supposed to be on this station.'

'You're really going in for this serendipity thing, aren't you?' said Fitz.

With that, they turned another corner and bumped straight into the royal party on their way to the viewing room.

For a moment everyone looked completely stunned.

Fitz braced himself for the inevitable cry of, 'Guard!'

But, amazingly, it never came.

Anji was staring, gobsmacked, at the dogs with hands. They were tiny, toy dogs, standing no higher than her knee. They looked dainty, well-groomed and terribly fierce.

And the Doctor looked utterly enchanted.

The three Imperial guards were rigid. This was entirely outside of their experience and they didn't know how to react at all. None of the dogs had seen a bipedal humanoid in their lives before – outside of 'movies', of course.

It was up to the Princess to take charge. She looked the newcomers up and down and mustered the most hauteur she could manage. She lit another thin black cigarillo and said: 'We take it that these creatures have been laid on for our entertainment this evening?'

Char gulped and found that his mouth was hanging open. He hated things getting out of control. He was slobbering. That feckless Fritter wasn't doing anything to help him, either.

He would have to say something. The Princess was giving him a terrible, stony look. Even her cataracts looked furious.

'Indeed, ma'am. We thought you would be most amused to see some genuine... um... specimens.'

'Hmm.' The Princess turned graciously to the Doctor's party, nodded her head and said very loudly: 'You are from the Earth?'

Fitz and Anji were still gawping at the talking toy dogs. Anji was trying to pull herself round. She had seen enough peculiar things to enable her to take this sort of thing in her stride. But still, along with Fitz, she was gawping.

The Doctor sent them an agonised look. He turned to the Princess and dropped to his knees.

She extended her withered hand and he kissed it.

'Madam,' he said. 'We bring greetings.'

'Grrr,' she said.

'Grrr,' said the Doctor.

'They're quite charming, aren't they?' the Princess asked her fellows. She reached out and gently ruffled the Doctor's hair. 'All dressed up in their little outfits and walking about the place!' She nodded approvingly at Char. 'You

have done well, Archivist Char, in providing this entertainment for us. We are quite amused.'

'Ma'am,' simpered Char. Things seemed to be working to his advantage for once.

'We must hurry along,' Fritter hissed to Char. 'The broadcast will be on soon...'

'We demand that our new pets be brought to the viewing room with us,' declared the Princess. 'We have grown very fond of them already. Especially this friendly one.' Again she ruffled the Doctor. She eyed Fitz primly. 'Mind you, that one is a bit of a mongrel. Nevertheless, have them accompany us to watch this "movie" of yours. It is, after all, the product of their own strange and alien civilisation. They could, perhaps, elucidate its finer points for us.'

With that, she motioned Fritter and Char to lead them on.

'Shall we accompany them?' the Doctor smiled to his friends.

Anji rolled her eyes.

'Grrr,' said Fitz.

'Silence,' said the Princess mildly. 'Bad people.'

Fritter was hissing right in Char's ear: 'Where did you get them from?'

Char gave him a tight shrug and mouthed, 'Search me.'

Then he scampered ahead to lead the Princess in the right direction.

'Of course,' the Princess was saying, 'it is, in point of fact, a breach of etiquette to have wild creatures brought thus into our presence. Have them walk on all fours, as is proper. Fit them with collars and chokers. Strip them of their quaint little outfits. We can't have them running around like this!'

'Indeed, ma'am,' said Char and nodded to Fritter to carry out her orders.

Anji cottoned on pretty quickly. 'What?' she hissed.

The Doctor shushed her. 'We have to try to fit in, Anji.'

'Bugger that,' she snapped.

## Chapter Ten

It was the most mortifying movie-going experience of Anji's life.

A makeshift pen had been hurriedly put together for them in front of the wide screen. Behind them, on tall, padded chairs, the Princess sat with her retinue of loyal, elite guards and the nervous archivists as they waited for the film to start.

Luckily the lights had been lowered. By the faint glow of the screen, she was vaguely aware of the Doctor and Fitz crouched on the floor beside her.

A number of chewable plastic toys had been thoughtfully provided for them by Fritter. He was the one who had also fitted their collars and leashes. Anji tried to loosen hers.

She was still absolutely furious.

'I've never been so humiliated,' she whispered, making the mistake of glancing sideways at Fitz.

He just laughed. 'Oh, I have.' Actually, he'd taken to the life of an ersatz dog quite happily. Neither he nor the Doctor seemed to have a scrap of bodily self-consciousness.

The Doctor. She was trying hard not to look at him naked.

On their way to the viewing room from the place they had left their clothes Anji had not been able to avoid getting an eyeful. She had forced her eyes ahead and tried to cover herself as best she could.

Her knees were very scuffed.

How she would be able to concentrate on some film, she had no idea.

Behind her, Fritter was briefly explaining how the archivists were able to tap easily into the Terran broadcasts and what an amazing insight they generally gave into the lives of people.

'Yes, yes,' said the Princess impatiently. She was passing out chocolates to her guards.

The Doctor was frowning, staring at the screen.

There was a buzz of anticipation in the air.

The screen crackled and flickered and resolved itself into what looked very much like a BBC logo. A deeply reassuring, avuncular voice assured them that they were, indeed, watching BBC Three on Christmas Day.

'I wonder if we've missed the Queen's speech,' said Fitz.

The Doctor shook his head absently. '2010, remember.'

'Oh,' said Fitz blankly.

'Bad people!' the Princess reprimanded them.

'Fitz,' Anji hissed. 'Are you telling me you really don't mind trotting around starkers in a collar and lead?'

He grinned. 'Are you kidding?'

'Bad, bad people!' the Princess growled. 'We want to watch! If you don't stop, you'll all be put outside!'

The Doctor gave his companions a warning glance.

The film had already begun.

Anji had been too busy talking to hear its title announced.

It seemed to be a science fiction kind of thing (oh, great. . .) with an opening sequence showing vistas of stars and planets. A stirring score was banging plangently away.

The Doctor and Fitz were looking rapt.

After a sequence of unfamiliar names flashed up on the screen ('So-and-so presents so-and-so starring in a so-and-so production directed by so-and-so) the title eventually appeared in bold, shiny lettering.

THE TRUE HISTORY OF PLANETS.

'They filmed it!' Anji found herself squealing.

'I knew there would be a reason for us coming here,' grinned the Doctor.

'But which version. . .?' she began, and was silenced once more.

Behind them, for the next two hours, there were whistles, cries, applause, tears, whimpers, growls and barks of appreciation. Sweet papers rustled and sharp breaths were drawn.

In their makeshift pen, the three time-travellers watched with almost equal fascination and appreciation.

The *Halliwel Film Guide* of 2010 would be fairly disparaging of the filmed version of Reginald Tyler's classic novel.

Utterly untrue to the erudite, scholarly spirit and tone of the great Professor's work, the movie version (Directed 2007 by American blockbuster mogul John Fuchas) was, in all honesty, a flashy travesty, designed to pull in the kids.

Computer-generated dog effects lend the principal characters (all of them rather snappy and brutal poodles with human hands...) a certain uncanny realism.

The story itself, as Halliwell's guide has it, was a ropey, mechanised, hackneyed affair.

On an alien world, dogs rule and humans are the enslaved savages. The plot (such as it is) follows one young poodle as he learns of his destiny to regain the lost bones of a lost ancestor in a lost city in the lost far north. The completion of this quest will enable him to depose the Empress of the dogworld and prove his legitimate right to rule the whole shebang.

Many, many computer-generated fights and adventures later on the dog-world, the young pup eventually wins the day; tears out the throat of the Empress and places the crown on his own head.

A dizzying, inconsequential feast – or rather, dog's dinner – Halliwell concludes. Not the finest hour of Fuchas to be had.

The Doctor, Fitz and Anji were, however, without the benefit of the esteemed Halliwell's critical commentary (invaluably dry and humourless as it is) and so they had to make up their own minds about the film.

'I preferred it to the book,' said Fitz.

'You never read it all!' said Anji.

'The book was boring. It took ages getting anywhere.'

'It was substantially the same,' said the Doctor. 'At least, to the altered version of the book.' He looked ashen. 'Which means that the dog version of Tyler's novel has passed into history. This is very, very bad news, by the way.'

The credits were rolling their last and there was yet another surprise coming their way.

As the house lights sprang on, the Princess was already on her hind legs, jabbing one hand at the now black screen and howling with rage.

'But it is all true! Every scrap of it! That is the true story of what happened on our world!'

With that she staggered around for a moment and had to sit down again. She was shocked and delirious. The other dogs pounced to help her.

The Princess rallied slightly and continued to rant.

'How do the Earth people know of such things? How can they know the truth of our history when it has been so effectively squashed and suppressed on our own world, so that not even our own people know that their Emperor – my uncle – came to power unfairly by killing my mother, the Empress?'

Fritter and Char looked equally shocked by now. ‘You mean all that was true? It wasn’t just a fairy tale?’ gasped Fritter.

‘Of course it wasn’t!’ barked the Princess. ‘Somehow, someone on that people planet has uncovered the truth! That my mother was unfairly deposed and murdered. And that I should now be Empress!’ She was frothing at the mouth and her hackles were up. She lashed out at the archivists. ‘What is going to happen to your recording of that “movie”?’

‘We... have to check it for any... undesirable elements...’ stammered Fritter.

‘Undesirable to the Emperor!’ laughed the Princess. ‘And one would imagine that it would be very undesirable to him indeed! It shows him for the treacherous hound he really is.’

Char was nodding. ‘The Emperor, it is true, would not be happy for such a “movie” to be in general circulation...’

‘Ha!’ cried the Princess. ‘Then he is already too late.’

‘Not quite, ma’am,’ Char said gruffly. ‘We have a recording of it on tape, yes. But it will not gain widespread broadcast on the dogworld.’

Her dull eyes narrowed as she took in his words. ‘What do you mean, archivist Char?’

‘I mean, ma’am, begging your pardon, that this is precisely the function of the dogstation and always has been. To relay only suitable material to the dogworld. And to suppress anything inflammatory.’

‘It’s certainly inflammatory,’ whistled Fritter.

‘It would cause a revolution on our world!’ cried the Princess. ‘My people would recognise it for the true history that it is. The people of Earth have done us a very great service. Revolution will ensue and the throne will be mine!’ She threw back her head and yapped in triumph. Her guards set up a howling hullabaloo of accord.

‘But,’ Char said, steadfastly, ‘the tape of this broadcast will go no further. We have done our jobs. We have intercepted, but we have not relayed.’

The Princess’s eyes burned into his. ‘You will do as we command.’

‘Begging your pardon, ma’am. You have no jurisdiction here. We take our orders from the Emperor himself.’

‘Steady on, Char,’ hissed Fritter. ‘Don’t wind her up.’

‘Silence!’ she barked. ‘I must think.’

‘Your majesty,’ said the Doctor, jumping up and breaking in. ‘Will you allow a word from a humble representative of the people of the Earth?’

'You?' she said, fluttering her long, fake eyelashes at him. He dropped to his knees and she ruffled his hair again. 'What does our pet have to say for himself?'

'Do you really want revolution on your world, majesty?' asked the Doctor. 'And all the ensuing bloodshed and palaver?'

'Indeed we do! Our mother was very cruelly slain, as you yourself have seen, my pet.'

Suddenly the Doctor looked cunning. 'But there are more ways than one to obtain your heart's desire, majesty...'

'Oh?' she snapped. 'We thought violent retribution was always the most effective. Are we mistaken?'

'I think, perhaps, that you are,' said the Doctor.

'But you don't understand, my pet, what it is like for us to be a minor and only barely tolerated member of the Royal family. If my uncle could have me killed outright without fuss, then he would certainly do it. Instead he sends me out on these ridiculous state visits, and I am a kind of slave...'

Her rheumy old eyes looked close to tears. 'I must use every chance I can get, to try to change the status quo. And to seize back what is rightfully mine. But what do you understand, just a person, just a pet like you?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I understand only a little.'

The Princess sighed. 'Guards!' she cried out, with just a tinge of reluctance in her cracked and aged voice. 'Impound the archivists Fritter and Char. They are to consider the whole of this dogstation under our temporary command. While we consider exactly what to do with this very valuable and inflammatory video tape...'

The scarlet poodles sprang to their feet and withdrew stubby phasers and made the two archivists get to their feet.

Char was horrified. 'You cannot do this.'

The Princess rounded on him. 'You two are censors and propagandists. You edit and control what my people may or may not see. Do not presume to tell us what we can and cannot do.'

She turned to look regretfully at the Doctor. 'Lock up these human pets with the archivists. And bring us this tape. We must have that tape in our possession.'

The dogs jumped into action, doing as they were bid.

Fitz looked at Anji. 'That's us in the doghouse, again.'

'Oh, shut up, Fitz,' she said, as they were led away.

## Chapter Eleven

‘Good for her,’ Fitz was saying as they made their ungainly way to their cell. ‘If she thinks this tape will make a difference on her homeworld, then good luck to her.’

‘You’re so sixties,’ Anji snorted. ‘Let’s disseminate subversive literature and bring down the government, man. Let’s storm the Bastille with dodgy arthouse movies and photocopied pamphlets – that’ll get them quaking in their boots. Power to the Poodles.’

‘Whoah,’ he said.

‘Anyway, don’t pretend you care,’ she snapped. She glanced at the Doctor. ‘Can’t we just bolt and make a break for the TARDIS?’

‘Hmm,’ he said, his thoughts elsewhere.

‘He’s so sixties as well,’ she muttered.

‘I think I’m a bit offended, actually, Anji,’ Fitz put in. ‘I’ve moved beyond the sixties, you know? I’m a citizen of the universe, I reckon.’

She tutted.

Char came sidling up. ‘I am armed. I am waiting for my moment.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Fritter.

‘I am loyal to my Emperor,’ said Char tersely. ‘Unlike this splinter group of dogs loyal to the Princess. What she is doing goes against every one of my principles.’

Fitz asked, ‘How come you let her see the film in the first place?’

‘We didn’t know what it was about!’ Fritter moaned. ‘Her visit just happened to coincide with a broadcast from the Earth. All we knew was that it was a nice “movie” about dogs. We thought she would be amused. . .’

‘She was certainly that,’ said Anji.

‘We have to get that tape back,’ growled Char. ‘We can’t have that old hag running around the dogsystem with inflammatory material. . .’

The whole dogstation was buffeted again, and took even longer than last time to steady.

Everyone, including the Princess’s guards, looked at each other nervously.

‘Another ship has docked,’ said the Doctor. ‘A bigger one.’

Archivist Char was puzzled. 'There was nothing scheduled...'

Suddenly one of the Princess's loyal guards was on his radio, which was blaring with static and a panicky voice.

'What's going on?' Anji asked.

From behind them, down the lushly-carpeted corridor, came the pell-mell deadly sound of blaster fire. There were howls of outrage.

The Doctor sat back on his haunches. 'Civil war,' he mused.

The captain of the guard stowed his radio and shouted: 'Leave them! We are to leave the prisoners and return to protect the Princess...'

The guards whirled around in the confined space and bounded away as one.

Char said, 'It can only be...'

'...more Imperial hounds,' Fritter finished for him. 'They've come for her. She's been stitched up. They'll find her in possession of subversive material...'

Char whistled. 'There'll be no escape for the Princess this time.'

The Doctor was on his feet, brushing down his knees and shins. 'What will they do to her?'

'I don't know... ' said Fritter and he was drowned out by further gunfire and cries. 'The Emperor has been looking for ways to get rid of her...'

'They really want to suppress that "movie",' said Char. 'Well. We've done nothing wrong. They can't do anything to us.'

'Oh, that's a great attitude to have,' said Fitz. 'What about that poor old bitch you were so busy sucking up to?'

Fritter was looking very shame-faced.

'What's wrong with you?' asked Char suspiciously.

'I made other copies of the "movie",' he admitted. 'I sent them on to my usual clients...'

Char was appalled. 'Black market?'

'I'm afraid so.'

Char was livid. 'How long has this been going on?'

'Ever since we started here... It's just my little sideline...'

'But they'll trace the tapes back to you!' Char gulped. 'To us! We'll have the Imperial hounds after us as well!'

They stared at each other dismally.

The Doctor saw his chance to step in. 'Well, anyway. The three of us have to be going now. I think we've done everything we can here... ' He was backing away from the archivists, motioning Anji and Fitz to get up off the carpet and follow him.

But Char had had time to whip out his stubby little phaser. ‘If you lot have got a ship, then we’re coming with you.’

Flossie was stuffing pancakes when the TARDIS doors hummed and opened gently.

She had made a dreadful mess of the kitchen, with flour and broken eggs and dirty implements strewn everywhere, but lunch was going to be heaven.

Disturbed from her work, she glanced up and squinted across the stone-floored expanse to the doorway as the TARDIS crew came hurrying back.

‘Just in time for the house speciality!’ she called out in a jaunty, sing-song voice they hadn’t heard from her yet. ‘Just to thank you all for letting me join you on your travels and your adventures in time and space and... Goodness!’

She balked as she noticed what a hurry her new friends were in. The Doctor, Anji and Fitz were in the all-together and they brought with them two poodles, one of whom was conscientiously brandishing a gun. The Doctor hurried to the console to close the doors.

‘Doctor!’ Flossie called, waving a spatula. ‘Whatever’s going on? Where are all your clothes?’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor.

‘Oh. I’d forgotten about her,’ said Fitz.

‘What is this creature?’ growled Char. He looked a bit more wild now, with feral red eyes and his ribbon untucked at the bow. He was unsure who to aim his gun at as his prisoners spread out around the vast console room. ‘Where are we?’ he asked then, glancing around.

‘A talking doggy!’ cried Flossie, delighted. ‘Doctor, you’ve done me proud! You’ve replaced my lost darling with two! Two talking doggies!’

Fritter swore loudly, as if to prove he could speak just as well as Char could.

‘Are they joining us on our journeys through time and space?’ asked Flossie rhapsodically.

‘Not if we can help it,’ said Fitz.

Anji slipped by, muttering something about clothes.

Char’s eyes were gleaming with almost vulpine zeal. ‘This is a time machine?’

‘Ah, yes,’ said the Doctor, from across the console. He stabbed at one particular control and made an exterior view of the dogstation appear on the scanner above their heads. ‘What a very charming station you live on,’ he said.

Fritter looked up and shuddered. ‘It really is an Imperial ship that’s docked. It’s huge. The Princess doesn’t stand a chance.’ Then, oddly, he grinned and produced a VHS tape. ‘Good job I smuggled away my own copy of the “movie”.’

Char snarled. 'You've got one?'

'Of course,' Fritter snickered. 'Just in case I fancied a spot of rebellion-incident myself.'

'You don't know what you're dabbling with, you idiot,' spat Char. 'This isn't just like pirating a few copies of *Beethoven's Second* or *101 Dalmatians* for your sick friends. This is serious.'

'He's right,' said the Doctor, darkly. 'That film shouldn't even exist. It's an aberration.' He tutted and sighed. 'Someone, somewhere has been messing with history.'

'Oh, great,' said Fitz, in a very small voice. 'Every time the Doctor said that, something really horrible happened.'

'We need to find out why it exists in the first place,' the Doctor said.

'If it's an aberration, we should find a way to prevent it from existing at all,' said Char. 'You said this was a time ship?'

'You know of such things?'

'We are poodles, Doctor. Of course we know of such things.'

'Lunch is ready!' Flossie yelled.

'I think,' said the Doctor, 'That we've all got some serious investigating to do. Back in the past...'

With that, he plunged the TARDIS into the swirling, endless vortex.

'I feel a bit bad about leaving the Princess behind,' he sighed.

Char snorted. 'If she were on the throne, she would cause far worse carnage than our present Emperor does.'

'If I'm right, said the Doctor, 'then where we've just been is an alternate timeline that shouldn't be there anyway. And anyway, affairs of the state can fend for themselves. Anomalies in history are my business.' He clutched imaginary lapels.

'We need to discover who is responsible for this trafficking in contraband otherworldly history. If planets start fictionalising each other like this, all hell could break loose. We, my friends, have got work to do.'

Despite his reservations Fitz felt like cheering.

The Doctor winked. 'I studied the credits at the end of that "movie" very closely. And I think... I think I've got a plan...'

## Chapter Twelve

The Princess was used to social situations of all kinds, and was very adept at mastering her reserve. Being captured by her own uncle's private guard and treated rather roughly as a prisoner wasn't really a situation she was used to, but she tried to play it cool.

She had had this kind of treatment hanging over her head for years. She had known it would have to come. She had always known that the Emperor would try to have her killed. He had been waiting for the right moment, to expose her as some kind of traitor, and then to execute her with impunity.

She was led aboard the sinister, subtle ship by his own guards. She shuffled along slowly on her frame, making them wait. She gathered about her all the shreds of dignity she still had remaining.

Her own guards had been mercilessly put to death. She was now completely alone and defenceless. In one hand she gripped the videotape like a talisman. As if that could be of any protection to her.

But the archivists had escaped. She had heard the Emperor's guards fussing and barking about their failure to detain the dogs. They had run away with the Earth people at the first sign of danger.

Perhaps... perhaps... Fervently she hoped that they were working for her. That they might be loyal to her in some way. It was the only feeble hope she had. The one called the Doctor... she had ruffled his hair and she had been kind to him... She had treated him like a proper pet. Perhaps he might help her. Perhaps he was helping her right now and acting on her behalf to rescue her...

She was grasping at straws, she knew.

And so she was led into the Emperor's private chamber.

It was a gleaming white and cream room. It was like a room from his own personal palace. She was amazed that he had come this far from home, to be present at her arrest. Really, she thought, I must still be important. I must still be a threat.

The Emperor was lolling on a stack of tasselled satin cushions. He gazed at her ironically, barely turning a hair.

'You tricked me,' she said simply.

'Margaret... ' he sighed. 'Always so paranoid.'

'You sent me on this visit. You must have known what I would see...'

The Emperor shrugged languidly. 'I have my odd scraps of knowledge. Yes, I knew what that "movie" was about. I have my informants on the Earth.'

'You sent me there, knowing I would get all worked up about that film... and then you could come striding in and declare me a traitor and a subversive...'

He yawned, revealing a pinkish, mother of pearl tongue. 'Indeed.'

'You've waited for the chance to put me out of the way. To kill me like you killed my mother.'

'Have I?'

'You know you have. The citizens of the dogworld would revolt if you killed me without reason. I am still beloved there. But now... now you can make me out to be a subversive...'

'Really, Margaret... if I hadn't thought of such a plan in the first place, I certainly would have by now. You're giving me every reason to put you to death, you know.'

'I don't care,' she sobbed. 'What has my life been these past few decades? A waste! A travesty! And I should be Empress!'

'I am not going to kill you,' he said abruptly.

She blinked. 'No?'

'Not yet.'

'Oh. Good.'

'I'm really not the bloodthirsty hound you think I am. It could still damage me, politically, if I have you beheaded. I shall only resort to that if...'

'If...?'

'It rather depends on the success or otherwise of your archivist friends and their Terran companions.'

'Oh. You know about them?'

'They had a time machine of some kind. I'm very interested in that kind of technology. I'd rather like a whiz on that myself, when they get back.'

A cold feeling was stealing over her. 'And where have they gone?'

'On a little mission,' he smiled, barely restraining his pleasure. 'And whether they know it or not, they are acting on my behalf. Archivist Char is, as I'm sure you have realised, extremely loyal to his Emperor. He is a snob. They make the best double agents.'

'They are acting for you?'

‘They have gone back in time to prevent this “movie” ever being made. I do hope they succeed.’

She gripped the videotape tighter.

‘And you, Margaret, must hope that they succeed, too. Your very life depends on their ensuring that *The True History of Planets* is uncreated. Now, shall we have a drink? And a little biscuit? Do stop looking so aggravated, dear. It’s only a “movie”.’

Enid was having a dust round the sitting room and the dining room when the stranger knocked at her front door.

What she had imagined doing, once the place was tidy and sorted out, was putting her feet up with that novel of William Freer’s she’d bought. A nice afternoon, a good racy read, perhaps a little drop of sherry later on. . .

*The Slaves of Sutekh* was a spanking new hardback from Faber and Faber that she had picked up – surreptitiously – just this last week, and she was hooked already.

It was lathered in very learned and earnest quotes from T.S. Eliot and the like but, from what she could make out, it was a mucky book, plain and simple. And she couldn’t wait to sit down with it again.

So this was the kind of bloke Reg was hanging about with!

The long, seductive shadow of William Freer had crept out of Reg’s cloistered world and stolen into Enid’s.

And so she was irked when the stranger came knocking.

So far this morning she’d been cheerful – anticipating her stolen afternoon of reading, and also because Reg had been in a better mood. Just lately he was sprightly and eager, in a way she hadn’t seen him for years. This recent change in him was incredible and Enid could hardly believe it. Maybe it was the season; spring was starting to unfurl across the mildewed town.

Reg had gone off this morning for his pint with Cleavis and, before leaving, he had been chatting away about what they would discuss, and he had been brimming with pleasure at the idea of the Smudgelings’ meeting tonight.

All of this boylike enthusiasm from a man who had been awake for most of the night!

Reg had been in his study, tapping away, working ‘like a demon’, as he put it. He had also said, ‘It’s been a hard day’s night, Enid. And I’ve been writing like a dog.’ And with that, he had cracked into shrill laughter.

Really, she hoped that he wasn’t going doo-lally. Well, you heard about what happened to geniuses, and the way they were prone to going round the bend.

Too much spinning around in their heads. It could lead them right up the garden path.

Then, as she was mulling over these recent developments chez Tyler and running her feather duster along the already spotless mantelpiece, there came that smart, businesslike rap at the front door.

The man was wearing very old-fashioned clothes indeed. He was in a long velvet coat, a silk waistcoat and a shirt with a starched wing collar. He was standing there under the trailing, livid honeysuckle with a ludicrous, beribboned poodle, surly at his feet. The dog was a nasty-looking, pampered little thing.

‘Good morning, Mrs Tyler,’ said the man.

He had all this curly brown hair, exactly the same shade of mahogany as the sideboard she’d just polished.

‘Is your husband home, by any chance?’

‘At this time in the morning?’ she said. ‘Certainly not. He was off this morning into town hours ago. He is a very busy man.’

‘Of course,’ said the stranger. He beamed at her and she felt her irritation increase, like milk coming to the boil.

‘Do you want me to give him a message?’ she asked.

‘Yes, indeed. You see, I have come a great, great distance to talk to the esteemed Professor Tyler. And I am afraid my dog is rather thirsty. Might we trouble you for a saucer of water?’

Enid glanced down suspiciously at the fancy-looking dog.

‘I suppose so,’ she said dubiously.

‘And I’m a bit parched myself,’ said the man. ‘Any chance of a spot of tea? I have come a very long way.’

A foreign student, she thought, narrowing her eyes. She wasn’t used to good-looking strangers grinning at her on the doorstep. Her hand flew up to the neckline of her housecoat, self-consciously. ‘I’m not really sure... Reg wouldn’t like...’

‘I am a great admirer of your husband’s work.’

‘I see,’ she said.

The poodle at his feet gave a thirsty-sounding rasp,

‘And your name is?’

‘I am the Doctor. And my dog is called Char.’

‘Char?’

He nodded.

Enid shrugged and let them into the hallway of her house.

While they settled themselves into the now dust-free sitting room, Enid clipped away to her kitchen.

Really, it wasn't often that she had visitors. Reg didn't approve of them. He liked things to be peaceful at home. But Enid, as she popped the blackened kettle on to the gas hob, found that she was enjoying this impromptu, mysterious visit from her husband's admirer after all. It was just like secretly reading that book: something Reg wouldn't approve of. Something unknown, slightly naughty. Something that had never happened before.

'I have never been so humiliated in all my born days,' sighed Char, sitting up on a threadbare rug and glaring at the Doctor, who looked contented in a high-backed armchair. 'Pretending to be a pet, of all things. I'm a well-respected archivist! I come from an impeccable line of researchers! I wish I'd stayed in your TARDIS, now.'

The TARDIS was parked by the riverbank, by a line of budding poplars. It was empty; its crew scattered and about their business.

'Hush now,' the Doctor said. 'You mustn't let Enid Tyler – or anyone, come to that – overhear you talking. She could get a nasty fright.'

Char rolled his eyes.

The Doctor plucked a new hardbacked novel off the coffee table. He examined it thoughtfully, biting his thumb. The cover illustration and the synopsis on the front flap were both very lurid. 'Is this the kind of thing the great Professor reads?' he wondered aloud. 'William Freer... I know that name. Can't remember how...' Then he fixed Char with a stare. 'How are your bootees?'

Archivist Char scowled. Because his delicate hands might draw some attention on Earth, the Doctor had fitted him with some ridiculous, knitted shoes; exactly the kind of thing an over-pampered pet might sport.

'Well,' the Doctor had told him, 'It's far better than being discovered. If the Earth people ever found out that you're not really a dumb and docile pet, they would put you in a freak show, or a zoo. They'd put you on a stage or do experiments on you! Believe me, I should know.'

Char looked at him steadily. 'You don't really belong here either, do you, Doctor? On Earth, I mean. This isn't your world.'

The Doctor looked saddened. There was an odd cast to his eye. He looked away from Char and flipped absently through Enid's mucky novel. 'No, you're right. It isn't. I don't know where my place is, Char. The truth is, I don't know at all where I belong. Some day I intend to find out. But... for now, I'm quite at home here. The twentieth century on Earth is like my own back yard.'

‘Hmm,’ said Char. ‘I saw that.’

They had made three quick trips through the twentieth century. The Doctor had played the control console as if it were a fruit machine, dextrously setting and resetting the coordinates for three particular twentieth-century locations. These locations were somehow determined by his study of the credits of the ‘movie’ they had watched on the dogstation, but exactly how that panned out, Char wasn’t really sure.

The Doctor was nodding. ‘I do hope the others are all right.’

Char sighed. ‘I think this plan of yours – what I know of it – is quite insane.’

‘Do you think so?’ The Doctor looked quite pleased at this.

Flossie and Fitz were in 1960 in a place called Las Vegas; a glitzy, horrible city in the middle of a desert. Anji and Fritter were in Hollywood in 1978. And the Doctor and Char were here, in England, in the springtime of 1942. The trips had been quick and everyone had been very efficiently dispatched. No time for any questions. The Doctor had just about sent them out of the TARDIS with a flat-handed shove.

‘Insane it may be,’ the Doctor said. ‘But I for one will be fascinated to see how it all turns out. Now, shush.’

Enid was back then, carrying a tea tray. She had brought the dog a bone. She presented it to him as if he ought to be pleased. The chief archivist of the dogstation stared at the grisly remnant, appalled.

Char watched, fascinated, as the Doctor drew the Earth woman out and gained her confidence. She must be very dull-witted and unsuspecting, he thought, not to realise what the wily Doctor was up to. He was simply gaining her confidence, flattering her, seeming to be interested. She was a lonely, sad old woman, Char thought, and she was easy prey for a man of the Doctor’s skill.

Char sighed, flopped down on the rug, and gave his horrible bone a desultory licking.

Enid was sitting on a kitchen chair beside the Doctor, with a leatherbound photo album open on her fat knees.

‘And this is us on the Prom at Whitby,’ she was smiling. ‘Look at how skinny Reg was! And how cold looking. He hates the outdoors, really. He’d be happiest if he could sit in that stuffy old study of his all the time.’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor. ‘Whitby. Best fish and chips in the world.’

‘That’s where I come from,’ she said proudly. ‘That’s where Reg and I met, during the last war.’

‘Oh, yes?’

'It was love at first sight.'

The Doctor smiled. 'He must be a very interesting man to be married to.'

'Oh, well, yes. Not that he talks to me about his work. If he has great thoughts, he keeps them all to himself. Of course, I wouldn't understand them.'

'He is a very brilliant man...' the Doctor said. 'But I bet that doesn't stop him from taking you for granted sometimes...'

Enid looked surprised for a second. 'Well! That's right! That's exactly what he does.'

'He should be very glad to have a wife like you,' said the Doctor solemnly.

Char snorted. The Doctor shot him a glance.

'I mean it,' the Doctor said. 'You're obviously devoted to him. And I bet he hardly notices you.'

'That's true enough,' she sighed.

She flicked through more pages of the album. 'And this was when we first moved here, when he was given his Chair. That's us outside this house. Cleavis took this picture. I was trying to get Reg to carry me over the threshold, but he wasn't having any of it. I was too heavy for him anyway.'

Char gave another snort; this one sounding dangerously like laughter. Now Enid glanced at the dog who, realising this, tried to look as doglike and docile as possible.

'You know,' said the Doctor, 'it's a great imposition on you, but I wonder if I could just... have a...'

Enid turned to him and smiled. He was stammering nervously. 'Yes, Doctor?' Whatever could he be about to ask for?

'I wonder if I could just have a peek into the great man's study? It would be a very great honour to see where he works and writes...'

Suddenly Enid looked severe. She closed the photograph album. 'I am afraid that's quite out of the question, Doctor. I'm sorry, but I am surprised you have even asked. Not even I am allowed to go into Reg's inner sanctum. I can't even go in there to dust and tidy round. It is, as you say, where he goes about his great work. And part of my job is to protect that and see that it isn't disturbed.'

'Yes, of course,' said the Doctor humbly. 'I should have realised. I shouldn't have asked.'

