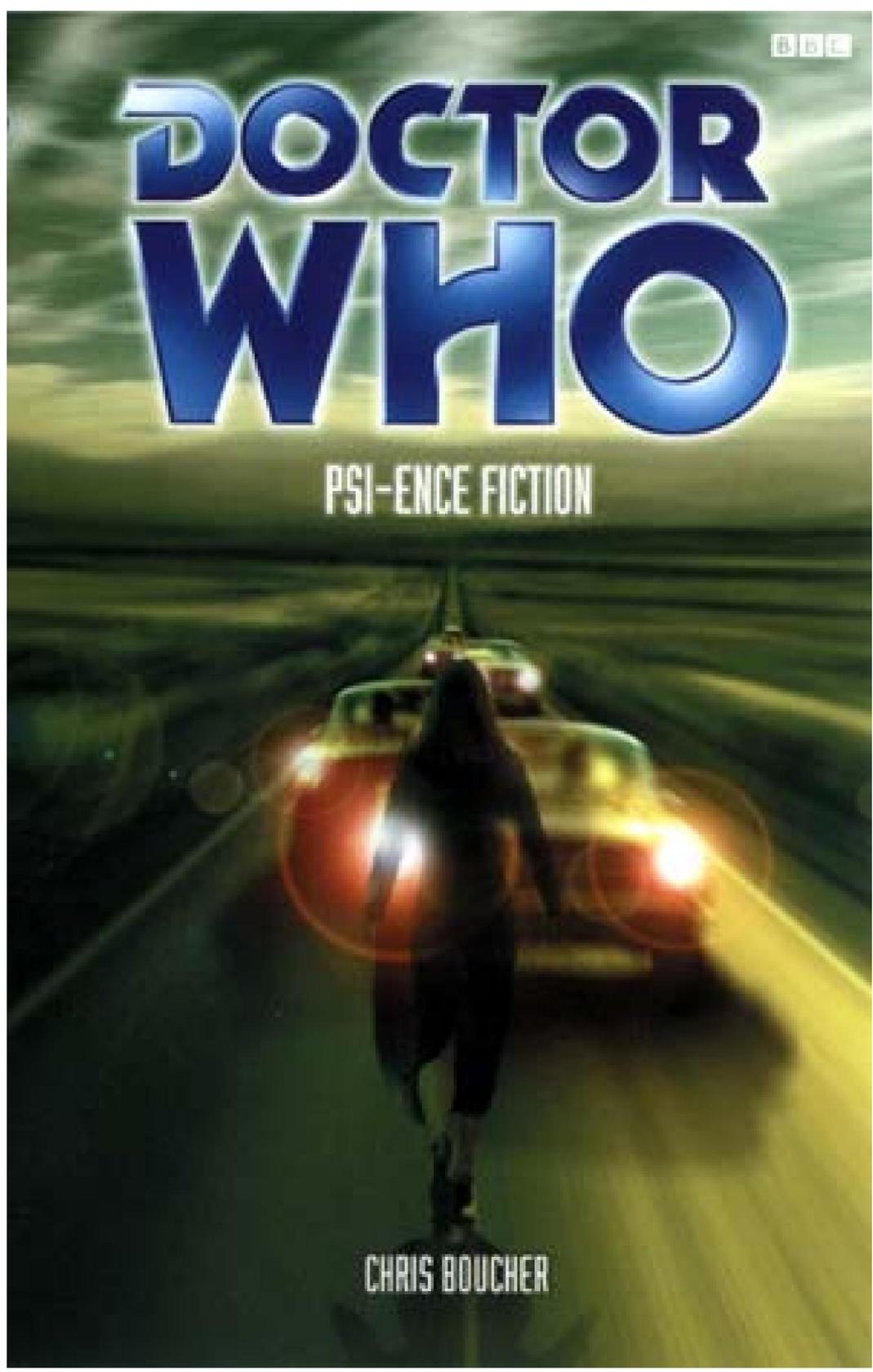


BBC

# DOCTOR WHO

PSI-ENCE FICTION



CHRIS BOUCHER

# **Psi-ence Fiction**

## **Chris Boucher**

*For Lynda*

### **Chapter One**

It was so very dark now the moon had set. Chloe shivered. What was it about darkness that made it so scary? she wondered.

Something was moving in the undergrowth off to the left. She could hear it quite distinctly. Fear prickled across her skin with a sudden feverish chill.

What on earth had possessed her to come into this stupid wood in the middle of the stupid night? She should have objected. They could have done this during the day. It would have been warmer for one thing. Just because the other four were up for it, that didn't mean they were right. They had no evidence the murder had happened after dark so there was no reason to hold the seance after dark either.

The shivering was momentarily vivid, a twitching shudder that seemed to run through her every muscle. What was she frightened of? she scolded herself. She wasn't a child for God's sake. This was only a patch of trees and undergrowth and stuff. She wouldn't have been afraid to be here in the daylight and there was nothing here now that wasn't here then. A few bits and bobs that only came out in the dark perhaps, but nothing big.

She found the urge to run was almost an ache, an itch inside the skull. She told herself it was just a race memory of predators that came for you in the night. Somehow, she thought, we all of us remember crouching, frozen in blind terror, as pitiless claws and teeth tore at us. And we know we've lost the light for ever. And we know we will never see the sun rise again. Something was moving in the undergrowth off to the right now. Chloe found she could barely breathe.

'Bloody rabbits make a racket don't they?' Tommy said softly.

He was shorter than Chloe and though she couldn't actually see him in the suffocating darkness she still found his floppy-haired Hugh Grant impersonation reassuring -tall- sounding and confident. 'Is that what it is?' she gasped, trying not to sound too relieved and eager. 'Rabbits?'

Off to one side Ralph said, 'Could be badgers. Fox maybe.' Ralph was taller and heavysset but there was no immediate comfort to be taken from his dour and plodding presence.

Somewhere close in front of her Meg snorted. 'It's probably me,' she said. 'I've got half a mile of sodding brambles wrapped round my ankles here.' Chloe found Meg beautiful in a square-faced ugly sort of way, and so much braver than she was herself.

Joan said, 'It's most likely to be rats.' She was small and sharp-featured. Chloe thought of her as elfin, knowing that elves were reputed to be malicious as well as delightful. 'Rats are drawn to any place of death.'

'Only if the corpse is still there,' Ralph said witheringly.

'They're psychic,' Joan persisted. 'Absolutely the most psychic of all animals. Only we have greater powers.'

'Absolutely the second most psychic of all animals then,' Tommy mocked.

'I wouldn't care but these were my best chinos,' Meg complained.

'Sensible choice,' Ralph said, 'given the circumstances.'

'Well frankly,' Meg said, 'I think wellies and jeans are a bit insensitive even for a shit-shoveller. Given the circumstances.'

'It's waste management,' Ralph said. 'And it's only one part of the course.'

*A binman by any other name'*

'Oh, sorry I'm not reading something useful like *EastEnders* and *Emmerdale*

'Media.'

'A showbiz wannabe by any other name?' Tommy chipped in.

'Don't you ever get tired of being a smart-arse?' Meg retorted.

'What did you mean about wellies and jeans being insensitive?' Chloe asked, thinking of the boots and jeans she was wearing herself.

'Show respect for the dead,' Meg said, 'if you want them to show respect for you. That's how I was brought up.'

'Really?' Chloe said, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. She had never thought of Meg as coming from a background of spiritualism.

'No not really,' Meg giggled. She leant in from the darkness to whisper and Chloe could smell the beer on her breath. Come on Chloe, pay attention. And stop taking everything so bloody seriously. It's just a laugh for God's sake.'

Ralph said, 'Look are we sure this is even in the right direction?'

Joan had been leading them down the narrow path and the others had followed her when she stepped off it and pushed her way through the undergrowth to a clearing where she had stopped, obliging them to do the same. They were standing uncertainly and unseeingly now, waiting for someone to take the lead.

Joan said confidently, 'This was where she was murdered.'

Joan was always positive even when she wasn't, Chloe thought, and said, 'I can't see a thing. And my stupid torch has packed up.'

'The dead tree is over there.' Joan flashed her torch into the darkness, illuminating nothing in particular. 'We're standing in the clearing where he killed her. Can't you feel it? He filled this place with his evil. Can't you feel his malevolence? Can't you feel the residual fear? The place is full of horror.'

Chloe could feel it. Joan was right. It was like a nightmare you had woken from but couldn't quite shake off. This must be where he killed her. She could feel the terror.

'We don't know the killer was a man,' Ralph said.

'Yeah right. Meg said scornfully. It's mostly women who beat women to death

'The victim was a girl. Ralph said, not a woman. And I thought the identity of the killer was one of the things we were here to try and find out.

Tommy sniggered. Maybe we should ask the psychic rats, presumably they'd know. How about it Joan? Any good with rodents?'

'If you weren't going to be serious about this,' Joan hissed, you shouldn't have come with us.'

'I see,' Tommy said. What you mean is when it doesn't work it's going to be my fault, is that it?

That's it exactly, she said.

It couldn't possibly be my fault.'

One sceptical presence is all it takes to break the circuit and block the contact.'

If you say so

'I do say so. Joan snapped. 'And if I'm acting as medium, then what I say goes tonight all right? Or do you want to take over the seance Tommy? Well do you?'

'No.'

'So what I say goes?'

So what you say goes, he conceded in a bored voice.

A breeze stirred the unseen trees around them. Chloe noticed that the sound it made was weirdly human, a sort of bronchial moan, almost a wheezing. The temperature seemed to be dropping rapidly. Is it getting colder? she asked.

'Are we going to do this or what?' Ralph demanded.

'Link hands,' Joan said. 'Form the circle.'

Chloe was glad of the excuse for physical contact. She was getting the oddest feeling that they were being watched, that something was watching them from the darkness. She reached out as they groped for each other's hands. Or was it someone? Was someone watching them? Was it him? Could it be that the murderer was here and he was watching them? Weren't murderers supposed to come back to the scene of the crime? She snatched at Ralph's and Tommy's extended hands and clung on grimly.

Are you OK, Chloe? Tommy asked.

Just cold,' she said, but in truth she could feel the watcher now and she knew he was watching her and her alone. The murderer was focusing on her and she knew she would be his next victim.

Chloe,' she heard a distant voice whisper and wheeze. Chloe.'

'Don't do that,' she protested angrily 'It's not funny. I'm scared enough as it is.'

Leave her alone, Meg muttered. Stop teasing her, you two.'

'I didn't do anything,' Tommy said.

Ralph said, Neither did I.'

Well one of you's playing silly buggers.'

"Shut up and concentrate,' Joan commanded. 'All of you. I cant do this on my own. Clear your minds. Concentrate on her. Think only of the dead girl. Just her. We call her to us through the focus of our collective will.'

His focus, his will, was calling to her, Chloe thought. 'Chloe,' he breathed. 'Chloe.' She concentrated on the hands she was holding. She closed her eyes against the darkness. 'Chloe,' the whisper said and she could hear the cruel smile in it.

With the circle settled and silent Joan began to chant softly. Come to us, come to us, come to us who call you, come to us, come to us, come to us who love you, come to us, come to us now:

Once the chant had been established the other three joined in. 'Come to us, come to us now:

Repetition, Chloe thought, as she too began muttering the pointless words, that's all it takes. The steady rhythm to make the trance, to make the magic, to make the music. The rhythmic beat is like steady running. 'Come to us, come to us, come to us.' Running keeps us from the slavering teeth and the scrabbling claws. 'Come to us come to us come to us come to us.' It amplifies the tune of the blood so you can feel its power. It keeps beating back the darkness and the sounds of the darkness. It was working. She could feel it working. The rhythm reaches into us and we have the power to see, we have the power to know, we have the power to control. Come to us come to us come to us come to us: She felt stronger. She felt the summons tugging at the dead girl, pulling her to them, pulling her back across the void. It was working. She was coming.

It was then Chloe heard the howl of pain and anger, and she opened her eyes. The wind had whipped up suddenly, lashing the trees and swirling dead leaves and bracken fronds around them. The thick, blind gloom of the wood had lightened and in the unearthly glimmer she saw the killer crashing through the undergrowth towards them. He looked monstrous, tall and wild, and he ran in huge strides, lifting his legs high like a triple jumper. His face was twisted with hate. His fury was insane. He was coming straight at her. He was coming straight for her.

Frozen with fear, Chloe closed her eyes again tightly and tried not to scream. He was a ghost. He was a demon. He was a figment of her imagination. He wasn't real. He couldn't be real. 'Come to us come to us come to us come to us.' She raised her voice in the chant, doing her best to block out the sound of him. 'Come to us come to us come to us come to us!

But above her own voice and the chanting of the others she could hear now words in the howling.

'listen to me! Listen to me you little bitch!' the killer was raging. 'You will listen to me and do as I tell you! You will do as I tell you, you little bitch!' Something struck her on the shoulder and thumped against her back and she lurched forward stumbling into the others, struggling to keep her balance and stay on her feet. The chant became ragged and then stopped abruptly.

'Oh for God's sake Chloe,' Tommy said, 'what is the matter with you!'

Chloe what's wrong? Are you in pain?' Joan said.

'Are you all right?' Ralph said.

What happened, Chloe?' Meg asked.

And then close to Chloe something unseen grunted and roared. A whisper in her ear echoed in the bones of her head. 'Die,' it said. 'Die for ever in my darkness, bitch.'

Chloe lost all chance of control. She broke the circle, pushed the others aside and ran. Raw panic drove her on and gave her unexpected strength and speed. She plunged through patches of scrub, cannoned into small trees and blundered into low branches, but she kept going. The glimmer of light had vanished completely and the darkness was impenetrable again, but it made no difference to her. She ran flat out with no sense of direction and no thought of obstacles or barriers. Only the demon striding and leaping behind her was real.

Then abruptly she weakened, and as she weakened she began to trip over roots and stumble as her feet caught in the tangles of ground creepers. She fell. Suddenly her legs were aching unbearably and she was very tired, but she scrambled up and shambled on. She fell again, harder this time, collapsing and sprawling headlong into the undergrowth. This time she just wanted to lie there where she had fallen but she heard the demon coming for her. She heard him crashing and roaring, closer and closer, louder and louder. She heard him

shouting her name and she dragged herself upright and ran on. She ran desperately until her breath was rasping in her throat and filling her ears with its sound, but behind her she could still hear the killer rushing and laughing and raging.

The darkness was unrelenting and she was exhausted, terrified, lost.

Suddenly she wanted to look back. She wanted to see it. She knew the light was there and she wanted to see something, anything. She wanted to put an end to the blind fear. But she knew her death was there, ready to snatch her if she looked. She knew it was ready to swallow her being if she listened and it was calling to her constantly now. 'Chloe? Chloe!' Now a woman's voice in the distance, now a man's. 'Chloee! Chlooeeee?' And now it whispered to her. 'Die,' it gloated, so close it seemed to be inside her head. 'Die in darkness, bitch!'

It was all around her, near and far, outside and inside. 'Chlooooooeeee!' It was mocking her, sneering, leering. She must not look back no matter how much she wanted to. She must not stop running no matter how much she wanted to. She must get out of the wood. She must get out of the darkness.

Without warning the black blankness ahead of her thinned and clotted into patterns of lighter and darker shapes. She glimpsed momentary specks of brightness like sparks from a fire. Almost without realising it she crashed into the brambles at the edge of the wood, ripped through them, plunged down through an empty ditch and found herself in open pasture. Clear of the ancient gloom under the trees it was possible to tell the sky from the ground, and in the distance she could see the lights of the University of East Wessex. She staggered a few paces further into the field. Relief dragged at her, draining what little strength she had left. She sank to her knees on the damp grass and sobbed for breath. She could see the lights of safety there across the open fields. She knew the way back. She'd beaten it, him, whatever it was - ghost, demon, murderer. Whatever it was she'd beaten it.

'You think so?' It was a whisper and was followed immediately by cackles and hoots of savage laughter that seemed to surround and buffet her. 'You can't run from me, you stupid bitch.' It was an agony in her skull like the burning ice of a migraine attack. She pushed herself upright.

'Chlooe!' Behind her the voices were back. She looked. Small lights danced in the wood, calling her name. She turned and fled, running for the safety of the campus. She ran across the open fields without looking back, without listening to the voices in the wood or in her head. Her only purpose was to reach the stockade of light and brightness in the middle of the endless plains of darkness.

She was still running when she woke with a start in her study bedroom in the student hall of residence. Daylight was bright behind the curtains. Someone was banging on the door. All the unreal terror and insane confusion of the night before vanished. It was a dream, she thought, just a stupid dream. Something must have disagreed with her. Something had screwed with her brain chemistry, big time. She tried to remember what she had been doing the evening before. Had there been a party?

There was more knocking on the door. 'Chloe? It's me. Meg. Are you in there?'

Just a minute,' she mumbled.

She got out of bed. She was naked. She slept that way for comfort though there was also an element of vanity since she was proud of her slim body and pale, unblemished skin.

It was as she was looking for her bathrobe that she realised her hands and face were scratched and she was covered in developing bruises.

The Doctor was frowning at the control console. "There's a reason for everything,' he remarked. The TARDIS had just spun off the time line and was moving motionlessly across the transdimensional direction loops towards an undiffer-entiated focal point. It left the Doctor with little idea of when they might be going and where, and the more the TARDIS manoeuvred the less idea he had. You start knowing nothing and end up knowing less, he thought, there's a lesson there somewhere. All he could be sure about was that wherever and whenever it was going to be, it was going to be soon; and that the TARDIS would have some reason for doing what it was doing. 'That's not the same as a purpose of course,' he went on. 'People often confuse reason and purpose. A reason is simply an explanation. And everything has an explanation.' Not for the first time he had a passing urge to thump the control console in frustration.

Leela had recognised all the signs. She had been carefully observing the movements, which were not proper movements, and the sounds, which were more like feelings, that the TARDIS sometimes made and the Doctor's reaction to them. What was happening at the moment suggested to her that the TARDIS was again about to stop, or drop, or whatever it was it did before she and the Doctor were able to go outside. Experience made her equally certain that the Doctor would have no idea what they would be facing when they opened the doors of what she used to think of as the travelling hut. 'So what is a purpose?' she asked, checking that her knife was securely sheathed and making sure the small travelling pouch she had added to her belt still contained a selection of essentials, among them a sharpening stone, a high-energy food bar and a comb. Of course she knew now that the TARDIS was a very large non-travelling hut inside a much smaller, travelling box. Everything had an explanation. Time And Relative Dimensions In Space, TARDIS, was the explanation of the hut-in-the-box and one day she would understand it, she was sure.

What?' the Doctor said vaguely, not taking his eyes from the console's unhelpful telltales. It was slightly shaming, he was thinking, that he had so little actual control. He should have paid more attention. At the very least he should have got out some manuals at some stage and tinkered a bit. A bit more. It wasn't as if he could take the systems back to the manufacturer for an overhaul. If something needed doing he would have to do it himself. Something did need doing, of course, and it was irritating that he didn't know what it was. Thumping the control console would clearly be stupid. Kicking it was quite appealing too. While he was thinking this he suddenly became conscious that Leela was watching him intently. She was trying to look casual about it but there was no disguising her attention. Unconsciously she had also taken up the first stage of her preparing-to-fight stance. Her weight was slightly forward on the balls of her feet, her hand was on the hilt of the large knife he could not persuade her to give up carrying. She obviously sensed that something was about to happen. It was interesting, he thought, how sensitive she was becoming to the way the TARDIS functioned. It was a pity aggression was always her first response to the unknown, but her early conditioning as a warrior had been thorough and counteracting it would take more time and patience than he presently had.

Leela had recognised other unrelated signs. Her growing experience of the Doctor suggested he was in one of his dark moods and she was sure that the longer he kept glaring at the controls of the TARDIS the more irritated and unreasonable he would become. From time to time she had heard him talking to the machine as if it was a friend and that had been peculiar enough, but offering it personal insults and threatening it was mad and that looked to be what he was once more about to do. All shamans were mad, she reminded herself, that was the nature of their magic, or else they were fakes. The Doctor said they were both - mad and fake. He got angry if she suggested he was a shaman. He never saw it as a compliment to his powers, only as an insult to his mind and his honesty. She remembered when the tribal shaman had gone truly mad. There was no magic then. There had only been danger for everyone and death for him. But there was an explanation if you thought about it, and there were ways to lighten the Doctor's mood if you knew what interested him. 'If a reason is simply an explanation,' she said, 'what is a purpose?'

The Doctor said, 'I've often wondered that myself,' and smiled his sudden, dangerous smile. 'Perhaps there isn't a purpose. Or perhaps when we know all the reasons we'll know the purpose. Or perhaps that is the purpose: to know all the reasons.'

'I am sorry I asked,' Leela said. 'You are making fun of me.'

'Never,' the Doctor said emphatically, but still smiling. 'I never make fun of you for asking questions. Even ones I can't answer.'

'But you do get angry'

'No. I am patience personified. You should know that by now.'

The TARDIS narrowed the multiverse options, gradually slipping towards the asymmetrical anomaly that was attracting it and pulling it towards a choice.

'Very well. Do you know where we are going then?' Leela asked.

That is not a question,' the Doctor said. "That is a deliberate provocation.' He looked around for his hat.

Leela said, 'Your hat is in the pocket of your coat.'

'I doubt that,' the Doctor said, finding it in the left-hand pocket of his long overcoat almost immediately and pulling it out. 'I wasn't looking for my hat as it happens.'

'Your jelly babies are in the other pocket,' Leela offered.

'Now you are beginning to annoy me.' The Doctor's smile was losing some of its spontaneity.

The TARDIS coalesced all the remaining chances into one inevitability, ground towards it, settled into it and, satisfied with its efforts to reach a balance, unlinked itself from the probability grids. As the systems disengaged the central column of the control console drifted calmly down to a stop.

The Doctor reached for the switch which, Leela knew, would turn on the observation screen and show them what was outside. 'Are we where you think we are?' she asked innocently.

'I think so,' the Doctor said.

'And that is where?' she prompted.

'Here,' the Doctor said.

'There you see,' Leela said triumphantly. 'You said you would not make fun of me for asking questions and you are making fun of me for asking questions.' She knew it was not really worthy of a warrior, but she had found that she relished such small victories. The Doctor talked so much more fluently than she did. He knew so much more than she did and he made no attempt at all to hide it from her. Sometimes it had made her angry though this was not such a time.

'You were trying to make me angry,' he said reasonably. 'To prove a point. A rather pointless point as you'd see if you thought about it reasonably.'

Leela shrugged. 'You do not know what I was trying to do.'

The Doctor flicked the switch and looked at the observation screen. 'You think not?' He was grinning wolfishly now.

'You do not know everything,' Leela went on.

'Of course not,' the Doctor said cheerfully. 'So you can stop sulking, can't you.'

'I am not sulking,' Leela said, sounding sulky even to herself.

'Look.' The Doctor nodded towards the screen. 'Here's a particularly frustrating example of what I don't know.'

The on-screen field of vision was slowly widening to show that the TARDIS had fetched up in a wood of some kind. Beyond the thickets of silver birch and elm scrub interspersed with mature oak trees, a cluster of glass and metal buildings could be seen in the distance. The low, square towers and black, shiny blocks looked new and carefully proportioned but still they stood out starkly in a wide landscape of long hedgerows and scattered islands of old broad-leaved trees.

'I don't know where we are,' the Doctor said.

Leela stared hard at the screen, scanning the undergrowth for predators.

## Chapter Two

They were walking past the parapsychology laboratory when John Finer, physicist and one of the more respected of the younger professors in the University of East Wessex, suddenly spoke. 'Charlatan?' he said loudly, as though in the middle of a conversation. 'No, I wouldn't say the man's a charlatan.' Then he scowled, squeezing the habitual half-smile from his long, narrow face.' To call Hitchens a charlatan would be a gross insult to charlatans everywhere.'

Bill Parnaby, philosopher and a friend despite their fundamental disagreements on almost everything, shook his head sadly. 'Childish or what?'

Finer looked down at the small, dark man beside him and raised an eyebrow. 'Childlike perhaps.'

Parnaby shook his head more vigorously, and said with mock disdain, 'It was childish. Why didn't you just bang on his lab door and run away?'

Finer smiled. 'I would have done but he'd probably have included that in his poltergeist data.'

Parnaby chortled, unable to suppress his amusement any longer. 'Is it possible,' he suggested, 'that you might be the teeniest bit envious?'

'Of?'

'The Kellerfield Research Fellowship.'

'The science of "things that go bump in the night"? Oh please.' It was Finer's turn to be disdainful, though in his case it was genuine. 'Credit me with a little more taste if not integrity'

'I'm glad to see you're not depressed anyway,' Parnaby commented.

Depressed?' Finer frowned. 'Why should I be depressed?'

'It's reading week.'

'So?'

Parnaby shrugged a small, slightly embarrassed shrug. 'I've noticed you tend to get a bit withdrawn around this time of year.'

Finer looked surprised. 'I do?'

'A touch of seasonal affective disorder perhaps?'

'Maybe reading week gives me time to think about the waste of resources in general and our friend Hitchins in particular. That's enough to depress anybody'

They had reached the tiny room which Parnaby had been allocated by office administration with, as he told it, a rather dismissive: you're a thinker for God's sake, how much space do you need anyway? Parnaby unlocked the door. 'I'm told his funding is particularly generous,' he said. 'No converted cupboards for the Kellerfield Research Fellow'

'Now who's being envious?' Finer asked, following him in and flopping down in the more comfortable of the two small armchairs which took up all the space not occupied by an untidy desk and some overstacked book shelves.

'I make no secret of it,' Parnaby said. 'I would kill for a study like he's got and enough money not to have to do any more popcorn lectures on piffle like time travel and the paradoxes thereof.'

'You love it,' Finer scoffed.

'This is not what I was led to expect from academic life in general and my academic life in particular,' Parnaby sighed, rooting through precarious stacks of paper.

'What you mean is,' Finer was grinning, 'nobody told you it was going to be this much fun.'

Parnaby did not look up from his search. 'Define fun.'

'Playing the wild man of philosophy for all those impressionable young females? You don't get them queuing to hear my lectures.'

'If your next observation is that philosophy is the new rock-and-roll I shall throw up that meagre and revolting lunch you just bought me.'

Finer did his best to look hurt. "The Developmental Engineering Department's not short of funds, but our sponsors demand detailed accounts and they frown on frivolity.'

'You mean you're going to charge it to expenses?' Parnaby found the notes for his forthcoming lecture on the impossibility of time travel and proffered them. Have I mentioned that you're the stereotypical mean Yorkshireman?'

On a number of occasions.' Finer got up from the chair and accepted the lecture notes without smiling. 'Thanks for these. I'm interested to understand your reasoning.'

'You could have come along and listened,' Parnaby suggested. 'I do take questions from the floor'

'I can't sit in your audiences,' Finer said. I find all that screaming and seat-wetting distracting. I suppose it's inevitable though,' he smiled. 'Philosophy being the new rock-and-roll.'

They stood outside the TARDIS looking round at the wood and the pastures beyond. The leaves of some of the deciduous trees were showing hints of yellows and reds. There were black fruits on the tangles of barbed creepers and shiny red seed pods on rambling thorn bushes. Everything was bathed in cool, early autumn sunshine which cast light shadows and deepened and enriched the pale colours of the ripe meadow grasses in the nearby fields. The Doctor was entranced. 'This is Earth,' he said beaming delightedly. 'I like this planet, it's one of my absolute favourites.'

'Are you sure?' Leela asked. 'You said you did not know where we were.' She was still watching and listening for predators but apart from the small scuttlings and twitterings that would be expected in a place like this she had heard nothing, and all she had seen were tiny, timid flyers and small, nervous tree-climbers. Although she knew there were always larger

creatures that fed on such smaller ones there was no sign of anything big and threatening in the immediate area.

That was before I smelt the air and felt the sun,' the Doctor said.

Leela frowned. 'We are standing in the shade.'

The Doctor ignored the contradiction. And look,' he said, gesturing towards the bushes, blackberries and rose hips.' He pointed up at the trees. 'Finches and squirrels. We are in the northern temperate zone.' He strode to one of the bushes and picked a fat blackberry heavy with juice. 'And the autumn is just beginning. A magical time.' He ate the berry with lip-smacking relish. 'Try some of these. They're almost as good as jelly babies.'

Leela shook her head. 'I do not like jelly babies,' she said.

'I promise you they're not poisonous,' the Doctor said, picking more. 'Trust me, I'm the Doctor.'

'I trust you, Doctor,' Leela said, making no move to join him but looking instead towards the distant buildings. 'Are we going there?'

'A pleasant walk in the afternoon sunshine?' The Doctor smiled. 'I think so.'

'If you know where we are, do you know what it is?'

I haven't a clue. But that's half the fun of it wouldn't you say?' the Doctor said, and before Leela could speak he went on, 'No you wouldn't, I know.'

Shall we go then?' Leela suggested, frowning. 'We do not know how soon the darkness will come.'

'Soon.' The Doctor ate another blackberry and stared thoughtfully into the middle distance. Making up his mind he said, 'There's something I need to do first.' He went back to the TARDIS. 'I'll only be a moment,' he told Leela as she moved to follow him.

Leela scowled. 'You forget how much time passes.'

'I'll be quick, I promise.'

'Such promises mean nothing,' Leela sulked, 'and you are never quick.'

'Wait out here and keep watch.'

'This is not a good place.'

The Doctor smiled. 'This is the only place,' he said enigmatically, and went inside.

He crossed to the console and examined the telltales again. There had been something very positive about the way the TARDIS had come here, something that was not really reflected in what he had seen outside. He might not know exactly how to fix her but he knew her moods and music intimately. She had come here as though this was the only place she could be. The question was why? The answer was probably unfathomable, but sometimes it was possible to get an idea of what might be happening from the time it took the console indicators to reset themselves.

He checked them all carefully. Only one was out of phase. The time-line flux adjuster showed a very small residual overlap. The temporal anomaly was fading fast but it was there. Somewhere close by, the Doctor realised, there must be a tiny fault in the fabric of the multiverse. 'Well spotted, old thing,' he said. 'While we're here you can draw on the auxiliary power banks,' as he talked he set the controls, 'and use your probability compensators to overlay that spot and strengthen that weakness.' He finished the adjustments and pressed the switch. 'A stitch in time,' he said, 'saves something or another.'

Stepping out of the TARDIS he said to Leela, 'What does a stitch in time save, do you know at all?'

'No,' she said darkly. 'I do not. Can we go now?'

'Soon.' The Doctor was not quite ready to leave. He wanted to be sure he had not destabilised the TARDIS. 'First I thought we should familiarise ourselves with our surroundings.' He pointed to some small trees. 'Those, for example. Do you know what they are?'

'Of course I do not,' Leela said. 'How would I know? And why would I care? Can we go now?'

It could be important,' the Doctor said. 'Someone might point them out to you and ask you about them.'

As they finally set out across the pasture Leela's mood lightened a little. 'I did not feel comfortable there,' she remarked, glancing back at the trees. 'And yet I could see no real threat.'

The Doctor inclined his head slightly and shrugged. 'It was simply a reaction to a new place. It's probably hormonal. Your endocrine system responds to potential danger.'

'You are saying I fear new places.'

'It's perfectly normal,' the Doctor said, offhandedly. 'In your case the warrior training channels it into aggression.'

'You are saying my fear makes me ready to fight.' For once Leela did not react aggressively to being patronised. That was not why I felt uneasy, Doctor,' she said. 'It was not because the place was new to me. I felt as if something was watching. I felt as if something that was not there was watching. You did not feel that.'

The Doctor said, not unkindly, 'You're letting your imagination run away with you.' And he lengthened his stride so that Leela had to jog to keep up.

Despite the hostility of his colleagues Barry Hitchins loved being the Kellerfield Research Fellow in Parapsychology.

It was not that he particularly loved the subject: he didn't. From the beginning he was privately very sceptical. His attitude to telepathy, remote viewing over distance, telekinesis, precognition and all the variations of ESP and mind power so beloved of brain-dead science fiction hacks was not much different from that of the rest of the university. He thought it unlikely that he would find evidence for any of it and if he did find evidence it would probably have been faked.

And as for ley lines, pyramid power, crop circles, standing stones, UFOs and all the wilder imaginings of the Internet conspiracy theorists: he was happy to leave that sort of ludicrous nonsense to New Age throwbacks, credulous X Files fans and the like. Psychics and paranormal manifestations - or ghoulies and ghosties and long long-legged beasts and things-that-go-bump-in-the-night as he thought of them - also left him unmoved and unimpressed. Clairvoyants and mediums, table-tappers, card-readers and fortune-tellers, the list of BFTG - bullshit for the gullible - was apparently endless.

But despite it all, despite his own reservations, despite the barely concealed contempt of those around him, despite the flaky weirdos he was forced to deal with on a regular basis - there was no getting around the fact that he really did enjoy the work. He enjoyed it even more than he had expected to.

'You're late,' he said mildly as the two students wandered into the laboratory.

'Sorry,' Tommy Carmodie said, smiling offhandedly and pushing the floppy hair back from his forehead. 'Haven't got a watch any more. Had to pawn it unfortunately.'

'Me too,' Josh Randall murmured. 'Student poverty gets worse by the hour. As far as I can tell without a watch of course.' Josh was the taller of the two and shaven-headed.

Unlike Tommy, who seemed to have modelled himself on Hugh Grant, Josh never made any attempt to be charming. It obviously did not concern him now, for example, that the watch he was wearing was clearly visible.

'What is it we're doing today?' Tommy asked. 'I seem to have forgotten.'

At an interfaculty meeting not long after his appointment Barry Hitchins had expressed the view that his research was 'going to be more fun than women's heavyweight custard wrestling. Not blancmange wrestling, but then nothing comes close to that, as I'm sure you'll all agree. Especially if it's the pink blancmange.' Bill Parnaby had laughed but he had been the only one. Everyone else had greeted the comments in frosty silence and Barry had realised that to the label quack practitioner of a pseudoscience

he had just managed to add stupid sexist moron. It had been a dumb thing to say, but he had been nervous and he tended to say dumb things when he was nervous. It was no excuse of course. After all, he had degrees in sociology and psychology - not good ones it was true, not as good as he claimed anyway - but they should at least have equipped him to know better than to wade on through the custard and blancmange. Up until then he had felt that you mostly knew more than you learnt, but he realised afterwards that the opposite was certainly true.

'I want to run a continuation of the series on short-range telepathy,' he said. 'You're in the number one capsule, Tommy. You're in the number four, Josh.'

The two young men turned towards the line of four white-painted, fibreglass cubicles, each one domed, almost egg-shaped, and about the size of a small shower unit.

'You don't trust us,' Josh said, matter-of-factly.

Tommy pantomimed surprise, said, 'I hadn't forgotten had I?' and did his best to look wounded. 'You didn't tell us. I have to say that's very hurtful. I thought we were supposed to be a team here? Boldly going and all that sort of thing.'

Josh nodded. 'How are we supposed to get these things right if you don't give us any advance warning? We've bugged the wrong capsules now, we've practised the wrong codes, we're totally screwed.'

'We've wasted a lot of time,' Tommy agreed. 'I don't know how much because I can't afford a watch any more. The thing is, though, you don't seem to be taking this whole thing nearly as seriously as we do.'

It was a disappointment to Barry Hitchins to know that one gaffe had probably cost him the chance of ever parlaying the research fellowship up to full professor with a department of his own. But once he had accepted the situation, he found that the abandonment of ambition was oddly liberating. If he was never to be respected or respectable then he was free to indulge, metaphorically speaking, in whatever custard-wrestling took his fancy.

On one notable occasion he had amused himself by publicly confirming that a popular mind-reader and metal-bending conjuror, who claimed among other things to have been trained by Israeli intelligence as a psychic weapon, might well have genuine paranormal gifts. An invitation to come to the university to have the telepathy and spoon-bending tested under controlled conditions was readily accepted by the entertainer. Of course the invitation was never taken up, but by then she and Barry had already got plenty of valuable publicity.

On another occasion he had investigated a poltergeist that was supposedly plaguing a suburban semi. The restless spirit was moving furniture, tossing ornaments about and slamming doors. Barry revealed it to be a fairly crude hoax. It turned out that the householder had planned the whole thing because he wanted to get on to daytime

television, and though he succeeded in this, 'Con men and those who expose them' was probably not the fifteen minutes of fame he'd had in mind. The episode did Barry Hitchins no harm however. Now known as 'Ghostbuster Buzzer' he was well on his way to becoming a minor media celebrity. This further irritated his colleagues which, as far as he was concerned, was a major plus.

Barry had calculated that it would only take one more reasonably high-profile opportunity to demonstrate his expertise in the field of the supernatural and he could make the jump to full media pundit, which would more than compensate for not being a full professor. He was in the process of devising such an opportunity - it involved a haunted vicarage and a particularly spectacular headless spook - when he received an unexpected and rather sinister note warning him that his funding was going to be at risk unless he paid more attention to researching the accepted areas of serious parapsychology.

'It's the usual card-reading,' he said. 'Tommy you're reading and sending. Turn the cards on the light cue. You won't be getting any sort of cue, Josh. I want you to call out the cards when you think they've been turned.'

'Wait a minute . 'Josh stopped and turned back to stare at him. 'Wait a minute. Not only do I have to guess what the card is, I have to guess when it's turned over?'

'Problem?'

'Why the new variable?'

'A small extra pressure, nothing more.'

The point being?'

'The point being,' Tommy interrupted, opening the thickly padded door to the number one capsule, 'he really doesn't trust us. He thinks we really might have a code or something.'

'And you think a "small extra pressure" would stop that?' Josh challenged. 'Why not go the whole hog? Do you want me to drink a glass of water and recite the alphabet backwards while I'm waiting for the cards to be turned? Or would you prefer a gottle o' geer?'

At first Barry thought it must be some sort of joke: what passed for wry humour among the more bitter of his academic associates. The accepted areas of serious parapsychology? Accepted by whom he wondered. And serious parapsychology? Surely the whole point was that parapsychology was not taken seriously by anyone who mattered. And then it had struck him in a shocking flash of the blindingly obvious. Presumably whoever it was who had endowed the research fellowship did take it seriously, and they mattered because presumably they were in a position, a very real position, to cut off his funding. And he realised how much he had come to rely on being Dr Barry Hitchins, the Kellerfield Research Fellow in Parapsychology. As a title 'Ghostbuster Bazzar' was never going to be an acceptable substitute.

'Shall we just get into the capsules and put the headphones on?' he suggested patiently. 'Prompting paranoid fantasies wasn't quite what I had in mind.'

With a token show of reluctance the two students opened the designated units and climbed in. The four isolation capsules stood in a line along one wall of the laboratory. Apart from elaborately quarantined air filtration they were designed to be self-contained and virtually soundproof. They were lightproof, too, and their individual circuits, both electrical and electronic, were heavily shielded. Even though all the capsules were completely

separated from each other, when two were in use as now, it was still standard operating procedure to have at least one empty one between the occupied units.

While Tommy and Josh closed themselves into number one and number four, Barry took up his position in the small control and monitoring suite at the other end of the room. From here he could communicate with the capsules, and see and record everything that went on in them via multiple CCTV cameras that covered every possible angle and position.

Research using people as experimental subjects was always difficult to frame satisfactorily, but a study involving them and elements of the supernatural made it almost impossible. Such work seemed to bring out the gullible and the deliberate cheats in more than average numbers. Barry recognised that, at its most innocent, this was because people wanted to believe and would lie to themselves to make it true. After lying to yourself, lying to someone like him was hardly lying at all. People saw what they expected to see and expected what they wanted to see.

At its least innocent, his feeling was that the world was full of self-serving scumbags who wouldn't know the truth if it bit them in the arse, and he went to elaborate lengths to spot and eliminate their scumbaggery.

As he powered up the cameras, set the capsule light levels and activated the mic in number four Barry was sure he had designed out all the chances to fake the results. He was sure, but he wasn't confident. He could never escape the nagging feeling that he was somehow being manipulated. He set the bank of video recorders running, put his headphones on and prepared to give Tommy the light signal that would cue the first card turn.

'Mr Bun the Baker,' Josh said solemnly, staring into the camera. 'I'm right aren't I? I can see it as clear as day'

After the first rush of guilty panic had subsided it had struck Barry as unlikely that an anonymous note in the internal mail would have come directly from the funder. His initial idea that it was a sour joke seemed more probable but he felt it was still a timely reminder, a wake-up call, even what he had once heard referred to as 'an updated reality check'.

If there was an element of overreaction in Barry's response it was understandable because up until then his benefactor had remained uncommunicative. Whoever provided all the funding had played no part in his recruitment and had offered no comment on his appointment. When Barry thought about it, which wasn't often, he assumed there were legitimate reasons for such reticence. He had no real idea what they might be, and the truth was he didn't much care, but he didn't see it as sinister.

Since the competition for academic funding of any kind was so cut-throat, the university for its part had been willing to accept a general definition of the field of study and complete donor confidentiality as conditions of the endowment. The feeling was that money encouraged money and, providing the Kellerfield Research Fellow conducted himself in a scientifically respectable way, the appearance of being well-funded would attract funding and this could only help in the development of the academic standing of the University of East Wessex.

But joke or genuine threat, whatever the source and seriousness of the warning, the note had a profound effect on Barry Hitchins' approach to his research. He now shunned publicity and turned down all the media opportunities that presented themselves. He refined his test equipment and he worked to devise objective, repeatable experiments. He resigned himself to the hard grind of serious research, satisfied in his own mind that the most he could hope to achieve was a reliable body of negative results.

Then abruptly everything changed again when one of his routine test surveys of the student body produced several volunteers who appeared to show signs of paranormal gifts.

'What a star I am, 'Josh said. 'I can see you're impressed.' He waved at the camera. 'Come on wave. Gottle 'o geer, gottle o geer! A definite star!'

Barry ignored him and flicked a switch on the control panel. In the number one capsule the signal bulb flashed and Tommy reached for the first card in a dealing shoe on the clear Perspex table in front of him. The deck of cards was made up of an equal number of five different simple geometric shapes on plain backgrounds: a circle, a square, a pair of wavy lines, a five-pointed star and a triangle. The cards had been machine shuffled, placed in

the shoe and put on the table before Tommy entered the capsule. He was strictly forbidden to touch the cards, shoe or table until he was given the cue.

He drew the card and lifted the star to show it to the camera, then he put it down on the table and stared at the image. In the number four capsule Josh yawned and said nothing.

Barry waited until he was sure Josh had no idea the card had been turned and cued a second draw. This time Tommy held up a card showing two wavy lines. Josh was leaning back in the chair now and his eyes were closed. Barry sighed to himself. Josh was obviously in another of his uncooperative moods. He switched on his own mic and said, 'Subject Josh Randall appears to be hostile to the experiment. Perhaps he's been thrown by the additional discipline though I'm not sure at the moment why this should be. Examine the sequence up to this point for clues to his behaviour.' He made a note of the time code.

In the capsule Josh said, 'Have we started yet?'

'You obviously haven't,' Barry muttered and cued another card. Again it was a star. Again Josh did not respond, then he said, 'Bored with this game. Let's play something else. Snap? How about snap?' He nodded as if making up his mind.

'Snap!'

Barry flicked the switch and Tommy drew another card showing a star. Not even the random shuffle seemed to have worked properly for this sequence. It was clearly pointless to go on. He decided to abort the experiment.

'Is there no end to their talent?' Josh chortled. 'Well yes, there is actually.'

Barry switched on the speaker circuits to both the capsules.

'And we're approaching it,' Josh continued, '*about* now.'

'All right,' Barry said into his desk mic. 'Thank you both. Call that a day I think.'

As they emerged from the capsules Tommy asked, 'How many did we get right?'

'None,' Barry said.

Josh was grinning. 'What are the chances of that?' he said.

'It's a spooky gift,' Tommy said solemnly.

Barry shook his head. 'I thought it was me that wasn't taking this seriously?'

'As long as you realise that,' Tommy agreed.

'Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, cross,' Josh murmured, marking an imaginary exercise book with elaborate flourishes. 'Must try harder. See me.'

Barry sighed. 'Maybe we'll do better tomorrow,' he said.

'Doubt that,' Josh said.

'When shall we three meet again?' Tommy was smiling broadly. 'Same time tomorrow is it? I'll borrow a watch.'

'The thing is,' Barry said, 'if you'd put some effort into this you might surprise yourselves. You might shake the world. You could be on the cutting edge of research.'

'Whoah,' Josh feigned awe-struck amazement. 'You don't mean we *could* he gulped theatrically, 'you don't mean we *could* push the envelope?'

Irritated, Barry Hitchins turned off the capsule systems, checked the time codes on the recorders and turned them off. Despite all his preparations and all his efforts he had completely missed the significance of what he had just seen.

## Chapter Three

'It's a cow,' the Doctor said as Leela warily confronted the large Friesian blocking her path. "They are completely harmless herbivores,' he added, walking on through the herd. 'Fully domesticated. Selectively bred for meat and milk.'

The animal eyed Leela with mild curiosity. 'Nothing that large,' Leela said, 'is ever completely harmless.' She put a hand out to stroke the cow and it swung its head to one side and trotted away. 'Nothing that large and that stupid is ever completely harmless.'

'I quite like cows,' the Doctor said when she caught up with him. 'They've always struck me as rather good-natured, all things considered.'

'Is there anything about this planet that you do not like?' she asked tetchily.

'Is there anything about it you do like?' the Doctor countered. 'So far?'

'No,' Leela said flatly. "This is not a place I wish to be.'

'Well as long as you've given it every chance,' the Doctor said and smiled his vivid, wolfish smile.

But Leela was not to be diverted from her souring mood. "There is something dangerous here. I can still feel it. If you were not so pleased with this Earth place you would feel it too. It *is*' she groped for the right expression, 'it is waiting everywhere.'

'As far as I remember,' the Doctor said, 'in this particular region there are no major predators, no lethal insects, no poisonous arachnids, no seriously venomous snakes and the climate is relatively benign.'

'Paradise?" Leela suggested, her voice full of angry scepticism. I do not think so.'

'It's probably boredom,' the Doctor said. 'Your warrior instinct is frustrated by the lack of stimuli.'

Leela shook her head. 'You do not understand what I am saying.'

'You're saying you feel threatened,' the Doctor said. And I am saying there is no threat here. Unless you're scared of cows of course.' He grinned. 'A lot of people are I believe. Especially girls?' But Leela remained grimly unmoved by the obvious teasing.

They were close enough to the cluster of buildings now to be able to see that people were strolling about in paved areas and sitting on the grass in open spaces. Here and there through the grounds of the complex there were small fountains and ornamental lakes. The people looked for the most part to be young, and many had what could be books with them. Groups walked purposefully between the smoked glass blocks.

'Do you know, I think that might be a university of some sort,' the Doctor remarked cheerfully.

Leela peered at the buildings suspiciously. 'What is a university?'

The Doctor was searching the hedge for a gap through into the next field. 'It's an institution devoted to the preservation and pursuit of knowledge and the communication of that knowledge to those who want it.'

Leela unsheathed her knife and began chopping her way through the hedge. 'Perhaps they pursue knowledge of the waiting danger'

'It's unlikely' said the Doctor. 'Judging from the architecture they should have left superstition and general unreason well behind them by now. I imagine religion will have been consigned to the department of history.'

Leela stopped chopping at a stubborn blackthorn stem and glared back at the Doctor 'I have left superstition and general unreason behind me.'

'Well behind,' the Doctor agreed.

'And I think of the religion of my tribe as his story,' she said. And then, in response to the Doctor's expression, added by way of explanation, 'The shaman's story.'

The Doctor smiled. 'It is a difficult thing to shake off,' he said. 'The religion of your tribe.'

Leela went back to hacking down the last obstacle to her free passage through the hedge. 'You said all it took was reason and an open mind.'

The Doctor followed her through the gap. 'I could be wrong,' he said. 'One mustn't be dogmatic about these things after all.'

'A demon chased you?' Josh sighed and ran a hand over his shaved scalp. 'Oh purlease. What have you been smoking? Get a grip, girl.'

'If she says that's what happened that's what happened, and she doesn't need to get a grip, bay! Meg said angrily.

'So how come no one else saw it?' Josh looked round the table at the others. 'You didn't see anything did you?'

Chloe drained her glass. 'It was me it wanted,' she said miserably. 'Only me.'

'I can understand that,' Tommy said. 'I feel the same way most of the time.' He reached across the table to touch her hand. Without thinking she withdrew it. It could almost have been a flinch. 'Is it my round?' he said, looking towards the bar. 'Unless someone can lend me a beer coupon or two I'm afraid it's going to be a half of bitter and straws.'

'Why don't I find that as charming and appealing as you so obviously do?' Joan said without smiling.

Tommy pushed the hair back from his forehead. 'Because you're a miserable bitch,' he suggested mildly, and as cuddly an androgynous dwarf?'

Joan smiled sweetly. 'Oh dear. I was going to lend you money too.'

