

BBC
BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

SOMETIME NEVER...



JUSTIN RICHARDS

This Week:

A hideous, misshapen creature releases a butterfly.

Next Week:

The consequences of this simple action ensure that history follows its predicted path. . .

Sometime:

In the swirling maelstrom of the Time Vortex, The Council of Eight map out every moment in history and take drastic measures to ensure it follows their predictions. But there is one elemental force that defies their prediction, that fails to adhere to the laws of time and space. . . A rogue element that could destroy their plans merely by existing.

Already events are mapped out and defined. Already the pieces of the trap are in place. The Council of Eight know when Sabbath will betray them.

They know when Fitz will survive the horrors in the Institute of Anthropology. They know when Trix will come to his aid. They know when the Doctor will finally realise the truth.

They know that this will be:

Never

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

Sometime Never...

Justin Richards

DOCTOR WHO: SOMETIME NEVER...

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For Alison, Julian and Christian – always

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There is a room in the TARDIS where the Doctor never goes... He is in there now.

Once Upon a Time...

Kujabi the hunter never saw Death come to the forest. He was watching the antelope, picking his target, his best spear balanced in his hand when the air cracked open like an egg and Death swam into existence between the trees.

```
>> Tracking...  
>> Portal established. Stable. Agent emerging into real  
time...
```

It was like a man, but it was also like an ape – a distorted mixture of both species, and of more besides. The huge figure stood motionless, perhaps sniffing the air. Perhaps knowing that Kujabi was there. Its shaggy head turned slowly towards him and the creature took a massive, lumbering step forwards. It gathered speed as it crossed the clearing towards the oblivious hunter. Its feet, its paws, thumped into the ground and made the foliage shake with fear. Kujabi was looking at Death. But he did not see it.

```
>> Target position locked and located...  
>> Proceeding...  
>> Real time co-ordinates established and verified...  
>> Countdown to Event Initiation... No interruption to be  
tolerated...
```

But before Death reached the hunter, another figure staggered into the clearing, blundered into Death's path. Kujabi had already turned away when Death smashed its way through the new arrival, knocking it back the way the creature itself had come. The smaller figure staggered and fell, but Kujabi did not hear it shout words he could not understand, and then came the screaming and Kujabi still heard and saw nothing. He did not see the creature continuing on its journey, as if nothing had happened. Because by then Kujabi was gone, following the antelope, becoming Death himself.

If Kujabi had been able to see it, he might have noticed that the creature walked in a perfectly straight line. If he could also have brought himself to follow the being that seemed to be made up from pieces of other creatures, he might have identified some of the parts – one arm from an orang-utan, the other apparently human, the legs of another massive ape, the head of a Neanderthal but with a reptilian jaw, a body covered with hair but rippled with pustules and erupting with scars and damaged tissue. . . If he had lived four hundred years later, Kujabi might have realised that Death carried a briefcase.

But Kujabi was dragging the antelope he had killed back to the village.

The creature's mind was only on its mission. It had barely noticed the life form that had blundered into its way and been thrown aside – ripped apart by the Time Winds as it fell back unprotected into the portal. There was no change in the ebb and flow of History, therefore the event was unimportant.

The creature hardly felt the forest plants and small trees that it trampled through on its way to the exact, calculated point. It perceived nothing but the manner in which Time was flowing around it, how everything was changing and evolving, how the tiniest impact of one atom on another set up miniature chain reactions of cause and effect that nudged History forwards and determined its course.

The Agent stopped at exactly the right point in the forest, and put down the briefcase. It was the sort of metal briefcase that might in centuries to come contain a camera. Or a gun. A hirsute paw undid one of the clasps. The creature's near-human fingers undid the other. Its mismatched hands reached into the case and took from the foam-padded interior a crystal box. The scorching African sun reflected off the angled transparency of the lid as the Agent slid it aside. Surprisingly gently, the creature reached a paw into the box and carefully lifted out the delicate form within.

Then: a hand held up, the sun behind it in the sky. Fingers slowly opening at the exact moment, at the exact point in space. A hesitation no greater than a child's breath, and then the butterfly was free. Its paper-thin wings beat gently as it lifted itself into the air, dark red against the brilliant yellow of the sun and the blue of the sky. It fluttered along its predicted course without a care in the world. Without a notion of what it was achieving. Without any consciousness of the part it might be playing on Time's stage.

The Agent watched the butterfly disappear into the distance. Despite the fact that it had no real existence in the world, the Agent could feel. Some-

where deep inside where the Time Winds had not yet scorched away its soul and its memory, the Agent felt a moment of supreme sadness as it watched the butterfly – watched a creature that had no idea that it was not free. Then the monstrosity that was rewriting History closed the box, returned it to the briefcase, and made its unrelenting way back to the portal point and its next mission.

>> Molecular disturbance building. Causal variations tracked...

>> Air currents affected...

>> Atlantic weather system changing...

>> Atmospheric conditions over English channel responding as predicted... Potential realised... Energy building...

The Queen listened patiently, her painted lips hinting at a smile.

‘One hundred and thirty Spanish ships in their armada, Your Majesty. Twenty thousand Spanish soldiers. Nearly nine thousand sailors, or so our sources tell us.’

It was a full smile now. ‘Thank you, Sir Howard. You have done excellently.’

‘With God’s help, Your Majesty.’

Queen Elizabeth nodded. ‘God blew,’ she said, ‘and they were scattered.’

At No time

The entire room was angular – walls, floor, and faceted ceiling constructed from flat sections of pale crystal. Light suffused the room, glinting on the sloping edges of the floor that ran down to the flat centre area where the table stood. The table was octagonal, stretched out into a lozenge shape, its glasslike translucency mirroring the room around it. It was like being inside a diamond.

Around the table were eight chairs, positioned at the points where the straight sides met. A figure was seated at each angle. Each figure wore the coloured cloak of the family it represented. Each stiffly shaped hood shadowed the face. The light gleamed occasionally as the figures moved, as it reflected off a crystalline surface or caught the glint of a latticed smile.

The chair furthest from the octagonal doorway was empty. On its upright back, a number eight was embossed into the icy crystal. There were numbers on each of the other chairs too – identifying their occupants. But only the eighth chair had the numeral tilted on to its side. So that 8 became ∞ .

Opposite, nearest the door, on the first of the chairs, sat Soul. His cowed head swung slowly as he looked at each of his fellows in turn. His grunt of annoyance left them in no doubt that he felt he was being kept waiting, but only one of the other members of the Council responded.

‘We have all been waiting some considerable time now,’ Trilon told him. ‘While you have been away.’

‘Not that it matters, really,’ Sept said, with a shrug and a half-laugh. ‘It’s not as if time has any meaning, after all.’

‘The latest reports from the Time Agents suggest everything is on track.’ Penter leaned forwards, delicate amber hands emerging from the sleeves of his cloak to rest on the crystal table. ‘I was in the Monitoring Suite a little while ago. Just to pass the time that we aren’t having.’

‘What was it on this occasion?’ Hexx wondered darkly. His hand was jet black as it gestured in the air. ‘As if it matters in the slightest.’

‘The Spanish Armada. A lot of potential there.’ Penter leaned back again.

'A spot of bother with, I assume, a native life form, but it didn't worry the Time Agent. It made physical contact and felt nothing, so the thing can't have been intended to have any impact on History. It won't be missed.'

'Unless it was a Rogue Element, of course,' Duvar suggested.

'You see Rogue Elements everywhere,' Trilon snapped impatiently.

'Better than not seeing them at all until they sneak up and shatter your illusions.'

'Boring.' The word was an explosion of sound. Fear folded his hands, allowing a little of the myriad colours of his arms to escape and reflect off the surface of the table. 'If it was a Rogue Element, then we're well rid of it. There's only one Rogue Element that matters. And that is being dealt with.'

'So we are led to believe,' Soul agreed. 'But where is the proof? Hmm? Tell me that. So many questions I would like answered,' he added quietly.

'I'm glad to see the Council of Eight has such confidence in the plan.' The voice came from behind Soul. But he did not turn to look. Octan was already striding across the room to his chair. He sat down at the beginning and end of the table and pushed back his hood. 'I would apologise for keeping you waiting, but then again... ' He waved a hand in the air, dismissively, before turning slowly to fix Duvar with a glassy stare. 'There is indeed only one Rogue Element left that we need worry about.'

Duvar shifted, as if slightly uncomfortable. But his reply was full of determination and defiance. 'And we are right to worry. One Rogue Element could disrupt everything.'

'It could,' Octan conceded. 'A Rogue Element, by definition, exists outside the normal laws of space and time. It flies in the face of cause and effect. Unpredictable. But,' he went on, 'if we can provide stimuli and inputs for which we have already formulated a response – a response based on what we *do* know about that Element's behavioural patterns, its properties and inclinations – then we can begin to predict even the most volatile of beings.'

'You mean the Doctor,' Penter said quietly.

'I mean the Doctor.'

'Yet he infects everything and everyone he touches,' Hexx pointed out. 'One *word* from him, even, and sentient beings step outside the nexus. If they spend any significant time with him, they themselves become unpredictable.'

'What we really need to do,' Fear said, as if the idea had suddenly occurred to him, 'is to reverse the infection. To introduce an element of complete and ultimate predictability that will itself affect the Doctor.'

‘Exactly.’ There was evident satisfaction in Octan’s voice, as if his star pupils had finally worked out the answer. ‘And that is what Sabbath is for.’

‘Do you ever get used to him?’ Trix asked. She flicked her blonde hair out of her eyes in a way that suggested to Fitz that she was not expecting an answer.

So, of course, he replied. ‘No. I’ve been with the Doctor for, well, for longer than I care to recall. But no, I still can’t predict what on earth he’ll get up to next. I mean,’ he went on, pointing to the table by way of illustration, ‘I thought we were going to have breakfast.’

‘Lunch,’ Trix corrected him.

‘What happened to breakfast?’

‘You slept through it.’

‘Well, time doesn’t really mean anything. Especially breakfast time.’

The large wooden table in the kitchen area of the TARDIS was barely visible under the electronic clutter and hi-tech junk piled on top of it. Looking round, Fitz could just see the top of the Doctor’s head as he leaned into the pile, connecting together bits and pieces that had never been designed to be connected together. Probably, some had never been meant to get within a hundred years of each other, Fitz thought. Behind the hint of the Doctor’s head, the window showed rolling hills and green fields, which existed outside the TARDIS just as much as breakfast time existed inside it.

A long metal prong emerged from the centre of the pile of equipment and disappeared into the top of a bag of granulated sugar. A similar prong spiked into a china cereal bowl filled with rock salt. A power cable snaked between the two before disappearing inside what looked like a microwave oven, but which had once done terrible things to a cup of cocoa Fitz had been looking forward to.

The Doctor’s hand appeared framed by the window behind. It was clicking its fingers and beckoning. ‘Did you get the cup of tea I wanted?’ The Doctor sounded like he was holding wires in between his teeth. Again.

‘Yes, it’s over here.’ Fitz turned to get the cup. ‘Look, Doctor, I sort of understand about how the sugar and salt crystals set up empathic resonance or whatever it was so we can see if the crystal has a similar internal structure. Stuff.’ He waved his free hand vaguely to show he really did understand.

Fitz almost dropped the tea as the Doctor leaped to his feet beside him. Fitz was still watching the point on the other side of the table where he felt

the Doctor ought to be. 'But how does plugging in a cup of tea help?' Fitz asked.

'Oh it doesn't.' The Doctor took the cup from him, sniffed at it cautiously, then raised it to his lips. 'That's for me to drink.'

'And what about breakfast?' Fitz wanted to know.

'Lunch,' Trix said.

'Whatever.'

The Doctor frowned, sipped at his tea, smacked his lips together, and handed the half-empty cup back to Fitz. 'Oh not for me, thanks.' He turned to Trix. 'Do you have the crystal handy?'

The large diamond – if it was a diamond – sparkled as Trix held it up. She had been through a lot to get that diamond, Fitz thought. They all had. And now – perhaps – they were about to find out what it really was. With the help of a bag of sugar and a pile of techno-junk. Right.

The Doctor took the diamond carefully from Trix, and peered closely at it, as if trying to discover its mysteries by looking inside. Apparently satisfied, he then dropped it into the teacup that Fitz was holding. Hot tea splashed over Fitz's wrist and he gave a startled cry, almost dropping the cup before the Doctor relieved him of it.

The cup balanced on top of the pile of equipment, angled so it looked about to topple off at any moment. The Doctor took two trailing wires and hooked them over the top so they dangled down into the tea.

'A good idea, Fitz. Liquid, especially hot liquid, should resonate in sympathy with the vibrations of the crystal. With luck it will amplify those vibrations and make them easier to pick up.' He grinned. 'And then we shall know.'

'Oh good,' Fitz said.

'And then what?' Trix asked. She had managed to retrieve one of the chairs from beside the table and was now sitting down, her long legs crossed in a way that Fitz thought was unfairly distracting at such a serious moment. She was examining her nails as if unaware of the problem.

'Oh, I don't know. Depends what we find we know.' The Doctor traced the line of the wires down from the cup. 'Now the resonance is picked up and transmitted along the wires, two of them of course for triangulation.'

'Of course,' Fitz murmured, earning a huge smile from the Doctor.

'Then the data from the sugar and the salt are fed into the comparator. For comparison.'

‘And why don’t they need two wires, for triangulation?’ Fitz asked.

‘Di-polar sensors,’ Trix said without looking up. Fitz assumed she was making it up. Hoped she was.

‘And all the various data then gets passed to the TARDIS systems for analysis,’ the Doctor went on, ‘and we should be able to read off the results from the console in a moment or three.’

Trix stood up and followed the Doctor over to the control room area of the TARDIS. Fitz was still staring at the table, at the heap of what looked like a load of junk. ‘Hang on,’ he called. ‘What’s the rest of this stuff for?’

‘Oh that’s just a load of junk. To ensure the teacup and the sugar and the salt are at optimum height.’

Trix and the Doctor were peering at various dials, meters and displays on the TARDIS console when Fitz reached them.

‘Hmmm,’ the Doctor was saying.

‘Ah,’ Trix agreed.

‘Well, well, well.’

‘So, there we are.’

‘Excuse me.’ Fitz pushed between them. ‘Resident thicko arriving, so explanations please. Preferably monosyllabic.’

‘Octo, more like,’ the Doctor said. He tapped at one of the small screens. ‘Look, base eight. The crystalline structure, all organised round base eight. Not unlike silicon, I’d say.’

‘Silicon as in silicon chips?’ Fitz said.

‘And base eight as in silicon chips?’ Trix suggested.

‘Computers work in binary,’ Fitz said. That he did know. ‘Base two.’

‘You’re talking bits, I’m talking bytes.’

‘Oh. Right. Yeah, of course.’ Fitz nodded. ‘Good point.’

‘And the frequencies it is emitting are all multiples of eight as well.’ The Doctor pointed to a read-out that Fitz could not see because Trix was in the way.

‘Emitting? You mean it’s a transmitter? The crystal is a transmitter?’ Fitz looked at the Doctor, then at Trix. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘The crystal,’ the Doctor said slowly, ‘is a transmitter. Yes, you know, you could be right. It is just possible,’ he decided, tapping his chin with a long index finger, ‘that your knack of stating the obvious is actually a talent bordering on genius.’

Fitz blinked. He was not quite sure how to react to that.

‘But more likely,’ the Doctor went on, ‘it’s just an annoying habit nurtured by your inability to grasp basic principles.’

‘What is it transmitting?’ Trix asked before Fitz could respond. ‘And where to?’

‘A data stream of some sort. Continuous information, so something that is variable and changing frequently. Not that it’s getting past the TARDIS walls, mind.’

‘And where is it transmitting this data to? Who’s listening?’

‘Well, since it isn’t getting there, we have no way of knowing. And anyway, we couldn’t work it out from just one crystal.’

‘Because you need at least two transmissions for triangulation,’ Fitz said, to prove he wasn’t a complete dork. He thought back to the body stuffed with crystals – to the birth of the universe, the Big Bang. The crystals exploding outwards and being scattered through the rapidly expanding universe. ‘But hang about, there were hundreds – probably thousands – of crystals. Are they all transmitting?’

The Doctor eased Fitz gently aside and leaned over to whisper loudly to Trix. ‘He’s doing it again, you know. I don’t think it can be a coincidence.’

‘Could be luck,’ she said.

Then the Doctor was a blur of motion round the console. His voice seemed to come to Fitz from points he had already left, he moved so fast. ‘We know there are thousands of these crystals out there in the universe – thrown out by the Big Bang, by the forces of creation. One day they’ll all get crunched back together as the universe shrinks and implodes, of course. But for the aeons in between they are transmitting data, all of them. Logically, it is all going to the same point. Each crystal must have a different frequency or whoever’s collecting the data wouldn’t know where it’s coming from any more than we know where it’s going.’

‘So?’ Trix asked.

‘So, we assume that each and every crystal is of the same family as this one. There are – or were – seven known crystal families. But this is totally new to me. An eighth family. And the whole of its structure is based round eight. So the frequencies being used are probably multiples of eight in base eight and since there are as we know thousands of these crystals we should be able to guess a few of the frequencies and detect the transmissions and trace them.’

He paused, and gestured at the vaulted ceiling. It was fading to darkness,

tiny pinprick lights appearing in mid-air above them.

‘How do we know which way the transmission is going?’ Fitz wondered. ‘We might just be finding where there’s another crystal, not where it’s sending stuff to.’

‘So we plot a few, and we see if there’s a point where the lines intersect.’ The Doctor made a point of reaching down and flicking a switch. At once the air was cut across with a spider’s web of white lines. ‘And we find. . .’ He looked up, lips pursed and hands clasped together.

‘It’s a complete mess,’ Trix said.

‘A complete mess,’ the Doctor agreed. He was looking accusingly at Fitz.

‘Maybe they meet somewhere off the display, where we can’t see,’ he said. ‘I mean, that’s possible, isn’t it?’

‘Two small points,’ the Doctor said. His voice sounded artificially calm and reasonable. ‘First, the lines are all going in very different directions in the three dimensions we can see from here. While some do cross each other, there is never going to be a point where they all, or even a majority of them, intersect at once.’

‘And point two?’

‘What we are looking at, is the *universe*. There is no “off the display”.’

Fitz looked up at the lights and lines again. ‘The universe?’ He whistled. ‘You know, it’s not as big as I imagined,’ he said. ‘So where are we?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘We are in the TARDIS. And the TARDIS is in the vortex. We are not there. We are. . .’ His voice tailed off and his frown deepened.

‘We’re off the display,’ Trix said quietly. ‘You know, Fitz, I’m beginning to understand why he keeps you around.’

In an instant the entire display above them changed. The points of light flicked out of existence, the lines swung and shifted. They rearranged themselves into a shape – an almost solid cone. As the Doctor twisted a control, the tip of the cone seemed to grow, to rush towards them at alarming speed.

‘What is that?’ Fitz asked.

‘It’s a point in the space-time vortex. Out there.’ The Doctor pointed his thumb in the general direction of the main doors. ‘Where all the transmissions from the crystals I’ve managed to find meet.’

‘Still looks a bit like a spider’s web,’ Trix said.

‘Temporal isometry.’

‘So what is it? What’s there?’ Fitz wondered.

‘I don’t know,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘Why don’t we go and see?’

‘Can it be done?’ Trilon wanted to know. ‘Can we engineer events and influences such that even a Rogue Element like the Doctor can be predicted?’

‘And predicted to the point where we can be certain of his actions?’ Fear said. ‘Where we can be sure he will not distort other predictions and drain off the potential?’

‘We need a probability analysis,’ Penter decided. ‘A test.’

Octan stood up. Seven hooded figures turned in their chairs to watch as he walked slowly up the incline to the sloping wall behind where he had been sitting. ‘Everything is predictable once the inputs are fixed.’ He waved his hand in front of the wall and the pale crystal seemed to shimmer like water. What colour it had was slowly bled out until the wall was transparent. A window. Outside a maelstrom of light and colour swirled in a never-ending storm.

‘Even here in the vortex, where time means everything and nothing, we can exert control. Remember how we drove out the creatures that seemed to resent our presence here and sent them scurrying into real space-time.’ He paused to make it clear that this was a threat as well as a reminder. ‘We can also predict. We can tame the Rogue Elements and have them do our will without ever realising their actions are dictated by us. Now that everything is in place, we can provide the input data, and control the variables. So even a Rogue Element becomes *entirely* predictable.’

He stepped to the side of the window, clicking his fingers – a gunshot of sound that echoed round the faceted walls.

And as the echoes faded slowly away, so something faded into existence outside the crystal window. A shape caught and buffeted within the storm of the Time Winds that ravaged the vortex: the incongruous form of a police telephone box.

Gazing at Infinity

‘It looks like a sponge.’

‘That’s your considered scientific opinion, is it Fitz?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Well, what do you think? I think it’s a lozenge-shaped sponge. Made of some sort of crystalline stuff.’

The Doctor did not answer. He was watching the image on the scanner through narrowed eyes and clicking his tongue. ‘Why isn’t it torn to pieces by the Time Winds?’ he asked himself quietly. ‘A structure that size must have huge mass. It would be ripped apart in a moment.’ He clicked his fingers. ‘Don’t you think?’

‘I think it looks a bit like a sponge,’ Trix said. Occasionally she agreed with Fitz. Even more occasionally, she was happy to admit it.

‘All those holes,’ Fitz pointed out. ‘Like you get in –’

‘A sponge, yes.’ The Doctor tapped his finger against his chin. ‘It does look a bit like a sponge,’ he admitted. ‘But it also looks a bit like a diamond. Don’t you think?’

Trix made a point of angling her head and squinting. ‘Like the crystal?’

‘Only full of holes,’ Fitz pointed out. ‘The crystal is not full of holes.’

‘All matter is full of holes,’ the Doctor said. ‘It’s just they’re so small you can’t see them. Most of a molecule is made up of the gap between the atoms. Most of an atom is...’

‘Yes, thank you. Point taken.’

Trix thought about this. ‘Are you saying that thing out there is the same as the crystal, only bigger?’

‘Well, no. Not exactly. There’s an affinity, a resemblance. But really, Trix, that thing out there...’ The Doctor paused to nod at the scanner. ‘Well, it’s full of holes. Like a sponge.’

‘They’re in a pattern,’ Fitz said. ‘Rows of holes. It’s deliberate. Structural.’

The Doctor zoomed the scanner in on the spongelike diamond. The colours and swirls of the vortex seemed to flow round it like waves round a break-water, yet it remained still. Unmoving within the storm. Closer, Trix could

see now that the pale crystal-like material was cut through with holes that were perfectly square. Obviously, as Fitz had said, it was deliberate. Each section between the holes was itself studded with smaller square holes. And each strut between those was dotted with more. . .

‘Holes within holes,’ she murmured. ‘Well, sort of.’

The Doctor was examining the console, his fingers beating out an irritatingly irregular rhythm that perhaps matched the way his mind was working. ‘And then some,’ he said. ‘That recurring pattern – square holes in larger square solids – it goes right down to the atomic level. Subatomic. Even further.’ He gave a low whistle. ‘You were right again, Fitz.’

‘Er, I was?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘It is a sponge. A Menger Sponge, in fact. A three-dimensional version of the Sierpinski Carpet.’

‘Of course,’ Trix said. She raised her eyebrows at Fitz to show she had no idea either.

‘Is that the way it was built?’ Fitz wondered. ‘Or did someone come and cut the holes in it afterwards?’

‘Of course!’ The Doctor was in sudden violent motion, racing round the console and checking more readings. ‘That’s how it’s done. Devilishly clever,’ he decided, shaking his head in something approaching awe. ‘Infinite regression.’

‘Oh yes,’ Trix said. ‘Why didn’t we think of that, Fitz?’

‘What, us mere mortals, you mean?’

‘Divide a square into three along each side, like a noughts-and-crosses board,’ the Doctor explained breathlessly. ‘Then take out the middle square. Then you do the same with each of the surrounding squares – take out the middle. And then again to the smaller squares that leaves you, and again and again and again.’ He turned back to the scanner. ‘Tending towards infinity. And here done in three dimensions rather than two.’

‘Yes, but why bother?’ Fitz asked. ‘Clever, OK. But rather pointless.’

The Doctor was still again, staring at them both sternly. ‘Pointless? Hardly. You take a block,’ he said, ‘and you cut a hole in it. A square hole through a square section.’

‘Back to school,’ Fitz said.

The Doctor scowled and pointed at Fitz. ‘What do you get?’

‘Er, a space?’

‘Yes. And. . .?’

'A spare bit of block,' Trix offered.

The Doctor sighed. 'What increases when you cut out the section? And what decreases?'

'Is this one of those conservation of energy things?' Fitz wondered. 'No? Just a thought. I suppose the block of whatever it is gets lighter. So weight decreases.'

'Mass,' Trix corrected him. 'And you increase the surface area.'

'Top of the class.' The Doctor paused, as if realising what he had said. 'Er, that is, well done.'

'So hang on,' Trix was beginning to see what he was getting at. 'You said that something of that *mass* would be ripped apart.'

'Yes.'

'And it isn't.'

He grinned. 'Evidently not.'

'Because the progression of increasingly small holes means that the mass is constantly reduced.'

'And the surface area increased,' Fitz added.

The Doctor was smiling, his fingers clutching – almost beckoning them on. 'And if the pattern of holes tends towards infinity?'

'Then that thing out there has infinite surface area,' Trix said slowly. 'Is that possible?'

'So the instruments say. A Menger Sponge. It has infinite surface area – infinite internal space. And zero mass.'

'That's a great theory,' Fitz said slowly. 'And maybe it explains how our diamond sponge space station...'

'Time station,' the Doctor cut in.

'Whatever. Maybe it explains how it can survive in the vortex. But...'

 He sighed.

'But what?'

'But it's completely *daft*. Crazy.'

'He is actually right,' Trix said. 'It's impossible.'

'And don't start going on at us about bumble bees again,' Fitz said quickly.

'But it's out there. Waiting for us. Even if it is impossible.'

'Told you we hadn't had breakfast yet,' Fitz muttered.

'What do you mean? Waiting for us?' Trix asked slowly. 'You think we should go inside that whatever-it-is and find out who lives there and what they're up to?'

‘And why the crystals are sending whatever data they’re sending to it?’

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. ‘That is the question, isn’t it. Are we supposed to go inside? Or are we supposed not to?’

‘Meaning?’ Fitz asked.

‘Well, you said you thought it looked a bit like a sponge.’

‘It does.’

‘Possibly. But it also looks a bit like a web, don’t you think?’ He adjusted the scanner so that they could see the complete structure again. ‘Could probably persuade the TARDIS to do something similar,’ he added, frowning as if stirring some deeply buried memory.

Trix had to admit, now he had mentioned it, the latticework – almost like crystal girders bolted together – did look like an intricate web. Woven, perhaps, by a rather angular spider with a degree in geometry.

The Doctor’s voice was barely more than a whisper above the hum of the TARDIS. ‘Will you come into my parlour. . .’

‘Will he come here?’ Trilon wondered.

Duvar gave a short snort of derision. ‘Would you?’

‘He will come here.’ Octan was still looking out of the portal, watching the TARDIS as it was buffeted by the Time Winds, as it stood firm in the eye of its own vortex storm. ‘But *when* he comes here is still his own choice.’ He turned back to face the Council. ‘He may decide to come now. Or he may not. But the Doctor will eventually come here.’

‘How can you be sure?’ Hexx said. ‘He is a Rogue Element. *The Rogue Element.*’ He leaned back in his chair, face shadowed and arms folded so that his hands had disappeared inside the folds of the cloak’s sleeves. ‘Now that the universes are back together, in a single predictable and predicted timeline, he knows his decision can affect. . . everything. He is not one to make such a choice lightly.’

‘You are assuming still that he has a choice.’

‘Doesn’t he?’ Fear asked. He somehow managed to sound bored and authoritative at the same time. ‘I thought that was rather the point. In the whole of time and space, the Doctor is the one living being besides ourselves that *does* still have some semblance of choice.’

‘Don’t confuse prediction with manipulation,’ Soul told him.

‘The point, surely,’ Trilon said, ‘is that we have predicted the Doctor’s arrival. And we all know what happens when our predictions are not fulfilled.’

Now more than ever, we can't afford to be wrong.'

'And we are not,' Octan assured him. 'It is inevitable. Whether he comes now or later is irrelevant. Whether he decides to come of his own almost-free will, or is persuaded by others is also irrelevant.'

'Others?' Penter countered. 'You mean his companions – who are almost as tainted and rogue as he is after such prolonged exposure?'

'You're forgetting Sabbath,' Duvar said quietly. 'We can always count on him to do the right thing.' He gave the barest hint of a chuckle.

'There is a limited set of possibilities. But each of those – with or without Sabbath's intervention – will lead him to this point. To this room. To this Council he must come.'

'And that will be the end of it,' Sept said with satisfaction.

'Whenever it happens, relatively speaking,' Hexx agreed. 'This week, or next week.'

'Sometime,' Octan said, nodding.

'Or never,' Soul breathed. But he was careful to let none of the others hear him.

Into the Unknown

The Doctor's finger traced the pattern in the air, mirroring the journey plotted on the scanner.

'So it's moving in time?' Trix wanted to know.

'So it would seem. Endlessly circling. Or rather,' the Doctor's forehead was lined with concentration, 'endlessly describing a figure of eight, which is itself rotating about the centre point, the crossover. Looping back on itself as it travels through every point in History.'

'Every point?' Fitz asked.

'From the big bang to the big crunch.'

'How long does it take it to do all that?'

'Well, strictly speaking, Fitz, no time at all.'

They watched the tiny dot of light on the darkened scanner as it traced back along its path.

'There again, maybe it takes forever. Decision time,' the Doctor said, clapping his hands together. 'Do we take the bull by the horns, as it were, and enter the lion's den? Or do we turn tail and hunt for... ' He paused as if at a loss as to what it was they would be hunting for.

'Mixed metaphors?' Trix suggested.

He ignored her. 'I'd like to have more information, I think. I want to know rather more about what's going on before I stick my head in the moose.'

'It's all our heads. And you mean "noose".'

'I know what I mean, Fitz.'

'So,' Trix said, 'you've decided.'

'Yes.'

The moment the Doctor spoke, a warning buzzer started sounding from the console. A stream of gibberish – numbers, letters, mathematical symbols – danced across the scanner screen, blotting out the infinite time loop.

'What the hell's that?' Fitz shouted over the buzzer.

The Doctor quelled the noise with a thump at the console. 'The consequences of being decisive within a single universe, perhaps?' He moved

slowly round the console, checking instruments and dials. 'Data. Similar to the data from the crystals. Similar but different. Unstructured. And tremendously powerful by comparison. It's swamping all the other triangulated tracks. Look.' He pointed at a meaningless reading – meaningless to Trix. She glanced at Fitz, and he shrugged, equally nonplussed.

'So what is it?'

The Doctor also shrugged. 'Who knows?' He sucked in his cheeks. 'A map?'

The alarms were louder in Central Monitoring. Crystal screens hung suspended in the air, relaying data from various points in space-time. The technicians had their glassy faces intent on the data streams, faceted hands operating the controls as they fixed bearings and decoded information.

'It's swamping all the incoming data,' Logite, the Chief Monitor, told Octan. 'Multiple transmissions. No apparent link.'

'There must be a link,' Octan told him. 'Find it. Unless we can eliminate this background noise, we won't be able to monitor the crystals.'

The only member of the Council who had followed Octan was Hexx. 'How can a transmission like that suddenly start?' he demanded.

'The Doctor,' Octan said simply. 'Whatever is happening, it involves the Doctor.' With the wave of a hand he brought up a graphical list of the emission points. 'At each of these points in space-time – look. All of them on Earth between the Cretaceous period and the twenty-first century. The Doctor must be present at each and exerting an influence.'

'But why should that suddenly show up, suddenly cause this?' Hexx gestured to the mayhem around them as technicians ran back and forth checking and re-checking their data.

'It isn't suddenly happening. We are seeing the effects, not the cause.'

'And what is the cause?'

'Some decision the Doctor has taken. Has taken now, moments ago, in our own relative time stream. A decision that leads inexorably to whatever is creating the emissions. A decision,' he said gravely, 'which could lead to our ultimate destruction unless we track and eliminate the effects at once.' He turned to Logite, who was listening to the exchange. 'Well?'

'There is a link. Apart from the Doctor – if it is him.'

'It is,' Hexx agreed. 'His TARDIS is in the vortex outside. That is where his decision was reached, the chain of events initiated.'

‘All these space-time co-ordinates.’ Logite pointed to the list. ‘I knew I had seen it before. It’s an itinerary.’

‘We can’t track the TARDIS,’ Hexx told him. ‘After the event we can trace the cause and infer that it has visited a certain point. We can track the Doctor only by the effect he has on History, we have no way of tracking the Doctor himself. You know that. We see only his footsteps in the times he should not have trod.’

‘It isn’t the Doctor’s itinerary. It’s one of ours.’

‘What do you mean?’ Octan snapped. ‘Explain.’

Logite looked from Octan to Hexx and back again. ‘It matches the mission statement of one of the Time Agents. Agent Six-Four, in fact. This list – the points at which the transmissions originate – is the series of co-ordinates for the trans-temporal portal that Six-Four is using.’

There was silence for several moments. ‘But that’s impossible,’ Hexx said eventually. ‘The Agents’ purpose is to change without interfering, to leave an effect with no evidence of cause. To be untraceable, undetectable, invisible. To all intents and purposes, the Agents do not exist.’

‘That may be so,’ Logite said. ‘But the Doctor has found one.’

‘It certainly saves us from having to decide which transmission to investigate,’ the Doctor said.

‘Yes,’ Fitz agreed. ‘We can’t detect any others now. Just these mega-noisy ones.’

‘How many of them are there?’ Trix asked.

‘Fifty-three.’

‘Still lots of choices then.’

‘Not really.’ the Doctor said. ‘Look. There are two that are far more powerful than the others. This one in 1485 in London.’ He pointed up at the ceiling of the TARDIS, where a tracery of lines linked dates and places on a three-dimensional map of Earth. ‘And then again in London, in 2004. That one’s as big as all the others put together.’ He gave a short laugh, then his face seemed to freeze. ‘How strange.’

‘What?’ Trix asked.

‘It’s *exactly* the same strength as all the others added together.’

‘Is that important?’ Fitz wanted to know.

‘The sum of their parts, perhaps? Let’s find out, shall we? Trix, you can take a look at August 1485.’

‘Thanks.’

‘And I’ll drop you, Fitz, in 2004.’

‘But that’s my time,’ Trix protested. ‘Or near enough. Why can’t I go to 2004?’

Fitz grinned. ‘Big job, 2004. Takes a real seasoned pro to investigate that.’

‘Absolutely,’ the Doctor said. ‘And what’s more, I think Trix will be able to fit in better in 1485 than you would, Fitz.’

Fitz’s grin dropped. ‘And what are we looking for, exactly?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘So how do we know when we’ve found it?’ Trix asked.

‘I’ll rig up a couple of portable detectors so you can home in on it, as it were. Be careful not to draw attention to yourselves – especially you, Trix.’

‘And what will you be up to while we’re having such fun?’ she asked.

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’ll have a little look at some of these smaller emissions and see what’s going on there. Shouldn’t be too hard to track them down. I can key the TARDIS to the frequency and it should home in on the source. If I arrive a few minutes ahead of the start of the transmission in each case, I can see what’s causing it.’

‘And we all meet up where, when, and how?’

‘I’ll pick Trix up round about when the 1485 emission starts. And then we’ll come and find you, Fitz. By which time,’ the Doctor said confidently, ‘a real pro like yourself should have it all sorted out.’

The corridor was damp and cold. The only light came from a burning torch hanging in a bracket on the wall, and from the light of the TARDIS as it rasped and faded away.

‘Thanks, Doctor,’ Trix said to herself. She had hoped that the Doctor might stay with her at least until she knew where she was. But he had all but pushed her out of the door, as if impatient to be off on his own adventure, leaving her with only her faith that he would ever return. If he didn’t, Trix thought, then she was stuck in the fifteenth century for the rest of her life. It was all very well realising that now, when it was too late to do anything about it.

The smoke from the torch was getting to the back of her throat, and Trix made her way quickly along the passage. The walls were of rough stone, the floor was made of heavy flagstones. The air was damp, cloying, almost dripping with condensation like the walls. Yet if the Doctor was right, it

was summer – August. Trix tried not to think that he might have landed her in completely the wrong time. Perhaps, if he did not return, it would be because the Doctor could not find her rather than did not want to. Not that this would be any consolation.

The Doctor had already dropped off Fitz centuries later when Trix had got back to the TARDIS's main control room. She had managed to find a suitable dress for a late-fifteenth-century lady, and taken the opportunity to hunt out a sort of ornate headdress thing that mercifully had a built-in wig of dark hair pulled back through it. Trix's first thought was that this had to be easier and quicker than sorting out her own hair, but by the time she had finished she was not so sure. The whole arrangement looked rather ungainly, and it felt constantly as if it was about to topple sideways and fall off.

'Hello Trix, you're looking well,' the Doctor had said without looking up. That had done wonders for her confidence. But she was happy she could remove the wig and change appearance totally within seconds should the need arise. She hoped that she was suitably nondescript. Underneath the dress she was wearing leggings and a T-shirt. They might not be the best attire for avoiding attention in 1485, but they allowed her to run faster.

The tracking device the Doctor had given her was about the size and shape of an egg whisk, but with a small black box attached to the handle. In theory, when switched on, it would bleep at an increasingly fast rhythm as it approached the emission. For the moment, there was silence – whatever was signalling had not yet started its message, if message it was. Trix tucked the device into her sleeve and continued along the corridor.

'Halt, who goes there?'

Trix stopped, startled. The shout had come from behind her, and she turned slowly. She almost raised her hands, but then decided it was unlikely whoever had shouted had a gun.

It was a soldier, complete with helmet and breastplate. He was holding a sword and approaching Trix warily.

'My lady, what are you doing here?'

'I'm afraid I'm a little lost,' Trix confessed, in her best haughty better-than-you voice.

'That's the way to the princes' quarters, my lady. Nobody passes that way without permission from the King.'

'Ah. Then I *am* lost.'

The soldier kept his distance and looked curiously at Trix. 'I don't recognise

you, my lady. Are you with Sir William's group?'

'Dear Sir William.' Trix smiled. 'Perhaps he is back that way, then?' She strode past the guard and continued along the passageway. 'I shall be able to find him now, thank you.'

'Are you sure, my lady?' Thankfully the guard made no effort to follow. 'The Tower is a big place.'

Trix froze. 'The Tower of London?'

She did not realise she had said it aloud. 'My lady?' The guard sounded suspicious now. 'Are you truly one of Sir William's entourage?'

'Don't worry yourself,' Trix said, moving quickly onwards. 'I know where I am now.'

'It's a strange one,' the Doctor had told Fitz after Trix had gone to change. 'Not only is this emission so much more powerful, but it builds over a number of years. Look.'

He pointed at a reading that meant nothing to Fitz, and Fitz nodded and 'Mmmm'ed at it.

'So, I'll drop you just before it peaks, here.'

'Er, where?'

January 31st 2004.'

'Right. Good. Soon as you're ready.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm ready now. We've landed.' He handed Fitz his detector – which looked rather like a tangle of wires coming out of a black box. 'Just follow the beeps and see what you find. We'll be back to pick you up before you know it.'

And so the Doctor had deposited Fitz on to a darkened London street without a pub in sight. What was in sight, behind the TARDIS as it faded away, was a building that Fitz recognised. The British Museum.

But the beeps from the detector led him away from it, back towards Holborn, then up a side street to another old building. It looked like the British Museum, but smaller, less impressive. A pale imitation. The iron gates stood open, and Fitz went through and up the short flight of steps to the entrance. On the stone pillar beside the closed wooden doors was a notice. A title and opening times.

'Institute of Anthropology.' Fitz read out loud. 'Sounds like a good place to start.'

When he looked back, he saw that the doors to the Institute were opening. Light spilled out from inside, the low sound of people talking. And a man was standing framed in the light.

‘Can I help you, sir?’ he asked.

Telling Tales

The sound was coming from the other end of the corridor, and Trix made her way cautiously towards it. The secret was to look as if she belonged, but not to draw attention to herself. If anyone asked her for a pass or papers or some other form of credentials, she was stuffed. Or, more likely given the period, skewered.

There was a large arched doorway, a soldier standing either side of it. The noise and light were coming from within and as she approached Trix could tell that a banquet was in progress. A rather raucous and drunken banquet by the sound of it. There was no way that Trix could get past without being seen, and she did not want to go back the way she had come – at least, not until she had permission from the King to visit the section of the Tower where it seemed the TARDIS thought the strange emission would start from.

So there was really only one option. Without hesitation, and ignoring the guards as she imagined any lady of the court would, Trix strode into the banqueting hall, praying that her hair was not about to fall off. A plan was forming in her mind as soon as she crossed the threshold. There were other women present, she was pleased to see. Blundering into King Henry's stag night or something might not have been the most inconspicuous of entrances. As it was, everyone seemed intent on their food or their companions.

There were several long tables running the length of the large room. Another table ran across the top, and it was pretty apparent who was in charge. He was a thin-faced man with dark hair cut into a bob. He was not actually wearing a crown, but the way everyone else deferred to him, the confidence he exuded, the fact that his chair was raised slightly higher than the others round him – all these marked him out as the King.

For a moment, Trix considered just walking up to him and asking for permission to roam freely round the Tower. It was not a prison in early Tudor times, was it? But she dismissed the idea at once. Instead she looked to the top ends of the other tables. The nearer the top, she thought, the more important the people would be. The closer to the King, the higher ranking. She

saw what she was looking for close to the top of the second table. A rather portly middle-aged man sitting on his own. He was swaying slightly, and the hand that held his goblet was waving so that wine or ale sloshed over the top. Sloshed, Trix decided, was the operative word.

She sat herself down next to the man, giving him a moment to notice she was there. His eyes were not as drunk as his hand as he fixed her with a cold stare and she wondered for a second if she had made a mistake. But she smiled and raised her eyebrows.

‘Do I know you?’ The words were very slightly slurred.

He had certainly drunk too much, Trix decided, but he was used to it. ‘Would you like to?’ she asked, trying not to breathe in the fumes from his gaping mouth. The man seemed to consider this without coming to any real conclusion. So Trix offered her hand. ‘Lady Beatrice,’ she said.

The man grabbed her hand. Trix gasped and tried to pull away, her immediate thought was that he was about to raise the alarm and shout for the intruder to be arrested. But instead he dragged her hand to his face and kissed it. His chin was peppered with stubble and uncomfortable. It was an effort not to wipe the back of her hand afterwards. Even more of an effort to keep smiling.

‘And I know who you are, of course, my lord,’ Trix said. ‘Everyone in the kingdom must know you.’

He nodded as if this was indeed the case. Trix waited, but when it became obvious he was not about to enlighten her without further prompting, she went on: ‘They say the King himself relies on your judgement.’

‘Well. . .’ His chest seemed to puff out slightly at this and he took a slurping gulp of wine. Trix could tell it was wine from the way it looked dribbling down his chin and staining his robes.

‘Say it for me, my lord,’ she said, her voice a husky whisper. ‘Say your name, just so I can hear it again.’ She fluttered her eyelids. ‘Such a melodious, auspicious name.’

The man set down his goblet. It wobbled for several moments before settling on its base. He made a show of blustering, as if unwilling to oblige. ‘Very well,’ he consented at last, glancing round as if to check if anyone else was listening. ‘I am,’ he announced grandly to Trix, ‘Lord Scrote of Penge.’ Then he belched. Loudly.

It happened that at this moment there was a slight lull in the noise from the rest of the room. The belch seemed incredibly loud as a result. Trix

looked quickly round, catching the eye of the King as she did so. She quickly looked away.

'I see King Henry favours you,' Trix said quietly. 'Lord Scrote.' But her words were all but lost in the sound of the banquet.

Scrote was staring glassily at Trix again. 'That bastard,' he announced vehemently.

'Er, I beg your pardon?'

'That bastard Henry,' he spat. 'All the Tudors. Bastards. All of them. That what you were saying?'

Trix was having visions of an executioner's axe. How could she shut him up? What had she said? 'All of them?' she asked, looking round again to see if he had been overheard.

'Tomorrow,' Scrote said proudly, 'I shall be at the forefront of the army when we leave to do battle with the would-be usurper.'

'Er, battle?'

'Of course. King Richard has given me command of...'

He paused and leaned heavily towards Trix. 'Are you all right, Lady Beatrice, you seem pale?'

'What? No, not at all.' Good recovery, Trix thought. But she was also thinking how easily she might have been heard speaking treason. Trust the Doctor not to tell her who was king, even if it wasn't going to be for long. 'I'm fine, thank you. Merely overcome with the honour of sitting so close to one of His Majesty's most trusted commanders.'

'Well...'

Scrote made a point of flicking dust off his robes. He seemed content to ignore the bits of chicken and splashes of wine.

'Tell me,' Trix went on, 'how do you intend to celebrate your last night in London, before the battle?'

Scrote did not have an immediate answer to this.

'Perhaps,' Trix said quietly, hoping she was not going too fast for him, 'I could keep vigil with you as you prepare yourself?'

He thought about this. Trix almost expected him to try counting off her one possible meaning on his greasy fingers. 'Ah,' he decided at last. 'Aha.' Then he belched again, and gave a sudden guffaw of laughter. 'Yes.'

'But,' Trix said quickly, raising her hands to quieten him, 'it must be here, in the Tower. Somewhere quiet, The residential area, perhaps?'

'Why? Why not return with me?'

‘Er, my husband,’ Trix admitted. ‘He would hear of it if I was seen abroad with another man.’

‘Husband?’