'Although... ' she said, 'I can understand your burning interest. As a student yourself, you must be consumed with curiosity to know what Reg is up to...'

'I am, I am,' said the Doctor.

'Well, I shall have to introduce you to the great man himself, Doctor. Though, I must warn you, that he is never on top form when it comes to strangers. Reg

can be truculent and uncommunicative with those he doesn't know and doesn't trust. . .'

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully.

'But I am sure I can work on him and if I tell him that you have come a very long way to see him. . . Where did you say you came from, Doctor?'

He looked at her blankly. 'What?'

'Where you come from? You said you came a great distance?'

The Doctor had a very strange look on his face. Char noticed it at once. He looked as if someone had stepped on his grave. 'Ireland,' he said at last. 'Little place in the South of Ireland.' He blinked once and his eyes seemed to turn from grey to blue in the afternoon light through the net curtains. 'It begins with a "G",' he said, quietly.

Enid looked, for a second, alarmed at his change in demeanour. 'I shall be sure to try to convince Reg. He's in a good mood just recently. He might well be disposed to speak with a devotee of his.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, who suddenly looked exhausted. 'Now, we mustn't take up any more of your time.' He got stiffly to his feet and snapped his fingers at Char.

'Oh,' said Enid, in a disappointed voice. She realised she would be sorry to see the stranger leave. Oh, get a grip on yourself, woman, she thought.

The Doctor had picked up the hardbacked Faber novel again. '*The Slaves of Sutekh*,' he murmured. 'Is this yours, Enid?'

She blushed. 'I don't read nearly enough. This caught my eye in the shop the other day.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. 'William Freer. Is he good?'

'Not according to Reg,' she said. 'In real life, I mean. I'm no judge of good books. But in life, Reg reckons that Freer is the very devil.'

'Really?' asked the Doctor.

'Freer has recently joined Reg's Monday night meeting of friends.'

'The Smudgelings,' said the Doctor with a smile.

Enid frowned. 'Well, how do you know that name? That's their private name for themselves. It's a kind of code. . . a password.'

The Doctor shrugged carelessly. 'As I say, I'm a very devoted follower.'

She pursed her lips. 'Well, this Freer has got himself in with them. Reg was very exercised about it when he first came in.'

'The very devil, you say?' asked the Doctor.

'Black magic,' said Enid, in a quieter voice. 'Perversion and the like.'

'I think, perhaps, your husband was quite right to have his doubts about William Freer,' said the Doctor suddenly. 'His instincts were, I fear, just right. Tell me, Enid, where is Reg at the moment?'

Something in the Doctor's commanding, brusque tone, caught Enid un-awares. 'Where he always is this time on a Monday,' she found herself answering. 'With Cleavis, down the pub. They're drinking in the Book and Candle. . . But. . .'

But the Doctor was already whirling on his heel with his velvet coat tails flailing out behind him. Char jumped up to follow him back into the hall. 'Thank you very much for your hospitality Enid!' the Doctor called. 'I do hope we meet again!'

She hurried after him, in time to see the front door crashing behind him on his heels.

He and his snippy-looking dog were gone.

Enid stood in her dust-free hallway, clutching Freer's novel to her bosom. Her mind was awlirl.

Yes, Doctor. And I hope I meet you again, too.

Then she had to go for a little sit down.

## Chapter Thirteen

The two of them were sitting in a diner and Flossie was watching Fitz eat.

She wasn't very hungry herself. That vortex thing they had passed through had turned her stomach slightly and one look at the menu here had made her feel distinctly unwell. Maybe time travel wasn't going to be her forte after all.

Oh, Flossie, she thought miserably, if you mess this opportunity up, I shall never forgive you. Everything else, all your lost loves, your fame, your own catering business. . . you lost all of those. . . now here, out of the blue, comes a man of mystery who says he can take you anywhere in time and space. And you get a gypsy tummy.

Really, she felt like a liability to herself.

She attempted to cheer herself up by glancing round at the diner; the long, silver counter, the busy cooks at the spitting griddle, the languorous customers slouched on high padded stools, stuffing their faces. She was in the twentieth century on Earth! She was in Las Vegas! The reality of it hadn't yet struck her. I could go and see Sinatra! she thought. Sammy Davis Junior! It's 1960!

She composed herself, trying to cultivate some cool. But her ample flesh was quivering, just the same.

Fitz didn't seem at all worked up. He was concentrating on the task in hand, working through a stack of pancakes with lugubrious precision.

Outside there was a welter of greasy, blaring street noise; traffic and a melange of cheap music drenching the wide city streets. The juke box was playing Presley. Fitz looked as if he was trying to block it all out. He had dressed himself in much the same kind of scruffy outfit he'd been wearing when she had first met him in her hotel. And he hadn't shaved yet. He looked like a wino, she decided. If he'd wanted a shirt ironing before stepping out of the TARDIS, she'd have done it in a jiffy. Not out of any need or desire to serve, just because she was slightly miffed at walking around with him looking a state like that.

She decided to engage his interest in conversation. Just to remind him that she was still there.

‘So this is all quite normal then,’ she said brightly. ‘The Doctor deposits you all off on little missions on your own sometimes? And then he picks you up again when it’s all sorted out?’

‘Sometimes,’ mumbled Fitz, through a mouthful of pancake and syrup.

‘Oh,’ Flossie said. ‘I was worrying that he’d done it to get rid of us. You know, sort of get us out from under his feet.’

She plucked nervously at her stained work apron. Actually, now that she thought of it, she couldn’t criticise Fitz’s slipshod appearance. She wished she had been given some time to pack some fresh outfits of her own. This time travel lark seemed to take a lot of thinking about and planning.

‘You see, I did just wander into your ship,’ she said. ‘Blundering my way in, as usual. Do you think it might have made him cross?’

Fitz stared at her. Trust me to get stuck with this one, he thought. If she’s going to go round looking and acting so self-conscious and out of place, I’ll just have to lose her. Dump her somewhere.

He sighed. Thanks a lot, Doctor.

‘Look, Flossie,’ he told her, ‘The Doctor doesn’t let people tag along for absolutely no reason.’

‘No?’

Suddenly Fitz was enjoying playing the expert. ‘No. We are all meant to be there. You see, he’s always got some kind of masterplan. . .’

She brightened slightly, the puckers of fat around her eyes lifting like curtain swags. ‘Really?’

‘Um. . .’ he stumbled. ‘Mostly, yes. You just have to trust him.’ Fitz was having his own doubts by now. ‘We are all here because of our special, individual talents,’ he explained. ‘And the Doctor needs all of us to help him.’

‘Oh! Well. . .’ She seemed much more cheerful now, apparently ticking a silent list of her own talents in her mind. ‘I wonder which talents of mine he’s thinking of.’

Fitz and Flossie had been the first to be dropped off. They had no idea where, or when, the others had gone to. It was a very disorienting feeling. But Fitz had learned enough about life with the Doctor by now to just go with the flow. This was his natural *métier*, anyway.

All the Doctor had told them to do was to watch out for any kind of anomalies. Anything that seemed at all out of place. He had also mentioned the name of a cabaret star they might like to catch in her one woman Vegas show: Brenda Soobie, the world famous Scots Caribbean songstress. As the Doctor had told

them this, he gave Fitz a very significant look and Fitz had realised that this Brenda Soobie was, somehow, their prime objective on this mission.

He wished the Doctor hadn't been so opaque, though. It was infuriating.

It was as if the Doctor didn't want to give too much away. He didn't want to reveal his whole hand with those two poodles hanging around.

'Oh,' the Doctor had added, just before shoving them out of the consoling safety of the TARDIS, 'Remember to beware of the dogs, too.'

At this, Flossie had looked alarmed. She had also looked a mite disappointed, too, to be separated from her new talking doggies so soon – even if one of them was brandishing a gun at everyone.

'There are different poodle factions at large,' warned the Doctor, sotto voce. 'And we can't be at all sure which are friendly and which are not.'

'Grrr,' Fitz had said.

So now Fitz and Flossie were at large in Las Vegas, on the alert for any signs of poodle interference.

'And,' Flossie was telling him sternly, as she picked up the check and glanced down at the total, 'the Doctor also told us to keep out of the casinos, remember? He said we weren't to waste our time and local currency on gambling.'

'It might be necessary,' Fitz said grimly. 'In order for us to blend in. Everyone else here will be gambling. That's what they come for. We wouldn't want to look out of place, would we?'

He got up swiftly to leave the diner, taking a straw to chew on contemplatively. At least ciggies would be cheaper here, back in the past. Really, he should stock up while he was here. Lucky there wasn't any such thing as trans-temporal customs and excise. Though, come to think of it, there probably was, and one day they'd have a visit from someone forbidding, from outside time and space, who'd ransack Fitz's TARDIS bedroom and reveal all the fags and booze and sundry comestibles he'd sneaked aboard in the past (and future). And the Doctor would look disappointed with him.

Flossie ambled out of the diner after him, into the searing late afternoon sunshine.

The air smelled cleaner and dryer than she was used to. Underneath the smoky, greasy city air, she caught a whiff of the scalding desert, stretching out all around them for hundreds of miles. So used was she to the sterile air of the hotel on that tatty asteroid, she found this fresh, dry air in the past energising and delicious. Every one of her jaded senses perked up at once and she bounced along on her mules besides Fitz, a slow grin spreading on her eager face.

Fitz stopped and nodded at the hotel opposite. It stretched up for dozens of storeys and its ground floor appeared to be a cavern of glinting golden, scarlet lights in the dark.

'We can at least have a go on the fruit machines,' he said. 'That's not real, proper, gambling, is it?' He led her at a dash across the wide and busy road, setting up a hullabaloo of honking and yelling from the irate drivers. 'It'll be a way of keeping our ears to the ground, seeing what's going down. . .'

Flossie frowned and followed him into the noisy, clattering, jangling lobby of the hotel. She wasn't looking at all convinced.

Within half an hour Fitz had gone through most of his loose change on the massive, overweight one-armed bandits, working his way further and deeper into the hall of games.

He was wearing his shades, even in the noisy obscurity of the hotel's recesses and he had paid hardly any attention to the other fervid holiday makers around him.

Everybody was dead set on the fruit machines' cryptic displays: holding and nudging and playing again, slotting in more thin coins and holding their breath for the delicious thunder of disgorged winnings.

As Fitz considered his final, shining dime and kissed it lightly for luck, he happened to glance across at the elderly couple at the massive machine next to him. They seemed just like any of the other, doddery tourists: both in baggy Bermuda shorts, short-sleeved checked shirts and sun hats at jaunty angles. But the withered old woman had a poodle in a knitted tartan jacket clamped firmly under her saggy freckled arm.

The poodle was glaring straight at him from under its crimped and primed fringe. Its eyes were like burning coals.

Fitz jumped instinctively at the sight of the small beast. He would never be the same now, he realised, after his visit to the dogstation.

The poodle was beginning to growl at him, malevolently grinding its tiny, diamond-sharp teeth.

Did this count as an anomaly? Was this the sort of thing Fitz was meant to be watching out for? Could this be a real, untalking poodle?

Fitz decided he was just being paranoid.

The poodle yapped at him and, without even looking, its elderly owner clipped it round the ear and went on concentrating on her fruit machine; her eyes avid and flicking along the ever-changing lit up display.

Stars, bells, cherries, dollars, bells, cherries, stars.

Fitz hadn't won a cent.

Just then Flossie came hurrying around the corner (looking more of an anomaly than anyone or anything else present, in her dirty pinny and a foot taller than Fitz himself). She was panting; breathless with searching for him among the one-armed bandits. Fitz was surprised, all over again, at the sheer bulk of her. She looked as if she could pick up one of these machines in her hands and play it like a Gameboy.

Flossie was holding out two salmon pink slips of card. She grinned at him and waved them under his nose.

'I have got tickets!' she gasped, triumphantly.

'Bingo?'

'No! For Brenda Soobie! Tonight – in the supper lounge of this very hotel!' Then she whipped out a printed flyer and wagged it at him. 'Isn't she glamorous?' Flossie sighed.

Fitz caught a glimpse of a woman in a diamante studded sheath of a frock and a cloak of ice-blue feathers. Her arms were thrust up into the air and her head was thrown back, as if she was belting out the climax to some terrible old torch song.

He grumbled, 'Do we really have to go and see her?'

Flossie handed him his ticket firmly. 'That's what the Doctor has instructed us to do.' She frowned at him. 'You know, it's become quite clear to me, young man, that you need taking in hand. It seems to me that you are the sort who, when the Doctor sends you on a mission, spends all of his time...'

Fitz grimaced. '... spends all of his time dossing about, getting drunk, falling for unsuitable women, yeah, yeah, yeah. All of the above is true. So what? It's never done me any harm.'

He frowned. He thought again. Actually, it had. But he was buggered if he was telling Flossie that. He stuck to his guns defiantly and faced the head cook out.

'Well, then,' she snapped, 'I think you ought to buck your ideas up, young man. It's simply not good enough. Our friend the Doctor has entrusted us with a very important mission indeed and I suggest that we apply ourselves to its rigours appropriately. And that we do our level best to accomplish what he has put us on this Earth to do.'

He tutted. It was like being harangued by someone born again.

Flossie went on. 'And we begin by making sure that we are in the audience, in the supper lounge of this very hotel, promptly at eight o'clock this evening: ready to watch Brenda Soobie, the Scots Caribbean songstress.'

'Brenda Soobie,' Fitz said bitterly. 'I bet it's going to be horrible. I hate that kind of Las Vegas glitzy showbiz thing.'

Flossie was looking as if it was just the kind of thing that she liked best of all.

At the next machine, the old woman had suddenly struck gold. A fortune was pouring noisily from the bandit's gullet. The old man and woman were jumping up and down and whooping. The poodle was being jogged uncomfortably in the old woman's arms. Fitz couldn't be sure, but he thought the dumb creature winked at him, maliciously.

This is all, he thought distinctly, my rotten luck.

But Fitz was wrong, anyway.

At the show that night, he would be utterly entranced. And Brenda Soobie would turn out to be just the type of unsuitable woman Fitz always fell for on jaunts like this. And not even the Doctor could have foreseen the trouble that this landed Fitz and Flossie in next.

## Chapter Fourteen

Anji – amazingly – felt as if she were somewhere normal, for once.

No, more than that. Anji felt that she was somewhere she might even like and enjoy being. Somewhere where she would actually choose to go herself, of her own volition, with gladness in her heart and maybe even a light spring in her step.

It wasn't a feeling she was very used to these days.

She was in a bar that wasn't, really, anything special. A little sleazy, if truth be told. It had a scratched, varnished bar, strewn with ashtrays and, behind it, an endless array of flyblown mirrors. Outside, she knew, it was midday and bright. But, in here, it could have been about three o'clock in the morning. She was in the endless insomniac vacuum of the barfly.

She was nursing a bottle of chilled beer and the management hadn't said a word about her bringing her dog into the bar. He was sitting on a barstool beside her, pointedly ignoring her and gazing around with interest. In fact, no one had spoken to her yet, at all. No one had – thankfully – given her any hassle. She was a woman alone in a business suit in a downtown bar and she was glad they had all kept a respectful distance.

Already she had the smoke and the stench of the city fumes in her hair and her clothes and she was exhausted from tramping the streets with her taciturn pooch.

The warm brown voice of Nina Simone was pouring out of the juke box. Broodingly, like molasses, like curling cigar smoke tumbling through the indigo air. The voice was like a slow, steady backrub to Anji, easing life back into her.

She was full of the city fumes and it was the wrong city and the wrong time, but she was here under her own steam, left to her own devices and, suddenly, she was feeling oddly at home.

She could almost imagine she was in a pub in London, somewhere done up to look like it was in America. She had finished work for the day and, any minute now, Dave would come in to meet her. He'd look awkward and almost shy amongst the City types, until he clapped eyes on her and came hurrying over.

But that wasn't going to happen. It would never happen again. She had managed not to think about him, and about home, for a while.

Come on, Anji. Think about the here and now. Just soak up the atmosphere and concentrate on what you ought to be doing.

It was all right here, really. She could manage.

One thing, though. There was a terrible old codger sat a few stools down from her, and he was giving her the glad eye. He was in a baseball cap and a baggy old T-shirt with a legend on the front reading: 'Wars with the Gods!' He was a white-whiskered, stained old man and Anji hastily averted her eyes.

She wished Fritter would perk up and say something. She couldn't tell if the talking dog was in a mood with her or not. Perhaps he was just taking very seriously his mission as a docile, subservient pet and didn't want to blow his cover. Actually, Anji felt ridiculous carting a poodle around with her. Here in LA she felt like a spoiled, pampered starlet, leading around an obnoxious house pet. Maybe that was the role she ought to be playing. Maybe she should be hanging out somewhere classier than this joint, then.

But the Doctor had been very specific. He'd told her the bar to go to. He'd dropped her off and handed her a slip of paper with the address scrawled on. There was someone here that she was supposed to meet.

She just hoped it wasn't that terrible, drunk-looking old gaffer who was still – she glimpsed him out of the corner of her eye – raking his watery old eyes over her.

She looked around at the other blokes shooting pool, under the dusky green lamps. Really, the way they were dressed made her laugh. It was retro before retro was invented. Everyone looked like they were on *Starsky and Hutch* or something.

Nina Simone finished and was replaced by Lady Marmalade. *Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir*. If that old bloke looked at her again, she'd thump him. It was 1978. It was a different age.

How old was I then? she wondered. About five. A good little girl. Watching the endless goings-on of her family with wide, worried eyes. A girl who knew her place.

Somewhere, across the ocean, she was still that little girl. She could get on a plane, fly to Heathrow and be there in a matter of hours. She could visit her family as they were then, back in the past. She could show them all how she had turned out.

The Doctor hadn't told her not to.

He'd trusted her with a mission instead. And she found herself oddly flattered by that.

At the same time, though, she hated herself for feeling flattered by him. He'd been trying for months to get her back home. That was the story. He'd tried again and again to get the timing and the co-ordinates just right.

Now here he was, when it was something he apparently thought important, being oh-so-specific, and dropping them all, with deadly accuracy, into particular spots of time during the twentieth century.

If she thought about that too much, it took her breath away.

Did she want to go home? Did she really? Sometimes she thought she did.

And could he have been lying to her these past few months? He could operate the TARDIS like a wizard. She had watched him, amazed. He was erratic and unreliable, she knew that much by now. Sometimes she thought she had locked herself up with a madman.

And here was another one, leering at her, by the looks of things.

'That's some dog you got there.'

The old man had shuffled along, to the padded bar stool next to her. He was staring past her at Fritter, who had turned in surprise and was glaring back at the old geezer.

'Pardon?' said Anji.

'That dog of yours,' said the old man wheezily. 'Why he almost looks real.'

'He is real!' Anji laughed.

'Real, yeah?'

Fritter was looking moodier than ever.

'That certainly is a fancy dog.'

'Really,' said Anji curtly, and turned back to her beer.

'I don't think I ever made a dog,' the old man said wistfully.

'What?'

'I don't think they ever asked me to make a dog. You'd think, wouldn't you, that there would have been a call for one at some point? Cerberus at the gates of hell or something?' He was slurring his words. His ancient, acrid, intestinal breath wafted gently over to Anji.

'Cerberus?' she frowned.

'I dunno... Or werewolves or... devil dogs. You'd have thought they'd have had a use for them at some point. But no, I was never called upon to make a dog for them. Not ever.'

Now she listened, there was something almost genteel about his voice, underneath the croaky swagger. Something of the deep south, just below the

surface. She still didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

He caught her eye and went on. His own eyes were blazing suddenly, with amusement and something close to excitement. 'I was called on to make all sorts of other creatures, though. I made a sabre-toothed tiger once. The fur is kind of difficult to get right. When they move, you see, sometimes, they look kind of phoney, when the fur doesn't lie right.'

'Right. . .' said Anji, worriedly.

'But scales and lizard hide is so much easier,' he smiled, revealing stunted, yellowed teeth. 'So mostly I was making. . . ah, you know. . . triceratops and iguanodons and pterodactyls. . . and giant squid and kraken. . . those kind of guys.'

'You made them?'

'With my own fair hands.'

His hands were resting on the bar, either side of his empty glass, and she saw that they were scarred and gnarled, like someone who worked with them every day of his life. They were ravaged but eloquent.

'And I made the gods, too,' he rambled on. 'And all the creatures that the gods controlled. I made the gorgons and got them to spread their vicious snake-hide locks, I made the minotaur and set him striding about his rancid, labyrinthine lair. . .'

Anji was staring at him, her mouth hanging open. 'I'm sorry. . .' she said. 'I really don't know what you mean.'

'I brought them to life. I did all of that. For years, that's all I have done, Miss. . .?'

'Anji,' she said. 'I'm Anji Kapoor.'

'Well, I'm pleased to meet you and your dog. I'm Ron Von Arnim and I. . . I guess you could say that I make monsters.'

The word 'monsters' put Anji in mind, immediately, of the Doctor. Monsters were his speciality. She had seen a fair few of those since she'd been in his company. Things she had never thought could really exist before she met him. Things that she had previously thought only existed in the kind of films her boyfriend Dave like to watch. . .

'Films,' she said. 'You're talking about films.' She smiled at the old man, relieved. 'That's what you mean, isn't it? Special effects. We're in Hollywood.'

'I suppose you could still kind of call this Hollywood,' he shrugged. 'We're on the wrong side of the tracks. But yeah, sure. That's what I do. Or used to do. I made more monsters for those guys over that side of town than any man.'

Now she was very relieved. He was an old drunk, but at least he wasn't barking mad.

'Stop motion animation,' he said abruptly. 'That's what we called it. We invented it here. I've been doing it for years. It takes years to do, you know? It takes months to do the drawings and to make the monsters and work out exactly how they should look. They should look like creatures out of your dreams. They should look like your own worst nightmares.'

'I'm sure,' Anji said, with a shudder.

'And then the real work starts. Bringing them little bastards to life. You got to photograph them over a period of months. You got to move them a fraction of an inch and photograph them again. They can't do anything without you. Why, by the end of a painstaking month's work... say, the minotaur might only have walked a little way across the room.'

'It does sound very labour intensive,' said Anji. She hated the way she sounded so prim.

'It's been my life for forty years,' Ron Von Arnim said, with his glimmer of pride. 'Ever since we invented the technique. We were the first people, back in 1938, to make *Tyrannosaurus Rex* walk the Earth again. After sixty million years extinct, we brought the mother back. Sure, he was only about twelve inches high, but anyone who saw him on that movie screen couldn't have said he wasn't alive.' The old man laughed.

Maybe he was, actually, barking mad. All that fiddling on with plasticine had driven him round the bend. 'You must be very proud,' Anji said.

'Proud?' A dark shadow went across his face. 'Proud?'

'Yes...' she said uncertainly.

'I guess you could say I was proud, Miss Kapoor. I make monsters and I bring them to life. Oh, there's less rail for that kind of thing now, I suppose. But I guess I'm proud. And I ain't no Frankenstein, neither. They ain't got together no filthy torch-waving mob to hunt me to my death. So I guess you could say I was proud. Do you want to see my workshop?'

The question took Anji by surprise. She was aware of Fritter, trying to catch her eye and warn her. 'Your workshop?'

'Up in the hills. Not too far from here. It's where I make my magic. It's where I weave my spell.'

'Oh,' she said. 'No, if you don't mind, I think I'll just finish my beer and...'

The bar man was standing immediately before them, as if he had appeared in a flash. 'Same again, Ron?' he asked. 'Miss Kapoor?'

'Sure,' said Ron. 'Bring the lady the same too. And fetch something for her dog.'

'You giving this nice young lady any trouble, Ron?'

'Me? Surely not.' Ron gave Anji a gallant and fragrant smile.

'Don't you mind him, miss. He'll rattle away for hours on those old tales of his. He been telling you about how he made all the gods and all?'

'Yes,' said Anji. 'It sounds very interesting.'

'He asked you to see his workshop?'

The old man cackled at this, as if he had been rumbled. 'Yes... ' said Anji.

The barman patted her hand. 'Well, then, you should go. He's harmless enough. And he's a real artist. You want to see something that'll knock your socks off... you go and see old Ron's workshop.' Then the barman turned to fetch their drinks. 'Well... ' said Anji.

'See?' Ron grinned his gap-toothed grin. 'I'm an artist. I'm the Michelangelo of monsters. You just got to see what I do. Bring your little dog. I'm sure he'll be interested, too. And I want to get a closer look at your little pooch.'

'Oh?'

He took his first, grateful swallow of the drink that just appeared at his elbow. 'Yeah. My next job. Involves that kind of dog... those, what-you-call-ems... Poodles.'

Fritter's ears perked up at this. Anji glanced at him. So this is who we're supposed to meet. The Doctor was right. We're exactly where we ought to be. This old fella was the key.

So she would have to go out into the LA hills with him after all. And take a look at this workshop of his. She and Fritter were going to have to visit the monsters.

## Chapter Fifteen

The Doctor was breezing along through the damp streets. Char could almost believe he had forgotten what they were here to do. The Doctor looked completely immersed in his milieu, smiling at passersby and gazing intently into bookshop windows when he came to them.

‘Look,’ he nodded at a display of new hardbacks. ‘William Freer again. The same book poor old Enid was reading.’ He tapped his chin thoughtfully. ‘Now, if I remember rightly, Freer was a very minor novelist in this period. He never enjoyed anything as lavish as window displays.’ He glanced at Char oddly. ‘See? Once you start looking for anomalies, they’re everywhere, aren’t they?’

Then he was striding off again, whistling, as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

He looked very much the visiting professor and Char envied him the ease with which he seemed to slip into life on Earth. The poodle resolved to do some probing; and to find out a bit more about the Doctor’s past.

Char was a double agent. Secrets of the Doctor’s kind would, he was sure, stand him in very good stead.

A double agent, he thought. Me! I’m just an archivist, really. Just a trumped up librarian. But his Emperor had picked him out for a very particular task.

Char’s life was running away from him, and getting out of hand.

He padded along at the Doctor’s swift heels, dwelling on these things.

‘I haven’t been here in decades,’ said the Doctor expansively, sniffing the springlike air. ‘Of course, they changed and spoiled it all later. They were considering giving me a Chair in something very complicated and grand at one point, but I had to turn it down. Didn’t want to make myself too conspicuous. . . And then, of course, there was Miranda to look after. We were living in the North. She didn’t need uprooting. . .’

‘Miranda?’

‘My daughter.’

‘Oh,’ said Char. ‘I didn’t think you were the marrying type.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I thought you were an itinerant wanderer. . . a traveller. . .’

'Well, I am,' said the Doctor. 'Mostly. When I can. I just got stuck here for a while. Which is why I know my way around so well. Ah, here we are.'

They were outside an old-fashioned-looking pub. A great, gnarled tree was shading it from the main street. From this vantage, only a keen eye could have made out the weather-beaten sign: The Book and Candle.

'Just think,' said the Doctor gently, as a clock somewhere bonged out midday. 'In there, Tyler and Cleavis are meeting and talking about their work. Doesn't it give you goosebumps? I always get goosebumps when I'm about to meet someone from history.' Then he frowned to himself. 'Though, when you think about it, almost everyone is someone from history, aren't they? I suppose I walk around with goosebumps all the time.'

'Really?' asked Char. 'And yet you look so blithe.'

'I'm a dissembler,' grinned the Doctor.

'Yes,' said the poodle. 'I think you are. Anyhow, I can't really share your enthusiasm for meeting Professor Tyler. He is, if you recall, the reason for all this mess. It is because of what he is oh-so-carefully writing that we're here anyway. The world might be better off without him and his meddling.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' said the Doctor. 'He can turn a decent sentence. And conceptually, he's marvellous.'

Char sneered. 'I don't read much, I'm afraid.'

'You prefer the telly?'

'It's realler somehow.'

'And books don't count?'

Char grimaced at him.

'Right,' said the Doctor. 'Shall we go in then? And take a gander at them? Geniuses at work?'

Cleavis had succeeded in getting the earnest Professor Tyler rather tipsy that morning. Seeing this, the more jocular don was delighted with himself. There was even an air of celebration during this morning's meeting and Cleavis was bemused and befuddled by that.

'The work's going well then, I take it,' he smiled at Reg.

'Well?' Tyler grinned. 'It's never been as good as this, in all these years. When I think back, it's almost as if I've wasted all that time. Inching along, word by word through that dratted book. And the whole time... I was going in the wrong direction.' Tyler sighed and sat back, amazed at himself.

'So,' said Cleavis eagerly. 'When will we get to see and read some of this new work of yours? When will we learn what this great breakthrough is about?'

'Ah, soon,' said Tyler, becoming more cagey again. 'Quite soon, I think. It isn't quite ready yet. . .'

Cleavis, disappointed, produced a sheaf of pages from his bag and proffered them at his friend. 'I have further chapters from my own book. . .'

Tyler waved them away. 'I am sorry. You will forgive me if I do not take them. Reading something of yours might disturb the careful balance of my own creation. I wouldn't want putting off my stroke now. I am at a very delicate stage. . .'

'Oh.' Cleavis's face fell. Now that he came to think of it, Tyler had never deigned to tell him what he thought of Cleavis's earlier chapters of his children's book, either. Perhaps he hadn't even read them.

This wasn't the Tyler Cleavis knew. Something had happened to him, and Cleavis wasn't sure it was at all good. There was something feverish and excitable about Tyler. Something jumpy and nervous. He looked like a man on the verge of a breakdown.

'I can't stay for long, Cleavis,' Tyler said. 'I have another appointment in town before my afternoon lecture. . .'

'Another. . .?' asked Cleavis. Then it struck him: perhaps Reg was having an affair. With one of the women they had let into the place. That phenomenon would certainly fit Tyler's heightened mood and his jumpiness. But surely he wasn't the type? Little did Cleavis know of such things, but he was sure that Tyler wasn't the type of man to go running after women. He had Enid at home; solid, steadfast, sweet, loyal Enid. What more could he want with a woman like that keeping home for him? Cleavis sighed. Occasionally, just occasionally, he could rather envy Tyler's life.

'I am meeting Freer,' Tyler said curtly. 'He's coming up from London somewhat earlier today. We have important matters to discuss.'

'Freer?' Cleavis burst out. He shook his head, tutting. 'Reg, I can't believe it. Why, just a few weeks ago, you wouldn't have given that man the time of day. Remember how I had to twist your arm to let him join our reading club?'

'Attitudes change, Cleavis,' said Tyler coldly. 'And I hope that you will do me the kindness of keeping my initial reaction to Freer's name to yourself.'

'Of course,' Cleavis said. 'Though it still mystifies me, how you have taken to him these past few weeks.'

'He is, as you once told me, a very remarkable man. And besides,' Tyler was getting up, brusquely, to go. 'Besides, he is helping me with the research for this rewriting of my book.'

Cleavis was shocked. 'He is helping you? You are allowing him to help you with your research?'

'That is what I said. Really, you can be such a dullard at times, Cleavis. Freer was quite right about that.'

Cleavis blushed. 'He said that about me?'

'We were laughing about it, just the other evening. You're like a schoolboy, trotting along after the rest of us. Full of ideas for japes and adventures.'

Cleavis was downcast. 'Reg, I...'

'Enough, now, I have matters to attend to.'

'Yes, but Reg... before, none of us would ever have... I mean, you would never have let any of we others take part in your research for the book. You were always so secretive and...'

'Freer is helping me,' Tyler said. 'And that is all there is to it. He has a very brilliant mind and I am making use of it.'

'Well... I'm flabbergasted.'

Cleavis stared at his friend for a moment in silence and jumped then, as they were interrupted by a hearty shout.

'Professors!'

Tyler folded his raincoat over his arm and picked up his satchel. Then he was looking down his nose at the new arrival, who had swept up to their corner of the bar; all wild-haired and full of the joys of spring. The younger man's demeanour made even Tyler's earlier, relatively effervescent mood seem glum.

'And you are?' asked Tyler dryly.

'The Doctor,' grinned the Doctor. 'And you two are, unless I'm mistaken, Professors Tyler and Cleavis. And you are talking about great works of literature. Namely, your own.'

Tyler glared down at Cleavis's crimson, bald head. 'Do you know this impertinent young man?'

Cleavis shook his head. 'No, indeed, I...'

'Enid told us where you would be,' said the Doctor, in a rush. 'She was ever so hospitable and helpful. You see, Professor Tyler, it is most important that I speak to you and...'

Tyler's face was like black storm clouds. 'Enid told you where I would be?'

'There are very important matters at stake,' said the Doctor. 'Great... ah, we could almost say – in fact, I think we can say – cosmic matters at stake. There, I bet that comes as a surprise to you? Well, it used to come as a surprise to me too, but...'

‘Look,’ said Cleavis, noticing that Tyler’s scowl had grown much more dangerous and dark as the Doctor rattled on. ‘What is it you want, Doctor? Professor Tyler is a very busy man. He has a very dear friend of his he must go and meet. . .’

‘That’s just it!’ cried the Doctor, beaming at Cleavis gratefully. ‘I’m here to warn him before it gets too late. Really, I’m amazed it’s been so easy to find you. Usually, affairs of this kind are much, much harder to orchestrate. . .’

Tyler turned away from him, as if dismissing him as a maniac. ‘Cleavis, I must go. This man is obviously crackers. You deal with him, will you? I must go and see Freer. I shall be late meeting his train now. . .’