'No you weren't.'

'No I wasn't.'

'This demon,' Ralph said. 'What did it want from you?'

'It wanted to kill me,' Chloe said. She took a £10 note from her wallet and pushed it across the table towards Tommy.

'What's this?" he asked.

'Your round,' she said and smiled.

'All yes.' He took the money. Same again everyone?' None of them noticed his unhappy expression as he made his way to the bar.

'Yes, but why?' Ralph asked.

'We conjured it up,' Joan said. It was drawn to that place of death and we gave it substance.'

'That's exactly what you didn't do by the sound of it,' Josh said. He sounded amused. It had no substance except in Clarrys mind.'

"Chloe,' Chloe said. My name is Chloe.'

'Shit, sorry. All this time I thought your name was Clarry.' He shook his head in mock embarrassment. "If you ask me,' he went on, you all trotted off into the woods, got yourselves worked up with some occult play-acting, and then Clarry here had a Blair Witch moment.'

I don't think we did ask you,' Joan said, did we?'

Unsmiling, Ralph said, "I think he's right though.'

Well there's a surprise,' Meg scoffed. Binmen of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your rubbish.'

'We were all of us hyped up,' Ralph said. 'It's not surprising that someone *got*

'Hysterical is the word you're looking for,' Josh said smiling.

'It's not surprising that one of us girlies got hysterical,' Meg said, 'that's what you mean isn't it? You might at least have the balls to come out and say it.'

'I may have imagined it,' Chloe said. 'I thought it was the murderer but I may just have been projecting my own fears back on myself.'

'What did it say to you exactly?' Josh asked. He seemed to be interested despite himself.

'It didn't say anything. It was just howling hate-filled gibberish.'

'Not one of your more coherent demons then.'

'Whatever it was,' Chloe shuddered, 'it was horrifyingly insane. Does that mean I am do you think? Am I insane?'

YES! 'the voice roared. YOU'RE MAD AND YOU'RE DEAD!'

The shout was so deafening it made Chloe's jaw clench and her ears ring, and she knew immediately that no one else would have heard it. She looked round for some clue, some possible link to the normality of the student union bar, but there was nothing. Would it come now, screaming and bellowing from the door, leaping and crashing into the window? She could feel her chest constricting and compressing. She panted, struggling to fill her lungs with thin, unbreathable air. Blood hammered in her eyes and rattled thickly in her ears. She grabbed the edge of the table and held on grimly. This time she would not run. This time she would keep her nerve no matter what happened.

'Are you all right, Clarry?' Josh was staring hard at her.

IT'S NOT CLARRY IT'S CHLOE!' a voice shouted but she wasn't sure whether it was her voice or the demon's. The others were looking at her now. Was it because they could hear the voice?

'Chloe?' Meg reached towards her, but it seemed as if her arm was getting longer and longer and she was getting further and further away. 'Is it a panic attack?' Meg's distant voice was full of concern. 'Breathe slowly, Chloe. Try to breathe slowly. Deep slow breaths.'

BREATHE YOUR LAST BREATH,' the demon cackled. ETERNITY IS AN AIRLESS AGONY OF PANIC!

Chloe's hands slipped off the edge of the table as she pushed herself to her feet. She would have fallen headlong if Ralph had not caught her and steadied her. 'I must go,' she said, or whispered, or shouted. She pulled free of his arms and ran for the door.

'RUN! RUN!' the voice exalted. YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE!

Somewhere in the chaos of her panic Chloe heard Josh say: not one of your more coherent demons then and thought: it shouts cliches too. But it didn't stop her terror, and it didn't stop her scramble to escape.

Sobbing incoherently and half-blinded by tears she wrenched open the door to the bar and plunged out into the sunlight. Almost immediately she cannoned into someone and fell on to the hard paving stones of the small quadrangle. Pain jagged through her knees and hands.

'Are you all right?' a friendly voice inquired. 'Don't try and move for a moment.'

Chloe peered up and saw a tall man dressed in a long coat, with a long scarf and a soft felt hat jammed over curly hair. There was a girl dressed as some sort of primitive hunter-gatherer standing beside him.

'What do you think, Leela?' the man said. 'Any broken bones?' He squatted down on his haunches and smiled at Chloe. Despite the pain she felt more relaxed almost at once.

'She will be bruised, nothing more,' the girl said without making any move to examine her.

'How can you tell from there?' Chloe asked. 'X-ray vision?'

'Leela's an expert,' the man said. 'She was trained to break bones for a living. No, I phrased that badly. She was trained to break bones to stay alive.'

'There's a difference?' Chloe asked as he helped her up.

'The Doctor has never understood the way of the warrior,' the girl said.

"The way of the warrior?' Chloe looked from the man to the girl and back again. Is this street theatre?' she asked, smiling.

Barry finished cataloguing the tapes and filing his notes. He completed the diary entry and the experiment log and tabulated the predictable, if disappointing, results of the day's test programme. Then he yawned copiously, stretched his cramped shoulder muscles and scratched his crotch.

'Nice manners,' the voice said from the doorway. 'But I suppose that's to be expected from Ghostbuster Buzzer, the pusher of scientific envelopes.'

'Professor John Finer as I live and breathe,' Barry said, genuinely surprised to see the physicist. 'You forgot ventriloquist, conjuror and children's party entertainer by the way'

'Your more reputable work is not my concern,' Finer said, the half-smile doing nothing to soften his narrow face.

Barry resisted the urge to throw something heavy at him and said instead, 'I don't think you've ever been in here before, have you? Can I show you what I've got set up? I'd be interested in your opinion.' He got up from his workstation and moved to where the head of the Developmental Engineering Department was standing barely over the threshold of the lab.

'Pointless waste of time,' Finer said flatly.

'Is that your answer or your opinion?'

Both.'

Barry nodded. 'So what are you doing in here, Finer?' he asked, no longer bothering to keep the anger out of his voice. 'Aren't you afraid of catching some reputation-crashing virus?'

Finer's smile broadened slightly into what looked like a sneer. 'Stupidity by association is always a danger.'

'As is respectability by association,' Barry sneered back. 'So make your point and leave. I wouldn't want to get a reputation as an establishment poodle.'

'One of my students is not working to his potential because *your* experiments; Finer stressed the word making it sound ludicrously inappropriate, 'are taking too much of his attention.'

'Maybe your course is boring crap,' Barry snapped. 'Maybe you're just not taking enough of his attention.'

'Josh Randall could be a talented engineer.' Finer's tone was pure contempt.

Stung, Barry said, 'As in train-driver presumably?' and immediately felt stupid and petty.

'You see,' Finer said loftily, 'that's the sort of ignorant prejudice developmental engineering comes up against constantly'

'I can't imagine what coming up against ignorant prejudice must be like,' Barry remarked, hoping he sounded ironic rather than self-pitying.

Finer scowled. 'Finish what you're doing with Randall and let him get on with his real work.'

'Consider it done.' This time Barry had no trouble sounding wry.

'I mean it.' Finer poked a bony finger at Barry's face. 'I'm not going to let you ruin this kid.'

'Get out of the lab!' Barry felt the anger making his heart beat quicker and his breath get shorter.

'You call this a lab?' sneered Finer.

'I call this my lab,' Barry raged, and I advise you to get the hell out of it before I forget that I'm an inoffensive academic and give my full attention to kicking your bony arse!'

Finer bunched his fists and stared at Barry for a long moment as though considering whether to fight him or not. Finally he shook his head dismissively. 'I shall never understand why they let anyone like you on campus in the first place,' he said, and turned on his heel. 'But I'll make it my business to have you thrown off it if you keep on the way you're going!'

Barry followed him to the door of the laboratory and slammed it after him. 'You arrogant pillock!' he shouted at the closed door. 'You do right to run away, *you* you chicken shit!' Then he locked and bolted the door just to be on the safe side and went back to his workstation to think about ways to widen the focus of his experiments. He would make Finer eat his words, preferably written in large letters on something disgusting.

The Doctor took a sip from the free sample of bottled water he had taken out of a Clearspring Water Company advertising display and looked at the flyers stapled to the notice board. One in particular caught his attention. 'If time travel were not impossible it would be pointless - a lecture by Professor Bill Parnaby,' he read aloud. He beamed down at Leela. 'That should be fun,' he said. 'It's a couple of weeks away though. What do you think, shall we jump the TARDIS forward and go and argue with him?'

Leela finally managed to twist and flip open the dispenser nozzle on her bottle. 'If you could control the TARDIS in that way we would not be in this place,' she said reasonably, and squirted some of the water into her mouth.

'Are you sure? Perhaps I would have brought us here anyway'

Why?'

'To discuss impossibilities with Professor Parnaby.'

But you did not know of this man until we came here.'

'That's true,' the Doctor nodded. 'But I do know of him now. So I might have brought us here then. And as you know, then and now are relative and interchangeable.'

Leela sighed. 'You are making fun of me again.'

The Doctor grinned. 'This may be our second visit, but we are doing it first.'

Beyond the university buildings the trees and hedges were darkening into silhouettes as the sun began to settle towards the horizon. Shadow was reaching across the fields and seemed to drift into the campus, dimming the colours in the small square where the Doctor and Leela stood watching students coming and going.

'It is getting dark,' Leela said, placing her hand briefly on the hilt of her knife.

It was an unconscious gesture the Doctor had seen her make many times, and he took it to be a reassurance reflex. He remembered that an Earth cartoonist whose work he much admired had coined a term for something which offered such irrational comfort and he wondered ruefully if a very large knife really qualified as a security blanket. 'Late summer dusk,' he said, trying to sound especially reassuring, 'is the time of peaceful beauty and quiet contemplation here on this world.'

Leela said flatly, 'Darkness is the time of predators that do not need the light to see what it is they are hunting. Everywhere on any world.'

It occurred to the Doctor that if Leela was not being deliberately downbeat to make some angry point of her own, then she was showing signs of incipient paranoia. 'I think you're doing it on purpose,' he said. 'Since we got here nothing has happened to make you feel threatened.'

You have no reason to be afraid.'

At the mention of fear Leela did not bristle with warrior pride the way the Doctor had hoped. There are always reasons to be afraid,' she said darkly. 'The dark is one of them.'

As if in response to her words, automatic sensors reacted to the developing gloom and lights began to switch on across the campus. As well as the standard space lighting there were low level floodlights which glowed gradually brighter round the ornamental lakes, and concealed uplighters among the trees and shrubberies which exaggerated shapes and made elaborate patterns from the foliage.

'I don't imagine this will lighten your mood?' the Doctor asked.

Leela shrugged dismissively. 'Some night predators are attracted to the light.'

Before the Doctor could voice his exasperation Chloe Pennick, the excitable girl who had cannoned into them earlier, came out of the administration office and hurried across the square to where they were standing.

'I've checked the regulations,' she said eagerly. "You're allowed to stage performances on campus 'providing you belong to, or have been invited by, a bona fide student group". I can organise that for you. In the meantime I've booked you into the guest accommodation.'

'How very kind of you, Chloe.' The Doctor beamed 'I think we may be at cross-purposes though. We weren't planning to stay. Were we Leela?'

'I did not want to come here at all,' Leela said, touching the hilt of her knife. 'This is a bad place to be.'

Chloe looked nervous suddenly. She glanced from the Doctor to Leela and back to the Doctor. 'Do you really think so?' she asked, her voice full of apprehension.

'No of course not,' the Doctor said. 'I must apologise for

Leela. She's been in a rather primitive mood ever since we arrived.'

Leela said flatly and ungraciously, 'I do not like this place or anything about it.'

'Why not?' Chloe was staring hard at Leela as though she already knew the answer to the question and merely wanted confirmation.

'There is danger,' Leela said.

'Yes,' Chloe agreed. 'I think so too.' She looked at the Doctor and nodded. 'I think so too,' she repeated.

'And what do you think this danger is?' the Doctor asked, wondering if his understanding of young women was even sketchier than he had thought.

'I am being pursued.'

'You are being hunted?' Leela asked.

Chloe frowned. 'In a way. But it's more haunted than hunted,' she said. Then she shrugged and smiled a small, embarrassed smile. 'I suppose that sounds silly doesn't it?'

'When you say *haunted*?' the Doctor prompted.

'It's a sort of demon. I think it might be the ghost of a serial killer?'

'Ah.' The Doctor did his best to look sympathetic because it seemed to him that the girl was either a very good actress or she actually believed what she was saying. Either way he felt it was kinder to play along. 'And it's following you - ?'

'Chasing me,' she interrupted.

'Chasing you,' the Doctor corrected himself, '*because*?'

'I don't know why'

'What does it look like?' Leela asked.

Chloe frowned with concentration and then said, 'I don't really know that either. I didn't see it very well. It was dark *and*'

'You were afraid,' Leela said matter-of-factly.

'I was terrified,' Chloe agreed.

'Fear will change what you see,' Leela remarked, 'and create what you do not see. That is one of the first things the warrior-trainers taught us.'

'If it isn't there,' Chloe's eyes filled with tears, 'then I'm losing my mind.'

Since she had not reacted to Leela's references to tribal lore, the Doctor was still not entirely sure whether Chloe was genuinely distraught or was merely playing along with what she thought was an impromptu theatrical performance. 'What does it do, this demon of yours?' he asked as patiently as he could. 'How does it chase you exactly?'

Chloe hesitated. 'It rushes towards me shouting and screaming threats,' she said. 'It's like it's in my head, like it's in my *head* Oh God it sounds as though I'm hearing voices doesn't it?'

Leela said, not unkindly, 'It sounds as though you are hearing voices because you are hearing voices.'

The tears were leaking down Chloe's face now. 'I am going mad aren't I?' she said miserably.

'I don't think that's likely,' the Doctor said, though in fact he thought it was quite possible she might be having a breakdown of some sort. 'I tell you what.' He felt in his coat pocket and pulled out the battered paper bag. 'Why don't you have a jelly baby,' he proffered the bag, 'and show us around this fine old seat of learning?'

Chloe peered at the bag. A jelly baby?'

'I find them a great comfort in moments of stress.'

'Something to do with boosting blood sugar I expect,' she said, taking one. 'So what would you like to see of this fine old seat of learning?'

'We're in your hands,' the Doctor said, setting off immediately towards one of the bigger smoked-glass and steel blocks. 'What's that building there?'

'That's IT,' Chloe said, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the heel of her hand as she hurried to catch up. It's the largest department. At least I think it's the largest. My friend Meg says developmental engineering has more money than you can shake a stick at.'

'What is IT?' asked Leela, who had anticipated the Doctor's abrupt move and was strolling beside him.

'Initial teaching?' the Doctor ventured.

Chloe eased her way between them. Information technology,' she said.

The Doctor was unfazed. 'So that's what it's called now? I haven't been on a tour of a university since Isaac Newton showed me around Cambridge. That was before he was Sir Isaac, of course. He was a remarkable thinker. He did have a tendency to paranoia though, and I always felt that fishing book was a mistake.'

Chloe giggled. 'You're trying to convince me I'm losing my mind aren't you. That was Isaac Walton, wasn't it? *The Complete Angler*?'

'No, no,' the Doctor said authoritatively. 'Isaac Walton was a composer. I'm sure you'll find I'm right.'

Chloe was enjoying the game now. 'William Walton was the composer.'

'Or am I thinking of Walton Hummer?' the Doctor mused.

'Who's Walton Hummer?' Chloe asked.

'You've never heard of Walton Hummer?'

'Should I have done?'

'You could hardly have avoided Walton Hummer,' the Doctor said. Charming little fellow. Small, only about three feet tall, but perfectly formed. He was a giant on the electronic kazoo and his work on the wiffle-synthesiser was earthshaking. If you've never heard of him I must have got the dates confused. This is obviously an earlier period than I imagined.' And he was about to explain the full significance of Walton Hummer to twenty-first-century popular music when Leela suddenly lengthened her stride and sidestepped in front of Chloe.

'I thought you told me, Doctor,' she said quietly as she leant in close to him, 'never to tell the people we meet too much about the way we have travelled.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm just trying to cheer her up,' he murmured but he knew Leela was right. He was talking too much and he was slightly puzzled by that. He didn't normally babble like an idiot. Was there something odd about this place after all?

'It's no good whispering you two,' Chloe said, smiling. 'There are no secrets from me. I'm Chloe the Clairvoyant. It's official. I'm certified as gifted. Dr Hitchins' tests show I may not be as gifted as one or two of the others but I definitely have psi powers.'

'What are psi powers?' Leela asked.

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. 'Parapsychology?' he said. 'Someone here's doing experiments in parapsychology?'

'Dr Hitchins, Barry Hitchins, aka Ghostbuster Bazzar? You don't look as though that means much to you.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'It doesn't.'

'Psi powers are parapsychology then,' Leela said carefully.

'He's famous,' Chloe said. 'Well, quite famous. He's been on TV and stuff.'

'Because of his experiments?'

'Mostly because of the research fellowship. He's the Kellerfield Research Fellow in Parapsychology. There aren't a lot of those about.'

'I should hope not,' the Doctor remarked frowning.

'You're another sceptic,' Chloe said. 'There are a lot of those about. At least around here there are.'

'What is parapsychology?' Leela asked

'The point,' the Doctor went on, 'is that the experimental protocols are invariably wrong. The research is usually undertaken in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons, and the results are almost *always*'

'Wrong?' Chloe offered.

'Wrong,' the Doctor agreed.

'You mean you believe in it?' Chloe seemed slightly incredulous. You sound as though you actually do believe in it.'

'There is an argument,' the Doctor said, sounding pompous even to himself, 'that says that anything you can imagine must exist, otherwise it would not be possible for you to imagine it. You cannot imagine what cannot exist.'

'You told me there was no such thing as magic, Doctor,' Leela said angrily, and no such thing as ghosts. And when I told you I felt as if something in this place was watching, something which was not there, you said it was my imagination. You said it was my imagination running away with me. Now you say that if I can imagine it, it must be true.'

'That's not what I said, Leela,' the Doctor snapped. 'What I said was -' and he realised abruptly that it was indeed more or less what he had said. 'What I should have said was: it's just a way of thinking,' he said more gently. 'Not a very useful way. I tell you what. Why don't we go and have a chat with Dr Hitchins? Find out what he's doing.'

'What is parapsychology?' Leela asked again.

'It's telepathy and remote viewing and precognition and stuff like that,' Chloe said, waving her hands about in vague and unhelpful gestures. 'Mental powers that aren't normal, you know?'

Leela nodded. 'I know,' she said. 'like magic and the power to summon ghosts and see demons.'

'Yes,' Chloe said. That too I suppose.'

'Superstitious nonsense,' the Doctor said. Magic, ghosts, demons, gods. They're all just names given by the ignorant and the frightened to phenomena they can't explain. If only people were not afraid of the unknown, ignorance would be a joy and curiosity would be the best reason for living.' Even as he said it the Doctor noticed out of the corner of his eye

a spreading pool of darkness sliding smoothly across the ground, flowing like flat, black water drowning the light. An eddy of chilly air breathed and whispered round him and he shivered. With a conscious effort he turned to look directly at the dark and it dissolved away into shadows and broken patterns of floodlit brightness. As it vanished he thought he heard a mocking voice sneer: 'If only people were not afraid of the unknown.'

'Who's there?' the Doctor almost shouted.

'Who is where?' Leela asked, touching the hilt of her knife and peering in the direction the Doctor was looking.

'You didn't hear anything?' the Doctor asked.

'What did you hear?' Chloe asked.

'Fear,' the voice muttered. Was he really hearing it? the Doctor wondered. 'Fear.' Was it distant or close? Was it real or imaginary? Was it in the world or in his head? 'Fear,' it murmured. 'Fear is the key that opens the door to where madness and hell wait. I'll take you there. You'll never come back again. You could be afraid for ever!

'Did you hear something, Doctor?' Leela asked.

'BE AFRAID!' the voice suddenly bellowed and the Doctor knew that only he was hearing it. BE AFRAID YOU POMPOUS PRATING FOOL! I WILL STRIP YOUR MIND AND LEAVE YOU SHIVERING IN THE DARK!' Laughter cackled through his head.

'Doctor?' Leela touched his arm.

No, nothing,' the Doctor said quickly. 'Let's get on with it, shall we?'

## Chapter Four

'Why is this shit always at night?' Josh asked scathingly.

It focuses the mind,' Joan said. There are fewer inputs, fewer distractions.'

'Yeah right,' Josh smirked. 'Nothing to do with cheap thrills then.'

Joan uncovered the crystal ball on the low table. 'Do you want to do this or not?' She switched on a small, halogen desk lamp and adjusted the head so that the light shone into the clear glass.

'Since each of us had a personal invitation to your room,' Tommy said, testing the castors on the Ouija-board pointer, 'and we knew nothing about anyone else, close contact with the living rather than the dead was probably more in our minds.'

'Sex?' Joan's laughter was bell-bright and genuine, and all the more cruel for that.' You thought I'd invited you here for sex? She looked directly at Josh. 'Get a grip, wasn't that the phrase?'

Tommy placed the small arrow back in the start position on the Ouija board, with the point set towards the centre of the elaborately drafted arc of letters. 'Board and planchette are go for contact,' he said, adding with a slight smile, 'and as it happens I was going to turn you down. I don't want to be treated as a sex object.'

'I do,' Josh said, rubbing his hand backwards and forwards across his shaved head. 'But you've definitely ruined your chances with me. Not that you had a hell of a lot to begin with.' He sat down on one of the floor cushions that had been placed by the table and nodded at the crystal ball. 'What exactly do you expect to do with that?'

'It's an experiment,' Joan said. 'You're not supposed to expect things are you?' She switched on a second halogen lamp and moved it about minutely until she was satisfied that the Ouija board was properly illuminated.

There was a tap at the door and Meg came in looking flushed and out of breath. 'Sorry, am I late? Sorry.'

'Put the latch down will you,' Joan said, ignoring the apology.

'You want me to lock it?' Meg asked.

'And turn out the main light.'

'Are you sure we want to be locked in a dark room with these two?' Meg said.

'My thought exactly,' Josh grunted.

Tommy pushed his hair back from his forehead. 'But if you both promise to keep your hands to yourselves we'll risk it.'

'No risk at all, trust me,' Meg snorted.

'My thought exactly,' Josh repeated.

Meg locked the door. 'Especially for him.' She turned off the light, made her way uncertainly to the table and flopped down on to one of the cushions.

'Right.' Joan passed her hand over the crystal ball a couple of times. 'Are we sitting comfortably?'

'I hope we're not required to cross your palm with silver,' Tommy said.

'You really should give up whining about being poor, Tommy,' Meg remarked. She sounded irritable. 'It's not very attractive.'

'I'll take your word for it,' Tommy murmured. 'Not being attractive is your area of expertise after all.'

Meg chortled abruptly. 'Bitchy-ee. You've been practising that haven't you?'

In the dimness outside the pool of light on the table Tommy smirked. 'It never hurts to rehearse.'

'Elizabeth Hurley obviously got the wrong Hugh Grant.'

'That's always been my opinion.'

'And hers as it turned out.'

Joan leant forward so that her face was in the brightness and glared first at Meg and then at Tommy. 'If you two want to work on a stand-up comedy routine -'

We're sitting down,' Tommy cut in, and Meg giggled.

'- can you do it another time!' Joan ploughed on shrilly. 'And Meg, why are you drunk, now of all times?'

'Oh shut up, Joan,' Meg snapped. 'You're not my mother.'

You knew we were going to do this! Joan accused.

'So?'

Josh asked, 'So are we going to do something or not?' He shifted on his cushion. 'My arse is going to sleep here.'

There was a moment of silence. Meg mumbled, 'Sorry. I'm OK. Really. I'm not drunk. Not particularly'

'And what difference does it make anyway?' Tommy demanded. 'We're talking communication with spooky forces here, yes? Not juggling or tightrope walking.'

'Presumably she'll be more suggestible,' Josh said. 'Alcohol's been used in this sort of nonsense ritual since whoever it was invented God.'

'Perhaps we should all get drunk,' Joan said, still angry.

Now that sounds like a plan; Tommy said.

'Bar's closed; Josh said and reached forward to put his right index finger on the planchette. 'Is there anybody there?' he intoned.

The little pointer rocked and twitched and started to roll towards the letters.

'Oh my God, look at that; Meg whispered.

The planchette reached the letter N, moved sideways to the letter O and then wobbled uncertainly back to the start position where it came to rest. Josh took his finger off it. 'Oh dear,' he said flatly. 'Nobody there. Wasting our time it seems.'

'Very funny,' Joan said.

Tommy snorted. 'Funny? Oh come on, it wasn't a patch on our routine and you weren't remotely amused by that.'

'All right,' Joan sighed. 'All right. Let's start again from the beginning. Are we sitting comfortably?'

'No,' the other three said, more or less in unison.

"Then we'll begin. Concentrate. Focus.' Joan made upward stroking motions on either side of the crystal ball as though she was trying to gather imaginary vapours and breathe them in. 'Focus. Concentrate. Now, each one of you put a finger on the planchette.'

Meg, Tommy and Josh did as they were told. They were sitting on three sides of the table so that no one person would be in a position to exert an undue influence over the movement of the pointer. In theory at any rate, they cancelled each other out.

'We are here to be guided,' Joan said in a slightly singsong voice. 'We are here to seek answers. We are here in all humility to ask for your help and to ask for your wisdom.' She paused dramatically. Slowly she laid her hands palms upwards on the table. 'Can anybody hear us? Is there anybody there?'

On the Ouija board the pointer remained stubbornly unmoving.

'We ask this in all humility: is there anybody there?' she repeated.

Still the pointer remained static.

After a moment or two she asked, 'Do you feel anything?'

'Does stupid count?' Josh muttered.

'Nothing,' Tommy said. 'Not a quiver. Perhaps we're pressing too hard.'

Why won't you answer us?' Joan asked more loudly in her semichant.

Abruptly the pointer began to move. A-S-K-I-N-G R-O-N-G K-W-E-S-T-I-O-N was painstakingly spelled out. Did any of you do that? Joan asked quietly.

Josh said. 'Presumably we all did it.' Did anyone do it on purpose?' Joan persisted.

Josh withdrew his hand. No I didn't,' he said pointedly. But you're not going to believe me are you.'

'You did it before.'

'I'll just watch this time then, OK?' He sat back from the table so that he was out of the light. What's the right question do you think?' Meg asked.

Tommy said, 'How about: where did you learn to spell? Are the dead dyslexic?'

'Who's there?' Josh suggested.

This time the planchette jerked between the letters. U D-O-N-T W-A-N-T N-O.

'Yes we do,' Joan said. 'We want to know who it is we're speaking to.'

NOT N-O.

Josh spoke from the darkness. 'You don't know who you are, or you don't want us to know who you are?'

N-O-T N-O.

'Even when you ask the right question the bastard won't answer it seems,' Josh said. 'What is your name?'

The planchette remained stuck where it was.

'Please tell us who you are?' Joan asked plaintively.

'I command you to tell us your name,' Josh ordered.

With a tiny jerk the pointer began rolling again. D-E-D.

Josh demanded, 'Is that your name or your condition?'

When nothing happened Joan said, 'Are you dead?'

U D-E-D. U D-E-D. U D-E-D.

Meg yawned suddenly. Well this is exciting. My guess is we're in contact with a defunct budgerigar. Or possibly a dead tape recorder.'

'Maybe he's trying to tell us his name,' Tommy offered. 'Uriah Ded. Uncle Ded. Ulysses S. Ded.'

'Maybe he's threatening us,' Josh said.

'Threatening us?' Tommy snatched his hand away from the board. 'How do you mean threatening us exactly?'

Meg took her finger off the planchette more deliberately. 'It's saying "you are dead" you mean?'

'That's what it sounds like to me.'

'If it is a threat,' Joan said in a small voice. 'it's aimed directly at me.'

'Why do you say that?' Josh asked.

Oh it's always about you, isn't it,' Meg said. It's always about Joan.'

'I asked the question,' Joan said.

Tommy leant forward into the light and pushed the hair away from his forehead. 'Josh was asking questions.'

'It was me who said: are you dead,' Joan said.

'Oh my God, look,' Meg gasped. 'Look at the planchette.'

The pointer had begun rolling on its own. It moved across the board slowly at first, then more and more rapidly. U D-E-D U D-E-D U D-E-D. As it raced back and forth, more and more frantically - U D-E-D UD-E-D UDE-D UDED - Meg, Tommy and Joan watched transfixed. Only when Josh leant in from the darkness and snatched the planchette from the board did they react.

'That was amazing,' Tommy gasped. 'Did you see that? That was amazing.'

'Why did you stop it?' Meg asked. 'It was'

'Amazing,' Tommy said.

'Amazing,' Meg agreed.

'You shouldn't have done that,' Joan said.

'It was bollocks,' Josh said flatly. 'Some sort of trick.'

Joan said, 'Put it back on the board.'

He plonked the pointer back down. 'It's as phoney as that crystal ball.'

Joan said, 'Is it me? Were you threatening me?'

Once again the planchette began to roll all by itself. H-E-L-L. It stopped when it had indicated the second letter L.

'Hell yes? Hell no?' Tommy asked.

'Are you in hell?' Joan asked.

The pointer moved to the letter O and stopped.

'Are you in hell \_ o \_ hello?' Josh said. 'You're not going to fall for that are you? Somebody's having a laugh.'

'Hello,' Joan said, showing no sign of seeing any humour in the situation. 'What is it you want to tell us?'

The pointer moved again. C B-A-L-L.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Meg asked.

'See ball?' Tommy suggested.

Meg said excitedly, 'The crystal ball. It's talking about the crystal ball!'

Josh said, 'Don't you think it would be a good idea to try and find out who it is who's doing the talking?' He moved closer to the table so that he was back in the pool of light. He was frowning with concern, or it might have been contempt. 'There's something deeply dumb about all this.'

But Joan was already peering intently into the small globe of clear glass.

'What can you see?' Tommy asked.

'Can you see anything?' Meg asked eagerly.

'Of course she can't see anything,' Josh sneered. 'It's an oversized marble you pair of pillocks - what do you expect her to see!'

'Shut up!' Joan hissed furiously, not looking up from the crystal ball. 'Shut up, shut up, shut up! If you're too thick to appreciate what's going on here just shut the hell up will you and stay the hell out of it!'

Josh grunted, 'Screw you.' He shook his head and sighed. 'I'm the stupid one? Yeah right.' He shifted back from the table so that his face was once again hidden by the darkness.

'Grease monkeys lack imagination,' Meg murmured, not unkindly. 'It's in the genes unfortunately.'

'Is there anything in the glass?' Tommy asked.

'Nothing!' Josh scoffed from the shadows.

In truth there was nothing, but Joan would never have admitted that. She continued to stare deep into the brightly illuminated ball. 'Show me what you want me to see,' she implored. 'I await your purpose.'

Suddenly in the centre of the sphere there was a tiny black speck. For a moment it hung there like a blemish in the glass and then it began to expand and inflate, a dark sphere growing within the transparent sphere, a total blackness absorbing light as it came, and leaving nothing. When the dark had filled the globe and seemed about to cross the boundary and flood out beyond the rim and into the room itself, a swirl of glowing beads appeared in it. They whirled and danced and slowly came together, coalescing into something almost but not quite recognisable.

On the Ouija board the pointer was moving again. It rattled as it raced to the letters. U D-E-D U D-E-D U-D-E-D-B-I-C-H U-D-E-D-B-I-C-H-J-O-A-N J-O-A-N-B-I-C-H-D-E-D.

'All right. Who's doing that?' Tommy demanded, but it was not clear whether he was talking to the others or to the unseen presence.

Meg half rose from the floor cushion. 'I'm going to put the light on.'

'Don't do that,' Josh warned.

Meg protested, 'This is sick.'

'Look at her'

Joan had not taken her eyes from the crystal ball and she was now bent so close to it that her nose was almost touching the surface. Within the glass a face was taking shape as spots of power met and melted into each other. The face was ugly, hollow-eyed and twisted with sneering hate. The mouth, wide and filled with the darkness, shaped a silent scream of madness. Without warning the face lunged upwards filling the ball. Involuntarily Joan jerked back away from it.

On the Ouija board the little planchette rattled and tapped as it flashed between the letters. B-I-C-H-D-E-D B-I-C-H-D-E-D B-I-C-H-D-E-D B-I-C-H-D-E-D.

Joan stared at the board in startled horror. 'It's Chloe's demon,' she whispered. 'It wants to kill me too.'

As if responding to her words the pointer steadied abruptly and, very slowly and deliberately, spelt out: J-O-A-N C-O-X D-I-E-S N-E-X-T.

'Who are you?' Tommy demanded, leaning forward and talking directly at the planchette. 'Tell us your name you piece of shit!'

With a crack of static electricity the pointer leapt off the board and smacked him on the forehead. The board itself upended and spun away into the darkness, hitting the wall with a loud slap. Both the halogen desk lamps exploded simultaneously, showering small shards of glass across the table and plunging the room into total darkness.

Joan screamed and then the main light switched itself on. No one had moved except Joan. She was lying on the floor, huddled up into the foetal position, and she was sobbing with fear. The crystal ball was unmoved on its small stand but inside what had been perfectly clear glass there was now a blemish: a small sphere of opaque, smoke-grey colouring. It looked a lot like a very large marble.

The Doctor lay on the narrow bed in the guest quarters and pondered the wisdom of his decision to stay over until the next day and talk to this Kellerfield Research Fellow fellow.

There was no real evidence that anything was seriously amiss here. There was nothing that actually warranted his attention. The study of parapsychology was not in itself a matter for concern.

He folded his coat more comfortably around himself and tilted his hat over his eyes.

He had allowed Leela's sour mood and the hysteria of a stressed young student to affect him, and his imagination had got the better of him. He was

not normally so suggestible. Perhaps he was tired. He didn't feel particularly tired but that was no guarantee he wasn't.

He yawned.

Of course, it was possible that there might be some sort of field effect operating in this area, which could be why there was research going on into parapsychology here. He had come across such phenomena before though he himself had never been directly affected by them. Naturally occurring multiverse overlaps, space-time loop anomalies, self-regulating temporal inversions and the like could all produce an identifiable reaction in certain species. In people there was often a subliminal, almost subconscious, response depending on personality type. Once within a field behaviour could become unsettled and fearful, or obsessively focused on the mystical, the magical, the paranormal. There were a number of, largely untested, theories as to why this should be. His personal preference was for the idea that such fields partially suppressed the higher brain functions, directly inhibiting logic and rationality. Belief in ghosts and demonic possession, all sorts of mindless superstitions, could take hold in such circumstances. Sudden mood shifts were also a common feature, and at the extremes there was always the possibility of violence.

He stretched his legs a little.

Then again, of course, it might be the other way round: the research itself might be causing a weak field effect which could be feeding back on itself and intensifying to produce a multiverse overlap or a space-time loop anomaly or even a self-regulating temporal *inversion*

The Doctor yawned again.

He envied Leela's capacity to sleep wherever she found herself. He had never had that *knack*

Doctor? Doctor?'

The voice was oddly familiar.

'Doctor!'

He came to and found Leela shaking his shoulder. 'What's wrong?' he asked, sitting up and adjusting his hat. 'Has something happened?'

'I could not sleep,' Leela said. 'I was thinking about the Tesh.' She wandered around the room, looking at the bland prints on the wall, picking up functional objects like coat hangers and the wastepaper bin and examining them half-heartedly.

Do you think about the Tesh often?' the Doctor asked. Or just when you can't sleep?'

Leela said, 'Do you remember the powers of the Tesh and how they used them against my tribe?'

'How could I forget?' The Doctor smiled, wanly. 'I was partly responsible.'

'You said the Tesh were originally the technicians on the spaceship, and we Sevateem were the survey team. We developed strength and courage, they developed mental powers - what you call psi powers or parapsychology.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes that's right. The Tesh did develop the sort of powers that our young hostess seems to be talking about.'

'They must have had some power to begin with,' Leela said. 'Nothing can come from nothing.'

The Doctor could still be surprised by Leela's quick intelligence. He was always slightly ashamed to need reminding that a lack of knowledge is not the same as stupidity. He nodded encouragingly. 'It's called a latent characteristic'

'Could the Tesh have come from this place?' Leela asked. 'Could they have come from this place originally?'

'It's very likely that you all came from here originally'

She was obviously pleased by the answer. 'I think one of them remained here,' she said triumphantly. 'I think there is a Tesh in this place.'

But the trouble with ignorance, the Doctor thought, is that it usually produces the same results as stupidity. No,' he said. 'I didn't mean you all set out from Earth. Although that is theoretically possible I suppose. Improbable but not impossible. I meant this may well be your planet of origin. You're probably distantly descended from the people of Earth. You might meet your great-great-great-great-great' His voice tailed off as he ran out of fingers on his left hand.

But Leela was not really listening. 'A Tesh is here now. I feel it. There is a Tesh in this place you call the university'

And sometimes he thought, stupidity is so stupid that it's difficult to know how to counter it. Or even where to begin. He smiled and said with exaggerated patience, 'No you don't understand. The university hasn't been here nearly long enough for anything like that to be possible.'

Leela glared at him. 'I know that,' she said witheringly. 'But perhaps the Tesh has been. Perhaps it is as you said about meeting the man called Professor Parnaby. Perhaps it is his second visit and it is happening first.'

I keep forgetting how often teasing you comes back to haunt me,' the Doctor said. He swung his legs off the bed and stood up. 'What time is it?'

Leela shrugged. 'It is daylight.'

Already?' The Doctor flung open the curtains, and autumn sunshine flooded into the bed sitting room. 'And it's a beautiful day,' he said, suddenly feeling refreshed and unexpectedly cheerful. 'I expect you'd like some breakfast wouldn't you?'

They had stayed with her all night. It had taken the three of them to uncurl her and carry her to the bed, but when they tried to turn out the light and leave her there she had become hysterical. Joan was terrified to be alone and even more terrified to fall asleep though she did drift off eventually.

None of them was particularly impressed with the way she was behaving, but Josh had been the least sympathetic. 'What is this crap?' he had demanded softly. 'Anything to do with hysterical self-indulgence at all?' He had shaken his head and snorted derisively. '*Nightmare on Elm Street* revisited.'

Because he was so scathing about her, Meg and Tommy had felt obliged to defend Joan and an argument had been carried on in raised whispers. 'She's a psychic,' Meg had said, glaring at him. "They're not called sensitives for nothing.'

'Yes they are.' Josh was rubbing his hand compulsively backwards and forwards over the stubble of his scalp. 'It's blithering bollocks. The whole psychic thing is a con from beginning to end and you know it.'

'No I don't.'

'And Joan certainly doesn't,' Tommy murmured. 'She thinks she's a psychic, which is pretty much the same thing as being one wouldn't you say?'

'I'd say it was pretty much the same thing as being barking,' Josh grunted. 'Are you sure she's not on something?'

'If you don't believe in any of this stuff,' Meg said, 'what are you doing here?'

'Curiosity,' Josh said flatly.

'And is that why you're on Hitchins' test programme?'

Pretty much.'

'You don't have to be modest with us,' Tommy mocked. 'We know you have the spooky powers.'

'No I haven't.'

'I saw the initial ratings,' Tommy persisted. 'When Ghostbuster surveyed everybody on campus?'

'Everybody who thought they might be gifted that is,' Meg put in. 'So how come you volunteered?'

'Same reason you did probably'

'I was drunk at the time. I thought it might be amusing.'

Josh shrugged. 'There you go. I was wasted and having a laugh.'

'You're way gifted,' Tommy said.

'No I'm not.'

'Your PQ was off the scale.'

'I'm bloody not gifted!' Unusually, Josh sounded irritated. Whatever the hell that means.'

'Josh Randall, a name to conjure with.' Tommy could never resist an easy joke even when it was obvious he had touched a raw nerve. 'You could be the next Aleister Crowley or Mystic Meg.'

Josh bunched a fist. For a moment it looked as though he was going to take a swing at Tommy.

'Now, now children,' Meg chided. Play nicely'

Josh backed down from the overreaction and the three of them whispered and bickered on through the night.

As it turned out Joan was the only one to get any sleep. They woke her once the sun was up and they knew the campus cafeteria would be open for business. Oddly, considering the experiences of the previous night, they all felt better, and optimistic in a vague unfocused sort of way. Joan was subdued but calmer. She claimed to remember nothing of what had happened.

## Chapter Five

Leela was ravenously hungry. She sat at the cafeteria table and ate quickly and without concern for appearances, washing the food down with occasional swallows of water from the bottle she had been given. She ignored the implements - what the Doctor referred to as 'cutlery' - and used her fingers like any warrior in the field would do. Around her at other tables people who were eating with cutlery glanced at her and then glanced away again quickly. The bolder among them stared more openly and seemed amused. Most of the eaters were as young as she was herself. The Doctor said they were students, here to acquire knowledge and wisdom. Leela could not understand what knowledge or wisdom they would acquire by watching her eat. She glared at the starers until they too looked away.

She had no idea what animals and plants might have been used in the preparation of the food she was devouring. The Doctor had said it was not poisonous and she trusted his judgement in these things, if not his taste. The food was called fried breakfast and it was greasy but not unpleasant. It would sustain her for a while, she thought.

The Doctor had said he was not hungry and, taking only water with him, he had wandered off to look for the man who was doing the experiments in parapsychology. He was called Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins - what elaborate and ridiculous fighting names these people gave themselves - and she wondered whether the 'doctor' part of it was the same as the name of the Doctor. Were the fighting names linked? Had the Doctor really been here before? Had he done the same on this world as he had done on her world? Was there a mad computer creature here too?

Perhaps the Doctor was not her friend after all. Perhaps he was ashamed to have her with him and was laughing at her ignorance behind her back. In fact, he was laughing at her ignorance to her face, now she thought about it. He sneered at her questions. He talked more to these students than he ever talked to her. He told them things they were not supposed to know, without them even having to ask a question. He told them things, they told him things, they all ignored her. Except when she was eating fried breakfast. She wiped the grease from her mouth with the palm of her hand and wiped her hand on her tunic.

Leela knew the way she was eating had made the Doctor uncomfortable and that this was why he had not waited for her to finish. She knew because he had said so. 'It always helps if you can try to fit in with the local custom and practice,' he had told her. 'It makes you less conspicuous and you can learn more from watching than from being watched.'

For some reason she could not quite understand, this had made her more determined to behave like a warrior of the tribe of Sevateem. She had earned the right. She was not a child to creep about and hide and watch. Warriors were proud and fearless. You faced down an enemy with boldness so he knew that you had beaten him before you fought. Modesty is fear, fear is failure, failure is death. The warrior-trainers had taught her that. Who was the Doctor to try and tell her anything different?

Perhaps the Doctor did not want her to be ready to face her enemies. Perhaps the Doctor wanted to get her killed. If he was working with the Tesh that would explain his behaviour towards her. Supposing a Tesh had come with them in the *TARDIS* or more than one. She had felt their presence all around her as soon as they had come to this place. Supposing all of them had come, hidden in the secret rooms in the *TARDIS*. This could be part of a counter-strike against her tribe by the eternal enemy. That would explain why the Doctor was so reluctant to let her travel with him. That would explain why the Doctor had mocked her when she told him of her suspicions. That would explain where he had gone. He was meeting with the Tesh.

Leela's thoughts became more jumbled and her chaotic anger grew as she lost the thread of what she was trying to remember and understand. She finished eating, licked the plate and pushed it away. Somewhere behind her she heard someone laugh. She put her hand on the hilt of her knife. Where was the Doctor? Why had he left her here among these people who hated her?

'Nice outfit. Whatever it is you're selling I'll take six, and two for Sundays.' The young man was standing at the table looking down at her. 'My name,' he went on in a suspiciously different voice and a completely changed way of speaking, 'is Michael Caine and I'll thank you to stop pointing that bloody spear at me!'

Leela leapt at him, drawing her knife as she vaulted over the table and crashed her shoulder into his chest.

The Doctor had found Hitchins' laboratory without much difficulty but it was locked, and knocking on the door and calling out, 'Hullo? Hullo Doctor Hitchins? Are you in there Doctor Hitchins?' produced no response at all.

"It's ten o'clock in the morning,' a voice said behind him. 'And trust me, as far as Barry Hitchins is concerned that's the middle of the night.'

The Doctor turned to find a short, dark-complexioned man smiling at him. He returned the smile. 'Temporal-shift lag,'

he said nodding. 'I used to have the same problem myself. It can be quite disconcerting if you try and maintain any sort of relative consciousness rather than an absolute personal reference point during a transition. It takes practice to develop the mental discipline to cope. Though some people do take to it quite naturally. My present travelling companion, for example, has no difficulties that I've been able to ascertain. She is a primitive of course, which might have something to do with it.'

'Oh dear' The man was still smiling but his expression had become slightly wry. 'Either that's a post-ironic gesture in the general direction of my upcoming - or rather my upchucking lecture - or you're a time-travel nut.'

'You're Professor Parnaby?' the Doctor asked delightedly.

'You didn't know?'

The Doctor offered his hand. 'I've been looking forward to meeting you.'

Parnaby shook the hand warily. 'Or possibly looking back to meeting me?' he suggested.

For a moment the Doctor found himself wondering if whole areas of the campus had been wired for sound. 'What makes you say that?' he challenged.

'Just a little time-travel gag,' Parnaby said with a slightly nervous laugh. 'I have to go now.' He started to edge away down the corridor. 'I suggest you try Barry Hitchins again around midday, mm'kay?'

As he started to walk off the Doctor fell into step beside him and said, 'Do you believe in coincidences, Professor?'

You'd have to define your terms more precisely I'm afraid,' Parnaby said. 'Belief and coincidence. Both a bit vague as they stand.'

The Doctor suspected Bill Parnaby was one of those dis-advantaged people who found it difficult to be rude to strangers. 'When was the last time you told anyone to go away and leave you alone?'

Parnaby frowned. 'I'm sorry?'

'Or when was the last time you gave a straight answer to a straight question for that matter?'

Parnaby looked at him sideways. 'Who are you exactly?'

'I'm flattered,' the Doctor said, 'that you would think I could answer such a question.' He smiled his most vivid smile. 'A philosopher's question of such terrifying complexity that in all my travels I have met only one entity who came close to answering it. It was a planet-sized fungus whose name as far as I recall was a small electric shock and a rather unpleasant smell.'

Parnaby stopped and turned to the Doctor, 'listen old *chap*'

'I'm not that old,' the Doctor said and thought: why am I talking so much? Is there something strange going on here? There is something strange going on here. This is not normal behaviour. I am not behaving normally.

'Is there some medication,' Parnaby was saying solicitously, 'that maybe you've forgotten to take?'

'Medication?' The Doctor was puzzled. Why should this short philosopher imagine that he had forgotten to take medicine?

'Pills perhaps? Only I notice that you're carrying a bottle of designer water.'

The Doctor looked down at the bottle of water he had in his hand. That's odd, he thought, where had he got that from? Then he remembered there was another Clearspring Water Company advertising display, and more free samples, in the cafeteria where he had taken Leela to get her some breakfast. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything else since they arrived so could it be that the water was affecting him? Could the water be contaminated in some way?

'Is the water to help you swallow your pills?' Parnaby suggested gently.

The Doctor recognised the exaggeratedly relaxed tone of voice which he himself often used when he was trying to calm a tense situation, and he realised with a jolt that this man was humouring him. This man seemed to think he was some sort of dangerous lunatic. Could it be the water? He put the bottle in his pocket and said with a cheerful smile, 'I don't take pills. Jelly babies. I take jelly babies. Would you care for a jelly baby?' He pulled the bag from his pocket.

Parnaby ignored the bag. 'I tell you what,' he suggested, maintaining the same carefully calm voice he had been using all along, 'why don't we go to my office? We can have a bit of a sit-down. You can tell me all about it. Maybe there's someone we *can* call.'

Call?'

To help,' Parnaby said, shaking his head and shrugging theatrically in a rather obvious attempt to keep his suggestion vague and unthreatening. 'If there was someone you felt might be able to help. Someone who's helped you *before*? Do you remember anyone like that?'

'Like a doctor you mean?' the Doctor teased.

'Not necessarily,' Parnaby lied.

The Doctor couldn't resist it. He leant closer to Parnaby and, lowering his voice a little, confided, 'As coincidence would have it, I am the Doctor'

'Of course you are,' Parnaby agreed. 'So what do you think then? Shall we go to my office and chat for a while?'

'Why not,' the Doctor said. Parnaby, he decided, was clearly more than just a man who was reluctant to be rude to strangers: he was actually concerned to be of assistance. The Doctor didn't need the sort of help he had in mind, of course, but nevertheless kindness, all kinds of kindness, should always be acknowledged and encouraged.

Parnaby took him lightly by the arm and began to lead him down the corridor. 'I didn't catch your name,' he said tentatively.