‘Yes. Sir Gerald Fitz-Kreiner. The finest swordsman in Berkshire,’ she added. ‘He can be so *very* jealous. So, if only...’ Trix let her voice tail off.

He took the bait immediately: ‘If only?’

‘If only I had the King’s permission to stay in the Tower for this evening. For the night. But alas, I have not.’

‘Oh.’ He was disappointed. ‘Oh well, that’s a great shame.’

Trix sighed. She made an effort to brighten. ‘Unless, perhaps, the King might be persuaded to grant me such permission.’

‘You could always ask, I suppose.’ He seemed more interested in the wine now.

‘But I am not one of His Majesty’s most trusted advisers and commanders. Whereas someone who has the King’s confidence could obtain such permission easily.’

‘Probably could. Yes.’ He nodded, refilling his goblet until it overflowed.

‘Someone like you, Lord Scrote,’ Trix finished through near-gritted teeth.

‘Mmmm.’ He froze. ‘Er, what?’ When he looked up, Trix was nodding furiously at him.

‘That is, if you really are so trusted and admired,’ she added wistfully. ‘As I have heard.’

Scrote hauled himself unsteadily to his feet. ‘Be right back,’ he said before pushing his way clumsily towards the top table.

Despite the scroll of parchment clutched in her hand, Trix still moved cautiously through the corridors. In her other hand she held the egg-whisk device the Doctor had given her. The King had apparently been amused by Lord Scrote’s probably rather incoherent request and sent off some lackey to get him the parchment.

Lord Scrote was finishing his wine, expecting to meet Trix later at some place she had already dismissed from her mind. She had no idea where it was, and she seriously doubted if he was capable of finding his way there anyway. The important thing, she had stressed to him, was that they should not be seen to leave the banquet together.

The device was picking up something now. It was faint, almost inaudible, but holding it in front of her face, Trix could just hear the tiny bleeps of sound, and let them guide her through the corridors and rooms of the Tower.

She saw a few people, several guards, but none of them challenged her now. Perhaps they saw the parchment in her hand, or perhaps they just weren't interested. Trix was a great believer in Sod's Law, and it was just typical that she was only challenged for her papers when she had none, and now she had the best possible credentials no one was the least bit interested.

The Doctor had said something about residual temporal imaging that would make the emission faintly detectable before the source actually arrived. The bleeps were becoming a faint but frantic staccato as Trix ascended a winding flight of stone steps and reached a heavy wooden door off the landing at the top. Checking there was nobody about, she opened the door and slipped inside the room. It was dark, and instinctively she felt for a light switch. Realising her mistake, she sighed and almost laughed at herself.

'Who's there?' a voice said out of the darkness. 'Who is it? Is it morning?'

'No,' Trix said quickly, biting back her surprise. 'No it isn't.' It had sounded like a child's voice. 'Sorry, I seem to be lost.' Her eyes were adjusting to the dim light. She could make out vague shapes. Something or someone moving. She pushed the device into her sleeve again, wondering whether to wait or to run. She started to turn.

'My brother keeps a candle burning by his bed. Wait.'

Trix paused. There was a shuffling sound, a door opened on the other side of the room and faint, flickering light illuminated a small figure. It was wearing a nightshirt and had long hair. A small girl?

'What is it, Edward?' another young voice called. So, not a girl then – a long-haired boy.

'She says she is lost.'

'I am.'

'And who are you?' The second boy was carrying a candle. He brought it into the room where Trix was and set it on a table beside the bed where the first child had been sleeping.

'You can call me Aunt Beatrice,' Trix decided.

'Are you our aunt?' the first boy asked.

'It is a term of affection. I am your friend.' It sounded like they were brothers. 'Why don't you tell me who you are?'

The two boys were sitting side by side on the bed. Trix could see now that they must be brothers. There was a definite similarity of features, and each had long blond hair.

The first boy she had seen looked to his brother. 'Doesn't she know? How can she not know?'

The other boy stood up. He was looking at Trix in a way that made her feel somehow small, insignificant. 'Are you jesting with us, Aunt Beatrice?' he asked sternly. 'I was once the King of England. Or very nearly.'

'A prince?' Trix murmured. And even as she did so, she realised who they were. 'The Princes in the Tower.'

The phrase seemed lost on the boys. 'You may call me Richard,' the boy from the other room said. 'And my brother is Edward.'

'Of course.' Trix smiled. 'Forgive me, I was lost and confused. It is an honour to meet you both.' She wasn't sure she was up to a curtsy, so she gave a short bow instead. Another thought had occurred to her now. If this was 1485 and Richard III was off in the morning to battle Henry Tudor...

'So King Richard didn't do it,' she said out loud.

The princes both frowned at her words. 'Do what?' Edward asked.

Trix did not answer. 'Are you well looked after here?'

'Indeed yes,' Prince Richard assured her. 'We lack for nothing.'

'Except freedom?'

The older boy frowned again. 'We are as free as you are. I am the Duke of York. Edward is Prince of Wales. Uncle Richard sees we have everything we need.'

'He's off to fight Henry Tudor tomorrow,' Edward said proudly.

'Yes, I know.'

'He said goodbye to us before his feast began,' the Duke of York said. 'We wished him well and he kissed us goodnight.'

'We'll see him when he returns,' Edward assured Trix. 'After the battle.'

But Trix knew this was not true. Just as she knew what was to happen to these children. The sudden realisation made her choke back an unexpected sob.

'Aunt Beatrice?' Edward was at once beside her, hugging her. 'Come and sit down. You must be tired.'

Before she knew it, Trix was sitting on the bed between the two princes, astonished at their sudden concern.

‘Are you all right?’ Richard asked her, and Trix realised they were both leaning against her, reassuring her, keeping her safe.

She struggled to keep her voice level and calm. ‘I’m fine. Thank you. Just tired.’

‘Tell us a story, Aunt Beatrice,’ Richard said.

‘A good story, with a happy ending,’ Edward qualified, taking Trix’s hand. ‘About us.’

Cause and Effect

The TARDIS had sunk almost a foot into the snow. It was a good thing, the Doctor mused, that the exterior doors opened inwards, or he would not have been able to force them through the snow. The air was dry and crisp and the Doctor took a deep breath. The air pressure and oxygen levels told him that he was on the slopes of a mountain. The instruments in the TARDIS told him that he was in south-eastern France and that it was 17 May 1837.

What they did not tell him was why he was here or what he was looking for.

The Doctor was rather pleased with the tracking devices he had put together. His own was a slightly different design to the ones he had given Trix and Fitz – a small, plain metal box with a read-out inset in one end. As well as tracking the emissions they had detected in the TARDIS, it would analyse the signal and look for associated but less obvious data. Or it would if there were any signal. The sacrifice he had made to enable this function was that unlike Trix's device, he could not predict the emissions. At the moment there was nothing, but the TARDIS had arrived a few minutes ahead of the start of the signal.

The device did, however, tell the Doctor his current geographical position relative to where the emission would start. He had about a quarter of a mile to walk. Uphill. Through the snow. Hoping it got no deeper, the Doctor started to wade away from the TARDIS, his arms wide to keep his balance. The snow crested into a convex rise ahead of him, so he could not see where he was heading.

Almost immediately he could see smoke. A thin trail wafting into the sky, it seemed to be coming from his intended destination. Intrigued, the Doctor hurried forwards. As he reached the top of the rise, he saw that the ground dropped gently away into a shallow valley. In the bottom of it was a small encampment – four tents, and a group of men gathered round a fire, over which a large pot was hanging from a metal tripod. On the far side of the valley, the Doctor could see the edge of a wood, the snow hanging on the

branches of huge pine trees. Just like Christmas, he thought.

The three men turned as the Doctor approached, watching him as he made his way towards them.

'Hello there,' he called out. A discreet check on his device told the Doctor that this was not where the emission would come from. That was about another thousand metres, up the other side of the valley and out of sight. 'Lovely weather for a brisk stroll.'

'More than a stroll,' one of the men said. There was frost in his straggly beard. 'Where have you come from?'

The Doctor pointed vaguely back the way he had come.

'From Figueras?' suggested another of the men by the fire. He was small-framed with a narrow face and deep-set eyes.

The Doctor smiled, as if in confirmation.

'That's quite a stroll,' the third man said. He was broad and stocky and clean-shaven. 'Will you join us for something to eat...?' He let the question hang, obviously asking more than he said.

'Doctor,' the Doctor said. 'Just call me Doctor. And thank you, but I'd like to keep going, I think. It's good for the circulation.' He stamped his feet and blew on his hands as if cold.

The broad man's eyes narrowed slightly, but he nodded. 'I am Jules,' he said. 'And this is Pierre.'

'Yves,' the smaller man said, not waiting to be introduced.

'Just the three of you?'

'Why do you ask?' Pierre wanted to know. He was looking suspiciously at the Doctor.

The Doctor smiled. 'No reason. It's just that there are four tents.'

It was Jules who answered. 'Louis is working. Up there.' He pointed towards the far side of the valley. Towards where the Doctor was heading.

'Working?'

'You don't know who we are?' Pierre asked, evidently still suspicious.

'I've never heard of you. Sorry.'

'That's all right,' Yves said. He leaned forward and stirred the pot. The smell of stew was strong and inviting and the Doctor was tempted to sit down with them and talk. If only life was that straightforward, he thought. If only there was time to sit and talk and make friends and be happy...'

'You haven't heard of Louis?' Jules wondered. 'Louis Vosgues?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I don't believe so.'

'You will,' Yves assured him. 'Louis is destined for great things.'

'Really?'

'If diligence and commitment are anything to go by,' Pierre said. 'Though he has more talent than the rest of us put together.'

'In what field?' the Doctor asked. He really ought to be going, but he was intrigued now.

'Palaeontology,' Jules said. 'If you have ever heard of that.'

'The study of fossils.' Their reactions confirmed the Doctor's guess as to why they were wary of him. 'But don't worry,' he said, 'I'm not a rival. As I told you, I'm just out for a walk.'

'Half way up the Pyrenees?'

'It's a lovely day. And I must be going.'

They watched the Doctor as he crossed the valley floor and started up the incline. But he got the impression they were more amused than worried by him now. He could hear them laughing together as he reached the trees.

Eleven minutes, the device told him. And he was four hundred metres from where the emission would start. The Doctor quickened his pace. The trees thinned away to the left of him, and he headed slightly that way. If he was out of the trees the going might be slower, but equally he might be able to see what he was heading for.

He was almost at the edge of the trees, just two hundred and twenty metres from his destination when someone shouted. It was a strong, urgent voice from somewhere ahead of him.

'Stop!'

The Doctor stopped.

'Don't move, you're right on the edge.'

He could see someone now – a man rising to his feet maybe thirty metres away. The Doctor had not seen him as he had been kneeling down in the snow at the base of a tree. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, with short dark hair and a thin moustache. The man made his way carefully towards the Doctor, shuffling through the shallow snow. Like the men at the camp he was dressed in heavy furs and weaving thick gloves. Or rather, one thick glove. He had taken off the other one and was holding something in his bare hand.

'The edge of what?' the Doctor asked.

The young man stopped several paces in front of him and gestured for the Doctor to approach. When he reached the man, the Doctor said: 'You must

be Louis Vosgues. I met your friends.'

The man nodded for him to turn and look back the way he had come. From here the Doctor could see that he had indeed been on the edge – the edge of a precipice. The snow masked the drop, but looking back it was apparent that the ground gave way and he was looking at the sheer side of the mountain – a drop of perhaps twenty metres on to rocks below that were dusted with snow. But the snow did not soften their jagged edges.

'Thank you,' the Doctor said. 'I am indebted.'

'Pleasure. I nearly went over myself when I first came up here this morning.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Easily done.' He pointed to the man's bare hand. 'What's that you've found?'

Louis held it up for the Doctor to see. His hand was shaking slightly in the cold, but the Doctor could see that it was a small bone.

'I'm building up quite a collection,' Louis said.

'Fascinating. May I?'

Louis shrugged and handed the Doctor the fragment of bone. 'I'm not sure what it is from yet. It's like nothing we've found before.'

'You have any theories?'

'About this?' He took it back and stuffed it into a pocket before pulling his glove back on. 'Or in general.'

'Either.'

Louis looked carefully at the Doctor, as if assessing him. 'It does seem to me,' he said slowly, 'that not all life on Earth exists at the same time in history.' He paused as if waiting for a reaction.

The Doctor kept his voice neutral. 'Go on.'

'Some species die out, and we find their bones. Others seem to appear.'

'I see.' The Doctor bit back further comment. This was 1837, he reminded himself. Darwin might not be the only, or even the first, person to think about notions of evolution. But his *On the Origin of Species* was not going to be published for over twenty years yet.

'Of course,' Louis went on, 'that is not what the Bible says. So the evidence I am finding must be wrong.' He raised an eyebrow. 'Mustn't it?'

'I think,' the Doctor said slowly, 'that would be a long discussion.'

'And you are in a hurry?'

'I have to check something, up there.' The Doctor pointed into the trees, up the incline. There was a ridge about a hundred metres away and perhaps

twenty metres above them. 'But it should only take a few minutes. Then perhaps we could talk some more.'

'So, you don't dismiss my theory?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm afraid I have very little expertise in these matters. But if you're after an attentive listener with an open mind, then I would be delighted to oblige.'

Louis was grinning. 'In a few minutes, then.'

The Doctor nodded, and continued on his way. He glanced back as he reached the trees, and saw that the young man was digging away at the snow where they had been standing. Not very scientific in his approach, the Doctor decided. But he had a keen mind. His colleagues had been right – he should go far. Odd, the Doctor thought, that he had never heard of Louis Vosgues.

There was nothing there. It was a steep climb up the side of the ridge. Now the Doctor stood at the top, with a good view of Louis at his work down the steep slope under the ridge. There was a small clearing in the trees, but the snow was undisturbed. Whatever created the signal they had detected in the TARDIS had yet to arrive. But looking round, the Doctor could see nothing. In a few seconds the signal would start, but there was nothing in sight that could be responsible. The young man was over a hundred metres away and a long way below. No other sign of life.

Unless, the Doctor realised, whatever it was he was looking for was already here, buried beneath the snow. Waiting for something to trigger it off. Perhaps he should go and look. Or perhaps it was that very act – himself digging into the snow with his bare hands just as Louis was doing elsewhere – that would start the emission which the Doctor would then detect and which would bring him here so he could create it. Well, it was possible. But it was not the sort of causal paradox that the Doctor cared for. So he waited and watched.

And saw the air shimmer and the creature arrive.

It swirled into existence in a sudden maelstrom of colour – the vortex breaking through into reality to deposit this... creature. A creature that seemed immune to the ravages of the Time Winds, and that was turning slowly as the light and colours faded, as if to get its bearings.

Or was it immune? At first the Doctor thought it was a giant ape, but now he could see that only parts of it were apelike. Others were more human.

More *evolved*, he thought, remembering his brief conversation with Louis. Tainted by the Time Winds – here was a creature that was made up of parts that had evolved and developed at different rates. Part reptile, part simian, part *Homo erectus*. Perhaps part *Homo sapiens*. And part perhaps even more advanced than that. . .

All of which was fascinating. But it did not explain why it was here. Nor did it explain why, as the creature started to lumber through the snow, the detector that the Doctor held insisted that the emission he was so interested in was still coming from the point where the creature had appeared. Not the creature itself then. Something else.

But for the moment it was the creature that held the Doctor's attention. There was no moment of insight, no sudden revelation. The Doctor slowly realised what was happening as he watched. By the time the idea had fully evolved, it was too late. The creature was already standing on the ridge above where Louis Vosgues was burrowing into the snow. Perhaps it was when the creature itself stooped, when it picked up a handful of snow. Or perhaps when it examined the snow, packed it into a ball, discarded some and weighed it in its inhuman hand. The Doctor was already running when the creature held out its hand, paused with the handful of snow poised above the ridge and seemed to sight along its arm. As if taking aim.

The Doctor knew instinctively what it was aiming at. He shouted. Below him, Louis looked up, uncertain at first where the sound had come from. He looked directly at the creature, yet the Doctor could tell he had not seen it. Then he started to stand, seeing the Doctor on the ridge. Seeing the Doctor waving his arms in warning, shouting, running.

As Louis stood, the creature opened its hand. As he stood, the creature let go of the handful of snow and let it fall. As he stood, the snow caught on the edge of the ridge, bounced, gathered speed, dragged more snow with it, continued falling. . .

Before long, the handful was a cascade, was a slide, was an avalanche. A waterfall of ice and snow crashing down towards where Louis was standing. He had no time to move.

Louis seemed to stumble as the wall of snow hit him, his face masked with surprise. Already he was losing his balance, his arms flailing on the edge of the snow as he was swept backwards – towards the edge of the cliff.

For a moment, time seemed to slow down. For a moment it looked to the Doctor as if Louis would regain his balance on the edge of the sheer drop as

the snow crashed past and over him. But then the edge gave way beneath him and another wave of snow smashed into the man. It occurred to the Doctor as he watched, suddenly cold and detached now that the outcome was inevitable, that the creature had carefully weighed the amount of snow it needed. Just enough to send the man over the edge, but no more. The smallest possible intervention, for the maximum effect.

In a second it was over. Louis was gone, only his cries continued to echo over the mountain. The creature was turning, retracing its steps, and the Doctor was frozen, watching, wiping the moisture from his cold eyes as the chill breeze made them blink and smart.

The creature seemed not to see the Doctor any more than Louis had seen the creature. It walked right past him on its way back to the point where it had arrived. As it went, the Doctor glanced down, and watched its legs shuffling back through the snow. And as they moved, so the snow fell back into place behind them – smooth and untrodden. As if the creature had never been there. As if Time itself could not see what had happened.

When the creature was gone, swallowed up by the swirling lights and colours, the Doctor went over to the point where the vortex corridor had been. The only footprints were his own. Now he did reach into the snow, clutching and searching, scrabbling away to find what was beneath. The device was bleeping frantically in one hand as he dug with the other. His hand closed on something – something smooth and cold.

It seemed to be made of glass. So transparent it was almost invisible. A short, stubby length of shaped crystal. Its smooth, curved surface reminded the Doctor of something, though for now he could not think what.

He stood alone in the snow and the trees, and thought about Louis Vosgues. He wondered if he should tell the man's friends what had happened, but then again they would discover soon enough. Let them enjoy their meal. Spare them the thought that a stranger might have walked over the mountain just to start a small avalanche that had pushed their colleague over a cliff. After all, that was a ridiculously complicated way to ensure someone died. Unless it had to be done that way – at just that time, after certain events in the man's life and before certain others. At the point where the maximum advantage could be gained with the minimum attention or suspicion.

But who would go to that sort of trouble? And why?

The Doctor pushed the piece of glass into his jacket pocket. He turned and started to walk back through the wood, taking a route that would bring him

through the little valley and back to the TARDIS out of sight of the men at the camp. He was still tempted to go back and tell them, to try to explain. To grieve with them at their loss. If only life was that straightforward, he thought. If only there was time to sit and talk and make friends and be sad...

Uninvited Guests

Through the door, Fitz could see several people with glasses of wine. He could hear the buzz of their conversation and laughter. The man who had opened the door was still looking at Fitz, waiting for an answer.

‘Oh, er, yes.’ Fitz made to go through the door, but the man did not move. ‘I’m here for the bash.’

‘Indeed, sir?’

Beyond the door was a foyer area, large and circular with arched doorways leading off. The people inside were making their way for the main archway, into the Institute. As they went, one of them turned back to look at Fitz. He was a tall man, so thin he was almost gaunt, with a dose-cut dark beard. He frowned when he saw Fitz, then turned and followed the others.

Just behind the man was a woman. She was also tall, but she was far from thin. Plump, Fitz thought, would be a good word. Her cheeks were puffed out like a greedy hamster’s so that her eyes seemed deep-set and shadowed. Her dark hair had wisps of grey in it and was tied up in a bun on her head so that she looked like a cottage loaf with a dark brown cherry on the top. The austere, grey dress she was wearing did nothing for her. The woman smiled at Fitz, and he forced a smile in return. Then she followed the others through the archway and into the Institute.

‘Your name, sir?’ The man at the door was wearing a security guard’s uniform complete with unnecessary gold braid on the shoulders and lapels. He had produced a clipboard from somewhere.

‘My name?’

The guard nodded. ‘Just so I can tick you off.’ He said it as if he was already ticking Fitz off.

Fitz tried to peer over the top of the clipboard in the hope of catching sight of the list of names. But the guard had carefully angled it so that this was impossible. He knew that Fitz was not on the list, just as Fitz knew. Of course, he could take a guess. ‘John Smith’ was as good an option as any. But

however common or obvious the name he chose, chances were Fitz's choice would not be on the guard's clipboard.

So instead he decided to try the other extreme. 'Sponge,' he said confidently. 'Horatio Sponge.' The guard looked unimpressed, so Fitz leaned forward slightly and added in a confidential whisper: 'O.B.E.'

The guard met Fitz's confident gaze. He did not even bother to check the list. 'I'm afraid, sir, that name does not appear to be on the list.'

Fitz was outraged. 'But that's absurd. I'm expected. Ask anyone.'

'I really don't think I want to bother them, sir. If you're not on the list, then you're not invited.' He started to close the door, apparently not worried that Fitz was in the way.

'Then it's a mistake.' Fitz tried to maintain his outrage as the door pressed painfully into his foot. 'And someone will be in very serious trouble about it.'

'I'm sure, sir. Goodnight, sir.'

'Aren't you going to check?'

The door paused. 'Are you seriously suggesting, sir, that Professor Fleetward will vouch for you and ask me to let you in?'

'You could ask him, but I may have been invited by someone else.'

'All the guests were invited by Professor Fleetward. This is his evening, after all, sir. As I expect you know.' The guard tilted his head slightly to one side. 'Which paper shall I tell him was interested, sir? The journalists who *have* been invited may be interested to know as well.'

'I'm not a journalist,' Fitz said through gritted teeth. But it seemed like he was losing this battle big time.

'Then why would you want to gatecrash?'

'I don't. I was invited. I told you.'

'I'm sorry, sir. If you're not on the professor's list and you didn't come with Miss Devine, then you will have to leave.'

Fitz's eyes narrowed. 'Miss Devine?'

'Miss Crystal Devine.'

Fitz beamed. If there was a glimmer of hope, then it had to be in a name like that. And if it was simply a case of charming a lady into allowing him into her party, then Fitz was the man. It was either go for that or try to shin up a drainpipe round the back after all.

'At last you're beginning to see sense,' Fitz told the dubious guard. 'Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell Miss Devine that I am here?'

She thought at first that the figures were alive. But as Zezanne crept closer and her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see that they were not moving, not breathing. It had taken her a while after the light and the noise faded to realise that she was somewhere else. A few moments ago she had been kissing her mother goodnight, and now she was... somewhere else.

The figures were in a line. A small plaque stood in front of each, held on a metal pole. She could not read the plaques in the dark. But she could see that the figure at the front of the line was a man. Or rather, a life-size model of a man. Like the others he was naked, frozen in mid-step. Behind him another man, but with more hair, a pronounced forehead, stooped, his arms hanging low. And behind the second figure, the third was almost an ape. The progression continued backwards through two more stages – at the end of which the final figure *was* an ape, knuckles to the ground to propel himself forwards.

A depiction of the evolution of Man, Zezanne realised as she walked back along the silent line.

She was in a large room. Zezanne could begin to see other exhibits now – displays in glass cases, shelves of bits and pieces. Bones, scraps of clothing, crude stone and metal tools... A museum, perhaps? Alone in the dark in a museum.

If she *was* alone. As she made her way into the darkness, her careful footsteps making more noise than she intended, Zezanne thought she caught sight of movement. At first she thought it was a reflection in a glass case. Or perhaps an animated exhibit of some sort. Then she saw the small, dark figure dart from one patch of shadow to another. Its feet scuffed on the wooden floor.

‘Who’s there?’ she called out nervously.

No answer.

‘I saw you,’ she protested. ‘Please, who are you?’ She made her way towards where she had seen the figure. ‘I’m lost. Can you tell me where I am? Have you seen my mother?’

‘Who are you?’ a voice called back. It sounded strained and nervous.

‘Zezanne. Who are you?’

The reply was muffled. It sounded like ‘Chad’.

‘Are you lost too, Chad? Were you somewhere else?’

‘I’m not lost,’ the boy protested.

His voice came from right behind her, and Zezanne spun round in surprise.

He was grinning at her, teeth pale in the darkness. He looked about her age, and slightly taller.

'I got locked in,' he said. 'There're people downstairs, by the way out. But I'm not supposed to be here, so I don't want them to see me.'

'I wonder if I'm supposed to be here,' Zezanne said.

'You've lost your mother?'

'I don't know if she is here too, or not.'

'We could look for her,' Chad offered. 'I don't like the dark. It scares me. It's good to have someone to wait with.'

'Wait for what?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know. Whatever's going to happen tonight.'

'You think something is going to happen?'

'You just arrived,' Chad said. 'That happened. I saw you arrive, in a tunnel of light.'

'Is that why you hid?' she asked.

He nodded. 'I didn't know it was you. Otherwise I wouldn't have hidden.'

'Who did you think it was?' she asked, half joking.

Chad did not answer. He looked away, towards the line of evolving ape-figures. His pale face was suddenly washed with shadows.

A Matter of Timing

The Italian air shimmered with the afternoon heat. The only sound was the gentle clip-clop of the horse's hooves on the steep, rocky path. Further down the hill, one might have heard the gentle sigh of the bellows in the blacksmith's in the village, the gruff shout of the blacksmith himself as he told the boy to pump harder and keep the fire going. But all of these would have been drowned out by the tearing, scraping cacophony that announced the arrival of the TARDIS.

The Doctor stepped out and took a deep breath of the medieval air. It would all change once the internal combustion engine arrived, he thought. Still, it was good for another few hundred years. This was 1564, according to the TARDIS and the emission data. In a few minutes something would happen, and the Doctor would be waiting to see what it was.

The TARDIS was hidden from the track by a clump of dry, brittle bushes that thrust themselves defiantly out of the stony hillside. The Doctor reckoned that whatever was about to happen would be in a couple of minutes, and somewhere just on the other side of the uneven path. He settled himself down so that he too was mostly hidden by the bushes, pulling the fragile branches apart so he could see between them.

The horse and its rider came into view round the bend, heading down towards the village at the bottom of the hill. The Doctor watched the horse's deliberate, careful progress, counting off the seconds. Yes, this was it. If his suspicions were correct, then the man on the horse – a gentleman by the look of him – would be someone important, or *potentially* important, in historical terms. He narrowed his eyes, trying to focus on the approaching figure. It was no one he recognised, he was sure of that.

The air rippled. At first the Doctor dismissed it as a heat haze, and continued to watch the man on the horse. But at the edge of his vision a shape was forming. The creature he had seen before, or one very like it. Did one of its legs seem more human now? Was one paw more like a hand? Were the facial features perhaps a little more distinct? It was interesting, he thought,

what the Time Winds could do even to those beings that thought they were immune to the effects of the vortex.

It was evident that neither the horse nor its rider could see the creature. It stepped out on to the track, directly in front of the horse, and waited. The Doctor was sure it was waiting, and he wondered what for. 'A matter of timing,' he murmured.

He did not see the cause, but he could deduce it from the effect. It happened as the man on the horse looked away, glancing down into the valley where the village nestled at the foot of the steep hill. The moment his attention had shifted from the road, the horse's head snapped up slightly and it blinked. Although the Doctor could perceive no difference, it seemed that the horse could now see the creature. Terrified, it gave a grunt of surprise and fear, followed by a loud whinny. The animal's front legs braced, stopping it in its tracks, and the rider grasped desperately for the reins as the horse reared up, almost throwing him.

The man was able to hold on for several seconds before he fell to the ground. For a moment he was still, and the Doctor wondered if he was dead. Forgetting that he was here to watch, not to get involved, the Doctor ran across to the thrown rider. The horse was stumbling, frightened, back up the track. The man sat up as the Doctor knelt beside him.

'What in heaven's name are you doing, scaring my horse like that?'

The Doctor blinked. Well, at least the man seemed uninjured. He got to his feet and dusted himself down, looking round for the horse.

'Not guilty,' the Doctor said, stooping to retrieve the man's hat. It was snatched from him. The Doctor smiled apologetically. 'I was over there, other side of the bushes. The horse didn't see me.' He looked round, wondering if the man had caught even a glimpse of the creature. But already it was gone, swallowed back into the time vortex.

The man grunted, apparently not believing a word of it. He caught sight of his horse, stamping its feet and blowing in agitation further up the track. With a final glare at the Doctor, he set off towards it, clicking his tongue, calming the creature so it kept still enough for the man to grab its reins. He patted the horse's flank, and the Doctor could hear him murmuring soothingly to it.

'He's just frightened,' the Doctor said to himself. 'The horse too.' He shook his head. The purpose of the episode lost on him, he made his way over to where the creature had first appeared.

There, glinting in the afternoon sun, was another piece of glasslike crystal. Again it was smooth, shaped. Long and thin but becoming wider at the ends. Just over a foot long, he thought. The Doctor lifted it carefully, weighing it in his palm. Then, on an instinctive impulse, he held it next to his forearm. 'Interesting.' He thrust the thing into his coat pocket, wondering as he did so whether wearing a coat on a day as hot as this would draw attention to him. The last few inches of glass – if it was glass – stuck out of his pocket.

It was as he crossed the track, heading back to the TARDIS, that the Doctor saw it. The significance was lost on him for a moment. He glanced idly at the horse and its rider. Saw the horse's front leg was bent, the man holding the hoof and examining it carefully. The Doctor stopped in mid-step, frowned, looked back at the ground.

'So it wasn't the rider that was important at all,' he said out loud. 'It was the horse.' But even as he said it he realised that this too was a mistake. He was looking again at only one half of cause and effect.

Up the track, the man began to lead his horse carefully and slowly down towards the village. The Doctor was already on his way – heading for the same building, watching the curl of smoke from the fire and catching the sound of the bellows between his breaths as he ran as fast as he could. Leaving the horseshoe which had been thrown when the animal stumbled to a frightened halt lying on the rocky path.

It was a slow day, but the blacksmith kept the fire going. Or rather, the Doctor thought, he shouted at the lad pumping on the bellows to keep it going. Sweat was dripping off the poor boy, and the blacksmith mopped his own brow frequently. The heat in the shed hit the Doctor as soon as he walked in.

The blacksmith glanced up, then returned his attention to the furnace. A pot of water hung over it, the metal lid rattling as the water boiled and steam escaped.

'Is it a sword?' the blacksmith asked as the Doctor approached.

'I have no horse, so it must be a sword?'

'Seems reasonable.'

The Doctor smiled, though the man was not looking at him. So he turned slightly to ensure the boy at the bellows got the benefit of it. 'I was just passing, thought I'd look in.'

The blacksmith grunted. There was silence for a full minute. The Doctor

looked round, trying to work out what was supposed to be happening here. Or was it something that was not happening? That would be even harder to spot. Like the dog that did not bark.

‘You see that?’ The blacksmith nodded at the boiling water.

‘What about it?’

‘The way it lifts the lid.’ He nodded, slowly. He still didn’t look at the Doctor. ‘And you see the poor lad working the bellows.’

‘Yes.’ He did see now. ‘You think there’s a similarity?’

‘Whatever lifts the lid, might be able to lift the lever. Work the pump.’

‘It’s a thought,’ the Doctor agreed. He tried not to sound too excited at the prospect.

The blacksmith looked up, seemed to study the Doctor for the first time. ‘I did a sketch,’ he said slowly. ‘This morning. Work’s slow today.’ He pulled a folded sheet of thick paper from his pocket and opened it out to show the Doctor. A crude line drawing showed pipes coming from a tank of water to a valve of some sort attached to the bellows. ‘Maybe this afternoon I might try making a small version. Just to see what happens.’

‘It could change the world,’ the Doctor said quietly, examining the rough plan.

The blacksmith grunted. ‘It could free the boy up to do something useful for a change.’ He took the paper back from the Doctor, and looked down at it. ‘Yes,’ he murmured, ‘maybe it isn’t such a bad notion.’

But his thoughts were interrupted by the shout from the doorway: ‘You there!’ The man from the track was standing there, with his horse behind him. ‘My horse needs re-shoeing.’

The blacksmith heaved himself to his feet, blew out a long hot breath, and went to examine the horse’s hoof.

The Doctor watched, keeping out of the way, fascinated by the process of shaping and fitting the shoe. The craftsmanship and care in an everyday task, the familiarity and expertise of the job. It took just over an hour, then the man paid and led his horse away.

The blacksmith slumped down on his stool, exhausted.

‘How big a model will you build?’ the Doctor asked.

‘What?’

‘Of the steam –’ He broke off. ‘Of your idea. For powering the bellows.’

The blacksmith pulled the paper from his pocket again. He did not unfold it, just tapped it against his thumb. ‘No,’ he said at last. ‘It’d never work.’

He stood up, walked slowly over to the fire. 'And I'd never have time to mess about playing with stuff like that anyway.' He tossed the paper into the flames, then waved to the boy to keep pumping so that the fire grew and roared as it fed.

The Doctor watched the paper curl and crisp and blacken and burn. Then he pushed his hands into his coat pockets, and walked back to the TARDIS with his head bowed and his mind full of thoughts.

Devine Intervention

Perhaps because he wanted to see Fitz humiliated, or perhaps because somewhere deep inside he thought there might just be a glimmer of truth in Fitz's story, the guard agreed to ask Miss Devine to see him. It would probably be, Fitz thought, a rather short meeting.

The guard sent his colleague to find Miss Devine, and Fitz imagined a tall, slim, elegant woman with her golden-blond hair in a French plait. In his mind's eye he could see the guard coughing deferentially and Miss Crystal Devine's long fingers toying with her diamond necklace as she smiled at the guard and said that of course she would see the charming young man. Well all right, approaching middle-aged man. And charming might be pushing it the way he'd argued with the guard at the door. But anyway...

While he waited, Fitz almost asked the guard beside him who Crystal Devine was, and why she was co-hosting a bit of a do in the Institute of Anthropology, and what was everyone doing here dressed to the nines anyway? But he stopped himself in time, remembering that he was on the guest list and knew all about it – Miss Devine's personal guest. Oh yes he was.

The slap of heels on the stone floor alerted him to the guard's return. He seemed to be struggling to keep a straight face. Beside him was a woman. Fitz had been right – she was tall. But there the accuracy of his imaginings stopped abruptly. It was the plump, plain woman with her greying hair in a bun. Her eyes narrowed as she saw Fitz standing with the guard just inside the door. Fitz could sense the guard beside him tense, perhaps expecting trouble.

'Er, hello,' Fitz hazarded as the woman approached. He dusted his hand and held it out. She ignored it, turning instead to the chief guard.

'Your message was that a man claiming to be a personal friend of mine with the rather improbable name of Horatio Sponge was here to see me.' Her voice was high pitched and slightly nasal. She turned her attention back to Fitz. 'Are you seriously telling me that you have any reason to believe that this man's name is Sponge? At all? Or that I know anyone of that name?'

The guard gulped. 'He was most insistent, ma'am.'

Miss Devine gave a matronly harrumph that made her bosom heave dangerously, forcing Fitz to take a step backwards.

'I'm very much afraid that he has been having you on,' Miss Devine continued.

'Look,' Fitz said, 'I can explain. Really I can.'

Miss Devine's face seemed to crack into a smile, flakes of foundation falling away and sprinkling to the floor. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she reached out and pinched Fitz's cheek playfully and painfully between her finger and thumb. 'Oh, he's such a tease.' She wobbled Fitz's cheek before letting go. 'Why did you bother with such a ridiculous story?' she asked, though she sounded less annoyed now.

'Well...'

But she had turned back to the guard. 'Horatio Sponge, indeed? Well, he will have his little joke. But actually,' she went on, looking back at Fitz, 'this is Mr Fitzgerald Kreiner and you'll find he is the second guest on my list.' She stuck out her elbow for Fitz to loop his confused arm through. 'Shall we, Fitzzy dear?'

'How can this happen?' Logite wanted to know. 'The nexus points were all defined. Right at the beginning.'

'You mean the end,' Octan said quietly. 'During the last syllable of recorded time.'

'Exactly. We have defined History itself. We continue to define it, through the Agents.'

'And yet it is still changing,' Octan said. His voice was quiet, but it had a hard edge.

'These Rogue Elements continue to cause us trouble,' a voice said behind them. 'What trouble are we in now?' Fear was standing behind them, his face shadowed by the hood of his robes. 'I thought the Doctor was being dealt with.'

'If it is the Doctor,' Logite said darkly. 'There are others.'

'Hardly of the same calibre.' Fear turned to Octan. 'Show me.'

'Very well.' Octan called up a screen, a single flat slab of crystal hanging before them. '2004, London, Earth.'

'Of course Earth. It is always Earth.'

‘Our touchstone for History,’ Logite agreed. ‘The one planet that has the best defined timeline from start to finish. From the birth of the planet itself to the final death of the last of its children. Ask Soul, he knows.’

‘One of those “children” is Ernest Fleetward,’ Octan said. Data scrolled and danced across the screen before them.

‘An archaeologist,’ Logite pointed out. ‘A nobody. Until a few minutes ago, relative time. An hour ago he did not feature significantly. But now...’ He pointed to a structure woven across the timelines, a lattice of interconnections.

‘He invents a new form of glass. Unbreakable glass.’

Fear nodded. He could see it well enough for himself. ‘Which hastens the development of interstellar travel, revolutionises insulation, conserves power, is used to construct bomb shelters, and even makes useful cooking utensils.’

‘We need to assess the changes. We need to know how it impacts the plan, what the potential effect might be.’ Octan turned slowly to look at Fear. ‘Then we may need to send an Agent.’

Fear leaned forward to tap the screen. ‘If we deal with Fleetward it must be after he addresses the Royal Geographical Society. His talk will have an impact on several people there and we need to restrict the effects of removing him from time.’

Octan nodded. ‘Here perhaps. By then, in our version of history, his effective career will be over. On January 31st, 2004. At the opening of his exhibition at the Institute of Anthropology.’

Miss Devine held tight to Fitz, leading him through the foyer and into the main exhibition area beyond. There were perhaps ten other people there, and several turned to see the new arrival. But Fitz hardly noticed. He was distracted. He was trying to work through the implications and ramifications of the fact that she was expecting him, that she seemed to know him.

Just as Fitz decided it couldn’t really be that important, Miss Devine turned to him, still holding his arm tightly so he could not pull away.

‘I expected Dr Smith to be with you,’ she said. ‘Will the Doctor be joining us soon, do you think?’

Meeting Point

The July heat was making the sidewalk steam. It felt even hotter than it was, the Doctor thought, because the heat was reflected up from the tarmac of the road and the stone of the pavement. Then there were the people: an unending flood of humanity streaming from the offices and into the bars, the subways, taxis and cars at the end of the working day.

He stood in the doorway of a second-hand bookshop at the junction of Broadway and Twelfth. The New Yorkers flowed round each other like a demonstration of chaos theory. Seen from above, the Doctor decided, he would be able to map out their individual paths and collisions. He could determine who would meet whom, who would move out of whose way, where each and every individual that made up the mass would end up. A collection of discrete particles that together formed a single heaving whole. Like Time itself – an ever-rolling stream bearing all its sons away. . .

And in about thirty seconds, the Doctor thought as he checked his pocket watch yet again, something would happen to that stream. An element would be introduced that would reshape it, that would bring some new order to the apparent chaos. He slipped the watch back into his pocket and realised he was humming a tune. A hymn. ‘Oh God, our help in ages past. . .’

Just a shimmer. Like the heat haze at first, but then solid, real. Crystallised. The creature swam into existence not ten feet from the Doctor, looking straight at him. And, the Doctor was certain, not seeing him. Obviously it was not he whose life would be altered today, not he who would rewrite history for. . . for whoever it was. Not the creature itself, he was sure of that.

Just as the creature seemed not to see the Doctor, so the people in the street did not, or could not, perceive the creature. They continued on their ways without surprise or comment that a multi-evolved Time-Wind-scarred man-ape had materialised in front of them. Yet, the Doctor noted with amusement, it had physical presence. People bumped into it, stepped around it, even mumbled apologies without apparently seeing it. A stone thrown into the time stream – so that the water flowed round and over it, disturbed,

redirected, but oblivious.

At the creature's feet, rocking back and forth as people stepped round and over it, was a lump of transparent crystal. The Doctor had seen it arrive with the creature. He had been tempted to step out and grab it. But if he did, that would create another displacement in the flow, another random element that would redirect and change the pattern.

Although the creature was not random, the Doctor knew that. It was exactly here, exactly now for a precise reason. Perhaps it was changing the flow to ensure that two people met, or to ensure they did not. And the real purpose of its mission might be a consequence of a consequence of a consequence of that event or non-event. It might be here, now, in front of them. Or it might be hours and miles away – a consequence of a man just missing his subway train, or a woman happening to notice an empty taxi as she stepped aside to allow someone to pass. . .

The Doctor let his imagination wander. In his mind's eye he saw an old man walking with his young grandson; saw the man stumble into a passer-by; saw that the passer-by was running, had a gun, incongruously carried a woman's handbag; saw him stumble, almost fall, blame the man for slowing him. Shoot. He saw the boy's eyes widen as his grandfather fell, and could imagine the sudden resolve in the boy. Resolve that might lead him to become a policeman; stand for mayor; governor. President. . . What might he not do for a grandparent? 'Our hope for years to come,' the Doctor murmured.

All imagining. The creature was gone, as a dream fades with the break of day. The Doctor stepped into the rush and swell of the crowd, colliding with people, forcing others to step aside or slow or hasten to avoid him. He scooped up the rounded lump of glasslike crystal and thrust it into his pocket, pausing only to notice that it was about the length and shape of the end of his own index finger.

Whatever had happened, had happened, he mused as he went inside the bookshop. A chance encounter perhaps. It did not really matter. The Doctor was not interested in what had happened here, except as a symptom. He was concerned with the cause not the effect. Or rather, with the cause of the cause of the cause.

One thing the Doctor was sure of. The consequences of the creature's intervention could have been enormous. It could have been a huge benefit in some way, or like the death of Louis Vosgues it could have been some

personal tragedy. The Doctor had stood and watched events set in motion, people manipulated and forced into a course of action. He might not yet know what was behind it all, but this was the last time the Doctor was prepared to stand back and let it happen.

A hand came down on his shoulder. The Doctor had been aware, he now realised, that someone was coming up behind him. Aware in the same way as one notices the hum of the air-conditioning the moment after it goes off. He swung round, only now hearing his name called a few seconds in the past.

'It is you, Doctor. I was sure it was.' The man was broad-built and smiling. His hair was a thinning steel grey and his eyes were deep with intelligence and amusement. 'You look worried,' he said.

'Chance encounters always worry me,' the Doctor said. He forced a smile in return, as much to show that he had recognised the man as anything. 'Especially now.'

'Why's that?'

'In case they are meticulously planned, Mr Correll.' The first time they had met was by chance, in the British Museum while the Doctor was examining the page of a journal. At least, the Doctor had assumed it was by chance. He was becoming wary of the slightest coincidence now, he realised sadly.

'Well, this meeting wasn't planned, I assure you. I almost missed you, and you didn't even see me.' He shook the Doctor's hand vigorously and enthusiastically. 'Hey, it's good to see you again. You going my way?'

The Doctor was. It was as good a way as any while he thought things through. And there really were such things, he reminded himself, as happy coincidences.

'I guess what you're really saying is that *chance* encounters don't worry you at all,' Lionel Correll observed as they stepped together into the surge of the crowd.

'Yes, I suppose that's true.'

'Then let's make a virtue of it. You got time for a drink?'

'A drink. Yes. I'd like that. Thank you.'

'My pleasure, Doctor.'

'And some advice, perhaps?'

They forced their way into a bar and Correll looked round for somewhere to sit. 'You giving it or asking for it?' He led the Doctor through to a free table at the back, away from the glare of sunlight through the tinted windows.

'You're well read,' the Doctor said.

'Not worthless diaries, I hope?' Correll was still grinning, but his eyes had hardened at the Doctor's serious tone.

'Not this time. Something cold, I think.'

Correll was waving for the waitress. 'Like Siberia?'

'I meant to drink.'

The waitress stood bored beside them, head angled so as to hear the order. 'Couple of beers, please. Whatever's on tap.'

They drank in silence for a minute, each easy in the other's company. Cooled by the beer, the Doctor reached into his jacket pocket. It was only now that it occurred to him that he might be cooler if he took the jacket off. So he did, draping it over the back of the chair. He reached into the pockets again and pulled out the pieces of crystal he had collected, lining them up on the table in front of him.

'May I?' Correll reached for the smallest piece, the rounded stump of crystal that the Doctor had collected from the sidewalk not fifty metres away. He turned it over in his hand, feeling the weight. 'Glass?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Much tougher than any glass I know. Crystalline, so far as I can tell. But it isn't a form of crystal I'm familiar with.'

Correll was examining the biggest piece, the long section that the Doctor had found where Louis Vosgues was killed. 'Crystal, you say?'

'There are seven distinct types of crystal. Crystal families, if you like.'

'That a fact? So which family are these from?'

'Number eight.'

'Fascinating.' Correll was looking at the Doctor again. 'So how can I help? I know nothing about crystal families or toughened glass.'

The Doctor drained what was left of his beer. 'That may be. But you know a lot of people. Know *of* a lot more. I was thinking, maybe you could point me in the direction of someone who would know.'

'Maybe I can. Not sure who.' Correll had finished his beer as well. 'Let's get back to my hotel and I'll make some calls, see who I can find with an interest in the field of...' he waved his hand over the crystal artefacts as the Doctor gathered them up and put them back in his pockets, '... whatever it is.'

