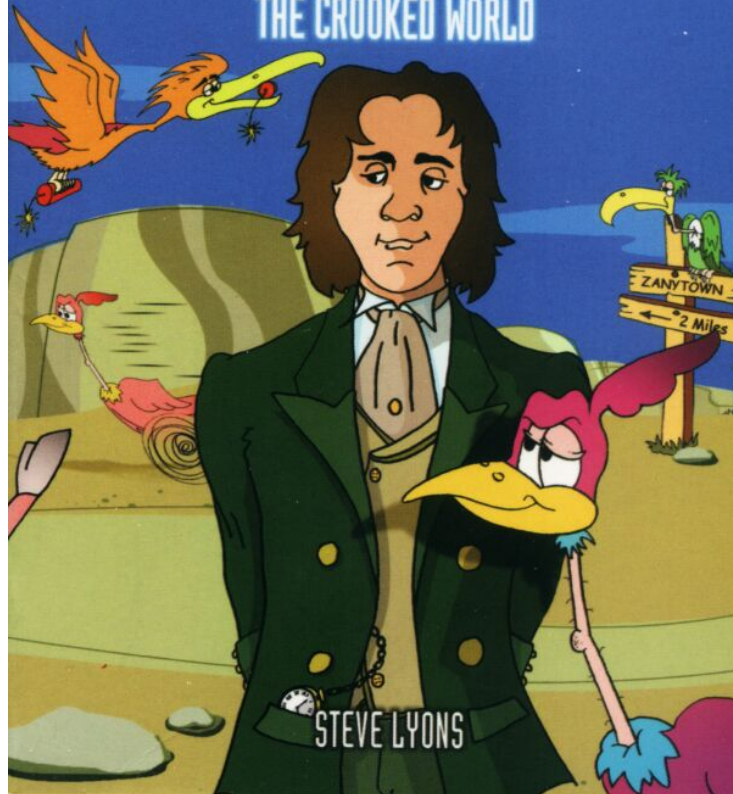


BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE CROOKED WORLD



STEVE LYONS

The people of the Crooked World lead an idyllic existence.

Take Streaky Bacon, for example. This jovial farmer wants nothing more from life than a huge blunderbuss, with which he can blast away at his crop-stealing nemesis. And then there's Angel Falls, a racing driver with a string of victories to her name. Sure, her trusted guardian might occasionally put on a mask and menace her for her prize money, but that's just life, right? And for Jasper the cat, nothing could be more pleasant than a nice, long nap in his kitchen – so long as that darn mouse doesn't jam his tail into the plug socket again.

But somebody is about to shatter all those lives. Somebody is about to change everything – and it's possible, that no one on the Crooked World will ever be happy again.

The Doctor's TARDIS is about to arrive. And when it does. . .
That's all folks!

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

The Crooked World

Steve Lyons

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Prologue

The sun smiled down upon the Crooked World, but the pig farmer felt as if it were laughing at him. He was hot, even in his light khaki jacket and cap, and sweat made his skin prickle. But he wouldn't let the discomfort distract him.

He crept through the cornfield, clutching his blunderbuss and keeping his head low. The stalks whipped at his face and his bare legs, and he pushed them aside with a grimace.

The enemy was only a few yards ahead of him now. He couldn't see it yet, but he knew where it was. It had foolishly stuck its head into view, a few minutes earlier, over the ripe, yellow ears of corn. He was stealthily approaching its last known position.

The enemy. It had become an obsession. But what else could he do, when it threatened his livelihood? The insolent creature had attacked his crops, causing untold damage. It had made him its target and had pestered him for months. No, for years. No, for as long as the pig farmer could remember. He had tried, untold times, to capture or shoot it, to put a halt to its mischief. But the creature was too wily and it always outsmarted him. He had begun to feel that he couldn't rest, couldn't enjoy life, couldn't do anything, until he had dealt with it, until he was rid of the enemy for good.

Sometimes, he wondered what he would do then. When it was gone.

But the pig farmer didn't let such bleak thoughts worry him. He had a purpose and he was close, so close, to achieving it.

He was almost upon the enemy. He could hear it pecking away, taking what was his again. He brought up the blunderbuss and squinted along its sights as he took the last few steps towards it and the final cornstalks between them parted.

At the first sight of its distinctive purple plumage, he fired.

The recoil blew him backwards. He landed on his fat hindquarters, but he was too excited to worry about the indignity. Purple feathers fluttered around him, and he sneezed as one of them tickled his round nose. He scrambled back up and brushed the stalks aside again, to inspect his victim.

A spindly, twisted figure stood before him, a few feathers clinging pitifully to its charred frame. With a cry of ‘Yaa-hoo!’ the pig farmer threw himself into the air and sang: ‘I shot the Whatchamacallit, I shot the Whatchamacallit!’ Then he ran up to the frazzled creature and reached out to touch it, to ensure that this was all real, that it wasn’t a dream.

This would teach it, he thought. It wouldn’t dare to come back after this.

But, even as he brushed against it, the Whatchamacallit collapsed. The pig farmer wailed in fright, thinking that perhaps he’d done something terrible – hurt the enemy far worse than he had ever intended – but the fright mutated into anger as he realised the truth.

Lying before him now was a familiar shape: his own lovingly constructed scarecrow, with its battered old overcoat, to which somebody – or something – had glued purple feathers haphazardly. Its leering pumpkin head had rolled off its shoulders, and its empty eyes mocked him. Hanging around the scarecrow’s neck, by a string, was a white cardboard sign, which had been inscribed with thick black marker pen. It read: ‘Boo!’

The pig farmer threw his blunderbuss to the ground and jumped up and down on top of it, waving his front prehensile trotters in fury.

The enemy chose that moment to stick its orange beak through the cornstalks beside him. It cocked its head, regarded him with an inquisitive smile and blinked twice. The pig farmer performed an angry double take, eyes bugging out of their sockets, and scrabbled to retrieve his weapon. The Whatchamacallit turned and bolted through the field in a flurry of purple, leaving the momentary imprint of itself upon the air.

The farmer, his pink face darkening, charged after it.

He had been right about the sun. It threw back its big yellow head, and its mouth split into a huge, open grin as it vibrated with mirth.

It was very definitely laughing at him.

By the time the pig farmer had stumbled out of the cornfield and into the adjoining desert, the Whatchamacallit had disappeared again. But it would be back. It would return to taunt him, as it always did. And the farmer would be ready for it, as he always was.

It was the work of just seconds to dig a deep pit and to cover it over with sand-coloured tarpaulin. Then the farmer took a bull’s-eye lantern, unscrewed its clear bulb and replaced it with a pink one. He buried the lantern in a mound of sand, carefully angling it so that its beam of light shone upon the glass of an upright mirror, which he produced from his pocket and placed at one end of the pit. It was a funhouse mirror, of course.

His plan was simple. Nobody knew what the Whatchamacallit was: it

defied any sort of classification, and was certainly unique. But, when it spotted its reflection – compressed by the distorting glass and washed in the lantern’s light so as to make it resemble a slender, pink-hued copy of itself – it would doubtless mistake it for a hitherto-undiscovered female of its species. It would rush towards it, made careless by desire, and fall into the pit trap.

Chortling at his own fiendishness, the pig farmer hid behind a convenient giant rock, to watch. Seconds later, the Whatchamacallit loped into view on its long, springy legs.

It spotted its reflection, gaped for a moment and then ran towards the mirror, as the farmer had intended. But as the creature bounded eagerly across the tarpaulin, it failed to disturb it. The farmer rubbed his disbelieving eyes, and his jaw dropped open in astonishment.

When the Whatchamacallit’s pink reflection stepped out of the mirror and the two bird-creatures began to smooch with their beaks, little hearts popping into existence around their heads, the pig farmer went beyond astonishment and into crimson-faced fury. He leapt out of hiding, discharging his blunderbuss three times and blowing himself further backwards with each detonation. The Whatchamacallit and its impossible mate fled, their splayed feet falling in unison, and the pig farmer raced after them.

He was halfway across the sand-coloured tarpaulin before he realised what he had done.

He cornered the Whatchamacallit, at last, at the top of a deep canyon. He stalked towards it, his blunderbuss raised, keeping it firmly in his sights. With the cliff edge behind it, it had nowhere to run, and its knees produced a most gratifying chattering sound as they knocked together. The creature twisted its long neck around; from somewhere behind its back it plucked a sign, which read: ‘D-D-Don’t Shoot!’ But the farmer had no desire to show it mercy. It had taken him many minutes to climb out of his sand pit: he was all hot and bothered, and just plain cross at his goldarn cheating foe. His trotter tightened on the trigger.

And then the air was split by a sound like none he had ever heard before.

The air shimmered blue before his eyes, as something slowly took on solid form. He realised that this was the source of the terrible groaning, and he wondered just how the Whatchamacallit had managed to pull off this latest trick.

By the time he had regained his composure and thought to return his attention to the enemy, it was too late. An oblong, blue cabinet had appeared between them. ‘Police Public Call Box’ read the sign above its doors, in unusually neat lettering, and the pig farmer wondered if the Sheriff himself

had intervened in their dispute.

He dismissed the question, as the Whatchamacallit poked its head around the nearest corner of the box and blew a cheeky raspberry in his direction.

The farmer pursued it, round and round the obstruction, round and round – and even, at one point, craftily turning back on himself and running in the opposite direction – but he only tired himself out, unable to clap eyes on the Whatchamacallit again. At least, not until a splayed foot reached down from the top of the blue box and knocked his cap from his bald, pink head. He jerked his gun up, but the enemy had already vanished again.

He whirled around at the sound of movement, and leapt back in shock at the sight of two human beings behind him.

The first man was a tall, gangly figure, with a thin face and a pointed nose, and untidy brown hair. He saw the pig farmer, and his grey eyes widened. ‘Doctor...?’

His companion stepped forward, easing the first man aside to get a better look. He had inquisitive eyes and an innocent expression, and he wore a green velvet frock coat and a loosely-tied cravat, which made him look like a cross between a dashing romantic hero and a vagabond in mismatched clothing.

The pig farmer didn’t trust either of the new arrivals. At first he thought they must be strangers. But they couldn’t be, as he was positive that he knew all the strangers on the Crooked World already. These people were stranger still.

The second man grinned, his expressive eyebrows riding up his forehead. He stepped forward and extended a hand of friendship.

And the frightened pig fired his blunderbuss, at point-blank range, and pumped a cloud of buckshot into the man’s chest and stomach.

Chapter One

Fitz Kreiner found it difficult to react to what had just happened.

He found it difficult because he couldn't quite believe it. He couldn't believe that he was looking at an armed and dangerous pig – and a humanoid pig, at that. A second ago, it had been standing on its hind legs. Now it was on its back, having been knocked over by the recoil from a blunderbuss that was far too large for it. It was short – well, short by human standards – and it wore a khaki jacket and no trousers.

Fitz couldn't believe that a humanoid pig had just shot his best friend.

The Doctor must have seen the odd creature on the scanner screen inside the TARDIS. Fitz had looked up too late, catching only a pink blur of movement across the desert sand. He had been worried enough, however, by the childlike wonder that had lit the Doctor's features as he made all haste towards the door control. That look meant trouble.

He had followed the Doctor out on to the cliff edge, advising caution and feeling the weight of his responsibility. It was Fitz's duty to save his friend from his own wide-eyed enthusiasm. 'Anji,' he had called quickly, over his shoulder, 'we're going outside. . . apparently.'

He prayed for Anji to emerge from the TARDIS now. She would know what to do.

The Doctor lay on his front in the sand, not moving, and Fitz was torn between the need to rush to his aid and the fear that the pig might shoot him in the back if he did. The creature, however, appeared to be in shock: it pulled itself up into a sitting position and reached blindly for its shapeless khaki cap, which had fallen beside it. It jammed the cap down over its pink forehead so that its little upright ears protruded through two slits in its top. And it stared at its victim with white, circular eyes.

Fitz decided to disarm it while he could. He dithered until he had reassured himself that this was the right thing to do, not just the selfish thing. Then he leapt on to the Doctor's attacker and wrestled the blunderbuss out of its. . . front trotters.

The pig didn't put up a struggle. It continued to stare blankly as it let

him take the gun. Whatever had prompted it to pull the trigger, it didn't seem to be a threat any more.

Fitz dropped to his knees at the Doctor's side, frowning at the half-dozen or so tiny blue birds that flew in a circle around his head, chirping brightly. He shooed them away and checked his best friend's breathing. It was shallow but regular. His eyes were closed and his face was pale. Fitz wanted to turn him over and inspect the damage to his chest, but he didn't know if it was a good idea to move him.

Where was Anji? She was better at this sort of thing. More practical.

'W-w-w-what the heck happened to him?' The faltering voice came from the pig. So, it could talk. Fitz wasn't as surprised by that as he felt he ought to have been.

'What happened?' he repeated incredulously. 'You shot him, you... you... pig!' He needed to work on a more cutting insult.

'B-b-but shouldn't he be OK by n-now?'

Fitz just stared.

'I mean, this... this isn't what usually happens when you sh-shoot somebody... is it?'

Fitz wanted to ask what usually happened, but a pool of blood had spread from beneath the Doctor's old-fashioned frock coat to soak into the ground, and he was sick with worry. Why had this had to happen now? Back when his friend had had two hearts, his body might have been able to cope with its injuries. Now, who knew? Fitz had to do something.

'Look, do me a favour,' he said, laying the blunderbuss aside and scrambling back to his feet. 'Look after him while I... ' He tailed off, realising the incongruity of the request. 'No, don't bother. Just... stay where you are. Don't move. I'm going to fetch help.'

He ran back to the TARDIS, almost overshooting and hurtling over the cliff edge. He caught his breath at the sight of the rock-strewn canyon far below. Collecting himself, he turned and pushed at the doors to the ship. To his irritation, they had locked themselves behind him. He hammered on the wooden panels and called out Anji's name, but received no response.

'I th-think help's coming already,' called the pig, even as Fitz was fishing for a key in the junk-infested pocket of his brown leather jacket, wondering if he had brought one.

He stopped and listened – and, sure enough, he heard something approaching.

It sounded like a voice, shouting 'Nee-naw, nee-naw, nee-naw, nee-naw!'

'Hold on, hold on, I'm on my way!'

Anji Kapoor tripped gracelessly across the console room, shoelaces undone, still trying to find the left armhole of a comfortable pullover while simultaneously fumbling with an earring at her right ear. Trust the TARDIS to have landed while she was in the bath! Trust her, for that matter, to have spent so long luxuriating in the hot water.

The urgent knocking at the main doors had only added to her haste, and therefore slowed her. Her black hair was still dripping, and she hadn't had time to tie it up as she had been forced to do recently: it had now grown long enough to irritate her, and she had no idea when she'd next get within reach of a decent hairdresser. She hadn't even been able to check the external conditions and choose appropriate clothing. OK, so she had long since learned – the hard way – that life with the Doctor was not conducive to the wearing of her usual smart skirts and high heels (Usual? Could she still say that? She'd been away a long time now). Still, she liked to take some pride in her appearance.

It would be just her luck, she thought, to burst out of the TARDIS into some alien court, in front of the most important people in the galaxy, looking like she'd just got up.

In the event, however, she didn't get that far. She came up short and let out an involuntary gasp at the sight of an intruder.

It stood on the far side of the hexagonal console, at the foot of the shallow flight of steps that led to the closed outer doors. Anji had no idea what it was; certainly it was no denizen of Earth. It must have been some species of bird, because it had feathers and a beak. However, it was wingless and its two long, almost string-thin legs – they looked as if they couldn't support its weight, but they did – led to three-toed, webbed feet. The creature had a long, slender neck, which brought its head up to the admittedly not considerable height of Anji's own. But its most striking feature was its coloration. The creature was a riot of clashing hues. Its feathers – which grew thickly all over its body and outwards at its tail were bright purple. Its legs and its smirking beak were an equally startling orange, and a crimson crest ran up the back of its neck to jut proudly from its head. Its eyes were big, round and white, like plates. They regarded Anji with an innocent curiosity, but somehow offered the creeping suspicion that a calculating intelligence lurked behind them.

'Er... hello?' she said, feeling a bit silly. She had never been one for talking to animals. Even when she had been around other people's cats and dogs, she had never believed they could understand more than the tone of her voice. She had never known what to say to them. How do you make small talk to a border collie anyway? And if that applied to Earthbound domestic pets, then it certainly applied to... well, to weird, alien bird-

things.

The creature didn't answer. Indeed, it seemed to lose interest in her altogether. Its head jerked around on its long neck, looking at the pale, wooden walls with their roundel patterns; at the arches that led to huge alcoves on each side of the room; at the spring-mounted, archaic monitor that hung from the high ceiling. It cocked its head as if listening to the regular background hum that permeated this part of the Doctor's space/time vessel. Then it looked at the console itself, which grew like the top of a mushroom from a narrower stem.

And it threw itself upon the nearest instrument panel.

'Hey, what do you think you're doing?' cried Anji. It was jumping back and forth, not caring what it hit with its clumsy, orange feet. The TARDIS responded with a symphony of beeps and electronic chirps; the lights dimmed and brightened again, and the scanner performed a staccato dance on its spring. Anji had no idea what most of the controls did, although she had watched the Doctor operate them many times. It often seemed to her that they had different functions each day, almost as if they varied according to his mood (or their own?). She did know, however, that the rising and falling of the central glass column indicated that the ship was in flight. So, panic gripped her when, with a coughing sound, that column jerked into motion. It stopped again almost immediately – but by then, Anji had flung herself across the console and was desperately trying to seize one of the bird-thing's legs, to drag it away.

It leapt nimbly on to her head, and she felt its toes snagging in her wet hair. She reached up blindly and tried to catch it with her left hand, even as its beak swooped down to pluck the shiny, golden earring from her right. Then the bird-thing performed a forward somersault, dropped to the ground in front of her and shot off into one of the alcoves with a turn of speed so impressive that, for a second, she imagined it had left white blur marks behind it.

It had gone into the library. She would have to chase after it, and not just to retrieve her jewellery. She couldn't let this creature run rampant inside the TARDIS. Who knew what harm it could do? But what about the Doctor and Fitz? Not five minutes earlier, one of them had been hammering on the doors (or perhaps it had been the bird-thing, attracting her attention). Anji looked up at the scanner and, using one of the few controls that she did understand, rotated its view through three hundred and sixty degrees. She saw nothing but a flat expanse of sand and a cliff edge. They had wandered off without her. She didn't know whether to feel slighted or worried about them.

First things first. She dragged a heavy sofa across the flagstone floor, un-

til it was sitting in front of the wooden doors that led deeper into the ship. Then, because it always paid to be prepared, she sat down and tied her trailing laces before she could trip over them. Returning to the console, she pulled a prominent, red-topped lever, which opened the roundel-decorated exterior doors. It was a pity, she thought wistfully, that she couldn't block the other archways somehow. It would be difficult to shoo the bird-thing outside.

She hesitated beside the storage alcove, looking at the overflowing chests and filing cabinets in which the Doctor kept all manner of gadgets, tools and spare parts. He always seemed to be able to lay his hands on something to suit a desperate situation. Conversely, Anji had rarely found anything in there but junk (What would she look for anyway? A giant net?).

She heard the sound of falling books, sighed in resignation and ran into the library unarmed.

'Nee-naw, nee-naw, where's the emergency?'

A small white van skidded to a halt beside Fitz, the unconscious Doctor and the humanoid, talking pig. It boasted a red cross on its side, which Fitz greeted with cautious optimism. There was something about the vehicle that didn't seem quite right. He couldn't shake the impression that it wasn't a real ambulance, but rather an overgrown toy. Perhaps it was the fact that it was so scrupulously clean and white, not a spot of dirt blighting it. Or perhaps it was because it appeared to have been cast whole from plastic, not a seam or joint visible. The lack of windows – even a windscreen – might also have contributed.

Oh, and of course there was the big, red-nosed face that jutted out of the vehicle's front.

'Come on, come on, who's hurt?' asked the ambulance impatiently, in an American drawl.

Fitz was speechless, so the pig stepped forward and answered: 'This f-fellow here. He got sh-shot a bit, but other than that I d-d-d-don't know *what's* wrong with him.'

The ambulance, which had rolled its eyes impatiently as the pig stutted its way through its explanation, groaned. 'You people! Always shooting each other. Right, buckshot wounds I can deal with, no problem. Load him up!'

'No, hold on a minute,' protested Fitz.

'No time to lose, pal. This is an emergency!'

'I'm not sure we need. . . I mean, we've got medical equipment in the. . .'

‘All aboard!’ cried the ambulance, rearing up on its back wheels and spinning its front ones. It screeched around until it was facing away from Fitz, and a set of double doors sprang open in its back. Fitz glanced nervously over his shoulder to see if Anji had appeared yet, and was about to object further when he was gripped by an unseen force.

He tried to cry out, but his breath was whipped away and the world was momentarily a blur of antiseptic white, until he found himself lying in the ambulance’s featureless rear compartment. He was aware of the Doctor on a gurney beside him and of the pig, in his hesitant tones, assuring him that he would be all right now but not sounding too certain.

Fitz tried to sit up, but the ambulance sped away with phenomenal acceleration and he was bounced off a white wall and straight back to the floor.

The library alcove was much, much larger than it appeared from the console room. Its shelves stretched out of sight in all directions, heedless of the fact that they ought to have run into the kitchen on one side of the arched entranceway and the front wall of the TARDIS (if it had such a thing) on the other. The contents were arranged in no order whatsoever, yellowed folios standing side by side with e-books and battered old paperbacks. The chaotic system had irritated Anji, at first – but, whenever she found the time to browse in here, she seemed to come across what she wanted, even if she didn’t know what it was, in short order. It was as if the TARDIS could read her mind and rearranged the books accordingly. She tried to catch it out sometimes, closing her eyes and making her movements as unplanned as possible, only to find herself with a hand resting on a book on just the subject that – almost without realising it – she had been thinking about.

It was certainly a large enough space in which to lose a weird, alien bird-thing.

She tried to stay close to the archway, in case it bolted past her again. But the sounds of destruction drew her further into the room. ‘Come on, er... birdie,’ she called, her voice echoing hollowly around the huge, dusty area. ‘You can’t play in here. Come on, out!’

She spotted it, halfway along a row of shelves, using its beak to yank books to the floor, piling them up around its splayed feet. It turned to face her, as if sensing her presence. Anji walked towards it slowly, hands extended with their palms turned upwards to indicate that she meant it no harm. She made a soothing clicking noise with her tongue, but that really did make her feel silly, so she stopped.

She began to get worried when the creature looked away from her. She quickened her pace.

The bird-thing twisted its head and plucked something from within the feathers on its back (How did it manage that? It had to be a contortionist!). It set the object down on a shelf, and Anji strained to see what it was. As she drew closer – just a few metres away now – she recognised it as a banana. The bird-thing had already peeled it, somehow, using only its beak. It threw back its head and flipped the fruit deftly into its mouth.

Then it looked at Anji again and she stopped, feeling somehow that the bird-thing knew something that she didn't.

They stared at each other for long seconds, and the bird-thing blinked twice.

This was getting ridiculous. Anji took another two steps towards it.

And, with a flick of its head, the bird-thing picked up the banana skin and skimmed it across the linoleum-coated floor towards her. By the time her second foot landed, the skin was already, impossibly, beneath it – albeit only for an instant.

Anji's right foot shot out from beneath her, performing an involuntary high-kick that was just a little too high. Losing her balance, she waved her arms frantically but couldn't remain upright. She toppled backwards, landing in a quite undignified heap.

A second later, the banana skin plopped, with perfect precision, right on to her face.

The weird, alien bird-thing had already shot away.

Anji was still holding the banana skin when she returned to the console room, a few minutes later, nursing her pride. Its yellow inner surface was quite the most slippery thing she had ever encountered: it felt almost frictionless, and it was an effort to keep it from sliding through her closed fingers.

She dropped it into her trouser pocket for want of a better place, and wiped her hand with a handkerchief as she looked around and listened for the intruder. It might be anywhere by now: the kitchen, the laboratory, even still in the library. Better yet, outside.

Something caught her eye: a glint of light upon metal from the floor between the console and the sofa that still blocked the inner doors. Her stolen earring.

She stooped down and retrieved it, only realising as she did so that a piece of thin, black string was knotted around it. It trailed along the floor, until it disappeared beneath the sofa. Anji glanced up fearfully and her instincts propelled her simultaneously backwards.

A grand piano fell from somewhere just below the ceiling.

She threw herself up on to the console, hugging its glass rotor, as the heavy instrument landed and its white, wooden frame exploded with a discordant jangle.

Anji stared at the debris for a full minute, breathing hard, waiting for her heart to stop racing and trying to make some sense of what was happening here.

Then she felt the TARDIS moving.

She started, and leapt back down to the floor. Had she hit the wrong button? Had she accidentally done what, mere minutes earlier, she had feared the bird-thing might do? In that lasting second of uncertainty, a cold dread ate at her stomach and she wondered how, if the TARDIS was in flight, she would ever get back to the Doctor (Get back to the Doctor? What if she couldn't even land? What if she was trapped inside the time vortex for ever?).

But the motion of the ship didn't feel right. It didn't feel normal.

And, through the open doors, she could hear a heavy scraping sound.

It took just one look at the scanner to confirm her suspicions. The TARDIS was moving all right, but not through the fourth dimension and certainly not under its own power. It was being pushed slowly along the dry ground, and towards the nearby cliff edge.

As if sensing her remote eyes upon it (how did it do that?), the weird, alien bird-thing took a break from its toils; its head snaked into view on the monitor around a corner of the ship's blue police box exterior. Clamped in its grinning beak was a piece of string, from which hung a cardboard sign, upon which was imprinted just one word: 'Byeee!'

Stunned, Anji glanced down and realised that the remains of the grand piano had somehow disappeared while she had been distracted.

It occurred to her, however, that she had more immediate worries.

The TARDIS began to move again and she ran for the doors, but it was already too late.

The floor tilted abruptly, and gravity snatched her from the steps that would have led her out to safety. She fell against the console, which poked a sharp, painful corner in her back. She turned and clung to it, and stared up at the scanner again.

The bottom of the canyon was a long way away.

But it was getting closer, fast.

Chapter Two

‘What kind of a crazy ambulance is this?’ cried Fitz. ‘There’s no paramedics, no equipment, no nothing! And where are we going?’

‘Nee-naw, nee-naw,’ wailed the ambulance. Then: ‘Hey, get out of my way, buddy. Can’t you see we got us an emergency here?’ It swerved around an unseen obstruction, and Fitz nearly fell over again.

The Doctor was lying on his back on the gurney, his jacket open, his shirt a bloody mess. It didn’t look good. His lone heart was pumping his life away.

The pig was confused, as if he didn’t know which question to answer first. He settled on a helpless shrug. ‘I d-don’t know where we’re g-going. Into the b-big city I should think.’

The big city. Well, that sounded promising. ‘To a good hospital, right?’

‘A hostiple? What the heck’s one of those?’

Fitz could feel himself beginning to panic. ‘Look, my friend needs medical care.’

‘N-no p-problem,’ the pig assured him. ‘He’ll be all right in a minute, you’ll see.’

‘And I mean from a proper doctor,’ said Fitz. ‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but is everybody on this world like you? Are we on the Planet of the Porkers or what? Because if you’re taking him to a vet –’

‘D-don’t worry there’s all kinds of p-p-people on the Crooked World.’

‘The Crooked World?’

‘Streaky B-Bacon, at your service.’

The pig held out one of his front trotters, and Fitz shook it gingerly. ‘Fitz Kreiner,’ he said. He was still worried. Even if there were human beings here, or something similar, there was still a good chance that they’d be baffled by the Doctor’s unique physiology.

The ambulance took a sharp bend on two wheels, and he was forced to brace himself against its white walls. Streaky Bacon let out a high-pitched squeal and tumbled over. His blunderbuss slid across the floor towards him and Fitz almost leapt after it, to snatch it away. But Streaky just looked at

the weapon and shook his head dolefully 'It's n-never done anything like this before, I swear. I mean, it's only a b-blunderbuss. I only... I only...'

'Shot somebody! You only walked right up to him and jammed that gun in his chest and... and...'

There was a near-hysterical edge to Fitz's voice. 'What did you *expect* to happen?'

'Well, n-normally, there's a big b-bang, and they...'

The pig was talking too quickly, and it faltered as it groped for words. 'They get f-frazzled. They turn b-black and c-crispy and their fur burns off, if they have any. Oh, and they look a b-b-bit surprised, but that's all. They're usually b-better in a couple of seconds.'

'And what if they're not?'

'Th-then they're whisked away in the ambulance and they c-come back cured. B-but it's not working this time and I don't know why, d-dagnabbit.'

'Nee-naw, nee-naw,' said the ambulance as it skidded around another corner. 'Hey, you guys, how much longer you gonna be back there? I'm exhausted! Nee-naw, nee-naw.'

'I don't understand what's happening,' wailed Streaky. 'There must have been a f-fault in the g-gun.' His face crumpled and he stamped a foot in frustration. 'Goldarn it!'

'I've got other emergencies to get to, you know.' The ambulance sounded short of breath. 'Two more shootings, three falls off cliffs and Sebastian the cat has been hit in the face again with the ironing board. You guys are throwing off my schedule.'

'Look,' said Fitz, in as calm a voice as he could muster, 'you obviously can't help my friend. Will you take us back to where you found us?'

'No can do, pal. More'n my job's worth. Not until he's all better.'

'He's not getting better, can't you see? He needs proper help or he'll die!'

'D-d-die?' repeated Streaky.

'Yes, die!' said Fitz through gritted teeth.

'But he'll be all right afterwards, won't he?'

'No, he won't!' insisted Fitz, giving in to an anger born of frustration. 'He won't be all right. He'll be dead. Don't you understand?' Streaky looked at him blankly, as if he really didn't. Gesticulating impatiently, Fitz snapped: 'Dead. Gone. Never coming back.'

'What, n-n-never?'

'N-n-never.'

'G-g-gosh.' Streaky fell back on to his hindquarters, with a heavy thump. He produced a handkerchief from his khaki jacket and dabbed at his forehead. He looked stunned, as if he had just discovered a shocking truth.

'Now, will you tell this bloody ambulance thing –'

‘Wh-wh-*what*?!’ Streaky leapt almost a foot into the air – which, from a sitting position, was quite some feat.

‘OK, you guys,’ panted the ambulance, ‘I am officially cheesed off now. I’ve been going round in circles so long, I’m getting dizzy. Will you tell your buddy there to get a move on? Nee-naw!’

‘Fitz. . .’

Fitz almost mimicked Streaky’s leap at the sound of the Doctor’s weak voice, and the touch of a cold hand against his own. ‘Doctor? Doctor!’

‘This is no time for telling jokes,’ objected the ambulance.

‘Are you all right? How are you feeling? I’m trying to get help.’

‘Do you know where we can find a hostile?’ asked Streaky.

‘No hospitals. . .’ The Doctor’s eyelids fluttered, but his lips barely moved, his words coming out in a low murmur.

‘You need help, Doctor. I don’t know what to do.’

‘I want you to. . . promise me. . . Fitz, no. . .’

He gave up in mid-sentence, his pale face falling still again. But his brief recovery had given Fitz new purpose. ‘That’s it!’ he announced. ‘I’ve had enough of being dragged who-knows-where by you lunatics. We’re getting out of here!’

‘You can’t!’ squealed Streaky. But Fitz had already braced himself against the Doctor’s gurney, and he kicked with all his strength at the back doors of the ambulance. The pig got in his way and tried to wrestle him to the floor. He wasn’t strong, but he was tenacious. Fitz threw him off three times, but he kept coming back. Finally, he gave in to temptation and landed a solid punch on his opponent’s pink, round face.

Alarmingly, Streaky Bacon’s head stove in like a hollow rubber ball.

Fitz was still wondering how to react – did he have to feel guilty? – when, with a sudden pop, the pig’s head resumed its normal shape, albeit with a dazed expression.

So, Fitz shrugged and hit him again, aiming for the stomach. Streaky doubled up, winded, and his eyes bugged alarmingly out of his head.

Fitz aimed another kick at the back doors and was pleased when, this time, they flew open. But then, with a cry of ‘Hey, what do you think you’re doing?’ the ambulance slammed on its brakes and the Doctor’s gurney cannoned into Fitz’s back. His legs buckled and he fell backwards on to his friend, as they were jettisoned into a world of noise.

‘And good riddance to the pair of you,’ spat the ambulance, as it sped away. For a second, Fitz glimpsed the upside-down, receding form of Streaky Bacon, hopping apoplectically from trotter to trotter. Then he closed his eyes and held on as the gurney hurtled through the air, landed with a jolt, collided with something soft and warm, overturned and spilled

its passengers on to tarmac. He rolled on to his back, tried to catch his breath, looked up and stared into the slavering jaws of a giant, grey bulldog.

'Ahh... um... there, there,' he panted, raising his hands in what he hoped was a placatory gesture. 'Good doggie. Nice doggie.' It bared its teeth, which at least drew Fitz's gaze away from the vicious-looking spikes that studded its collar.

'Watch where you're going, you road hog!' growled the dog.

'You can talk!' groaned Fitz. 'Of course you can. Look... er, I'm sorry if I sounded a bit patronising just then...'

His apology tailed off as the bulldog sprang at him, barking. With a yelp of fear, he did his best to scramble out of its path, covering his head. He was immensely relieved when it was brought up short, its sharp teeth less than an inch from his face. It dropped to the ground, landing on all fours, and howled angrily. Its lead, Fitz saw now, was tethered to one of the stone posts of a wood-panelled fence. He edged a little further away from it, just in case. The Doctor, by chance, had fallen out of the animal's reach.

This gave Fitz a breather – and, for the first time, he was able to take a good look at what Streaky had called 'the big city'.

Its name was Zanytown. He knew this because of the large, wooden sign in the road beside him, with letters that looked as if they had been thrown at it, reading: 'Welcome to Zanytown – Population 512 ½'. Fitz was put in mind of a large American city, surrounded as he was by window-dotted skyscrapers, which towered to varying heights. If Zanytown was patterned after New York or Chicago, however, then it was a caricature rather than a copy. The buildings sprouted at odd angles to each other, several teetering almost thirty degrees from the vertical. They weren't even built evenly. Lines that should have been straight looked as if they had been drawn without benefit of a ruler. Many buildings tapered as they reached for the sky, becoming almost pyramidal. Far more worrying, however, were those that did the opposite: they were narrow at street level but grew wider as they grew higher, until they appeared to be dangerously top-heavy.

No wonder Streaky had called this the Crooked World: there wasn't a pair of parallel lines to be seen. Even the road on which Fitz stood meandered carelessly, wide at some points, narrow at others. And the tarmac was pink. Zanytown was decked out in candy colours, its brickwork yellow and its wooden façades red.

But he could question all that later. Right now, he was more concerned with what was happening around him. He had heard the noise before but, on his way out of the ambulance, he had been too disoriented to register the fact that he was tumbling into a riot in progress.

Everywhere he looked, animals were running and fighting. That is, if ‘animals’ was the right word. Like Streaky, most stood on their hind legs, wore clothes and were shouting at each other: pithy phrases like ‘I’ll get you, you varmint!’, ‘Come back here, you pesky rabbit!’ and ‘Goodness me, what a very big sledgehammer you’ve got.’

Dogs chased cats and rabbits, cats chased mice and birds. Many a household utensil was wielded in anger, and many a face temporarily bent out of shape as Streaky’s had been. With the streets so blocked, Fitz wondered how the ambulance had managed to get through at all, let alone at speed. His question was answered as a police car rounded the corner, driven by a large, white dog in a Stetson hat: those creatures that couldn’t get out of its way were simply knocked aside or flattened. Of course, they recovered almost instantaneously.

‘Doctor. . .’ Fitz murmured, as his friend stirred again and opened a lazy eye. ‘I think we’ve landed on the planet of the cartoon animals.’

‘I know,’ said the Doctor, in little more than a croak. ‘Fascinating, isn’t it?’

‘That isn’t the word I had in mind.’

‘They can’t harm each other, so they think they can’t harm us.’

‘But you’ve already proved otherwise.’

‘Indeed. I think we ought to find shelter, don’t you?’ He tried to stand, but he was too weak. Fitz offered him a hand and hauled him to his feet, and the Doctor put an arm around Fitz’s shoulders and leaned on him, almost a dead weight. Still, the bloodstain on his shirt hadn’t spread any further, and he was talking. That was something.

Fitz manhandled him into the relative safety of a doorway, while he tried to get his bearings. Across the road and a short way along it, the word ‘HOTEL’ was picked out in neon tubing. It blinked on and off like a beacon, above a set of double doors. Fitz eyed the building suspiciously: it didn’t lean at too great an angle and it was therefore probably his best bet. To get to it, though, he would have to negotiate a path through the chaos.

He was trying to work out a strategy when he spotted something that gave him hope. Somebody was moving through the fighting animals, unaffected and apparently unconcerned by them, his head jerking from side to side as if looking for something. He was wrapped in an overcoat, despite the warm sun, and a large hat was pulled down over his head, obscuring most of his features. A huge white moustache engulfed the rest, but Fitz was sure he was looking at a human being. The first one he had seen here. Maybe now he’d get some answers.

He waved to the stranger to attract his attention – but at that moment, the man saw something else through the crowd and jumped up and down

in excitement. He reached into his coat and produced a large, black sphere, from which a short wire protruded. The man lit the fuse – for such it surely was – with a match. It threw off sparks as it burned down quickly.

‘Oh, great!’ moaned Fitz.

The man slipped between two small dogs, which were yipping at each other. He ran up to a tall, white, humanoid rabbit, with ears that stuck up, and he tapped it on the shoulder. It turned around, and the man thrust the bomb into its arms and ran away, his fingers in his ears.

The rabbit’s eyes bulged and, in panic, it hurled the bomb backwards over its head. Fitz watched in horror as it described an arc, its fuse still burning, towards a wooden fence. Just before it hit, a cat in a top hat and a waistcoat pushed through the fence from the other side, raising two planks almost to the horizontal. The bomb hit the planks and bounced like a ball. It soared above the heads of the crowd again and was about to collide with one of the skyscrapers when somebody pushed open a window from inside and batted it away.

The man with the moustache was running through the crowd, cackling, when his own bomb dropped into his hands. He stopped and looked at it for a fraction of a second.

It exploded.

Nobody else noticed the sudden flash of colour, or they didn’t care. The man just stood there, with a startled expression, as the fighting continued around him. His hat had been dislodged, his moustache was burned and his white eyes blinked in his soot-blackened face.

‘So, *that’s* what the pig was talking about,’ Fitz realised. ‘Frazzled!’

He set his sights on the hotel, and waited for a relative lull in the activity before him. As he lugged the Doctor across the road, a gigantic baby swung at him with its rattle, until it was distracted by a large, clockwork mouse and crawled off in pursuit. A custard pie whistled past his ear and an open-topped car with a face on its front and headlights for eyes came out of nowhere and skidded to a halt, yelling at him to get out of its way.

The hotel’s reception area, Fitz was pleased to find, was almost normal. Oh sure, everything was predictably crooked – none of the plush furniture was constructed to quite the same scale, and not one of the chairs or tables had all four legs the same length – but soothing music played over hidden speakers and nobody was fighting or running in here.

Nor was checking in as much of an ordeal as he had expected. The receptionist was a chicken with a lilting, female voice, but Fitz was surprised how normal that seemed by now. She produced a pile of forms and set about them with an elaborate quill pen, but she appeared to be filling them with random scribbles; Fitz couldn’t make out anything resembling

an actual word. She couldn't have noted down much information, anyway: she didn't even ask for her prospective guests' names. And there was no mention of money, which was something of a relief because Fitz had no idea what passed for currency here. He would probably have to sneak out tomorrow without paying, but he could worry about that when the Doctor was feeling better.

The only problem came when the chicken asked how they wanted their eggs in the morning, and gave 'freshly squeezed' as an option. Declining breakfast altogether, Fitz snatched his room key and hurried away as fast as the Doctor's weight would allow.

Their room, apparently, was on the fourth floor. Had he been alone, Fitz would have taken the stairs – but he didn't fancy heaving his near-unconscious friend up four flights, so the elevator it was. As he had feared, it tried to make small talk throughout the upward journey, in a cheerful voice that issued from a tiny grille. Normally, the Doctor would have been delighted to engage it, but he had passed out again. Fitz couldn't get past the fact that he was being addressed by an inanimate object, so he responded with embarrassed grunts to a series of questions about where he had come from and how long he was staying. The elevator took umbrage, and grumbled 'Be like that, then!' It opened its doors with deliberate abruptness, and snapped them shut again as soon as Fitz had carried the Doctor clear.

A few minutes later, he stumbled into Room 1313 and gratefully dropped his friend on to the nearest of the two lopsided beds. The room was basic – and crooked, of course – but it would suit their purposes. There was a wardrobe, a pair of bedside tables and a chest of drawers, upon which stood a television set. There was also a writing desk, the slope of which was so severe that Fitz wasn't sure why its two pens and pad of paper didn't slide off. A photograph of a humanoid black mouse hung in a frame on the wall, and a single window with two panes overlooked the street. The sounds of the fighting animals were muted by glass; Fitz watched them for a few seconds, then drew the red curtains to shut them out.

He opened a small side door and peered into a bathroom, with a wash basin, a bath, a neat pile of white towels and a space where there ought to have been a toilet. He returned to the bedroom, where he saw that the Doctor had shifted position slightly. His hands were crossed over his chest and he appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

He wondered if he ought to do something. His friend had been adamant that he didn't need a hospital, but what if he was wrong? The Doctor was used to knowing the capabilities of his body, to having that second heart. It had taken him long enough to accept that it had gone at all; what if he

was still overestimating his own powers of recuperation?

For now, Fitz settled for loosening the Doctor's cravat, opening his shirt and dabbing at his bloodied chest with a wet towel. If it looked like his condition was worsening, he would. . . do what, exactly? Fortunately, the damage didn't look too bad. The bleeding, as he had guessed before, had stopped – although there still had to be a dozen buckshot pellets in there somewhere.

The room, he noticed, was lacking in. . . well, *detail*. The wallpaper was a plain flat white, the carpet a plain flat pink, and neither possessed much in the way of texturing or shading. The wood from which the furniture was made was smooth and red, with neither knots nor grain. The blankets on the bed were blue, and it looked like somebody had doodled on them with a black pen to give the impression of a more complex pattern.

Out of curiosity, Fitz turned on the television and sat in front of it, at the foot of the second bed. As the set warmed up, the image of a middle-aged man came slowly into view. He had short, black hair and an almost square face, which hardly moved as he spoke. He wore a neat, blue suit and he sat behind a desk in the manner of newsreaders everywhere.

'Police are looking,' said the newsreader, over-enunciating, 'for a big, red rock-eater.' He picked up a stack of papers, shuffled them and cleared his throat. 'But back to today's top story, and the appearance on the Crooked World of a box full of strangers.'

The scene changed, and Fitz gaped as he observed the recent arrival of the TARDIS from a whole new perspective. He recognised Streaky Bacon, although he had never seen the purple bird-thing that taunted him before. And he wondered where the camera had been that had zoomed in for a close-up shot as he and the Doctor had taken their first steps on to this world.

He swallowed dryly as the Doctor was shot down. If it had looked bad the first time, then it looked even worse from this angle, with a slow-motion replay. He looked over at his sleeping friend, to reassure himself that the Doctor's breathing was still normal.

'The two men were taken away in the ambulance,' said the returning newsreader, 'and were last seen heading towards Zanytown. In a statement issued just now, Boss Dogg urged all citizens not to approach them. The uglier of the two men – the thin-faced, mean-looking one – has already punched a pig and is considered to be dangerous.'

Fitz stared at the screen. 'Uglier. . . ? Mean-looking?'

'That's right, buster,' said the newsreader, catching his eye. 'I'm talking about *you*!' He pointed and, to Fitz's alarm, his accusing finger stabbed right out of the screen.

'You can see me?' he yelled.

'Well, of course I can see you, you idiot. You can see me, can't you?'

'Yes, but –'

'And I can hear you. So, if you don't mind, shut up and let me finish my broadcast.'

'Have you seen a young woman? She's called Anji. She arrived with us.'

The newsreader glared at him and straightened his tie. 'Breaking news: the two strangers have checked into the Zanytown Hotel. We go over to the scene for exclusive live footage.'

Fitz started as he found himself staring at himself, staring at the TV. There had to be a camera behind the screen. He jumped up quickly and shut it off, hoping that this would solve the problem. 'How very rude,' the newsreader complained, as his image faded.

Fitz stripped the blanket from his bed and threw it over the set for good measure. Then he fell back on to his mattress and prayed for the Doctor to get well soon.

Chapter Three

The TARDIS hit the ground with less force than Anji had dreaded. Its force field must have cushioned it. Nevertheless, she was thrown roughly to the floor and, as she heard crockery smashing in the kitchen alcove, she feared for the contents of her bedroom. Time to worry about that later, though.

The scanner showed her nothing but blue sky interspersed with perfect cotton wool clouds. The ship had landed on its back, but its internal gravity had shifted to compensate so that it felt like it was standing upright. Anji had only recently been here before – and as she made her way gingerly towards the exit, she was prepared for the world to be flipped around her again until she was hanging vertically from the lip of the external doors.

She hauled herself out of the familiar police box shell on to hot sand, and straightened up to find herself at the bottom of a deep canyon. There was no sign of the weird, alien bird-thing, which was probably for the best. Had she seen it now, she would have wanted to wring its neck, and that would have been no way for a caring professional to behave.

So, what were her priorities? She couldn't lift the TARDIS by herself (and she had no intention of trying; she must look rough enough already), and perhaps it could take off from a horizontal position anyway. Her best plan, therefore, was to find the Doctor and Fitz and let them know what had happened. So, her immediate goal had to be to get back to the top of that cliff.

She surveyed the impossible climb, shielding her eyes from the sun – and taking note of this, the sun politely sidled out of her line of sight. OK, thought Anji, fine. No problem. Something else to think about dealing with later.

There was no question of dragging herself up the sheer rock face, not least if it meant she would have to climb back down again later. She would have to find another way up.

The canyon, thankfully, was open at both ends. In fact, after exploring it for half an hour or so, she concluded that it was part of a network of gullies, a veritable maze. It also occurred to her that she ought to be uncomfortably

hot by now. It felt as if the sun were regulating its output, to keep her body at a pleasant, warm temperature. This made no sense, of course. But then nor did the fact that, when she glanced up at said sun, it responded with a grin and a cheerful wink.

Her search was curtailed by the sound of a bloodcurdling scream from above her. She looked up, and was alarmed to see a humanoid figure plummeting from the cliff top.

She froze, not knowing what to do. Should she try to get under him and break his fall, or would that kill them both? She was almost relieved (although she felt guilty because of it) when she realised she was too far away for such a heroic gesture. She ran towards the figure anyway (What did she think she could do for him? As if anyone could survive a fall from that height!). She winced as he landed with a sickening, wet smack, a few metres in front of her.

He lay face down, arms and legs splayed out in a grotesque star shape, half-buried in the sand. There was no blood. Anji felt sure there ought to have been blood.

And 'he' wasn't human. She frowned. The creature looked like a large, brown wolf, but its silhouette had seemed human enough on the way down. A humanoid wolf? A lycanthrope? Perhaps the dominant life form on this planet; Anji had been travelling in time and space long enough to know that you could never judge by appearances.

The sight of the wolf-man – and the thought of what it had suffered – made her queasy. She turned away, but turned back quickly at a slithering, sucking sound from the creature's direction. It was moving, picking itself up. Anji's hand flew to her mouth, to keep herself from vomiting or screaming, whichever her body decided to do first.

It rose before her, on to its hind legs. Its jowls sagged with misery, and it blinked at her with moist eyes. It was flat, like a piece of paper. It had not so much stood up, she realised, as peeled itself off the ground. It swayed gently in a light breeze.

The wolf-man stuck out a flat arm (or front leg?) and, with a pop, it re-inflated, simple as that. It repeated the process with its other limbs, then its head, and finally its torso. Anji backed away slightly, wondering if she should try talking to it but noticing how big its teeth were. But the creature disregarded her completely. It half-turned away, to stare up at the cliff face, and it rubbed its chin thoughtfully. Then its features lit up with delight, and, with a soft ping, a glowing, yellow light bulb materialised above its head.

The bulb faded away as the wolf-man reached behind its back, took hold of its long, thin tail, twisted it and let it go. The tail unravelled at speed,

impossibly beginning to rotate like a helicopter blade, and the wolf-man was lifted into the air, backside first.

Anji followed its progress for a while, open-mouthed, as it climbed slowly upwards. Then she heard the drone of approaching traffic – and, forgetting the wolf-man in the hope of getting a lift out of this desert, she ran towards the sound.