'I didn't throw it,' the Doctor chortled, and he was suddenly washed through with a warm flood of gratitude towards the diminutive thinker for reminding him of innocent times long past. It had been such a long time since he was able to use that joke or anything nearly as funny. He had always found nostalgia puzzling, but now for the first time it seemed he could understand it properly. He felt small tears gathering and trickling into the corners of his eyes. He missed so many things; all gone and lost to him; lost and forever out of reach. He missed himself as he was. He had changed. He missed the Time Lord he had been. He missed the past so very much. Missed the past so very much? That was absurd. He was a Time Lord - how could he possibly be missing the past? That made no sense at all. There was something wrong here. He was not thinking normally. Something was definitely affecting him. Could it be the water?

'I'm Bill Parnaby,' Parnaby persisted meanwhile. 'And you *are*'

'I'm the Doctor,' the Doctor said. 'I already told you that:

Parnaby nodded. 'Just the Doctor.'

'That's right. Just the Doctor.' The warm flood of gratitude had drained away. Parnaby was beginning to irritate him.

'Just the Doctor. That's cool.' Parnaby was still nodding understanding. 'I can understand that.'

The Doctor glowered. No you can't. You have no idea what I'm talking about.' He thought: / have no idea what I'm talking about so I'm quite sure you don't. It must be the water. He tried to work out how long it was since he had drunk any of it.

'I didn't mean to offend you,' Parnaby said anxiously.

"That's because you think I'm mad,' the Doctor said, and you're afraid I might be violent. Well I'm not violent. And I'm not mad. So be a good little philosopher and stop patronising me!"

'Or what?' Parnaby asked. 'You'll use gratuitous abuse to demonstrate your pacifism and mental stability?'

'Is it a coincidence,' the Doctor asked, ignoring the philosopher's comment, 'that time travel and parapsychology are both being studied at this university?'

'No,' Parnaby said flatly. "There you are you see? I can give you a straight answer to a straight question. No, it is not a coincidence.'

They reached Parnaby's office and he unlocked the door. It is not a coincidence because time travel is not being studied at this university.' He ushered the Doctor inside. 'Have a seat.'

The Doctor surveyed the small cluttered room. 'This is a small office,' he remarked.

Parnaby sat down behind the desk, pulled open one of its drawers and rummaged around in it for a moment. 'Yes, but then as you pointed out I am a small philosopher.' He closed the drawer again.

The Doctor began examining the contents of the book shelves. 'I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.' As far as he could see there were none of the standard texts on time travel. In fact there was almost nothing he was familiar with.

'You didn't hurt my feelings,' Parnaby said.

'Obviously not,' the Doctor mused. 'I'm reassured. Because I expect you'd have mentioned it if I *had*

'Have a seat,' Parnaby said again.

The Doctor gave up on the books and looked at him more carefully. The philosopher seemed nervous suddenly. 'Do I make you nervous?' The Doctor gave Parnaby his most reassuring smile. It seemed to make him more nervous if anything. 'There's no need to be nervous of me. I'm not nearly as tall as I look you know.' It probably wasn't a good idea to tower over him like this, the Doctor thought, it did tend to make people nervous. He sat down in the chair Parnaby was indicating, made himself comfortable and said, 'Parapsychology.'

'What about it?' Parnaby asked, glancing towards the door.

'It is being studied?' the Doctor asked.

'Yes, but it's clearly nonsense.'

If only that were true, the Doctor thought. Why is it happening here in this place at this time? Which came first: the research or the field effect? And why am I so badly affected? Unless it's the water. It could be the water. There could be some sort of hallucinogenic pollutant in the water. I must get it analysed. He said, 'There is a properly funded research programme, I've been told.'

That means nothing,' Parnaby said, sighing. 'If funding and good sense were synonymous, mass religious movements would be rational by definition. Rich men would all be geniuses.'

'How long has it been going on?' the Doctor asked.

Weirdly, Parnaby glanced at his watch before saying, 'Mass religious movements? Stupid rich men?'

'The research into parapsychology.'

Parnaby shrugged. 'The research fellowship's been up and running a couple of *years* three maybe.'

'And this water,' the Doctor said. 'How long have they been giving away this water?'

'I have no idea.' Parnaby glanced past the Doctor towards the door again. 'But I don't see the connection.'

This time the Doctor turned to try and see what Parnaby was looking at. 'Are you expecting someone?' he asked.

As if on cue the door to the room opened and a uniformed security guard came in. Standing in front of the doorway with his arms folded he asked politely, 'Is there a situation here, Professor?' But before Parnaby could answer him, the short-wave radio clipped to the guard's uniform lapel squawked faintly. Never looking away from the two men in front of him he turned his head slightly to speak into it, pressing the send button with his thumb. 'One four to base, yes it's Professor Parnaby,' he muttered. The radio squawked again. 'No, I can deal,' he answered. 'Yeah right. One four out.' He released the radio and spoke to Parnaby again. 'So is there a problem, Professor?'

'Problem?' The Doctor turned back to Parnaby. 'You have a problem? Why didn't you say so? Is it something I can help you with?'

'You pressed your panic button,' the security guard said.

'Is that what you were doing in the drawer?' the Doctor asked.

The security guard ignored the interruption. 'Do I take it this gentleman is bothering you?'

'Good grief,' the Doctor protested with mock amazement, 'you're not suggesting I'm a problem.'

'Please be quiet, sir.' The security guard managed to make politeness sound peculiarly threatening. 'You pressed the panic button Professor Parnaby?'

'I'm not sure why they call them panic buttons,' Parnaby said. 'What took you so long?'

'There's been some trouble in the cafeteria.'

'What sort of trouble?' the Doctor asked, conscious that when he had left Leela eating her breakfast she was not in one of her most reasonable moods. She was drinking the bottled water too, of course. It was looking suspiciously as though the water was involved. He started to get up out of his chair.

The security guard unfolded his arms. 'I asked you to be quiet, sir.' He put a firm hand on the Doctor's shoulder and pushed him back down into the chair. 'And I'd ask you to stay seated until we get this sorted out.'

'What sort of trouble?' Parnaby asked.

'One of your young ladies has been watching a little too much *Xena, Warrior Princess*, I'd say'

'Meaning?'

'Fancy dress, crude manners, beat the crap out of the first one who mentioned the fact.'

'So it was a fight,' Parnaby said matter-of-factly. 'We've had them before haven't we? Even if we don't talk about them publicly, they're not exactly unknown to us.'

'Got worse again recently,' the security guard said. 'This girl pulled a socking big knife. A real pigsticker.'

The Doctor twisted his shoulder free of the man's hand and stood up. 'She didn't use it did she?' he asked, thinking he should never have left her on her own just because her stubborn insistence on behaving like a primitive had irritated him.

The man pulled the chair aside to give himself a clear path to the Doctor.

'Well, did she?' Parnaby asked, forestalling his move.

The security guard paused and shook his head. 'She frightened him into changing his trousers mind,' he said. 'And would she hell give up the knife.'

'Where is she now?' the Doctor asked.

'What's it to you?' the guard demanded. 'Are you her father or something?' He looked to Parnaby for instructions. 'Do you want me to remove this bloke?'

'Well,' Parnaby said, sounding uncertain, 'when I pressed the *alarm*'

'We can do this the easy way or the hard way, sir,' the security guard said to the Doctor. 'The easy way isn't easy -'

'And the hard way's very hard indeed?' the Doctor suggested. 'What an original threat.' He smiled at him wolfishly. 'I am thoroughly intimidated.'

The security guard was not amused. He narrowed his eyes and reached for the Doctor. 'This way if you please, sir'

"There's no need for that.' Parnaby jumped up from behind the desk and somehow managed to get between them. 'The thing is this *gentleman* the uh, the *uh*'

"The Doctor,' the Doctor prompted.

"The Doctor seemed a little confused.'

The Doctor said, 'I'll go quietly, officer.' He wasn't certain himself whether he meant it or whether he was deliberately baiting the guard. He wasn't surprised, however, when the man reacted badly to him offering his wrists as if to be manacled.

The guard pressed forward. Parnaby pushed him back. 'I thought he might need help that's all.'

The Doctor said, 'You'd have to define your terms more precisely I'm afraid. Need and help. Both a bit vague as they stand. Don't you think so?'

'I made a mistake,' Parnaby said to the Doctor, and to the security man he said, 'I thought he was mad.'

'You mean he's not?'

'I mean he's not.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes I'm sure.'

I wish I was sure, the Doctor thought suddenly. I know I'm behaving erratically. The problem is: can I remember what my normal behaviour should be, and how can I question myself objectively about it? If I'm going mad how will I know? 'BEAFRAID,' that voice had bellowed in his head. BE AFRAID YOU POMPOUS PRATING FOOLL I WILL STRIP YOUR MIND AND LEAVE YOU SHIVERING IN THE DARK!' Hearing voices. Loud voices. If that wasn't the first sign of madness what was it? If he was mad it wasn't real: if it was real he wasn't mad. But what was reality anyway? He mustn't think about it, he decided. He must simply get on with the practicalities. He must get the water analysed. He must find Leela. He gave the security guard his best and most charming smile. 'What did you say happened to the warrior girl?' he asked.

## Chapter Six

'I am not getting into that. No way am I getting into that.' Josh slid the access-hatch cover on top of the device back a short distance, and peered inside. 'It's a bloody great coffin.'

'It does remind you of one of those Egyptian tomb things,' Ralph agreed. 'The ones they put the mummies in.'

'A sarcophagus,' Meg said.

Ralph said, 'Are you sure about that? Final answer?'

Josh closed the cover again. 'It better be,' he remarked. 'If she's got to phone a friend she's pretty much bugged.'

Oh why's that?' Ralph asked absently. He tapped a spot on the side of what looked like a very large and slightly flattened grey cocoon. It was about nine feet long by six feet wide by five feet deep, and it was resting on series of low, shaped trestles. A pair of yellow and green hoses linked it to the laboratory's main sink.

'He's suggesting I haven't got any friends,' Meg explained slowly and deliberately as if she was talking to a small child. Duh!"

'I thought that went without saying,' Ralph said, tapping another spot and getting the same almost complete lack of acoustic resonance. 'This thing is really well damped and insulated.'

Barry Hitchins came out of the monitoring suite uncoiling connex and fibre-optic cables. 'It's top-quality kit that is,' he announced. 'None of your Jap-crap, we are talking the BMW of sensory-deprivation tanks here.' He reached the tank and began to plug the cables into the sockets of a small control box in the base. 'You put water in the reservoir – you make it two feet deep give or take - just about enough to float in comfortably.' He patted the side of the tank. 'It's triple-skinned. The outer layer is full-spectrum sound and temperature insulation, and then between the inner two layers there are heating elements and thermostats. The temperature of the water inside is automatically brought up to 98.4 degrees Fahrenheit, and

maintained at that. Blood heat, yes?' He pushed the access-hatch cover all the way open so that the inside could be seen more clearly. 'As you will see,' he went on, 'the access cover moves on double bearings. It closes snugly but it cannot be locked and it can be opened with the slightest pressure from the inside or from the outside. So there's no chance of being trapped in there or anything like that, and claustrophobia shouldn't be a problem.'

'I am still not going in it,' Josh said. 'I still say it is a bloody great coffin.'

It was going to be a major disappointment to Barry if the person who could still turn out to be the best of his test subjects set his face against using the one piece of apparatus that might finally unlock his full potential. When Barry had first assessed him Josh had shown unmistakable signs of paranormal powers. The other seven kids he had found were promising - there were flashes of latent talent there; results that were statistically significant; certainly more than mere chance - but Josh Randall had been something else again, something altogether more significant. Unless Barry had got it all wrong. Josh hadn't shown much sign of anything since that original survey. The others had. Not Josh. But it was there. Barry knew it was there. He tried not to sound too desperately eager as he continued with his upbeat introductory patter. 'The subject climbs in and lies in the water, naked except for light-excluding goggles.'

'Job for the girls then,' Josh said.

'What a little chuckle-bunny he is,' Meg commented to no one in particular.

'I'd like to volunteer to be the towel boy,' Josh continued, 'and general dogsbody.' He looked hard at Meg. 'Oh no. Dog's Body - that would be you of course.'

'Laugh?' Meg said. 'I thought I'd never start.'

Barry pressed on. The hatch is then closed, and we run some standard tests for the telepathy and distant viewing series. Could be quite interesting.'

Josh said, 'I always piss in Jacuzzis and swimming pools. Would that affect things do you think?'

Meg pointedly ignored him. 'You think by neutralising the physical senses you're going to get heightened psi effects?'

'I think it's a possibility which is worth testing. Don't you think so?'

'And you monitor the results how exactly?' Ralph asked.

"There are four cameras and three mics inside the tank itself.' Barry indicated the tiny night-sight lenses of the cameras, set two at each end on either side of the tank, and the microphones set in an arc at the head end.

'It all seems a bit elaborate,' Meg said.

Ralph said, 'A solution looking for a problem in fact.'

'Yeah.' Josh yawned. 'What's up, Doc? Having trouble thinking of ways to spend the budget?' He wandered to the sink and checked the hose link. 'One names this device the Bloody Great Coffin,' he said in a queeny voice. 'May God bless her and all who drine in her.' He turned on the water.

'For God's sake, Josh,' Barry complained, hurrying to turn off the tap.

Water had begun to leak on to the floor below the tank.

'It leaks,' Josh said cheerfully. 'Is it supposed to leak like that? It's an antidrining device, am I right?'

'You did say the BMW of sensory-deprivation tanks?' Ralph mused. 'Looks more like a Skoda to me. A Lada even.'

Meg squatted down to hold her hand under the drips. Blood heat did you say? Not unless you're a frozen turkey'

'It'll work when I've finished rigging it up. I haven't even tightened the joints yet.'

'Small tip, Doc,' Josh said. The smart move is to tighten the joints on the tank before you connect the hose to the water supply, otherwise it's probably going to leak.' He flicked the tap on again and the leak intensified.

'Like that, see what I mean. Dear oh dear.' He turned the tap off again. 'Who was it did you say did this job again?' He clicked his tongue. 'They must have seen you coming. What a bunch of cowboys.'

Barry disconnected the hose from the tap. 'I don't have the benefit of your engineering background,' he said. Then, remembering the scene with Finer, he added, 'Which reminds me, your head of department is making waves.'

'That'll be why this is leaking I expect,' Ralph said, and chuckled at his own witticism. He seemed unaware that nobody else acknowledged the joke.

'What sort of waves?' Josh asked.

'He says you're not working and it's all my fault for wasting your time on this pointless rubbish.'

'Maybe he's got a point,' Ralph said. 'Maybe it is a waste of our time?'

'Pointless rubbish is one of your course options surely,' Meg said.

'No it isn't,' Ralph said, 'and stop calling me Shirley'

Josh's face had clouded with anger. 'It's none of his damn business what I do,' he snarled at Barry.

'I'm afraid it is his business.' Barry thought he could see a way to persuade Josh to volunteer for the sensory-deprivation experiments after all. 'I think I may have to drop you from the programme.'

'Because Finer says so?'

Barry shrugged and did his best to look sadly resigned about the whole thing. 'He's got a lot of influence with the senate and with the university council. I don't want to get on his wrong side. Hell, I can't afford to get on his wrong side.'

'Sod that!' Josh raged. 'I'm not some snotty-nosed schoolkid you people can push around. I decide what I'm going to do with my time, not him and not you, not anyone. I decide what happens to me. That arrogant bastard.'

It was a more vehement reaction than Barry had expected. 'Well if you really feel that strongly about it,' he said. 'If you really want to be part of the programme that much, I'm ready to take a chance with you.' He went back to working on the connections for the sensory-deprivation tank. As he stretched between the trestles to check the thermostat housing he said casually, 'Who's going to test-fly this lot for me? Any suggestions? Any volunteers?'

'I'd like to volunteer -' Josh said.

Score! Barry congratulated himself smugly. And that was why he was the lecturer and research fellow, and Josh was the lectured to and researched upon.

'- Chloe,' Josh finished after the briefest of pauses. 'Should be just her barrow. Might cheer her up in fact. Certainly cheer me up to hold the towel while she gets her kit off.'

Barry stopped tinkering with the cables and hoses and looked up at Josh. It seemed to him that the student's slow smile had a sly, almost malicious cast to it. 'You can only volunteer yourself, Josh,' he said.

'I told you there was no chance of that,' Josh said. 'I told you I wasn't getting into that bloody coffin.' His smile broadened. 'You haven't been thinking you could change my mind have you? How stupid was that?'

From the other side of the tank Chloe's voice said, 'Not as stupid as what you were thinking.' She came round into

Barry's eye line. 'I heard something about volunteering me to take my clothes off? And holding my towel? Rearrange the following into a sentence: chance, fat, slaphead, you.'

Feeling confident today are we?' Josh said. 'Shaken off the dreaded demon; the supernatural stalker? Got a grip finally?'

Chloe smiled at him sweetly. 'I met a couple of people who cheered me up.'

'Whatever you took wore off more like,' Josh sneered.

Ralph said, 'I'm glad you're feeling better, Chloe.'

Touchy-feely binmen, don't you just love 'em,' Meg said. She put an arm round Chloe. 'Are you really feeling better? You've really shaken off the after-effects of whatever it was?'

Chloe smiled at her. 'I met some people who made me feel better about myself, Meg: better about everything in fact. Even the scratches and bruises have stopped hurting.'

'Oh God, it wasn't the Mormons was it,' Josh said, 'or the Moonies, or the Scientologists, or the Seventh Day Adventists, or the born-again brain-deads'

'No,' Chloe said, 'and it wasn't the Ouija board believers either.'

'I don't believe in any of that crap,' Josh said quickly.

'You went though, didn't you,' Chloe teased. 'And you stayed to the bitter end.'

'And beyond,' Meg said.

'Someone been gossiping out of turn?' Josh said, giving her a hard stare.

'You haven't got religion, Chloe?' Barry asked, wondering which of his little group of experimental subjects had been playing with Ouija boards now, and what else they had all been getting up to recently. It would go down like a bucket of cold sick with the university council if there was any suggestion that he'd been encouraging students to dabble in the black arts or something similarly ludicrous. 'Haven't joined a cult?'

'Not really my thing,' Chloe said.

'Who were they then?' Ralph asked.

'I'm not sure. I thought they might be travelling entertainers. Like itinerant actors you know? Like street theatre?'

'You mean they were beggars,' Ralph said. 'You didn't give them money did you?'

'No,' Chloe said. 'Not exactly'

'You did, didn't you?' Josh crowed. 'You gave them money. What a stupid waste. I'd have done it for half.'

'Done what for half?'

Whatever it was cheered you up.'

'I didn't give them money,' Chloe insisted. 'I arranged guest quarters for them that's all.'

'They've done a runner, right,' Josh chortled.

'No. I don't think so. They weren't like that.'

'But they're not there,' Ralph suggested.

'No,' Chloe agreed. 'They're not there.'

'And needless to say they didn't pay the bill before they left.'

The cheerful confidence Chloe was showing when she came in looked to be rapidly disappearing, so Meg said, Leave her alone. It was a nice thing she did.'

Josh shook his head in mocking disbelief. 'Giving money to beggars,' he said. 'That's what made you feel better? Hell, I can beg.'

'I had heard that,' Meg said. 'A bit embarrassing really. Especially as in your case it never does any good.'

'You're not seriously expecting them to show?' Ralph asked. It was more of a statement than a question. He did not smile as he said it.

Chloe bridled. 'Yes I'm expecting them to show,' she said. I'm expecting them to show here as a matter of fact.'

Here as in here?' Ralph sounded mildly incredulous.

The man was very keen to talk to the famous Ghostbuster Bazzar'

'Did you get a name at all?' Josh asked, not bothering to keep the contempt out of his voice.

He called himself the Doctor'

Just the Doctor?'

Just the Doctor.'

'Doctor of what? Divinity?' Josh glanced sideways at Ralph. Landfill and shelf-stacking?'

'He didn't say,' Chloe said.

Meg said, 'And, OK, so Ralph's sponsored by a supermarket. What's the problem with that? Do we resent his good fortune or something?'

Josh snorted. I don't *know* do we?'

'Yes, as it happens, we do,' Meg said. 'Especially as the tightfisted shit-shoveller never buys a round.'

'That's not true,' Ralph objected.

Barry finished tightening the last of the tank's joints and checked the hose connections yet again. 'Why did this mysterious Doctor want to talk to me? Did he say?'

'He was interested in the experiments,' Chloe said.

'Was he indeed?' Barry wasn't sure whether to be flattered or suspicious. Why would someone who wouldn't give a name be snooping around asking about him and his work?

'Probably another of your supernatural groupies,' Josh said. 'The woods are full of them in case you hadn't noticed.'

'What did he know about the experiments?' Barry asked.

'Nothing,' Chloe said. 'Nothing that he mentioned anyway. He seemed to think they were important though.'

'But he knew they were going on,' Barry persisted. 'How did he know they were going on?'

Chloe hesitated. 'I think I may have mentioned it. They're not secret are they? You didn't tell us we weren't supposed to say anything.'

'Oh yeah, right,' Josh chortled. 'He's going to tell us that isn't he? Ghostbuster Buzzer: discretion, his middle name: publicity, his worst nightmare.' He threw up his hands in mock horror.

Barry nodded and smiled. 'Yes, you're right, it's not a problem.' He found himself wondering whether this very discreet Doctor who was so interested in his important experiments might be something to do with the Kellerfield Research Fellowship. Might he be the source of the funds? Or had he been sent to check up on him by the source of the funds? Pointless to worry about it he decided, after a moment or two of worrying about it. After all, the man hadn't showed up yet.

'What's the septic tank for?' Chloe asked.

Before Barry could speak Josh said, 'It's a bloody great coffin.'

'It's a sensory-deprivation tank,' Meg said witheringly. 'Josh has developed this boring obsession.' Her voice took on a whining tone. 'I'm not getting into that, no way am I getting into that, it's a bloody great coffin.'

'You'll see,' Josh said. 'It's a bloody great coffin. I have a feel for these things.'

Chloe wasn't listening. She moved round the tank. 'A sensory-deprivation tank? Really? Is that what it is?' She looked pleased. 'I always wanted to try

one of these.' She peered through the open access hatch. 'Is it for us? Can I have a go?'

'Told you so,' Josh said to Barry. There was something smugly triumphant about the way he said it Barry thought. 'Do I know how to volunteer them,' Josh went on, 'or do I know how to volunteer them?'

\* \* \*

Frank called her but the dog was reluctant to come to him. She sat shivering unhappily, the habit of obedience in direct conflict with her fear. He sighed and went back along the path to clip the lead to her collar. 'Come on, you daft old bitch,' he muttered. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. How often have we done this?' He tugged the spaniel on to her feet and, as though she was relieved that he had made the difficult decision for her, she walked with him into the old wood.

Frank had grown up in the village, which had become a small town after they built the university in the Sixties, and for as long as he could remember local people had said that Norswood was haunted. As kids they'd dared each other to stay in it after dark and there were one or two who claimed to have done it. Bob Cattermole and Cyril Naylor both said they'd been there when the darkness came and they had seen the ghosts. Frank himself had never stayed once the dusk had started to gather, and he never really believed that Bob and Cyril had either.

All that was long ago, in the distant, childish past. Bob and Cyril were gone, and he was now a middle-aged accountant who made a point of not believing in ghosts. He was a rational man, and to prove it he often quite deliberately walked his dog through the old wood at dusk; he walked after dark if the night was clear and moonlit and he'd got a decent torch with him.

Even the unfortunate business - what four, maybe five years ago now - when that corpse was found hadn't frightened him off. A few of the old people who remembered Norswood's reputation had nodded knowingly and muttered about the evil spirit of the place and suchlike rubbish. Frank prided himself on his reasoning though, and once the police were finished - and were satisfied he couldn't help them - he had gone back to exercising his dog along the ancient, root-rutted paths. The only thing that ever

unsettled him, and then only occasionally, was the animal's routine reaction to the place.

His old bitch was plainly frightened and that bothered him sometimes. He couldn't work out why she was frightened. She couldn't know Norswood was supposed to be haunted. She wasn't like those daft old buggers: she couldn't be telling herself ghost stories and scaring herself stupid. She couldn't be affected by the wood's reputation. He could be affected by it of course, and he had considered the possibility that she was responding to some subtle sign of fear in him. It seemed a bit far-fetched, he thought. Dogs were not that sensitive. He was not that afraid. He was not afraid at all, in fact. Superstition did say that dogs could see things people couldn't see: ghosts and the like. He knew it was nonsense. But then why the hell was she so afraid of the wood? Sometimes that did bother him a bit. Sometimes it bothered him more than a bit. This was one of those times as it happened.

It must have been the particular way the dog had been shivering that put the thought into his mind. Either that or he had mistaken the time, or it had taken them longer to get here than it normally did. Something. The thing of it was, the wood was somehow darker than he expected. It shouldn't have been this dark this early. He checked his watch. No it definitely shouldn't be this dark. Maybe the weather was changing. Maybe there was a storm coming. The lunchtime forecast hadn't said anything about it, but that didn't mean much. If it was always 100 per cent accurate it wouldn't be called a forecast, after all. He held his watch to his ear just to make sure it was going. It was beating solidly, and rather slower than his heart he suspected. He took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself.

Typically the dog, having managed to make him a bit uncomfortable -he still didn't want to think of himself as nervous - typically, the old bitch was dawdling now. Pulling against the lead, she was insisting on smelling every last bush and tussock. It wasn't that she was peeing, she was just sniffing. She seemed to have forgotten completely her initial reluctance to cross the boundary of the wood. She wasn't frightened any longer.

He resisted the impulse to haul her along and, as he waited for her to finish snuffling at what was probably a chunk of stale fox crap, he peered about him. Was it his imagination or was it getting darker as he looked? His

eyesight wasn't what it had been but he didn't need pin-sharp distance vision to distinguish dark and light. He rubbed his eyes. It was getting darker. And colder. He shuddered involuntarily. Was it really getting colder or was he imagining things? Mustn't get hysterical here he told himself: that way lies madness and *thingy*

'Come on girl,' he urged the dog. 'We haven't got all day. Or any of the day by the look of it.' The dog ignored him. No change there then, he thought ruefully. 'Come on, girl,' he entreated. 'We're supposed to be walking. This is supposed to be a walk. Can we walk please?' He tugged on the lead. The dog tugged back. Frank gave in to his impulse to haul her along. 'You had your chance,' he muttered as she straightened her legs and dug her feet in. 'You don't want to walk, you can slide.'

The dog continued to struggle against the lead as he dragged her along the path and Frank felt like a bully and a fool, but he kept on going because suddenly he wanted very much to get out of the wood. Unexpectedly another feeling had crept up and was pressing in on him. He was sure he was being watched.

He pulled harder on the lead. The dog leant back and reared up, heaving herself from side to side. She began to whimper. It struck Frank that all that sniffing and dawdling might actually have been her way of avoiding going further into the ancient, rustling, darkening, freezing, frightening, haunted bloody wood.

'Sod it,' he said abruptly. 'Who am I kidding?'

He stopped and turned back. 'You're right, girl. Let's get the hell out of here!'

Eagerly the dog set off back the way they had come. She towed him along behind her and although he found it hard to keep his feet, slithering and stumbling across the suddenly slippery tree roots, by the time they reached the edge of Norswood Frank and the dog were both running.

Leela had watched the man put the animal on the tether and walk with it into the wood. From the moment he stepped among the trees his movements and the way he held himself made it clear that he was frightened. The further he walked the more frightened he became. Leela

decided she needed to find out what it was that he was so afraid of.

She was not sure what purpose the animal on the tether was serving. The man was concerned for it. He paid a lot of attention to it. He behaved almost affectionately towards it. He spoke to it, calling it 'girl' as he tried to persuade it to do what he wanted. Her best guess was that the creature was there to warn him of danger, or it could just possibly be a source of food. Apparently they did breed several different sorts of animal here and kept them close until they were ready to eat them. But whatever the creature was for, it too appeared to be frightened.

Staying in cover, and treading lightly through the crackling leaf litter, she followed the man and the tethered animal to try and see what it was that was threatening them. She knew there must be predators here no matter what the Doctor said. Men, even timid men, were not afraid for no reason.

A closer look at the animal confirmed Leela's first impression that it carried little meat on its bones and that its nature would be to run: so it was probably a guard creature rather than a food creature. It seemed strange to her that, although it was reluctant to keep walking into the gloom, it was not until it began struggling against the tether that the man responded to the warning it was giving him.

By the time he turned to run away Leela was so close she could have reached out and touched him and yet he was totally unaware of her. Fear sharpened the senses only up to a point, as her warrior-trainers never tired of telling her. A little fear might have its uses, but too much fear overwhelmed the mind and made you unseeing and stupid and helpless. It was easy to give yourself up to fear. Easy and usually fatal. She stepped out of cover as the man and his animal blundered off.

From the way they were running Leela concluded the danger must be in the opposite direction, towards the place where she and the Doctor had left the TARDIS, and she set out to hunt whatever it was. Tribal hunting theory taught that predators are attracted to disturbance and, although she had found this teaching less reliable once she had left her home world, she knew it still made basic sense. Any predator must look for changes and differences if it was going to see its prey. The TARDIS would be a change, a difference and a disturbance so there was a good possibility it would

attract the attention of the creatures that stalked this gloomy place. This suddenly very gloomy place.

She glanced up through the fire-bright leaves to the pale clouds high above the trees in the still-light sky. Her eyes were failing her. Unless something was swallowing the light as it shone down, it should not have been this dark here on the ground. What she had taken to be shadows must be something else, something harder to explain.

Thickening darkness, cold and dim like deep flowing water, seemed to be filling the space below the trees. It could not be shadows, she realised, because it went from the ground upwards. Was it smoke or mist? She tried to judge its density and power, but each time she looked directly at some part of it there was nothing unusual to be seen. There was no strange darkness. It was as though her sight was glowing with light which made it impossible to see the dark except out of the corners of her eyes.

But she knew blackness was behind and all around her, everywhere except where she looked. She knew it was overtaking her, gradually wrapping itself round her and slowly closing her in. She felt cold, and chilly whispers of air touched her skin and made her shiver. Her heart was pounding and she was finding it hard to breathe. Little swirls of wind stirred dead leaves and dust around her.

Leela knew certain predators could make themselves invisible and use their invisibility to make the fear of death almost worse than death itself. She closed her eyes. She had been taught that when a threat was invisible, sight could be a distraction and a danger. She took several slow, deep breaths and tried to blank her mind. One of the earliest lessons of her training was to recognise and control the physical symptoms of panic, and then identify the reasons for it. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. Slowly her breathing became easier and she felt her heartbeat slowing down. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. Ignoring everything she had seen, or thought she had seen, she concentrated on her other senses. She listened: but there was no particular sound, nothing you would not expect in a place such as this. Even if a predator was invisible it could not move without making some small noise which did not fit the general pattern; but there was nothing. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know.

She sniffed the air. She smelled vegetation, damp and rotting, live and growing, dry and blowing. There was nothing recently crushed or torn: nothing to suggest immediate danger. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. She turned her face slightly, feeling the air. You could not feel darkness but you could feel a change in temperature, you could feel a shift in the way the air was moving. She tried to keep what she had seen out of her mind: not to use what her eyes had given her while she continued building the picture of what was around her. Was it especially cold? Was there really a wind? Yes, she decided, there was some small stirring in the air. But it was not chillingly cold and it was not out of the ordinary. A flow of air could be expected to break and swirl in a place like this. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. What she knew was that in her panic she had reacted to small things and exaggerated their effects. She was back in control now. The question that remained to be answered was why had she panicked? There was no reason she could think of. She set the question aside for the moment. Perhaps she would be able to answer it when she knew more about these predators and how they hunted.

Leela opened her eyes. The strange darkness had receded. There were still hints of it, wisps of fear, glimpsed at the very edges of her sight. Mist, smoke, shadows: it could be any of them she told herself, or all of them. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. She stepped carefully across the thorny vines that crisscrossed the ground and concentrated on finding the path she and the Doctor had taken when they set out. Soft-footed, she moved diagonally back and forth through the fringe of the wood, knowing that the pattern of search would cut their original trail and that she would recognise when and where it did. She wanted to approach the TARDIS from a different direction. If she accidentally walked part of the same trail as before it would give the predators a dangerous advantage.

Know your ground or end up buried in it. So many stupidly obvious rules her warrior-trainers had required her to learn by heart and recite back to them whenever they instructed, she thought. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. Know your ground or end up buried in it. Predators prey, prey run away. They came into her mind unbidden now and left her wondering whether they were a help or a hindrance in the warrior's fight to stay alive.

It was as she expected. She found the Doctor's heavy, careless footprints easily enough, the less obvious marks of her own progress beside them. She scanned the ground carefully. There was no sign that anything had been following their spoor here at this point. Satisfied that she could tell exactly where their line of march had been, she circled away from it and headed for the TARDIS from the opposite side. She knew it was unlikely that whatever these predators were they would target the Doctor and her by lying in ambush along the already trodden trail. But there was a remote chance that they might. The chance of death is never remote, the chance of survival always is. Why had she been taught that? That was so completely useless: it could not be called a rule. Why would she remember it? She wondered. She drew her knife and shifted her weight slightly forward on to the balls of her feet. Fight or run, she must be ready for either if she was going to survive.

Carefully she approached the small hollow where she knew the TARDIS was standing. It was screened by stunted trees which the Doctor had said were scrub oaks. He had been so positive about it that Leela doubted whether he had any idea what the bushy vegetation was actually called. All he was certain of was her ignorance, and as usual he took advantage of that to pretend to be vastly knowledgeable. He was a typical shaman in that way, as in so many other ways, now she came to think about it. He revelled in the attention he got for his magical powers, whether they were real or not. He always denied it, but really he loved to play the powerful shaman. He loved to show off. At the moment he was enjoying himself among the students, who it seemed to her were even more ignorant than she was herself. They followed him around listening to his every word and he encouraged them to do it. It was not behaviour that a warrior found proper. It lacked dignity. That was why she had come back to this threatening place. She had planned to wait by herself with the TARDIS, to wait by herself for the Doctor to tire of his new-found acolytes and return so that the two of them could leave this world and continue on their travels.

She ghosted forward. The vegetation still seemed to be completely blocking her view of the TARDIS. That was wrong, she thought, that could not be. The scrub oaks, or whatever they were called, were not dense enough to do that. True, she was deliberately approaching from a different angle *but* She stopped. She could see through the thicket of small trees. There was nothing there. There was nothing in the hollow. The TARDIS was gone.

For a moment she doubted herself. Was this the right place? The wood was unfamiliar to her. Know your ground or end up buried in it. She might be mistaken about the trail, she might have got the directions muddled. Her panic might have distorted everything she knew, everything she thought she knew. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. She shook her head. Nonsense. It was nonsense. She was Leela of the Sevateem. She was a warrior, trained by the best of her tribe to be the best of her tribe. She knew exactly where she was. She knew exactly where the TARDIS was. Or rather, she knew exactly where the TARDIS should be. It should be exactly where she was looking. It was gone. Something or someone had taken it. It was gone.

For a moment she doubted the Doctor. Had he left without her? While she was dodging the warriors from the university who were trying to take her captive, he could have sneaked back to the TARDIS and left without her. Suppose she had been right after all. Suppose he was conspiring with the Tesh all along. She knew there were Tesh there in that university somewhere, she knew there were. She could sense them. She could smell them. How was it the Doctor could not? How could she believe that? Or perhaps he had simply taken a new companion to travel with him. Perhaps he had chosen one that did not argue; one that was prepared to hang on his every word and treat him like the shaman-chieftain he pretended to be. Someone like that girl student he had taken such a liking to, that one called Chloe, she was the sort of travelling companion he would rather have. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. Nonsense. It was nonsense. The Doctor would not do that to her or to anyone else. The Doctor would say what he felt about things, and he would tell you what he intended to do about them. He was a Time Lord and, although Leela was not sure what a Time Lord was, she knew it was nothing to do with the Tesh.

The darkness was spreading out beyond the edges of her vision again. This time it was flowing across the ground like a flat shadow cast by something huge and close, and it was moving towards the hollow where the TARDIS should be standing. Involuntarily she glanced up at the sky. It was unchanged. Nothing was casting this shadow. It was the shadow of nothing. But that was madness: nothing could be the shadow of nothing. Instinct whispered to Leela that if she let this black nothing touch any part

of her it would take her into itself and she would be lost and alone for ever. She would be lost, alone and afraid for ever.

She shivered. She remembered the invisible killers the Tesh let loose on her people. Fear muttered strange words in her mind. 'Listen to me! Listen to me you little bitch!' The words were jumbled and overlapping like distant, fading echoes. 'You will listen to me and do as I tell you! You will do as I tell you, you little bitch!' The words seemed to collide and buffet one another. 'Die. Listen to me! Die for ever in my darkness. Listen to me you little bitch! Die for ever in my darkness, bitch.' They made no sense as they ran together. 'Die. Die in darkness, bitch! You will listen to me and do as I tell you! You will do as I tell you, you little bitch!' And they came and went, louder and softer, further away and closer to her, but never really there with her. 'You think so?' It was a whisper, followed by cackles and hoots of mad laughter which seemed to come from all around, and yet not all around, her. 'You can't run from me, you stupid bitch!

Leela gripped her knife tighter and did her best to shake off what she could only understand as the memory of fear. What she was hearing was nothing to do with her she told herself. She felt the fear and the mad words whirling in her mind but somehow they were not hers. She recognised the hate and the anger and the fear for what they were, because she herself had felt all of these things at one time or another. But she had never felt them all at once, and she had never felt them like this. These feelings belonged to someone else. She was Leela of the Sevateem. She repeated it like a mantra. She was Leela of the Sevateem. It was more important to her than any of the rules she had been made to learn by the warrior-trainers. She was Leela of the Sevateem. She was a warrior and she had been trained to recognise and overcome the weaknesses and stupidities that crippled men and women. Fear, hate and anger were the most crippling stupidities of all. They were instincts that served no useful purpose. They were for short-lived fools. Bright and stupid die the same way: but not the same day. Fear, hate, anger: no warrior who gave in to them could survive for long. The chance of death is never remote, the chance of survival always is.

The half-heard words and pale feelings flickered and gibbered on and suddenly there were images too. Pictures that were almost transparent but not quite, visions that were almost imaginary but not quite. A striding, leaping man-creature was charging towards her. He had long legs and moved with speed and agility. He was not armed but he cackled and raged

as he came. He obviously intended to terrify his victim, but Leela judged that the long thin legs were vulnerable. His face was a twisted, sneering distortion of something that might once have been human. If there was such a thing as a ghost or a demon, Leela thought, this could be what it looked like. She could sense the terror he brought with him, but it was someone else's terror. She had faced far more formidable adversaries. If it had not been for the fear she felt him carrying she would have laughed in his face. She watched him carefully until he was only a few strides away from her and then the image vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

The shadow was still sliding over the ground towards the empty hollow. Leela resisted the urge to move with it so that she could get a closer look at what was happening. Some of the featureless darkness had already passed beyond the small line of bushy trees and she thought she could see the dip in the ground filling up with blackness. She shivered. Why was she shivering again? She closed her eyes. It was colder. There was a breeze now, too. She opened her eyes and glanced at the nearest tree. It was still. She could feel the air moving but the tree could not. So she must be imagining it. Unless she was imagining the tree. Perhaps it was bent and lashing about in a storm of wind. She closed her eyes and checked again. It definitely felt as though air was being sucked past her towards the hollow.

Darkness that flowed and a wind that did not. The TARDIS gone, stranding her and the Doctor. What was this place? The Doctor had ignored her feelings but she had been uncomfortable here from the moment they arrived. Though he would never admit it, this proved that she was right and he was wrong. People and animals were afraid to be here. The whole wood was full of fear. She was not afraid. She was Leela of the Sevateem and she had fought stronger adversaries and faced worse predators. She froze. Predators. She had forgotten the predators she had set out to stalk. This was the trap she had been expecting. She had not been paying attention and she had fallen into the trap she had taken so much trouble to avoid. Fear thrilled through her body, her nostrils and eyes widened, her mouth went dry and her breath caught in her throat. She badly wanted to turn and run. Predators prey, prey run away. She stood her ground and waited to react to the attack.

In the hollow the dark began to heap up, gradually forming itself into a block of black nothing. Leela felt herself drawn by the dizzying blankness of

it. She felt herself teetering forward at the edge of an unimaginable drop, pushed on by the rush of cold behind her.

She took a step towards the hollow, and then another and another. She struggled to stop. This was the attack, she told herself. This was what she must react to. This was what she must fight. This was what the Tesh were doing. They thought she was less than they were. They thought she could not understand. She was Leela of the Sevateem and that meant she was stupid. The machine that had been God had left her in ignorance. Ignorance was why her father had died. Ignorance was what the Doctor had brought her to and left her to face alone. This was her loss and her pointlessness.

She tried to turn away from the blackness but she found herself unable to balance. She fell clumsily. The spiny ground-vines caught her skin, making tiny, stinging tears and cuts. She was abruptly furious at the pain. She kicked at the undergrowth and slashed at the earth with her knife. Helpless rage overwhelmed her.

The cold intensified and she was pulled towards the hollow. Nothing around her was moving at all. Everything seemed frozen in a moment of time which she was not a part of. Everything was moving except for her: everything was motionless except for her. Both were happening in the same moment. She was unconnected to the world and in the same instant uncontrolled within it. She alone was drifting and dragging in the unreal wind with nothing around her moving, and at the same time everything was moving normally while she was lost, alone, ignored. The TARDIS appeared as if to torment her and then it vanished again. Another rush of mindless fury raged through her.

She was bumping across the ground into what was now a gaping flutter of torn and flickering hollows in an infinite-seeming curve of identical patches of woodland. In her flailing anger Leela stabbed her knife into the ground again. This time it caught there. She wrenched at it, but it remained stuck. She clung on grimly. The cold became a painful howling hiss, and all around her the voices murmured and gibbered.

Then without warning the chaos ended as suddenly as it had begun. Leela sat up. The wood was simply a wood. The shadows, the sounds, the currents of air were all as she would have expected. The fear and the

threat she had sensed had gone. The predators she was expecting were not here. She found herself doubting their existence. The hollow was just a small, tree-fringed depression. The TARDIS was clearly visible and standing exactly where it should be standing.

For a long moment Leela's relief made her want to laugh. It must have been a dream she thought, caused by the bad food - the Doctor had obviously been mistaken: fried breakfast was poisonous. But the relief was brief. Breathe deep and slow, examine what you know. It was not a dream. She was covered in cuts and bruises and her knife was still stuck in the ground.

## Chapter Seven

The Doctor's best and most charming smile did not seem to be working its usual magic. 'I take it you have no idea where she went then?'

The campus's security supervisor, a shaven-headed, thickset individual in a quasi-military uniform, was not a happy man and he was in no mood to be charmed. 'That's funny,' he said, showing little sign of amusement, 'I was about to ask you the same thing.'

The Doctor continued to smile in the vain hope of winning him over. He would find Leela a lot more easily with this man's help. 'I'm afraid Leela's rather a headstrong girl.'

The supervisor glared at him. 'She's quite powerful in the arms and legs department too,' he said. 'She thumped a student, trashed the cafeteria and she's done a runner having kicked seven shades of brick-dust out of one of the security staff.'

'Really?' The Doctor stopped smiling and looked suitably concerned. 'Which one?'

'Me as it happens.'

The Doctor nodded sympathetically. 'That would explain the black eye?'

'That would explain the police who are on their way even as we speak.'

The Doctor glanced round the large, well-appointed office with its attached custody suite of two small holding-cells. 'You're not the police?'

'Campus security,' the man said coldly. 'As you well know.'

'Well no,' the Doctor said. 'I'm a stranger here.' He noticed for the first time that there was a small bottle of water, the same Clear spring Water Company bottled water that seemed to be everywhere on campus, in among the clutter on the supervisor's desk.

'Your purpose on campus being?'

"The pursuit of knowledge?' the Doctor suggested. He nodded at the bottle. 'Do you drink a lot of that designer water?' he asked.

'Don't get lippy with me.' The supervisor leant forward in his chair and pointed a finger at the Doctor's face. 'You're in no position to get lippy with me.'

'That was not my intention,' the Doctor said politely, struck once again by how uniform people's behaviour became when they put on a uniform. 'I was merely answering your question.'

The supervisor looked smugly threatening. 'You do realise that this is private property,' he almost gloated. 'There is no public right of access to the campus and unless you can prove you have legitimate business here you can be arrested.'

'The pursuit of knowledge is not legitimate business?' The Doctor was genuinely taken aback at the idea.

'Depends on the circumstances doesn't it,' the supervisor remarked. 'Ever hear of competitive advantage investigation?'

No,' the Doctor said. 'Sounds distinctly dull.' He decided it would be sensible to cut his losses and look for Leela without the direct help of campus security. 'Or else it's a convoluted way of describing something distinctly dull.'

It used to be called industrial espionage,' the supervisor persisted.

'Ah,' the Doctor said. 'I have heard of that and I was right: competitive advantage investigation is a dull way of saying something dull. Look, can you give me any idea of the direction Leela took when she left you?'

'Nope,' the supervisor said flatly.

'She hit you and left, is that it?' As soon as he said it the Doctor realised it was a tactless mistake. 'She has been trained as a fighter,' he added hastily. 'She's unexpectedly formidable.'

The supervisor glowered. 'How long have you worked with this Leela person exactly?'

I don't think working with her is quite how I'd characterise our association.'

'How long have you associated with her?'

The Doctor shrugged. All time is relative isn't it?'

'Relatively how long have you associated with her?'

The Doctor stood up. 'I wish I had time to discuss time with you.' He offered his hand across the desk. 'It was good to meet you,' he lied. 'Thank you for your help.'

Ignoring the Doctor's extended hand, the supervisor pressed a button on the desk communications console. 'Base to one four get your arse in here will you?' he barked into the mic.

The security guard who had accompanied the Doctor from Parnaby's office, and whom he now knew was called Len Spart, came in with a cup of coffee in one hand and a sandwich in the other. 'I'm on a break,' he protested.

'You'll take your refs when I say you'll take your refs,' the supervisor snapped.

'Get a grip, Fred,' Spart said. 'You're not in the job any more. We're civilians, mate, nobody calls them refs.'

'Put this bloke under restraint until the cavalry arrives.'

'You want him locked up?' Spart asked.

'Yes, Len. I want him locked up.'

'If this keeps happening to me,' the Doctor sighed, 'I shall have to start taking it personally'

Spart looked dubious. 'What's he supposed to have done this time? Apart from being an irritating loony?'

Felonious trespass, criminal damage, assault with intent, actual bodily harm, how long a list do you want?'

What him?' Span smirked. 'When did he do all this? He's a fast worker for a nutter, I'll say that for him.'

'He's an accessory before and after the fact. And he's under suspicion as an industrial spy'

'Yeah right,' Spart scoffed.

'Yours not to reason why, Len, yours but to do as I sodding well say!'

'You reckon?'

'It's called being in charge. It's what I am and you're not. Now are you going to do what I tell you or is employed also what I am and you're not?'

And what's felonious trespass when it's at home?' Spart demanded, and took a bite out of his sandwich.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered casually towards the door. He was not sure whether Len Spart was on his side or whether he merely wanted to finish his snack, but either way it seemed like a good opportunity to leave the scene.

'Where do you think you're going?' the supervisor challenged.

'You've obviously got me confused with someone else,' the Doctor said, offering the most open and friendly smile in his repertoire. 'I'm a harmless traveller nothing more: a harmless traveller passing through.'

'There you are, you see.' The supervisor was triumphant. 'He's a harmless traveller. That means he's a didicoy or else he's part of that New Age convoy lot. You can probably add sheep-stealing to the list of charges.'

'Make up your mind, Fred.' Spart moved, though with a marked lack of enthusiasm, to block the Doctor's exit. 'A minute ago you had him down as James Bond. Now he's some sort of hippie livestock rustler - which is it?'

'What am I talking here, some obscure foreign language?' The supervisor's face was suddenly flushed with angry blood. 'Put the sodding sandwich down, put the sodding coffee down, put this sodding character in the SODDING LOCKUP!'

Somewhere outside in the distance a siren could be heard getting closer. The Doctor assumed it was a police car coming in response to the call from campus security. He considered barging his way out before it arrived but decided this would probably make the situation worse. He reasoned that if there was some sort of malevolent force at work in the immediate area the police would be outside its influence and he would be able to reason with them. Or it could be the *water*

Spart was frowning at the supervisor. 'I'm not surprised Zena chinned you.'

'Leela,' the Doctor said, wandering back to the supervisor's desk. 'Her name is Leela.' He leant across the desk. 'You didn't answer my question by the way,' he said and picked up the bottle of water. 'Do you drink a lot of this stuff?'

Chloe lay in the darkness with her eyes wide open. Not that it made any difference: open or closed, she could see nothing. The inside of the tank was almost totally dark and she was wearing light-excluding goggles just to be sure. Like a black cat in a sack in a cellar, she thought, only more relaxed because, unlike the cat, she could understand what was happening to her.