‘Freer!’ gasped the Doctor. ‘You’re meeting William Freer?’

‘If it is any business of yours,’ snapped Tyler, ‘Then yes, I am. Otherwise, kindly keep your nose out of my. . .’

‘But it is my business! That’s what I’m here to prevent!’

‘What?’

The Doctor stalled. ‘I don’t know yet. I’m not sure. But I’m on the lookout for funny business of any kind. Professor Cleavis, has Professor Tyler been acting strangely of late?’

‘Strangely?’ murmured Cleavis.

‘Oddly. Out of character,’ urged the Doctor.

Suddenly Cleavis looked torn in his loyalties.

Tyler prevented him from answering by giving out an exasperated sigh. ‘This is ridiculous. I will not be questioned by an appallingly rude stranger in fancy dress. Good day to you both.’ \_

Tyler manoeuvred out from the stall then and, brushing roughly by the Doctor, saw his pet poodle Char for the first time, and gave out an involuntary cry of surprise.

‘What is it?’ Cleavis shouted, alarmed by his friend’s outburst.

Everyone else in the saloon bar was watching.

Char was rather glad of the attention. The esteemed Professor Tyler was white-faced, pointing a rigid finger straight at him.

‘What is that?’ Tyler intoned.

‘It’s my dog,’ Said the Doctor simply.

Tyler went muttering to himself. The chance is too great. . . the coincidence. . . it’s exactly. . .’ But then he seemed to stop himself and gather his composure. He turned to the Doctor, saying harshly: ‘Only the blind may bring their dogs in here.’

‘How do you know I’m not blind?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Because I believe the evidence of my own eyes.’

‘And so do I,’ said the Doctor softly. ‘And my ears and whiskers. And my instincts too. And, do you know, Reginald Tyler, I think there is something very odd going on here. And you haven’t heard the last of me, either.’

Tyler waved him away contemptuously. He took one withering look back at Cleavis, and stepped hastily around that pink, primped poodle.

Then he was gone, the saloon bar door crashing after him.

Cleavis put his head in his hands.

When he looked up again, the Doctor was planting a pint of his usual, right in front of him, and he had brought a pint for himself, too. He was sitting in Tyler’s place and that ghastly dog was sitting beside him, with a horrible rictus grin on its face.

‘Drink up, Professor Cleavis,’ smiled the Doctor. ‘And then, perhaps. . .’ Now he leaned across the table conspiratorially, ‘You can tell me what is going on here. Because Tyler has changed, hasn’t he? I think he’s probably changed out of all recognition. And I think you have the answers I require.’

‘What are you here for?’ Cleavis stammered, at last.

‘The same as anyone else,’ said the Doctor, hefting his pint glass. ‘Pure research. Now, cheers.’

## Chapter Sixteen

Flossie and Fitz had a dining table right by the end of the extended stage area.

‘Aren’t we lucky?’ she asked him.

There was a kind of runway, decked out in pale pink carpeting, so that Brenda Soobie could dance her way to the front, so that she would be almost amongst her audience of grateful, worshipping fans.

‘Oh, we’re in the limelight here,’ said Flossie.

The stage was alight with soft pinks and scarlets; the set was dressed in lilac and pink tulle.

‘Look at the fake stars on the backdrop,’ Flossie gasped. ‘This is real show-business this, isn’t it? Oh, wasn’t I clever to get us good seats?’

The orchestra was hidden away in a pit and it seemed that the songstress existed in her own, glowing world of pink; with music booming out of nowhere and her voice and personality flooding the atmosphere.

‘Oh, it’s marvellous,’ sighed Flossie, who had only ever dreamed of such things.

And to think, she reminded herself: just yesterday I was slaving in that hellish kitchen.

Oh, Mr Brewster... why can’t you be here with me instead of this surly boy?

But then, she reflected, if Mr Brewster had been here, even dressed up to the nines, chances are, the noble boar would have sent their fellow audience members screaming out into the aisles. Oh well. Never mind.

A bucket of ice and a bottle of champagne had appeared out of nowhere. Compliments, they were told, of a very shady character a few tables away, who nodded at them a few times from under his hat. Flossie quickly assumed the gift to be tribute to her, and fluttered her eyelashes accordingly. The strange man didn’t respond.

Fitz thought there was probably more to it than that. There usually was. It probably didn’t do to go accepting champagne off shady-looking strangers. But he was gagging for a drink and decided to take the risk.

The two of them had visited a boutique or two in the late afternoon and togged themselves out for a night on the town Fitz was in a lounge suit he was

rather pleased with; a velvet leopardskin number with snakeskin shoes. Flossie had taker rather longer to find the right outfit. She had to be just right for this evening. She was entering a world of glamour she had never been near for years.

They had justified the expense and the time-wasting, by deciding that blending in with the appropriate dress was vital to their mission. They'd eventually found a shop for ample ladies called 'Hefty Hideaway' and Flossie had been decked out in ruffles of silk. Now she looked like a box of chocolates and seemed entirely delighted with the effect.

They sat back, drank the bubbly, lit a couple of cocktail cigarettes, and then the houselights dimmed and Brenda Soobie stepped out on the stage.

She was dressed just as she had been in the flyer. She was even more lithe and breathtaking in the flesh, however. Fitz just stared. She had smooth, coffee-coloured skin and hair piled high so that she stood almost as tall as Flossie. She moved her arms sinuously in accompaniment to the music. And then she started to sing.

She was a belter. She virtually shouted every word of every song she sang.

Somehow Fitz had been expecting something gentler. Something... well, a bit more easy on the ear.

Flossie, meanwhile, was enraptured as Brenda Soobie tore through the classic song book: Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Rodgers and Hammerstein: all were grist to her impressive and deafening mill: Every notable song writer of repute was gobbled up and swallowed down with massive relish. Brenda Soobie howled and yelled and belted and shrieked. Never once did she resort to a croon or a murmur. Everything she sang was at the same deliriously ecstatic pitch. The sweat was pouring off her.

'Goodness,' said Flossie, as the houselights popped on for the interval. 'Gives it her all, doesn't she?'

Flossie turned to look at the feather boa Brenda Soobie had left strewn, like a throttled anaconda, on the stage at the end of her last song. She thought about darting on to fetch it as a souvenir. She rather fancied herself in a feather boa. Really, this time travel lark was turning out to be far more entertaining than she'd expected. She didn't know what Fitz went on grumbling about.

'Um, Flossie,' Fitz was saying now, in that whining, grumbling voice of his.

'Hush, now, Fitzy boy,' she said. 'We're staying for the second act, and that's that. I know it's not your kind of thing, but... Oh.'

She was startled because the shady-looking man in the hat who had sent the (now quite empty) bottle of champagne to their table was standing right

behind Fitz. He was standing there rather menacingly, it had to be said. He did have a look of Spencer Tracey about him.

'He's got a gun wedged right into my ribcage,' Fitz explained to her. 'Either that or he's extremely pleased to see me.'

Be Katherine Hepburn, Flossie thought. That's what you've got to be now, if this one's doing the Spencer Tracey heavy number. Come out with something witty and beguiling and put the gangster right off his stroke.

'Oh, help!' she whimpered instead, suddenly feeling the full effect of the bubbly she had almost single-handedly bolted. 'What are we going to do?'

'You two are gunna come with me,' said the man in the hat, grinding out the words between perfectly square teeth. Really, he was quite horrible. Flossie wished she had sent his rotten champagne back.

'OK, OK,' said Fitz. 'We'll come quietly.'

'Wait,' said Flossie, struck by sudden – if rather rare – inspiration. 'He can't do anything here. He can't shoot you here.'

'What?' said Fitz, looking anguished.

Flossie nodded steadily at the gangster-type person. 'I'm right, aren't I? If you shoot my friend through his skinny little rib cage here and now, then you're going to draw an awful lot of attention to yourself, aren't you? You're going to blow his measly little guts right across the stage area and up the star-spangled backdrop. And then everyone in this place is going to see exactly what you're about. They'll see what a nasty little man you are.'

Fitz's eyes had widened in horror.

'Just you sit there, Fitz,' Flossie told him wisely. 'See? He can't threaten you in here. Everyone would see. And he wouldn't want that, whatever his funny business is.'

Fitz looked as if he wanted to cry. The gangster person was obviously pressing in harder with the barrel of his gun.

At last, the shady character said: 'All right. You got a point, fat lady.'

'Fat lady!' cried Flossie. 'How dare you!'

'I'm going back to my table now, till the end of the show. But after that... after the show is over... you two are coming with me. OK?'

He stepped back smartly, leaving Fitz to breathe sharply and sort of slump forward at their table in immense relief. 'OK,' he gasped. 'Whatever you say.'

'Fitz,' said Flossie sharply. 'You're such a wuss.'

'Bugger you,' Fitz snapped.

'When the show's over...' growled the hatted stranger, one last time, and moved away, stealthily to his solitary table again.

The houselights were sinking once more.

'Well!' said Flossie. 'That wasn't a proper interval, I don't think. There wasn't even time to go and powder my nose.'

Fitz just stared at her. 'You old bag! You could have had me killed!'

Flossie winked at him broadly. 'But I didn't, did I? Now, be a dear and keep quiet, will you? Old Brenda's coming back on.'

Fitz was left staring at her.

Where had all of Flossie's sudden gumption come from? He could hardly believe it was the same person. Was she really just a bit tipsy?

But Brenda Soobie was indeed back on the stage, scooting right up to the mike in a backless jet black number, her perfect neck and shoulders heaped with jet and pearls. The audience sighed with vast, collective pleasure as she launched into her next bout of decorous yodelling.

And Fitz could hardly keep his attention on the stage. He was far too aware of the hat-wearing menace a few tables behind them. He could still feel that gun, snug in his terrified ribs.

Only after a few minutes did he realise what he was listening to Brenda Soobie singing. 'Hey!' he leaned forward and whispered to Flossie. 'That's a bloody Beatles medley!'

Flossie nodded dreamily. 'That's right. Her version of "Hey Jude" pisses on Paul McCartney's, doesn't it?'

'But it's 1960!' said Fitz, too loudly.

'Hey, you're the time traveller,' Flossie told him, with equanimity.

The second half of the concert seemed to go on for the rest of Fitz's life.

He couldn't be sure what put him under the greater emotional strain: the gunman at his back, the rapturous sighs of the ungainly head cook, or the hysterical warbling of the superstar on the stage.

All in all, his poor nerves were shattered.

He hoped Anji and the Doctor were having just such a rough time. But he knew it was always he who ended up with the roughest assignments. It was just the way the world worked.

You're a loser, Fitz Kreiner, he told himself.

And he listened, in head-shaking despair, as Brenda Soobie carried on contravening the laws of space and time, ripping energetically through songs by people who hadn't even been born in 1960.

It was at this point, when Brenda Soobie was braying out only the sixth of her seven encores, that Flossie handed Fitz a paper napkin.

Oh, no, he thought. She's going to make me go for that woman's autograph. But then he saw that Flossie had surreptitiously scrawled him a message on it in black eye liner pencil. Hey, maybe the fat lady's not as daft as she looks.

He looked down, squinting in the bad light, and read:

'All right, Fitz boy. We're in terrible danger here, as you well know. Mostly from that horrible man with a gun who's staring so intently at that oh-so tender and vulnerable nape of your neck.'

Fitz gulped. Flossie certainly went on a bit, even in her hastily dashed off notes. He read on.

'What I suggest we do,' she had written, 'is make a break for it.'

But how? He wondered. Where? The press of the departing crowd, once the lights were up, would hold them back, sure as anything. It would make them an easy target for the gangster type person. He definitely would get them if they made a bolt for any of the exits...

Flossie had written more.

'There is only one direction we can run in. Somewhere he'll never fire after us...'

He looked up, horrified, into Flossie's pasty, nodding face.

Oh no.

On the stage, Brenda Soobie had at last reached her climax. With one final, ear-splitting shriek, she was murdering a Burt Bacharach ballad for ever.

The applause was immense.

It welled out of the supper lounge like the noise of the coliseum once all the Christians had been done in. You could see that Brenda Soobie was exhausted; she hung there; triumphant, quivering, basking in their praise and adoration.

And then Flossie screamed out in his ear: 'Now, Fitz!'

She grabbed his skinny arms, launched herself out of her seat, and hurled the two of them at the stage.

Afterwards, Fitz would be able to recall very little of it.

He could vaguely remember being dragged up the few short steps on to the platform, feeling his slight weight tucked under Flossie's massive arms. And then the two of them – to the gasps and shrieks of the audience – were barrelling at top speed, full throttle, into Brenda Soobie herself.

He had a fleeting glimpse of the songstress's wild eyed, appalled stare as they cannoned into her and knocked her to the stage floor.

In the audience, pandemonium broke out. There were screams, shouts and the stamping of feet. There was a gigantic roar of disapproval. Story of my bleeding life, Fitz thought crossly, as he smacked his head off the stage floor.

And above it all, he could hear shots being fired.

In the wings, stage hands were going crazy. The orchestra were scattering, terrified, dropping their instruments and clambering out of the pit as more and more shots rang out around the supper club.

Then the heavy stage curtains dropped with a thump.

And Fitz was – actually, to his immense relief – knocked out cold.

## Chapter Seventeen

Ron Von Arnim had an old van parked out in the street. At first Anji was dubious about getting into it, with him, having seen how much booze the old fella had put away.

She peered through the dusty glass, to see a whole load of chicken wire and art supplies stacked on the filthy back seat. It looked to her like a complete death trap.

‘Been collecting my supplies,’ he cackled, hobbling round to the driver’s side. ‘I got to have all my things ready for when the inspiration strikes. Get in, Miss Kapoor. C’mon, hurry up. You are gunna see something magical today.’

Reflecting that she was probably going to regret this, Anji clambered into the van; which reeked inside of spirits, Marlboro Lights and plaster of Paris.

Fritter hopped lightly in after her, sitting on her lap and looking much too pleased about it.

As the old man sat himself in the driver’s seat he turned and laughed at the poodle. ‘Cute fella, ain’t he?’

‘That’s one way of putting it,’ said Anji tersely.

‘I’ve been asked to bring some outlandish things to life before now... but never poodles.’

‘So you said,’ smiled Anji. ‘Who exactly has got you doing this, then?’

Proudly, Ron Von Arnim gunned the old jalopy’s engine and smiled at her. ‘Why, the wunderkind of modern cinema, Miss Kapoor. The biggest magician in all the world. This is top secret, though. No one knows what he’s working on...’

‘Oh?’ said Anji, wishing she was more of an expert on cinema history.

‘John Fuchas,’ said the old man. ‘The greatest of them all. He’s gunna make me a millionaire, I reckon. At last!’

‘Well,’ said Anji. ‘I’m glad to hear it.’ And maybe you can buy a new bloody car, she added to herself.

Then Ron Von Arnim put his foot down and they roared off, heading out of town.

All the way into the dusty, scrubby, alarmingly steep hills, Ron Von Arnim was regaling her with film lore. As the day waned, a stiff dry breeze started up out of the desert and Anji realised that she was getting a headache.

Still Von Arnim went on and on, as the old van wound around the narrow, perilous roads, one hand lightly on the steering wheel and the other gesticulating excitedly.

Anji thought: I'm going to die in the Hollywood hills in 1978 with some mad old coot and a poodle on my lap.

It wasn't the kind of death for herself she'd ever envisaged.

'And then in 1966 they reckoned the bottom had dropped out of the monster flicks market and all the kids wanted to see were spy flicks. Well, back then I thought I was finished for good. Until they got that Russ Meyer fella to make that last Bond movie of Sean Connery's... remember that one, Miss Kapoor? The one with all the living skeletons and the zombies a-coming out of the graveyards in New Orleans? *Voodoo Something To Me?*'

Anji wasn't at all sure that she remembered it.

'Well, all those were done by me. Me in my little workshop, making those little skeleton fellas fight each other and hack off each other's heads.' He sighed. 'And after that I went straight into the monster business again, because the fantasy films had started up and that's when I had the greatest of pleasures winning that little Oscar of mine in John Waters's movie of *The Lord of the Rings*. You know, the one in drag? With Bette Davis as Sauron and Joan Crawford as Gandalf the witch?'

Anji just stared at him. What messed up kind of timeline was he living in?

'Well, that was a big success anyway,' the old codger grinned. 'I sure have had some glory years in this town. And I thought they were all over. But not now. No, indeed.'

'Because of this John Fuchas and his poodle film?'

The old man cracked out laughing. 'Poodle film?' he spluttered. 'Well, it's gunna be a bit more spectacular than just a little doggy movie, Miss Kapoor. It's gunna be years in the making. That John Fuchas is a genius, that boy. He's got gazillions to spend on this project, after the success of that little picture of his about the space men and their dinky robots. And he's hiring me. I'm gunna be in work for the rest of my life 'cause of those poodles of his.'

'Really,' said Anji. 'How come he can't use real poodles?'

'Hah! Can real poodles fight? Can they talk and act? Can they sing?' Ron Von Arnim shook his head, and sighed as if Anji didn't know anything at all. 'Do real poodles have hands, Miss Kapoor?'

Anji could feel Fritter flinch his tiny fingers in his bootees self-consciously. This old man was straying too close to the truth.

‘I suppose not,’ said Anji.

‘Like I say,’ said Ron, swerving them ever deeper and higher into the dusty mountains. ‘This is a very special poodle movie we’re talking about here. We’re talking about a full scale adaptation of Reginald Tyler’s sci-fi classic, *The True History of Planets*. And it’s gunna make me a fortune, I reckon. . .’

Anji sat back in her bucket seat and gazed out at the web of city streets far below them.

We’re in the right place. We’re in the right place.

Doctor, you’re brilliant, she wanted to say.

She also wanted to tell him: you’re a two-faced bastard. You could have got me back home ages ago. If you’d really wanted to.

But she kept quite still, and quiet, until they arrived, at last, at the old man’s run-down ranch.

There were chickens strutting on the densely-packed earth of the front yard, and Anji had to peer closely for a second to make sure they were real. They fixed her with such baleful, malevolent stares.

The old man yanked out his wire meshing and his art supplies from the truck and called out to her gruffly to follow him inside.

Oh, what have I let myself in for? she wondered. This could be like the Texas Chainsaw Massacre or anything. And she just knew what the Doctor would say about that: So what? We’ve faced much worse things together, haven’t we?

And she supposed it was true. She had a sudden flashed image of herself being carried off in the arms of a man turning into a giant wasp. That had been pretty bad.

She could look after herself.

Ron Von Arnim was disappearing inside the dusty, run-down ranch house. Its windows looked blind with dust and ancient cobwebs. Some of the smutty panes were smashed. There was what appeared to be an old barn, in a slightly better state of repair, off to one side.

As Anji walked up, shivering, and glancing at the stark blue bowl of the sky above, Ron came haring out of the house and gestured proudly at the barn.

‘That’s my workshop! This is what you’ve come to look at, Miss Kapoor!’

At her feet, Fritter the poodle was perking up in interest.

‘Hey you,’ she told him, irritated that he had kept quiet for so long. ‘You’re going to be a model. Did you know that?’

Fritter sighed. 'Yeah, yeah,' he growled. 'And you know something else, Anji? That old bloke's got an axe. And he's going to chop the two of us into bloody bits, soon as we step inside that shack.'

'That's exactly what I was thinking,' she said. 'Anyway, I'm glad you're talking again, Fritter.'

'I was just blending in,' he said, padding ahead of her. 'I was quite enjoying just being a pet. It was fairly relaxing.'

They stepped into the barn, just as, somewhere within, old man Von Arnim clicked on the fluorescent lights.

They juddered and flickered and finally burst into life.

And Anji and Fritter both gasped in awed surprise.

'Hah!' cackled Ron Von Arnim. 'Impressive, ain't it?'

He hurried to the middle of the studio's floor, set down his packages of supplies and gestured around at the shelves and shelves of models.

'This is my life's work!' he cried happily. 'This is all my own!'

'It's incredible,' said Anji, and meant it.

There were more monsters here than she had ever seen in her life.

'They let you keep all these? When the films were finished?'

A greedy, jealous look stole into the old man's crazy eyes. 'They're mine!' he shouted. 'They've always been mine! Always will! These are all my creatures!'

Fritter set up a very doglike, involuntary whining growl, low in his throat.

Anji knew just how he felt.

From every shelf, as high as the ceiling itself, there gazed down monsters of every kind and description, and all sizes. Each was posed menacingly and their horrible faces were contorted into the most ghastly and terrible leers. Gargoyles and bat creatures had their wings unfurled, as though ready to pounce through the air. Carnivorous dinosaurs held up their savage claws in mid flex hungrily. The gorgons and minotaurs and skeleton people looked exactly as if they were about to clamber down from their places on their shelves and attack.

'These are... brilliant, Mr Von Arnim!' Anji gasped. 'You're a real artist!'

He coughed. 'Well, ain't that exactly what I been trying to tell you, Miss Kapoor?'

Anji was left alone for a few hours then, as the craftsman went to work.

Von Arnim seemed to have forgotten all about her as he coaxed Fritter to jump up on a work bench and submit himself to the scrutiny of lights and the lenses of the old man's many cameras.

Anji sat on a high stool and looked up at the terrible, creepy creatures on the shelves.

Dave would be in his element here, she thought, as she outstared a particular orange and greenish creature, covered in suckers, which she took to be some kind of alien. He would know all the right things to ask.

As it was, Anji was just getting a right royal dose of the creeps.

Fritter was looking rather pleased at all the attention he was getting. His coat might be tattier and longer than Char's and his nails might be more unkempt and ragged, but he was still the one that the special effects master wanted to photograph. He was still going to be the model for the dogs in the movie.

After a good long while of bulbs flashing and changing of films, the old man sat back and decided: 'I reckon we can give up for a while. Your little doggy looks tired out, Miss Kapoor.'

He had startled her. 'What?'

'I said,' he chuckled, 'Why don't we head back to the house and I can rustle up something to eat? As my reward for letting me borrow your poodle? I bet the two of you are starved by now.'

'Oh,' said Anji politely. 'That's very kind of you, Mr Von Arnim, but I...'

'Oh, come on, Anji,' Fritter burst out suddenly. 'I'm bloody starving here. If the old fella's saying he'll cook us some dinner, why shouldn't he?'

Anji was horrified. She waved her hands at the poodle on the bench, trying to shush him, Except it was far too late.

Ron Von Arnim looked as if he was going to have a heart attack. He stared first at the dog, then at Anji, and then back to Fritter.

'Whoops!' said Fritter.

## Chapter Eighteen

After a couple of pints at lunch time with the Doctor, Cleavis was sufficiently beguiled to invite him home.

This, as Reginald Tyler would have told him, was one of his weakest and most foolish points. Cleavis was, as Tyler knew, a brilliant linguist and critic, and a damned good writer, but he was also unfortunately easy to sway and to impress.

And the Doctor had, of course, worked on him like a charm.

The Professor had ended up telling this eccentrically-attired stranger everything about the book he was writing for children. Perhaps it was because Reginald had been so dismissive of it, but once he was sitting in the Book and Candle with a receptive audience, Cleavis had gladly held forth about his book about the old woman and the magical double-decker bus.

'I think it sounds delightful,' said the Doctor at last, with a slow, spreading grin.

'Do you really, Doctor?'

'I do. Though I do think your main character sounds like a proper old harri-dan. You wouldn't want to go running into her, would you?'

'Why not?' Cleavis asked.

'Well, she sounds like such a meddler. Such a selfish old woman. Involving everyone in her adventures and taking no responsibility whatsoever.'

'Oh,' said Cleavis. 'She's based on Baba Yaga, the hag in Russian folk tales. The one who flies through the air in a mortar and steers with a pestle. And she lives in a shed that runs around on chicken's legs. And she eats babies for breakfast.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'I know the one. But you still wouldn't want to go on an adventure with her, would you? She'd drive you bonkers.'

'I suppose so,' said Cleavis glumly. 'Though I don't actually go on many real adventures...'

'Oh, I do,' said the Doctor. 'And I know.'

Cleavis stared at him.

'But really,' said the Doctor. 'I think It sounds marvellous, your book.'

'Are you a writer yourself, Doctor?'

'Hmm?'

Cleavis patiently repeated the question as the Doctor rubbed his dog's ears for him.

'Oh, no,' the Doctor said. 'Just a humble student. Just a reader.'

'Just a reader!' cried Cleavis hotly. 'Why, there is no such thing as "just a reader"! To the writer, there is nothing better! It does my heart good to hear you describe yourself thus, Doctor. To know that there is, somewhere in the world, at least one person who happily reads without ever wanting to write pages of his own... Really, sometimes I think that everyone else in the world harbours writerly ambitions and hides scrawled-over pages away in drawers and under their beds...'

'Really?' said the Doctor.

'And then they come waving them at you, just because you write, and they think that you can help them...'

'That sounds absolutely awful,' said the Doctor.

'It is,' said Cleavis. 'And really, I've got enough on my hands already, what with lecturing and tutorials and my own writing... and looking after that brother of mine...'

'It must be quite difficult,' said the Doctor. 'Tell me, tell me about William Freer.'

Cleavis's expression changed. 'Are you a reader of his then, too, Doctor?'

The Doctor's eyes seemed, for a moment, mesmerising, and Cleavis had to blink. 'I have read a great many things,' said the Doctor solemnly.

And suddenly Cleavis had the bizarre impression that this man could see straight into him. He could somehow and, at a glance, read in Cleavis everything he had ever committed to paper. And not only that, he could read there, in his face, everything he would ever write, until the day he died.

It was a very unsettling feeling.

Cleavis swallowed, hard. 'Freer joined our group...'

'The Smudgelings?'

The Smudgelings, yes... at my invitation, Doctor. I host the group meetings in the rooms where my brother and I both live. At first Reg wasn't happy that this man was going to attend. He had some sort of religious or moral scruples...'

'On what grounds?'

Cleavis gave an uneasy laugh. 'That Freer was an adept in the dark arts...'

The Doctor shrugged. 'The Golden Dawn? Aleister Crowley and that lot?'

Cleavis looked mystified. 'Who?'

'Well, it's not out of the question that he is an adept of some kind,' sighed the Doctor. 'All sorts of people were drawn into that messy crowd. All of them poring over the old books, meeting in cellars under London, mumbling half-understood incantations and killing lambs. It's really not all that unheard of.'

A chill swept through Cleavis. 'So then it might be true?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Though I've also met some very nice people mixed up in magic, it has to be said. Salt of the earth. Rather than the brimstone, as it were.'

'That's what Tyler said. He said that there was about William Freer... a whiff of brimstone.'

Now the Doctor looked grave. 'You know, abrupt and arrogant as he might be, I'd be inclined to trust the instincts of Professor Tyler. He's a man who can see round a corner or two, I'd have thought. Is there any chance of me taking a peek at this William Freer? Is he coming to your meeting tonight, by any chance?'

'Of course,' Cleavis sighed. 'He is now the focus, I would say, of our meetings. Oh, they were such innocent things before. As Reg said, just like a boys' gang. But now there is something else there... something evil...'

'So Tyler was right.'

'I should have listened. I am starting to see Freer for the wicked presence I think he really is. But now Reg himself is under the man's spell. You saw him today, Doctor. He simply isn't the man he was. That wasn't the Reg Tyler I knew talking. He would never have been so rude to you as that...'

The Doctor smiled. 'I am quite used to people being rude to me, or thinking I'm odd. I hardly even notice it.'

'Well, I did. And I tell you... Reg Tyler is not in his right mind. He's been so excitable and overworked... writing through the night... rewriting this book of his...'

'*The True History of Planets?*' asked the Doctor.

Cleavis blinked. 'But... how do you know what it is called?'

The Doctor tapped his nose waggishly. 'Did you really say *rewriting* his book?'

Cleavis nodded dumbly. 'Yes. Since he has fallen under Freer's spell, Reg has started again from the beginning. Changing everything. He says it is much better now. Much easier, faster. Much more true.'

'I don't like the sound of this influence Freer has over him.'

'Neither do I... ' said Cleavis bleakly. 'But what can we do? I've never known a man of such strong character as Reg Tyler. If he can bend to the will of one

such as Freer... what chance do the rest of us stand?’

‘Cleavis,’ said the Doctor firmly, draining his pint. ‘I am coming along to the Smudgelings tonight. You will introduce me to them as a Dr John Smith from Trinity College in Dublin. And I am writing a fantasy... a novel about... um, terrible shape-shifting aliens who have lived beneath Loch Ness for millions of years. That’s my cover story. I am an old friend of yours and you will vouch for my presence in your group’s esteemed company OK?’

‘Very well, Doctor...’ said Cleavis slowly.

‘And perhaps, then, we can start to get to the bottom of this...’ smiled the Doctor.

Char trotted after the two men, irritated by their gabbled erudition as the afternoon waned in the cloisters.

The students – such as they were in wartime – and the Professors in their flapping crowlike robes cast him the occasional questioning glance and Char felt very conspicuous. He was a dog who had spent sixteen years single-handedly living on a space station, carrying out routine repairs, recording Terran transmissions and cleaning up after that wretched Fritter. He wasn’t used to this kind of attention at all.

But all the same, he was fascinated by the way the Doctor worked. The way he managed to get people on his side. Already he seemed to have drawn them close to the heart of this affair.

Reginald Tyler had been nobbled. That seemed to be the truth, pure and simple. Someone had indeed been filling his mind with the information that much later became the banned text that the Emperor of the dogworld feared could wreak so much havoc. And that someone feeding the contraband knowledge from offworld appeared to be this William Freer.

And now Cleavis was leading them straight to him.

Char wondered what the Doctor would do. Kill him outright? Torture him and force him to confess? The chief archivist found he was quite looking forward to the spectacle.

In the meantime he trotted along, into the old, mildewed college, through the porter’s lodge, through cloisters, up stone steps, up round towers, and at last into the rooms where Cleavis said he lived with his brother, Fred.

There were only five rooms, all fussily and messily decorated, with a series of dour mediaeval prints and facsimile manuscripts. There were dusty and forbidding-looking books stacked in heaps everywhere. The place was a tip.

But the Doctor was looking around, delightedly. 'What a wonderful life you must have here,' he smiled.

'We manage,' Cleavis said. He was looking more wary now. Now that he had let a complete stranger and his dog into his home.

His brother, Fred, was much younger. He came stomping in from the tiny kitchen dressed in a muddied and grass-stained rugby outfit. He stared at the Doctor and his poodle.

'Have you been out boozing all this time, John? I – Oh.'

'Ah,' said Cleavis. 'Allow me to make some introductions. This is Dr Smith, from Trinity College. He'll be joining us tonight.'

'Oh?' Fred had a ragged old towel and was rubbing at his sweaty, tangled hair. 'I'm not sure how happy the others will be about that. I don't think Freer will be happy at all, in fact.'

Suddenly Cleavis burst out: 'Well, damn Freer, if he's not happy. Who is he to say who we can and cannot invite?'

Fred shrugged haplessly. 'You know what he's like, John.'

Cleavis stared at his brother. 'Since when did you care what anyone thought, Fred?'

Fred seemed to take on a glassy look. 'I care what Freer thinks. I think he's right.'

The Doctor stepped forward to peer into Fred's eyes. 'Right about what, Fred?'

'About many things,' Fred intoned flatly.

'Pshaw,' gasped Cleavis. 'The man's an arrogant fool. And you're a fool too, Fred. I'm surprised at you, too, for falling under his influence.' Cleavis threw himself down into his favourite armchair and fanned himself with the local paper. 'I wish I'd never invited the man here in the first place.'

At this point there came a chuckling from the kitchen, and they all turned to see a tall, dapper figure dressed in immaculate grey step out into the shabby living room.

'Ah, but you did, John Cleavis,' said William Freer with a snide smile. 'And I must thank you for that. But I am most displeased – to hear that you have had enough of me now.'

He seemed to glide, rather than walk, across the threadbare carpet.

Cleavis jumped to his feet. 'What are you doing here? Jumping out on people, indeed!' You could see, quite clearly, that Cleavis had been badly rattled by Freer's sudden, smooth entrance.

'I was visiting your brother,' said Freer.

‘Aren’t you supposed to be with Tyler?’

‘Tyler can wait,’ Freer purred.

The Doctor stepped up to him, all concentration. ‘It doesn’t do, you know, to keep a man like Reginald Tyler waiting.’

Freer gave the Doctor a piercing look. Then he looked down at the poodle at the Doctor’s feet and he startled them all with a brilliant – and quite demonic – smile. ‘And who is this?’ he asked Cleavis.

‘Ah. . . Dr Smith. He will be joining us this evening.’

‘I wasn’t aware of any new members,’ said Freer.

‘Damn it, man,’ cried Cleavis. ‘These are my rooms!’

Freer chuckled at Cleavis. ‘So they are. So they are.’ He turned swiftly to the Doctor. ‘So. . . my dear Doctor. It is very good to meet you, I must say.’

‘Is it?’ said the Doctor blankly.

‘I have heard a great deal about the good work you’ve been doing. Yes, a very good deal indeed. . .’

## Chapter Nineteen

Fitz came to with a terrible, pounding headache, seated on a stiff chair in Brenda Soobie's luxurious dressing room, far beneath the Las Vegas Hotel Miramar.

Gradually he became aware of Flossie crouching beside him, patting his hand and mopping his brow with a cold, damp flannel. 'I do hope he's all right,' she was saying to someone. 'He's got a terrible bump on his head.'