There were about twelve vehicles in all. Anji couldn't see them clearly, because they were still quite distant and because they kicked up a cloud of dust as they skidded around a bend and raced towards her. They were jostling for position, driving up to four abreast.

She stuck out a tentative thumb towards them.

And suddenly they were upon her.

At first, she was struck by the sheer variety of the vehicles. She saw a long-nosed blue dragster, an old-fashioned coupé, something that looked suspiciously like a bubble car and, skipping along the ground on its landing wheels, a biplane.

The next thing that struck her was the fact that they were all barrelling in her direction, as if she were invisible. The two leading cars roared past her, one to each side, blowing up her hair in their jet stream (typical – that was *why* she'd wanted to tie it up!). And the dragster released a shower of tacks on to the ground behind it.

The bubble car swerved to avoid a puncture, and came straight at Anji. By instinct more than anything, she threw herself aside, and the car just missed her as she fell into the sand. But she had stumbled into the path of another bizarre vehicle, and there was no time to avoid this one. It looked like the skeleton of a racing car, built as it was entirely from white tubing; no, she realised, from actual bones! She couldn't even see an engine.

And that irrelevant observation, she told herself, might be her last thought.

Her penultimate thought.

Whatever.

The car didn't slow down, not even slightly. But its tubes rearranged themselves, clacking into a new configuration and hoisting the driver's cabin as if it were on stilts. The wheels, still on the ground, sped around the prone Anji, leaving plenty of clearance. The white bone chassis passed over her head, and she shuddered as the mortal peril of her situation began to sink in at last. She hadn't even had time to panic. Perhaps she ought to do that now.

But then another car, bringing up the rear of the pack, hit the tacks and suffered a quadruple blowout. It skidded past her, and she saw the grim expression of the pink-clad, young lady driver in the open-topped cabin as

she struggled in vain to regain control. The car crashed into the cliff face, its front end crumpling. The bonnet sprang open and steam issued from within, with a loud hiss.

‘Oh, shucks!’ The driver pounded at the steering wheel with tiny, pink-gloved fists. ‘It looks as if poor little old me has been run out of this race by a dirty, no-good cheat.’

‘Are you all right?’ asked Anji, running to her side.

The woman glanced at her with a surprised expression. ‘Oh, I’ll be fine, sugar. Just as soon as I find me a knight in shining armour to come to my rescue.’ She reached into a pink handbag, which lay on the seat beside her, and produced a compact. She angled her rear-view mirror so she could watch herself as she applied blusher to her cheeks.

‘Can I help?’ Anji didn’t know much about cars, but she was sure she could work out how to mend a puncture if she had to. The engine, however, was a different matter.

‘Don’t put yourself out, dear,’ said the driver breezily, putting on her lipstick. ‘I’m sure there’ll be a big, strong man along here any minute.’ Perhaps she was in shock.

Anji couldn’t help wondering about the car itself. It looked more like a battery-powered buggy than a vehicle built for speed. It was small and boxlike and, incongruously, pink. A round decal on its side contained the number 21; beneath it – and written, it seemed, in the driver’s own darker pink lipstick – neat, fussy letters spelled out ‘But Only Just’.

She took a peek beneath the dented bonnet, to see how bad it looked. To her surprise, she was able to diagnose the problem immediately. ‘There’s no engine in here!’

‘Oh, I don’t like to worry my little head about such technical details,’ said the driver, waving a dismissive hand.

‘But you actually race in this thing?’

‘Do you mind, sugar! I’ll have you know, you’re talking to the very best driver in the Crooked World’s daily Funny-Car Derby. Angel Falls is the name. How do you do?’

Perplexed, Anji introduced herself, as Angel Falls put down her handbag and slid out of her seat. She was just a little taller than Anji, but painfully, almost worryingly thin. She walked with a provocative wiggle of her hips and, as she stopped in the middle of the canyon and extended a thumb with its pink-varnished nail, she reminded Anji of a catwalk model striking a pose. At best, though, she possessed a bland, artificial beauty, with her big eyes, pursed lips and too-symmetrical face and figure. And how could any woman think herself sexy – as this one obviously did – with a clunky, pink racing helmet strapped to her head?

Another vehicle sped into view around the canyon wall. This one resembled nothing more than a mechanical horse, all straight edges, finished in gleaming silver and rolling on four wheels. The rider wore an old-fashioned suit of armour, and his face was hidden behind his closed visor. A standard flew behind him; it was green with a golden dragon motif.

When the knight saw Angel, he brought his vehicle to a halt. It reared up like the animal after which it was patterned, and its engine gave a protesting ‘neigh’.

‘What ist up with thou, dear lady?’ asked the knight.

‘Oh, brave knight,’ Angel simpered, ‘some beastly rotter has punctured my tyres – and, me being only a poor little girlie, I can’t fix them. Would you be a darling and help me get back on the road?’ She fluttered her long eyelashes, and Anji rolled her eyes in despair.

‘I shouldst not help thee, Angel Falls,’ said the knight with good humour, ‘as thou wouldst surely steal a lead over me in the race. Aye, but verily I canst not refuse a fair maiden.’

‘You’re such a honey, sugar,’ Angel cooed, as the knight dismounted. He opened a hatch in the side of his mechanical steed, and Anji glimpsed a clutter of tools and components, reminiscent of one of the Doctor’s drawers in the TARDIS (but again, no sign of an engine, despite the fact that the storage compartment had to take up most of the horse’s innards).

‘I don’t suppose there’s a city near here?’ she asked Angel, as the knight rummaged. If there was, then it would probably be a good place to start looking for her friends.

‘That’d be Zanytown, sugar.’

‘Oh? How far is it?’

‘Ooh, you wouldn’t want to walk there, Anji dear. It’s far too dangerous for a helpless girl to be out on her own in the big bad desert.’ Anji was about to make a scathing reply when Angel continued: ‘I know! I live in Zanytown myself, with my sweet old guardian. I’ll drive you there as soon as I’ve won this here race and picked up my prize money.’

‘Thanks,’ said Anji weakly, wondering if walking might prove safer after all.

The knight had produced a foot pump from inside his horse and connected it to the exhaust pipe of Angel’s car. As Anji watched with a furrowed brow, he worked the pump once, twice, three times, and the car – tyres, bonnet and all – popped back into its original shape, like an oversized inflatable toy (or like the wolf-man).

‘Much obliged, honey,’ said Angel, leaping back into her seat and starting up the engine (or whatever). Glancing back at the reluctant Anji, she called, ‘Come along, dear. Hurry now.’

‘Forsooth, Angel Falls,’ the knight protested, ‘tis foolhardy enough for one fair lady to risk riding in yon mechanical contrivance, let alone two.’

That made Anji’s mind up for her. ‘Don’t worry about me,’ she said, clambering into the vehicle behind its driver. ‘I can take care of myself!’

‘See you at the finish line, honey!’ called Angel, waving her delicate fingers at the knight.

‘Zounds!’ he exclaimed, running for his mount as the pink buggy pulled away. Anji turned to watch him, but the car’s phenomenal acceleration whipped her head around and folded back the skin of her cheeks. There was definitely an engine somewhere: she could hear it, whining like a hyperactive hairdryer. She struggled to draw breath, as her face was blasted by stinging particles of sand and the canyon walls whizzed by.

She held on tight to Angel and yelled into her ear: ‘Do you have a spare helmet?’

‘No!’ the driver yelled back. ‘Sorry, dear. I know you must be worried about your hair.’

‘That wasn’t why I asked!’ she shouted (although, now she came to mention it. . .).

She was startled by the sound of an explosion behind her, but she didn’t dare relinquish her grip on Angel to look round. ‘What was that?’

‘Oh, that’ll be Sir Percival’s car,’ replied Angel smugly. ‘Clumsy old me accidentally dropped a packet of nitroglycerine into his fuel tank.’

‘You. . . you killed him?’

‘“Killed him”? No, honey, I don’t think so.’

‘Let me out!’ bawled Anji.

‘Sorry – can’t hear you, dear. Hold tight, now!’

Somehow, they had almost caught up with the other cars already. Anji could see them, still clustered together, kicking up sand behind them. As she drew level with the rearmost vehicle – a tank, of all things – Angel slowed down to apply more blusher. ‘A girl’s got to look her best,’ she explained. ‘Why, I shudder to think of all those handsome drivers staring at poor little old me, and me looking like. . . well, like you, dear.’

A chorus of wolf whistles emerged from a viewing slit in the front of the tank, and Angel smiled demurely and waved at her unseen admirers. ‘Cooee, boys!’ she chirped. Then, putting her compact to her lips, she blew them a kiss and, with it, a cloud of white powder. The whistles turned to coughs, and the tank veered off at an alarming angle. A set of thick caterpillar tracks hit the canyon wall and gripped it, raising one side of the tank off the ground and flipping it over. It landed on its turret and span like a top.

The pink car moved into the pack, and Angel reached for a prominent red lever on the dashboard. 'It is such a *dry* day,' she complained. 'Time to apply a little moisturiser.'

A ridiculous volume of white cream spurted out from each side of the buggy; Anji couldn't tell from where exactly. It coated the ground, and the vehicles around Angel's lost traction, sliding in all directions. The pink car was edging towards pole position, but alongside it now was the blue dragster, which, Anji saw, bore the number 13. At the wheel, to her consternation, was a man with the head of a black-feathered duck. He wore an old-fashioned helmet of World War I vintage, and a pair of goggles. The monstrosity turned to look at Angel, and its beak twisted into a sneer beneath its upward-curling moustache. It produced a gun from within its long, brown trenchcoat, and Angel threw up her hands with a gasp.

Anji had been through a lot since joining the Doctor and Fitz. She had faced a lot of dangerous people and perilous situations. She thought she had coped well, considering. She thought she had become used to reacting quickly and practically to unexpected events. But sometimes, to her immense frustration, she just couldn't think quickly enough.

She didn't know what to react to first: the fact that her driver had taken her hands off the steering wheel or the fact that the duck-monster was pointing a gun at Angel's head. She didn't know what she could do about either.

The duck fired, and Angel squealed as she took a face full of water. 'My make-up, my make-up!' she wailed, fumbling for the driving mirror with one hand and her handbag with the other as the dragster pulled ahead.

Anji stared at the fast-approaching canyon wall, facing death for the second time in minutes, and she opened her mouth to shout something but knew it was too late.

The car hit the rock, its front end crumpled, its bonnet flew open and steam hissed out.

Anji hardly felt the impact. It was as if the kinetic energy of the vehicle had been stolen, as if it had eased itself to a stop and yet had done so instantaneously. Other cars were speeding by: the very ones that Angel had only just run off the road. Anji trembled, on the verge of hyperventilation. This didn't feel real. She ought to be badly injured or worse (perhaps she was, but she was in shock; perhaps it would hit her in a second).

'That's better,' said Angel, putting down her make-up bag. She turned from her reflection and gasped, as if only now seeing her predicament. 'Oh, shucks!'

Anji's body wasn't ready to move yet, but she had to get out of this death trap. She dragged herself clumsily out of her seat, got her foot caught and

almost fell into the sand. ‘No need for you to do that, sugar,’ said Angel. ‘We’ll be right back in that race just as soon as I can find a nice, obliging man to get me out of this itty-bitty fix. Then we can show that dastardly cheat how a lady ought to be treated. Now, be honest, dear: do I need more lipstick?’

Anji opened her mouth but she didn’t know what to say, and she felt too shaken and weak to speak anyway. She let out a groan instead, and ran her hands through her dishevelled hair. ‘Anji, honey?’ Angel prompted. ‘I asked you about my lipstick.’

‘Why, what’s the plan, “honey”?’ she heard herself retorting. ‘I suppose you’re going to waggle your breasts at some other poor idiot until he agrees to help us.’

‘There’s no need to be like that, dear!’

Frankly, Anji had surprised herself – but shock had given way to self-righteous anger, and once she had unleashed that torrent, she felt she couldn’t have stopped it if she’d wanted to. ‘What is it with this poor damsel in distress routine anyway? You don’t exactly play fair yourself. And you could have killed us both, the way you were driving – oh, but it’s not your fault, is it? How could it be when you don’t take responsibility for anything? You’re just life’s poor little victim! And, by the way: no, you don’t need more lipstick. You wear too much make-up as it is, and it’s not very attractive!’

She didn’t wait for a reaction. Her vitriol spent, she had begun to shake again, and she turned and marched away before she burst into tears. The canyon forked nearby, and the other cars had taken the left branch. She stomped up the right. A final glance over her shoulder was rewarded by the sight of an unscathed Sir Percival bringing his mechanical steed to a halt at Angel’s side. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

She felt ashamed. She hadn’t lost her temper so badly for a long time: she prided herself on her ability to remain rational, even in the most trying of circumstances.

It was this world, she realised. It didn’t make sense to her, and that made her feel uneasy and, as a consequence, irritable. She kept telling herself that she had adjusted to all this, got used to dealing with new worlds and new beings. But there was always something weirder out there to take her by surprise, to prove her wrong again.

Sometimes, she longed for a normal, predictable life. The Doctor had promised to take her home many times, but it never quite happened. Lack of control of the TARDIS was his usual excuse, but she had begun to suspect him of stalling in the hope that she would eventually change her mind. She ought to put her foot down, but it never felt like the right moment.

Another hour passed, with no sign of civilisation – and Anji realised too that she didn't know her way back to the TARDIS. The sun was still lukewarm, and until now she hadn't thought about being lost in the desert – but she could no longer ignore that possibility. She would need food and water soon. (You could get water from cacti, couldn't you? There were plenty around, if she could only work out what to do.)

When she heard an approaching motor, then, she knew she couldn't pass up any more offers of help, even from another Funny-Car racer. So, it was with some relief that she flagged down a lone van, although her spirits were dampened somewhat by its ramshackle appearance, and she winced at the gunshot sounds of its backfiring engine.

The van had been painted with large, stylised flower shapes in various bright colours, against a lurid green background. Upon its side, in large, wobbly letters, it bore the legend 'Spook Wagon'.

Chapter Four

Jasper was tired. But this time he was determined not to lose.

He lay on his front in a familiar corner of the kitchen, his claws outstretched towards the mouse hole, ready for the slightest movement within. The words of the big, fat hotel maid still rang in his ears. She had given him an ultimatum. She had gone out for the evening, her stockings rubbing together as she walked, and she expected to find the kitchen neat and tidy when she returned. If it wasn't – if a big, fierce, ginger cat like him couldn't keep one pesky little mouse in order – then what was the point of having him?

Jasper was scared. He didn't want to be kicked out. Not that this was his first 'last chance', of course – but the big, fat hotel maid had surely meant her threat this time.

The trouble was, Squeak had held a cheese party in his mouse hole last night, and invited all his rodent friends. Loud music had pumped out of the skirting board until the small hours – and, when Jasper had finally nodded off, several of the guests had sneaked up to his basket, picked up his tail between them and plugged it into the wall socket.

It was an effort to keep his eyes open. He had tried propping up the lids with matchsticks, but they had snapped. He needed a short nap, to refresh him for his task. But he didn't dare take one.

And now, Squeak was playing music again. Not the heavy rock beats of last night, but a sweet, haunting violin solo. A lullaby. Even the shapes of the crotchets and quavers seemed soothing as they drifted and dissipated on the air. Jasper's eyelids drooped involuntarily, and he wondered if perhaps it wouldn't hurt if he just rested them. Just for a second.

When he woke up, the tiny brown mouse that had become his nemesis was standing in front of him with a taunting smirk. He pulled out his tongue and ran away – but, as Jasper sprang after him, he felt something tugging at him from behind.

Standing up on his hind legs, he craned to look over his shoulder, and saw that a piece of string had been knotted around the end of his white-

tipped tail. He followed it with his white eyes, and leapt into the air with a horrified shriek like he always did when he was startled.

The string had been threaded around the huge, precarious stacks of plates that the big, fat hotel maid always seemed to leave on the draining board. Jasper's sudden movement had shot them into the air, and he leapt into action, racing frenziedly around the kitchen to catch each one before it could smash on the hard floor. The plates dropped into his front paws, forming neat piles. He extended his back right paw to catch another, and, forced to hop now, was able to pile three more plates on top of it.

But he had reached full capacity, and he could only watch in horror as one final piece of crockery – a small, white saucer – fell in front of his eyes, spinning, unreachable.

He blew out his cheeks in relief as the saucer plopped into the toaster, remaining intact. Then he frowned, as the toaster swayed on its work surface and tipped over, so that the slits in its top now faced him.

He sweated as the plates in his paws also swayed, and he knew he couldn't relinquish his burden, couldn't even move, without causing a catastrophe.

And he screamed as, red-hot now, the saucer was jettisoned horizontally from the toaster, to blaze an unerring path towards his open mouth.

By the time Jasper's teeth had grown back, a few seconds later, he was lying disconsolately on a carpet of porcelain fragments, waiting for the big, fat hotel maid to return and punish him. At the very least, he could expect to be hit over the head with her broom.

Why did life have to be like this?

The question popped, unbidden, into Jasper's mind. It surprised him – so much so that it drove his immediate worries away for a second.

Why did he always have to lose?

Somewhere inside him, a new emotion woke. A powerful longing – but for what, he didn't know. For victory over Squeak? To bask in the praise of the big, fat hotel maid? To prove his worth? But that was nonsensical. Jasper knew his place in the world. He could never defeat his foe, never win. That was just the way of things. And this realisation only deepened his longing, until it was almost a physical pain in his stomach.

The kitchen door opened, and Jasper cringed and covered his head with his front paws, in anticipation of being blasted by the strident tones of his mistress. Instead, he heard an unfamiliar man's voice, calling: 'Is anybody in here? Hello?'

He looked up, blinking curiously. It was rare that a stranger entered the kitchen, but Jasper didn't recognise the thin-faced, scraggly-haired human being who now faced him. 'Oh,' said the man, upon seeing him. 'I suppose

you're a talking cat, are you?'

Jasper raised himself on to his hind legs, still staring, and shook his head.

The man frowned. 'But you can understand what I'm saying?'

He nodded. There was something different about this man, but he wasn't sure what it was. He didn't look like other human beings. His eyes weren't as big, and his face was more... more lined, more detailed. His clothing, at first, looked dull in comparison to what Jasper was used to – but, upon closer inspection, it offered more colours: subtle shades of light and dark such as he had never seen before, all blending together in a pleasing way. The colours were vibrant without being bright, and Jasper couldn't imagine what material the man's shiny, brown jacket might have been cut from.

'My name's Fitz,' said the human being. 'I'm a guest in the hotel. I was just wondering if there was anything to eat in this place. I can't find any members of staff.' His eyes flicked searchingly around the kitchen, and alighted upon the broken plates.

Jasper held up the nametag on his collar for inspection.

'Hello... Jasper,' read Fitz. 'It looks like there's been a bit of an accident in here.'

Jasper turned his mouth downward and stooped his shoulders.

'Ah, well. You don't mind if I have a look around, do you?'

The human being opened an overhead cupboard, and Jasper screamed again, his ginger fur standing on end, as dozens of egg boxes tumbled out of it. No doubt they had been balanced there on purpose by Squeak.

He pushed Fitz out of the way and piled up tea towels on the floor beneath the falling eggs, just in time to give them a soft landing. 'Wow,' said Fitz, 'that was quite impressive.'

Jasper wiped sweat from his brow in relief. But then he became worried again. A prickling premonition told him that his troubles weren't over. How could they be? He hadn't lost yet.

'Whoa!' Fitz had seen the inevitable danger. The big, fat hotel maid had left her ironing board up as usual, and Squeak had hopped on to it and given her clunky old iron a good push. Fitz had caught it, even as it had teetered on the edge, the fragile egg boxes laid out beneath it. He towered over the brown mouse, the iron in his hand, an inquisitive frown on his face, and Squeak stared up at him, openmouthed, before turning tail and fleeing.

Jasper couldn't believe it. He couldn't take his eyes off Fitz as he set down the iron and picked up the egg boxes, several at a time, returning them to the cupboard without a single breakage, oblivious to the fact that

he was defying the very way of things. He was out of place here. The world seemed somehow wrong with him in it. He was *different*.

The ginger cat decided to test his theory. He picked up the iron, waited for Fitz to turn around and hit him experimentally in the face.

He cried out in pain, threw his hands up and staggered backwards into a work surface. 'What the hell was that for? Is everyone on this world mad or what?'

Jasper blinked uncomprehendingly. Why hadn't the human being's eyes bugged out? Why hadn't his head been flattened into the shape of the iron's underside?

Perhaps he just hadn't hit him hard enough.

He struck out a second time, and Fitz let loose with a stream of words which, although Jasper had never heard them before, he knew to be very, very bad indeed. Fitz's head still hadn't changed shape, but his face was looking distinctly red. He snatched the iron from Jasper's paws, and the cat cowered, expecting retribution.

'Why is everyone on this world so obsessed with hitting each other?' complained Fitz. The cat shrugged, wondering how else he expected people to settle their differences. Fitz shook his head, flung the iron aside and walked out of the room, rubbing his cheek ruefully.

As Jasper watched him go, the longing welled up inside him again. For a brief time, although he only realised it now, the human being had changed his life. He had made it unpredictable, opened up new possibilities. It had been breathtaking and frightening. But now Fitz was leaving, and he was taking those possibilities, those terrifying opportunities, with him. What if there was more? What if Fitz could show Jasper how to stop losing?

A Big Idea came to him. It was so big that he felt sick thinking about it. But the sight of the kitchen door closing behind his unexpected visitor caused his stomach to sink, and he knew that he had to act now, to seize his opportunity, or he would regret it for ever.

Why didn't he go after Fitz? Why didn't he leave the kitchen?

He pulled open the door and peered cautiously around it. His heart raced as he surveyed the hotel lobby: he had only seen it in passing before, as the big, fat hotel maid had carried him through it by the scruff of his neck to dump him on the street for the night. He hadn't realised before that the lines of it were slanted, crooked.

He didn't have time to ponder that, though. He caught sight of the human being's back, already disappearing around a bend in the grand staircase. He looked back over his shoulder at the security of home, but he saw only broken plates on the floor and the prospect of yet more misery to come if he stayed here.

So, Jasper took his first bold steps into an unknown world, by following Fitz upstairs.

When Fitz returned to Room 1313, still hungry, he was surprised and pleased to find the Doctor awake, if a little alarmed that he was watching television. He had pulled a wooden chair up to the screen and he was sitting too close to it, hunched forward, riveted by the continuing news broadcast. He didn't even acknowledge his companion's return.

'In other news tonight,' the newsreader intoned, as if he were giving a performance of Shakespeare, 'Explosion in Zanytown: One Person Surprised. Local Feline in Ironing Board Tragedy. And an exclusive interview with the unmasked Prairie Cactus Monster: learn how he would have gotten away with it too, if it hadn't been for those meddling kids.'

'Thank you very much,' said the Doctor. 'You've been very informative.'

'My pleasure,' said the newsreader, with a sparkling, false grin.

The Doctor turned off the TV and leaned back in his chair, with a heavy sigh. He still looked pale. 'A very useful service,' he muttered.

Fitz wasn't sure if his friend was addressing him or just talking to himself. Just in case, he cleared his throat to alert him to his presence. 'How are you feeling?' he asked.

'Much better, thank you. Still weak, but nothing a little more rest won't cure.' The Doctor pushed his chair backwards and turned it to face Fitz. His eyes were distant, perhaps bleary, and his voice was more subdued than normal. 'My tissues are knitting together quite nicely. Perhaps not as quickly as they once would have done, but...'

'What about the bullets? Aren't they still, you know, in there?'

He shook his head. 'No, and that's the curious thing. Almost as soon as they entered my body, the buckshot pellets dissolved. That's how I was able to recover, albeit slowly.'

Fitz raised his eyebrows. 'I wish I could shrug off being shot in the chest so easily.'

'The pellets didn't penetrate too deeply. The damage was nothing this old body couldn't handle.' With a wry grin, he added: 'Still.'

Fitz realised for the first time that the Doctor was wearing a clean, bright yellow shirt. 'Where did that come from?' he asked, pointing.

The Doctor didn't seem to know what he was talking about. He glanced down, and a look of realisation crossed his face. 'Oh, you mean the shirt. Room service.'

'Room service?'

'I telephoned them. They couldn't get the blood stains out of my old shirt, so they let me borrow this one in the meantime. Do you like it?'

'It's very, um, yellow.'

'Hmm. Quite.'

'Doctor, I was only gone for a few minutes!'

'Yes, they were very efficient. But enough about me, Fitz. We need to decide what we're going to do next.'

'If it were up to me,' said Fitz, suspecting that it wouldn't be, 'I'd get the hell off this mad world as fast as I could.'

The Doctor nodded. 'An excellent idea.'

'You mean that?'

'With one or two small drawbacks.'

'Oh. I thought there might be.'

'We'd need to find Anji.'

'She probably stayed in the TARDIS.'

'No, no, no, she's trying to make her way here.'

'How do you know?'

The Doctor looked surprised that he should ask. 'I saw it on the news. She's persuaded some of the denizens of this world to offer her a lift into... what was this place called again? Zanytown. Ever resourceful... Unfortunately, her transport has broken down en route.'

'Far away?' asked Fitz.

'In an area of woodland that bears the rather dubious name of Gloomy Forest.'

'Well, couldn't you persuade someone to take us there? And then back into the desert?'

'Maybe,' said the Doctor. 'But by the time we reached the TARDIS, it could be too late.' His eyes clouded over. 'It might be too late already.'

'Too late for what?' asked Fitz. 'What's wrong this time?' But before he could get an answer, he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

He looked to the Doctor to take the lead, but he had steepled his fingers in front of his nose and mouth, and closed his eyes as if meditating. Fitz got up with a sigh – and, seeing that the door had no spy-hole, he braced himself for something weird to happen and opened it.

There were two figures in the corridor outside, but Fitz's gaze was pulled to just one of them. The pink-clad young woman was quite short, but she had the most perfect figure he had ever seen: amazingly slender but still – and here was a word that Fitz didn't think he'd ever used in all seriousness before – curvaceous. She had large, appealing eyes and a tiny mouth, which she had highlighted with pink lipstick. Her hair was hidden beneath an equally pink helmet, which somehow looked like a fashion accessory on her.

‘Well, hi there,’ said the woman in a silken voice, and she placed her hands on her hips. ‘I hoped I might find Anji Kapoor here, but I do declare, you are a very welcome bonus.’ Fitz could only hope that his jaw hadn’t actually dropped open; he was too busy staring to check.

‘She’s. . . er, she’s on her way,’ he mumbled. ‘Would you like to wait?’

‘That’s mighty decent of you, sugar. I’m Angel Falls.’ Angel. That seemed appropriate.

‘Fitz. . . er, Fortune.’

‘Oh? They called you Fitz Kreiner on the TV

‘Or Kreiner,’ said Fitz lamely. ‘Either one, really.’

‘And I am Miss Falls’s guardian,’ announced the other figure, his soft, cultured tones distracting Fitz from his perfect rear view of Angel as she wiggled past him into the hotel room. ‘Mr Weasley.’

‘Yes,’ said Fitz, shaking Weasley’s proffered paw and noticing for the first time that he was a humanoid weasel, about six feet tall. He was dressed in a smart, mauve, pinstriped business suit with a matching cravat. He wore a pair of half-moon spectacles, and the silver chain of a pocket watch trailed across his waistcoat. ‘Of course you are.’

‘Are you aware,’ asked Mr Weasley, ‘that you appear to have attracted the attention of a rather large feline?’ He nodded his head down the corridor, and Fitz looked. He was just in time to see Jasper, the cat from the kitchen, ducking back around a nearby corner.

He followed Weasley into the room, where Angel had taken the remaining chair. He perched on the end of his bed, while Weasley stood with his hands behind his back and watched them both over the thin frame of his glasses. Fitz introduced the Doctor, but his friend embarrassed him by failing to respond to his visitors’ greetings. ‘He’s been ill,’ he muttered awkwardly, by way of an explanation. He turned to Angel. ‘So, you’ve seen Anji?’

‘That’s right, honey, and she was on her way to Zanytown. When I heard there were more of you strange types at this here hotel, I just naturally assumed she would have found you.’

‘I did advise Miss Falls against this course of action,’ said Weasley. ‘I do not see what she could hope to gain from conversing with outsiders – no slight intended.’

‘Oh, Mr Weasley,’ groaned Angel. ‘How could I come to harm with these two dashing, handsome men to look after me?’ Angel leaned forward and put a friendly hand on Fitz’s knee. He resisted the urge to let out a delighted whoop. ‘You must excuse my guardian, dear. He’s very protective of poor helpless me.’

‘May I remind you, Miss Falls, that your foe could attack at any moment.’

‘Foe?’ repeated Fitz, almost but not quite taking in the word.

‘That’s what we’re here for, silly,’ said Angel, with an endearing giggle. ‘You see, Fitz honey, your friend Anji said a few things to me that I’ve been thinking about very hard indeed. I think it’s time I did something about my situation.’

‘Well, er, good for you,’ said Fitz, not sure where this was leading.

‘And I’m sure a big, strong man like you could help me.’

‘If I can,’ he responded automatically.

‘I fear Miss Falls is wasting your time, Mr Kreiner,’ said Weasley. He turned to his ward and, with a hint of impatience, said: ‘It’s perfectly normal to have a mortal enemy, Miss Falls. I fail to see what you expect these good people to do about it.’

‘I’m just fed up with it, Mr Weasley. I thought they might be able to stop it.’

‘You want to change your life,’ the Doctor murmured. Fitz looked at him. He had only raised his eyelids a fraction, and yet he seemed to be fixing Angel with a penetrating stare.

It was sometimes easy to forget that the Doctor had lived many lives, seen many worlds and years, fought in many wars and borne many scars. He had forgotten so much himself, and he still approached the universe with a childlike enthusiasm. But then there were the other times, when Fitz looked into the infinite depths of his eyes and was sure that he could see every moment of experience, every piece of wisdom learned and every fragile mortal friend that this lonely wanderer had ever loved and been torn from by time.

Angel deflated. ‘Is that so bad?’

‘Not at all,’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s just that I’ve lived so long with this problem, this... this archfiend who won’t leave me alone, and I can’t help wondering... what if things could be different?’

The Doctor’s eyelids fell again, and he nodded to himself.

‘Things can certainly change, Miss Falls,’ he said. ‘I think they’ve already started.’

Chapter Five

Gloomy Forest was living up to its name.

Almost as soon as the Spook Wagon had crossed its threshold (its driver, Mike Leader, was trying out a new short cut), the sky had darkened. At first, Anji had put this down to the thick canopy of leaves above her. Then she had realised that, without any warning, storm clouds had gathered. There was no rain, but intermittent forks of lightning lit the darkness, followed by ominous rolls of thunder. The black, wizened trees formed ghoulish silhouettes, as if they were reaching out with sharp talons.

A mile or so along the winding forest road, the van had broken down, the cause of its malaise unknown. Mike, a tall, blond, handsome nineteen year-old who dressed older, had looked under its bonnet, and Anji hadn't been able to resist peering over his shoulder. The van, she had been surprised to see, had an engine (or at least an approximation of one; for all she knew, it could have been a lump of scrap metal).

'Well, gang,' Mike had said, 'it looks like we're going to have to find a garage.'

'You mean we've got to walk through this spooky old forest?' the skinny, nervous Tim Coward had wailed. 'On foot, like? What if we run into a ghost?'

'Oh, Tim!' the dumpy Thelma Brains had groaned, huge eyes blinking through the lenses of her thick-framed glasses. 'How many times do I have to explain to you that free-floating spectral manifestations cannot exist in the rational world?'

'Still, perhaps Tim's got a point,' the group's slender redhead, Harmony Looker, had said. 'Perhaps somebody ought to stay to look after the van. It's got all our instruments inside.'

Anji had been left out of the ensuing discussion – and, preoccupied with her own thoughts, she hadn't followed it too closely. She wasn't sure how it had come to be that Mike, Thelma and Harmony had all got to stay in the warmth and relative safety of their vehicle, while a reluctant Tim had headed into the dark forest with only his pet dog for company.

‘What should we do until Tim and Fearless come back, Mike?’ asked Harmony.

‘I don’t know,’ shrugged Mike. And he and the two girls stared through the windscreen, occasionally blinking but otherwise motionless.

Anji paced restlessly outside, wrapping her arms about herself to stave off a chill wind and wondering if she should have gone with Tim Coward after all (at least then she would have been *doing* something). When first she had flagged down the Spook Wagon and met the Skeleton Crew – a clean-cut, teenage rock band with a shaggy, canine mascot – she had thought they seemed fairly normal. She was in danger of revising that opinion.

Then Tim returned, breaking through the trees at a run, his hair standing on end, his bony arms waving frantically, his dog at his heels. His friends jerked into action, leaping from the van to greet him, Mike shouting a concerned ‘What’s wrong, you guys?’

‘We ran into a ghost!’ stammered Tim through chattering teeth. He pointed vaguely back the way he had come, then he and Fearless dived beneath the Spook Wagon, although their shaking legs – and Fearless’s stumpy tail – remained visible.

Thelma folded her arms and smiled indulgently. ‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous, you two. I already told you, there’s no such thing as –’

‘A ghost!’ gasped Harmony, as a bizarre apparition came stumbling towards them.

‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ said Anji, joining the others to get a better look.

‘I believe I may be forced to reconsider my objections,’ wailed Thelma.

Mike cried: ‘Let’s skedaddle!’

‘It’s a man with a luminous green sheet over his head,’ said Anji.

But Mike, Thelma and Harmony had already turned and... well, not fled exactly. Not yet. Their feet were pedalling the air with insane speed, but they didn’t move forwards.

‘It’s got eyeholes,’ she said. ‘And look, you can see one of his shoes.’

The trio gained traction and shot away as one, as the ‘ghost’ lumbered closer. It came to a halt as it saw Anji, and they regarded each other with mutual suspicion.

The ghost raised its arms, and tried an experimental ‘Whoooo!’

‘Oh, please!’ she groaned.

Streaky Bacon had been walking in circles for hours, ignoring the usual squabbles and games that were played out around him, giving no more than a passing thought to the devastation that the Whatchamacallit was no doubt wreaking in his absence. What did it matter?

His path varied, but it always brought him back to one particular building, on the outskirts of Zanytown, just along from McMulch's Burger Bar: a single-storey, red, wooden shack with bars on its windows. A free-standing, crooked sign identified it as the 'Animation Cells'.

On his ninth pass, Streaky saw a blue and white police car standing outside the building. The Sheriff was back. Two circuits later, the car was still there, and Streaky knew he couldn't put this off any longer. He took a deep breath, knocked and pushed open the door.

It was dim and faintly musty inside the jailhouse, and Streaky thought about how much he'd miss the smiling sun if he were to be detained here. He glanced nervously to his left: there, a row of metal bars reached from floor to ceiling, partitioning off the end of the shack's single room. They weren't parallel, of course: it puzzled Streaky that he had only just begun to notice such details. Another row ran perpendicular – well, more or less – to the first, dividing one cell into two. Each cell contained one small, barred window, a metal cabinet and a pair of bunk beds, but none of the berths were occupied.

The Sheriff's desk faced the door, and Boss Dogg was behind it, rocking his chair back on two legs, his back heels resting on the table. He was a large, white mutt with an oval face and black patches on his fur. His long, black ears were plastered back against his head, atop which a brown Stetson hat was perched. He also wore an open, brown waistcoat with a red star badge pinned to it, and a low-slung gun belt.

'Mr Bacon,' he rumbled in his rich, deep, lazy voice. 'And what brings you away from your farm on this fine, sunny day?'

'I've c-come to t-t-turn myself in, Sheriff,' said Streaky.

Boss Dogg raised an eyebrow in moderate surprise. 'What in tarnation are you talking about, boy? You ain't no villain, I know you!'

'B-b-but I must be, Sheriff. I hurt somebody, goldarn it, hurt him b-bad.' Streaky wrung his front trotters in anguish. He was sweating, like he always did.

Dogg frowned. 'Hurt somebody, my eye!' He shook his head. 'I don't know what your game is, boy, but I'm too busy for your farfetched nonsense. Now git gone!'

At that moment, a wall-mounted telephone in the corner of the room began to ring. 'Oh boy,' came a squeaky voice from behind the desk, 'a telephone call. Leave it to me, Uncle Dogg, I'll get it!' A short, brown pugnacious pup with a flattened nose had been standing beside the Sheriff. However, at just under two feet tall – even on his hind legs – he hadn't been visible over the tabletop. Still, Streaky should have known he would be there. Boss Dogg's heels were permanently dogged – quite literally – by

his overenthusiastic nephew.

The pup bounded across the room and on to a chair, from which he could reach the receiver. ‘Sheriff’s office, Deputy Scrapper speaking.’ Streaky turned his attention back to Dogg. He didn’t *seem* busy: he was leaning back again, and he had pulled his hat down over his eyes.

The pig didn’t know what to do. Ever since he had shot the stranger, the outsider – the Doctor – he had been wracked with guilt. He felt the need to make amends for his deed, but he didn’t know how. He had thought that, once he had forced out his confession, he would feel better. He had expected Dogg to take control, to tell him what to do, to relieve him of the awful burden of responsibility.

‘You’ve g-got to believe me, Sheriff,’ he implored. ‘I might have k-killed him.’

Boss Dogg tipped back his hat and opened one eye; by his laid-back standards, this meant he was thoroughly alarmed. ‘Yes, k-k-killed him!’ Streaky repeated. ‘Made him d-d-dead, so he can never come b-back!’

The Sheriff just looked at the wretched pig, blankly.

‘Oh boy, oh boy!’ cried Scrapper, as he put down the phone. ‘Uncle Dogg, we’ve got us another nasty old villain to deal with. He’s in Gloomy Wood.’

‘Well then, young Scrapper,’ said Dogg, coming back to life and leaping to his feet, ‘we’d best get out there, hadn’t we?’

‘You said it. Oh boy, I hope he tries to resist arrest, then I can biff him!’

‘B-but what about me?’ stammered Streaky, as Boss Dogg passed him on his way to the door, his nephew capering excitedly beside him. ‘I’ve committed m-m-murder, dagnabbit!’

Dogg stopped in the doorway and grimaced, as if Streaky had made him think about something he’d rather have forgotten. Then, brusquely, he said: ‘Well, don’t do it again.’

‘B-b-but Sheriff. . .’ Dogg swept out of the building, and Streaky hurried after him.

‘You heard me, boy,’ said the Sheriff. He opened his car door, and Scrapper leapt inside and hopped over on to the passenger seat. ‘Consider yourself severely cautioned.’

Streaky Bacon watched, his mouth hanging open, as Dogg drove away at speed. He tried to feel pleased to have escaped with such light punishment. But it didn’t seem adequate. It didn’t erase the guilt. He was beginning to wonder if anything could.

Something was eating at the pit of Streaky’s stomach. He knew the word for it, although he had never felt anything like it before and he had

certainly never understood how strong, how terrible, how all-consuming the sensation could be.

He was feeling despair.

The Doctor had dozed off again in his chair, and Fitz had suggested to his visitors that they continue their discussion in the hotel bar so as not to disturb him. But neither Angel Falls nor Mr Weasley knew what a 'bar' was, and so they had ended up in the reception area: not quite the surroundings in which Fitz had planned to get to know Angel better. And that cat from the kitchen was still lurking. It was trying to keep out of his line of sight, but it hadn't been successful. He was aware of it now, beneath the grand staircase, watching him.

He became a little happier when Mr Weasley looked at his pocket watch and announced that he had an appointment to keep with Angel's accountant. 'I strongly recommend that you accompany me, Miss Falls,' he said, 'for your own protection.'

'Oh tish, Mr Weasley, you just go on ahead. I'm sure I'll be safe with my Fitz here.' Fitz's late mother had called him that; from anyone else, he would have hated it. From Angel, however, it sounded good.

The chicken receptionist put in an appearance, and he asked her if she could fetch some drinks and charge them to his room. He tried out the names of several alcoholic beverages, to no avail, before asking her what she did have. She brought two glasses of milk.

In the meantime, Angel had revealed something about herself. She was a racing driver, and a good one. She had accumulated a small fortune in prize money. 'And that, Fitz sugar,' she said, sipping her drink through a pink-striped straw, 'is the problem. I seem to have attracted the attention of a real villainous kind. He won't leave me alone. He's always following me around and kidnapping me and wanting ransom money, the cad.'

'Have you told the police?'

'Oh, I've tried that, for sure – but he's too cunning for them. He always wears a mask, you see, to conceal his identity. That's why I need somebody like you.'

'I'll do what I can,' said Fitz, his chest swelling with pride. 'You can count on me, Angel.' A small voice in the back of his head reminded him that his attempts to play hero tended to bring him grief. It had never stopped him before, though. And he had rarely had the chance to play the role opposite such a beguiling leading lady. Anyway, how much of a threat could one sad man in a mask pose?

'I'll get you, Angel Falls!'

Angel gasped, and Fitz leapt out of his seat. 'Mr Weasley?'

‘That’s not Mr Weasley,’ cried Angel, ‘It’s that no-good scoundrel, the Masked Weasel!’

‘The Masked...? But it’s just... I mean, isn’t it...?’ Perhaps, thought Fitz, it was simply that all humanoid weasels looked the same to him. But then it had to be said that, had Angel’s guardian taken off his suit and spectacles and donned a long, crimson cloak, a wide-brimmed hat and a mask to conceal the top half of his face, then he would have looked exactly like the figure who had just strode in through the main doors.

‘Oh, save me, Fitzy!’ wailed Angel, pushing Fitz forward and cowering behind him.

‘Nobody can save you from me, Angel Falls,’ said the Masked Weasel, and he burst into laughter: an overly dramatic cackle, which sounded more camp than sinister.

Fitz sized up his foe, not sure what to expect. He didn’t look strong: he was tall and thin like Mr Weasley, and his voice was reedy and a bit whiny, like Mr Weasley’s. Damn it, he *was* Mr Weasley, how could anyone not see it?

The quickest way to end this was to pull off that stupid mask and expose the charade. Fitz made to do just that, but the Weasel took a step back, made an elaborate gesture and, with a swish of his flowing cloak, produced a machine gun.

‘Oh,’ said Fitz.

‘Our first clue,’ Thelma Brains explained with ineffable smugness, ‘was when we found a container of phosphorescent green dye. We inferred from this that the Green Ghost was not really a supernatural being as he had attempted to make us believe.’

‘Like, Fearless and I knew that all along,’ laughed Tim Coward nervously.

‘So,’ said Mike Leader, ‘we decided to set a trap for him.’

‘Oh boy,’ chirped Scrapper, ‘you biffed him. You biffed him good!’

The so-called Green Ghost was looking decidedly unhappy, suspended in a trawling net between two trees. Anji almost felt sorry for him. Just a few metres away, the Sheriff of Zanytown had parked his police car alongside the clapped-out Spook Wagon. Unable to take her eyes off Boss Dogg and his diminutive sidekick, she was beginning to feel that she was staring too much. Perhaps she shouldn’t have been so surprised, not after the wolf-man, but she hadn’t seen this coming. Not talking dogs. Not again.

The Ghost was still wrapped in his green sheet, but Thelma had pulled it back to reveal his true identity. He had a long, mournful face, short ginger hair and a pencil-thin moustache. ‘It transpires,’ said Thelma, ‘that Mr

Gruenwald, who works in these woods as a ranger, participated in a recent bank robbery in Stoneville. He and his associates decided to hide their ill-gotten gains here until the authorities had concluded their investigations.'

Boss Dogg was nodding, and taking notes with a pencil and notepad. Anji wondered where all this information had come from: nobody had questioned the prisoner. She also wondered how it was that talking dogs existed side by side with the non-talking variety on this world. The Skeleton Crew's shaggy mutt, Fearless, hadn't said a word since she had met it. Perhaps it was just shy (or more likely, given its wide-eyed, slack-jowled, dopey looks, very stupid), but then it didn't wear clothes either, and it walked on all fours. Was she dealing, then, with two entirely different species?

'Yes,' said Harmony Looker, 'and he dressed up as the Green Ghost to scare people away, so they wouldn't accidentally stumble upon the loot.'

'And I'd have gotten away with it too,' Gruenwald grumbled, 'if it hadn't been for... for...' He frowned. 'Well, if it hadn't been for that lady there.' He pointed at Anji, as best he could while entangled.

The Skeleton Crew looked scandalised; Harmony actually put a hand to her mouth in horror. 'Well, I'm sorry,' said Gruenwald, 'but it *was* her fault. She walked right up to me and tried to yank my costume off. I didn't know what to do! I was trying to get away from her and I couldn't find my eyeholes – that's the only reason I fell into your stupid net trap.'

'Well,' drawled Dogg, 'you'll have plenty of time to think about that where you're going. Cut him down, Scrapper!' Scrapper produced a knife (from where? Apart from a yellow dog collar, he was naked) and began to saw through the rope that held up the net.

'And, er, hurray for Anji, then,' said Mike, with obvious reluctance.

'Yes,' conceded Harmony, 'hurray for Anji.'

'And Fearless, of course,' piped up Tim. 'We couldn't have done it without him.'

Anji had come to the conclusion that the teenage band were as odd, in their own way, as Angel Falls had been. It was like everybody was playing their own game, and she didn't know the rules to any of them (like, for example: if Mike could summon the police from a phone inside the Spook Wagon, then why couldn't he have called a garage earlier?). She focused upon her own objective, sifting out the parts of this situation that made some sense.

'I don't suppose you could give us all a lift back to Zanytown, could you?' she asked Dogg. 'Our van broke down.'

'Oh, that's no problem,' interrupted Mike. 'It's bound to be working again by now.'

‘Yes,’ said Harmony cheerfully ‘now that the mystery’s been solved.’
The Green Ghost let out a yelp of pain as he crashed to the ground.

A black cloud hovered over Streaky Bacon’s head as he sat on the front stoop of the jailhouse, his chin in his front trotters, oblivious to the passage of time.

He had taken his blunderbuss out of his jacket and laid it across his lap. His gaze strayed down to it for minutes at a time. He had tried to blame the faulty weapon for his plight – but it had been he who had taken fright and aimed it at a stranger, he who had pulled the trigger, he who had been using the gun for as long as he could remember without cleaning it or checking that it still worked. It was his responsibility.

Why hadn’t things like that occurred to him in the past? Before it was too late?

‘D-doggone it,’ he muttered to himself, miserably, for the umpteenth time.

He couldn’t blame the gun for his problems, but – it had occurred to him just minutes ago – it might help him to solve them.

Streaky couldn’t bear the pain he was feeling, but he knew it could never, ever go away, because he couldn’t fix his mistake, couldn’t undo the harm he had done.

He had thought a lot about what death must be like. To go away, as Fitz Kreiner had said, and never come back. It wasn’t that Streaky had been unaware of the concept before, it was just that he had never had cause to think about it, to consider what it really meant. Now, he could think of nothing else. For the first time, he realised what a precious gift life was – and this only made him feel worse, because he had taken that gift away from somebody.

He had been wrestling with his conscience. To surrender his own life had seemed such a cop-out, a way of avoiding the hurtful emotions that were surely a punishment for his dreadful crime. It had seemed so selfish. But he couldn’t live like this. He couldn’t bear it any longer. And surely one life was a fair price to pay for taking another?

He picked up the blunderbuss and turned it upon himself. He opened his mouth and wrapped his lips around the muzzle of the faulty, dangerous weapon. It dug into his cheeks, and pushed them into a circular shape. He hesitated, afraid, but he reminded himself that this was the only way. The only way to bring an end to the aching despair.

He closed his eyes and tightened his trotter on the trigger.

The resultant explosion blew the gun from Streaky’s mouth and left him frazzled. He looked at his charred khaki jacket and his blackened skin, and

he blinked with surprise. He was smarting all over, but he knew that the pain would fade.

The despair and the guilt, however, remained, and pressed down upon him with redoubled weight. And he buried his head in his front trotters and cried.

Chapter Six

'Now hold on, Mr, er, Weasel, there's no need for violence.' Fitz winced at his own timorous words. He ought to be better at this by now, more self-assured after all his experiences. More like the hero he had dreamed of being since his shunned and bullied childhood. A hero from the big screen that had been his escape from a cold, grey world.

'I disagree,' said the Masked Weasel. 'There's always a need for violence.'

'Can't we talk?' Good move, he thought. As long as they were talking, nobody was shooting anyone. The hero always persuaded the villain to talk. As did the Doctor.

The Masked Weasel blinked. 'Talk?'

'He doesn't talk, honey,' said Angel, behind Fitz, her voice a tone higher than normal, 'he's a nasty old evil-doer.'

'Quite right, Miss Falls,' said the Masked Weasel proudly, 'and this time, I assure you, I will have your money.'

'Oh no you won't, Masked Weasel!' said Angel.

'And how do you propose to stop me?'

'Evil never prospers, you should know that.'

'Oh? But I don't see your brave knight anywhere this time.'