The warm water buoyed her up and gradually the touch of it was disappearing from her skin so that she was floating, hovering in the essence of the blackness. She could hear nothing but the pulse of her own blood souging in her ears. She had never felt so completely detached from everything. She was free. There was no stress. She was awake and she was asleep at the same time. She smiled and sighed from the pure pleasure of it.

Then a thought drifted into her half-asleep mind. It struck her that she had not heard herself sigh. She repeated the sigh, slightly more positively, adding an element of extra throat-iness and a small uuh noise to it. She was still unsure whether she had heard the sound of that or not so she

cleared her throat loudly. This time there was a noise of throat-clearing but it was oddly muffled and distant. It seemed to be coming from someone else.

While her sight had been deliberately cut off nothing had been done to affect her hearing, so why was she suddenly deaf, she wondered. 'Hullo,' she said aloud. 'Can you hear me?' Again the sound of it was muffled or at least, as far as she could tell, it was not very loud. Of course, she realised, there was no way to tell how loudly she had actually said it. There was no objective measure of the volume. And the water would affect her ears wouldn't it? Her ears were under the water. Or were they? There was no way to tell that either, since she could no longer tell where the water was. For all she knew she could be under the water. She could be drowned. She could be drowned and dead. Or this could be nothing but a dream, and any moment now the frightening weirdness could kick in and she would know that it wasn't happening and feel that it was happening and know that it was happening and feel that it wasn't happening: all at the same time.

How do you feel in there?' Barry Hitchins' voice was much louder than her own.

'All right,' Chloe said. 'I can't hear myself clearly. Can you hear me clearly?'

Yes, quite clearly.' The voice was warmly reassuring.

Everything's fine. I can hear you and see you quite clearly.

You can't hear clearly because of the tank's acoustic blanketing and because your ears are under the water'

That made sense, Chloe thought, but then what about the fact that: 'I can hear you clearly.' And so close: it was almost as though he was inside her head.

'Receiver taped in your left ear?' the voice prompted

That's right, she remembered them doing that, of course she remembered them doing that. Pay attention, Chloe, she thought. Half-asleep obviously. But then what about the fact that: 'It's under water then:

'Isn't technology wonderful.' The voice had a chuckle in it. Especially expensive technology.'

He shouldn't do that, Chloe thought. He shouldn't chuckle like that. He sounded insincere. Was he lying to her? Would an earpiece like that work under water? Wouldn't the water short it out or get behind it or would the signal work at all? Maybe it was the warped logic of a dream. She put her hand to her ear but somehow the movement got lost. 'Yes,' she said, barely hearing herself.

'If you're ready, Chloe,' the voice in her ear said.

'Yes,' she said again. Perhaps he hadn't heard her before.

"Josh is going to send a series of images just like we said. You remember?"

'Yes.' She tried to speak more clearly so that he would hear her. The blood throbbing in her ears sounded louder. Was it suddenly louder or had she simply not noticed before? Yes,' she said again.

'I want you to say what you see as soon as you see it.'

'Yes.' Could he hear that? Was the blood muffling the words?

'No matter what it is.' The voice was brisk.

Chloe tried to match the briskness. 'Yes.' But the word coincided with a surge of blood and somehow the two sounds were the same.

'I'm going to turn off the earpiece now,' the voice said.

There will be no sounds coming from the outside and no light. Do you understand?'

Yes,' the blood sighed. 'Yes. I hear you. I understand.' 'Remember you can open the tank and stop the experiment any time you want to.'

Yes the blood, yes the blood, Chloe could hear the rhythm in her ears, yes the blood, yes the blood, yes the blood. And there was the beginnings of light shining through the goggles. She closed her eyes but it made no

difference: the light shone through her eyelids. It was blood-red and pulsing.

Barry was tempted to stop the whole thing right there. The girl seemed to be pretty much out of it already and they hadn't even started on what was nothing more than a preliminary test run anyway.

She was OK when she got into the tank. Despite a lot of nervous joking around, the nakedness thing hadn't bothered her. In fact he got the distinct impression that she rather enjoyed showing off her body. Actually it was a very attractive body - something he had allowed himself to acknowledge briefly before suppressing the reaction completely: trouble like that was something he badly didn't need.

He had always considered Chloe Pennick as borderline flaky. She had demonstrated some natural aptitude, her PQ was above average and she was nice enough. She was slightly shallow and vain but most girls of her age were in his experience. There was something a bit naive about the way she approached things though. His initial assessment was that she wanted to believe in the existence of her own psi powers without quite being able to do it. In experimental terms that could be more of a problem than the unwavering belief of the Cox girl or the outright scepticism of Meg Lansing. At least you could treat those as baseline variables and compensate for them. With Pennick the responses were all over the place.

Not only that, but wanting to believe made for vulnerability and a readiness to open up to all sorts of irrational impulses and malign influences. At best it made the subject eager to misinterpret what they were seeing and feeling. At worst it made them stupid and dangerously gullible. And stupid and dangerously gullible were charges routinely levelled at him and his whole research programme, so he was not keen to have one of his test subjects demonstrating such traits for anyone to see.

Watching her on the monitors Barry could not decide whether Chloe Pennick was playing silly buggers in an attempt to convince herself that she was having a genuine experience or whether she was having a genuine experience. According to the literature, sensory deprivation could produce some interestingly bizarre psychological effects but they took time to manifest.

He was fairly sure the girl was responding too quickly. She wasn't even fully cut off yet. Darkness and warm water were not enough in themselves to produce what she was showing and saying. It was weird enough, for example, that she seemed to have forgotten about the earpiece, but when he reminded her of it she hadn't even tried to feel for it. Reaching for it would have been the instinctive reaction. He would have to examine the recording more closely later, but as far as he could tell she hadn't moved a muscle. Of course, the output from the night-sight lenses of the tank cameras was not ideal: green and fuzzy was a bit of a disappointment.

He switched off the mic, isolating the interior of the tank from any normal inputs. At a light signal from him Josh, who was locked in isolation capsule number three, would start visualising and sending a series of images. The capsule had been chosen at random and only Barry himself knew beforehand what pictures were on the cards he had given Josh to take in with him.

While he waited to cue Josh, he said to the others who were standing around the control and monitoring suite, 'Chloe's not on anything is she? As far as you know?'

'On anything?' Meg asked.

Drugs? Has she taken any drugs?'

Meg was dismissive. 'Chloe isn't on anything.'

'None of us are on anything,' Ralph said. 'Them were the rules were they not.'

'Yes indeedy,' Tommy said. 'You made it clear that cellphones and mind-altering substances were off limits to anyone on your programme. We said we wouldn't use them and we are men of our word. Isn't that right Meg?'

Meg smiled mirthlessly. 'You flatter yourself.'

'It has made us life-style icons,' Tommy went on, 'and fashion leaders in our peer group.'

'The moby ban is a bit of a pain,' Ralph said. 'Nobody uses public phone boxes these days. Except to pee in, I suppose.'

Tommy nodded sadly, and sighed. 'Every time poor old Meg goes into one people think she must be putting up cards advertising her sexual services.'

'No,' Meg said. 'They think I'm taking down the cards advertising yours.'

'Touché, she cried,' Tommy said grinning, 'and chopped his head off at the shoulders.'

'All right,' Barry said. 'Enough with the comedy routine.'

'We've been told that before.' Tommy was half-grinning and looking at Meg. 'I'm beginning to think our future may not lie in stand-up.'

She scowled. 'What makes you think we have a future?'

'The way my luck's running? It's either that or walk in front of a bus.'

Meg tried to suppress a smile and failed. 'The bus would be the better option.'

'I said enough with the comedy routine,' Barry repeated. 'I'm letting you observe this as a favour, so do me a favour and shut the hell up.' He keyed the light cue in capsule three, and on the monitor Josh picked up the first picture card and showed it to the CCTV camera. It was a photograph of the Empire State Building in New York. He threw up his hands in a mime of feigned astonishment before settling down to stare at the image.

'Should they be that well known?' Ralph asked. 'Doesn't it make guessing easier?'

'Why should the Empire State Building in New York be easier to guess?' Meg said.

'Well, it's easier than the town hall in Leighton Buzzard say,' Ralph said.

Barry said, 'An immediately recognisable image makes it easier for Josh to focus. He's not faffing around absorbing unexpected details. If telepathy did

exist at some instinctive level it would be better if he wasn't thinking about what it was he was seeing.'

'Lucky he isn't seeing what Tommy's seeing then,' Meg remarked pointedly.

Tommy was looking intently at the monitor that had the best angle on Chloe's naked body. Green and fuzzy did not seem to be interfering with his appreciation of the picture. If he heard Meg's comment he gave no sign of it. 'What happens if she mentions Leighton Buzzard now?' he asked.

'I get a Nobel prize,' Barry said, watching the output of the camera focused on the girl's face. 'Or you all get burned as witches. Or possibly both.' But it didn't look likely, he thought, that she was going to mention Leighton Buzzard or anything else for that matter. He fiddled with the remote focusing and peered more closely at the screen. Her lips were moving very slightly. She could be whispering or it could just be the way she was breathing. Even in close-up he could not be sure. Next time he must have an ECG readout at the very least. She might be entirely motionless but her heart rate could be off the scale for all he knew. Was she whispering? He turned up the gain from the tank's mics.

Chloe screamed again and again and again. She screamed until her throat was cramped and her lungs were paralysed with the effort. They must be able to hear her. Why didn't they stop this and let her out of here? She clawed at the hatch but it wouldn't budge. They must be able to see this. They must be watching her agony. They were doing this to her. They must be. It must be part of a plan to kill her. To kill her slowly while they watched it and enjoyed it. While they laughed at her.

And all the time the blood poured from every pore of her skin. It was squeezed and wrenched from her. With every pulse of her constricted heart her body convulsed and slippery blood swept over her. She was covered in so much blood that she choked on its thick, slimy slick. She tried to reach the bottom of the tank but the blood was too viscous to feel through: it buoyed her up and held her in an oily limbo. She bent her knees and pushed her heels down and felt nothing. The effort made the cramps and convulsions worse.

She turned on her side and reached down with her hand. Still she touched nothing. She gasped with the strain of it and blood slid into her mouth and filled her throat. She began to choke.

Barry sighed. He was right, he should have called it off. The bloody girl had gone to sleep. There was not a movement or a word from her. The monitor pictures might not be pin-sharp, but green and fuzzy couldn't disguise the fact that Chloe Pennick was enjoying a refreshing rest while he stood around like a pork chop at a bar mitzvah waiting for something interesting to happen: waiting for anything to happen.

He flicked the switch to signal Josh to move on to the next image. Try one more and then call it a day. If at first you don't succeed, he quoted to himself, try again; then give up; there's no point in being a damn fool about it. He'd have to work on Josh some more. Persuade him. It was Josh he'd had in mind when he set up the tank.

Ralph said, 'You didn't give them very long. She hasn't even had a chance to guess. Don't you want her to guess at least?'

'Perhaps Chloe doesn't realise she's supposed to have started,' Meg said.

Barry looked at her. 'What sort of an experiment is this?' he asked and raised an eyebrow.

'Doomed?' she suggested.

'It's a psi experiment,' Barry said slowly, as if explaining it to a very young child. 'We are investigating the paranormal.'

'Ye-e-e-eth,' Meg said, lisping in a childish voice. She stuck the tip of her thumb in her mouth.

Tommy said, 'If she was receiving what Josh is sending she'd know it had started.'

'Duh? You really think so?' Meg said witheringly.

'You're the one who made the stupid remark,' he snapped.

'I didn't want you to feel out of it.'

'I don't.'

'You see perving over her bum as an intellectual exercise do you?'

'You can't see her bum,' Ralph remarked.

'And as it happens I was watching the water,' Tommy said.

'Yeah right,' Meg snorted.

Does the water look different to you?' Tommy addressed the question directly to Barry.

Different?' Barry asked vaguely, not looking at any of the tank monitors but looking instead at the capsule output. Josh appeared not to have noticed the cue. Meg was right: this was doomed.

Ralph asked, 'Different in what way?'

Barry flicked the cue switch again. This time Josh looked up from the picture of the Empire State Building and stared directly into the CCTV camera that was above the capsule's clear Perspex table. He looked heavy-eyed and slightly bemused. He nodded his acknowledgement, turned the picture face-down and picked up the next one. He showed it to the camera. It was the Great Pyramid at Giza. For a moment Barry couldn't remember it being in the set he'd prepared. There was one building he thought, and they'd already had that. He must have got them muddled up. Doomed, definitely doomed. A catalogue of stupid errors. Unless - the thought struck him suddenly - unless the little bastards were playing tricks on him again. He watched Josh hunch forward in his seat as he settled down to concentrate. Was it just his imagination or did the actions look a bit exaggerated? If this was a joke then the punch line should be coming up any time now.

It's moving in sort of slow motion,' Tommy was saying. 'Looks oily or something. Does it look oily to you?'

'Oily?' Barry tried to keep the suspicion out of his voice. He looked at the monitor Tommy was indicating and shook his head. 'Green and fuzzy maybe,' he said dubiously.

'The movement,' Tommy persisted. 'It's not moving like water moves. Is it?'

Chloe tried to suck air through the plug of gluey slime filling her nose and throat and clogging her windpipe. She couldn't breathe. She needed a breath. One breath. One chance to save herself from this hell. She tried to swallow the lump, but all she did was pull in more of the flabby slobber that was sliding down into her. Still she cramped and ached and shuddered and still the blood pumped out of her. So much blood. How could there be so much blood? She was dying in this blood-filled coffin and nobody cared.

'I CARE BITCH!' the demon gibbered and roared. Chloe had almost forgotten him. 'I WANT YOU DEAD! I WANT YOU HEREWITH ME! AFRAID! CROUCHING IN THE DARK! FOR EVER AND EVER FEAR WITHOUT END!'

Chloe made one last effort to breathe: one last effort to tear the covering from her eyes: one last effort to open the hatch. She failed.

'AMEN!' the demon cackled. And then the redness became blackness and there was nothing.

'If it's movement we're talking about,' Barry said. 'Chloe's not moving like Chloe moves. Is she?' Any second now, he thought. Fooled you, Ghostbuster. Big yuks, har-de-har. Chuckle and be a good sport. Not much chance of that, children.

He glanced at the bank of video-recording machines, all whirring away taping the output from each of the CCTV cameras. He was beginning to regret not using the money to upgrade to computer-disc recording. The sensory-deprivation tank looked like a bad joke and a worse investment.

'Is she all right do you think?' Meg looked and sounded convincingly worried.

'Why shouldn't she be?' Barry said. 'My theory is that she's asleep.'

Ralph put a finger on the mic control. 'Why don't you shout in her ear?'

Barry yawned. 'That would do wonders for the test run wouldn't it.' He yawned again. He was a bit tired himself. It must be watching her sleep. Must be catching.

'I heard this voice,' Tommy was saying. 'It was telling me to wake up. Then I saw an alarm clock and bacon and eggs. He was sending me an image of breakfast, right?'

Barry said, 'One of the pictures in the sequence is a plate of food.' He knew it. They were jerking him around again. 'How did you know that?'

'I'm psychic,' Tommy said.

'I'm serious,' Barry said. 'How did you know that?' He had to restrain himself from grabbing the boy by the front of his sweatshirt. Jokes. Jokes. He wasn't in the mood for bloody jokes. 'How did you know that?' he demanded.

I didn't know that.' Tommy took a step backwards in mock alarm. 'What's wrong now, for God's sake? I didn't know that.'

Ralph said, 'The test isn't working anyway.' He still had his finger resting on the mic button. 'If she's asleep,' he nodded at the monitor with the close-up of Chloe's face, there's no way of telling from that.' The green, fuzzy image could have been a still photo. 'I mean you should either restart it or call it off all together'

'Makes sense,' Tommy said.

Barry slapped Ralph's hand off the control console. 'I don't know what you lot are up to,' he said, 'but this is my lab OK. And in my lab you'll do as I say'

'No offence,' Ralph said frowning, 'but don't you think that sounds a touch paranoid?'

'Yeah, what's up Doc?' Tommy said in a not very good Bugs Bunny voice.

'I'm waiting for the custard pie,' Barry said.

'Pudding?' Ralph asked.

'Metaphor'

Tommy pushed the hair from his forehead in his best

Hugh Grant style. 'You're waiting for the metaphorical sweet trolley.'

'You know what I mean.'

'I haven't the first idea,' Tommy protested. 'Do you know what he's talking about, Meg?'

He turned for support to where Meg had been standing. 'Meg?' But she had left the control and monitoring suite and was at the other end of the lab where she was kneeling beside the sensory-deprivation tank. 'Meg?'

'What are you playing at?' Barry demanded.

She rubbed her hand on the floor and then examined her fingers. "There's something leaking here,' she said. 'It's dripping from the tank. It looks a bit *like*' She hesitated and then she held up her hand for them to see. 'It looks a lot *like* blood.' She looked at the tank and back down at the floor. Oh shit! Abruptly she flinched away. 'It's getting worse.' She stood up quickly. 'It's seeping out,' she said in a horrified voice. 'It's pouring out everywhere.' She made a sudden attempt to step away from the tank and slipped, losing her footing. For a moment her feet skated awkwardly about on the floor as she scrambled to regain her balance. Lunging and jerking around she looked absurd, like a comedy performer in a silent movie.

Barry watched in triumphant irritation. 'You cannot be serious,' he said dismissively. 'I'm Barry not Homer.'

Meg lost her struggle against gravity and fell heavily.

Meg?' Tommy called. Are you OK?'

She lay where she had fallen.

Meg?'

She did not move.

Don't just stand there,' Tommy almost shouted at Ralph and Barry. 'She's hurt herself.'

Tommy rushed out of the control suite and hurried to help Meg, but as soon as he got near the tank he hit the same skiddy surface and began the same helpless skating routine. Before long he too fell heavily and lay still.

Barry was tempted to applaud ironically but instead he shook his head and glared at Ralph, whose face was fixed in an expression of stunned disbelief. 'Not funny,' Barry said. 'Not bloody funny' He switched on the mic to the tank and the one to the capsule and said loudly into both of them, All right. Enough. Test's over. Out of there.'

Neither Chloe nor Josh responded. He peered at the monitors. Chloe was in the same position she had been in all along. Josh seemed to have slumped further forward in his seat. He gave every sign of being unconscious.

'Not funny,' Barry bellowed at both mics. There was still no reaction from either of them. 'And you two can get up!' he shouted at Tommy and Meg, but they both remained stubbornly unmoving.

'What's going on?' Ralph asked of no one in particular. 'What in the hell is going on?'

'Open three,' Barry instructed. "Get Josh out of there.' Presumably, Barry thought to himself, as the only one left on his feet it was Ralph who had been designated to deliver the punch line, whatever that was.

'He's not in three,' Ralph said.

And there it was: the payoff to the whole elaborate gag. Barry said, 'Of course he's in three.' He was too tired to resist. Let them have their fun and let's finish with it.

'Not according to the monitors.' Ralph's voice was quiet, as though he wasn't sure he should be saying what he was saying. 'He's in four according to the monitors.'

Barry looked at the screens. Sure enough, the slumped figure of Josh was on a different set of monitors. He had been on the monitors of capsule three and now he was on the monitors identified as showing the interior of capsule four. Or had he misremembered it? Was Josh in four before?

No. 'He was in three,' Barry said aloud, not sure any more whether he was playing along with the joke or resisting some sort of weirdness. 'I put him in three myself. He can't be in four.'

Ralph was nodding vigorously. 'He was in three, wasn't he?'

To Barry the earnest and normally rather unimaginative student looked distinctly unnerved. If he was acting he was showing unexpected talent. 'How did he do that?' Barry asked.

'Do what?'

'Switch from three to four' He stared at the screens. For the briefest moment Josh appeared to be on both sets of monitors, and Barry was almost sure the two groups of images were different. In capsule three he was slumped forward and in capsule four he was sitting up. Then all the screens went blank and filled with white noise.

Did you see that?' Ralph asked.

'This has gone too far,' Barry said. 'Get him out of whichever one he's in.'

Ralph asked. Why me?'

He actually sounded frightened, which for some unfathomable reason Barry found intensely irritating. 'Because I'm going to deal with Sleeping Beauty and the all-star comedy skaters.'

Leaving Ralph dithering in front of the screens, he stalked across the laboratory to the tank. As he approached he realised that from underneath the framework of support trestles there was indeed a pool of red spreading

over the floor. There were smeary marks where Meg and Tommy had skidded about. The two of them lay in an ungainly huddle, both unmoving as the creeping redness seeped around them. How had they managed to produce all this *blood* was it blood? Animal blood maybe. What was that film?

'All right you two, on your feet,' Barry said. 'You're sussed. This is your version of Carrie isn't it?'

Gingerly he paddled through the blood and reached for the hatch on the top of the tank. He tried to open it. The cover did not slide back the way he expected it to. He pushed harder. It seemed to be stuck. That was impossible. He had checked the mechanism very carefully. There was nothing to go wrong. There was nothing to jam. He changed position and tugged at the cover. It would not budge.

So the impossible had happened. It had gone wrong. It had jammed. Furious at such malign absurdity, he heaved and wrenched at it. It was solid. It was as though there was no hatch there. It was defying him deliberately. He pummelled at it with his fists. A jolt of agony shot through his arms. The pain was excruciating. He looked at his hands. They were pouring with blood.

He felt a warm wetness all over him. He looked down. His clothes were soaked in blood. He watched it spreading. He was bleeding. The blood was coming from him. He was bleeding from every orifice, from every pore. So much blood. He felt dizzy. He closed his eyes. The redness broke over him like a wave. And then the real pain hit and there was darkness and nothing.

## Chapter Eight

Detective Constable Martin Bartok put his elbows on the melamine-surfaced counter and rested his chin in his chubby hands. 'He's just a harmless loony. I don't know why we're wasting our time with him.'

The custody sergeant finished filling in the dockets. 'There's no such thing as a harmless loony,' he said. 'When you've been in the job as long as I have you'll know that. Loonies are always trouble. Either trouble for themselves or trouble for other people. Always trouble for us.'

'Not if we don't drag 'em in here they're not.'

'What are you whinging about now?' Detective Sergeant Bob Simpson wandered into the custody suite. He was a tall, cadaverous-looking man and he towered above the short, slightly overweight DC. 'Did you take the fags off my desk?' he asked suspiciously.

Bartok looked mildly affronted. 'Do you know what the statistics are on smoking-related deaths, Sarge?'

'No. And I don't want you to tell me,' Simpson said. 'What were you whinging about?'

'This Doctor bloke.'

'He's a vagrant by the way,' the custody sergeant remarked. 'No address given.'

'He says he's a doctor and I believe him,' Bartok said. 'He's clean, he's well-fed, he's articulate, he's co-operative.'

'So was Harold Shipman! I'm told,' the custody sergeant said.

Bartok looked up at Simpson. 'Why am I wasting my time with him, Sarge?'

'Because you haven't got anything better to do, Constable.'

'It's not because your brother-in-law's the rent-a-cop up at the uni then?'

That's right, it's not because my brother-in-law's the rent-a-cop up at the uni.'

The custody sergeant tucked the ledger away below the counter. 'He doesn't like his brother-in-law, do you Bob?'

Simpson shrugged. 'I can take him or leave him.'

The custody sergeant sniffed. 'Still, he is family I suppose.' He shook his head as if depressed on Simpson's behalf.

Bartok said, 'They say friends are God's apology for families.'

'I reckon he might be foreign,' the custody sergeant remarked.

'Bartok?' Simpson said.

'Your vagrant.'

'He's not my vagrant.'

'Your brother-in-law's vagrant. What does he want him charged with anyway?'

Simpson smiled. 'There's a list as long as your arm. All of it bollocks. He's a stupid prat, my brother-in-law.'

'My point exactly, Sarge,' Bartok said. 'Why don't we just kick this guy loose?'

'Kick this guy loose?' Simpson said with ponderous irony. 'You're going to have to stop watching those films, Constable.' He grimaced at the custody sergeant. 'He's never been the same since he took out that Blockbuster membership.'

'Yeah, well they wouldn't have me in the masons,' Bartok said.

'Off you go, Constable,' Simpson told him, jerking a thumb in the direction of the double doors leading into the office area of the station. 'Check the computer, see if anything's known.'

'He hasn't done anything,' Bartok said, obediently heading towards the doors. 'I'll give odds there's nothing on him.'

'Martin?' Simpson said, 'Before you do that?'

Bartok turned back.

Simpson held out his hand. 'Hand over my fags.'

Bartok hesitated, then he put his hand in his jacket pocket and took out the pack. 'Have you read the warning on these?'

'One statistic,' Simpson threatened. 'One single health statistic passes your lips and you'll be back in uniform within the week.'

Bartok handed him the cigarettes and left.

After he had gone, the custody sergeant said, 'He's a pushy little bugger isn't he?'

Simpson took out a cigarette. 'He's clever though.'

'Bit too clever if you ask me,' the custody sergeant said. 'There's no smoking in the custody suite, Bob, you know that.'

Simpson put the cigarette back in the pack. 'Can you be too clever?'

The custody sergeant sniggered. 'You can if you want to join the masons.'

After several hours the police released the Doctor without charge, which he thought was reasonable since he had done nothing.

They would have let him go sooner, he realised, if he had thought it acceptable to make up a name and an address. As it was, 'the Doctor' and 'no fixed abode' inevitably led to exhaustive checks being made while he sat in a cell eating jelly babies and amusing himself with his yo-yo.

He couldn't remember the details of this particular legal system, if he ever knew them, so he wasn't exactly sure whether the local constabulary were exceeding their authority by detaining him. He did, however, remember the advice he had been given about authorities in general and police forces in particular: if in doubt, don't stir them up, and never under any circumstances poke them with a stick. It was Che Guevara who had told him this and it had always seemed to the Doctor to be a sensible rule of thumb.

As he expected, the arresting officers eventually got bored with trying to find some justification for holding him, and settled for requiring that someone vouch for his good character. When that proved to be a problem they simply decided that his claim to be a traveller meant that he was in fact a foreign tourist. They advised him to return to Australia or Holland, or wherever it was he came from, since they would not be as lenient with him next time. The Doctor thanked them and asked politely who it was that would drive him back to the university where they had picked him up.

He had been walking for half an hour and had reached the outskirts of the town when he noticed the Clearspring Water Company lorry pulling off the main road into the local industrial estate. It seemed too much of a fortunate coincidence to pass up, so he set off after it.

The industrial estate was not large and the driver stuck rigidly to the ten miles an hour speed limit, so it was an easy jog for the Doctor to keep the lorry in view until it turned through the gates of a modest warehouse site at the end of a row of similar units.

By the time he got there, however, the gates had been locked and the lorry was nowhere to be seen. Not only that, but there was no sign on the building to indicate that it had anything to do with the Clearspring Water Company. The Doctor began to wonder if he might have been mistaken.

He crossed the deserted road and peered through the high, wire-mesh fence. It did not look like a bottling plant as far as he could see. Maybe there was something of the sort inside the building, though it didn't really seem big enough to accommodate filling lines, packing, storage and all the other elements that would be required for such an enterprise.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered round the perimeter to see what he could see.

The lorry was parked against a loading bay at the rear of the building. Two men, in identical green overalls and uniform jackets with 'Clearspring' emblazoned across the back, were using hydraulic trolleys to wheel pallets full of cardboard cases from the lorry into the warehouse. The cases were brightly printed with the message: Clearspring Water – pure waterfront clear springs.

The Doctor stood watching the men work. When one of them noticed him he lifted his hat, waved it and shouted, 'Excuse me?' The man did not respond so he shouted again, 'I say? Excuse me?'

'Yeah?' the man shouted back.

The Doctor put his hat back on, took the bottle of water from his coat pocket and held it up. 'I've been drinking your delicious water for a long time,' he shouted.

'I doubt that,' the man shouted back. 'It's only been on the market six months.' Then when the other man said something to him he corrected himself. 'Ten months, give or take.'

'Ten months is a long time as far as I'm concerned,' the Doctor shouted. 'I'm very fickle normally. What I wanted to ask you was - is it bottled here on the premises?'

The man climbed down from the loading bay and walked across to the fence. 'No. Up north somewhere. Yorkshire I think.'

Ah,' the Doctor smiled. 'Bottled in Yorkshire you think?'

'That's what I'm led to understand.'

'You don't bring it from there yourself?'

'You ask a lot of questions.'

'Sorry,' the Doctor beamed. He leant forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'Is it a secret?'

The man grinned. 'Nan, makes no odds to me. I bring it from a distribution depot in Birmingham.'

I see,' the Doctor said, puzzled by the convoluted system of supply, 'It's bottled in Yorkshire, taken to Birmingham, and it's distributed all over the place from there.'

'Not all over the place. It's pretty much a niche product.'

The Doctor nodded knowingly as he tried to recall what a niche product was exactly. 'In what way a niche product?'

'I'm not sure they sell it anywhere else but round here.'

Really?' The Doctor was even more puzzled now. How *very* nichey'

The man smiled a world-weary smile. 'A bottle of water's a bottle of water isn't it. It's all a question of advertising, am I right?'

'I'm sure you are,' the Doctor agreed.

'They give them names to appeal to the local tastes.' The man was wanning to his theme. 'It's down to focus groups and all that sort of stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if the Clearspring Water Company doesn't exist at all, as such. Just a brand name used by one of the big conglomerates. I've been told the labels are put on in Birmingham.'

'Do I take it you don't work for the Clearspring Water Company?' the Doctor asked.

The man shook his head. 'I work for the transport company.' He pointed to the other man who was still bustling about on the loading bay. 'He works for the warehouse company'

'Despite what it says on your jackets?'

'These?' The man craned his neck round in a pointless attempt to see the Clearspring name on the back of his jacket. 'Advertising freebies. You wear Nike trainers, it doesn't mean you work for the company does it?'

'I suppose not,' the Doctor said. 'Does anybody work for the Clearspring Water Company?'

'Bloke who sticks the labels on in Birmingham might.'

The Doctor was disappointed. 'It's a very complicated arrangement.' He was not happy with what he had learnt, mostly because he was uncertain what that was. Did this water really have any significance or was it all just a coincidence? He felt sure it would have been helpful to examine the bottling plant. But maybe it was in Yorkshire to avoid precisely that. And if the water wasn't suspect, why was everything about it so complicated? 'Very complicated,' he repeated.

Something to do with dodging tax and VAT I shouldn't wonder,' the man said, and he looked at the Doctor with a sudden unease. 'You're not from Customs and Excise are you?'

The Doctor's mind was still on the water. 'I'm from Gallifrey,' he said without thinking.

The man seemed relieved. 'What line are they in? Don't tell me it's bottled water.'

'No, no. Nothing like that.' The Doctor smiled reassuringly. 'Travel.'

'Excellent,' the man said. 'Any danger of a holiday package discount? Cheap *flights* that sort of stuff?'

Leela had decided not to wait with the TARDIS. She had decided it would make more sense to go and look for the Doctor. She had put some of the salve she carried in her equipment pouch on to the most severe of the cuts on her legs and arms. She had done this slowly and deliberately and then slowly and deliberately she had walked out of the wood.

Basically she knew that it was sensible to find the Doctor quickly and tell him what had happened. Basically she knew that waiting for him to come

back to the TARDIS would not be the most sensible way to do it. Basically she knew the decision was sensible and right. But she also knew that part of her was frightened and she wanted to get away from the wood as fast as she could. She moved slowly and deliberately to try and keep that part of herself controlled and small. Only when she was clear of the trees did she allow herself to start running.

She slowed to a casual walk once she reached the grounds of the university. She was aware that her appearance attracted unwelcome attention and that she must do her best to ensure that her behaviour did not make things worse. She approached the first of the towering buildings and hesitated. She knew the Doctor planned to go to the man who called himself Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins and talk to him about his experiments in parapsychology. That would be a good place to look for the Doctor she thought, if she could just find out which of these huge shelters this Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins lived in.

She looked towards the other equally large buildings. He could be in any one of them. He could be anywhere in any one of them. She could search for hours and not find him. In the meantime the Doctor would be long gone: probably back to the TARDIS where she should have stayed and waited for him. Coming here was a mistake which she had made because she was afraid to stay in the wood. You can think and be afraid at the same time, as the Doctor, kept telling her; you simply cannot think rationally. Coming here was a mistake and she would put it right by going back to the TARDIS and waiting as she had originally planned. Still she hesitated. She could hear the Doctor's voice lecturing her: When you make a mistake you cannot go back and correct it. You can only go forward and make up for it. Was that the Doctor or was it her warrior-trainers? There had been so many instructions and orders, so much advice, she wondered if she would ever be allowed to think for herself.

Suppose she did search, how would she do it? The last time she was in one of these buildings she had seen that the doors to the rooms were usually numbered and some of them had little sliding signs with the name of the person inside the room. Leela could read and, with practice and the Doctor's help, she was getting better at it all the time. But she was not confident that she would be able to decipher the signs quickly enough for it to be a useful way to search. There was nothing for it she decided, she

would have to ask someone for directions and that would draw attention to her again. Who could she ask without causing a problem?

She glanced around and found that several students waiting by the entrance to the building were watching her. This time, she told herself, whatever the provocation she must remain calm. She caught the eye of one of the students and smiled at him.

When the young man approached she could see that he was slightly tense. That was good, she thought. That was how it should be. She was a warrior. The respect of an untrained boy was no more than her due.

'Is it an Animal Rights gig?' he said. 'I've got to be honest, I'm not actually a supporter. I can't get worked up about it. But you could probably get me excited if you put your mind to it.' He looked her up and down appreciatively. 'Where do you keep the leaflets?'

Leela said, 'I am looking for Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins. Can you tell me where he is?'

'You're a wannabe witch,' the student chortled. 'I should have known.'

Despite her good intentions Leela was already getting irritated. 'Can you tell me where to find Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins?' she repeated.

'Great look,' he said, ignoring the question. He reached out to feel Leela's tunic. 'What is it *moleskin* hamster hide?'

Leela's move was restrained, but fast and without warning. She caught his thumb, twisting it hard against the joint so that he gasped. She immediately eased the joint so that the pain was a small jagged ache that threatened far worse if he moved. 'Do not touch me,' she said flatly.

The student swallowed hard. 'Right. Sorry. No offence.' He did his best to smile. 'What did you ask me again?'

Can you tell me where to find Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins?'

'I can show you where his lab is,' the student said. 'If that's what you want.'

Leela released his thumb. She more than half-expected him to run away. When he did not she said, 'That is what I want.'

'You're not from round here are you?' the student suggested as he led her towards another of the impressively large, metal and black glass buildings.

'I have travelled a long way to get here,' Leela agreed. She stared across the outside of the shelter as carefully as she could, looking for signs of danger. The student did not move as if he was leading them into a trap, but it was not always possible to anticipate treachery from an unfamiliar enemy's body movements.

The student flexed his thumb and wrist and said, 'Look, I'm sorry if I offended against your culture, or customs or whatever'

'It is not important,' Leela said. 'How is it that you know where Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins is?'

He gave a rueful shrug. 'I was tested like everybody else, wasn't I? I thought I might have the 'fluence you know. Turns out I've got the psychic powers of a breeze block.' He wagged his thumb at her. 'That hurt you know.'

'I know.'

'You go to some sort of martial arts class?'

'I was trained to do it.'

'What's it called?' he asked, pushing through the swing doors and holding one open for her.

'Thumb-bending,' Leela said.

'Right. Stupid question.' He led her down a long corridor busy with people. 'And I suppose that's an ethnic costume is it?'

'What is an ethnic costume?' Leela asked.

Most of the doors to the rooms on either side of the corridor were propped open. In some rooms groups of students were sitting facing lecturers writing on boards, in other larger rooms people were working with elaborate equipment.

Traditional to your culture. What your people wear when they're not interfered with.'

Leela glanced down at herself. 'It is what we wear' She was puzzled by his references to her culture. She had no idea what it meant but it seemed to matter to him.

'I'm Welsh, myself,' he said. 'We Welsh know how important it is to maintain your ethnic roots. Your separateness.'

Leela had not heard of the Welsh. They sounded like a tribe that was deliberately being kept isolated. Not for the first time she found herself wondering if there was another like Xoanon running this world too. The name Welsh was not that different from Tesh. If the Welsh were like the Tesh, who were the Sevateem, and where was the all-powerful Xoanon hiding this time?

Ahead and behind them doors were beginning to close and the corridor was suddenly emptying. Leela tensed. Was it a trap after all? If it was, she would drop this Welsh first and hardest.

The student looked at his watch. 'Oh shit, I'm going to be late for the econometrics lecture,' he said. 'If I miss more than the first five minutes I won't understand a bastard word of it. And I'm in trouble with it already, see.' He stopped and gestured along the corridor. 'Your man's in Lab 7B I think it is, on the right-hand side down there as I remember' He offered his hand. Got to go.'

Leela had seen the Doctor perform this greeting ritual. She took his hand and shook it up and down twice. He seemed very pleased. 'I work in the student bar,' he said. 'Any time you're passing be glad to buy you a drink.' He started back the way they had come, then paused and turned. 'So long as it's not a cultural taboo, of course,' he said. 'I wouldn't want to offend you again.' He waggled his thumb at her and smiled.

Leela watched him trot away and disappear round the corner at the end of the corridor. She was still not certain about his motives. This could still be a trap so she drew her knife and readied herself to fight.

Laboratory 7B was where the Welsh said it would be, and beside the door was a narrow panel which Leela deciphered as Dr B Hitchins. She hoped that Dr B was in some way the same as Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar, though she could not see how it would be. But the Hitchins was correct, so she put her ear against the door and listened. The only sound she could hear was a distant crackling hiss. It reminded her of the wind in the wood whipping up eddies of dry leaves. It reminded her of the wood. She recoiled from the door into a fighting crouch and spun round to face the corridor.

There was no threat but she found she was shivering. Something was happening to her. Something was turning her from a warrior into a frightened child. She was Leela of the Sevateem, she shouted in her head. She was no child to be terrified by ghosts and demons and the shadows of dreams. She stood up straight and sheathed her knife. This was a time for thinking and for reason. She stopped shivering and moved back close to the door and put both hands against it. It was cold, like the flesh of a corpse was cold. There was a very faint smell, too, which she could not quite identify. It was an acrid smell: burning but not fire. She leant her forehead against the door and breathed. She could see her breath making a tiny cloud of condensation. It was cold there. It was not her fear making her shiver: not just her fear.

The handle of the door was a dull-surfaced, polished metal lever. When she reached out to touch it a spark of static electricity flickered into her fingers. That was the smell she realised: electrical flame. The Doctor said there was no smell from such things, but Leela knew that lightning strikes left the sharp smell of burnt air. She pressed the lever down and heard the metal catch click.

The door was made to open inwards. She pushed at it carefully and when the gap was wide enough she drew her knife and slipped into the room, taking three quick sideways steps to make herself a less obvious target. Behind her the door shut itself. Leela ignored it. The real danger was in front of her.

Someone or something murderously destructive had ripped through the place only moments before, attacking anyone who was here. There was blood running everywhere and bodies, four at least, sprawled throughout the length of the room. As far as she could tell the Doctor was not one of them, but she could not see everything from where she was standing. She resisted the urge to rush forward and search for him. There was no track or trace of blood at the door or in the corridor outside. Unless there was another way out of the room, whatever had done this was still in here. She pressed her back to the wall and waited. Nothing moved. She surveyed the layout carefully. It was a long room. There were oddly shaped containers: four standing, one lying flat and raised on a frame of reinforced legs. Any of these could contain more bodies or could be hiding the killer.

Two people, a boy and a girl both covered in blood, were lying on the floor near the box on legs. There was another body, an older man, slumped over the box itself. At the far end of the room a boy was sprawled on the floor in front of an open-sided lean-to. Behind him Leela could see banks of dead screens, and machines which her experiences in the TARDIS suggested should be flashing with small lights to show they were working even when they were not in use. The lean-to must be a control room, she decided, though it was not clear to her what it controlled.

It was then that she saw the horror. In the darkest corner of the darkened control room there was a tall sliver of blank-ness. It was the same blankness she had seen gathering itself in the wood. Blankness that was a darkness that sucked everything into itself. For a moment she felt the ghostly wind of it tugging icily at her. She stepped forward, looking for something to brace herself against, and abruptly the darkness folded in on itself and vanished. In the control room the screens began to flicker into life and tiny bright lights began to blink and flash.

Leela found she was still pressed against the wall, but she could not remember stepping back to it. Something else about what she was looking at had changed too. What was it? What had changed without her seeing it change? It was the blood. The blood was gone. The bodies were no longer soaked in their own gore. What was spattered about the room was a sort of reddish colour, but it had only a very slight resemblance to blood. For anyone with any experience, it was nothing like the blood that spilled from wounds. And there was less of it. She could not see as much of it as she thought she had seen at first. Most of the liquid was on the floor too, not

splashed over other surfaces and splattered up the walls. Why had she thought it was blood when she could see so clearly now that it was not? She hesitated to move from the wall. Had she been tricked then or was she being tricked now? There was only one way she could think of to find out for sure.

She left the wall and walked slowly towards the man lying across the box. She could see he was alive before she reached him. She lifted him off the box and dragged him clear of the pool of congealing slime which was underneath it. She laid him on the floor and turned him on his side so that he would not choke. Next she checked the box itself. She had no intention of having it behind her without knowing what was in it or what was likely to come out of it. The man had been slumped over what looked like a sort of lid. She put her hand on it and found that it moved at the slightest of pushes. Leaning back slightly to give herself room for a full cutting arc with her knife, she slid the lid open. Nothing reared up or leapt out at her. Knife turned for a close-quarters thrust, she ducked forward to take a look.

Chloe tore the blank goggles away from her face and stared up at Leela. Her eyes were wide with horror. 'I was having a nightmare. I thought I'd drowned in my own blood.' She sat bolt upright and then yawned copiously. 'You're that girl. I wondered where you'd got to,' she said, and began to cough. Choking and spluttering she wiped red-tinged scum from her arms and breasts. 'What is this shit?'

'I do not know what it is,' Leela said. 'I know it is not blood.'

'I said it was a nightmare.' Chloe tried to smile. 'So what are you doing in my nightmare?'

'I am looking for the Doctor,' Leela said. 'He was coming to talk to Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins.'

He wasn't here when I got into this bloody tank. Thanks for getting me out of it by the way. I couldn't make anyone hear me. Could you hear me? I couldn't make anyone hear me and I couldn't get it open.' She shook her head as if in disbelief. 'It wouldn't move.'

Leela nodded towards the man on the floor who was just beginning to stir. 'There was a body lying on top of it.'

Chloe looked around. 'My God, what's going on? What's happened to everyone?' She struggled to pull herself up and clamber out of the tank but she slipped and flopped back into the water and scum. 'Bugger,' she spluttered and started to pull herself up again.

Leela moved on down the room, checking as she went. The boy and girl lying on the floor near the tank -were stirring so she ignored them and turned her attention to the standing containers. The first two and the last one were open and empty, but the third one in the line was closed. Inside it she found a student sitting slumped forward with his arms dangling at his sides and his forehead resting on a small table. She heaved him upright in his chair and he remained awkwardly propped up, head lolling at an angle, his eyes open but unfocused and apparently unseeing. She left him and moved on to the control room.

The boy who had been lying in front of the lean-to was already sitting up and groaning. As Leela approached he said groggily, 'Who are you?'

'I am Leela of the Sevateem,' she said, stepping past him. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Ralph Naylor,' he said. 'At least I think that's who I am. Who hit me? Was it you?'

'No.' Leela entered the lean-to warily. In the wood she had balked at going into the hollow where the blank darkness had been. She had been afraid to go there. She had been afraid despite its complete disappearance and despite the return of the vanished TARDIS. This time she must not give in. She must face this faceless fear. She stood in the centre of the control room and stared at the place in the corner where the horror had folded in on itself and swallowed the terrifying blankness. It was no different from the rest of the lean-to. The dark had left no sign. There was nothing to mark what she had seen. There was nothing to mark what she thought she had seen. Already she was uncertain about it. Already she was uncertain whether or not it had been real.

She looked at the screens. They seemed to show pictures from the inside of the boxes. She could see the girl called Chloe was finally managing to start climbing out of the tank. She was slow and clumsy. Her body clearly lacked strength and co-ordination. Its thinness must be lack of food, Leela

thought. But it was the pictures of the boy in the standing container that caught her attention. He had not changed from the position she had put him in. She watched carefully and, except for his breathing, no part of him was making the slightest movement.

'What did you say your name was again?' a voice said behind her.

Leela had seen Ralph reflected in the glass of the screens as he hauled himself unsteadily to his feet and propped himself up in the doorway. 'I am Leela,' she said without turning round.

'There was more,' Ralph said. He had started to shake his head but had stopped when he almost fell over. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he went on. 'Sounded foreign. Rovasevateem was it? Eastern European maybe?'

Leela was still watching the boy on the screens. 'What is his name?' she asked.

Ralph staggered closer and peered at a screen. 'That's Josh.' He put a hand against the glass to steady himself. 'He doesn't look too good does he? Perhaps we'd better raise the alarm. Call the emergency people.'

On the screens Josh moved for the first time. His hands and arms flexed jerkily, he lifted his head and his eyes focused.

'He is recovering; Leela said. 'Now you are all recovering.'

Ralph stopped leaning against the screen and straightened up. 'Whoa,' he breathed. 'That's better. I feel better suddenly'

Leela turned from the screens. In the main room the other three casualties were on their feet. They were massaging bruises but they seemed otherwise unhurt and fully awake. The girl Chloe was clear of the tank and already rubbing herself down with a sheet of drying material.

'Something went seriously awry there,' the older man said.

The boy pushed some slimy hair back from his forehead and said, 'Gosh, do you really think so?' He sounded to Leela as though he did not mean it as a question.

"The question is: just what did go wrong?' the man said.

Leela stepped out of the lean-to. 'I am sure the Doctor could tell you,' she said.

They all looked at her.

'Who are you and what are you doing in my lab?' the man demanded.

'Her name's Leela,' Ralph said. 'Leela Rovasevateem. She's from Russia or the former Yugoslavia or one of *those*' He looked at Leela. 'You didn't actually say which one, did you?'

'What are you doing in my lab?' the man pressed.

'You must be Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins,' Leela said. He did not look nearly impressive enough to have given himself such a name. 'The Doctor wanted to talk to you about your experiments in parapsychology.'

'You have no right to come barging into my laboratory.' The man sounded defensive suddenly. 'Your Doctor will have to make an appointment if he wants to discuss my work.'

'Don't start on her,' Chloe said. 'If it wasn't for her I'd have been in serious trouble.'

Out of the corner of her eye Leela saw the boy called Josh come out of the standing box. She tried to watch him without making it obvious. There was something about him she found intriguing. 'How do you work that out?' he now asked Chloe.

'You were right when you said it was a bloody great coffin. I could have died in there. I could have drowned,' she said. Nobody was paying the slightest attention to what was happening to me.'

The other girl spoke for the first time. "That's not true. Tommy never took his eyes off you for a moment. A technique he is demonstrating for us right now."

Chloe stopped rubbing herself down and wrapped the sheet of drying material round her body.

'You were being monitored the whole time, Chloe,' Ralph said.

Monitored. That's the word,' the other girl said. 'Is that the word Tommy?'

No. I think bitchy is probably the word, Meg,' he said.

I don't care what you say,' Chloe said. 'It was Leela who got me out of there. It wasn't any of you. It was Leela who saved me.'

Saved you from what?' Josh mocked.

'I don't know,' Chloe said. 'A fate worse than death?'

'Is there such a thing?' Josh asked. 'Is there a fate worse than death? If there is I can't imagine what it would be. Can you?'

To Leela the question sounded like a challenge of some sort.

## Chapter Nine

Death is not the worst thing that can happen to you. There is something worse than death that can happen. Living for ever in the darkness, always being afraid, always being alone. That has got to be worse than anything I can imagine. What if eternity turns out to be an airless agony of panic. I can't spend my whole life terrified of fear. I can't face the wait. I'd rather jump now than wait to fall.

Detective Constable Bartok finished reading the suicide note through the clear plastic of the evidence envelope and handed it back to the scenes-of-crime officer. 'Do we believe this?' he said to Detective Sergeant Simpson.

Simpson surveyed the blood-splashed study bedroom from which the body had not long been removed. 'I've seen worse,' he said. Then he thought for a moment and shook his head. 'No I haven't.' He sighed heavily. 'Poor little bugger. What was she thinking of?'

'From the lecture notes on the desk it looks like the handwriting matches,' the SOCO said, tagging and listing the remaining physical samples.

The photographer finished the last of the close-up fingerprint photos.

'You've got wide shots of the room, haven't you?' Simpson asked. 'From both sides and from the doorway?'

'Every which way,' the photographer said.