The name that Correll came up with was Ernest Fleetward. It took him half an hour in the hotel lobby on his mobile phone. He had retrieved a thin

laptop from his room, set it open on a coffee table, and went through a list of contacts. The first few were unable to help.

Eventually, Correll spoke to a contact called Rob, who said he had read something in *The American Journal of Archaeology* about some guy who had found some weird bits of crystal and was trying to find others. They defied analysis, and this guy believed they occurred naturally. Or something.

So Correll rang someone else who knew the name and number of the editor of the *Journal*. They called back ten minutes later with the name and address of Ernest Fleetward.

‘He’s in London. Some sort of archaeologist. You want a copy of his article?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘That would be interesting.’

‘I can have the editor call him and say you’re coming. Vouch for you.’

The Doctor tapped his finger against his chin. ‘That’s very kind. But I’m not quite sure when I shall be able to see him.’

‘A letter of introduction from this editor guy, then?’

‘Yes. That’s a good idea. But undated, if that’s possible.’

Correll shrugged. ‘Sure it’s possible. I’ll get it expressed over with the article. Rob can sort that out. Should be here in 24 hours.’ He closed his laptop and tucked his phone into his pocket. ‘Amazing what you can make happen with a phone these days,’ he said with a wry smile.

‘Yes, thank you.’ The Doctor smiled back. ‘The power of cause and effect.’ His smile turned slowly into a frown. ‘I thought at first,’ he said, ‘that the crystal was the cause. That the creature was homing in on the crystal, or summoned by it somehow. It resonates, like a transmitter, after all. The crystal, I mean.’

Correll shook his head, laughing at his own incomprehension. ‘I’m sure you’re right, Doctor.’

‘Ah, but I’m not. Don’t you see? Because the crystal arrives with the creature. So then I thought that the creature was the cause and the crystals were the effect.’

‘And now you’re not certain of that either?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘It’s like you getting me a letter of introduction from someone you don’t know. A friend of a friend. Part of a chain. Except I’m not even sure the creature and the crystals are links in the same chain. Cause and *side* effect.’ He blew out a long breath. ‘But which is which, I wonder?’

Suddenly the Doctor was on his feet, reaching out to shake Correll's hand. 'I must dash. I'll see you here tomorrow – same time, same place, yes?'

'If you like. You rushing off?'

'Yes, sorry.' He was already turning to go. 'Things are rather urgent, I fancy. And I'm meeting an old friend, well maybe more of an acquaintance but a very helpful and kind one. And I'm meeting him here tomorrow in about ten minutes.'

History's Mysteries

She told them a version of *Cinderella*. She had to adapt it slightly, so that there were two Cinderellas and two princes. That seemed easy enough, until they fled from the ball at midnight. Could they both lose a glass slipper, or was that just too implausible?

Trix did not want to spoil the story. The two princes were enjoying it, paying rapt attention to her every word. Clapping their hands together in delight as Cinderella and her twin sister Ashlina got the better of their ugly stepsisters. They delighted as much in Trix's adopted voices and absurd characterisations as Trix did in producing them.

In the event, and almost without thinking about it, Trix explained how Cinderella lost her glass slipper as she ran down the stairs, and how Ashlina hesitated, turned to run back for her sister's shoe. But Cinderella pulled her away towards the waiting pumpkin-coach – and Ashlina dropped her spider's-web glove in the process. The princes' eyes widened and they exchanged looks. What could happen next?

And all too soon it was over. The first light of dawn was taking the edge off the night as Trix told them how the twin sisters fell into the arms of the twin princes and the whole kingdom prepared for a double wedding. She blinked, sure that it was just the gathering light making her eyes water. She struggled to rid her mind of the image of two small skeletons, to be discovered centuries later buried under a staircase in the Tower. 'And they all lived happily ever after,' she said, turning quickly away.

The older boy, Richard, was nodding. 'And so shall we,' he said solemnly. 'Forever and ever.'

'Forever and a day,' his brother agreed.

Trix was standing at the window, looking out across the misty morning as the sun rose over London. How long, she wondered, before the news of the battle came? How long before a messenger rode into the city to tell how the King was dead, long live the King? And what then. . . ?

'Tell us another story, Aunt Beatrice,' Edward was saying.

'It's morning,' she said, without turning.

'Tonight, then. You will come back tonight.'

She turned to face them, hoping the light behind her shadowed her face. 'We shall see.'

As she spoke, Trix could see a light in the next room, in Edward's bed chamber. It was faint, glimmering for a moment, then gone. But there it was again. Flashing slowly in time to the rhythm of the grating, rasping, nerves-on-edge sound of the TARDIS.

'What is it?' The brothers clutched each other.

'Wait here,' Trix told them. 'I'll go and see.'

Richard stood in front of her, afraid but firm. 'It could be a demon.'

'Or an angel,' she said gently, easing him aside. 'I'll be back in a minute. There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to worry about. Not in there, anyway.' She smiled. 'It's just a friend of mine. Really.'

The young prince still looked anxious, but he said nothing. His brother joined him, and together they watched Trix as she left the room.

The TARDIS had materialised in the corner of the older prince's room, beside the bed. The door was still open and the Doctor was fumbling behind himself trying to find the handle to pull it shut. He wasn't looking at what he was doing, because he was reading a magazine.

He glanced up as Trix came into the room. 'This is fascinating, you know.' Finally he found the handle and pulled the TARDIS door closed. He walked slowly over to Trix, still reading, yet somehow negotiating the furniture – stepping over a low table that he could not possibly have seen.

'Nothing's happened yet,' Trix told him. 'But we're in the right place according to your tracker-tracer-egg-whisk thingy.'

'Good, good,' the Doctor murmured. He turned back a page as if to check a cross reference. 'Just give me a moment.' He turned back to the beginning of the article he had been reading and handed the magazine to Trix.

She flipped to the cover. *The American Journal of Archaeology*. An issue from November 2001. The article the Doctor had been reading was called 'Crystal Clear' and written by someone called Ernest Fleetward.

'Archaeologist,' the Doctor said, tapping the name. 'He's found some bits of crystal that defy standard analysis and categorisation. He argues that they must occur naturally and that if we can synthesise the material, it could

revolutionise. . . ' He paused, frowned, seemed to grasp about for what it was that could be revolutionised. 'Stuff,' he decided.

'Doctor,' Trix said slowly, handing him back the magazine without reading it, 'that may be fascinating. But we are in the Tower of London.'

'Are we?' He was wide-eyed and innocent.

'On the day that Richard the Third is about to be replaced by Henry the Seventh.'

'Really?'

'In the apartments of the so-called Princes in the Tower.'

'How interesting.'

'Who have just enjoyed a rather fine adaptation of the story of Cinderella with two princes and two nubile young housemaids.'

'Marvellous,' he said, apparently savouring the moment. He continued towards the door back to Edward's room. 'How did you cope with the glass slipper problem?'

'I substituted a glove in one case.'

The Doctor was serious now, nodding. In a tone solemn enough to announce the imminent end of the universe he confided: 'That's what I would have done.'

'Doctor,' Trix said, worried that she might sound too anxious, 'what's going to happen to. . . ' But she got no further.

There was a shimmering in the air in front of them. The sound of a rushing wind. A moment's clarity, then another shimmer. Like a heat haze.

'I think it's already happened,' the Doctor said, his tone still serious. He was through the door in two long strides, Trix hurrying after him.

'There is a creature,' the Doctor said, 'that travels through the time vortex. Somehow it rides the Time Winds and yet it survives. But at a terrible cost.'

The room was empty. Or almost. Trix walked slowly over to where the boys had been standing moments earlier. No sign. The door was still closed. She would have heard it open, surely?

'I think it was once an anthropoid of some sort. But exposure to the Time Winds plays havoc with evolution, even within an individual. So the creature is rather mixed up now. Neither one thing nor another. An amalgam.'

'And it's been here?'

'Undoubtedly.' The Doctor was behind Trix, and she felt him put his hand on her shoulder. 'We couldn't have done anything. Except watch. It's outside time somehow. Able to influence and change events, but not perceptible

in the grand scheme of things. Which I think is the point. Manipulation. Making sure events run true to someone's plan.'

'And this?' Trix knelt down to examine the large crystal artefact that was lying on the floor where the princes had been.

The Doctor knelt down beside her, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. 'A fragment of crystal appeared with the creature at each point I visited, each time I saw it.'

'Like this?' Trix was aghast. 'That's hardly being imperceptible and inconspicuous.'

But the Doctor shook his head. 'No, this is rather more interesting. And it makes me wonder about the other pieces I found.'

'And Richard and Edward? The Princes in the Tower?'

'I rather think that what has happened to them will remain a mystery. They have been removed from Time. They existed long enough to play their part in History; now that part is over and if they stayed they might have changed things.'

'So they had to go.'

'Yes. Like Louis, like the blacksmith's idea, like... ' He shrugged. 'Like who knows who or what else.'

'And this?' She pointed to the crystal.

'I'm not sure about this.' The Doctor opened out his handkerchief and Trix saw that it was stained with something old and dark. Bits of it flaked off as he reached down to pick up the crystal.

'So what do we do now?'

'We go and see Ernest Fleetward. I wonder if he has any real idea of what he's been collecting.' He lifted up the curiously shaped piece of crystal. 'If not, then this might give him a rather hefty clue.'

'I have a clean hanky somewhere, I'm sure,' Trix offered.

'No, no. This is fine.'

'Yes,' Trix said slowly. She nodded at the stained handkerchief. 'Er, is that blood?'

'Don't worry. It isn't mine. Well, the hanky is, obviously. But not the blood.'

'I remember.' Trix could recall the sound of the shot. The sight of Sabbath's hand dripping red and the Doctor giving him a handkerchief to bind it.

'Alas, poor Sabbath,' the Doctor said quietly, carrying the handkerchief and its contents carefully back to the TARDIS. 'Come along, Trix. I've a feeling there's no time to spare.'

Life Line

‘So what time does the gig start?’ Fitz asked. He had finally managed to untangle himself from the ample clutches of Miss Crystal Devine.

‘Oh, not for another hour. Plenty of time for the Doctor to arrive,’ she assured him.

‘You know the Doctor well?’ Fitz wondered.

She smiled, her foundation cracking further so that her mouth seemed to be surrounded by thawing pack ice. ‘We’ve met.’

‘I’m sure he’ll remember.’

‘There are still some things to set up, catering to organise, the exhibition to prepare finally.’

‘Can I help?’ He didn’t want to, but there was nothing else to do while he waited for whatever he was waiting for.

‘By keeping out of the way, I should think,’ Miss Devine told him. She leaned forward, close and conspiratorial. ‘Why don’t you have a mooch round?’ she suggested. ‘Case the joint. See what’s really going on here?’

‘Er, yes. Good idea,’ Fitz agreed. ‘Right.’

She had his arm again before he could move. ‘But before you go, I’d like you to meet Professor Fleetward.’

Dragging Fitz in her wake, Miss Devine strode across the large area, ignoring a man carrying a tray of glasses and forcing him to swerve and juggle. Her target, Fitz could see, was a small, wiry man with little round glasses and almost no hair. He was talking to another man who towered over him but was nodding deferentially. The taller man hurried away as Miss Devine approached – no fool him, Fitz decided.

‘Ernest, dear.’

Fleetward turned at the sound of her voice. His smile seemed genuine, and Fitz wondered if he got the strong arm treatment as well. Perhaps Miss Devine was more gentle with academics. When Fleetward spoke, Fitz stifled a grin – he had a west-country accent that made him sound somehow quaint and old fashioned.

‘Crystal, my dear. How’s it all going with the catering arrangements?’

‘Very nicely, thank you. I’d like you to meet Mr Kreiner.’ She thrust Fitz forward, propelling him towards the professor.

Fitz stumbled to a halt. ‘Er, Fitz,’ he said. It sounded like a confession. ‘Call me Fitz.’

Fleetward looked perplexed, frowning at Miss Devine. ‘He’s a friend of the Doctor’s,’ she hissed back at him, eyes wide as she nodded vigorously as if to say: ‘It’s true, no matter what he looks like.’

‘Mr, er, Fitz. Delighted.’ Fleetward shook Fitz’s hand. ‘Any friend of the Doctor’s is a friend of mine. Of ours,’ he said quickly, looking up to include Miss Devine, who beamed back at him in appreciation.

‘That’s nice,’ Fitz told him, grabbing a glass of white wine from a young woman with a tray as she walked past.

‘Although we are a bit busy just now. Getting the exhibition ready for the grand opening, and so on.’

‘Of course.’ He tried to sound like he knew what the man was talking about. ‘I’ll keep out of your way till curtain up.’ He downed his wine in one gulp, and looked round for somewhere to put the empty glass.

‘Mr Kreiner is going to look round the Institute,’ Miss Devine explained.

‘Good idea. Do you know it well?’

‘Never been here before in my life,’ Fitz confessed. There was nowhere to put the glass down, so he twisted the stem between his finger and thumb.

Fleetward looked disappointed at this. But he quickly brightened. ‘Be lots for you to see then. Better tell the security lads what you’re up to. Then they won’t worry if they see you going round putting the lights on.’

‘I’ll take you to the control room,’ Miss Devine threatened with a crocodile smile.

Fitz stepped back just quickly enough to avoid another arm lock. ‘After you,’ he said as sweetly as he could manage.

The two guards in the security control room were leaning back in their chairs with their feet up on the desk. They moved quickly as the door opened, but not quite quickly enough. Fitz had seen them, and he guessed Miss Devine had too, though she said nothing. One of the guards stood up, and Fitz guessed he was in charge. He had a name badge pinned to his shirt pocket – Neil Havers.

The desk was actually a large console, with buttons and switches on it. Ranged above were several black-and-white monitor screens, each showing a scene inside or outside the Institute. One showed the foyer where Fleetward was fussing with the taller man again. Another was focusing on the main entrance to the Institute where Fitz had come in. The others showed various darkened areas of the interior of the building, the cameras moving slowly – tracking to and fro as they watched nothing at all happening.

On the wall beside the monitors was a floor plan, with different coloured numbered markers indicating, Fitz guessed, the positions of cameras, fire doors, sprinkler systems and anything else of use to the security team – toilets probably.

‘Everything’s quiet,’ Havers offered. He was watching Fitz and Miss Devine closely, perhaps wondering why they were here.

‘Great,’ Fitz said. ‘Actually, I had a favour to ask.’ From Miss Devine’s harsh expression he guessed she would have taken a slightly different approach – not asking but informing.

‘Ask away,’ Havers said. ‘It’s your show tonight. Well, Miss Devine and Professor Fleetward’s. Anything we can do to help.’

‘I’d like to have a look round the Institute,’ Fitz said simply. ‘That’s all. I haven’t seen it before. Just flown in, as it were. But I thought I’d let you know. In case you see me on the monitors and wonder what’s going on.’

‘No problem,’ Havers told him. ‘Thanks for the warning.’

‘We won’t come after you with all guns blazing then,’ the other guard assured Fitz. ‘Not that we have guns, of course.’

‘Have fun,’ Havers said. He sounded as bored as his subordinate looked. ‘Things’ll get a bit noisier when the guests arrive in about forty minutes, I guess.’

Fitz nodded his thanks and followed Miss Devine out of the room.

‘Right now it’s as quiet as the grave,’ Havers was saying as Fitz closed the door.

‘Where’s that exhibit that was on the monitor on the left?’ Fitz asked Miss Devine. ‘The one that looks like a line of people.’

‘Second floor, down that end of the building.’ She pointed. ‘If you go up the main staircase, then follow the signs for the Corridor of Life, that brings you out quite close to it. Why?’

‘Just curious. Looked like a good place to start exploring.’ He was still holding his empty glass, Fitz realised. He set it down on a reading table

close to the door to the security control room. He half expected Miss Devine to tell him not to leave it there but to take it with him. But she said nothing. So Fitz gave her a quick wave goodbye and headed for the main staircase. It swept up from the foyer into the darkened exhibition areas on the floors above. He was aware of her watching him as he started up the steps. He was aware of her watching him as he reached the first floor, and doubled back on himself starting up the next flight of stairs to the second floor.

He paused, turned away so she could not see what he was doing, and checked the tracker the Doctor had given him. Just as he thought, the emission was coming from below – from the curtained-off area where they were preparing whatever exhibition would be unveiled here later. Well, plenty of time to check that out, Fitz decided. For now there were a few other questions he wanted to answer.

Had she seen it too, he wondered – on the monitor? She had been standing next to him, looking the same way, the movement must have caught her eye as it had caught his own. Had Miss Crystal Devine also seen the two small figures run across the picture on the monitor? And if she had, why hadn't she mentioned it?

The Corridor of Life was long, narrow and unlit. It curved round the edge of the building, on the outside of the main exhibition area on the top floor of the Institute. There was probably a light switch somewhere, but Fitz could not find it, so he made do with the moonlight filtering through the skylights.

There were display cases set into the inner wall of the corridor and plaques with pictures and text on the outer wall under the windows. It was, Fitz decided, quite cleverly done. The corridor traced the evolution of life from an explosion of light that represented the Big Bang on to the Earth's formation, primeval slime, the first single-celled organisms, and on to the dinosaurs and beyond. . .

Occasionally there was a door back into the main exhibitions. Each of these was relevant to the point on the timescale that you had reached within the corridor. Want to know more? Then step inside. Most of it, Fitz let wash over him. He passed by display cases and exhibits, he glanced at reptiles and small mammals, he ignored doors to fossilisation and the first apes. But he appreciated the effort and thought that had gone into the design.

Because it curved, it was impossible to tell how long the corridor was. When Fitz did pay attention to the exhibits along the way, it was to try to

work out if he was nearing the end yet. It seemed to go on forever, but Fitz knew that once he had been along it once, it would seem shorter the next time. Travel was strange like that – when you know where you’re going, the distances seem to shrink. Like time going quicker when you’re enjoying yourself.

But eventually he reached the end of his journey through Man’s evolution. The corridor ended with a tall glass case in which a naked nuclear family – man, woman, girl, boy – stared back at him with glassy eyes and half-smiles. As if it was actually Fitz who was on display and held up as a specimen of humanity. He nodded at the man, smiled at the children, winked at the woman, and stepped out of the corridor back into the main exhibition area.

It was the same man. The man from the display case at the end of the corridor was now standing in front of Fitz, the half-smile sinister in the half-light. Fitz blinked and gasped and stepped quickly to one side. And then he could see that the man was in fact at the end of a line – a line that started with a slouching ape and gradually evolved through six discrete figures into *Homo sapiens*. With a sinister half-smile. Each of the figures, Fitz noticed, had a small plaque in front of it giving dates when the creature existed and a description of how it differed from its predecessor.

Annoyed at himself for being so jittery Fitz turned in a slow circle, trying to see into the shadowy corners, trying to make out any hint of movement among the silhouetted exhibits.

‘Hello?’ he called out, and even to himself his voice seemed diffident and anxious. ‘I know you’re here. I saw you on the monitors, in the security control room.’ He took a step forwards. Perhaps they had gone, whoever they were. ‘I just wanted to help. Are you lost, or what?’

‘I got locked in.’ The boy was suddenly in front of Fitz. He sounded as if he had practised the phrase. Probably scared stiff of being in trouble if anyone found him. He looked about fourteen, Fitz thought, with long straggly hair and – bizarrely – what looked like a dressing gown, though in the dim light it was impossible to discern the colour or detail. Probably a long coat.

‘That’s all right,’ Fitz said gently. ‘You’re not in trouble. I’m Fitz, by the way. What’s your name?’

‘His name’s Chad.’ The girl’s voice came from behind him, making Fitz whirl round in surprise. ‘I’m Zezanne. I’m lost even if he isn’t.’

She might not be any older than the boy, but she was more confident. Her face was thin, her chin thrust forwards, her dark hair cut short. Everything

about her seemed angular, spiky. 'So where are we?'

'You're in a sort of museum.'

She sighed. 'We know that. I mean, what planet?'

'Earth,' Fitz said. 'Look, what are you doing here?'

'I told you, I'm lost. And he told you, he got locked in.'

Fitz thought about this. 'There's something going on here,' he said. 'Something odd.' The girl looked like this was hardly news. 'And I'm here to sort it out.'

'You?' the boy asked.

'Yes, me. Well, and my friends.'

'Can we help?' he asked, eyes glinting with enthusiasm.

Fitz considered. But since he did not yet know what was really happening – or going to happen – he was not sure how they could help. Equally, he was unwilling to admit to them how little he knew. 'Not just now,' he told them. 'Look, I don't know why you're here or what's going on, but I suggest you stay put. Keep out of the way. There's some sort of reception or something going on downstairs. When that's over, I'll help you get out of here.'

'I don't want to get out of here,' Zezanne told him. Her face was suddenly less angular, rounder, shivering almost as she tried not to cry. 'I want my mother. Where is she?'

'I don't know. I'm sorry.' Fitz watched her slump down, sitting cross-legged, throwing imaginary pebbles across the floor. 'Look, maybe I can look out for her.' A bizarre thought occurred to him. 'What's your mother's name?' he asked. 'It's not Crystal, is it?'

She looked up at him, eyes wide and surprised. 'No,' she said quietly. 'It's not.'

Crystal Clear

The roof of the TARDIS was crystal. The Doctor adjusted the magnification on the microscope, and the image changed, showing the molecular structure of the piece of glasslike material resting in a compartment on the console.

‘You see,’ the Doctor told Trix, ‘it’s the same as the crystal we already had. Same structure, same resonance. Humming like quartz, but tough as diamond.’

‘It’s all carbon, though, isn’t it?’ Trix said. ‘The stuff of life.’

‘Life?’ The Doctor considered, his mouth making a peculiar rolling movement as if he were having trouble with a gobstopper. ‘In a way, I suppose. I don’t *think* it’s sentient, at least not in the way you or I would understand. But it may be reacting in a lifelike way.’ He turned off the screen. ‘But whatever it is, the emissions are hundreds of times stronger than the other crystals. That’s why they’re swamping our readings of them.’

‘But why? I mean, for what purpose?’

‘Not everything that’s technically alive has a purpose, you know.’

Trix smiled. ‘I *have* met Fitz.’

The Doctor ignored this. ‘I think this is something accidental. I told my friend Lionel Correll that I thought it was a side effect. I’m pretty sure it is now.’ He grinned, a spontaneous and surprising movement. ‘But if it’s giving us trouble tracking the original crystals, it must be a real pain to whoever put them out there.’

‘The Fleetward data was so intense, such an upheaval to the timeline, that it got through,’ Octan was telling the Council.

‘So everything else is still jammed?’ Penter asked.

Octan nodded, his dark hood dipping as if in prayer. ‘I am afraid so.’

‘And this is something the Doctor has done?’ Duvar asked. ‘So much for having everything under control.’

‘Let’s not bicker,’ Trilon said quietly. ‘The cause is not important. It’s the effect that worries me.’

‘But if we can find the cause –’ began Hexx.

Trilon cut him off: ‘If we neutralise the effect, we don’t need to concern ourselves with the cause.’

‘And if we don’t,’ Soul told them all, ‘then I think it all becomes rather academic, don’t you?’ He turned towards Octan. ‘Unless there is more to the plan than we have been told?’

‘No data, so no way of knowing what path History is taking,’ Fear said before Octan could react. ‘Although we shall soon know if it diverges from our predictions.’

‘You think so?’ Sept said.

‘When the potential is exhausted, and we cease to exist,’ Octan snapped. ‘That’s obvious.’

‘He meant,’ Fear replied, his voice calm and quiet and dark, ‘that if that happens, we would actually know nothing about it. Ever.’

‘If it is the Doctor,’ Duvar said, turning to address Octan directly, ‘and if he really is coming here, to us, as you predict, then let us hope it happens quickly.’

‘Can we rely on the Doctor to come?’ Trilon asked.

‘Of course not,’ Octan said. ‘But we can rely on Sabbath to bring him.’

They were drinking mugs of tea in the TARDIS ‘kitchen’. The Doctor had cleared the junk of his experiment out of the way, although much of it seemed merely to have been swept on to the floor or pushed to the sides of the table.

‘So what makes you think it’s a side effect?’

The Doctor blew on the hot tea, making curls of steam rise. ‘It doesn’t fit with anything else,’ he said.

‘Cause and effect?’

‘If you like. In a chaotic sort of way, but yes.’ He set down his mug and started to count off on his fingers. ‘These crystals are signalling, sending data to that structure within the vortex.’ He tapped the next finger: ‘The creature I’ve seen, and which I think is probably one of several if not many, is interfering with History.’ He paused, frowned. ‘Or rather, I think it is ensuring that History as we perceive it follows a particular route. The tiniest nudge to keep it on track at various points in time.’ He moved back to his first finger. ‘Points perhaps derived from the data that the crystals are transmitting.’

‘But surely,’ Trix said, ‘everything we do changes the course of History. In some small way, at least.’

‘Mmm. And I would guess that somebody somewhere is rather unhappy about that. If they know about it.’

‘How could they not?’

‘The creature is not perceived by the people around it. It affects – alters – their lives and yet they don’t seem to realise. Maybe we are the same.’

‘Changing without being perceived.’

‘We are certainly perceived,’ the Doctor said, draining his steaming tea in a gulp. He smacked his lips. ‘But, unless you were hoping for applause, that isn’t too bad a position to be in.’ He sucked in a sharp breath. ‘Gosh, that was hot.’

‘But what if they – whoever, whatever *they* are – what if they do know about us?’

The Doctor was on his feet, pacing round the table. Abruptly he changed direction, swinging round and starting back the other way. ‘I think the key is to be unpredictable. Just in case.’

‘And how do we know if we’ve succeeded?’

‘We don’t.’ He sat down again, leaning across the table with such intensity that Trix leaned back. The Doctor’s hands were stretched out towards her. ‘But think of what we’ve done so far. We know about the crystals, and we tracked one down. We analysed it and found it was transmitting. We traced the transmissions, and we saw where they went.’

‘But we didn’t go there.’

The Doctor clicked his tongue in thought. ‘No, no we didn’t. Perhaps we were expected to? It’s so difficult to be unpredictable without knowing what people expect of you, isn’t it?’ He shook his head. ‘Anyway, we did follow up on the strongest transmissions, though it seems they may be aberrations. But so far...’

‘So far?’

‘So far we’ve responded, reacted to various inputs.’ He cupped his hands round the mug of tea. ‘Should we have been more proactive?’ He sat back, pulling the mug towards him, then absent-mindedly sipping at it. ‘Yes, perhaps it’s time to take the fight to them rather than sit back and let it happen.’

‘Unless that’s what they’re expecting, what they want, of course.’

The grin was back, big time. ‘Oh, they won’t be expecting what I have in mind. I have a little job for you. Well within your extensive capabilities. It might even be fun.’

Trix found she was grinning back. ‘So what are we going to do?’ she asked. ‘Drink their tea?’

‘What?’ He raised the mug to his lips again, then seemed to realise what she was saying. ‘Oh, sorry.’

He didn’t really like lecturing. He preferred seminars – so much less formal. With a lecture, one was supposed to stick to the topic, not go off at interesting tangents or involve the students and find out what they actually thought (those of them that did actually think). A necessary evil, Professor Fleetward supposed. But he lectured as little as possible – just enough to stay on the staff of the University of West London. Just enough for them to feel they had a real, down-in-the-dirt archaeologist on their books, and just enough for him to be able to get money out of them to finance the digs and get down in the dirt.

He didn’t really like the lecture hall either. The lights were all wrong. He could adjust them so that they either shone in his eyes and he could not see the students, or so that they did not – but then the students were sitting in darkness. Adjust the dimmer so they were halfway between the two and the light reflected off his glasses and bounced distractingly round the room. He could see the students watching Tinkerbell rather than paying attention to the lecture.

It was about ten minutes into the lecture when he noticed the man at the back of the hall. He was stretched out with his hands behind his head. But if his posture looked like he was settling down for a snooze, his eyes were alive with intelligence and concentration. Fleetward had not seen him before, but he guessed from the long hair that he was one of the students. It was not that far into the term, so maybe this student had only now deigned to bother with Fleetward’s infrequent lectures.

He did seem a little old for a student. Mature. Fleetward could only catch glimpses of the man if he angled his head so the light did not shine in his eyes. As he did this for the third or fourth time, the man suddenly sat upright, as if realising he was being watched. Fleetward quickly looked away and departed on a brief description of dendochronology.

When he looked back, the man was staring up at the ceiling, at the lights. When Fleetward glanced over again, he was gone.

Then the room went dark.

‘Sorry,’ a voice called out. The lights came back on, this time so that Fleet-

ward could see clearly without being dazzled. But of course the students were in darkness. One of the girls in the front row was peering at her notes and tutting as she tried to see what she had written.

The lights returned to their former setting, and through the glare Fleetward could see the outline of the tall man with the long hair striding down towards the stage.

'I see the problem,' he said. 'Please, ignore me. You carry on.'

So Fleetward did. It was a little distracting – to him and the students – that the man was dragging a table from the back of the stage. Fascinating that he then lifted – apparently effortlessly – the lectern on top of it. Worrying that he seemed to think he could climb on top of it. Breathtaking that he managed to balance on one leg and reach up towards the high ceiling. Like Eros in Piccadilly.

The man looked down from his perch, and grinned at Fleetward's astonished expression. 'I'm pretty sure this is the one,' he said. There was muted laughter from the audience.

The lights hung low on long steel cables, and the man's fingers could just reach the light immediately over the podium. For a moment Fleetward thought he intended to swing from it and make Tarzan noises. But instead he gently, delicately, moved it, angled it on the wire, bent it slightly upwards.

And now Fleetward understood what he was doing. So simple. The man jumped down, landing easily beside Fleetward with knees bent to take the shock of his weight. He lifted down the lectern, pushed away the table, smiled apologetically at the professor and nodded for him to continue. Then he resumed his seat at the back of the hall, and Professor Fleetward continued his lecture – able to see the students, without them being in darkness, and with no hint of a Tinkerbell reflection from his spectacles.

The students streamed out at the end of the lecture. It always amazed Fleetward that the young could be in so much of a hurry. Before long, only the strange man who had adjusted the light was left. He was still sitting at the back of the hall, and as the door swung shut behind the last of the students, he leaped to his feet and ran down to where Fleetward was stuffing his notes back into his briefcase.

'Brilliant,' the man exclaimed breathlessly. 'Fascinating, insightful, entertaining.' He paused to shake hands. 'You should do this for a living.'

'I do,' Fleetward told him.

The man seemed momentarily disappointed. 'Oh,' he said. 'Well,' he added. 'Good,' he decided.

'I'm glad you enjoyed it, er...?' He let the question hang.

'I'm the Doctor,' the man told Fleetward, in a tone that suggested this should have been obvious.

'Doctor...?'

'That's right.' He shook hands again.

A sudden random and unpleasant thought struck Fleetward. 'You're not from OFSTED, are you?'

The man seemed confused by the question. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'Should I be?'

'No, definitely not.' When this got no further reaction, Fleetward offered his hand, and the man shook it enthusiastically. 'Professor Ernest Fleetward,' Fleetward offered, hoping this might provoke more information.

'I know,' the Doctor replied, apparently proud of the fact. 'I have a letter for you. It has your name on it.' He pulled a crumpled envelope from his inside jacket pocket. 'See.' He pointed to the printed name, then handed it to Fleetward. 'Go on, open it,' he encouraged.

Fleetward opened it, took out the single sheet of headed paper and read through the letter. Then he read it again.

'You know Trevor?' It looked genuine enough. *Journal* notepaper, a signature that Fleetward recognised.

The Doctor shrugged. 'No, actually. Friend of a friend. Of a friend. You know how it goes.'

'And how can I help you?'

'You can tell me about these.' As he spoke the Doctor reached into his jacket pockets and started to pull things out. He laid them out on the top of the lectern. Three pieces of what looked like glass. All different shapes and sizes.

Fleetward looked at them. He picked one up, weighing it in his hand before he put it down again. 'Where did you get these?'

'I read your article,' the Doctor said quietly.

'It hasn't been printed yet.'

'I know. It comes out next quarter.'

Fleetward felt suddenly cold. 'I haven't finished writing it yet.'

A look of consternation spread across the Doctor's face. 'Oops,' he said. 'Look, you may have to trust me on a couple of things. But I found these in

different places round the world. No apparent connection. Just as you have found – or acquired pieces that were found by others – in different places. And from different times.’

Fleetward watched the Doctor return the pieces of crystal to his pockets. ‘Yes. That’s right. One in a Cretaceous rock strata. Another found in a coal mine. Several buried under hundreds of years of debris and accumulation. And others just lying about as if they were waiting to be found.’

‘And you have no idea what they are?’

Fleetward picked up his briefcase and headed for the door at the back of the hall. ‘I have a very good idea what they are.’

‘Really?’ The Doctor was somehow ahead of him, holding the door open.

‘But if I publish *that*, I’ll lose any help I might have got in finding more pieces. My job too, probably.’

‘Surely you can tell me.’ They were off down the corridor, and for some reason Fleetward already knew he would take the Doctor back to his flat, would show him the pieces and how he had them arranged on a table in the study.

‘Or at least let me guess,’ the Doctor was saying as they left the building and started across the staff car park.

‘Based on those three pieces you have, and a reading of what I’ve written so far, it would be a wild guess.’ He unlocked his car, gestured for the Doctor to get in.

‘Wild guesses are the best sort.’

Fleetward found himself trying to guess what the Doctor could possibly know already. ‘You’re going to tell me they are crystalline,’ he said.

The Doctor nodded. ‘A form of hardened crystal akin to diamond. Akin to, but very different. Did you know that diamond burns?’ he asked.

‘Er, no. No I didn’t. Does it?’

‘Oh yes. With a clear, blue light. But then these aren’t diamond.’

‘I can’t find anyone who can tell me what they’re made of,’ Fleetward said. He pulled out in front of a taxi and waved a thank-you to the angry cab driver.

‘But we both know what they themselves make, don’t we. How many pieces do you have?’

‘Not enough to be certain. Even with those three.’

‘But you’re right.’ The Doctor was staring intently at him as he drove. It was disconcerting. ‘They’re bones, aren’t they.’ It was not a question. ‘Parts

of a glass or crystal skeleton.'

Fleetward lived on the second floor of a converted Victorian house in west London. He kept the living room fairly tidy. The kitchen, he was less bothered about, and yesterday's washing-up was still in the sink. He considered the study to be his own personal space – no visitors were ever allowed in there. It was, he had to admit, a mess. Piles of magazines and papers were now so high that a slight breeze might topple them. The desk was itself crying out for the help of an archaeologist to unearth whatever might be lurking in the lower layers of paperwork. The floor was barely visible. But Fleetward knew where everything was.

He was about to apologise, to explain that no one apart from himself ever came in here, when he noticed that the Doctor was looking round and nodding appreciatively.

'If a man's study is a reflection of his mind,' the Doctor said brightly, 'then you obviously have a lot going on inside your head.'

'I just need more space,' Fleetward said, leading the Doctor through a narrow path to a large table that was all but lost in the corner of the room.

'I might be able to help you there, actually,' the Doctor said. He seemed to mean it as a joke, but it was lost on Fleetward. The Doctor cleared his throat in a 'forget it' sort of way. 'So what gave you the idea that the pieces of crystal you were collecting might be bones?'

'This did.'

Fleetward gestured for the Doctor to look at the table. A sheet was draped over it, but from the shape it was obvious that there was something under the sheet, something hidden and protected. Fleetward lifted one edge of the sheet and folded it back to reveal what was beneath.

It was a hand. Or rather the skeleton of a hand. Made of the same clear crystalline material.

'Fascinating,' the Doctor breathed.

'I found it virtually intact on a dig in Devon.'

They were both staring down at the table. The Doctor crouched down to get a closer look, careful not to touch. 'Devon, Devon, Devon,' he murmured, as if trying to coax out a distant memory. 'Ah yes, 1624.'

Fleetward frowned. 'I did estimate seventeenth century from the position. We were excavating an Elizabethan manor house that was burnt down during the Protectorate.' A thought occurred to the professor. So obvious he was

amazed it had not struck him before. 'Doctor,' he said, 'you asked me how I guessed these might be bones.'

'I did.'

'But, from the three pieces you have found – how did you know?'

'Ah. The Doctor nodded, as if this was a very good question. With a single rapid movement, he swung the sheet off the table to reveal the crystal bones arranged beneath. It was nowhere near complete, but even without the hand the shape of a skeleton was evident. The Doctor took out his own three pieces of crystal and carefully positioned them on the table – left forearm, part of the ribcage, a finger of the other hand. . . 'I'll tell you what,' he said, 'why don't you make us each a cup of tea, and then we can relax and have a nice long chat about it. What do you say?'

The diamond-shaped slab of crystal that formed the Council's table was alive with a shifting flow chart. Lines of causality connected events, which produced more lines. . . Hexx tapped an event box, one with fewer lines emerging than went in.

'And you agree this is the point?'

Octan nodded. 'Before that and there are too many loose ends to tie up. Afterwards, and the damage has already begun to be done.'

'Tricky,' Duvar said.

'But possible,' insisted Trilon. 'We've coped with worse.'

'After a lot of planning and scenario-mapping,' Penter pointed out. 'This doesn't look like a clean break to me. There will be ramifications.'

'Yes,' Soul said. 'It isn't like August 1940. So far as History up to that point was concerned, Trotsky was played out. Finished. As good as dead already.'

'The ice pick as a full stop in History,' mused Sept. 'Discuss.'

'Please do be serious,' Hexx snapped. 'I just wish to point out that there will be some tidying up to be done as well.' He waved a hand over the diagram, looking for a good example. 'Look, what about this? His children.'

'He doesn't have any children,' Octan said. 'He is not going to have any children.'

'Yet here he seems to be a father.'

'More corruption. Distortion. Infection.' Octan stood up and walked over to the crystal window. 'We must stop this before the taint spreads. It's already affecting his later personal life as well as the web of History itself. We must stop it, and stop it now.'

‘It’s more like’, Fear said, commanding the immediate attention of his colleagues, ‘that Jones woman.’

‘Yes, well, she was infected, wasn’t she?’ Duvar said. ‘One of the worst cases. Insignificant druggie to eco-campaigner in one easy lesson.’

‘We sorted it out,’ Soul said quietly. He did not sound proud of the fact.

‘But for Fleetward I maintain that we need a closed environment,’ Octan said. The fact that his own timeline is even now in flux suggests that the Doctor is in some way still involved. We can’t just have a tree fall on him, or a drunk driver hit him on the crossing.’

‘Why not?’ Penter wondered.

‘Because it would be too easy for the Doctor or one of his agents to intervene. No, we need a closed environment where any collateral damage can be absorbed or repaired before History notices. We need to seal off Fleetward and deal with him. Permanently.’

‘And if the Doctor is there too?’ Hexx asked.

‘He will be.’

‘You cannot possibly know that,’ Fear snorted. ‘We can’t trace the Doctor any more than he can know of us.’

‘We can see his trail. And we know he is on the guest list for that evening.’

‘That doesn’t mean he’ll be there,’ Trilon said quietly. ‘Or that we would ever recognise him if he were.’

‘So we have to assume the worst. That he and Kreiner will both be there.’

‘And you are suggesting – what exactly?’ Trilon wanted to know. ‘A closed temporal environment. No externals. Remove the Fleetward problem and deal with any consequences before real-time even notices?’

Octan nodded. ‘We’ve done it before. You can go and watch if you’re that worried. A closed environment means no fallout from our own presence.’

Duvar sighed. ‘Well, I suppose this is the best way.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Assuming you really do have all the variables covered and the potential mapped out.’

‘All except the Doctor and Kreiner. And...’

They all turned, expectant. Eventually it was Trilon who asked: ‘And what?’

‘There is one small thing.’

‘It only takes one small thing,’ Fear murmured. ‘We of all people know that.’

Octan ignored him. 'Logite and his team have managed to screen out most of the rogue signal that has been swamping our data. There are patches where it is still difficult to read the situations, but for the most part we have now restored our monitoring and mapping and there seems to be no appreciable change in the web.'

'We *are* still here,' Soul said. He steepled his smooth, pale fingers, tapping the tips together so that they clinked quietly in the expectant silence.

'One of the blank patches, one of the data anomalies that remains culminates at the Institute of Anthropology, on January 31st 2004. The event is organised by Fleetward and a woman called Crystal Devine.'

'What of her?' Penter asked. 'A quirk in her timeline?'

Octan's dark eyes seemed to glisten in the suffused light. 'More than a quirk. A woman of that name appears on guest lists, makes telephone calls, sends emails, lives a life in early 2004. Yet she has no timeline. No timeline at all.' He paused while they realised what he was saying. 'Crystal Devine does not exist.'

Piecing Things Together

The tea, the Doctor noted with pleasure, was Earl Grey. He wasn't convinced by the wisdom of putting milk in it, but it was hot and aromatic and the cup was almost clean.

'Lucky guess, I suppose,' he told the professor. 'I thought the biggest piece I had looked a bit like a forearm. Then I decided it looked a lot like a forearm. Then I was sure it was a forearm.' He smiled and sipped the tea, as if this was the most natural chain of assumptions. Perhaps Fleetward was convinced.

'I found the hand. That was enough of a clue for me.'

'Yet you are still unwilling to publish until you have more.'

Fleetward nodded. 'They'd think I was mad. If I publish, there's a real danger *I* shall think I'm mad. I've tried not to think about it,' he confessed, putting his teacup back on the saucer that was precariously balanced on a pile of papers. 'I mean, what are we actually saying here? That at some time in the past as yet undefined but definitely before there was intelligent life on Earth to speak of, someone – we don't know who – made a skeleton in the shape of a human being – which had not by then evolved. They made it out of a substance that seems not to exist anywhere else in nature and which doesn't fit into the known elements. The structure of the crystals doesn't even fit in with the periodic table, let alone established crystallography so far as I can tell.'

'Good so far,' the Doctor said, allowing a smile to wrinkle his face. 'And of course, someone – maybe someone else we don't know about or perhaps the same someone – then broke the skeleton into pieces and scattered it all round the world. And they did it in such a way,' he added, peering over his cup as he took another sip of tea, 'as to make it look as if the pieces came into existence at different times throughout History. I found that smallest piece, by the way, on a New York street.'

'My God. When?'

The Doctor hesitated. He didn't like to say *The third of next month, 2002*. So he settled for 'Oh, recently.'

‘They just seem to pop up without rhyme or reason.’

‘I’m sure there are both.’

‘If only there was a pattern.’ Fleetward had finished his tea and was on his feet. He paced up and down, as if the movement might lubricate his brain. ‘If we could work out what’s behind the apparent dates and the locations we could predict where to find more pieces. But it’s not like following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, or tracing Minoan civilisation, or even digging up Troy. Completely random.’

‘Of course, there are a couple of things that count in our favour.’ The Doctor finished his own tea and set aside the cup and saucer. ‘If you really want to trace all the pieces.’

‘We don’t know if the skeleton was ever complete.’

‘I think there’s a good chance.’

‘And what are these things in our favour?’

‘Well first, the crystal that the bones are made from emits a signal. It resonates, not unlike quartz, though I doubt that anyone has noticed that.’

Fleetward shook his head. ‘I’ve had it analysed by the best experts in the field. All the fields I could think of.’

‘My analysis may have been just a touch more sophisticated. And my equipment certainly is.’ The Doctor blew on his fingernails and polished then on his lapel. ‘So we can build a tracer. If that would help.’

‘Help?’ Fleetward was staring wide-eyed at the Doctor. ‘I’ll say.’

‘Let’s not get too excited yet. The tracer will only work once you get fairly close to a piece of the stuff.’ He grinned. ‘Stuff is a technical term which I’ve decided is about as accurate as we can get so far.’

‘Works for me,’ Fleetward said. ‘So this tracer will be of very limited help then. We’d still need a way of knowing where the, er, stuff is likely to turn up.’

By way of an answer, the Doctor was reaching into his jacket pocket. He pulled out a set of folded papers, letting them drop so that Fleetward could see that it was a computer printout on a continuous perforated sheet. ‘I thought this might help there,’ the Doctor said.

‘What is it?’

‘Of course, we’d have to do some guessing of how and where the stuff might have moved in the meantime. Chaos theory would probably help. Predictive analysis. That sort of thing.’

Fleetward had hold of one end of the long sheet and was examining it carefully. He pushed his glasses up his nose to see better.

‘It’s a list of dates and places where I believe we can find pieces of crystal. Of course, some of them you have already. So we need to cross those off our list.’

‘But, how did you...?’

‘Oh, ways and means.’ The Doctor smoothed the paper out on a spare patch of floor and they both knelt down beside it. ‘It may take a while. A couple of years, I should think. But we can trace where each of these has gone.’

Fleetward was running his finger down the list. ‘This is incredible,’ he said quietly. ‘No indication of which part of the skeleton each is, I suppose?’

The Doctor sniffed. ‘I thought it was quite impressive as it is, actually.’

‘What? Oh, yes. Sorry.’ Fleetward was looking at the Doctor over the top of his spectacles. ‘It’s just that, well, I had sort of promised myself that I’d publish when I found – if I found – the skull.’

The Doctor nodded slowly. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’m sure it will turn up. Eventually.’

Fleetward was staring at the list again, chuckling. The chuckling grew louder and heartier until he was laughing. And then the Doctor was laughing too.

‘You know,’ Fleetward said, reaching a finger behind the lenses of his glasses to wipe his eyes, ‘what we need is a time machine.’

The Doctor laughed even louder at this. ‘It’s a thought,’ he said as he recovered some of his composure. In a moment he was serious again. ‘But I think that would be cheating. Don’t you?’

They spent two days going through the list. Fleetward took occasional breaks for meals and sleep. The Doctor drank tea while he worked, and on the second evening accepted a glass of whisky. He poked at the single ice cube floating in the amber liquid, then sucked his finger.