Fitz's head was still ringing with the soundtrack of his dream; which had been one of the last songs he had heard Brenda Soobie sing, before all hell had broken loose. As he jarred awake, what he wanted to know was: how did she, in 1960, know all the words to 'Bohemian Rhapsody'?

'Fitz!' Flossie cried. 'You're still alive!'

He sat up and gazed around at the dressing room. The brick-walled expanse was heaped with flowers and frocks and every kind of cosmetic under the sun. Some way behind Flossie sat Brenda Soobie herself, surveying him ironically from a butterfly chair. She looked just as fantastic this close up, if a little more lined and worried.

'That bloke tried to kill us!' Fitz burst out, remembering.

'Well, we got away,' said Flossie. 'And he's gone now. He managed to disappear himself inside the crowd. Brenda thinks he probably had something to do with the Mob.'

'The Mob?' asked Fitz.

In her high-backed chair, Brenda Soobie shrugged carelessly. She was busily applying cold cream to her face. 'We get all sorts around here.'

'How did we get back here?' Fitz asked Flossie.

'Brenda smuggled us away to safety,' she told him. 'Which was very nice of her, considering that we knocked her flat on the stage at the end of her act...'

Fitz stared worriedly at Brenda Soobie, who continued to sedately remove her make-up. 'How do you know all those songs that haven't been written yet?' he asked her, abruptly.

To stall him, Brenda passed out champagne flutes and made Flossie pour them all a drink. 'Hush, now. And don't think about complicated things for a

while,' he was told.

'That,' said an old woman's voice, 'sounds like very good advice indeed.' For a moment, Fitz couldn't locate the source of that old woman's voice.

And then, suddenly, he could. There was an elderly poodle, bright orange, sitting on the dressing table behind Brenda, watching them all with great interest. She wore a green tartan coat, knitted green bootees, and her hair was in ribbons.

'I'm Martha,' the poodle explained. 'I'm Brenda's long-term companion.'

'Oh dear,' said Brenda. 'I do hope you're not alarmed by talking dogs, Mr Kreiner?'

'Oh, no,' he said weakly, 'Not at all.'

'Brenda,' said Martha, suddenly businesslike, 'I think we should get up to our suite. The security is better there...'

They went up in a plush, private lift, free from prying eyes, to the very top of the hotel, where Brenda was being kept in the style to which she was accustomed. Flossie was very impressed.

On the way, Fitz managed to ask the formidable Martha: 'Are you from the dogworld?'

She gave him a withering look and retorted with: 'Are you from the human-world?'

'Fair point,' he said. 'I really don't think I know any more.'

Brenda said: 'Martha thinks that the gentleman in the hat who tried to kill you two is part of the same bunch who have been after us, these past few weeks.' Now that Fitz listened, Brenda had a lilting Scots accent that didn't come out at all in her singing voice.

'We don't know what they're after,' said Martha. 'But they're making life pretty hairy for us.'

'I can imagine,' said Flossie.

'It was only down to Flossie's quick thinking that we weren't kidnapped or shot,' said Fitz. Flossie beamed at this impromptu, unexpected tribute.

'Well, you're welcome to hide away with us for a while,' said Brenda Soobie. 'Until the heat is off.'

She led them to her suite. The door stood alone in the wood-panelled corridor.

Flossie and Fitz gasped as they shuffled into the vast, futuristic space. It was carpeted in brilliant white and its windows stretched in an endless curve, showing a panoramic view of the city far below.

Brenda said: 'It will be good to have some company, actually. You've no idea how lonely it is, to be a star of my magnitude.'

Martha rolled her eyes and winked at Fitz.

'I never get to spend any time with ordinary people,' Brenda grumbled. She swished over to the white piano, where a huge, newly-delivered sheaf of pink lilies was waiting for her. She opened the card and cried out. 'Oh! We're going to have another guest!' she told them.

Flossie had parked herself on the zebra-patterned settee, before the Swedish-style fireplace. She had made herself very much at home, warming her fat knees in front of the fake logs. 'Oh, yes?'

'Very dear friend of mine, popping into town,' Brenda smiled. Just before he starts his own cabaret season. . .'

Flossie was agog. 'Not Tom Jones!'

Brenda laughed. 'Nöel Coward. He's coming here tonight.'

'Um,' said Fitz. 'Do you want us out of the way?'

But Brenda wouldn't hear of it. 'You two have been through a dreadful ordeal, and since it happened during my show, I feel partly responsible. Now the least I can do is look after you here for a while, until those goons decide to leave us all alone.'

On the settee, Flossie was hugging herself with glee. 'Nöel Coward actually coming here! To see us! I can't believe it!'

Fitz found his way to the stainless steel galley kitchen, making himself useful. He rooted through the wardrobe-sized fridge for party nibbles and more champagne.

He looked up to see that Martha the elderly poodle had padded in after him. She hopped up on to a stool and surveyed him critically.

'Fancy suit,' she said, giving his leopardskin number the once over.

'Cheers,' he said. 'This isn't really my usual look.'

From the living room there came a tinkling of the ivories and the sound of Brenda singing in a far softer voice than her stage persona. It was as if she and Flossie were warming the atmosphere up, ready for Coward's arrival.

'I'm a bit nervous about meeting Nöel,' Fitz said.

Martha rolled her eyes again. Then she said: 'You really have to tell me why the two of you are here.'

'Pardon?'

Martha wasn't to be put off. 'I'm here to protect Brenda. And I will do so with the last iota of my strength. But I need to know that you are on the right side.'

Fitz was wrestling with the cork on a heavy, frosted bottle. 'Of course we are.'

'How do you know about the dogworld?'

'Ah,' said Fitz. 'That sort of slipped out. . .'

'How?'

'We were there,' he said. 'Well, on a space station near it, anyway. We've been sent back to Earth to do a few chores. . .'

'Chores?'

'I've probably said too much already,' he gulped, and the cork shot out of the champagne bottle with a resounding bang.

'Is this anything to do with that terrible film?' Martha asked severely.

'You know about it!' said Fitz.

'I know that it causes a whole lot of bother on my world. And I know that the Emperor will go to any lengths to prevent it from causing a revolution there.'

'Uh. . . I guess that's what we're doing here,' said Fitz. 'Though, as yet, I fail to see the connection between some ropy old sci-fi novel and Brenda Soobie. . .'

'You'll see,' Martha promised. She sighed suddenly, and sounded extremely weary. 'I think you'll see quite soon. . .'

Fitz was feeling fairly weary himself – especially with cryptic poodles.

'Well, what are you doing here, anyway?' he asked Martha. 'You're from the dogworld. What are you doing in the sixties?'

'As I say, I'm protecting my mistress. I wouldn't go back to that dump of a planet if you paid me.'

There was shrill laughter from the living room. Brenda and Flossie seemed to be bonding already.

'I don't want any harm to come to her,' Martha warned. 'You've got to promise me, Fitz, that we are on the same side.'

It was becoming harder for Fitz to know which side was which. But anyway, Martha and Brenda had a luxury pad and a fully-stocked fridge. It wasn't too hard to throw in his lot with them.

'I'm with you guys,' he promised.

Brenda Soobie was a Glasgow girl. By this point in her very long career, 1960, there had already been masses of articles and interviews with her, detailing

her rise from a poverty-stricken background, through singing in working men's clubs, to the stage of the Palladium and to the dizzying heights of Vegas.

She was a down-to-earth diva, as the world's press had it. But also, a woman of mystery, who let no one into her life except for this bright-orange poodle, Martha, whom she had kept for years.

Some speculated that Brenda Soobie was a lonely figure, almost a tragic star. But no one ever got close enough to her to find out. She seemed to have very few friends, in or out of showbusiness.

Noël Coward, whom she had met at the Royal Variety Performance in 1957, was the exception to that.

Only he would have the temerity to drop her off a bunch of flowers in her hotel suite in Las Vegas and casually announce that he would pop in on her that very evening.

They were like gods from classical legend, Flossie thought happily, as she mulled this over and gazed at Brenda, seated at her spotless piano. They move in their own firmament, far above the likes of the rest of us.

'Hey, Flossie!' Brenda called out, launching energetically into a new tune, bashing it out with two fingers. 'Remember this one?' It was 'My Old Man Said Follow The Van.'

They were belting it out together when Fitz returned from the kitchen with Martha. He was carrying a silver tray with more drinks on.

Brenda abruptly left her playing and turned on him with a rakish grin. 'Aren't you a darling? Hey, Flossie, you've got a perfect little serving boy here, haven't you?'

Flossie cackled. 'Serving boy!'

'Where did you meet him then?' asked Brenda, while Fitz blushed deeply.

'In another hotel!' Flossie laughed. 'I used to work in the kitchens there and it was a terrible place. Well, I escaped, didn't I, because Fitz and his friends, the Doctor and Anji, very kindly offered to take me away from all that in their time machine, the TARDIS and...'

'What?' cried Brenda Soobie, slopping her bubbly on the piano keys in her surprise.

'Flossie,' groaned Fitz. 'Actually, we don't usually go round telling people the whole story. It tends to take them off guard and it winds up with them thinking we're lying or mad.'

'No, no,' said Brenda. 'It's quite all right.' But she looked rather ashen. 'I think I misheard what Flossie was saying...'

Flossie was impervious to Fitz's good manners and she tried again. 'The Doctor brought us here this afternoon in his TARDIS and...'

Brenda Soobie squawked once more. 'She really did say that! I wasn't hearing things! I wasn't!'

'But, what... ' began Fitz.

And then there was a heavy thumping at the door of the suite.

Instantly, Martha was on her guard. From nowhere she had produced a stubby phaser pistol, very similar to the one archivist Char had carried. 'It could be those heavies after us again,' she warned Brenda.

But Brenda was swishing in her kaftan towards the main door. 'Oh, don't be so paranoid, Martha, dear.'

'Perhaps you should let one of us open the door,' said Flossie worriedly.

The heavy knocking continued.

'Fitz,' Flossie told him: 'Go and answer it.'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

Martha covered him with her gun as he went, grumbling, to the ornate door. He held his breath and threw it open.

Standing there on the plush carpet, was a man of medium height in a black suit with felt lapels. His thinning black hair was slicked close to his head and he looked to be in his fifties. He surveyed Fitz with a coolly ironic stare, and his mouth twitched in amusement.

Fitz's jaw dropped in awe and relief. 'You're Noël Coward,' he told the man, who was carrying a heap of wrapped and ribboned presents.

There was a pause then, as everyone standing in the hotel suite, observing this encounter, waited for the inevitable, witty Coward retort.

## Chapter Twenty

‘Christ almighty,’ Ron Von Arnim gasped at last. ‘I knew there was something funny about you two. I just couldn’t put my finger on it, but I knew there was. Well, now we know.’

He stared in horror at Fritter, who looked, in turn, ashamed of himself.

‘I’m sorry, Anji,’ Fritter said. ‘I guess that’s my cover blown.’

Anji sighed. ‘Never mind, Fritter.’

The old man’s face had hardened, and his eyes narrowed in deep suspicion. ‘Right. There’s some kind of hoodwinkery going on here, and I intend to get to the bottom of it. You two better have some good answers. Since you’ve started talking I want to hear what those answers might be.’

Anji shook her head. ‘You’d never believe us if we told you, Mr Von Arnim.’

The old man wasn’t to be put off. ‘I mean it, Miss Kapoor. Now. Start talking!’

This was something the Doctor hadn’t really briefed them on. It was a skill that his companions picked up bit by bit, by watching him in action. It was a very delicate decision to make: deciding exactly how much to tell the people you fell in with about your adventures so far.

Where was Anji to start?

But old man Von Arnim seemed patient and, though brusque, not harsh. He sat the three of them at the rickety kitchen table of his run-down house and let her talk.

He also let the shame-faced Fritter talk, though he still seemed shocked to meet a dog so eloquent.

Anji was giving him a very sketchy version of their adventures on the dogstation and their mission so far.

‘Well...’ he sighed at last. ‘Even if I did believe a word you guys were saying about life on other planets and talking dogs... I’m not sure how I come into it all. What do you want me to do?’

Anji was embarrassed. ‘According to the Doctor, that will all become apparent. We just had to find you. And here you are, preparing to make this film about the poodles. It all fits somehow.’

‘And you say this film, when it’s made, will cause revolution on this world of poodles?’

‘Potentially, yes,’ said Fritter. ‘It could be very nasty indeed.’

‘And you’re here to stop it being made? To stop me doing the special effects?’

‘No,’ said Anji. ‘We’re not working for the Emperor. It’s the Doctor’s idea that we should come back and see how it all happened in the first place. You see, that book the film will be based on. . . it isn’t about poodles at all.’

Von Arnim laughed. ‘Sure it is! Everyone knows that.’

Anji shook her head. ‘Someone has messed around with time.’

The old man sat back with a sigh. ‘This is a bit like being in one of my own films. Without the monsters.’

‘Oh,’ said Anji. ‘We usually have the monsters, as well.’

Suddenly Von Arnim looked keen. ‘If I believed you, just for the sake of argument. . . I’d have to be pleased, wouldn’t I? Because the movie gets made after all.’

‘In 2008,’ said Fritter. ‘In thirty years’ time.’

‘I’ll be dead by then,’ said Von Arnim hollowly. ‘That’s too late.’

An uncertain silence settled over the kitchen. Anji stared at the old man’s bleak expression.

‘But. . . at least it gets done,’ he said. ‘Even without me. At least the work gets done. . .’

‘Anji,’ said Fritter. ‘I think we should show him the video.’

‘No!’ Anji burst out. It was a gut reaction. She really didn’t think the old man should see the pirate copy of the movie. Not only was it in contravention of the laws of time (as she vaguely understood them by now), it also might upset him.

But Von Arnim’s eyes were gleaming with tears. ‘You’ve got a copy? You brought a copy back from the future?’ He looked, suddenly, like a man who would believe in any number of impossible things, if it meant he would get his own way.

Anji nodded dumbly. She felt around in her handbag and produced the coverless, unlabelled tape. ‘Can you play this?’

He examined the tape and whispered excitedly: ‘Sure. . .’

‘I’m not sure if you should,’ she warned. ‘It comes from thirty years in the future. . .’

‘This is my work!’ he cried. ‘Work that I’ll spend the rest of my life planning for and slaving over. And your friend Fritter is right – I’ll never live long enough

to see the end result of that. I'll never get to see my own special effects. But this is my only chance! I have to see this!

He held the tape up and hurried through the kitchen doorway, to his TV room.

'Fritter.' said Anji. 'I don't think any good will come of this. . .'

Von Arnim sat in his Lay-Z-Boy and watched the film crackle into life.

He could barely believe what he was watching.

Thirty years from the future. The movie John Fuchas was planning now.

The human stars in this picture, the technical crew behind the scenes. . . why, they might all still be children.

He sat up eagerly in his chair, avid for whatever technical advances in the art of film making he might suddenly be made privy to.

It also struck him that there might be a great deal of money to be made from this tape, pirated and smuggled out of the future.

As the opening credits rolled and Von Arnim spied John Fuchas's name, he thought: What would Fuchas pay to watch this recording of a forthcoming attraction?

Why, he could just clean up this tape and pretend he'd already made it.

But that was one of them paradox things and probably wouldn't work. Best concentrate instead on the flashy, confusing film itself.

Von Arnim settled back, content to wait to see all the special effects.

Two hours later he returned to the kitchen. He was shambling, white faced.

'Those weren't my effects,' he said.

Fritter and Anji looked up at him, sadly. Suddenly Anji felt a rush of compassion for the old man.

'We should have warned you,' Fritter said. 'We'd already watched it. We knew that the effects they used were. . .'

'Computer generated,' said Von Arnim, in a desolate voice. He paced weakly around the bare boards of his kitchen. 'There's been talk of that happening. There were rumours that Fuchas had hired all these whiz kids and computer geeks to develop the technology. Well, I never thought it would happen. I never thought they could make something on a computer that would look real. That could move and talk and look real.'

'Well, they don't,' said Anji. 'They look fake.'

'But they still replaced my models!' Von Arnim thundered. 'They didn't want my models, did they? They used. . . computers, instead.'

He looked a completely broken man.

'Tell me...' he beseeched them. 'You think my models are better than those computer graphics, don't you? You saw them out in the workshed. You believe in those monsters more than the computer ones, don't you?'

'Yes,' said Anji. 'Of course we do.'

'I've been made redundant!' Von Arnim wailed. 'All these months, waiting for Fuchas to call me back, to talk over the details and the deal... and all the while, he's planning to sell me out. And all the while he's got his sick geeks working on computers, working on a way to make me redundant...'

'They're quicker,' said Fritter. 'The computer stuff must be quicker and cheaper. Better than having some old bloke in a shed taking months and months with lumps of plasticine and chicken wire.'

Anji glared at him. 'Don't rub it in, Fritter.'

Von Arnim was beyond consolation anyhow. 'Fuchas won't get away with this. We had a promise. He said he had work lined up for me for the rest of my life. But he'll bring in this new technology with no thought... of how it will affect me.' Suddenly Von Arnim looked cunning. 'But he doesn't know I've seen this tape. How could he? I still have the element of surprise...'

Anji looked worried at the glint in the old man's tearful eye. 'What does that mean?'

'I mean,' Ron Von Arnim said, 'He won't get away with this. We're going to his ranch. Tonight.'

Outside, dusk had settled swiftly, startling Anji when she glanced out of the window. The lowering skies were inky and indigo, and the fluorescent lights were blazing still in the barn.

'And we're gunna take some friends of mine along,' Von Arnim said.

## Chapter Twenty-one

As the day started to wane and others turned up at the Cleavis brothers' rooms in the old college, there could be no doubt that William Freer had become the focal point of their meetings.

After his suave entrance earlier in the day, during which he had been so rude to Cleavis and had mystified the Doctor so, Freer had made an equally suave exit. He still had Tyler to see, and had kept the great man waiting quite long enough.

The afternoon had passed, with the Doctor deep in thought.

And the thought that kept tracing its tantalising way through the Doctor's mind was: Freer knows who I am. He has heard of me. His whole manner proclaimed that he knew more about the Doctor than the Doctor did himself.

Then the older Cleavis was standing before him with a cup of tea, rubbing his own neck thoughtfully. 'Don't let Freer get to you, Doctor. You see what an insinuating manner he has. . .'

'Oh, he hasn't got to me, exactly,' said the Doctor, deliberately lightening his mood.

But there was, in fact, a gloom stealing over the Doctor as the sun swung slowly round on the quad outside.

The mood that he had been fighting off these past few days was descending upon him with gusto. He had managed to hold it off for a while, by throwing himself into the next thing that had come along. . . but now he had a moment to think. He wasn't feeling very well at all.

He sat in Cleavis's favourite chair and stewed over his predicament.

Even the acid-tongued Char knew to leave him alone and sat, rather meekly for him, quiet and under the drop-leaf table. The younger Cleavis brother, Fred, tried to tempt him out with a scrap of ham, and Char had simply sneered.

'Please yourself,' shrugged Fred, and sat with the Doctor. He was altogether more gung-ho than his brother, and still in his rugby outfit from his practice this morning. Fred Cleavis was thirty-two and in most respects, the Doctor dimly observed, still very much a boy.

‘So you’re another of John’s writing cronies, eh?’ he said. ‘Well, the more the merrier, I say. We have some pretty good nights round here on a Monday. All the blokes reading out their stories and stuff. I just listen, of course. I haven’t much talent in that direction, myself. But I am a good listener.’

The Doctor glanced up. While Cleavis was out of the way, out buying cake for this evening, the Doctor decided to be direct with his brother. ‘What’s Freer offering you lot, hmm?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘There’s usually something,’ said the Doctor. ‘Let’s see. Eternal life? The power to control men’s thoughts and actions? A weapon of some kind?’

‘Now, hang on, Doctor...’ stammered Fred. ‘I’m sure I don’t know what you’re on about.’

‘Or a pact,’ said the Doctor. ‘Pound to a penny he’s got some kind of pact going. With the devil? Am I right? Am I getting warmer?’

Fred sighed. ‘Freer hasn’t offered us anything, really. There’s nothing like that going on here, Doctor.’

‘No ritual sacrifice, hmm? No dressing up or daubing yourself with fresh blood?’

Fred’s lips quirked into a smile. ‘Well, there’s a chicken...’

‘I knew it.’

‘But it’s stuffed and in the oven. Black market. It’s already dead, Doctor.’

The Doctor sighed. ‘You’re really claiming this is just a run-of-the-mill writers’ circle?’

‘Of course not,’ said Fred. ‘We’ve got some of the greatest talents in the land here, I believe. Tyler, my brother, and so on... but there really isn’t anything fishy going on, you know...’

‘That remains to be seen,’ said the Doctor. ‘That Freer knows more than he is letting on.’

Fred mused. ‘It is true that he has promised to show us something tonight, the like of which we have never seen before...’

‘Oh?’

‘But he is a man of great learning, Doctor. He merely intends to demonstrate to us the fruits of his research.’

The Doctor narrowed his eyes.

At that point Cleavis senior returned to their rooms, huffing and puffing up the stone staircase. He was checking off on his fingers the list of provisions they would need for this evening.

‘Ah,’ he smiled at the Doctor. ‘You’re still here.’

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor.

‘I’ve just seen Tyler walking about the town with Freer. Thick as thieves they are. They barely had the time to nod me hello.’ Though he said it jauntily enough, Cleavis still looked hurt.

‘They’re planning something,’ the Doctor said. ‘They’re planning something for tonight.’

And then the first of the other guests arrived. As the next hour went on, with shadows lengthening on the grass of the quad outside, the brothers’ rooms were filled with pipe-smoking, earnest young men in tweed. And the Doctor soon lost track of everyone’s names.

It all began innocently enough.

Drinks were dispensed and habitual places were taken up around the living room. Stiffly, Tyler seated himself by the crackling fire and watched everyone else milling around with hooded eyes.

Tyler hadn’t reacted at all to the Doctor and Char’s presence beyond a slight, stiff nod of recognition. The others, meanwhile, were intrigued by this new member from Trinity, and the Doctor found himself having to quickly improvise more details of this novel he was pretending to be writing.

‘There is a World where the creatures who live there are building perfect replicas of English villages from plastic,’ he found himself saying at one point. ‘And they are sending automata in coffins to crash land on the Earth and, um, well, one of these goes wrong and he’s a creature of shreds and patches with a brain in a glass case instead of a head and... um, he’s possessed by a gigantic spider that attaches itself to his back and...’

‘Goodness,’ said Cleavis, handing the Doctor a glass of brandy. ‘It does sound complicated.’

The Doctor looked rueful. ‘Yes, perhaps I do over-egg the pudding.’

‘Come and meet Johnson,’ Cleavis told him. ‘He’s writing this wonderful epic poem about silver Vikings who are frozen in a tomb...’

The evening’s readings, in fact, began with this Johnson, who read in a slow, halting fashion and bored everyone.

Several others followed and there was a lively discussion for several minutes as Cleavis brought out the nibbles.

‘I wonder,’ Cleavis said dramatically, ‘whether Professor Tyler has anything to give us from *The True History of Planets*?’

Everyone looked at Tyler then, who looked gratified for a second, and shook his head brusquely. He licked his thin lips and said, ‘Not this week, I’m afraid,

no. *The True History* is undergoing severe and radical reconstruction. It isn't ready yet.'

The men in tweed started murmuring at this gobbet of news.

William Freer, almost unnoticed till this point, held up one elegant, tapered hand to gain their attention. 'Professor Tyler, however,' he said, 'has agreed to take part in a small demonstration of mine.'

The murmurs increased in pitch. The Doctor leaned forward in interest and, from under the drop leaf table, Char inched and frowned.

Tyler nodded to Freer, who came to kneel before him.

The others drew back.

'You have all spent some time listening to this Man's work,' Freer told them, sounding rather like a priest. 'You are all aware of his mind and its mysterious, almost supernatural brilliance. You have wandered through the landscapes he has created for you, and you have met the creatures and beings he has invented. Now I, William Freer, intend to give you a glimpse of what lies within this mind. And to let you experience it for yourself.'

Tyler sat, entirely passive and calm, his hands upon his knees.

Cleavis looked bewildered. 'How do you propose to do this, Freer?' he asked, dubiously.

'By opening his mind,' said Freer simply. 'Via a technique I now believe myself to have mastered, through my extensive studies into the old arts.'

More shocked, fascinated whispers around the room.

'I must ask for silence, however,' snapped Freer. 'It is a very delicate operation. Professor Tyler is willing to undergo this experiment and will allow me to attempt this for you all, He wants to... make himself plain and open to you.'

Tyler gave a single, grim nod of assent.

The Doctor didn't like the sound of this one little bit.

Now Freer was instructing various Smudgelings to draw the heavy curtains and to light the candles. Soon the room was filled with gently pulsating shadows and everyone's faces were obscure and intent.

Freer concentrated for a moment and then he reached out with both pale hands.

He placed his fingertips on Tyler's face and Tyler gently closed his eyes.

Cleavis said, 'Look here. I don't think I like this...'

Freer spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'Silence, Cleavis.'

Then Freer appeared to fall into a trance.

There was nothing that the Smudgelings could do but watch.

For a few moments, nothing happened.

Perhaps the temperature in the room dropped, just a little. The candle flames swayed and bobbed and steadied again.

And Tyler's face seemed to be sweating. Suddenly, copiously, until drops were running down his brow and dropping off the end of his hooked nose.

Freer's fingertips stayed in place, pressing hard. Freer was muttering under his breath. An incantation.

The Doctor was half out of his seat in alarm. But he restrained himself.

It became apparent that it wasn't just perspiration running off the Professor's brow.

His whole face was melting.

His eyebrows and nose were blurring and folding in upon themselves.

Slack flesh slid down his face and over Freer's fingers, soft as butter melting in a pan.

The Smudgelings were frozen rigid as Tyler gradually deliquesced. Soon there was nothing about his face that they could recognise.

Freer opened his eyes, saw what he had done and grunted with satisfaction.

From the single gaping hole that used to be the Professor's mouth, a noxious flesh-coloured vapour slowly issued.

Freer slowly moved backwards on his haunches as the cloud gathered and hung between himself and the Professor.

The ectoplasmic mist hung there, expanding, glowing from within.

'There,' said Freer.

Everyone stared.

Within the glowing cloud there was suddenly discernible a small, unfocused being. It was like looking at cuckoo spit on a blade of grass, and glimpsing the pupa within.

Gradually this figure resolved itself.

A dog.

The Doctor's eyes widened. He recognised her at once.

It was the Princess of the dogworld.

She began to speak and, when she did, her voice was dull and crackled, as if it were being transmitted over vast distances.

'My friends,' she whimpered. 'I speak to you from far in your future. I speak to you to beg for your help. Only you can help me avenge the wrongs done to my family. You must hear me. You must help me. You are my only hope.'

Then, abruptly, something appeared to go wrong.

The image stilled and vanished. The mist began to dissipate.

Freer swore venomously as his concentration and the connection were broken.

'Quickly!' he shouted out, with a note of panic in his voice. 'Bring up the lights! Make it brighter!'

The younger Cleavis brother, Fred, rushed to do as bidden.

Everyone stirred and a worried pandemonium broke out.

Char started barking as the overhead lights splashed on.

The ectoplasmic haze was vanishing back into the hole in Tyler's ruined head.

And then the old man was thrashing his skinny limbs, and screaming through his molten, featureless face.

## Chapter Twenty-two

‘Brenda,’ Noël was saying, ‘There are a number of quite undesirable-looking gentlemen hanging around your suite, you know. Perhaps you ought to have a word with security about them. . .’

The initial welcomes and introductions had been made and now the visiting playwright had been installed on the zebra-striped settee with a flute of champagne. Flossie was staring at him with something approaching awe.

‘Undesirables?’ Brenda asked worriedly, catching Martha’s jaded eye.

‘They look,’ said Noël, ‘rather as if they are up to no good.’

The orange dog swore at this. Fitz was surprised to see that Noël didn’t seem at all surprised.

Suddenly he looked rather severe. ‘I think you ought to explain to me what’s going on, Brenda, dear. I’ve had my suspicions for some time that you have been in some kind of trouble.’

Brenda’s eyes widened at the clipped harshness of his tone and suddenly she looked close to tears.

‘I am your friend,’ Noël said. ‘I care about what happens to you. Yet I deserve to be told if you are in some kind of danger or bother. I need to know whether I am risking my own life in coming here and popping in on you.’

Then, all of a sudden, Brenda Soobie was in tears. She was sobbing and clinging to Flossie who had, good-naturedly, hurried over to provide an amply consoling shoulder.

‘So, I am right,’ sighed Noël. ‘Tell me then, what kind of business have you got yourself involved in, you silly girl?’

Brenda was in no state to reply to the measured, almost brutal calm of Coward’s questioning, so Fitz broke in. ‘They were after us, as well. After me and Flossie, down in the supper lounge.’

Noël gave him an appraising look. ‘Were they indeed?’ His brilliant eyes narrowed. ‘And what are you here for, Mr Kreiner?’

Fitz found himself blushing. ‘To help protect Brenda Soobie.’ It was true enough, in its own way.

‘Hmm,’ said Coward, eyeing Fitz’s leopardskin suit, as if judging him to be very inept protection indeed.

Martha said, ‘I believe the people after us are agents of some kind, Noël. I don’t know whose. But they are after Brenda, as we thought they might be.’

‘Indeed. Then we must proceed to somewhere safer. My villa, perhaps, out of town. They’ve lent me an enchanting little place while I warm up for my engagement here.’

This exchange struck Fitz as quite odd. Brenda was sobbing too throatily to notice it, but it sounded to Fitz very much as if the dog and the playwright were in cahoots. That couldn’t be right, surely?

Then Brenda was saying, ‘I can’t leave here. I can’t leave the hotel. It’s the only place I’m really safe, up here in this suite. If I even try to leave, I’m sure that’s when they’ll get me. . .’

‘She’s well-nigh hysterical,’ said Flossie, shaking her head sadly.

‘Poor girl,’ said Noël. Briskly he stood up and smoothed down his already immaculate jacket. ‘She’s been highly strung for as long as I’ve known her.’ He bit his lip regretfully. ‘And I feel somewhat to blame for her present state of distress.’

‘Oh?’ said Fitz. ‘How’s that then?’

Coward glowered. ‘There’s no time to go into that now, young man. I suggest we gather our things together and make plans to decamp to my villa. We’ll be much safer there.’

Fitz felt again the hard, cold metal of the hatted man’s gun in his back and shuddered.

Martha looked at Brenda. ‘Are you up to it?’

Brenda was stifling her tears and blew her nose dramatically on the sleeve of her gown. ‘I think so.’

Noël brightened. ‘That’s the spirit. Good girl.’

‘I wish we knew what they were after,’ said Flossie. ‘I don’t like the idea of running away from people with guns and things.’

‘Occupational hazard,’ Fitz told her.

‘I have some stiff questions for you two,’ clipped Noël, ‘when we get to our place of safety.’

‘I’ve got transport,’ said Brenda. ‘It’s down in the basement. The only thing is, getting down there safely. . . if those goons are hanging around the hotel. . .’

‘Then we must put our heads together and think,’ said Noël.

They put a bag over her head. It wasn’t the most elegant of disguises, but

it would have to do. They took a shopping bag and pulled it carefully over Brenda's glossy black wig, as she held Martha to her and submitted to the indignity of it all.

'Now, we must keep bunched up very close around her,' said Noël. 'And act as a kind of human shield as we make our way down to the basement. This is a very special, very precious lady and we must do our utmost to see that she comes to absolutely no harm.'

'Thank you, Noël,' came Brenda's muffled voice from within the shopping bag.

How do I get myself into these things? thought Fitz.

'We're right with you,' said Flossie. 'Don't you worry about a thing.' She looked rather excitable and flushed.

'Right,' said Coward, with a last glance around the luxurious suite. 'I imagine, Brenda, that this transport you're talking about in the basement, is your usual, somewhat eccentric vehicle?'

Martha replied. 'Oh, yes. The same old trusty vehicle.'

'Hmm,' nodded Noël. 'Come on then. Tally ho.'

With that, he thrust open the door to the suite and glanced up and down the corridor. 'Empty,' he whispered.

To Fitz it seemed that Coward, too, was enjoying this cloak and dagger business.

They bundled Brenda out on her impractical high heels, guiding her carefully down the long, tastefully-lit corridor. They shuffled along together, almost as one body, towards where they knew the lift to be. Coward smelled deliciously of some scent manufactured by Chanel.

At the end of the corridor there was a maid. She had a trolley of unwashed linen and she was singing to herself. As they approached, she looked suddenly alarmed.

'Ignore her,' Coward instructed. 'We'll just walk past as if nothing unusual was going on...'

The hotel maid was staring unashamedly as they went past her.

Brenda kept her covered head down and concentrated on walking in a straight line.

As they passed the tiny maid, only Fitz caught a glimpse, out of the corner of his eye, of her hand reaching under the linen basket for her gun.

He leapt into action with a high-pitched shriek. 'Run!'

Without even thinking about it, the others launched themselves, full pelt, down the corridor as the maid wielded her weapon and aimed it straight at

their retreating backs.

The shots rang out hollowly, bouncing off the plushly papered walls.

The fugitives tore round the corner.