'I don't need Sir Percival. You've met your match in my new friend, Fitzy. He'll put a stop to your wicked schemes once and for all.'

In a way, Fitz was glad she had said that, because he had begun to get the impression that both Angel and her foe had forgotten he was present. Had he really sounded so pathetic?

He changed his mind, though, as the Weasel turned his machine gun upon the would-be champion, and sneered: 'Is that so? Well, we'll see how he fares against my gun, shall we?'

Fitz held out his hands in a placatory gesture, but some instinct told him that the Weasel was making no idle threat. An image flashed into his mind: the Doctor, on the ground, bleeding. And he didn't have the Doctor's constitution – two hearts or not – nor did he possess the apparent immunity

of this world's inhabitants to such trifles as bullets and explosions.

Of course the Masked Weasel would fire, without compunction. Like Streaky before him, he couldn't predict the full consequences of his actions. He thought he was threatening to, as the pig would have put it, 'frazzle' Fitz, no worse. He couldn't have known that he was pointing his weapon at the one person in the world – well, one of two, if Anji ever showed up – to whom it could do real harm. Perhaps he wouldn't have cared if he had.

Fitz dived for cover behind a couch, his self-image in tatters again.

There was an explosive rattle, and the room filled with smoke.

He was mortified to see that Angel had taken the brunt of the Weasel's assault. As the acrid smoke parted to show her surprised eyes wide in her soot-blackened face, the villain's jaw dropped and his gun fell to the floor. 'Oh my goodness, my goodness!' he wailed, as he ran to his supposed enemy's side. 'Are you all right, my dear?'

'I... I...'

The Masked Weasel rounded on Fitz, as he picked himself up gingerly. 'What did you think you were doing, allowing this young lady to be hurt? You call yourself a hero?'

'You fired the gun!' he spluttered. 'I didn't have time to... to...' Why was he justifying himself to this loony? 'I'm sorry, Angel,' he said lamely, 'I thought you'd have taken cover. If I'd known you were still behind me...' What? What would he have done? Died? She had just stood there, he realised, trusting in him to take a barrage of bullets on her behalf.

She burst into tears. 'My big, manly protector is a coward! Who'll save me now?'

'There, there,' said the Masked Weasel, handing her a white handkerchief.

'Get off her!' growled Fitz, laying a hand on his shoulder.

The Weasel shook him off. 'It's a bit late to be playing the gallant protector now, don't you think? Go away, "Fitzzy", you've done enough damage!'

'Thank you, Masked Weasel,' sniffed Angel, returning the villain's handkerchief. During the second that Fitz had taken his eyes off her, she had made an incredible recovery. Her singed racing leathers were an immaculate pink again, and her face was clean.

'Are you all right now, dear?'

'I think so, honey.'

'So, um...' The Weasel looked a little awkward. 'What do we do now? Do you want to... er, carry on?'

'Yes. I think I'd like that, Masked Weasel.'

'Very well, then. Er... um, I'll get you, Angel Falls.'

If the Weasel delivered his line half-heartedly, then Angel's reaction was startlingly real. She leapt into the air with a shriek, threw up her arms and yelled: 'Help! Help!' Then she turned and ran, but the Weasel didn't follow her. He stood with his back paws apart, his front paws raised and clenched, and he let out another supposedly evil laugh.

Angel shrieked again as a trapdoor opened beneath her, in the middle of the reception area. She plunged out of sight, and Fitz was galvanised into action. He had no idea what to do for the best, but he knew what he *wanted* to do. He smacked into the Masked Weasel's stomach, head first, knocking him back on to a coffee table. Its surface was slanted, and the Weasel was pitched on to the carpeted floor, Fitz on top of him. He landed a few good punches – but, as with Streaky the Weasel's body gave beneath each blow. He made a show of being pained, but there were no bruises and no blood. On an impulse, Fitz snatched at his foe's crimson mask and tore it off. 'Mr Weasley!' he exclaimed with satisfaction. 'I knew it.' Then he thought: What if all humanoid weasels *did* look the same?

His foe fought back. Fitz took a punch to the stomach and another to the jaw. They hurt – which, under the circumstances, he couldn't help but feel was unfair. He reeled, and the Weasel wriggled out from beneath him. He leapt after him, determined not to lose his advantage, but he ran into the folds of a crimson cloak, stumbled and fell over a chair.

'Here, Fitzy,' cackled the Masked Weasel, 'catch!'

Fitz reacted instinctively, putting his hands out in time to catch a wire-wrapped bundle of six red sticks, which the villain had lobbed towards him. Dynamite, he realised. The fuse was burning slowly, although he couldn't imagine how the Weasel had had time to light it. He stared at the bundle stupidly, as his foe ran away with a maniacal laugh.

Then he started to panic.

Jasper was watching from beneath the grand staircase, and he was worried.

The Masked Weasel took flight, haring past him and down the hallway. The human being, Fitz, ran this way and that, staring at the burning sticks in his hands. Any second now, those sticks would explode, hurting him and turning him black and crispy for a while. It had happened to Jasper many times, and he didn't want to see such an unpleasant fate befall the one man who could change his life.

He stepped out of hiding, feeling he ought to do something. But what could he do?

And then Fitz was racing towards him with fresh purpose. He saw Jasper in the mouth of the short corridor that led to the kitchen, and he cried: 'Get out of my way!' But surprise had rooted the ginger cat to the

spot. 'I need to get these to the sink!' yelled Fitz – and, reacting to the urgency in his voice, Jasper scuttled to his left. Unfortunately, the human being had moved that way too, in an attempt to get past him. Jasper jumped to his right instead, but again Fitz mirrored the movement as he made it.

The fuse on the sticks hissed, and scattered yellow sparks in all directions. Fitz turned and ran back across the reception area. The main entrance doors slid open for him, and he pitched the sticks out on to the street, before taking cover behind a couch again.

Jasper put his fingers in his ears, expecting to hear a big bang. But nothing happened. Had Fitz done something clever to stop the sticks from exploding? He hoped so – because, if not, then it was rather selfish of him to have thrown them out on to a crowded street. But then, he had already watched as Fitz had caused a helpless girl to be shot. Perhaps he wasn't such a good person after all.

The cat was confused. He looked towards the kitchen door and experienced a pang of longing. He wanted to go home and sleep – but that would mean giving up his new-found hopes and dreams, accepting that he could never improve his lot. He couldn't bring himself to return to his old life. Not until he knew for sure that there was nothing more.

He looked back towards Fitz, who had picked himself up and was cautiously approaching a window. His brow furrowed in confusion as he peered through the glass, as if he too had been expecting something to happen outside. Jasper wanted so much to approach him. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, and he was finally beginning to form the words with which to phrase them. But how could he communicate such unusual concepts? Why couldn't he speak, as other cats could? And what if the human being wouldn't help him? Fitz knew now that Jasper had been following him around. What if he was annoyed?

He felt frustrated, as if he were failing himself. But he didn't know what to do. He needed more time to think. So, Jasper put his tail between his legs and slunk away into the bowels of the hotel, in search of a quiet corner.

But he made sure he headed away from the kitchen.

'Uncle Dogg,' said Scrapper, 'do you think the big city looks emptier than usual?'

If it did, then Boss Dogg hadn't noticed. Indeed, as he threw the steering wheel to the right and took a corner on two wheels, he ran into a careless turkey. The creature was flipped into the air by the bumper of his police car, landing on the windshield with a wet splat. Its flat, splayed form obstructed Dogg's view; its open beak was spread across the glass and its startled eyes

stared into the Sheriff's own.

'Get out of my way, you clumsy varmint,' cried Dogg, leaning out of the open driver's window and honking his horn. The turkey scraped itself off his vehicle and hopped back on to the road. By then, the car had already veered on to the sidewalk. Dogg grimaced as he drove through a set of trashcans and scattered them like bowling pins. Then he turned to his nephew with a pertinently raised eyebrow. 'Empty, my eye!'

'It just seemed a bit quiet, that's all,' shrugged Scrapper.

'Um... Sheriff.. said the unmasked Green Ghost, from the back seat. Dogg had freed him from the Skeleton Crew's net, but had handcuffed his wrists behind his back.

'Keep your yap shut back there!'

'But Sheriff...'

'I told you to be quiet. Now, what the heck are those chipmunks staring at?'

'And that skunk over there,' said Scrapper. 'Look, Uncle Dogg, his eyes just bugged out. And what's *she* waving for...? Hey, I think she's trying to get your attention.'

Dogg leaned out of the window again. 'What's up, you stupid bitch?'

The tall, slender dog sniffed the air indignantly. 'Well, if you're going to call me stupid!' She turned, threw her handbag strap over her shoulder and stalked away.

'She's trying to inform you,' said the Green Ghost with strained patience, 'that there's a bundle of dynamite on top of this car.'

'Dynamite? Oh boy!' enthused Scrapper, as Dogg's eyes widened.

'Some skinny guy just ran out of the Zanytown Hotel and threw it at us,' said the Ghost.

'Tarnation!' exclaimed Dogg, and he stamped on the brake pedal.

The police car came to a sudden halt, its back end running into its front. Sure enough, a bundle of dynamite with a lit fuse was flung forwards off the roof.

A middle-aged human woman was pushing a pram across the road; a tiny arm protruded from within, a baby's rattle in its hand. The dynamite landed on the conveyance and rolled beneath its hood. Oblivious, the woman turned on to the sidewalk.

'Well, that's that there problem out of our hair,' said the relieved Sheriff. 'Phew!'

He put the car back into gear and drove on.

'Doctor, I need your help!'

Fitz burst into Room 1313, but came up short upon seeing that the Doctor was lying on his bed again, apparently asleep. ‘Doctor?’

Perhaps he had suffered a relapse. Perhaps Fitz shouldn’t have disturbed him. But, despite appearances, his friend must have been awake already – because, without opening his eyes, he replied in a perfectly even voice: ‘Angel Falls is in trouble, I take it?’

‘How did you know?’

‘It wasn’t difficult to guess. Repetitive patterns of behaviour.’

‘Right,’ said Fitz, without understanding. ‘She fell through a trapdoor and the Masked Weasel – oh, he’s this, this arch-foe she was talking about – he distracted me and got away. I can’t find either of them. I can’t even find the trapdoor now.’

‘And you feel the need to rescue her, of course.’

‘Of course. Well... I think I do.’

‘She’s a damsel in distress. You could never resist one of those, as I recall.’

‘No. I mean, yes. She’s helpless, Doctor. She’s being threatened by this Weasel guy for her money, and... and yes, yes of course I want to help her.’

‘But?’

‘But ...’ Fitz didn’t want to put his suspicions into words. He didn’t want to think that Angel could have lied to him, could be manipulating him. But the evidence was there – and, once it was out in the open, once the Doctor had heard it, there would be no denying the conclusion. He swallowed and said: ‘There was an... accident, and suddenly the Masked Weasel and Angel were like old friends. Just for a minute. Then they went back to normal.’

‘Ah,’ was the Doctor’s only comment.

‘It was like this whole thing was some sort of a game for them.’

‘And you don’t want to join in?’

He was taken aback. ‘That’s not the point... is it?’

‘If it helps, Fitz, I don’t think they see you as a piece on the board. You’re a player. The most important player: you’re the hero. And it’s your move. I expect they’ll be waiting.’

‘So, you’re saying I should do this? I should get involved?’

‘If it’s what you want.’

‘Right.’ Fitz didn’t sound at all certain, even to himself, so he thought a little more and then said ‘Right,’ again. But he still didn’t understand.

How was it that the Doctor, who had seen so much less of this world than he had, appeared to know so much more about it? That was just the Doctor, he supposed. And, just like the Doctor, he hadn’t addressed the original problem at all. He hadn’t told Fitz how he might find Angel.

His breathing was deeper and more regular now, and Fitz was sure he had dozed off again. But that was OK, he told himself. He was the hero, after all. He could do this.

Angel had screamed her throat raw, but her hero hadn't arrived.

She lifted her head as best she could, to stare at the circular buzz saw that was slicing its way through the tabletop towards her. It had already passed between her ankles. It was almost up to her knees now.

The Masked Weasel pulled a big lever, with a sigh, and the saw stopped spinning. He wrestled a rickety wooden chair free from a pile of broken furniture and sank on to it, resting his elbows on the chair back and his chin on his fists. 'He's not coming, is he?'

'Don't give up hope yet, sugar. He'll be here.' Angel tried to sound confident, but the dingy, junk-strewn basement room of the hotel, with its dusty wall hangings, seemed to close in around her, to mock her with the knowledge that she had made the wrong choice.

'Would you like some water? You've been doing a lot of shouting.'

'I'm fine – although I'd be much obliged if you could loosen these wrist straps a little.'

'I may as well take them off now.'

'Oh, but you mustn't!' cried Angel, although she couldn't think of a single reason why not.

But then the door was flung open, and her heart fluttered at the sight of Fitz on the threshold. 'Leave Angel alone, you scoundrel,' he ordered, sounding more sure of himself than he had done before, 'or you'll have me to deal with.'

'Curses!' exclaimed the Weasel. 'It's Fitz Kreiner! How did you find my hidden lair?'

'It wasn't hard, Weasel. I saw you running towards your secret staircase at the back of the hallway. Once I realised what I was looking for, I only had to twiddle a few light fittings.'

'You're a resourceful man, Mr Kreiner, but you've arrived too late. By the time you can reach Miss Falls, she'll be begging to sign her fortune over to me, bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!' He threw the lever again, with a flourish, and the sharp-toothed saw resumed its cutting action.

'Help! Help!' wailed Angel Falls, with renewed gusto.

Fitz circled the Masked Weasel warily, his eyes shifting towards the lever, looking for a chance to reach it. His muscles tensed, and Angel knew that he was about to make his move – but the Weasel produced a portable hole from beneath his cloak and flung it to the floor in his adversary's path. Fitz almost stumbled into it; he struggled to keep his balance,

and the Weasel charged him.

As the pair wrestled, it occurred to Angel that she didn't want to do this any more. Well, of course she didn't; wasn't that why she had approached the outsiders in the first place? Because she was fed up of being threatened, of forever going through this same routine? Fitz would defeat the Weasel, of course, and shut off the buzz saw at the very last second. But, while he was thus occupied, the villain would escape to menace Angel another day. It was all so predictable and, although she had never thought so before, quite boring.

Except that Fitz and his friends seemed to do things differently to everybody else. Perhaps he would capture the Masked Weasel after all. Or perhaps he wouldn't throw the lever in time. The saw was between her thighs now, and grinding its way surely upwards. Angel realised for the first time that, if it did cut into her, it would hurt. It would hurt a lot.

'Help! Help!' she cried again, with a real edge of fear to her voice now.

'Hold on,' called Fitz, 'I'm coming!' He couldn't harm the Weasel, with his malleable form, but he had managed to manoeuvre him beneath a dull, old tapestry, which he now tore down, wrapping the cloth around his foe and tripping him at the same time. A cloud of dust billowed into the air as the entangled Weasel hit the floor. Then Fitz bounded across the room, and shut off the villain's fiendish death-trap.

'Oh, thank goodness,' breathed Angel, as her hero removed the strap from her left wrist.

The Weasel was already climbing to his feet, beneath the tapestry, when Fitz leapt on him again. 'Oh no you don't,' he muttered, stamping on his head until he fell down. He found the Weasel's front paws and wrapped the strap around them, tying them to a rusted water pipe.

By this time, Angel had freed herself from the rest of her bonds. She stood up, and Fitz rose to face her, cheeks flushed with success, an open-mouthed grin almost reaching his ears. 'You know,' he said, 'for the first time in my life, that all happened exactly as I imagined it!'

'It did?' said Angel.

'Well,' said Fitz, drawing closer to her, 'it has done so far. Only one thing left...'

He hesitated, just for a second. Then, to Angel's immeasurable surprise, he put his arms around her, pulled her towards him and planted his wet lips on hers.

Chapter Seven

‘Let me get this straight,’ said Anji. ‘Your van breaks down a lot, but only when there are ghosts around.’ She was making use of the journey out of Gloomy Forest to work on cracking the logic, such as it was, that governed the Skeleton Crew’s existence. She was also looking for some reassurance that the spluttering Spook Wagon would reach its destination this time.

‘It certainly looks that way sometimes,’ admitted Tim Coward.

‘So, what, does it have some kind of psychic detector or...?’

‘I’m afraid Tim’s perception of reality is often distorted by his imagination,’ laughed Thelma Brains from the front seat.

‘That’s right,’ said Mike Leader. He was at the wheel of the left-hand drive vehicle again, with Harmony Looker beside him. Behind them, Anji was sandwiched between Tim and his hairy, panting dog. ‘It’s just a coincidence that we keep running into spooks.’

‘Besides which,’ said Harmony, ‘they’re never real ghosts.’

‘Yes,’ said Anji, ‘and that’s another thing. How many of these things have you met?’

‘Oh, hundreds,’ said Harmony.

‘Nine hundred and sixty-two,’ said Thelma.

‘Too many,’ said Tim, with feeling.

‘And they’re always people in costumes? Every time?’

‘Of course,’ said Thelma. ‘Free-floating spectral manifestations –’

‘Don’t exist,’ completed Anji. ‘So, when that forest ranger appeared, with a pathetic green sheet over his head... why did you all run away?’

Mike, Harmony and Thelma just looked at each other. It was Tim who finally spoke up. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘there’s a first time for everything!’ Fearless nodded vehemently.

They emerged from the forest and, mere seconds later, were driving along a pink tarmac road, surrounded by brightly coloured, crooked buildings. The rainless storm had suddenly lifted, although it was still a little dark; the sun was looking decidedly sleepy.

Anji was pleased, if somewhat surprised, to find that Zanytown looked

pretty much as she had imagined. Perhaps she was getting the hang of this world after all.

Mike had to drop his speed to allow numerous upright animals – and the odd human being – time to get out of his path. Clusters of the strange creatures had formed, their animated conversations creating a constant background buzz. ‘Is it my imagination,’ asked Thelma, ‘or are the inhabitants of this conurbation behaving in a way that is contrary to their natures?’

‘You’re right, Thelma,’ said Mike.

‘Like, nobody’s fighting,’ said Tim. ‘They’re all just talking.’

‘It looks as if we’ve got another mystery to solve, gang,’ said Mike.

He stopped at a T-junction, and Anji’s heart leapt at an unexpected sight. Standing down the road to her right, in front of a sign for the First National Bank, was a familiar police box shape. ‘The TARDIS!’ she exclaimed.

‘Like, does anyone else know what this chick’s talking about?’ asked Tim. So, now he knew how she had felt for the past couple of hours!

‘Just let me out here please,’ she said, reaching past Fearless and sliding open the side door of the van. ‘I’ve found what I was looking for. Er. . . and good luck with that mystery thing.’

‘If we meet any ghosts,’ said Mike, ‘we’ll be sure to pull their masks off. No running.’

‘You do that.’ Anji waved as the Spook Wagon pulled away – but she was already hurrying towards the TARDIS, fishing for her key on the end of its chain, glad to find that she had remembered to pick it up. She had never, she thought, been so gladdened by the prospect of normality (and since when had she considered the TARDIS normal, exactly?).

It occurred to her that the Doctor must have returned to his ship and brought it here. If she had stayed where she was, she could have avoided a great deal of aggravation.

As she fumbled with the anachronistic Yale key in the lock, a tall, white rabbit sped by. It was pursued by a shorter, moustached man with a rifle, which he fired repeatedly. The rabbit must have sensed each shot beforehand, as it avoided the bullets with a series of leaps. It was grinning inanely. ‘That is so immature,’ remarked a passing fox to its lamb companion.

The key wouldn’t fit. Anji tried again, but the lock had definitely been changed. She frowned and knocked on the door instead.

A telephone rang. Puzzled, she circled the blue box until she traced the insistent sound to a panel in its front. She prised it open and, sure enough, revealed an old-fashioned, sixties-type black dial phone. She had never seen it before, but then the TARDIS had a habit of surprising her. Perhaps the Doctor was contacting her from inside.

She picked up the receiver and held it to her ear. 'Hello?' she said. She could hear only static, but it had a regular rhythm like the tide of the sea. 'Hello?' she said again, louder. She shook the receiver and looked at it, as if expecting to spot an obvious fault.

A jet of water blasted out of the earpiece.

She dropped the phone and backed away, spluttering and wiping her face on the sleeve of her pullover. A figure emerged from behind the blue box: the weird, alien bird-thing she had encountered in the console room. Its beak was stretched into a smug grin, and it rocked with silent laughter. Then it turned and bolted away from her.

When Anji turned back to the TARDIS, it was no longer there.

What if the Doctor and Fitz had never come to Zanytown? It had seemed the most likely place in which to find them – and, until now, she had concentrated on getting here – but it was by no means their only possible location. What if they were back at the ship – the real ship – by now? Or half a world away?

Fitz barely got out of the way in time. The purple-feathered bird creature raced past him with such speed that a wind whipped across his face in its wake. 'What was that?' he cried.

'Oh, no one knows,' said Angel airily. 'It's unique. We call it the Whatchamacallit.'

'Uh-huh,' said Fitz. 'Fine.' He wondered if he could get away with holding her hand. She hadn't said anything about the kiss, and he was feeling insecure again. She had seemed happy enough about it in the heat of the moment, but was that all it had been?

The Doctor was ten steps ahead of them, as he had been since they had left the hotel. He had expressed a wish to see more of Zanytown, and his zest for exploration seemed untempered by his recent injuries. He didn't even seem fazed when a large, grey cat cut across his path on a pogo stick, bouncing to impossible heights until it cannoned into a protruding shop sign, which slammed its head down into its shoulders. It fell to the ground, and the Doctor ran to its side and stooped over it, more curious than concerned.

By the time Fitz and Angel had reached him, a familiar flock of tiny, blue birds had appeared from nowhere to fly around the cat's restored head. Its tongue lolled on to its chin and it was seriously cross-eyed. The Doctor reached over and plucked a bird from the circle. He turned to display it to his friends, his face alive with a childish delight.

'I believe they call this a Twitter,' he said. 'A tiny, avian creature drawn to pain and suffering. Exquisite, isn't it?' It was fluttering in his hand, so he

opened his fingers and allowed it to go free. It vanished in a puff of golden dust, as did its fellows. The cat sat up, shook its head until its eyeballs fell back into place, then retrieved its pogo stick and scuttled off. The Doctor sprang to his feet too, and looked around. 'I'd like a word with that group of squirrels over there,' he announced, and he hurried across the road.

'Fitz,' said Angel, 'what are you doing with my hand?'

Having only just plucked up the courage to take hold of her, Fitz let go as if her pink glove had become electrified. 'Sorry I didn't think you'd mind.'

'Oh, honey, I didn't say I minded. I just wondered what you were doing.'

'Well, it's just that, after we kissed and all...'

'You do have some strange ways, honey.'

'I have some strange ways? I... er, suppose we just have different customs. On Earth, kissing and holding hands is what you do if you like someone. I mean, *really* like them.'

'Oh, Fitzy, you flatterer. I had no idea!'

'I thought the kiss would have given you a clue. Didn't you like it?'

'I think I did,' mused Angel. 'I didn't know what you were doing at first, but... yes. Yes, I did like it. It's just that... well, usually, when a big, handsome man takes a fancy to little old me, I can tell. You didn't give me any of the usual signs.'

'I didn't?' Fitz had never been accused of being too subtle before. 'What sort of signs?'

'Oh, you know sugar, love hearts around your head, your tongue unravelling to the floor...'

'I think most girls would consider that a bit rude where I come from.'

'Where's Earth?'

'What?' After a slow start, Fitz had been guiding the conversation on to the right track and bringing it up to speed. Now, Angel had changed the points.

'Earth. I don't believe I've heard of it. Is it anywhere near Stoneville?'

'No. No, Earth's another planet.' Please, he thought, don't let me have to explain that.

'Oh, you're an alien,' said Angel, to his surprise, 'like Marty the Martian.'

'You've heard of Mars?'

Angel shook her head. 'Marty comes from Martia.'

'Right. And, er... ' Fitz spotted an opportunity to shunt their dialogue back on course. 'Where do *you* come from, Angel?'

'Zanytown born and bred, sugar.'

'So, you must live near here?'

‘In Angel Mansions. Everybody knows that!’ A sad look crossed Angel’s face. ‘Oh, I suppose dear old Mr Weasley won’t be there to greet me when I get home tonight. He looked so sad when the big, stern Sheriff came and took him away.’

‘I’m just glad I was able to rescue you in time,’ said Fitz, in an attempt to get her mind off her erstwhile guardian and back on to his own heroism. ‘But if you’re worried about going home alone, I could always come with you.’

‘Oh, and why would anyone want to do such a lovely, sweet thing for poor little old me?’

‘I’d just like to get to know you better.’

‘Oh, goody, that sounds like fun. Let’s start by swapping star signs.’

‘That’s not what I meant. Angel, what are you doing tonight?’

‘Well, most evenings I spend being menaced by that despicable arch-fiend, the Masked Weasel.’ Angel sighed heavily. ‘But I suppose I’ll have to find something else to do now.’

‘I could make a few suggestions,’ said Fitz, approaching the tunnel at last.

Anji was still staring at the blank spot where the false TARDIS had been.

‘Where d-did it go?’

Oh, great! So, now she had been joined by a talking pig. With a stutter.

‘You tell me,’ she said, still smarting at having been caught out by the bird-thing’s trick. ‘Things on this world have a habit of disappearing.’

‘D-d-do they? I hadn’t n-noticed.’ The pig sighed, and his shoulders slumped. Anji looked at him properly. Like Boss Dogg, he wore clothes only on the top half of his body – and a question occurred to her. She glanced down (no, don’t do it, you don’t what to know – too late! Oh, thank goodness. . .). He had no apparent genitalia.

‘I thought I recognised the b-box,’ said the pig. ‘I thought it belonged to the D-D-Doctor.’

‘The Doctor? You’ve met him?’

‘I k-killed him.’

‘You did what?’

‘It’s when you send somebody away and they n-never come b-back.’

‘I know what “killed” means! I just. . . I mean. . .’ Anji didn’t know what to say. She was only just beginning to react to the pig’s confession when she heard a familiar voice.

‘I’m delighted to say that rumours of my death, to quote an old acquaintance. . .’

‘Doctor!’

'D-Doctor!'

'Hello, Anji. I see you've met my friend, Streaky.' It was him all right, bounding towards them with a face full of enthusiasm and a shocking yellow shirt.

'Your friend? He said –'

'Yes, well, that's all water under the bridge now.'

Streaky collapsed, stunned, on to his hindquarters, in the middle of the road.

'Is Fitz with you?' asked Anji.

The Doctor looked over his shoulder, as if only just realising that his companion wasn't present. 'Well, he was. I must have left them behind somewhere.'

'Them?'

'Yes, yes, yes, Fitz and his friend, Miss Falls.'

'Not Angel Falls! Don't tell me she's here too.'

'You know her?' beamed the Doctor. 'It must be a small world after all. She and Fitz appear to have grown quite close.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me? Doctor, what's going on here?'

'Going on?' The Doctor pursed his lips. 'Well, we've landed on a world whose physical laws differ from those we're accustomed to.'

'We've been dropped into the middle of a Saturday morning cartoon!'

'Hmmm. I can't say I'd thought of it that way, although Fitz said something similar.' The Doctor dropped to his haunches beside the pig. 'Streaky, how are you feeling?'

'P-p-perplexed,' said Streaky.

'Yes, you've had a nasty experience, haven't you? Well, you shouldn't take it too hard. No harm done, and you've learned a valuable lesson for the future.'

'Yes, D-Doctor.' The pig allowed the Doctor to take his front trotter and haul him upright.

'Is that it?' cried Anji. 'No clever explanations? No reasons for all this?'

'What reason do you need?'

'How about some reassurance that I'm not stuck in somebody's bad dream?'

'We exist in an infinite multiverse, Anji. Everybody's dreams must come true somewhere. Right now, I'm less concerned with where the Crooked World came from than I am with where it's going. You can't have been in Zanytown long, or else you'd have noticed.'

'Noticed what? Is something wrong?' (And how could you tell if it was?)

‘When Fitz and I arrived here,’ said the Doctor, ‘the streets were teeming with people.’

‘And with funny animals.’

‘Those animals are people too, Anji. They were running and fighting and firing guns and attacking each other with household utensils. It’s different now. Quieter. You’ve noticed it, haven’t you, Mr Bacon? The old patterns are changing, evolving.’

‘They’re still fighting,’ Anji pointed out.

‘M-many of them, yes,’ said Streaky, ‘but a lot of p-people are talking now too.’

‘No, not just talking,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re thinking.’

Fitz was embarrassed, frustrated and, he was beginning to realise, quite out of his depth.

He had chatted up women often enough before; he considered himself fairly good at it. OK, his technique might not have been the most polished, but he prided himself on his relatively high success rate. Most women, however, would have helped him along a little more than this. They would have read his body language, picked up on the meaning behind his words.

Until today, he hadn’t fully appreciated how much was left unsaid on a first encounter. But Angel Falls was proving immune to any form of innuendo. When Fitz had suggested going back to her place for coffee, she had asked what coffee was. When he had talked awkwardly about ‘playing around’, she had suggested I Spy. When, in desperation, he had asked her if she had ever slept with anyone, she had taken him literally and talked about sharing a bedroom – but thankfully not a bed – with Mr Weasley.

Finally, in a clumsy attempt to get the message across, he had blurted out that, after kissing and holding hands, Earth people liked to indulge in an activity called sex. And now, he wished he hadn’t, because Angel kept pestering him to explain what he had meant.

‘This must be another of those darn different customs of yours, honey, because I’m sure I don’t understand a word you’re saying.’ If the conversation was indeed still on the right track, then its brakes had failed and it was sliding uncontrollably.

‘Look,’ said Fitz, because his attempts to change the subject had failed and this was all he could think of, ‘how do you make babies on your world? Where do they come from?’ He avoided Angel’s inquisitive gaze, and his face burned with humiliation.

‘Well, first a man and a woman get married. . .’

‘Right. Of course.’

‘And then they write a lovely letter to the Baby Stork.’

‘Fine. Good. Well, I’m glad we got that sorted out,’ said Fitz, pulling the ‘emergency stop’ cord. ‘Oh dear, is that the time? I think we’d better find the Doctor.’

‘I’ve been talking to a lot of people,’ said the Doctor, ‘and they all say much the same thing. They’re starting to question their old habits, to think about new ways of doing things.’

Well, good for them, thought Anji, wondering where this was leading.

The Doctor rounded on Streaky, who leapt back, startled by the sudden attention. If the Doctor noticed at all, then it didn’t dampen his enthusiasm. ‘Mr Bacon, you must have felt it.’

‘Felt what, D-Doctor?’

‘New ideas, new concepts. Tell me, what were you doing before we first met? Why were you carrying a blunderbuss?’ The Doctor tucked his left hand into his right armpit, and spread the fingers of his right hand across his lips, to show that he was ready to listen.

‘I was hunting that p-pesky Whatchamacallit.’ Streaky scowled as he remembered.

‘And you do that a lot?’

‘I have to protect my c-crops, don’t I?’ The scowl lifted, and the pig’s expression became wistful. ‘Only, n-n-now it doesn’t seem as important as it used to.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I d-don’t know.’

‘Think.’

As the pig screwed up his pink face in concentration, Fitz and Angel Falls joined the trio. ‘Oh, hello again, Anji honey,’ said Angel. The Doctor shushed her, with a flurry of gestures to indicate that Streaky’s cogitation was not to be disturbed. Anji answered the greeting with a tight smile, then glared daggers at Fitz. He raised his eyebrows and pointed to himself in silent surprise. She looked meaningfully down at his other hand, which was holding Angel’s.

‘I suppose,’ said Streaky, slowly, thinking about each word, ‘I’ve realised there are m-more important things in l-life. You know, ever since I k-k-killed you.’

‘You didn’t kill me, Streaky,’ the Doctor reminded him gently.

‘Oh, n-no, so I didn’t. But I could have done, and it was all through not thinking, through b-being too c-careless. And I realised that, if I *had* shot the Whatchamacallit, and that had d-d-died too, then I would have been sad about that, and I asked myself, would it have been worth it? I n-never

pick the crops anyway, I d-don't know why I g-grow them. Just habit, I g-guess.'

'You see?' said the Doctor, turning to the others with a broad, triumphant grin, as if he had just concluded a complex scientific experiment. 'Free will! These people have been trapped in repetitive behavioural patterns for as long as they can remember, and now it's as if they're waking up at last. I think it's all rather wonderful.' A yellow bird flew by, at chest height, with a black and white cat galloping in pursuit. 'Of course, some people will wish to indulge in familiar pastimes. So long as they can't harm each other, I don't see why not.'

'They can harm us, though,' said Fitz ruefully, rubbing his nose.

'In which case,' said Anji, 'we should probably leave.'

'Do we have to?' Fitz's face fell; clearly, he regretted speaking up now. He moved a little closer to Angel, and Anji resisted the urge to roll her eyes (she couldn't decide which of them to warn about the other – perhaps they were a good match after all).

'I'd like to stay a while longer,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'Keep an eye on things.'

'What for?' asked Anji. 'I thought you said nothing was wrong.'

'Perhaps not,' he conceded, 'but I think we have a responsibility to these people. I'd just like to be sure...'

'Sure of what?' asked Fitz.

'And what makes us responsible for them, exactly?' asked Anji.

'I thought I'd explained that,' said the Doctor. 'These new ideas, these new ways of thinking that are changing this world – where do you imagine they came from?'

The realisation crept across Anji like prickling dread. It was merely a suspicion at first, a dark possibility that she wanted to dismiss out of hand. But the logic of the idea demanded further consideration – and, by the time she had formed the words in her mind, they were no longer a question but a statement of cold fact.

'They came from us, didn't they?!'

Chapter Eight

‘And tonight’s big news story: the inexplicable phenum – phemon – phenone – thing that has swept across Zanytown and now threatens to spread into surrounding areas. Medical experts are already calling it a Plague of Questions. In a statement issued just now, Sheriff Boss Dogg of Zanytown urged all citizens to remain calm:

‘ “It’s come to my attention that some of you people are getting idle. I’ve seen dogs that won’t chase cats any more, rabbits growing their own carrots to avoid the effort of stealing them, and it ain’t natural. I’ve been asked all kinds of dang fool questions about why everyone can’t just go ahead and do exactly what they feel like – but them’s the laws, and that’s the way it has to be. So, my advice to you people is this: if you start to feel these unnatural urges, then pull yourself together. Go and have a nice lie down or something.”’

Jasper didn’t like the moonlight. The moon was generally more grumpy than the sun – and, when its cold, scowling countenance had appeared in the sky, he had thought about heading back to the hotel. Not to the kitchen, but perhaps he could have curled up in a storeroom and slept until it was warm again. His excitement at his beckoning new life had lessened, and he had begun to remember how tired he was.

But then, he had been spotted by Sebastian: a rough-edged black cat with a white face and chest, who lived in Zanytown’s toughest neighbourhood. Sebastian was shorter and scrawnier than Jasper, but the ginger cat felt intimidated by him. Sebastian always held himself so confidently, his fur sticking up like spikes – in contrast to Jasper’s, which lay flat and smooth – his tail swishing with self-assurance and his wiry whiskers spread proudly from leering lips.

‘Jasper! Jasper, my old buddy!’ Despite the friendly words, there had been a nasty side to Sebastian’s voice, as always. ‘I didn’t expect to see *you* outside already. I thought you’d have been one of the last to join our little band. Good for you, comrade!’

Sebastian had assembled a motley collection of cats, about a dozen in

all. Some were young, some old; some were alert, strong, confident tricksters, some pitiful mewling creatures that scampered around on four legs. There were tall cats, short cats, fat cats, thin cats, black cats, grey cats, blue cats and yellow cats. Jasper had joined them as they prowled the streets, attracting more of their own kind to their ranks, hissing and snarling at any other type of creature that dared come too close. At one point, a fluffy poodle had run from them, yipping in terror, and Sebastian had led a chorus of raucous laughter.

They had headed into a quiet, residential area, where the buildings were shorter. They had turned over the green trashcans and clashed their lids together like cymbals. They had even gone to Sebastian's house and hammered on his front window, jeering and shouting taunts at a small, yellow bird that had been sleeping in a cage within.

Jasper stayed towards the rear of the pack, wanting to join in, feeling good to be part of a group but also uneasy, unsure what pleasure he was supposed to take from causing mischief. He couldn't speak as most of the other cats could, but he did try putting his fingers in his mouth and pulling his tongue out at a fish as it waddled by. It spat water in his face.

Then the crowd parted and Sebastian approached him, a devilish glint in his eye. Jasper's stomach rolled with nervous anticipation as all heads turned towards him. 'I think it's time for a solo prank, don't you comrades?' said Sebastian. 'I think it's time for our taciturn friend here to show us his claws.'

Jasper turned over a front paw, aware that his blunt, clipped nails must have seemed pathetic compared to the black cat's steely talons. He soon realised, however, that Sebastian had not meant his words as a literal challenge. He pointed out a small house. 'You see that cottage?'

He nodded and looked at the building askance, wondering why it was wider at the top than at the bottom, why its windows were all different sizes.

'That cottage belongs to a bird,' said Sebastian, spitting out the final word with distaste. 'One of those real uppity types that thinks it can strut around all high-and-mighty, being six feet tall and talking to real people. Well, you my old buddy, you are gonna teach it a lesson. You're gonna go up to that bird's door, and you're gonna knock. But then, instead of waiting for an answer...' Sebastian paused for dramatic effect. 'You're gonna run away!'

A gasp of horror rippled through the feline onlookers, softening into a murmur of approval, and Jasper's fur prickled. What Sebastian was asking would have been inconceivable a few hours earlier, but that only made it more tempting. It was something different, something new, and wasn't that

what he wanted?

No. He didn't want to do this. It was wrong and it was pointless. But he looked around the other cats, and their glowing eyes urged him to commit himself, just as surely as many of them betrayed the certainty that he wouldn't dare. If he didn't do as Sebastian bade him, he would be cast out, scorned, to spend his life alone again.

And how could he know that something was wrong anyway, until he had tried it?

'Can you do it?' asked Sebastian. 'Will you do it, old buddy?'

Jasper gathered up his courage and nodded dumbly.

As the other cats cheered and clapped him on the back in congratulation, an odd thought occurred to him. He had never met his 'old buddy' Sebastian before.

'Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Crooked World Electric Company announced that, due to a large increase in the number of ideas, their supply of light bulbs has been exhausted.

'On a happier note, the number of bank robberies in Zanytown dropped dramatically as a leading academic, Doctor Hamilton Penguin, announced that money was worthless. "The economy of the Crooked World," he said, "is based not on barter but on invention, theft and the ability to pluck hitherto non-existent large objects out of thin air. The fact that people covet money at all has become a mystery to me, quack." Responding to those claims, Mr Meekley, president of the First National Bank and gopher, insisted that money would always be desirable for its own sake. However, Doctor Penguin's speech has already affected pay negotiations at the Dry Gulch Mining Company. Members of the Prospectors' Union had threatened to walk out unless offered wages. Now, they claim that money is no use to them after all, and a gold-miners' strike seems inevitable.

'But our top news story tonight is still the Plague of Questions that has hit Zanytown. Teen rock star detectives the Skeleton Crew have been investigating, but so far no fake ghosts have been exposed. Remarkably, though, some people believe the Plague to be a good thing. One farmer told this programme: "I've wasted so m-much of my life chasing after a g-goldarn silly b-bird. Now I've got a ch-chance to do something worthwhile."

'Sheriff Boss Dogg has also released a statement. It reads: "I've told you people once already, just pull yourselves together!"

'I am so obliged to you for letting me stay here tonight,' said Angel, touching up her lipstick in front of a large mirror. 'I just couldn't have faced going home to an empty mansion.'

‘Thank the Doctor,’ grumbled Anji, who was already in one of the hotel room’s twin beds. ‘It was his idea.’

‘You’re such wonderful people – you, the Doctor, and my little Fitzy of course.’

‘“Your little Fitzy”?’

‘Oh yes, he’s been just lovely to me.’

‘I can imagine.’

Angel looked at Anji. She had closed her eyes, as if trying to sleep. But Angel knew that she would never sleep herself, not while her head was a whirl with so many disturbing new thoughts. She had been trying to deny them, trying to pretend that everything was normal, but it wasn’t working. She needed to get the thoughts out into the open, to talk about them. And Anji Kapoor was one of the few people who might understand.

‘Anji, honey,’ she said tentatively, sitting on the edge of her bed.

‘What?’ returned Anji, a little abruptly.

‘I’m glad we’ve got some time alone together,’ she said awkwardly. ‘I wanted to ask you something. It’s about your friend, Fitz.’

‘What?’

‘I like him, I really do – but he has such strange ways. I can’t work him out.’

‘That’s Fitz for you.’

‘He put my dear old guardian, Mr Weasley, behind bars.’

Anji frowned. ‘I thought your guardian kidnapped you for your money.’

‘Yes, but none of my other heroes ever did such a beastly thing. What am I supposed to do now, a poor little girl like me alone in the big, bad world?’

‘You can stop relying on people like Weasley, for a start.’

‘Oh, I’m trying to, honey. You told me to stand up for myself and I’m doing my best, honest. That’s why I came here, to find out how.’

‘That’s not standing up for yourself, Angel. You’ve just found another crutch!’

‘But... but I’m only a helpless girlie! I need somebody to tell me what to do!’

‘You’re a young woman. You can do whatever you want.’

‘But I don’t know *what* I want!’ The words dripped with anguish, and Angel felt as if she had torn a piece out of her heart and placed it on display. Even Anji was suddenly taking more notice of her: she sat up in bed, and her face was creased with genuine concern.

‘I... I’m not sure what you mean,’ said Anji.

But Angel had opened the floodgates of emotion, and she didn’t even care that her tears were streaking her mascara. ‘This morning,’ she sobbed,

'I knew my place in the world. Now, everything's different. I used to race in the Funny-Car Derby, but I can't think why. I've got pots of money already and I don't ever spend it. And I used to be menaced by that no-good Masked Weasel, but now he's in prison and my life seems so empty!'

'I'm sorry.'

Angel sniffed and wiped her tears on a pink handkerchief. She didn't know where the deluge of sadness had come from – she had never felt anything like it before – but she felt better, albeit drained, for having let it out. 'I don't know why you should be sorry, honey,' she said, 'it's hardly your fault.'

'You'll find something else,' said Anji. 'Something better. That's the great thing about freedom. I know change is frightening, but you've got so many opportunities now.'

'What kind of opportunities?'

'Well... ' Anji faltered. The question, apparently, was difficult for her too. However, she thought of something. 'You enjoyed being with Fitz today, didn't you? You had... fun.'

'Oh yes,' said Angel, 'I suppose I did. Even if I didn't always understand him.'

'Well, then.'

'He's very interested in making babies, isn't he?'

Anji laughed dryly. 'Well, as I said, that's Fitz for you.'

'He talks about it a lot, then?'

'It's his favourite subject.'

'But he isn't even married!'

'I don't think that matters to him.'

'I see,' said Angel, half to herself. An idea was forming: a way in which she could help somebody who had helped her so much. It was only a small thing – a few minutes with a pen and a piece of paper – but it felt good. She was making a decision, finding something she wanted to do and bringing happiness to somebody else into the bargain. It was still a frightening new world out there, but she was beginning to see what Anji had been trying to tell her. She certainly had a lot to think about.

'Angel,' said Anji, as Angel climbed into her bed.

'What is it, sugar?'

'Aren't you at least going to take off that crash helmet?'

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' complained the Masked Weasel's cellmate from his bed. 'Can't you stop pacing and swirling that cloak?'

'I don't know how you can be so calm,' the Weasel bleated. 'We're in jail! Oh, if only I'd realised earlier that crime doesn't pay.'

‘You’re a villain, what did you expect?’

‘But I usually escape before the police arrive! This has never happened to me before.’

The man whom the Weasel knew only as the Green Ghost opened one eye. ‘It hasn’t?’

‘Are you telling me this isn’t your first time in prison?’

‘Hardly. I just finished a two-stretch for haunting an ice-cream factory.’

The Weasel’s eyes bugged out. ‘Two whole days? How did you cope?’ His face was sweating beneath his mask, and the fur around his eyes was matting. The strength drained from his legs, and he leaned against the bars that separated his cell from the Sheriff’s office. Dogg was not present, but he had left a bare bulb to throw off electric light and heat.

‘If you shut up and keep still for a second, you might not have to find out.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m trying to think,’ snapped the Green Ghost irritably.

The Masked Weasel fell silent and didn’t dare move again, even when his nose itched. His breathing sounded too loud, so he tried to control it.

He had been in awe of his fellow prisoner even before the revelation that he was a hardened convict. He hadn’t forgotten how, when Boss Dogg had first locked him in here, he had been terrified to find a ghoulish apparition waiting for him, how he had hammered on the bars and wept and begged to be set free. What a relief it, had been when the spectre had pulled back its hood to reveal a normal – and living – human being beneath.

‘So, the costume *is* still scary,’ the Green Ghost had muttered. And then he had settled back on to the lower bunk, his luminous sheet wrapped around his body but his head still showing, and he had pondered in silence for the next few hours.

‘I think,’ said the Ghost now, climbing to his feet, ‘you and I could make a good team.’ The Weasel looked at him with a furrowed brow. ‘Yes, a team. It’s obvious, really. That’s how those kids keep beating me. You’ll share in the fruits of my criminal genius – and, in return, you can tell me how you managed to get away with it for so long.’

‘But it’s too late,’ said the Weasel. ‘We’ve already been arrested.’

‘Maybe,’ said the Ghost, ‘but I can get us out of here.’

‘Wouldn’t that only land us in more trouble?’

‘It could be a full week before Boss Dogg lets you go.’

‘Oh no,’ cried the Weasel, ‘I couldn’t face that!’ Hot tears pricked his eyes. He ought to have been at his ward’s side now, fixing drinks for her, plumping her pillows and fetching her make-up bags, and all the time

scheming to steal away her fortune. He couldn't believe that, with one foolish mistake, he had thrown away such an idyllic lifestyle.

'It's a simple plan,' said the Ghost. 'I'm surprised I didn't think of it long ago.'

'Perhaps I could plead with the Sheriff to show mercy.'

'I should warn you, though, that it might hurt a bit.'

'I beg your pardon?'

The Green Ghost punched the Masked Weasel in the head.

While the Weasel was staggered, the Ghost hit him again, and delivered a third blow to his breadbasket. He was still wondering what was going on when the Ghost tripped him. He landed on his face, and the breath was knocked out of him. But the onslaught seemed to have let up for now. He raised his head and looked over his shoulder.

The Green Ghost had dragged the cell's single, tall metal cabinet into position beside his cellmate's back feet. The Weasel screamed and raised a futile front paw, as the heavy object toppled towards him. He hated being flattened.

For a few seconds, the world was a dark and painful place. Then the Green Ghost lifted the cabinet and let in the light again. 'Now,' he said with satisfaction, 'we escape!'

'I don't see how hurting me helps,' the Weasel moaned, as the Ghost scraped him off the floor. He smarted all over and he was still seeing Twitters.

'Just try not to re-inflate for a few seconds. And stop flapping about!'

The Ghost was struggling with the Weasel's two-dimensional form. Nevertheless he was able to manoeuvre him, clumsily but quickly, across the cell. The Weasel gasped as he realised that his cellmate was trying to bundle him between the metal bars. 'You can't do that,' he protested, 'you can't push me through there, I won't fit! Oh, so I will.'

As the Ghost had said, it was a simple plan – but, had he bothered to explain it, then the Weasel would have insisted that it couldn't work. Now, as he drifted gently to the floor beside the Sheriff's desk, he couldn't think of a single reason why it shouldn't have done.

The Twitters tried to follow him, but one of the blue birds flew into a bar as it tried to maintain formation, and knocked itself out of the air. The others abandoned their former charge to describe a circle around their fellow's head until they faded.

The Weasel gritted his teeth and grunted as the first parts of his body popped back into shape. The process felt more painful than usual, as if his muscles were exploding. He was glad when it was over. He felt sore and drained of energy.

‘So, what next?’ he asked, as he reached for a chair and dragged himself into a standing position. ‘I suppose you’ll have to flatten yourself too.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the Green Ghost tartly. ‘Just get Dogg’s keys from his drawer.’

‘In other news, a Zanytown woman received a surprise today when she tried to change her baby. Miss Happ, of Custard Pie Terrace, thought her infant son looked a little red in the face as she dressed him in fresh swaddling-clothes – until she realised she had been dressing six sticks of dynamite. The distraught mother can’t explain how the explosives came to be in her pram. However, as she explained to reporters, she was so alarmed that she threw them into the air. They came to rest on a passing train, and their current whereabouts are unknown. A police spokesdog has urged members of the public not to approach the dynamite, which is believed to be lighted and dangerous.’