By then the study walls were plastered with sheets of flip-chart paper covered with flow charts and spider’s web diagrams.

‘A good start,’ the Doctor decided as he looked round. He sipped carefully at the whisky, treating it with respect. ‘You should be able to trace a good number of the pieces from this. You and your colleagues.’

'We'll see.' Fleetward had to admit he was excited at the prospect. But at the same time he had only the Doctor's word that there was any validity in the list of places and dates. And most of their work had been amalgamated 'what-ifs' and 'could-have-beens'. No proof as such. Nothing that was solidly scientific – probability and prediction rather than knowledge.

'But what about these?' Fleetward went over to a single sheet that was pinned behind the door. It was headed 'Irretrievable' and it listed the pieces that they had reluctantly agreed would be difficult or impossible to find. One was under a car park in the centre of Milan, another would have sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic or been carried on an unknown ship or boat to an unknown destination almost a century ago. There were about thirty in all on the Irretrievable list. Thirty out of a total of over two hundred.

'It's not a bad percentage really,' the Doctor said. 'Though we're being optimistic at the moment.' He turned in a full circle, waving his hand at the other sheets. 'There are bound to be a few of these that you can't find. Maybe more than a few.'

'Maybe a lot,' Fleetward said.

The Doctor looked round for a free surface to put down his whisky. Finding nowhere suitable, he drained it in one and stuffed the empty tumbler into his pocket. Fleetward could hear him crunching up the ice.

'So here's what we'll do,' the Doctor said through a mouthful of ice fragments. 'You go ahead and organise an exhibition of the complete skeleton for, when shall we say, end of January 2004?' He said it so casually that Fleetward was sure he had already worked out a date and a venue. As if to confirm these suspicions, the Doctor went on: 'How about January 31st? And the Institute of Anthropology, just round the corner from the British Museum would seem appropriate, don't you think?'

'If you say so, Doctor.' Fleetward was taking his time with his own whisky. He did not drink much as a rule, but he was beginning to think he might need another before too long. 'But that's less than two years. Is that enough time to get enough of the pieces to make a suitable exhibition?'

'I think you have enough now, actually.'

'If I had the skull, I'd agree.'

'I'm sure it will turn up.'

'So you said. But what if it doesn't? What if I go ahead and arrange to make a splash and when the time comes we don't have enough even for a...'

He broke off and shrugged.

‘A very small splash?’ the Doctor suggested. ‘A splashette, shall we say?’
‘If you like.’

‘Don’t worry about it. Just make sure I’m on the guest list for the grand opening reception.’

‘The grand opening reception?’

‘On the night of January 31st 2004. Oh, and include my colleague Mr Fitz Kreiner, would you?’

‘If you say so,’ Fleetward said weakly. He was still not convinced that their hard work of the last two days would actually convert into any real benefit.

‘Good,’ the Doctor said. He pulled the tumbler out of his pocket, weighing it in his hand as if it were made of the same mysterious crystalline material as the skeleton’s bones. ‘I’ll put this in the kitchen, and see you at the reception, then.’

It took a moment for Fleetward to realise what he was saying. He followed the Doctor out into the kitchen. ‘You mean, I won’t see you until then?’

‘Of course you will.’ The Doctor was on his way back to the study. He pulled down the sheet of Irretrievables and folded it up until it would fit into his pocket. ‘I’ll be back with these in plenty of time.’

‘Back with...? But – how will you get them?’

The Doctor clicked his tongue and shook his head. ‘Details, details,’ he murmured. ‘Oh, and have a list ready of any others you don’t manage to find, will you?’ He strode across to the door. ‘If I call in briefly on, say, the first of January, then I can drop off the bones I’ve managed to get and still have time to find the ones you have trouble with. How’s that strike you?’

Fleetward must have looked dubious. ‘First of January 2004,’ he said flatly, disbelieving.

‘Oh, don’t worry.’ The Doctor had the door open and was stepping out on to the landing. ‘I’ll make it the afternoon. Let you sleep off those New Year’s parties. I know what the academic world is like.’

Fleetward watched him down to the next landing. He heard the Doctor’s footsteps all the way to the front door, and then the door closing behind him. He fancied he could still hear the footsteps as the Doctor crossed the road, could imagine him whistling happily to himself as he disappeared as carelessly as he had arrived in Fleetward’s life.

Predictivity

The open foyer area at the bottom of the stairs was much busier when Fitz returned. He had persuaded Chad and Zezanne to stay out of the way. He hoped he had managed to keep the two youngsters away from where he knew the security cameras were pointing – certainly they had not been interrupted by guards.

Fitz was not sure what was going on, what was going to happen here, but if they were somehow involved he would find out soon enough. Having promised to keep an eye out for Zezanne's mother, and to return and let them know what was happening if and when he ever actually found out what was happening, Fitz left them at the line of evolving figures and made his way back to the main staircase.

From the top of the final flight down, as the staircase swung round past the first floor of the Institute, Fitz had a good view of the milling people. He could see the curtained exhibition area at the back of the foyer, caught sight of the nervous, diminutive figure of Professor Fleetward looking out from behind the curtains. More interestingly, Fitz could see that several men and women in dark suits were carrying trays of food round, pausing with each group of people to allow them to help themselves. His stomach rumbled at the promise of sustenance.

One group was significantly larger than the others, Fitz noticed as he descended. Having liberated a glass of sparkling wine from a passing tray carried by a member of staff, Fitz decided to make this his first port of call. There must be something interesting going on, and there was the added advantage that Miss Devine was talking animatedly in another of the groups. She caught Fitz's eye as he passed, and Fitz smiled at her in as friendly and non-defensive manner as he could manage. She raised an eyebrow, sniffed, and turned away.

Strangely, Fitz felt a bit snubbed by this. But he did not worry for long, and worked his way through the loosely packed group of people. They were watching something, quiet and intent. Some noted *bon vivant* or raconteur

perhaps?

As he reached close enough to the centre of the group to be able to see over the shoulders of the people in front, Fitz found that the attraction was a single man. He was tall, thin to the point of being almost gangly, with narrow features and dark eyes. His face was framed by a close-cut black beard and his equally black hair was slicked away from his forehead. Fitz remembered having seen the man in the foyer, when he first arrived. When he spoke, the man's voice was calm, controlled, rich and dark.

'That's very interesting,' he was saying to a young woman in a low-cut dress that fought for Fitz's attention. 'Because what I've written down here, and of course I may be completely wrong. . . .' The man pulled a small card from the top pocket of his immaculate dark suit jacket, '... but you did just say it was in Hertfordshire, and I've written "A wine bar in Hemel Hempstead".' He turned the card so they could see for themselves.

The woman's hand went to her astonished mouth, and everyone else seemed to gasp with her.

'That's right,' she said, her voice shrill with excitement and embarrassment. 'That's where it happened. How could you know that? Nobody knows that.'

The man smiled. As he turned to accept a smattering of applause, Fitz could see that he was wearing a small name badge. Glancing round he saw that everyone was wearing one – everyone apart from himself. 'Malcolm Patterson', the man's badge said.

Patterson had already picked on someone else – a short, stocky man with thinning fair hair and a mass of freckles. 'Now you look like a man who can play cards. Poker, maybe?'

The man shrugged. 'A little.'

'I thought you were looking flushed.' Patterson smiled at his own joke. He produced a pack of cards and riffled through them. 'Now then, here's what we'll do.' He handed the cards to the man, and peered at his badge. 'Jeffrey. Jeff, right? Good.' He stepped back from the man, raised his index fingers as if to draw his attention, and then clenched his hands into fists. 'I want you to choose a card. Don't look at the pack yet, just get an idea of which card you're going to find in there. Got it?'

Jeff nodded. 'Yep.'

'Right, now fix your mind on that card. Don't tell us what it is. Just find it and take it out without showing me. OK?'

Jeff turned the cards face up and started to shuffle through them. He went

through the pack twice, with people jostling to look over his shoulder.

‘What’s the matter?’ Patterson asked as Jeff started through again. ‘The cards are in order within suits, aren’t they? Just find the card.’

‘It’s... I...’ Jeff looked up. ‘It’s not here.’

Patterson seemed astonished, but the light glinting in his eyes was enough to suggest that he was not at all surprised.

‘It goes from the ten of diamonds to the queen.’

‘And you chose the jack, is that it?’

Jeff nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘But all the other cards are there, aren’t they?’

‘Seem to be.’ Jeff shuffled through again, as if to check. ‘Yes, I think so.’

‘How strange then,’ Patterson said. Fitz thought he was milking it for rather more than it was worth. They had all got the point now, surely. ‘The trouble is,’ Patterson went on, ‘I was sure that was the one card you wouldn’t choose. So I slipped it into your trouser pocket before I gave you the cards just now.’ He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Jeff’s eyes widened and he reached into his trouser pocket, pulling out a playing card. His face broke into an incredulous grin. ‘Amazing.’ He handed the cards back to Patterson.

As Patterson took the cards, he turned, looking for someone else to involve in the act. Perhaps it was because he was taller than the people round him, or perhaps it was his less than amazed expression that singled him out. But whatever the reason, Patterson smiled at Fitz and gestured for him to step forward.

‘Something a bit different this time,’ Patterson said. He had already taken out another card, blank as he made a point of showing Fitz. ‘I’m going to let you read *my* mind. OK? Well, in a sense. Actually, it’s sort of mutual.’ He had a black felt-tip pen poised over the card and he looked carefully and intently at Fitz. ‘Maybe you weren’t the best choice.’ Patterson grinned, and touched Fitz’s arm briefly to show he didn’t mean it and to involve him in the joke. Fitz laughed with him, though he wasn’t terribly impressed.

‘Right.’ Patterson cleared his throat and returned to his businesslike voice. ‘I’m going to write a word on this card. Could be anything, anything at all. Could be a name, for example. Anything. OK?’

Fitz nodded. ‘OK.’

‘Now our minds are going to sort of synch-up. So what I write will depend on what I can see in your mind. And then you will tell me what you think

you see in my mind, all right?’

‘I think so.’

‘So by working together we should arrive at the same word. As I said, it could be any word. Doesn’t have to be a name. Anything at all. Just let me write it down, then you say whatever seems to come into your head. Let it wash over you and flood into your mind. Stream of consciousness stuff, you know?’ He stared at Fitz for a moment more, then wrote quickly on the card, angling it so Fitz could not see. He looked at what he had written, as if to be sure he was happy with it, then put the pen in his pocket and held the card close to his chest.

‘Right, ready,’ Patterson said. ‘Actually, no,’ he changed his mind. ‘Hang on just a second, I’m parched.’ He smiled apologetically and accepted a glass of water from a woman close beside him. ‘Thank you.’

Now Patterson stared into Fitz’s eyes. He stood close to him, almost touching him. ‘And the word is. . .?’ he breathed.

Fitz said the first word that came into his head. ‘Time,’ he said.

For a split second the world seemed to freeze round him. Patterson’s stare seemed to lose its edge. The man blinked, and just for a moment, Fitz thought he could see fear and panic in his eyes.

Something white fluttered and floated to the ground. The card that Patterson had written on. It landed face up at Fitz’s feet and he bent to pick it up. He handed it back to Patterson.

On the card, in black capitals, was written: ‘Water’.

‘Funny, I usually get that right,’ Patterson said. He sounded genuinely mystified. ‘But maybe between the two of us we’re saying it’s time for a drink. Let’s take a short break, shall we?’

As a recovery it worked fairly well, but Fitz was still not impressed. He turned to go, but felt Patterson’s hand on his shoulder.

‘I can usually predict what the person is going to say.’

‘Predict or inspire?’ Fitz wondered. Now he knew the word Patterson had expected was water, he could understand why he had said it would wash over him and flood into his mind. And he knew why he had answered as he did.

‘A little of both. Most of my act is a form of psychology really.’

‘Very impressive,’ Fitz assured him. ‘I liked the card trick.’

Patterson nodded his thanks. ‘Can I get you a drink, Mr. . . ? You don’t seem to have a badge.’

Fitz made a point of touching his lapel, as if surprised he wasn't wearing his badge. 'Don't you guess people's names as well?'

'Usually I do,' Patterson said. He was frowning again. 'But, for some reason. . .' He shook his head. 'You'll have to prompt me.'

'It's Kreiner. Fitz Kreiner.' He held his hand out, just being friendly. It seemed the right thing to do.

But Patterson was backing away, shaking his head, his eyes wide. 'Excuse me,' he said, his voice dry and husky. 'I. . . I have to. . .' But before he finished speaking, Patterson turned and walked quickly and nervously away, leaving Fitz standing alone with his hand extended, wondering what he had said.

Bare Bones

As he drove home, Ernest Fleetward's mind was occupied with thoughts of the weeks ahead. The exhibition at the Institute of Anthropology was due to open in less than a month. It should be cause for excitement, except there was still so much to do.

The Doctor had returned, as he had promised over a year before, with a carpet bag full of the crystal bones. They had spent a pleasant evening arranging them in position on the skeleton, which was now almost complete. The Doctor had accepted Fleetward's list of dates and locations from which he had not managed to find a crystal fragment, and had offered no explanation of how he thought he might himself be any more successful in tracking them down.

'You didn't find them,' the Doctor had 'explained', 'because they've already been taken away.'

But when Fleetward asked who had taken them, the Doctor just smiled and tapped the side of his nose.

The Institute had suggested an 'event' to mark the opening of the exhibition. The curator – an annoying and officious man called Pearl – was excited at the prospect of his Institute hosting what they were all sure would be a ground-breaking exhibition. They wanted a definite launch, the press, publicity. Fleetward was sure this was less to do with the excitement of what he was going to display and more to do with the Institute of Anthropology and its curator seeing a way of finally stepping out of the shadow of its neighbour, the British Museum, and gaining some recognition of its own.

But be that as it may, it should still have been a time for Fleetward to celebrate. He should be excited, not apprehensive, he thought as he parked his car and gathered up his battered briefcase from the passenger seat. He had done enough, surely? He could simply display the skeleton, along with the data of where and when the 'bones' had been found and what small amount of information there was from the various analyses, then wait for the kudos and recognition of his peers as they tried to fathom out the truth

of what he had discovered.

He didn't really need to find some gimmick for the opening reception, after all. Just because Pearl had suggested they needed something for the press to latch on to, something to somehow put the exhibition in context and relate it back to the Institute of Anthropology, that didn't mean he had to do it. Let the skeleton speak for itself – it was impressive enough. Even without the skull.

And this was the main source of Fleetward's frustration. He had hoped and prayed; every time he unearthed one of the pieces of crystal he hoped and prayed as he saw the first glint of the material. But all the hoping in the world had not led him to the skull. Still it eluded him.

He had thought that the Doctor might bring it. But with each fragment that the Doctor proudly unloaded from his carpet bag (which surely held more crystal pieces than it had a right to judging by the size it appeared to be), Fleetward's heart had sunk ever so slightly lower.

'It will turn up,' the Doctor had told him. 'I'm sure it will.'

Then today had come the biggest blow of all. Again, a sweet-bitter blow – the news from Madrid that they had found something at the final location on the list. Just two things left to unearth – a small bone from the left foot, and the skull. In Madrid, the expedition sponsored by the Spanish Museum of Fine Antiquities had found only the bone from the foot. Fleetward could barely contain his disappointment.

Preoccupied with these thoughts and memories, Fleetward was halfway down his hallway before he realised the lights were on. Surely the hall light was not on when he left that morning for the university? He would have turned it off, as he always did. And even if he had, this once, forgotten – he had so much on his mind – he would not have left the door to the study open. Or the anglepoise desk light on. Yet as he crossed the lounge on his way to the kitchen to put the kettle on, he saw that the door was open, the light was on.

'Doctor?' he called tentatively. He could think of no one else with the gall to let themselves into his locked flat and make free with the study.

But even as he called out, he shivered. There was another possibility. He had kept quiet about his discovery. After the article in the *American Journal*, he had fended some inquiries from various scientists and academics, and tried to avoid rather more criticism and outright disbelief – even mild abuse. He had kept quiet about his continuing research, about what he had

really discovered. But inevitably as he needed to involve more people in the search for the crystal bones, as more people became involved in the preparations at the Institute and the press were invited to the opening, so news was spreading, rumours were rife.

Dropping his briefcase on the sofa, Fleetward walked slowly towards the study. He paused in the doorway, afraid of what he might find – or not find – inside. What if – he hardly dared think it – what if the skeleton was gone? What if in three weeks' time (was that all?) he was forced to unveil an exhibition consisting of a single piece of crystal he then claimed was a small bone from the left foot of a glass skeleton – a single fragment of crystal despatched by courier from Madrid that afternoon and yet to arrive...?

He had to know. Steeling himself, Fleetward stepped into the study.

Two things surprised him. The first was that the skeleton was still there. Someone had pulled back the sheet that usually covered it, but it was *still there*.

The second surprise was the large lady in an ill-fitting red dress who was sitting in his desk chair, smiling up at him. Her dark hair was tied in a severe bun on the top of her head, but a few grey strands had broken free and hung like spindly spider's legs. They shivered when she spoke.

'Professor Fleetward, I presume?' Her voice was slightly nasal and upper-class haughty. It didn't seem to match her body, and for a bizarre moment, Fleetward could imagine her doing voice-overs for advertisements featuring sultry beauties with unfortunate north-London accents.

'Who are you?'

She hauled herself to her feet with something of an effort. 'Do forgive the intrusion. But I wasn't sure how long you would be and I don't like to loiter on the streets, even in such a salubrious neighbourhood as this. You understand, I'm sure.'

He didn't, but he nodded and made sympathetic noises. 'Can I help you?' he asked, rather lamely he thought.

'Well, a cup of tea would be very nice indeed.' She waddled over to the door, pausing to allow Fleetward to catch up with her. 'I have your present out here. In a bag.'

'Present?' He felt apprehensive as he asked. But her answer dispelled all his fears, and made him realise how breathless and frightened he had been.

'From the Doctor,' she said. 'He asked me to bring it to you, oh I forget when. A while ago, I think. I'm so absent-minded.' She lifted a supermarket

carrier bag from behind the sofa and placed it carefully on the coffee table. As she put it down, her hand went to her mouth as a thought struck her. 'Oh, I do hope I'm not too late. The Doctor did say it was urgent. But then he's always saying that, isn't he? I mean, one never knows when he is being serious really.'

'No,' Fleetward said. 'No, if this is what I think it is, then you're not too late. Perfect timing.' He knelt down beside the coffee table, his hands shaking as he reached for the bag. 'I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.'

'I think I neglected to tell you,' she apologised, watching intently as Fleetward pushed open the top of the bag and reached inside. 'It's Devine.'

He thought she meant the skull. He lifted it out carefully, reverently, flattening the bag and lowering the crystal skull gently on top of it. The skull seemed to watch him through dark, glassy sockets as he leaned forward to examine it. 'Devine,' he echoed.

'Yes. Miss Crystal Devine.'

Miss Devine made the tea. Fleetward could not tear himself away from the skull. He sat on the sofa and stared back at its sightless eyes, immersing himself in its icy majesty.

'Oh, one thing,' Miss Devine said, popping her head round the kitchen door and calling over the sound of the kettle.

'Mmmm??' He did not look up.

'The Doctor said that he thought you should keep the skull separate for now. He suggested that placing the skull in position on the skeleton would be a good gimmick at the opening reception. Something impressive for the press people to take their photographs of.'

'Good idea.' He had no idea how long it took him to absorb what she had said, think about, and reply. But she was sitting in the armchair opposite now, sipping tea and he was vaguely aware that there was another cup of tea on the coffee table beside the skull. One side of the skull was misting slightly from the heat.

'Yes, good idea,' he said again. He needed a gimmick, they said. Perhaps that would be enough. Save him worrying about finding anything else, at least for now. And if another idea occurred later, then fine.

'Though we could just pop poor Yorick into position now and have a look at the complete chappie,' she suggested.

It was tempting, and Fleetward found he was grinning at the thought. 'Yes,' he said, leaping to his feet and gathering up the heavy skull in one movement. 'Yes, let's do that.'

'Very impressive,' Miss Devine said. The skull was in position and they both walked round the table, examining the complete skeleton.

'Almost complete,' Fleetward said out loud.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I can honestly say that when I place the skull in position at the opening, it will be the first time the skeleton has been completely assembled.' He paused at the bottom of the table and tapped the glistening left foot. 'There's one small bone yet to arrive. From Spain.'

'You can't tell,' she assured him.

'True. But I know.'

They spent several minutes just looking at the glittering beauty of the thing. Despite having spent so long with it, having seen it grow and become more complete almost day by day, Fleetward was astonished at how beautiful the skeleton was. It was tall, narrow, elegant, but because of the glasslike substance it was made from, the actual shape was difficult to discern. It seemed almost to glow as it reflected back the light, as if burning with an inner energy. The whole thing shimmered, like it was alive and struggling to move...

Fleetward lifted the skull carefully away from the top of the skeleton and placed it on his desk. He was aware of Miss Devine watching him.

'The arrangements for the opening reception,' she said.

'What about them? There's still a lot to organise.'

She was smiling. 'Not really your sort of thing, is it?'

'Not really,' he confessed with a snort of laughter. 'Not at all, in fact.'

She nodded sympathetically. 'You just let me know what you want me to organise, and I shall see that it happens. You have done enough.' She was looking at the decapitated skeleton again. 'You should be proud, enjoying yourself, not worrying about some stuffy party.'

'Thank you.'

'You talk me through what you've done so far, what state the guest list is in, who thinks they have some say in what's happening – all that sort of thing. Then leave it to me.'

He was happy to do so. In fact, he could already imagine her facing down that idiot Pearl. 'Thank you,' he said again, and was rewarded with a smile

from her that made her plump cheeks seem to quiver with joy.

It was a relief rather than a chore to go through the paperwork once more. He spread it over the table where the skull had so recently rested, sweeping the carrier bag on to the floor and ignoring it. Miss Devine listened carefully, made notes on a small pad she produced from an enormous handbag, and asked intelligent questions. When he did not know the answers, she did not admonish, but merely made a note before continuing.

At one point, when they were about halfway through the correspondence between Fleetward and the Institute authorities, Miss Devine produced a silver hip flask from her handbag. Fleetward fetched glasses, and she tipped the pale contents of the flask into them in equal portions. It was brandy, and it burned Fleetward's throat in a way that was at once painful and refreshing.

She promised to call him if she had any more questions, and to let him know how things were going. In return, Fleetward undertook to call the Institute in the morning and let Curator Pearl and the publicity people know that Miss Devine would be handling things for him from now on.

They shook hands at the door, businesslike but smiling. Then Miss Crystal Devine pushed her handbag strap over her shoulder, and started on her ponderous journey down the stairs.

If Fleetward had returned a moment earlier from saying goodbye, he might have seen the plastic carrier bag blown gently across his living room, as if by a breeze. He might have guessed from the manner and direction in which the bag moved that the breeze was coming from his study. He might also have assumed that it was a gust of wind from the open window.

Except that he would know that the window was closed.

And he could not have guessed that the displacement of air was caused by the shimmering arrival of a hunched, apelike creature in the centre of the study.

The creature was still for a moment, then turned slowly, apparently sniffing at the air as if trying to detect a faint scent. In its long, hairy arms it held a leather document wallet, tight to its hirsute chest. Through almost-human eyes it surveyed the study, pausing for the briefest moment on the skull, then the skeleton, before dismissing both as irrelevant. For all the world like a bored executive, it slumped into the chair behind the desk and leaned forward to leaf through the papers strewn over the blotter. Letters, bills, a funding application for approval.

The creature was aware that this was just part of its task. When it had finished here it had another task – several weeks in the future. It would travel along its Time Corridor to a deserted and unremarkable stretch of country road in the late afternoon of the last day of the current month. Unremarkable save for the public telephone box standing alone and neglected by the side of the road. The creature had a call to make.

But that was yet to come. At the bottom of the untidy pile on the desk was a magazine, a thin glossy that had come free with a Sunday paper and somehow never been thrown away. The creature lifted the magazine, careful to disturb nothing else on the desk. It unzipped the document wallet and pushed the magazine inside. Then it drew out another magazine – identical, except for one short article. It opened the magazine to the article, smoothed the spine so it lay flat, and slipped it under the papers where its near-twin had been.

In less than two minutes, less time than it took for Fleetward to tidy away the glasses and stuff the plastic bag into the waste bin, the creature had finished. It shimmered out of the universe, gone as if it had never been there.

Which in a sense was true. Almost nothing had changed.

But as the creature and its masters knew, it is the almost-nothings that make history.

Eternity in an Hour

They were sheltered behind a row of display cases, a place Fitz had told them Security could not see. They sat cross-legged on the floor, hardly daring to move. The boy Zezanne had introduced to Fitz as Chad had watched the glass-eyed camera set into the ceiling, fascinated by the way it moved slowly back and forth as it scanned the area. Could it really see them in the dark?

Zezanne assured him that the camera would see everything. 'We have to assume that, anyway,' she whispered, as if it could hear as well – though Fitz had said it couldn't. 'We aren't supposed to be here.'

'I know that.' He was tired and he was hungry, but he didn't want to say so. She thought he was just a boy, though she was hardly more than a girl herself. Anyway, Chad knew she was worried about her mother. 'Fitz will find her,' he said quietly.

Her eyes were like a cat's, almost glowing as they caught the light. They were moist and wide. 'Maybe,' she replied. 'If she's here.' She looked away, then thumped the floor in frustration. 'What can we do?'

'Just wait.'

'For what?'

He shrugged. He was still looking at her eyes, but behind her he could see the row of silent figures that depicted the evolution of man. Six of them. And out of the corner of his eye, he saw the air shimmer and a seventh figure begin to materialise at the beginning of the line.

'Maybe for this,' he whispered, and pointed.

As the figure became more solid, so the air settled back to normal and Chad was able to see the creature more clearly. It looked like an amalgamation of the six figures in the line, and of more besides. It had the heavy forehead of an apeman, yet its bearing was more upright and the face behind the hair was almost human. The arms hung low, ending in paws tipped with sharp, ragged nails. The body was almost black with erupting hair, but the legs were covered in reptilian scales and ended in clawed feet. As it raised itself

up slightly and looked round, Chad thought he could see feathers sprouting amongst the hair on the arms.

‘What is it?’ Zezanne hissed.

Chad shook his head. He did not know. But he could guess. ‘It’s starting,’ he said quietly. ‘Whatever is going to happen here, tonight – it’s starting.’

They sat in silence for a while, watching the creature, waiting to see what it would do. For almost a minute, it stood where it had arrived, turning slowly, looking round, apparently getting its bearings and surveying the surroundings. Chad could see now that in the hand furthest away from them the creature was carrying a briefcase. It knelt down, setting the briefcase at the foot of one of the apeman exhibits.

Chad could not see into the briefcase when the creature opened it. Beside him, Zezanne also peered into the gloom, trying to make out what was happening. The creature straightened up, closing the case.

It was holding something – a pendant perhaps, dangling on a chain, swinging slowly back and forth like a pendulum. The creature hung the end of the chain over the outstretched hand of the man at the front of the line, the final link in evolution’s chain. The pendant swung and twisted slowly before eventually it was still. Apparently satisfied, the creature stood the briefcase at the feet of the man, turned, and walked slowly away.

Chad watched it disappear into the darkness. If it continued in that direction, he knew it would reach the edge of the floor – a railing, then a view down to the ground floor below. If you stood in the right place, you could see over the curtain that hid the exhibition area from the guests who were milling about. Their voices, the chink of their glasses, the sound of their feet on the hard wooden floor all floated faintly up to the second floor. Chad had stood there when the Institute was first dark and empty, had looked out over that curtain, and seen what was to be unveiled later. He wondered if Fitz knew what it was.

‘Come on.’ Zezanne was already on her feet, tugging at his shirt. ‘Let’s see what it was doing.’

Chad was not at all sure he wanted to know. ‘What if it comes back?’

‘Then we run away. It didn’t look very fast, did it?’

He wasn’t sure about that either. The creature’s reptilian legs had looked powerful enough; just because it chose to walk slowly did not mean it couldn’t go much faster if it wanted. But Zezanne was already tip-toeing over to the line of figures, and rather than stay where he was, alone, Chad

followed.

‘It’s a watch,’ she said, reaching out towards it.

Chad caught her hand. ‘Don’t touch it.’

She glared at him, but pulled her hand away all the same.

They both examined the watch, careful to keep below the angle of the camera on the other side of the exhibit. It was a gold pocket watch, hanging on a gold chain. Except that the face was not divided into hours and it had only one hand, a thin hand that ticked slowly round the dial as if every second was an effort.

‘What is it measuring?’ Zezanne murmured.

‘Time,’ Chad told her.

She glared again. ‘I know that. But what? Seconds, minutes, hours?’

Chad peered at the dial again. There was a notation, but he could barely make it out. A ‘1’ with a line under it. And below that another symbol – like an eight, but lying on its side. ‘What’s that?’

‘One over infinity?’ Zezanne said. ‘It’s measuring fractions of infinity? That can’t be right.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it doesn’t make any sense,’ she snapped.

Chad looked round quickly, checking the creature was not on its way back, had not heard her raised voice. Sure that they were safe for the moment, he whispered: ‘Then why do it?’

Fitz checked his watch. It was digital and he was very proud of it. OK, so digital watches were, according to Trix, rather passé these days. But it was still a novelty to Fitz to see the numbers rather than watching a hand tick round a dial. You could press a button to see the day and date as well – if he remembered to set it when he left the TARDIS, otherwise it just showed him what the day and date would have been if he hadn’t left wherever and whenever he last was when he did remember to set it. Which was quite fun, in a useless sort of way.

It was a stopwatch too, though he couldn’t recall how that worked. He had once got it to start timing something, but had no idea how to stop it. So when he pressed the button to show the date once more, it took him to an ever-increasing number of hours, minutes and seconds. At some point it reached the maximum and started again at zero, or maybe the numbers just fell off the left edge of the display when they got too big. So he pressed the

button twice to get from the date back to the time and ignored the stopwatch, acknowledging it only with the wry thought each time that actually it should be called a 'non-stop watch'.

Now Fitz just glanced at the numbers and saw that the time was 20:32:15. The great unveiling, or whatever it was, was scheduled for nine, so most people would be here by now.

Having been rather rudely and strangely snubbed by Malcolm Patterson, Fitz had sorted himself a drinks refill, had his winning smiles ignored by a couple of attractive young ladies, and wandered off to have a general look round the area. If nothing else he could make sure he was standing in a good spot to get a decent view of... whatever it was they were going to be looking at when the curtain went up.

Everyone else, Fitz saw, was staying on the other side of the foyer, close to the drinks. Patterson seemed to have recovered his good humour and was staging another demonstration that seemed to involve dice and sealed envelopes. Miss Devine and Professor Fleetward were talking together on the far side of the group, near the entrance. Perhaps they were waiting for the last few guests. People who turned up late were either important or disorganised. Or both.

Which left Fitz, he realised, on his own, close to the curtained-off area. He looked round again, to be sure that nobody was watching, then slipped behind the curtain.

It was a stunning sight. Laid out on a blue velvet cloth on an angled display table under a glass cover was a skeleton. But like the cover, the skeleton too seemed to be made of glass. A single light source shone down on it, making it seem to glow with inner light. Fitz was at the feet end, so it took him a few seconds to realise that the skeleton had no head. His eyes travelled up the body, kept going as he wondered at how the light seemed to get inside the display case, reflecting off the glass, and was then absorbed and thrown back by the skeleton.

Behind the skeleton exhibit there was another table – tall, almost like a lectern. On it stood a glass carafe filled with water. There was a tumbler upturned over the neck of the carafe. And standing beside the water was a glass skull, staring back at Fitz as if to say 'What are you doing here?' Fitz smiled at it, and waved. So this was the great exhibit. Wow.

Actually, it was a bit of a 'wow', he had to concede. Impressive, whatever it was. He wondered for a moment whether the skeleton might have anything

to do with why he was actually here. The thought made him suddenly cold. Of course it did. This wasn't glass at all, was it – it was crystal. Transparent crystal. This skeleton was *exactly* why he was here. He fumbled the device the Doctor had given him out of his pocket, pointed it towards the display case, and switched it on.

It was supposed to give off a gentle clicking sound as it detected the emission. Outside the Institute, that was what it had done. Now, when Fitz turned on the device, it was like switching on a radio at full volume tuned to a dead channel. A scream of static that echoed round the Institute. Frantically, Fitz fought to turn it off again. He was aware of the complete silence when he did – not just the lack of static noise, but the fact that everyone on the other side of the curtain seemed to have stopped talking.

He stood absolutely still until the sounds of conversation and laughter started again. With luck people would assume it was some problem with the Institute's public address system. Feedback, static, a test. Whatever. Fitz shook his head in relieved amusement, and raised his eyes to the heavens.

Which was how he came to see that the light shining down on the display case came from a single spotlight high above. Much higher than the ceiling should be. He was staring into the beam, but by angling his head and shading his eyes with his hand, he could just see that there was no ceiling over this part of the ground floor of the Institute – it was open to the roof. He could see a ribcage of railings round the edges of the two floors above him. Vantage points from which people could look down to the main exhibition floor below them.

As his eyes blinked away the dazzle from the spotlight, he was aware of a figure standing on the second floor, leaning over the railings and looking down at Fitz and the glass skeleton beside him. He could not see details, of course, just a vague shape. It could be either Chad or Zezanne. From the way the dark figure seemed so large and distorted – almost a parody of the human form – it was probably both of them standing together.

Since his hand was raised to shield his eyes from the light, Fitz waved. He grinned, knowing that with the spotlight they would see him clearly – would be reassured by this.

The figure did not wave back. And when Fitz again shielded his eyes from the glare, he saw that it was gone.

Lowering his arm, he glanced again at his watch. Not long now, surely. He would have to slip back into the main reception and mingle for a few

minutes until things got underway.

He stopped, one hand on the curtain ready to pull it gently aside, the other raised so he could see his watch. It said: 20:32:15.

The room was furnished like a library. Each of the eight walls of the room was shelved from floor to vaulted ceiling – white, marble-like shelves. There were two doors, set into the bookcases.

Except that there were no books on the shelves. Arranged at regular intervals on each and every shelf were hourglasses. Fine crystals fell from the top of each crystalline bowl, dripping to the lower bowl. Each glass figure-of-eight was held upright by an intricate web of dark crystal. All of a similar design, but none identical – just as none of the names etched on the bottom frame of the hourglasses was the same.

The shelves too were labelled, the words carved into the crystalline structure: ‘Agents’, ‘Residents’, ‘Council’ and ‘Others’. Octan was standing in front of the area labelled ‘Others’. He stood before a large hourglass, the bowls of which were wider than they were tall, appropriately enough he thought. The top bowl was almost empty, the crystals dropping slowly – so slowly they seemed to spiral down like lazy snowflakes – into the lower bowl. The name etched on the frame was: ‘Sabbath’.

Beside that was the one gap in the pattern, the one place on the shelves where there was no hourglass. There were others nearby, laid on their sides, that were waiting for their owners to claim them. The sandlike crystals were not moving. Frozen into infinity. Octan was not concerned with these. Only with that one gap. In place of the hourglass was a single thin sheet of pure white crystal, the size and shape of a business card. Octan reached out a glasslike hand to touch the ‘card’, to gently lift it from the shelf. But before his hand reached it, one of the doors opened, and he turned his translucent crystalline face to see who dared to interrupt him.

‘I thought you might be in here,’ Hexx said. He sounded not at all reverent or apologetic. ‘Gloating?’ he asked. ‘Or anxious?’

‘There is nothing to be anxious about,’ Octan said sharply.

‘That’s not what the Council thinks. Soul is especially jittery.’

‘According to the data, everything is on track. According to plan. Realising its potential. We have the problem with Fleetward, but the Agent we have sent to the Institute of Anthropology can deal with that.’

‘Perhaps it can.’

‘Certainly it can.’

Hexx was smiling, the way he did when he had bad news. ‘But you haven’t seen the data stream it is sending back. I have. The Council has. And the Council would be grateful if you would join us to discuss the . . . implications.’ He took a step closer to Octan. ‘You may be Chair of the Council,’ he said, quietly but with an edge to his tone. ‘But that merely means that you are the first among equals.’

‘Yes, the first. And the last.’

Hexx was still, smiling. ‘Actually the word I wished to draw your attention to was “equals”.’

Octan was silent for several relative moments. ‘Of course,’ he said at last. ‘I shall come at once.’ He turned away from the shelf, the shelf with the crystal card in place of an hourglass. ‘Tell me, what has the Agent reported?’

‘It reports that the exhibit which Fleetward is about to unveil, the exhibit that we could not pinpoint or analyse in the distortion and white noise of the temporal signal, is a skeleton.’

‘A skeleton?’

The crystal card that had two words inlaid in darker, richer crystals.

‘A humanoid skeleton. Apparently made of glass.’

Octan strode past Hexx, his mind working through the implications. ‘One of us?’ he murmured. ‘How can that be?’

Two words in dark crystal in place of an hourglass:

The Doctor

Timeless

‘Only Kalicum is unaccounted for,’ Soul said as soon as Octan entered the Council Chamber.

Octan took his seat. ‘Kalicum is – or rather he *was* – helping Sabbath.’

‘Really?’ Fear seemed amused. ‘I rather thought that Sabbath was helping *him*.’

‘I meant,’ Octan replied without looking at Fear, ‘that Kalicum was helping Sabbath to fulfil his destiny. To realise his potential.’

‘What about the Doctor?’ Duvar wanted to know, nervous and tense. ‘Is he at this Institute of Anthropology as well? Is that what the problem is?’

‘We don’t know,’ Penter told him. ‘How could we?’

‘The Agent has not so far detected any life form that could be the Doctor,’ Hexx said. He had followed Octan into the Chamber and also taken his place. The Council was complete. ‘Of course, we only have Kalicum’s description to go on. And for all we know he may be in a different form at the Institute. Acquiring data about a being that resists all means of quantification and qualification is rather tricky.’

‘Spare us the lecture,’ Sept mumbled. ‘The point is,’ he said louder and more clearly, ‘what do we do now?’

‘We need more information,’ Fear said.

Soul snorted with annoyance. ‘We always need more information. We spend our lives here gathering information. Observing and predicting, never actually doing or achieving.’ He lapsed into grumpy silence. It was an old gripe, and while he knew many – if not all – of the others agreed with him, he also knew they would never admit it.

So Soul was surprised when Octan stood up and said: ‘I agree. We should go there and assess the situation.’

‘We? You mean, one of us?’ Trilon was appalled. ‘We cannot enter the real-time stream on Earth. There was enough disturbance when we simply sent Kalicum to help Sabbath, and that was in ultra-controlled circumstances.’

‘Much good that it did him,’ Penter muttered.

'You are forgetting,' Fear said, 'that the Agent has removed the physio-temporal location from the real universe. In a sense, we would be going nowhere.' He leaned forward, grinning hugely. 'Rather like staying here, in fact.'

'We have to know if it is Kalicum. If it is one of us,' Octan said. He was still standing, but now he leaned his glassy fists on the crystal table as he addressed his peers. 'The Agent isn't qualified to analyse, merely to carry out the simplest instructions.'

'Like the trained monkey it is,' Duvar murmured.

Octan ignored him. 'One of us can assess, can decide what is best under the circumstances, and can instruct the Agent in real time as necessary.'

Trilon shook his head. 'But the risk...'

'We have to take the risk. Don't you realise what is at stake here?' Octan looked round at them all. They each returned his stare. 'Everything. And I do mean *everything*. Fleetward's changed timeline, this new substance he discovers – we all now know what it is based on. On *us*. On the skeleton of one of our own people.'

'We don't know that for sure,' Penter pointed out.

'It is a theory that fits the data,' Trilon conceded.

'And we *need* to know for sure. We need to put an end to the changes in our predictions.' Given the potential severity of the situation, it would do no harm to spell it out, Octan decided. 'One percentage point deviation from our predicted history of the planet Earth, and we lose the potential temporal energy created to make the predictions that provide that same energy. If we are wrong to the tune of two per cent, this vortex station ceases to operate.'

'We do know all this,' Soul said.

'Five per cent, and the loss of potential outstrips the energy we harness from the remaining predicted but as yet unfulfilled ninety-five per cent.' It was Fear who said this. 'And over five per cent, we ourselves will falter and die and slip into the void.'

'The Schrödinger Cells would be emptied,' Hexx went on. 'No power for the present or the future, and even our past will fall away, stripped of the energy on which it was built. The crystals will vanish. Will never have been. We shall never have existed.'

'And that,' Octan said quietly, 'is why one of us must go there and ensure that our predictions are fulfilled and the energy remains available. Our very existence is built on the certain knowledge that particular events will come

to pass, and the potential of those future events fuels everything. This one small change could ripple out, invalidate our predictions. We have to know. We have to be there. We have to ensure History follows the correct pattern.'

'And who do you think will go?' Duvar demanded. 'It must be one of us, I suppose, if they are to assess and act.'

'I will go,' Octan said simply. 'There is no choice in the matter.'

'And how will you get back?' Trilon asked. 'Or haven't you thought of that? Entering the vortex from here is not a problem – we can open a corridor that will protect you from the ravages of the Time Winds and prevent you being ripped apart by the vortex. But you are not an Agent. You don't have their ability to ride the Time Winds back again. Otherwise we could simply bring our own people here en masse. We wouldn't need to harness the power in the Schrödinger Cells.'

'We can't open a corridor from the other end, from real space-time, to bring you back not in a controlled manner,' Penter agreed. 'You'd be torn apart as soon as you cross the temporal threshold.'

'The Agent is there,' Fear reminded them. 'He can return with that. It can create a controlled entry point to the vortex when it returns, when its work is complete. As it does for the Schrödinger deliveries.' He grinned again. 'Might be a bumpy ride, though. Hardly a general solution.'

Hexx cleared his throat. 'I fancy you may be forgetting something else.'

'Oh?'

'The Agent has isolated the location. As you have already reminded us, it no longer exists within the context of the real universe. So you can't actually get there.'

'Hoist by our own petard, perhaps?' Soul suggested.

But Octan shook his head. 'Not really,' he told them. 'Again you fail to realise the power at our disposal. There is a very simple solution.'

The TARDIS lurched violently to one side as it materialised, and the Doctor grabbed at the console. In a moment it had righted itself and settled, but not before the Doctor had found himself sprawled on the floor.

'What's up with you, old thing?' he murmured, pulling himself to his feet. He busied himself checking the readings.

It was 8:32 p.m. on 31 January 2004. Pretty much when he was aiming for. And the location was spot on – hidden away at the back of the ground

floor of the Institute of Anthropology. All the readings were Earth normal, of course.

The Doctor checked the TARDIS fault locator, but that showed no problems. Unless it was faulty itself, of course. Just to be sure he double-checked the time and location. They were exactly the same. Smiling at his navigational skill, the Doctor reached for the lever to open the main doors.

His hand froze just before it reached the control. His smile edged into a frown. He sucked in his cheeks, withdrew his hand, and rippled his fingers. Then he checked the location and time again.

And still it was a few seconds after 8:32 p. m. This needed thinking about, he decided, and sat down on the floor. Maybe the TARDIS outer shell had not properly entered real time. Perhaps it was stuck, half in and half out of the vortex at a single moment, while relative time continued to pass inside. Was that possible? He had to admit he had no idea if it was or not.

The best thing to do, he decided, was to play safe. He didn't want to open the outer doors and find himself frozen on the TARDIS threshold, caught in a still moment in time unable to get back in or emerge fully into the real universe. No, best to dematerialise and land again in the same spot.

Except that the controls did not seem to want to respond. They moved, went through the motions, responded, and nothing happened. Like the TARDIS was stuck but did not yet realise it. It was as if. . .

The Doctor slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. Then he rubbed it better with his other hand as he considered the situation. He checked the readings again.

'I have arrived,' he said out loud, 'at a moment when relative time is moving at such a slow rate as to be virtually at a standstill. Yet. . . Yet it is only time that has slowed, not the events that play out against its canvas.' He pinched the top of his nose as he thought through the implications. 'Fractal time?' he muttered. 'A finite moment chopped up so small it stretches to infinity?' It would explain why the TARDIS was having difficulty. If the interior was running at normal speed, the outside had not yet realised that it was supposed to have dematerialised again. Wouldn't catch up with itself for thousands of years at this rate. Just so long as he was back inside when and if it ever did.

He took another reading. Just to be sure. And found that time had indeed moved on outside the TARDIS. In the minutes he had pondered the problem, it had inched forwards by a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a

nanosecond.

The Doctor sighed and opened the doors. Well, at least he knew he had arrived at the right time and in the right place. Now he just had to find out what it was the right time and place *for*.

The exhibition area was in near darkness. Display cases and exhibits stood round the Doctor like statues or the ruins of ancient buildings. From across the Institute, the Doctor could hear the sounds of people enjoying themselves – drinking, talking, laughing. Oblivious to what was happening – or rather not happening – around them. He set off towards the sounds.

The pale light from a fire exit sign spilled on to a clock set on the wall close beside it. The second hand seemed to shiver as it tried to force its way forward to the next second, before springing back, defeated but ready to try again. The Doctor stopped and watched it. He watched it try five times to move time onwards. Five times he watched it fail.

He shook his head, sighed, and moved on. ‘I think this could be a very long night,’ he said.

If Octan was successful, then History would simply move back on to its previously predicted path. The universe would return to how it would have been.

Ironically, until it did, the Council could only wait and watch. They looked up uneasily as the light in the Chamber dimmed for a few seconds, and breathed a collective sigh of relief when the light returned.

‘I thought it was starting,’ Hexx admitted. ‘Or ending.’

‘Energy expended when Octan entered the vortex?’ Sept suggested.

Trilon shook his head. ‘That shouldn’t cause a drain. More likely a loss of potential somewhere. Some event we believed was available to us and drew energy from has now never happened.’ He shrugged. ‘Hardly a good sign though.’