Brenda was wailing blindly. 'They're everywhere! We don't stand a chance!'

'Hush now,' gasped a breathless Flossie.

'Save your breath,' commanded Martha as they staggered towards the lift doors.

'The maid's coming after us!' roared Fitz, and jabbed at the lift controls.

Coward swore grimly as they all watched the dial move with terrible indecision. The elevator was coming much too slowly.

'Turn around,' came the maid's voice from behind them.

Flossie squealed as the woman took careful aim.

The lift doors whooshed open and Coward cried out in triumph.

But inside the lift there was already a figure in a hat.

He, too, was armed.

'What's happening?' Brenda said, in the still, agonising silence that followed.

'It appears, my dear Brenda,' said Noël. 'That they have us covered.'

'That's right,' said the shady-looking character in the hat.

Coward's tone became even more clipped and deathly. 'Would you mind telling me who you people are working for?'

The man in the hat simply smirked.

'You really can't do this, you know. Both Brenda Soobie and I are stars of international repute.'

'I don't think fame's going to help you,' said Fitz. 'These guys mean business.'

'But we still don't know who they are,' Coward barked.

'MIAOW,' said the man in the hat.

'I beg your pardon?' said Noël.

'That's who we're working for. And we're here to see that *The True History of Planets* remains exactly that.'

With that he slowly took hold of his black homburg and raised it into the air, almost as if he were doffing it in tribute to the two stars of world renown. Under his hat his head was spotlessly bald and shining.

But there was some kind of creature, an insect sitting perched there.

Everyone stared at the overgrown aphid.

'I am Professor Alid Jag,' said the insect. 'And you are my prisoners.'

'But you're dead!' Fitz cried. 'We squashed you flat, when we arrived. . .'

'As you can see,' said the tiny academic. 'I am very much alive and well.'

'But we pulverised you! When we arrived in the TARDIS!'

The aphid rolled his spiteful eyes. ‘That kind of thing is easily faked by one of my expertise. You walked right into it.’

Fitz wasn’t having any of this. He gave the bald man on whom Professor Jag was sitting a flat-handed shove, back into the lift. Deftly Noël nipped in and pressed a selection of buttons on the control panel. He hopped nimbly out before the doors swept closed. They could hear the confused lift as it started to judder away, back down the shaft.

Behind them, the maid jumped, startled into life, but before she could do anything, Flossie had her massive hands around her throat.

She shook the small woman until her teeth rattled and she dropped her gun.

Noël took off one of his very expensive shoes and calmly and brutally destroyed the call mechanism. ‘That should keep them busy,’ he murmured. Showers of sparks cascaded out of the wall, just as Flossie took the maid’s gun and attempted to – as humanely as possible – render her unconscious by clobbering her on the head with it.

It took one or two tries to get it right.

‘It always looks easier than that in the films,’ she said dolefully, as the maid at last went down. Already she was deeply regretting the violence she had been forced to use.

‘Never mind her,’ said Noël briskly. ‘Now, hopefully our gangster friend and his ghastly insect chum will be stuck somewhere between floors. That only leaves us. . .’ He led them along the corridor to an emergency exit, which he energetically heaved open. ‘The service stairs.

It was twenty-three floors down to the basement.

‘We have to be quick,’ Coward warned them. ‘There could be any number of these creatures after us.’

‘But what have we done?’ moaned Brenda, from within her bag. ‘What have we done to offend them so badly?’

But her question was muffled in the sound of their party’s rapid descent down the dusty brick-walled staircase.

Flossie kept darting Fitz anxious glances as they thundered down the stairs. Her massive flesh was heaving up and down and she thought her poor heart was going to give out at any moment. But this was living! These were thrills of the kind she’d never in her wildest dreams expected to have.

Down, down and down they clattered, through the service shaft of the Las Vegas Miramar hotel.

‘I hope you really did trap him in that elevator,’ Martha told Noël. ‘They could be waiting for us at the bottom.’

‘I know,’ said Coward. His wit seemed to have momentarily deserted him.

At last, at last they came to the bottom.

Flossie’s legs were trembling with the effort. For a few moments she saw swimming dots in the air and thought she was about to pass out. Fitz offered to support her as she struggled to regain her breath, and instantly regretted it.

‘Right,’ Coward said. ‘Beyond this door is the basement. They could be anywhere out there. I suggest we stick as close together as possible once we’re out in the open. Then we make a break for it – to the getaway vehicle.’

They all nodded earnestly. Flossie was amazed by his impressive tone of command.

‘Good luck,’ said Noël.

‘Can I take my bag off now?’ asked Brenda.

Just as she did, Coward opened the door to the basement, revealing a grey, dark, cavernous car park beyond. It was echoing and huge and almost empty.

‘I can’t see anyone. . .’ he whispered, leading them out on to the wide, concrete floor.

As they tiptoed out into the open, they looked around to see where the lift exit was.

‘I suggest. . .’ said Noël. ‘That we run on my count of three.’

‘Wait,’ Fitz said. ‘What are we running towards? What kind of car is it?’ He peered into the gloomy recesses of the car park.

‘It isn’t a car,’ Brenda Soobie told him, slipping her hand into his for reassurance’s sake. ‘It’s not a car at all.’

‘Then. . .’ He was puzzled. ‘What is it?’

A terrible, zinging shot rang out above their heads.

There was a triumphant cry: ‘There they are! Get them!’

Flossie screamed.

‘Now!’ thundered Coward. ‘Run for it, you fools!’

Coward seemed to gather them up, as one, in some superhuman display of strength and determination.

There were further cracks and shrieks of gunfire from their as-yet-unseen assailants and they were hurling themselves across the concrete, making a terrible racket.

We’re gunna get shot, Fitz thought. This is it. We’re going to die.

But he put his head down and ran, flat out, with the rest of them, into the centre of the car park, dodging round pillars and buttresses, dodging the slick pools of spilled oil.

'There!' came the cry again, and further shots.

And then the goons could be seen, emerging from the doorways of the lifts and the staircases.

'They're going to get us!' Flossie wailed, grabbing Fitz's arm and shaking him.

'Just run, Flossie!' he yelled.

'We're here!' Brenda Soobie screamed out. 'It's this one! Here!'

She was fumbling in her tiny handbag for the key.

Oh, thank god, thought Fitz. He hoped her car was bullet proof, though. . .

Another shot cracked out, just missing them, ricocheting off the low roof as Fitz looked up then, to see exactly what kind of escape vehicle Brenda Soobie possessed.

She was striding out ahead of them on her impossible heels, with the key held out in front of her.

'Oh, no,' said Fitz, almost stopping in his tracks.

'Come on!' Flossie bellowed down his ear. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Oh, no,' said Fitz again, realising that he really had no choice at all.

Brenda Soobie had reached her getaway vehicle, and her key had slammed straight into the lock.

The waiting lock of a bright red double-decker bus.

The double doors cranked open and Brenda Soobie ushered them frantically over the threshold.

'Everyone aboard!' she cried. 'They'll never get us in here!'

## Chapter Twenty-three

Fritter knew that his erstwhile dogstation companion Char would have a thing or two to say about this. Fritter imagined that, wherever Char was, he was conducting himself on his mission with the Doctor in a far more subtle and adept fashion than Fritter had managed. Fritter knew that Char would have given one of his bitter yelps of disapprobation, had he known just how much Fritter and Anji had messed up.

I talked, Fritter thought. I opened up my big mouth and let the old man know I could talk, just as it was going so well. He could still see Anji's look of total horror, and then old man Von Arnim's sly, incredulous, slack-jawed stare.

But that wasn't all. We also gave the old duffer the video tape to watch. It had seemed just the right thing to do at the time.

It didn't look that way now. They hadn't known just how badly the old bloke would react.

Now they were back in his deathtrap van, hurtling round the hairpin bends and climbing, higher and further, into the night. Von Arnim was hunched over the steering wheel with thunder in his heart and blood singing in his ears. He was muttering like Rumpelstiltskin and Anji and Fritter had exchanged a number of worried looks.

She had tried to talk sense with him. Good old Anji, doing the damage limitation bit. At least Fritter had her to depend on.

'Surely there's nothing we can do tonight,' she told the old man.

The windscreen was black like patent leather. God knew how he knew where they were going. Any second they could go tumbling and careening into the scrubby valley far below.

'Come on, let's go back,' she suggested. 'Get a call through to his office in the morning. Let's go about this calmly...'

There was just a hint of hysteria in her voice. Anji looked like she wanted to wrench the steering wheel out of the old man's grasp.

And that was when the thunder had started up, out in the hills. It rumbled long and hard, building in intensity, shaking the filthy cab of the van. Fat spots

of rain started to slap on the glass. They fell heavier, quicker. Soon, Fritter thought, we'll be driving through a quagmire.

'We got to beard him in his den,' said Von Arnim. 'Talk to him the only language he understands.'

Fritter hunkered down on Anji's lap, feeling the very doglike impulse to whimper. She even stroked him, unconsciously, hoping to calm him down.

What was doing Anji's head in, more than anything, was what they had been forced to load on to the back of the van.

Von Arnim had brooked no refusals, and had told the two of them to help him carry this stuff out and load the back up. It had taken an hour or so and then he had stretched a tarpaulin over the top of the curious freight.

She didn't know what he wanted to take his models with him for. It seemed a peculiar thing to do. He was crackers, she realised that now, and she wondered if there was any chance of her and Fritter getting away from him alive.

Gingerly she had carried his moulded beasts out to the van. They were swaddled in sheets and Von Arnim had barked at them, making them carry the creatures carefully, as if they were babies. For what seemed like hours they had worked on this very odd removal; until the barn was almost deserted of his precious creatures.

'What are you hoping to do with them?' Anji had asked.

Von Arnim had looked at her hatefully for a second, and then muttered under his breath, as if it had nothing to do with her.

She had hated the feel of the fake leathery hides, the tentacles, the claws that stuck out through the swaddling sheets. They had felt almost warm under her fingers.

Now the rain was slashing down and she wondered if the old man had managed to get them lost.

On the dashboard, his rifle lay amongst a litter of cigarette packets and candy wrappers. She thought about making a grab for it.

Instead, in a voice dulled by the rain and her sudden exhaustion, Anji asked: 'How much further do we have to go?'

'Not far,' Von Arnim said. 'I know the way. Don't you fret about that. I've been up to his ranch a few times. For private viewings and meetings. He's in a world of his own up there. He'll let us in. Don't you worry.'

Fritter became suddenly agitated. He was craning his neck.

'There's a car behind us. They're tailing us.'

Anji tried to see through the curtains of slashing rain.

‘They ain’t following us,’ the old man said.

‘I tell you,’ Fritter insisted, ‘they are.’

It was an old, solid, black car with blacked out windows. ‘It’s signalling to us.’

‘They can go to hell,’ Von Arnim said.

Then the black car was putting on a burst of speed, and attempting to nudge past them on the narrow track.

‘What are they doing?’ Fritter asked.

‘Let them by,’ Anji told Von Arnim, grabbing his arm. He shook her off. ‘Look,’ she said. ‘They’ll have us off the road.’

The old man growled, but relented, and braked.

The stately black car (it was like a hearse, Anji realised) swept past on the perilous road and drew to a halt in front of them, blocking their route.

Silence in the cab of Von Arnim’s truck. Only the rain drumming down on the thin skin of the roof.

He grabbed his rifle and flung open the door. ‘If they want a fight. . .’

‘Wait. . .’ said Anji, but followed him out of the van.

A man had already stepped out of the sleek back car. He seemed unperturbed by the heavy rain and stood before them on the mountain road, hatless, and wearing what appeared to be a black tuxedo. He was mostly bald and, Anji realised, quite elderly. He looked almost ghostly, with hooded, amphibious eyes and a wry twist to his mouth.

He was lit only by the van’s headlights and the soft yellow light from inside his own car. Beside him were two poodles, one green, one purple, both with hands.

‘More of them!’ Von Arnim gasped. ‘What is this?’

Anji couldn’t shake the feeling that the man before them was familiar. Not someone she had met before; a different kind of familiar. Someone like a film star. . . or. . .

When the stranger spoke she knew exactly who it was. That clipped, confident, overly-cultivated Mayfair twang.

‘Ron Von Arnim. I fear that you are about to make the biggest mistake of your career in this town tonight.’

Von Arnim grunted. ‘Well, you know who I am. Who the hell are you?’

‘Nöel Coward,’ Anji gasped.

‘My compliments, Miss Kapoor,’ said Nöel, with a dignified little bow. The rain streamed down his face and Anji realised that he was moving stiffly, almost painfully.

‘Nöel Coward’s dead,’ said Von Arnim. ‘He died in ’72 or something. I knew Coward. He was in John Waters’s *Lord of the Rings*. He was Aragorn. This guy is nothing like him.’

‘I assure you I am he,’ said Nöel. ‘Terribly prolonged beyond my natural years, of course, but the definite article, nonetheless.’

‘This is getting so much weirder,’ Anji said, and Fritter concurred.

‘What,’ said Coward, ‘are you hoping to achieve by driving out to Fuchas’s ranch tonight?’

Von Arnim’s eyes narrowed and his grip tightened on his rifle. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘Oh, come on. It’s obvious. And you look as if you’ve finally flipped.’

Don’t provoke him, Anji thought.

‘Fuchas needs a talking to,’ said Ron Von Arnim. ‘I just found out tonight. He’s sold me out.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Coward. ‘He’s a businessman. He’s ruthless, of course.’

‘He ain’t gunna dump me,’ Von Arnim said.

‘He may well do,’ said Coward.

‘Then I’ll get to him first.’

‘And what? You’ll kill him?’

Von Arnim’s eyes blazed. ‘Maybe. Scare him a little. I’ve got nothing to lose, have I?’

Nöel licked his thin lips. ‘I trust this is to do with *The True History of Planets*?’

‘How do you know that?’ Anji burst out.

‘My dear Miss Kapoor,’ he chuckled and indicated his two lavishly-manicured companions. ‘Isn’t it quite evident I am as much mixed up in this bad business as you?’

‘Bad business,’ she agreed.

‘Where do those dogs come from?’ Fritter asked, and the two dogs gave him a supercilious stare.

‘The dogworld,’ said Coward simply. ‘They are my friends.’ He turned to Von Arnim again. ‘I knew you would attempt to make trouble with Fuchas. But I cannot allow you to harm him.’

‘What can you do?’ the special-effects man jeered. ‘You’re a dead man already.’

‘True.’

‘You can’t stop me. Me and my creatures.’

‘Ah, your little menagerie. No, I don’t suppose I can.’ He shot his cuff and examined his expensive-looking watch. ‘But I can insist that I come with you

tonight. And mediate, perhaps. You see, I have my own vested interests in seeing that this film is made.'

'We all do,' Von Arnim snapped. 'But made the right way.'

Coward shrugged and yawned, as if it were all the same to him, suddenly. 'Let us go, then. And let's behave with a little decorum, hmm? Fuchas is the biggest director in the world. He deserves a little respect.'

The rest of the journey passed, for Anji, in a terrible, storm-lashed haze.

Von Arnim muttered all the way, following in the lights from Coward's hearselike car. Because they were following now, he had to temper his speed and drive more carefully and for that, at least, his passengers were relieved.

But everything had taken on the lurid quality of a nightmare.

They passed into the next valley and there, down in the deepest recesses, was the ranch.

Tall, electrified gates rose before them. Up a narrow gravel drive they could glimpse a Swedish style building, all white wood and glass, gleaming pallidly in the rainsoaked moonlight.

Coward stepped out of his car to speak with the men at the gatehouse. They were uniformed and armed like a private militia. As Coward confronted them they seemed astonished for a second, and then they were casting suspicious glances at Von Arnim's scruffy truck.

'They're gunna let us in,' Ron Von Arnim was muttering. 'They'd better let us in.'

They watched Coward turn and wave a brisk hand in the air. He climbed stiffly back into his own car.

The massive gates swung open.

'They listened to him,' Anji said. 'They're letting us through.'

Von Arnim grunted. 'Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, letting him come with us.'

The gravel crunched and scattered under their wheels as they approached the softly glowing ranch.

They parked up in a lit forecourt.

Coward came marching briskly towards them.

'I mean it, Mr Von Arnim. We don't want any gung-ho tactics. We don't want any nasty scenes. . .'

Von Arnim still clutched his rifle.

'I got us in here,' Coward said. 'I insist we do this my way.'

Von Arnim muttered and hurried around to the back of his truck.

'I think you were right before,' Anji told Nöel. 'He really has gone mad.'

Nöel fixed her with a piercing stare.

'It was our fault,' she admitted. 'We had a tape of the film from the future and we showed him it.'

'You showed him?' Coward spluttered. 'This could be catastrophic...'

'And he realised that Fuchas went with the CGI effects in the end,' Fritter said. 'He's a broken man.'

'Then,' said Nöel, 'we might have brought someone very dangerous, quite Trojan-horse-ishly, into the great director's inner sanctum...'

'He's a good man really,' Anji said. 'Underneath it all. I can't believe that he'll do anything really bad...'

'Oh no?' Fritter asked, as the noise of some ghastly fracas broke out at the back of the van.

Von Arnim had undone the straps and clasps holding down the oily tarpaulin in place.

With a savage cry of triumph and manic glee he hoisted it and whirled it away.

And the myriad hand-crafted creatures they had brought with them bolted into vile animation.

Their tiny red eyes blazed brightly. Experimentally they flexed wings and claws and raised beaks and snouts to the damp LA night air and squawked and roared and shrieked and chattered.

'Goodness,' said Nöel, backing away.

The creatures jumped and scampered and hopped off the tail gate of the battered truck. Some of them lifted into the dark air on leathern wings. Others slid on glistening coils and dragged themselves hissing and spitting across the gravel.

Von Arnim threw back his head and howled with laughter.

His menagerie gathered their wits and began slouching, en masse, towards the mogul's waiting ranch.

## Chapter Twenty-four

Cleavis and the Doctor had warned Enid that she shouldn't phone a real doctor. A real doctor would be of no help to Tyler whatsoever.

She confronted them in her sitting room. She was quivering with rage and fear. Already she had, in her distress, lashed out, and slapped Cleavis hard about the face. He had taken it stoically, and now a red handprint had raised itself on his cheek.

Tyler was upstairs in bed. He was calmer now; no longer thrashing about and panicking. He had found he could breathe safely. He just needed to rest.

Enid was boiling with fury.

'You take him away on these nights... and then you see fit to bring him back to me, carry him back to me... without a face!' She laughed bitterly, hysterically.

The Doctor was using his most calming tone on her. 'His face will grow back. I promise you. I've seen this kind of thing before.'

'Oh, have you?' she snapped. 'And what am I supposed to do in the meantime, with a headless husband?' She jeered at the Doctor. 'None of this kind of business ever went on before. It's only since you and that mangy dog of yours appeared on our doorstep today.'

'Enid,' began Cleavis warily. 'Really, the Doctor isn't to blame. He's been of great help in dealing with Reg since... since the mishap. He's even tried to help us get after Freer...'

At the mention of the man who had done this to her husband, Enid's eyes blazed. Then something within her broke and she burst into tears, flinging herself down into a chair. Cleavis hurried over to take her hand.

'We'll get him,' Cleavis promised. 'We'll find out what this vile thing is, that he's done to Reg. But I agree with the Doctor, also. That we mustn't call in the police or the authorities. They won't understand at all what has gone on tonight...'

Cleavis looked at the Doctor for support. The Doctor was in the doorway of the room with his dog at his feet, looking tense and grim. He looked as if his mind were in a thousand places at once.

Enid was sobbing into a clean white handkerchief. She was gasping out through her sobs: 'Reg always said... that man was up to no good... he was dabbling... that he was a necromancer...' She moaned with fear.

'I saw something like this once in the South Seas, I think,' said the Doctor. 'Shamanism, that kind of thing. It can come at a terrible cost to the host. William Freer used Tyler as an unwitting host... he exploited him... just to prove something...'

Cleavis glanced at the Doctor as he thought aloud like this, hardly thinking that it was the kind of thing poor Enid could cope with hearing.

The Doctor seemed to be in a world of his own.

The Smudgelings' meeting had broken up in chaos. As the men gathered helplessly around Tyler, and the Doctor had tried to get him to calm and breathe through the ragged hole that had become his single feature, Freer had managed to slip out. He had melted through the panicked crowd of terrified scholars and beaten a hasty retreat out of the Cleavis brothers' rooms.

'This has all gone wrong,' Cleavis found himself muttering. 'It was meant just as fun, a harmless pastime... but recently the tenor and the tone have changed... We have let something terrible into our midst...' Even to himself his own voice sounded haunted.

'I rather think you have,' said the Doctor darkly.

Enid's grip tightened on Cleavis's forearm. 'You get him, you hear me? Find Freer. Find him.'

The Doctor was rigid and determined, a silhouette against the honeyed hall lighting. When he spoke his voice was just as hard. 'I will, Mrs Tyler.'

Then he whirled on his heel and, with as much alacrity as before, exited their house, with Char snapping after him.

'Doctor, wait!' Cleavis called impotently. 'I'll come with you, I'll...'

But the Doctor was already set on his path.

He borrowed Tyler's bicycle and pedalled off down the quiet leafy darkness of the street. Char was balanced on his lap as he tore into town. An ARP warden noticed them and gave futile pursuit for a street or two.

The Doctor pedalled hard, his coat flaring out behind him.

'Doctor?' the dog asked, clinging on for dear life.

'We're going,' said the Doctor, 'to the station. The last train to London is half past eleven. Freer has to be on that...'

They made it in time, just as the rain started.

The station was small and, as the Doctor leapt off the bicycle, leaving Char to fend for himself, he could see the train standing stolidly at the platform.

‘He’s on it,’ he muttered. ‘I know he is.’

‘Why didn’t you just nobble Freer before?’ said Char crossly. ‘Before he could melt Tyler’s face off and escape?’

‘“Nobble” him?’ frowned the Doctor, setting off at a run for the entrance.

The station master was standing in front of them: an officious barrel-chested man in blue serge. He held up both meaty palms and said something about tickets and dogs.

The Doctor swept by him. ‘You don’t understand how I work,’ he told Char.

‘Not that efficiently,’ sniffed the poodle.

The Doctor hurried them over to the train and yanked open the nearest door.

‘Sir,’ puffed the station master, ‘I really must insist. . .’ He was drowned out by the hooting of the whistle and a gout of steam that billowed across the platform. Char nipped at his fleshy calf and bounded on the train after the Doctor.

They watched through the window as the train started shunting away.

‘Brief encounter,’ smiled the Doctor.

‘Are you sure we can catch up with him in London?’

‘We’re going to scour every compartment.’

They made their way up the side corridor, where the lights were dimmed to a dullish amber. Everything was polished wood and frosted glass. The train lurched from side to side as it ambled along. Char muttered something about primitives. The Doctor grew defensive of antiquated trains: one of his earliest memories was of waking on just such a train as this.

He thrust open the sliding door to a compartment and peered around beadily.

Within, a middle-aged woman sat with her blind daughter. They held between them a hat containing four newborn kittens. The mother glanced up expectantly at the Doctor and he apologised for disturbing them.

In the next compartment they found three nuns, of various ages. The Doctor nodded at them.

‘This will take all night,’ complained Char, back in the corridor.

‘Something funny about those nuns,’ the Doctor mused. ‘Did you notice? One of them was wearing bright-red high heels under her habit.’

They pushed on.

In the next compartment three men were having a very energetic debate. The most domineering was a black-bearded man with the physique of a wrestler and a very fierce mien. He was debating the existence of the afterlife with a young

bowler-hatted man and a sharp-nosed ascetic. All three glared at the Doctor and Char as they entered. They looked suspicious, as if expecting trouble.

'Sorry,' said the Doctor, and slammed the door.

'I need a sit down,' Char complained.

They took seats in the very next compartment. Here, an elderly woman was knitting, with the *Picture Post* open upon her lap. As the carriage jounced and swayed and the murky countryside jolted by outside, the Doctor gave a pleasant smile and sat opposite her. With relief, Char jumped up on the velour cushions. The old woman peered over half moon glasses and frowned.

'I came in here for some peace,' she warned them.

'We're very quiet,' said the Doctor.

'I had to move away from those three terrible men in the carriage next door.'

'We saw them,' the Doctor smiled. 'They were talking about life after death.'

'If you ask me, it was very blasphemous, the way they were talking.' She sighed and snipped her wool with her front teeth and laboriously tied up the loose ends. 'Did you see him? The big gentleman with the black beard? He's the famous scientist, Professor Challenger. Well, famous or not, I'm not listening to sacrilegious talk while I travel.' She smoothed her skirts primly.

'Challenger, was it?' asked the Doctor.

'I didn't know he was still going,' she said. 'Do you remember, he was the one who led that foolhardy expedition up the Amazon to search for prehistoric beasts? And he brought back a set of fuzzy photographs, and an egg, which cracked open and set a Pterodactyl loose in Regent Street?'

'You know, I think I do remember something about that. . .'

'And then he drilled that colossal pit into the centre of the world, just so he could prove he could make the whole earth scream, because it was alive or something, or so he reckoned. . .'

She tutted and sighed and turned the page of her *Picture Post*. 'There's nothing worse than professional adventurers, is there? I hope their time is drawing to a close at last. I mean, here we are in the middle of the biggest war mankind has ever known, and what is the esteemed Professor Challenger up to?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said the Doctor.

'Huh,' she sighed. 'He's on the trail of the evil genius, Fu Manchu, whom he thought was operating out of an abandoned mill in West Yorkshire. Challenger seems to have gone the way Holmes went, towards the end. They lose all sense of priorities, these people. Dinosaurs. Oriental masterminds. What did you say your line of business was?'

'I'm investigating killer poodles from another planet,' said the Doctor.

‘Oh, dear.’

‘But it is rather important,’ said the Doctor. Suddenly from his pocket, he produced Enid’s hardbacked copy of Freer’s *Slaves of Sutekh*. The author photograph – suave, dapper Freer glaring straight into the camera – was held solemnly before the old woman’s jaded eye,

‘Handsome devil,’ she commented.

‘Have you seen him?’ asked the Doctor. ‘I mean, tonight, on this train.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘I’ve seen quite a number of things on this train tonight. The younger Van Helsing loading a wooden crate into the luggage hold. Well, everyone knows he’s been in the Hebrides. They reckon he’s found some kind of creature, wedged into the ice. Mutterings about a creature built of dead human body parts. I can’t say I relish travelling on the same train as that. I’ve seen a number of late night, fly-by-night, odd-looking things... but I’m not sure I’ve seen this man. Is he important?’

‘Very,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suppose we’d better carry on searching the compartments. There’s only a couple of hours to London. Thank you very much for your help.’

‘I’ve met you before, haven’t I?’ she asked abruptly.

‘Have you?’

‘That business with the artefacts from Peru...? Years ago?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I never talk about the artefacts from Peru.’ He tapped his nose darkly.

‘Oh,’ she said, and nodded.

They left her and continued up the swaying corridor.

‘What the hell is this?’ Char gasped. ‘The 11.30 train for dilettante adventurers?’

‘It certainly looks like it,’ said the Doctor. He slid open the next door.

The same three nuns looked up at him. One of them was tapping her red stiletto impatiently.

‘You’ve moved!’ said the Doctor.

‘Bless you,’ said the red-shoed nun.

And then Fritter gasped. Beside the eldest nun, a poodle dyed purple was glaring at them.

The Doctor had seen it. He coughed, to gain their full attention.

‘I wonder if you’d mind if I inspected your dog’s paws?’ he asked.

The nuns gave him a very funny look.

He advanced and the poodle growled. It was wearing booties.

‘Are you the ticket inspector?’

The lights in their glass bowls flickered and dimmed as the train passed into a tunnel. The poodle growled again as the rails hummed and hissed. 'Now, boy...' coaxed the Doctor.

The lights went out. One of the nuns gave a cry of surprise. When they emerged from the echoing, rattling tunnel, the lights sprang on again and the dog was gone.

'Your dog...!' gasped the Doctor.

'What dog?' asked the nun in the scarlet high heels.

Char shouted from the doorway. 'He flew past me, Doctor! He ran past on two feet!'

The Doctor gave the sisters a disgusted look. 'Thanks for all your help: Then he flung himself back into the corridor, after Char, who was bounding away towards the restaurant car.

'He went this way!' Char was barking out.

Almost immediately the Doctor was accosted by the huge form of Professor Challenger, who emerged irritably from his compartment. 'What's all this racket about? My friends and I are having a very important...'

'No time,' gasped the Doctor, dodging round him.

One very last serving was going on in the dining car. The mother and the blind daughter were seated at the first table with their hatful of kittens set out by the cruet. They both had wine glasses with dormice scabbling about inside.

At other tables, other well-to-do passengers were tucking into lobster and pheasant. One very thin man had what appeared to be a baked badger set before him on a golden platter, and was sawing energetically at a fat, dripping haunch.

'Not exactly what you'd call rationing,' murmured the Doctor, as a glum waiter budged passed him with a silver cage filled with live song birds.

'That's a Beatles medley they're singing!' the Doctor cried.

Several diners gave him looks of disapproval.

'Doctor,' said Char, 'is this some kind of nightmare train?'

'There,' said the Doctor.

At a table at the end of the dining car, William Freer was delicately spooning up a pale green, watery soup. As they approached him determinedly, the Doctor saw that all the golden utensils were chained to the tables. Very wise precaution.

Freer looked up at them and smiled.

'Mock Turtle soup,' he said. 'It's really quite good. Are you following me to the big city?'

The Doctor slid soundlessly into a high-backed chair opposite him.

'What you did,' said the Doctor levelly, barely restraining his anger, 'what you did to Tyler was extremely stupid and dangerous.'

For a second, the usually imperturbable Freer looked abashed. 'Perhaps I did let the experiment go too far. But his mind was not damaged.'

'No thanks to you, Freer.'

'He can still go about his work.' Freer's eyes flashed. 'That is the most important thing.'

The Doctor tried another tack. 'What were you trying to do?'

'He has to make firm contact,' Freer sipped at a spoonful of soup, and then dabbed at his full lips with a napkin. 'To continue his work, he must make full contact with the dogworld. Psychically.'

'You're changing his book,' said the Doctor. 'You are deliberately perverting the course of *The True History of Planets*.'

'That's true enough.'

'You admit it!' cried Char.

Freer nodded at him and smiled. 'Oh, so you've decided to speak up at last, have you?'

Char blushed.

'I thought you might. All your people are nasty, yappy little things.'

The Doctor leaned heavily on the table, nicking the damask, intending to intimidate. 'Who has put you up to this?'

Freer snickered. 'What makes you think I'm not doing this off my own bat?'

The Doctor sneered. 'You've got lackey written all over you, Freer.'

Freer looked furious for a second, then controlled himself. 'I'll take you to him. Quite gladly, Doctor. You only ever had to ask.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor, surprised.

'Yes, he's been quite keen to meet you. He knew you were about, dabbling in this... bad business.'

The Doctor's voice had lowered dangerously. 'And who is he?'

'Haven't you guessed yet, Doctor?' asked Freer lightly.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'I'm afraid I haven't managed to.'

'Ah.' Freer carefully put his spoon down. 'He likes to be known as... the Master.'

## Chapter Twenty-five

Lobsters and mobsters. These are the banes of my life, she thought. Mobsters and lobsters: the deadliest foes Flossie had ever had to face.

The gentlemen in the suits and hats were in a hefty silver car, dodging through the Las Vegas night time traffic.

The savage lights of casinos and hotels streaked past them as Brenda Soobie floored it, ducking and weaving her antiquated bus through the other messy joyriders.

‘They’re still rather close behind us,’ worried Noël, swaying on dogged sea-legs in the gangway by the driver’s cab. ‘Do get a move on, dear.’

Flossie was clinging for dear life to the arm of a chintzy settee and repeating the lobster mobster mantra that was whirling in her head, invoking her own greatest fears as they careered down the wide, cluttered main street and she prayed for their safety. Never once yet had she had the chance to act surprised that the interior of Brenda’s getaway vehicle was decorated and furnished rather like a small and fussy flat: with porcelain ornaments, a leatherette cocktail bar and overstuffed furniture.

Fitz had noticed, though, and he was slumped in an armchair, seemingly oblivious to the hair-raising car chase in hand. He had his head in his hands.

Up in the driver’s cab, Brenda Soobie was yodelling her pleasure at being back in control again. She wrenched the wheel this way and that, causing the bus to rock back and forth on its plaintive chassis. Martha, the elderly poodle, lay on the richly-carpeted floor, digging her claws deep into the pile.

‘They aren’t letting up,’ Noël said. ‘And they’re firing on us. Some innocent bystanders and inveterate gamblers may be killed.’

Brenda shouted over the engine’s roar: ‘Did I hear right, Noël? They said they were working for MIAOW?’

He nodded firmly. ‘That ghastly insect thing on the gunman’s head. I should have known.’

‘So they aren’t Imperials. . .’

‘Oh, goodness, no,’ said Noël. ‘No, we haven’t been menaced by the Imperials. Yet.’

Fitz came stumbling down the passenger aisle to ask: 'Look, can I just ask – what the hell is MIAOW?'

'The Ministry for Incursions And Ontological Wonders,' clipped Noël. 'They're rather heavy handed in their efforts to see that historical cultural artefacts aren't buggered about with.'

'I see,' shouted Fitz. 'And you're rather keen to bugger about with said artefacts?'