'And he's got full sequences of the blood spatters from source to cutoff,' the SOCO said.

'So is that it?' the photographer asked. 'Only I've got a wedding at three.'

The SOCO said, 'Don't forget to lose the suit. Turn up in all that white and they'll think you're the bride.'

The photographer shouldered his equipment bag. 'If I keep the cap and mask on,' he chortled, 'they'll think I've come to deliver the baby'

'Prints as soon as you can, yeah?' Simpson said.

A.s.a.p. chief,' the photographer said as he left.

'He's not our regular guy is he?' Simpson said to the SOCO.

'Outsourced leave replacement. We have to buy in the holiday cover these days.'

'Is he reliable?' Simpson asked. 'We don't want pictures of the corpse turning up for sale on the Internet.'

'He wouldn't dare.'

'You'd be surprised what people will do for money'

'Not me,' the SOCO grunted, boxing the samples. 'You think I do this for fun?'

'Can I look at that note again?' Bartok asked.

I've already boxed it and listed it.'

'I'm sorry,' Bartok said. 'I need to look at it now. There's something really bugging me about that note.'

'Won't it keep?'

'Let him have a look at it,' Simpson said amiably. 'Relax man, what's the *rush* you got an invitation to that wedding or something?'

The SOCO sucked his teeth and made an irritated tutting noise. 'Make up your mind, Constable. I haven't got time to play games here.' He fished out the plastic envelope and handed it over. 'I'm not paid by the hour you know.'

'Death is not the worst thing that can happen to you,' Bartok read aloud. 'I mean how many suicide notes start like that?'

'Most of them do,' Simpson said. 'One way or another'

'Sergeant's right,' the SOCO said, turning his attention to packing up his forensic kit. 'That's every note I've ever seen.'

'Yeah, but they don't go on about how much worse it's going to be after they're dead do they?' Bartok insisted. His plump face was frowning but his voice was matter-of-fact as again he read aloud from the note: 'There is something worse than death that can happen. Living for ever in the darkness, always being afraid, always being alone. That has got to be worse than anything I can imagine. What if eternity turns out to be an airless agony of panic' He paused for effect before saying, 'I mean, if you felt like this would killing yourself seem like the best course of action?'

The SOCO snorted. 'Does the expression: while the balance of the mind was disturbed mean anything to you,' he said. 'Can I have the note back now?'

'What about the stuff at the end?' Simpson asked. 'The stuff about being too afraid to wait?'

'It's bollocks,' Bartok said. 'It's a rationalisation. I don't believe it for a second. If she was barking it's too rational. If she wasn't barking why the hell did she do this?' He gestured at the bed where most of the blood had drained, though it had also spurted up the adjacent wall and on to the floor.

'So what are you saying?' Simpson said. 'The note was forged, dictated, what?'

'If I can have it back,' the SOCO demanded.

'Thanks,' Bartok said, carefully putting it back in the box the SOCO had taken it from.

The SOCO inclined his head ironically. 'Thank you, Constable.'

'You don't think this was a murder do you, Martin?' Simpson said. 'Not seriously? You're having another Blockbuster moment aren't you?'

Bartok shrugged unhappily. 'I just don't think it's what it appears to be, that's all Sarge. There's something not right about all this.'

The SOCO finished packing the equipment cases and stood them near the door. 'Maybe forensics will come up with something but I wouldn't hold your breath. I'm only the SOCO but I've got to say it looks straight up and down to me. There's no sign of a struggle, nobody walked through the blood or anything. The door was locked from the inside. The note looks like her handwriting. The prints on the knife will be hers, you watch. There was one clear one in the blood on the handle which I know was hers.' He picked up two of the cases.

'Do you want me to get a uniform to help you with those?' Simpson said.

'No thanks,' the SOCO said. 'I can't afford the breakages.'

When he had left the small room Simpson stood closer to the bed and stared at it as if he was trying to visualise the girl there. So,' he said. 'She writes the note. She lies down on the bed. She takes a Stanley knife and she cuts her wrists and as the blood pours out of her she cuts her throat just to be sure.'

How painful is that going to be?' Bartok said.

'It's going to hurt,' Simpson agreed. 'Poor little bugger was in a lot of pain.'

'But we still think she killed herself.' Bartok's voice was accusing but his expression was sorrowful rather than angry. 'We write it off as just another student suicide.'

'I didn't say anything about writing it off,' Simpson said. 'Whoever this Joan Cox was, her death deserves a proper professional investigation. Of course it does. But not as a murder, Martin. That SOCO's got it right. It's straight up and down, this one is.'

'As long as we haven't made up our minds about it,' Bartok said.

Simpson shook his head. 'I've always been a sucker for the locked door mystery.'

The Doctor was bored with walking. Sometimes it did help him to think but since there was nothing he particularly wanted to think about at the

moment, walking was simply an inefficient way of getting from one place to another. He had considered trying to get a lift to the university, but for the life of him he couldn't remember the accepted signal for: if you have room to spare and are going in my direction I should be grateful to ride with you in your vehicle.

When he had walked a bit further and got a bit more bored, however, he decided to experiment with possible gestures. He had tried raising his right hand palm upwards, his left hand palm upwards, both hands palms upwards, both hands palms downwards, one upwards one downwards first right then left; he had tried raising his hat; he had tried standing on one leg and wagging his foot; he had tried raising his hat while standing on one leg and wagging his foot. In return he had been waved at, hooted at, laughed at, and there had been a couple of hand gestures which he couldn't interpret but which he felt were not kindly meant.

It was obvious to him that he had not yet come close to the correct signal and he was almost as bored with trying as he was with walking. He would have persevered though if it had not been for the appearance of the police cars.

The first of them roared past with sirens blaring and lights flashing, and it looked to the Doctor as if it might be heading in the direction of the university. Wherever it was they were going he did not relish the idea of being picked up by them, so he paused in his experimental gesturing.

Then a second police car roared past and in it he thought he caught sight of the two detectives who had questioned him. Could it have been Detective Constable Bartok and

Detective Sergeant Simpson again or was it just an illusion, a paranoid flashback? When he heard the cars coming and saw, if he did see them, those two policemen it had occurred to him that they might have changed their minds about letting him go. All that activity might be about recapturing him. It was an irrational thought, an arrogant idea. What possible interest could they have in him? He must try to remember, he reminded himself, what the dangers of the field effect from a multiverse overlap or a space-time loop anomaly or a self-regulating temporal inversion could be. Mild paranoia was only one of many problems

faced by the vulnerable mind. Not that his was a vulnerable mind of course. And the longer the susceptible spent within the field, and the closer they got to its cause and focal point, the more dangers they were in. Nor was he one of the susceptible either. He had not even positively identified such a field effect in operation let alone pinpointed its focus, but if it was there and the parapsychology experiments were feeding into it something very unpleasant could be happening. Or it could still be the water. There was something more than a little peculiar about the water.

When a third police car howled and flashed past, the Doctor decided to abandon the idea of getting a lift and to leave the road altogether. He clambered over the first field gate he reached and set out across the rough pasture land in the general direction of the university. The police sirens were fading into the distance and he could not tell whether that was where they too were heading.

'Every last one of them comes screaming in with the blues and twos going.' The security supervisor remained standing behind his desk as he glared at Simpson. 'You'd think it was a bank blag going down. I mean we were looking for a bit of discretion on this one, Bob.'

Simpson poured himself a mug of coffee from the supervisor's percolator. 'You've always wanted all the lights and sirens you could get, Fred,' he said mildly. 'Back up your authority? Remind the little bastards who's in charge here and where you draw the line? Wasn't that what you always told me?' He added a couple of spoonfuls of sugar to the coffee.

'Yeah, but not in this case. This is an ugly one.'

'An ugly one you reckon?' Simpson sipped the coffee and made a face. 'This is ugly coffee I'll say that.' He stirred more sugar into the mug.

'We don't want to draw too much attention to this, Bob. Not if we can avoid it.'

For the first time since he had arrived on campus Simpson's relaxed manner disappeared and his carefully cultivated calmness deserted him. 'You don't get to decide that!' he snapped. 'I'm the investigating officer and I'll decide how much attention this gets. If necessary I'll flood the place with coppers and question anybody who so much as looked in that kid's

direction. I'll turn over every rock and rattle every skeleton in every cupboard until I find out exactly what drove that girl to do what she did.'

The supervisor's manner became more conciliatory. 'What good would that do?'

'I don't know,' Simpson said. 'I won't know till I do it, will I.'

'Come on, there'll be enough bad publicity without you making things worse.'

'Without me making things worse?' Simpson was calm again. 'Did you actually see what had gone on in that room, Fred?'

'Me?' The supervisor sat down abruptly. 'Yes I saw it. I've got passkey authorisation. No one else gets access to the master keys while I'm on shift so' He nodded to himself as if confirming the recollection. 'Yes I saw it. I tried to unlock the door but the snib was on and I had to force it open. So I was the first one in there.'

I know that,' Simpson said patiently. 'You told me that already. What I'm asking is: did you take a good look at it?'

'I could see she was dead if that's what you mean. But I didn't hang around in there, no. I pushed everybody back out and I sealed the door up again. Then I put one of my guys in front and I called it in to you. And what do I get for my trouble? The full Bertram bloody Mills.'

'Very bloody as it turns out,' Simpson murmured. 'As circuses go.'

Bartok bustled in to the office without bothering to knock. 'Sarge?' He looked pleased with himself. 'You're going to love this.'

'Don't you knock before you come into people's offices and interrupt your superiors?' the supervisor demanded.

'Sorry,' Bartok said, with no change in his self-satisfied expression. 'Was it a family conference?'

The supervisor sat forward in his chair. 'What did you just say to me?'

'I didn't mean to interrupt.'

'Do you let him talk to you like that?' the supervisor asked Simpson.  
"Things have changed a bit since I was in the job.'

'Yes,' Simpson said, 'I dare say they have. What is it I'm going to love, Constable? And why?'

'Because it fits right in with your theory, you and the SOCO. I've been talking to some of the dead girl's friends. She was into the occult and spiritualism and all that sort of stuff.'

Simpson looked interested. 'All what sort of stuff exactly?'

'Student stuff,' the supervisor put in hastily.

Bartok said, 'She's been holding séances.'

"They're all at it.' The supervisor was dismissive. 'It's this year's fashion. They see a couple of movies about ghosts and they whip out the Ouija boards. They're all trying to contact Freddy Krueger or Bruce Willis or whatever.'

'She's been holding séances in that wood apparently,' Bartok said. 'The one with the dodgy rep? Supposed to be haunted?'

'Norswood?' Simpson asked.

A bunch of them have been creeping about in there after dark it seems.'

'After dark?' Simpson gave a small grimace. 'Not sure I'd fancy that myself.'

'The woods are full of them,' the supervisor snorted. 'If the weather's warm they're sneaking off and bare-arse bonfire dancing all over. Where's the harm in that? It's kids' stuff. Just an excuse for a bit of illicit nooky.' -

Simpson's gaunt face was expressionless. 'You knew about this, Fred?'

'I knew it went on.'

'How come you didn't mention it?'

'I didn't think it was relevant to anything.'

Simpson smiled faintly. 'You're really going to piss me off if you keep on trying to think, Fred.'

The supervisor bristled. 'I was trying to keep it simple. It's in everybody's interest to keep it simple. You don't want the press all over this, Bob.'

'Do I not?' Simpson asked. 'Why is that?'

'Trust me, you're going to be a very unpopular copper round here if that happens.'

Simpson affected a puzzled expression. And why would that bother me?'

'The university's important, you know it is. You of all people know it is.'

Simpson put the coffee mug down on the desk and nodded to himself. 'Tell you what, Fred. I think you'd better come down to the station for a bit of a chat. There are fewer distractions in an interview room I find.'

'What? What are you talking about?'

'Now if you don't mind,' Simpson said flatly. 'On your feet.'

The supervisor looked uncertain. 'You are joking right?'

Simpson shook his head. 'I don't like your attitude. I think you're withholding evidence. I think you might even be trying to pervert the course of justice.'

'Me? Don't be *stupid* this is me. I wouldn't do anything like that. You know I wouldn't do anything like that.'

'You keep telling me what it is I know,' Simpson remarked. 'But you're still not telling me what it is you know.'

"This is me, Bob. We've got history. We're family.'

You can come voluntarily or I can nick you if you'd prefer. I wouldn't want anyone to think you were getting special treatment just because you're married to my sister.'

'We've always had a good working relationship.'

'No we haven't.'

The supervisor glanced at Bartok, who was looking on with open enjoyment, and then leant forward towards Simpson and lowered his voice. "That's why they reckon me in this place. They like the links.'

'There are no links, Fred.'

'Come on, Bob, you can't do this to me. You'll make me look like a stupid prat.'

'If you've been misleading your employers,' Simpson said, 'that's their problem. My problem is I'm not having the bouncer looking to mess me about.'

'Is that what you think I am? A bouncer?'

What would you prefer? Door security?'

The supervisor looked crushed. 'You bastard, Bob,' he said quietly. 'You miserable bastard.'

'So we're going to start again,' Simpson said. 'I want you to sit there and I want you to remember everything you know about this girl, about this Joan Cox, and about what went on prior to her death. And when you've got it all remembered you're going to tell it all to me. All of it, Fred. Not just what you think it is I need to know.' He looked at his watch. 'I'll be back in half an hour.' He gestured for Bartok to follow him out. 'Don't go anywhere in the meantime.'

As they walked outside into the gathering dusk Bartok said, 'Don't leave town, pilgrim,' in a passable imitation of John Wayne.

'Give over, Martin,' Simpson said tiredly. 'My sister's going to put me through all kinds of hell for that.'

'Sorry, gov.'

'And don't call me "gov". I've told you before, we're the swedey not the sweeny'

'Sorry, gov - boss - Sarge. Sorry, Sarge. Where are we going?'

'Nowhere. I want a cigarette that's all.'

Bartok looked about him. 'I think this whole area is no smoking,' he said dubiously.

Simpson lit up without bothering to argue with him. 'And what were you looking so chuffed about in there?'

Bartok coughed pointedly and moved upwind of the smoke before saying, 'I didn't think I should interrupt you and your brother-in-law, so I never got the chance to tell you, Sarge. It gets worse. It gets messier and sillier.'

'Spit it out, Constable.'

'They've got a department of it here.'

'A department of what?'

'A department of the occult.' Bartok's expression was a mixture of amazement and amused contempt. 'They've got a department devoted to the study of the occult.'

'As in history? Anthropology? Sociology of?' Simpson offered in a tone that clearly suggested he recognised an exaggerated distortion when he heard one.

As in science of,' Bartok said triumphantly.

Simpson said, 'There is no science of. It's superstition. Superstitious rubbish is what it is.'

They regularly test the students here for spookiness.'

'Spookiness? What is that supposed to mean?' I'm not exactly sure but it looks to be mind-reading and fortune-telling and stuff of that sort.' Bartok shrugged and shook his head. 'I'm not exactly sure.'

Are we exactly sure that it goes on?' Simpson still looked dubious.

'Oh yes. They call it parapsychology or some such.'

First I've heard of it.'

'Me too.' Bartok looked around him at the blocks of smoked glass and steel, and the geometrically linked shapes of the multilevel paved areas with their water features and specimen-tree planting. 'Maybe it's not something they like to admit. Doesn't fit with the hi-tech image.'

Lights had begun to come on across the campus.

'Why do it then I wonder?' Simpson mused. 'Was Joan Cox involved?'

Bartok shrugged again. 'Seems possible, doesn't it? And if she was and if that was what set her off, where does it leave them?'

'No wonder Fred's got his knickers in a twist.' Simpson blew a thin column of smoke up into the still air. 'He actually thought he could use me to keep things quiet. Stupid prat was going to be a big man with the university authorities. Look at what I've done. I've saved you all from a bloody nightmare.'

Bartok's smile was not without admiration. 'Imagine the Brownie points he'd have racked up if he could have told them that.'

I prefer to imagine the call he's making right now telling the powers that be what's going on and why he can't do a damn thing to stop it.' Simpson tossed the cigarette down and ground it out. Go and see what else you can find out about this department of the occult. I'm going back to rattle Fred's cage some more.'

'You said you'd give him half an hour.'

I lied,' Simpson said, and headed back into the security offices.

It was almost dark before the Doctor reached what he recognised as the path that led into the wood where the TARDIS was. He stood hesitating. Beyond the wood he could see the university campus. Already lights were coming on in some of the buildings. Should he make a detour to the TARDIS and collect the components for a basic field-effect detector? It would have to be a very basic detector, he thought, and even for that he would need to cannibalise several quite useful pieces of equipment: like the outside viewing screen and the electric sandwich toaster, for example. The chances were that he would also have to borrow one of the pseudo-time-line narrow focus coils from the control console itself. He was never comfortable doing things like that to the TARDIS. The old girl resented it. He could feel her resentment. There was a feedback which was slow to reverse and dissipate. It took time and effort for him and the TARDIS to get back to a comfortable working relationship. During that period the TARDIS could be very unpredictable.

In the distance more lights were coming on. The campus was beginning to glitter. The wood looked almost pitch-black silhouetted against a sunset sky. There were other possibilities to be examined, the Doctor thought, before he needed to abuse the trust of the TARDIS. He still hadn't had so much as a preliminary conversation with this Kellerfield Research Fellow fellow. He really should talk to him before doing anything else, anything precipitous. He must not jump to conclusions. You could fall from a precipitous conclusion and land yourself in trouble. The field effect could inhibit logical thought processes and lead to dangerously hasty conclusions. It would be sensible, he decided, to leave the detector for the time being and go straight on to the university campus and the parapsychology lab.

He turned away from the black wood and strode across the darkening fields towards the bright, star-spangled blocks. And there was the water too. That was another unanswered question. He must remember to have the water analysed.

They sat in the student bar in awkward, almost embarrassed, silence. The news of Joan's death had brought them hurriedly back together, but now

they seemed to have nothing to say to each other. Although the bar was not particularly crowded there was laughter and busy chatter all around them. But at their table no one seemed able to break the mute spell: to find something appropriate to say.

It was Chloe who spoke finally. 'It wasn't anybody's fault,' she said, feeling her voice clashing with the emptiness like out-of-tune karaoke singing. 'It's not as if we did it to her or anything. It's not really as if any of us could have stopped her either,' she plunged on. Probably not, I mean.' The subtext of which was, she thought, that she hadn't liked Joan much and she was pretty sure that none of the others had either. She didn't wish her dead or anything, but now she was dead none of them could ever admit that.

'We shouldn't have left her on her own,' Meg said. 'She was terrified. We knew she was terrified. We know why she was terrified.'

'We do?' Ralph asked. 'I don't think I know why she was terrified. Refresh my memory. Why was she terrified?'

'We don't really know,' Tommy said. 'You might think you know but that's not the same thing is it?'

'The Ouija board shit was her idea,' Josh said. 'Who knew that crap would get to her?'

'Joan Cox dies next?' Meg said. 'Wouldn't that crap have got to you?'

'No,' Josh said. 'Because it's crap.'

'Oh yeah, right,' she scoffed. 'Nothing scares you.'

'Any time you want to try it again, just say the word,' Josh challenged. 'We can do it in the local cemetery at midnight if you like.'

Meg raised her lager bottle in an ironic salute to him. 'My hero.'

Chloe was surprised by what she was hearing. She had thought her own reaction to Joan's suicide lacked the correct degree of sympathy, but this was beyond anything she felt she had been guilty of. 'Joan Cox dies next?' she asked.

Meg said, 'We had a session with the Ouija board. You weren't around. You were off playing with your new friends or something. Anyway, that's what we got. Joan Cox dies next.'

'We?' Ralph said. 'Who we?'

'Joan, him.' She pointed at Josh. 'Tommy, and me.'

Ralph nodded thoughtfully. 'I see. So I was off playing with my new friends as well as I?'

'She didn't like you,' Meg said.

'I know,' he said.

'She chose the group, it was her session. Sorry.'

'I expect I'll live.'

Josh said flippantly, 'Keep away from Ouija boards then.'

Tommy frowned at him. 'You weren't impressed by any of it?' he asked.

Josh shook his head dismissively. 'Any more than I was impressed by that rubbish with Ghostbuster's sensory-deprivation tank.' He gave a short, mirthless laugh. 'What a fiasco that turned out to be.'

'But the business with the Ouija board was weird,' Tommy said. 'How do you explain it?'

'Coincidence,' Josh said. 'Imagination. Hoax. Could be any number of things. But psychopathic killers communicating from beyond the grave? Attack by demons or the undead? I don't think so.'

Tommy pushed the hair back from his eyes. 'I know what I saw.'

Josh took a coin from his pocket. 'You know what you think you saw.' He held the coin up, made a couple of hand passes over it and then palmed it. 'You think you saw that disappear but it didn't.' He showed the coin again.

'You're wrong,' Tommy said. 'I didn't think it had disappeared. You're not that good.'

'That's not the point he was making,' Ralph said.

'Oh shut up and keep out of this will you!' Tommy snapped. 'I know what point he was making. We're not all as thick as you are!'

Chloe had never seen Tommy so viciously angry. And with so little reason. Was it shock? She wondered. She tried to remember the manifestations of grief from her basic psychology foundation course but the list wouldn't come back to her. 'Aren't we forgetting something?' she said quietly.

'You've just been pretending then, have you,' Ralph said to Tommy. 'I must say you make a very convincing thicko.'

'Aren't we forgetting something?' Chloe said more loudly. 'Joan killed herself. A friend of ours is dead. Joan is dead.'

'She wasn't a friend of mine,' Josh said. 'I didn't like her. I thought she was a hard-faced little bitch.'

'You can't say that,' Ralph protested. He sounded genuinely shocked.

Josh shrugged. 'It's the truth. The fact that she's dead doesn't change anything.'

'Joan Cox dies next,' Meg said. "That turned out to be the truth as well, didn't it?' She looked at Josh. 'You think that was a hoax do you? How could that be a hoax?'

'Maybe she was the hoaxer,' he said. 'Maybe she planned the whole thing.'

'Why would she do that?' Ralph asked.

'Yeah, why would she do that?' Tommy agreed.

Josh rubbed his hand over his shaven scalp. 'To make her death seem more important than it was.'

Chloe couldn't believe he had actually said that. 'I can't believe you actually said that,' she said. Shamingly, she found she wanted to laugh. 'That is so sick.'

'Suicide is sick,' he retorted. 'Sick and stupid and feeble-brained.'

'It does sort of make sense,' Tommy murmured. 'She was manipulative. And she was theatrical. And if she had already made up her mind to do *it*

Chloe got to her feet. 'It was us who failed her. Not the other way round. It was us let her die. I can't believe you're trying to suggest that we're the victims here.'

'You mean we let her down,' Meg said. 'Us three. The ones who were there when the Ouija board came up with all those threats.'

'I didn't say that,' Chloe said, and thought, yes that is what I meant.

'Yes,' Tommy said, 'that is what you meant.'

Chloe said, 'Is it?' and thought, And why not? I wasn't there, you were. I had no idea what was going on.

'And why not?' Ralph said. 'She wasn't there, you were. She had no idea what was going on.'

Had she said that, or thought it? For a moment Chloe was confused about what she had said aloud and what had only been in her mind. Was this another coincidence or was she imagining things?

'You're imagining things,' Josh said to Meg. 'Chloe wasn't thinking that.' He looked at Chloe. 'Were you Chloe?'

'Thinking what?'

'You weren't thinking Joan's death was down to us and that Ouija board.'

'No,' she lied. 'I wasn't thinking that.' She sat down again feeling foolish. 'I'm sorry.'

It's not a good time is it. 'What was happening to her? 'I'm sorry, I'm not thinking very straight.'

'You've got nothing to be sorry for,' Meg said. 'You least of all.'

So you think it was our fault,' Tommy said, even if she doesn't.'

Meg ignored him. 'First that business in the lab, now this. It's no wonder we're all a bit spaced out.'

'They happened at the same time,' Ralph said. 'As far as I can make out.'

Meg said, 'Joan killed herself while we *were*?' Her voice trailed off.

'While we were imagining all that blood and stuff,' Chloe supplied, remembering the vivid horror of the sensory-deprivation tank. 'I was in the bloody great coffin, that's what you called it wasn't it?' She glanced at Josh, who nodded. 'I was in the bloody great coffin thinking I was dying in a flood of blood, while Joan actually was. The coincidences just keep piling up, don't they?'

Josh nodded solemnly. 'They certainly do.' He drained his glass and burped. 'Maybe we should have another session with the Ouija board,' he suggested.

'You must be joking,' Ralph said without the trace of a smile.

'All of us this time,' Josh said. 'Set our minds at rest. Prove to ourselves there's nothing to it. It's just a bunch of crap.'

'That is a sick suggestion,' Chloe said.

I am a sick puppy,' Josh admitted. I admit it. Are you up for it?'

'You don't seem to understand how horrible you're being,' Chloe said.

Wrong again, Chloe,' he chortled. 'I do understand. I do, I really do.'

'It's disrespectful,' Ralph said. 'I think it is anyway. I think it's disrespectful to Joan.'

'That's rich coming from you,' Meg said. 'I mean self-righteous or what? You couldn't stand each other. God, hypocritical binmen, is there anything worse?'

Ralph scowled. 'Drunken media slappers do you think maybe?'

'I'm up for it,' Tommy said. 'Where do you suggest we do it?'

'I've already made my suggestion,' Josh smirked.

## Chapter Ten

Leela could not hide her relief when the Doctor stuck his head round the door of the laboratory and smiled his most dazzling smile. 'Doctor where have you been?' she almost shouted. 'I have been waiting for you.' She gestured towards the control and monitoring suite where Barry Hitchins was checking video time codes. 'Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins has been waiting for you too.'

'I'm sorry I'm late,' the Doctor said cheerfully. 'May I come in?'

Barry came out of the suite and called, 'Please do, come in, Doctor.'

The Doctor stepped inside and closed the door. Directly in front of him and occupying most of the available space was the partially dismantled sensory-deprivation tank. The floor of the lab was still damp from the resultant leaks and spillages. 'Did I miss something unexpected?' he asked.

Barry hurried to him and offered his hand. 'I'm Barry Hitchins. Your assistant Leela insists on calling me Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins. She tells me it's my fighting name and she uses it in full as a matter of respect.' He lowered his voice to just above a whisper. 'I gather she's from the Balkans?'

'It's a bit further away than that,' the Doctor said.

'Her English is really excellent,' Barry said. 'Very precise.'

The Doctor nodded vaguely. 'It comes partly from learning by machine.' He stepped carefully through the debris. 'What happened here?'

'Doctor?' Leela said. 'I must tell you what happened in the wood where we left the TARDIS.'

The Doctor patted her arm absently. 'Let me talk to Dr Hitchins first. This is important.' He took off his hat and stuffed it into his coat pocket. 'You were saying, Dr Hitchins?'

Barry said, 'I'm not entirely sure but I think your assistant may have arrived just in time to avert a major accident.'

'Really?' the Doctor said. 'I've always quite liked the idea that there is no such thing as an accident.' He bent down and rubbed a finger along the edge of a separated insulation panel.

"There are many times,' Leela said, 'when the Doctor says things like that.' She frowned at his back. Things he will not explain to me.'

'Leela's background was very practical,' the Doctor said, rubbing a smear of red insulation gel between his thumb and forefinger.

Leela said, 'To me it is obvious that an accident is something unexpected which happens.'

'If everything has a cause,' the Doctor said, 'nothing can be truly unexpected. If an accident is something unexpected, and nothing can be truly unexpected *then*' He looked at Leela and smiled encouragingly.

'There is no such thing as an accident,' she supplied, and then added after a moment's thought, 'There is something wrong with that.'

'Possibly,' the Doctor said. 'There is certainly something wrong with this.' He indicated the sensory-deprivation tank. 'Tell me about the accident; he said to Barry.'

'Doctor?' Leela said. 'I have been waiting to talk to you. I think what I have to tell you is important.'

'In a moment, Leela.' He waved her to silence.

'It's a new piece of equipment,' Barry said, and we were test-running the experimental procedures.'

We?'

'I was using student volunteers.' Barry poked some pieces of the tank with his foot. 'This is the best-value small unit I could find on the market. It's fun-size except that in the event it isn't any fun at all. This is an individual -'

'It's a sensory-deprivation tank, yes, yes,' the Doctor interrupted impatiently. 'Your theory being that the mind comes into full focus if you eliminate as far as possible all physical inputs.'

Crestfallen, Barry said. 'You know about it.' He shrugged and shook his head ruefully. 'Of course you know about it. How would you not know about it?'

The Doctor opened the nearest of the isolation capsules and looked inside. 'Sooner or later it's always tried.'

'Has it ever worked?' Barry asked.

'Only in the most advanced and dangerous situations.' The Doctor's gaze took in the multiple CCTV cameras and, closing the capsule again, he peered towards the control and monitoring suite and the banks of screens and recording machines. 'You set out to do this right didn't you?'

'Of course,' Barry said.

'A genuine scientific study. Good. That's a plus anyway'

'I admit I was all over the place to begin with,' Barry admitted, looking suitably contrite. 'It took me a while to focus down on to the accepted areas of serious parapsychology.'

The Doctor paused in his explorations and fixed Barry with a searching look. 'What changed you?' he asked.

Barry shrugged and smiled. 'A nod's as good as a wink,' he said. 'Or a note indeed.'

The Doctor nodded. 'There was no alteration in the basic circumstances then? You didn't notice anything different happening?'

'Nothing at all,' Barry agreed. 'As I'm sure you realise there was a feeling of threat there for a while, but it didn't come to anything once I gave up the custard wrestling.'

'Custard wrestling?'

'Sorry. Bad private joke.'

'So you've kept an open mind throughout all your researches?' the Doctor pressed.

'That's why they pay me the big bucks,' Barry said.

'Do they?' the Doctor asked. 'You're well paid and all this is well funded?'

'I've got no complaints.' Barry smiled. 'I hope you feel the same way'

The Doctor looked noncommittal. 'I can see no point in complaining.'

'As long as you're satisfied,' Barry said.

'I'm a long way from satisfied,' the Doctor said. 'There may not be much time left and there are a lot of questions that need answering.'

'Ask away'

'The accident?' the Doctor prompted.

Barry said, 'I'll need to do some more detailed investigation, but my best guess is that something went wrong with the tank's heating system and that the red insulating gel – the stuff you were looking at? - went kerflooey.'

'Kerflooey?' the Doctor said. 'That would be some sort of technical term I imagine?'

Barry smiled. 'Excessive heat made it volatile and it leaked. At which point we all thought we were up to our necks in blood.'

The Doctor went back to the tank and collected some more of the gel with his finger. 'Why should you think that?' He held the finger out for Barry to see. 'This looks nothing like blood.'

'I've thought about that. Maybe the word was in our minds. One of the kids kept calling the tank a bloody great coffin.'

Maybe blood was in our heads.'

'Leela?' the Doctor said sharply. 'Does that sound reasonable to you?'

Leela was working on the edge of her knife with a sharpening stone, something she routinely did when she was bored or upset. She pouched the stone and sheathed the knife before saying, 'To have blood in your head and in your eyes takes imagination or fear.'

'Do you and your students have especially vivid imaginations?' the Doctor asked. 'Or some reason to be terrified?'

'I saw it too,' Leela said. 'When I came into this room I saw the blood. I saw it was blood. Then I saw it was not blood.'

'I've thought about that as well,' Barry said. 'I have a possible solution. Fumes. The overheated gel was giving off fumes which caused us all to hallucinate.'

'How much of what happens do you record?' the Doctor asked, making his way into the control and monitoring suite.

Barry followed him in. 'All our experiments are continuously monitored and videotaped.'

'This was just a test of the new equipment though,' the Doctor said.

'I recorded as normal. You never know when something valuable is going to show up, do you?'

The Doctor beamed. 'Excellent.' He glanced at the racks of carefully labelled cassettes and then at the machines, all of which contained tapes. 'The answers will be somewhere here.'

'No I'm afraid not,' Barry said sheepishly. 'That's what I was rechecking when you arrived. The tapes for that particular time seem to have been wiped.'

The Doctor pressed a button on one of the machines and was clearly startled when the cassette was ejected into his hand. Barry put it back in.

'You haven't been fiddling with these buttons have you,

Leela?' the Doctor asked, and turned to find that she had not followed them into the suite.

Leela was standing some distance away sharpening her knife once again. 'I have touched none of the controls,' she said. 'What happened in there was not my doing. It had nothing to do with me.'

'I think I know what happened,' Barry said, with the flourish of a detective revealing the murderer in a whodunit. 'I think there was a power surge, and that that is the key to the whole shebang.'

'Another technical term?' the Doctor suggested.

it blew the tank's systems and it set off the whole sequence of events. The gel, the fumes, the blanked tapes, the jammed ventilation system.'

The ventilation system was jammed as well?'

'Must have been,' Barry said, 'otherwise the fumes wouldn't have got to us. That's how Leela averted a disaster. The ventilation system was jammed by the power surge and when she opened the door it kicked in again.'

'Why?'

'Temperature and pressure change.'

The Doctor smiled at Barry, 'I do believe you're a rational sceptic,' he said. 'I like that in a person.'

With the ventilation system going again,' Barry went on enthusiastically, 'the fumes cleared and we all returned to normal.'

it fits together very conveniently' the Doctor agreed, 'it even accounts for the fact that Leela herself was briefly affected.'

'Exactly,' Barry said. 'But you don't buy it do you? I can see it in your face.'

"The gel is chemically inert. I don't think you'll find it will give off fumes in those circumstances. And the products of combustion, which didn't happen anyway, are unlikely to be hallucinogenic'

'Bugger,' Barry said. 'Are you sure?'

Fairly sure,' the Doctor said. 'I have some experience with inert materials. It's to do with the machinery I use in my travels.'

'Right,' Barry said thoughtfully. 'That is a pity, because the fumes theory helped solve another small conundrum.'

'There's a time anomaly isn't there?' the Doctor said.

Barry nodded. 'How did you guess?'

'I was afraid that's what you were going to say.'

'As far as I can remember it didn't all happen in that nice logical sequence I described to you,' Barry said. 'But how reliable is memory at the best of times? I thought the fumes might have confused things. You know, they might have affected the order of recall?'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'It's more dangerous than that.' He left the suite and went to where Leela was standing working on her knife. 'What was it that you saw in that control room?' he asked. 'What was it that frightened you so much that you won't set foot in there?'

'I have set foot in there,' Leela said, without emphasis and without looking at him. 'I have faced my fear.'

'I'm sure you have,' the Doctor said, 'but I'm not one of your warrior-trainers. I haven't got a religious devotion to facing fear.' Still she did not look at him. 'Leela, I don't doubt your courage,' he said. 'You are as brave as anyone I have ever met. What was it you saw?'

'I saw it in the wood too.'

'I'm sorry' the Doctor said. 'I should have listened to you. I should have let you tell me straight away. Describe what you saw.'

Leela looked directly at him for the first time. 'Is it possible,' she asked, 'to fall into the spaces between the worlds and then never to stop falling through the darkness?'

'Multidimensional voids?' the Doctor said.

Leela said, 'There was darkness upon darkness. It became more and I became less. It pulled me towards it and I felt I would be alone in it for ever'

'Here and in the wood.' The Doctor pulled the bag of jelly babies from his pocket and searched around in it for a green one. 'Are they separate focal points or is this the beginning of a major collapse I wonder?'

'The darkness in the wood was bigger. It swallowed the TARDIS but then it swallowed itself and the TARDIS came back.'

'You saw it do that?'

'No, but the one in there,' she pointed to the control and monitoring suite, 'swallowed itself and they were the same.'

'Excuse me,' Barry interrupted. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Ask away.' The Doctor proffered the bag. 'I may not know the answer though. It's an area in which I have very little practical experience. My theory's not really up to scratch either.'

'It probably isn't a good time to ask this,' Barry said and took a green jelly baby from the bag.

'I was looking for a green one,' the Doctor said.

'Sorry.' Barry gave him back the jelly baby and took a different colour.

'So what was your question?'

Barry hesitated then said, 'Can I take it you're not considering the withdrawal of my funding?'

By the time they reached the entrance to the old graveyard Chloe couldn't remember why she had agreed to do this. How had she let herself be persuaded? How could she possibly have thought it was any sort of a good idea? It must have been the shock and depression over Joan. That and the lager. But then alcohol was a depressant anyway wasn't it.

Whatever the reason or lack of it, here she was stumbling about in the dark again.

It was another pitch-black night, as every miserable night seemed to be. There was a chilly wind blowing, as there always seemed to be after it got to be pitch-black. She had never liked the cold and the dark and now, after that hysterical fugue or whatever it was she had suffered in the wood, she was beginning to hate them with a serious vengeance. She looked at the sky. Was it cloudy? She couldn't really tell. She looked in vain for the moon. 'What time does the moon rise?' she asked. 'Does anyone know?'

The cemetery entrance gates were heavy wrought-iron and they were set into high curving walls of ancient, red-brown brick topped off with thick slabs of monumental sandstone. 'Not sure there is a moon tonight,' Ralph said. 'Or it may already have set.'

The gates were closed and securely chained and locked.

'I hope not,' Chloe said, wondering if she could simply say she had changed her mind, and then leave. It was a longish way back on an unlit road though, and she didn't fancy walking it alone.

What difference does it make?' Josh said.

'It'd be nice to see what we were doing,' Meg complained.

Tommy said, 'I can't see my hand in front of me.'

Josh shone the torch across the gates. 'Don't worry about what's in front of you,' he said.

His voice took on a sepulchral tone. 'It's what's behind you. That's where the threat comes from. Hooo.' He made a soft, ghostly wailing noise and put the torch under his chin so that his face was turned into a grotesque mask.

Chloe shuddered. 'Don't do that.'

'Bit nervous are we?' Josh teased. 'Afraid of the dark?' He gave a ghoulish laugh and rattled the chain on the gates.

I said don't do that. I don't like it, OK?' Why did idiots like him think that scaring you was sexy? she thought. Why did they imagine it made them attractive? It was a sort of bullying, that was all it was.

'You'd think I was bullying you or something,' Josh said. 'Don't be such a wimp. You know you love it really.' He shone the torch back on to the padlock. 'Would you look at the size of that thing? The size of that thing, nudge, nudge, oooer missus.' He rattled the padlock and tugged at the chain. 'Tell you what though, they really don't want any of the dear departed to get out of here do they?'

'Why don't we do that?' Ralph said.

Do what?' Josh asked.

'Get out of here? This is a tacky idea.'

'You're no fun, Ralph, no fun at all,' Josh remarked, handing Chloe the torch. 'Point it there will you.' He guided her hand so that the light was directed at the side of the gate where the hinge was embedded in the wall. 'If you've changed your mind you can simply leave, you know. It's a longish walk back in the dark, but I don't suppose that's a problem for you is it?'

It was happening to her again, Chloe thought. The others were reading her mind in some way. Or was it yet another coincidence? Was she looking for them now? If you looked for them you could always find patterns and coincidences. You could build a whole insane world round them. That was how astrologers worked. You shouldn't look for patterns and coincidences because that way lies madness and death. What should she say to him? Where did you get that thought from? Did you think I wouldn't notice that

you're stealing my thoughts? She was still trying to come up with a reply when Ralph spoke.

'Not really, no,' he said. 'I'm not afraid of the dark as it happens.'

Josh put his foot in the ironwork of the gate and swung himself up so that he was within reach of the top of the wall. 'Just dark cemeteries right?'

Chloe was relieved that the question had not been directed at her after all, but the relief was short-lived when she realised she had muffed an obvious opportunity to bale out on this whole stupid project. 'I'm not that keen on dark cemeteries,' she said. 'Since you mention it.'

Josh was busy scrambling over the top of the wall and he gave no sign of hearing her as he disappeared into the darkness.

'I'm not that keen on climbing over walls in the dark,' Meg said.

'We could follow the wall round,' Tommy suggested. 'See if there's another way in.'

'Or we could just go,' Ralph said. 'I still say this is in pretty bad taste after what's happened.'

'We can't just leave him in there,' Chloe said, irritated at not being able simply to agree with Ralph and go. She had the torch. There was nothing to stop them leaving the obnoxious moron where he was. 'We can't leave him in there on his own. Can we?'

'Why not? It was his idea,' Ralph said. 'He's not scared. He thinks it's all crap.'

Torch?' Josh pushed his hand through the gate. 'Gimme my torch, Chloe.'

Chloe handed him the torch. 'How come you're the only one with a torch?' she asked as he worked it back through a gap.

'All part of my master plan,' he said, 'to cast you into the darkness. And let the ghouls have their ghoulish way with you.' He gave a horrible chuckle and ducked away behind the wall.

Chloe leant in close to the gate. 'Where are you? What the hell are you doing?'

'Oh my God,' Josh's horrified voice came from the darkness. 'Oh no. Keep away from me. Keep away! No don't touch me! No! Don't!' He screamed and fell silent.

'What's happening to him?' Ralph pushed in close to the gate, craning and peering to see into the darkness beyond.

Tommy and Meg both held back slightly.

'What's going on?' Tommy said. 'Can anyone see anything?'

'Where's the damn torch?' Meg asked. 'Can you see it? Did he drop it?'

A deep voice grunted, 'No he didn't, now / have the torch!' and Josh ducked back into view with the torch held under his chin. He growled a bit and then hooted with laughter. Shining the torch through the gate, he giggled 'You should see your faces.'

'You moron!' Chloe shouted. 'You stupid moron!'

'That's a tautology isn't it?' Josh chortled. 'As quality insults go it lacks a certain style don't you think?'

'Try dickhead, you dickhead!' Meg raged.

Ralph said, 'Nice one, Josh. I was obviously wrong about all this being tacky.'

'Oh come on, lighten up, guys,' Josh said, flashing the torch beam backwards and forwards across their faces. 'lighten up? Geddit? Lighten up. I love it! Is there no end to the boy's talent? Not so's you'd notice.' He tucked the torch under his arm and shone it on the gate. Using both hands he began shifting the loops of chain, pulling them round so that he could work the padlock through to the inside of the gate. 'Come on, it was a gag.'

'And a very funny gag it was too,' Tommy said. 'Not.'

'OK, let's leave idiot-features to it,' Meg said. 'You were right Ralph. This was a rubbish idea from the off.'

Chloe said, 'Yeah, let's go. I'm not stumbling about in the freezing dark any more just to keep some stupid moron amused.' She looked back the way they had come and strained to make out the twisting route of the dark road home. It seemed to her that it was more clearly defined than before. She could see the darker mass of the high hawthorn hedges that bordered the narrow lane and the looming shapes of the trees. She stared up at the sky. It was definitely lighter. There was a moon. She tried to see where it was rising but she couldn't since the whole sky seemed to be the same distant washed-out grey.

'Are you coming with us Tommy?' Meg asked.

'Why not?'

The four of them began to walk away.

'No wait!' Josh called after them. 'I'm sorry. Listen don't go. I'm really sorry. No more arsing about, I promise. Meg, you've got the board and stuff. At least leave me the board and stuff. I want to try this.'

Meg paused. 'You can't do it on your own.'

'Yes I can. Why can't I?'

Chloe stopped walking. What would be the point of that? she thought. 'What would be the point of that?' she said loudly. 'Nobody would believe you no matter what you said had happened.' Unless, she thought, he really does want to do it for his own peace of mind.

'And how important is that?' Josh demanded. 'I'm doing this for my own peace of mind.'

No, Chloe thought, no. This cannot be coincidence. He was reading her mind. He had to be reading her mind. But before she could say anything the torch went out and there was a heavy metallic clunk from the direction of gate. It was followed by a rattle and several more heavy clunks.

'Now what?' Tommy said. 'Another hilarious ghost impression?'

'That sounds a lot more like the destruction of private property to me,' Ralph said gloomily.

Chain slithered in a clinking rush and the cemetery gates creaked.

Meg and Chloe made their way back to the entrance. Tommy and a more reluctant Ralph followed them.

Josh was waiting by the open gates. There are usually tools in these places,' he said, 'if you know where to look.' He brandished the pickaxe he had used to break open the padlock. 'That's what you call a lock pick. A lock pick? No? A definite sense of humour bypass, you people.' He switched the torch back on and shone it down the stony track which zigzagged through the old graveyard and led eventually to that part of the cemetery that was used for current burials. 'Old or new? Which do you reckon would be the most haunted?'

'There's not a chance I'm doing anything like this where someone's just been buried,' Ralph said.

'Dead's dead,' Tommy remarked. 'I don't see that it matters that much.'

'It would matter to the relatives,' Ralph said.

'You think they'll have locked some of them in here then?' Tommy snorted. 'Overlooked them in the rush to get home for tea?'

'Supposing we're caught?' Ralph asked.

'Relax Ralph. I don't think what we're planning to do is illegal,' Josh said. 'You don't need to worry about getting caught.'

'How would you feel,' Ralph continued imperturbably, 'if you found out that a bunch of drunken students had been playing with a Ouija board on the grave of someone you cared about?'

Tommy said, 'I think I'd probably regret not going for the cremation or the burial at sea.'

It was a facetious comment Chloe thought, and although she couldn't see it on his face she could hear the smirk in his voice. She found herself wondering why she had once felt his manner was reassuring. 'Ralph's right,' she said. 'I think Ralph's right. We should stay in the old section.'

'If we're going to use a gravestone,' Meg agreed, 'let's at least use an impressive Victorian one. Not that we'll see too much of it of course. Not unless someone knows where the light switch is.'

As if on cue the moon finally began to break through the clouds and the graveyard brightened faintly. It was a strange luminous effect, giving no more than the palest of monochrome impressions.

Josh said, 'Someone must have heard you. Someone *or* something!'

Chloe sighed. 'Shut up.' She was disappointed at how little difference the moonlight made, but the moon was still rising and the clouds were still breaking up, she thought, so things would probably get a bit brighter. A bit brighter and a lot stupider. 'You've got the torch,' she said to Josh. 'You'd better pick the grave.'

Josh took the lead as they stumbled their way along the track, passing the darker, more distinct shapes of a chapel and a large yew tree before reaching the first, and what looked like the oldest, burial area.

Josh said. 'That little chapel back there and these graves here were probably all there was to begin with. This would have been the original cemetery.' He shone the torch about like a guide directing a tour party's attention to interesting features.

It was immediately obvious that the place was routinely maintained and cared for. An effort had been made to keep the weeds and brambles back and under control. The grass paths between the old graves had been clipped and edged. The gravestones were tilted and uneven, their surfaces weathered, lichen-pocked and stained with age but there was a neat and dignified elegance about the decay.

'I'll bet it's pretty in the daylight,' Meg said. 'If you like that sort of thing.'

Josh swept the torch slowly and systematically across the area. 'Something reasonably level would be favoured.' He found what he was looking for in the far corner of the plot. 'There's one.'

'Typical,' Tommy said. 'Have you noticed that about tombstones? The one you want is always the furthest away.'

Josh led them through the jumble of graves. 'It's a pity we can't tell much about who's in any of these,' he said. 'There's no way of separating the saints from the sinners unfortunately. Did you know they used to bury the bad 'uns face down? They wanted to be sure they couldn't dig their way out. Now, if we could find one of those who knows what unquiet spirits might be stirred into action.'

'I thought you said this was all crap,' Ralph said. 'Are you telling us it's different in the dark?'

Josh said, 'You have to be open-minded about things don't you?'

Ralph slipped on the narrow path. 'Not always. Some things don't deserve to be given that much respect.' He clutched at a headstone to regain his balance. Pushing himself off it he whispered, 'Excuse me, I meant no disrespect.'

'You seem to know a lot about cemeteries,' Tommy said.

Josh said, 'Vacation job.'

'I thought it might be a hobby,' Tommy said. 'A sort of necrophiliac trainspotting?'

'Or a Good Cemeteries Guide,' Meg offered from behind him.

At the back of the line Chloe thought she had misheard. A vacation job? Was that what he said? A vacation job. As she waited for Ralph to get moving again a sudden icy doubt chilled Chloe. Could it be that this whole thing was just another stupid game? A really, really sick joke? She wouldn't put it past Josh Randall to have lured them here to make absolute idiots of

them. It was the sort of cruel idea that would probably appeal to someone like him. 'Did you say you worked in this cemetery?' she asked, trying to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

'Not this one, no,' Josh said. 'Trust me, if I'd worked in this one I'd have had a key to that gate.' He turned round to look at her and shone the torch directly on his face. This time the illumination did nothing to make him look grotesque. 'And I'd have said wouldn't I? I mean if I hadn't said, you might think I was playing stupid games. Trying to make you look like an idiot.' He shone the torch back on the grass path.

'Is that what I'd think?' Chloe challenged. 'What gives you that idea? How do you know what I think?'

'It's what I'd think in your place,' he said reasonably. 'It would only be reasonable. It's what any reasonable person would think.'