‘How long before we know if he has succeeded?’ Penter wondered.

‘If he succeeds,’ Hexx muttered, glumly.

‘Relatively, as long as it takes him,’ Fear said. ‘His time is linked to ours, and time has no meaning in the Institute.’

They were silent for a while. Then Duvar spoke up. ‘What do you suppose he’s *really* doing?’

‘What do you mean?’ Trilon wanted to know.

Duvar shrugged. 'I don't trust him, that's all. Why did he have to go? Why not one of us?'

'I didn't see you leaping to your feet to volunteer,' Trilon countered.

But Duvar just smiled. 'Nor you.' He gave a short laugh. 'And he knew we wouldn't.'

'We seem to have an increasing number of questions that our esteemed Chairman seems to want to leave unanswered,' Soul said.

'Like what your mission was all about earlier,' Sept reminded him. 'And what you discovered that has made you so uncharacteristically quiet.'

Soul did not answer.

'Or why our predictions of History stop at a finite point,' Fear said. 'Given the energy requirements, you would think that we would harvest as much potential energy as possible from all of time. So why stop at a particular point?'

'Saving it for afters, perhaps,' Duvar suggested.

'Saving it for something,' Fear agreed. He settled back into his chair. 'I wonder what?'

'Perhaps,' Trilon said slowly, voicing all their thoughts, 'while Octan is not here to address these issues, now is the time to find out.'

Reunion

Hitting his watch seemed to do no good. It still said 20:32:15. Fitz shook his wrist, tapped the watch, pressed the various buttons. But it didn't want to move. Broken.

Except that the clock on the other side of the exhibition hall, the clock he could just make out near the emergency exit sign if he squinted and peered, seemed to have stopped as well. Typical. Fitz was wondering what the time really was when he saw a figure striding purposefully towards him out of the darkness.

As the figure emerged into the light, Fitz grinned with undisguised glee. He was about to rush over to the Doctor, but someone else beat him to it. Professor Fleetward almost flew past, his hand stretched out, already speaking:

'Doctor, my dear Doctor, I'm so glad you could get here. I was beginning to wonder if you would make it.' He pumped the Doctor's hand up and down.

The Doctor seemed just as pleased to see Fleetward. The two were deep in conversation by the time Fitz reached them. He had to bob up and down and lean over Fleetward's shoulder to get the Doctor's attention.

'I hope it's all going well,' the Doctor was saying. 'I see Miss Devine arrived safe and sound.' He leaned over the shoulder that Fitz wasn't using and waved across at Miss Devine's ample figure on the other side of the gathering. 'Did she bring anything interesting with her by any chance? A crystal skull? Well, fancy that.'

Somewhere in the middle of this he paused and threw in a quick: 'Hello, Fitz.' Then he was off again, leading Fleetward back to join the reception. Fitz followed in their wake, feeling spare and ignored.

'My watch is bust,' he said rather lamely. He didn't expect the Doctor would hear, let alone react.

But he swung round immediately, grabbed Fitz's wrist and examined the watch. 'No,' he said at once, 'it's working fine.'

‘Oh come on. It’s stopped. Dead.’ Fitz hurried after them again. They seemed to be heading for Miss Devine.

‘No it hasn’t,’ the Doctor assured Fitz without turning. He was reaching out to embrace Miss Devine, and kissing her affectionately on the cheek.

‘What do you mean?’ Fitz demanded, nodding a greeting to Miss Devine and ducking away from any possibility of a peck on the cheek.

The Doctor turned and looked at Fitz. ‘I would say “I’ll explain later”,’ he said. ‘Except that there is no ‘later’. That’s the problem.’

‘Ri-ight,’ Fitz replied.

But already the Doctor was looking round in admiration at the assembled group of people. ‘My, my. What a good turnout,’ he exclaimed.

Fitz was still staring bemusedly at his watch. There was obviously no chance of getting the Doctor to mend it – or even explain what he was going on about – for the moment. So he might as well muck in, Fitz decided. ‘So how are things?’ he asked during a brief hiatus in the Doctor’s enthusiasm.

The Doctor’s smile remained fixed. ‘Could be better, I fancy,’ he whispered out of the side of his mouth. ‘Act like you’re enjoying yourself.’

‘I was,’ Fitz told him.

‘And spend some time with the delightful Miss Devine. I think that would be useful.’

This was scarcely what Fitz wanted to hear, and he struggled to find an excuse to ignore the advice. ‘Something’s wrong here, isn’t it? Dreadfully wrong.’ He tried not to sound too upbeat at the prospect.

The Doctor gave the merest hint of a nod. Then he seemed to realise that Fitz had something to say, and excused himself from Fleetward for a moment to talk to his associate Mr Kreiner.

‘At last,’ Fitz breathed as they found a space where they could confide in each other. ‘Look, there are a couple of kids hiding upstairs.’ Fitz shrugged as if it had nothing to do with him and nobody could say it did. ‘I mean, if things are a bit hairy. . .’

‘Some of the things I’ve seen have been very hairy,’ the Doctor assured him. ‘What are they doing?’

‘The hairy things?’

‘The kids.’

‘Oh. Er, no idea,’ Fitz admitted. ‘There’s a boy who got locked in when the Institute closed. I think. And a girl. She’s looking for her mother.’

The Doctor's expression changed not at all, yet despite this he somehow seemed to have shifted from 'mildly interested' to 'disapproving'.

'They're only children. Teenagers,' Fitz said. 'And if things are getting dangerous, maybe we should keep an eye on them? Just a thought.'

'Yes, perhaps you're right,' the Doctor conceded. 'Things are certainly getting out of hand. So why don't you go and find these young people and bring them down here to join us.'

'Right.'

'At least then we'll have them where we can keep an eye on them.'

'Good.'

The Doctor nodded, apparently pleased with this plan. 'And you can spend time with Miss Devine later.'

'And my watch?' Fitz asked, as much to make the point that he was ignoring this last remark as because he was interested.

'What about it?'

'It's stopped.'

'Oh no, no, no,' the Doctor assured him. 'Your watch hasn't stopped. Time has. Or very nearly. But we'll worry about that once we've got these children here safe and sound.'

He watched Fitz make his way across the Institute. As he turned away, the Doctor almost collided with a tall, thin man who was now standing close beside him. Fleetward was also near by, rubbing his hands together, eager to speak.

'I'm sorry, I didn't hear you sneaking up on me,' the Doctor said to the tall man. The man had a dark, pointed beard cut close to the shape of his face that made him look saturnine and sinister. For some reason the Doctor immediately took against him. He was sure it was the beard that did it.

'You are a colleague of Mr Kreiner, I assume,' the man said. His voice was as dark as his beard, deep and cultured.

'This is Malcolm Patterson,' Fleetward said quickly. 'He's providing the entertainment, before the opening.'

'Is he?' The Doctor tried to sound interested. 'Is he really?' He looked Patterson up and down. 'Conjuring tricks perhaps? Pulling hats out of rabbits and boy scouts out of horses' hooves, that sort of thing?'

'Hardly.' Patterson's voice was like broken glass. 'I am a psychologist. I make predictive statements about behaviour, and manipulate that behaviour

in a sociologically informed manner.'

The Doctor smiled at Patterson's serious demeanour. 'That's what I said.'

'It seemed appropriate.' Fleetward was still rubbing his palms together – perhaps he was subconsciously washing his hands of the idea. Patterson would know, the Doctor thought. 'I mean, it fits so well with the anthropological angle, don't you think?'

The Doctor smiled at Fleetward. 'I'm sorry,' he said brightly. 'I'm being a bore. Yes, I think it's inspired.' He forced a smile at Patterson too. 'Show me a trick,' he said. 'Or a sociological manipulation, if you prefer.'

'He's been doing tricks all evening,' a woman behind Fleetward said helpfully. 'He's very good. Very impressive. Mind-reading and stuff. Like when he made me think of a card.'

The Doctor gave every impression that he shared her excitement. 'How very novel.'

Patterson had the cards out already. 'Why don't you pick a card?' He riffled through the pack, as if to demonstrate they were genuine playing cards. 'I didn't catch your name, I'm afraid.'

'Doctor will do.'

Patterson blinked. 'Doctor it is then. Now, please, choose a card. Think of it, then find it in the pack for me. Can you do that?'

'No, I'm afraid I can't.'

Patterson seemed smug. 'It's a simple enough request surely. Or do you not like to gamble?'

'I fear I do little else.' The Doctor was equally self-assured. 'But the card you want me to pick is the eight of diamonds.' He reached out towards Patterson's frozen smile. 'And I can't pick it from the pack as it's in your top pocket.' And to prove it, he plucked the card from Patterson's pocket and pushed it into the pack, ignoring Patterson's expression of surprise and anger. 'But I do know a trick with a silver sixpence and a crooked smile, if that's any help.'

Logite was uneasy. He did not like to be away from his work, from the monitoring, especially while things were in a state of flux. And he did not appreciate being summoned before the Council. He knew they thought he was Octan's lackey, even though he was supposed to answer to them all. But it was Octan's plan, Octan's vision. They all worked for Octan, whether they liked it or not. Whether they knew it or not.

'You can see our dilemma,' Fear was saying to him.

He could indeed, and Logite was sure they could see his. 'I really cannot comment,' he said. 'My work is authorised by this Council, and I fulfil the tasks you give me to the best of my ability.' He knew as soon as he said it that he had made a mistake.

'Yet you refuse to tell us what our Chairman has requested of you. What his ultimate plan really is,' Trilon said.

Logite tried to stay calm, tried not to show them how worried he was by the questions. 'There is no plan. Well, none that you don't know about. How could there be?'

'How indeed?' Soul said quietly. He glanced at Duvar, and Duvar nodded. Logite did not like that. Duvar might appear a fool, but Logite knew that he was anything but.

When Duvar spoke, his voice was calm and reasonable. As if explaining to a child. 'You say you work for us, Logite. So it is quite within your rights to report to us, to the Council. Just as it is quite within ours to ask for such a report. Or indeed to demand it.' His smile was edged with threat. 'There really is no conflict of interests. Whatever your loyalty to Octan, you can hardly refuse to talk to his colleagues – your patrons and employers. Now, can you?'

They had him. He knew it, and they could tell that he knew it. He wanted to sit down, but there was no chair, except Octan's. And that would not be permitted. 'What do you want to know?' he asked.

'There, that's better.'

Hexx took up the questioning – bluff and aggressive. 'What is his plan? What hasn't he told us?'

Hexx's aggression made Logite defiant. 'I can't answer that, how can I possibly be expected to know what he hasn't told you?'

'I think you could make an informed guess,' Sept told him.

'I could. But it would only be a guess. He has not confided in me any more than it seems he has in you.'

'Then we may all be equally threatened,' Penter pointed out. His voice was stretched out with nerves. 'It's best you tell us everything. After all, you know where he's gone. He may not be coming back.'

'I don't know,' Logite said. 'I really don't know. Not the big picture, just odd details. Things he has done or ordered that don't seem to make sense, or that seem to run counter to what I believe we are trying to achieve.' Perhaps

he should make them think that he too did not trust Octan. ‘Suspicious, no more.’

‘For example?’ Fear said darkly.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘If you expect us to believe you, then you need to provide some evidence that you have your suspicions. That you aren’t in this – whatever *this* is – up to your rather fragile neck. Give us examples of things Octan has done or ordered that seem to you not to make sense.’

‘It may just be that I don’t know the whole plan,’ he pleaded. ‘That I don’t know what the Council has decided.’

‘But we know,’ Fear said, more gently now. ‘So you can tell us, and we shall know if it really does give cause for concern.’ His glance at the others suggested he was concerned already.

Logite sighed. How little could he tell them? Could he give them something, some snippet of information that would lead them away from him? ‘Before he left,’ Logite said, conscious of the rapt attention they were paying him. ‘Before he left, Octan opened a Schrödinger Cell.’

Silence.

Hadn’t they realised? ‘You must have seen the lights dim. We lost one and a half per cent of relative energy as soon as the door was opened and time crystallised round the moment.’

‘Lost potential,’ Soul breathed. ‘A might-have-been made reality. The energy clawed back into real time.’

‘It wasn’t Cell Eight, was it?’ Penter was always quick to panic. Logite shook his head, trying not to smile. As if Octan would open *that* cell.

‘What *was* in the cell?’ Hexx demanded. ‘What, or who?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Tell us!’ Fear shouted, his face darkening. They were all leaning forward now.

‘A human. Two humans. Octan took one of them out, spoke to them. I don’t know what about, I wasn’t there.’

‘And the other human?’

‘Still in the cell, though it’s a real-time bubble now, not a cell of course. Perhaps Octan spoke to them both.’ He looked round at the Council, saw fear in their faces. And for the first time, Logite too felt afraid. ‘But the human knows nothing. How could the human know anything?’

‘The human knows who shared the cell,’ Duvar said.

'And may know why they were taken out of the time stream, their potential unfulfilled,' Trilon added.

'Bring the human here,' Soul said. 'Now.'

Long Night

It was probably best, Fitz thought, to warn the security people that he was going to be bringing down a couple of teenagers from where they were hiding on the top floor of the Institute. He didn't think Havers and his team had seemed the sort to spot something suspicious on their cameras and immediately surround the area with angry guards and vicious dogs. But if there was one thing he had learned from his time with the Doctor, it was that you never knew.

The door to the security room opened outwards. There was a keypad on the outside, but Fitz did not know the code. When he and Miss Devine had come to the room before, the door had been standing ajar. Now, as then, Fitz could see that the door was standing slightly open. So he opened it fully, ready to call out to Havers or whoever was inside. He had the idea of making a sarky comment about Security leaving their door unlocked, but the quip froze in his throat as he looked into the room.

Havers was standing up, plastic cup raised to his mouth, head tipped back as he tried to catch the last drips of coffee. Another guard was leaning back in his chair, staring at the screens. His feet were up on the control desk, just as when Fitz had been here before. But this time the guard made no attempt to move them. He just continued to stare at the screens.

The camera images on the monitors has been continuously panning, changing, moving. There was a time code in the bottom corner of some of the images, together with data that presumably indicated which camera was feeding the pictures to the screen. But now the images were still. The time code was frozen. The guard did not look up.

And still Havers was waiting for the last drip of coffee to reach his mouth. Nothing moved. The clock on the wall behind them was stilled, its hands at just after half past eight. Fitz was aware that he too was frozen, immobile on the threshold of the room. What was going on? He took a step forwards.

Rachel Taylor's tray was full. She was collecting empty glasses as the other

staff went round with the champagne ready for the opening. There was to be a toast of some sort, no doubt. She wasn't bothered what the event was this week. She just wanted to finish and get away before the last tube ran. A taxi would be expensive. She could do with a good long sleep. The catering company she worked for had a lunch tomorrow, and another evening do. It would be a long day. She didn't want this to be a long night.

The wine was being poured and the food prepared in a small kitchen area in the basement. There were steps down to it from behind reception, through a small door that was usually curtained off, but which was now propped open to allow the catering staff easy access with their trays of food and drinks.

The steps were stone, so old they were worn down in the middle, scooped out by the years of use. She had to hold the tray awkwardly away from her so she could see the steps or she might slip. Gerry had slipped with the orange juice earlier and they had not had time to wipe it up properly. So one of the steps was tacky. She only remembered which one when her foot stuck to it and she almost dropped the tray.

As she turned the corner and started down the second short flight, Rachel realised that someone was waiting at the bottom of the steps for her. The stairs were wide enough for two people to pass, but it was awkward if they were both carrying something. Nearing the bottom, she could see that it was Gerry. He was doing that awkward half-smile he did when he wasn't quite sure if he was supposed to be amused or serious.

'Thanks.' She stepped into the corridor, standing to one side to allow Gerry to pass and continue up the steps. He was carrying a tray of champagne and Rachel knew they were waiting upstairs for the drinks.

But Gerry made no effort to move.

'Come on,' she told him. 'We haven't got all night.'

Still he did not move. She was close enough to see now that his eyes were fixed, the half-smile frozen in place. And there was something weird about the champagne too. It took her a confused, anxious moment to realise that the bubbles in the glasses were not moving. They remained fixed in place. Like a photograph. Then anxiety gave way to fear. She took a step closer, reached out to tap Gerry on the shoulder, to try and wake him from what seemed to her as well like a dream.

Another step. Into the photograph. Rachel's hand was poised, the tray balanced on her other hand, but slipping slightly as she gasped in astonishment, as she was caught in the moment. Caught and held. Unmoving.

His first instinct was to step into the room, to go over and look more closely at the two men. But even as he took a step forwards, Fitz wondered if this was a good idea. The Doctor had said something – something cryptic of course – about time being stopped. Yet somehow Fitz and the others could still move and act.

Havers and the other guard it seemed could not. Were they frozen with time? Stuck like that until time started up again at the normal speed? If it ever did. Maybe this is how the world ends, Fitz thought: not with a bang but with a –

But why were the guards special? Or rather, why were Fitz and the people at the reception special? Or was it the people at all? He took a short step forwards. He was on the threshold now. Fitz made to take another step – to enter the room. And froze, immobile.

Or was it to do with *where* they were, Fitz wondered? What if certain areas of the Institute – of the whole world, come to that – had ‘stopped’. It wasn’t that certain people were somehow immune, but certain *places* were. And he had almost stepped into non-time. Was that it? How could he tell?

Fitz looked round, hoping for inspiration. Not for the first time, he found it in a glass. Except that for once the glass was empty. His own discarded wine glass, still resting where he had left it on the table close by. He picked it up, weighed it in his hand, pondered the consequences. Then he hurled it through the door, into the security control room.

There was no sign of the glass slowing. He had expected it to look like a film in slow-motion, or as if the glass was falling through water, its movements deadened and cushioned as its momentum carried it some distance into the room.

Instead, as soon as it crossed the threshold, it stopped. Dead. So suddenly that it looked like it had hit a pane of invisible glass and become embedded in it. So abruptly that Fitz expected the glass to explode into stinging fragments, and he ducked.

When he dared to look back again, he thought it was like looking at a photograph. Time might be frozen for the security guards, he thought, but it was probably running out for the rest of them. He turned and ran for the main stairs.

Fleetward was examining his watch. He shook his wrist, held it to his ear, tapped on the face as if it was a barometer. Beside him, Andrew Pearl, the

Institute's curator, regarded Fleetward with ill-disguised impatience.

'The champagne should be here by now,' Pearl decided. 'Half the guests haven't got a drink.'

The Doctor watched and listened with amusement. He decided not to ask out loud if Pearl's frustration stemmed from the fact that he was one of the half who did not yet have champagne. Instead he took Fleetward's hand, partly to reassure him and partly to stop him worrying about his watch.

'I'm just waiting for Fitz to get back,' he said. 'Then I suggest we make a start.'

'Yes, right,' Fleetward agreed. 'Good idea.'

'What about the champagne?' Pearl demanded. He was looking at the Doctor as he spoke, and while the words were different, his meaning was clearly: 'Who is this man?'

'I must say,' the Doctor told him quickly, beaming with apparent admiration, 'I have some thoughts on how this evening has been organised. Very much on a par with what I'd expect given the regular management of this Institute. It very much deserves its reputation.' He hoped his smile served to blunt the double-edge to the comments.

And as he had expected, the possible insult was completely lost on Pearl who shrugged and blustered and accepted the Doctor's apparent praise as if he had personally arranged everything, rather than simply accepting someone else's advice on who to employ to do the catering.

'Where is Mr Kreiner?' Fleetward asked.

'A very good question,' the Doctor said. 'I think he's just rounding up the last few special guests.' He smiled to allay the obvious next questions.

A flash of white in the darkness caught Chad's attention. But when he looked, it had gone. Then he saw the figure on the other side of the exhibition area. The figure was walking slowly and carefully forwards. Then it stopped, picked up the white ball that Chad had glimpsed, and tossed it ahead before following, picking it up and repeating the process.

As the figure drew nearer, Chad nudged Zezanne and pointed. He could see now that it was Fitz, and he was throwing something soft ahead of himself.

'What is he doing?' Zezanne wondered.

Chad did not answer. He stood up to see better, and when he realised that Fitz had noticed him, he waved.

‘Is it all right over there?’ Fitz called, just loud enough for Chad to hear.

‘I think so. The creature has gone now. I don’t know where.’

Fitz paused. He looked pale in the dim light. ‘What creature?’

Chad shrugged. ‘Some creature. It just appeared, hung up its watch, and went off.’

‘There was a time distortion,’ Zezanne said. She sounded like she was lecturing a child. ‘Fairly sophisticated temporal technology, except that it seemed to be open to the vortex. The thing should have been ripped apart.’

‘What thing?’ Fitz wanted to know.

Zezanne shook her head. ‘Misshapen, mutated. . . A mix of ape and man, with reptile thrown in. I don’t know.’ She nodded at the ball of white material that Fitz was holding. ‘What’s that?’

‘What?’ He seemed to realise what he was holding and unfolded a grubby handkerchief. ‘Just some temporal technology of my own. Not to be sniffed at,’ he added, evidently thinking this was funny. Serious again when no one else laughed, he went on: ‘I’ve been tossing it ahead of me. If it stops – if it I throw it in the air and it sticks, I know there’s a problem.’

‘A problem with gravity,’ Zezanne said.

‘A problem with time,’ Fitz corrected her, and she scowled. ‘I’ll tell you on the way. You’re invited to the party.’

‘Who by?’ Chad wondered.

‘The Doctor. Come on.’

‘The Doctor?’

There was something in how she said it that made Chad nervous. What was the girl not telling them? What did she know? But before he could ask, they were moving briskly towards the main stairs, Fitz throwing the handkerchief ahead of them.

‘At least it’s reasonably clean,’ he said, picking it up again. ‘Unlike some people’s.’

Chad and Zezanne exchanged glances. Chad could see that she did not know what Fitz was talking about either. Nor, he guessed, did she know where they were going or what they would find when they got there. He peered into the shadows as they made their way down the stairs. Watching out for monsters.

The guests were all gathered close to the curtained-off area. A few glanced back as Fitz, Chad and Zezanne hurried across to join them. Several frowned,

though Fitz wasn't sure whether this was at the silver one-piece jumpsuit Zezanne was wearing, the long cloak and open neck shirt that Chad wore, or the fact that a couple of teenagers were joining their sophisticated, adult *soirée*.

They joined the back of the group, Fitz catching Malcolm Patterson's admonishing eye and smiling back innocently. The Doctor also turned, saw Fitz and the others, and smiled.

His smile flickered as he saw Chad. Froze as he caught sight of Zezanne, as if he was trying to recall where he might have seen them before.

Then an officious, fat little man was tapping a wine glass with a gold pen and looking at everyone as if he were their head teacher and they were in disgrace.

'Welcome.' His voice was thin and reedy with the hint of a Welsh accent. 'Welcome to...' The man seemed to catch sight of Fitz and his companions, and faltered. '... you all,' he managed with a frown. 'As you all know, I am Andrew Pearl, the Curator of the Institute of Anthropology.' His assurance renewed, he went on: 'I will now hand over to Professor Ernest Fleetward, who will officially open his exhibition and say a few words about how important it is, and how appropriate that it should be hosted by our illustrious Institute. Professor Fleetward.' He stepped aside, making a point of clapping politely to start everyone else off. Like they wouldn't have considered it otherwise, Fitz thought.

Since Fitz already knew what was behind the curtain, he paid little attention to Fleetward's excited explanations. He caught odd words and phrases. He gathered that several of the people there would already know what they were about to see, and that others would be better able than the Professor to understand the implications. But Fitz spent the time looking round at the other guests, gauging their reactions, watching their rapt attentions.

He could see that the Doctor was itching to say something. It was only a matter of time before he interrupted, but perhaps he was loath to spoil Fleetward's moment of pride and achievement. Fitz saw the Doctor was bouncing on the balls of his feet, opening and then closing his mouth. Doing everything, in fact, short of putting up his hand or pointedly brandishing a megaphone.

Miss Crystal Devine was also watching the Doctor, was also amused by his barely bottled-up mood. Fitz caught her eye as they both watched – her from the front of the small crowd, Fitz from the back. For the smallest moment,

they both grinned at each other, completely lacking in self-consciousness.

It was exactly the moment when Fleetwood drew back the curtain. It was as he stepped aside and the people craned to see. It was as they gasped with astonishment, and Fleetward nodded as if to tell them: 'I said you'd be impressed.'

The Doctor was moving now. Another distraction. But Fitz was still staring at Miss Devine, aware that his mouth was hanging open, and not at all amused by the way she continued to smile back at him.

Fleetward was standing at the top end of the skeleton. He had lifted the glass skull, almost as if it were a medieval crown to be placed on his crystal monarch's head. But the Doctor was gently moving him aside, and Fleetward seemed to catch the Doctor's serious mood and put the skull down on top of the glass display case.

Perhaps it was heavier than he thought. Or perhaps the cover on the case was thin. They all heard the crack of the glass. The skull seemed to lurch to one side as it broke partly through. Angled, staring back at the onlookers, it seemed to be grinning manically at them.

Fitz was half aware of Patterson catching his breath, his hand to his mouth in surprise. He was half aware of the rest of the crowd exchanging looks, murmuring, anxious. He could hear the Doctor's voice clear and loud above the muttering:

'I'm sorry to distract you all for a moment, but there are a few things which I would very much like to bring to your attention before we go any further.'

Curator Pearl was glaring – first at the Doctor, then at Fitz as if it were his fault. But Fitz didn't care. His attention was still fixed on the ample figure of Miss Crystal Devine. He watched her round, heavily made-up face, as if in a dream, as she winked at him – just as she had when he had first arrived. And he realised what he should have known back then.

'Trix?' he said out loud.

Freeze-Frame

Trix watched with amusement as Fitz pushed through the crowd to join her. Her good humour had helped her over the shock of seeing Fitz bring the two youngsters into the foyer. God knew how he found them, and their presence raised questions that Trix was not sure she was qualified even to ask.

‘Trix?’ Fitz said quietly as he stood beside her.

‘Took you long enough,’ she told him, in her normal voice rather than the high-pitched, nasal flutter she had adopted for Miss Crystal Devine.

‘Yes, well I had other things on my mind.’

‘So has the Doctor, by the look of things.’ She nodded towards the front of the crowd.

Curator Pearl had forced his way through the front few people to join Fleetward and the Doctor beside the display case. ‘Who is this man? Why the delay?’ he demanded. ‘What’s going on here?’

‘This is the Doctor,’ Fleetward said, as if this explained everything.

Pearl, by contrast, was far from mollified. ‘Well, get him out of the way. We’re wasting time.’

It was the Doctor who replied, his voice clear and loud and authoritative. ‘I can assure you that we are not wasting time. For the simple reason that outside this Institute – quite possibly outside this foyer – time has stopped.’

There was silence at this pronouncement for several moments. Then Pearl gave a forced, high-pitched laugh. This broke the spell, and there were mutterings and murmurs from people as they turned to each other in a mixture of surprise, amusement, and perplexity.

‘Is it another trick like that man was doing?’ a woman close to Fitz and Trix asked her neighbour. ‘Do we have to guess something?’

The Doctor too had heard her. ‘Yes,’ he announced loudly. ‘It is a trick. Of sorts. But quite beyond anything that Mr Patterson could arrange, I fancy.’

Trix glanced round and saw Patterson raise an eyebrow. But he said nothing.

‘I don’t have answers to all your questions,’ the Doctor went on. ‘I don’t even have answers to all *my* questions. But I do know that we, here in this Institute, are under siege.’

There was no laughter now, but exchanged looks and the beginnings of anxiety.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Pearl shouted above the hubbub. ‘Are you suggesting some sort of terrorist threat? Look around you, man.’

‘Doctor,’ the Doctor corrected him. ‘And what I’m suggesting is far more dangerous than any terrorist activity. Unless you can countenance the existence of time terrorists.’

‘Time terrorists?’ Fleetward asked.

The Doctor nodded. ‘And they want to change History.’

Pearl seemed to gather himself. When he spoke again his voice was calmer, more controlled. ‘And they aim to change History now? How? By withholding our champagne?’

He looked round, a derisory smile fixed on his face. Some people laughed with him. But not many. Most could see that the Doctor’s face was dark and serious, and even Trix found she shivered to look at it. Beside her Fitz too was tense and uneasy.

The Doctor’s reply seemed so quiet that it was a mystery to Trix how she – and everyone else – could hear it. But his words reached them clearly. ‘As I said, time has been stopped. Or at least slowed to a point where it might as well have stopped. For us, here, it seems to continue at its normal rate. But that is just so the creature or creatures employed by the beings I mentioned can do their work.’

‘Piffle,’ Pearl pronounced.

The Doctor’s glare silenced him, and the colour drained from his face.

‘You think so? The why are *they* here?’ The Doctor pointed across at the youngsters Fitz had brought in with him. ‘Some aspect of the plan that has gone awry. A symptom. Like the lack of champagne. Which I suspect is on its way just as quickly as it ever was, and will arrive in a few seconds. Except that those few seconds have become like hours or days or weeks in the terms in which we currently perceive time.’ He looked round at his audience, and apparently satisfied that he now had their full attention, he went on. ‘Something will happen here. To us. Soon. Or rather, now – at the moment that is frozen. Something terrible that will change the world forever.’ He stepped towards the group of people. ‘And I can prove it,’ he

whispered.

The crowd parted for the Doctor as he strode through. As he went, everyone followed, drawn out in a line like a school trip round the Institute, until they were all grouped round the Doctor again. He stood in front of the main doors, turned to address them once more. Trix found herself standing with Fitz still, but now the two children had joined them.

‘Where did you find these two?’ she hissed.

Fitz pointed. ‘That’s Chad,’ he said – typically answering a different question. ‘He’s sort of lost.’

‘Chad?’ She frowned at Fitz as if he was mad.

‘And Zezanne just got time-dumped here or something. She’s worried about her mother.’

‘Aren’t we all,’ Trix murmured. But before she could ask any more, the Doctor was speaking again.

‘When I open these doors,’ he said, ‘no matter what you see outside, none of you must leave. Is that absolutely clear? Stay in here, all of you.’

He looked round, checking that everyone had understood. Several people nodded. Pearl shook his head and muttered something that was lost in the general shuffling of feet and murmur of the crowd.

‘Right then.’ The Doctor took hold of the twin handles of the heavy double doors, turned them, and swung the doors inwards. He stepped smartly aside to allow them to open fully.

The crowd pushed forwards, to see through. Trix craned to get a view over the shoulder of the man in front. Beside her, Fitz was doing the same.

The view outside looked perfectly normal. At first. It was a dark winter’s evening in London. There were people walking on the pavement, a woman running across the road waving for a taxi that was pulling up at the kerb. It was raining and the light from the street lamps and the buildings reflected in the puddles and caught the raindrops as they fell.

Except, the raindrops were not falling.

The people were not walking.

The woman was not running for the taxi that was not pulling up at the kerb.

Trix heard gasps as people realised what they were looking at. They continued to stare in amazement as the Doctor’s voice washed over them. Did they even hear him? Or were they staring in wonder at a moment frozen in time?

‘As I said, it’s usually demonstrated as a trick. I’ve never seen it applied on this scale before. And usually, you freeze the moment within a specified, small area – to stop a feather from falling, or to introduce a rabbit into a hat.’ He grinned. ‘That always gets a reaction.’ He was serious again now. ‘But here, time has slowed outside a specified area.’

‘How is it done?’ Fleetward asked. His voice was husky with nerves. Like everyone else, he was staring at the scene outside. Perhaps he was awed by the way the puddle splashed up round the running woman’s feet, at the way she was in mid-stride, at the way the water hung motionless in the air. He whipped off his glasses and polished them furiously on an untucked corner of his shirt.

‘By measuring time.’

‘What, you mean with a watch or a clock?’

‘Something of the sort.’

‘That thing had a sort of clock,’ Chad told Fitz in a nervous whisper.

‘It hung it over one of the exhibits,’ Zezanne agreed.

Fitz nodded, finger to his lips as he listened to the Doctor.

‘It’s like measuring the coastline of Britain,’ he was saying. Which meant nothing to Trix.

But evidently it did to Fleetward. He put his spectacles back on and peered carefully at the Doctor. ‘Fractals?’

‘Something of the sort. Same principle. You break time into increasingly smaller and smaller fractions.’

‘So it tends towards infinity.’ Fleetward nodded, happy to have understood.

‘And for those of us still on planet Earth?’ Fitz asked loudly.

‘It is rather a difficult concept,’ the Doctor replied. ‘And you can see for yourselves what’s happened.’

‘Just curious,’ Fitz said.

‘All right. Since we seem to have a few moments.’ The Doctor considered. ‘Think of time as a dimension,’ he decided. ‘Think of it as a path from A to B, from one hour to the next. One minute to the next. But before you can get to the next minute, you have to step through each of the seconds.’

‘That doesn’t take long,’ someone quipped.

‘No, it doesn’t,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Not usually. But before you step through a second, you have to step through the half second. And before that the quarter second, and before that the eighth. When you watch the second hand of your watch click forward, you forget that it measuring not

just a second but the nanoseconds that make up that second, and the ever smaller moments that make up the nanoseconds. Imagine counting through each of those on your path from now to then.'

'It would take forever,' Trix said. She was beginning to realise what the Doctor was saying.

'Yes it would. And by making the infinitesimally small but measurable divisions of time explicit, so time appears to slow, the path stretches out. For every tiny moment I want to step through, I have to experience the half moment, and before that the quarter moment. . . If you can create a device that enforces that journey, that doesn't allow time to be lumped together into experiential pieces, then. . .' He sighed, and waved a hand at the scene outside.

'It's all nonsense, of course,' the Doctor said as they watched nothing happen outside. 'Until someone does this to you.'

'But why? Why have they done it?' Pearl demanded.

'So as to minimise the effects of whatever is to happen here tonight. If they have to,' the Doctor said, 'whoever is responsible will destroy this Institute and everyone here, then cover their tracks. There will be a freak accident, an explosion, a fire. Whatever. But if they can remove us from Time, perform their temporal surgery while no one else is even aware of the problem, and then let events continue as they dictate, well that would suit them so much better.'

'But who are they?' Fleetward asked. 'What do they want? Do you know, Doctor?'

The Doctor looked round at them all, everyone watching, expectant. 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'In general terms, yes, I think I do.'

But before he could say more, he was interrupted by the sound of breaking glass.

From where she was, Trix had a better view back at the exhibition area than she did of the bizarre scene outside. Patterson was a way behind her, hurrying back over to rejoin the crowd. 'I saw it falling,' he explained as he stood by Trix. 'The skull.'

And now Trix could see that it was gone. The crystal skull that she and the Doctor had found in the Tower of London had fallen into the display case. But surely that could not have made so much sound?

Then she saw what had made the noise, what had broken the glass. A crystal fist thrusting upwards from the display case. A transparent, skeletal

arm pushing its way out, joined by another, grasping for the side of the cabinet. Then the whole crystal skeleton seemed to heave itself out of its coffin-like case. Glass from the cover exploded ahead of it, a waterfall of shards crashing to the floor as the skeleton rose to its icy feet and lurched forwards, towards the crowd.

As soon as it stepped forwards, as if this was a cue of some sort, the crowd too surged forwards – but away from the skeleton and towards the doors.

The Doctor leaped aside, dragging Fleetward with him. ‘No!’ he shouted. ‘No, don’t go through there!’

Trix could hear Pearl shouting too as he was pushed along by the people rushing for the doors.

Fitz grabbed Chad and Zezanne and dragged them clear, pushing Trix ahead of him. Trix stumbled and almost fell to the floor. As she caught her balance, she saw the rest of the people – also stumbling, falling in their desperation to escape. Tumbling out of the Institute.

Frozen in the doorway as time around them skidded to a halt.

Then she turned back towards Fitz. And saw beyond him the glassy form of the skeleton, its arms stretched out in front of it as it lurched unsteadily forwards. Towards them.

Happily Never After

I do not know what happened to us. We were there, together one moment. Our world around us. Just another day. Then a creature appeared – a creature such as you might find in stories, or nightmares. Part ape, part man, part something else. It arrived in an instant, and took us both into a tunnel of light. At the end of the tunnel was... Nothing.

I don't know how I can describe it more than that. The walls seemed to glow, but there was no light. The room, if it was indeed a room, was pale and square. No door, no windows, merely a table and two chairs. We stood, or we sat at the table. How long we were there, I could not say. It was as if Time itself had lost all meaning. We were nowhere, and nothing happened.

The strangest thing was the way we both just accepted it. We were together, so perhaps that was enough. We neither of us knew what was happening, or why. Maybe the whole world had ended. Or perhaps we were dead. We did not know. We did not talk about it. We just knew what we each thought. That happens with someone you are close to. Family. Your own flesh and blood.

At least, we both thought, we were together.

Until the man made of stained glass came for us.

There was a door in one of the walls. It was not that we had failed to notice it. It was not there one moment, then it was. It just appeared, as the nightmare creature had appeared. When it appeared, then for the first time we felt that we had been waiting, that time was passing. Until then, we just *were*. But now we felt impatient. Waited for the door to open.

When it did open, it slid sideways and made a sound like the wind, as if the air were being sucked out of the room. Or into it. Then the man stepped into the room, if indeed he is a man. His hood hid his face, but the hand he held out was like water made solid. Like ice, only warm to the touch. I thought he would take us both, but he left me in the room.

I seemed to wait forever. Whereas before time had meant nothing, now it was everything. Every moment was drawn out into minutes – hours. Every hour was an eternity. Perhaps it was only a few moments before the man returned for me. He was alone, and I could not bring myself to ask the obvious question.

He gave me a cloak, though this palace of ice is not cold as it looks, and he led me through crystal corridors and eventually we came to a room. I thought at first it was a library. But it was not books on the shelves. Then I did ask, and he told me that I too had a mission. He told me that my mission was to stay behind, and to remain in the empty room. He said that he could hope to conceal sending one of us, but the power needed to send both would be noticed. So I was to remain behind. And he told me he would make the same bargain with me.

Then he explained about the hourglasses, and what would happen if I failed in my mission. And he said that the most important part of that mission was to tell no one what had happened. To tell no one what he had done.

Which is why I can tell you no more.

No, he did not threaten me. Never did he threaten me. I could face any threat he could contrive against my person. We both could. I suppose he knew that. You might not think it to look at me, but I have been threatened so many times, in so many ways in my short life. Threats against me hold no terror. They are for us both, I suppose, a way of life.

He talked a lot about the hourglasses, and I confess that I did not understand the half of what he told me. But I understood that it was my place to listen. He said that each hourglass had an owner, someone to whom it was inextricably linked. He pointed to the shelves, to the rows and rows of hourglasses. We walked slowly round the library as he explained. He said that each hourglass was constructed of a crystal lattice that matched the composition of its owner.

Then he showed me a set of shelves where he said the owners were different. These hourglasses belonged not to people who were present in this palace, or whatever you call this place, but to people that you – the Council – wished to manipulate. He said that they did not exactly match their owners' composition, but since carbon is the stuff of all life, it was possible to mimic the DNA (is that right?) and approximate to a point where manipulation is still possible.

I remember I asked him not about crystals or carbon or DNA or any of a dozen things I did not understand. I watched the grains of glass falling from one bowl to another along the shelf of hourglasses, and I asked him what he meant by 'manipulation'. Was he truly saying that he could take an hourglass and with it define or influence the life of a living person? I was not thinking of myself.

He smiled at that. I could see the glint of his amusement under the hood of his cloak. I realised that unwittingly I had asked the question he had known I would. He had predicted my actions and reactions.

'Think of the hourglass as a heart,' he said. 'Think of each grain that falls as if it were a beat of that heart. Some cultures believe that we are born with but a limited number of heartbeats. When they are used up – we die.'

I had heard it said, so I nodded.

'But they are more than that. Yes, we can regulate the beat of the heart. But it is the time that this heart beats out, that rhythm that we control.' He lifted down one of the hourglasses, and I saw that its upper bowl was empty, and the lower one was cracked and misshapen. 'Take this as an example,' he said. 'It belonged to a lady called Melanie. I say belonged,' he told me, 'as although we are ourselves outside the normal ebb and flow of time while we are in this station, this "Vortex Palace" if you like, the hourglasses are anchored in a real timeline. And at that point in the relative time of Melanie, her life has been cut short. Ended. The timeline is broken.'

I asked him why this was. I meant, why were we outside time. But he answered a different question. He told me about Melanie, and he pointed to a whole row of twisted, broken hourglasses.

'She was tainted,' he said. 'She had a plague, an infection that needed rooting out. There have been so many that he has touched and tainted, we cannot hope to find them all. But some are so dangerous that their very actions betray them to us. These we remove as best we can as a surgeon cuts out a canker.' And he showed me an hourglass called Jones that he said 'died of an overdose', and another called Harry who might have been killed by a wolf, although that was not yet certain. 'Crystallised,' he said. He held the glass for a moment, and I thought he was about to smash it and wondered what would happen if he did.

But he replaced it on the shelf and said: 'We shall see.' I thought he was speaking to himself more than to me. He knew, after all, that I could not hope to understand him. 'That is why the universes had to be collapsed,' he

said. 'We cannot hope to manipulate every reality, for when we do another springs up to take the place of the one we have altered. Like the Hydra,' he said, and the allusion seemed to amuse him.

As if to make the point more emphatically, he took down another hourglass. This one was actually two hourglasses fused together, the one seeming to grow out of the other. One upper bowl was broken, and the other lower bowl was blackened and distorted. But somehow the grains of glass still fell from the intact upper bowl to the surviving lower bowl.

'This is what happens when you try to manipulate a life in one universe without first closing off the others,' he said. 'When *he* is involved we cannot change the timelines too much. Distort them to breaking point, and the universes overlap and break through. That is why we have isolated this one universe. That is why we have Sabbath ensuring that he does not redefine reality to restore free will and the multiverse. That is why,' he said – as if he had just remembered that I was listening – 'that is why *you* are here.'

Now that he seemed to remember his purpose, he replaced the double hourglass in its place. 'Alas, poor Dorothy,' he said as he put it back with its fellows. 'But History must take its course. We can predict, and we can manipulate and control up to a point. But only up to a point, or it will be the end of everything. The end and the beginning.'

Yes, that was exactly what he said. I remember it was like the Book of Revelation. 'The end and the beginning.'

I only half listened as he talked about 'gravity'. He said that in space travel you need artificial gravity to make up for the state of weightlessness. I nodded as if I understood. The hourglasses, he said, provided artificial time for the people in the Vortex Palace. He talked again about the heartbeats. He said that the hourglasses ensured that people here age at the normal rate, that their lives are measured out in seconds and minutes and hours even though while we are here there are no seconds and minutes and hours.

I asked him whether he had an hourglass of his own. He nodded, but he did not show me it. 'And so have you,' he said. 'Now that you are again inside reality even though you are outside time. Both of you have hourglasses.' And he showed them to me.

As he held one of the hourglasses, I began to perceive his purpose in telling me all this. He spoke again of our missions, of what we must do for him. I listened attentively now while he talked of what would happen to anyone here if their hourglass were dropped, or broken. If it were laid on its side, or

turned upside-down.

Then he did show me his hourglass. It was composed entirely of glass. Even the frame in which the conjoined bowls rested. I wondered how such an intricate and beautiful device could be made, and he laughed. 'I am an hourglass,' he said. 'I am History itself. Even my name,' he told me, 'is an hourglass for it is 8. And it is Alpha and Omega. I am the beginning and the end of things. I have such power...'

He showed me his power. But first he showed me his face. He pushed back the hood of his gown, and for the first time I perceived his features. I saw the glowing ice-glass of his face, shot through with colours like the rainbow where it caught the light. I saw that his face was human, and seemed kindly. Apart from his eyes, which burned with a fire I did not like.

The hourglass he held close to his face, and he told me to watch as he tilted it slightly.

I told him that I could see nothing different. And he said that this was because time was so slow, in relative terms. Then he did something, something with his hands, so that the narrow gap between the two bowls of the hourglass became larger, and the grains of glass that had dripped through in a heartbeat now fell in a rushing torrent. And as they fell, I saw his face change and grow old.

He laughed at my surprise, and pinched the waist of the hourglass so that the cascade became a trickle once more. 'But,' I said, 'you are so old now.'

'"Now" means nothing,' he replied. 'He turned the hourglass over, so that the top became the bottom, and the bottom the top. Again he opened the gap so that the grains fell freely. And this time, he grew younger again. When he was back to the age at which I had first perceived him – neither young nor old – he tipped the glass on its side. And time stopped again, for him.'

'We can slow time to a standstill. For an individual, like this. Or for a whole environment. And imagine,' he said, replacing his hourglass, 'what might happen if I broke the hourglass. In here, in this Palace, one would become vulnerable to the Time Winds, to the forces of the vortex, and ripped apart in a fraction of an instant. But out there in real time, with no steady rhythmic beat second by second...'

He shook his head in a manner that made me think the notion scared even him.

'Does everyone have an hourglass?' I asked him.

He smiled and nodded. 'Everyone who is here, and everyone who we deem important to the way time works.' Then his smile faded and the colour

seemed to thin in his face. 'All except one,' he said quietly and I saw that he was looking at an empty space on one of the shelves. There was just a card there, no hourglass.

'Who?' I asked.

Again I felt as if he was talking to himself rather than to me. 'The hourglass is like the heart, the centre of being,' he said again. 'There is a blood bond between them. By creating an hourglass for him, we thought we could control him, keep him in check.' His voice was low, but there was a passion, a hatred in his tone. 'Instead, his heart rejected the glass, which withered and blackened and broke. Just as his heart did. We sought to control him with the glass, but instead – whether knowingly or by some residual instinct – he controlled and destroyed the glass. So much potential.' He sighed, shook his head. 'So much power expended on that one glass. Then wasted. We could not afford to try again. The moment we took that decision, his heart grew back, stronger than before.'