Coward's eyes narrowed. 'There are very important things at stake here, young man. You wouldn't understand.'

Fitz looked put out. 'What I do understand is... is that I've been on this bus before.'

'What?' yelled Brenda Soobie.

'You!' Fitz cried out to the chanteuse. 'I think I've met you before... in another life! Somewhere else!'

'The poor dear's gone off his head,' said Noël.

'You must be mistaken,' said Brenda, and knocked him flat on his back as she took a sharp corner at speed, trying to shake off her pursuers down a quieter road.

'Make for the open country!' Noël cried. 'For the desert, if you must!'

Their bus heaved itself onwards and tore through the night.

For a few blocks they lost the silver car, and then it darted out of a side street and back into the choking fumes of their slipstream.

They were lost and found and lost again.

And then, abruptly, they hit the city limits and the bus went soaring out into the vast silvery purpled darkness of the desert.

It swallowed them up without a sound. They were like a cork shooting out of a bottleneck, straight into the dark, complacent sea.

And the silver car was nowhere to be seen.

'We made it!' Brenda shrieked, but drove on for a few miles more, until the hazy, orange lights of Vegas were far behind them and they felt safely obscure. She swung the bus round to the side of the road and killed the engine dead with a triumphant cry.

She put on a blast of music to celebrate. Then she sprang out of the cab to hug Noël fiercely, and nearly sent him flying to the ground.

The celebratory music came from Abba's greatest hits.

'It's 1960!' Fitz shouted. 'And you can't possibly have this tape!'

Brenda was giddy with excitement. She took one look at his furious, oh-so-serious face and laughed. 'You sound just like the Doctor, Fitz honey.'

Then her face fell. 'Whoops,' she said.

Fitz nodded. 'I knew it. Of course it's you. It had to be you.'

Nöel was frowning. 'Who? What's he talking about, Brenda?'

Flossie was on her feet now. 'Yes, what's going on, Fitz? How does this woman know the Doctor?'

Martha the poodle cackled. 'Brenda? You haven't got time to go explaining everything now...'

Brenda nodded. 'Martha's right. Suffice to say that Fitz and I have indeed met before, as is inevitable in the crazy kinds of lives we lead.'

'Iris,' said Fitz. 'Your name is... was... Iris.'

She shrugged. 'How could you forget me? Even for a moment? I'm rather hurt, Fitz.'

'It's... uh, been a tough time lately. Trying to hang on to ancient history and so on.'

Now Brenda looked even more hurt. 'Ancient history? Is that how you see me?'

He was flummoxed. 'I didn't think you were around any more... I thought, everything had changed... But you're here! You can talk to the Doctor! You can explain to him... everything that he's...' Fitz stopped himself. 'No. You can't. It might kill him if you...'

'Fitz,' Brenda said. 'I'm not sure what you're talking about. But if the Doctor is in trouble...'

'He may well be,' said Fitz. 'But he's in a different time zone.'

Nöel broke in then. 'There isn't time for this, children. Listen.'

Out in the silent desert, the stillness of the luminous night had been broken by the harsh noise of whirling chopper blades.

Flossie grew alarmed. 'They've found us!'

A sleek black copter came chattering down out of the glossy night to confront their bus.

'I'm not running from them any more,' sighed Brenda. 'I'm going to face them out.' She took off her impractical, strappy shoes and flung them into the luggage rack. She slipped off her dressing gown and revealed her slinky black dress beneath. 'Is my wig on straight?'

'You look wonderful,' breathed Flossie. 'You look every inch the star.'

‘Unfortunately,’ said Noël, ‘that doesn’t help much, when one is faced with murderous rogues from the future.’

‘It ought to,’ said Flossie.

Brenda made the bus doors swish open. She hopped lightly out on to the burnished, still burning sand.

‘Flossie,’ Fitz whispered. ‘I think things are going to get a good deal worse, now that she’s involved. I thought it was going quite well till now.’

Noël was following Brenda outside, where the sultry air was being stirred by the copter’s blades as they slowed to a stop.

‘Oh, dear,’ he said.

Six Imperial poodles, armed and dyed red, had emerged from the copter. They gave the ceremonial greeting as one.

‘Grrr.’

Brenda tried to play it very cool. ‘Grrr,’ she said, with perfect pitch.

And then a woman stepped out of the copter. She was in a suit and her hair was cut into a severe black bob.

In the Vegas moonlight, the silvery track of a vicious, puckered scar could be seen, quite plainly, running down the side of her face.

‘My friends,’ she smiled.

Flossie was aghast. ‘Mida Slike!’

‘Who?’ said Noël.

‘She was a guest in our hotel!’ Flossie gasped.

‘Who is she?’ said Noël. ‘What is she?’

‘She’s a literary critic,’ said Flossie.

‘With a Chair in Bastardisation,’ added Mida Slike primly. ‘Now, would you all lie face down in the sand, please, while my poodles sniff you for weapons?’

They were led smartly aboard the MIAOW copter (now that they were close enough, Fitz could read it quite plainly down the side of the craft: it was what you might call emblazoned.) As they were led by the scarlet dogs, Brenda cast one last, forlorn look at her bus, left stranded and lit up on the sand.

‘Come on, come on,’ urged Mida. ‘We haven’t got all day. Events are reaching a head. Time is pressing on.’

‘Where are you taking us?’ stammered Flossie, and was ignored.

The interior of the copter was fitted with brass and wood: everything looked rather antiquated. Mida sat down on a green leather swivel chair and brushed her hair back into place as the hatchway slid shut.

‘You’ve all been rather busy, haven’t you?’ she purred.

'I'm always busy,' said Brenda. 'And right now I should be sleeping, so that I'm ready for tomorrow's matinee.'

Mida rolled her eyes. 'You don't have to put on that act for me. I know who you are, love.' Then she switched her attention to Coward, who gave her a defiant look. 'And you, sir, have been busier than most, haven't you? Our little scouts have detected your activities in at least three different time zones. However do you manage to keep yourself so busy?'

'I am a very talented man,' said Noël.

'A talent to amuse,' she chuckled. 'You know, MIAOW takes a very dim view of what you are about, Mr Coward.'

'What do I care?' he snapped. 'You can't tell me what to do.'

'You have something,' she said. 'Something very important to us. Something that could do untold damage to the dogworld.'

'Do I, indeed?'

'You know you do.'

'I'm sure I don't know what it is.'

Mida Slike scowled at him and turned abruptly to the scarlet poodles. Brusquely she instructed them to take off.

'Where are we going?' demanded Fitz, who was feeling rather left out.

'The dogworld,' said Mida. 'That is where everything is tending towards, isn't it? You may all consider yourselves prisoners of his highness, the Emperor.'

For a second everyone looked shocked.

Then the small band of friends clung to each other and almost fell over as the copter lifted off the desert sands and rose into the air, with the noise of the whirring blades scything through them.

'You're taking us all the way there, in a helicopter?' cried Brenda.

'For a woman who gets into all sorts of unexpected places in a double-decker bus,' shouted Mida, 'that's a bit rich!'

Suddenly Martha was howling piteously and flinging herself on the floor. Everyone looked shocked at the pathetic display made by the small, orange dog.

'Don't make me go back there! Please don't! I vowed never to return! They'll put me down if I go back! You're taking me to my doom. . . !'

## Chapter Twenty-six

John Fuchas thought he was alone that night.

Alone, and safe in his mogul's ranch, far from prying eyes. Safe from the lenses and the gossips of the world: the world's most famous director, relaxing at home, the way he knew best. Free from wagging tongues and fan speculation about his newest projects.

In his basement he had the lights down low, and he was lying full-length on a pasteboard model of the surface of a world of ice. He was absolutely in that world; his whole concentration was wrapped up in believing that this planet's miniature landscape was real.

Across that scale model came marching hundreds of tiny men, stiff-jointed, plastic-limbed, and through the skies of that planet roved spaceships of all descriptions. As the night went on, Fuchas was growing more and more absorbed in his war games.

This was the necessary work of imagining. This was the earliest stages of invention. It might have looked just like his playing with the merchandise from his first movie in the trilogy, but actually, he was plotting out the manoeuvres for the next one: setting down his beloved characters in a whole new environment.

Oh, what wouldn't his millions of fans worldwide give for just a glimpse, the merest glimpse of what the great man was playing at? As he swooped a two-man cruiser over the papier-mâché glaciers and bombed the hell out of a troop carrier (making laser noises with an expert glottis) he congratulated himself roundly on his genius.

He was a short, stocky man in a short-sleeved plaid shirt and faded jeans. Immense fame hadn't changed him one bit. He was just the same guy underneath. But instead of playing these games in his bedroom upstairs in his parents' house in New Jersey, he was doing it in the basement at the heart of his Empire. And he knew that he had inspired children all over the world to play with exactly these toys, just the same.

In a way, it felt to him just like having friends. Friends all over the world.

Now he started to work on the dialogue between the lead characters as they retreated to their underground base. He waggled the little figurines to show which one was talking.

So caught up in plotting the next chapter of the myth was he, that he completely forgot he had buzzed in visitors for the night. He had let them in absently, without thinking, and promptly forgot they were on their way.

And so caught up in his new story was he, he never heard the door at the top of the basement stairs creak open, just a tad.

He never heard the slithering of little serpentine coils, the padding of tiny, plasticine feet on the stripped pine flooring on the first level upstairs. He never heard Von Arnim's tiny army at all.

Not until his busy protagonists were thick in an argument about how best to defend their underground base. It was as if they really had come to life, and their words and reactions were out of his sweaty hands.

The first he knew about the disturbance was when Captain Wilberforce in his hands turned to look over his shoulder, and saw the two-foot-tall, five-headed hydra gallumphing up the paste-board valley, hissing and spitting as it came.

John Fuchas watched in amazed horror as one of those glistening, savage beaks darted forward and bit off the head of the hero of the hour.

Fuchas dropped his characters and sat up on his haunches with a cry of dismay. He hadn't quite worked out what was happening yet, but whatever it was, it had ruined his work.

The lampshade was swaying suddenly, throwing crazy shadows about the place. He blinked and saw that, in addition to the horrific hydra thing (which wasn't even native to his world of ice) there were bat creatures, flying zombies and pterodactyls swarming around his head.

Fuchas leapt to his feet and howled. Whether this was out of rage or in terror isn't very clear.

An army of skeletons with swords came marching across his world.

A brontosaurus, three gorgons and several yeti were storming the stronghold of his heroes. They ripped the tundra to papery shreds as they came, as the flying beasts swooped around and taunted the creator of the world.

'What's happening?' Fuchas raged, as if he expected personal assistants to come running out of the shadows, now that the illusion was fully broken, to explain to him what had gone wrong.

Instead came the deranged and wild-haired Ron Von Arnim, brandishing his rifle on the cellar stairs.

‘Good evening, John,’ he snarled. ‘I guess you could say we’ve come round to play.’

Upstairs in the Swedish-style lounge, Anji was fretting.

‘We’ve unleashed chaos. . .’ she said. ‘Von Arnim could kill him, or anything.’ Fritter was hiding behind her legs.

Coward had gone pale, as the noises from below came up to meet them: it sounded like a hellish commotion. ‘You were a very silly girl, to let the old man see that tape.’

‘I know.’

Coward sighed. ‘Never mind. I shall do my level best to soothe the ways.’

In the kitchen nook, the cellar door had flown open. Von Arnim appeared, red in the face, leading Fuchas before him; one arm twisted up his back.

A smattering of the infernal, hand-crafted creatures came spilling out into the light with them; tugging at trouser cuffs and sleeves, whirling copter-like around the director’s head, taunting him and lashing him with their bladelike wings.

‘Ron. . .’ gasped Fuchas. ‘What are they? Little robots? How did you do this? How can they live like this?’

‘Shut up,’ Von Arnim snapped. ‘You think I’d give away my secrets to the likes of you? After what you’ve done to me?’

Fuchas struggled to remain upright as the menagerie snapped at his sneakered heels. ‘What are you talking about, Ron? What have I done to you?’

‘Ha!’ jeered Ron, and roughly forced the director to sit in a wooden chair. The creatures gathered round him, hissing and spitting.

Ron made a savage cutting gesture in the air, and his hideous familiars fell silent as one.

‘I mean it, Ron. . .’ stammered Fuchas. ‘What have I done to you? Why are you so mad at me? I employed you. . . when nobody else in the industry would. When you’re supposed to be washed up and finished. . .’

Von Arnim lashed out and smacked him round the face. ‘Shut up!’

His creatures chuckled at this, their eyes shining with malevolent glee.

A dribble of blood ran down Fuchas’s face. There was real terror in his eyes. Even he could see how real this was becoming.

‘Ron, Ron. . .’ he gabbled. ‘You know I love your work. . . all those old monster movies. . . Why, they were exactly what inspired me in the first place, and set me off on my own career of making movie magic and dreams come true. . .’

Ron jeered. 'Yeah, set you off to become one of the most successful movie makers of all time. You took my genre and you bought it up wholesale and traded it in for a life I can only dream of! And then you spit on me.'

'Spit on you? How? Look, I gave you a contract... you're designing poodles for me... you're meant to be constructing them now...'

Fuchas could see that Ron was clearly unhinged and that there was to be no reasoning with him.

Fuchas's eyes widened as he looked across to the open plan lounge area, and saw Anji, standing there with a poodle and what appeared to be Noël Coward.

'Oh yeah,' Ron said. 'I brought some other friends, too.'

Noël coughed and decided this was clearly the moment at which he should intercede. He marched over briskly.

'Good evening, John.' He turned smartly to Ron. 'Don't you think this has gone far enough, Ron?'

'Far enough?' cried the special-effects man. 'He's gunna ruin me! I've seen the future, remember. I know what happens.'

'That's as maybe,' clipped Noël. 'But that doesn't give you the right to torture cinematic visionaries in their own homes.'

'Huh,' snapped Ron. 'Cinematic visionaries, nothing. I'm a cinematic visionary, you English queer.'

'You're Noël Coward!' Fuchas gasped. He looked at Von Arnim. 'Is he one of your homunculi, too?'

Noël shuddered. 'Thankfully not, Mr Fuchas. I am, happily, quite real and of my own, ineffable, invention.'

'But you're dead!' wailed Fuchas. 'You died five or six years ago!'

It was true that, now that Anji stared at the elderly, stoop-backed playwright under the blazing lights of the kitchen, there was something insubstantial about him: a glimmer of unearthly light playing around him, like the northern lights in miniature, flickering around his dapper silhouette.

'Hmm,' said Noël. 'One of my lesser-known attributes is my ability to manipulate my own timeline. Good, isn't it?'

Fuchas was astounded.

'That,' said Noël calmly, nudging a minotaur out of his way, across the lino, with the toe of his shoe, 'is how I am here, far beyond my own death. And I am here for a specific purpose, John Fuchas.'

'To set this maniac on me?'

'Indeed not,' said Coward, with hauteur. 'Mr Von Arnim seems to have an agenda of his own; one which I find alarming, to say the least.'

Von Arnim swore at him.

'I am here,' said Coward, 'to see that your movie of *The True History of Planets* goes ahead as planned.'

'Oh, yeah?' said Fuchas. 'Well, it's going to anyway – so long as this freak doesn't give me a heart attack with his toys.'

'I need to ensure that your projected movie has the required degree of verisimilitude,' said Coward.

Fritter slunk out from behind Anji then, and straightened up on to his hind legs with some relief. The time for subterfuge was over. If it had ever begun.

'I think,' Fritter said, 'that Nöel is talking about putting you in touch. . . with the dogworld.'

Fuchas just stared at the talking poodle. His mouth hung open stupidly, as if at the most impressive effect he had ever seen, even in his own luridly box-office-busting career.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Of course Char didn't trust Freer's sudden equanimity one little bit. He was amazed that the Doctor seemed taken in by it.

It was the very early hours of the morning when their train came shunting and squealing into London. It was a vast, cluttered and darkened city, stuffed full of silence and secrets and the dog found himself shrinking into the velour plush of his seat as he watched the buildings slide by and the train twisted its way into the very heart. Easy to be intimidated here, especially if you were a poodle from another world who'd lived on a space station for years. Really, Char was amazed that he'd kept his cool so well so far.

The Doctor leapt up from his seat just before they arrived. The man clearly had no need to sleep or to rest. He looked as fresh as a daisy still and this only added to Char's ire.

Freer was wearing a sly look. He slid out of his seat and motioned them both to follow him. Curtly he told them to stick right by him as they went out on to the platform. The Doctor was nodding solemnly and wore a slight smile, as if running around after vicious meddlers was something he did everyday.

Steam rolled down the platform, obscuring its end. There was a ghastly chill in the air and, for once, Char was glad of his knitted bootees.

The passengers were disembarking from the dilettante adventurers' late night express. Char had never seen such an odd-looking bunch of freaks, ambling along down the platform. He shook his head and sighed.

Freer, meanwhile, paid them no heed.

He turned smartly and led them out of the cavernous station.

'Are you sure about this, Doctor?' Char asked him.

'I want to get a look at this Master of his,' said the Doctor tersely.

Out in the main street there were no cabs and the other travellers were dispersing quietly on foot, swishing skirts, tapping canes. All of them seemed not to want to draw attention to themselves.

The quietness of the streets gave Char the horrors. London seemed to be a desolate place. It wasn't quite the bustling heart of an Empire that he'd been

looking forward to. The pale, tall buildings seemed to be built out of bone. It was as if someone had pulled a plug and drained all of the colour and vitality from the place.

Standing at the kerb, Freer gave a sharp whistle and drew a rickshaw over to them. It was a very old man with a humped back who dragged the ungainly-looking vehicle over to them. He didn't say a word as Freer instructed the Doctor and Char to clamber on board.

They sat, clinging on for dear life, as the old man went padding off on the cold roads. All they could hear in the quiet streets was the pad-pad-pad of the old man's bare feet.

'My master will be so pleased to meet you, Doctor,' Freer said at last, in a chalky voice, full of self-possession. He straightened the creases in his grey trousers.

They were passing over the river. The few lights still showing, illegally, in the night, looked like glowing, monstrous fruits. Below them the river looked oily, deadly.

'And you, Char,' Freer added. 'He is very particularly attached to dogs. Especially of your sort.'

They arrived in Mayfair.

'I was expecting Limehouse,' the Doctor frowned, unfolding himself from the rickshaw. 'Something Gothic and suitably grim. Somewhere dank and populated with murderers and thieves...'

He looked around at the tall Georgian houses and the railings.

The trees moved in the early morning breeze and their leaves made a noise like the sea. A few sudsy clouds went roving over the blue clockface of the moon. Somewhere a dog let out one strangulated bark, and Char stiffened instinctively.

Freer led the way to one particular house, which had a glossy black door. He rang a bell and stood waiting with his hands patiently clasped.

'Of course,' smiled the Doctor, as they were led into the main room on the top floor of the building. 'The Master. I should have guessed.'

The Master was tinkling energetically at a gleaming baby grand, in the very centre of a plush royal-blue carpet. He was partially obscured by a huge spray of tiger lilies sprouting from a green glass vase.

He looked up at his visitors with a delighted smile and broke into song.

This Noël Coward was young. His hair was still lustrous and black, combed perfectly to his scalp. He was unlined and impeccable, and wearing a thick purple silk dressing gown over his evening dress. A black cigarette holder was propped in a fruit bowl-sized ashtray on top of the piano. His cigarette was smouldering away, forgotten, as he sang for the Doctor, Freer and Char.

They applauded politely when he had finished.

'Well,' said the Doctor. 'This is quite a night for cultural treats. First I get invited to a meeting of the Smudgelings. And now I get to hear his Master's voice.'

Noël's mouth quirked in amusement. 'Welcome, Doctor.'

'I must admit to being somewhat surprised,' said the Doctor. 'And probably perplexed, too.'

'Oh dear,' said Noël. He stood and picked up the cigarette holder and surveyed them all critically. 'But you must be terribly thirsty after your journey down on the train. You look as if you've had a hellish night.' He led them to a three-piece suite in white suede. He was opening a toddler-sized bottle of champagne, which had been kept on ice, quite as if he had been expecting this late night visit. Then he noticed Char. 'What a darling doggy,' he smiled.

'Grrr,' said Char.

'He must be introduced to my little dogs,' said Coward. 'They're rather timid on first acquaintance. Right now they're asleep in their bedroom. Now, Doctor.' He passed the Doctor a tall, frosted glass, seething with tiny bubbles. 'Mind this doesn't go right up your nose and explain to me, please, why it is that you're feeling so dreadfully perplexed.'

They all sat down.

'Well,' said the Doctor, and Char was surprised to hear that his manners hadn't deserted him yet, 'I would like to know why someone of your calibre is mixed up in this rather murky business.'

'Murky business?' Noël's eyebrow went up elegantly.

'It is murky,' said the Doctor. 'Very murky indeed. I wouldn't have expected you to be involved with a dangerous charlatan,' the Doctor looked to their silently menacing companion in grey, 'like William Freer.'

'A charlatan!' cried Freer.

'Perhaps his books are a little melodramatic and lurid. Sensationalist, perhaps.' Noël smirked. 'But he has gone about his business in this affair extremely efficiently I think.'

'His business?' said the Doctor. 'Removing Reginald Tyler's face in a ridiculously dangerous experiment? Noël, I can't believe that you're embroiled with

a man like this.'

'Certain circumstances,' Nöel said thoughtfully, 'bring us all kinds of queer bedfellows.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. 'What's it all for, eh? Why are the two of you dabbling with the writing of a novel by some poor obscure college don?'

'Oh, dear,' said Nöel. 'You want revelations. You want me to simply hand over all the answers and reasons and secrets, just like that. I find that very disappointing, Doctor. I did think you might attempt to outwit me first.'

'It's too late for wit,' said the Doctor. 'I think I might be running out of patience.'

'It's never too late for wit,' said Coward.

'Touché,' said Char.

'It talks,' observed Nöel mildly. 'A true denizen of the dogworld, then. Good.'

'You know that *The True History of Planets* is bound to become an important book,' said the Doctor. 'Somehow, you know the future of Tyler's novel and somehow you know about the dogworld. Acting through this creature –' Again, the Doctor turned to Freer. 'You have set about perverting Tyler's text. You have imported into it all of this information about the dogworld revolution. . . and you've managed to make the esteemed professor write about that instead.'

'Indeed,' said Nöel, taking a sip from his glass. 'Top marks, Doctor.'

'Well. . . why?'

A sly smile. 'You must admit that his book, in its original, untampered-with form, was a very dull object indeed. All of those ghastly elves and trolls running about the place with nothing on their hairy feet. Oh, it was dreadful, and not at all to my taste. No wit, no glamour. Just lots of not very realistic people talking in ridiculously ornate and overblown sentences about prophecies and quests. . . all of them evincing a very dubious religiosity. Oh, that book's much better off, being about poodles. Much nicer. And much more true to life.'

'But how do you know about the dogworld?' the Doctor burst out. 'You shouldn't know about any of that! And how do you know about your own future? About what the future holds for your world and this book?' The Doctor looked at the playwright very severely. 'There are things that you are and you are not allowed to know about. You seem to go skipping about willy-nilly, meddling with people and messing everything up for the fun of it.'

Nöel shrugged lightly, as if it were no concern of his.

The Doctor's voice was hard. 'I mean it, Nöel: You can't just interfere with cultural product, just for the sake of it. Not if you have knowledge of future history and not even if it is not to your taste. And you really can't dress up

one world's fact as another world's fiction. It doesn't mix! It's an extremely explosive combination!' The Doctor was pacing about and growing animated. 'If all the worlds started fictionalising each other truthfully... why, all hell could break loose!'

Coward said, 'Call me an anarchist, then. Punk before my time.'

The Doctor slapped his own forehead. 'It's 1942! You can't say "punk" with that specific meaning yet! You just can't! That's exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about!'

'Well, I don't see why not,' Noël said churlishly. 'What are you, some kind of time policeman?' He chuckled dryly at the very idea.

At this point, Freer leapt to his feet and launched himself at the Doctor, his hands outstretched to take him by the throat.

'I have him, Master!' howled the maniac novelist. 'Shall I kill him for you? No one will know. I never knew he'd be so set against you. Shall I kill him for you now, Master?'

Noël sighed and flopped down on to his settee again.

Char was looking very alarmed.

The Doctor, meanwhile, took hold of both of Freer's forearms, twisted him and tossed him casually over his shoulder.

Freer crashed into the corner of the room. Several framed and signed photographs of twenties starlets slid off the walls, crashing and tinkling as Freer banged his head and promptly passed out.

'Venusian aikido,' said Noël. 'Well, I never.'

The Doctor grimly dusted his hands. 'He was a sententious little man, anyway. Why on earth are you dealing with the likes of him, Noël?'

'Needs must,' said Coward.

For a second, Char saw a loneliness and a deep sadness in Coward's face. A thousand things he didn't really want to say went flitting across that sombre expression.

At last he said, 'Do you really want to know how I know what I know? How I... Well, what would the terminology be, I wonder? How I... manipulate my own timeline...?'

'That would be a start,' said the Doctor.

Coward reached inside his quilted dressing gown. At first Char thought he was going for a weapon.

The Doctor stared.

'These,' the playwright said. 'These are what I use to flit around and about the twentieth century and beyond. These are my means to easy travel all over

the shop.’ He smiled sadly. ‘They’re much less unwieldy than a TARDIS, say.’

Nöel was holding up a pair of pinking shears.

The Doctor was scandalised. ‘Pinking shears?’

Coward nodded. ‘These are what I use to slash open the Very Fabric of Time and Space. As fabrics go, it cuts and slices open rather beautifully.’

With that, and with no further ado, Nöel held up his hand and gave the air in front of him a decisive pinch and a tweak. The empty air seemed to shimmer and ruffle before their very noses.

Then he plunged the open, jagged-edged shears into the wrinkle in the air and he started to cut. There was a delicate tearing noise, like blades running neatly through the finest damask.

The Doctor and Char watched him make his careful gash through the Very Fabric of Time and Space.

‘We have an appointment, the three of us,’ said Coward lightly. ‘We have to leave Mayfair in Wartime.’

‘We do?’ said the Doctor. ‘Would you care to tell us where we’re going?’ He tried to peer through the hole that Nöel had made in the Fabric.

The Doctor’s whole body was rigid with tension.

‘In the LA hills,’ said Nöel. ‘Into 1978. There is a situation there, urgently requiring our attention.’

## Chapter Twenty-eight

And it is all true!

For the first days here by the hectic shore, the old man went wandering.

In delighted perplexity.

It is all true and every word of it.

He thought: Every single word that I magnificently dreamed up through the years and all. . . Why, here it's all come true.

Professor Tyler, rescued from the world of human beings on the very day of his death in Bournemouth in the early nineteen-seventies. . .

He could hardly believe his luck.

On the outside, to the untrained pair of eyes, he was just a shelled-out, hollowed-out wreck of a man, wrapped up in a herringbone coat and a wife-knitted scarf. He was all toggled out for a brisk morning walk in the winter woods.

Here on the dogworld – with its gorgeous seaside skies of candied lipstick pink and its rocks and crags and shores, all asparagus green – he was, of course, an alien freak, an oddity; a visiting cause for celebration.

His old heart jumped and jostled inside his wiry chest.

With excitement and glee because, at some deep-wired level he knew, down in his brittle bones, that he was meant to have died that morning, splashing and dropping in the frozen beck at the back of the Bournemouth bungalow.

Instead he was here, in a place he might have – had he been of a religious bent – thought of as heaven.

That dog had rescued him that day, and slipped him so safely, through a rent in the air, to this place. A world that had welcomed him. Reginald Tyler: home at last.

And why shouldn't the curmudgeon be quite at home here?

He wandered the beaches, the promenades, the shops that sold buckets and spades and souvenirs and all the nostalgic paraphernalia of holidays on the beach. And Reg thought, incredulously:

Why shouldn't I be entirely at home on this world? I made it all up. I covered every inch of it. Accounted for all of it.

All my laborious, handwritten notes, all my crazy and dogged invention, for all those interminable years.

This is my payoff. This is my reward.

He walked around the small town, that first week of his wondered-at, unhopd-for afterlife and he felt just like the creator.

This town looked just like Whitby between the wars.

Except for the fact that the colours were all different and the place was (of course) populated and run completely by poodles.

The Emperor had a modest palace in this town. It was a jade structure, set high on the damp cliffs overlooking the sea.

That afternoon he was lolling in his state room and taunting the Princess Margaret, just as he had for these past few days.

‘You would be hopeless running this world, anyway Margaret. You’ve got no idea about politics or history or anything.’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘You wouldn’t know where to start. To really rule, you have to have intellectual scope and breadth. You can’t just go round making up new laws willy-nilly to suit yourself.’

‘Ruling is in my blood,’ she snapped. ‘My mother managed perfectly well, and so would I.’

‘Your mother was a joke. She flounced around the place, like everything was a garden party. There’s more to it all than that.’

‘Well, I haven’t seen you doing much, these past few days.’

‘We’re having a crisis,’ said the Emperor stiffly. ‘We’re on full red alert. Thanks to you, anarchy could break out at any moment.’

‘Could it?’

‘Apparently.’

‘Why are you sitting around waiting, then?’

‘Because everyone is coming here. All the players in this ridiculous game are, even as we speak, heading in our direction.’

‘Oh.’

Then the Emperor very politely asked her if she fancied a spin around the town in his new hovercar. Which she did fancy, as it happened, after several days of being cooped up.

‘Good,’ he beamed. ‘Then we can keep an eye open for these visitors from another world. We don’t want them scaring everyone.’

Mida Slike's MIAOW copter was fast as well as sleek.

Before its startled occupants even knew it, they were homing in on the small seaside town where the Emperor kept his jade summer palace.

'Goodness!' said Flossie, craning to see out of the window. 'Are we really there already? Have we really travelled through space and time?'

Nöel sighed. 'Yes, we have. Awful, isn't it?'

'I think I'm getting a taste for it,' said Flossie.

Martha, the orange, elderly poodle, was still lying face down on the laminated wooden floor. She was moaning and shaking her head.

'Is your dog always so demonstrative?' Fitz asked Brenda.

'I've never seen her like this before,' Brenda said. 'And we've been together now for sixty years.'

'Sixty years?' cried Flossie. 'But you don't look a day over thirty, girl!'

Brenda looked pleased at this.

They peered out of the copter at the brilliant sunlight over the little bay. It was a delicate rose pink and yellow: exactly the colours of Turkish Delight, which made Flossie suddenly ravenous.

Mida Slike was conferring with her scarlet poodles.

They brought the copter down at the top of the town, in a church yard.

Mida Slike talked to them rather brusquely. 'We will, of course, be taking you, under arrest, to see the Emperor, for the crimes you have committed against the dogworld. In the meantime, I don't see why we shouldn't first have some lunch.'

They trekked down the hill to a bistro by the shore.

The prisoners breathed the cool sea air with relief, after the stuffy atmosphere of the copter.

'What is it that Nöel has that you want so badly?' Fitz asked Mida Slike.

She sighed and scowled at Coward, Who was breezing along unconcernedly.

'Shall I tell him, or shall you?'

Nöel produced a few sheets of manuscript paper from inside his jacket. He waved them at Fitz.

'What is it?'

'A song,' said Nöel. 'A song that I have written and one that is destined to become a huge hit success on more than one world.'

'A song?' said Flossie. 'All of this bother about a measly song?'

'An anthem,' said Mida Slike darkly. 'An anthem for the revolution that will cause untold chaos on this planet.'

‘Oh,’ said Fitz.

They sat themselves down at a long table under an awning at Mida’s selected bistro.

‘The song is called ‘Martha’,’ Noël explained, picking up the menu with a flourish.

In her chair, Martha was trembling and looking worried.

‘Is it all about you?’ asked Flossie gently.

‘Of course,’ said Noël. ‘My song is a fitting tribute to the hero of the revolution. Brenda Soobie’s poodle.’

Brenda elegantly crossed her legs. ‘Noël writes it for me, I sing it at the end of all my shows and it becomes a colossal hit. Then, years later, when John Fuchas films his multi-billion-dollar version of *The True History of Planets* he, of course, chooses it for the theme tune.’

‘Of course!’ cried Fitz. ‘I’ve already heard it! I’ve heard you sing it!’

Brenda nodded. ‘And it becomes a revolutionary anthem here. Martha becomes an elderly martyr.’

Martha was shaking her head and moaning still more.

‘And that’s why we have to put a stop to it,’ Mida Slike said. ‘We can’t have everyone eulogising Martha the revolutionary poodle all over the place. Ah, here’s the waiter.’

Flossie had already chosen, even before the golden-haired, sniffy-looking waiter approached them with his pad in his hand. He was clearly dumbstruck, at first, at the sight of dressed and upright people, but he was far too sophisticated to show it.

‘Salad Nicoise, I think,’ Flossie said.

They had several bottles of a pale green, very dry white wine.

‘I think this is the most civilised arrest I’ve ever been under,’ said Fitz, tucking into an overcrowded prawn omelette. The prawns here were rather larger than those he was used to.

‘Oh,’ said Noël airily. ‘I wouldn’t have it any other way. In my adventures, we always stop in time for lunch.’

‘Mine, too,’ said Mida.

Brenda said, ‘I’m rather out of the habit of having full-scale adventures. Ever since I took up my singing career.’