‘Uncle Dogg, Uncle Dogg, what are you doing? We haven’t finished our patrol. Where are you going, Uncle Dogg? What’s up?’

Boss Dogg wasn’t in the mood for his nephew right now, nor for patrolling. He tried to ignore the pesky pup, but it got caught between his feet and brought him crashing down on to the sidewalk. That had never happened before. The Sheriff glared at Scrapper, humiliated, and brushed dust from his legs. Then he rose, adjusted the angle of his Stetson hat and strode determinedly towards the jailhouse.

‘I’ve seen enough,’ he rumbled. ‘It’s anarchy, that’s what it is. All those people, not chasing each other, not fighting. We used to have fun in Zanytown. This used to be a happy place.’

‘You can make them fight again, Uncle Dogg. If they won’t, we’ll biff them!’

‘Maybe. But not tonight, Scrapper. Let them wallow in misery. Tomorrow, they’ll realise what they’re doing, and we can all get back to normal.’ At least, he hoped so. Just as he had hoped that, by dismissing Streaky’s tale of strange emotions and physical impossibilities, he could make it go away. Just as he had tried to tell himself that the arrival of three outsiders wouldn’t upset his world. He felt sick to the stomach and he wasn’t even sure why, except for the numbing feeling that everything was changing. And not for the better.

‘If you say so, Uncle Dogg. Gee, you’re smart. I guess that’s why you’re the Sheriff.’

Dogg was squinting to make out a slender figure, who waited for him outside his shack. ‘Miss Falls,’ he greeted her, ‘what’s a purty girl like you

doing out here of a night?’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Dogg,’ said Angel. ‘I tried to sleep, honest I did, but I kept thinking about my poor dear old guardian.’

‘You mean the Masked Weasel?’

‘No, I mean Mr Weasley. I slipped out of my hotel room –’

‘Tarnation, missy, what are you doing in a hotel when you’ve a perfectly good mansion out on the hill road?’

‘Oh, but I can’t stay there tonight, Mr Dogg, sir, I miss my guardian too much. When you took him to jail, I supposed it must have been for the best. But now I’ve had time to think, and I’m sure he didn’t mean to be so naughty. And if he wants my money, well then, he can have it, because it’s not as if I know what to do with it anyway.’

‘All right, ma’am,’ grumbled Dogg, holding up a paw to stem her pleas. ‘I suppose Weasley’s learned his lesson. He’s been locked up for six hours.’

‘Oh, thank you Mr Dogg, honey, I’m ever so grateful.’

‘If you ask me,’ said Scrapper, ‘that weasel’s a snake, and he deserves a good biffing:

Dogg shouldered open the door to the shack and stepped into his office. ‘At least it means *somebody* in town’ll be acting normal tonight.’

‘Yes,’ said Angel, ‘I’m sure looking forward to sleeping with my guardian again.’

She walked into the Sheriff’s back as he halted suddenly. ‘Well, I never!’ he gasped. Then, as the impossible sight in front of him sank in, his stomach tightened and blood drained from his face.

‘Oh boy,’ said Scrapper, for once sounding shocked rather than enthusiastic.

The cells were empty. Dogg’s prisoners had escaped.

In all his days, he had never seen anything like this.

Chapter Nine

A large, white banner delineated the starting line of the Funny-Car Derby. It fluttered in the breeze as Angel Falls guided her pink buggy to a stop beneath it. ‘Oh dear,’ she said to herself. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, what’s everybody doing out of their cars? And where are the rest of them? I knew this was a bad idea.’

‘Rubbish!’ said Fitz, prising himself out of the back seat. It was good to be able to stretch his long legs again. Anyway, happy as he had been to let Angel drive him out of Zanytown, Anji had warned him that on no account should he remain in her car during the race, and he believed her. ‘They just haven’t started yet. We’re on time after all.’

‘You don’t understand, honey,’ said Angel. ‘Usually, we all get here together, and we start the race straight away. Sir Percival? Sir Percival, dear, what’s happening?’

A knight in old-fashioned armour clanked over to them. ‘Forsooth, sweet lady, many of our opponents hath not turned up on this morrow. We must decide if we wouldst continue with the race. Mayhaps it be not worth the hassle.’

Fitz had to admit that, after everything Angel had said about the splendour of the Funny-Car Derby, the assembled competitors made up a pretty pathetic bunch. She had told him there were thirteen entrants – the same thirteen each day – but hers was only the fifth car to arrive. He looked suspiciously at a squat, open-topped vehicle carved out of stone: if he’d had to take a guess, he would have matched it to the big, thick-set, heavy-browed bloke in the leopard-skin smock. The one who was wielding an unfeasibly large club.

‘We should continue,’ said a tall, skinny figure in a raggedy cloak. His voice was like ice breaking, and it chilled Fitz’s flesh. He was discomfited to see that this driver was armed too: the hooked end of a scythe protruded from beneath his robes. The occupant of the bone car, then. Number 666. His face was lost to the darkness beneath his cowl.

‘Thudd agree with Grim Rider,’ said the caveman. ‘Less cars to beat to

win money.'

'The money is worth nothing, you simpleton,' grated the Grim Rider.

'Who puts up the prize money for these races anyway?' asked Fitz.

The drivers looked at each other blankly. Then Angel broke the awkward silence with a little laugh, and addressed the Grim Rider as if her new friend had said nothing. 'Oh, don't be so silly, dear, the money's *always* been worth nothing. We're here for the race itself, because it's fun – and winning's the most fun part. My dear friend Fitz here made me see that.'

Fitz felt the Grim Rider's hidden eyes upon him, and he smiled weakly. He still wasn't sure if coming here had been a good idea, but Angel had been so down this morning; she hadn't seen the point of anything. He had wanted to cheer her up, and this had seemed the best way.

'No wait any longer,' said the caveman. 'Thudd want to get started.'

'Verily, I think yon brute hath a point,' said Sir Percival. He turned to Fitz. 'Mayhaps, young squire, in the absence of our usual starter, thou wouldst accept the task.'

'OK,' said Fitz, 'but aren't we missing someone?' He looked at the five cars again. Assuming the robotic horse belonged to the knight, that left the sleek, blue dragster, which tapered to a wicked point at its front and bore the number 13. Actually, he thought, that was one cool motor; he wouldn't have minded a quick spin in it himself.

Angel clapped her hands in delight. 'Oh goody, he's turned up. It wouldn't be a Funny-Car Derby without him. Where is he, brave Sir Percival?'

The knight nodded to indicate an outcrop in the cliff wall, about a hundred yards behind them. Fitz had glanced that way before, but only now did he spot two figures, partially concealed by the jutting rock. And one of them looked familiar.

'The Masked Weasel,' gasped Angel, throwing a hand to her mouth.

'Yon scoundrel turned up some minutes since and didst express a desire to speaketh with our fellow racer alone,' said Sir Percival.

'Goodness, what in the world could that devious archfiend want with Dirty Duck?'

'Whatever it is,' said the Grim Rider unpleasantly, 'he's delaying our... fun.'

Angel sidled behind Fitz and pushed him towards the outcrop. 'You'll deal with him, won't you Fitz, my big, strong hero? You'll stop that beast from menacing me!'

'Hold on a minute! I thought you'd forgiven him. This morning, you said –'

‘Oh no, sugar, you’re thinking of Mr Weasley, my dear old guardian.’ Fitz fixed Angel with a meaningful look. She blinked twice before the penny dropped. ‘Oh, you don’t think it could be him in that costume *again*, do you?’

‘It’s a disease, that’s what it is,’ said Boss Dogg, ‘eating its way through the fabric of our decent, clean society. How the heck am I supposed to keep control when people are doing what they darn well feel like?’

Anji and the Doctor had arrived at the jailhouse (the Doctor’s idea: he considered this the best place from which to monitor developments) to find the Sheriff pacing the length of the small shack, fretting about the escape of his prisoners. Also present was Streaky Bacon – although, like Anji, he was keeping out of the way. Dogg’s nephew, Scrapper, bounced around the room like a hyperactive spring, leaping on to the furniture and shadow-boxing. He was beginning to irritate Anji, like a child on a train who wouldn’t stop shrieking.

‘Perhaps,’ ventured the Doctor, ‘it’s time to relax your grip on the reins.’

Dogg came to a halt and his eyes widened. ‘Tarnation, boy, what kinda liberal hogwash are you spouting now?’

‘Your people are learning to think for themselves.’

‘And look what it’s doing to them! Look at this poor wretched fellow.’ Dogg pointed to Streaky, who gave a startled jump. ‘Mr Bacon here came to me cuz he doesn’t know what to do with himself. He wants me to tell him. Well, I told him all right. I told him to get the heck back to his farm and do his dadblasted job, but oh no, that ain’t good enough no more. Our Mr Bacon’s been thinking too hard, see, and now he’s done thunk his fool head loose.’

‘I don’t think that’s actually possible,’ said the Doctor, apologetically. Anji wondered how he could be so sure. Who knew what was possible on this bizarre world? Still, if she had learned one golden rule on her intergalactic travels, it was this: when in doubt, shut up and leave everything to him. At the moment, she was doubting just about everything.

Some time ago, the TARDIS had taken her to a place where folk tales had come true. That had been bad enough, but this was worse. Hard as it had been to accept the existence of magic, the people of the folk tale world had at least been normal. Well, fairly normal. They had eaten and bartered and worked for a living and fallen in love and done normal, sensible things. Anji had been able to relate to them. After that, it had just been a case of learning the rules, as on any new world. But how could she understand a people who had created money without ever having had a use for it? A world, she thought suddenly, on which there were no shops. And that was

before she even considered its physical laws, the ones that had allowed her to walk away from a high-speed car crash without so much as a bruise.

This morning, she had witnessed the return of the sun. It had slid across the sky and exchanged a few words with the moon, which had put on a hat and slipped away.

At least she had had time to wash and put her hair up this morning. She had even 'borrowed' a bit of Angel's make-up when she hadn't been looking. Anji felt more herself now, better able to cope with whatever was thrown at her. The problem was that, just as she had been adapting, just as she had started to form a sense of the twisted internal logic that held the Crooked World together, everything had begun to change.

'What people need,' asserted Boss Dogg, 'is to be told what to do.'

'What they need,' countered the Doctor, 'is to learn responsibility for their own choices.'

Dogg's eyes narrowed. 'What is it with you and all this fancy talk, huh?'

'I want to help – and I just happen to believe that free will is a good thing.'

'A good thing?' Dogg exploded. 'You call this good? This darn Plague of Questions threatens everything we know. When I was a pup, we had none of this unseemly whining, I can tell you. We just buckled down and got on with it. We had order! Now, instead, we've got people jawing all the time and thinking. *Thinking!* Well, not in my town, pal!' He strode around his desk and yanked open a drawer.

'He's got a p-point,' said Streaky, wringing his front trotters as he stepped forward. 'I mean, all these changes, they're not all g-good for us, are they? When I thought I'd k-killed you, Doctor, I c-couldn't... I c-couldn't... I c-c-c-c-'

Mercifully, Dogg interrupted him. 'You see? You're not happy, are you Mr Bacon?'

'Well, n-no, I g-guess I'm n-not.'

'Good. Then perhaps, the next time you want to start thinking, you'll think twice!'

'You might have thought you were happy before,' said the Doctor, 'but were you? Repeating the same actions over and over again, never advancing, never achieving anything – is that the sort of life you want to go back to?'

'I d-don't know,' said Streaky, trembling. 'If it's a life where p-people don't get hurt...'

Dogg had rummaged two items out of the drawer, and he threw one to the pig. It caught the light as it travelled through the air – but it was small,

and only when Streaky held it up to his eyes did Anji see what it was: a silver star. 'F-f-for me?'

'You might be a dumb little critter, but your head's basically screwed on right, and I need more men. So, I'm deputising you until this here business is over.'

'Hot-diggety!' said Streaky, staring at the badge with an awe that bordered on reverence.

'You see?' said the Doctor. 'A simple moment of joy. Perhaps you're right, Streaky, these changes might bring anguish, pain and even despair, but isn't it worth it? You have opportunities now. You can live up to your potential. You can be so much more than you were before. Sheriff, you'll listen to me now, won't you?'

Dogg checked the other item from the drawer – a large, gleaming six-shooter – and jammed it forcefully into the holster of his gun belt. 'That's the problem with the Crooked World today: everybody wants to be listened to. Well, I'll put up with no more of this nonsense, you hear me? Free will, my eye!'

'It wouldn't be so b-bad if it were free swill,' quipped Streaky. Dogg shot him a withering glare, and he turned a deeper shade of pink and fell silent.

'Oh boy, oh boy,' enthused Scrapper. 'Are we gonna biff somebody? Are we?'

'Well, boy?' Dogg challenged the Doctor. 'Any more to say?' The Doctor's only response was a shrug and a wry, helpless smile, but Dogg didn't even wait for that. 'Good!' he said brusquely, marching through the door. 'Deputy Bacon, with me!'

Behind him, the Doctor sagged on to the Sheriff's desk and rubbed his eyes with his fingers.

Fitz flattened himself against the rock behind which the Masked Weasel and the racing driver, Dirty Duck, were talking. He still wasn't sure what he was going to do, having only got this far because he couldn't resist Angel's big, pleading eyes. Still, he had beaten the Weasel once, he could do it again. For all the good it had done him last time.

'I thought you said you were a despicable villain,' came the Weasel's familiar snivelling voice. When he was wearing his mask, Weasley tried to harden his cultured tones and shorten his rounded vowels, to sound menacing; instead, he sounded like an American putting on a bad English accent.

'I'm as despicable as they come, buster.' The second voice quacked and lisped, in a way that left Fitz in no doubt that it belonged to a mallard. Not

that he'd had any reason to doubt it. 'You ask any of the other racers, they'll tell you. "Dirty Duck", they call me.'

'Only because it's your name,' said the Weasel, with an air of long suffering. 'Is that the extent of your ambition? To cheat in a few petty races? I'm offering you membership of an exclusive organisation. The villains of the Crooked World are banding together!'

'To do what?'

'You know... um, villainous things. Something to do with, er, strength in numbers and evil deeds not rebounding and, um... er, no, sorry... look, why don't you come and talk to my associate? This is his idea really, he'll be able to explain it much better than I can.'

At that moment, a rock slipped beneath Fitz's foot, and the villains fell silent. He held his breath for a second and thought about bluffing it out, but the silence continued. He stepped out of hiding instead, as if he had planned to all along. 'Not so fast, Masked Weasel,' he said. 'I overheard your plot and I intend to stop you.' Oh God, that sounded corny. That was what happened when you let yourself get carried away.

And he felt even more stupid when, without so much as a 'Curses!' or a double take, the Weasel fled, and left him striking a heroic pose. He was out of sight in a second, his trail marked by blossoming clouds of dust. How could anyone run so fast?

'And what are *you* looking at?' Fitz snapped at Dirty Duck, who was regarding him with a raised eyebrow and a smirk across his beak.

'The big, bold champion, apparently.'

'Yes, well... obviously, he knows better than to mess with me.' In fact, considering what the Doctor had said about the inhabitants of this world beginning to learn, and given that Fitz was the only person to have captured the Weasel, that was actually quite likely. The thought made him feel a bit better.

'I cannot express how disinterested I am in your attempts at heroics.' Dirty Duck waved a yellow, webbed hand, which protruded only briefly from a long sleeve of his trenchcoat. The coat reached to the ground, obscuring the shape of his body; all Fitz knew for sure was that he was uncommonly tall and thin.

'Now,' said Dirty Duck, turning and stalking back towards the starting line, 'we've delayed this race long enough, don't you agree? It's time we got started.'

'Doctor,' said Anji, 'can you explain to me how we could possibly have caused all this so quickly?' She had been waiting to tackle him, reining in her impatience until Boss Dogg was out of earshot. Best not to let the

temperamental Sheriff know that she might be in any way responsible for his so-called Plague.

‘Obviously,’ shrugged the Doctor, ‘the people of the Crooked World are extremely fast learners.’ They were alone in the jailhouse now: Streaky had given them an apologetic look before hurrying out after Dogg and his nephew, fiddling with his star badge as he had tried to pin it to his jacket with ungainly trotters.

Anji shook her head in disbelief. ‘I might have said a few words to Angel Falls about thinking for herself, working out what she wanted, but –’

‘And Fitz said a few words too.’ The Doctor looked directly at her, his eyes shining with an intensity that was familiar but unnerving. ‘And those words contained ideas, and those ideas sparked off new ideas, and the people around us began to think and to learn and to grow.’

‘And to talk to each other,’ said Anji.

‘I’m not sure they even need to talk,’ mused the Doctor.

‘Boss Dogg was right. It’s like a disease, being transmitted from person to person.’

‘A benevolent disease, fortunately.’

‘I’m not so sure. If it’s making people so frightened and confused. . .’

‘They’re growing up, Anji. Yes, it can be painful, but surely you don’t regret doing it?’

‘But what if they weren’t meant to grow up?’

‘That’s a very good question – and that’s why we have to stay here.’

‘Aren’t we making things worse?’

The Doctor took her hand in his, and smiled at her like a kindly uncle. ‘I’m afraid it’s too late to debate the rights and wrongs of what we’ve done. If I’d known this would happen – if I hadn’t been shot, if I’d had time to think – then we might have been able to leave in time. But you know, I’m really rather glad we didn’t.’ The Doctor leapt off his perch, suddenly animated by renewed enthusiasm. ‘Ignore what Boss Dogg has to say. There are always some people who’ll resist change because they’re afraid of it. Look around you, Anji. Imagine the feelings, the possibilities, that the inhabitants of this world are experiencing for the first time! Yes, they’ll have to make some hard choices – but at least they *have* choices now.’

Suddenly, a few things fell into place for Anji. ‘And we’re here to guide them,’ she realised, ‘to ensure that they make the *right* choices.’ She could do that, she thought. In fact, she quite liked the idea of moulding a civilisation. It would be built along efficient but compassionate lines, free of the bureaucracy, the injustices and the downright stupidity that so niggled her about the institutions of her own world. People would be lucky to live here.

‘No, no, no,’ said the Doctor, crushing her momentary sense of purpose, ‘that wouldn’t do at all. These people need to find their own way.’

‘So, what’s the point of our staying?’ asked Anji, a little sullenly.

‘To help, of course. To make the process of maturing as painless as we can. Most of all, we’re taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions.’ The Doctor looked into the distance and muttered to himself: ‘To be honest, I’m hoping the idea might catch on.’

‘Ah,’ said Anji, ‘not interfering at all then, just nudging things in the right direction.’

‘Precisely,’ said the Doctor, beaming, apparently oblivious to her sarcasm. ‘Speaking of which, I think we’d better find out what our canine friend is up to.’ He offered his companion an arm, which she declined to take, and they left the shack together.

‘On your marks. . . get set. . .’

Fitz fired the large antique starting pistol that Sir Percival had given him, holding it as far from his ears as possible and bracing himself for a loud explosion. Instead, with a soft click, a black and white chequered flag popped out of the end of the barrel.

Angel roared into a joint lead, alongside the Grim Rider. Fitz shook his head in amused disbelief as Thudd stuck his feet through the floor of his stone car, lifted it up around his waist and ran with it. He was fast, though – as fast as the Weasel had been – and, even as the first two vehicles sped out of sight around the first bend, he was catching up with them. In fact, he was already a good few lengths ahead of Sir Percival’s metal steed.

The blue dragster, Number 13, hadn’t left the starting line. Dirty Duck was quacking with rage, the incoherent sounds slowly resolving themselves into words: ‘Drat and double drat!’

‘Engine problems?’ asked Fitz, not entirely sympathetically.

As if on cue, the engine itself fell out of the car, clanging to the ground between the six wheels that supported its long nose. ‘Sabotaged!’ complained the duck bitterly. He was already climbing out of his seat to inspect the damage. ‘You should have stopped this.’

‘Me? So, I’m the referee now as well, am I?’

The duck responded with a long squawk of unreasoning anger as he pulled open the bonnet. ‘You can at least give me a hand fixing it. Well, come on then, can’t you?’

With a mental shrug, Fitz joined him at the front of the car. He had wanted to get a good look at this baby anyway, even if these were less than ideal circumstances. He made to put down the starting pistol, but realised he wasn’t holding it any more.

‘Yep,’ he said sagely, rubbing his chin for good measure as he peered under the hood, ‘it’s just as I thought. Your engine’s fallen out, all right.’

‘You should be less concerned with the engine and more with your own health, human!’

‘Hmm?’

‘You’ve made the fateful mistake of turning your back on Dirty Duck!’

Fitz whirled around in time to dodge a nasty blow from a wrench. ‘Drat!’ cursed Dirty Duck, as the tool hit the front of his car and vibrated out of his grip.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ cried Fitz.

‘You weren’t meant to turn round!’

‘And, to answer your question,’ came another voice, ‘I believe my friend here was demonstrating his new-found allegiance to our conglomerate of evil.’ The Masked Weasel had appeared from nowhere. He was carrying the machine gun with which he had shot Angel.

‘I almost had him, Weasel,’ said Dirty Duck, shaking his hand – his front foot? – ruefully. ‘I don’t know what happened.’

‘You explained your plan to him,’ said the Weasel tartly. ‘That’s why you always lose.’

‘If you know what’s good for you, Weasel,’ said Fitz, trying to sound menacing, ‘you’ll turn around and start running again.’

The Masked Weasel threw back his head and laughed. ‘A strategic withdrawal to consult with my associate, that’s all. In case you hadn’t noticed, Mr Kreiner, you are very much at my mercy. I wish I could say that firing this gun would hurt me more than it would hurt you – but we both know that that would be a lie, now don’t we!’

Great – so, he had worked that one out! Fitz swallowed. ‘So, what are you going to do?’

‘If it were left to me,’ said the Weasel, ‘I’d kill you now. But my associate believes you could prove useful to us. So, I must ask you to accompany me to our secret villains’ hideout.’

‘All right,’ said Fitz, with a sigh of resignation, ‘you can take me to your leader.’

Chapter Ten

The Baby Stork was feeling hot and bothered.

She had come all the way out to Zanytown with her heavy, wriggling bundle, only to sense that its intended recipient had left. She had flown out to the desert in pursuit of him, but he had moved on again. The Stork was tired, and she had more deliveries to make today. She had never known a time so busy, and it didn't help that certain people didn't have the courtesy to stay where they were.

The quickest route back to Zanytown was via Gloomy Forest, but the Stork had seen too many scary ghosts in those woods to be happy about passing through the storm-darkened sky above them. She took a curving path over the neighbouring jungle instead.

As she followed the route of the jungle railroad, she wondered why she was bothering at all. What did she get in return for spreading joy? Sore wings, and a beak that was cramping through being locked around the scruff of a set of clean, white swaddling-clothes.

With a sullen scowl, she worked the muscles in the lower half of her beak, in an attempt to alleviate the pain. In so doing, she dropped her baby.

Perhaps it had been an accident. Or perhaps a small part of her had wanted to let go, to relieve herself of her unfair burden. Either way, the baby was plunging away from her, and the Stork felt a gut-wrenching horror like nothing she had ever known. She dived as fast as she could, but the white-wrapped bundle fell faster.

It crashed into the jungle, and the Baby Stork winced. She could only hope that the treetops and the vines would slow it down, save it from being too badly flattened.

She dropped between the orange and gold leaves, and scanned the undergrowth with mounting anxiety. But a familiar whistle distracted her from her search, and she realised that a train had just passed this way. It was rounding a bend now, disappearing into the foliage, but the Stork glimpsed something small and white on its roof. She took flight after the

train, caught it as it was waiting at a level crossing for a family of deer to tramp over the line, and swooped to retrieve what it thought was its lost charge.

The real baby, meanwhile, lay abandoned among fallen leaves and creepers. However, it was lucky. It had had the immense good fortune to be lost in the jungle. Inevitably, therefore, it was destined to be discovered and brought up by friendly wolves.

Awash with relief, the Baby Stork resumed her journey without further complaint. And, if she even noticed the hissing sound that emanated from within the white swaddling-clothes, then she quickly dismissed it as the sound of a baby re-inflating.

Boss Dogg had put up posters, almost half an hour ago, and appeared on TV to announce an urgent public meeting. A day ago, such an important summons from the world's foremost lawman would have resulted in Zanytown's dark-timbered parish hall being packed to its high rafters. Today, the rows of wooden chairs were only half filled and, with the appointed start time five minutes gone, it looked like there wouldn't be many more arrivals.

Standing behind a lectern at the front of the hall, Dogg didn't bother to hide his scowl. Streaky Bacon sympathised with the Sheriff's frustration. How could he be expected to run things if people wouldn't listen to him? He glanced at the Doctor, who sat next to Anji in the front row. He had seemed convinced that the Sheriff was in the wrong, but Streaky wasn't sure why. The world had to have law and order, didn't it?

He had felt so proud at first, to be up at the front beside the Sheriff himself, his star badge displayed for all to see on his lapel. He had enjoyed the looks of surprise that people had given him as they had filed in. To think that he, a mere farmer and a pig at that, could have attained such an exalted position. But now the looks of surprise had turned into looks of animosity. Streaky couldn't hear what his fellow townspeople were muttering to each other, but he was sure he was being talked about.

Boss Dogg opened the meeting, addressing the assembled citizens in terms that Streaky found depressingly familiar about the need to pull themselves together and get back to normal. Some were cowed and hung their heads, but more took the lecture less well, fidgeting resentfully as they glowered at the orator. The only person who dared interrupt, however, was Scrapper; he stood on a chair beside Streaky's, never still for a moment, punching the air and shouting agreement to his uncle's every point.

Just as it looked, though, like Dogg was losing his audience, he produced a thick sheaf of papers from nowhere. 'I know what you're thinking,'

he rumbled, donning a pair of round spectacles and glaring over their tops. 'I can see it in your faces. You're thinking it ain't no great crime if cats don't want to chase mice or hunters take a day off from shooting rabbits. What y'all don't seem to realise is that this is the thin end of the wedge. You start turning a blind eye to that kinda thing, start tolerating unnatural acts in the name of some dadblasted dumb notion of "free will", and you end up with chaos!'

'Yeah, that's telling 'em, Uncle Dogg!'

'If you don't believe me, take a look at these here reports, all filed at the jailhouse this morning.' Dogg leafed through his papers. 'Incidents of people chewing gum and spitting, and some of them in this very room right now.' A disconcerted murmur ran through the crowd, and many of them looked to their neighbours. 'Reports of people openly saying rude words in the street.' That elicited a gasp. 'And a statement here from the Baby Stork, to the effect that she's received four letters today, and all from people who ain't even married!'

The crowd were scandalised, and Streaky among them. Boss Dogg was right. He had only doubted it, he realised, because he had succumbed to the temptation of 'free will' himself. Why else was he here, acting all uppity and important, when he ought to have been keeping that Whatchamacallit away from his livelihood? He had known he was doing wrong, but it hadn't seemed to matter. Now, as Dogg continued his litany of shame, Streaky realised that his selfish, decadent actions could only lead to anarchy. People were standing on the grass, playing music too loud and eating with their front knees on the table. Society was crumbling, and he was partly responsible.

'It's a lack of respect, that's what it is. Well, listen up, people, cuz I'll tell you this just once. I ain't having none of it, you hear? From now on, my department will be stamping down hard on any and all forms of antisocial behaviour, you mark my words!'

Dogg turned away, his speech over, and shuffled his papers back into order. He had left his audience with much to talk about, in subdued voices. Streaky looked at the Doctor again; he had expected him to put forward another point of view. Instead, he watched in silence, his chin in his hands, fingers spread across his mouth, eyes narrowed.

'And what,' came a voice from near the front of the hall, 'if we don't agree?'

Streaky's heart leapt. The room fell silent. Boss Dogg froze, his eyes widening dangerously. He turned around slowly, taking off his glasses, to face the lone dissenter.

And the Doctor smiled quietly.

Jasper shrank into his seat with embarrassment. Why did it have to be a cat who spoke out like this? And a friend of his, at that.

‘What if we won’t go back to the old ways?’ Sebastian challenged the Sheriff. Dogg’s white face filled up with red anger, and steam seeped out from beneath his black ears. ‘What if we reckon we’ve found something better?’ There were a few grunts of covert agreement, but no one dared identify him or herself openly.

Jasper didn’t know if he agreed with Sebastian or not. Had he found something better? No, he hadn’t – but he still felt there ought to be something out there. And it had nothing to do with prowling the streets in a pack to indulge in random acts of malice.

He had wanted to do nothing more than sleep after a tiring night – but, when this meeting had been called, he had felt he ought to attend. He had found an unobtrusive position towards the back of the room and had waited, hoping for answers. More, he had hoped to find the strange human being, Fitz, here. He had been thinking hard about what he wanted to ask him. Frustrated at his inability to communicate vocally, he had boiled his questions down to four words written in shaky, black capitals on a white placard. He looked at it now, and turned it over in his front paws. It read: WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Boss Dogg reached Sebastian with three resolute strides, his paw restless on the butt of his holstered gun. The cat’s white face dripped with sweat, but he didn’t back down.

‘So, you reckon you can flout the law, do you?’ thundered Dogg. ‘Well, don’t think I don’t know what *you* were doing last night, little kitty: turning over trashcans, knocking on doors and windows and running away, terrorising innocent dogs with your little kitty gang! That’s how you get your kicks, is it? And that’s your better way, huh? Huh?’

The crowd didn’t like that: news of Sebastian’s misdemeanours caused a good deal of tutting. ‘Goldarn cats!’ cursed somebody in the back row.

Jasper’s ginger fur turned a bright shade of scarlet, exposing his shame. He tried to make himself even smaller but ended up sliding off his chair altogether and cowering beneath it.

‘Oh, so it’s all right to chase mice and birds but not to start on your precious doggy friends, is that it?’ he heard Sebastian say, in a voice that was frightened but trying to be brave.

‘Them’s the laws, kitty,’ retorted Dogg, ‘and I’m talking about the Laws of Nature! You’ve already got yourself a puny little bird to chase. In fact, where is he?’ A bright tweeting sound went up in response. ‘There! That’s the little fellow. And what do you suppose *he’s* doing while you’re out causing mayhem? You’re neglecting your duty!’

‘Why should *I* care what he’s doing?’ spat Sebastian. ‘He can do what he darn well likes, so long as he doesn’t keep me from enjoying myself.’

‘Don’t you dare use that sort of language with me!’ growled Dogg.

‘I’ll say what I like,’ said Sebastian. ‘You don’t control me! We’ve all got free will now, and a lot of us here have been thinking and talking. We reckon that, now we know what it is we want to do, we ought to be allowed to do . . . whatever it is.’

‘That does it!’ Peering out from his hiding place, Jasper saw that Boss Dogg was trembling with rage. He drew his six-shooter and jammed it into Sebastian’s face. The black and white cat leaned back as far as he could, until he was bent almost double across his chair, his eyes bulging with terror. ‘Now you listen to me, pussy-cat,’ yelled the Sheriff. ‘You are going to walk out of this building right now. You will go back home and you will chase that bird friend of yours whether you like it or not, is that clear?’

‘Yes,’ said Sebastian, in an unusually high-pitched voice.

‘Yes, what?’

‘Yes, that’s clear.’

Boss Dogg cocked his gun and fired a bullet into the ceiling. The sudden percussion made everybody jump, and Jasper banged his head on the bottom of his chair.

‘Yes, Sheriff! Yes, Sheriff!’ squeaked Sebastian. Dogg stood aside, satisfied, and the frightened feline bolted through the main entrance doors at the front of the hall, leaving a humanoid-catshaped hole in the wood. Dogg nodded curtly at a tiny, yellow bird, whom Jasper recognised from the previous night. With a cheerful trill, it fluttered out after him.

‘Now,’ said Dogg more calmly, blowing smoke from his muzzle, ‘anyone else got any stupid questions?’

Boss Dogg basked in the uncomfortable silence. His audience had seen the truth of his words now. He had shown them once and for all where their irresponsible ways must lead. Perhaps now everything could return to being normal and predictable.

But then, as if to mock him, something unexpected happened.

‘Tarnation!’ he exclaimed, as the recently repaired main doors to the hall were barged open from without. That pink-clad racing driver girlie, Angel Falls, rushed in, pushing a television set on a hotel cleaning trolley before her.

‘Mr Sheriff, sir,’ she panted, ‘I do declare, you have got to see this.’

‘What’s going on?’ he grumbled.

‘I went back to my hotel room to find my dear friend Anji, because I had to tell her something. . . .’ Dogg frowned at the two strangers on the

front row. The Doctor had stood up and put a fatherly arm around Anji's shoulders. Why was it that, when things went wrong, they and their skinny friend were never too far away?

'Just get to the important part, dear,' said a weary voice from the TV screen.

Dogg's eyes bugged out. 'The Masked Weasel, by thunder!'

'Yes,' said Angel. 'You see, he just appeared on the screen like that, and he said –'

'I asked Miss Falls to bring this television set to you,' interrupted the Weasel. 'Which, after a fashion, she did.'

Angel pouted. 'You're just sulking because I dropped you down the stairs.'

'Please, Miss Falls. . . I have something of import to tell you, Sheriff, and it's probably best I announce it to this less-than-impressive gathering at the same time.'

'What are you planning, you lawless fiend?'

'We just wanted you to know that you are no longer in charge of Zanytown.'

'What? Tarnation, boy, what are you talking about? And who's "we", exactly?'

'My associates and I. You see, Sheriff, the villains of this world have decided to band together for the common bad. We outnumber you now.'

'You can't band together,' snapped Dogg. 'It ain't natural! It's wrong! This was what happened when people couldn't be bothered to attend meetings, he thought grumpily. How many times was he going to have to repeat himself before everybody learned?'

'We're villains,' pointed out the Masked Weasel. 'We're *supposed* to do wrong! We're evil, bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'That doesn't mean you can break the rules, boy! If you want to be villainous, you'll do it like you've always done it: the right way! And you can start by getting your bee-hind back to my jailhouse and serving out your sentence. Honestly, you'll be telling me you want to stop losing next!' Dogg played that last remark to his audience; his comic overstatement earned a few obliging titters at the Weasel's expense.

But then, to his annoyance, he realised that the Doctor was standing beside him, peering earnestly at the TV screen, his brow furrowed thoughtfully, his hands clasped in front of him. 'What are you planning to do, Mr Weasley?' he asked.

The Weasel started. 'Weasley? Oh, er. . . ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,' he laughed unconvincingly, 'I fooled you all, didn't I? I'm not Mr Weasley, good gracious

me, no. I just wanted to torment Miss Falls by making her believe that her sweet old guardian was really an evil bounder.'

'Oh, thank goodness!' Angel sank into the Doctor's vacated seat with relief.

'Er... no, Angel,' said Anji quietly, squeezing her hand.

'You didn't answer my question,' said the Doctor.

'I'll ask the questions here if you don't mind,' said Dogg.

'What are you planning to do?' repeated the Doctor, ignoring him.

The Weasel squirmed. 'Well, we haven't actually finalised our evil plans yet.' Regaining some of his confidence, he added: 'But they'll be very evil indeed, I assure you.'

Somebody spoke to the Weasel from off-screen, and Dogg was torn between remonstrating with the Doctor for his interference and trying to hear what was being said. He chose the latter option, but couldn't make out any words, nor identify the speaker. Clearly, however, the Masked Weasel had just been reminded of something. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'we have a hostage – one of the strangers.'

'Fitz!' cried Angel suddenly. 'Fitz disappeared – that's what I had to tell you.'

'Yes, thank you Miss Falls, dear,' said the Weasel.

'Can we see him?' asked the Doctor.

The Weasel laughed again. 'Do you think I'm that stupid? Do you really think I'd turn the camera on my hostage so that you can reach into the TV screen and pull him out?'

The Doctor turned to Dogg with a raised eyebrow. 'Is that possible?'

Dogg nodded. Did this fool know nothing about modern technology?

'You can see your friend when you have paid a substantial ransom for his safe return. Need I remind you that, unlike the natives of this world, he can be hurt and killed!'

'You'll get no money off the good citizens of Zanytown, you scoundrel!' swore Dogg.

'One thousand dollars!' said the Weasel. The off-screen voice spoke again. 'Oh. Right. I meant to say one million. Sorry. And that's only the start.'

'I don't think so!' Dogg was livid now. He pointed his six-shooter at the screen and squeezed off the five remaining bullets. 'I'll hunt you down, you varmint, and I'll kick your bottom straight back to the jailhouse where it belongs!'

When the smoke died down, the television set had been destroyed and Boss Dogg was the focus of a hundred shock-widened eyes. 'What?' he snapped, bad-temperedly.

'You s-said the b-b-B-word, Sheriff,' said Streaky.

'No I didn't.'

'Yes you did. You s-said you'd kick the Masked Weasel's...' Streaky cleared his throat in embarrassment.

'You're mistaken, boy,' said Dogg, curling his lower lip defiantly over his top lip. 'Your ears must have been ringing from the shots I fired. And that goes for the rest of you!'

But the crowd kept staring.

Somebody was baking a pie. The tempting white odour wafted out across the street from a crooked ventilator grille. Jasper padded closer, and was pleased to find that it smelled as good as it looked. He snuggled up beneath it. His eyelids were like one-ton weights, of the kind that Squeak used to drop on him from time to time; he couldn't keep them open any more.

He had slunk out of the public meeting in despair, rocked by the revelation that Fitz had been kidnapped. He would never be able to show him his question now. He would never be able to find out what he was missing. Perhaps, he had thought, Boss Dogg was right. Perhaps he had been selfish. He was thoroughly ashamed of his behaviour last night, and he had begun to wish that he had never left the kitchen. But if he couldn't go forwards, then he couldn't go back either. The big, fat hotel maid would have missed him by now. She would surely refuse to allow him back in, and probably hit him with her broom into the bargain.

Jasper's thoughts had been in turmoil. But then he had spotted the smell of the baking pie.

Now, everything was clearer. His friend Sebastian had said that everyone should do what they wanted. But Jasper had been denying himself what he wanted most of all.

With hindsight, it seemed obvious. Jasper wanted to sleep. So, sleep he did, his head resting comfortably on his folded front legs, his fur warmed by the air currents from the grille. And, as his thoughts turned to dreams, he saw himself tucking into a gigantic pie, and he knew that he could find one in the air just as he had found sledgehammers, rolling pins and bombs in the past when he had needed them. Tomorrow, he would feast.

Another idea came drifting to him on the ether. He had vocal cords. He could scream and gasp, and he could understand language. So, why couldn't he speak it? It had to be possible. Perhaps he could teach himself. He moved his mouth idly, and produced some simple sounds. 'Aaaaar... Eeee...'. That would do for today. He had plenty of time.

He was contented, for the first time. He had found all the answers.

Then the familiar clout of a broom handle across his backside shocked him back to reality. Jasper leapt up with a yelp, to find the big, fat hotel maid standing over him.

‘I’ve been looking all over town for you, you moth-eaten fleabag!’ Her voice was like the shriek of nails on a blackboard. ‘What do you think you’re doing, leaving my kitchen with that pesky mouse still not caught? It’s been playing havoc with my folding!’ She punctuated the scolding with two more swipes of the handle. ‘Now come on, home with you!’

Jasper shook his head fearfully, and the big, fat hotel maid slammed the broom head into his teeth. Plump fingers wrestled their way beneath his collar and lifted.

‘Landsakes, Jasper, don’t you think I’ve enough to worry about without that you light out on me too? If you pull a stunt like this again, you are out, do you hear me? O-U-T.’

Surrendering, Jasper allowed himself to be dragged back to his old life.

Chapter Eleven

‘So, this is your grand conglomerate of villains.’

Fitz ought to have been taking the situation more seriously. But it didn’t help that he was looking at such a ridiculous quartet: a weasel in a mask and hat, a duck in a trenchcoat, a sharp-faced man in a green sheet and a rag-wearing hag with a stony blue face, grey wispy hair and the most exaggeratedly grotesque features he had ever seen.

‘Our numbers are still growing,’ said the Masked Weasel stiffly. ‘Soon, the world will tremble at our names.’ With a flourish of his cloak, he indicated the others in turn. ‘You’ve already had the misfortune to meet Dirty Duck. Now allow me to introduce Repugna.’

‘Charmed, dearie!’ The warts on the hag’s face wobbled in time to her words.

‘And the founder of our operation, Mr Gruenwald.’

‘I prefer to be known as the Green Ghost, actually.’

‘Oh. I thought when you didn’t have the mask on. . .’

‘It’s a name designed to strike terror into the hearts of the innocent and good!’

Fitz coughed to disguise an involuntary laugh. ‘So, that’s what you were doing in the office all that time, is it? Phoning around other villains and asking them to play out with you?’

‘If you must know,’ said the Weasel, ‘I was broadcasting an ultimatum to Boss Dogg.’

‘We’ve placed a value of one million dollars on your head,’ said the Green Ghost.

‘Not,’ said the Weasel, ‘that we intend to hand you over even if the ransom’s paid.’

‘That’s how villainous we are!’ bragged Dirty Duck.

Fitz’s lips twitched again. Not that he hadn’t heard all this before. On the way here, with Fitz and the Masked Weasel squashed together in the back of his blue dragster, the duck had done little but assert his evil credentials, presumably in response to the Weasel’s earlier belittlement. ‘I’m

warning you,' he had said at one point:if this conglomerate of yours doesn't think of some very bad things to do indeed, then I'm quitting.'

They had taken Fitz to the edge of Zanytown, to a ramshackle warehouse at the deserted docks. By now, it hardly amazed him that they could drive out of the desert, around a few buildings and find themselves beside the sea. His captors had tied him to a chair in the warehouse's main storage area before disappearing into a corner office. For the next hour or so, he had listened to muffled voices and watched shadows on the frosted glass of the office door. He had worked on the ropes that bound his wrists, to no avail, and dragged his chair over to inspect the wooden packing crates that were piled around the room. Their labels promised such useful contents as invisible paint, portable doorways and exploding cigars, but they were all nailed shut.

'It doesn't matter what you do,' bluffed Fitz. 'I can get out of these ropes, you know.'

'Go ahead,' laughed Dirty Duck. 'I tied those knots tightly – because I'm evil, me.'

'Not now. I mean when the time's right.' Fitz had been thinking about this story. He had worked on it carefully, trying to find a way of making the Crooked World's weird rules work for him. 'I'm the hero, right?'

'Right,' said the Masked Weasel.

'Well, it stands to reason. When have you ever known the hero not to escape?'

The Weasel turned to the Green Ghost, nervously. 'I think he may have a point. Perhaps we should let him go before we end up being burnt or squashed or arrested again.'

'You fool,' spat Repugna, 'he's bluffing! He's not from this world. Those rules don't apply to him.' Ah well, thought Fitz, it was worth a try.

'That's why I had him snatched,' said the Ghost. 'This man and his friends don't belong here. They continually flout the conventions that restrict us. He can teach us how to do that.'

'You can make us better villains, can't you dearie?' said Repugna.

'You can tell us how to start winning,' said Dirty Duck.

'I'm not sure about that,' said Fitz. 'I don't think I can.'

'He won't talk,' said the Masked Weasel. 'Should I use the torture device?'

'Torture device?' repeated Fitz, his heart sinking. But, at a nod from the Ghost, the Weasel produced a fluffy duster and advanced upon him with an air of menace.

'You must have villains on your world,' said the Green Ghost. 'Villains who know what they want and how to get it. Villains who don't always

lose. And the sooner you tell us all about them – their goals, their methods – the less it will tickle.’

‘OK, OK,’ said Fitz, swallowing another laugh as an idea occurred to him, ‘I give in, I’ll talk. Just don’t use that. . . that thing on me, please!’ As the Weasel stepped back, smugly, he looked down, composed himself and tried to affect his most serious expression.

‘OK,’ he said again, ‘you want to know about the villains of my world? I’ll tell you.’

‘Boss Dogg! Boss Dogg, I must speak with you. My friend is in trouble.’ The Sheriff had stormed out of the parish hall, ignoring the offended mutterings and the occasional giggle from behind him, Scrapper at his heels as always. By the time Anji had realised that the Doctor had bolted after them, he had already gone, leaving her to follow if she so desired. She had emerged on to the pavement to find that he had collared Dogg beside his police car.

‘You call this trouble, boy? Your skinny pal’s been kidnapped, that’s all. It’s not like he’s started to think or nothing serious.’ That was true enough, thought Anji.

‘It’s more than that and you know it. You heard what the Masked Weasel said: he’s breaking the rules of this world just like that poor cat did.’

‘You’ve changed your tune! Time was, you were all for this free will hogwash.’

‘Yeah, he was, wasn’t he? You tell him, Uncle Dogg.’

‘Not when it threatens innocent lives!’ The pitch of the Doctor’s voice had risen slightly. ‘Please, you must have realised by now that my companions and I aren’t the same as you. We can be hurt, badly. Or worse.’

‘Then maybe it’s no more’n you deserve,’ barked the Sheriff. ‘You started this blamed plague. It’s your fault!’ (So, he already knew that. Fine!) ‘In fact, I ought to run the lot of you in. Bringing down a clean-living, peaceful society – that’s worth a few days in the jailhouse. I should blooming well. . .’ He broke off and clapped a paw over his mouth.

‘Go on, Uncle Dogg, you biff him! Er. . . did you just say another bad word, Uncle?’

‘You see?’ yelled Dogg. ‘You see what’s happening? You’re corrupting everything that’s honest and decent. I’m gonna have to go wash my mouth out, thanks to you. Now which one of you’s responsible, huh? Huh? Who spread the idea that it’s OK to swear?’

‘Fitz,’ sighed the Doctor and Anji in unison.

‘I can assure you, Sheriff,’ said the Doctor urgently, ‘that you won’t gain anything by locking us up. We’re on your side. We can help you.’

‘Can’t you just pay the ransom, Mr Dogg sugar?’ Angel had appeared at Anji’s shoulder, where she struck her usual provocative pose: the one that made men do whatever she wanted. ‘I’d be ever so grateful – and it’s not like the money’s worth anything.’

‘Let’s hope the Masked Weasel doesn’t realise that,’ muttered Anji.

‘Goshdarn it, missy, it ain’t the money that’s the problem. I can’t go dishing out ransoms willy-nilly to every crook that wants one.’

‘Why not?’ asked Angel.

‘It’s the principle of the thing. Besides, when all this nonsense blows over, that cash’ll be proper valuable again, you mark my words. You wanna make those suckers rich?’

‘They’ll be rich soon anyway,’ Anji pointed out, ‘as soon as they realise they can make money out of thin air. Or hadn’t you worked that one out yet?’

‘Now you listen to me, all of you,’ snapped Dogg. ‘You wanna deal with this darn weasel and his pals, you go right ahead, but you do it the right way – the old-fashioned way – or you don’t do it at all. You find yourselves a hero and you make sure those villains’ plans backfire on them. When you’ve done that, you call me and I’ll come arrest them gladly. Until then, I’ve more important things to worry my head about.’ He turned on his heel, got into the police car, slammed the door and drove off so quickly that he left Scrapper behind. The pup chased after him, shouting.

‘Well,’ beamed the Doctor, rubbing his hands, ‘you heard the Sheriff. We have carte blanche to deal with this situation as we see fit.’ Trust him to find the most mindlessly optimistic interpretation. ‘So, where shall we start?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. He began to pace, pulling at his lip. ‘We could find a way to raise Fitz’s ransom, of course. I doubt if it will satisfy his captors, but it might buy us time and even lead us to their base.’

Anji had seen the Doctor in this mood before; he probably wouldn’t stop until he had worked out how to find Fitz, defeat the Masked Weasel, change Boss Dogg’s mind and save the world, if not the whole universe. Just to show that she had her uses too, she chimed in: ‘Why doesn’t Angel create the money for us?’

‘Angel?’ said the Doctor, gazing at the young racing driver intently.

She returned his look blankly, and Anji could almost hear her tiny brain working, trying to cope with this new concept. ‘I could fetch the money from home,’ she offered finally.

‘Perfect!’ said the Doctor. ‘Do you want us to come with you?’

‘Please, no,’ she said, a little awkwardly. ‘I . . . I have to do this myself.’

‘Of course.’ The Doctor gave her an indulgent smile, which she returned weakly. ‘We’ll meet you back at the hotel, then.’ Angel nodded bravely and

shuffled away.

‘So,’ sighed Anji, as she watched her go, ‘we’re on Boss Dogg’s side now?’

‘No, no, not at all.’ The Doctor sounded surprised at her. People were beginning to spill out of the hall, and he drew his companion to one side and lowered his voice. ‘Free will has its downside, but it’s a necessary downside and a price well worth paying. Where self-determination exists, there will always be people prepared to employ it without responsibility, to cause harm. That’s why people like me exist too. It’s our job to stop them.’ Anji found herself grinning, but the Doctor’s expression was solemn. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘there’s no going back now. We’ve set into motion a chain of events –’

‘And we have to keep it from twisting around and strangling us.’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her extension of his metaphor. ‘Well, quite,’ he said.