He seemed to regain his humour as we moved on. 'Then there is Sabbath,' he said. 'The hourglass linked them for a time. Like two men with the same disease. But even physically divorced from its owner, the original owner still controlled his heart, still it atrophied and withered away. And Sabbath, he thought he was being so clever. His first little rebellion. He thought we never knew. But of course we did. We had after all predicted it, as we predict everything. And from that we knew of his greater rebellion that was to come. Every moment of his treachery mapped out from that point.'

I know of treachery and treason. So I asked what this Sabbath had done.

This was a moment of great amusement, it seemed. For Sabbath had done nothing – not yet. He had spoken not of matters past, but of moments to come. His humour lasted until he showed me two more hourglasses, standing at the end of an otherwise empty shelf. He spoke again of what I must do, and he carefully lifted down one of the hourglasses.

It was not my hourglass.

I have told you – he never once threatened me.

Never Once. . .

‘No – don’t move. Don’t go out there,’ the Doctor shouted. But he was too late. Most of the guests had already run in panic to the doors, and were spilling out on to the damp pavement outside.

Some were frozen as they tumbled through the doors and down the steps. Some were apparently jammed in the doorway, but unable to move. At some point, Fitz supposed, the great dock of time would start up again and they would continue on their way, without ever realising they had stopped. If they really had stopped. A moment stretched out to infinity, the Doctor had said – if Fitz had understood him. Which meant the people, like his watch, were actually still moving. It was his own perception of time, rather than time itself that had changed.

Not that this was a lot of consolation given there was a skeleton made apparently from glass lurching his way, that seemed not at all bothered about what Fitz’s watch might say.

Patterson was running back towards them, the skeleton following him at a rather slower pace. But already it seemed to be getting the hang of walking, and was speeding up.

‘The skull,’ Patterson gasped as he rejoined them. ‘I saw it fall through the display case. Then. . .’ He shook his head, at a loss for words, and looked fearfully back at the skeleton, which was now bearing down on them.

The Doctor pushed his way through the small group of people who had not tried to rush outside. There was Fleetward and Pearl – the small curator cowering behind the Doctor, struggling to stay close to him. Chad and Zezanne were still with Fitz. And the matronly woman, who was actually Trix playing silly buggers for some reason, was of course right beside them. Plus the annoying Patterson.

The Doctor, typically, was studying the approaching crystal monstrosity with something close to awe and excitement. ‘Incredible,’ Fitz heard him breathe. He was tempted to drag the Doctor back, slap him round the face and tell him to grow up.

‘You know, I don’t believe it means us any harm,’ the Doctor went on. ‘Maybe it’s confused.’

‘Maybe,’ Fitz said in a low voice, ‘it should join the queue.’

‘And maybe that thing isn’t dangerous,’ Trix added, though her tone suggested she was yet to be convinced. ‘But what about that thing?’

She was pointing in a completely different direction – over the Doctor’s shoulder and towards where Fitz knew the security room was located at the back of the Institute. Fitz peered into the gloom, remembering with a shudder how he had found the security team frozen in position.

There was a figure approaching, out of the darkness. Fitz could not make out its shape for the moment. As it drew closer, as it emerged into the light, he saw that this was because the shape was so confused. It was like a man, yet it was also an ape – long arms reaching almost to the ground. It was simian, yet the legs and feet dragged like a reptile and Fitz fancied he could make out the scales as the light caught them. Its face, when it was close enough to discern the features, was a ragged and misshapen combination of human and monkey. As if evolution had got confused some way through the process, and so parts of the creature had evolved at different rates through the millennia to produce the nightmare mixture that was now lumbering across the Institute.

‘Ah,’ the Doctor was saying as he too watched. Everyone seemed to be waiting for him to make a pronouncement. Were they actually in danger or not? ‘Yes,’ he decided. ‘Well...’

‘Well what?’ Trix demanded. She had adopted a typical Trix pose – hands on hips and head to one side as if challenging him for an answer. It looked weird given the padding and the wig.

‘Have you seen a creature like that before, Doctor?’ Fitz asked, trying to sound calm and in control.

‘Something similar,’ the Doctor admitted. He looked from the approaching creature to the advancing skeleton and back. ‘I think,’ he offered, ‘that this may be the time to...’ His voice faded away as he peered with renewed interest at the skeleton, which was now very close. The jaw was working, the hands clutching.

‘To run?’ Fitz suggested.

‘What?’ The Doctor was shocked out of his contemplation by Fleetward’s hand on his shoulder. Then he seemed to realise what Fitz had said, and looked back at the creature that was now moving quickly towards them.

‘Yes, indeed,’ he decided. ‘Run!’

Fitz pushed Zezanne and Chad ahead of him, then ducked under the skeleton’s outstretched arm and followed. Trix was close on his heels. He felt the glassy fingers of the skeleton catch on his cheek as he thrust past. But he kept running, pushing Chad and Zezanne back towards the main stairs.

‘It left a watch – a clock,’ Zezanne gasped as she ran. ‘That thing.’

Nobody needed to ask her what thing she meant. It was lumbering after them, apparently unhurried. After all, Fitz thought, it had all eternity to hunt them down.

‘What clock? Where?’ the Doctor demanded, catching up with them.

‘Upstairs. Where we were hiding,’ Chad told him. ‘With strange markings. Where it appeared.’

‘You saw it arrive?’ The Doctor was excited. ‘You know where the entrance to the time-space corridor is. Show me, quick!’

‘It’s on the top floor,’ Zezanne said. ‘We’ll take you there.’

It seemed as good a plan as any to Fitz. But Curator Pearl was not convinced. ‘Shouldn’t we split up, hide, try to escape?’ he shouted, struggling to keep up.

‘Which?’ Trix asked. ‘Make your mind up.’

Behind them, the skeleton was following the creature across the foyer. The creature seemed not to have seen the skeleton, or perhaps it just wasn’t interested. Or maybe, Fitz thought, they were working together to some plan to herd everyone upstairs and trap them.

Pearl tried to catch up with the Doctor on the stairs, pushing past Fitz and the others. Probably thought he ought to be leading the valiant retreat, Fitz thought. ‘Hey!’ he called out as Pearl knocked into him, almost pushing him over. Fitz grabbed at the banister to catch his balance. Pearl seemed not to notice. Now he was pushing his way past the tall, lanky figure of Patterson.

But Patterson seemed to anticipate Pearl’s arrival, and moved aside as he ran up the steps. Pearl had been expecting to have to elbow his way past, but now he found there was nobody there. His weight was forward, ready to push – now it dragged him down and over and he stumbled.

Fitz grabbed for him, but he was already off-balance himself, and missed. Pearl was falling under Fitz’s arm, twisting and crashing to the ground, rolling, slipping, sliding back down the stairs. Everyone turned to watch.

The short, rotund man seemed to roll and bounce his way down the staircase, scrabbling for a hold, trying desperately to halt his fall. Eventually, he

managed. But by now the creature was already starting up the staircase.

Pearl pushed himself away, on his back, but was up against the banister. He cowered away, turning his head and squeezing his eyes tight shut like a child who believes if he cannot see what frightens him then it isn't there.

Bizarrely, it seemed to work. The creature ignored the curator and continued on up the staircase towards the Doctor and the others. Fitz could clearly see the expression of surprise and relief etched on to Pearl's face as the thing went past him. Then, as the creature brushed past him, a breeze seemed to ruffle the man's thin hair, and the expression hardened on his face. The lines grew deeper, the hair thinned and whitened. His raised hand dropped from the balustrade he was clutching – gnarled and painfully thin.

'Keep going!' Fitz shouted. He pushed Trix, Zezanne, Chad – even Patterson ahead of him. Gathered them up as he ran and urged them onwards after the Doctor's disappearing figure. He did not look back.

If he had, Fitz knew that he would see a glass skeleton following the apelike creature – stepping carefully and deliberately past the decaying, mildewed suit that clothed another more human skeleton. The aged, desiccated remains of what had once been Andrew Pearl.

The Doctor was waiting for them on the first floor. He did not seem to be out of breath, but he nodded for everyone else to take a quick breather. None of them wanted to stay still for long, watching the creature making its deliberate way up the stairs behind them.

'Is it after you, Doctor?' Trix wondered.

'I don't think so. But it's after one of us. Someone here it needs to remove from History.'

'Remove from History?' Chad echoed.

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes,' he said gentry. 'To ensure that someone's version of events takes place unhampered.'

'I think we should keep moving,' Fitz said. The creature was three quarters of the way up the stairs, and showed no sign of stopping for a break itself. The skeleton followed slowly, almost painfully behind it.

'I agree, but let's try a little experiment, shall we?'

'Oh yes,' Trix said. 'Let's. Can't we just run?'

'You can,' the Doctor told her. 'I'm going to stay here. And when you get to the top of the stairs, split up a bit – see who the creature follows.'

'Bagsie not me,' Fitz muttered, and led the assault on the next flight of stairs.

The Doctor stepped back from the top of the stairs and waited. The creature was not the same as the one he had seen before. He was sure now that he had tracked and followed one particular creature through time, had watched it changing History as it went. This was another of the same species – if ‘species’ was any sort of description for an animal whose evolutionary ancestry was so in flux.

How many of them there were in all, he had no way of knowing. Several? Hundreds? He thought of the apes he had encountered when he first met Sabbath. How many of them had there been in all? In all the universes and dimensions where they existed. . . ?

The creature reached the top of the stairs and paused. It was standing right beside the Doctor as it sniffed at the air and swung round. Their eyes met for an instant, but the Doctor could see only unfocused ignorance of his existence in the creature’s expression. Then it continued to turn, and started up the next flight of steps after Fitz, Trix and the others.

‘But who are you really after?’ the Doctor murmured.

Close behind the creature came the skeleton. Could the creature see that, the Doctor wondered? What was the connection – for there had to be one. Could the skeleton see the Doctor? Or anything? It seemed to have gained an awareness of sorts now that it was made whole, the pieces brought together. They must be held together by some inner bonding, based on the crystalline valency, he assumed.

One of the Doctor’s questions was answered as the skeleton reached the top of the stairs. Its glassy feet clicked on the wooden floor as it took a step towards the Doctor. Its jaw opened as if it were trying to speak, but no sound came out. The Doctor returned the glassy stare – friend or foe? For several seconds the skull grimaced back at him. Then the skeleton seemed to reach a decision, and it too started up the next flight of steps, its progress uneven and hesitant. Each step seemed to be an effort for it, and the Doctor was able to race past as he took the steps two at a time.

He was careful to keep well clear of the ape-creature as he passed. It had barely touched Pearl, and the residual time energy the thing was exuding had aged the man to death and beyond in an instant. At the top of the stairs, the Doctor looked quickly round. He could see Fitz with Chad and Zezanne heading off in one direction, Professor Fleetward was moving quickly in another, accompanied by Malcolm Patterson. Trix, typically, was nowhere to be seen.

The Doctor waited for the creature to catch up with him. By now none of its possible targets was within sight. But again it seemed to sniff at the air, and the Doctor was not surprised to see that it headed after Fleetward and Patterson. He had been pretty sure it must be Fleetward the creature was after. He could not believe that Malcolm Patterson was destined to amount to very much.

But that still left one question. The Doctor drew aside, stepping into the shadows so as not to disturb his experiment by his evident presence. He watched as the skeleton hauled itself up the final few steps. It seemed to be in pain, having difficulty moving. But like the creature it seemed to sense where it was going.

And it too followed in the direction that Professor Fleetward had gone.

'Interesting,' the Doctor mused. 'And why would you want to talk to him, I wonder?'

'Maybe it sees Fleetward as its daddy,' a voice murmured close behind the Doctor's ear.

'Hello, Trix,' he said Without turning. 'You're still looking well.'

'I'm looking fat,' she told him. 'And I'm looking relieved that neither of those monstrosities is after me.'

'Do you think you can get to Fleetward before the creature does?' the Doctor asked her.

'Warn him?'

'Keep him out of its way. And the skeleton's too. For a while.'

Trix just stared at him. The Doctor sighed. '*If*,' he said heavily. '*If* there are any crystals available at the end of this, then as far as I'm concerned you can have them.'

Trix nodded, her expression fixed. No comment, no gratitude. 'I'll keep Fleetward out of its way for a while,' she agreed. She paused to shift what looked like a cushion over her stomach.

'Why don't you lose that?'

'And give young Chad, amongst others, a surprise? No, if I seem fat and slow that might give me an advantage at some point. You never know.'

'Give me five minutes. Longer if you can. Then lead the creature back to the point where it arrived.'

'And where is that?'

'I'm not sure. But I'll be there. Somewhere on this floor Zezanne said.'

‘Great.’ She did not sound enthusiastic. ‘We’ll find you. You just be ready to do whatever clever thing it is you’re going to do.’

‘I’m going to try to send it back home,’ the Doctor told Trix as she disappeared into the shadowy world of exhibits and emergency lighting.

Fleetward was terrified. He was cowering behind an upright display case in which there was a life-size model of a Saurian a life form that might have evolved to dominate the Earth had the dinosaurs not died out. He could not help thinking it looked rather like the accepted form of the traditional ‘grey’ alien figure, complete with large, angled ovals for eyes. How wrong accepted theories could be, he thought.

‘It’s coming this way,’ Patterson hissed at him. He seemed almost to be relishing the experience.

‘We’d better move,’ Fleetward said. But he had no idea where to.

‘Or stay put.’

‘And hope it doesn’t find us?’ That did not sound very sensible. There were few places to hides, and Fleetward was sure he had not hit on one of the best even from what was available.

Patterson shrugged. ‘It went right past the Doctor – you saw, on the stairs. Maybe it will ignore us too.’

Fleetward thought of Curator Pearl, lying dead and decaying on the stairs lower down. He shuddered. ‘And maybe not. Come on.’

‘Where?’ Patterson asked.

It was a good question. Fleetward could see the outline of the creature now as it approached them, making its almost ponderous way across the exhibition floor towards them. As if it knew exactly where they were hiding. He felt awful for it, but Fleetward had hoped – had almost prayed – that the monster would follow Crystal Devine, or Kreiner, or the children. It was with a sense of trembling inevitability that he had realised it was following himself and Patterson. Himself, he was sure.

And now the thing was almost on top of them, and there was nowhere to run.

‘Over here!’ The shout startled Fleetward, galvanised him into movement, and he ran instinctively towards it.

Miss Devine was waving to them from the other side of a table showing the prehistoric landscape of Britain. She too seemed to be relishing events,

Fleetward thought – she seemed younger, more dynamic. Even her voice had changed. She was moving with a speed that belied her ample figure.

As Patterson and Fleetward reached her, the creature turned to follow. Miss Devine swung the heavy table round to close the gap between it and the next display – a case full of arrow heads and sharpened stones. It blocked off the route after them. It might, Fleetward thought, slow the creature down. But it would not stop it.

He made the mistake of looking back as Miss Devine led them away into the semi-darkness.

The creature collided with the table – simply walked into it like it had not noticed it was there. The table exploded into dust and fragments of glass. As if it had been so old it had simply disintegrated when touched.

Fleetward took a deep breath, and followed the others.

Fitz peered at the dial of the pocket watch that hung on its chain from the *Homo sapiens* exhibit's outstretched hand. It did indeed seem to be marked off in very small increments. Could this be what was holding time itself in check? He reached out tentatively towards it.

And drew his hand back sharply as the Doctor's voice said: 'I wouldn't touch it.'

The Doctor was standing with Zezanne and Chad, watching Fitz.

'Can you fix it with this? Get time working again?'

'Possibly.' The Doctor stooped down close to Fitz, and he too examined the dial, careful not to get too close to it. 'But I think it's probably best left well alone.'

'So what's the plan?'

The Doctor straightened up. 'The plan is for Zezanne here to show me where the creature appeared. Then I can open up the entrance of the Space-Time Corridor so that we can jiggle about with it a bit.'

Fitz considered this. 'And jiggling about a bit with a Space-Time-Corridor is less hazardous than changing the time on a pocket watch, is it?'

'For us,' the Doctor said. 'But maybe not for the creature.' He turned to Zezanne. 'So, where did the creature first appear? Exactly?'

She and Chad showed him, pointing as best they could recall to the exact spot. The Doctor approached it carefully, his hands out in front of him as if testing the air. He seemed to meet resistance over the spot they had indicated, and he nodded and smiled.

Keeping one hand pressing against the invisible wall of the Time Corridor, the Doctor fumbled in his jacket pocket with the other, and eventually pulled out a small device rather like the tracker he had given Fitz, only with fewer trailing wires and awkward attachments. 'Where's yours?' he demanded, and when Fitz produced it he was forced to use both hands as he started to pull them apart. He glared for a second at the point where he had found the corridor, as if telling it to stay put while he was busy.

'So, what's the plan?' Fitz asked again. Chad and Zezanne were also craning to see what the Doctor was doing with the dismantled circuits.

'Well, I think I can persuade the entrance to the corridor that it arrived here at a different time to that when it actually did arrive. The fact that time is as good as stood still should help. Gives us a stable control point to calibrate from.'

'Right,' Fitz nodded and tried to look and sound as if this made sense. Best not let the children think he was a complete dork.

'You're shifting the moment when the corridor opened relative to the creature's own timeline,' Zezanne said. She gave Fitz what he interpreted instantly as a 'You're a complete dork' look.

'That's right.' The Doctor seemed impressed. 'If I get this sorted, the creature will never have arrived here.'

'Good move,' Fitz said. 'Given that it's arriving here now.'

'What?' The Doctor looked in surprise at the point where the corridor was supposed to be.

Fitz pointed the other way. 'It's following Trix and the others,' he said.

'Hurry!' Chad implored.

Trix, Fleetward and Patterson were running towards them. Behind them, clearly visible as it passed under the red glow of an emergency light, came the creature.

'Right,' the Doctor said. 'That should do it.' Beside him a swirling maelstrom of colour swept into existence, spinning like a miniature tornado.

'What if you've got it wrong?' Zezanne asked.

'Oh, I should think anything could happen,' the Doctor told her gleefully.

'Er,' Fitz offered. 'Er – the creature hasn't disappeared yet.'

The Doctor did not seem surprised. 'Well, we have to entice it into the vortex.'

'How do we do that?' Trix asked breathlessly as she joined them.

The Doctor grinned at Fleetward. 'We ask the Professor to lure it through. That all right with you, Professor?'

Fleetward did not answer. He was staring past the Doctor, at the vortex that twisted and swirled in the centre of the exhibition room. The colours seem to coalesce on his glasses. 'My God,' he said quietly. 'There's someone in there.'

The Doctor spun round. They could all now see the figures hardening into existence within the mass of colours. Two shapes – a woman and a girl. The girl looked familiar, and Fitz realised almost at once who it must be.

'Zezanne?' Fitz said out loud. But even as he said it, the shape of the girl shimmered and disappeared.

'I remember. The colours.' Beside Fitz, Zezanne was staring at the vortex, at the remaining figure.

'I must have mis-calibrated. You were snatched out of the corridor,' the Doctor said. 'Just now. By me. But I moved the entrance, so you arrived earlier. Where did you come from? Where was the creature taking you? And why?'

'Never mind that,' Trix shouted, pushing them all back as the creature advanced.

The Doctor was frantically fiddling with the device he had created. But even as he pulled it apart and rebuilt it, even as the creature swept past him without so much as a glance, the vortex shimmered, slowed and died.

Leaving a single figure standing there, dazed and confused. A middle-aged woman, slim and attractive. Once, Fitz realised, she would have been beautiful. Her hair was cut short, streaked with grey. Her face was long and elegant. Her eyes were pools of colour as they focused on one of the figures before her. 'Zezanne?'

'Mother!' Zezanne dashed forwards, enfolding her mother in her arms.

Trix grabbed Fleetward and dragged him away, the creature swinging round to follow them, ignoring the reunion of mother and daughter.

Zezanne's mother seemed to catch sight of the creature as it went and she followed it with her eyes. As it passed the Doctor, she blinked. Her eyes widened in shock and recognition.

Fitz could see that the Doctor was staring back at her, just as amazed. The device he had been fiddling with slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor, smashing into pieces. He took a step forwards, then stopped, as if afraid to go any closer.

The woman detached herself from her daughter, and moved slowly towards the Doctor, hesitant, as if unsure it was really him. 'Doctor?' she asked, tentatively.

He nodded, still not speaking. From somewhere behind them came the sound of a display stand crashing to the floor.

'Doctor,' the woman said again, certain now. She was standing right in front of him. 'It's been so long.'

The Doctor's voice was barely more than a whisper: 'Miranda.'

Her voice was almost breaking with emotion when she spoke again. Just one word. 'Father,' the woman said, and she drew the Doctor into an embrace.

The Eternity Corridor

It was as if the creature was confusing the time around it. One of the display tables it crashed through as it followed Fleetward and Trix seemed to simply rot away at the creature's touch. Another, glass-topped, disappeared completely – to be replaced with a small sapling that grew out of the floor, and a pile of sand.

It was pretty obvious that just pushing things into the creature's way was not going to slow it down. Fleetward was already gasping for breath. Looking desperately back to see what the Doctor and the others were doing, Trix was astonished – and slightly miffed – to see that the Doctor seemed to be hugging the latest woman to tumble out of a time vortex.

'Excuse me!' Trix shouted across the room. 'Some help would be in order. When you've quite finished over there.'

She was pleased to see the Doctor extricate himself from the woman's embrace, though it was difficult to tell at this range whether he also had the decency to look at all embarrassed. Pushing Fleetward ahead of her, Trix tried to circle back to the others.

'What's going on?' she demanded from Fitz when he came over to help her with the near-exhausted Fleetward.

'Family reunion,' he said. 'Don't ask. I shudder to think what he got up to – and into – when I left him alone for a century.'

'You did what?'

'I know. Foolish, I suppose, looking back.'

'*Foolhardy*, more like.'

'But there was a terribly good reason for it at the time.' He frowned. 'I think.'

The Doctor seemed to have recovered from his surprise. 'Right,' he called to them. 'Over here.'

He pushed the new arrival, together with Zezanne, Chad and Patterson in front of him and then grabbed Fleetward's elbow from Fitz. 'Go with them – scout ahead. Down the corridor.'

There was an opening behind the exhibit of the apes who became Man. A notice above it read, rather strangely Trix thought: 'The Corridor of Life. Start Other End.' She shook her head – so that's what I've been getting wrong, she thought.

The Doctor was supporting Fleetward's weight now. The man seemed to have aged – out of anxiety and shock, Trix thought, not something the creature had done to him. Not yet anyway – but that could all change when and if it caught up with them. Of all people, she was surprised to see that Malcolm Patterson had hurried back from Fitz and the others, and was helping. She was glad of the rest, and paused to catch her breath.

But the creature was almost on them now, and she hurried after the Doctor, Patterson and Fleetward.

'Who's the new addition?' she asked the Doctor, nodding to the dimly lit corridor ahead of them where Fitz and his group were disappearing round the corner.

'Miranda,' the Doctor said. 'She's my daughter.'

Trix stopped dead. 'Your *what*?'

'Well,' he admitted, with a grin, 'adopted daughter. I looked after her when her parents met with... an accident,' he decided. 'It was a long time ago. She's Empress of somewhere or other now, I believe.'

'These things happen,' Trix murmured.

The creature seemed to be taking its time. So they paused maybe halfway along the corridor. Since it curved round the outside of the exhibition area, it was difficult to tell how long the corridor actually was. So far as Trix could tell, it was lined with exhibits showing how Earth – and life on Earth – had evolved. Except they were doing the journey backwards, so everything was rapidly plunging into chaos and disorder. Which seemed appropriate.

'I'm sorry,' Fleetward gasped. One lens of his glasses was cracked.

'Not your fault,' the Doctor told him shortly. 'None of this is your fault.'

'I could be fitter,' he said with a half-smile, patting his stomach. 'I can't remember when I last ran so far.'

'Me neither,' Trix assured him.

'And I must apologise to you, Mr Patterson.'

Patterson did not reply. He was watching the creature moving slowly – so slowly – along the corridor towards them.

'Why does Patterson get the special treatment?' Trix wondered.

‘Because he wouldn’t be here if it were not for my invitation.’ Fleetward was getting his breath back now. ‘I saw an article about you in one of the colour supplements,’ he said to Patterson. ‘Very impressive. I don’t know why, but it just seemed like your interest in – your use of – anthropology and social awareness made you the ideal guest to provide some entertainment and bolster publicity.’ His voice became quieter as he added: ‘Curator Pearl thought it was a good idea.’

‘He may have a different opinion now,’ Trix pointed out.

‘Perhaps you should leave me. Let it catch me,’ Fleetward decided. ‘That will end it, won’t it, Doctor?’

‘In a way,’ the Doctor said. ‘But if I’m right, it will start something else. Something worse. Something we may not be able to avoid or control. So there really is no option.’ He patted Fleetward encouragingly on the shoulder. ‘Come on, we should get moving.’

‘That may be easier said than done,’ Patterson said suddenly. ‘I didn’t like to mention it before, but I can’t actually move.’

‘What?’ The Doctor frowned, looking from Patterson to the creature and back, as if gauging the distance between them. ‘Come on!’ He pushed Patterson ahead of him and dragged Fleetward onwards.

‘You are actually moving now, in fact,’ Trix pointed out. They all were, hurrying along the corridor to escape the creature.

‘That isn’t what I meant,’ Patterson told her between gasps for breath. ‘I’m running, just as you are. As fast as I can.’

‘Yes,’ Fleetward agreed.

‘But we’re none of us going anywhere.’

‘Stop!’ The Doctor put up his hand and skidded to a halt. ‘He’s right.’

‘Don’t be daft,’ Trix told him. ‘We were running like hell.’

‘Like hell we were running,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Look – what do you see?’ He was pointing to a window set into the wall of the corridor.

Trix peered inside. ‘Looks like a cutaway model of a range of mountains, with a key I can’t read to explain the different layers I can’t see. So what?’

‘So,’ the Doctor said, ‘run like hell, as you put it, for ten seconds.’

Trix did. They all did. When she stopped, having counted to ten in her head, the Doctor pointed again.

He was pointing at another, identical window in the corridor wall.

Inside was an identical model.

Or rather, the same model. They had not moved.

‘That’s impossible,’ Trix gasped. ‘It’s like...’ She struggled to think what it was like. ‘It’s like Scooby and Shaggy running from the ghost – their legs spin round and round but they don’t move. Only,’ she decided, ‘we did move. I know we did.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘We did. But time and space have changed around us.’

‘The creature is moving,’ Fleetward pointed out. ‘Very slowly, as if it is less affected. But it is moving. It will catch up with us soon.’

It seemed to be pushing its way through jelly. Trix’s vision seemed blurred as she tried to focus on the creature behind them. But Fleetward was right, it was moving slowly, but inexorably, towards them.

‘What’s happening?’ she murmured.

‘Let’s save our breath for a minute while we work out what to do.’

Trix thought for a moment that the Doctor had vanished. His voice seemed to come from right beside her, yet he was nowhere to be seen. Then she realised he was sitting cross-legged on the floor at her feet. She sat down beside him, angling herself so she could see the creature as it slow-motioned towards them. The Doctor patted the floor to encourage Fleetward and Patterson to join them.

‘So,’ Trix started off, ‘why aren’t we getting anywhere, then?’

‘Is it like the way time has stopped?’ Fleetward suggested.

‘In a way, I suppose. Like time, we *are* moving,’ the Doctor said. ‘But in this case I think the environment has changed around us. We’re trapped in an eternity corridor.’

‘A what?’ Patterson asked. Trix wasn’t sure if he looked smug or completely confused. His face just seemed devoid of emotion.

‘The length of the corridor we are in now tends towards infinity.’

‘Fractals, again?’ Fleetward asked. ‘You mentioned measuring the coastline of Britain before. Is that what’s happened here?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘So far as I can tell. Unless anyone has a better diagnosis?’

Trix put her hand up. It seemed the best way of getting their attention for a moment. ‘Could I just ask, what is all this about measuring the coastline?’ She glanced back at the creature. Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed larger, closer... .

‘It doesn’t have to be Britain,’ Fleetward said, ‘though that’s a good example. If you measure the coastline, on a very detailed and accurate map – or

even the real thing – how long it seems to be depends on how small your unit of measurement is.’

‘Er. . . ?’ Trix hoped this was a suitably unambiguous plea for clarification.

‘Well, if you had a pole a hundred metres long, and you laid it along the edge of the coast, then counted how many times you needed to measure a hundred metres to get round Britain, you’d get an answer that was approximately right,’ Fleetward said.

‘But if,’ the Doctor went on, ‘you then measured again with a ruler just one metre long, you’d get a different answer.’

‘Would you?’ Patterson asked.

‘The coastline would be longer this time, because you can measure more accurately with one metre than with a hundred,’ Fleetward told him. ‘You can get into the crinkly bits, and round the smaller corners.’

‘OK,’ Trix was getting the idea. ‘So then I measure with a ruler just a foot long, and I get a bigger answer again because I can get round even smaller crinkles. Right?’

‘Right,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘And so it goes on. Ad infinitum. Literally.’

Fleetward was smiling. ‘It’s a mathematical joke. In theory, whatever measurement you use, you could always do it again with a smaller one. So the coastline of Britain is always longer than you measured. It might only be a very slight change, but it is a change nonetheless. Take that to the logical, if rather absurd conclusion, and the coastline of Britain is an infinite length.’

‘It may be absurd to you,’ Trix said. ‘But it might be the death of us.’

‘Assuming this is a practical application of the theory,’ the Doctor said, ‘which I think it is, then I’m afraid you’re right. This creature can somehow progress through infinity. Probably in the same way it has the ability to travel through the time vortex where time and space should have no meaning.’

‘The TARDIS can do that,’ Trix pointed out.

‘But we can’t get to it,’ the Doctor countered.

‘The what?’ Fleetward wanted to know.

‘Never mind,’ the Doctor told him. ‘We could try shouting for Fitz to come back, but if he isn’t stuck like we are already, he soon would be. And I reckon that given the rate the creature is moving, and the rate at which we aren’t – even when we “run like hell” as Trix so quaintly puts it – we have about five minutes of relative time before the creature gets to us.’ He drummed his fingers on the floor, considering the problem. The hastening rhythm culminated in a thump. ‘Got it!’ the Doctor exclaimed.

‘Yes?’ Fleetward’s relief was almost palpable. Trix knew that his sudden grin must mirror her own expression.

The Doctor was nodding excitedly. ‘I spy,’ he said, ‘with my little eye, something beginning with “F”.’

There was silence for a moment.

Then: ‘Fleetward,’ Patterson said.

‘Floor,’ Fleetward suggested.

‘Hatch,’ Trix said.

The Doctor’s smile faded. ‘I don’t think you’re taking this game very seriously, Trix.’

‘Stuff the game,’ she told him. ‘Behind you. In the wall. There.’

She pointed, and they all turned to look. Trix had not actually seen it appear as such. It more sort of ‘was’. One moment there was just the wall, the outside wall of the building she guessed. The next moment – there was a hatch set into it. A circular hatch, perhaps two metres in diameter. It looked like it might lead into an early submarine, or have been taken from the inside of an old steam ship. It was made from dull metal, and studded with heavy rivets. Traces and trails of oil seeped from the rivet heads, and set in the middle of the hatch was a large locking wheel.

‘What does it mean?’ Fleetward hauled himself to his feet and stared at it.

The Doctor was already at the hatch. He had produced a stethoscope from somewhere, and had pressed the business end against the metal doorway. He was listening intently. Then he whipped the stethoscope away, and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. ‘Something beginning with “S”,’ he murmured.

With a scraping, metallic echo the locking wheel began to spin. The Doctor leaped back from the hatch.

‘Run?’ Trix suggested.

He shook his head. ‘Wouldn’t do much good.’

The creature seemed to be almost upon them now, quickening its pace if anything, forcing its way through the solid air, becoming clearer as it came closer.

The hatch swung back, hinges squealing for oil.

A huge figure stepped through, glaring for a moment at the creature, then turning to survey the Doctor, Trix, Fleetward and Patterson. It was a man – a man built like a tank and squeezed into a dark business suit. His face was round, his jowls sagging slightly as middle age took hold. His hair was cropped so close to his head it was almost impossible to tell what colour

it was. He looked older than the last time Trix had seen him – older and tired. But she did not pause to consider the possible reasons. Because he was holding a gun.

‘Sabbath,’ Trix said.

‘Got it in one,’ the Doctor replied.

‘My dear Doctor,’ Sabbath’s deep voice boomed. ‘And Miss Macmillan, I recognise you this time by the company you keep. How nice to see you looking so...’ He paused to take in the remains of Trix’s disguise – the out-size, padded evening gown and the severe wig, ‘...well,’ he decided before quickly turning back to the Doctor. ‘Won’t you introduce your new friends?’

‘Perhaps you’ve already met some of them?’ the Doctor asked. ‘The Time Agent?’ Sabbath paused to make a point of looking at the creature as it closed on them. ‘Not this one, I fancy. But I am of course aware of its nature. And its purpose.’ He turned back to the Doctor and the others, and in doing so caught sight of the hatch he had stepped through. ‘I see the process still needs a little work. It thinks it is part of the *Jonah*, rather than part of the corridor. A slight adjustment may be needed to the technology my former associate Kalicum was so kind to provide before he departed.’ He raised the gun. ‘But first, to business.’

‘A bullet in the head, is it?’ Trix wondered.

‘A bullet?’ He seemed amused. ‘How very quaint. No, this is a Vortex Gun, as I’m sure the Doctor is aware. Provided by my erstwhile employers.’

‘And what does a Vortex Gun do?’ Fleetward asked nervously.

Sabbath seemed to notice him for the first time. ‘Hello there,’ he condescended. ‘Well, as I understand it – and you’ll appreciate that for very good reasons I have never actually used one before – a Vortex Gun fires a pellet of pure temporal energy.’

‘That will rip apart whatever it hits,’ the Doctor finished, stepping in front of Fleetward and obscuring Trix’s sight of the advancing creature. She fancied she could hear it growling and salivating as it sensed its prey. ‘Rip it apart and disperse it to the Time Winds. Hurl it, broken and screaming forever into the vortex to be tortured for all eternity – aged and re-aged, never dying, never alive.’

Sabbath sucked in his cheeks. ‘How eloquently put,’ he decided.

‘So why have you got it?’ Trix wanted to know. ‘And why are you here?’

‘Were you not listening?’ Sabbath asked. ‘I was given it by my employers, who have sent me here to complete a task. A task they set me some time

ago, in fact, but which has so far eluded me despite my best endeavours.' He leaned forward and lowered his voice as if confiding in them all. 'Through no fault of my own, I might add. Circumstances were such. . .' He shrugged. 'I'm sure you understand.'

'And this particular task? Your new mission?' the Doctor asked. His face seemed pale in the dim light of the corridor.

Sabbath laughed. His whole massive frame shook – except for the arm and hand holding the gun. 'Why to kill you, Doctor. Oh, and Miss MacMillan and Mr Kreiner of course.'

He brought up his other hand, holding the gun rock steady and pointing it straight at the Doctor. 'But especially you. Dispersed to the Time Winds, to scream for all eternity, did you say?' The Doctor stared back – the gun mere inches from his face.

'Let's see if you're right, shall we?' Trix could see Sabbath's knuckles whiten as he squeezed the trigger.

And fired.

Unlikely Allies

The pellet of pure temporal energy tore down the corridor, ripping its way through the fabric of reality. The Doctor flinched as it almost grazed his cheek, but he did not move. Sabbath was smiling with satisfaction. Once Trix had realised that Sabbath was not actually firing at the Doctor, she smiled too – but from relief.

They all turned to watch as the pellet exploded. It hit the advancing creature in the chest, and the exploding energy seemed to ripple out and through its body. It reeled back, but only for a moment. Then with a snarl of anger and pain, it surged forwards. The blur that surrounded it was gone, and it leaped towards the Doctor, Trix and the others.

‘Time to go,’ the Doctor shouted, pushing everyone – including the bulky Sabbath – ahead of him.

‘Hey, we’re moving,’ Trix realised as they ran from the creature behind them.

‘Luckily, *it* isn’t,’ the Doctor observed.

Trix risked a glance back, and saw that the creature – the Time Agent as Sabbath had called it – was fighting its way through a swirling maelstrom of colour.

‘So much for screaming for all eternity or whatever it was,’ Fleetward muttered.

‘You can’t expect a creature that lives in the vortex, that surfs on the Time Winds, to be too bothered by them,’ the Doctor said. He was speaking to Sabbath, but the big man simply shrugged and smiled.

‘I think you still owe me your lives,’ he countered.

‘Thank you,’ Patterson said without any discernible emotion.

‘It’ll be free of the standing vortex in a moment,’ the Doctor said. ‘It’s only interference patterns set up by the two sets of Time Winds interacting. Let’s see if we can catch up with the others.’

‘They’ll be miles away by now,’ Fleetward argued.

But in fact, they were waiting round the corner.

'I was beginning to think something unpleasant might have happened to you,' Fitz said as the two groups caught sight of each other. He paused as he saw Sabbath. 'Oh,' he said. 'Something did.'

The Doctor immediately went to check that Miranda and Zezanne were all right.

'Spot of bother,' Trix admitted as she struggled to get her breath back. 'Apart from meeting our friend here, who just saved us from a ravening time monster for reasons that are yet to be made apparent, we also paused for a discussion about the nature of infinity, how far it might be to bike round Britain, and what happens if you use a smaller ruler.'

Fitz seemed impressed. 'You cram it in, don't you?' he said. 'You were only gone about half a minute.'

'We were ages,' Trix protested.

'Not to Fitz,' the Doctor interrupted. 'And the Time Agent won't be far behind us either, even if it's stuck there for hours.'

Fitz was trying to keep an eye on Sabbath while at the same time not get too close. It seemed pretty obvious that if Sabbath had turned up – again – then he was the most likely candidate for 'evil genius behind it all'. Trix's assertion that Sabbath had just saved their lives was somewhat disconcerting in the circumstances, as it took something that Fitz reckoned was pretty much a given, and turned it on its head.

The Doctor led them all at speed back round the exhibition to where the entrance to the Time Corridor had been.

'We can't keep running in circles forever,' Patterson pointed out.

'Indeed not,' the Doctor agreed.

'So what's the plan this time?' Fitz asked. 'Same as before, or something new?'

'That rather depends on Sabbath.' The Doctor turned to the large figure standing quietly beside him. 'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Well what are you up to?' The Doctor tilted his head to one side, the way he did when he was thinking. 'You said you had been sent to kill us. But you haven't said what for, or who by, or why you didn't.'

'No.' For a few moments Fitz thought that was going to be the extent of Sabbath's answer. But then he went on: 'The truth of the matter, the simple truth, plain and simple...'

‘For once,’ Trix put in, earning herself a glare from Sabbath.

‘Is that I don’t actually want to kill you.’

‘How nice,’ Fitz said.

‘I’m not exactly proud of the fact,’ Sabbath went on, ignoring him, ‘but I must confess I have grown more than a little fond of you, Doctor.’ At this point, he did spare Fitz a quick glare. ‘And I’m prepared to tolerate your associates. I have developed quite a respect for your talents and your abilities.’

The Doctor nodded, looking far from convinced. ‘I sense an “and” coming on.’

‘And...’

‘Thought so.’

‘After our recent experiences together, I have begun to wonder and worry more than a little about my employers.’

‘Worried you might be on the wrong side, is that it?’ Fitz suggested.

‘In the crudest terms, yes. That is it. As you know, I have learned some things that have given me pause for thought. You may not believe – or may not want to believe – that I have done what I have done because I believed it to be for the best.’

He paused, evidently expecting a comment. But Fitz was surprised to find that he could actually believe this. Sabbath might be wrong, but he always seemed to be doing what he believed in, that was for sure.

Realising no one was about to contradict him, Sabbath went on. ‘I have been misled. Duped.’ His voice was low and angry. He had put the bulky pistol he had been carrying inside his jacket, and now his massive hands were bunched into fists at his sides. ‘Played for a fool.’

‘It was always on the cards,’ the Doctor said quietly.

‘More than that, in fact,’ Sabbath said, his eyes fixed on the Doctor’s. ‘I think that collapsing the timelines into a single universe was not only wrong, but was purposefully wrong. The more I think about it, and I can assure you I have thought about it a lot, the more I believe that it was done for a purpose. Not a side effect, not an accident, not even a way of ensuring order. Not in and of itself anyway. There is some other purpose behind this to which we – I – am not privy. Some purpose that relies on the fact that there is a single universe and that decisions made within that universe echo and reverberate and have meaning and consequence within it. I have been lied to and betrayed. And so, when they tell me that for the good of the

universe I must find you and kill you, Doctor, I may play along. But at the same time, I wonder whether I shouldn't trust my instincts and listen to your judgement since my reason and my intelligence seem to have let me down.'

There was silence for several moments. Everyone was looking at the Doctor. His face was serious, half in and half out of the blood-red glow from a nearby emergency light. 'That's a very long way of saying, "You were right and I was wrong",' the Doctor said at last.

'Realisation can be a very long process,' Sabbath said quietly.

The Doctor smiled. 'So can trust. Can we trust you?'

'That is a question I know I cannot answer.'

'So, what can you tell us that would be useful?'

Sabbath's Story

In 1762, when I was just twenty-one years old, I was initiated into the Service. Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to recount my entire life story. Just a few salient points. The Service, as I'm sure you remember, Doctor, was the secret organ of state in eighteenth-century Britain. And beyond. It survives to this day, of course. Though in what form and manner is an interesting discussion for another time.

The initiation was different for every initiate. In short, a near-death experience from which the subject could only escape by dint of his – or her – own expertise and initiative. I discovered later that they had found it difficult to devise an initiation for me that was suitably difficult. I believe the task was made slightly simpler by the fact that even then, even only having been in the informal employ of the Service for a few months, there were those at the highest level who had decided it might be better if I died in the test. Devising a circumstance from which there is no escape is somewhat easier than devising one where the chances of escape are regulated, defined and codifiable.

I had no idea what was to happen. I had no idea that I was to be 'initiated' at all or even that there was such a ceremony. And it was a ceremony, have no doubt. I was led to the top of a building close to St Paul's and overlooking the Thames. There, on the roof, I was bound hand and foot – with thirteen chains secured by thirteen locks attached to thirteen garters. The possible significance of the number did not escape me. Then they hung weights from the chains, as if that might make any difference, pushed my head into a hood made of sackcloth, and threw me into the water far below.

I may seem arrogant, but I like to think of myself rather as self-assured and having confidence in my own abilities. So do not be surprised when I tell you that as I fell, knowing the water to be mere seconds below me, I was certain that I was falling to my death. I had seen my last glimpse of light and London. I had tasted the last clean air. I had heard my own voice for the final time. I was a dead man, falling.

My past life did not flash before my eyes. Nothing did. Just blackness, numbness, and then the freezing water closing over me.

Time stopped. Somehow, somehow the hood had come free. Perhaps I had shaken it off, perhaps someone – or something – removed it. I was under the water, watching the bubbles that were my last breath rising in front of me as I sank. Below, despite the darkness and the murk of the water, I could see the bed of the river Thames. I could see the muddy mess that waited for me as I sank. I watched it, knowing that in a moment, I would be falling through that too. Layer after layer, each darker and more solid than the one before. Like falling through the circles of hell. I believed in hell in those days. And now? Now I know it to exist.

But as I watched, a part of the river bed seemed to lurch, to heave itself up. A black mass of material rising through the water to meet me. To envelop me.

When I woke, what seemed like seconds later, I was face down on top of the blackness. But I could breath and I was dry. I sat up – finding I was in a chair, and that the blackness was the table my head had been resting on. It was blacker than any material I had seen before or have seen since. All except for the figure seated on the other side of the table.

He was a man, but a man made of ebony. Or obsidian. Or jet. And he talked to me about Time, about the future – *his* future, he said.

The universe, he said, stood on the brink of total chaos. Control had been relinquished and whoever used to watch over things had failed in their duties. He said that it was up to me – and beings like me – who had an innate understanding of the ebb and flow of Raw Time to take control, to put the genie back into the bottle. He knew that the bureau-occultists of the Service who professed to understand these things had no real knowledge or influence. He said that it had been predicted that I was the One – the One who could help them in their quest, their duty. It is easy to see afterwards when one has been flattered and played to.

They all played to me then. Some transparent, some merely translucent, one multi-coloured, the first one black. One seemed to change colour as his mood swung like an unpredictable pendulum. Eight of them in all sat down at that diamond-shaped table of blackness. They showed me the stars and the vortex within it. They showed me the beginning and the end of the universe. One of them, the man made of glass, seemed to think it was a

joke, watching the end of all things. None of the others laughed, but they all deferred to him.

And all of them, these men who said they were from the future, I realised, were made of crystal.

And then, nothing. For almost twenty years, nothing. Until you, Doctor, until you came along.

They met me again then. At the same college – St Cedd's at Cambridge. We sat at the same table, in a room that seemed bigger inside than the outside dimensions could possibly accommodate. They told me of a man – though I knew from what they said he was not human – a man who they knew would come to London. They were sure, or almost sure. That slight uncertainty seemed to distress them.

They said he was called 'The Doctor' and that he was a Rogue Element. They used the word, or I took them to, as in 'elemental.' They told me that this Rogue Element tainted and infected everything he touched. That he was the cancer in Time, an affliction that needed rooting out to make the body of the universe healthy enough for the surgery they knew they would soon have to perform.

There would be other missions, they said. If the Doctor escaped on this occasion, as they feared he would, there would be others.

And, as you know, there were. With the Time Vortex no longer regimented, and – as I understood it – the nature of the vortex itself changing (later I realised this was caused by the crystal men's own presence, not some random effect), creatures were fleeing it. They had to be contained. Or at least, the effect of them did. Hence my mission as Mistletoe. And others.