‘I don’t understand why you ever did that, Iris,’ Fitz said. ‘It’s quite a change of direction. . .’

She admonished him with a look. ‘Please call me Brenda, Fitz. You’ll only complicate matters.’

‘Hey,’ said Flossie suddenly, through a mouthful of boiled egg and tuna. ‘There’s another human being!’

It was true: coming up the cobbled lane from the prom, Reginald Tyler was shielding his eyes and glaring at them.

‘Whooo-oooh!’ cried Flossie. ‘Human being! Over here! Come and sit with us!’

Fitz nudged Martha. ‘I thought human beings were supposed to be rare on this planet?’

Martha gulped. ‘I don’t know what’s going on anymore!’

Flossie patted the seat next to her and the breathless old man in the herring-bone coat sat himself down stiffly.

‘Reginald Tyler,’ smiled Mida Slike. ‘This is a real pleasure.’ She splashed him a glass of green wine. ‘Which year did you leave to get here?’

‘1972,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ she smiled. ‘Right at the very end of your life, then?’

Tyler’s eyes boggled at her. He looked round at the others. ‘This is the dogworld,’ he stammered. ‘I’ve looked around for a week, and it’s all exactly as I described it in my book. Every little detail! All of it true.’ He blinked. ‘You’re Noël Coward!’ he accused Noël suddenly.

‘Yes,’ smiled Noël extending his hand. ‘Hullo, Mr Tyler. We’ve all come from 1960. We’ve just this minute arrived.’

But Tyler was muttering to himself again. ‘This is how I saw it all... when I rewrote the book in its final form... those months in the forties when I was convalescing and my face was growing back... this is how the dogworld appeared in my dreams... convincing me to write about it... Am I dead now? Is that where I am?’

Noël made a moue of displeasure. ‘Oh dear. Existential angst. Why don’t you order him something delightful off the menu, Flossie, dear? That might cheer him up.’

But they were interrupted then, by a peremptory voice, barking at them from the air through a megaphone.

The lunch party looked up to see the Emperor’s brand spanking new hovercar above their heads. The Emperor and the disgraced Princess Margaret were leaning over the side and staring at them.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ the Emperor shrieked and ranted. ‘Having lunch together! You’re all due at my palace!’ He glared at his scarlet guards, who had jumped up from their water bowls in mortification. ‘Come along at once! All of you! At once!’

## Chapter Twenty-nine

Anji watched John Fuchas's face as it streamed with frantic sweat.

Ron Von Arnim had, by now, successfully tied the director to the kitchen chair, and was sadistically letting his little toys bait him. The tiny purple skeleton men had clambered all over the rigid body of the director. They were ripping and shredding his clothes and flesh with their scimitars. A methodical brontosaurus was nipping at his trouser cuffs.

'Von Arnim,' Nöel insisted. 'This must stop!'

Von Arnim had been, however, reduced to guttural and bestial moans of pleasure.

'He won't listen to any of us,' Fritter said disgustedly. 'He won't stop now until Fuchas agrees to use his models for the "movie"!'.

'And I won't!' Fuchas shrieked. 'If someone invents the computer technology to make it look real, why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I use the most advanced and expensive effects available to all mankind? Why shouldn't I, eh? I'm John Fuchas! I can do anything!'

Anji's mouth dropped open. 'They're as bonkers as each other,' she said.

At that moment, something extraordinary happened.

A gash appeared in the fraught air of Fuchas's luxury Swedish-style kitchen. It unzipped suddenly, revealing a nebulous, shifting blur of light within.

Anji saw Nöel give a nod of appreciation at this outrageous sight.

Fuchas and Von Arnim, locked in their struggle, were quite oblivious.

Only Anji and Fritter stood looking astounded as first the Doctor, then Char and finally another, much, much younger Nöel Coward came striding out of nowhere into the kitchen.

'Doctor!' Anji burst out. She was utterly relieved to see him.

He grinned and grabbed her up in both arms.

'I wonder if you've been having as splendid a time as I have?' he said.

'Look around you!' she shouted. 'It's been absolutely bloody awful!'

Fritter and Char almost hugged each other, but both stopped themselves in time. 'Grrr,' said Char.

‘Grrr,’ said Fritter, though he couldn’t keep his pom-pommed tail from wagging.

‘It’s been hellish,’ shuddered Char.

‘Ditto,’ said Fritter.

‘What are all those horrible little creatures?’ gasped the Doctor.

But Anji was staring instead at the two Noël Cowards.

The younger one seemed to be taking the whole thing in his stride. Purposefully, he advanced on his older self. Then he appeared to walk straight into the space that that self was occupying. The shivering blue nimbus around the elder increased for a second, and then vanished: leaving just the younger Noël standing there.

‘Handy tip,’ he winked at Anji broadly. ‘Just in case you ever happen to bump into yourself at a party. That can be terribly embarrassing.’

Now Coward seemed redoubled in vitality.

‘Doctor,’ he said.

The Doctor was watching Von Arnim, who was cackling as Fuchas writhed in terror and the creatures swarmed over him.

‘We have to stop him!’ the Doctor cried.

‘There isn’t time,’ Coward snapped.

But the Doctor marched his way across the kitchen. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he asked the special-effects man.

‘Computer-generated effects!’ jeered Von Arnim, ‘They’re the devil’s work!’

‘Maybe,’ said the Doctor. Then he punched the old man in the jaw.

Von Arnim dropped where he stood.

‘Doctor,’ said Noël, ‘You’re using these strong-arm tactics rather a lot these days.’

The Doctor rubbed his knuckles ruefully. ‘Yes, I’m not sure what that’s about.’

They watched as Von Arnim’s vile homunculus army slowed and stilled mid-attack.

Fuchas gibbered and drooled his thanks to them.

The slash in the Fabric of Time and Space from 1942 sealed up noiselessly.

‘I’ll tell you what it is,’ said Noël, ‘It’s impatience in you, Doctor. You’re driving events on quickly. Easier just to punch Von Arnim’s lights out, rather than trying to outwit him.’

‘That’s true,’ said the Doctor. ‘But I get the feeling that we’ve an appointment elsewhere. Am I right?’

Fritter and Char groaned at this.

Anji knew the feeling. 'Somewhere else? Do we have to? Look, where's the TARDIS?'

'Thirty-six years ago,' said the Doctor. 'It got left behind. For now, we have to depend upon Noël and his magic pinking shears.'

'His what?' said Anji. She couldn't get used to the sight of the suddenly rejuvenated Noël in his dressing gown. Coward, meanwhile, was wagging his fabric scissors about in a very show-off manner.

'I would still like to know where you got them from,' said the Doctor.

'A very dear friend of mine who happens to be a singer of international repute on the cabaret circuit.'

'Oh yes?'

'She's got a poodle who I wrote a song about and she had a fantastic runaway success with it. Martha, the poodle's called.'

'And I take it,' said the Doctor, 'Martha hails, like Fritter and Char do, from the dogworld?'

'Of course,' said Noël. 'It was Brenda Soobie's poodle Martha who informed me in the first place of the terrible plight of the Princess of the dogworld.'

'Oh, we met her,' said Anji. 'She's awful.'

John Fuchas was staring at each of them in turn, his eyes wide.

'Awful she may be,' said Noël, 'But her mother was very cruelly slain. Martha was the dead Empress's handmaiden. She was rescued from the dogworld just in time and brought to earth, disguised as Brenda Soobie's pet pooch. One day Martha is destined to lead an uprising, a counter-revolution on that world. And her supporters will sing the song I wrote about her.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. 'I'd guessed all of that, actually.'

'You had?' said Anji.

'It was obvious,' said the Doctor, 'from my study of both the novel and the film. Which is how I knew just where to drop you all off.'

'Doctor, you astound me,' Anji told him.

'I try.'

'I pledged myself to helping Martha,' said Coward, 'to return the throne to the Princess Margaret. By fair means or foul.'

'But that's a diabolical plan!' Char suddenly spoke. 'You can't just go meddling in the affairs of our world!'

'Ssssh!' said Fritter.

Noël looked cagey all of a sudden. 'I must admit, things have gone rather awry.' He glared at the Doctor. 'Mostly through your intervention, as it happens.'

The Doctor smiled delightedly. 'I'm glad to be of service.'

But Noël's face was dark. 'One of my incarnations, myself from 1960, was in Las Vegas with Brenda Soobie and Martha. He's been kidnapped and taken along to the dogworld to face his fate...'

'And,' said the Doctor, 'I take it he's got Fitz and Flossie with him.'

Coward nodded. 'All of them together, dragged into space by that hag Mida Slike from MIAOW.'

'But she's dead!' said Anji. 'We saw her body, covered in tufts of poodle fur.'

'Members of MIAOW regularly fake their own deaths,' Noël sighed. 'Now, this is all an unutterable bore, and rather a dicey situation.'

'It is indeed,' said the Doctor.

'So,' Noël brandished his pinking shears again, 'I have decided that you are all coming with me to the dogworld, to ensure that my plan goes ahead. We are going to rescue my 1960s self and all the others and see that the revolution goes along swimmingly.' He snipped at the tense air. 'As I see it, you don't really have much choice.'

Char looked pleased at the sudden prospect of going home. Fritter didn't.

'I'm not helping you spread chaos,' said the Doctor darkly.

'Doctor,' Noël warned. 'I am a man who, because of the gifts conferred upon me by Brenda Soobie, can whistle up and down his own timeline. I can make a nips and tucks in history like no one can. I could alter the course of popular culture in far worse ways than you could imagine.'

The Doctor looked at him daggers. He paused. 'Very well. We'll come with you to the dogworld.'

'Doctor!' said Anji. 'You don't give in to blackmail like this!'

'He's doing it for a good cause, Anji,' Noël said. 'He's doing it to right all of these dreadful wrongs on the poodle planet.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, I'm not. I'm only doing this and going along with your hare-brained insanity because of the threat you have just made. There's nothing more dangerous than a man armed with knowledge and no respect for the web of time.'

'Web of time?' smiled Coward. 'Oh, really, Doctor. Do you really believe that semi-mystical nonsense?'

'You are an anarchist and a threat to everyone, man and dog,' the Doctor said. 'Everyone on this world and the dogworld. What's next, Noël? Rewrite *War and Peace* so it's about guinea pigs? Or *Blithe Spirit* as a starling vehicle for bottle-nosed dolphins?'

‘I wrote *Blithe Spirit* myself anyway,’ said Coward haughtily. ‘I can put as many dolphins as I like in it.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor. ‘So you did.’

John Fuchas’s eyes were still wide and staring.

The director of blockbuster movies watched as the bizarre intruders opened up another of those rents in the Very Fabric.

Stunned, he watched as they all disappeared through it, without so much as a backwards glance.

Then, John Fuchas was left alone, tied to his kitchen chair, in his luxury kitchen. Von Arnim was still unconscious on the lino and the plasticine models of monsters and mythological beasts were still quite quite still.

Until . . .

With horrible, creaking, gradual, almost stop-motion slowness, the homunculi started to come back to life . . .

‘Oh,’ said Fuchas, Oscar nominee. ‘Shittitty doo dah.’

## Chapter Thirty

When he was a very old man, and right before he actually died, Noël Coward lived in a penthouse in Jamaica.

Retired, he was tanned and beatific: the precise colour of crème caramel.

His house was art deco and in pastel ice-cream shades. From the terrace, high on a hill looking over the bay, he could look out and see what ships were sailing in. He could even see who was driving up the winding road, up the hill from the shore.

Across the valley on another hill, there was another swanky villa, and this was owned by another rich English writer in his dotage.

William Freer, however, wasn't famous and well loved throughout the world. No one had heard from or about this gnarled old creature in decades. There were rumours that he had come by his sudden riches by dubious means, though Coward was too polite to ask him outright if that was true.

On the last day of Coward's life the two of them were fussing around on the terrace, preparing the table for lunch.

Out in the bay, the royal yacht was securely berthed.

From here they would be able to watch the stately progress of the Queen Mother's car as it left the shore and came here. She was due for lunch at one precisely.

Even knowing that this was his last day on Earth, Noël felt surprisingly chipper. He was pleased that the Queen Mum was popping in. He'd known her for years, of course and it would be pleasant to see her and catch up, have a few pink gins and engage in their customary ribald banter.

He was making a particular kind of curry, to be served in coconuts, rather than in dishes. A rather novel little recipe he had found in a book.

Even Freer's dour, satanic mien couldn't put him out of his buoyant mood.

'Oh, do cheer up, William,' snapped Noël. 'It's not everyday you get to have lunch with an old queen.'

Freer grunted. He glared at the table and then down the hill. In the bay there were crowds.

'The car's setting off now,' he said.

Indeed, you could see it; glinting silver in the oppressive sun.

‘A shame your new girlfriend couldn’t join us,’ Noël smiled.

Freer shot him a look of sheer dislike. ‘My fiancée, actually,’ he said.

Noël raised an eyebrow. ‘You’re going to marry Enid?’

‘Only to get my hands on Tyler’s money, of course.’

‘Of course. The old man must have left a fair bit.’

‘Even more than he knew,’ said Freer, almost smacking his lips. ‘If this film gets off the ground.’

‘Oh, well, you know,’ said Noël. ‘Hollywood. It’s all very tricky in that world.’

Enid was still stuck on board her ship, which had been delayed somewhere out at sea. Secretly, and despite the idea of the fortune she brought with her, Freer was dreading the arrival of the merry widow. She was a vulgar and silly woman, and he might have to put some serious thought to having her murdered or cursed, once the marriage was legal.

The cat had jumped on to the Queen Mother’s place setting.

It was giving her coconut an enthusiastic licking.

Noël squawked and shooed it away. ‘Oh, hang. . . look at that! We can’t give the Queen Mum a coconut that the cat has licked!’

‘Well, I’m not having that one,’ said Freer, shuddering.

They peered into the valley, to see how far the cavalcade had come through the lustrous green of the trees, up the red dirt track.

‘Oh, she’ll never know,’ said Noël.

They both sat back, to gather their energy.

‘Who’d have thought it, eh?’ cackled the ancient Freer. ‘That the two of us would be living like kings? In all the exotic locations, with royalty visiting. . .’

Noël shrugged. ‘Oh, I always knew my life was going to be like that.’

‘Oh.’

‘But I bet it’s a surprise for you, William. I mean, you’re a nobody, really, aren’t you? And you only ever came by what you have now by a combination of villainy, deception, murder, subterfuge and black magic, didn’t you?’

‘That’s true,’ nodded Freer.

‘Well, I’m sure that’s a lot of hard work,’ said Noël. They clinked their pink gins together. ‘Cheers.’

‘Yes,’ said William Freer. ‘I’ve been much, much more villainous than you have ever suspected.’

‘Oh, yes?’

'Far, far worse, Nöel.' Suddenly he chuckled and looked very pleased with himself. 'Remember that whole scam I invented, to interfere with the film they're going to make in the future of Tyler's book?'

'How could I forget? How we made them change it all... so it was all about poodles instead? Oh, we were naughty, weren't we?'

'Diabolical,' said Freer.

'Well, it was all for a good cause,' said Nöel. 'It was all to put to rights the terrible and shocking things that went on on that dogworld. Anyone else with the know-how would have done the same. We couldn't have let that poor princess be killed and forgotten. Absolutely not!'

Freer smiled. He peered over the terrace again, to see that the Queen Mother's car was now approaching, through the rippling, midday heat, the impressive cast-iron gates of Nöel's Jamaican villa.

'That was the story, dear Nöel,' grinned Freer, 'as far as you understood it. That is, as far as I let you understand it.'

'Whatever do you mean, you strange man?'

'I mean, I hoodwinked you.'

'Hoodwinked? Me?'

'Indeed.'

'You dog.'

'It's true.'

'I don't believe it.'

'You ought to.'

'I see.'

'I thought I had better tell you, Nöel, before...'

'No, please. Do stop. I must absorb this.'

Freer snickered at him.

'Are you telling me that I did quite the wrong thing, in helping you to spring chaos upon the unsuspecting web of time?' Nöel demanded.

'I am,' said Freer.

'Then, dash it all.'

The gates to the villa's drive were swinging open. The car was on the last, gliding stretch up the hill.

'You see -' said Freer.

'Oh, please do not preface your explanation with that ghastly phrase, "you see". I am about to be lectured with a whole set of facts of which I was previously unaware. Please do not patronise me en route.'

‘All right,’ said Freer. ‘The Princess whom you have been so keen to help back on to her dogworld throne. . . she is quite, quite wicked.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Noël.

‘Horribly so,’ said Freer. ‘And she has been my secret lover since 1932.’

Noël spat out his mouthful of pink gin in spluttering shock.

‘She got me to rope you into helping her, by making up a whole lot of sentimental twaddle and you fell for it.’

‘Her lover?’ Noël gasped. ‘You’ve a poodle for a paramour?’

Freer flushed. ‘And there’s something else you don’t know. Now that you have been so successful, throughout your non-synchronous and charmed and gilded life, in helping the Princess of the dogworld back to power by causing that revolution through the release of that trashy film. . . now she has been able to go ahead with the next stage of the plan.’

‘Which is?’ choked out Noël.

But by then, the Queen Mother’s Silver Ghost had slid into the end of the driveway, pulling to a gentle halt by the terrace.

Noël got up stiffly. ‘We’ll talk about this sensibly later, Freer. Now, however, I have royalty to attend to.’

A chauffeur had stepped out and was opening the back door of the long, lavish vehicle. Noël went hurrying over, with Freer in delighted pursuit.

‘Listen. . .’ Freer was hissing.

‘Not now, dear,’ said Noël.

‘It’s important!’ Freer suddenly shouted, and Noël turned on him with a face like thunder.

‘Not as important as an old queen for lunch!’ he bellowed.

‘The Princess’s plan!’ Freer cackled. ‘It was, once she was back in power. . . to supplant the entire British Royal Family!’

Noël flushed with patriotic fervour. ‘Do you mind lowering your voice?’ he asked, indignantly.

‘Ha!’ Freer cried, and bolted for the Queen Mother’s car. ‘Come out! Come out! Show him!’

Noël was scandalised.

‘This is tantamount to treason,’ he gasped.

But then the figure he was fully expecting to be the Queen Mother stepped lightly out of the back of her car.

She was in an outmoded Norman Hartnell frock in lime green and yellow pastel, true enough. And there were enough feathers on her hat to stuff two pillows.

But it wasn't the Queen Mother wearing all that opulent tat.

It was a poodle with hands. It was the triumphant-looking, feral-looking, blazing-charcoal-eyed Princess of the dogworld. She was chomping on a che-root and blowing smoke into Coward's horrified face.

'Darling,' she said to William Freer.

'Darling,' Freer said, embracing her.

Coward swung on his heel and hurried away to his villa.

On the very last day of his gorgeous life, the whole world had chosen to go mad.

## Chapter Thirty-one

The first thing that the Emperor did was attempt to dismiss Mida Slike.

She rounded on him, flushed red, furious; the scar on her face standing out a livid purple.

‘You have a contract with MIAOW,’ she thundered.

Flossie was impressed at the way she stood her ground with a royal poodle. The critic didn’t seem at all intimidated by their surroundings. Flossie herself had long ago succumbed to awe.

Mida Slike, she told herself, you deserve better than this. You’ve got a Chair in Bastardisation. You’re the top critic in your field. Now that that horrible aphid thing is out of the way. . . But Mida Slike was demoralised by this whole affair. She wanted to be back aboard her copter and leaving the dogworld forever.

The hovercar had brought them to the courtyard of the jade palace, high above the thrashing sea. They were surrounded by Imperial red dogs and shuffled together like prisoners. The Emperor was lordly and self-satisfied: knowing he had won.

‘You owe us,’ said Mida Slike, in a dangerously low voice. ‘You hired us to see that this movie was never made. That Coward’s song never became a hit. We’ve fulfilled our side of the bargain.’

‘Hmm,’ said the Emperor. ‘I must admit –’ he submitted to one of his lackeys, who was heaping his robes of state back over his shoulders, and setting the royal crown on to his head. ‘I must admit that you’ve been more successful in the task I set you than that insect thing I also hired.’

Mida stiffened. ‘Jag? You hired Alid Jag?’

The Emperor chortled. ‘Through the same agency. You people are ten a penny.’

Mida’s mind reeled. ‘Jag and I were working for the same person? But he was trying to kill me!’

‘Secreting foul poisons in your soup and all that malarkey,’ agreed the Emperor. ‘I thought if you could manage to bump each other off en route, I might be spared the expense of actually paying you.’

'Where is Jag now?'

'He's in 1960,' said Fitz. 'Stuck in a lift in Las Vegas, last time we saw him.'

The Emperor glared at Fitz appraisingly. He frowned at his leopardskin suit. 'Ah, yes. You lot were the ones aboard my dogstation. I'm not sure what to do with you lot.'

Flossie broke in. 'Oh, please, your majesty, don't do anything to harm Fitz. He's only a boy. He doesn't know what he's saying!'

'Yes, I do,' said Fitz.

The captured Princess of the dogworld couldn't hold herself back any longer. 'They were acting on my behalf. They were my champions, travelling to the Earth. I met them aboard the dogstation and they fell in thrall to me...'

'No, we didn't,' said Fitz. 'I never fall in thrall.'

The Emperor sighed. 'We could stand out here bickering all day. Shall we go in?'

But the ancient, shambling Professor Tyler stepped forward.

'You are the Emperor...' he gasped. 'I know you... I wrote about you. You were my anti-hero. My main protagonist. The arrogant, amoral pup who set off on his quest to depose the Empress...'

The Emperor bristled with pride. 'Reginald Tyler, are you?'

The old man grunted and nodded.

'You've caused a great deal of trouble here, Professor Tyler. I've read your book. I caused you to be brought here, just to take a look at you. And you're not very impressive really, are you? Just some shabby old professor. Fancy, you being able to cause so much bother on my world.'

'You brought me here?' Tyler gasped.

'On the last day of your life on Earth.'

'But I thought I had come to heaven! I thought I had been rescued!'

The Emperor shrugged. 'I was just being curious, really. Wanting to try out a little trans-temporal kidnapping. It worked out OK, really. Here you are.'

Tyler was just staring at the diminutive ruler. He couldn't believe how casual he was being. Tyler stammered: 'I know you... I know what goes on in your mind, I know all of your past... everything, your hopes and fears and your every move... how can one being know another so well?'

The Emperor looked, for just a moment, discomfited.

'Never mind him, your majesty,' said Coward. 'He's still a little disoriented. He's probably gone quite giddy.' Coward fancied himself as a bit of an ambassador and diplomat, Fitz noted. He must be quite used to these sort of social gatherings.

But, by now, the Emperor was gazing at the still-quivering Martha. ‘Our martyr to the cause.’ He glanced at the Princess. ‘Do you remember this one, Margaret? Your mother’s handmaiden?’

The Princess nodded. ‘She looked after me. She brought me up as her own. After my mother was slain, Martha was everything to me.’ Tears of frustration rolled down her face. ‘Won’t you let me go to her? Embrace her?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the Emperor.

‘Margaret,’ Martha said, at last looking up. ‘We’ve done everything we can for you. We’ve had a really good go. But it’s hopeless, I fear. . .’

The Princess’s face was raging with confused emotions. ‘Why did you leave me here on the dogworld? Why did you leave me to fend for myself, a political prisoner, a pawn in the Emperor’s sadistic game? Why did you go to Earth?’

Brenda Soobie shuffled forth in her bare feet. She looked divine, in the early evening light, in her backless, strapless evening dress. ‘It was me who took her to Earth,’ she said. ‘Martha has been my constant companion for sixty years.’

‘Your pet,’ said Martha, with just a hint of bitterness.

‘Martha!’ gasped Brenda. She clutched her pearls.

‘It’s true,’ Martha sighed. ‘You, like everyone else on the Earth, regard us as subhuman, even if we do have hands. I have been your pet and your slave all this time, Brenda Soobie. I’ve helped you rise to the top of your chosen career. You would still be no one without me. You’d still be singing in the bars down in Leith Docks if it wasn’t for me.’

Brenda looked shocked at the vehemence, the slight growl, of Martha’s tone. Something had happened to her little dog, changing her. . . she was all bitterness and gall and not at all the obedient, loyal and wise little Martha that Brenda knew so well.

Martha said: ‘I allowed you to take me from this world to the Faith for one reason only, Brenda. And that was so I could manipulate you. Make you sing the song that I would make Coward write. It was all to help the Princess and her cause.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Brenda gasped. ‘You’ve been my friend, my adviser. . .’

Martha tossed her head, as the scarlet poodles lined them up, and started to lead them into the jade palace.

‘Never trust a poodle, Brenda. Never trust one of us.’

It wasn’t quite a cell they were taken to, but it might as well have been. There were guards on the door and they were trapped here until the Emperor saw fit to see them again.

The room was furnished with expensive silk cushions and low settees. Fitz flung himself down thinking: This is a world organised and run by dogs. It was much tidier than he would have expected. In fact, it was much tidier than anywhere he had ever lived.

‘Brenda, my dear,’ said Noël. ‘Do forgive Martha her abruptness.’

Brenda’s eyes were filled with tears. ‘You knew more about her plans than I did.’

Noël stiffened. ‘I have been a very foolish old man.’

‘You have?’

‘I’ve been too easily swayed by poodleworld rhetoric.’

‘You have?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Oh, Noël,’ Brenda sobbed. ‘I think we’ve all been pawns.’

‘I misused the gift you gave me, Brenda. The ability to travel up and down my own lifetime. I’ve used it to make mischief on a vast scale...’

Mida Slike laughed out loud. ‘So you admit it, anyway! You admit that you were wrong! And it’s up to the likes of me to sort it all out!’

‘Wrong,’ came a new – though familiar – voice, echoing through their jade-walled apartment. ‘It’s up to the likes of me to sort it all out.’

They all whirled around then, to see that a fissure had opened up in the Very Fabric of Time and Space. It hissed and fizzed and frayed out gorgeously, revealing a gaggle of silhouettes, stepping out from unreality, into the room.

## Chapter Thirty-two

The Doctor firmly believed that he had attempted most forms of transport. Nothing was new to him. He couldn't get seasick or develop a fear of flying or succumb to the vertiginous terrors of the time-space vortex.

But this mode of transport – the ease of travel between times, places and dimensions that Coward so blithely practised – was a completely new one on him.

The small party had stepped out of John Fuchas's luxury Swedish-style kitchen, through the rent in the Very Fabric, and then they were swimming through a substance that felt very much like warm milk, except that it wasn't wet and it was coloured bright blue.

The Doctor felt for and clutched Anji's hand as they swam with the flow, following in Coward's authoritative wake, through the scintillating morass. Beside them, Fritter and Char were keeping up a laborious doggy paddle.

Char was saying: 'Best not to think about it too much. Just follow the rest of them and pray we're heading for somewhere sensible...'

His words echoed weirdly through the silken dimension.

'Oh, yeah?' said Fritter. 'And what are the chances of that, then?'

Coward forged on, with his pinking shears at the ready slicing and snipping at the fabric that unfurled and fluttered about them.

Anji gripped the Doctor's fingers harder.

Coward looked at them. 'It's terribly easy to become lost in all of this,' he said. 'Luckily, I received expert coaching in negotiating these highways and byways...'

His body seemed to stretch, warp and fold in on itself. Anji blinked and realised it was happening to all of them. Noël winked at her reassuringly.

'But where is this?' she asked. 'The vortex?'

Noël shook his head. 'We're in the warp and the weft of the Very Fabric. A much subtler place than the vortex. Being in the vortex... well, that's just like being on the M25, or something. No, we're between the Very Threads...'

The Doctor looked miffed at Coward's slight to the vortex: it had become his ostensible home.

‘From here,’ sighed Nöel, ‘we can see all the possible eventualities we might want to. All the possible futures and pasts. All the events, large and small, that link the human world to the poodle world. It’s a very dizzying spectacle.’

The Doctor said, ‘It’s something you should never have been messing around in. This whole thing could unravel. . . like a whole load of knitting.’

‘Oh,’ said Nöel. ‘Your type are always so protective about the status quo.’

‘My type?’ frowned the Doctor.

‘From here,’ said Nöel, ‘we could enter a version of the galaxy in which everything was reversed. Where the poodles made films about human beings and worried the governments of Earth. Or a world in which Brenda Soobie never had a poodle, never became a star. Or where John Fuchas had never heard of Reg Tyler, and his last film was actually a cowboy picture. But then the rulers of the planet of the cowboys became alarmed. . .’

‘Planet of the cowboys?’ said Fritter.

‘Nothing’s impossible,’ said Nöel. ‘All those worlds are here.’

Anji couldn’t believe how languidly Nöel talked, how he seemed to swim so leisurely through the Warp and Weft. He looked immaculate, hardly ruffled. He was evidently quite used to wandering about here.

‘Look,’ he said mildly, and they all peered through the misty threads of yarn.

They weren’t alone.

Other Cowards were floating backwards and forwards through the strange landscape. Old Cowards, middle-aged Cowards, young Cowards, skilfully going about their various businesses. Each was in a different, pin-neat suit, some with cravats, others with dicky bows. One or two of them even waved to the small, bewildered party. Amongst the many Cowards trotted poodles of all descriptions, every possible colour and shade. They tottered about on their slim, shaved legs as easily as if they were walking in the park.

‘It’s a conduit between dimensions,’ said the Doctor, ‘but one exclusively for poodles. . . and a thousand Nöel Cowards!’

‘So that’s how you managed to be such a good multi-tasker,’ gasped Anji.

Their Nöel nodded. ‘Jack of All Trades. And Master of all.’

They paused then, as the oldest Coward of all sailed regally by, on a golden chair backed with shining, unfurled angel wings. His legs were crossed and his hands neatly folded upon his lap: but he wore a very determined expression indeed as he floated by them.

‘Oh, the poor Queen Mother,’ he was muttering. ‘Oh, the poor dear. The whole Royal Family! So brutally deposed!’

‘That’s the oldest me,’ Noël said. ‘On the day of his death. You often see him tootling up and down. I wonder where he’s off to.’

‘So you don’t know everything,’ said the Doctor.

‘Goodness, no,’ Noël laughed. ‘Where would the fun be, if you knew everything?’

‘So you don’t know how this is going to work out?’ Fritter barked.

‘Of course not,’ snapped Noël. He wielded his pinking shears again, slicing open a particularly knotty skein of fabric. The eldest Coward was vanishing into the distance. ‘What would be the point of that?’

‘I’d just feel a bit happier,’ sighed Char, ‘if someone knew. I’m a little bit worried about this. . .’

Noël peered into the new aperture he had made. ‘Ah,’ he smiled, ‘This could be it. After you, Doctor?’

‘Oh, Noël,’ Brenda sobbed. ‘I think we’ve all been pawns.’

‘I misused the gift you gave me, Brenda. The ability to travel up and down my own lifetime. I’ve used it to make mischief on a vast scale. . .’

Mida Slike laughed out loud. ‘So you admit it, anyway! You admit that you were wrong! And it’s up to the likes of me to sort it all out!’

‘Wrong,’ came a new – though familiar – voice, echoing through their jade-walled apartment. ‘It’s up to the likes of me to sort it all out.’

They all whirled around then, to see that a fissure had opened up in the Very Fabric of Time and Space. It hissed and fizzed and frayed out gorgeously, revealing a gaggle of silhouettes, traipsing out from unreality into the room.

A tall figure with wild, flowing hair was stepping through and grinning. He straightened up his waistcoat and his long velvet coat.

Fitz’s eyes were out on stalks.

‘It’s me!’ the emergent figure grinned. ‘Hullo, everyone!’

‘Doctor!’

The Doctor was followed by Anji, Fritter, Char and, lastly, the younger Noël Coward.

‘Quite a party we’ve got here!’ the Doctor laughed, and went round hugging them all. There was a flurry of excitement and tangled limbs. Mida Slike recoiled from his touch.

‘Doctor,’ said Fitz urgently, ‘this is Brenda Soobie. . . um, she. . .’

‘Brenda,’ grinned the Doctor, and grabbed her up in both arms.

She winced and stared at him, stepping back. ‘It’s been so long, Doctor,’ she said uncertainly, her eyes darting, trying to take the fact of him in.

'Has it?' he frowned heavily. 'Have we met before?'

'He won't remember,' said Fitz. 'I warned you.'

'I came and stayed with you for a while,' she said. 'In the nineteen-eighties.'

The Doctor stared at her. 'I've never seen you before in my life.'

The others gasped as the younger Coward strode towards his 1960s self. They surveyed each other very gravely.

'You let yourself be kidnapped and taken to the dogs' home.'

'It's been ghastly.'

They put their wrinkled brows together and suddenly merged into one evanescent figure, and then solidified, looking younger and more vital again. There were one or two gasps of surprise at this.

Anji said: 'Well, the gang's all here, again.'

And what a gang they made.

The Doctor, Fitz and Anji were reunited at last, as they always knew they would be. Flossie was smiling at them proudly.

Mida Slike was standing to one side, scowling.

Brenda Soobie was swarming with all kinds of emotion, without even Martha to turn to. She wanted to run to the Doctor and explain everything to him, to fling herself on to him for protection. But she held herself back, quivering with pent-up tension.

Martha was sulking, and looking sniffily at Fritter and Char.

Reginald Tyler was going through an epistemological crisis in the corner.

And Noël Coward took charge.