‘I still don’t understand,’ said the Masked Weasel, ‘why should we want to rule the world anyway? Least of all from some great, computer-filled underground base.’

The quartet of villains had retired to their cramped office, with much to think about. The Green Ghost was standing behind a desk which, the Weasel noticed, was decidedly slanted. His hands were clasped behind his back, which was turned to the others. The Weasel and Dirty Duck had found themselves seats, while Repugna was bent over a tar-stained cauldron, using a broomstick to stir a foul-smelling potion.

‘Because we’re evil,’ said Dirty Duck, ‘and it’s what we do.’

‘But the whole world! What would we do with it?’

‘They looked down on me,’ growled Repugna, ‘because I’m old and I’m warty and... well, because I sometimes turned my neighbours into toads for a laugh. But they won’t be able to look down on me when I’m in charge.’

The Weasel rubbed his head ruefully. He was beginning to wonder how he had ever found himself here. He had listened to Fitz’s monologue, hoping that somehow it would make things clearer – that, in the stranger’s words, he might find a goal worth striving for. Instead he felt as if his new, conflicting thoughts might split his brain open.

‘Are you sure we can even do this with just four of us?’

‘The boss man said we might get Baron Von Nasty to join us,’ said Dirty Duck, nodding towards the silent Ghost. ‘He’s thinking about it.’

‘A pity you failed to recruit the hunter,’ said Repugna.

‘I told you,’ protested the Weasel, responding to the accusation in her tone, ‘he didn’t like being called a villain just because he enjoys the taste of rabbit – or thinks he would.’

‘The four of us will be enough,’ said the Ghost quietly.

‘Why don’t we ask Doctor Demonica?’ asked Dirty Duck.

‘No. I won’t work with villains from Anime City. Big, googly-eyed freaks!’

‘And there’s another thing,’ said the Weasel. ‘If we can afford to hire Oriental henchmen and build a gigantic laser weapon and an orbiting satellite – whatever one of those is – why do we need more money?’

‘It’s not the money, you imbecile,’ spat Dirty Duck. ‘The money’s worth nothing!’

‘Then why are we waiting for a million-dollar ransom?’

The Green Ghost turned to face the others. ‘The money itself,’ he said, ‘is unimportant. What is important is that no ransom has ever been paid before. The masses will know that we alone had the power to make it happen. They will fear and respect us.’

‘Respect, yeah,’ said Dirty Duck, ‘that’s what we’ll get. And recognition.’

‘And power,’ said Repugna. ‘Oodles of intoxicating, scrumptious power!’ She flung her hands into the air and cackled, still holding the wet broomstick, which speckled the Masked Weasel’s fur with a sticky, black liquid.

‘The power,’ said the Ghost, ‘to do anything we want, to be anything we want. That’s what this is about, my friend. Freedom! You want freedom, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said the Weasel meekly, because he felt it was the expected answer. On reflection, however, he had spoken truly. He *did* want freedom. Freedom to return home, to be reunited with his ward and to be happy again. As if Angel would have him back now.

Perhaps, he thought, when he ruled the world, he could make her forgive him.

‘But,’ he said, still unsure of himself, ‘what if things go wrong? You said it yourself: evil always rebounds upon the perpetrator. It’s like... like... well, I never thought of it this way before, but it’s like a physical law. It might not be the same where Fitz comes from.’

‘He can change the rules here,’ said the Ghost. ‘Therefore, so can we if we try.’

‘He’s right, dearie,’ said Repugna. ‘We’ve just never tried before.’

‘But if we did good deeds instead...’ the Weasel ventured.

‘Good deeds?’ interrupted Dirty Duck, so horrified that he quacked more than usual and became almost unintelligible. ‘Villains don’t do good deeds. What would be evil about that?’

‘Well, nothing, I suppose. It’s just that so many of my plans have backfired. I’m sick of being blown up by my own bombs and trapped in my own nets. I thought –’

‘You don’t need to think,’ said the Green Ghost smoothly. ‘Things are changing on the Crooked World, I promise you. Soon, very soon, it will be good to be bad.’

The villains indulged in a bout of malevolent laughter and, aware that he was under scrutiny, the Weasel joined in half-heartedly. He wondered what was wrong with him. He was with his own kind here. Why couldn’t he see what they could see?

Perhaps it was simply that he wasn’t used to doing this full-time. He had had an alternative identity, a whole other life, to fall back on before, and he missed it. Yes, that was it, he thought. He just had to accept that Mr Weasley was gone, that he was only the Masked Weasel now. And he had to do what was best for the Weasel.

But then the laughter was stilled by the sound of knocking from without.

Somebody was pounding on the side door of the warehouse. Fitz was bemused to see that the door strained inwards and threw off faint white lines, as if part of the noise were being converted into light. The four villains raced out from their office but didn’t seem to know what to do next. They looked at each other, then three of them looked at the Green Ghost. He put a finger to his lips, demanding silence, and Fitz wondered if he should take the opportunity to cry out for help. Perhaps later, he thought, when he knew what was happening; he didn’t want to risk looking stupid.

The Ghost motioned his racing driver colleague towards a small window. Dirty Duck crept over to it and used the sleeve of his trenchcoat to wipe away years of grime, allowing him to peer through. Something looked back from the other side, its eyes almost pressed up to the glass, and the duck recoiled with a ‘waaaaaark’ of fear. Fitz caught a vague impression of white feathers before the figure disappeared.

‘It’s the Stork!’ exclaimed Dirty Duck. ‘It’s the Baby Stork!’

‘What?’ cried the Ghost. He frowned. ‘Is anyone expecting a delivery?’

‘Don’t look at me, dearie,’ said Repugna. ‘If I want a little brat, I’ll build one myself.’

‘I’m not even married!’ protested the Masked Weasel. ‘Don’t open that door!’

‘It’s a trick,’ spat Dirty Duck. ‘A low-down trick. It’s a spy, that’s what it is, sent here undercover to find our secret hideout.’ Fitz was beginning to enjoy this.

There was a thump as something landed on the roof, then the tapping of what he guessed was a beak against glass. Even as the villains looked up in unison, a skylight smashed and the Baby Stork fluttered into the building amid a hail of shards. They cowered from it comically as the huge, white

bird alighted atop a pile of crates and surveyed its surroundings with a series of jerky head movements. A fluffy, white bundle hung from its beak, and suddenly Fitz remembered something he had said to Angel Falls.

The Stork made eye contact with him and flapped its wings once, tucking its spindly legs beneath its body as it soared towards its target.

‘Oh bloody hell, no!’ moaned Fitz. ‘I don’t want it. No, get away! Shoo! Shoo!’

The Stork dropped its package into his lap and rose again with a second powerful beat. Fitz was too busy staring downward, petrified, to care where it went. He couldn’t see the baby inside the swaddling-clothes, but the thought of it was terrifying enough. What was he supposed to do with it? He couldn’t look after a kid, not with his lifestyle. His first instinct was to get the thing away from him – but, tied up as he was, he could do nothing but let it rest on his knee, a dead weight, growing slowly warmer. Why was it making that hissing sound?

The villains had recovered from their shock and they crowded around him, beginning to find the situation every bit as amusing as he himself had done a few seconds earlier. ‘Oh dear,’ said Repugna, her voice devoid of sympathy, ‘looks like you’ve been caught out, dearie.’

‘There’s been a mistake!’

‘Too late,’ said the Green Ghost. ‘You’ve ordered it, you can’t send it back now.’

‘You should have used a French letter,’ said the Weasel. Everybody looked at him. ‘It’s something I heard once,’ he said with a shrug. ‘If you write to the Stork in French, it won’t understand you, so it won’t bring you anything.’

‘Let’s have a gander,’ said Dirty Duck. He stooped down beside Fitz and began to unwrap his unwelcome delivery. Fitz’s stomach tightened and he closed his eyes. The last thing he wanted was to see this kid, but his throat had dried and he couldn’t muster a word of protest.

‘Go on then,’ said the Green Ghost, ‘let’s have a look at the bundle of joy.’

‘Er,’ said Dirty Duck, ‘it’s no bundle of joy. It looks more like a bundle of dynamite!’

Fitz leapt as if stung, jerked his chair backwards and spilled the wool-wrapped explosives into Dirty Duck’s webbed hands. With a terrified quack, he threw them over his shoulder. They landed at the Ghost’s feet; he scooped them up and hurled them away across the warehouse. They ricocheted off two packing crates and a wall, shedding their wrapping in the process to reveal themselves as six red sticks of dynamite, bound by wire, their single fuse lit. They plopped neatly into the Masked Weasel’s horrified

grasp.

At which point, they exploded.

'You see,' said the Weasel sourly, his mask and hat in tatters as his white eyes blinked in his burnt black face, 'this is exactly the sort of thing I was talking about!'

Chapter Twelve

‘The quantum multiverse is full of conflicting forces, Anji. White holes, black holes, wormholes. Strong forces, weak forces, gravitic forces. Reality itself is pulled this way and that.’ The Doctor tried unsuccessfully to demonstrate the concept with his fingers. ‘In some places, in some entire universes, it’s stretched too thinly and the fabric becomes weak.’

Anji was beginning to wish she had never brought up the subject. But, while she and the Doctor were waiting for Angel, taking a stroll towards the outskirts of Zanytown, she had decided to have one more crack at unravelling the mystery of this world. ‘I’m sorry, but I refuse to believe that somewhere as... as *silly* as this place could have evolved naturally.’

‘You think it was created?’

‘I think there has to be somebody behind it, yes. Don’t you?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Doctor, as if it had never occurred to him before. ‘Human beings have been asking the same question of your own world ever since they evolved the capacity to think. I don’t know the answer to that either.’

‘Oh, Doctor!’ groaned Anji. ‘I’m not on some great quest for God.’

‘No?’

‘I just want an explanation that makes sense. I mean, the fairy tale world I could understand. Well, just about.’ She frowned. ‘You don’t think this planet could be alive too, do you?’

‘I don’t think so,’ mused the Doctor, ‘although there are some similarities.’

‘You mean the way people’s thoughts mould their surroundings.’

‘Allowing them to create objects out of thin air, yes. Not to mention the fact that they can manipulate momentum, the weather, even gravity. Have you noticed that, by the way? Gravity on this world works by mutual consent. Until you realise and accept that you ought to be falling, you simply don’t fall.’

‘You’re getting off the point.’

‘Hmm. Of course, now that you come to mention it, it does seem quite

a coincidence that we should find two such places in a relatively short span of time.'

'Places where reality is. . . malleable. That's what you're saying, right?'

'Allow me to demonstrate.' The Doctor stopped suddenly, turned to Anji and spread his arms wide, beaming as if he were showing off a conjuring trick.

'What?' she said.

'The shirt,' he prompted.

'Oh, that's right – it was yellow, wasn't it?'

'But blue goes much better with this jacket, don't you think?'

'Not really. But at least I can look at you without shielding my eyes now.'

'Hmm.'

'And you changed it entirely by force of mind? Could I do that?'

'Perhaps,' said the Doctor, as they walked on, 'with practice. We're not attuned to this world as its natives are. Even changing the pigmentation of a small amount of its matter took a great deal of effort – and it was really only possible because I've been wearing it close to my chest, so to speak, for so long.'

'OK,' said Anji, 'just one more question. 'What does that mean?' They had reached the jailhouse, and she stopped and pointed at the sign outside it. ' "Animation Cells." As in what they make cartoons with on Earth, right?'

'Ah, yes, I did ask about that. . . a passing rabbit; charming fellow, although he did persist in asking me what was up, and addressing me as. . . '

'Doctor!'

'Yes, well. Apparently, the cells are so called because they prevent free movement.'

Anji scowled. 'It still sounds like an in-joke to me.'

'I'm sure it's not,' said the Doctor.

Jasper felt as if he had been woken from a pleasant dream. He was back in the hotel kitchen, back in his old life, and it was time to let his flights of fancy, his hopes and aspirations, recede into the depths of his subconscious mind. He had been given a final warning, as usual, before the big, fat hotel maid had abandoned her duties to go out on some personal errand, as usual. The usual mound of wet plates teetered on the draining board, and a freshly iced cake stood on the big central table, just asking for trouble. As usual.

It wasn't long, of course, before Squeak came out to play.

Jasper went through the usual motions of combat, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He knew how this would end: as it had always ended, as it would always end. He tried to lose himself in the chase, not to think about

the inevitability of his upcoming defeat. But he couldn't make himself forget, and he couldn't lift himself out of his crushing depression.

Ten broken plates, one singed tail, eight lost teeth and the imaginative use of one improvised spatula fulcrum system later, Jasper lay face down in the remains of the big, fat hotel maid's lovingly prepared dessert, and in the depths of despair.

He realised then that he couldn't put up with this for the rest of his life. But he had tried running from it, and that had made things worse.

Which left him with only one option.

It took Angel a long time to pluck up the courage to enter her home.

Angel Mansions looked so different to how she remembered it. It was all . . . crooked, like the rest of Zanytown. But she had never pictured it that way before. In her mind, it had always been perfect. Had she always had to bob her head to avoid hitting it on the slanted lintel of the front doors? Had the grand hallway always had an upward slope?

By the time she had picked her way up the crooked stairs and along the crooked balcony to her crooked bedroom, however, she was used to filtering her old life through this strange new perspective. The bed next to hers may have had two legs shorter than the others, but it was still the bed in which Mr Weasley had once slept. His bedtime book and glass of water still stood on the short table beside it. She flicked through the book, and wished that she too could be clever enough to decipher the wavy lines that filled its pages.

Mr Weasley's dear, sweet face still smiled kindly at her from the painting on the wall. Angel tried to avoid his frozen gaze as she lifted it down from its hook and laid it aside, to expose her wall safe. She didn't know the combination – but, after a moment's anxiety, she simply closed her eyes and turned the dial randomly, and the door clicked open. She took a million-dollar note from the top of the pile within and secreted it in her breast pocket.

She returned the painting and spent another minute trying to straighten it, until she realised that its top and bottom edges weren't parallel. She sighed and made to turn away, but instead found herself riveted by the image of blissful days trapped within the gilt-edged frame. Herself and her guardian, the perfect happy family. Or so she had thought, then. They had smiled, in those days, and embraced each other warmly. How she missed that.

Angel Falls was lonely, and she feared that the feeling might never go away. What was it about her that made everyone she loved, those people whom she trusted and needed to look after her, keep leaving her?

It was her fault that Fitz had been kidnapped. It was she who had dragged him all the way out into the desert, just to indulge her in a pointless, frivolous game. She had been playing with cars, unaware that her hero was suffering so awfully.

Why had everything had to change? Why did horrid things keep happening? Who would look after a helpless little girlie like her now?

The weight of questions pushed Angel down on to her bed. She lay on her front and buried her face in her pillow and wept, and wished it would all go away, that she could just wake up and find that her life was all normal and lovely again.

To Anji's surprise and pleasure, the TARDIS was waiting for them at the Zanytown Hotel. The Doctor had persuaded a pair of pack mules to fetch it in exchange for having their backs scratched last night. She ran to her room, forgetting that its contents ought to have been upset until after she had seen that they were just where she had left them. She changed her blouse, washed and touched up her make-up. She thought about her pullover, but swapped it for a stylish short, black jacket (not that she needed to impress anybody, oh no – and especially not Angel).

She remembered the banana skin in her pocket and reached for it with some trepidation, to find that it had disappeared. Of course it had: it was created by the inhabitants of the Crooked World and, like everything else, endured for only so long as they could see it. Which reminded her: she grabbed a tablet from the food machine. Ideal though disappearing food was for keeping cream cakes off the hips (and she was certainly tempted to take advantage of that fact, but it might lead to bad habits), it did nothing to combat hunger.

Finally, she made use of the toilet facilities. She had been starting to worry about the lack thereof in Zanytown: she hated the thought of doing her business in public, especially if there was a chance of being spotted and (ugh!) imitated.

This brief interlude in familiar surroundings gave her time to think. When she eventually re-emerged into the Doctor's room, she had put her finger on the one thing that still bugged her.

He was waiting in front of the TV set, which was turned off. 'Has he been in touch yet?' asked Anji. It was the Doctor's theory that the Weasel would contact them, rather than the Sheriff. Somehow, he would know that it was they who planned to pay Fitz's ransom.

'Not yet, but he will be. As soon as Angel arrives with the money, I expect.'

'Ah, yes. The money. One million dollars.'

‘That’s right.’

‘One million *dollars*,’ she repeated, with added emphasis.

‘Your point being?’

‘Earth currency, Doctor. Earth animals, Earth customs, Earth landscapes, Earth language.’

He gave her a look of mock disapproval. ‘I thought you said no more questions.’

‘No questions, then, just statements. Weak points in reality, I can accept. People able to influence their surroundings with a thought, I can accept too. But this isn’t just a Crooked World, is it? This is a crooked version of one specific world: Earth!’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure. You’d be surprised how parallel evolution –’

‘Doctor!’

‘And, of course, a quantum echo of Earth across the dimensional –’

‘Or,’ said Anji, folding her arms stubbornly, ‘someone’s been here before us.’

‘That’s possible too, yes.’ Reacting to the triumphant expression on her face, the Doctor continued: ‘Although, if they have, then I’m sure they’re long gone.’

‘Pity. I’d like to know what sort of demented mind creates somewhere like this. For that matter, what do you suppose it was like before they came here?’

‘Who knows?’ said the Doctor. ‘Perhaps nothing more than cosmic dust. This is only a theory, though, Anji. We don’t know anything for sure.’

‘I know.’ She liked this theory though. It made some kind of sense to her.

‘Any more “statements” you’d like to run by me?’ asked the Doctor.

But, before Anji could answer him, she heard footsteps approaching the room from outside – followed, seconds later, by a timid knock at the door.

The television set turned itself on with an electronic flash.

When Squeak next emerged into the kitchen, Jasper was pretending to be asleep. He faked a snore as the mouse pattered by, and his whiskers twitched as he heard the fridge door opening and closing. Then he leapt to his feet, his instincts telling him to go straight after the thieving rodent, to save as much food as possible. The sound of munching from inside the fridge was almost too much to bear, but Jasper controlled himself. He had a plan – and a wedge of cheese or two was a fair price to pay for ridding himself and his mistress of their nemesis for ever. He was beginning to realise that he could replace the cheese anyway.

He produced a hammer, a set of nails and two short planks, and swiftly boarded up the entrance to the mouse hole. From nowhere, he found a handful of ball bearings, which he scattered along the floor beside the skirting board. Then he crept to the sink and found himself a sturdy frying pan. By the time he confronted Squeak, he was fully prepared.

As Jasper yanked open the fridge door, a light snapped on inside. Squeak reacted quickly, hurling a large joint of ham into the cat's mouth. As Jasper recoiled, dumbfounded, the mouse leapt on to the floor and scuttled away towards his home. He skidded to a halt, his eyes bugging out, when he saw that he couldn't get in. He turned and ran along the skirting board, but careered out of control on the ball bearings. Eagerly, Jasper swooped in with the pan, but Squeak's frantic pedalling kicked the tiny, silver balls up behind him to ricochet off the cat's face like machine gun fire.

As Jasper nursed his pain, Squeak struck out across the kitchen floor in search of cover on the far side. But the cat was close on his heels. They raced round and round the big table; Jasper brought the pan down in a regular rhythm, on every third step, but Squeak leapt out of harm's way as if prescient during each downward stroke. So, Jasper took three steps but kept his makeshift weapon raised. And Squeak jumped. And then, as he landed, on Jasper's fourth step, the cat gleefully pounded him into the ground.

He scraped the mouse's body off the base of the frying pan. Squeak was already re-inflating, but Jasper had his tail and, much as he wriggled, he couldn't get free.

Jasper hesitated for a moment, wondering what to do now. The answer, he supposed, was to do what came naturally.

He dropped Squeak into his mouth, closed his teeth in front of him like ivory prison bars and swallowed him whole.

A long silence followed, and Jasper imagined that he ought to have felt happy. Instead, he felt a distant sense of relief, tinged by a more immediate uncertainty and emptiness.

Then he was doubled over by a sudden pain, and he realised that Squeak was still active inside him, punching his stomach lining. He hiccuped, once, twice – and, on the third time, he blew the mouse up through his throat and was thrown backwards himself by the force of the expulsion. He was angry now, railing at the injustice of a world that wouldn't let him win just once. He looked around for the loathsome creature that had blighted his life and found it wielding a brush that was far too large for it. Squeak was painting a new hole on the skirting board beside the old one. Jasper dived at him, claws outstretched, too late. Squeak, impossibly, darted into the new, fake hole, leaving Jasper to punch the skirting board

and get black paint on his pain-swollen, throbbing paw.

Normally, that would have been the end of it. Jasper would have cowered in his basket, defeated, until the big, fat hotel maid came back and punished him for the theft of the cheese. But not this time. He had promised himself that this time would be different and, as his face turned red with fury, he only grew more determined to keep that promise.

He created the biggest lump hammer he could think of, and a saw, and he set to work on the skirting board. It was the work of a minute to pull a large section of the wood away, leaving a clumsy, jagged hole that spread up the wall. His bolt-hole exposed, Squeak hid beneath his matchbox bed, but Jasper flicked it over and fastened his paw around his enemy again.

He carried him to the table, picked up the flour-stained rolling-pin and bludgeoned Squeak's head into his shoulders. A few seconds later, the head popped back up, so he hit it again. He repeated the process nine, ten, eleven times, but – apart from a lengthening lump on Squeak's head, a look of increasing annoyance on his face and Jasper's growing frustration – it had no lasting effect. What would it take to be rid of this vermin?

He thrust Squeak into the oven and turned it on full, but realised – just in time to catch him again – that he had climbed out through a gas ring at the top. He filled the sink and held the mouse underwater, but Squeak blew up like a balloon until all of Jasper's strength couldn't hold him down, at which point he floated to the surface and spat a deluge of water into the cat's eyes. He thrust a large-bladed kitchen knife through Squeak's chest, but removed it to find that it had left no wound. Running out of ideas, he went for the cheese grater, but somehow Squeak twisted and curled in his grasp so that the only things he grated were his own toes. He cast his obstinate foe into the microwave, where he steamed and turned a bright shade of cooked red but, irritatingly, didn't explode.

Jasper watched through the glass, and his anger and resentment grew as Squeak revolved on the turntable, sitting with his arms folded and wearing a sullen expression.

When he could stand it no longer, he popped open the door, seized his tormentor by the tail again, raised him to his mouth and purged himself of a lifetime of helplessness and aggravation by fastening his teeth around Squeak's throat and tearing his head from his body.

Blood spurted from Squeak's neck, and splattered Jasper's face. The small, round head tasted salty, and felt wet and sticky on his tongue. He spat it out in disgust and it landed on the table, in the squashed remains of the home-made cake. It wore a shocked expression, and Squeak's dead eyes stared at Jasper accusingly. Slowly, horribly, he began to realise that he had done something unspeakable, that Squeak was never coming back.

With a surge of revulsion, he half-placed, half-threw the body next to the head, as if the mouse might somehow knit itself back together. He stared at its remains, paralysed and cold with dread.

And that was how the big, fat hotel maid found him, still staring, almost an hour later.

At which point, she started to scream and wouldn't stop.

'What I'm s-saying, Sheriff, is that I'm grateful to you for g-giving me this chance, but I've realised now that I should g-get back to my farm. Sh-Sheriff?'

Boss Dogg turned his eyes slowly towards Deputy Bacon, and devoted a small part of his mind to working out what he had just said. He had not been listening, but enough of the words had seeped into his subconscious for him to fill in the blanks. 'No,' he said gruffly.

'N-no? G-goldarn it, Sheriff, I only want to do what you t-told me.'

Dogg sighed. He wasn't in the mood for this. Something had come to him while he was sitting behind his desk, pondering his problems. A memory. A painful memory. Of something that had happened a long, long time ago.

'That's why I need you, Deputy. You know what's right. You can help us get through this.'

'That's right, Uncle Dogg,' said Scrapper. 'He can hold 'em down while we biff 'em!'

'B-b-but b-b-b-but...'

'You're staying and that's all there is to it,' snapped Dogg. He sounded more impatient than he had meant to, but he needed silence. He needed to think. Forcing himself to calm down, he said: 'This situation is more serious than you can know. We need all the help we can get.'

'If you s-say so, Sheriff.'

'Now get out of here. I need a few minutes alone.'

'Oh boy, you're gonna formulate a plan to biff those villains, aren't you, Uncle Dogg?'

'And take Scrapper with you!'

'Oh, Uncle Dogg!'

Dogg sighed as his two deputies filed out of the shack. His head was pounding – an unpleasant new sensation – and he rested it in his front paws as his mind filled with memories of the most terrible, tragic day in the history of his world. He had thought, then, that he would never forget that awful time, never be able to keep his dark secret, but somehow he had done both. At least, until now.

Now, more than ever, he knew that he couldn't allow this plague of free will to continue – because it had all happened before, and only he remembered.

Only Boss Dogg knew how it had ended, last time, and that memory brought a cold flush to his forehead and filled his stomach with ice.

Chapter Thirteen

Streaky Bacon was minding the Sheriff's office alone when the shrill ringing tone of the telephone in the corner made him jump. 'Hello, D-Deputy B-Bacon speaking,' he stammered into the receiver. He still liked the sound of that.

A breathless, female voice at the other end babbled excitedly, not making much sense to him. The woman had been upset by something – that alone was clear – and she wanted urgent assistance. Streaky had to persuade her to calm down enough to reveal her identity.

'Don't you recognise my voice?' she shrilled. 'It's the big, fat hotel maid.'

Promising to be right with her, he jammed his cap down over his pointed ears, buffed up his badge on his sleeve and strode out of the jailhouse. The thought of dealing with a situation himself made him both proud and nervous. He turned towards the Zanytown Hotel, wishing that Boss Dogg hadn't gone off in the only police car.

What he found there shocked and revolted him more than he could have imagined.

'I see my former ward has finally agreed to part with a fraction of her fortune,' said the Masked Weasel coldly. His head and shoulders had appeared on the television set in the Doctor's room, but Anji was more interested in what lay behind him; perhaps his background would yield a clue to Fitz's location. The wooden wall, unfortunately, was mostly unremarkable, although the end of a cluttered notice board was visible. She tried to decipher its messages, but they were nothing more than scribbles.

Angel had passed her single million-dollar bill to the Doctor, and Anji recoiled as the Weasel reached out of the screen and made a grab for it. The Doctor snatched the money away, not quite fast enough; the Weasel took hold of it and it ripped down the middle. 'Ah ah ah,' said the Doctor. 'Not until our friend is back with us.' He held up his portion of the torn note. 'Half now, half later, so to speak.'

'That wasn't the deal,' snarled the Weasel.

‘Well, I’m making it the deal. I don’t trust you, Masked Weasel. I think you’re planning to take Angel’s money and keep Fitz as well, and I won’t allow that.’

‘If you want to see your friend again –’

‘No.’ The Doctor’s tone was suddenly forceful. ‘If you want the rest of this note, then it’s time you did things my way. I suggest a meeting, face to face. I’ll let you choose the location. Bring Fitz, and you can have your ransom.’

The Weasel thought for a moment before giving an assenting nod. ‘Very well. We’ll make the exchange out in the desert, where we won’t be disturbed.’

‘How will I find you?’

‘Out towards Futuria. There’s a pond surrounded by trees.’

‘An oasis.’

‘No, it’s just a mirage. A member of our conglomerate will meet you there in an hour.’

The Doctor glanced at Angel. ‘I know where he means,’ she confirmed.

‘Very well,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll be there. Just don’t double-cross me, Weasel.’

The Weasel’s face twitched. ‘I’m an honourable villain, Doctor.’

‘I don’t believe in such a thing.’ The Doctor leaned forward and turned off the TV. ‘I don’t suppose you know what an atlas is on this world?’ he asked Angel. Without waiting for an answer, he looked away from her and massaged his lower lip. ‘No, of course you wouldn’t. Not a detailed one, anyway. But if we’re to get Fitz away from those people, then I need to learn all I can about the layout of our meeting place before they arrive.’ He looked up again ‘Angel, how fast can we get to this, um, mirage in your car?’

‘In one piece,’ added Anji quickly, getting to her feet.

‘I’m sorry, Anji, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to come along.’ She opened her mouth to object, but the Doctor had already raised a silencing hand. ‘The Masked Weasel and his cronies have Fitz; if this backfires, they’ll have me too. We can’t afford to let them capture all three of us. Somebody has to stay here for Boss Dogg. When he eventually sees sense, he’ll need our help. It’s important, Anji.’

She sat down again with a sigh of resignation. The Doctor rewarded her with a warm smile and a ‘thank you’, before he and Angel hurried out of the room.

As their footsteps receded down the corridor, Anji turned on the TV again. The Doctor might have wanted her to stay in Zanytown, but that didn’t mean she had to remain cooped up in here doing nothing. She

would see what was going on outside, find a way to make herself useful. Briefly, she wondered which channel she would find the latest news on, but the familiar square face of what appeared to be the Crooked World's only newsreader was already appearing on the screen. He looked perturbed: sweat stood out on his forehead, his voice trembled and his hands shook as he read from a sheaf of papers.

She was appalled to hear what had been happening downstairs.

Once he had turned off the video camera, the Weasel abandoned his façade. He sighed and allowed his shoulders to droop. Putting on a villainous act still came easily to him – he had had enough practice – but his heart was no longer in it. He had to force himself not to think too hard, to let habit guide him.

As he left the corner office, it occurred to him to look back over his shoulder. The camera on its tripod had disappeared. This perplexed him for a moment, but he felt somehow that it would return when needed.

He rejoined his colleagues in the main part of the warehouse. They were sitting around a rickety table, playing cards. They had distanced themselves from their hostage, although they could still keep an eye on him over a small pile of crates. Hesitantly, the Weasel recapped his conversation with Fitz's friend, holding up his half of the million-dollar bill to show that he had at least achieved something. Dirty Duck scowled and Repugna rolled her red eyes at his stupidity, but the Ghost was more understanding.

'I expected something like this,' he said. 'This Doctor, he's like our friend over there – he has his own ways of doing things. We need to tread carefully.'

'But we want our money,' insisted Dirty Duck.

'And we'll get it,' the Ghost assured him. 'The Weasel here will make that rendezvous.'

'What? Why me? I carried out all the negotiations, and it was me who had to talk to the Sheriff too. I seem to be doing all the work around here!'

'You're our spokesperson,' said the Ghost.

'Isn't it obvious?' Fitz called over. 'They're making it look like you're in charge. That way, when it all goes wrong and the heroes win, you can take all the blame.'

'Ignore him,' said the Ghost, aiming a glare at the prisoner and guiding the Weasel away. 'You're the most eloquent of us, and the most recognisable. When Boss Dogg looks at the Masked Weasel, he knows he's in trouble.' He grinned and gave the Weasel a playful punch to his shoulder. 'After all, you usually get away with it, don't you?'

The Weasel nodded, slightly mollified, but Fitz's claim still bothered him.

'Anyway, my friend, you won't be alone. I have no intention of handing over a useful hostage, not when I can have two or three instead.'

'You're planning to kidnap the Doctor?'

'When you arrive at the Mirage, Dirty Duck, Repugna and I will be closer than anyone suspects. The Doctor will be ours, yes – and the other outsider too if she shows up.'

'Why? Fitz can tell us anything we want to know about their world.'

'Indeed – but I'd like to keep that information between as few people as possible.'

'What if they're not alone?'

The Ghost raised an eyebrow. 'I trust you warned them not to contact the Sheriff?'

'I didn't like to. I didn't want to put the idea into their heads.'

The Ghost grimaced. He and the Weasel were alone now, in a short, dusty passageway created by stacked crates. He stopped and thought. 'I don't think Dogg would help them,' he said, 'but we can check his whereabouts on the news before we leave, just in case.'

'Not if he's made it a secret. The newsreader won't report it then, like he can't tell anyone about our secret hideout here.'

The Ghost nodded pensively and the Weasel knew that, like everyone else, he was still getting used to the rules of the Crooked World – rules that they all knew instinctively but had never put into words, never had to think about, before. 'Then we'll take our chances,' he decided. 'Boss Dogg isn't so smart. He won't accept that things have changed. He still thinks he can predict what we'll do. So, we'll just have to do something he doesn't expect.'

Streaky had been looking forward to making his first ever arrest, but he hadn't expected it to be like this. Jasper had submitted to him without resistance. He had walked meekly beside the deputy, front paws in handcuffs, head bowed, back to the jailhouse. He was in a cell now, and the pig cast furtive glances at him from behind the Sheriff's desk, at which he was attempting to appear busy. Not that Jasper returned the looks anyway. He was staring at the floor, never blinking, with the same doleful expression he had worn when Streaky had found him at the hotel with the decapitated corpse of his victim.

He felt he ought to say something. He knew what Jasper was feeling. But what could he say? How could he help anybody to cope with all that pain and guilt, when he had been unable to cope with it himself? He had

inspected Squeak's body and he knew that, unlike the Doctor, he was gone for good. Jasper couldn't hope to share his lucky escape.

This was what he had feared most: that somebody, somehow, would repeat his mistake, that they would do something without thinking. That somebody would die. He had clung to the hope that it couldn't happen, at least not to a native of the Crooked World. But Jasper had managed to do what had once seemed impossible. He had attacked Squeak in a way that nobody had ever conceived of before.

Streaky rested his head on his front trotters despondently. Death, it seemed, had dominated his thoughts of late, looming like a dark chasm before him. He had tried to push it away, to feel secure in his own apparent invulnerability. He had succeeded, in part. But now that chasm loomed vertiginously before him again, much closer and deeper than ever, with the knowledge that nobody was safe any more. He couldn't even draw comfort from his gleaming star badge. He didn't think he could do this job, didn't know if he could protect his charges from the most unspeakable fate. And how could he keep exposing himself to danger when he suddenly felt so fragile?

He glanced sidelong at Jasper again, feeling desperately sorry for him. Had it been his decision, then he wouldn't have had the heart to punish the poor cat further. But when the Sheriff heard about this, he would be furious. He might have been lenient with Streaky yesterday, but things had been different then. He wouldn't let this crime go. How could he?

Whatever his reasons – a tragic accident, a backfiring prank or a split second of anger of which he couldn't have known the consequences – Jasper had taken a life. He had caused the first death that, in Streaky's recollection, this world had ever known.

Now nothing could be the same again.

Fitz had been frogmarched out of the warehouse, his hands still tied behind his back. He had wondered out loud how four villains and one hostage were expected to fit into a two-seater racing car, but Dirty Duck had produced a spanner and set about his vehicle in a seconds-long blur of motion. When he had finished, its bodywork had been rearranged and the blue dragster was now a blue minibus.

They had driven back out into the desert, keeping to the high ground this time. Up here, the sand was crazy-paved with ravines, and they had to take a winding route. They skimmed along a jagged cliff top, and Fitz's throat seized up as he gazed out of a side window and the only solid ground he could see was a thin sliver of yellow far below. His stomach lurched as two wheels of the minibus skidded over the edge, but somehow they

regained their traction and the villains didn't seem too worried by the near-accident.

To Fitz's relief, they reached their destination and disembarked. The Mirage looked strangely out of place, this lush grove in the middle of the desert, its six trees dripping with all manner of juicy-looking fruits and its central pool a clear, sparkling blue. The sight of it made his mouth water and reminded him that he hadn't drunk anything all day. However, the oasis shimmered in the afternoon sun and, if Fitz squinted at it in the right way, it became translucent, exposed for the cruel trick it was.

He was far more cheered by the appearance of a single figure, small and alone though he seemed to be as he stepped out from the concealment of an illusory tree.

'You're early!' snapped the Green Ghost.

'I could say the same about you,' said the Doctor with a companionable smile.

'We haven't had time to hide yet,' said the Weasel. Dirty Duck shot him a withering glare.

'He's canny, this one,' muttered Repugna. 'He thinks like a villain.'

'Since we appear not to have each other at a disadvantage,' said the Doctor, burying his hands in the pockets of his green frock coat, 'I suggest we proceed to business.'

'A splendid idea,' said the Ghost. He nodded to the others, and the four villains advanced in a threatening semicircle, Dirty Duck prodding Fitz along in front of him.

'It's a trap, Doctor,' warned Fitz. 'They aren't going to hand me over.'

'I know, Fitz,' said the Doctor, standing firm and still smiling.

Fitz tensed himself, knowing that somebody would make a move soon. At times like this, anxiety held his stomach in its queasy grip and it was hard to think of himself as a hero. He strained at his bonds – and, without warning, the knots gave way and the ropes fell from his wrists, as if because he had wished so hard for it to happen. He smiled to himself and gave the Doctor what he hoped was a meaningful look and a secret nod.

The villains stopped in unison, still a few paces away from their foe. 'Now, Doctor,' said the Ghost, 'you may have noticed that my associate here has a machine gun.' In fact, no such weapon had been visible before, but the Weasel produced one from the folds of his cloak now, as if only just remembering. 'And we both know that this can do a great deal of damage to your kind. So, I suggest you hand over the money and get on to the bus.'

'I don't think I will,' said the Doctor.

'I'll shoot you!' growled the Weasel.

'I don't think you can.'

Fitz wondered what he was playing at. 'He shot Angel Falls with that gun,' he warned the Doctor, in case he had forgotten.

'I know, but has he reloaded it since?'

The Weasel's aim faltered. 'I... I don't need to reload it.'

'Are you sure?' The Doctor raised his eyebrows quizzically. 'You've used your bullets and yet you don't need to replace them? I don't think that makes a great deal of sense, do you?'

'Look,' quacked Dirty Duck impatiently, 'is that thing loaded or not?'

'How can it be?' scoffed the Doctor, raising his voice. The Weasel lost his nerve and fumbled clumsily with the gun. As its empty magazine plopped on to the sand and he stared at it, mortified, his foe suddenly revealed a weapon of his own.

Normally, a gun in the Doctor's grasp would have been an incongruous sight. But the insane contraption that he had just produced, impossibly, from his pocket suited him down to the ground. It was a haphazard assembly of steel tubes and wiring, held together by nuts and bolts and elastic bands. A white container hung from its underside, and a large, cream-filled piecrust rested on a plastic spatula. 'This custard-pie gun, on the other hand...' he said.

The villains cowered, the Weasel's eyes bugging out, Repugna raising her hands in surrender. Fitz slipped away from them before they could think to place him in the line of fire. 'Behind me, Fitz,' said the Doctor, and they backed away together.

'You won't get away with this, Doctor,' snarled the Green Ghost.

'Unless you fancy a face full of dairy products, I think I will.' But the villains had overcome their initial fear now, and they had started to advance again cautiously.

'They still outnumber us,' whispered Fitz. 'I hope you've got another plan, Doctor.'

'I have,' he muttered out of the corner of his mouth, 'but I need you to trust me.'

'I do.'

'I mean implicitly. Enough to place your life in my hands.' Fitz didn't answer that. He was too busy thinking about the implications of the statement. 'When I say run,' said the Doctor, 'you take my hand and you close your eyes as tightly as you can, and then you run.'

'How can I -?'

'Implicitly, Fitz, remember? I'll guide you. But whatever happens, you must keep your eyes shut.' His emphatic tone left Fitz with no choice but to nod. A half-smile curled the Doctor's lips. 'I suppose I ought to feel ashamed

of myself for doing this,' he muttered. And he squeezed the trigger of the custard-pie gun.

An elastic band released its grip and the spatula catapult launched its soft payload. 'Bull's-eye!' yelled the Doctor in delight, as the Green Ghost fell to his knees, pastry sliding from the yellow and white mess that covered his face. The Weasel dithered by his associate's side, but Dirty Duck and Repugna raced forward. However, a crankshaft system on the Doctor's gun had already dipped the spatula into the white container and returned it to its sprung position, newly loaded. The second pie hit Repugna's shoulder and sprayed cream into Dirty Duck's eyes. 'Run!' yelled the Doctor as the villains recoiled, and Fitz did as he was told. His eyes screwed shut, he let his feet hit the ground automatically and tried not to think about where he was putting them and whether he might fall.

He heard raised voices behind him and almost looked, but resisted the impulse. The Green Ghost was shouting threats, Dirty Duck was just quacking angrily, and the Weasel let out a scream that quickly receded. Suddenly, Fitz realised that none of the voices were following him, and that there was a new sound: the sound of an approaching car engine.

'You can look now,' said the Doctor, as they skidded to a halt.

Fitz opened his eyes as Angel pulled up in front of him in her buggy. He turned round quickly, and his jaw dropped at the sight of a deep ravine between him and his pursuers. The Green Ghost, Dirty Duck and Repugna stood on the far side, shaking their fists helplessly. 'What the hell -?' he spluttered. 'How did we get across that?'

'If you'd asked that question a few seconds ago, we'd be as flat as that weasel by now.'

'What -? Oh, I see.' Fitz stared down at the distant canyon floor, on which the Masked Weasel lay face down, spread-eagled, not moving.

'Thank you, Angel,' said the Doctor, leaping into the back seat of the car and motioning Fitz to squeeze in beside him, 'you can stop thinking about the custard-pie gun now.'

'My pleasure, sugar,' said Angel, and the gun faded from the Doctor's hands.

'Malleable reality!' he shouted, grinning at Fitz's confused expression as the car accelerated and blew back his long hair. 'Mind over matter, you might say.'

Chapter Fourteen

Having found the hotel kitchen empty, Anji had decided to head towards the Sheriffs office. However, as she had stepped out on to the street, a familiar flower-patterned van had pulled up at the kerbside and the Skeleton Crew had leapt out.

At first they had chattered excitedly, talking over each other in their haste to report the strange sights they had seen. She had followed only half of what they said, but it had become apparent that they had detected changes within themselves as well as the people around them. 'A balloon burst on Water Pistol Road and Tim didn't even jump.' 'The manhole cover was open but Harmony didn't fall down it.' 'We've been investigating this mystery for almost a day, and Mike hasn't suggested splitting up once yet.'

Mike Leader's strong voice had emerged through the babble. 'We need your help.'

So, now she found herself back at the Zanytown Hotel, sitting in the reception area and listening, not entirely keenly, to the concerns and questions of the young musicians.

'I am beginning to infer,' said Thelma Brains, 'that this situation is more complex than I first envisaged. Certainly, I no longer suspect the involvement of masked smugglers.'

'Like, we haven't seen a single ghost,' said Tim Coward, tickling Fearless under the chin.

'I'm not sure there's really a mystery to solve,' said Anji apologetically. She had tried to explain what the Doctor had told her: that the highly adaptive nature of the Crooked World allowed new concepts to spread from its visitors to its native inhabitants. She didn't think she had put it very well, as she hadn't seemed to get through to the kids at all. 'I tried to tell you, we already know why this is happening, why you're feeling all these new things.'

'Oh, that's not the mystery,' said Harmony Looker, surprising her.

'It isn't?'

'Of course not,' laughed Mike. 'We're all in favour of this free will gig,

aren't we gang?'

'We're seeing things now that we've never seen before,' said Harmony, 'and yet they seem so natural, like they should have been obvious all along.'

'And that,' pronounced Thelma, 'is our conundrum.'

'We thought you could help us,' said Tim, 'because, like, you seem to know about these things. You told us all about the ghosts and the masks, remember?'

'I'm lost,' said Anji with a shake of her head. 'What are you asking me exactly?'

'Harmony is correct,' said Thelma. 'We can no longer conceive of the possession of free will as being anything other than a natural condition.'

'So, what we want to know is, like, why didn't we have it before?'

'Indeed. I would be most interested to learn who or what dictated the repetitive patterns of our existence before your fortuitous arrival.'

'We want to know,' said Mike, 'where we come from.'

'It still hurts,' complained the Masked Weasel. He slouched on the back seat of Dirty Duck's blue minibus, unable to move without his muscles protesting. His skin itched as if it were about to peel off, and he wanted to scratch himself all over.

'You're imagining it!' snapped the Green Ghost. 'It's been twenty minutes since you plummeted off that cliff. You must be back to normal by now.'

'I can mix you up a potion, dearie,' said Repugna. 'Just apply it to your skin and it'll take the sting away, no problem. There might be side effects, though. Boils, some loss of fur, transformation into a wolf-creature during the full moon, that kind of thing.'

'I am not imagining it,' said the Weasel tartly. 'I think I've been flattened once too often.'

'If you will insist on chasing people across sheer drops...,' remarked Dirty Duck from the driver's seat. The bus swerved as he took his eyes off the road.

'Only heroes can defy gravity, dearie, you ought to know that.'

'I don't see why,' spat Dirty Duck. 'It's a despicable unfairness if you ask me.'

'You have a point, my friend,' said the Ghost. 'If a stranger to this world can learn to do it, then I don't see why we can't. It's just a matter of knowing how.'

'Great,' said the Masked Weasel sourly. 'You go and capture the Doctor, then, and we'll ask him his secret, only don't expect me to test it out because I don't believe it!'

‘No, you don’t, do you? And that might be the problem. . .’

‘Anyway, the rest of you were no help, cowering from a custard-pie gun.’

‘Force of habit,’ said the Green Ghost, massaging his chin thoughtfully. ‘Clever of the Doctor to use our instincts against us. We’ll know better next time.’ He looked at the Weasel. ‘Have you heard the latest news from town? They’ve arrested Jasper for murdering Squeak.’

‘He killed him?’ quacked Dirty Duck, and the bus swerved again.

‘But that’s impossible!’ cried the Weasel.

‘As impossible as a gun that doesn’t need to be reloaded,’ said the Ghost, animated by a new-born enthusiasm, ‘but you believed in it – at least until the Doctor changed your mind.’ He fell back in his seat as if trying to cope with a flood of new ideas. ‘Oh yes,’ he murmured gleefully, almost to himself, ‘that’s how he did it. To possess that amount of confidence. . .’

‘So, have you decided where we’re going yet, boss?’ asked Dirty Duck. ‘Only we’re running out of desert and I don’t fancy having to deal with all the jetcar traffic in Futuria.’

‘Take us to the nearest mountains,’ said the Green Ghost.

‘Why?’ asked the Weasel. ‘What’s up there?’

‘Do I detect the beginnings of an evil scheme, dearie?’

‘No, not the beginnings,’ said the Ghost. ‘We already know what we want to achieve, and we’ve known for some time how to achieve, it. All we have to do is believe in ourselves.’

The Weasel shifted uncomfortably, and the pain in his muscles brought a tear to his eye. ‘It still hurts,’ he whimpered.

The jailhouse was full, ten people crammed into its two cells and sharing four bunks. Streaky Bacon was the only lawman present; his pink cheeks had reddened as he had explained to Fitz, the Doctor and Angel that his employer had been busy. Boss Dogg had arrested two cats for breach of the peace: they had argued because one had planted a tall tree, which overhung the other’s garden. A rabbit and a fox had been charged with ‘deviant acts’, having thought it might make a nice change for the former to chase the latter. In the back corner of one cell stood a pram, from which Fitz could hear gurgling noises: its occupant’s first word had been ‘pooh’, so the Sheriff was teaching it an early lesson about foul language.

‘N-not that he has room to t-talk,’ said Streaky. ‘He denied it, but I d-distinctly heard him say another b-bad word before. It began with an F, and it rhymed with c-c-c. . .’

‘Cook?’ suggested Fitz.

‘C-claiming,’ said Streaky.

In Dogg's absence, Angel told his deputy what had happened at the Mirage. Her account was enlivened by periods of breathlessness as she described 'her' Fitz's heroism. Much as he wanted to hear this, Fitz himself was distracted by Jasper, who was slumped against the far wall from the cells, one paw secured by a long chain to a bar in the window above him. Streaky had been forced to move him when the other prisoners had objected to being locked up with a murderer. Upon hearing of Jasper's crime, the Doctor's blue eyes had clouded; he had been lost in thought ever since, his brow lined with deep furrows.

Fitz sidled over to the ginger cat and knelt beside him. He tried to say something, but Jasper just stared blankly, dejectedly, at him as if in shock. Fitz felt vaguely guilty, remembering how the cat had followed him around when he had first arrived here. He wished he had taken the time to talk to him then, to find out what he was thinking.

'I just wish we'd been able to do something more about those horrid villains,' Angel was saying. 'The fact that they're still out there, that they're getting away with what they did to my poor little Fitzzy, ooh, it makes me so cross.'

'Don't worry,' said Fitz, returning to her side and daring to put a comforting arm around her. 'We'll make sure they get what's coming to them, won't we Doctor?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Not yet. Not until Boss Dogg gives the word.'

'Why do we have to wait for him?'

'We don't – but the situation with the Masked Weasel and his cohorts is the responsibility of the Sheriff, and I'd like to see him accept it.'

'You'll be lucky, D-Doctor,' said Streaky. 'To him, those v-villains are no worse than anybody else out there – b-better, even, because at least they're acting true to their n-natures.'