I could tell you more – much more – of what they said to me, what they had me do. But how much of it was true, how much we can now rely on, I do not know. They said they were from the future and that I was to help them save the past – my present. They told me of the crystalline technology that had transformed them, and which they could use to save humanity – save and distribute the very essence and *will* of Mankind.

But you and I know that was not the case. None of it was true. They told me what they had decided would be most likely to draw me in, to persuade me to help them. They gave me the technology for the *Jonah*, my Time Ship, and as you know they helped me acquire a suitable crew. Perhaps not the most stimulating company, but uniquely suited to pilot such a craft through

the vortex.

They also gave me a companion. Kalicum – a man, though I did not at first know it – made of crystal, like them. One of their own race. Or rather one of the races, for I surmise there are eight in all. Hence the eight members of their ruling body: The Council of Eight, I have heard it called. Each of them I believe is the head of a crystal house, a member of that carbon-based family.

And their true purpose, their real plan? I can only guess at it, piece it together from what I can remember having overheard or things they have let slip. They mention their predictions. They talk of 'potential'. They have hinted that their races are dying and they – the Council – are their people's salvation. They have said that I am their Agent – one of their Agents – as they cannot themselves interfere. They are content it seems to watch and observe, but not to be involved. I think I am their only human Agent, the others are as you have encountered. Creatures from beyond Time, from the other-dimensional land of the Apes that you and I have seen at first hand. Beings that have learned to ride the Time Winds, though not without pain and consequence. . .

They have a plan. There is a purpose. Everything they have had me do is calculated towards that purpose, I know. They are, as I'm sure you must have realised, manipulating History itself, steering it on to a course that suits their own ends. There is an event, a culmination of that plan coming at some time in the future. I do not know what it is, or even the nature of it. But that is what they are working towards.

That is why they have collapsed the multiverse into a single timeline, so that this event is inescapable and inevitable. It was no accident, but part of their grand design.

That is why they have used me – to bring this about.

That is why they want you dead, Doctor. You are the Rogue Element, the unpredictable factor, the one elemental they cannot control. You are the one who is infecting and changing those around you simply by your presence, by doing what you must do. By being there.

You are the only one who can save the universe from its predetermined fate.

Out of Joint

All the time that Sabbath was speaking, the Doctor had been trying to re-assemble the makeshift device he had dropped to the floor when Miranda appeared. Now he had enlisted her help in putting it back together.

Or perhaps, Fitz thought as he watched them and listened to Sabbath's mellifluously told story, it was a completely different device. Like he was qualified to tell.

'Do you think he's right?' Patterson asked as soon as Sabbath was finished. He seemed eager for the Doctor's opinion, whereas Fleetward, Chad and Trix looked like they hadn't a clue what Sabbath had been talking about. Miranda and the Doctor didn't seem to be paying attention, and Zezanne was watching their work without any indication that she had been listening either. Fitz, if he had to choose, would put himself, he decided, squarely in the 'hadn't a clue' team.

'I do,' the Doctor said without looking up. He was holding some part of some component in his mouth as he tried to speak, so his words were slurred like a drunkard. 'Some cataclysmic event.'

'So we need to stop something happening,' Trix summarised, bending down a finger for each point she made. 'Without knowing what it is. Without knowing when it will happen. Without knowing why it is important. Without knowing really whether we're *intended* to stop it and that's what the event actually is.' She stopped, possibly because she had confused even herself with this last point. Or more likely because she had run out of fingers.

'And before that creature thingy escapes from whatever it's stuck in and comes to get us,' Fitz added, helpfully.

'It seems to me,' said Professor Fleetward, 'that we are in danger of theorising without enough data.'

'A good point,' Miranda said, glancing at the Doctor.

The Doctor had now wired whatever had been in his mouth into the device, so his words were clear. 'Yes, well now I hope you can get some data for us.'

He handed the final part of his device to Miranda and let her attach it to the rest of the egg-whisk-meets-stationery-cupboard device.

‘Me?’ Fleetward seemed astonished.

‘Well, you are probably as qualified as anyone. And it gets you away from the Time Agent that’s hunting you.’

‘Down that Time Corridor thing?’

‘Exactly. Don’t worry. Trix will go with you.’

‘I will?’ Trix said in amazement.

‘Miss Devine?’ Fleetward asked, even more surprised at this.

‘Her name’s Trix, and she has with her, unless I’m much mistaken, a crystal that may be rather useful – even though she believes that I think it’s still in the TARDIS.’

This surprised Sabbath: ‘You actually have one of the crystals? This could be invaluable.’

‘It’s a fair cop,’ Trix said quietly. ‘You think it may come in handy?’

‘It’s the only evidence we have.’

‘No, wait.’ Sabbath held his hands up. ‘If we can discover the true purpose of the crystals. . . Not the story I was given, but what they are really for. . .’

‘They’re transmitters,’ Fitz told him. ‘Sending data from across time and space to your crystal alien chums.’ He couldn’t help smirking at Sabbath’s expression.

But Sabbath was not miffed that Fitz – for once – knew more than he did. It was realisation. ‘So that’s how they monitor the timelines. That’s how they know whether their version of History is being played out. And if it isn’t. . .’

‘They send an Agent to sort it out,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Exactly.’ He clapped his hands together. ‘Now, Trix will take her crystal and go with Fleetward while Sabbath and I work out how to get the rest of us into the villains’ lair. How’s that sound to everyone?’

‘Er,’ Fitz said. ‘About the villains’ lair bit. . .’ He was aware that everyone was looking at him. ‘It’s just, I thought that maybe I should go with Trix and the Professor. Look after them. And, er, maybe we’ll meet you at the said villains’ lair once we’ve got it all worked out for you, and you’ve fixed it so the villains aren’t quite so. . . villainous.’

The Doctor was looking at Fitz with ill-disguised amusement. So ill-disguised Fitz reckoned it was immediately obvious to everyone. ‘I didn’t say that where Trix and Fleetward are going isn’t dangerous.’

‘Oh danger’s fine,’ Fitz said, perhaps a shade too quickly. ‘Danger I thrive on. My breakfast, lunch, and evening out in the pub. I laugh in the face of danger.’ By way of proof, he added a quick though possibly not very credible: ‘Hah!’ Seeing the less than convinced expressions of everyone else, he felt perhaps he should tell the truth. ‘Actually,’ he said, ‘though I was very impressed with the head in a bag dumped in the water stuff, I’d rather keep well away from him.’ In case there was any doubt, he pointed at Sabbath, who was good enough to smile and nod as if he quite understood.

‘So,’ Trix said, ‘where are we going? Exactly?’

It was Miranda who answered. ‘This device will reopen the Time Corridor. The trick is to stabilise the opening. The Time Agents can withstand the powers within the vortex, so they don’t bother to stabilise the entry point, unless they have another being with them. Like myself and Zezanne. But you or I would be ripped apart. We are trying to stabilise the opening, and to move the end point from the position in the vortex where it currently emerges back into real space-time. In the far future.’

‘The *very* far future,’ the Doctor said.

‘So we can check up in the history books and try to find out what it was that happened. Assuming it has happened by then,’ Trix said.

‘It will have happened by then,’ the Doctor assured her.

‘And where will we be?’ Fitz asked. ‘I mean, where in the far future? Where have you set up for the corridor to emerge into space?’

‘Ah well, that’s the tricky bit,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘I can’t actually shift the location of the end point. It will just emerge at random, I’m afraid.’

‘What?’

‘But that’s not a problem.’

‘Not a problem?’ Fitz’s voice was almost a shriek. ‘We could end up anywhere.’

‘Bit like the TARDIS then,’ Trix offered.

‘Thank you, Trix, I heard that,’ the Doctor said levelly. ‘And no, you could not emerge anywhere. The point in time we’ve set the corridor to arrive at means there is only one place *to* arrive.’

‘Wherever it is,’ Chad said, surprising Fitz who had all but forgotten the boy was standing behind him, ‘I think you’d better go there soon. Look!’

Turning to face Chad meant that Fitz had a clear view of the nightmare shape of the creature as it raced towards them across the darkened exhibition

floor. Exhibits and furniture exploded out of its way, its long arms almost trailed the floor as its reptilian legs powered its hunched shape forwards.

'Time you were going,' the Doctor said, almost lifting Fleetward's diminutive body off the ground as he hurled him at an empty point of space in front of Miranda. The air swirled with colour, and in an instant, the Professor was gone.

Trix was close behind him, again vanishing in a split-moment. Fitz made to follow. But the creature was already there, pushing past, sending Patterson, Chad, Zezanne, then Fitz himself leaping out of the way to avoid touching it.

Fitz fell to one side, cracking into the floor, rolling, watching the creature step over him. He could see the gaps between the scales on its legs and hear the click of its claws on the floorboards.

Then the creature was past him, ignoring the Doctor as if he wasn't there and diving after Fleetward. Into the swirl of colours still fading from Trix's exit. In a moment, it too was gone.

The device in the Doctor's hand crumbled to dust, falling through his fingers as the colours faded to nothing. Several metres away, the links of the chain holding the watch-that-was-not-a-watch rusted and broke. The watch fell to the floor and shattered in a cloud of ancient dust.

'I rather think you are stuck with us, Mr Kreiner,' Sabbath said slowly. 'Stuck with me.'

'It followed Fleetward,' the Doctor said. 'I should have thought of that. It will arrive soon after they do. And now the corridor has gone.'

At the bottom of the stairs down to the kitchen area, Rachel Taylor's tray slipped from her hand and fell to the floor as she reached out to tap the surprised Gerry on the shoulder. It hit the floor with a clatter, bounced and span. . .

Havers was just taking a sip of coffee when the wine glass caught him on the side of the head. He turned in pain and astonishment towards the doorway, but there was no one there.

The glass glanced off, hit the wall behind him, and shattered into fragments.

Outside the Institute of Anthropology, a group of confused and excited people spilled out of the main doors and into the rain. In front of them, a woman

ran for a taxi that was pulling up at the kerb. Someone, somewhere, laughed long and loud.

‘Just one small question,’ Sabbath said to the Doctor.

‘Just one?’

‘For the moment, just one.’

‘Which is?’ Fitz asked.

‘What, pray, is that?’ Sabbath asked.

Fitz turned to see where he was pointing. And the crystal skeleton stepped into the blood-red light and advanced slowly towards the group of people huddled by the exhibit showing the evolution of Man.

The Last Museum

As the universe ends, there are three people watching: Ashtek, Korsann, and Singleton.

A circular seating area in the middle of a circular space station at the centre of a circular universe. There was a certain irony, Ashtek thought, in the fact that the refugee fleet had arranged itself in a circle outside.

Ashtek was a tall woman, gaunt and thin. She had not eaten or slept for days. She could not remember when she had last left the station. She could barely remember when she had last left the room. As head of security it was her job to monitor the universe outside. Not that it made any difference. Not that there was anyone left who could tell her what to do, or cared if she did it. Just Korsann and Singleton in the central hub, and the security and curational forces on the outer rim of the station.

She had cut contact with her people on the rim hours ago. All they did was demand, threaten, plead to enter the hub. For all the difference a few minutes might make when the time came. Like the refugees, she thought – pointless. Like herself, sitting here, watching them all. Just as pointless. Leave them where they were – it wasn't really being cruel, and she was not going to sit here and let them panic round her. Rest in peace, that was the hope.

Korsann's rasping reptilian breath was close to her ear, startling her.

'Why do you keep watching them?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'I've nothing better to do. And there's nothing else to look at. Not any more.'

'They want to come in here,' Korsann said. 'For all the good it will do them.'

Singleton's voice was surprisingly strong and assured for such an old man. Ashtek was not sure why he was here, or even who he was. But that didn't matter. Nothing mattered any more. 'People will do anything for a few

minutes more, for the merest hope of a hope of survival,' he said. 'You'd be surprised.'

The old man was sitting drinking tea on one of the semicircular padded benches. The design had seemed like a joke centuries ago, when the station was built. Now it was a sick joke.

As much to take her mind off things as for any other reason, Ashtek flipped open the comms channel. She thought they might have given up by now. But of course they had not.

The voice was scratchy with static, but still a low rumble of anger. The result of the fusion all round them, the approaching end. '...demand that you lower your barriers and let us in. We are all life forms of the universe. The same universe as you yourselves. You cannot deny us access to the station. We demand sanctuary. This is Admiral-Commander Diljento of the Solarii fleet, and I...'

Ashtek changed frequency. The next voice was a high-pitched squeak, nervous and strung out: 'Let us in, damn you. Damn you all. We have as much right...'

She turned it off.

'They think that the transduction barriers will protect us in here,' Korsann said.

'Will they?' Ashtek wondered. Would the barriers buy them a few precious minutes, hours? Days even?

Singleton's answer was quiet and final: 'No,' he said, pausing to sip his tea. 'They won't help one jot. And they know it. But you can never separate a fool from his prejudices, can you?'

'No one can get in,' Korsann said. 'And we aren't going anywhere.'

'Because,' Ashtek murmured, 'there is nowhere to go.'

He was alone. More alone than he had ever been in his life. Alone in a bland, metal corridor. It curved, perhaps running a full circle and returning to the same point. The carpet was deep and red, and on the metal walls were panels that showed scenes from history. At least, Fleetward assumed it was history. Some he recognised elements of an exploding star, a man in a protective suit standing on a barren landscape. But others were incomprehensible – like the paintings you saw on the covers of cheap science-fiction novels from the 1970s.

And in front of him was a door. He hoped it was a door. A panel of metal, the shape of a door, inlaid into the wall and without adornment. No pictures here. But equally, no sign of any way to open it. He took off his glasses, breathed heavily on them, rubbed them on his sleeve, and slid them back on.

‘It looks like a door,’ a voice said, making him jump.

Fleetward clasped his hand over his chest. ‘Miss Devine, you startled me.’

‘Please, call me Trix.’

To Fleetward’s amazement, she was pulling off her hair – grabbing the bun on the top and tugging. It struggled free, trailing long light brown strands behind it. As the wig came away, the woman was shaking her head, letting her real hair come free. She looked twenty years younger already. Then she reached into her mouth and pulled pads from inside her cheeks, dropping them next to the wig.

‘Where do you suppose we are?’ the young woman who had been Miss Crystal Devine asked. She was reaching inside her clothes now, pulling out layers of padding. ‘God, that’s better. You have no idea. I wonder if being pregnant is like this?’

‘Less easy to dispense with, I imagine,’ Fleetward said. ‘I always rather fancied the notion of fatherhood,’ he added, out of embarrassment as much as anything. He thought that perhaps he should not be watching, but he was unable to look away as the woman was transformed. Her dress was now far too big for her, but she had a way of folding it over itself so that it hugged her slight body and looked as if it had been tailored for her new shape.

‘Trix,’ she said again, by way of introduction. And it was like meeting her for the first time, although Fleetward had thought he had known her for weeks. ‘Let’s see what’s through here then, shall we?’

‘But how? There’s no door handle.’

‘You don’t watch *Star Trek*, then?’ Trix said. She was waving her hands over the sides of the door as if trying to attract its attention. It seemed to work. The door slid slowly open, hinged at a top corner so it seemed to pivot. ‘There you go,’ Trix said, evidently pleased with herself. ‘Or rather, here we come,’ she added.

She was gazing back over Fleetward’s shoulder, and he turned to see what she was looking at. A swirl of colour, and a figure started to materialise in the corridor behind him. ‘Fitz?’

‘Not necessarily,’ Trix said.

Now that the figure was gaining substance, Fleetward could see that it

wasn't Fitz at all. It was the creature that had been pursuing him. Even here, wherever 'here' might be, even here it had found him. There really was no escape.

He felt his knees buckling, Trix's hands under his arms as she dragged him through the door. She was shouting:

'Close the door, quick, can't you? Lock it or something.'

'Who the hell are you? How did you get into the hub?'

A tall, thin woman had been sitting at a bank of flat-screen monitors. She was rising to her feet, indignant and confused at the sight of Trix and Fleetward. Beside her stood what looked like a small dinosaur, green mist swathing its scaly body and failing to hide its enormous jaw and sharp teeth.

An old man with white hair receding from a high forehead put down what looked rather like a cup of tea and hurried over to the console where the woman had been sitting. He reached over and fiddled with the controls.

Trix was helping Fleetward to a circle of bench seats – like an office reception area, he thought vaguely. Behind them the door closed with a subtle 'swish' of sound, cutting off the roar of the creature that was lumbering towards it. Fleetward waited for the door to buckle and crush inwards, or for it to fall away in a shower of dust.

But nothing happened.

The old man adjusted another control, and one of the monitors showed the creature, out in the corridor, hammering against the other side of the door.

'I've set up a transduction barrier against the door,' the old man said. 'The temporal displacement will confuse and hold it for a little while.' He smiled, thinly. 'But then, a little while is all there is.'

'Who are you?' the woman demanded. 'How did you get in here?'

'Through the door,' Trix said. 'More detail than that will take rather a long time.'

'Have we time for a story?' the mini-dinosaur wondered. Its voice was a dry rasp.

'Certainly we have time for manners,' the old man chided. 'My name is Singleton, and this is Korsann,' he told Trix and Fleetward, gesturing to the reptile. 'The lady is Security Chief Ashtek. Which is why she's a little discomfited to have you here. We did think we had the place to ourselves. Not that it really matters, you understand.'

'Why not?' Trix asked. 'Where are we?'

The woman, Ashtek, frowned. 'You don't know?'

'I'm asking.'

Fleetward was recovering slightly now. His head had stopped swimming, and he could feel the strength returning to his legs. Shock, he told himself. What was good for shock? As if in answer, the old man handed him a cup of tea. Or something very like tea. It was strong and sweet and Fleetward immediately felt better.

Looking round, he was amazed. He had expected a featureless metal room to match the corridor outside – the corridor that he guessed ran round the outside of this circular chamber. But in here, the walls were panelled with wood, the ceiling was decorated plasterwork rising to a glass dome. Outside he could see a fleet of spaceships. He might not watch *Star Trek*, but he could tell that was what they were – a mass of different designs and styles, shapes, sizes, colours. . .

But it was the interior of the room that fascinated him. Before he knew it, Fleetward was on his feet. All round the walls were statues and artefacts. Paintings hung in space and what might be old newscasts played out in mid-air like screenless holograms. In one alcove, the universe seemed to be expanding, leaving stars and planets in its wake as a wave of energy rushed outwards.

'We turned the sound down,' Korsann the reptile said. It was standing beside Fleetward watching. 'It gets a little wearing after a while. But if you like. . .?'

Fleetward shook his head. 'No, thank you.'

'You didn't tell us who you are,' the reptile said, louder to include Trix in the question.

'I'm Trix,' she told him. 'And this is Ernest. He's a professor.'

'Professor?' Singleton seemed impressed. 'A man of learning then.'

'I'm an anthropologist,' Fleetward told him. Beside the exploding universe was a plinth with a weirdly shaped statue on it.

'Indeed?' Korsann nodded his huge scaled head, sending mist swirling. 'Then you have come to the right place. However you managed to get inside the barriers.'

'This is a museum?' Fleetward asked – hesitant as he was aware that both Korsann and Singleton were watching him with interest. Ashtek had gone back to the monitor screens and was staring at the creature now thrashing at the door in the corridor.

‘This is a museum,’ Singleton admitted. ‘This is the Last Museum.’

‘Why the *last* museum?’ Trix asked.

‘Because from here, very soon,’ Korsann told them, ‘we shall watch – and of course experience – the end of the universe.’

‘Am I getting a sense of déjà vu, or is time really going in a loop?’ the Doctor asked. Chad wasn’t sure what he meant.

‘It isn’t,’ Miranda told him. ‘We are.’

‘We can’t keep running away for ever,’ Zezanne said.

‘We probably can,’ Patterson said. ‘It’s pretty slow.’

‘And even if we can’t,’ the Doctor decided, ‘there’s nothing wrong with getting a good head start.’

‘Why run away in any event?’ Sabbath backed away from the skeleton as it lurched another painful step towards them. They were trapped at the back of the exhibition area. Behind them stood the railings, and the drop down to the ground floor. Chad had been here before, and looked into the abyss. The skeleton had them cornered.

‘What do you mean?’ Miranda asked.

‘I mean, we don’t know if it’s actually hostile. And in any case it looks as if a good sneeze would see the thing off.’

‘I doubt that,’ the Doctor told him.

‘Anyway, its made from a material stronger than steel. Virtually indestructible.’ Patterson seemed to sense that everyone was looking at him, and shrugged. ‘That’s what Professor Fleetward said.’

‘I’m sure he’s right,’ the Doctor said. ‘Sneezing may not be the best option.’

They were against the railings now. Chad turned and looked down, over the edge. He felt his stomach begin to slip away. Was it now? Was this the moment? Surely he would know when it came. It was as if he had been waiting all his life for the moment, to make the choice. As if his life – both their lives – depended on it.

‘I think it all depends what you sneeze with,’ Sabbath said. He reached inside his jacket, and when his hand came out it was holding a bulky pistol.

‘That didn’t work on the Time Agent,’ Patterson pointed out.

Sabbath seemed unimpressed. ‘A different case entirely. This thing, whatever it is, is very different.’

‘With very different motives, apparently,’ the Doctor added.

‘It isn’t looking for Professor Fleetward,’ Zezanne said. ‘It’s us it wants.’

‘Or one of us,’ Chad said. But no one seemed to hear him.

Miranda took a step forwards. ‘Perhaps it doesn’t mean us any harm.’

The Doctor’s hand was on her arm. Chad watched him pull her gently back. Could she really be his daughter – even his adopted daughter? She seemed older than he was. But then he had seen something of what Time could do. He had been shown some of the tricks that Time could be made to play.

‘Let’s not take any chances,’ the Doctor said. He was still holding her arm as he peered at the advancing skeleton. Another painful step, another scrape of glasslike crystal on the floor of the Institute.

‘She could be right,’ Sabbath said. He sounded dubious, but he lowered the gun slightly. ‘And we do need data from which to theorise. How does this fit with the other evidence and information we have?’

‘You know,’ the Doctor stepped away from Miranda, letting go of her arm and moving towards the skeleton, echoing Sabbath as if he had not been listening, ‘she could be right. See the way its jaw is moving. It has no vocal cords of course. . .’

‘It has no muscles,’ Patterson pointed out, ‘but it’s still coming this way.’

‘Yet it could be trying to communicate. Trying to tell us something.’

Patterson was evidently not convinced. ‘Just shoot the thing, for God’s sake and we can all go home.’

‘It may not be that simple,’ the Doctor protested. ‘What’s it trying to tell us? Or one of us? We need to know.’

‘We do not need to know. We need to get out of here.’ Patterson reached across, intending to take the gun from Sabbath. But the bigger man moved it out of the way.

‘The Doctor’s right,’ he said. ‘The thing craves an audience. So let’s give it one.’

He lowered his arm, the gun hanging loose in his hand as he stepped forward to join the Doctor. Sabbath was now next to Chad, so the boy could see closely the gun he was holding. He could see the stubby barrel, the translucent rings that surrounded it. He could see the grip embossed on to the handle of the pistol, and the tiny dark hairs that grew out of the hand holding it.

‘Now then,’ the Doctor’s voice came from the other side of Sabbath, ‘what is it you’re trying to tell us, my transparent friend?’

‘This station contains a complete history of humanity,’ Korsann told them proudly. ‘I may not be human myself. . .’ he went on.

‘Surprise me,’ thought Trix as she watched the green mist swirl round him.

‘. . . but I have made it my life’s work to study every aspect of the history of the human race.’

‘In many ways,’ Singleton said, ‘the history of Humanity is the history of the universe itself. Korsann’s collection here is unparalleled.’ He gave a short bark of a laugh. ‘It was unparalleled even before everything else was destroyed in the big crunch.’

‘I did not start the collection, or conceive of the museum, of course,’ Korsann admitted. ‘I am merely lucky enough to be the final custodian of the Last Museum.’

‘And what’s the big crunch?’ Trix asked.

They just stared at her.

Fleetward cleared his throat. ‘The end of the universe,’ he said. ‘The opposite of the big bang. Having finished expanding, the universe then contracts – back down to a single point. Crushing everything.’

‘Ouch,’ Trix thought out loud.

‘As you say,’ Singleton agreed. ‘Ouch.’

‘Of course it is a process that takes millennia,’ Fleetward assured her.

‘Which is why we have had so long to prepare ourselves, and this museum,’ Korsann said.

‘Millennia that will end in a few minutes.’

‘Ah,’ Trix said, ‘minutes?’

‘Indeed,’ Singleton said. ‘That is why we are here. That is what we are waiting for. That is why the ships are outside and their occupants are so anxious to be here with us, in this room. It may have been designed and built as a museum, as an edifice to the history and achievements of sentient life. But now it has become the focal point for the last refugees and the most desperate self-delusionists.’

‘This room,’ Korsann said, ‘is the central hub of a huge circular space station at the very centre of the universe. We are surrounded by rings of exhibition halls. Even now, the invited guests are enjoying, if that is the word, their final moments in the various galleries and halls. Waiting for the end of eternity with their favourite artefacts, surrounded by the art and culture they most admire from the history of Man.’

‘The Last Museum,’ Trix murmured, finally understanding.

‘Matter will close in shortly, crushing everything to a single point.’ Singleton was standing in the middle of the room, the chairs arranged in a circle round him. He stooped, stiff and awkward, to tap his index finger on a dark circle set into the middle of the red carpet. ‘This marks that point. The centre of the shrinking universe. The last atoms to be destroyed when everything comes to a close.’

He gripped the edge of the circle, and lifted. It came away – a lid – to reveal a small space inside. Trix could see that it was padded with velvet.

And set into the velvet were eight indentations, scooped out as if it was a jewellery box.

And while three of the indentations were empty, nestling inside the other five were perfect, transparent crystals.

‘As the universe contracts, so all matter is pushed into the centre. Including these crystals.’ Singleton lifted one carefully out of the velvet and held it up to catch the light. ‘I have been collecting them. They have unique qualities and properties, although I am afraid I shall have precious little time to analyse them fully.’

‘How do you know there will be eight of them?’ Korsann asked. It seemed that this was news to him as well.

‘Everything about their structure – and each of these is unique, elemental – suggests eight types of crystal. One pure example of each of the families of carbon crystallography.’

‘I thought there were only seven,’ Korsann said.

But before the old man could respond, Fleetward asked, interested: ‘And they just sort of turn up, do they?’

Singleton nodded. ‘In the oddest ways.’

Trix pulled a tissue from her sleeve. It was crushed into a ball, squeezed into shape rather like the universe, she thought. Carefully, she unfolded it, teasing apart the thin layers. To reveal inside the perfect crystal she had taken from inside a cup of tea in the TARDIS so very long ago.

‘Odd, like this, you mean?’ she asked, handing it to Singleton.

He lifted it almost reverentially from her outstretched hand, his mouth open in surprise.

‘You do realise they are all transmitters, don’t you?’ she asked him, feeling smug and amused.

Her smugness vanished as he replied. ‘Oh yes,’ the old man said. ‘And, of course, they are alive.’

When it Comes to the Crunch

‘Never once?’ Penter asked. ‘You expect us to believe that?’

The boy said nothing.

‘We know Octan,’ Trilon said. ‘It is in his nature to threaten, to cajole, to *persuade*. That is what he does, what he *is*.’

‘He never threatened my life,’ the boy repeated. ‘Never once.’

‘And yet,’ Fear told him, ‘you agreed to help him. Both of you.’

‘I agreed only to keep silent.’

‘Which you have not done,’ Sept pointed out. The boy hung his head.

‘And what other agreements did you reach? The three of you?’ Penter asked. ‘You can tell us. It will do no harm.’

‘Gently with him,’ Soul said, kindly. ‘The poor boy is terrified of us. As he is of Octan.’ He turned to the boy. ‘But you must tell us. You see, we think that Octan is planning something he has not told us. We have recently discovered that the plan he claims to be following has certain flaws in it. Yet we know for a fact that it will work.’

‘It has already worked, you see,’ Fear said. ‘So Octan is keeping something from us. Some aspect of the plan.’

‘Or possibly a different plan altogether,’ Trilon added. ‘We have to know. So, you can trust us.’

‘Especially if he didn’t threaten you,’ Duvar said with a short, humourless laugh.

‘He didn’t!’ the boy protested. ‘I told you. He took down an hourglass. He held it, ready to let it drop to the floor and break. Ready, if I did not agree, to smash the glass there and then.’

‘But it was not *your* hourglass,’ Hexx told him. ‘That is what you said.’

The boy looked away. ‘It was not. But I knew what would happen, and what they had already agreed, and why.’

‘And what had they agreed?’ Penter asked.

‘A phrase. To be spoken by someone, we did not know who. In the place full of artefacts and exhibits when the monster came. He said it had been

predicted, that it would happen thus. Someone would say: “It is the unpredictable that is so dangerous.” And that was – would be – when. That was when he must do it, or the glass would break.’

‘But why?’ Hexx persisted. ‘If it was not your hourglass, why did you agree?’

The boy was looking at the floor, his eyes misty-damp with tears. ‘He would have dropped it. Smashed it. I know he would.’ He looked up at them, let them see his stained cheeks. ‘It was not my hourglass that I was shown,’ he repeated quietly. ‘It was my brother’s. And my brother was shown mine.’

The skeleton did not seem to be interested in the Doctor, but nevertheless, he approached it warily – reached out, coaxing it towards him like a pet. Fitz kept to the back, leaning on the railings and hoping it wasn’t him.

Which was how he was able to see everything that happened.

‘I think it’s looking for someone,’ Fitz called to the Doctor.

The Doctor glanced round, giving him a ‘Yes – thank you’ look. Then he returned his attentions to the skeleton. ‘Is that it?’ he asked. ‘Do you want to talk to someone in particular? A message for someone here?’

The skeleton pushed past the Doctor, advancing on the others.

‘Professor Fleetward is no longer here,’ the Doctor said. ‘I can’t work out who else it might be. Who could you know?’

‘Can’t you work it out?’ Patterson asked. His voice was strained and nervous as he took a step backwards. ‘If you’re so clever.’ The skeleton swung its glassy head towards him at the sound of his voice.

‘And what about you?’ Fitz countered, suddenly angry with the man. ‘You and your social science or soft sociology or whatever it is. The card tricks and the predictions.’

Patterson was staring back at Fitz. He took another step away from the slowly advancing skeleton. His face twisted into something between a sneer and a smile. Fitz saw Sabbath raise an amused eyebrow as the tall, thin man pushed past him.

‘It is the *unpredictable* that is so dangerous,’ Patterson said.

And that was when it happened.

Fitz saw Sabbath’s expression change. It flickered from amusement to surprise, and then on to anger. The boy – Chad – had grabbed the gun,

seizing it in both hands and tearing it free of Sabbath's grip. Fitz thought at first the boy was going to shoot Sabbath. For a moment, he was glad.

But then Chad turned, holding out the gun – and handing it to Patterson.

It was difficult to tell if Patterson was surprised or not. But he took the gun, swung it up, passing Sabbath, tracking over the Doctor, Miranda, Zezanne, until it focused on the approaching skeleton.

The skeleton paused, as if knowing what was going to happen, its hand in front of its face. But Fitz could still see the distorted shape of the skull through its transparent hand.

'No, Patterson,' the Doctor cried out. 'It wants to talk to us. To one of us.'

But the gun was aimed, steady.

'It may want to talk to *you*,' the Doctor shouted.

Miranda was moving, leaping across to block his aim. But the Doctor caught her by the arm and dragged her back.

Fitz leaped at Patterson. Sabbath grabbed for the gun, but Chad knocked his hand aside. The boy's expression was almost apologetic. His eyes were wide with fear and anxiety.

The gun fired.

Time seemed to slow, as Fitz cannoned into Patterson, knocked him sideways, but too late.

'Noooooooooooo!' The cry was a drawn-out rasp that echoed round the huge space. It took Fitz forever to realise that it was coming from the skeleton itself.

As the shot from the gun impacted and tore it apart.

There was a light at the very centre of its being, and everything – bones, glass fragments, skull – seemed to be ripped apart before tumbling back into the light. The air around it seemed to ripple and shimmer. When it was stilled, there was nothing but empty space.

And a group of people standing amazed. Turning slowly to face the tall, thin, bearded man who held the Vortex Gun.

There was little to do while waiting for the universe to end other than talk.

Singleton had examined Trix's crystal briefly, holding it up to the light and turning it carefully and slowly between his thumb and forefinger. Then he nodded and cleared his throat and handed it back to her.

'Not interested?' she asked. 'For your collection?'

‘These are archetypes,’ he told her. ‘Perfect specimens of each family. But your crystal is flawed.’ He smiled apologetically. ‘Oh, very slightly. But flawed, nonetheless. Etched with a design at the molecular level.’

‘You understand these crystals?’ Fleetward asked.

‘I have studied them in detail and for a very long time,’ Singleton said. ‘But as a man of learning you will know that does not mean that I understand them.’

‘Indeed,’ Fleetward agreed.

‘They are carbon-derivatives. They are transmitters, as you have said. They are, in a way, sentient.’

Korsann added: ‘They seem to be driven ahead of the conflagration. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of these crystals have arrived here, bumping up against the transduction barriers, over the centuries since this museum was built. Singleton has sorted and stored them. Though he refuses to tell me why.’

‘I have declined to tell you why, not refused,’ the old man said huffily. ‘There is a distinction there, you know.’

Korsann held up his clawed, scaly hands by way of submission.

‘Have you ever wondered’, Singleton asked Trix and Fleetward, ‘where the energy comes from?’

‘Energy? What energy?’

‘The energy that enables these crystals to transmit whatever data they are sending to wherever it is they are sending it. Have you?’

Fleetward shrugged. ‘I know nothing much about them, I’m afraid,’ he admitted. ‘My line is more anthropology, as I said. And glass skeletons.’

‘Glass skeletons?’ Singleton frowned at him, then rubbed his eyes as if suddenly tired. ‘How very peculiar,’ he said. ‘But perhaps a topic for another day.’

‘There are no other days,’ Ashtek called over from her monitors, without looking round.

‘So, where do *you* think the energy is coming from?’ Trix asked.

The old man considered. He was still standing over the circular opening in the floor where the five crystals nestled. He reached up and tugged at the lapels of his jacket with both hands, symmetrical, reminding Trix for a moment – for some reason – of the Doctor. He had the same intense look of concentration on his face. He stood like this for almost a minute, then he sat

down opposite Trix and Fleetward, next to Korsann, and leaned forwards as if speaking to them in confidence.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I will tell you. I believe that these crystals are deriving energy from knowledge. Somehow, perhaps through the way they vibrate in sympathy with the causal structure of the universe itself, the crystals are predictors. They *know*, somehow, the nature of future history – what events will come to pass. Or if they do not in and of themselves know this, then they are sending data somewhere where it is analysed and the results of that analysis passed back.’

‘And how does that help?’ Fleetward asked.

‘Potential energy?’ Korsann suggested. ‘Some way of deriving power from an event that has not yet happened?’

Singleton snapped his fingers. ‘Now, yes, I believe that is exactly right. The problem being that the energy is available *before* the event takes place.’

‘And why is that a problem?’ Trix asked. She had some distant memory of potential energy from Physics lessons at school – the energy that would be expended if a weight fell or a trolley rolled down an incline. She had always wondered what would happen if it just didn’t fall or roll. . . Was that what Singleton meant? ‘Unless,’ she said slowly, ‘the event the energy is drawn from, that it depends upon, never happens?’

Singleton nodded, smiling. ‘Exactly, my dear. Well done.’

Trix found she was smiling back. She tried to stop, tried to persuade herself that actually she was being patronised, not congratulated. But somehow she failed, and kept on smiling.

‘So the predictions have to be accurate to the nth degree,’ Korsann said. ‘Otherwise the energy will no longer be available and will have to be returned.’

‘Clawed back,’ Trix said. ‘Sorry,’ she added, catching sight of Korsann’s ‘hands’.

‘With interest,’ Singleton completed. There was a sadness in his pale blue eyes now. ‘Nothing in this universe – or any other – comes for free, you know.’

‘So,’ Fleetward said, ‘it’s rather like a loan or a mortgage. Which is fine so long as you keep up with the payments.’

‘Makes you wonder,’ Trix said, ‘what they’ve put up for security. What they stand to lose.’

Singleton was staring into space as he considered. 'Everything, I should think.'

'Now that we are approaching the end of the universe,' Korsann said, with creditable lack of emotion, 'there can be few events left to predict.'

'Indeed,' Singleton said. 'But they have energy stored up in them still. I know that. Energy that will enable these crystals – all of them, not just these here – to achieve their ultimate goal when the universe ends and they expend that energy.'

'And what goal is that?' Fleetward asked.

'Why, the goal of any sentient race,' Singleton told him. 'Survival.'

There was a pause as this sank in. It was ended when Ashtek called over: 'Another one's come in. The automatic sorting parameters have isolated it just outside the station. Beaming it through now.'

'Excellent.' Singleton was on his feet again, rubbing his hands together. He peered down at the circular opening in the floor, as another – a sixth – crystal faded into place, snug on its velvet cushion. 'Just two left,' Singleton murmured. 'They cannot be far away. And then, we shall have a complete set.'

'Collect the set,' Trix said out loud. 'Why do you want them? What good are they to you now?'

The old man shrugged. 'Oh they have their uses. You could, for example, grow a thousand – or a hundred thousand – crystals like the one you have from these archetypes.'

'If you wanted them for some reason,' Trix said slowly, the ghost of an idea forming in her mind. 'But I guess the last two will have to hurry if the universe is about to end.'

'It's exponential,' Korsann told her. 'Nobody realised that at first, but of course as the energy and matter rush inwards, towards the centre of the sphere where there is less space and a narrower diameter, they speed up. That's why the end has come a few millennia before anyone expected it.' He gave a snarl that might have been a laugh. 'You would think we would spot the fact that the universe is coming to an end, wouldn't you?'

'This energy,' Fleetward said, 'surely it would have to come from very large scale events. Events that in effect change the course of History itself.' He was looking at Trix, and she realised that he was trying to steer them on to the question the Doctor had sent them here to resolve.

Singleton thought about this. 'Not necessarily,' he said, but he seemed less

certain of himself now. 'Some of it, yes. But as Korsann pointed out, there is less history available to the crystals as we near the end. And there is a huge amount of potential energy available in the end of the universe itself.'

'But no way to pay it back,' Fleetward persisted. 'They can't be using that, can they?'

'And anyway,' Trix said, 'there must be some purpose, some reason. What are they – whoever they are – trying to achieve?'

'I told you, survival.' Singleton seemed sure of this. He sighed, and sat down again. 'I don't know who sent you, or what you are really after, or even how you got here, although I fancy I could guess. When the universe ends,' he paused to check his pocket watch, 'in a few minutes now, then the crystals held in the outer rings of this station will be crushed into the centre. The transduction barriers that hold everything here in stasis will bend and collapse to allow the energy in-rush. Space-time will fold in on itself. The only energy left, aside from the collapse itself, will be in the crystals.'

'But to what end?' Fleetward asked him.

'To allow them to slip out of existence, through the opening holes in reality as its fabric is ripped apart, and into the time vortex.' He looked from Fleetward to Trix and back again. 'That is where they will survive. Outside reality. A new sentient force that exists – that thrives – within the vortex.'

Trix spoke without thinking, the realisation and the words coming together. 'You mean, they're signalling to *themselves*? A race of sentient crystal people?'

'No.' It was Korsann who spoke. 'You are wrong,' he told Singleton. 'It is impossible.'

'Oh? And why, sir, is that?' He seemed not to notice as a seventh crystal faded into existence in the hollow at the centre of the room – at the centre of everything.

The reptile hauled itself to its feet and pointed up at the domed roof above them. In the distance, on what Trix might have thought of as the horizon if there were such a thing in space, there was a faint glow. A circle of fire was slowly closing in on them. . .

'Because this is the way the universe ends,' Korsann said. 'Not with a bang, but with a whimper.'

Patterson still held the gun, but now he turned to face the others. Chad stood beside him, looking faintly embarrassed, but trying not to show it.

The gun tracked between Sabbath and the Doctor, as if the man were trying to make up his mind. Fitz tensed himself, ready to jump – to leap forward. He was pretty sure he could tackle the scrawny, smug git, so long as the gun was pointing the other way.

‘What did you do that for?’ the Doctor was demanding, all but wringing his hands with frustration.

Now, Fitz told himself as Patterson turned to face the Doctor. Do it now!

Except that as he braced himself, as he began to move, he saw the skin of Patterson’s face fade, whiten, then become translucent. Just for a split-second, the merest of moments. Then it returned to normal, as if it had been a trick of the light. But Fitz knew what he had seen.

For the briefest moment, Patterson had looked as if he was made of glass.

Heart of Glass

The traffic was halted. Nose to tail. Lights marking out the road ahead for as far as the eye could see. None of them moving. Brake lights glaring in frustration. Someone's hazards were still going from when they slowed – over an hour ago. Or maybe they were on the hard shoulder. Given up completely.

He thumped the steering wheel in anger. It was going to be tight anyway, he knew that. He should never have gone back for the phone. Those two minutes had cost him. They meant he had got stuck behind a tractor just outside the village. If he had not met the tractor – if he had been that minute or so earlier, he would have been ahead of the accident. Judging by the radio reports – which he had listened to after he was in the jam, a serious voice advising him to avoid the M4 – he would have missed it by a couple of minutes.

The most annoying thing had been that there was no one on the other end of the phone. Just silence. He had shouted, in case they could hear him. He had hung up and waited for whoever it was to call back. He had dialled 1471 to discover the number was withheld. He had cursed, wondered, and been later leaving than he should have been. His frustration had been exacerbated by the fact he had slept so badly. He didn't usually have nightmares, but last night he had dreamed that a man was standing by his bed. He had seemed to wake to find the man there, reaching out a hand and touching him. He had felt as if a part of him was being drained away. But that was not what had left him restless and unable to sleep. It was the image of the man that haunted him – standing in the semi-darkness of the bedroom, looking down at him. A man made entirely of glass. . .

Typical. Now he would miss – was already missing – his appointment in London. At the Institute of Anthropology. Probably boring, he consoled himself. But it might have raised his profile as well as his bank balance. The one thing you could never predict, he thought, was the traffic.

Malcolm Patterson shook his head in annoyance and resignation. He

switched off the engine and stared at the lights dwindling into the distance.

‘I think you can dispense with the disguise,’ Fitz said.

Patterson turned slowly towards him, gesturing for him to move round and join Sabbath, Miranda, Zezanne and the Doctor. ‘I would have thought realisation would eventually come from the Doctor,’ he said. He was smiling.

‘Another wrong prediction?’ Fitz said as he joined them.

‘Not really.’ The colour was draining from him again now. But not just from his face this time – from his clothes, hands, shoes, everything... ‘You are an associate of the Doctor. In causal terms it comes to the same thing. You are tainted.’

‘Thanks,’ Fitz said.

‘Infected by the Doctor’s influence.’

The man who stood before them, the man with the gun, was entirely transparent now – crystal; glass; ice.

‘Oh, and what influence is that?’ the Doctor asked.

‘The Rogue Element,’ Sabbath reminded him. ‘I should have recognised you,’ he said to Patterson.

‘But I knew you wouldn’t. Whereas the Doctor poses a problem through his ability to remain unpredictable, you, Sabbath, are entirely his opposite. As transparent as...’ He gave a short laugh, and held up his free hand, looking through the palm at Sabbath. ‘Well, I leave you to make your own analogy. A predictable one though.’ He turned slightly, bringing the gun more towards the Doctor. ‘As predictable, in fact...’

At which moment, Sabbath hurled himself forward with a snarl of rage. But the gun was already at his head as he lunged towards Patterson.

‘...as that,’ Patterson finished. ‘I know your every move. Your every decision. Your every thought. Even before you do. That is why we chose you, of course. Pavlov’s dogs have nothing on you.’ He held the gun close under Sabbath’s chin. ‘My puppy,’ he whispered.

Fitz looked at the Doctor. He could jump Patterson now. Probably. But the Doctor gave the barest hint of a shake of his head, so Fitz waited.

Patterson stepped away from Sabbath, seeming to savour the big man’s anger and frustration. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘since the Time Agent will have completed its mission by now, I think we can leave.’

‘And where are we going?’ the Doctor asked.

‘You know where we are going. You have seen it.’

‘Ah yes. The Swiss Cheese Palace,’ the Doctor said. He seemed not in the least intimidated. Somewhere outside there was the sound of sirens. Fitz could imagine confused police cars skidding to a halt to allow even more confused policemen to rush into the building. Too late, as usual.

‘I know,’ Patterson said quietly, ‘that threatening to kill you will have no effect, so I won’t waste my time.’

‘Very wise.’

‘Besides. As my friend here will tell you. . .’ He paused to ruffle Chad’s fair hair with his glassy hand. The boy flinched, terrified at the touch. ‘I find it so much more effective, not to say satisfying, to threaten others.’

Patterson reached out, and grabbed Miranda by her short hair, dragging her towards him, forcing her down, standing over her with the gun above her head. She stared up at him, hurt and frightened, but defiant.

The Doctor took a step forwards, his eyes burning.

‘I really wouldn’t,’ Patterson warned him. ‘“Screaming forever”, wasn’t that what you said?’

‘Leave her alone,’ the Doctor said. His voice was low and hard. His face was set in stone. ‘Harm her in the slightest, and you will be the one screaming forever.’

Patterson pressed the gun closer to Miranda, so that it was touching her hair. ‘And I thought you weren’t predictable,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘You just need the right stimuli, it seems, Doctor.’ He looked down at Miranda. ‘You were supposed to be on your way to a Schrödinger Cell, you and your daughter. It seems I was lucky that you have emerged back into real time. You see, Doctor, even when you interfere you are merely stepping your way towards the inevitable.’