'Everyone,' he said. 'I think we appear to have reached what you might call. . . a dramatic crisis.'

'Oh, yes?' said the Doctor.

'A denouement,' he smiled, relishing his pronunciation of the word.

'Oh,' said the Doctor. 'Good.'

'Look,' Coward told them all simply, and nodded at the slash in the Fabric through which he had recently passed.

Another version of him had appeared there.

This was the very old Coward. He was waving his own pair of pinking shears feebly and sitting on a golden throne. The angel wings were spread out either side of him as if he had floated down from heaven.

'You followed us through,' said his younger self. 'All this time, this was where you were heading. This moment.'

The old man nodded heavily. He cleared his throat and shot his cuffs, as if readying himself to make an announcement.

'I haven't much time,' he warned them all, as they stared at him. He was clearly on his last legs. 'Today's the day I die, I'm afraid. I'm about to snuff it and then I'll whistle back to my birth and do it all again.' He gave a feeble chuckle. 'People ask me in interviews whether I would do it all again. And the fact is, I do. Again and again. That's the price of the gift you bestowed on me, Brenda. Or, I should call you, Iris.'

Brenda blinked.

The Doctor looked at her, with a strange frown.

'What is it you are here to tell us?' asked the younger Coward.

'Oh yes,' said the elder. 'I have a little revelation for you, about William Freer. Something I've just discovered, on the very last day of my life.'

They all waited. 'Well?' said the Doctor. 'Go on.'

The eldest Coward had nodded off for a second. 'Hmm? Oh yes. The revelation about Freer. Well. . . He isn't a very nice man.'

Tyler snapped, 'You took your time in finding out! He melted my face off! It took three months to grow back! He perverted my great work!'

The elderly Noël nodded sagely. 'But I thought he was doing it because the Princess deserved to be helped. I thought we were engaged in something worth doing: righting a great injustice. Freer made me believe the Princess was worthy of our love and our help. But she isn't. She never was. We were all hoodwinked, my dears: by a satanist and a royal poodle. It's very shaming, but there it is. The two of them are as wicked as each other. And what is more, they have been lovers for years.'

Everyone looked rather surprised by this news.

'Lovers?' gasped Fritter.

'Lovers?' cried Fitz. They stared at each other, appalled.

'Where is Freer now?' asked the Doctor.

'With the Emperor and the Princess,' Noël told him. 'Hello Doctor, nice to see you again. It seems a lifetime since we met in Mayfair.'

'When Nightingales Sang,' smiled the Doctor. 'It was indeed a long time ago. Can you let us out of here?'

The old man and his angel-wing chair were fading away, being drawn back into the rent in the undulating fabric. Before he vanished from view he gave a swift click of his gnarled fingers. The room's door clicked magically open behind them. The elderly Noël smiled beatifically one last time, and that smile seemed to hang, by itself, in mid air, after he had gone. Then the gap sealed itself up and they were free to hurry out.

‘Come along, come along!’ urged the Doctor, ‘There’s quite a few things to sort out yet!’

The Emperor found himself shrinking back on his throne-cushion. He gave a small, concerned whimper.

He had always known that the Princess Margaret was capable of employing great and terrible sorcery. The knowledge and the talent had been in their family for years. The gift had been passed down quietly, surreptitiously, on the side of the bitches.

Now she was using it. A small demonstration, she said. She wanted to show him her powers. Show him that she ought to have the throne.

‘With these powers,’ she said ominously, ‘we poodles can accomplish anything.’

Like a stage magician asking for volunteers, she called forth three of his scarlet guards for assistance. They glanced at him worriedly, and the Emperor nodded his equally worried approval.

The Princess fixed them with her balefully malevolent stare and swiftly put them into a trance.

They swayed on the spot, transfixed by her.

‘What are you doing to them?’

‘Nothing bad,’ she said. ‘It’s only the ancient magic of the dogworld. It’s just the same as when you travel and transport people through time, your majesty. Though you use that as a silly parlour trick. We poodles have vast, incredible talents – and they can be used for far greater things. . .’

‘Just like your mother,’ he said. ‘She had similar delusions. That’s why I had to do away with her. She was doing very bad things indeed.’

The Princess snorted and started to concentrate.

Tendrils of shimmering ectoplasm came sliding off the guards’ snouts. Their faces were melting off, turning into this cobwebby, candy-flossy substance, and forming a cloud in mid air.

The Emperor was horrified to see his guards drop unconscious, faceless, to the floor.

Princess Margaret stood before the glowing cloud she had summoned into being, and she was calling out to it: ‘Come forth, my lover! Come forth from the Earth and the mists of the past!’

Who was she calling to? The Emperor was frozen with fear.

Within the cloud, the smart, malignant form of William Freer was coalescing.

‘My lover!’ the Princess cried, as he stepped into the room and looked around with great interest.

‘Darling!’ he smiled.

‘I have brought you, at last, to the dogworld!’

He peered around, rather impressed.

The Emperor’s hackles were up. ‘What is this person you have brought into my palace?’

‘He’s my lover,’ she said. ‘And he has been for years.’

William Freer looked proud.

‘But he’s a human being!’

‘He has worked very hard on my behalf,’ she snapped. ‘It is down to Freer that the “movie” was ever made. It is down to Freer that Reginald Tyler ever found out about the dogworld. And it is Freer who is responsible for the poodles eventually deposing the entire Royal Family of the United Kingdom!’

The Emperor looked shocked. ‘You’re going to invade them?’

‘Of course!’ she laughed.

‘And rule with this... human creature as your consort?’

Freer grinned. ‘Naturally, she is. That is why she has called me here. We will rule both worlds together. That is how it’s always meant to be. That was the promise darling Margaret made me, all those years ago, when I first called her up, during my first Black Mass... Back then, I had no idea she would change my life so much... I just thought she was a talking poodle. But between us, our love has brought us the thrones of two worlds...’

Suddenly the Princess looked sly. ‘Actually, William. That’s something I wanted to talk to you about.’

‘Yes, darling?’ he simpered.

‘Um, yes,’ she growled, as if she were about to broach a very difficult subject indeed. ‘You see, I’ve given it some thought and... really, well, I think I would be happier all round if I ruled both worlds by myself. That is, just me, having sole rulership and queendom of both the humanworld and the dogworld. That is, ahm, without you, in fact.’

Freer had turned white. ‘Without me? But Margaret... you promised and pledged your undying love and... everything... you said...’

‘Yes, yes,’ she said brusquely, waving one liver-spotted hand. ‘I said all sorts of things. But, really, couldn’t you see that was just to get my own way? Honestly. You surely couldn’t have been taken in? Not a tricky customer like you. You’re a vile black magician, Freer! How could you be so gullible?’

His shoulders slumped. ‘Because I loved you. That’s how.’

The Emperor said: 'She takes in everyone, Freer. She's evil!'

'Yes,' said Freer miserably. 'I think I see that now.'

The Princess was looking terribly pleased with herself.

Freer turned to her. 'So then why did you call me here? Why did you summon me through time and space? Just so you could tell me that you were dumping me?'

The Princess grinned, revealing her savage, needle-like teeth. 'No,' she murmured. 'It was...'

Suddenly the Emperor had to hide his eyes as the Princess leapt on to her erstwhile lover's shoulders.

'... It was to rip out your throat!' she howled.

A great gout of the black magician's blood splashed on to the marble flooring.

The Emperor hid his face in his hands and moaned.

William Freer's dying, gurgling cries echoed and softly faded away, rolling across the throne room and out over the balcony that surveyed the town.

Princess Margaret licked the bloody froth and slobber from her lips. 'That's him sorted out, anyway,' she said mildly.

The Emperor slowly opened his eyes again and regarded her with horror.

'Are you ready to give up?' she asked him.

'Never!'

She laughed. 'But out there... out in your precious dogworld, pirate copies of that "movie" will be doing a roaring trade. The poodles will be learning the truth about how you came by your power...'

'They will be loyal to me... ' he said.

'No they won't,' she said. 'They'll see you for the bloodthirsty upstart you really are. And then it will be only a matter of time before I'm restored to my rightful place. The truth will out, you know. It always does.'

'It's not the truth,' snapped the Emperor. 'You made it all up.'

'The truth is whatever I make it,' said the Princess. She looked down at William Freer, who was lying dead at her feet, his throat a mass of mangled flesh and his black blood congealing in a frightful pool on the marble. 'Or the truth is whatever I force fools like this to make it become.'

'You killed him... after he helped you...'

'I couldn't leave him around to tell the tale,' she shrugged. 'Now, pass me your crown, would you?'

'I won't give in to you,' said the Emperor. 'I wish I'd had you put down years ago.'

'You never had the balls,' she yapped smugly.

There was a sudden, great crash as the throne room's heavy doors were flung open.

'But we do,' came a voice from behind them. 'We've got the balls, Princess Margaret.'

Fritter and Char had arrived.

Both the Emperor and the Princess stared at them, open-mouthed.

'Who dares to interrupt business of state?' demanded the Emperor, though, truth be told, he was quite relieved.

Char came bounding in, ahead of the rest of them, a little wild about the eyes and clutching a VHS dogworld/humanworld compatible video tape. Fritter was padding along behind him, looking a little less sure of himself, and overawed to be in the Emperor's presence. He was wondering whether letting Char have his tape was such a good idea. It had already caused enough bother. But Char had been manic ever since they had stepped between the Very Fabric: Fritter knew nothing would put him off this final confrontation.

'We're here to stop you,' Char growled.

'Oh,' laughed the Princess. The laugh turned into a vile sneer. 'The archivists still loyal to the Emperor. I knew you two were trouble. What are you going to do?'

'I should kill you,' Char said flatly. 'I am, after all, a double agent. I'm licensed to tear out throats.'

Princess Margaret raised an eyebrow at the Emperor.

'It's true, actually,' the Emperor said.

'Well,' she smiled. 'I'm shaking in my bootees.'

'I think, first,' put in Fritter, 'the Emperor should see what she has done. We should put before him the evidence of how she has tampered with *The True History of Planets*.'

The Princess clapped her spindly hands delightedly. 'Yes! Let's! Why don't you show the Emperor what I and my poor lover have accomplished!'

They all stared at the gory remains of William Freer.

'Evil,' said Char, shaking his head.

'There's a TV and video in that corner,' said the Emperor in a tired sort of voice. He waved a hand at Fritter. 'Drag it over so we can watch, would you, Archivist Fritter? And mind you don't slip on all the blood.'

Fritter hurried off to do the Emperor's bidding, pleased that he had remembered his name.

Char was telling the Princess, in a low, gravelly tone: 'I should slay you now, for all the bother you've caused.'

But they were interrupted again at that point, by the others, stumbling into the throne room.

'Guards!' cried the Emperor, backing away, trembling uncertainly as they all filed in.

'Char!' cried the Doctor. 'Stop this at once! There is to be no more bloodshed!'

Guards were at last pouring into the state room, a vivid, bounding streak of red.

'Wow,' said Fitz. 'It's all happening in here.'

Flossie had seen the corpse of Freer and the faceless poodles. She gave a wail of dismay. Brenda tried to give her a futile hug.

'Freer's dead. . .' muttered Nöel. 'She's killed him. . .'

'Why's Fritter putting the TV on?' asked Anji, and they all looked.

'Ah,' laughed the Princess. 'Now you'll see! Now you'll see the truth!'

Fritter slipped the tape inside the machine. It gave an efficient clunk and whirr and they all crowded round to study the flickering, snowstormed screen.

'*The True History of Planets,*' mused the Doctor thoughtfully. 'I wonder. . .'

'Oh, not again,' groaned Anji, who hadn't been that enthralled by the thing in the first place.

They watched the credits roll in breath-bated silence. The title flashed up, the starscapes unscrolled and the Princess Margaret looked very pleased with herself.

That is, she did look very pleased with herself, until the film proper began.

It was quite, quite different to what it had previously been.

They all stiffened and frowned as the tape played on, regardless of their shock and surprise.

'But. . . it's nothing like it!' cried Fitz at last, voicing all of their thoughts in one. He felt like the boy who had pointed at the Emperor's bare arse.

There wasn't a single dog in the movie.

The first few scenes played through and there wasn't a poodle to be seen.

Instead there were elves, dwarves, wizards and pixies. They were running around and hitting each other with swords and big sticks. They were doing magic and learning about curses and setting off on long, gruelling quests. Elves and wizards and gnomes.

Everything but poodles, in fact.

It wasn't what Princess Margaret had expected at all.

'NNOOOOoooo!' she shrieked, frothing at the mouth again. She flung herself at the TV and knocked it over backwards, where it exploded on the marble

floor in a puff of green smoke. ‘Nooo!’ she howled again, tearing at her coifed hair. She pointed a rigid finger at the interlopers. ‘One of you meddling, time-travelling bastards has ruined it all! You’ve bugged up everything! All my fantastic plans and schemes!’

She threw back her head and screamed with frustration.

‘I think you’ll find,’ said the Doctor, ‘that history has been set back on its rightful course. Reginald Tyler wrote about elves and pixies and dwarfs. Not poodles. Never poodles. It was you who were meddling, not us.’

‘But...!’ she spat hatefully. ‘But... I shall still be Empress!’

And with that, she launched herself with surprising agility over the smashed and smoking television set, at the throat of the Emperor himself.

The Emperor squealed.

‘Stop her!’ Fitz cried. ‘She’ll rip his head off! She’s gone crackers!’

Humans and poodles milled about in some confusion as the Princess and Emperor tussled to the death on the tasselled throne-cushions.

The guards entered the fray with savage gusto.

‘Stop them!’ Martha howled. ‘They’ll kill her!’

It was Char who, at last, glad of the opportunity, raced into the dogfight to rescue the Emperor. He launched himself into the scrap and dragged his ruler out by the scruff of his aristocratic neck.

The Emperor was dragged, shaking, into the waiting arms of the others. Char stood proudly by and the fight went on, over the throne.

The battered, bloody Emperor fluttered his eyes feebly and stared up at them all. ‘Human beings!’ he quavered, appalled. ‘My state room is swarming with human beings!’

‘Never mind,’ said Coward. ‘We’re quite a distinguished bunch, you know.’

‘And we’ve saved your life!’ put in Fitz.

They could no longer tell what was going on in the dogfight as it moved towards the balcony. Tiny toy-dog hands and feet and claws were scrabbling for purchase on the blood-slicked marble.

The Princess was putting up a decent fight.

Char told the Emperor. ‘You should have killed her while you had the chance.’

The Emperor was aghast. ‘I could never have done that!’

‘No,’ said Char. ‘But I could.’

Just as the scarlet poodle guards were managing to restrain the Princess, Char went crashing into them again: his claws out and his teeth bared.

‘Char!’ Fritter cried. ‘You can’t...!’

But Char had clearly lost his mind. He'd been foaming at the mouth for quite some time.

'Oh, stop them!' wailed Martha, and Flossie took up the cry.

Char had the Princess by the throat.

She raked his face and coat with her claws.

It was clearly a fight to the death.

The Doctor rushed forward and put on his most authoritative voice.

'Stop this at once!'

But then, out of the mêlée, as all the dogs skittered and slid on the spilled blood, human and canine, and as their savage diamond-sharp teeth tore into each others' coats, a horrible cry went up.

'The Princess is dead!'

The guards shrank back.

Everyone was staring at the demented Char: his flesh tattered by Margaret's claws. But he was shaking her in his jaws and her body was lifeless and limp. He staggered once and then threw back his bloodied head.

The Princess Margaret's small carcass was flung up into the shocked air.

'He's killed her!' hissed Fitz, needlessly.

The body went sailing, all tattered, over the balcony, and down towards the courtyard below.

Everyone froze and stared in appalled dismay as Princess Margaret flew over their heads, in a graceful arc, and plummeted down through the evening skies.

Martha shrieked: 'Noooooooooooo!'

Her orange body was bristling and tense. She shrieked once more and skittered towards the balcony.

And leapt right after her royal mistress.

Without thinking about it, the tall, elegant shape of Brenda Soobie darted forward to grasp her pet poodle by the hind legs as she jumped, but to no avail. Brenda's grasp closed on empty air.

There was a tiny, futile scream.

Martha went soaring to her death after the Princess of the dogworld.

Everyone bolted to the balcony. They clashed and crashed into each other as they stumbled about. They peered over the edge, down into the courtyard.

There, below, lay two shattered poodle bodies, crumpled on the gravel.

Everyone turned away then, sickened.

'Oh,' said the Emperor. 'That sorts that out, then, doesn't it?'

He looked very close to tears, as if he could barely understand how such savagery could come to pass in his ordered realm.

From behind them there were sounds of stirring, a slight whimpering.

A very feeble voice asked them all: 'Is she dead? Is she? Did I kill her? Did I succeed? Is the Emperor and his dogworld safe at last?'

They turned to see a ripped and bleeding Char lying on the ground. There was a pathetic hopefulness in his voice. His torn tail batted softly on the floor. All of his terrible, pent-up bloodlust had gone. His eyes were turning misty. 'Did I manage to stop her?'

Fritter went to his friend. He went unthinkingly, not approving of what he had done, but knowing that Char would want a familiar face above him in his final moments. He would want that reassurance. 'Yes,' he said. 'She is dead. And the dogworld realm is safe from revolution. You succeeded, Senior Archivist Char. You certainly did.'

Fritter held his small colleague's body in his arms as he died. 'He will be a hero,' said the Emperor softly. 'A hero of the dogworld.'

'And someone can make a film about him,' said Fitz, but Anji elbowed him in the side. She was a little bit shocked at all the sudden, violent deaths around her. She was amazed that Fitz could make light of them.

'Then the web of time is safe at last,' said Mida Slike. She sounded satisfied and businesslike. She dusted herself down and was making for the door.

'Oh, bugger the web of time,' Brenda Soobie sobbed. 'What's the web of time when you've lost your favourite four-legged friend?' Her slim body buckled, and this time it was Flossie who had to gather her in her hefty arms.

Oddly enough, 'What's the web of time, when you've lost your favourite four-legged friend' just happened to be the first line of Brenda's classic torch song, 'Martha'. Noël had written it for her years ago, historically speaking. Almost as if for just such an occasion.

Noël slid smartly away to the glossy black grand piano that stood solid in the centre of the Emperor's state room. With immense dignity, he sat himself down and produced the rolled-up score of the song from inside his suit jacket. He smoothed it out and set it on the stand.

The others drifted over and stood within the warm nimbus of light from the guttering candelabra.

Noël knew his part. He flexed his expert fingers, set them on the keys, and started to play the lilting, mournful introduction to the song.

Brenda's ears pricked up, and she broke away from Flossie's consoling embrace. She, too, knew her part. Ever so gracefully, the transdimensional chanteuse drifted over on her bare feet to stand with Noël at the piano. She took in a deep, brave breath.

Nöel finished the introduction with a flourish, and gave Brenda the nod. She flung up her arms and started to sing.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, when the applause had subsided. He gazed round at the motley ensemble he had managed to gather this time. ‘I think, maybe, it’s time we got everyone home. It seems about that kind of time.’

Fitz nodded, and pointed beyond the balcony and the darkening air, where a black copter was rising noisily into the sky. ‘Mida Slike has already popped off.’ No one had stopped her slipping away.

‘I thought she might,’ said the Doctor. ‘She’s probably got very important business to attend to elsewhere. She seems that type.’

‘I thought she was awful,’ Anji said. ‘Faking her death like that.’

The Emperor shuffled over to the Doctor. He still seemed shaken by the whole, grisly ordeal. ‘I can’t thank you enough, Doctor. I can’t thank any of you enough.’

The Doctor shrugged modestly, and spread his hands.

Anji asked him curiously: ‘You knew the Princess was evil, all along?’

‘Oh, yes,’ he said firmly.

‘Because,’ she said, ‘just for a while, it looked as if you were making it up as you went along. Winging it, shall we say?’

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘I knew what was going on. I know a megalomaniac when I see one.’

Then he seemed to brush her off, as if he didn’t want to answer too many of her questions. Anji still wanted to know how it was he could operate his TARDIS so accurately when it came to something he wanted to do. But something about him put her off doing that just now. Underneath the smiles, the Doctor was ashen-faced. Something was weighing heavily on him. He was wrapping up this strange adventure, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Brenda Soobie glided over to them with her hands outstretched for the Doctor to kiss them. She draped herself for a moment over his shoulders like a mink stole.

‘You still haven’t clocked who I am though, have you, lovey?’ she asked purringly, almost mockingly.

He blinked. The Doctor’s eyes seemed to twinkle for a second, animating his face. He appeared to be reaching for the right word, the right gesture; as if on the brink of recovering a distant, faded memory.

Then his face dropped. He went suddenly cold. He shut up like a book. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t.’

Brenda stood back from him. She looked hurt. She turned away.

Fitz touched her elbow. 'Never mind,' he said gently. 'There'll be other times.'

A tear rolled down Brenda's face as the Doctor went over to talk with Nöel. 'Will there, Fitz? And what then? He's changed. Almost out of all recognition.'

Fitz shook his head almost fiercely. 'No. I see him every day. I know. He's still the same Doctor.'

'Not to me he's not,' Brenda sighed. 'Not to me. And you're only saying that to reassure yourself, Fitz boy.'

'Everything's fine,' Fitz found himself saying, his voice harder. 'We've been through some tough times. . . but everything's fine.'

'You look after him,' the songstress admonished. 'OK? Or you'll have me to answer to.'

'All right,' he grinned, and she kissed him on the cheek.

Meanwhile, Nöel was scissoring the air with his pinking shears in a peremptory manner. 'Home time, everybody!'

Professor Reginald Tyler stood forward grandly, making sure he had everyone's attention. He'd been feeling quite left out of it all up till now. He had stood back and watched events unfurl, feeling very much the chronicler, the outsider, the unimpeachable voice of the True History. And now he had made a decision. He glared at them all from under his bushy eyebrows.

'I, for one, am staying here,' he announced. 'There's nothing for me down there on the Earth and -'

Nöel broke in, 'That's probably just as well. Enid thinks you're dead and she's run off to Jamaica with the money. Every penny of it.'

'Oh!' gasped Tyler.

The Emperor sidled up to him. 'Never mind, Professor Tyler. Why don't you stay here, on the dogworld? We'll gladly put you up for the rest of your days. You can have another stab at that novel of yours. That's what you do, after all. You're a writer. You should be writing. Perhaps, at last, you can tell the true history this time.'

'Come along, come along!' smiled Nöel. 'Everyone step this way!' He was flashing his pinking shears, which were keen to get on with cutting through the Very Fabric once again.

## Chapter Thirty-three

‘Oh dear.’

They had passed once more in exhausted convoy through the shimmering, silken dimension, with Coward forging the way before them.

And now they were back in the luxury Swedish-style kitchen of the movie mogul John Fuchas.

‘Oh, I see.’

Ron Von Arnim had evidently regained consciousness and absconded. The terrible old man had gone.

It was a bright morning, with the sunlight coming blearily through the security blinds. It was oddly quiet. Everyone in their small party shivered, despite the warm morning breeze.

All the little creatures had fled, too. That, at least, was a relief to Anji, who couldn’t have faced another confrontation with tiny dinosaurs, gryphons and minotaurs at this point. She wondered vaguely if they had gone off with Ron. And then she realised that she was thinking as if the tiny creatures had been real, with independent minds of their own. But they couldn’t have been, could they?

‘How long is it since we left, Nöel?’ the Doctor was asking.

Nöel looked shifty. He frowned. ‘It could be weeks. The pinking shears aren’t always a very exact science.’

‘Hmm.’

The Doctor looked regretfully at the skeleton that was sitting strapped to the kitchen chair.

‘We didn’t do him much good,’ Fitz said.

‘It was all meant to happen like this.’ Coward sighed. ‘Evidently. Now that awful film can never be made. At least, not in its poodle form. I suppose that’s why, when the Emperor saw the video, there wasn’t a poodle to be seen. Because we left Fuchas here, tied up.’

‘It’s our fault!’ Anji gasped.

‘And history returns to normal,’ said the Doctor. ‘As normal as it ever was.’ He turned away from the mogul’s skeleton.

'I suppose this means an end to great big blockbuster science fiction movies,' said Anji.

'Indeed,' said the Doctor.

'What a shame,' she said.

Mida Slike was standing with her arms folded, watching the firemen prising open the doors of the lift. It was a blazing hot day in Vegas, though you would never guess that down here.

She hugged herself, smoking a cigarette as the firemen worked.

'We'll soon have your friend out, ma'am,' one of them smiled.

She nodded. She bided her time. She was patient and thorough, like an agent from MIAOW ought to be.

But, all the same, Mida Slike wanted to be away from this ghastly car park as soon as possible. And away from this ghastly world. There were other anomalies needing sorting out, all across time and space. There were events that needed looking at, as only a Professor in Bastardisation could look at them.

At last the lift doors jerked open.

The firemen recoiled.

Within the plush interior lay the half-eaten remains of some poor goon in a hat. He was slumped against the back wall of the elevator.

The stench that came wafting out was terrific.

The firemen were all too preoccupied with their shock to notice Professor Alid Jag come bounding out into freedom. He was a triumphant aphid, soaring over their helmets.

Mida Slike saw him, however.

Alid Jag landed nimbly on the concrete floor of the car park, dizzy with freedom and congratulating his own tiny, brilliant self.

And Mida Slike nipped swiftly forward and trod on him, neatly.

'I've not visited Vegas in years,' said the Doctor, glancing around eagerly. He squinted in the brilliant desert shimmer, the car fumes, the bewildering neon light. He darted Fitz a curious look. 'You didn't spend all of your time here gambling, did you?'

'No!' Fitz acted offended. 'Of course not.'

Anji raised an eyebrow. 'Maybe next time we should all just stick together?'

'Stick together?' Fitz asked, as if he had never heard of such a thing.

'Maybe. . .' mused the Doctor, 'we could just have a little go on the fruit machines. Just a whiz. I seem to remember working out a system once. . . It was guaranteed to work. . .'

He strode off in the direction of the gambling hall.

In his office, at the heart of his beloved hotel, Mr Brewster the noble boar had his head in his hands. Tears were streaming down his hairy face.

'Oh, Flossie, Flossie. . . Whatever shall I do without you?'

He sobbed and blew his quivering snout very loudly.

It had taken a few days for the truth of the matter to sink into his thick hide. She was never coming back to him. She had left with those curious murderers and now she would never return to take her rightful place in his kitchens.

Really, he should have told her that he loved her. When he had had the chance he should have told her the truth. He could have put his pig-headed heart on the line. He could have made her listen.

But now it was far too late.

There was no one down in the hotel kitchens.

And Flossie was off somewhere, gallivanting round the universe.

In the glittering, endless desert, the Doctor threw back his head and laughed.

'You travel in that? In a bus?'

Enid stumped heavily down the stairs and smiled at Cleavis, who was waiting in the hallway. As ever, he looked hesitant. He was ever so polite around her. He treated her like a real lady. Enid smoothed down her housecoat and smiled.

The jocular don had been calling round each morning for the past fortnight. He was checking on Reg's health with unusual attentiveness. Perhaps, she thought daringly, perhaps he's really coming to see me. . .

Spring was turning slowly into summer. The gentle yellows and purples of the flowers were giving way to warmer, redder shades. It was like the old town was returning, at last, to life.

'He's much, much better,' she told Cleavis wearily. 'He can focus his eyes and his nose is almost completely back to normal. Everything has grown back into place.'

Cleavis looked delighted at this news. But then his face grew darker and perplexed. He asked: 'Is there no word from the Doctor?'

Enid scowled. 'Did you really think there would be?'

She made them a pot of tea and they sat in the living room, rather companionably. There was an odd sort of silence between them. Cleavis found he was rather shy with ladies. He watched her swirl the tea leaves round in the pot.

‘Reg will be able to write again quite soon,’ she told him. ‘He’s very keen to. So he says. He keeps going on about his bloody gnomes and elves and what-have-you. He talks like they’re all real!’

Cleavis nodded, and picked at the Battenburg cake she had put out on a plate for him. ‘The Smudgelings meetings aren’t the same without him.’

There was a dull thumping noise from the letterbox then.

Enid went out in the hallway to look. ‘Lunchtime post,’ she said, returning with a parcel, frowning.

In brown paper, the Doctor had dutifully returned her copy of William Freer’s novel.

‘I’d forgotten he’d taken this.’

The Doctor had enclosed a note:

*Tell Reg to get back on with the good work. We’ve all been to the future and everything works out fine! Honestly!! Tell him if he wants to write about fairies and elves, then that’s his business.*

*Don’t let anyone put you off your stroke and beware of the dogs!*

*Lots of love,*

*The Doctor*

*PS. And Cleavis. . . Change the bus in your children’s book to something else, eh? Choose some innocuous piece of household furniture. I don’t know – a chest of drawers or something. There’s a good chap.*

Flossie was looking very worried. Her wattles hung down disconsolately. Her pinny flapped in the arid desert winds.

‘I know this will be disappointing to you all.’ She gazed at the faces of her new friends. Great fat tears were rolling down her chops. ‘I know I promised to join you on your adventures in time and space. . . But I really can’t. You see how heartbroken Brenda is at the loss of her faithful Martha. And how upset she is that Martha wasn’t all that faithful after all. Well, I’ve decided I’m going with her. I’m getting on the bus.’

‘Really?’ said the Doctor.

‘We’ll. . . um. . . miss you,’ said Fitz, with immense relief.

Flossie grabbed hold of him and hugged him till he squealed.

'I'm going with them, too,' said Fritter. They all looked down at him. 'There's nothing left for me on the dogworld. And Brenda is used to having a poodle around the place.'

The Doctor was solemn. 'Well, if you're all sure. . .'

They nodded in unison. The double-decker was to be their new home. Flossie made an effort at brightness: 'And who knows what adventures we'll have!'

Brenda was in another new outfit, shimmering with feathers and jewels on the burning sands before her bus.

'Have you heard?' she cried. 'I've got a new crew! I've got new companions aboard the bus!'

'We've heard,' grinned the Doctor. 'And we're very pleased for you.'

She winked at him. 'Are you sure I can't get you aboard my double-decker, lovey?'

He laughed. 'We've our own transport to retrieve.'

Brenda kissed them all goodbye and hustled her new crew aboard the bus. She whooshed the doors open and closed and took her place in the driver's seat, in the cab.

The Doctor shook his head.

Then, after a few moments, the Number 22 to Putney Common dematerialised.

'Hey!' cried the Doctor. 'That was a wheezing groaning noise! It was. . . It was. . .'

'We know, Doctor,' said Fitz. 'Don't think about it too much.'

Anji shrugged. 'Well, I'm glad to see there's still some things that can surprise even you, Doctor.'

'But it was a TARDIS!' the Doctor boggled. 'That was a noise like my TARDIS!'

'It was a bit like it,' Fitz admitted. 'That kind of vworp vworping noise. . .'

'Why didn't she tell me?' the Doctor wondered. Another thought seemed to hit him. 'But this means. . . I'm not alone!' Anji reached for his hand.

'No, you're not.'

'There is. . .' laughed Fitz, 'another.' He ruffled the Doctor's hair. 'Though Christ knows where she'll turn up again. . .'

Nöel sliced an expert rip through the desert air. The pinking shears made a clean snipping noise.

'I'm getting rather good at this,' he smiled.

Through the hole in the Fabric, beyond the broiling Vegas sands, they saw a bright summer day in an ancient English town.

There was a river bank lined with poplars and willows, rippling in a temperate breeze. They could hear chirruping birdsong and, far away, a clock bonging out the hours and dogs barking distantly.

And on the edge of the river, the TARDIS was waiting for them. Bright blue, solid and homely. It was waiting to take them off again, into some other adventure.

‘Come on, folks,’ clipped Noël. ‘You know what they say about people who stand out in the noonday sun. . .’

It was time to step through the Very Fabric.

And to go home.

## Chapter Thirty-four

That night, having despatched everyone and said his goodbyes, Noël Coward gratefully returned himself to Mayfair in 1942 and sat down, with relief in solitude at his Baby Grand.

After midnight, he was interrupted by unexpected guests.

He answered the door himself, in his dressing down, with a gruff, 'Yes?'

In the doorway were a middle-aged woman and her blind daughter. The woman was holding a hatful of squirming, newborn kittens out before her. He peered at them with some distrust.

'Do I look like the RSPCA?' he asked curtly.

'Oh, Mr Coward, sir,' said the woman, proffering the hat. 'We need your help something rotten, sir. It's these kittens, you see. They were born on Saturday last and they can talk, sir! They talk the King's English better than what you do, sir! And they're telling us such awful things that're going on on their planet far away, sir. Such horrible beheadings and uprisings and all sorts of nastiness. And they told us, me and my daughter, sir, that you are the one we have to come to for help, sir. Only you can help their world, sir. Only you can help out with the future history and destiny of the pussyworld... They begged me to come to you...'

'I see,' said Noël, very gravely.

He peered at the beseeching kittens, and the blind girl, and the anxious mother, who had trooped all the way to Mayfair in wartime, just to enlist the subtle transdimensional help of his pinking shears.

He frowned.

Then he said, 'I see,' again.

He added, 'Good evening,' and slammed his front door in their astonished faces.

## About the Author

Paul Magrs was born on Tyneside in 1969. He lectures in English literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. His latest novels are *All the Rage* (Allison and Busby, 2001) and *Strange Boy* (Simon and Schuster, 2002).