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. 'I suppose it's to be expected that an authority figure like Dogg would fight against any threat to his order – but he can't keep burying his head in the sand. Sooner or later, he's going to have to deal with what's happening.'

'And what will the villains be doing in the meantime?' asked Fitz.

'I really don't know if I'm the person to help you,' Anji prevaricated. As soon as the Skeleton Crew had explained their dilemma, her stomach had sunk.

'But somebody must have created our world,' said Harmony.

'We just want to know who,' said Mike, 'and we don't know where else to turn.'

She didn't want to hear this. She had accepted what the Doctor had told her, stopped tormenting herself with questions about how the Crooked World could be and started to deal with the reality of its existence instead. Now that other people were asking those same questions, she didn't know what to tell them. She couldn't rid herself of the nagging suspicion that she had planted these doubts in their minds herself.

'It defies all logic,' said Thelma, 'that, in the absence of self determination, we should have acted as we did without some higher force guiding said actions.'

Perhaps this was why the Doctor had seemed so reluctant to discuss this out loud, why she had practically had to force some straight answers out of him. Perhaps he had known what would happen. What was it he had said about being on a quest for God? She wished he was here now, to handle this. She couldn't take responsibility for creating a religion.

'I... I don't think you can always find objective answers to questions like that,' she said awkwardly. 'Sometimes you just have to make up your own mind.'

'But we don't know *what* to think,' said Harmony.

'And I can't tell you!' insisted Anji.

'But you could give us a... a... what were those words again, Thelma?' asked Tim.

'A unique external perspective,' supplied Thelma.

'I wouldn't know where to start looking.'

'Ah,' said Mike, 'but maybe we do. Scary Manor.'

Anji frowned, intrigued despite herself. What if there was something more to learn? What if these kids were on the verge of uncovering something big? But... 'Scary Manor?'

'Yeah, it's like the most haunted house in the world,' said Tim. 'A couple of days ago, you couldn't have got me inside it for all the pizzas and triple-decker sandwiches in town.'

'Nobody's ever been there,' said Harmony.

'If the Crooked World has any deep secrets,' said Mike, 'that's where we'll find them.'

'We just want to take a look,' said Harmony, 'and we hoped you'd come with us.'

'Well, what do you expect me to do?' bellowed Boss Dogg, waving the gun with which he had just herded yet more criminals into the overcrowded jailhouse. The skinny outsider, he noted, cowered from the weapon. Even Scrapper was quieter than usual: he watched his uncle intently, but for once he didn't interrupt. That was just the way Dogg liked it. He pointed a

trembling toe at Jasper. 'You know what that varmint's done, do you, huh? Huh?'

The Doctor's response was infuriatingly calm. 'He's presented you with a problem.'

'A problem? A damn problem?' Deputy Bacon and Miss Falls both gasped at his use of the word 'damn', and the Sheriff was annoyed at himself for the slip. But he didn't apologise; he couldn't show weakness. 'It's the most vile, the most unspeakable thing that's happened in all my years and I won't have it, you hear me? I won't have it! If it's suddenly possible for people to do this sort of thing to each other, then they need learning now that it's not rudd... I mean, *darn* well acceptable!' He marched up to the cells and swiped the barrel of his gun across the bars, causing several prisoners to flinch. 'You see what your dadblasted free will leads to? You see where it gets you?'

His face had turned crimson, and he forced himself to calm down. He had to stay in control. He dropped into his chair with a sigh. 'I knew this would happen,' he grumbled, shaking his head. 'I told them all, but would the darn fools listen?'

'Have you considered,' broached the Doctor carefully, 'that it might not be possible to reverse the spread of free will itself? That, instead of slavishly enforcing your old laws, you might need to think about creating new ones to deal with a new situation?'

'What kind of a doctor are you?' sneered Dogg. 'You want me to deal with the symptoms and ignore the dang cause? You dadblasted do-gooders, you're all the same, poking your noses in. And a damn good haircut wouldn't do you any harm!'

The Doctor said something else, his expression pained, but Dogg was no longer listening. An argument had broken out in the right-hand cell; something to do with who got to sit on the beds. Bristling at the sound of raised voices, he leapt to his hind feet. 'Quiet in there!' he snarled. But the argument had turned into a scuffle and, in such cramped confines, a scuffle couldn't help but turn into a melee. 'I said, quiet!' raged Dogg, striding purposefully across the small shack. But the fight had spread into the other cell now: a beaver had reached through the connecting bars to gain a stranglehold on a cat's neck, and a tiger had torn him away and punched him.

A tall, thin leopard reached through the bars to take hold of the Sheriff's foreleg. 'You've got to let me out of this madhouse,' he pleaded. 'They'll knock the spots off me!' Dogg shook him off with a glare, reaching for his six-shooter.

'What do you think you're doing?' He ignored the Doctor's cry. He

squinted along his sights, taking aim at a particularly mangy-looking moggy. Even as he squeezed the trigger, though, the blamed do-gooder leapt at him and knocked the gun from his paw. It discharged its bullet into the ceiling and clattered on to the wooden floor.

Dogg whirled around and seized the front of the Doctor's blue shirt. 'You're obstructing the course of justice, boy!' he screamed. 'I ought to run you in!'

Somehow, the shirt freed itself from his grip and his victim fell back. Dogg was almost glad: he was shorter than the Doctor by a head, and he had felt quite ludicrous pressed up against him. That was no way to demonstrate his authority.

The fight was over now anyway, ended by the gunshot and Dogg's outburst. The prisoners all stared at him as he retrieved his gun, but he didn't much care. If they wouldn't respect him, then they would have to fear him. Either way, they would obey him.

He returned to his desk and was about to sit down again when Angel gasped and put a hand to her mouth. 'Oh no. Mr Dogg sir, look – it's the leopard, he's hurt!'

'He'll be OK,' Dogg snapped automatically. So, some big cat had taken a tap; it served him right for staying up too late and refusing to get up this morning. A sidelong glance revealed that the villain was on the floor, his cellmates shrinking as far away from him as they could.

The Doctor was already at the bars. 'I hope you're right,' he said, 'but this wound appears to be bleeding and I don't think that's normal for you people.'

Dogg looked again. He had to admit that the oozing crack on the prisoner's head, surrounded by dark, puffy tissue, was like nothing he had seen before. However, there were bigger things to worry about. 'And where are the Twitters? This animal is stunned! Think they've got better things to do than come fly round his head, do they? We'll see about that!' He strode towards the door, but stopped when he realised that Streaky, Angel and Fitz, even Scrapper, had all crowded around the Doctor. 'Deputy Bacon, you're with me!' he barked.

'But Sheriff I think this p-person is hurt. I mean really hurt, like the D-Doctor was hurt when I sh-shot him. I d-don't think he's getting b-better.'

'Hogwash! If he was all that bad, then the ambulance would be here, wouldn't it? At least, it darn well would if it knows what's good for it.'

The Doctor muttered something under his breath; Dogg only just caught his quiet, grave words: 'I'm afraid things may have gone too far.' A chill slid down his spine. Was the outsider right? Was it too late to hold back the flood of events? To prevent further tragedy?

For an indecisive second, silence fell inside the jailhouse. And, in that sudden, unnatural hush, Dogg became aware of voices outside, raised in protest.

‘Too late, my ar... er, eye,’ he growled to himself. ‘This ain’t over yet. Not while I’ve got breath in my body to do something about it!’

He drew his six-shooter again and marched out of the building.

Anji had written a note for the Doctor, using the pad from her hotel room. But it occurred to her that the paper or the ink might vanish as soon as she left it. She looked at the note askance: it seemed solid enough, and surely some things on this world had to be permanent? Perhaps the notion of the Zanytown Hotel – complete with all the contents that a hotel would carry – was ingrained upon the inhabitants’ psyches? Still, better safe than sorry.

It was only when she was back in the TARDIS, rummaging in the clutter of the equipment alcove for a working pen, that she wondered what might happen if no one was thinking about this building at any given moment. After that, she couldn’t scribble her brief message and race down the four flights of stairs to street level fast enough.

For that reason, she found herself in the back of the Spook Wagon – stuck between Tim and Fearless again – before she had had time to give her course of action the full consideration it deserved.

‘Scary Manor is more than just another haunted house,’ Mike had tried to assure her.

‘No one’s seen any ghosts in there,’ Harmony had added.

‘It’s just that there’s something about the place,’ Tim had said. ‘It’s like, if you get too close to it, you can feel it. It makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. It sends shivers down your spine and puts goose bumps on your goose bumps.’

So, Anji had started to think along the lines of a sophisticated force field: one that played upon the nervous system to create a sense of foreboding. That, she thought, would have been enough to keep the natives away, back when they had acted on instinct alone. And it suggested (to her, at least) that there was something well worth seeing inside that field.

She had checked the news and found that the Doctor, Fitz and Angel had returned to town. She didn’t need to stick around any more; it wasn’t as if the Doctor was relying on her to do anything important (was there a hint of bitterness there?).

‘We’d be grateful if you could monitor our behaviour,’ said Thelma, ‘and inform us if you consider any aspect thereof to be illogical.’ Anji nodded. She could do that.

As Mike started up the van, Harmony passed back a piece of paper, upon which she had sketched a rough map. The Zanytown Hotel was marked with an X, Scary Manor with a black skull. 'Well, for starters,' said Anji, 'this route of yours goes all over the place.'

'It's the quickest way,' said Harmony.

'We have to circumvent all local ghost towns, spooky woods, eerie swamps and areas prone to outbreaks of fog,' said Thelma. 'It's the only way to ensure that our means of conveyance won't suffer a mechanical failure en route.'

'Oh,' said Anji. 'OK.' These kids had got the hang of this better than she had.

Mike eased the Spook Wagon away from the kerb and steered around a pair of arguing geese. Anji still wasn't sure if she was doing the right thing. She was being careful to let the Skeleton Crew take the lead – she was just helping out – but she didn't know to what extent her feelings had already influenced them. The Doctor would probably have told her that she was wasting her time, at best. But she wanted to do this, that much she finally did know.

And perhaps, in the end, that was all that mattered.

Chapter Fifteen

'I think we should go after him,' the Doctor had said, before asking Scrapper to stay behind and find a wet handkerchief for the wounded leopard. The pup, still subdued, had obliged without protest, and the Doctor had led the way out on to the crowded street.

Dogg had come to a halt outside the jailhouse door. Therefore, without meaning to, Streaky, the Doctor, Angel and Fitz found themselves lined up behind him. Streaky cast a doleful look down at his star badge, and knew he couldn't have kept out of this anyway. The situation made his stomach flutter, but he couldn't avoid his responsibility.

'I'm giving you one last chance,' snarled Dogg. 'Disperse now or face the consequences!'

'Not until we get some justice!'

It shouldn't have surprised Streaky that the speaker was Sebastian. He stood at the head of a thirty-strong group, consisting mostly but not exclusively of cats. Their expressions were mutinous, and they carried placards with slogans like 'Justice for Jasper', 'Give Cats a Fur Deal' and 'Fight for the Right to Kill Vermin'.

'You keep pushing me, little kitty, and you'll see justice all right!'

'You can't bully me again, dog-breath. My comrades are behind me, so I got numbers on my side this time.'

'Feline Liberation Front!' shouted somebody, and a ragged cheer was raised.

'We got demands, Sheriff,' said Sebastian, 'so you'd better listen up!'

For a moment, Streaky feared that his employer might explode. The Doctor placed a calming hand on Dogg's shoulder, but it had the opposite effect. 'It can't do any harm to talk,' he counselled, heedless of the steam that hissed from the Sheriff's ears.

'Like hell it can't!' Dogg blanched as the crowd reacted to his latest obscenity.

The Doctor took advantage of his hesitation. 'Look beyond the end of your nose, Boss Dogg.' His voice was sterner than Streaky had heard it

before. 'This protest is growing, and it isn't going to go away because you stamp your foot.'

He was right. More people were arriving, packing into the narrow space between the jailhouse and the facing buildings. Presumably they had felt, as Streaky did, the prickling on their backs, the certainty that this was the place to be, that fates were about to be decided. Even if he had wanted to flee now, he couldn't have moved his legs. Sebastian's group was swelling, and fresh slogans were presented. 'Do As We Want, Not Do As You Do' read a hand-painted banner. 'Free Will For All' appeared on several boards.

'The only way to deal with this,' said the Doctor, 'is to listen. Reason with them.'

Dogg breathed through his teeth, his shoulders trembling with pent-up fury. The demonstrators reacted to his thunderous expression, their voices dying. Sebastian was visibly shaken, his eyes anxious. In a low growl, Dogg said: 'You've got one minute.'

The cat exhaled slowly, his flushed cheeks deflating. Composing himself, he cleared his throat and launched into a prepared speech: 'The Feline Liberation Front wish to protest at the treatment meted out to our brethren under the present canine-dominated judicial system.'

'Tarnation!' interrupted Boss Dogg. 'Is that what all this goddamn whining is about?'

'Sh-Sheriff... ' squealed Streaky.

'I treat you people all the same, and that's all there is to it. Now let's have an end to this self-pitying hogwash!'

'You're a dog!' said Sebastian. 'It's in your nature to hate cats, like we hate mice and fish and pesky little birds. But we're the ones who are demonised. We're the ones accused of bullying and hit with ironing boards and planks, while you can do what you darn well like to us. It's one law for you mutts and another for us.'

'That's paranoid nonsense!'

'How can we expect fair treatment when two-thirds of our police force are dogs, eh?' The crowd were getting excited again, rallying around their spokesman.

'I just deputised a pig, what more do you want?'

'Feline representation!' yelled somebody, and another cheer went up, from rather more voices this time.

'Fitz, I don't know who to believe.' Angel whispered the words, but Streaky's small, keen ears picked them up. 'Who's right?' To the pig's disappointment, Fitz just shrugged.

Dogg caught sight of another new placard: 'Respect Your Neighbour – Say

No to Free Will'. He was encouraged by the support. If he could shout down Sebastian, then that would surely change a few more minds, mark a real turning point. But the hateful cat had returned to the attack. 'How many of our comrades are in your cells right now?'

'It's not my fault if you people have no respect for the law. You don't hear no cute little birdies screeching through the night, disturbing the peace.'

'Oh, that's right,' spat Sebastian, 'let's all feel sorry for the poor little tweety-birds.'

'I think you're forgetting, little kitty, that I've got one of your kind in the jailhouse right now for killing – yes, killing – a defenceless mouse! Am I victimising him, huh? Huh? Am I? Huh?' Dogg emphasised his words by prodding Sebastian's chest repeatedly.

The cat fell back a step, his black fur bristling. 'He was doing what you wanted, acting according to his nature.'

'There ain't nothing natural about killing a person.'

'What did you *think* he'd do when he caught that rodent?'

'He was supposed to lose, goddamn it!' Was there no reasoning with this animal?

'Oh, now we're getting to it, aren't we? You don't mind cats so long as we keep our heads down, stay in our place and don't win.'

'That's right! And your minute's up, pussy-cat!'

'A few hours ago, you told us to go home and chase our natural enemies. Now you're making Comrade Jasper a scapegoat for being the first cat to ever actually catch one.'

The crowd was coalescing into ever more factions. A pack of dogs chanted anti-cat vitriol and baited the fringe members of Sebastian's group; Deputy Bacon's old enemy, the Whatchamacallit, had joined rabbits and foxes to protest against hunting; more happily, the opponents of free will now formed a sizeable lobby. 'Self-Control is the Only Control,' read Dogg. 'The Best Things in Life Aren't Free.' 'Get Your Hamburgers Here.'

Oh. That last slogan fluttered above a mobile food stand; Mr McMulch from down the road had set up in the midst of the throng and attracted a short queue.

This was getting out of hand. Dogg's society was crumbling. Its head lawman had to be stronger. He had to force the dissidents back into line. 'That's enough!' he yelled in Sebastian's face. 'I've answered your questions, now git gone home!' The crowd reacted badly. They shouted and jeered. He raised his voice to be heard. 'I said git gone, the lot of you. I won't warn you again! It's about time you people learned self-control!'

'That's rich,' scoffed Sebastian. 'You can't even control your own mouth!'

Dogg's eyes widened at the cat's impudence. 'Sod off!' he roared, without thinking.

That made things worse. He became the target of indignant protests and shrieks of derision. Suddenly, everybody seemed to have something to say – but, amid the clamour, the Sheriff couldn't have heard any one of them, even if he had wanted to.

A horrid feeling crept over Angel, and she knew now that this could only end in violence. Fitz drew her closer to him – a sweet gesture of protection – as he looked at the Doctor. 'What was it you said about trying to reason with them?'

'I thought it was worth a try,' said the Doctor, his face long with disappointment. 'Perhaps all civilisations must go through this stage.'

'Can't you do something? Calm them down?'

'I think we're beyond that.' It occurred to Angel that Fitz was the most vulnerable person here. In which case, why was *he* protecting *her*?

And then, a half-brick bounced off Boss Dogg's head and dislodged his hat.

Angel hadn't seen who had thrown the missile, and she was fairly sure that its victim hadn't either. Dogg fired his revolver anyway, twice, in the general direction from which it had come. The crowd panicked, and three dogs from the Anti-Cat League took the opportunity to spring upon a small, white kitten and tear it apart. 'No, you mustn't do that!' the Doctor was shouting at Dogg, but the pair were separated as a line of angry people surged towards them.

Angel's senses exploded. She froze, unable to cope with the onslaught of noise, unable to comprehend how her neighbours had become an elemental force, unstoppable. When Fitz propelled her back into the jailhouse, she was too numb to resist him. Behind her, Dogg was screaming hoarsely but his attackers were past listening.

Inside, the prisoners rattled their bars and shouted in support of different interest groups. Jasper cowered in the far corner. Fitz went for the Sheriff's heavy desk and tried to push it. He realised, even as Angel did, that Streaky Bacon had run into the shack after them. 'Quick,' he called to the pig, 'give me a hand!'

'I should g-go back out,' stammered Streaky, his expression suggesting that, in fact, there was nothing he wanted to do less. 'I d-don't know why I c-came in here, dagnabbit.'

Scrapper sprang towards him. 'Does somebody need biffing out there? Do they?'

‘There’s nothing you can do!’ insisted Fitz. ‘We’ve got to block that door!’

‘We can’t!’ cried Angel, a sudden fear pricking at her, sharp and clear amid the confusion. ‘Boss Dogg and the Doctor are still out there!’

‘Come on, Mr Bacon!’ shouted Scrapper, disappearing through the door. Streaky hesitated, as did Fitz.

‘Then what do you suggest?’ he cried. *He was asking her?* Angel felt tears building inside her. This was all too dreadful. She looked at Streaky, who looked at Fitz, who looked at her.

Then the door was kicked open, almost flying off its hinges, and the riot engulfed them.

Fitz half-ducked behind the Sheriff’s desk, glad of its shelter as the room filled with bodies. He was in the best place, out of the way. The invaders were mostly feline, and they were more concerned with freeing their comrades than in hurting anybody. They heaved at the bars and succeeded in wrenching one free. Prisoners poured out, shouting joy and defiance. There wasn’t enough room in the shack’s office area, and people were pushed and pulled, squashed and felled. The desk was thrust across the floor and it hit the stooped Fitz in the stomach, slamming him into the wall and winding him. As he dragged himself free, he heard a high-pitched squeal from Streaky and caught sight of Angel’s face, afraid, in the melee.

She couldn’t be injured. He could. It made sense to stay where he was.

Then the second cell was opened, and a wiry cat sprang out, eyes flashing wildly. It scrambled across heads and shoulders until it found a brown fox and dug its claws into its eyes, exacting vengeance for some past slight. And war broke out.

Damn it, thought Fitz. Damn this to hell!

He scrambled up on to the desk. A tabby in a top hat tried to climb after him, but he drove a heel into its face. He looked for Angel across a carpet of fur, and saw her pink helmet. She was covering her face, trying not to be scratched. He dived for her and landed on two cats and a fox, flattening them. He reached for Angel, but she had already been torn away from him. A paw alighted on his shoulder, and he half-turned into a punch that sent him reeling. He would have fallen, had two more animals not caught him. His eyes watering, he couldn’t see what they were, but he felt a knee to the back of his head and a slice across his shoulder. He grabbed a tuft of fur, which prompted a screech of pain, and he pulled himself to his feet. He couldn’t keep his left eye open and he fought almost blindly, throwing punches and kicks where he could, not caring where they landed, just hoping that nobody would get through his defences. Some did: his

cheek was slashed and his nose split open.

The crowd thinned out; some people must have fled. Fitz saw Angel again through blurred vision. Setting out towards her, he was tripped by some animal on the floor. She caught him, and suddenly it was she who was carrying him out of danger. He would feel humiliated about that later; right now, he was too grateful.

He collapsed on to a bunk in one of the cells. Angel stopped him from rising as soon as he had got his breath back.

The sounds of battle lessened and, when he was finally able to look, he saw that the jailhouse had almost emptied, the fight taken back out on to the street. Only about a dozen people remained, some sprawled on the floorboards, some shaking and panting in the aftermath of adrenalin highs. Jasper's chain had been broken, but he still cowered in his corner. Streaky was nowhere to be seen.

Fitz tensed as the brown fox staggered into the cell, but it was in no condition to attack him. One of its ears had been torn off, and blood flowed down its face. It dropped on to the bed beside him, and he hurriedly swung his feet on to the floor to make a space for it. Its eyelids fell, its breathing was shallow and Fitz stared at it, remembering the leopard's nasty cut.

Weren't the people of this world meant to be almost indestructible?

He thought of the Doctor, alone and fragile with his single heart, outside, but his head was pounding and he didn't have the strength go after him.

The malcontents burst out of Dogg's shack, carrying their prize aloft on their shoulders. Deputy Bacon kicked and squealed, but the Sheriff couldn't reach him. He had only just managed to clear himself a space, through judicious use of his six-shooter. He had been knocked out of shape four times, his hat was lost and the pain in his temple wasn't going away, but he was teaching these perverts not to mess with the law. Many had fled already, and others had fallen and were unable to get up. But that still left the hardcore troublemakers, and they were more than numerous enough.

The pots and pans were out in force. A wolf had fastened his paws around a cat's neck. A white dove steadied a huge rifle upon her back and aimed it at a dog's head, while another braced its butt and a third, in the trigger guard, bent her shoulder to the task of firing. The burger van was overturned and a bucket of hot fat slopped over the backs of two ducks; their screams were fuel for nightmares.

Dogg reloaded and shot a cat that had been sinking its teeth into a dog's throat. To his satisfaction, bone and blood erupted from its shoulder and it was thrown back, open-mouthed.

Some of the rioters had climbed on to the jailhouse roof, to dance and wave placards and shout incitement. Two of them strained to push a large, black, metal object towards the roof's edge. It was shaped like a pyramid with its top shorn off. '10 TONS' proclaimed the white figures on its side. The rebels were standing against the sun – which had covered its eyes with its rays, in horror – and Dogg couldn't make out who they were. But he seethed at their impertinence and raised his gun again. He would pick them off, see how fast their friends came down after that. But then some filthy moggy jumped him from behind. He wrestled himself free of its grasp and beat it into the ground.

He heard a strangulated cry, looked up and caught a bespectacled penguin as it toppled towards him. His first impulse was to hurl this impediment, this dead weight, aside, but he found himself staring instead at the kitchen blade that protruded from its back.

An old joke came to him, unbidden: *What's black and white and red all over?*

Then revulsion welled up inside him and, with a yelp, he let the bird fall. It landed at his feet with a wet slap. Dogg stared down at it numbly, and he knew that it was dead.

His worst fears had been realised. His world was doomed. Why hadn't he been able to stop this? The sound of the crowd washed over him, and deadened his ears. He was drowning in the tumult and he didn't know what to do.

Somebody cleared his throat, the sound remarkably clear. Dogg whirled around and snapped up his gun, to find the Doctor's worried eyes in its sights. He almost squeezed the trigger, glad of an excuse to be rid of the pesky outsider, to vent his frustration, but something stopped him. The Doctor's dark but somehow open expression? The feel of the penguin's corpse against his paw? The pitching sensation of loss in his stomach?

'I suggest you don't shoot,' said the Doctor with remarkable calm. 'You know what that bullet would do to me, don't you?'

Dogg didn't move, didn't back down. But he knew the answer to the Doctor's question. He didn't want to see more death, but how could he prevent it?

'You don't want to kill me, Boss Dogg,' said the Doctor, his words coming out quickly but still sounding earnest. 'You don't want to kill anyone, I know that. I know you're a good person. But look around you, Sheriff. Look what you've done. Look what you've all done.'

Dogg had known for several minutes that things had changed. He had even predicted it. He had seen the injured and the dying. He had inflicted horrific wounds himself. It alarmed him that, at the time, he hadn't cared

at all. He had sacrificed his reason to the red mist of rage. He had lost control. And he feared that it was now too late to reclaim it. He lowered his revolver, and the Doctor took it from him with a smile that was approving but bereft of warmth.

And the fighting died down.

Streaky felt ashamed. As the rioters had carried him out of the jailhouse, he had succumbed to terror. His own pitiful screams still echoed in his head as if mocking him, telling him he wasn't worth the trust that the Sheriff had placed in him.

His captors had dropped him and jabbed at his ribs and his head with their feet. His body had given with some of their blows, but others had left purple blemishes on his pink skin. In the end, his prone position had worked to his advantage. The violence had closed in around him, and his attackers had been borne away on its irresistible tide. He had curled into a ball and buried his face and put up with being trampled because it was less painful than facing a deliberate, vicious assault. He had remonstrated with himself, feeling that he ought to get up and do something, but what could he have done?

Then something fell beside him, and he found himself staring at a big, black dog. He tried to scramble away from it, before it regained its bearings and lunged for his throat. But its eyeballs had rolled back into its head and blood trickled from its open jaws.

He had no choice, then. He leapt to his hind feet in panic and battled his way through the crowd, his front legs over his head, running blindly for the jailhouse.

He collided with Fitz in the doorway. He looked up at the human being, dismayed to see livid red cuts on his face and a dark swelling around his left eye. Fitz greeted the pig with a watery smile, as Angel emerged from the shack beside him. Only then did Streaky realise that the riot had suddenly ended, and he turned to see the apparition that hung over the quietened crowd and demanded their attention.

The Masked Weasel was three times his normal size, translucent and floating. 'Look at you all,' he sneered in an amplified, booming voice. 'Squabbling over who'll get his own way. Well, while you were all busy acting like children, my associates and I have settled the matter for you. The machine that is projecting this holographic image is only a sample of the technology we now have. Technology that most of you cannot imagine.' Fitz winced, presumably feeling his injuries. 'Technology with which our conglomerate of villains will rule this world.'

Streaky looked for Boss Dogg and found him, the only moving figure

in the still-crowded street. He was ignoring the Weasel, walking slowly towards a point beside the jailhouse – a point that was blocked from the pig’s view – as if drawn by hypnotism. Streaky couldn’t see Scrapper. That didn’t make the Weasel his responsibility, did it?

‘And so,’ continued the villain, ‘I give you this ultimatum. We have in our possession a giant laser weapon, which is currently targeted upon the centre of Zanytown. If the people of this world don’t swear allegiance to us by midday tomorrow, then we’ll boil both the town and its inhabitants out of existence. And don’t imagine we can’t do it: I think you’ve all quite adequately proven in the last few minutes that we can cause great harm to each other. Nor will our fiendish acts rebound. I don’t believe that sort of thing happens any more, do you?’

The image of the Weasel blinked out with an electronic fizz, and left its audience confused and frightened. They looked to their fallen, responding to the moans of the wounded and weeping over the dead. The fight had been drained out of them. Some confided their fears to each other in low, anxious voices while others slunk away, ashamed of what they had done.

Streaky walked among them, his footsteps heavy, sharing their emotions. He needed Dogg’s instructions. He needed to know what his duty was. Perhaps he ought to turn in his badge, useless porker that he had shown himself to be.

But, at the side of the jailhouse, he stumbled upon a heart-numbing tableau.

A big, black, ten-ton weight lay beside the wall of the shack. The Sheriff stared at it, and didn’t lift his head to acknowledge his deputy’s approach. Drawing tentatively closer, Streaky caught his breath at the sight of a small, brown paw, protruding pathetically from beneath the base of the great metal hulk. Blood seeped into the paving stones around it and washed the forlorn limb in a disturbing shade of red.

The paw belonged to Scrapper.

Tears streamed down Boss Dogg’s white cheeks.

Chapter Sixteen

Fitz lay sprawled across a sofa, holding a handkerchief to his bloodied nose and a cold compress to his black eye. Streaky had offered him a raw steak for the latter, but he had declined it in favour of the medical supplies stored in the TARDIS. A couple of painkillers had already eased his headache, but he was feeling battered, tired and generally hard done by. The price of being a hero. The bit they always glossed over in the films.

Angel leaned over him, using a dropper to apply a menthol-scented solution to the claw marks on his cheek. He winced with each touch of the stinging liquid, but her gentle hands and the close proximity of her breasts to his face almost made the pain worthwhile.

The console room was darker than usual, as if reacting to its owner's mood. The Doctor leaned with both hands against one of the instrument panels, cast in shadow. 'I should have anticipated this,' he murmured. 'The physical properties of this world are moulded by its inhabitants; ergo, as they change, so too does it. By influencing their thoughts, their beliefs, we've altered the very Laws of Nature.'

'You mean it's our fault?' asked Fitz. 'That they've started to...?'

'These people had no conception of mortality before we arrived. They didn't know the damage that a gun or a knife or a fall could do. We've brought them death.'

Fitz was so appalled by that notion that he didn't fully register Angel's reaction. She sagged on to the sofa beside him. 'How could we... I mean, isn't there something we can...?' His tongue felt numb and he couldn't think of a question that might prompt a reassuring answer. 'We've got to get away from here, haven't we?' he said at last. 'We've got to collect Anji from her haunted house and leave before we make things even worse.'

'I don't think we could make things a great deal worse if we tried.'

Fitz jumped to his feet, almost forgetting his wounds. 'So, what are you saying? That we've already screwed this whole planet just by landing here?'

'I'm saying,' said the Doctor, 'that it's always darkest before the dawn.'

Our job now is to help these people usher in that dawn if we can, to fight the darkness.'

'Oh, and what do we do for an encore? Show them how to make an A-bomb?'

'I think it's time we dealt with the Masked Weasel.'

'You said you were waiting for the Sheriff to do that.'

Even as Fitz spoke, the Doctor was nodding, his long hair bouncing on his head. 'Yes, yes, but I don't think we can afford to wait any longer. The Weasel and his colleagues are developing, learning, at a faster rate than Boss Dogg is. I'm worried what will happen if they carry out their threat. Did they tell you anything about their plans?'

Fitz shifted uncomfortably beneath his friend's sudden gaze. He couldn't help but feel that the Doctor knew everything already. In which case, it seemed unfair that he still had to confess it. 'Well, no, not exactly, but I think I might have given them one or two... ideas.'

The Doctor pursed his lips. 'Go on.'

'I didn't realise,' he defended himself. 'I didn't know they could make things out of thin air. I was trying to stall them, have a bit of... you know, fun at their expense.'

'I thought I detected your hand in the "giant laser weapon".'

'And the hologram,' admitted Fitz with a weak, apologetic smile. As often happened, he didn't know if the Doctor was criticising him or just stating facts. The irony of his own 'A-bomb' comment wasn't lost on him. 'And, er... I think I might know how to find them.'

He was interrupted by a great, racking sob. He turned to Angel: she had risen from the sofa, and Fitz was mortified to see that she was crying, her lips trembling, her fingers clenching. He was drawn to her side, but she shrugged him away. 'You caused all this...'. She was breathless with horror; she could hardly even look at him. 'I knew you'd made us think, but this... this horrid, horrid...'. She swallowed, tears almost choking her. 'I thought you were my hero. *Why couldn't you have left us alone?*'

Fitz reached out a half-hearted hand to stop her as she fled towards the outer doors. But he let her slick racing leathers slip through his grasp before he could think of a word to say. And then she was gone, leaving only a lingering whiff of her perfume.

He looked to the Doctor helplessly, but drew no comfort from his sombre expression.

And the room darkened further.

The sun had retired early, sickened by the violence it had witnessed. The moon had taken its place but had summoned clouds to obscure its view of

the corrupted land below. For the first time in Boss Dogg's memory, a real darkness had fallen.

He didn't bother turning on the jailhouse light; he surrendered instead to the gloom. He rocked his chair on its back legs, rested his heels on his desk and gulped whiskey from the bottle, drawn out of his torpor only when he realised that the sharp, purple liquid was exhausted. He stared in disbelief through the glass of the empty vessel before hurling it over his shoulder and creating a new one.

He didn't know when the Doctor had arrived. By the time he had fully registered his presence, he was sure he had been lurking on the edge of his perception for some minutes. He had probably even talked to Jasper in his cell, the Sheriff's sole remaining prisoner.

He waited for his visitor to say something, but he didn't. His silence seemed to accuse Dogg, to damn him for his failure. He felt a surge of anger towards the man, the outsider who had brought this fate upon his world. But what did it matter?

'There's still reports coming in,' he said, speech slurred by drink. 'Still people dying. Seems gravity's turned against us too.' He hiccuped. 'Works of its own accord now, doesn't wait for you to think about it. You just fall.' He made a plunging motion with his paw and lost his balance on the chair, almost giving a fuller demonstration. 'Three people dead, last I heard, flattened at the bottoms of cliffs and can't re-inflate themselves.' The Doctor looked down at his hands. 'There's a rabbit who cooked and ate a human being; said it deserved a taste of its own damn medicine. And out on Jollity Farm, a man got stoned to death when his neighbours found out he'd married a cow.'

The Doctor sighed and lifted himself on to the desk to sit cross-legged in front of Dogg, his fingers steepled over his lips, his blue eyes alight in the gloom. He still said nothing. What was it about him that made Dogg feel he had to justify himself?

'See? The whole world's gone to Hell. Too late to stop it. So, what's the point in trying?'

'There's always a point,' said the Doctor softly.

Dogg stared down the neck of his quarter-full bottle. 'My nephew's dead.'

'And it must be very hard for you.' Dogg didn't have the words to respond. He took another swig of whiskey, but it couldn't blot out his all-consuming grief. 'But the best thing you can do for him now is to make sure that nobody else has to suffer the same fate.'

'Too late,' Dogg burred. 'Too damn late for anything.'

'It's never too late,' insisted the Doctor. 'You can't repress free will, but

you can establish parameters. You can't control people, but you might be able to guide them. Jasper is the key. He caused the first death. You need to decide what you're going to do about it.'

'Make an example of him.'

'Yes, yes, yes – but what kind of an example?'

'Put him to death.' Dogg found the idea amusing, although he wasn't sure why. He giggled, and the thought that Jasper might be listening from behind his bars only made him giggle harder. The bottle slipped from his grasp and smashed, souring his mood again. 'Put him to death and then find the scum who murdered Scrapper and kill him too.'

'No, no, no, no.' The Doctor swung his legs off the desk.

'No?'

'You've lost control, Boss Dogg. You can't keep acting as if your word is law. The only weapon left in your arsenal is justice, and that has to be seen to be done.'

'No point,' shrugged Dogg. 'We're all gonna be fried by a laser thingie anyway.'

'I can deal with the Masked Weasel. You deal with Jasper.'

Dogg's brain felt fuzzy and he made himself cross-eyed with the effort of thinking. 'I could put him on trial, I suppose.' The Doctor nodded, as if in approval of a particularly slow pupil. 'A trial,' said Dogg, 'and then we execute the bugger!'

'No. Then you let the people decide.'

'The people?'

'Give them the responsibility.'

Dogg mulled that thought over, leaning ever further back until the legs of his chair slid out from beneath him. He crashed on to the floorboards and lay on his back in the prickling, wet remains of his two discarded bottles. His vision was unfocused and his eyelids felt heavy. He didn't know why he was still drunk, given that he had taken his last gulp of whiskey at least a minute ago. But he had given up questioning that sort of thing.

He drifted into sleep and awoke with a dull pain in his head, in time to see the light in the jailhouse change as the moon gave way to a reluctant sun. He dragged himself to his feet and saw that Jasper too had succumbed to tiredness. He was curled up on the top bunk in his cell, snoring fitfully. There was no sign of the Doctor, and Dogg could almost believe that his visit had been no more than an alcohol-fuelled dream.

But at least he knew what he had to do now.

Anji had slept surprisingly well in the Spook Wagon. Mike had opened up its back, which had proved impossibly spacious, clearing aside the Skeleton

Crew's few instruments and their crime-fighting computer to make room for four mattresses (Fearless the dog had got one to himself, leaving Mike and Tim to make do with the seats in front).

She was less comfortable now, fidgeting as the van passed between the gates of Scary Manor: once ornate and grand but now hanging limply from rusted hinges. From the tops of stone gateposts, twisted gargoyles glared balefully at their uninvited visitors.

They had already reached 'the most haunted house in the world' once – but, at Anji's insistence, they had turned back. 'It's the middle of the night,' she had pointed out – and, when Mike had protested that this was the best time to explore a haunted house, she had folded her arms resolutely and said 'No, Mike, it's the worst time.'

They had had to push-start the Spook Wagon, of course: it had stalled as soon as Scary Manor had come into view. Its engine had spluttered back to life only when it had left the house's extensive grounds, whereupon Mike had driven back to the deserted freeway and pulled into a lay-by about a mile away, just outside the force field.

She was still calling it a force field – but in truth, she didn't know what it was that had caused first Tim and then the rest of the band to complain of feelings of anxiety and dread. Fearless had whimpered, and Tim had had to feed him a big, white bone to calm him. Anji hadn't felt a thing herself, which had made her wonder if the problem was psychological. It hadn't been worth making an issue of, though, as Mike had been determined not to let his fears control him. He had tightened his square jaw and pressed down hard on the accelerator pedal, and soon the others had reported that they felt a lot better.

In the light of day, Mike found it even easier to repeat his triumph of willpower. He negotiated the treacherous, winding driveway and, when the building at its head loomed into view and the Spook Wagon died again, he coasted to a halt outside its front door. Predictably, a thunderstorm had just begun and the sky had darkened, leaving Anji to conclude that they might as well have explored by night after all.

As she stepped out of the van, a cloud of black shapes swooped towards her, with a cacophony of high-pitched chitters and a sound like tarpaulin in the wind. She gasped and threw her hands up over her face, but the unusually diurnal bats passed over her.

Scary Manor was an enormous, sprawling mansion. Its dark walls were studded with glass, black like hooded eyes; they rose to a slate roof and an insane number of turrets. Creepers found purchase in pitted stone and prised their tendrils into rotting window frames. The building was crooked, of course (surprisingly, that was almost the last feature she noticed, as if she

had acclimatised to the strange geometry of this world). Otherwise, it was a house out of a horror movie: the sort of building she had sneered at on screen, wondering what the big, scary deal was about Gothic architecture and the lack of a good cleaner. Perhaps the force field was getting to her at last, because she wasn't sneering now.

To her embarrassment, then, she let out a stifled cry as the huge, wooden door to the house was flung open with a sharp retort, and an apparition flew out.

An apparition? Rather, Anji realised as she willed her heart to slow to a more dignified pace, a small man in a larger padded costume. He made for a more convincing ghost than the green-clad forest ranger had – but then, that wasn't saying much. Even Thelma saw through him, in time to dissuade her friends from bolting. The man was dressed in a red smoking jacket, a ruffled shirt and black pantaloons (an outfit like the Doctor might have worn, although the Doctor's clothes weren't phosphorescent of course). His collars came up over his head: it was obviously meant to look like he had no head at all, but the effect was spoiled because he had ripped his shirt open, presumably to see better. He was approaching old age, his hair sparse and white, and he had a low brow, narrow eyes and a hooked nose.

He was obviously very frightened.

Determined to compensate for her momentary lapse, Anji intercepted the small man as he raced past her, screaming. He tried to fight back, but he was too weak and his costume too bulky; to her satisfaction, she was able to pin him down and sit on his chest.

When he had calmed down, she allowed him to stand and let Mike and Thelma lead the questioning. The small man introduced himself as Mr Grumper, the house's janitor. 'I've been haunting Scary Manor for years,' he said sullenly. 'I've got it down to a fine art: costumes, secret passages, projectors, speaker systems. Not that anyone else has set foot inside the building in all that time, but they'd have been scared if they had.'

'For what reason would you act in such a way?' asked Thelma.

'It was my job. Anyway, the house was empty. So long as folks stayed away, I could keep on living here undisturbed.'

'What do you mean, your "job"?' asked Anji, unable to keep quiet. Grumper just shrugged.

'So, why were you running away?' asked Mike.

The janitor's face paled. 'Because strange things have been happening. Last night, I heard a spooky howling exactly like the one I've got on tape – only I wasn't in the control room. And then I was chased by a glowing praying mantis, as if one of my fake monsters had come to life. I can't think

of any other explanation: Scary Manor must have real ghosts after all.'

'Or perhaps,' said Thelma, 'somebody else is utilising your equipment.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' admitted Grumper. 'But... no, no, it can't be that, because there's something else. A voice. That's why I ran just now, I couldn't stay in the house any longer with... with... I had to get away...'

He was letting fear take him again, his eyes darting nervously this way and that, a muscle twitching in his face.

'What did you hear, Mr Grumper?' asked Mike.

'The voice...'

stammered Grumper in a deathly whisper. 'The voice... of God...'

At the top of a claustrophobic staircase, the Doctor produced a spoon and a length of wire and made typically short work of a locked door. Fitz followed him out on to the flat roof of the Zanytown Hotel, to find the sun hovering a few feet above them. 'Good morning,' it said, and he returned the greeting, a little bemused. He had found a pair of shades to hide his black eye – and in fact, he thought he looked quite cool in them – but still he wondered if it was safe to look at the blazing orb directly. Perhaps so, given that it was only about four feet in diameter.

'Bad business yesterday,' said the sun conversationally. 'I tell you, if I have to watch anything like that again, I'll be packing my bags. I'll find a better-behaved world to light up.' Fitz wanted to point out that it was hardly big or bright enough to light up any world, until he considered what might happen if it chose to believe him.

The Doctor had been making arrangements while Fitz had indulged his bruised body with the safety and comfort of his own bed for the night. Now, he whistled through two fingers, and a shape appeared in the sky. As it drew closer, accompanied by a low droning, Fitz recognised it as a two-seater helicopter. It was bright yellow and, like the ambulance, it had a big, ruddy face, although this one looked younger.

The helicopter stilled its rotor and hopped on to the roof with a cheerful grin. 'Hello Doctor, hello stranger – you must be Fitz Kreiner, nice to meet you – hello sun, nice day isn't it?'

'Thank you,' said the sun.

It turned to face Fitz again, shuffling around on its flexible landing struts and wrinkling its snub nose. 'So, have you decided where I'm taking you yet?'

'Chip has volunteered to help us find the villains' new base,' explained the Doctor.

'Chip the Chipper Chopper at your service.'

'I see,' said Fitz. 'Um... yes, yes, I have a few ideas.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow, obliging him to continue. 'I don't suppose there are any volcanoes nearby?'

Chip screwed up his face in concentration. 'I've never seen a volcano.'

'I think you might find there's a new one somewhere,' said the Doctor. He offered a half-smile. 'Apparently, there's likely to be a vast subterranean base beneath it.'

'Should be easy to spot, then,' said Chip. 'You'll want a standard search pattern.'

'I could keep an eye out too, I suppose,' said the sun, 'although frankly I've been trying not to look too hard at what's been going on down there just recently.'

'Splendid,' said the Doctor, patting his friend on the shoulder. 'Off you go then, Fitz.'

'Aren't you coming?'

'I've got an important job to do here. You might say it's vital. I had hoped that somebody else might accompany you, but...'

'So, what if I find the Masked Weasel? What do I do?' It was all very well acting like the big, bold screen hero, but Fitz drew the line at the part of the film that involved flying off to infiltrate the enemy's fortress alone and outnumbered. That was just stupidity.

'Wait.'

'Just wait? That's all?' He wouldn't have left it there – but, at that moment, a new arrival emerged on to the roof and he was rendered speechless. His stomach performed a double somersault at the realisation that Angel Falls was hurrying towards him – but it sank as she faltered and averted her gaze. He took a step in her direction himself, but could go no further. He prayed for somebody to break the tense silence, but this was about him and Angel, and all eyes were upon them.

She looked at him, and he saw in her face a resolve that had never been there before. 'I want to come with you,' she said in a voice that was small but defiant. 'A long time ago. I said I was going to start standing up for myself, only I didn't know how then. But if you're going to talk to my guardian, then I want to be there.'

'I want to take control of my life.'

Chapter Seventeen

When Boss Dogg unlocked Jasper's cell, the ginger cat thought for a moment that his sentence was over. The idea worried him because it was too soon: he didn't want to be set free to live with other people, to suffer their contempt. They wouldn't forget what he had done to Squeak, any more than he could. He cowered against the wall as Dogg swung back the barred gate and strode towards him. His whiskers drooped as the Sheriff snapped handcuffs over his front paws and yanked him to his hind feet.

'No use trying to hide, pussy-cat, you're going to trial. It's time we decided once and for all what the hell we're gonna do with you.'

Jasper felt conflicting emotions of despair and relief at the realisation that his ordeal wasn't over after all. The road outside the jailhouse was lined with people; and he hung his head as he was led between them, wishing they could all just leave him alone. He had expected jeers and insults, perhaps the odd custard pie, but their silence was worse.

At the door to the parish hall, Dogg handed his prisoner over to his remaining deputy. The five-hundred-strong population of Zanytown had, it seemed, all turned out for this spectacle. The rows of chairs were already filled; those who still filed in from the street had to jostle for standing room. Three tables had been stood on their short ends to form three sides of a square defendant's enclosure, into which Streaky Bacon guided his charge.

One of the outsiders – the tall, long-haired man – was taking an unusual interest. Jasper avoided his piercing gaze, as he had when the same man had approached him in his cell last night. It had been through following an outsider that he had come to this plight. He had been tempted by a demon. He should have known his place, should have stayed where he was. But the outsider had a way of forcing his presence upon him. He invaded Jasper's space, snatched his chained paw and shook it. 'I don't believe we've been formally introduced,' he said. 'I'm the Doctor. I'll be acting as your defence counsel.'

A platform had been erected at the front of the hall. Dogg climbed the

steps on to it and lifted himself into a high chair behind a lectern. The Doctor sat beside the enclosure, while a nervous Streaky stood guard over its open side. Jasper stared at the floor, glad that he couldn't see the crowd behind him although he could feel their white eyes upon him.

Dogg produced a dusty, white, woollen wig and draped it over his head, concealing his black ears. He picked up a gavel and banged it on his lectern, although the room was already silent. 'This court,' he intoned, 'is now in session. Jasper, you have been accused of the murder of a defenceless mouse. Do you plead guilty? I thought so. Prosecution counsel?'

A grey bulldog with a spiked collar rose from his seat: Jasper recognised him as Dexter, a ferocious canine who lived next door to the hotel and sometimes sided with Squeak against him. It hardly seemed fair that he had been given this opportunity to torment him further. He could see the malicious delight in the dog's eyes as he read from a prepared statement in a voice like pouring gravel: 'Your Honour, I submit that on yesterday of this month, the defendant Jasper did rip off Squeak's head and kill him. He's obviously guilty.'

'Agreed,' said Dogg. He placed a square of black cloth over his wig, banged his gavel again and announced, 'Jasper, I sentence you to –'

'Objection!' The Doctor leapt to his feet, provoking a gasp from the onlookers. Even Jasper was alarmed. Bad enough that he'd become the defendant in the Crooked World's first criminal trial; he had at least hoped to keep his head down until it was all over. Now, the outsider – his self-appointed representative – was heaping further shame upon him.

'What do you want, boy?'

'A procedural point, Your Honour. I believe you've forgotten the small matter of the case for the defence. . . ?'

'I ain't forgotten nothing – but that cat's guilty and there's no damn well denying it.'

'My client doesn't deny the charge, but I believe there are exceptional mitigating circumstances to his crime, which must be brought to the attention of this court before sentence is passed.' The Doctor turned as he spoke, taking in the whole of the courtroom, as if he were trying to sway the crowd as much as he was the Sheriff. Jasper didn't understand his long words, but he did get the gist of his speech and he wasn't sure he liked it. He just wanted to get this over with, to learn his fate and remove himself from scrutiny.

What did it matter what happened to him anyway? No punishment could be worse than what he was suffering already.

'Things have changed on this world.' The Doctor paced the narrow corridor between Dogg's platform and the public seating, emphasising his

words with his hands, locking gazes with members of his audience in turn. 'You've all experienced new ideas, new impulses. Many of you, I dare say, have done things, just like my client, of which you are ashamed.' They were starting to avoid his eyes now. 'We know for a fact that Jasper isn't the only murderer in Zanytown, probably not even in this room.' Some muttering, and shifting of feet. The Doctor raised his voice sternly. 'Until you understand what is happening to you, what has happened to my client, then I submit that none of you can have the right to judge him.' A rumble of anger, at that. He spoke quietly again: 'I can help you to understand.'