They reached the chosen grave and filed on around it so that they were standing two on either side and one at the foot. From the worn carving on the headstone and the roughened surface of the marble there was no question but that this grave was as old as any of the others. Some fluke of drainage, or perhaps it was the quality of the original workmanship, had left the memorial stones solid and unmoved. Unlike most of the others the headstone was vertical, and the main part of the grave, built up and carved to look like a miniature vault, was level and undamaged.

Josh read aloud from the headstone. 'Jeremiah Johnson, born eighteen oh seven died eighteen sixty-eight. Clarissa Johnson, born eighteen twenty-five died eighteen ninety-two.'

'Not very informative,' Meg said. 'Doesn't say if they were husband and wife or brother and sister, or even father and daughter'

'Round here back then?' Tommy said. 'Probably all three.'

'I don't think we should be making fun of them,' Ralph murmured.

Meg took the Ouija board and the planchette from her sports bag and put them on the flat top of the tomb. 'How are we going to do this?'

Josh said, 'First we've got to make sure the board is level presumably. We don't want the pointy thing rolling about under the influence of gravity do we?' He balanced the torch against the headstone so that the beam was on the board and then he put the planchette on its spot. It showed no inclination to roll independently, moving only when he poked it with his finger. 'Seems OK,' he said. 'Who wants to go first?'

Chloe said, 'Everyone is supposed to put a finger on it at the same time.'

'That's not how she did it,' Josh said. 'Joan, I mean. That's not how she set it up.'

'Yes she did,' Meg said.

'No,' Josh insisted. 'If you remember she was doing a number as a medium. She had that stupid crystal ball. Sad loser imagined she was some sort of a clairvoyant didn't she?'

'You don't think she was?' Tommy said. 'I think she might have been. I think she might have *had* powers.'

'Powers my backside,' Josh said. 'There is no such thing as clairvoyance. It's self-deception all the way. Usually hysterical girly self-deception.'

'You know what I like about you?' Meg asked.

'Absolutely nothing,' Josh said. 'Imagine how upset I am. The thing is Joan didn't touch the planchette.'

'You mean the pointy thing?' Ralph said. 'Make up your mind - do you know about this stuff or not?'

'Actually you didn't touch it either,' Tommy said. 'You were having a bit of a sulk.'

'A hissy fit,' Meg said. 'You and Joan were both having hissy fits.'

'She thought I was cheating. And she thought I was thick.'

Meg said, 'Which is pretty much what you thought about her wasn't it?'

Josh said, 'The difference being that I was right.'

Chloe noticed that the moonlight was much brighter now. She could see a lot more of the cemetery a lot more clearly. It was almost as bright as the day for night used by those low-budget movie-makers the film society admired so much. There were even the same sort of shadows cast by larger things like the chapel and the yew tree. Maybe those films were shot at night after all. Maybe they were just shot badly. She looked up at the sky. Without her really noticing, the moon seemed to have climbed higher. Why hadn't she noticed that? How fast would it have happened? It didn't matter, this was taking too long she decided. 'Can we get on with this?' she said. 'If all you wanted to do was bitch at each other and slag off Joan you could have done it in the bar. At least it would have been warm. I don't know about anybody else but I am frozen.'

'You mostly have to be cold to get in here,' Tommy said.

'No, you have to be cold to stay in here,' Meg said.

'It is very popular though,' Tommy said.

'People are dying to get in,' Meg said.

Josh said, suddenly positive, 'You four put your fingers on it. I'll stand back and watch what happens.' He sounded slightly put out. 'I don't want to be accused of cheating again. I wouldn't want anyone to think I was manipulating the pointy planchette thing, would I Ralph?'

Josh turned the board so that the top was towards the headstone. From one side of the tomb Meg and Tommy stretched forward and each placed a finger on the planchette. Chloe and Ralph did the same from the other side.

'Ask it something then,' Josh said.

'You ask it something,' Chloe said. "This was your idea.'

'You're doing this for your own peace of mind remember,' Ralph reminded him, without the slightest hint of irony.

Much as she hated to agree with a moron like Josh about anything, Chloe thought, she had to admit Ralph wasn't much fun. He could be so earnest and so thoroughly dull. He did seem to have almost no sense of humour at all. At once she felt guilty. That was a rotten thing to think about anybody. No sense of humour! That was worse than saying they were a bad driver or a poor lover. A lot worse. And supposing he could read her mind. How embarrassing would that be? She glanced at Ralph. He showed no sign of knowing what she was thinking. That was a relief.

'Is there anybody there?' Josh asked.

As Chloe turned her head back to look at the Ouija board something caught her eye by the big yew tree on the far side of the graveyard.

'Is there anybody there?' Josh repeated.

Chloe stared at the yew tree. It was hard to tell, but it looked as though there was a hooded figure standing just at the edge of the deep shadow underneath it.

Josh said for a third time, 'Is there anybody there?'

Was it a figure? Chloe narrowed her eyes and concentrated. Was it a tall figure wearing a monk's habit? Or was it some sort of robe? A shroud!, 'Oh God, it was a shroud. It was a figure in a shroud!

'If there is somebody there,' Josh said. 'Come closer and make yourself known.'

As Chloe watched the figure moved slowly away from the tree. What was it doing? Was it coming here to them?

'Come closer and make yourself known,' Josh repeated.

Could he see it too? Was he calling it? Chloe tore her eyes away from the figure and looked at Josh. He wasn't looking in the right direction. He was looking directly down at the board. He wasn't aware of the thing that was watching them. Was it watching them? The thing that was coming to them. Was it coming to them? She had to look at it. She had no choice, she had to look at it again. She had to know how far it had got. She had to see

where it was now. She was beginning to be terrified. She was beginning to fall apart. She could hardly breathe. Her lungs were full of unbreathable ice. She had to look. She had to look now. She looked. There was nothing there.

'I feel like a bit of a prat now, don't you?' Josh said. 'Got meself all excited and up for it and there's nothing there.'

Chloe pressed her knees against the tomb. She could feel the roughness of the stone through the denim of her jeans. It was comfortingly real. She looked around surreptitiously. There was no shrouded figure anywhere to be seen. It must have been a trick of the light. Or a trick of the dark. A trick of the day for night perhaps. The ice in her chest began to melt slowly. The problem with that was it seemed to be soaking through her skin and covering her in cold sweat. Abruptly her mouth filled with saliva, and for a long moment she thought she was going to pass out or be sick. She swallowed hard and concentrated on keeping her finger on the planchette. She was not about to be called hysterically girly by a moron like Josh.

'Maybe we should ask the questions,' Meg suggested. 'You're only a bystander. It's our fingers on the pointy thing.'

'Feel free,' Josh said.

'I do,' Meg said, 'I feel freer all the time. There are days when I feel almost equal. But thanks for the permission big boy. We hysterical girlies have trouble making these decisions.'

'Why did you ask?' Josh demanded.

Meg ignored him and looked at the board. Is there a message for anyone here?'

The planchette began to move immediately.

'Hello,' Josh said. "I think we have a winner.'

The pointer picked out the letters H-E-L-L-O and then it paused.

'Don't you hate it when the dead are so predictable?' Tommy murmured. Hello? What does it think: it's answering the phone?'

'Concentrate,' Josh hissed. We don't know who it wants.'

'Relax,' Tommy said. 'We'll take a message.'

The planchette began to move again. More slowly it picked out the C and then the L.

Chloe's nausea was coming back. This message was going to be for her. She knew it. It might not be going to spell her name right, but it was going to talk to her.

The pointer speeded up: A-R-R-Y .

'Hello Clarry?' Ralph said. 'Obviously a wrong number.'

That was a joke, Chloe thought. Ralph made a joke. What was the significance of that? Hello Clarry. She had been called Clarry before. Josh had called her Clarry just to annoy her probably. But Josh hadn't got his finger on the planchette so he couldn't be doing this. Who could be doing this? They couldn't all be ganging up on her could they? They could all have reasons not to like her. No wait, she thought. Josh had called her Clarry and then the demon had picked up on it. 'It's not Clarry it's Chloe!' it had shouted. It was the demon again. It was the demon tormenting her. It was almost a relief. It might be a creature from some supernatural mad-house but at least it wasn't her friends.

The pointer continued to pick out letters. I N-O-T L-E-V-E U I N-E-A-R U.

'Yeah right,' Josh said. "I believe it. Which one of you is doing the pushing?'

U NOT RUN U N-O-T HIDE.

'We're talking Red Indian spirit guide are we?' Josh commented.

Ralph said, 'Native American spirit guide you mean.'

'Concentrate,' Josh said. 'The Red Indian might have something interesting to communicate.'

U D-E-D.

'You dead?' Josh said. 'OK, Native American it is.'

U D-E-D.

'Is that right?' Josh said. 'That's not funny. Which one of you is doing that?'

C-L-A-R-R-Y U D-E-D.

The planchette rolled off the board completely and rattled to a stop on the tombstone. They took their fingers off it and looked at one another.

'What's it got against Clarry?' Meg said. 'Whoever that is.'

Chloe said, 'I think it might *be*' She was going to explain that the threat was directed at her but it was then that she saw the shrouded figure. It was definitely closer now. It had moved away from the tree and it was standing at the edge of the burial area.

'It might be what?' Tommy asked.

Chloe found her throat was tight and she couldn't speak. Her legs went weak and suddenly she could hardly stand. Pain ached through her knees as they pressed harder against the gravestone. She put one hand on the top of the tomb and leant on it, pointing vaguely with the other one.

'What is it?' Josh said. 'You look like you've seen a ghost or something.'

She could hear the contempt in his voice. It made her angry and the anger made her fight to shake off the paralysing fear. She would not give that pig the satisfaction. She would not be thought of as a hysterical girly. She reached across the tomb and grabbed the torch from where it was propped against the headstone. 'Look,' she croaked as she turned the beam towards the figure.

'There,' Ralph said. 'There it is.'

Chloe could no longer see it. The torch beam was shining through the place where the figure had been standing. She flashed the light along the boundary of the graves. Nothing. It was a trick of the light. It was a trick of the light, there was nothing there.

'Did you see it?' she whispered.

'Absolutely,' Ralph said. 'Hold the light steady. Look, it's there isn't it?' He took the torch from her and shone it on the headstone. 'Look. Jeremiah Johnson, born eighteen oh seven died eighteen sixty-eight. Clarissa Johnson, born eighteen twenty-five died eighteen ninety-two.'

'Of course,' Meg said. 'Clarry. It's short for Clarissa.'

'It was a message to tell Clarry she was dead?' Tommy said. 'What would be the point of that exactly?'

Meg said, 'I'd say old Jeremiah was declaring his love for her wouldn't you?'

'By telling her not to run and not to hide?' Ralph said. 'Doesn't sound very loving to me.'

'Maybe they'd had a fight,' Meg said. 'Maybe he's apologising.'

Tommy said, 'So it was a communication between two dead people which we were overhearing, is that what you're saying?'

'I'm saying it's nonsense,' Josh said. 'One or maybe more than one of you is playing silly buggers. What do you say, Chloe?'

'I've had enough,' Chloe said. 'I'm tired and I want to go now. Can we go now?'

'But what do you think it meant?' he pressed.

Chloe thought, why is he asking me? Does he know it was me that was being tormented? 'Why are you asking me?' she said. 'How should I know what it meant?' She looked towards the yew tree and the track which led to

the cemetery gates. She could see most of it in the bright moonlight. There was nothing. Not even a suspicious shadow. But could she go there now without panicking and running like she had in the wood?

'Why do you keep looking over there?' Ralph asked. 'Is there something over there?' He craned round in the direction she was looking and shone the torch.

Not that I can see,' Chloe said. Is there a caretaker or security or someone that patrols this place?' By an effort of will she had managed not to tremble, but there was a quiver in her voice that she did not seem able to control.

Are you all right?' Meg asked. 'You're not having another funny turn are you? Not that I'd blame you under the circumstances. I'm due for one myself.' She moved away from the grave and took several steps down the narrow grass path towards the track. It was as though she was trying to distance herself from what had happened. What the hell are we doing here? This is insane. Joan kills herself and we end up playing with her Ouija board in a cemetery in the middle of the night.'

Tommy picked up her sports bag and put the board and planchette back into it. 'Some ideas are better than others,' he said. 'This was one of the others.'

Josh said, 'I still think the Ouija board thing is a bunch of crap.'

'You've seen it work twice,' Meg snapped. 'What's it going to take to convince you there's something odd going on?'

'Oh I'm convinced of that already,' he said. 'I'm just not as easily fooled as somebody round here thinks I am.'

What was it, Chloe?' Ralph asked. What was the problem, did you think you saw someone over there?'

Chloe shook her head. She took a deep breath. 'Trick of the light,' she said firmly, dusting off the knees of her jeans. She straightened up and stood waiting to leave. 'For a moment I thought we might be in trouble.' This time, she had made up her mind, this time she was not going to run no matter what happened.

'Nothing to do with your pet demon then?' Josh suggested.

'Nothing at all,' Chloe said.

'That's a relief.'

Ralph was still holding the torch, so he led the way back through the graves to the cemetery track. Meg was behind him, Tommy behind her, then Chloe with Josh bringing up the rear.

'Clarry?' Josh whispered as they picked their way along the grass path.

'Clarry?'

'What?' Chloe said without turning round.

'You're not Clarry, you're Chloe,' Josh said. 'I wasn't talking to you.'

'I thought you were talking to me.' Chloe kept her eyes fixed on the path.

'Why were you whispering?'

'I was talking to myself, do you mind?'

'Yes I mind.'

'I don't like coincidences,' he said. 'The name on that grave was a coincidence.'

'Was it?'

By the time "they reached the track Chloe could see there was no hooded figure between them and the cemetery entrance. There was nowhere it could be hiding, nowhere obvious it could leap out from, howling and gibbering. She could feel herself calming down. She could feel the tension draining away. She was suggestible that was all it was, she thought. It wasn't the same as being hysterical and girly. They were in a moonlit graveyard. You expected to see hooded figures in moonlit graveyards. So sometimes you saw them.

They walked as a group towards the gates. Chloe thought about looking back at the grave of Clarissa and Jeremiah but at the last minute she decided not to risk it. There was no hooded figure, but it was better not to look just in case there might be another trick of the light. To make up for her feebleness and to keep faith with her determination not to run, she slowed down and let the others draw slightly ahead. She deliberately hung back as far as she could without drawing attention to herself. But as she reached the yew tree she realised Josh must have noticed because he had stopped and was waiting for her. He fell into step beside her.

'Why don't you want to look back?' he asked. Are you scared of it?'

Of what?'

'Of whatever it was that spooked you.'

Nothing spooked me.'

Are you afraid there's something nasty behind you?'

'Only when you're there'

'So look behind you,' Josh challenged.

Why should I?' Chloe said and thought, why are you so determined to frighten me?

'I don't want to frighten you,' Josh said.

Chloe thought, there it was again. Her thought echoed back to her almost exactly. Was he reading her mind? Or did they think alike? God no, surely not. Surely that wasn't possible. That truly would be terrifying.

Josh looked over his shoulder. 'I can't see why that would terrify you. I can't see anything to be terrified of.'

'No problem then,' Chloe said. 'So stop doing whatever it is you're doing.'

I'm only trying to help.'

Chloe stopped. Look leave me alone, OK. I don't know what you've got in mind but I'm not interested, I'm not interested in your help. I'm not interested in you. I want you to keep away from me, OK?' If it hadn't seemed ridiculous she would have added: And keep out of my head, OK.

'OK.' Josh strode off and caught up with the others.

Chloe continued to walk slowly. She was less comfortable being back there on her own now. She badly wanted to speed up and join the others but she felt she couldn't after what had just happened. Josh would probably think she was chasing after him and that was the last thing she wanted him to think. Except that if he could read her mind he'd know she wasn't. The others wouldn't though. The others would probably think she was having another funny turn. A funny turn: how embarrassing was that?

Worse still, the thing about looking behind her was back in the front of her mind. She couldn't shake it now. She should look back. She should look behind her if only to give the lie to his stupid accusation. She wasn't afraid to do it. Why should she be afraid, there was nothing there, he said so. He'd looked and there was nothing behind her.

She glanced back over her left shoulder. There was nothing, as he had said there was. She glanced back over her right shoulder. There was no hooded figure. She stopped and turned round and looked. Nothing was following her. Of course nothing was following her.

When Chloe got to the cemetery entrance the moonlight was fading behind the closing clouds. The others were waiting in the steadily deepening darkness. Josh was ready to close the gates. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I wanted to take a good look back just to be sure.'

'And are you?' Josh murmured.

'Yes.'

'Still worried about the caretaker?' Ralph asked.

'No.'

As Josh pulled the gates together they creaked and the hinges squeaked dryly. 'When he does turn up he could do worse than oil these gates,' he commented, looping the chain round them and securing it in place with the broken padlock.

'Will that fool them?' Tommy asked. 'Will they think it's locked, and stay put?'

'Will who think it's locked and stay put?' Ralph sounded puzzled.

Tommy said, 'The ghouls and the undead and similar undesirables.'

'Don't you start,' Meg said witheringly. 'That joke is already thin.'

'Well thin,' Josh said. 'But we don't want any of them following us about do we, Chloe?'

Chloe couldn't think of a good put-down. It was partly because the tone of the comment was so matter-of-fact and yet so intimate. It was as if he thought the two of them shared a secret understanding. He was beginning to feel like some sort of stalker. How long was it going to take him to realise that she didn't like him.

The five of them walked away from the cemetery in a group. With the moonlight gone the narrow country lane was impenetrably black. Without the torch and someone taking the lead it would have been difficult to avoid tripping over the uneven verges and blundering into the hedges.

It was Ralph who was methodically illuminating the edge of the road. As they reached the first bend he said, 'Is everybody OK? Everybody keeping up?'

Halfway round the bend Meg said, 'What was that?'

Josh said, 'Was it the gates? It sounded like the gates.'

'The gates?' Ralph stopped abruptly. 'We closed the gates. Didn't we close the gates?'

Tommy had been walking close behind him. Watch it!' he said and stumbled into him.

Ralph fumbled the torch and dropped it. It hit the road and went out.

'What did you stop for?' Tommy complained.

'Never mind that, where's the torch?' Ralph said, groping about on the ground. Help me find the torch!'

'How could you drop the torch?' Meg demanded. 'What were you thinking about?'

'Calm down,' Josh said. 'Everybody calm down. It's got to be there somewhere.'

'Listen,' Chloe said. She had heard a noise in the darkness behind them. 'What's that?' she asked. 'Listen! What is that?' But she already knew what it was. She already recognised the heart-stopping sound from the total blackness behind them. Unmistakably, the hinges of the cemetery gates were squeaking.

## Chapter Eleven

'There's always been a problem with student suicides.' Simpson cradled the phone between his shoulder and chin as he reached for another cigarette. 'These things happen.' He flipped open his lighter. 'Suicides among young adults are on the up generally. Does anybody know why?' He lit the cigarette. 'No, East Wessex is below average if anything.' He listened for a moment then said, 'You know me Karen. You know if I find anything unusual about this *one* anything newsworthy at all and you'll be the first reporter I contact.' He laughed. 'Yeah all right, slip of the tongue. You'll be the only reporter I *contact* Yeah. Take care.' He hung up and took a deep drag on the cigarette. 'Should be OK for the time being.'

Bartok put down the two plastic beakers of coffee and drew up a chair on the other side of the desk. He shook his head disapprovingly. From his expression it was not clear whether he was more unhappy about the cigarette or the telephone conversation he had just caught the end of. He coughed a token couple of times and said, 'She's going to be very unchuffed when she finds out you've been lying to her.'

Simpson shrugged. 'I haven't been,' he said. 'It's a suicide.'

'Anything unusual, anything newsworthy, Sarge? Where do you want to start?'

'A messy suicide, but still a suicide. Come the inquest there's no question what the coroner's verdict will be.' Simpson sipped the coffee. 'Did you put sugar in this?'

Bartok snorted. 'Fags, coffee and four sugars? You want to die right there at the desk?'

'What about the pool car. Did you get the pool car?'

'Being serviced. Won't be ready till lunch time.'

Simpson nodded resignedly. 'You *watch* they'll have us back on push bikes one of these fine days.' He took four sachets of sugar from his desk drawer

and began tearing them open and emptying them into his coffee. 'Is your paperwork up to date?'

Depends which date.'

Simpson stirred his coffee with a Biro. 'Get it done this morning.'

'The ink'll leak,' Bartok said, never taking his eyes off the stirring.

'Did you hear what I said?' Simpson asked, and wiped the pen on an empty sugar packet.

'Yes, Sarge.' Bartok retrieved the packet and examined it. 'Sarge, why are you flogging yourself to death to keep the press away from the girl's suicide?'

'I reckon her family might have suffered enough.'

Bartok gave up looking for leaked ink and tossed the packet away. 'It's bound to come out eventually though. I mean it'll all come out at the inquest.'

'Yeah well.' Simpson sipped his newly sweetened coffee. 'Sufficient unto the day, Constable.'

'Sorry?'

'Is the evil thereof.'

'Oh right,' Bartok said. 'And in the meantime the university authorities will have had the opportunity to cover their collective backside.'

'There's that too,' Simpson agreed. 'It wouldn't be the first time.'

'I bet that coffee tastes plastic now doesn't it,' Bartok said, sipping his own. 'Your brother-in-law must have got to you after all then did he?'

Simpson smiled slightly. 'You can find out a lot by doing nothing, Constable. Trick is to let people get on with what they want to get on with.'

Bartok looked sceptical. 'Get on with what for example?'

'Get on with trying to cover it up, for example.'

'Cover what up?'

'Exactly.' Simpson's cadaverous smile broadened. 'When you know what it is they want to cover up you know what it is that's important to them. Then all you need to know is why it's important to them and you're home and dry.'

Bartok still looked sceptical but he was smiling now. 'Welcome to Cobblers Are Us.'

'Get back to your paperwork.' Simpson sipped his coffee again and then put it to one side in disgust. 'Stuff tastes of plastic'

Bartok said, 'Using a Biro'll do that.' He stood and picked up his own coffee. 'By the way,' he said. 'I know why they were in that wood.'

'Why who was in what wood?'

'The Cox girl and her friends. The séance? In *whatcha-callit* Norswood.'

'Because it's supposed to be haunted presumably'

'They were trying to contact the spirit of that girl that was found in there.'

Simpson retrieved his coffee and took a sip before saying, 'Amanda Joslin.'

Bartok looked blank. 'Sorry?'

'That was the name she went by. Amanda Joslin.'

'Went by?'

'Stepfather's name. She was adopted.'

Oh right.' Bartok nodded. Well anyway, they wanted to ask her to tell them who her murderer was.'

'Maybe we should have done that at the time,' Simpson said. As I remember it's one of the many avenues we didn't go down. I wonder how they knew about her?'

'It's common enough knowledge isn't it?'

'Five years ago?' Simpson shook his head. 'It's got to be at least five years ago. People don't remember five years ago. It wasn't even that big a deal. Not what you'd call a high-profile case. Some of the locals might remember, some local coppers might remember. I remember. Not students though. Can't see any reason why students should. They come and go, why should they know about it?'

It was a murder,' Bartok protested. 'Within sight of the campus.'

'No it wasn't,' Simpson said. 'We never found out where it happened.'

She wasn't killed in that wood?' Bartok could not hide his surprise.

'She was dumped in Norswood but we never found out where she was killed. We couldn't work out how she got there even. Could have fallen out of the sky as far as we were concerned.' Simpson did not look or sound smug when he added, 'You see. You didn't know about it and you're a copper'

Bartok said, 'I wasn't here then.'

Neither were they'

The Doctor strode purposefully through the campus with Leela jogging at his side. It was a fine, fresh morning and he was feeling better. There was finally some concrete evidence that something was happening, and so at last he could get on with coming to grips with it. There would be no more unproductive dithering. No more ifs, ands or buts. He could rule out the bottled water, for example. This was nothing to do with the Clearspring water or the Clearspring Water Company if indeed there was such a *thing*

There was clear evidence here of temporal shift anomalies linked to multidimensional voids, or possibly multidimensional voids linked to

temporal shift anomalies, but whichever way round it was there was certainly evidence of them both. Of course it wasn't evidence that he could personally vouch for since he hadn't actually seen either of these phenomena for himself, but Leela had seen them.

And he knew Leela was a reliable eyewitness and he trusted her completely. At heart she was still basically a superstitious savage, however, and what she thought she saw could be affected by what she expected to see. And if what she was saying was accurate, then she was describing something that was disorientating and could be mind-altering. This meant that if his interpretation of what she described to him was right, it was unlikely that her description of it was accurate in the first place. But if her description of it was not accurate in the first place, then was his interpretation right? And if his interpretation of it was not right, then could her description of it have been accurate in the first place? But if her description was accurate, then his interpretation was right, and her description could not be *accurate*

'Doctor?' Leela said, interrupting his spiralling thoughts. 'Why have we stopped here?'

'Stopped here?' the Doctor said vaguely. He looked around him. It was a pleasant octagonal space with a tree at its centre, the campus book shop and the main library on one side, lecture theatres on two others. There were students bustling about. Why had they stopped here? he wondered. Where were they supposed to be going? 'Do you remember the way?' he asked.

'Yes I do,' Leela said, and pointed to a broad flight of steps.

'Lead on,' the Doctor said and smiled at her. He was uncomfortably aware that he still couldn't remember where they were going. 'We don't want to be late.'

Leela said, 'I thought Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins gave you a key to his laboratory in case he was not there when we arrived?'

Of course, the Doctor remembered, that was where they were going. He must examine immediately the tapes of all the recent experiments to see how serious the danger was and how difficult it was going to be to put

things right. There's no time to waste,' he said. 'We have a lot to do and very little time to do it in.' Judging by his own incoherence, very little time indeed. The feedback loops must be intensifying by the moment. Unless it was nothing to do with parapsychology and its links to temporal shift anomalies and multidimensional voids.

As they hurried up the steps he reminded himself that he must remember to get the Clearspring bottled water tested.

Its over,' John Finer snarled. 'This dog and pony show is at an end.' He stalked round the laboratory, pausing every so often to stare at something and shake his head as if he could not believe what he was seeing. 'What a waste of time and effort and money. How did you get away with it all this time?'

Barry tried to be angry but he couldn't quite bring himself to it. 'Why do you take it so personally?' he asked. 'The time and effort was mine not yours.' He was suddenly aware that he was using the past tense. Was that why he wasn't angry: because he knew it was over? 'It's not as if the money came out of your departmental budget. Though God knows you could have spared it. This was outside funding. The Kellerfield Foundation weren't interested in developmental engineering. They weren't about to finance your quest to build a better mousetrap. So why is it important to you, Finer? Why me? Why are you after me?'

Why me? Why are you after me?' Finer sneered. Isn't that just typical. I'll tell you why shall I? Because this,' he gestured round, 'this pseudoscience is an embarrassing disgrace in a serious academic institution.'

You pompous pillock,' Barry said. 'A serious academic institution? This is a polytechnic with ideas above its station.'

'A girl is dead, Hitchins.'

'You're saying that's my fault?'

'She was obviously unstable. You encouraged her instability. You intensified it in fact.'

Barry sighed. 'Yes that's possible,' he said, miserably. 'That is possible.'

'You imagine you're going to be allowed to continue under those circumstances?' Finer demanded triumphantly.

'I don't get to put my side of it to the senate?'

'No, of course you don't.'

"What about the council?'

'Not a chance. They'll be skating in hell before you'd get anywhere near the council.'

'There's always the press,' Barry said, in an attempt at defiance that sounded unconvincing even to him. 'I still have friends in the media.' It wasn't much of a bluff, he thought. 'I don't think anybody would like that sort of publicity would they?'

Finer said, 'Least of all you, presumably'

Whatever else he was, Finer wasn't stupid, Barry thought and said, 'Suppose I take my funding somewhere else? The University of East Wessex isn't the only polytechnic on the make.'

'Pay attention, Hitchins,' Finer said pityingly. 'The girl killed herself in questionable circumstances. In spectacularly questionable circumstances. Everyone's running for cover on this. It isn't just the university that's disowning you. The Kellerfield Foundation terminated your funding as of nine o'clock this morning.'

'How do you know that?'

'They faxed the vice-chancellor's office.'

Yes, Barry thought. It's definitely over. 'Time to update my CV it seems,' he said.

Finer turned on his heel. 'I wouldn't take too long about it,'

he said as he walked to the door. 'Hanging around this campus will do nothing for your long-term career prospects.' He paused in the doorway and stared back at Barry. His face was expressionless. 'Assuming you have any,' he said. 'Which I doubt.' An abrupt smile twisted his narrow features. 'Which I seriously doubt.' He reached for the door but, before he could pull the release, the door was pushed open from the other side and he was confronted by the Doctor and Leela.

The Doctor stepped back politely. 'After you,' he said, gesturing Finer forward.

Finer nodded his acknowledgement. 'If he owes you money,' he said as he passed the Doctor on his way out, 'take my advice and don't accept a cheque.'

Barry glared at the Doctor. 'Thanks for not telling me beforehand.'

The Doctor looked puzzled. 'Was I supposed to tell you beforehand?'

It would have been courteous.'

I wasn't sure you'd be here,' the Doctor said. He took the key he had been given from his coat pocket and held it out.

Barry ignored it. 'Is that why you faxed the office?'

The Doctor hurried through the lab towards the control and monitoring suite. 'I don't understand.'

Barry followed him. 'You told me you wouldn't withdraw my funding,' he accused.

The Doctor stopped in his tracks and thought for a moment. 'I don't think I said that, did I?' he said.

You said you would have nothing to do with the withdrawal of my funding.'

Ah yes,' the Doctor agreed. 'That is what I said.' He pressed on through the lab.

Barry continued to follow him. 'Why did you tell me that?'

The Doctor stopped again. 'I told you I would have nothing to do with the withdrawal of your funding,' he said, 'because I would have nothing to do with the withdrawal of your funding. I'm sorry if you misunderstood me.'

Barry said, 'Are you saying the foundation operates entirely independently of your opinion?'

'I imagine so.' The Doctor beamed wolfishly. 'Since they've never asked for my opinion.' He patted Barry's arm. 'I'm glad we've cleared that up. Shall we get on now? We have a lot to do and very little time to do it in. Isn't that right Leela?' The Doctor peered round the lab but Leela was nowhere to be seen. 'Where is the girl?'

'Who the hell are you?' Barry demanded. 'What do you want?'

'Did you see her?' the Doctor asked. 'She was right behind me.'

'Your assistant, you mean?' Barry shrugged. 'She didn't come in with you. I don't know, maybe she went with Finer for some reason. She is a bit eccentric, isn't she?'

'Erratic rather than eccentric,' the Doctor said. 'She comes from a peculiarly primitive background.'

Whatever,' Barry said. 'Maybe Finer's special brand of Yorkshire charm appeals to the peculiarly primitive.'

'Finer? Who's Finer?' the Doctor asked.

'Professor John Finer. He was on his way out as you came in.'

'He's from Yorkshire you say?'

'A lot of people are,' Barry said.

'Yes of course,' the Doctor said thoughtfully. 'So would that make it less or more of a coincidence I wonder?'

Barry said, 'I suppose it would be unfair to blame them all for pond scum like him.'

'You two don't get on.'

The first flickerings of anger stirred in Barry. The research fellowship he enjoyed so much had just been snatched away. It had disappeared in a puff of potential publicity. Have you ever met a rich man you could trust?

I trust everybody,' the Doctor said.

Your life must be one long disappointment.'

'Not really,' the Doctor said. 'If you trust people and they let you down you're only unhappy once. Imagine the disappointment if you don't trust people and then they don't let you down?' He beamed. 'You have to be unhappy twice and that makes no sense.'

Barry was not really listening. 'You have to bear in mind that the only way anybody can get rich is at somebody else's expense.' His resentment was cheering him up and he was warming to his theme. That ratbag Finer ripped somebody off sure as shot. Serious academic? The man is clearly a crook.'

Professor Finer is rich?' the Doctor asked.

Developmental engineering is up to its yin-yangs in funding. And his private fortune is gross apparently. It could feed half of sub-Saharan Africa.'

That's why you don't like him?'

It's him that doesn't like me, as it happens.' Barry scowled. Wait a minute, wait a minute. Why am I answering your questions?'

Why wouldn't you?' The Doctor smiled and lowered his voice slightly. 'Have you got something to hide?'

What business of yours would it be if I had?' Barry demanded loudly. 'I don't know you from a hole in the ground. Don't think I haven't noticed that you managed to avoid saying who you are and what it is you want.'

You can trust me, I'm not rich,' the Doctor said. 'I'm here to help.'

Thanks,' Barry said, sounding less than grateful, 'but it's a bit late for that.'

The Doctor was not smiling. No,' he contradicted flatly, 'we can still save the situation. Or if we can't,' he gave a small shrug, then there'll be no situation to save.'

Barry said, 'Now you're saying you think it's not too late to save my job?' Was it possible, he wondered, that this strange person might really be in a position to help him? To help him do what exactly? He'd already said that the Kellerfield Foundation didn't listen to him.

'It's more important than saving your job I'm afraid,' the Doctor said seriously. 'It's more a question of saving your world and all its possible time lines.'

Barry's heart sank. The man was insane. 'Right; he said, hoping his tone of voice was noncommittal but supportive.

'I'm fairly sure,' the Doctor went on, 'that if we fail to do it then the universe and all its alternates will disappear too.'

Why now? Barry thought tiredly. I don't have the energy for this. 'What would that leave?' he asked.

'I'm not entirely sure,' the Doctor said. 'Chaos, infinite darkness possibly. Nothing, I suspect. It may be that the original singularity will disappear and existence will cease to exist or to have existed. It won't be the end of everything because there will have been no beginning. It could happen at any moment. We wouldn't know about it, of course. It's the definition of death.'

Barry sighed. 'What are you on?'

'On?'

'Medication?'

'Oh, not you as well,' the Doctor complained. 'I assure you I am not mad. A little unfocused perhaps. But that's to be expected. In theory the fluctuating field effect from a multi-verse overlap will do that to a vulnerable mind. I'm forced to the conclusion that I may have such a mind.'

Barry stared at him. He was a little out there, but apart from the X Files gobbledegook he seemed almost reasonable. He might be mad but he certainly wasn't stupid. 'There's no chance that you've taken *something* recreational?'

'Recreational? You mean drugs?' The Doctor shook his head dismissively. 'I enjoy trying to understand things. The interface between the brain and reality is too fragile to tamper with deliberately'

'You can't think of anything you might have taken that could have affected your brain chemistry?'

'Nothing that I'm aware of,' the Doctor said. 'Except possibly this.' From his coat pocket he took a bottle of Clearspring water. 'While I examine these tapes of yours perhaps you could do me a favour?'

While I examine these tapes of yours - am I going to let a madman play with the tapes? Barry thought. Why *not* what do I care? Serves them right. 'In return for saving the universe,' he said. 'How could I refuse?'

The Doctor brandished the bottle. 'The Clearspring Water Company have been giving these away on campus for some time. We need a chemical analysis of the contents and all the information we can find on the company itself.'

Barry took the bottle and examined it. 'I can do that,' he said without much enthusiasm. It was one thing to humour the guy, it was quite another to waste time and *effort* but wasting time and effort and money was what he was known for. 'I can do that,' he said more positively.

It could be crucially important,' the Doctor said. 'Or it could mean nothing at all.'

Barry said, 'That's in the nature of all scientific investigation isn't it?'

The Doctor smiled. 'It's bottled in Yorkshire I understand,' he said, and turned and went into the control and monitoring suite.

There had been no chance for Leela to tell the Doctor what she was going to do. She had barely had a chance to think about it herself, and she doubted whether he would have listened to her in his present mood anyway.

It was partly the Doctor's fault. When the stranger had come out of the laboratory the Doctor had stepped back from the doorway to let him through and, because she was standing directly behind him and because he was wearing that ridiculous hat and unnecessarily long and bulky coat, he had blocked her view. She had caught only a passing glimpse of the man's face as he strode by, but that passing glimpse had puzzled and confused her a lot. She thought she remembered the face and yet she was almost sure his could not be the face she remembered. It must be a mistake she felt, but it was too important just to let it go. She must get a more direct look.

The Doctor had already gone into the laboratory by the time she had made up her mind and set out to catch up with the man as he hurried away down the corridor.

Her simple plan, though her trainers would hardly have called it a plan, was to find a way to circle round ahead of the man so that she could turn back and take a good look at his face as she passed him. Unfortunately, he had immediately speeded up and was soon walking so quickly that she had found herself unable to get in front of him without drawing attention to the manoeuvre. He seemed to be on some urgent errand, and as they crossed through the complex of buildings he showed no sign of slowing down and there was no indication that he might be approaching his destination. From the way he was moving his errand could be taking him to the other side of the university and beyond.

Reluctant to give up, Leela carried on shadowing the man with a crude doggedness that she found shaming but unavoidable. She was forced to keep him in direct line of sight since it was not possible to fall back and rely on her tracking skills. Seeing him and not being seen by him would have been difficult for her under any circumstances. Trailing an enemy in this way had never come naturally to her. On the warrior-training grounds she

had usually failed such tests despite being well camouflaged and in familiar territory. Here she was dressed conspicuously and she had no idea where her quarry might be heading.

Blending into the background was made even more of a problem in this place because she was still uncertain how to behave like everyone else. The students seemed to her to have the same sort of complicated rules that a tribe would use to protect itself from strangers. Many of these rules were unspoken and you learnt them without knowing you were learning them. They were rules that could be learnt but could not be taught. Often you only realised they were rules when a stranger broke them. Sometimes they changed, and everyone knew they had changed but no one knew who had changed them or when. The Doctor told her this was called 'fashion' and that it was a destructive, mindless and pointless thing. He was a loner though, and it was unlikely that he would ever understand how the rules worked. You had to grow up as a member of a tribe to understand what it was you might not know. She was Leela of the Sevateem. She understood what it was she might not know. She was not sure that she was even walking correctly. It was possible that her every movement could be setting her apart and pointing to her as a dangerous outsider. How long would it be, she wondered, before everyone noticed a dangerous outsider was following one of their people, maybe one of their tribal elders?

Her concerns turned out to be unnecessary. Those students who saw her may have recognised that she did not belong, but they showed no interest in raising the alarm about her or in what she appeared to be doing. They did react, but their reactions were no different now than they had been when she was eating cooked breakfast or when she was trying to find Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins. If anything, she felt they were less *aggressive*. Fortunately their behaviour did not draw the man's attention to her. Unaware that she was behind him he walked on through the paved spaces, up and down flights of stone stairs and along narrow walkways. He spoke to no one. He did not pause. He did not look back once.

On at least two separate occasions Leela realised that her image and his were showing in the same reflective surface, and she had to drop further back. Since she had been unable to see his face clearly in the dark glass she assumed he had not noticed her careless lapses. She knew it was a risky assumption. If he had seen her then his lack of reaction meant he was leading her into a trap.

Eventually they reached the edge of the main group of buildings and the man took a deserted path out past artificial lakes and ornamental fountains. In the carefully tended parkland they were crossing there was almost no cover at all and Leela's options narrowed. She walked silently, closing the distance between them and relying on him not to turn round until she was ready to put her new simple plan into operation.

Her new simple plan was to mistake him for someone else, look at his face and then apologise in the charming way she had seen the Doctor do it: I am most terribly sorry or please do forgive me. And then she would go back the way she had come and tell the Doctor where she had been and why.

She got closer to the man. How close should she go? She put her hand on the hilt of her knife. Why was she uncomfortable about confronting this man? It suddenly struck her that she had followed him this far like a timid child when all she needed to do was make him turn and face her. He was a tall man but he was skinny. He was no warrior. She could kill him without breaking sweat. So why was she hesitating? She did not believe he was anything other than a man. He was no threat. *Unless* unless he was more than he seemed. Unless it was him.

She was within ten paces of him when she called out. 'Hullo?'

He ignored her and strode on.

She tried again. 'Hullo?' She loped to within touching distance and reached out to tap his shoulder. 'Hullo?'

He stopped abruptly and turned. 'Yes, what can I do for you?'

It was him. The narrow face, the thin-lipped sneering smile and the sharply cruel eyes. For a moment Leela was lost for words. The face was not twisted and wild but it was the same face. It was the face of the striding, cackling man-creature, the face of the ghost she had seen in the wood. It was the face of the demon. She remembered the simple plan. 'I am most terribly sorry,' she said automatically, knowing that she should be smiling and that the words sounded wrong. 'Please do forgive me.'

'It's all right,' he said. He looked her up and down. 'What is it? Some sort of charity stunt?'

'No,' Leela said. 'It *is*' but then the words failed her again. She could not think what to say it was.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'I thought you were somebody else,' she finally managed.

'Really,' he said. 'Who did you think I was?'

'Somebody who is not you,' Leela said. 'I am most terribly sorry please do forgive me.'

She turned on her heel and walked back along the deserted path towards the main university complex. She could feel the demon's eyes hot on her back. She had to fight the impulse to run. Behind her she imagined the demon capering and leaping and rushing after her.

## Chapter Twelve

The Doctor was sitting in the control and monitoring suite surrounded by print-outs and video cassettes. He had started by examining the results of the general screening tests that Barry Hitchins had conducted. The first ones clearly identified the group of students he was subsequently working with. They appeared to have psi abilities which were well above the norm. What was striking, however, was how high the general average was. It was as though almost every student in the university was showing some small sign of paranormal powers. These results tended to confirm the Doctor's worst fears. A multiverse disruption, a major one, was developing in the area, creating the parapsychological energy that was feeding back into it. Either the phenomenon had multiple focus points or it was already vast.

After that first screening, however, none of the subsequent tests showed similar results. Much to his relief, there were no more generally raised levels of psi ability. The next intake of students tested normal. Either the field effect of the disruption, multiverse overlap or whatever it turned out to be was unusually variable and had been particularly strong when the first tests had been done, or something else had been involved. Either way, it suggested that the disruption was not vast after all.

Barry Hitchins didn't appear to have been bothered by this strange discrepancy in his preliminary test findings and the Doctor was obliged to revise his previously high opinion of the Kellerfield Research Fellow's scientific methods. It seemed he had found six promising research subjects, and once he had found them, nothing else was of any concern to him.

The Doctor had then turned his attention to the monitoring videotapes. As he began working his way through the early cassettes he could see why Barry Hitchins had been enthusiastic about the students he had found. The initial experiments did seem to bear out some of their early promise. The Doctor could see that two of the girls, Chloe Pennick and Joan Cox, were showing particularly strong potential in telepathy and remote viewing. One of the boys, Josh Randall, showed some aptitude too. All three of them would have been the obvious candidates for more intense study.

Oddly, Hitchins did not seem to have realised that the two girls, and to a lesser extent the boy, were the special ones in his group. He had pressed on with his routine series of experiments, testing each of the students in each theoretical discipline on a strictly rotational basis. It was only after the Doctor had watched a long series of these carefully structured trials that he thought he understood Hitchins' problem. He was testing for something he did not think could possibly exist. As a result, he was overlooking evidence and missing the developing possibilities.

And then for some reason the possibilities stopped developing. Gradually, the students' paranormal talents appeared to disappear. Dr Hitchins' experiments were proving what he designed them to prove. They were establishing to his satisfaction that there was no such thing as telepathy, remote viewing, telekinesis, precognition or any of the other powers the mind might develop to directly affect the world outside itself.

The Doctor was beginning to think that the evidence of parapsychological activity here was so insignificant that it was not a warning of disaster after all. Whatever it was that was happening in that wood, and perhaps in this laboratory, the Kellerfield Research Fellow's work had nothing to do with it. It was possible that there had been a temporary multiverse overlap, a self-adjusting space-time loop anomaly, a self-cancelling temporal inversion. The disruption could already be *over*.

He pushed the next two cassettes in the series into machines, and adjusted the playback so that the time codes were the same on each screen before simultaneously releasing the freeze-frames on both of them. In his new mood of optimism the Doctor found this rather basic technology reassuring. It suggested the funding for the project was limited. Limited funding meant limited interest. Limited interest meant limited effects in the first place. He had been panicking unnecessarily.

'Mr Bun the Baker,' Josh Randall said, staring out of the screen. 'I'm right aren't I? I can see it as clear as day. What a star I am. I can see you're impressed.' He waved at the camera. 'Come on, wave. Gottle 'o geer, gottle 'o geer! A definite star!'

The Doctor was aware that, of all six members of the group, it was Josh Randall who had shown the most obvious loss of ability so far. Judging

from the tapes of the experiments he seemed to have become the most disruptive too. Perhaps he resented the disappearance of his talent.

On the other screen Tommy Carmodie was waiting for his cue. Until the signal bulb flashed he would not reach for the first card in the dealing shoe on the clear Perspex table in front of him. As always, the sender was not allowed to touch the cards before he or she was cued.

When the Doctor read the notes for this short-range telepathy test sequence he was struck by the extra difficulty Hitchins had built into it. Usually sender and receiver got the same light cue at the same time, but for this series only the sender was getting a cue. The receiver, the already failing

Josh Randall, had to guess not only the card but also the moment it was turned over.

The light cue flashed and Tommy drew the card and lifted the star so that it was clearly visible on screen, then he put it down on the table and stared at the image.

'Star,' the Doctor said watching Josh on the other screen. There was something very studied about his lack of interest. It was an exaggeratedly theatrical display of boredom. 'What a star I am,' the Doctor said thoughtfully as Josh yawned and said nothing.

On the second cue Tommy held up a card showing two wavy lines. On the other screen Josh was leaning back in the chair and his eyes were closed.

'Come on, wave,' the Doctor said.

On voice-over Barry Hitchins said, 'Subject Josh Randall appears to be hostile to the experiment. Perhaps he's been thrown by the additional discipline though I'm not sure at the moment why this should be. Examine the sequence up to this point for clues to his behaviour.'

The Doctor said, 'But you're not seeing his behaviour are you?'

On the screen Josh said, 'Have we started yet?'

Another card was cued. Again it was a star.

A definite star,' the Doctor said. 'Star, wavy lines, star.'

On the screen Josh said, 'Bored with this game. Let's play something else. Snap? How about snap?' He nodded as if making up his mind. 'Snap!'

"It'll be another star,' the Doctor predicted.

On the cue Tommy drew another card showing a star.

Is there no end to their talent?' Josh chortled. Well, yes there is actually, and we're approaching it *about* now.'

All right,' Barry's voice announced with the slightest of feedback echoes. 'Thank you both. Call that a day I think.'

Sow and all right had been spoken almost simultaneously.

The Doctor's fragile optimism vanished. Josh Randall had just displayed remarkable powers of precognition. His control of it was so good that he could take the time to play games and pretend it wasn't happening. How far into the future could he see? Had he got other powers? And why was he covering up what he could do?

'How do you find out what they're trying to cover up?' Detective Constable Bartok asked as he set about squeezing the unmarked pool car into the only remaining parking space in the university's secondary main car park.

Detective Sergeant Simpson said, 'Cover up?'

'Your theory of detective work. Let them get on with it; see what they're trying to cover up.'

'Oh that.' Simpson smiled. 'You wait for them to make a mistake.'

'That *means*' Bartok pulled the car back. 'That if they don't make a *mistake*' He took another swing at the space. 'They'll get away with it.'

'And your point is?' Simpson asked.

Bartok struggled to get the car to straighten up and fit into the narrow gap. 'My point is, that way you're only going to *catch*' He failed and pulled the car back a second time. 'You're only going to catch the failures.'

'That's all we ever catch. Failures. By definition that's all we ever catch.' Simpson yawned and rubbed his eyes.

A vertical ripple ran horizontally across Bartok's field of vision, momentarily distorting everything. 'Ugh, giddy,' he muttered and drove the car into the space, straightening up as he went. There was room to spare suddenly.

Simpson stopped rubbing his eyes. 'That was a piece of piss,' he said. 'How come it took you so long?'

Bartok shrugged and frowned. 'I could've sworn the gap just got bigger,' he said.

Simpson opened his door and it hit the car next to them. 'Not on my side it didn't,' he said.

Bartok opened the door on the driver's side and found himself equally cramped for room. 'That was pretty cool driving,' he said. 'What do you reckon, Sarge?'

'I reckon I can get you transferred to traffic,' Simpson grunted, clambering through the narrow space left by his partially open door, 'if that's your fancy.' . As they walked towards the campus Bartok pointed across the parkland to the fields and the woodland beyond. 'That's Norswood isn't it?' he asked.

Simpson nodded. 'It's genuinely ancient apparently. You know why it's called Norswood?'

'Because that's its name?' Bartok suggested.

'Traffic beckons, Constable,' Simpson said. He stopped and stared intently towards the distant wood.

'Why is it called Norswood, Sarge?'

'After Nor the giant.'

'Gnaw the giant? Sounds like one of those crap games they only sell at Christmas. Munch the Monster.'

'Nor, N-O-R. Nor was the father of the night according to Scandinavian mythology'

'Is that right? So some Viking marauder thought it was a bit dark in there.'