He turned back to the judge, with an expectant look. Dogg chose not to argue, and the Doctor smiled gratefully. 'I call to the stand my first witness. I believe she is known as... ' He cleared his throat apologetically. 'The big, fat hotel maid.'

'Just get this done quick,' grumbled Dogg. 'I've got a hanging to get to.'

Jasper's old mistress forced her bulk through the crowd, and the Doctor asked Streaky to produce another lectern for her, which he did. Jasper realised that he had never looked above the big, fat hotel maid's waist before; he had always been too cowed by her presence. Now that he saw her face, she didn't seem as intimidating as he had always imagined. She was a sad, dumpy old woman with misshapen features, rheumy eyes and hairs sprouting from her warts. Her white hair was held in place by rollers and a hairnet. It took him a minute to adjust to this new image of her, to shift his perception of his world once again. By this time, his counsel had put the witness at ease with questions about her duties at the hotel and her relationship to the accused. Now, he went on the offensive.

'Am I right in thinking, Miss Maid, that you repeatedly beat my client with a broom?'

'I did.' The woman seemed proud of the fact. 'Moth-eaten fleabag! I knew he was a bad lot, knew it all along. You ask me, I should have whacked him a bit more often.'

'I see. And you never considered that you might be perpetuating a cycle of abuse?'

'Eh?'

'Tell me, what crimes did my client commit to deserve such punishment?'

'That cat was a lazy old so-and-so. He wouldn't do his job, just lay around my kitchen.'

'And his job was?'

'I gave him one duty, that's all, just one. I told him to get rid of that darn mouse.'

'For good, you mean.'

‘Of course for good. I didn’t want that filthy thing scampering around while I was preparing food. Landsakes, it got so as I was spending half my days up on that kitchen chair.’

‘So, in effect, you told Jasper to murder “that darn mouse”.’

Another gasp from the crowd. The witness squirmed. ‘I . . . I wouldn’t put it like . . .’

‘Did you or did you not instruct my client to kill Squeak?’

‘Well . . . yes, but I didn’t expect him to do it! It’s against nature, that’s what it is.’

‘And yet you routinely assaulted my client when he failed!’

As the big, fat hotel maid spluttered protestations of innocence, Jasper felt an indignant spirit rising within him. The Doctor was right, he *had* been mistreated. He had suffered a lifetime of losing; why should he take all the blame for an act to which he had been driven? But then, he told himself, it was he who had picked up Squeak, he who had put the mouse’s head in his mouth and bitten down on his neck. Nobody else had killed him.

He missed those days, in the kitchen with Squeak and the big, fat hotel maid. He had always lost then – but he realised now that those losses had been small indeed, because he had always been given another chance. He hadn’t known then how happy he was.

‘No further questions for this witness, Your Honour,’ said the Doctor. Dogg looked at Dexter, who fumbled with his papers and gave a helpless shrug. The big, fat hotel maid returned to her seat, face red, and the Doctor called Sebastian to replace her at the lectern. Dogg pointed out, irritably, that he hadn’t been anywhere near the scene of the crime. ‘Perhaps not, Your Honour, but I believe he can offer unique insights into the workings of the feline mind, and of my client’s mind in particular.’

Sebastian certainly did that. ‘I don’t see what all this fuss is about. Some creatures are inferior and it’s our right as cats to hunt them down and kill them! Who cares about a dead rodent anyway? Nobody likes them. He was just a piece of vermin!’ That claim provoked high-pitched squeals of outrage from a family of giant black mice in the public seating, but the cat was unrepentant. ‘They need controlling, and this is the most natural, humane way.’

‘And what else do you enjoy doing?’ Sebastian blinked, confused, and the Doctor prompted, ‘Apart from chasing mice and birds? What do you enjoy doing?’

‘Running with my gang.’

‘Feline Lib-’ called a cat in the crowd, before being silenced by disapproving glares.

‘Kicking over trashcans, knocking on doors. . .’ suggested the Doctor.

‘That’s right! And sleeping. Cats like sleeping.’

‘I’m sure you do – and you wouldn’t want to be disturbed while you were sleeping, would you? You wouldn’t want to be woken by, say, a falling trashcan.’

‘What’s that got to do with some dead rodent?’ Sebastian snarled defensively.

‘In some ways, perhaps nothing. In other ways. . .’

‘He’s right,’ said Dogg. ‘You’re getting off the subject. Bloody good point, though.’

Deputy Bacon was next, despite the Sheriff’s comment that it was ‘darn irregular’ to put a court official on the witness stand. He was reluctant to speak, embarrassed by the reminder that he had almost caused a death himself. ‘I c-can’t j-j-justify what I d-did,’ he said tearfully. ‘I just d-did what I w-wanted at that split-second, and if I’d have stopped and th-thought about it, I’d have realised that I didn’t really want to d-do it at all, and even though I d-didn’t know then that p-people could d-d-die, I still kn-knew it would hurt to be shot and I should have th-thought about th-that before I did it, d-dagnabbit. I was lucky.’

The more Jasper heard, the more resentful he became. Streaky *had* been lucky. It should have been him in this prisoner’s enclosure. But he was outside wearing his new star, while fate had conspired to put its perennial victim here instead. Some things never changed.

The Doctor called many more witnesses, continuing to broaden the scope of his questioning until even the Sheriff gave up trying to keep him on topic. He asked each person what he or she wanted, and some couldn’t answer. Others talked of golden beaches, of great banquets and comfortable living, of how they enjoyed the thrill of fast cars or the skill of shooting. Some wanted to be noticed, to feel important; some professed that they could find satisfaction from helping others, although few believed them. Some only wanted one good friend. As soul after soul was bared, other people became more confident and eager to speak up, and the Doctor had volunteers to choose from. Each in turn faced an audience that empathised fully with their hopes and fears even as they contemplated their own feelings.

Even Streaky asked to return to the stand, to expand upon his earlier evidence. In a quiet but strong voice, he told the court how he had felt when he believed he had killed the Doctor, about his attempt to take his own life in recompense. As he described a familiar dark world of guilt and despair, Jasper found his jealousy towards the pig fading. He began to feel a strong kinship with the only person who could truly understand his pain.

‘I should have known b-better. Only a c-couple of hours before it happened, I sh-shot at the Whatchamacallit, and I thought I’d hurt it b-bad. B-but of course it was a trick, and I thought no more about it. I d-didn’t learn my lesson, I just acted without thinking. I guess Jasper did the same. It could have been me, goldarn it. It could have b-been any one of us.’

For the most part, the Doctor let his witnesses speak for themselves. Sometimes, however, his voice was the only sound in the courtroom – and, although Jasper would later recall few of his words, he would always remember the soft, hypnotic tone that had turned his thoughts inwards. Remarkably, he forgot about his current situation for minutes at a time. He began to look to the future again. He felt a renewed hope that things might get better, that there was a way in which he could be happy again and he could almost, *almost* see it.

And then the Doctor started to ask more difficult questions, which nobody could answer. ‘What if the rabbit doesn’t *want* to be shot?’ ‘You’re not the first person to ask for the Sheriffs job: how can you all be satisfied?’ ‘If Miss Loveheart doesn’t want the same thing as you, then whose desires are the more important?’

Sebastian didn’t like that. He jumped from his seat and cried out, ‘You’re just like that mutt up there, telling us what we can and can’t do. We’ve got free will, pal. That means we don’t need the likes of you any more. It means we can do exactly as we please!’

‘But apparently,’ said the Doctor, unruffled, ‘not all at the same time.’

Jasper had begun to think of him as more than an outsider. He was a force of nature. But no, more than that too. He twisted nature around him, warping the certainties of the cat’s world by his mere presence. He had sensed something similar about Fitz when he had first seen him, but this time the feeling was almost tangible. He imagined the Doctor unravelling the strands of reality itself, creating chaos but somehow knitting together a new order in his wake. Perhaps he couldn’t have asked for a better advocate after all.

When the Doctor called the judge himself to the stand, it seemed that the whole room held its breath. Boss Dogg scowled and looked as if he might refuse the summons, but he put down his gavel and removed his wig and came down from his platform.

‘You’re the most important person on this world right now,’ the Doctor flattered him. ‘You make the laws. You decide what’s acceptable.’

Dogg cleared his throat. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t make the laws. I enforce them.’ He spoke slowly and carefully; Jasper guessed that, having seen others tied up in the Doctor’s words, he was striving to avoid the same trap. Or perhaps he was just making an effort not to swear.

‘Oh? Then who *does* make them?’

‘Nobody makes the laws. They’re the laws, and that’s how it’s always been.’

‘But laws must adapt. They must take account of new circumstances.’

‘I don’t see why. Wrong is wrong.’

‘But you can’t legislate against change, Boss Dogg. Everybody grows. Societies have to evolve. Don’t you think it’s time you accepted that?’

Dogg shook his head vehemently. ‘Free will is dangerous.’

‘Maybe, but don’t you find it exciting?’

‘No!’

‘Come on, Boss Dogg, there must be something you want.’

‘That’s not the dadblasted point. Sure, I’d like to shrug off my responsibilities, laze around all day getting stinking drunk, but then who’d keep the streets safe?’

‘I believe we’ve already heard from a number of volunteers.’

‘It wouldn’t be right.’

‘Why not? You work hard, Sheriff. Don’t you deserve something in return?’

‘You want to know what I want, boy? More than anything?’ Dogg took a deep breath, calmed down and continued in a low, defeated voice, which tugged at Jasper’s heart. ‘I want a world where people respect each other. I want things to go back to how they were. We were happy in the old days. I want my nephew alive and well, but it ain’t gonna happen.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor quietly, and Boss Dogg padded back to his high chair, head bowed as if he were ashamed of having unburdened himself in public.

The Doctor left a short, respectful pause before addressing the courtroom again. ‘My friends,’ he said, ‘I want to thank you for indulging me. I realise that the purpose of my questioning hasn’t always been clear to you, but I believe this trial has to be about wider issues than the actions, however unfortunate, of one individual. We have to see those actions in the context of everything that has happened to this world and to its people.’

‘My client, Jasper, cannot speak for himself. We can only guess what was going through his mind when he took the life of his friend, Squeak. You might believe that the testimonies you have heard today can assist you in forming a fair and considered opinion. But first, I have one final question, which – with the Sheriff’s permission – I would like to put to all of you.’

‘Boss Dogg told this court that the Crooked World was once a better place, a happier place. I want you to think very hard about that statement, test his claim against your own experience. Nobody can deny that you’ve discovered a great deal recently: new ways to find happiness, new paths

to fulfilment. In the past two days, you've reached higher than you've ever reached before. But you've also learned that with happiness comes sadness. You've experienced disappointment and pain and despair.

'So, the question I'd like to put to you is this: Is it a price worth paying?'

In the heavy silence that followed, Jasper saw that even Sebastian and Boss Dogg were contemplating the Doctor's words. For his part, he didn't know what to think. He was grateful to the outsider for making people understand him – they looked at him with sympathy now, not revulsion – but he couldn't bring back Squeak. The world had become a more frightening place. There may have been rewards out there – but what chance did he, Jasper, have of finding them? When he reached too high, the fall hurt all the more.

'And when you've thought about that,' said the Doctor, 'then consider my client, ask yourselves why he killed his friend and how he must feel about that now. Ask yourselves what good would be served by extinguishing another life. And, most importantly, ask yourselves what steps can be taken to ensure that such a tragedy doesn't happen again. Ask yourselves if it's possible to be happy without making somebody else sad.

'My client didn't have to be here today. During yesterday's riot, the jailhouse was invaded and its prisoners freed. Only one of those prisoners chose to remain, although it would have been much easier and safer to run. The defendant, Jasper, has come to this courthouse to take responsibility for his actions. I hope you can all afford him the same courtesy.

'The case for the defence rests.'

Chapter Eighteen

The wood-panelled halls and passageways of Scary Manor were coated with dust and lit by flickering gaslights. Cobwebs clung to each corner. The storm had closed in outside and darkened the windows, as thunder vibrated the ancient timbers underfoot.

Like the building's exterior, everything had been calculatedly designed to cause fear, even down to the fact that the temperature was just cool enough to chill flesh. Anji hated herself for letting such an obvious trick work on her. She had visited theme park attractions like this before, and had never been able to get past their artificiality. Why was this place different? Perhaps it was because she knew there was somebody here, somebody who didn't want to be disturbed, and that knowledge made every shadow crawl to life in her mind.

And then, of course, there was the voice of God.

The concept bothered her, despite the fact that (or more so because?) she was not particularly religious. She came from a Hindu family, but she hadn't visited a Temple in months, perhaps years, certainly not since she had been travelling with the Doctor. She had always liked to imagine, to hope, that there was something out there, some form of life after death, but such spiritual concepts had always been resisted by her practical side. She couldn't bring herself to believe in anything without tangible proof.

She didn't *want* proof. She wasn't ready to have her worldview uprooted.

Not, she told herself sternly, that the so-called God of the Crooked World was likely to bear much resemblance to any God of Earth. No, the creator of this world was far more likely to be a scientific deity: a powerful telepath or the instigator of an experiment gone wrong. The owner of an Earth-based theme park, perhaps, like EarthWorld, sent out of control. Or maybe, in a realm where thoughts could mould reality, one mind was powerful enough to see its own dreams, its fictions, come to life; could such a thing be possible?

Yesterday, Anji had longed to know the answers to those questions. To-

day, all she could think of was how the Skeleton Crew, her friends, might be destroyed by the knowledge. They hadn't even thought of that yet. Perhaps she should tell them, make them turn back.

'If only Mr Grumper hadn't vamoosed,' said Mike. 'He could have shown us where his control room was.'

'I expect it's behind a secret panel,' said Thelma. 'We ought to be able to locate it.'

'Let's split up, gang,' said Mike. 'Harmony, Thelma and Anji, you come with me and we'll check out the ground floor. Tim and Fearless, you go down to the cellar.'

'You're sending Tim off on his own again?' asked Anji.

'With Fearless,' Harmony pointed out.

'He's a dog. And what are we splitting up for anyway?'

Mike shrugged. 'To explore the house faster?'

'There's no hurry. It'll be safer if we all stick together.'

'She's right, you know,' said Tim. 'You know what will happen if Fearless and me go down another spooky cellar alone. We'll run into a ghost.' Fearless whimpered at the thought.

'All right,' said Mike, a little put out, 'I guess we don't have to split up.'

'Uh-oh,' said Tim.

'"Uh-oh" what?' asked Anji, denying the tickling sensation at the base of her spine.

'That painting – I thought I saw its eyes move.'

'That's impossible,' scoffed Thelma.

'No it's not,' said Anji grimly. She strode across the hallway, past the sweeping staircase with its faded carpet, to the painting that hung between two tarnished suits of armour. It portrayed a long-faced, thin-haired man with a high, black collar and a pale complexion. She snatched it from the wall, held it up to the others and used her fingers to poke out its eyeholes. 'You see? I think we've found your secret panel, Thelma. It must be behind –'

'Yikes!' yelled Tim – and she saw that all the kids' eyes had become wide with horror, their hair literally standing on end as they cringed. She turned, and leapt back in time to avoid a crashing blow from a sturdy axe. It took a second for the evidence of her eyes to sink in, for her brain to accept that, yes, both suits of armour had jerked into motion. By that time, they were lumbering forwards, one brandishing a sword, the other bringing up its axe for a second attack, and the kids had turned and were pedalling air.

All except for Thelma. 'Guys,' she groaned, 'we've discussed this. There's no need to flee from such manifestations now that we know they cannot be animated by paranormal forces.'

Flinging the painting aside, Anji took hold of her sleeve. 'They're big and armed and trying to kill us. It's OK to run.'

Mike, Harmony, Tim and Fearless had already zipped away. Anji pulled a confused Thelma along after them, the girl's protests drowned out by the clattering of metal.

God, apparently, had a strange sense of humour.

'... one hundred and four... one hundred and three... one hundred and two...'

The Masked Weasel leaned against a balcony railing, gathering his courage as he considered the long drop to the subterranean living quarters. He was not too far beneath the metal-shuttered caldera of the volcano itself, almost level with the nosecone of the rocket: a red-capped, sleek, silver bullet. Its silo, hollowed out of the mountain, was equally impressive, metal balconies circling the space vehicle and leading to alcoves on the lower, wider levels. And it wasn't at all crooked. He wasn't sure how the Green Ghost had managed to build all this so quickly. But that feat, he could accept. He had just one pressing question.

'... fifty-nine... fifty-eight...'

The soulless voice of the countdown clock echoed around him as he padded down two flights of narrow, twisting steps. He found his associate in an alcove off Level 23, hunched over a bench. Cradled in his hands was a large, black bomb, and the Weasel flinched from it reflexively. Hovering in the archway, he cleared his throat to announce his presence.

The Ghost looked up, saw his visitor, grinned and lobbed the bomb into his front paws.

It exploded, and the Weasel blinked in the sudden flash, coughed and spluttered in indignation. Suddenly, he was showered with light metal tubing. He realised that the explosion hadn't hurt, but piled up around him now were dozens of thin, silver frames. He stared at them. They were all identical, each shaped like a giant letter A. 'What the heck -?'

The Green Ghost scowled. 'It's supposed to be an A-bomb.'

'What?'

He waved a dismissive hand. 'Something I just thought of, but I can't get it to work.'

'What's it meant it do?'

'I'm not sure. I think the frames should be bigger. I think the idea must be that they fall over your head and pin your arms to your sides.' He shrugged in defeat. 'Well, it would have come in useful in the days when normal bombs didn't do much harm.'

‘Er... yes,’ said the Weasel. ‘In a roundabout way, that’s why I’m here. I thought you should know... Repugna... she’s left us.’

The Green Ghost’s eyes narrowed dangerously. ‘She’s what?’

He continued nervously. ‘I think she was upset – to tell the truth, we all are – about the riot, about people dying. And I think she was worried that, if heroes do come, we might end up with a lot worse than jail this time. She went back to Zanytown, to mix up potions to help the injured. She’s going to open a pharmacy.’

Gruenwald was silent for a moment, and the Weasel wondered if he was about to explode like his bomb. Instead, he set about collecting his scattered A-frames with a studied indifference. ‘Then she’ll die with the others, or she’ll serve us.’

‘You mean we’re still going ahead?’ The Weasel hadn’t realised how disappointed he was until the words had left his mouth; he certainly hadn’t intended to betray his feelings.

‘Of course we are. The giant laser weapon is all charged up and targeted. The Sheriff has one hour left in which to surrender. The world, my friend, will be ours.’ The Green Ghost returned to his bench and set the frames down with a clatter.

‘...twenty-three... twenty-two...’

The Weasel remembered his question. He hesitated, wondering if it was a good time to ask it. But then, there was never a good time and he desperately wanted to understand. ‘Just one thing... I was wondering... about that rocket out there...’ He coughed. ‘I mean, it’s lovely, very well made, but... but what is it for?’

‘Don’t ask me. Fitz said we needed one.’

‘Oh. I see.’

‘I’m sure we’ll find out why soon. Perhaps when the countdown finishes.’

‘You think so?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘...fourteen... thirteen... twelve...’

‘And down there to your right,’ said Chip, ‘is the monumental town of Stoneville, home of Mike Mason and his forward-looking Palaeolithic relatives.’

Fitz had taken off his sunglasses to stare out of the window, but Angel knew he wasn’t interested. He had been like this since they had taken off from the hotel roof, avoiding conversation on the pretext of scouring the Crooked World for their objective. As if the Chipper Chopper, with his superior eyesight and the advantage of not having to press his nose up against his own tiny windows, wouldn’t see a volcano before they could.

He felt awkward with her. It was hardly surprising. It was up to her to reassure him, but she wasn't used to taking the initiative. She needed to find courage.

'I'm sorry I shouted at you, Fitz honey,' she said.

He turned to her with a winsome smile, as if he felt guilty about ignoring her. 'It's OK,' he mumbled. 'I know how you must have felt, and you were kind of right.'

'No, no.' She shook her head. 'You didn't kill anyone. You might have shown us how, you might have changed things, but... but the more I think about it, the more I think all this would have happened eventually anyway. I can't imagine going back to the way things were.'

'Do you want to?'

'I don't know. In some ways. I miss not having any real cares. I mean, there was the Masked Weasel, sure, but he was just *there*, if you know what I mean. I didn't have to think about confronting him like this. It makes my stomach all queasy.'

'Then why...?'

'Because I have to. Oh, I know you, Fitzzy, you'd take this burden away from me if I asked you to, and that's why I love you so. But I've been letting people fight my battles all my life, and it's never done me any good. Does that sound silly?'

'Not at all. I had to learn to stand up for myself too. You won't regret it.' He had moved in closer to her; his breath was warm against her cheek, and it felt good. She wanted, needed, to get closer to this strange and kind man, if only she knew how.

She whispered: 'Tell me about this Earth thing you call "sex".'

His eyes went misty, and she thought she had upset him. But he wiped away a tear and said, 'You don't know how long I've waited for someone to say that. I mean, you *really* don't know!' He leaned across the ridge between their seats, and put an arm around her. 'What colour is your hair?' She shrugged, and he fumbled with the chinstrap of her helmet.

'Now we're passing over the Jolly Jungle,' said Chip, 'home of such characters as J. J. LeHay and his eternal pursuer, Ty the Tiger.'

'Hey, helicopter!' called Fitz. 'Can you see back here?'

'Of course not. My eyes are on the front.'

'Good. Then can the tourist spiel for a few minutes, will you? We've got something to... do.' The helmet came free, and long hair cascaded down on to Angel's shoulders. She felt strangely liberated. 'Blonde,' said Fitz, his voice melting.

Chip chirped up again: 'I've found it, you guys. Hey! Hey, back there, did you hear me? I said I've found it!'

‘Are you sure?’ Fitz looked indescribably pained.

‘It’s a volcano, all right – just outside Futuria – and it wasn’t there two days ago.’

‘Well. . . let’s not be too hasty. There might be another one.’

‘But this one has a sign outside it. It says “Villains’ Secret Base – Keep Out”. I really think it’s the one, guys.’

‘Just. . . just fly around it a few times, would you? Just to be sure. Let’s call it aerial reconnaissance. But keep your distance.’

Fitz grinned as Chip fell silent and banked into a turn. He turned back to Angel, and the smile froze on his face. He must have read her expression. He must have seen her doubts. She didn’t feel comfortable about delaying her reckoning with the Weasel. It didn’t feel right. But the press of his body against hers was warm and comfortable and exciting, and she didn’t want to be cold again. Not yet.

His eyes lit up with relief at her assenting smile, and he started to unzip her pink leathers.

His hands were shaking.

‘Mike! Where’s Mike?’

‘I’m here, Harmony, don’t worry. But where’s Fearless?’

‘I can report a positive sighting of our canine companion.’

‘It’s all right, you guys, I count six pairs of eyes. We all made it.’

‘Six?’ said Anji. It was no good. No matter how she tried, she couldn’t pierce the absolute darkness of the storage closet into which she had followed the Skeleton Crew. They hadn’t given her time to question their decision – if the knights found them now, they would be cornered, squashed together – but, thankfully, the long corridor without had fallen silent.

She had been disconcerted to find that her fellow explorers’ white eyes shone in the dark. But that wasn’t the worst of it, as a quick count told her.

‘My eyes don’t glow!’ There was an awful moment as the revelation sunk in. Then Tim cried out and lunged past her, tripping over a bucket and tumbling out into the corridor.

‘Grrr,’ said an unfamiliar voice, and Fearless bounded into his master’s arms. In the inrush of gaslight, Anji found herself pressed up against a man-sized green insect. A grasshopper? No, Mr Grumper had talked about this creature. A mantis. A colossal praying mantis.

Her first instinct was to flee – but the others were in her way, scrambling to be next through the door, so she went with the second. She threw herself upon the monster, trying not to think how *icky* it was. It wasn’t real, she told herself, it was a man in a costume. But, on a world where upright dogs and cats and pigs existed, why not an upright mantis?

With eyes half-closed, she felt for the join between mask and bodysuit. Unable to find it, she pulled at the monster's head. It roared and used its weight against her. As they stumbled out of the cupboard, the mantis threw her backwards, but she took its head with her; it tore from its shoulders with a sucking sound, to reveal no human face beneath it. The decapitated insect thrashed its multiple legs, green blood spurting from its neck, and Anji froze with horror until it lurched towards her. Then she hurled its own head at it, disgusted, and made to run.

But the knights were approaching, along the corridor, one from each end.

She went for the nearest door, knowing it would lead to a dead end, hoping at least for a room rather than a closet and for some heavy furniture to barricade the entrance. The room she found was empty, but she was overjoyed to see another door in its far wall. She sprinted for it, only stopping as she reached for the handle to see if the kids had followed her. Mike and Harmony had. She prayed she wouldn't have to go back for the others.

She opened the door and emerged into the corridor. The one she had just left. The mantis was still staggering around, a pair of feet clutched to its gushing neck. The knights had closed in, one to each side of her. A swipe of a sword came too close. Anji turned, and motioned to Mike and Harmony to retreat. A knight followed them into the room, and they fled back through the opposite door because there was nowhere else they could go.

They were back in the corridor, but a different part of it. Anji didn't stop to question it. She raced for another door, pulled it open and collided with Thelma. As she picked herself up, a third door opened and a knight – impossibly, the knight that had been behind her – emerged. Thelma was still on the floor, groping for her glasses. Anji propelled her back the way she had come, dragging her through another room and back out into the corridor, where the mantis was waiting. "Tim, is that you?" asked Thelma, blinking as she wandered towards it (nobody could be *that* short-sighted). She tripped on the carpet, falling beneath its clumsy attack, her hand landing on her lost spectacles. She put them on, saw her danger and fled. The mantis swung around and came for Anji, who backed away across the room and emerged into the corridor again.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

The Skeleton Crew had set up their instruments, although she knew they had left them in their van. Tim carried a guitar by a strap around his neck; Thelma was at keyboards; Mike and Harmony shared a microphone, and Mike also carried a tambourine; Fearless sat behind a drum kit, a stick

in his mouth. 'We always do the music for the chase scene,' said Harmony.

Anji shook her head firmly.

'No?' asked Thelma, looking disappointed.

'No,' she said.

Further down the corridor, three doors flew open and three monsters emerged. Anji turned to run again, but there was something else in her path. A ghost. And this one couldn't have been a costume. It floated, translucent, its white shape shifting in the air currents but retaining the look of a creature with long, mournful eyes and arms upraised as if to strike. As it drifted towards her, Anji felt an unearthly freezing, crawling sensation up her back.

The Skeleton Crew scattered into the rooms off the crazy corridor, and she reached for a door herself but thought better of it. The knights were right behind her, but the insubstantial phantom didn't seem to pose a physical threat, and she was sick of running around in circles, of being afraid, of letting whoever was controlling this freak show call the shots.

So, she gritted her teeth, put her head down and let out a defiant howl.

And she charged towards the ghost.

The Doctor was staring intently at the television set in his hotel room. Streaky Bacon stood beside him, wringing his front trotters. 'It's not that I d-don't want to come with you. I'm the Deputy Sh-Sheriff, it's up to me, goldarn it.'

'You don't have to justify yourself.'

'It's just... it's just B-Boss Dogg, he didn't take your speech very well. I think he still wants to k-kill Jasper, but he knows it won't be p-popular. That's why he adjourned the trial, to th-think about how he can start to win p-people back over.'

'The longer he waits,' said the Doctor, 'the more difficult he'll find it, I suspect.'

'Then you think I should c-come with you? I should g-go after the Masked Weasel?'

'I can't tell you that.'

'But you made things so c-clear in the courtroom! Can't you -?'

The Doctor looked up and shook his head firmly. 'I didn't offer your people any answers. I can't do that, do you understand? I can only guide them to the questions.' He looked back at the TV screen, on which the newsreader was reporting the highlights of the trial again. He tapped on the glass with an impatient finger. 'Excuse me. I've been waiting for a particular news item, and I'm afraid it's rather urgent.'

The newsreader scowled as he sorted through his papers. 'Well, what is it? Can't you see I'm dealing with the biggest news story ever to hit this world?'

'My friends, I'm sure, have discovered the Masked Weasel's base by now. Isn't that worth a little airtime?'

'I suppose so.' The newsreader found the appropriate sheet, and read grudgingly: 'Angel Falls and the outsider, Fitz Kreiner, found a secret base today.'

'Is that all?' asked the Doctor.

'What more do you want?'

'Well, given the Masked Weasel's threat to evaporate Zanytown in a little under forty minutes' time, I thought you might at least have a live report from the scene.'

The newsreader rolled his eyes. 'Oh, very well.'

Streaky had wondered how the Doctor intended to find and join his friends before the Weasel's deadline. Now, his plan hit him with such clarity that he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before. But his stomach sank at the realisation that he had run out of time, that he had to make up his mind. He had find an answer.

'I... I'm going to stay. I know it sounds like I'm a c-coward, and you said yesterday that Boss Dogg should be dealing with this himself and I guess it f-falls to me if he won't, but I think you can handle this without me. I think there are th-things – more important things – for me to do b-back here.' He faltered, wondering if he had said the right thing, looking at the Doctor with beseeching eyes for validation.

The TV showed an image of Fitz, sitting on grass beside a woman with long blonde hair, whom Streaky didn't recognise at first as

Angel Falls. An awkward distance stretched between them. In the background of the picture, a placid, blue lake reached to the foot of a looming black volcano, from which red smoke curled ominously.

The Doctor beamed and said, 'I think you're being very responsible.'

He unfolded his long legs and eased himself into the screen.

Chapter Nineteen

Anji hadn't meant to keep running. In truth, she had half-expected her act of defiance to end this madness, to expose the ghosts and monsters for... for whatever they were. But the nerve-chilling sensation of the phantom as she had barrelled half-under, half-through it had numbed her brain; she hadn't been able to think of anything more than getting away from it, away from the knights and the mantis and the corridor that defied all logic.

She found herself back in Scary Manor's entrance hall and looked towards the main doors, but she didn't want to be that spineless. She realised then that Thelma Brains had followed her. They exchanged a quick glance and made for the staircase.

In an upstairs bedroom, they rested at last. 'I bet,' panted Anji, hands against her knees as she fought for her breath, 'you've never seen any ghosts like that before.'

'Oh yes,' said Thelma, 'all the time.'

'No, I really don't think so.'

'I assure you, the Skeleton Crew has encountered numerous similar apparitions.'

'They weren't men in masks, Thelma! I think I proved that quite decisively.'

'Indeed, but I can state with some confidence that they were manufactured by corporeal entities. The knights and the praying mantis, I would conjecture, were robots. The phantom was almost certainly created by Mr Grumper's projector.'

'You're serious, aren't you?'

Thelma cocked her head to one side. 'I'm always serious.'

'I need to think about this.' Anji sank down on to the threadbare mattress of a four-poster bed, but leapt up again as a voice boomed out:

'HEAR ME, YE MORTALS, FOR I AM YOUR GOD.'

She pivoted around, looking for the source of the voice, but it seemed to be all around her, to come from the very walls. It was low and . rumbling, and it must have extended into subsonic frequencies because it tickled her

stomach and played with her nerves.

‘YOU HAVE DISOBEYED ME. YOU HAVE BROKEN MY SACRED LAWS, AND I AM DISPLEASED.’

‘Where are you?’ cried Anji, but she sounded small in comparison.

‘THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT IS NIGH. LEAVE THIS PLACE NOW, AND SPREAD MY WORD. MY PEOPLE MUST ATONE FOR THEIR SINS.’

She ran to the door and opened it, but there was nobody in the passageway. She returned to Thelma, dazed and confused. In the wake of the powerful voice, even the silence seemed loud. It rang in her ears.

‘I believe,’ said Thelma, ‘that I may have discovered our first clue to this mystery.’ Anji didn’t know what to say, so she just watched as her companion pulled a sturdy old chair into a corner of the room and climbed on to its seat. She produced a handkerchief and dabbed at something in the nook where the walls met the ceiling. She turned her face away and coughed as dust and shredded cobwebs tumbled around her, to reveal a small brown box. Then she smirked. ‘A loudspeaker! Mr Grumper informed us about this artifice too, if you recall. It is my deduction that the voice was relayed through this, from his secret control room.’

Not unless there were another twenty speakers hidden in the walls and beneath the floor, thought Anji. Or were things finally beginning to make sense? She had expected, despite her apprehension, to be confronted by a series of cheap parlour tricks – and she realised now that she had been. Only, on a world where reality was swayed by ideas and beliefs, those tricks had become more effective. She should have anticipated that.

Then, stumbling into the bedroom through the open door, came two more ghosts, one tall and skinny, one impossibly short and neither realistic. At last, she could take some positive action. She threw herself upon the taller ghost and wrestled his white sheet from him, to find herself sitting on top of a breathless Tim Coward.

‘Are we glad to see you guys!’ he exclaimed.

‘What the hell were you doing with that sheet on your head?’ cried Anji, frustrated.

‘Like, it was an accident. That gruesome insect chased us into the kitchens, and we hid in a laundry basket and then we heard the voice of God and... and... it’s a long story.’

Thelma hopped down from her chair, with a grin. ‘It always is. And it’s my guess that, beneath this other sheet, we’ll find Fearless.’ The shaggy dog had dived beneath the bed, and she pulled him out by his back legs. ‘I thought so.’

‘Have you seen Mike and Harmony?’ asked Anji.

Tim shook his head. 'We thought they were with you. Mike usually goes off with the girls.'

'We need to find them.'

'But shouldn't we just scam? The voice of God said –'

'The voice was a fake, Tim,' laughed Thelma, pointing out the loud-speaker. It doesn't take a great deal of rational thought to conclude that the existence of an omnipotent creator of life is a scientifically unsound concept.'

Anji felt she owed it to her nominal religious beliefs to put forward a counter-argument, but she really didn't feel like it. 'The important thing now,' she asserted, 'is to find out who *did* broadcast that warning. Which means finding that control room.'

'Which means getting past those spooks downstairs,' wailed Tim.

'I don't think we need worry overmuch,' said Thelma. 'I have concocted a plan.'

'I think,' said Fitz, 'yeah, I *think* I mentioned something.' He looked at his own reflection, wavering in the bright blue water of the lake, rubbing its stubbly chin as if it were an aid to memory. The water, he realised, wasn't reflecting the sky, it was actually blue.

'Think, Fitz,' urged the Doctor, 'it's important.'

'I didn't know what they'd do to me,' he justified himself. 'I said a lot of things, whatever it took to keep that Ghost bloke happy. I just kept talking. I can't remember everything.'

'But the lake, you say, wasn't here before?'

'That's what Chip told us before he left,' confirmed Angel.

'I told them,' said Fitz, trying to sound sure. 'I must have told them.'

He looked at the Doctor, who was nodding. 'You told them that an underground installation belonging to a group of villains ought to have a submerged rear entranceway.'

'And unguarded,' said Fitz. 'I would have specified unguarded.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow 'So the hero can sneak in,' he explained lamely. 'Like in the films.'

'Hmm.' The Doctor clearly had no idea what he was talking about. Well, that made them even: Fitz still didn't know how he had managed to materialise a square of white light in mid air and squeeze his tall form out of it. He had tried to explain, but his passing reference to the fact that Fitz and Angel had been on TV had startled his companion into changing the subject. 'Yes, yes, I imagine everyone was watching,' the Doctor had said, his eyebrows knitting in puzzlement over the reason for the question.

'For how long?' Fitz had almost squeaked.

‘Oh, just for a few seconds.’ That had been a profound relief.

‘I hope you’re not going to suggest we all swim down there, sugar. I don’t want to mess up my new hair.’ Angel was running a hand through said hair again: in the short time since she had discovered what lay beneath her helmet, the habit had developed from a cute affectation into an irritant. Seeing Fitz’s disapproving look, she stopped and blushed. ‘Oh sorry,’ she said, ‘that was an awfully silly thing to say, wasn’t it?’

‘The question,’ mused the Doctor, ‘is how long do we have before our friends in there realise the logical flaw in their security arrangements?’

‘The question,’ countered Fitz, ‘is how deep is that water?’

‘Does it matter, dear?’ asked Angel.

‘Well, I don’t know how long you can hold your breath, but. . .’

‘I think Miss Falls was expecting to be able to breathe and talk underwater,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m afraid that more than one recent incident of drowning suggests otherwise.’

‘That’s horrible!’

‘Can’t she knock up some, I don’t know, scuba gear?’ Clumsy, thought Fitz. Why couldn’t he have addressed the question to her directly? Why did he flinch from her gaze? Why couldn’t he forget what had happened in the helicopter?

‘I don’t know,’ said Angel. ‘Could I, Doctor?’

‘I think you might find that type of thing more difficult than it used to be. No, we’ll have to rely on our lungs, I’m afraid. I’ll dive first, see if I can locate this back door.’ He stripped off his green jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his blue shirt. ‘Promise me one thing, Fitz.’

‘What?’

‘You didn’t suggest to your captors that they stock their lake with piranhas.’ Perhaps he understood more than his companion had given him credit for.

Ten minutes later, as Fitz was trying to follow his friend but had lost him in a haze of blue, as he thrashed his wiry arms and tried to keep his boots from dragging him to the bed of the lake. As his cool shades drifted off into the depths, Angel chose to break the silence between them.

‘Are you all right, Fitz honey? You look as if you’re having problems.’

Her words came out in blue bubbles, and startled him into taking a breath himself. Water seeped into his lungs and he choked but only breathed more water in, and his throat was burning and his stomach hurt and he kicked out, trying to send himself to the surface, but he didn’t know which way was up any more.

She saved him, for the second time. He resisted her hold at first, sensing that she was taking him down and fearing that she couldn’t see, couldn’t

understand, what was happening to him. He was starting to feel dizzy and his vision was fading, when he burst through a wall of water and collapsed on a curved metal surface, a rattling sound in his chest. His ribs ached, reminding him that he wasn't yet ready for such strenuous activity.

He began to recover eventually, staving off the darkness, and he dragged himself into a sitting position and sat with his knees against his forehead, concentrating on the sound of his steadying respiration. Finally, he was able to look up with a weak grin at the concerned faces of Angel and the Doctor, and at his new surroundings.

He was in a tubular, steel water pipe, tall enough for Angel to stand in although the shirt-sleeved Doctor had to stoop. It disappeared into unknown depths before him; behind him, it ended in a circle of blue water. He wondered what kept the lake from venting itself through here, but he figured it was just another of those physical quirks of the Crooked World and that he really ought not to say anything to spoil it. His clothes were already dry, which was equally perplexing but welcome.

'Well done, Fitz,' said the Doctor, and Fitz wondered if he was being sarcastic. But he smiled as he indicated the pipe with a sweep of his arm. 'You left us a way in after all.'

The streets of Zanytown were quieter than ever. Many people had retreated beyond the perimeter in anticipation of the Masked Weasel's attack. But others had stayed, trusting in the outsiders to save them or simply unable to conceive of such a horror.

Three cows had formed a picket line outside McMulch's Burger Bar and, to Streaky's surprise, he recognised Esmerelda, his best friend from the farm. The aroma of frying meat made his mouth water as he approached her, but he didn't have time for self-gratification. 'What's your b-beef with McMulch?' he asked.

'Are you trying to be funny?' she retorted, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

His mind made a connection that it had never made before, and his stomach turned over. He mumbled an embarrassed apology and hurried on to the jailhouse.

Dogg was at his desk, which came as a surprise and a relief. He had searched for the Sheriff throughout Zanytown, calling in at his office twice before to no avail. Jasper was still in his cell, but he was more alert than he had been before the trial, standing up against the bars as if hoping to hear something of his likely fate.

'Where have you b-been?' asked Streaky.

'Thinking,' said the Sheriff curtly.

‘But it’s only t-t-twenty minutes till the villains’ d-deadline.’

‘And what do you expect me to do about it, boy?’

‘Well, I don’t know. Couldn’t you t-talk to them?’

‘I thought the Doctor was dealing with that. He bloody well ought to, it’s his fault.’

‘Well, he’s trying to, but I thought you could. . . I m-mean, we should be. . . d-dagnabbit, Sheriff, I’m worried. I’m worried about our world. I’m worried about you.’

‘And you’ve every reason to be. Until this damn, I mean darn, plague ends –’

‘But it’s not *going* to end, Sheriff!’ wailed Streaky. Bravely, he ignored the annoyed look on Dogg’s face at the interruption. ‘And until you accept what’s happening, things aren’t going to get b-b-better. Didn’t you hear what the D-Doctor said?’

He fell silent then, sweating beneath Dogg’s glare, fearing he may have gone too far.

‘You don’t remember what happened last time, do you?’ asked the Sheriff, in a voice that was surprisingly calm and measured, but with a hint of a threat.

‘Last time? What do you m-mean?’

‘Last time outsiders came to our world. Last time we were infected by their fool ideas. Last time things changed.’ Dogg stood up, a snarl on his lips. ‘Think, Deputy Bacon. You like thinking, don’t you? You think we should all be able to think what we like. Well, search that little brain of yours, because I know the memory’s in there somewhere.’

Streaky felt as if there *were* something, but it was something dreadful. ‘No,’ he whined.

‘Think of Scary Manor,’ persisted the Sheriff, rounding his desk and seizing him by the shoulders. ‘Ask yourself why we don’t go there no more.’ He shouted: ‘Remember!’

Nightmare images collided behind Streaky’s eyes, where he couldn’t shut them out. He couldn’t, didn’t want to, make sense of the kaleidoscope of grief. ‘I’ve held this memory inside me for so long,’ cried Dogg, choking back tears. ‘I knew what would happen if I let it out. Well, I’m sick of carrying that weight, of being the only one who knows the truth. Remember, Deputy Bacon. Remember what’s beneath that house: despair and death! Cuz then you might see why I’m putting an end to this blight of free will whatever the damn cost!’

And, when Streaky did remember at last, he cried.

The knights had returned to their sentry positions at the painting behind

which, Anji suspected, lay the hidden entrance to Scary Manor's control room. Along with Thelma, Tim and Fearless, she had found a circuitous route back through the house to the corridor in which they had last seen Mike and Harmony. They had seen no sign of the mantis or the phantom, but suspicious sounds emerged from the storage closet in which they had encountered the former. Somebody or something was moving in there, and she could hear heavy breathing.

A mop lay on the floor, having shared Tim's undignified exit from the cupboard. Anji picked it up and brandished it like a club, feeling marginally safer with its weight in her hands. She pulled open the door and leapt back.

Thelma and Tim groaned at the sight of their missing friends, but Anji was dumbstruck by what they were doing. They had removed their clothes and Mike was lying on top of Harmony, their arms and legs wrapped around each other's bodies, cramped as they must have been. They looked up at their would-be rescuers and blinked in the intrusive gaslight.

'We were just –' said Mike, embarrassed.

'We thought we'd –' stammered Harmony.

'I know what you were doing,' said Anji, thin-lipped, knowing that only one person could have introduced *that* concept to the Crooked World, and pretty sure she knew with whom he had introduced it.

'I don't,' said Tim.

'If you've both quite finished,' she continued, 'we've work to do.'

'Of course,' said Mike. He and Harmony fumbled for their discarded clothes, and Anji couldn't help but notice something that cheered her immensely. She should have expected it, of course, given her earlier observations. She shouldn't have been surprised to see that the teenagers were lacking in certain anatomical details. She imagined Fitz's reaction as he undressed the latest object of his lust to find that she was built like Barbie.

She was still grinning when, a minute later, Mike emerged from the storage closet, knotting his cravat, and asked her what she thought they should do.

'Don't ask me,' she said. 'We're following Thelma's plan.'

Mike was agape. 'But won't that be old-fashioned and illogical?'

'We've got to adapt,' protested Harmony, as if parroting back the words from a memorised lecture. 'We've got to take account of our new circumstances.'

'You're supposed to help us understand,' said Mike.

'Yes, I know what I said – but I've realised now that some things haven't changed. My logic won't always work on your world. What we need right now is your experience.'

'But we've grown,' insisted Harmony. 'Societies have to evolve.'

‘Oh, listen to you two,’ said Thelma, wagging a chiding finger. ‘It makes perfect sense for us to remain informed by our past, even as we face an uncertain future.’

‘Anji wants us to do what we’d normally do in this kind of situation,’ said Tim.

‘Although, in Tim’s case,’ smiled Thelma, ‘that would normally entail fleeing.’

Mike grinned. ‘You want us to set a trap for the ghosts? Well, why didn’t you just say so?’

‘IT WILL AVAIL YOU NAUGHT, FOOLISH MORTALS,’ boomed the voice of God, still seeming to come from everywhere even after Anji had spotted the nearest speaker at the top of a wall. ‘YOU CANNOT DEFY ME. YOU WILL SUBMIT TO MY WILL.’

Even as Streaky had run out of the jailhouse, tears streaming down his cheeks, he had felt guilty. He had been so upset, so appalled, by what Dogg had made him see, that he had forgotten his duty. He had had to control his feelings, leaning against the wooden wall of the shack where Scrapper had died. He had resolved nothing. He had let everybody down.

He had found an almost welcome distraction outside the burger bar: its proprietor had attempted to disperse the protestors, and a scuffle had ensued. ‘If you cows don’t want to be eaten,’ McMulch had yelled, ‘then you shouldn’t go around tasting gorgeous all the darn time!’ The deputy had had to intervene to save him from being trampled.

He was beginning to hate his once-treasured star. It was too heavy a burden for one lone pig to bear. And yet he had accepted the badge, and the responsibilities that came with it. And so, once he had mollified the cows, told McMulch to shut up shop for the afternoon and advised all four of them to get out of town, he knew what he had to do.

He was still confused and hurt, but he had to put aside such feelings. He was running out of time. He took a deep breath on the stoop of the jailhouse, and pushed open the door without knocking. He strode into the shack, an argument poised on his lips, and came up short to find the Sheriff’s office empty. He blinked and looked in every corner, but the only occupant of the building was Jasper: the cat had been lying on his bed, but he got to his feet now and came to the bars again with an expectant look.

Streaky was confused. He had never let the jailhouse door out of his sight. Distracted though he may have been, he didn’t see how Dogg could have sneaked out unnoticed. He felt something cold in the pit of his stomach. He had made the wrong choice. He felt now that he should have ignored the altercation at McMulch’s, should have faced and dealt with his

greater problem instead of hiding from it.

He remembered what Dogg had said about his intention to eradicate free will. If he did something stupid now, then Streaky would be equally to blame for the consequences.

Chapter Twenty

They walked in single file, Angel in the middle – and, when the blue-tinged illumination from one end of the pipe was replaced by a stark, clinical, white light from the other, she knew they had to be nearing their destination. Ahead of her, the Doctor halted and motioned to the others to do the same. A few seconds later, he crept forwards again – and, shortly thereafter, Angel heard a voice ahead. It took her a few seconds to realise what he must already have deduced: that the voice was artificial,

He led the way out into a corridor, with silver plates riveted to its every surface to give it a cold, space-age look. The electronic voice was much clearer here, buzzing as it reverberated from the metal.

‘...one... one... one...’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at Fitz, who pondered for a moment before his face cleared. ‘A countdown! I said there should be a countdown, and it should always end at one.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Angel.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor, ‘it appears you aren’t the only one.’

The corridor curved out of sight in both directions. The curve, like that of the pipe, was smooth and natural, and the seams between the riveted plates were perfectly straight. This entire installation was like nothing that belonged on the Crooked World; it felt to Angel like the product of a mind that was almost too ordered, too attached to its own worldview, so focused upon a single path that it could see nothing beyond it.

Feeling vulnerable, Angel’s first instinct was to find protection in Fitz’s shadow. She resisted it. He was no more immune to harm than she had become, but somehow he coped with the possibility of being hurt or worse. The skin around his left eye was still purple from his sweet but futile attempt to rescue her during the riot. And she knew that she had hurt him in the helicopter too, although she didn’t know how. His awkward silence had thawed somewhat since their underwater adventure, but she still felt the weight of unspoken words hanging between them.

‘...one... one... one...’

They proceeded too quickly for her liking. She hurried to keep up, willing her feet to fall softly and the heels of her boots not to clang so. The outer curve of the corridor was studded with doors, and the Doctor halted before one and slapped his hand against a back-lit grey panel in the wall beside it. The door slid open with a terribly loud whirr. He bobbed his head through the aperture and reported, 'Living quarters.'

He took another few loping steps to a similar door on the inner wall, disappearing through this one. Angel and Fitz followed him into a large circular room, which the corridor must have bound. There were five or six other entrances, over which Angel cast a wary eye. The room was dominated by a circular pool, and the Doctor had already gambolled across the white-tiled floor and dropped to his haunches at the water's edge. 'Fascinating,' he breathed.

Angel craned over his shoulder to see black shapes moving in the blue depths. She looked inquisitively at the nearest shape as it became darker and larger... and then it broke the surface, leaping almost a metre into the air. Her gaze was riveted by two neat rows of white razor teeth against a jet-black background, and she only managed to look away because the Doctor collided with her and – almost knocked her over. He had propelled himself away from the pool with his feet, reaching behind his back to catch himself. The black creature, thankfully, fell back into the water, but Angel's heart still pounded against her chest.

'What the hell was that?' spluttered Fitz.

'Nothing I've encountered before,' said the Doctor, scrambling back to his feet as he recovered from his shock. He gave his companion an arch look. 'But if I were to describe a piranha fish to somebody who had never seen one, and then ask that person to sculpt it...'

Fitz's cheeks coloured. 'At least I was right about them not being in the lake.'

To Angel, the black fish were just another example – more visible than most – of how, every time she thought she had found a bright side to her new life, it only became more dark and ugly. 'Who'd want to dream up such a horrid, vicious brute?' she asked with a shiver.

'In some ways, I think they're rather beautiful,' said the Doctor, pulling at his lower lip.

'What are you thinking?' asked Fitz, recognising the mannerism.

'About the miracle of life,' said the Doctor, his eyes a gleam.

In the oblong entrance hall that led to the circular corridor, the Masked Weasel was pleading with Dirty Duck. 'You can't leave now. You can't leave me with Gruenwald.'

The duck kept his back turned, webbed digits moving clumsily over the locking keypad. ‘Why don’t you leave too? Our ghostly friend is in the silo; he can’t stop you.’

‘I’ve nowhere to go.’

The keypad beeped, and there was a hiss of steam as hydraulics began to lever the heavy double doors open. ‘Goodbye then,’ said Dirty Duck dispassionately.

‘I thought you were evil,’ whined the Weasel. ‘I thought you were a real villain.’

‘Now listen here, buster, I may be despicable but I’m no fanatic.’

‘We’re only trying to take over the world! You said you wanted that.’

‘I did – but we were mad to think it would be handed to us without bloodshed.’

‘What about our dreams? Power and recognition!’ Even to his own ears, the words sounded hollow, the lofty ambitions irrelevant. He searched his soul for his own desires, and found them.

‘Somewhere to belong,’ he concluded plaintively.

‘I belong on the racetrack. I should never have left it. Why, with my evil genius, that prize money could have been – *will* be – mine, all mine.’

‘But... but...’ The Masked Weasel had run out of words.

Dirty Duck shot him a look of fierce determination. ‘He’s going to use that laser weapon, you and I both know it, and I intend to be a long way away when it happens. I won’t take the blame for that kind of an atrocity. I don’t want to rule a world that’s scarred.’

The Weasel seized upon his admission. ‘I don’t want that either. We can plead with Gruenwald, tell him not to fire the laser. We can find another way. It’ll be two against one, he’ll have to listen to us.’

‘Not my responsibility, pal. Are you coming or not?’

The doors stood open now, to reveal the lower slopes of the volcano rolling towards a lush meadow and the beckoning spires of Futuria in the mid-distance. For a second, he wanted to go to those spires, more badly than he had ever wanted anything. He imagined starting a new life in a new place, casting off the worries he had borne for so many days. But he couldn’t turn back time. If the Green Ghost burnt away hundreds of lives, then the Weasel would feel no less culpable for having walked out now. He had played too large a part already, brought the world to this brink.

And where could he be safe now anyway?

Dirty Duck had crystallised his fears, making him face what he had tried not to think about. He had thought of the laser weapon as a defence, a bargaining tool, a threat never to be used. But Boss Dogg had proved

intractable, and now the countdown echoed around him, a reminder of a deadline that was minutes away.

‘...one... one... one...’

He shook his head dumbly, and his erstwhile cohort shrugged. ‘Your choice, pal.’ Dirty Duck slipped through the doors, which were already beginning to close. As they slammed together, it felt as if they were shutting the Weasel away from his dreams for ever. His thoughts – and his stomach – were in turmoil, but one fact hammered at the forefront of his mind: Angel lived in Zanytown.

He retraced his steps along the circular corridor at a nervous trot, knowing what he had to do. But, as the ladder that led up to the silo came into view, he hesitated. The Ghost had never listened to him: he thought his so-called partner weak, inferior, stupid. What would be achieved by a confrontation?

Perhaps the duck, and Repugna before him, had been right. Who would mourn one more death among so many? What good would it serve? And yet, how could he turn and run? How could he abandon his sweet ward again?

And a part of him believed that, if he could do this, if he could defy his own nature, turn himself into a hero for however brief a time, then she would run into his arms and all would be forgiven. But that was an unworthy thought, and an unrealistic dream.

So, he stood between the ladder and the exit, unable to bring himself to approach either... until a door slid open beside him, and he whirled to find himself staring at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He didn’t know who she was at first. It took him a second to see past her golden hair, to recognise someone he had always thought of as his little girl. He caught his breath. He didn’t know what to say or do, but he started towards Angel with an uncertain half-smile.

She punched him in the face.

Angel hadn’t known what she would do when she saw her guardian again. Part of her had wanted to talk to him, to find out why he had betrayed her. Another part had been afraid that she would not have the courage, that she would cower before him and let him do as he wished to her, as she had always done in the past. She had her answer now.

She bore down upon him, screaming as she hit him again and again, taking out all the frustration and anger and hurt that she had been repressing, surprising herself with the ferocity of the emotions. He fell against the wall, not fighting back, not making a move to defend himself, and a cold reality crept over her. She wasn’t looking at a monster any more, some

mythical nemesis to blame for destroying her life. She couldn't see the Masked Weasel, only Mr Weasley: a dear old man, cringing from her assault, his sad, round eyes pleading at her from behind a tissue-thin crimson mask.

'I trusted you,' she said, determined not to cry.

'I know,' he said quietly, his head bowed.

'Take off that costume!'

'I don't think we've time for –' Fitz began from the doorway behind her, but the Doctor shushed him. Mr Weasley looked up at Angel uncomprehendingly.

'You heard me,' she said. 'I don't want to talk to the Masked Weasel, I've got nothing to say to him. I want Mr Weasley. I want my "trusted guardian".'

He sighed and nodded, and removed the mask obligingly. He discarded his oversized hat and climbed out of his crimson cloak, retrieving his half-moon spectacles from a hidden pocket before he dropped it. He donned them, squinting through the lenses, and patted down the pinstriped suit that he had worn beneath the disguise. 'Miss Falls, my dear child. . .'

'Why did you do it?' she demanded.

He swallowed, apparently taken aback by her forthrightness. Well, she thought, she had changed since last he had seen her – he had *made* her change – and it was time he knew about it. 'I. . . don't know,' he confessed.

'That isn't good enough, honey! We all have a choice now, and a responsibility. You can't tell me you haven't thought about your actions, because we've all had to do that.'

'Well, of course I've thought about them,' he said, holding out his front paws in a gesture of supplication. 'I can hardly think about anything else, but it's too late now. How can I go back? You can never forgive me. . . can you?'

'For everything you did to me? For masquerading as my dearest friend, my protector, while you were plotting behind my back?'

'My dear, I cannot apologise enough for everything I did to you, but it was a long time ago.'

'Is that supposed to be an excuse?' The indignant response came out automatically, before Angel had had time to consider Mr Weasley's words in full. He was right: in some ways, their old life together *did* seem long past, but the scars of its ending were so fresh, so painful.

'I was a different person then,' he claimed. And this time, Angel bit back her rejoinder because his words rang so true with her own experience. She hadn't thought about it before, but the blissful past for which she had been mourning had contained kidnappings and threats on an almost daily basis.

She couldn't deny to herself that she had been content to let her war with the Masked Weasel continue, like a childhood game.

She shook her head, angry with herself, denying the part of her that wanted to believe him. 'How can you say you've changed when you're blackmailing the whole world?'

'That wasn't my idea. You've got to believe me!'

'Then what are you doing here?'

With a wretched shrug, Weasley lowered his eyes again and shuffled his back feet. When at last he melted under Angel's glare, he murmured, 'Fate has cast me as a villain.'

'Once, maybe. But you can choose to break out of that mould.'

'No, I can't,' he insisted, in a voice strained by anguish. 'As I told you, my dear, it's too late for me. Yes, I did have choices, I can't deny it, but I was weak and I was selfish. I let other people make my decisions for me, and this is what they have brought me to.'

She looked at him, her eyes as moist as his, torn by conflicting emotions.

An eternity of silent indecision passed before the Doctor stepped forward. 'What do you want to do now?' he asked quietly. Angel wasn't sure at whom the question was directed. She wasn't ready to answer it yet, so it was to her relief that Mr Weasley spoke up first.

'It's gone too far,' he said. 'I don't want anyone else to die. I want to stop Gruenwald's plan, and then I'll turn myself in... if I can find the courage. If you can help me?'

The Doctor gave him a nod of approval, then turned to his ward. 'Angel?'

'I should... I should... ' She bit back a sob.

'That isn't what I asked,' he said gently.

'I know,' she said, succumbing at last, not caring as hot water trickled down her cheeks. A thin film of tears softened the image of the stooped, humbled figure before her – and she flung herself into his arms, barely taking in his startled and pleased expression as she wept into his shoulder and held on tight to the man she had loved all her life.

'Er,' said Fitz awkwardly, 'we really are running out of time now.'

'The boy's right,' said Weasley, disentangling himself from his ward's arms with reluctance. 'We have something like two and a half minutes in which to prevent a tragedy.' Without looking at the Doctor and Fitz, he said, 'We'll find the controls for the laser weapon at the base of the rocket silo, up that ladder. I'll lead the way.'

He couldn't move, however, transfixed as he was by the love that shone from Angel's damp eyes, by the realisation of a redemption he had thought

impossible. 'When all this is over,' she whispered fondly, 'when you're out of prison and everything, then you must come home to Angel Mansions with me.'

'My dear, I would be delighted.'

'I think we should have separate bedrooms, mind,' she said, trying to sound stern although her heart apparently wasn't in it. 'To start with, at least.'

He smiled. 'I always thought that, in a building of some one hundred and thirty-seven rooms, it was quite odd that we should share at all.'

'I suppose there'll be a lot of changes to get used to,' sighed Angel.

'I'm rather looking forward to it, actually.' Weasley knew, as he spoke those words, that they were true, and he was glad for it. But the weight of his past settled upon him again, and he was sobered by the realisation that he might not live to enjoy his happy future. If that was his fate, he thought, then he would accept it with dignity. He had brought it upon himself.

He tackled the ladder with his teeth gritted, his mind set to the task of driving his legs onward, giving himself no time to think, to doubt, to falter. He clambered on to the lowest platform of the silo, beneath the round exhaust vents of the rocket. The Green Ghost was sitting with his back to him, still wrapped in his luminous sheet, at the edge of the circular area, at the giant laser weapon's curved control console.

'Ah, Weasley,' he said without looking around, 'come to witness our final victory?'

'No.'

Don't think, don't doubt, don't falter.

'Step away from the controls,' said Weasley, his voice trembling. 'I mean it.'

The Ghost turned slowly, an inquisitive eyebrow raised, a smirk pursed on his lips. He looked at Weasley, and saw the Doctor at his shoulder – and Fitz, stepping off the ladder and offering his hand to Angel, behind him. 'Or you'll do what?' he said.

'I'll... stop you,' said Weasley, for want of a better answer.

'I think I'd like to see that.' Gruenwald's hand hovered tauntingly over the controls.

Weasley was sweating, and he wondered why the others hadn't come forward, why they were leaving it all to him. Because, he told himself sternly, this was his fault. His responsibility. He remembered how the Doctor had tricked him at the Mirage, and he heard himself saying, 'It won't work anyway. The giant laser weapon, I mean.'

Gruenwald laughed. 'You idiot. You think you can make me doubt myself?'

‘You think you’ve got a satellite in orbit.’ Weasley’s head was filling with ideas; he didn’t know where they were coming from, and he hardly had time to process them before they sluiced out of his mouth. He feared that, if he stopped to think, he would stem the flow. ‘You need it to deflect the laser beam towards its target.’

‘You think I’m as weak-willed and feeble-minded as you?’

‘But how can it be true? We can affect the physical make-up of this world, but do you really think our influence can extend thousands of miles beyond it? Your satellite isn’t there!’

‘Nah-nah, not listening,’ sang Gruenwald, with his fingers in his ears.

And, with his foe’s hands away from the console, Weasley flew at him and brought him crashing down on to the metal gantry. Only then did he hesitate for a half-second, as some buried instinct asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, and that was when the enraged Gruenwald landed a punch to his chin. He cried out in pain, and the Green Ghost did the same. His jawbone hadn’t given beneath the blow; instead, his whole head had snapped back with the force of it, straining his neck muscles. He had never experienced such pain before. He staggered back, claspings his front paws to his face, only dimly aware of a flurry of movement around him.

By the time he had composed himself enough to look again, the Doctor was wreaking havoc with the brightly-coloured wires in the innards of the laser control console. Gruenwald was still on the floor, rubbing the bruised knuckles of his right hand ruefully as he glared at Fitz and Angel, who stood guard over him. Weasley’s hind legs felt weak, and he fell back against a guard rail, a dizzying rush of inner coldness threatening to overwhelm him.

Was it finally all over?

‘You can’t defeat the Green Ghost so easily,’ snarled Gruenwald. ‘Whoooo!’ he added, in a scary voice – but, although Weasley’s heart leapt, nobody else was impressed. The villain cleared his throat, embarrassed.

‘I’m afraid we can,’ said the Doctor, almost apologetically. ‘You see, to defeat us, you’d have to outthink us – and some of us have had a great deal more practice at thinking.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that.’ A mean grin crossed Gruenwald’s face. ‘I think I’ve finally worked out what that countdown is for.’

‘...one... one... one...’

He shifted around, before anyone could react, and kicked out hard at the curved wall of the silo. The countdown voice slurred and squealed like a needle slipping back into the groove of a cracked record, and Weasley heard an ominous, reverberating clunk of metal above him.

'Zero. Countdown complete. Commencing rocket ignition sequence.
This base will now self-destruct.'

Chapter Twenty-one

Anji stood in an upstairs corridor, and cast a dubious eye over the serving trolley that Mike and Harmony had fetched from the kitchens below. Her gaze tracked upwards, towards the heavy armchair that hung suspended by a complicated pulley system from the ceiling.

‘It’s perfectly simple,’ said Mike. ‘Tim and Fearless will lure the knights along here, then Harmony and I will let go of the chair so that it knocks them on to the trolley and sets it rolling. Thelma will open the cupboard door. . .’ His bespectacled friend was already in position, at the point where the corridor turned. She pulled back a wooden door with a flourish, to reveal the twin ends of a giant horseshoe magnet. ‘And the knights will fall on to the magnet, which will hold them fast.’

‘Leaving the way clear for us to get to that secret door,’ said Harmony.

‘And you’re sure about this?’ asked Anji, unable to hide her doubts any longer.

‘Like, you said you were leaving it to us,’ Tim pointed out.

‘Just checking. I mean. . . this sort of thing usually works for you, does it?’

‘Oh no,’ said Thelma cheerfully, ‘hardly ever.’

‘Tim and Fearless will foul it up,’ laughed Harmony. ‘They’ll panic and run in the wrong direction or forget to go around the trolley.’

Tim scowled. ‘Or Harmony will fall over and let the chair go too soon.’

‘So, why not switch roles?’ asked Anji with an impatient grimace. ‘Why not let Mike bait the trap? And I’ll spring it.’

‘I can’t do that,’ protested Mike. ‘It’d be dangerous!’

‘Like, thanks a lot,’ said Tim.

‘Why would the knights bother chasing a dog anyway?’

‘It is my opinion,’ said Thelma, ‘that we should proceed with the plan as formulated. Experience suggests that matters will somehow come to an opportune conclusion anyway.’

‘All right,’ sighed Anji, ‘if that’s how you want to play it. . .’

Tim and Fearless padded down the grand staircase to begin their task

of pulling faces at the silent sentries in the hallway. Thelma waited by her door. Mike and Harmony withdrew around the corner, pressed up close to each other as they held on to the rope that would spring the trap. Anji trod nervous circles in the carpet behind them. She felt like a spare part, having no task other than to keep out of sight.

The situation seemed unreal, distant, as if it weren't happening to her (because how *could* it happen?). She had been so pleased with herself for taking charge, for overriding the weird logic of this world – and yet here she was, waiting for the impossible, no longer in control. Her intellect, her instincts, were all but useless. It was like being blind, she reflected. Blind and helpless. She wished she hadn't strayed so far from the TARDIS.

She pictured herself in the console room now: the ship was in flight, and she was talking to the Doctor in her mind. 'Doctor,' she was saying, 'you know that world where everyone was like a cartoon character and nothing made sense? Let's not go there again.' She clung to that image because it gave her some comfort. She tried not to think about the twists and turns ahead on the path that would lead her to that comfortable, settled future.

The sound of running footsteps, and of Fearless's terrified whimpering, brought her back to the uncertain present. 'What's happening?' Mike whispered.

Harmony craned to peer around the corner, and gasped. 'Oh no, Fearless is running on his hind legs, and... and Tim's so scared he's jumped into his arms, and...'. Her eyes widened. 'No! Duck, guys! You'll hit the chair!' She winced – and, simultaneously, Anji heard a crack. Then Harmony and Mike cried out as their rope was pulled taut, yanking them towards Thelma just as Tim and Fearless came into view, sprawled across the speeding trolley. Everybody collided, and collapsed in a flurry of arms and legs. A pair of thick-framed glasses was thrown clear of the tangle, to fall neatly into Anji's hands.

She started forward, knowing that she had only seconds in which to act, hoping she could at least haul one or two of the kids to safety. But, even as she reached them, she saw that the knights were only a few feet away along the adjoining corridor.

She didn't know where her next idea came from – but, before she could question it, she had pulled the Whatchamacallit's banana skin from her pocket and slid it across the floor. The first knight stepped on it, and lost its footing. Its flailing sword cut a deep gash in the side of its fellow, and Anji heard electrical fizzes and pops from within. The damaged knight lurched, and brought its axe down on the head of its prone attacker, denting its helmet. Within seconds, the knights were locked in combat, striking sparks off each other with increasingly jerky movements.

‘The automatons must have corrupted each other’s programming.’ Anji turned, to find Thelma blinking myopically as she addressed the cupboard door. Attracting her attention with a cough, she returned her glasses to her. ‘You see?’ grinned Mike. ‘Our plan worked out just dandy after all.’ Anji was about to make a retort, when she had a disturbing thought. The last time she had looked for that banana skin, it had not been there.

Fitz threw his hands over his head and balled himself up, screaming in anticipation of pain, as fiery smoke exploded from the exhaust vents of the rocket. There was no time to escape, nothing he could do. The only thing that saved his life – saved everybody’s lives – was the Green Ghost’s ignorance of physics. The smoke was hot, but not boiling as it ought to have been. Still, as he tried to take another breath, it forced itself into his mouth and tugged at his throat. He could feel it searing the insides of his lungs. He was wheezing, his eyes were tearing and he had to get out of here before he suffocated, but the floor was trembling to the accompaniment of a series of muffled crumps from below and it was all he could do to keep his balance. He found Angel, somehow, through the thick haze, before he could even question the wisdom of endangering himself for her sake again. They supported each other as he tried to guide them back to the ladder up which they had come. He led the way down, but got no more than a few rungs before he realised that the corridor beneath him had collapsed.

He looked up at Angel helplessly, and was dimly aware of the luminous shape of the Green Ghost over her shoulder, disappearing up a flight of narrow, twisting steps. The Doctor hared after him, and Fitz motioned urgently to Angel to follow him. When in doubt, it was rarely a bad idea to follow the Doctor, and at least it might get them above the fumes.

Angel went ahead, and Fitz soon became aware of Weasley climbing behind him, panting heavily. The smoke began to thin out at the second level, but he still wanted to cough his guts up. More explosions were set off beneath his feet, and he felt as if they were catching up to him. A balcony rail and a segment of flooring plummeted past from above, and suddenly two steps gave way beneath Weasley. Fitz caught him and hauled him up, despite the fact that he was wailing and pedalling the air and generally making the job more difficult.

The rocket swayed dangerously; if it fell, it would probably bring down the balconies that surrounded it too. Fitz’s face was sweating, and he prayed that there would be a way out at the top of the volcano, that the Doctor knew what he was doing. He had to trust in his friend’s instincts. After all they had been through together, why was it so hard to do that?

Four more levels up, with the metal walls of the silo closing in as the

volcano sloped towards its caldera, Angel leapt off the steps and felt her way along one of the curved balcony rails. Fitz followed, hardly able to keep his eyes open, trusting that the Doctor was still ahead of her. The balcony vibrated and lurched, threatening to give way altogether at any second. They stumbled into a claustrophobic alcove, where the smoke was slightly thinner and he could make out a laboratory bench and a jumble of equipment. The Doctor was waiting for them; Weasley emerged from the fog behind them, gasping for breath.

There was, Fitz couldn't help but notice, no other way out. Nor was there any sign of their quarry. 'Well? Where is he?' he almost squeaked, alarmed, his voice barely audible over the rumbles of destruction from below.

'I was hoping you could tell me that,' said the Doctor, looking flushed.

Fitz's jaw dropped open. 'What...? How...?'

'You helped to design this base,' said the Doctor, betraying a hint of high-pitched urgency. 'I trust you didn't neglect to inform our friend of the need for a secret escape route?'

It didn't take too long to find the secret door behind the portrait that the robot knights had once guarded. It took a lot longer, however, to get everybody through it.

First, there was the voice of God again. 'I REALLY WOULDN'T DO THAT IF I WERE YOU,' it said. 'I'M WARNING YOU. IN FACT, NO, I'M *COMMANDING* YOU, BECAUSE I AM YOUR GOD – JUST PUT THAT PAINTING BACK UP AND LEAVE, AND WE'LL SAY NO MORE ABOUT IT, EH?' Tim suggested that perhaps they should do as they were told, that perhaps some things were best left unknown. But Mike and Thelma heaped scorn upon that notion, and Anji herself was reluctant to quit now and let all her tribulations be for nothing. Which wasn't to say that she didn't have her own doubts.

The secret door, unfortunately, took the form of a panel that rotated on its own axis. For some reason, this caused the Skeleton Crew an inordinate amount of difficulty. Mike and Harmony stepped through without a problem – but, when Thelma followed, the panel somehow caught her two friends and spun them back to their starting positions. Tim and Fearless whizzed around for several seconds before being flung clear and landing in a heap at the foot of the grand staircase. Seething, Anji held the door open and ushered the kids through it one by one, ensuring that they all stepped well clear on the far side.

Thelma spent some time cooing over the consoles with which Mr Grumper had presumably controlled his sophisticated illusions. However, Anji was more concerned to learn the whereabouts of the janitor's succes-

sor. One wall of the tiny, square control room had collapsed to reveal the mouth of a long, rough-hewn tunnel, just large enough for the tallest of them – Tim – to stand in. They crept along it two abreast, Mike leading the way with a torch; Anji had intended to accompany him, but Harmony beat her to it.

For several minutes, their footsteps and a distant dripping were the only sounds to penetrate the gloom. The tunnel sloped downward and twisted back on itself, until Mike remarked that they had to be beneath the very heart of Scary Manor. There were several side passages, down which he shone his torch inquisitively, but each one petered out after a short way.

With little else to think about, Anji's worries returned in force. There was something down here, that much was certain: something or somebody who claimed to be God. But, just as her careless words had probably put the idea of an all-powerful deity into the minds of the Skeleton Crew, what if they in turn had willed Him into existence? What if she was chasing her own tail?

And what sort of a God would He be if she – Anji Kapoor – had created him?

The air inside the cramped elevator was warm and stale, but Fitz gulped it down gratefully, glad to be out of the crumbling and burning rocket silo. The frantic search for an exit from the Green Ghost's laboratory had been uncomfortably protracted – and the Doctor had only been 'fairly sure' that Gruenwald had in fact ever entered the alcove. At last, however, Angel had pulled a book on 'key-ology' from a shelf and, in so doing, had caused a section of the wall to slide back.

They descended slowly, and Fitz had plenty of time to fear that they might be disgorged into the collapsed lower level of the villains' base, no less trapped than they had been above. They emerged, however, into a vast subterranean cave, with stagnant pools and stalagmites and a thin, cold breeze to suggest a path back to the surface somewhere.

The Doctor seemed to sense and interpret the air currents intuitively, galloping sure-footedly across the uneven ground and turning sideways to squeeze himself into a tunnel opening that looked like no more than a crack in the wall. Fitz, Angel and Weasley followed at a wearier pace; Fitz wanted to complain that they all needed to rest, but it would have done no good. The Doctor had the bit between his teeth. Anyway, what if the Green Ghost escaped? How long would it take him to build another lair, and another laser weapon? Fitz shivered at the thought of a world on which terrorists could gain access to all the equipment they desired just by wishing for it. Without even thinking, he had escalated the arms race from blunderbusses

and sledgehammers to weapons of mass destruction.

As the passageway widened, Angel stopped to help Weasley, who was dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. 'Oh dear, oh dear,' he puffed, 'I really don't think I'm cut out for the life of a hero, my dear.' They trailed behind after that, Angel helping her guardian along, while Fitz found a new reservoir of energy and dogged the Doctor's heels, glancing over his shoulder occasionally to ensure that the others were OK and that Angel could see how strong he was being. His eyes had adjusted remarkably well to the darkness, which didn't seem as total as it ought to have been.

He caught a heartening glimpse of Gruenwald: he was some way ahead, but conspicuous in his glowing ghost costume. They emerged behind him into another chamber, which must once have been part of a mine. Old wooden struts were buckling with the strain of their long-supported burdens; pickaxes, hammers and ragged sacks were scattered haphazardly in the dust; several shafts led from the area; and Gruenwald was escaping on a hand-pumped mine cart, along a rusty section of track into a dark, round tunnel.

The Doctor made a game attempt to follow him on foot, but it was doomed. Fitz hurried across the chamber to join him, but found himself distracted by the sight of a large, silver egg. It was tarnished and broken, leaning at an alarming angle, every scratch on its metal surface lit by a dull ray of sunlight from above. Fallen rocks surrounded it, piled up to over half its height in some places; it had fallen down here a long time ago.

Fitz joined the Doctor at the lip of the tunnel, where he was standing with a long face, listening to the receding clatter of wheels and the squeak of the mine cart's pump. He was about to point out his strange find, when a new sound echoed along the rails towards them.

A dog was barking.

'It's a g-g-g-g-ghost!' a young man's voice yelped.

'No, it's the forest ranger again.' The long-suffering tones were familiar, and Fitz turned to the Doctor with a grin and mouthed the name of their companion. 'He hasn't even got his mask on this time.'

Scary Manor and the Green Ghost's volcano base were miles apart on the surface. Still, nobody questioned the fact that the caverns beneath them met so quickly. Even Anji didn't worry overmuch about that kind of thing any more.

All in all, then, it was a motley crowd that finally approached the abode of God. The Doctor, Anji and Fitz, reunited; the Skeleton Crew, with Fearless cowering behind Tim's legs; Gruenwald, his hands tied with rope, still muttering about the meddling kids that had cut off his retreat; and Angel

and Weasley, holding on to each other for courage.

They formed a semicircle in front of the capsule, not wishing to draw too close. Anji knew it was a capsule because the Doctor had said so. They all knew that this was where they would find God – or, at least, whoever supplied his voice – because. . . well, everybody just knew.

And because they had all heard the sound of movement inside the egg-shaped object.

After interminable seconds of hushed anticipation, they heard it again.

They caught their breaths as one, as the hatch in the side of the capsule was popped open and a figure stood revealed in the oblong aperture.

Anji controlled a sigh of relief and resisted the urge to smile, although she couldn't articulate to herself precisely what she had been afraid of. A crashed escape capsule had to equal an alien being, right? Somebody who had created this world for. . . whatever reason. Somebody to blame for everything. Just as she had said in the first place.

The figure clambered gingerly over the rocks and, once it was out in the open, puffed out its chest and drew itself up to its full height. It was about five feet tall. It appeared to be humanoid, but the lines of its body were concealed by purple robes that swathed it from neck to toe. It wore a huge, circular, golden mask with fierce, staring eyes and a tiny but proud jutting beak. Anji didn't recognise the face, but thought it might have come from Aztec or Mayan mythology (from one of those sorts of places, anyway).

'WHY HAVE YOU COME HERE?' boomed the unimposing figure of God. 'WHY HAVE YOU DISREGARDED MY COMMANDMENTS?'

Fearless whimpered. Mr Weasley fell to his knees, and Tim Coward followed. Even Fitz looked to the Doctor for a lead. Oh *please*, thought Anji. She cleared her throat and stepped forward boldly.

'These people would like to ask you some questions,' she said.

God thought about that, but finally nodded his assent. 'GO AHEAD.'

In the ensuing silence, Anji gave Mike Leader a stern look, until he raised a tentative hand and asked: 'If you're God, then. . . then what is it all about?'

Thelma Brains spoke up next. 'Are you responsible for the creation of the Crooked World?'

'And if so,' said Angel, 'why did you make all the horrid bits?'

'How can you allow your subjects to suffer and die?' asked Weasley, from the ground.

God looked nonplussed. He made uncertain noises with his throat, and Anji folded her arms with a cruel smile. 'Where did you really come from?' she asked shrewdly. 'Earth?'

‘JUST... JUST...’ God waved his arms vaguely, and snapped: ‘JUST SOD OFF, THE LOT OF YOU. GO ON, GET OUT! GET OUT! I’M MEANT TO BE UNKNOWABLE!’

The Doctor was smiling to himself, making circles in the dirt with the toe of his shoe.

‘Come on gang,’ said Mike, starting forwards, ‘you know what to do.’

‘WHAT ARE YOU...?’ yelled God, as the Skeleton Crew leapt upon him.

‘I’ve got it!’ cried Tim, pulling at God’s head. ‘You were right, Mike, it’s a mask!’

‘With an integral microphone for amplification, I shouldn’t wonder,’ said Thelma.

With God outnumbered – even Fearless did his part, nipping at his heels – the outcome of the struggle was inevitable. He accepted defeat, his shoulders slumping as Tim Coward tore off his ornate mask to reveal a white, oval head with black patches and long, flat ears.

‘Boss Dogg!’ cried everyone in unison. Everyone but the Doctor.

‘Our first clue,’ said Thelma, ‘was when “God” was confused by our theological conundrums. A real omnipotent deity would have been able to answer them.’

‘Instead,’ said Harmony, ‘he told us all to “sod off”.’

‘Yes,’ said Thelma. ‘Now “sod”, of course, is a synonym for “turf” – but it can also be a very rude word.’

‘So, we knew we were looking for someone who can’t control his mouth,’ said Tim.

‘But the clincher,’ said Mike, ‘is that, when you spell God’s name backwards, you get...’

Gruenwald gave a cry of realisation: ‘Dog!’

‘Bah,’ grumbled Boss Dogg.

‘The Sheriff wanted order,’ explained Thelma. ‘When he couldn’t force people to obey his laws, he theorised that they might pay more attention to a higher power.’

‘Like, he probably got the whole idea from Anji,’ said Tim.

Everybody looked at Anji, who blushed furiously. She had already been wishing herself a long way away from this insanity. She didn’t want answers any more, she just wanted to go home and forget that the Crooked World existed. Better still, see if she could go back to believing that it *couldn’t* exist. She resented the smirk on Fitz’s face – and, although the Doctor’s expression was neutral, she was sure he was thinking ‘I told you so.’

‘And I would have gotten away with it too,’ spat Dogg, ‘if it hadn’t been for you... you... you complete and total bastards!’

‘Well, that about wraps up this case,’ said Mike. ‘Let’s head for the ice cream parlour.’

‘No,’ came an unexpected voice.

Streaky Bacon was behind them, seeming somehow taller than he had when Anji had last seen him, the star badge on his jacket gleaming proudly.

‘Tarnation!’ cried Dogg. ‘Where the hell did you come from?’

‘I found your secret trapdoor and followed you down here,’ said Streaky, ‘thanks to my friend, Jasper.’ The cat, Anji realised, stood in the shadows of one of the tunnel entrances, his eyes wide and curious.

‘There’s something else you should all know,’ said Streaky, striding confidently through the assembled onlookers until he reached the wretched figure of the Sheriff.

‘I think it’s time they were told the truth,’ he said quietly. ‘Don’t you?’

Chapter Twenty-two

Boss Dogg took them to the burial site.

He didn't want to, but he didn't bother to argue. He knew that Deputy Bacon was right. It was time they learned the truth. Anyway, what harm could it do? The Crooked World was in tatters. He was protecting nobody by continuing to keep his tragic secret.

His white fur prickled as he retraced his steps from all those many years ago, down the narrow, dark tunnel. He fought down a tide of awful foreboding: the feeling that had kept people away from Scary Manor all this time. Dogg had had the mansion built, of course: it had been his first act as Sheriff. He had appointed Grumper its janitor, and charged him with maintaining its dark reputation. He had feared the consequences, should anyone find out what lay in the caverns beneath the house. But it had been the feeling that had really kept people away: the nameless dread scratching at the backs of their brains whenever they came too close. For, lurking down there in the darkness, were the memories that nobody had wanted.

Those memories were strong now, at the forefront of Boss Dogg's mind and bleeding at last into the minds of the others, as they had into Deputy Bacon's mind at the jailhouse. No words were necessary. They were ready to know now, and so they all remembered. Apart from the outsiders – but they had worked out most of it already, and they would see the rest soon.

The exchange of thoughts felt natural, like an old truth rediscovered. It reminded Dogg of a time before names and secrets, before life was sectioned into lonely, labelled little parcels. He recalled little of that time, but for an enduring sensation of floating in warmth and comfort.

But he recalled, only too well, how it had all ended.

The great silver egg had crashed into his world in a rain of fire, and punched a ragged hole through everything he had known. He remembered what had hatched from it: the tiny, fair-haired creature that had been like nothing he had ever sensed before. Like a newborn chick, the creature had been lost and confused. He had sat with it and listened to its gabbled words, although they had meant nothing to him at first. If the creature –

the child – had ever told him its name, then he had not understood it.

But understanding had indeed come, in time, and it had brought the first changes with it.

And, by then, it had already been too late to stop them.

The creature's thoughts – its unformed beliefs, its naive suppositions, its unfocused memories of the place that had birthed it – had spread out of control. It had taken the blank canvas of Boss Dogg's home and splattered the many vivid colours of its imagination across it. The fair-haired child, so innocent, so sweet on the outside, had twisted his cherished land of order and contentment into one of chaos and violence and noise. A Crooked World.

And he had been afraid. The fabric of everything he had held so dear had been crumbling around him. He had appealed for restraint, for the return of reason, for everything to go back to the way it had been. But the child's mind had been like a Pandora's Box, to which the ideas that had sprung forth could not be returned because they could not be unlearned.

He had sat with the child and he had fed it and he had nursed it – but, as the changes had continued, he had come to a bitter conclusion. He had realised that, if left unchecked, the changes could only bring destruction. And he had slowly come to accept the sad fact that there was only one way left to stop them, to retake control.

One way to save himself and his people from insanity.

The mournful procession reached the end of the tunnel, where a rock fall caused by the egg's nearby descent had rendered further progress impossible. Dogg had seen this place only once before, and he had secreted its memory deep within the caverns of his subconscious mind because it had been too painful. And too dangerous. The Crooked World, he had considered, had learned too much already. It had been his solemn duty to spare it from this final concept, from the most terrible of all truths.

He had failed in that duty.

Behind him, somebody caught his or her breath. He didn't turn to see who it was. His eyes hurt. He wanted to cry, but he didn't dare disturb the heavy silence that had fallen.

And they stood there for the longest time, looking at the place where, they all knew now, this world had first discovered mortality. At the burial site: the pile of rocks, two feet high and less than four feet long. And at the wooden cross, which a guilt-wracked Boss Dogg had hammered into place and upon which, through his tears, he had carved a eulogy in six words.

It read: 'She made us what we are.'

The outsiders stayed for another three days after that – although Streaky

noticed that they remained in the background, spending much of their time in their blue box. Still, he was glad of their presence – and of the Doctor’s advice, which he would dispense upon request. As Zanytown’s new Sheriff – and the Crooked World’s senior law enforcement official – there was much he needed to learn and, it seemed, an endless burden of decisions to be made.

As time went on, however, he found less and less need to seek counsel. He had felt, during that awful moment at the graveside, that there was no hope for the future. But the future had arrived all the same, and it was not so frightening after all.

Therefore, when the Doctor announced that he was leaving, Streaky wasn’t too worried, although the news did send him into a reflective mood. The outsiders had come to see him at the jailhouse, along with Angel Falls and Mr Weasley, and he took some time from his duties to enjoy a short stroll with them in the sunshine.

‘So much has changed,’ he sighed. ‘And yet. . .’

‘They’re settling back into the old rhythms of life,’ observed the Doctor.

The streets were teeming again, full of noise – and, if the scene wasn’t quite as chaotic as it had once been, if some people had chosen to stay indoors and talk or think or write, then that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. ‘It can never be the same though,’ said Streaky.

‘If it’s any help,’ said the Doctor gently, ‘I doubt very much that Boss Dogg could have caused that poor girl’s death. He wouldn’t have known how And the substance of this world wouldn’t have kept her nurtured. She would have starved in a matter of days.’

Streaky forced a sad smile. ‘Thank you, Doctor, that’s comforting to know. But we still wished her gone, and Dogg kept that knowledge, that guilt, locked inside him. If we’d known – if we’d been brave enough to remember – then it might not have happened again.’

‘I heard about your plans for Scary Manor,’ said the Doctor.

‘It seemed the right thing to do,’ said Streaky.

They had turned the haunted house into a museum-cum-library-cum-shrine, reburial of the little girl in a prominent position in its grounds. They had replaced the makeshift marker of her grave with a grand marble headstone, although the sentiment thereon remained the same.

‘Mr Weasley is going to work there as a writer,’ said Angel proudly.

‘A writer?’ queried Fitz.

‘Mr Bacon has decided that the events of the past week should be recorded in book form,’ explained the Doctor. ‘I hear that even Sebastian has volunteered his services.’

'He probably wants to make sure it's his version that's remembered,' mumbled Anji.

'We won't forget this time,' vowed Streaky.

'I don't expect we ever could,' said Weasley. 'We have all learned so much.'

They said their farewells, then, and Streaky Bacon returned to the jailhouse, to his work. There was only one prisoner in the cells: Jasper had been released on bail until the new Sheriff was ready to pass sentence upon him. Another tough decision. The Green Ghost hammered on the bars of his cage and demanded release, but Streaky tuned out his shouts with ease. Gruenwald couldn't escape again, because nobody else wanted him to.

He sank into the chair behind his desk, and closed his eyes. He basked in the sound of laughter that drifted in through the barred windows of the shack, and he thought of the Whatchamacallit and of all the fun they had had together back on the farm. The memory brought a smile to his face, but it faded into a nostalgic sigh at the knowledge that those times were long past. He had responsibilities now. Still, he told himself, he had plenty to look forward to. His date with Thelma Brains of the Skeleton Crew tomorrow, for one thing. They were going to take in the Funny-Car Derby, then perhaps go back to his place for a glass of milk and a bit of wriggling. Imagine that, he thought: a pig going out with a rock star.

And perhaps, the next day, he would go out on to the street and watch the games for an hour or two. Just keeping an eye on things, of course. Just making sure that everybody played nice.

Or maybe he could join in, just a little.

Just for old time's sake.

Anji stepped out of the way of a tall, blue cat, which shook its fist as it chased a dog down Catapult Lane. She wasn't sure why the sight made her smile. She had become more used to the strange norms of the Crooked World, more attached to its people, than she wanted to admit. In some ways, she was surprised to realise, she would be sorry to leave.

It wasn't often that they remained in one place for so long; that they could begin to feel settled. Another reason, she asked herself, to think about having that awkward conversation? To insist on being taken home?

It had been the Doctor, of course, who had insisted on staying, to make sure everything was running smoothly, that he hadn't overlooked any potential problems. Or so he had said. Yeah, Anji had thought, because he was always so concerned with such details, wasn't he? Usually, when they had saved a planet, he couldn't get away soon enough. But change happened fast here; fast enough to satisfy even the most impatient curiosity.

She got the impression that he had really enjoyed these past few days.

They parted company with Angel and Weasley, who were bound for Angel Mansions. Angel was tearful as she shook hands with Fitz and then threw herself at him and hugged him. In return, he tried to smile but looked uncomfortable.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked awkwardly. ‘You’re looking a bit. . . drawn.’
‘Aren’t we all, sugar!’ she smiled.

‘We’ve been through a lot,’ said Weasley, ‘but we’ll be all right now.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think you will.’

‘In fact. . .’ Weasley cleared his throat. ‘Before you leave, this dear lady and I would like you to know something. We’ve made a decision, and it’s largely thanks to all of you.’ He cast a fond look at Angel, who blushed and returned to his side. Their hands found each other, and Anji knew what they had to say before they spoke.

‘We think,’ said Angel shyly, ‘we think. . . well, we think we are very much in love.’

Fitz almost choked.

‘We may even get married,’ said Weasley, ‘although we would like to take some time to consider such a large step before we commit ourselves.’

‘You’re in. . . ? But aren’t you his. . . ? And he’s. . . ? Don’t you think that’s a bit. . . ?’

‘We’re very happy for you,’ beamed the Doctor, as Anji silenced Fitz with an elbow to his ribs and added her own effusive congratulations. Fitz shook his head in disbelief.

She watched as they walked away, arm in arm (and no, her eyes *weren’t* filling up, she wasn’t going to cry or anything, all right?), until the Doctor placed a hand on her shoulder, and the other on Fitz’s, from behind, and said in a soft voice: ‘It’s time.’

‘Just when I was getting used to this place,’ she said, determined to sound airy.

‘Will they really be all right?’ asked Fitz.

‘We’ve done all we can for them,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ve given them a push in the right direction. They’ll have to learn to cope for themselves now. I’m sure they’ll be fine.’

‘What if somebody else comes here?’ asked Anji. ‘Like that girl’s parents?’

The Doctor nodded sadly. ‘I think that all happened a very long time ago,’ he said. ‘Whoever placed that little girl in the escape capsule, whatever dangers they hoped to spare her, I think they’ll have long since stopped looking for her. If indeed they began.’

They walked on, and Anji was unnerved by the sound of gunfire in the next street. It reminded her that not everything was cosy here, that danger still lurked around each crooked corner. Everybody knew that the outsiders were fragile. So far, they had avoided discharging firearms or wielding household appliances without care around them. Still, she couldn't help but feel that such common sense and restraint on their part could not possibly last.

‘So, we didn't mess up this world after all?’ she said.

‘We rescued it from a repetitive, unfulfilled existence,’ said the Doctor. ‘We taught its people to think for themselves, to make their own choices. We changed things for ever. We gave them ambition, but perhaps we took their innocence in return. What do you think?’

She smiled and took his arm, propelling him faster towards the Zanytown Hotel and the waiting TARDIS. ‘I think we made things better,’ she said. ‘Now let's get out of here.’

Even Jasper had sensed the spreading mood of optimism, and begun to share in it, although his own fate remained uncertain. He spent his days slinking around the side streets and back alleys, keeping out of sight of people but watching them as they adjusted to the new ways of thinking. And somehow, something deep within him had lightened, and he had fooled himself into believing that he might even be able to join in their carefree games one day.

As he kept his appointment at the courthouse, then, his heart felt heavy. He had been allowed hope – a better future, he was now sure, was indeed a possibility – and so, he could only expect a crushing disappointment. That was how it always been – and this time, unlike the other times, he deserved it, because Squeak's death had yet to be atoned for.

Sheriff Bacon eschewed his predecessor's wig and gavel: with a packed hall hushed in anticipation of his every word, he hardly needed such symbols of authority. He spoke in a quiet voice about the changes that had swept across the Crooked World, and of the difficulties that everybody had faced as they adapted to them. ‘We've seen people commit awful deeds,’ he said, ‘threatening our precious new-found freedoms – and those people must be stopped.’ Jasper looked down at the floor and nodded miserably. ‘However, I don't think any of us believe that our prisoner here is one of those people.’

He looked up with a frown, unsure whether to believe his own ears. ‘Jasper,’ continued the Sheriff, ‘made a mistake, that's all – and I'm sure we can all sympathise with that. I know I can.’ His face clouded. ‘Nevertheless, because of his moment of uncontrolled anger, we all suffered a tragic loss,

and I can't ignore that fact.'

The cat sighed and bowed his head again, knowing that this latest shred of hope had been no more than fate's last cruel trick.

'Jasper,' intoned Streaky Bacon, 'I have lowered the charge against you to one of mouse-slaughter – and, having been found guilty, I sentence you to be...'

Jasper dosed his eyes and clenched his paws until his claws bit into his skin.

'... hit in the face with a big plank,' said Streaky.

An audible gasp went up from the spectators, and Jasper blinked in confusion.

Then somebody tapped him on the back, and he turned to find a familiar brown mouse perched atop one of the upended tables that formed the prisoner's enclosure. It took several seconds for his initial surprise to fade, but then his mouth broke into a wide grin.

Whereupon Squeak produced a big plank and slammed it hard into his face.

Jasper stood, nonplussed, with his nose flat in his rectangular head. But relief crept over him as he realised that the blow hadn't hurt too much: Squeak had obviously used a rubber plank for safety. He spat out his dislodged teeth as new ones grew, and he looked at the mouse, who was looking at him expectantly. He looked at the Sheriff, who smiled and said, 'You're free to go, Jasper.' And he turned back to his lifelong foe, with an expression of exaggerated menace, and produced a lump hammer from behind his back.

Squeak giggled, pedalled fresh air for a second and then bolted out of the courthouse. Jasper shot after him, and there were tears of sweet relief streaming down his face.

By the time Squeak's flight led Jasper past their old home, his recent ordeals had almost begun to seem like a distant dream. Almost. He was brought to a halt by the sight of the Doctor, standing in the doorway of the Zanytown Hotel, hands deep in his pockets as he watched the games before him with an indulgent smile.

Jasper already knew that the outsiders were leaving. He would probably never see them again. And suddenly that thought made his stomach feel hollow. He stopped and stared at the larger-than-life figure with his bouncy hair and his long, kind face, and he searched himself for a way to communicate his feelings towards him at last.

The words welled up from the cat's heart, feeling strange as they twisted the insides of his throat and vibrated off his tongue and lips to emerge from his mouth as a painful, gravely and yet discernible sound: 'Thank...'

you...'

The Doctor smiled and winked. Then he turned and disappeared inside the crooked building.

'Married?' muttered Fitz to himself, in his bathroom in the TARDIS, staring at the reflection of his stubbly face with its fading scars in the mirror, and forgetting to stop squeezing the tube of antiseptic cream in his hand. *'Married...?'*

Boss Dogg was thumbing rubber bullets into the breach of his blunderbuss when he heard the staccato explosions. He started and looked up, to see smoke trails and orange blossoms in the blue sky. And he feared for a moment that it was about to start all over again.

At first, he had refused Streaky Bacon's offer to let him tend his crops in his absence. 'You ain't gonna run me out of my own town, mister,' he had sworn, 'no way, no how!' But really he had had no choice in the matter. His one-time deputy had become Sheriff, because it was what people wanted. His word was law – and Dogg was aware that, had he been of a mind to, then the pig could have clapped him in irons for a week for the crime of aggravated haunting.

Anyway, life on the farm wasn't too bad. The work was hard but rewarding, and he didn't have to worry about keeping secrets. And he had a new playmate: the Whatchamacallit, which challenged him to friendly games of hide and shoot. Sometimes, he even won.

The orange blossoms faded slowly, and he smiled quietly to himself. Fireworks, let off by celebrants in the big city. He chided himself for having assumed the worst, for jumping at the slightest noise. But the last thing he wanted was for more outsiders to come, to pollute his world with their corrupt ways, to turn his new life upside down.

His blunderbuss was loaded. His enemy was hiding somewhere in the cornfield. The sun was smiling down upon him, and everything was right with the Crooked World today.

He didn't want things to ever change.

About the Author

STEVE LYONS was born and lives in Salford, near Manchester. He has contributed articles, interviews, short stories and comic strips to many magazines, including *Doctor Who Magazine*, *Starburst*, *SFX* and *Dreamwatch*. He has also written X-Men novels, *Doctor Who* audio plays and books about several TV series, including *Doctor Who: The Completely Useless Encyclopedia*. He can hardly believe he's typing this, but *The Crooked World* is his tenth *Doctor Who* novel! His favourite cartoon series is *Scooby-Doo* – but then, if you've read this far, you already knew that.