'Local historian told me that,' Simpson said, starting to walk again. 'When we were investigating the Amanda Joslin business.'

'That case got to you a bit didn't it, Sarge?' Bartok said. 'Was it grim or something?'

'Not especially. When they're beaten to death you don't expect it to be *pretty* but not especially'

'But it did get to you,' Bartok pressed.

'She was a kid,' Simpson said. 'Kids shouldn't die. It's not the way things are supposed to be.'

Bartok's plump face took on a sympathetic look of thoughtful understanding. That's why we're not letting this one go, right Sarge?' he said. 'Because it's another kid.'

'Joan Cox was at least six years older and a suicide,' Simpson said mildly. 'There's no connection, Constable.' He smiled his cadaverous smile. 'You really should have finished that OU psychology course.'

Well, if there's no connection then why are we back here,' Bartok sulked. 'There's nothing much more we can do is there? Not here.'

'We're just crossing the i's and dotting the t's.'

'I thought you'd already done that.'

'And while we're here I want you to chat up those student friends of yours and find out how they knew about Amanda Joslin.'

Bartok cheered up. 'Oh well, as long as you're sure there's no connection,' he said smugly.

'Do you like coincidences?' Simpson asked.

'I can take them or leave them, Sarge.'

'Tomorrow is the sixth anniversary of Amanda Joslin's death.'

'Why is that a coincidence?'

'I don't know.' Simpson shrugged and shook his head. 'It probably isn't,' he said.

'Tell you what,' Bartok said, looking out across the parkland again. 'Norswood does look sort of black doesn't it. It is darker than anywhere else isn't it?'

'Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. Must be the angle of the dangle. Something to do with the shape of the ground.'

Another distortion rolled through both men's fields of vision. It was large enough for them to notice, but too small for either of them to mention. Both assumed it was a personal aberration. At the same time the momentary darkening in the already dark Norswood looked like a distant cloud effect.

Bartok said, 'I looked up the file on Amanda Joslin, Sarge.' His tone made it sound like a confession.

'I thought you might,' Simpson said. 'I was wondering how long it would take you to mention it.'

'We're not here so you can talk to her father are we? You're not using the anniversary and this suicide thing as an excuse are you?'

'That would be harassment, Martin. I was warned about that five years ago.'

'I know. It's in the file.' Bartok's plump face was creased with genuine worry. 'An official warning, Sarge? He makes any sort of complaint and you're history.'

'He wont. And if he does I'll make sure your name's not in the frame.'

'It's not that,' Bartok protested. 'I'm not bothered about that.'

'Yes, I know.' Simpson patted him clumsily on the shoulder. 'I appreciate it, Constable. Let's forget about it shall we, it's not a problem.'

They walked on in silence for a while, then Bartok said, 'You think he did it though.'

'I know he did it,' Simpson said expressionlessly. 'And sooner or later I'll get the bastard for it.'

Chloe sat on one of the eight connected benches surrounding the lime tree in the middle of the octagonal space that acted as a linking hub for the main campus walkways. She had chosen this spot because it was busy. It was one of the few places she could think of where she could be sure she would not be alone. Unlike the student bar or the library or the cafeteria, all of which were equally busy, this space did not have any dark or shadowy corners. You could see every part of it clearly and brightly. It was essential that she be able to see every part of it clearly and brightly.

Obviously she could not see all of it all of the time. Since she did not have eyes in the back of her head, there was the simple physical problem that she could not see behind her. She had found a way to cope with this problem, though. Occasionally - she hoped it was so occasionally that her behaviour wouldn't look too bizarre - occasionally she would move to the next bench round. This shifted her sight lines and allowed her to watch a slightly different area of the octagon. In the course of the two hours she had been there, she knew she had made at least three complete circuits of the tree; possibly more than three. Possibly a lot more than three.

As well as moving round the benches, she found it necessary to glance behind her from time to time. Actually she wasn't doing this from time to time, she knew. She knew she was doing it often. She knew she was doing

it pretty much constantly in fact. She realised that to anyone who was watching it must look like a nervous spasm of some sort. To anyone human who was watching.

She couldn't think of what else to do. She was trapped there. If she ran she knew she would never be able to stop running. She would just keep on running until she died from the sheer exhaustion of it. She was trapped there. But she couldn't think of what else to do. And what would happen when it got dark? What would happen when she wasn't able to see every part clearly and brightly? She couldn't think about that. She mustn't think about that. She would run if she thought about that. She couldn't think of what else to do.

Death had followed her and now it was watching her and waiting. She was trapped there. It seemed as though death might be the only way out for her. She might have to die simply to get out of there. She might have to die simply to get away from it.

She knew the shrouded figure was there even though she hadn't been able to see it properly. She knew it was there. It had followed her from the cemetery. It was watching her now. She couldn't look at it directly. It wouldn't let her see it directly. Perhaps she would only be able to see it directly at the end. Perhaps only at the moment of death would it let her see it. For the time being she caught only glimpses out of the very corners of her eyes.

She knew it was standing and waiting and looking at her. She knew if she sat in one position for too long it took advantage of her stillness to move closer. It had come from the cemetery, following them back in the darkness. But it wasn't the others it wanted. It was her it wanted. It had picked her and it was waiting *to* to what? Not knowing what it wanted was almost as terrifying as knowing it was there.

All around her there was bustling and life but she felt as if she was already dead. She was frozen in the middle of it, like in one of those TV ads where the character was picked out in a different colour or was stationary when everything else was moving. The shrouded figure was slowly separating her from the world, reaching towards her, spreading a frozen loneliness across the ground between them. She was trapped there. She couldn't think of what else to do.

Chloe turned her head more quickly. She almost saw it that time. It was closer. She got up from the bench and moved to the next one. She turned her head the other way. It had anticipated her and again it was behind her. She glimpsed it; just glimpsed it; almost glimpsed it.

'What is the matter with you?' a voice asked. 'What is it that you are afraid of?'

Chloe snapped out of the spiralling trance of her terror and looked at the face frowning into hers.

'What is the matter with you?' Leela repeated. 'Why are you so afraid?'

The rush of relief Chloe felt made her momentarily light-headed. 'Leela,' she said. 'Just when I think there's no way out you keep turning up and saving me.'

Leela rested her hand on the handle of the big knife she carried on her belt. 'What have I saved you from?' she asked, and then unexpectedly she glanced back over her own shoulder.

Chloe's relief vanished. 'Have you seen it too?' She squinted in the direction Leela had looked. 'Is that where it's coming from? I thought it was behind me. Is it behind you?'

'It is not following me,' Leela said.

'What do you think it is? What did you see?' Chloe asked anxiously.

'I saw a demon,' Leela said. 'Then I saw a man who had the same face the demon had.'

'Who was it? Do you know who it was?'

Leela shook her head. 'I fled,' she said flatly.

'I can understand that,' Chloe said. Her anxiety was subsiding again. There was no doubt Leela was strange, but she was tough and she was self-

reliant. With her help Chloe knew she could face this ghost that was haunting her. With her help she could be tough and self-reliant too.

'I cannot understand it,' Leela said. 'Warriors stand their ground unless there is a good reason not to.'

'You were afraid.'

'That is not a good reason,' Leela said. 'My actions shamed me so I went back to face my fear, but he was gone. I searched for him but I could not track him and I could not find him again.'

Chloe thought, *I went back to face my fear. That's what she needed. She needed that attitude. She needed to stand her ground and face her fear. You weren't afraid when you went back?* she asked.

'I had no cause to be.' Leela smiled. 'I did not find him. What were you frightened of?'

Chloe was suddenly embarrassed by the way she had been acting. 'I think I imagined it,' she said sheepishly.

'Most fear is imagined,' Leela said. 'What was it you imagined?'

Chloe said, 'Look behind me.' She gestured at her chest with her thumb. 'Directly behind me. Is there a figure in a shroud watching me?'

Leela looked past her shoulder at where she was indicating. 'A figure in a shroud?'

'You *know* like a corpse in a burial wrapping?' It sounded ridiculous as soon as she said it out loud.

Leela said, 'I can see nothing like that.'

'I thought something like that was following me.'

Leela frowned a sceptical frown. 'Why?'

Chloe thought, guilt, alcohol and autosuggestion, that's why. 'I saw it in a graveyard,' she said and then corrected herself quickly. 'I thought I saw it in a graveyard.'

'You let your imagination run away with you,' Leela said matter-of-factly.

'Yes, I expect so,' Chloe agreed. 'It seemed real.'

'Walking corpses are for children to fear,' Leela said. 'You are not a child.'

Chloe was irritated by the criticism, especially as it was justified. 'Neither are you,' she snapped, 'but you thought you saw a demon. And it scared you.'

'What I saw has to be called something,' Leela said. 'Demon seemed closest to what it was. I know there are no ghosts or demons.'

'You're saying it was imaginary.'

'No. It was real.'

Chloe snorted. 'You saw something so it's real. I saw something and it's just imaginary,' she complained.

Leela nodded. 'It is for you to judge what you saw. I can only judge what I saw.' She looked around. 'There is no walking corpse following you,' she said and started to walk away.

'Wait!' Chloe hurried after her. 'Wait. I'll come with you.'

Leela kept on walking. 'You do not know where I am going,' she said.

Chloe walked beside her pretending not to have heard. 'I saw a demon,' she said conversationally. 'It was a thing like a man but with long spindly legs and a horribly twisted face.' She twisted her face into a feeble demonstration of a snarl. 'It was shouting and gibbering and it rushed at me. I fled.' She laughed. 'Boy, did I flee. It chased me. I thought I was never going to be able to stop running.'

'That is very like what I saw,' Leela said. 'We have imagined the same demon.'

Chloe said, 'No. It was real.' Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw a shrouded figure following them. 'Where did you say we were going?' she asked.

Quietly Simpson opened the door to the dead girl's study bedroom and stepped inside. He watched the security supervisor poking about in the desk drawers for a moment or two before he said, 'Hullo Fred,' and saw his brother-in-law start guiltily. 'They told me I'd find you in here.'

'Dear God, Bob, you frightened the living crap out of me!' the supervisor exclaimed.

'What are you doing?' Simpson asked, his voice casual, his expression mildly interested.

'Mr and Mrs Cox asked me to gather up some jewellery and a few odds and ends. For safekeeping.'

Simpson wandered across to look into the last drawer the supervisor had been searching. 'I thought you said I'd frightened the crap out of you,' he murmured.

'Meaning?'

Meaning that was crap, Fred.'

Very deliberately the supervisor said, 'Mr and Mrs Cox asked me to gather up some jewellery and a few odds and ends for safekeeping.'

'Saying it twice doesn't make it twice as convincing, you pillock.' Simpson looked close to laughing. 'What are you doing in here?'

The supervisor squared up to leave. 'I don't have to tell you anything.'

Simpson stepped between him and the door. 'Yes you do.'

'Or what?' The supervisor was shorter than Simpson, but he was stockier and his shaved head made him look the more threatening and aggressive of the two.

'Or I nick you and give you a kicking,' Simpson said matter-of-factly.

'It's too late for that,' the supervisor said. 'You've already used that one. You're not going to nick me.'

Simpson nodded. 'And saying it twice doesn't make it twice as convincing,' he agreed, 'I should've done it, shouldn't I? At the time. Tell you what I am going to do, Fred. I'm going to invite you round to Sunday lunch and let your sister give you a kicking.'

'I'm not frightened of my sister.'

'Yes you are.'

'Yes I am.'

Simpson said, 'I did you a favour.' It was a statement of fact.

'I know you did, Bob,' the supervisor said earnestly, 'I know you did. I won't forget it. I promise you I won't forget it.'

'Neither will 'I' promise you.'

'That's fair.'

Tell you what I'm not going to do, shall I?' Simpson's tone was suddenly cold. 'I'm not going to lift a finger to help no matter what happens to you. If I can drop you in it, I will drop you in it. And trust me, I can drop you in it.' He stepped aside to let him pass.

The supervisor hesitated. 'I was checking for drugs,' he said finally. 'They wanted me to check for drugs.'

"The parents did?"

The supervisor returned to searching the room. 'The powers that be.' He lifted the desk drawer out and peered underneath it.

'You don't think we did all that?' Simpson asked.

Grunting, the supervisor stretched an arm down behind the other drawers. 'I'm supposed to make doubly sure. They don't want anything unexpected turning up at the inquest.'

'What sort of drugs?' Simpson folded his arms and leant against the door jamb.

The supervisor crawled under the desk. Any sort: pills, powders, potions. You know what the little buggers are like these days.' He crawled out again. 'They'll take anything.'

'Bit late to cover it up,' Simpson said. 'The pathologist's report will include a toxicology analysis. If she was on anything it'll show up in her blood.'

Ours not to reason why. They want it checked, I check it.' He approached the bloodstained bed reluctantly. 'Did your lot look under this?' he asked hopefully.

Simpson shrugged noncommittally. The supervisor tried to see underneath the bed without touching it or kneeling on the stained carpet.

'Anything particular you're supposed to be looking for?' Simpson asked.

"They reckon the latest thing is to dissolve it in water," the supervisor said. 'I'm supposed to look for bottles.'

'Dissolve what in water?'

'I don't know do I?'

Simpson said, 'What sort of bottles?'

'Bottles containing liquid,' the supervisor said.

Simpson shook his head and smiled. 'I'm amazed you left the job, Fred,' he said. 'If you'd stayed a copper you could have been chief constable by now.'

The Doctor had examined the rest of the tapes, including the incomplete recordings of the trial run with the sensory-deprivation tank. Even the apparently inexplicable gaps in those, which were assumed to be the result of equipment failures, pointed to Josh Randall in his view. It looked to the Doctor as though this particular student was playing increasingly ugly games with everyone around him. What was not clear from the recordings, or from anything else, was Josh's motive for doing what he was doing.

He clearly enjoyed the secret power he had to tease and torment people, but there was more to it than that. He had another purpose. He wasn't just the over-stimulated product of a parapsychology programme powered by a random field effect.

He wasn't an alien in disguise who had been drawn to the overlapping spatial confusions of the weakened time lines. Ironically, thanks to the behaviour of the TARDIS, the alien was in fact the Doctor himself. Leela too, of course. Briefly he wondered where she had disappeared to, but then he forgot about her again. No, the Doctor thought, Josh Randall had another purpose and he knew he was missing the point of what that was.

There was nothing for it he decided, he would have to confront the boy. He was trying to decide how to do that -with the sort of powers Josh Randall probably possessed it could be difficult to find him if he didn't want to be found, never mind confront him - when the door to the laboratory opened.

Barry Hitchins breezed into the lab brandishing the bottle of Clearspring water. 'Clean as tap water,' he announced loudly. 'In fact, it probably is tap water.'

He looked remarkably cheerful for someone who had just lost his research fellowship, the Doctor thought. I'm glad you're pleased. It doesn't help me unfortunately.'

'My friend in the chemistry department is doing some further tests. Sample comparisons? If it should turn out to be tap water from say Yorkshire, the

people involved get done for fraud.' Barry smiled broadly. 'Guess who turns out to be involved?'

'I need to talk to Josh Randall,' the Doctor said.

'Professor John Finer,' Barry said triumphantly. He could go to jail and it couldn't happen to a nicer academic'

Why could he go to jail?' the Doctor asked, interested despite himself.

'The Clearspring Water Company is one of his. Look.' Barry took a crumpled print-out from the inside pocket of his jacket. I love it I love it I love it! I knew there was a Santa Claus. It was just a case of knowing what to ask for. Look at this list of companies. Serious academic? Not much. He wouldn't know serious academic study if it bit him in the wallet. As I believe I may have mentioned, the man is just another disgraceful greedy crook. If I'm going down in flames at least I'll take that skinny bum with me. Not that I'm vindictive, you understand. I have nothing against the man personally. Apart from hating his guts and hoping he dies in a cellar full of rats I have nothing but good feelings towards him.'

The Doctor interrupted, 'What happens if it isn't tap water?'

'Don't you spoil this for me now,' Barry said. 'I've barely had a chance to enjoy it.' He was abruptly crestfallen. 'You have. You've spoiled it for me now. You don't think it'll turn out to be tap water do you?'

'I have no idea,' the Doctor said. 'Where will I find Josh Randall?'

'What about him?' Barry asked vaguely. 'What's he got to do with the Clearspring Water Company?'

'Since the water is not contaminated,' the Doctor said, 'I don't imagine he's got anything to do with it. Where can I find him?'

'Are you still saving the universe and stuff?' Barry said. He peered into the control and monitoring suite. 'Did you put everything back where you found it?'

The Doctor took him by the shoulders and glared into his face. Do you know where I can find Josh Randall?'

'No.' Barry was starting to look gloomy. Our association has been severed. He is no longer part of my nonexistent research programme. Finer will be pleased about that as well presumably'

'Professor Finer and Josh Randall have some connection?' The Doctor thought he had the flicker of an idea: the beginning of the possibility of a link beyond this laboratory to something else, to somewhere else.

'It was an excuse to get at me.' Barry said dismissively. 'That was all it was. Josh Randall was one of his most talented students, I was wasting his valuable time, blah blah blah. I don't know how he knew Josh was one of my most talented, but he must have found out somehow.'

The Doctor was about to remark on Barry's paranoia and its causes, but surprise put it out of his mind. You knew that?' he said.

'Knew what?'

The Doctor hesitated momentarily: had this man been deliberately deceiving him the whole time? 'You knew Josh Randall was special,' he accused.

'Of course I knew.' Barry agreed. He sighed. 'I couldn't get him to take it seriously though. If I could have got him to take it seriously, who knows where it might have led?'

The Doctor's insecurity subsided. 'Did you confront him?'

'About not taking it seriously? Of course. Fat lot of good it did me.'

'About his powers,' the Doctor said impatiently.

'Powers is putting it a bit strong don't you think,' Barry said. 'It was hardly powers. He had a bit of a hint of a possible something. I tried to talk to him about it but he wouldn't listen. But then why should he? I expect he listens to Finer, but why should he listen to me? Why should anyone listen to a loser like me?' His mood had crashed and he was now quite morose.

'When was the Clearspring Water Company established?' the Doctor asked. 'Does your print-out say?'

Barry shrugged and proffered it. The Doctor unfolded and smoothed out the crumpled paper. He suddenly had the strong feeling that somewhere in this list was the clue he needed to put it all together.

The student bar was still busy with the hangover from the lunch-time trade. Bartok carried the tray back to the table and passed out the drinks and crisps.

'Do you get these on ex's?' Ralph asked.

'Oh yeah, right,' Bartok said. 'My governors'd love that. Drinks for students? There's a claim chit that'd go down like a bucket of cold sick.'

Tommy pushed the hair back from his forehead. 'Pity,' he said. 'An official bribe would have been nice.'

'He's anybody's for a pint,' Meg said. 'Isn't that right, Tommy?'

'Unless they're *pretty* then all it takes is a half of shandy,' Tommy said and gazed into her eyes. 'I'll have a Scotch when you're ready. Better make it a triple.'

'Where are the other two?' Bartok asked, sipping his pint and glancing round at the other tables.

"The other two?' Tommy said.

'Mm. The leggy blonde and the guy with the shaved head.'

'Chloe and Josh?' Ralph said.

'How would we know?' Meg interjected, noisily pulling open a packet of crisps and accidentally scattering some of them across the table. 'Whoops.'

'I thought you *were*' Bartok let his voice trail off, and waved his hand vaguely.

'A coven?' she suggested.

'That takes thirteen doesn't it?' Bartok said, and smiled at her. 'You don't do witchcraft as well do you?'

'As well as what?'

He shrugged. As well as whatever it is you do.'

'We study mostly,' Ralph said.

it's OK, you don't have to convince me,' Bartok said, i know being a student's no free ride.'

Well, that's all right then,' Tommy said.

Bartok said, i just thought you were all like, *uh* you know, like, friends?'

'We are all like, *uh* you know, like, friends,' Meg said mockingly.

Tommy said in his most languid Hugh Grant voice, 'That doesn't mean we know where the leggy blonde and the guy with the shaved head are at any particular time.'

Bartok nodded. 'Any more than you knew where Joan Cox was,' he said. 'At any particular time.'

'Nasty,' Meg murmured.

'That wasn't our fault,' Ralph said.

'Nobody's fault,' Bartok agreed. 'People do what they do. Something I needed to ask you. Something I forgot when we chatted before.'

'Now we get to it,' Tommy said.

'Anybody for a refill?' Bartok offered.

Meg said, 'Let's hear what you want first.'

'The séance in Norswood. How did you know about the dead girl you were trying to contact?'

'What do you mean, how did we know about her?'

'Are you investigating that one too?' Tommy asked.

Ralph said, 'You don't think we had something to do with it do you?'

'It was years ago,' Bartok said. 'When she was killed you'd have been about the same age as she was.'

I don't understand the question then,' Ralph said.

'It's simple enough. Where did you hear about her? Who told you about her?'

Tommy drained his glass and plonked it back on the tray. 'Same again then please, since you're offering.'

'Joan Cox suggested the séance didn't she,' Bartok suggested. 'So was it her who knew about the murder? Was it her who mentioned it first?'

'I don't remember. Another pint would probably help my memory,' Tommy said and looked at Meg. 'I don't remember. Do you remember who mentioned it first?' He glanced at Ralph and smiled. 'Or was it you, Ralph? I think it might have been you actually. I think it was Ralph.'

It was Josh,' Ralph said very positively. 'I remember we were talking about psychics and the power to reach beyond the grave. And the purpose of doing it anyway. I think it was Josh. Yes, I'm almost sure that's who it was. It was Josh.'

'The one with the shaved head,' Meg supplied.

'Yes,' Bartok said. 'I wonder how he knew about it.'

'You'll have to ask him that,' she said.

When he turns up,' Bartok said, getting to his feet. 'Same again all round is it?'

I do love a man with money,' Meg said. There is no such thing as an unattractive rich man.'

'What do you have to read to get into your line of work?' Ralph asked.

Bartok shrugged. 'Recruitment ads?'

'You don't have to be a graduate then?' Ralph said. 'I got the impression you might be a graduate.'

Bartok gathered up the glasses. Self-taught,' he said. Waiting table, all that sort of thing. All entirely self-taught.'

Tommy said, 'An autodidact in fact.'

'No,' Bartok said. 'I know nothing about cars.'

## Chapter Thirteen

It seemed to Leela that they had been walking too quickly for too long a time. She was beginning to think it was taking much longer to cover the distance to Doctor Ghostbuster Bazzar Hitchins' laboratory than it should. Something about what they were doing was wrong.

They were not lost. She knew she had remembered the way correctly. She knew this was the correct way she had remembered. They were not lost. She had accurately followed her memory of the trail. She knew where they were. She knew it was where they were supposed to be. They were not lost. And yet and yet they did not seem to be getting to where they should be getting.

The student, Chloe, whose behaviour had been agitated when Leela first saw her but who seemed calmer now, did not appear to have noticed what was happening to them. From the way she kept glancing back over her shoulder she was still thinking about her imaginary walking corpse, but she was not as afraid of it as she had been.

Leela stopped walking and stood looking back in the direction Chloe had been glancing. For the briefest moment she thought she saw someone in a loose, white robe with a hood. The way the garment was worn hid the person's arms, legs and head completely so that it was impossible to tell who it might be. The figure darted away, moving quickly and smoothly as though it was floating across the ground. As she watched, it disappeared behind the dark glass corner of the dark glass building they had just passed.

'What do you keep looking for?' Leela asked.

'Nothing,' Chloe said a little too quickly.

'Is it the walking corpse?'

No.' Chloe hesitated. Yes.'

'Have you seen it?'

'I don't know,' Chloe said miserably. 'I think I may have done. Or I may have imagined it. I think I may be losing my mind.'

I have seen it too,' Leela said. She drew her knife. 'Wait here.'

Chloe nodded. 'I'll wait here shall I?'

Leela trotted back to the building and ghosted along the wall parallel to the one she had seen the figure take cover behind. When she reached the first corner she paused, listening and watching. Then, holding the knife low, she ducked round the angled glass. There was no one there. There was no sign of the white-robed figure she had seen.

She ghosted on to the second corner. If the figure was hiding where it had first gone, Leela's move should take her behind it. She waited a moment and listened and sniffed the air. Very quietly she stepped round the next corner. Again there was nothing.

If someone was tracking them, she thought, then they were fast and they were clever enough to realise that she would try to flank them by circling the walls. She walked on to the next corner. She was stepping round it to the front of the building when suddenly, tall, faceless and stinking of ancient death, the white-robed figure loomed over her.

Instinctively she lunged at it with her knife.

It had fooled her. No.

She brought the blade up smoothly.

It had been hiding at the front of the building. No.

She aimed the thrust at its chest.

She had circled and it had waited at the front of the building. No.

She leant her shoulder into the thrust.

It had waited at the front of the building. No. That did not follow from its actions. No.

At the front. No.

Stop this. It was a mistake. Stop.

She aborted the knife thrust as the tip of the blade pushed into the whiteness of the robe. Immediately the figure faded and vanished and Leela found herself looking into Chloe's horrified face.

'You nearly stuck me with that thing!' Chloe protested, staring down at the knife point that was pressing lightly against the lower edge of her ribcage. 'What's the matter with you?'

'I told you to wait.' Leela tried to keep the shock out of her voice. 'You said you would wait.' How could that have happened? What was it she had seen? 'You should have done as I told you to do .' Was it a ghost she had seen?

'Who died and left you in charge?' Chloe demanded.

Leela sheathed the knife. 'I could easily have killed you.'

'I can see that,' Chloe said. 'But why? What were you thinking of?'

Leela thought, there are no ghosts. I must have let my imagination run away with me,' she said. But she had seen something.

Chloe said, 'You have a seriously dangerous imagination.'

They began to walk again, still following the route Leela had mapped out in her mind.

'Why did you come to the corner of that building?' Leela asked.

'You were gone a long time,' Chloe said. 'I mean a really long time. I got worried.'

'You did not come because you saw the walking corpse?'

'No.' Chloe glanced back over her shoulder. 'Did you see it again?'

'Yes.' Leela was becoming aware of the faint whisper of strange background sounds that came and went. There were brief rushing winds and dull groaning roars. 'Yes, I saw it.' Underneath it all there was a background humming that seemed almost constant. 'I saw it and I smelled it.' The noises seemed as though they should be far away, but some part of her instinct told her they were closer than they seemed. And if they were closer than they seemed then none of these small sounds should be there at all. None of them matched what she was seeing. I saw the walking corpse but it was you.'

'Wait a minute.' Chloe grabbed her arm. Are you saying you saw me dead?'

Leela shook her head. 'I did not see you at all. 'What could be making such sounds in this empty place? There was nothing moving on the walkways. No students came and went through the entrances of the deserted buildings. No one else was clumsily clambering up and down the short difficult flights of steps. There were no people to be seen anywhere around. There was only Chloe and her. 'Why is there no one here?'

'No one here?' Chloe said vaguely.

'Where has everyone gone?' Leela said. The noises got louder suddenly, then faded away into the murmuring background.

'I hadn't noticed,' Chloe said. 'Where has everyone gone? The campus is never completely deserted. Not even at night. They were here when we started. Where did they go? I didn't see them go. This doesn't make sense does it?'

'Yes it does,' Leela said.

'How?'

'I do not know, but it will make sense,' Leela insisted. She could see Chloe was near to panic. 'This makes sense,' she went on, quoting the Doctor and trying to be as reassuring as he could sometimes be, 'because everything makes sense. All you have to do is think and work out how.'

Chloe said, 'Is this hell? Are we dead, do you think?' YES GIRL,' the voice roared

triumphantly. YOU'RE DEAD, GIRL! YOU'RE DEAD, GIRL! YOU'RE DEAD!

Chloe flinched and clamped her hands over her ears. 'Not again,' she sobbed.

Leela undamped her hands. 'listen to it,' she said. DEAD! DEAD!' the voice howled on.'DEAD! DEAD! DEAD! DEAD! DEAD! DEAD! DEEEAAAD!' The last screamed word echoed and reverberated through the empty campus.

Who was it?' Leela asked.

'You mean you heard it too?' Chloe looked hugely relieved. 'So either we're both mad or it's real.'

Cackling laughter broke out. 'YOU'RE BOTH MAD AND YOU'RE BOTH DEAD! AND YOU'RE BOTH IN MY HELL!'

Do you recognise the voice?' Leela asked.

OR MAYBE YOU'RE ALONE, GIRL!'

'It's the demon.'

MAYBE YOU'RE IMAGINING THE OTHER ONE!'

'There are no demons,' Leela said. 'No ghosts, no walking corpses. There is no magic. Think! Who is it?'

YOU'RE ALONE!' the voice crowed.

'I don't know!'Chloe closed her eyes. 'I don't recognise the voice. It's pain and it's fear and it's nothing else.'

'They hate you,' Leela said.

'Who hates me?'

YOU ARE ALONE!'

Leela could hear the noises again. They were louder now. Whoever is doing this hates you and wants you dead.' The noises faded.

YOU ARE ALONE AND INSANE!

They hate you too,' Chloe said hopefully.

'Leave her,' a voice which she knew the other girl could not hear whispered in Leela's head. 'Leave her to me and I will allow you to go free. Leave her and I will allow you to be safe.'

Leela put her hand on the hilt of her knife. 'They hate me only because I am with you,' she said. 'That threatens them.'

'You will die screaming in my darkness,' the voice whispered. 'Alone. Always and for ever alone. Never to see another person again, never to hear another person again, never to touch another person again. Always alone, always afraid, always and for ever in darkness. Leave her to me.'

'They are afraid of you,' Leela said.

Sounds like it.'

Leela said, 'Yes, that is what it sounds like.' She could hear the sounds again now, and much more clearly. On top of the previous roars and hums there were new noises. There were screeches; there were long blaring howls; and there were short sharp hootings.

Chloe snorted. 'Imagine how they'd sound if I didn't scare them. How are they doing it? Is it loudspeakers? Or what?'

Leela felt the sounds were getting steadily louder and sharper, and as they did the campus she saw around her seemed to be growing paler and less distinct. If Chloe was aware of any of this she gave no sign of it. 'Can you hear it?' Leela asked.

'Hear what? What are they doing now?'

'I do not know what it is. It may be the sounds of animals.'

'Animals? Where?' Chloe stared around the campus. 'Are there animals loose around here? What sort of animals? Is that what drove everyone away?'

Leela said, 'I cannot see what is making the noise I can hear.'

'I haven't heard a thing,' Chloe said. Apart from our demon with the lungs of steel and the supercharged larynx.'

It occurred to Leela that the walking corpse had disappeared when she touched it with the knife. That might not have been the only reason it vanished, but it had something to do with the figure's disappearance, so perhaps if she used the knife to prod part of what she could see it might have an effect. There had to be some way to get what she was seeing and what she was hearing to match up. She pulled the knife. 'Wait here,' she said.

'Not again,' Chloe wailed. 'You're not going to start waving that carving knife about again.'

'Be ready,' Leela said, and trotted towards one of the glass and steel blocks. 'I do not know what will happen.'

'What are you doing?' Chloe called after her. 'I'm not going to stand here while you run amok with that thing! I've seen you lose it once already! You didn't know I was there! You almost killed me!'

Leela reached the glass wall. Tentatively she poked at it with the point of the knife. It made a tapping sound as she would have expected. That much was right, but something else was wrong about what was happening. It was a mismatch. What she was hearing and what she was seeing did not go together. It felt right but somehow it did not look right. What was it that was wrong? Then she realised that she could see no image of herself reflected in the surface of the glass. Everything else was there as it should be. Everything except her. Was this all just a dream then? You could never see yourself in a dream, she knew. Was she going to wake up in the TARDIS to find that this was nothing more than a bout of fever? Better still, was she going to wake up back in her father's hut to find that the Doctor was just one more monster sent through the barrier by Xoanon's will? Was she going back to being Leela of the Sevateem again?

'Are you ready?' she called out. There was no answer and she looked back to see that Chloe was walking quickly away. Leela wondered whether the voice had made the student the same offer as it had made her. It would be a way to separate them, and that seemed to be its purpose.

Leela pressed the knife point harder against the glass. It began to slip. The noise it made was oddly metallic: metal against metal. The background noises had faded until they were almost gone. She knelt down to get a better purchase and leant her full weight on the knife. Still the glass panel did not give. She stopped pushing on the knife and examined the surface of the glass. There was no mark. She ran her finger over the spot. It was as smooth as the rest. There was still no image of her or her hand in the otherwise perfect reflection. She closed her eyes and thrust the knife at the panel with all her available strength.

The noise was suddenly deafening. It was clear and immediate and close, as was the choking stench that filled her nostrils. This was real. She knew this was real, all her instincts told her so. She opened her eyes. This time sounds and vision matched perfectly and they had nothing to do with the university. Somehow she had walked away from it. Somehow she had been tricked.

She was kneeling by a track with her knife pressed against the curvy grey metal of a small fence. On the other side of the track was another small fence like the one she was kneeling beside and beyond that was another small fence and beyond that another track. She sheathed the knife and stood up.

Both tracks were smooth and flat and hard, and the vehicles which travelled on them were rushing by at great speed. The Doctor had explained a little about cars and lorries and how they functioned, but Leela had not realised how fast they could move and how much noise they made. The wind of their passing tugged and buffeted at her. She could see that even a glancing blow from one of these things would kill any warrior no matter how strong and agile they might be.

She realised now that the howls and hoots she had heard faintly in the distance were the sounds the vehicles made to warn of their approach. It struck her as senseless given the speed they were moving, but they did it

anyway and at this point they seemed to be doing it continuously. Obviously the vehicle-riders did not want her to be inside the little fence which marked the edge of the track. Leela could see the sense in that. The track was not a good place to be if you wanted to survive.

She hopped over the fence. Getting killed must be the reason she had been lured here, and she intended to make someone pay for such a cowardly ambush. The way it had been done, blinding her eyes and fooling her senses, angered her deeply and stirred her warrior instincts. It was a Tesh trick. She was a warrior of the Sevateem and she knew how to fight the Tesh. She could resist their mind control. Her survival proved it.

She was about to climb up the grass embankment and go in search of the Tesh when she remembered Chloe. Where was she? Leela had forgotten that they wanted to kill her too. In fact they wanted to kill her more. For some reason it was more important to the Tesh that they kill the student than it was that they kill her. Leela turned back to the track. They had even tried to trick her into killing Chloe with that walking-corpse ghost routine. Where had she gone? When Leela had last seen her she was scuttling off down what they had both thought was a walkway. Where was the stupid student now? How far had she got and in what direction?

Hastily Leela scanned up and down both the tracks. It was difficult not to be distracted by the lines of bellowing vehicles charging past. Then she saw her. She had crossed through the vehicles. She was in the space between the tracks, and she was clambering uncertainly over the second of the two small fences that separated one track from the other.

'Chloe!' Leela shouted, trying to make herself heard above the noise.  
'Chloe!'

From the way the girl was moving it looked to Leela as though she was still lost in the vision of walkways and glass-walled buildings. She was glancing back over her shoulder a lot, too, so the chances were the ghost was still pursuing her. It seemed the Tesh had given up on Leela but were determined to kill the student.

'Stand still!' Leela yelled as Chloe stepped down off the fence and walked out on to the track, and into the path of the onrushing cars and lorries.

Leela bounded over the fence and sprinted out on to the track. She dodged through the first line of vehicles and then realised that the second and third lines were moving faster and faster. The warning sounds were deafening and the dust and fumes caught in her throat and in her eyes.

She paused. There was an overlapping gap coming towards her in the two faster lines. It was closing up as it reached her, and she was almost hit as she lunged through it and leapt the first of the small fences.

On the other track Chloe was wandering sightlessly among the rushing lines. Leela could see the Tesh were probably using the ghost to try to manipulate her into stepping directly in front of one of the speeding vehicles.

Leela scrambled and hopped along the narrow gap between the fences until she was level with Chloe. 'Chloe!' she shouted at her. 'Chloe look at me!' But there was no attracting her attention.

Leela was about to make a rush and grab her when the student suddenly stopped walking, threw herself down on the track and lay there unmoving. The Tesh had worked out a way to make her into a bigger target, Leela realised. This time the strategy would succeed because two huge lorries were rushing side by side towards where Chloe clearly thought she was hiding.

Leela had already made up her mind that the Tesh would not win this fight. Without thinking about it she jumped the fence pulling her knife as she went. Running across the track she bent low and flung the knife skidding over the surface of the ground in front of her. The blade touched Chloe's face as it spun and rattled past her, and she reared up and away from it.

Leela reached Chloe just as she was pushing herself upwards. She grabbed her under the arms and heaved her to her feet. Using the forward momentum of her run and their combined loss of balance she flung them both to the edge of the track and tumbled them over the low fence. The lorries thundered on by, hooting and howling.

'Shit,' Chloe moaned, 'that hurts.' She turned over and sat up. 'I bet I'm a mass of cuts and bruises,' she said, examining her hands and knees and touching her face. 'Is my face bleeding?' She peered at Leela. 'Yours isn't.'

'Can you see it?' Leela asked, gesturing at the track. 'Can you see where we are?'

Chloe took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Oh yes,' she said. 'And do you have any idea at all how we ended up on the motorway with no motor?'

'You do not remember what happened?'

I remember being chased about the campus by a walking corpse. But there was no walking corpse was there? And I don't suppose it was the campus was it?' She shook her head and groaned. The pain seems real anyway,' she said.

"This is all real,' Leela said.

'I hope so,' Chloe said. 'I didn't like The Matrix all that much. I like it a whole hell of a lot less now I find I'm in it.'

'Do you know why the Tesh want you dead?' Leela asked, going to retrieve her knife from where it lay under the low fence.

'No?' Chloe asked.

'That is unfortunate; Leela said. 'It is easier to find and fight an enemy whose purpose you understand.'

'We could ask them,' Chloe suggested.

'When I find them I will kill them,' Leela said flatly. Their reasons will be of no help.'

'Isn't that a bit drastic?' Chloe asked.

Leela looked into her face and saw her uncertainty. It struck her that the Tesh was someone the student knew. 'You think you know who it is who did this to you.'

'I still don't know why,' Chloe said. 'But I think I might have recognised that voice after all. Well, not so much the voice as the way he kept calling me "girl".' She sat staring at the traffic.

'It is someone you know,' Leela prompted.

'I'm not a bad person,' Chloe said. 'Why would someone I know want to kill me? What have I ever done to make Josh Randall hate me that much?'

'You've worked in the same academic institution for several years, but you've never so much as visited this?' the Doctor said. 'I find that hard to believe.' He was finding the conversation difficult to maintain. Barry Hitchins' mood had not improved despite an invigorating walk.

'You're something of an innocent aren't you,' Barry remarked gloomily.

They were approaching the low, grass mound studded with intertwined spirals of clear glass and opaque photovoltaics which was the roof of the developmental engineering department. Most of the department was underground and it was accessed through a revolving doorway set into one side of the turf-covered roof dome. The whole installation was located at the extreme edge of the university's property, and its only link to the main complex of buildings was one straight path through the elegant parkland.

'Weren't you the slightest bit curious?' the Doctor asked.

"This is Finer's fiefdom. I don't think even Bill Parnaby's had the conducted tour, and he's the nearest thing the man has to a friend.' Barry said. 'Whereas me? I'm not exactly top of his Christmas card list. I'm a pariah you realise, academically speaking.'

'Not any more,' the Doctor said cheerfully. 'You're unemployed now, academically speaking.'

They walked down the slate-tiled cutting that led to the revolving door. The door stopped revolving as they approached it.

'We don't have the required security clearance,' Barry said as the Doctor gave it a futile shove.

'Required by whom?'

Barry shrugged, 'The university? Finer? Does it really matter?'

The Doctor stepped back from the doorway. 'Of course it really matters,' he said in a loud voice. 'How do the students get in?'

"They're registered and ID'ed,' Barry said. 'They'll be scanned on approach. Why are you shouting?'

'What happened to universities as institutions of learning,' the Doctor declaimed, waving his arms about a bit, 'open to all for the free flow of ideas and the transfer of knowledge? This,' he gave the door a couple of hefty kicks, 'is not how it should be.'

"That's giving them the big picture, Doctor,' Barry said wryly. 'I'm sure it'll make a major difference in the long run.'

'Just getting their attention,' the Doctor said.

Barry said, 'It's a fully automated system. What makes you think anyone will be watching?'

"There's always a manual override,' the Doctor said. 'And where there's a manual override there's usually a man.'

Barry turned away. "That's like saying there's always a key under the flowerpot.'

'There usually is,' the Doctor said. He addressed the doorway. 'We're here to discuss Professor John Finer's connection to the Clearspring Water Company,' he waved the print-out above his head, 'and his student Josh Randall's enhanced psi abilities. We feel the two are not unconnected.'

'We do?' Barry said softly. 'When did we feel that? I thought it was tap water we were here about?'

'We haven't got an appointment,' the Doctor went on loudly, 'so we'll wait.'

'This was to be my last boohoo,' Barry said. 'That's like a last hurrah only more miserable.' He pushed at the unrevolving door. 'They're not going to open up. We'll have to find some other way to do this.'

'Or,' the Doctor said loudly, 'we could go to my police friends. I think they'd be interested in what I've got to tell them.'

'You have friends in the police?' Barry said.

'I have friends everywhere,' the Doctor said. 'I'm very likeable. You like me don't you?'

Barry sighed heavily. 'What am I doing? I'm following a loon -' He interrupted and corrected himself, 'an *eccentric*, I'm following an *eccentric* about the place. I'm taking suggestions from some passing *eccentric*. I'm madder than you are. Friends in the police: as if. How often have you spent the night in the cells, Doctor?'

'You'd have to define what you mean by cells,' the Doctor said smiling. 'I've been locked up, incarcerated and trapped in any number of different ways in many different places. Different planets, different time lines, different *regenerations*'

'Different regenerations?'

'It's a sort of reincarnation. This is my fourth I think. It's quite difficult to remember sometimes.'

Barry turned away, shaking his head in painful disbelief.

'Mad as a snake,' he muttered to himself. 'King Mad of the Mad people.' He began to walk away, back to the path that led to the main blocks. 'I should be working on my CV not wasting time here.'

In front of the Doctor the revolving door began to turn again. He stepped into it and followed it round into the bright foyer where Josh Randall was waiting.

'You wanted to talk to Professor Finer,' Josh said.

The Doctor beamed at him. 'I knew there was a flowerpot round here somewhere,' he said. 'Would you like a jelly baby?' He pulled the battered paper bag from his coat pocket and proffered it.

'No thanks. And you can drop the mad act, it's not fooling anybody'

'Least of all you, I imagine,' the Doctor said.

'You're probably overestimating my paranormal powers,' Josh said.

'I hope so,' the Doctor replied, but he could see from the student's casual arrogance that he was not.

'I'm not arrogant,' Josh said, mildly. 'I'm just different.'

'And I'm not acting,' the Doctor said. 'I'm different too.' It was going to be difficult to keep his thoughts to himself, he thought.

'Try impossible,' Josh said. 'This way.'

He led the Doctor to an escalator on the far side of the foyer. It was descending very slowly, and it looked to the Doctor as though its incline was so shallow that it was going nowhere. When he stepped on it the surface was solid and reassuring and for a moment or two it continued its slow progress.

Then almost imperceptibly the escalator gained speed, folding itself up behind the Doctor so that he found himself sitting down. Once he was safely seated the machinery shifted him and his seat sideways, transferring him to a vertical tube down which he dropped in a series of slowly braking spirals. At the bottom of the tube the seat transferred sideways again and unfolded itself so that he was standing. Gradually the slightly inclined escalator slowed so that he could step off it in comfort.

The Doctor found it hard to estimate how far he had descended below ground. Perhaps that was the purpose, he thought.

Immediately behind him Josh stepped off the escalator. 'Some people are claustrophobic so it's better that they don't know,' he said. 'And the different sensations make it less stressful than a lift.'

'How very considerate,' the Doctor said. You can tell me. I'm not claustrophobic. How far below ground are we?'

Josh ignored the question and gestured for the Doctor to follow him. 'It's a refinement of a ride Professor Finer developed for a theme park.'

'I noticed theme-park development as part of his portfolio of business interests,' the Doctor remarked as they walked down a brightly lit corridor. 'He's obviously a man of many talents.'

'You have no idea,' Josh said.

'Give me a clue, Josh,' the Doctor said, smiling his most charming smile. 'May I call you Josh? Are we just below the surface here, Josh, or deeper than that, or very deep indeed?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'Call it professional curiosity.'

'We're very, very, very deep indeed.'

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. 'I lied. I am claustrophobic. Can we go back now please?'

Josh said, 'You didn't lie; you're not claustrophobic; and no, we can't go back now.'

'Tell me something, Josh,' the Doctor said. 'Why do you bother with speech? Is your telepathy only one-way?'

Can you only receive thoughts? Maybe you're not telepathic at all? Maybe you're just good at reading expressions? Is that what you are?' He leant forward smiling and lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'Are you a fortune-teller without a tent?'

At the far end of the corridor a door sougged open. Finer strode towards them. 'I'll take care of this, Josh; he said. 'You'd better go and clear your mind.'

'Clear your mind for what?' the Doctor asked.

Josh smirked. 'You ask a lot of questions.'

'Try answering some of them.'

'I'll answer all your questions,' Finer said.

'I seriously doubt that,' the Doctor said. 'You've spent too much time covering up to reveal everything to a perfect stranger like me.'

Josh strolled away. The Doctor wondered whether the focus of his telepathy was affected by distance, and if so what its range might be. Could he be clearing his mind, whatever that involved, and still be eavesdropping?

'It's the fact that you are a perfect stranger that makes such candour possible,' Finer said, ushering the Doctor into a spartan office. 'That and the fact that nobody knows where you are.' One wall of the room was a single, flat display screen within which were strips of linked images. He pointed a small light wand and the screen filled with a life-size Barry Hitchins peering around and banging on the revolving door. 'Nobody of any consequence knows where you are.' The thin, sour smile did nothing to soften the features of Finer's narrow, bony face.

'Why do you hate him so much?' the Doctor asked casually.

'He was the wrong choice,' Finer said. 'He was useless and irritating. Ghostbuster indeed. I wasted a lot of time getting him to do what I wanted him to do.'

'Which was?'

Find me a suitable psychic. If such a thing existed.'

'You couldn't do that for yourself?'

'Hardly. I do have a reputation. Some standing in the academic community.'

For the Doctor another piece of the puzzle drifted towards a place. 'It's not on the list, but you own the Kellerfield Foundation presumably.'

I am the Kellerfield Foundation,' Finer said. It doesn't actually exist as such. If anybody had taken the trouble to investigate they'd have found that out. Nobody did, of course. Funding is hard to come by these days so no one cares to look too closely at its sources. Did you know there's a chair in peace studies that's funded by an arms dealer?'

Your Clearspring Water Company doesn't actually exist as such. Does it?' the Doctor said.

'Oh yes.' Finer nodded vigorously. 'It exists. I'm expecting great things of it. It's going to be very profitable as a matter of fact. Consumers are endlessly gullible.' He lifted a bottle from an open carton on the floor by its top and tossed it to the Doctor. It was a more streamlined design than the others, with a simplified label. 'Better packaging don't you think? It might only be water but you can't sell it to them in a bucket.'

I assume it's not tap water,' the Doctor said, turning the bottle round in his hands and looking at the label.

'Genuine spring water,' Finer said. 'Try it.'

Thank you, no,' the Doctor said and tossed the bottle back to Finer, who missed it and did not bother to retrieve it from the floor.

'What sort of drug was it?' the Doctor asked.

Drug?'

'In the first of the free samples you gave out.' Although he was curious to know, the Doctor half-hoped Finer would deny any knowledge of drugs. The man was confiding far too much. It suggested to the Doctor that he was not intended to survive for very long.

'Biotechnology isn't my field,' Finer said conversationally. 'But I do have a controlling interest in a company that's trying to develop cognition enhancers. They improve brain *function* that sort of thing. One of the drugs

showed early promise but unofficial tests threw up some unfortunate side effects. There was a certain amount of short-term psychosis.'

'Psychosis?'

'Schizophrenic episodes: mild paranoia, hallucinations.' Finer shrugged.  
'Short-term psychosis.'

'How short term was short term?' the Doctor asked.

'The subjects all recovered,' Finer said impatiently. 'What was important, what interested me, was a recurring theme in their hallucinations. They all thought they had paranormal gifts. It occurred to me that in one or two cases it might be true and the drug might be a trigger. A parapsychological enhancer perhaps.'

'You gave that stuff to everyone?' It was what the Doctor had suspected, but he was still shocked by the enormity of what had been done. 'That's monstrous.'

'I needed to kick-start that idiot.' Finer used the wand to freeze the image of Barry Hitchins. 'He was getting nowhere. I was running out of time.'

'A student has committed suicide.'

'There was no connection.'

'With short-term psychosis as a side effect how do you know?' the Doctor challenged. 'She was part of his experimental group.'

For the first time Finer looked irritated as well as impatient. 'I don't have to justify myself to you.'

'Then why are you telling me about it?'

'Good question. I'm relieved you're not stupid.' Finer waved the wand. 'I want your help with this.'

The Doctor stared at the new image which filled the screen. He was looking at some sort of dark tunnel in which stood a projector. It was not unlike a

primitive laser projector but probably much bigger: there was no way to judge scale from the image. What was terrifying was what it was doing.

Starting at the projector, steady pulses of energy flickered backwards and forwards through a line of circular tubes of perfect, shadowless light. Each pulse seemed to gain power by bouncing backwards and forwards through the circles until it reached a critical mass when it suddenly disappeared.

In that moment everything reversed itself. In a bright tunnel the tubes of perfect light became tubes of perfect darkness. The pulses of energy became non-pulses of absolute emptiness. As this negative process deflickered to an un-climax and reversed itself, the next positive pulse was already running across it. Positives and negatives whirled and danced over and round one another, bound together but separate, blurring at any point of focus but needle-sharp in passing.

Here and there it looked random, but the Doctor knew it wasn't. Positive pulses and negative non-pulses grazed edges and multiple blocks of blank darkness spun off the collisions and gathered into black drifts of nothing which folded back into themselves and disappeared. Some of these growing drifts folded in on themselves, disappeared and then reappeared and folded in on themselves, disappeared, and then reappeared and folded in on themselves and so on and on in an ever-recurring pattern.

The Doctor could not remember when he had last seen anything so hugely destructive and so horrifyingly dangerous. 'You idiot,' he said. 'What have you done?' It was possible that the damage the machine was doing right now was already irreversible, and he could see that this was supposed to be its steady state. It was not even in use.

'I don't expect you to understand what it is you're seeing,' Finer said.

'We have something in common then,' the Doctor murmured. 'I don't expect you to understand it either.'

'What you're looking at is a time machine,' Finer explained.

'What I'm looking at isn't a time machine,' the Doctor contradicted.

'I know it's difficult to believe, particularly without the appropriate education and training,' Finer changed the angle of the image with the wand, 'but I promise you that's what it is,' he said, more than a little smugly.

The Doctor said, 'It's half a time machine at best. The half that draws together the time lines and collapses the multi-verse. What you appear to be missing is a transdimensional containment and a semisentient control system. Without them your machine will go on collapsing the multiverse for ever. It will feed on it, in it, and through it.'

You have no idea what you're talking about,' Finer said.

'No,' the Doctor said. 'You have no idea what I'm talking about. Put it this way. If you took every bomb and every explosive device of every kind ever made and set them all off in the same place at the same time, the destructive capacity would be minuscule compared to what you have there.'

'I'm sorry you feel like that.' Finer smiled. 'I had hoped that by answering your questions frankly I could persuade you to be a pioneer of time travel. I was planning to use the machine to send you back through time.'

'You cannot use that machine,' the Doctor said, urgently. 'You cannot increase the power it's getting already.'

'You think not?' Finer stared at the screen with genuine pride. His voice took on a tone tinged with awe. 'That is one of science's holy grails. It's the perpetual motion engine, it's the cold fusion process, it's action without reaction.'

You get more power out of that machine,' he pointed at it triumphantly, 'than you put into it.'

'Of course you do,' the Doctor said witheringly. 'But it's not magic, man. It's not something for nothing!'

'When I've done what I have to do,' Finer went on, 'it will be my gift to the world.'

The Doctor raised his voice. 'It's already in a feedback loop which you may not be able to reverse,' he said slowly and distinctly.

'Nothing will be the same ever again,' Finer exulted.

'Nothing will ever be again!' the Doctor raged.

'I can't talk you into it then?' Finer flicked the wand and the image of Barry Hitchins was restored. He was pacing about outside the locked revolving door. 'I was afraid the irritating little bugger might be persistent.'

'Are you listening to me?' The Doctor was suddenly feeling disconnected. Finer wasn't paying attention to what he was saying. He'd put it simply enough. Surely the man must have understood?

'There may have to be a brief delay,' Finer said. 'In the meantime, let me tell you about a really useful drug my biotechnology company has developed. It's a contact tranquilliser. Stable enough to put on any nonporous surface.'

The water bottle, the Doctor thought. Finer hadn't missed that catch. He just didn't want to touch the body of the bottle.

'Concentrated it becomes an anaesthetic of course,' Finer was saying. 'You'll be feeling a bit disorientated I expect.'

Darkness slipped across the Doctor's eyes. It reminded him of the drifts of black *blocks*

## Chapter Fourteen

The student bar was almost empty.

Bartok finished his third pint and said, 'That séance.'

'Which one?' Ralph asked.

'The one we've been talking about. The one in Norswood.'

'Oh right, yes.'

'I don't suppose you managed to contact anybody did you?'

'On the other side you mean?' Meg said sardonically. 'No we didn't.'

'Chloe thought we had,' Tommy said.

'Chloe's a bit suggestible,' Ralph said.

Meg said, 'Why don't you say hysterical, Ralph? It's what you think.'

'You don't know what I think.'

'Hysterical girlies.'

'That was Josh, not me.'

'You agreed with him,' Meg said. 'Admit it. All men think like that.'

'We are given to generalising on the subject of women,' Tommy agreed.

'Unlike you, of course, and men.'

'Amanda Joslin wasn't killed there you know,' Bartok interrupted. 'She was dumped in the wood but she wasn't killed there.'

The three students looked at him. They couldn't hide their surprise.

'Josh didn't mention that,' Tommy said.

'So you do remember it was Josh then, do you?' Ralph said.

Amanda Joslin,' Meg said. 'Was that her name?'

'Most murders are domestic,' Bartok said. He had their undivided attention and he was finally enjoying himself. My governor reckons her father did it.'

'Does he have any evidence for that?' Tommy asked. 'Or is Joslin an Irish name?'

'He's one of the professors in this place.'

'Joslin?' Ralph said. 'What department's he in?'

Bartok shook his head. 'Finer. His name's Finer'

'You said her name was Joslin,' Meg said. Make up your mind, which is it? Joslin or Finer?'

'Finer's ex-wife remarried. His daughter took her stepfather's name.'

'Professor Finer was her father,' Tommy said. "There's a striking coincidence.'

'You were trying to contact this dead girl and you didn't know where she died or who she was,' Bartok said. He was gloating a bit. 'Sloppy or what?'

'It's obvious how Josh got to hear about it then,' Tommy said.

'Of course it is,' Meg said.

'Obvious,' Ralph agreed.

Bartok waited, but it was clear they were not about to volunteer information. 'So how did he get to hear about it?' he asked.

Tommy pushed his glass forward. 'Mine's a pint,' he said.

The other two pushed their glasses across the table.

'You did say you could claim these on expenses didn't you?' Ralph said.

Meg chortled. 'I think I may have misjudged you, Ralph. I think you've got hidden shallows.'

The Doctor came round slowly. Whatever the drug was, it had hit him hard. He lay where he had fallen. For a moment or two his eyes wouldn't focus. Slowly he propped himself up on his elbows. He could tell he was in an underground room of some kind, but there was something incongruous about the floor covering.

It was an odd greyish, brownish colour and it was moving. It was a fur carpet that was twisting and turning, pulling back and slipping forward. It took him a moment or two longer to realise what it was he was seeing. They were live animals. It was a carpet of rats. He sat up quickly and scrambled backwards so that he was sitting against the wall. As far as he could tell he was in a cellar full of rats.

The Doctor looked at them over his knees and the rats all stopped moving and stared back at him. He had never found rats threatening but these particular ones seemed to be acting together and there were lots of them. He knew he was still groggy from the drug so he could be misinterpreting what he was seeing.

He concentrated blearily. They were definitely rats and they were definitely not afraid of him, but that didn't mean they were a superspecies. It did mean he was possibly in trouble. He fished about in his pockets and came up with some pieces of string which he tied round the bottoms of his trouser legs. Now, according to what he had once read about ratting, all he needed was a heavy stick and a Jack Russell terrier. He stood up.

He felt a mist of small sharp minds settle across his consciousness, probing for ways to understand and use him; testing him for threat. I'm imagining this, he thought. It's a side effect of the drug. He pictured the dog and the stick and violent mayhem. The assembled rats stirred and skittered and moved further away from him, then settled again to watch.

Shoo!' he shouted at them. Go away!' He clapped his hands. 'You are not psychic! You are rats! Go away and leave me alone!'

'Sharing your mind with inferior creatures,' Josh remarked, stepping out of the deep shadows. 'Not very appealing is it? Does that answer your question?'

'Did you do that?'

'I can take animals' thoughts or people's thoughts and amplify them and pass them on. They never realise it's happening.' He rubbed his hand backwards and forwards over his shaved scalp. 'Hours of innocent fun. Gets boring of course.'

The rats scurried away as he walked unhurriedly through them.

The Doctor's mind was clearing. 'Why do you use speech?' he said. "That was the question. The answer is: you use speech to keep contact with inferior creatures like the rest of humanity to a minimum.'

Josh said, 'I don't want to share your thoughts. I don't want you to share mine. I don't want to be part of you.'

'You shared Barry Hitchins' thoughts,' the Doctor suggested. 'Or was the cellar full of rats a coincidence?'

'I am unique,' Josh stated.

'Everybody is,' the Doctor said.

Josh laughed. 'You all spend your lives imagining you're unique,' he sneered. 'None of you is even unusual. You're all so predictable. You're all the same. Only I am unique.'

It seemed to the Doctor that the student's attitude was more unmediated, his behaviour more erratic, than it had been before. Could that be the result of clearing his mind? Or was clear your mind a euphemism for something altogether more damaging? 'Are you still taking the drug?'

'The enhancer releases my power'

'How long have you been taking it?'

'Look.' Josh pointed at one of the departing rats. The animal turned and began to run towards them squealing. 'Your dog is chasing it.'

'Let it go,' the Doctor said. 'It hasn't done you any harm.'

The rat turned again, ran a short distance and then reared up on its hind legs before collapsing into a twitching heap.

'You hit it with the stick,' Josh remarked. 'It thinks it's dying.'

The rat kicked its back legs convulsively and lay still. The Doctor went to it and pushed it gently with his foot. It was dead. Was it because he had deliberately pictured the dog and the stick that Josh had picked up the images, he wondered? How much more of what was in his mind did this boy 'share'? Could he keep anything in his mind a secret from him?

'I am the next stage of evolution,' Josh said. 'There will be no other'

'I think you may be confused about how evolution works,' the Doctor suggested. 'There has to be more than one.'

Josh gestured into the shadows. 'Professor Finer is ready to start.'

In that event I'll say goodbye.' The Doctor went back to the wall and sank down into a sitting position.

'He needs you for the experiment,' Josh explained.

'I tried to explain to him that he may already have damaged this planet irreparably,' the Doctor said, 'and that to press on any further would be a waste of a perfectly good universe. Unfortunately he wouldn't listen to me.'

Josh looked uncertain. 'You are exaggerating, aren't you?'

'It's not possible to do that, I'm afraid.'

'Why should I believe you?'

'Why shouldn't you believe me,' the Doctor said. 'You can read my mind.'

'If what you think is true,' Josh tugged at his arm, 'you can't just sit there and let it happen.'

The Doctor got wearily to his feet. 'What do you suggest I do?' Was it possible, he wondered, that the student's short-term psychosis had worn off or was even working in his favour? Was Josh on his side now?

'I suggest we try and convince Professor Finer before it's too late.' Josh hurried off into the shadowy dimness. This way. Come on!

The Doctor followed him out and found him waiting at the entrance to a concrete service tunnel. Josh handed him a pair of rubber overshoes and a hard hat with a lantern attached. The Doctor put them on.

'How do you explain God?' Josh asked, putting on his own overshoes and hat and leading the way into the tunnel.

'I'm sorry?'

'If there has to be more than one, how do you explain God?'

The Doctor said, 'You don't explain a god. A god is an excuse not to explain.' Somewhere ahead of them he could hear a rushing sound rising and falling like waves on a shingle beach. Around them he could already feel the crackling static building at the edge of a huge magnetic storm.

A wave of panic crashed over him. He couldn't stop what was happening. It had gone too far. It was already beyond him. This wasn't his fault. If he could just *escape* If he could turn and run and get back to the TARDIS he could survive. There wasn't anything he could do except run away. He had to run away. He had to get back to the TARDIS. Survival was everything. He had to survive. Turn and run. Turn. Run.

He took a deep shuddering breath and strode on behind Josh. The field effect was obviously getting stronger. He must remember how susceptible he was to the field effect.

Bill Parnaby peered over the top of his new laptop. 'Have you spoken to the police?' he asked. 'Yeah, right,' Barry said. 'They're going to listen to me.'

Parnaby started to fold the screen, then thought better of it and closed the machine down and turned it off. 'What about security?'

'Excuse me guys, but Professor Finer, rich and powerful Filhrer of this parish, has kidnapped a harmless loony and is holding him captive in his bunker. Please investigate. Signed unemployed and vindictive.'

Parnaby giggled. 'It was that attitude that got you into trouble in the first place if you remember.'

'I do remember,' Barry said. "There was never enough custard round here for the sort of wrestling I had in mind.'

Parnaby put the laptop in his desk drawer. I don't know what you want me to do, Barry?'

'You're a friend of Finer's. Can't you talk to him and find out what's going on?'

Parnaby shook his head. 'It's a bad time.'

'Tell me about it,' Barry said wryly.

Parnaby said, 'He always gets a bit weird about this time of year.'

'You mean weirder'

'I used to think it was the autumn. It depresses some people. But I think it might be something else. Maybe an anniversary. Anyway he won't talk to anybody'

'Not even to you?'

'He locks himself away in his department. Won't pick up the phone, won't answer his mobile, won't respond to e-mails.'

'That is suspicious right there,' Barry said. "The man's like Howard Hughes only with less hair and shorter fingernails.'

'And if you're honest,' Parnaby said, 'you didn't see the Doctor go in to the department did you?'

'Oh come on, Bill. One minute he was there, next minute he was gone,' Barry said. 'As a vanishing act all it lacked was a puff of smoke and someone yelling shazham!

'You don't know where the Doctor went.'

'I know he's disappeared. I think that's out of character.' Parnaby sighed. 'I have to admit he didn't strike me as the disappearing type. Quite the contrary in fact. For a while there I thought I'd never get rid of him.' He locked the drawer and got up from behind the desk. 'All right, Barry. Let's wander over and have a quiet chat with security. Maybe they can make some discreet inquiries.'

By the time they emerged from the service tunnel into the low cavern the Doctor was feeling more in control of himself. Stuttering static sparks snapped and sparkled in the air and the surge and resurgence of the power pulses vibrated and shocked through his skull.

He closed his eyes and listened to the thick rushing. The pulse rate had increased. Finer must have started the final powering up of his infernal machine. It was already too late. It was over. He felt a pang of guilt. He had failed. He had failed everyone and everything. At the moment it all vanished would the TARDIS feel abandoned? And Leela, what about Leela? He had forgotten her. Where was she? Was she alone and afraid? He opened his eyes again. Field effect. He must remember the field effect.

Ahead of them a line of rubber-surfaced duckboards led from the tunnel to a slightly raised platform. High above this a translucent, saucer-shaped gallery was attached to the cavern roof. Is that another impressive feat of engineering or just a pointless theme-park gimmick? the Doctor thought. Finer seemed to be an odd mixture of showman and recluse. As they crossed the duckboards the Doctor said, 'Drainage is always a problem with these abandoned excavations. What was it originally? A mine of some sort I imagine?'

'Early attempt at a nuclear bomb shelter,' Josh said. 'Too deep as it turned out.'

'But not as deep as you implied,' the Doctor suggested.

Once more Josh ignored the comment. 'It was the reason Professor Finer had the department sited where it is,' he said. 'He wanted it below ground, and a lot of the tunnels and shafts were already in place.'

They climbed the short flight of steps on to the platform. When they reached the centre of the platform the whole structure began to rise towards the roof. 'Another fairground attraction?' the Doctor asked as a hatch opened in the bottom of the saucer and the platform slotted into place. 'Is there by any chance a coconut shy? I was always rather fond of coconut shies.'

'There you go with that mad act again,' Josh said.

Around them was a chamber, unmanned but stacked with elaborate-looking monitoring and operating equipment. It was presumably the equivalent, the Doctor thought, of one tiny section of the TARDIS's function console and it was about ten times the size of the whole of her control deck. Primitive,' he said briskly. About on a par with the galoshes and the tin hats.'

'It's a really sensitive self-regulating system,' Josh said. 'The powering up is so gradual it's almost unmeasurable.'

Try reversing it,' the Doctor said. I think you'll find unmeasurable will take on a whole new meaning. So where is Professor Finer?'

Josh beckoned him across the chamber and led him into a side gallery. Twenty yards along it there was a viewing platform, below which was another separate cavern. Set up in this one was the projector and pulse tunnel of Finer's attempt at a time machine.

The Doctor stared down at it as it pulsed, pulling at reality and pushing at non-reality, all the while making a softly deafening sound *like* like what? he thought.

'Like the sound in my head when I rub my hand over my scalp,' Josh said.

The projector was at least twenty feet high and thirty feet long. The hoops of the pulse tunnel were perhaps twelve feet in diameter, and stretched for what looked to be a hundred yards or more.

'It's huge,' the Doctor murmured. Not that it makes much difference in the end.'

Finer was working at an open panel high on the side of the projector. To reach it he was using a small crane lift. He finished what he was doing and slammed the panel closed with an irritable flourish. Operating the lift with casual ease he rose towards the viewing platform.

In the pulse tunnel the rate of the strobing flicker went up perceptibly.

'It's supposed to be gradual but there's a stepped acceleration effect,' Finer said as he reached the platform. 'I've had to replace the fail-safe with a remote activation autodestruct just to be on the safe side.'

'It's feedback,' the Doctor said. 'You can't compensate for the power gains from the pulse grazing.' He could just glimpse the end of the pulse tunnel. It was a chaos of multiple images of trees and blocks of blanknesses. For the briefest moment he thought he saw the TARDIS in the middle of the multiplying maelstrom, and he missed the old thing terribly. The field effect. Remember the field effect, he thought.

'My systems are automatically self-regulating,' Finer said, stepping out of the cradle on to the platform. It's one of my areas of expertise.'

It doesn't work like that,' the Doctor said. The man was obstinate to the point of obtuseness. 'You know it doesn't work like that. Why else would you need a psychic?'

'It's nothing to do with controlling the basic systems,' Finer said. He pointed to the pulse tunnel. 'I need a psychic because I can find no other way to maintain a link with whoever goes through that.'

'By "whoever goes through that" I assume you mean me?' the Doctor said.

'I was going myself, but Josh couldn't be expected to handle all the systems -'

The Doctor interrupted him. These would be the automatically self-regulating systems?'

'Josh couldn't be expected to handle all the systems,' Finer repeated doggedly, 'and maintain contact with me. So I needed a *volunteer* thank you for volunteering.'

The pulse rate went up again.

How long, the Doctor wondered, before the first full collision between positive and negative pulses boosted the power feedback exponentially and set the machine on final phase, straightening the power streams into one another so that they annihilated each other and time, and space, and time lines, and multiverses and stopped it all from existing and made it never exist. There were equations but he couldn't remember what they were. It was a matter of luck. Just luck.

'If we work together we might still be able to find a way to stop this,' the Doctor said. 'The continued existence of existence can't just be a matter of luck.'

'Here's what I want you to do,' Finer said. His manner told the Doctor that he thought he was reasoning with a hysteric.

'You don't believe I know what I'm talking about,' the Doctor said, desperately searching for some way to convince the man. 'When you set your machine up you aligned it to a small wood. It's a couple of miles from the campus. I expect it's got a reputation for being haunted. I'm right aren't I?'

'As it happens you are.' Finer was still being carefully reasonable. 'We're below the university's secondary main car park here, and Norswood is out in that direction, yes.' He got back into the lift cradle and beckoned to the Doctor to join him. 'Why don't we go down and have a closer look at everything?'

Why not? the Doctor thought. Nothing can be done from up here. Nothing can be done from anywhere. It ends soon. As he climbed into the cradle he noticed the look that passed between Finer and Josh. He was obviously

doing what they wanted him to do. He hadn't persuaded the student . Josh wasn't on his side. It didn't matter. 'Why did you line up the machine in that direction?' he said.

'You tell me.' Finer moved the small joystick and the lift swung away from the platform out over the projector.

'Because your systems worked better'

'That's true,' Finer said. 'There's an unexplained magnetic anomaly.' He stopped the lift above the beginning of the pulse tunnel and looked down at the power stream. 'Seems to help the power flux.'

The Doctor said, 'There's a weakness in the multiverse located in that wood. You're tapping into it.'

'And that's a bad thing is it?' Finer said. 'In your view?' He dropped the lift a little closer to the power stream.

'You're creating a multidimensional void,' the Doctor explained. "That's a bit like a black hole only infinitely more destructive. You do understand what "infinitely" means don't you? No, of course you don't, nobody does. It's impossible to comprehend.'

Finer pointed down at the glowing stream of pulses. They were so fast now that no flicker could be seen. 'It looks extreme but that light beam is harmless, trust me.'

The Doctor gave a hollow laugh. 'You mean it didn't kill your test animals in front of your eyes. You couldn't get them back though, could you? They're dead, trust me.'

'Have you been spying?' Finer teased. 'You haven't been working on competitive advantage investigations have you?' He dropped the lift until it was almost touching the top of the first of the pulse-tunnel hoops.

The Doctor tried again. 'What's this for?' he asked. 'Have you asked yourself that? Have you asked yourself what you're doing it for?'

He was expecting some evasive waffle about the good of mankind, but instead the man looked him in the eyes and said, 'I killed my daughter. That's what it's for.'

The Doctor was taken aback. All he could think of to say was: 'I'm sorry.'

Finer went on. 'I didn't mean to. I lost my temper. I shouted at her. I remember every word I shouted. Listen to me. Listen to me you little bitch. You will listen to me and do as I tell you. You will do as I tell you, you little bitch. I remember every word.' He shook his head, never taking his eyes from the Doctor's. 'She defied me the way they do, and I hit her. And I hit her again and I kept on hitting her. I don't know why. It was insane. I'm not like that. I was never like that. I was never that sort of father.' He looked away. 'I did worse. I didn't call the police or anything like that. I hid what I'd done. I dumped her body in that wood. That's why the machine's aligned in that direction. The magnetic anomaly's real but it was just a coincidence.'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'It wasn't.'

Finer said, 'I don't want to have killed my daughter.' He looked into the Doctor's eyes again. 'You're going back to stop me.'

The Doctor found himself overwhelmed by pity. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm genuinely sorry for your daughter and for you. But you cannot go back and change things.'

'I don't care what effect it has on the future,' Finer said. 'I don't care about anything except not having done it. I'm not going to have done it.'

The Doctor said, 'No, you misunderstand me: I'm not saying you shouldn't, I'm saying you can't. It isn't possible. There may be a time line: a place where you haven't done it. But this isn't it. This can't be it.'

"That's what we're going to find out, isn't it?" Finer said and, with a sudden flick of the joystick, he upended the lift cradle and the Doctor found himself falling into the pulse tunnel. 'Stop me!' Finer was shouting from the cradle. 'Stop me from doing it!'

Barry had seen from the moment they walked into the security supervisor's office that there was absolutely no chance of the quiet chat Bill Parnaby

had in mind, but he hadn't expected a full-scale knock-down-drag-out row to develop.

The stocky, bullet-headed security supervisor, whom Barry had never liked, had taken to banging his desk with his fists. It was a sure sign that he was afraid he was losing the argument, and Barry would have enjoyed it much more if he hadn't felt guilty and worried about what had happened to the Doctor.

'It can't be done!' the security supervisor yelled. 'My job's at stake here!'

Detective Sergeant Simpson was remaining admirably calm. Barry could see it was a wickedly effective technique, especially against an aggressive oaf like the security supervisor. 'Two young women have had a serious attempt made on their lives,' Simpson said. He was ticking points off on his fingers.

Chloe Pennick was sitting sipping coffee. She looked a bit shaken and it occurred to Barry that coffee might not be the best thing for her under the circumstances.

One of them has run off,' the security supervisor countered. 'Waving a ruddy great knife. Which, when I last looked, was classified as an illegal weapon.'

What was it the Doctor had said about his assistant: she was erratic rather than eccentric and came from a peculiarly primitive background. Was she doing something practical about all this, Barry wondered, while they sat around here arguing?

'And I'm not sure this famous attempt on their lives wasn't something they took, or smoked,' the security supervisor added.

'Or drank?' Simpson murmured.

Was that a dig at his detective constable? Barry wondered. The young man looked a little the worse for wear. If it was, it didn't register with him but it did seem to be a palpable hit on the security supervisor. He suddenly looked very shifty.

Simpson continued, 'I have a direct link between a recent suicide and an unsolved murder' He unfolded another finger.

'Don't piss on my boots and tell me it's raining,' the security supervisor raged, and thumped his desk for emphasis. 'It's a coincidence, not a link - let alone a direct link!'

And,' Simpson looked towards Barry and folded up a third finger, 'we have a disappearance.'

'I can't do it, Bob,' the security supervisor said. He glared at Barry. He's been fired you know. By rights I should sling him off campus.'

'No,' Bill Parnaby said, politely. It's nothing to do with security. His status is an academic matter, it has nothing whatsoever to do with you.'

'He hasn't got a status,' the security supervisor snarled, 'and I don't have to listen to him or take his word for anything.' He sat back and folded his arms.

Barry had to admit that the security supervisor might be shouting and banging but he did have some good points. It was a relief to see that the policeman didn't seem to think so.

'I intend to talk to John Finer,' Simpson said, 'as a matter of urgency. You are going to give me access to his department, Fred. You're going to dig out the access codes and you're going to do it now.'

The security supervisor kept his arms resolutely folded.

'You'll need a warrant.' He said it flatly, so Barry could see that he was confident of this.

'Drugs,' the detective constable said. He definitely sounded a bit vague and mumbly to Barry. Coffee would be a good idea for him, he thought. 'If we have reason to believe there's drugs involved,' the constable went on, 'we don't need a warrant.'

'What drugs?' the security supervisor challenged.

Oh please, Barry thought. This is a university. But saying it aloud didn't seem sensible at that moment.

'What about the ones you were looking for, Fred?' Simpson suggested. 'Did you have a warrant for that search by the way?'

'I had the parents' permission,' the security supervisor blustered.

Barry wasn't sure what this exchange was about, but it was certainly unsettling the security supervisor. He had unfolded his arms and was leaning forward in his chair.

'I suppose I could check that,' Simpson said. 'While I'm waiting for the warrant.'

The detective constable caught Barry's eye and grinned a slightly bleary grin.

It looked to Barry as though the security supervisor was beaten. They were going to find out what had happened to the Doctor after all. And maybe he could get to help him too.

## Chapter Fifteen

'Are you ready?' Finer said as he hurried into the control and monitoring chamber. 'Did you take the booster dose?' All around him the gauges and meters were registering rapidly escalating power levels and fast-developing system connections.

Josh was standing in the middle of the floor with his eyes closed and his arms held out from his sides. 'I have been ready all along,' he said. 'I have been ready before and after and now.'

'Have you established a full link with him? Are you focused?' Finer adjusted a monitor screen so that he could see what was happening within the power stream that was blazing more and more coherently between the projector and the break-through zone. He could see the Doctor hanging there, motionless at the launch fulcrum. Everything was perfectly poised and waiting for the moment of criticality.

'I am focused.'

The Doctor was suspended, balanced by the power, held upright and spread-eagled in the centre of the first of the pulse-tunnel hoops. There was no pain. There was hardly any physical sensation at all. The static noise had gone. The throbbing pulse had gone. He was almost at peace. At the end of the tunnel he could see the kaleidoscopic multiples multiplying, the flat dark blocks and turning trees, dividing round themselves and whirling downwards into vortices and splitting and reforming and twisting and rolling. It was a mesmerising display. He could feel himself beginning to drift with the patterns. He could feel the possibility of being one with the patterns. Perhaps that would be best. Perhaps he should let his consciousness be taken into sleep. Perhaps he could lose himself in sleep. Perhaps it would be easier to face what was about to happen if he didn't have to face what was about to happen. Again he thought he saw the TARDIS, not a multiplying TARDIS but just one faithful TARDIS, one solid, unshakeable constant in a nightmare of chaos. It was comforting. It was comforting to think his beloved TARDIS was there at the last.

'Are you sure you're ready?' Finer said. 'Everything's balanced. We're getting close.'

'I have been ready to take the place that I will exist for,' Josh said. 'I have been waiting to take the place of everything. I am the next. I am the only'

Finer glanced at him and frowned. 'Is there a problem, Josh? Now's not a good time to lose your grip.'

'It will be, I will be, one will be, nothing.'

'Stay with him Josh,' Finer urged. 'Concentrate. We have to know what happens to him at the moment he hits that break-through zone.'

'Too late,' Josh said. 'His being is gone. He's lost. Not gone before but lost.'

Finer looked back at the monitor. The Doctor was gone. He looked at the power readings. They were almost off the scale and the rate of increase was building. Unbelievably, the systems were running out of control. Peripheral links flashed out, popping and showering electric sparks, spitting tiny short-out arcs of blue lightning.

'I listened to the Time Lord.' Josh opened his eyes. 'He was right. The Time Lord knew what he was thinking about.'

Who was right? What Time Lord? What are you talking about?' Finer tried to trip the system dampers.

The Time Lord is no more and I am Lord of Time,' Josh said.

The dampers were not tripping. Finer tried again. The overload was already too great and they would not kick in. 'Give me a hand with this. I'm losing it.' Closing down sale,' Josh chortled. 'Everything must go.'

Finer tried to cut the power. With the gauges gone there was no way to tell if this was having any effect. If the power was dropping the dampers should work. He tried to trip them one last time. They still would not kick in. Nothing seemed to be having any effect.

'I am the universe!' Josh exulted. 'I tell them to die and they die. Joan Cox die. Chloe Pennick die. There is only me! There shall be only me!'

Finer went for the last resort: his nuclear option. He tried to flip the machine's polarity and reverse the energy flow. When that failed he was left with no choice. He had to destroy the machine before it destroyed the university and possibly most of southern England. As it was, it was going to leave a big hole where the department had been.

'I'm sorry Josh!' Finer yelled. "There's no way out! I have to use the autodestruct!"

'Too late, too late and still too late,' Josh chanted.

The Doctor and the pulse tunnel moved together through the hoops which folded back into one hoop. In the time which was no time the Doctor saw the multidimensional void mark reality with a contagion spot which spread and sucked the possibilities out of the time lines.

'I'm sorry Josh,' Finer repeated. 'It's my fault. I've killed you too.' But then he found he could not remember where the control for the autodestruct was. But then he found he could not remember where the remote control was. But then he found he could not remember what it was he could not remember. An icy, black wind rushed through him.

The door had been solid and unmoving. Leela was about to look for some other entrance to the shaman's stronghold when, for no reason she could see, the whole doorway started to revolve. She stood watching it slowly spinning. It was not a normal doorway. She did not trust it. Normal doorways did not spin. It looked like a teaser trap: the sort of trap prey entered out of curiosity. Did this shaman think she was a fool? Chloe had told her of the doorway. She had said it would work only for those it recognised. How was it that it seemed to recognise her suddenly? Was the shaman tempting her?

She approached warily. If she stepped into the moving hole and it stopped moving and became a box she would be caught. It would take time to force her way out of it again. If the Doctor was a captive in this stronghold there might not be time to waste in such a way. She took her knife out and tapped the glass as it passed. It did not spring the trap. The passing glass sheet did not even change speed.

She made up her mind. There was no real choice, and this was wasting time too. Alert for danger, she stepped lightly into the hole. She pirouetted quickly but there was no threat that she could see coming from behind her. The doorway continued to spin and she walked with it. More confident and impatient to speed things up she pushed at the glass in front of her. The doorway stopped spinning abruptly.

Leela was furious with herself. She had sprung the trap. If she had not touched it she could have slipped through undetected. She had been caught like an unthinking food animal. She looked around and tried to decide where the weakest point of the trap might be. Without warning it all started to move again. This time Leela was careful not to touch it, and when the hole opened up she skipped out of it and into the first room of the stronghold.

She dropped immediately into a fighting crouch with her knife held low, her free hand extended. The shaman must be very confident to have trapped and released her simply as a demonstration of his superiority, she thought. If he was underestimating her that was a mistake and that was good. If she was to fight him on his own ground she would not make the same mistake. She knew the power his murderous acolyte, the Tesh called Josh Randall, could call on.

The first room was empty. Ahead of her on the other side of it she could see the floor was moving. She did not intend to let them play games with her again. Beyond the moving floor there was a door: a normal door. Above it there was a crude representation of a man and a stairway. That was the way she would go.

The Doctor saw there was no reality. The possible realities were not reality. Nothing came and took what the Doctor had been and made it nothing. He flew apart in nothing. Reality gathered to the void and *there was one dark flash*

The door was operated with a push-bar. Despite her best efforts Leela could not open it quietly. The push-bar rattled and the door squeaked. She abandoned stealth and kicked the door open, plunging through with the knife held wider and higher.

The stairwell was empty. As she peered down it, lights came on. She could see the stairs went round and round and down and down, deep into the ground until they more or less vanished from sight. Was the Doctor all the way down there? How was she going to find him? No wonder the shaman was so confident. He had all this to hide in.

'Doctor?!' she shouted down into the echoing depths. 'Doctor where are you?!'

The Doctor saw nothing folding into the multidimensional voids as the line of singularities became infinite and *there was one dark flash*

'Doctor?!' Leela shouted again. Below her she saw the most distant of the lights had started to go out. It looked as though the shaft was filling with darkness like black water rising in a well. She looked harder. The shaft was filling with darkness. It was the same blank blackness that she had seen in the wood and in the laboratory of Ghostbuster Bazzar. She could feel the icy tug of it as it raced upwards. It was flooding up towards her.

Leela turned and fled back into the top room of the stronghold. She saw at once that the doorway had stopped spinning. The shaman had trapped her and sent his darkness to kill her in the worst way, the way of the coward, the way of the Tesh.

She looked for something she could use to smash her way out of the stronghold and escape the icy blankness. There was nothing. She shivered. The icy wind was pulling at her. She was going to die here in the freezing darkness. She would be swept away and swallowed by the freezing blankness. She would not die as a warrior. She was Leela of the Sevateem and she would die alone and helpless. Death was nothing if it was a warrior's death. Dying alone was nothing, and nothing to be feared, if it was in the way of a warrior of the Sevateem. This was dying alone and afraid, alone and paralysed by fear. This was the way of the Tesh. This was what the Tesh had told her would happen. This was the what the Tesh had threatened her with.

A fierce instinctive anger surged through her. Hot rage warmed her. If she was to die in darkness it would not be alone. This shaman and his Tesh would die with her. It would be a death worthy of a warrior of the tribe of

Sevateem. When she killed them the Tesh would know that she was Leela of the Sevateem and that no Tesh was her equal. She must find them. Where would they be? They would be hiding below their darkness. Flank an ambush and it becomes a trap. Even with death only moments away the warrior-trainers' rules nagged at her memory. How could she get to the shaman and his Tesh? The moving floor was still moving. Was that the way? Had they sent the death darkness because they heard the noisy door? Had they sent it that way because they thought that was the way she was coming? The moving floor must go somewhere. She went to it. Would she be flanking their ambush or was she walking into it? She stepped on to the moving floor. When it speeded up and got steeper she found she was no longer afraid.

*And there was one dark flash*

And there was one dark flash and it was still unsatisfied, still unfinished. Some stubborn reality was holding all existence back from the voids.

The TARDIS was there in the moment where the singularities were leading to eternity and from eternity and in eternity. The TARDIS was where eternity was nothing and everything. The TARDIS was poised where the unmediated time machine had driven the action and non-reaction through the time lines and multiverses and on to annihilation. The TARDIS balanced the imbalance and absorbed the excess.

The TARDIS held the line.

The Doctor and the pulse tunnel moved together through one hoop which folded forward into the hoops. The Doctor was suspended, balanced by the power, held upright and spread-eagled in the centre of the first of the pulse-tunnel hoops. There was no pain. There was hardly any physical sensation at all. The static noise had gone. The throbbing pulse had gone. He was almost at peace. At the end of the tunnel he could see the kaleidoscopic multiples multiplying, the flat dark blocks and turning trees, dividing round themselves and whirling downwards into vortices and splitting and reforming and twisting and rolling. It was a mesmerising display. He could feel himself beginning to drift with the patterns. He could feel the possibility of being one with the patterns. Perhaps that would be best. Perhaps he should let his consciousness be taken into sleep. Perhaps he could lose himself in sleep. Perhaps it would be easier to face what was about to

happen if he didn't have to face what was about to happen. Again he thought he saw the TARDIS, not a multiplying TARDIS but just one faithful TARDIS, one solid, unshakeable constant in a nightmare of chaos. It was comforting. It was comforting to think his beloved TARDIS was there at the last.

The Doctor jolted awake. The TARDIS was there blocking the pulse stream. He fell forward into a heap. Now there was physical sensation. The static noise was back. The throbbing pulse was back. His hands and knees and forehead hurt.

He was on the floor of the cavern. Rats scuttled away from him. He got to his feet. The TARDIS was hovering just above the floor. It was balanced more or less where he had been suspended. He hurried to it. 'Hullo, dear old thing,' he said. 'Come to save the day?' He clambered through the door. 'Come to save all the days in fact.'

He made his way to the control console. He could guess what was happening before he looked at any of the telltales.

The TARDIS was functioning as the transdimensional containment and the semisentient control system which he had tried to tell Finer his machine was so dangerously lacking. She had been trying to repair the weakness in the multiverse just as the Doctor had told her to do when they first arrived. When the damage worsened she had drained the auxiliary power banks. She was inhibited from using her main supply so now she was drawing power like an induction coil from Finer's machine, and she was focusing where the damage was focused. She was reversing everything.

The Doctor watched the observation screen. The TARDIS had returned to the wood. He saw Leela struggling in the time-disrupted maelstrom. He saw her rolling on the ground, caught in the brambles, flailing helplessly with her knife.

The on-screen image changed. The TARDIS was back in the cavern. It was right at the beginning of the pulse tunnel. It was difficult to tell from the screen, but it looked to be hard up against the front of the rogue projector.

Leela found the ride down into the depths of the stronghold oddly exhilarating. As she leapt off the slowing floor she knew she had made the

right choice. Here there was none of the death darkness that had been flooding up the stair shaft.

She trotted along the brightly lit corridor. As she went she kicked open all the doors to all the rooms, but none of them gave her any clue about where the shaman and his Tesh were hiding. Nor was there any sign of where they were holding the Doctor.

Finally, in a room near the end of the corridor, she found a huge screen on which were many different moving images. Among them she saw a set of pictures showing a control room where the shaman and the Tesh were scuffling and creeping about. She peered at the pictures, looking for some way to identify where the control room was.

She turned away and searched the work desk, pushing and prodding at buttons and switches. Finding nothing, she went back and peered at the screen again. It was then that she noticed a sort of flickering reflected into the control room, a pulsing of power. Faintly, in the background of her senses, she could hear and feel that pulsing which was in the picture. She must follow the pulsing she decided, if she wanted to find them.

At the end of the corridor there were cruder tunnels. Leela could feel the pulse getting stronger as she loped on through them.

The Doctor was very careful to avoid any contact with the power beam as he left the TARDIS and stepped down on to the cavern floor. Finer's projector had narrowed the break-through zone to a point which was still narrowing and closing, and there was already a scatter effect reflecting from the back of the TARDIS. Some of the excess was dissipating into the cavern but a number of intensifying streams were forming feedback links with the projector. Sooner or later, or perhaps in this instance sooner and later, the projector was going to destroy itself and collapse all these tunnels and caverns, leaving nothing to mark their passing other than a big depression in the surface of the university's grounds.

He hurried to the crane lift and climbed into the cradle. He had to make sure there were no innocent bystanders involved and give Finer and Josh a chance to escape the destruction. At least now, thanks to the TARDIS, it was destruction from which there was a chance to escape. Providing he

hurried, of course. He fiddled with the lift controls and after a couple of abortive bounces got the cradle soaring upwards.

Stopping the upward momentum was not as easy as he had expected, however, and he had passed the gallery viewing platform before he found the correct control. Crouching just below the roof of the cavern, he set the lift going downwards again and was almost back on the cavern floor before he could stop it.

He glanced at the TARDIS still holding position and feeding the projector with annihilating streams of energy. 'Don't leave without me,' he called as he set the lift going up again.

Leela was very calm as she rose on the platform towards the place where she knew the enemy was skulking. She flexed her arms and practised routine killing strokes with her knife. She could see how this travelling device would work and she knew her most vulnerable moment would be when it arrived in its place. Above her the hatch opened and she stretched up and tried to get a look at the positions of the shaman and the Tesh.

She did not wait for the platform to lock into place, but leapt into the control room and did a half-somersault away from the hatch. She was in a fighting crouch with her back protected by a wall before she saw that the shaman was already dead and the Tesh was not ready to fight her like a warrior.

'No,' he said. 'The way of the warrior? I don't think so.' He gestured at her with a small wand. 'There are much easier ways.'

'It is what I would expect from a Tesh,' she said contemptuously.

'There's no time to check out these Tesh,' he said. But you really don't like them do you? So you'll be glad to know they're going to disappear along with you and along with everything else. 'Again he waved the wand at her. 'This is not a wand, you sad primitive you. It's a remote activator. It's the end of the universe.'

'Not any more, Josh,' the Doctor said from the entrance to the side gallery. 'Now it's a much more localised ending.' He nodded at Leela and quickly touched his finger to his lips to silence her.

No it's not!' Josh contradicted him angrily. 'You know that's not true. You know you can't lie to me. I have evolved beyond you, beyond your comprehension.'

Beckoning to Leela, the Doctor said, 'Did you kill Professor Finer, Josh?' He put a finger to his lips again and gestured to Leela to hurry.

'He was a killer,' Josh said. 'And he wanted to kill me.'

The Doctor pointed, and Leela went into the gallery. Below her she could see the TARDIS in a blaze of strange light.

What did you do to him?' the Doctor asked.

'He was just another rat. I put darkness in his mind.'

But you don't want to die, do you Josh?' the Doctor suggested.

I'm the only one who isn't going to die,' Josh said. 'I'm the next. I'm the only'

'If you press that button Josh, you will die,' the Doctor said.

'Wrong!' Josh raised the remote control. 'Pity you'll never know how wrong.'

'Wait!' the Doctor said urgently. Wait! You're right, of course you're right. Give us a little time to prepare ourselves? What's a little time in an eternity?'

'How long do you want?' Josh asked. 'Don't be greedy though. When your time is up, your time is up.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I don't know,' he said. 'How about you count to a hundred?'

Josh glared at him. 'Are you mocking me?'

'Of course not.'" The Doctor shook his head emphatically. 'I wouldn't dare. It's just that we're little more than children to you after all. It seems an appropriate way to end our time.'

Josh frowned for a moment, then said, 'Very well. I'll count to a hundred. One, two, three -

The Doctor walked out of the chamber and then sprinted down the gallery. 'In the cradle, Leela,' he urged and jumped in after her. 'Hold tight,' he said, and jammed the lift into its downwards motion. 'We have about twenty seconds before he gets bored and presses that button.'

Hullo Doctor,' Leela said. 'I thought you might have forgotten about me.'

'Never,' the Doctor protested. 'I would never do that.'

The lift cradle crashed into the floor of the cavern and Leela and the Doctor staggered to the TARDIS which was already beginning to make small destabilising movements, and heaved themselves inside. The Doctor pointed to the screen. The TARDIS had returned to the wood.

Nineteen, twenty. Ready or not,' Josh said, 'here I come.' He was smiling as he pressed the button.

On the screen in the TARDIS Leela watched herself in the wood. She watched as she got up from the ground. She watched as she put salve on her scratches. She watched as she made up her mind not to wait there in the wood for the Doctor, but rather to set off for the campus instead. She watched herself walk slowly and deliberately away.

'I do not understand,' she said.

'It's tricky,' the Doctor agreed.

'That is me,' Leela said, pointing at her departing figure on the screen.

'Yes,' the Doctor said.

Leela said, 'We are inside the TARDIS but the TARDIS stayed there in the wood. So we were there all the time in the TARDIS.'

'No.'

We are still there,' Leela persisted. The TARDIS went back to the wood. We went back to the wood in the TARDIS. We are still there. Here. We are here before what is going to happen has happened.'

No,' the Doctor said. The TARDIS allowed the multiverse to renew, but there was some local damage. The time line we were on doesn't exist any more.'

Leela hesitated. 'You mean they were all killed? Everyone we met was killed?' I mean it never happened.'

Leela looked relieved. They all survived.'

'They never existed.'

'Are you saying we have imagined it?' No, I'm not saying that.'

Good,' Leela said. 'Because I remember it happening and so do you.'

Only,' the Doctor said, 'until we next step out of the TARDIS. Then we shall forget them because they never existed. Not in that way'

In what way then?' Leela demanded.

'I don't know,' the Doctor admitted.

Leela was silent for a moment, thinking. She turned away from the screen. 'Was it you who opened the doorway to the shaman's stronghold to let me in?' she asked.

The Doctor turned off the observation screen and went to the control console. 'I think you might have done that yourself while you were searching the place for me.'

'I think you are teasing me,' Leela said.

The Doctor beamed. 'When have you known me ever to do that?' he asked.

Leela said, 'It is some sort of trick you have played on me.'

The Doctor activated the TARDIS and set her to leave. For a moment nothing happened. 'There's a reason for everything,' he said, waiting for something to happen.

That's not the same as a purpose of course."

The rage had gone and there was nothing. A black, cold blankness. He sat staring at the body of his daughter. It took a long time for him to see her. To focus and to really see her. This was not his daughter. There was nothing of his daughter in this lifeless shell. Mandy?' he whispered. "Oh my God. Oh my God.' He lifted her into his arms. Oh my God.' He held her for a long moment and then he laid her on the couch and went to the telephone and dialled.

'Emergency: which service do you require?' the impersonal voice said.

'Police.' When they answered he said: My name is John Finer and I've murdered my daughter.'

For a moment nothing happened and then the console began its familiar movement and the TARDIS began its familiar song and it set off again.

In this case it could be said that what the TARDIS did had a reason and a purpose and they were the same thing. Or it could all have been a coincidence,' the Doctor said.

Barry Hitchins leant forward and looked sincerely interested. Bill Parnaby was a star in the field of pop philosophy and he wasn't cheap. "So you don't think time travel is actually possible, Professor Parnaby?'

"Longevity depends on memory,' Parnaby said. Not only is there no point in living for three hundred years if all you can remember is yesterday but also, and more to the point, how do you know you've lived three hundred years without any memory of them?'

'Memory of a goldfish, me,' Hitchins said. At least that's what I tell them when I wake up next morning."

When the laughter had died down, Parnaby said. Time travel is like longevity. How can you travel through time without a memory of the time through which you have travelled?

And even if it were possible what would be the point of it?

You wouldn't know it was happening.' 'You mean we could be time travellers ourselves?' 'I don't know, Barry,' Parnaby twinkled. 'I can't remember.' Professor Bill Parnaby ladies and gentlemen!' Barry

Hitchins said loudly, gesturing towards his guest. The studio audience applauded dutifully.

Tommy reached up. 'Boring, pretentious little bugger,' he said, and turned off the bar TV set.

'You're just jealous,' Meg said.

'Because he's rich, famous and good-looking? What have I got to be jealous about?'

'You forgot brilliant,' Ralph said.

'Still not enough.'

Joan said, 'And Chloe thinks he's sex on a stick.'

'Doh!' Tommy said.

'All right,' Joan said, fishing a pack of tarot cards from her case. 'Gypsy Rose Cox is open for business. Who wants their fortune told?'

She began to lay out cards. A tall young man with a shaved head wandered over to the table and watched for a moment.

Do I have to cross your palm with silver?' he asked.

'No charge,' she said.

'Excellent,' he said, sitting down.

'You don't believe in this stuff do you?' Ralph asked.

'I don't know. I'm interested in the whole parapsychology thing. I reckon there could be something to it. Maybe some-one'll get around to doing a decent scientific study of it.' He offered his hand.' Josh Randall. I might have a go myself if

I can get a grant for it.'

\* \* \*

Leela came back to the control deck looking pensive. The Doctor could see she had been thinking about what he had told her and that she was ready to challenge it. He smiled to himself. He loved a good argument. And, shaming as it was to admit it, he did rather enjoy teasing Leela. 'You look ready to dazzle and confound me with clear-eyed and uncluttered logic,' he suggested.

Leela nodded seriously. 'I have been studying a book in the library and I can say for certain that you were completely wrong in what you told me.' She paused for effect. "Those trees were nothing like scrub oaks,' she said.