‘The inevitable what?’

‘How amusing that you don’t know.’ Patterson lifted the gun aside, and pushed Miranda away from him. She got unsteadily to her feet, the Doctor and Zezanne both hurrying to help. ‘Let’s keep it that way for the moment, shall we? Now, move.’ He jabbed the gun forwards to make sure they understood him.

‘And where are we going?’ Sabbath asked.

‘To the Swiss Cheese, I guess,’ Fitz said.

‘That’s right.’

‘Not in my TARDIS, you’re not,’ the Doctor told Patterson.

‘That’s true,’ Patterson admitted. ‘We shall go in Mr Sabbath’s *Jonah*. Or more accurately, *my Jonah*, since I had it built for him.’

For the first time since Chad had taken the gun from him, Fitz saw that Sabbath was smiling.

Patterson followed them, keeping the gun levelled. Chad was at his side, like a reluctant schoolboy. Fitz wondered what hold he had over the boy, how they knew each other. He didn’t really have any idea, he realised, where Chad had come from.

The exhibits along the Corridor of Life were familiar to Fitz now. As they made their way along the corridor, the main lights flickered into life, making the whole place look completely different. It also made the bronzed, rivet-studded hatch that was set into the outer wall of the corridor seem even more incongruous.

The hatch was standing slightly open, and as they approached, it swung towards them – pushed from the inside.

Immediately, Sabbath dived away from Patterson. Fitz was not sure whether to follow him, but he was transfixed by the sight of the two huge apes that emerged from the hatch. Each was dressed in a Victorian naval uniform, though without the cap, Fitz noted. One looked like a gorilla, the other was a more orange colour. Both had long, sharp claws emerging from the ends of the white cotton gloves they wore. Both were staring at Patterson with small red eyes that burned with something that might have been recognition. That might have been hatred.

‘I think the odds are now rather more in our favour,’ Sabbath said with satisfaction as he stood between the two apes.

‘I think you forget,’ Patterson said, his voice quiet and calm, ‘that I dictate the odds.’ He raised his free hand, and clicked his fingers.

It was a sound like a gunshot. Immediately the two apes reacted, turning inwards, each of them taking hold of one of Sabbath’s shoulders and forcing him into a kneeling position.

‘Just as I selected your crew,’ Patterson went on. He leaned forward, to look at Sabbath on his own level. ‘These creatures may not have ridden the Time Winds like their brothers, but they know who their masters are, what their destiny is. Who they serve.’ He straightened up and gestured for Fitz and the others to go through the hatch.

Sabbath was thrown in after them, stumbling and almost falling. The Doctor caught him and with difficulty helped the big man to his feet.

Patterson paused before following. Fitz could hear him talking to the two apes outside. 'Find the Doctor's TARDIS and bring it here. It can't be far away. If anyone tries to stop you, kill them.'

'Charming,' Fitz murmured.

'Mutiny,' Sabbath muttered under his breath.

'Well,' the Doctor told him sympathetically, 'if you will pay the staff peanuts...'

The throbbing of the *Jonah's* engines was like a giant heartbeat. It seemed to permeate every surface and to thump inside Miranda's chest. She did not know why she and Zezanne had been brought here – or where they were being taken when they had fallen out of the Time Corridor. But she did understand the implications for the Doctor.

He was saving the universe – again. And having Miranda there could hardly be a help. Even before the creature that had called itself Patterson had jammed the gun into her head, Miranda had known that it was only a matter of time before her very presence became a threat to the Doctor and whatever plan he might have.

A matter of time. There was the nub of it. The Doctor might have made some joke about it, some witty response to cover his deeper anger and emotion. But Miranda could not pretend. She could never pretend. And above all, she could never pretend to her father. It might be Patterson who claimed the ability to predict the future and how people would act and react. But Miranda could see as clearly as she had ever seen anything that there was only one way out of the dilemma. Only one possible response, one possible outcome.

So when they were put in the cell – Fitz, Sabbath, Zezanne and the Doctor – she went to sit with her daughter, turned her back on her father, hugged Zezanne. And wept quietly.

The cell was a solid metal box, the walls riveted into place and the only door a circular hatchway that had no inside locking wheel to open it. There were no windows. If air came in, it was not obvious how or from where. She could taste the bronzed metal at the back of her throat. It had a rusty, stale taste. Like blood.

It took longer than she had expected. They sat in silence, each lost in his

or her own thoughts. Except for Sabbath, who paced up and down like a caged animal, his fists tight at his side and his whole body visibly shaking with anger. But eventually, the Doctor came over and sat beside her.

Miranda gave Zezanne the gentlest of pushes. She looked into her mother's eyes, took the hint, and went to join Fitz. After a moment she could hear them talking quietly. She thought she heard muted laughter, but it might have been Sabbath muttering under his breath as he paced past.

'It's been a long time,' he said at last.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak without crying openly.

'Did you sort out the Factions and the Houses, unite the Empire and rule beneficently?'

'Yes,' she managed. She tried to smile. 'A long time ago. It was... difficult, but it was worth it.'

More silence. Then he said, quietly, his hand on her shoulder: 'I am so sorry.'

She bit back a sob. 'I know.'

'She's a lovely girl,' the Doctor said, looking over at where Zezanne was talking to Fitz. 'Though I'm a bit worried about the company she keeps.' He forced a laugh, but a glance at Miranda wiped the half-smile from his face. 'She reminds me of you, when you were a teenager. Quietly assured. Burningly intelligent.' Another attempt at a smile. 'Probably answers back and refuses to tidy her room. Only with dark hair of course.'

Miranda *almost* smiled. 'My hair has been grey for a long time. Yet you look no older.'

'Time's like that. It plays tricks on the unwary.'

'Her father had black hair. A long time ago.'

'And now?'

'And now he is dead,' she said simply. It was not something she wanted to dwell on. Finished business.

'I will look after you both,' he said. 'I will make sure that nothing happens to you.'

She recognised the anger and intensity and commitment in his voice. But she shook her head. 'You can't make that promise.'

'But I do.'

'All right. But you can't know if you can keep it.'

He was quiet for a moment. Then he took her hand between his, stroked the back of it, stared down at her pale, lined skin. 'I will do the best I can,'

he said. 'That's all any of us can do.'

'And your best is better than anyone else's. I know that. There is one promise you can make me,' she said.

'Anything.'

'Look after Zezanne. Whatever else happens, look after Zezanne. And...'

She was not sure if she could say it, but she forced herself. 'If it comes to a choice between me and the universe, or between me and my daughter...'

'It won't.'

'If it does.'

'I love you,' he said, so quietly she could hardly hear him.

'I know. But promise me.'

He looked away.

'Promise me,' she said again.

When he looked back, he was crying. No sound, just the tears, dripping down on to her hand, which he still held in his. He lifted it, kissed it, did not let go. 'I promise,' he said. Then he pulled her into an embrace, and they both cried. Together. Father and daughter. Alone in a room full of people.

The red haze had become a raging fire, rippling towards them at tremendous speed. The ships outside were manoeuvring, as if they could somehow ride out the end of eternity.

'What do you mean?' Singleton demanded. His face seemed greyer and older. 'How can you possibly know that there is not enough energy?'

Korsann seemed as surprised as Trix and the others at the old man's vehement reaction. 'I am sorry to question your hypothesis.' He pointed up at the roof, at the approaching hellfire. 'It hardly matters now. Perhaps you are right.'

'No – I want you to tell me.'

Despite her worry that maybe – just maybe – the TARDIS was not about to arrive and whisk herself and Fleetward away before the end of the universe, as advertised, Trix found she was holding her breath, waiting for the reptile-creature's answer.

Beside her, in the silence, Fleetward muttered, in a tone of quiet disbelief: 'We're going to die.'

'Although it looks from here as if the universe is coming to a magnificent and sudden end,' Korsann said, still looking up at the blazing domed roof, 'that really isn't the case. Oh, it is coming to an end. And quicker than

anyone imagined even a few centuries ago. But in universal terms, if I can put it like that, the end is merely the closure of an ongoing process. There is no great expenditure of energy. No more so than the process to date has released.'

As he spoke, the outermost ships, struggling to move inwards into space where there was no space, exploded. Further in, another ship detonated as it collided with its neighbour, jostling for position close to the space station. Debris rained down at the roof, bouncing off the invisible barriers beyond. A series of smaller explosions was triggered as fire and metal hit other ships. Then the next wave of explosions. And the next.

'The transduction barriers will delay the inevitable for a few moments,' Singleton said. 'No more than that.' They were all staring transfixed.

'All this energy is a mere trickle,' Korsann said over the strangely silent chaos outside. 'No sudden release, as you would need for what you are suggesting. That would require a quick burst of tremendous energy all in one moment.'

'And how might one achieve that?' Trix asked. Suddenly she had a notion that here, as the universe ended around her, that was the single most important question in History.

Korsann looked down from the approaching ring of fire. There was nothing else visible outside now – just flames and death. His pale yellow eyes locked with Trix's for a moment. Then he said: 'I have no idea.'

There was noise now – a creaking sound like on a sailing ship. It was growing, building into the scream of twisting, breaking metal. Perhaps people screaming too, far far away.

'Your friend is coming through!' Ashtek shouted above the noise. She was standing up, backing away from the monitors towards the centre of the room, as if that would buy her more time.

Trix thought she meant the Doctor. Her hopes rose – only to be dashed as she saw the door through which she and Fleetward had entered was buckling, twisting... rusting away. A hole appeared, and through it a huge hair-covered arm smashed into the room, the metal of the door falling away around it in red powder.

In the midst of the mayhem, as Trix began to fancy she could feel the heat of the approaching explosions and hear the universe itself crying out as it died, the final crystal appeared inside the circular cavity at the centre of everything.

'At last,' Singleton breathed.

The Time Agent ripped its way into the room, lumbering purposefully towards Fleetward and Trix. Behind it, a raging ball of fire burst through from the corridor, silhouetting the advancing creature – black against blood red.

Sabbath made no attempt to conceal his anger as they were lined up inside the hatch of the *Jonah*. Fitz stood beside him, intending to allow the Doctor and Miranda more time alone together. But they seemed to have said everything they needed to, and Miranda was standing with her hands on her own daughter's shoulders. The Doctor was silent and alone, watching Patterson as he walked confidently past them, flanked by his apes. Chad followed behind him, avoiding looking at anyone. Especially Fitz.

The Doctor reached out as Chad passed, and tapped him on the shoulder. Fitz thought the boy was going to scream in fright. But the Doctor had his finger to his lips and was smiling. Chad stared back at him confused.

'Don't worry about it,' the Doctor said, as if Chad had apologised. Perhaps he had – perhaps it was in his eyes, Fitz thought.

'I'm going to see you get home, safe,' the Doctor went on, still speaking quietly, careful that Patterson should not overhear. 'You'll be all right. Trust me.'

'What about my brother?' Chad asked, glancing nervously towards Patterson as he spoke.

'Ah,' the Doctor said, nodding as if this explained everything. 'Well, I'll make sure he gets home safe too.'

Whether Chad replied, Fitz never knew. Because at that moment, Sabbath exploded.

Not literally, of course. But his anger boiled over as Patterson stood smiling smugly at him. Despite the apes, despite the fact that Patterson seemed to anticipate his outburst of rage and signal for the creatures to hold Sabbath back, he shouted at Patterson:

'You'll pay for this. I trusted you. I was your ally.'

'But allies have some degree of mutual respect. And I have nothing but contempt for you.'

'I helped you,' Sabbath hissed. 'I was important to your plan. Vital.'

Patterson laughed and shook his head. 'No, you weren't. You were gloriously irrelevant. Your only task, though you were too vain and arrogant to see it, was to keep the Doctor sidelined and out of the way. Which you man-

aged competently, no more. And now this treachery, this pathetic attempt at betrayal. . .’ He shook his head, and sneered: ‘Predictable from the very first.’

There was a loud clang from the other side of the hatch.

‘Ah, we seem to have arrived,’ Patterson announced. ‘Let’s see if I have managed to sort out the previous owner’s rather inept attempt at adapting the camouflage system, shall we?’

He gestured for the apes to let Sabbath go. One of them lumbered over to the hatch and swung the locking wheel. It clicked round rapidly, and then the door swung open. The glowing light of the crystal corridor outside seemed to fall into the *Jonah*, and Fitz could see dark shapes standing outside, waiting. A line of hooded figures, and a boy.

Chad ran past Fitz, hurling himself through the door. He and the other boy were hugging each other as the prisoners filed out. Patterson was standing in front of the line of hooded, cloaked figures. Fitz counted seven cloaked figures in all. And Patterson, though all pretence at humanity was gone from him now. He too now wore a cloak, though the hood was down to reveal his glasslike head. Rainbow colours collided inside his skull as the light from the glowing walls was caught and fractured.

‘I was not expecting a welcome committee,’ Patterson said. His voice was deeper, echoing. No longer Patterson. ‘I can deal with this.’

In answer, the other figures lowered their hoods.

‘Who are they?’ Fitz wondered aloud.

‘I have no idea,’ the Doctor told him. He was standing next to Fitz, answering in a low voice. ‘But I have some unpleasant notions.’

Each of the cloaked figures was in the shape of a man. And each seemed to be made of crystal. But the colours, the textures were different. One was a riot of bright colours, another jet black. One was a pale yellow like amber, while another seemed to glow a dull blue. One appeared very old, another quite young. The rest were somewhere between.

The old, white-crystal man stepped forwards. He looked like he had been carved from quartz, then left to weather for a thousand years. His voice too was cracked and ancient.

‘We have been talking while you were away. Deliberating.’

Patterson, or whoever he was, seemed amused. ‘A meeting of the Council but without the Chair?’

‘First among equals, remember?’ It was the black-stone man who said this.

‘We have spoken with the boy,’ the young amber-like man said.

The old one spoke again: ‘And we have reassessed your plan. With Logite’s help we have recalculated the potential energy requirements, and we have worked out how much energy was – will be – created by the end of the universe.’

Patterson nodded. ‘And so you know it is not enough to save the crystals. Not enough to bring them here. To become us. To survive.’

‘Yet we are here,’ a deep voice said – the ‘man’ who was carved out of colour. ‘So where did the energy come from? Or rather, where will it come from?’

The Doctor pushed past Fitz and stood in front of them. All statue-like heads turned in interest.

‘Is this really him,’ a short statue-man asked. ‘The Doctor?’

‘It is,’ the Doctor told them. ‘And I have heard enough. I don’t know who you are –’

‘We are the Council of Eight.’ They seemed to speak in unison.

‘And I don’t really care,’ the Doctor finished, ignoring them. ‘But from what I know, and what I have heard; from what I can gather, and what is transparently obvious. . .’ He paused to smile thinly at Patterson. Then the smile was gone, and his voice was deep with anger and rich in recrimination. ‘You gather energy from future events, events you predict will happen and work to ensure take place. But if you have indeed survived the end of the universe, if you have been able to survive here in the vortex in this impossible structure, predicting and manipulating and interfering, then there is only one event that can have fuelled your tyranny. Only one event that can have given you life after death.’

Patterson was smiling. ‘I always thought you would realise before they did,’ he said quietly.

‘And what is that event?’ the old man asked.

‘Total destruction on a massive scale,’ the Doctor told them. ‘The death of History.’

The End of Eternity

Fleetward was screaming. Singleton was standing staring down at the eight crystals at his feet. Korsann seemed to have summoned up dignity from reserves that Trix could only guess at as he stood and faced the fire.

The woman was gone – burst apart in an explosion of sound and fury. Trix did not know what she herself was doing, or how she felt. She was more terrified of the creature rampaging towards her than the fiery end of the universe following at its heels.

Singleton scooped the set of crystals out of the floor, lifting the velvet cushion free and clutching it to himself. He seemed to shimmer, his skin taking on a marbled, translucent quality akin to quartz.

But Trix had no time to wonder at this. The creature was hurling itself at them – leaping forwards ahead of the fire, its arms stretched wide. She felt a massive paw grab her shoulder, pull her in, crushing her as the whole of reality was itself being crushed.

Then the blinding white light.

An explosion behind the eyes.

Fleetward's screams cut off abruptly.

Nothing.

The Doctor stood before the Council of Eight.

Fitz, Miranda, Sabbath and Zezanne had been taken away. Chad and his brother had also been led away. The Doctor did not know where.

'All History,' the old man – Soul, as he had introduced himself – said, 'that is, human history, the history of Earth and its descendants.'

'That is the best-documented history of any race in the universe,' Duvar said.

'In many ways,' Trilon added as they went round the table, 'it is the history of the universe.'

'The influence of Man is so great,' Fear said.

Penter's turn: "That is why the history of Earth and humanity is so useful to us, such a rich set of events to predict and from which to reap energy."

"How can ending that history possibly be of value?" Hexx asked.

They were all turning slowly to face Octan – Patterson, as he had been.

"You know better than we the consequences of an unfulfilled prediction," Sept told him.

"That is the point," Octan said patiently. The Doctor could imagine he had rehearsed this argument many times. He must have known he would have to account for himself one day. But if the Doctor could persuade the rest of the Council that this course was unnecessary, unworkable, *wrong*...

"If we are to survive, if we are to be here now having this conversation, we have to call on enough energy to save the crystals you mistook for diamonds when the universe itself ends. That is the paradox – by saving the archetypal crystals from which we can regenerate the thousands we need to seed the universe at its very beginning, we save ourselves. And now, those same crystals provide the raw data we need to realise that energy from our predictions of future events." He looked round at the other members of the Council, ignoring the Doctor. "Every event we correctly predict provides energy."

"Energy that must one day be paid back," the Doctor pointed out.

"Which is how we are trapped in this cycle," Fear said. Was he talking out of turn, the Doctor wondered?

"We must keep predicting, and predicting accurately," Sept added. "That gives us the energy to pay back, and to keep going. To keep this station stable within the vortex. To send the crystals back to the creation of the universe, and to rescue them from its end."

"If we make a wrong prediction," Hexx said, "then we not only lose the energy we would have had, but we must repay what we have already used of that energy. Including what we expended in making the original prediction."

"So we cannot – we must not – predict that human history will somehow end," Soul told them. "Because it will not. A prediction of that magnitude would indeed provide enormous energy. But only if it were fulfilled, if it came to pass."

"Otherwise," Duvar said, "we would have more to repay than we can ever gather. When the universe ends, and our prediction remains monumentally unfulfilled, we should perish. We would cease to exist now – in a moment – if we expended that sort of energy with no hope of reclamation."

"And that," Octan told them, "has not happened."

‘Because they will stop you from making that prediction,’ the Doctor said. He was sure now that he had won.

But Octan was shaking his icy head. ‘No. That is not the reason.’

Soul was exasperated. ‘Human history does not come to the sudden full-stop that will release the energy we are talking about. I know.’ He stood up, leaning forward over the crystal council table. ‘I have seen the end of the universe, and believe me, I know.’

‘But you forget, we have experienced this situation before,’ Octan replied. ‘Indeed, the Doctor himself has brought it about so many times. We know what must happen for our prediction to become reality, and we send a Time Agent to ensure it is so.’

‘To make minor changes,’ Trilon conceded. ‘To alter a timeline, change the nature of cause and effect, even to remove someone to a Schrödinger Cell in extreme cases.’

‘Those cells power this station,’ Fear reminded him quietly. ‘The potential of lives left unfulfilled. And they will eventually provide the energy to save our peoples – draw them outside time to be with us here in the never-ending now.’

‘But the end of History itself?’ Hexx was shaking his dark head. ‘Impossible.’

Octan stood up, facing Soul across the table. Slowly Soul sat down again. As he did so, the middle section of the table swung up and tipped over, revealing a long glass rod fixed to a bracket. Inside the rod the Doctor could see coloured filaments running along its length: One end was shaped, perhaps into a stock. Half way along was what might be a trigger.

‘This star-killer is based on the same principle as the Vortex Gun. But enhanced and increased a million times.’ He held the gun up for them to see. ‘I am Alpha and Omega,’ Octan said. His voice was deathly quiet, commanding their full attention. ‘The beginning and the end. When I destroy Earth’s sun in the time before Mankind even ventures forth from the planet’s surface, when I ensure that it never existed in the first place, all History will change – will bend to my will. The potential energy will ripple out, the mass of history that never happens will provide unimaginable fuel for our people to be brought here, and for their continued existence with us.’

There was silence in the room, as Octan lifted the star-killer from its bracket and held it up.

‘With that energy, with that power, with the knowledge and talents we

already have, we shall become the lords of Time itself and outsit eternity.'

'And if we refuse?' Soul said, his voice as insistent as his colleague's. 'If we decide not to submit to your arrogance and your ignorance? Decide that your plan is so obscene that we can be no part of it and would rather sacrifice our continued existence than condemn the whole History of Man to extinction?'

Octan gave a short laugh. 'You of all people I would expect to appreciate what we are saving our people from. We are races born, evolved, at the very end of time. Hardly established as a force in the universe when that universe must end. You, Soul, you have seen it happen. Why do you question our goals?'

'I question the means, not the end,' Soul told him.

'Well, it really doesn't matter what you decide,' Octan said. 'Any of you. You forget. . . ' He walked away from the Council table, star-killer in one hand and the Vortex Gun in the other, gesturing for the Doctor to go ahead of him. At the door he paused, and looked back into the room. 'I shall leave you to your meaningless deliberations and arguments. But whatever you choose to discuss, remember this: I have your hourglasses. I *own* your lives.'

Chad and his brother were gone. But Miranda, Zezanne, Fitz and Sabbath were all waiting together in the room full of hourglasses. There were shelves and shelves of them, reaching up to the ceilings of the crystal chamber. Everything here was made from some kind of crystalline substance, it seemed to Fitz. He was surprised he could discern no sign of the ever smaller holes drilled into the structure that he, the Doctor and Trix had seen from the TARDIS.

Come to that, where was Trix? Loath though he was to admit it, Fitz thought he would miss her if she didn't come back from wherever the Doctor had sent her and Fleetward.

He paused in front of yet another shelf of hourglasses, reading the labels without really taking them in. Then he stopped, blinked, read them properly. Again he surprised himself, this time by going over to Sabbath rather than either Miranda or Zezanne.

'What is it?' Sabbath rumbled. He was still rippling with suppressed anger.

'Something I think you should see. Over. here.'

Fitz led him across the room, and let the big man see for himself. A row of hourglasses, on a shelf of their own. Each with a name embossed on the crystalline frame. One was tall, elegantly designed – silver wrapped round

glass. It was named Miranda.

Another, shorter and less ornate but similar carried the name 'Zezanne'.

A third was quite frankly a mess. That was the one that had drawn Fitz's attention first – woodlike struts pieced together to hold the nondescript glass bowls. Seeing his own name etched into the 'woodwork' had made Fitz blink.

Sabbath lifted the last hourglass down and held it carefully up to examine. It was constructed from strips of what might be iron put together efficiently but without an eye for elegance or beauty. But Sabbath was not looking at the way it was made. He was not even looking at his name stamped into the frame, though Fitz was sure he had seen it. He was staring into the upper bowl of the hourglass. Where the last grains of sand were slipping slowly but surely away.

Fitz watched Sabbath return the hourglass carefully to its place. Then he seemed to notice what Fitz had already seen on the shelf above. A card, plain white, written on it: 'The Doctor'. Behind the card was an hourglass, plain and of a simple construction, entirely of glass with no apparent supports for the bowls. Both bowls in the figure of eight were full of sand.

They turned as the door opened. It was one of the apes from the *Jonah*. It glared at Sabbath for a moment, then turned back to the door, helping others to manhandle something into the room. Something big, and obviously heavy and awkward. Fitz and Sabbath exchanged looks as the apes half dragged, half carried the TARDIS into the circular room, and set it down by one of the shelved walls. Then, without a sound, they departed, closing the doors behind them.

'A way of escape?' Sabbath said quietly.

'Who knows. I wonder where the Doctor is.'

'Over here,' a familiar voice called from behind them.

The Doctor and Patterson were standing in another doorway. Patterson, as he had been, was holding the Vortex Gun.

Patterson went over to the shelf with the hourglasses. He looked at them with evident satisfaction. He lifted down the Doctor's hourglass and stroked it before putting it back. 'I wondered how yours would manifest itself,' he said to the Doctor. 'You see, you are all here. All of you. Everyone who comes here, everyone in our Schrödinger Cells is here. I have control over you all. As soon as you set foot here, Doctor, you were in my power. Nothing you can do or say can stop me now.'

'Don't you be so sure,' the Doctor replied levelly.

Patterson smiled. 'You cannot even leave unless I allow it. That is why I had your TARDIS brought here. As a demonstration of my power. Go on,' he goaded, 'try to escape.'

The Doctor sat down on the floor, dangling the TARDIS key between his crossed legs, swinging it back and forth, to and fro. 'I think that's for me to decide, not you.'

'You decide nothing. No one decides anything. The only will here is mine.'

'Oh really?' Fitz said. Without really knowing why, he ran across the room and grabbed the swinging key. The Doctor might be making a point, but he was damned if he was going to let some see-through man run his life. Once he was in the TARDIS, once the key was not within Patterson's grasp, then the Doctor could negotiate from strength. Zezanne was beside him, running with him, across the room. . .

Fitz thrust the key into the lock and twisted. He pushed the door open and tumbled inside, Zezanne with him. Too late he heard Patterson's laughter in his ears, and the Doctor's shout of: 'No, Fitz!' and Miranda's scream at Zezanne to keep away.

The door closed behind them.

Fitz was standing close to Zezanne inside an empty upright box. The door was shut, and locked. And there was no handle on the inside. They were trapped.

'And then there were three,' Octan said.

'You can't count,' the Doctor replied. 'Or perhaps I mean, you don't count.'

'I hardly think you are in a position to be insulting.' Octan raised the Vortex Gun, pointing it first at the Doctor, then slowly moving it to cover Sabbath before finally bringing it to rest aiming at Miranda.

'I think I'm in exactly the right place to be insulting,' the Doctor said, apparently unimpressed. 'I have a very apt target.'

'So does he,' Sabbath said quietly, a warning look in his eyes.

'Yes, and he has a plan. A plan to destroy History with his star-killer. A plan with just one tiny flaw in it.'

'And what, pray, is that?' Octan asked.

'Simply this. Your plan won't work.' The Doctor shrugged, stuffed his hands into his pockets, and grinned.

They sat in silence for what seemed an age, but was in actuality no time at

all.

‘We should do something,’ Trilon said at last. He said it to Soul. They were all looking at Soul.

‘But what can we do?’ Penter asked. ‘He owns us. He controls the hour-glasses.’

‘Nevertheless we should do all that we can,’ Soul said.

‘Perhaps,’ Fear said, leaning back, apparently unconcerned, ‘we need do nothing.’

‘And condemn a whole race – History itself – to death?’ Duvar asked him.

‘The price of our own survival,’ Hexx said quietly. ‘No,’ he decided. ‘It is too great a cost, surely.’

Fear whipped his feet from the table and sat up. ‘Ah, but would it? Our esteemed Chairperson intends to destroy Earth’s sun, to create a chain of events such that Earth itself never existed, so that the entire History of Man is null and void.’

‘I think we are acutely aware of that,’ Sept told him.

‘And he plans to do this... how?’

‘We know how,’ Trilon responded.

‘Do we?’ Fear asked quietly.

Soul considered. ‘It takes all the energy we can amass simply to keep this Station stable within the vortex and predict the events that provide further energy to maintain that stability through relative time.’

‘And we know,’ Duvar went on, ‘how much energy using a Time Agent expends. The tiniest nudge to History to keep events on track – on our predicted path.’

‘Exactly,’ Fear said. His feet were back on the table now. He leaned back, eyes closed. ‘So how can he possibly find the energy to destroy all of History in the first place?’

‘From the prediction that History will be destroyed?’ Penter suggested.

‘No.’ Trilon could see it now too. ‘He needs that energy to ensure our survival, our existence past the end of the universe.’

‘And we did survive,’ Soul said. ‘I was there. As Singleton I saw it happen.’

‘Is there energy to be reaped from a temporal paradox?’ Hexx asked.

‘A paradox is a loop, appropriately enough,’ Trilon said. ‘A closed system. It makes no difference to the equation.’

‘We could ask Octan himself,’ Duvar said.

‘Or,’ Soul decided, ‘we could ask Logite.’

'I think we're stuck in here,' Fitz said. He hammered on the door, or rather the wall that used to be the door. But to no effect.

It was almost dark, but light was leaking in from somewhere. Just enough for him to be able to make out Zezanne's shape in the gloom beside him. She was shaking her head.

'There's no way out,' she said.

Fitz sighed. She was probably right. Through the wooden panelling of the door of what seemed to be an ordinary police telephone box, he could just hear the Doctor talking. He strained to work out what was going on outside.

And as he listened, he hoped that Zezanne could not hear.

Logite stood before the Council. But whereas before he had seemed nervous and secretive, he now seemed confident and assured.

'You are right, of course,' Logite said.

'Well that's a relief,' Fear told him sarcastically.

'Do you mean that he knows his plan can never work?' Soul asked.

'I mean that he knows how to create the energy.'

'From a prediction? From a realised event?' Duvar laughed at that. 'It would have to be of extraordinary magnitude.'

'And you forget,' Trilon added, 'that we are already drawing all the energy we can from the potential history of the universe. There's quite simply nowhere left that we can make predictions *about*.'

Logite's crystal face twisted into a smile. As if he knew something they didn't, as if he were cleverer than them. 'There is one place,' he said, enjoying the moment. 'Here.' He looked round at their astonished faces, the surprise etched across them. 'Why do you think he needs the Doctor and Sabbath? Can't you see what he is planning? What he has already predicted? The event of sufficient magnitude to power up the device which is already aimed at Earth's sun?'

'He is going to kill the Doctor?' Fear said, his voice hardly more than a whisper. 'Is that what he has predicted – the death of a Rogue Element? Of *the* Rogue Element?'

The Doctor's grin had faded. 'But you're not stupid, are you? Whatever else you might be, stupid isn't it.' He clicked his tongue. 'So where do you think the power will come from? Not from the universe outside, that's for sure. So where else is left?'

'Inside,' Sabbath said. 'Some event within this place.'

'Exactly.' The Doctor gave him a thumbs-up. 'And since a large part of your set-up here is concerned with sorting out problems that I have been inadvertently causing, or so Sabbath leads me to believe, I suppose removing me would make that energy available again. Am I right?'

'That is true,' Octan conceded.

'But you can't just kill me, can you? You could have done that already. Sabbath could have done that, except you manipulated him so that he didn't really want to. You made him realise he'd been used so that he would shy away from killing me in case he needed me as an

'Right from the start,' Sabbath said quietly. 'All the time.' He had not realised he was so gullible, so predictable. Such a fool.

'No, no, no, no, no,' the Doctor decided. 'You want to bring me to heel. You want me to do what you have predicted I will do in some way. You want to prove that I am not a Rogue Element, as you call it, at all. Isn't that it?'

'You are very clever, Doctor,' Octan said. The Gun was still pointing at Miranda. She stood calm and still and proud in front of the row of hourglasses. Like the Empress she apparently was.

'And you think that Miranda is the lever you can use to make me – what, kneel perhaps? Sing your praises while hanging from the chandelier? Catch a Number Nine bus to Shepherd's Bush?'

Sabbath took a step towards Octan. All his attention was on the Doctor and Miranda, he seemed to have forgotten Sabbath. Another step as the Doctor spoke again.

'So you threaten to kill her.' The Doctor gave a short humourless laugh. 'I'd say *that* was predictable, wouldn't you?' His voice was low and dark as he went on: 'But you can only kill her once. And if you harm her in the slightest, I will surely kill you.'

Even Sabbath shuddered at the words, at the Doctor's face. Another step.

'Not just Miranda,' Octan said. He was smiling.

'What?'

'Oh she was an unpredicted bonus. I must admit I had not yet decided which of them to use.'

'Them?' The Doctor's frown deepened.

'The people you have tainted and infected with your actions, your travels. They all have to be removed, cut out like the cancer they are. Taken out of History, one way or another.'

The Doctor was shaking, his voice a dry croak. 'What have you done?'

Octan shrugged. 'In some cases we merely arranged a death. The murder of a colonist here, the shooting and dumping in the Thames – appropriately enough – of a young girl there. A political activist gunned down while giving a speech. An investigative journalist following up a dangerous story in Hong Kong... Even,' and this seemed to amuse him, 'an attack by a werewolf in your own TARDIS, though there were certain complications with that one too, I have to say.'

'What have you done?' the Doctor repeated, but he seemed to be asking himself now.

'Of course that is the easiest, the cheapest route if you like. But in other cases – like Miranda and her daughter – we had to surgically remove them from the timelines. They were on their way here, to a Schrödinger Cell, when you intercepted the Time Corridor that held them.'

'A Schrödinger Cell?' It was Miranda who spoke.

'When necessary, the Time Agents remove people from Time. This is important sometimes to deal with people who are temporally aware or who have been tainted by the Doctor's influence and are therefore unpredictable, even in death. We cannot tell what effect their death – or continued life – would have on History. Perhaps just a message to allay any suspicion, a returned key, and then they are gone. Forever.'

'And what happens to them?' The Doctor's voice was quiet and controlled once more.

'They are put in Schrödinger Cells. Because they both do and do not exist – they are in an indeterminate state, their timelines and lives suspended.'

The Doctor nodded, as if he now saw another piece of the puzzle that he could fit into place. 'And the temporal potential energy generated by these cells – cell, as in battery – provides a large amount of the power that keeps this place stable within the vortex.'

'That's right.'

Sabbath took another step forwards. Miranda watched him, their eyes locking for a moment. Then she turned away, as if she could not bear to watch or listen.

'So,' the Doctor was saying, 'if a cell is opened, the timeline crystallises. Perhaps around a history in which the occupant was taken out of time and placed in that cell.'

'As happened when I opened the cell the boys were in. A loss of energy,

but worth it. I needed their help to ensure you were brought here. All of you.' He seemed to make a point of not looking at Sabbath. As if he were now irrelevant.

Sabbath took another, angrier, step forwards.

'Until the door is opened that may or may not have happened,' Octan explained.

'But once the door *is* open and time crystallised, then the potential energy is no longer available,' the Doctor insisted. 'History is back on track and will be realised, and so the energy has in effect already been expended.'

'I think,' Octan told him, 'that I can afford to open a few cells without destabilising the station too much. I think I can afford to take out and kill – *really* kill – enough of your former companions to bring you to heel.'

'Even if I don't remember them?' the Doctor asked. But Sabbath could see that it would make no difference. Already the Doctor was caught. Already he was realising there was no way out.

'Now, let us begin,' Octan said. He turned so he was facing Miranda, both hands on the gun.

'The Doctor won't do it,' she said confidently.

'I think he will. Eventually.'

'Never.'

'It's not just the death, you see,' Octan said. He might have been discussing what was for dinner. 'It's the suffering. The eternal pain. Screaming forever, the Doctor said, isn't that right?'

The Doctor did not reply. He was standing stiff and still, hands clasped into fists at his sides. 'Do it,' he said.

Octan did not so much as blink. 'You know, Doctor, I knew you'd say that.'

'You can't win. You can't force me, not with the whole of History at stake. You must realise that.' There was a note of fear in the Doctor's voice. 'So why bother trying? Why not just let her go and try something else?'

'A logical question. But I'm afraid the answer is no.'

'But why?' Pleading now.

'Because... ' He stepped forward, sighted along the gun. 'On a count of three, I think. One... '

Sabbath took another step.

'Two... '

The Doctor's lip quivered.

'Three.'

His whole face was shaking, as if the Doctor was trying to hold in the cry. But he failed: 'No! I'll do it. Whatever it is.' He was on his knees now, hands out wide.

'That's better.' Octan lifted the gun so it was pointing up and away from Miranda's head.

His movement was mirrored by Miranda's own hands.

'You promised,' she said to the Doctor.

And only now did Sabbath – and the others – see what she was holding, what she had taken from the shelf behind her.

'No, Miranda – I can't.'

An hourglass.

'You promised me!' she shouted, her voice full of anger and hurt.

Her hourglass.

'I love you,' the Doctor's lips said. But no sound came out.

Then Octan was reaching forward, grasping for the hourglass, dropping the gun as he tried to wrench it from her.

Sabbath was running the last few paces, launching himself at Octan.

Miranda kept the hourglass clear of the clutching crystal hands. For a moment she held it high above her head.

Then she brought it crashing down, hurling it at the floor.

An explosion of glass and shriek of metal. The hourglass shattered, spilling grains of pale crystal across the floor.

Sabbath's shoulder knocked Octan aside. Sabbath landed heavily, rolled, grabbed the Vortex Gun. . .

The Doctor was already with Miranda, cradling her emaciated body in his arms, watching the years roll across her face.

'I love you too, Father,' the old woman said. Her voice was dry as dead leaves. Her skin was sagging, withering. Her hair was pure white, and for a moment as the skin on her face tightened in death, she looked like a young girl asleep in the snow.

Playing the Odds

‘Of course not the death of the Doctor!’ Logite was angry now. How could they be so wise and yet so foolish, so blind? ‘The Doctor is merely part of the pattern. An onlooker. Yes, by predicting his actions and reactions he fuels the major prediction, lends weight to it. But taming a Rogue Element is not sufficient. He is here to be humiliated and humbled. Here to convince Sabbath of the righteousness of his anger. Here to suffer so that *he* will act. That is what all this is about. The final prediction. The moment of realised potential.’ He shook his head in mock sympathy. ‘You don’t deserve what he is doing for you, what he is willing to sacrifice for you to survive.’

Trilon was on his feet, realisation printed across his face. ‘You cannot be serious.’

‘What else could provide the power?’ Logite asked them. ‘Octan has predicted his own death.’

He laid her gently on the crystal floor, brushing the back of his hand across the brittle bone of her cheek. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm, forcing his grief to the back of his hearts. He could grieve later. There would be time for it later. Many lifetimes.

Slowly, he stood up, dusted himself down, and looked around.

Tableau.

Octan was standing on one side of the room. Through his glasslike form the Doctor could see the distorted shapes of the shelves behind. On the other side of the room stood Sabbath. With the Vortex Gun. He was pointing it at Octan, but as the Doctor stood up, Sabbath moved so as to cover them both.

‘Now we come to the nub of the matter,’ Octan said. His voice was calm and resigned. ‘You have one shot, one option. Which will it be, Sabbath? How will you fulfil your destiny? Will you kill me – in a rage, out of anger that you think you have been used and deceived?’ He was smiling. ‘Or will you revert to form, carry out your original mission for us and return to the

fold – become a part of the great plan and live here throughout eternity by killing the Doctor?’

Sabbath said nothing. He kept the gun pointed at Octan now, perhaps believing he was more of a threat.

‘You don’t seem very concerned,’ the Doctor said to Octan. He tried to keep the emotion and anger out of his voice, and almost succeeded.

‘Because I have already predicted this moment, Doctor. This is what it is all about. This is how the power will be realised – here and now.’ He took a step towards Sabbath. ‘I know the choice Sabbath will make. And when he does, the power will flow through the star-killer and my people will become the lords of Time Eternal.’

As he spoke, a part of the air to one side of the room, close to Octan, seemed to become solid. A slab of crystallised air floating above the ground. On it was a view of the Council of Eight. Standing with them, in front of them, was another crystalline figure – spiky and angular, translucent yet rippling with colour.

‘Ah, there you are, Logite,’ Octan said. ‘I assume that the power is building.’

The standing figure nodded what might have been an elongated, faceted head. ‘The potential is being realised. Time is crystallising around the path you predicted.’

Behind him, one of the Council was rising to his feet. The others followed his example. It was the old man made of quartz who spoke: ‘You must stop this, Octan. We shall have no part in it.’

‘But it is already happening. Don’t you see? I cannot stop it now. It is in Sabbath’s hands. Literally.’ He turned his head slightly, to make the point that he was ignoring them and speaking to the angular creature. ‘Logite, I think you can send the Agent now.’

The old man was speaking again, but Octan waved his hand, and the sound cut out. The crystal screen continued to float, showing the Council as they continued to argue, silent and ineffectual.

‘So, which is it to be, Sabbath? Anger or pragmatism? Hurt pride, or future investment?’

‘You don’t control me,’ Sabbath said. His voice was strained. ‘You never have and you never will. It’s all bluff, all a trick. You never intended to face the sacrifice of your own life. You never intended me even to have this gun.’

‘No?’

‘Don’t underestimate him,’ the Doctor said. ‘What he says *could* be true.’

‘Be quiet!’ Sabbath yelled. For a moment he jabbed the gun at the Doctor. ‘If he’s telling the truth, then my best course would be to shoot you, Doctor. Don’t you forget that.’

‘Oh, I won’t forget that,’ the Doctor assured him.

‘A good point,’ Octan said. ‘And perhaps that is what you will do. You know, it is fascinating watching you come to the inevitable decision. Though perhaps *decision* is the wrong word, under the circumstances. Don’t you realise yet, this is what your whole life has been about, Sabbath. Ever since we saved you from the Thames.’ His ice-face twisted into something that might have been a grin. ‘But what am I saying? We haven’t saved you. Not yet.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sabbath demanded, the gun pointing again at Octan. ‘What are you implying?’

Octan spread his hands, as if it were all childishly simple. ‘You don’t really think we would save you, go through the process of grooming you for *this* moment unless we already knew that you would make the right choice?’ He clasped his hands together in front of him. ‘You will make the right choice though. I can see that now. Everything has gone so terribly well. Which is why I just ordered Logite to send the Time Agent.’

The Doctor was nodding, understanding now. ‘The Time Agent that saves Sabbath from the Thames.’

The murky water seemed to shimmer and distort as the creature materialised below the surface of the river. It knew that in a few seconds the human it was waiting for would fall literally into its waiting arms.

From above, the huge, black apelike being must seem like some dark leviathan lifting itself from the surface of the riverbed as it crystallised into existence and reached up to enfold the struggling man in its arms. He was already losing consciousness, his vision blurring, his mind affected by the lack of oxygen. Hallucinating, yet seeing the impossible take place through the rising bubbles of his final breath.

Then the arms closed round him, and both life forms vanished. Taken from the Thames along a Time Corridor to arrive in Cambridge a split-second later. On a cold morning in 1762.

‘The very fact of your survival’, Octan was saying, ‘has always been proof to me that you would fulfil your destiny. That you would come to this moment.’

That you would make the right choice, exactly as I have predicted.'

'Oh I'm not sure we can say that for certain yet, can we?' The Doctor sounded like it was an academic discussion. He ignored the gun in Sabbath's hand and the desiccated body at his feet. But his face was drawn and his eyes were burning with anger. 'You may think that you have control, but I for one still believe in free will. Even in a single universe there is room for Sabbath to do what he believes is right. To make a choice. If it happens to coincide with your wishes, well then bully for you. But that's not prediction, that isn't a qualification for universal domination. That's just luck. I mean,' he went on, 'it isn't difficult to guess what he'll do. Which of us he will kill.'

'The obvious thing,' Octan agreed, 'is for him to kill you. If he can see past his anger and use the skills in strategy and planning that he is so proud of.' He pointed to Sabbath, in case anyone had missed the fact that the gun was still aimed across the room at the Doctor. 'Are you looking forward to screaming forever, Doctor?'

The Doctor smiled back at Octan. 'I don't have to, do I? Because,' he was speaking to Sabbath now, 'I know that he won't shoot me.'

When Sabbath spoke his voice was strained with emotion. 'Why not, Doctor? It is the obvious thing to do. Either I have free will and can decide for myself, in which case my best interests are served by helping Octan fulfil his plans. Or if I have no real choice in the matter, I go with his prediction. And I kill you anyway.'

'But you won't do that. You won't do it because you have been used.' The Doctor's voice was quiet and level. 'And you won't do it because of Juliette.'

Sabbath stared at him. At first he looked blank. Then puzzled, and finally his mouth opened slightly and his eyes widened as realisation spread across his face. 'Juliette... I remember.' He turned slowly towards Octan, bringing the gun round. 'What happened to Juliette?'

'Nothing,' Octan said. He glanced at the Doctor, just enough for the Doctor to realise with a sting of guilt-satisfaction that he was annoyed, that this was not part of his plan. 'Nothing at all.'

'I suspect he is right,' the Doctor said. 'Juliette was never supposed to leave London with you in the *Jonah*. Maybe she was never supposed to survive. They couldn't allow you the distraction, the influence she might have exerted over you. So, they took her away. Perhaps one of your own apes from the crew brought her here at dead of night, leaving her to languish in a Schrödinger Cell, while they persuaded you to forget.' His eyes met

Sabbath's. 'Leaving Juliette as a might-have-been. A non-person. Never mentioned or even recalled. Forgotten for ever.'

The gun was shaking in Sabbath's hand. His knuckles were white as he tried to steady it, pointing it directly at Octan. 'You bastard,' he hissed.

'Go ahead.' He seemed resigned to the fate. 'After all, perhaps that is what I have predicted.'

'Your own death?' the Doctor asked. He pursed his lips. 'Well, better people than you have given their lives so that others might live.' He glanced down at the skeleton lying close by. 'Far, far better.' He sighed. 'I suppose it isn't impossible, though it does seem out of character.'

'I could shoot no one,' Sabbath said.

Octan nodded. 'In theory. But one of us must die. One way or another. Where you are concerned, Sabbath, my predictions always come true.'

The Doctor cleared his throat noisily. 'As I understand it, your grand scheme rather depends on that fact. On the rather arrogant assumption that you are never wrong, in particular about Sabbath here.'

They were both watching him, listening carefully – Octan probably wondering what the Doctor would try next, and Sabbath hoping for some clue as to how he was expected to act.

'But, and correct me if I'm wrong here,' the Doctor went on, 'you don't even know that Sabbath was in the Tower of London when your Time Agent took the princes in 1485.'

They both just stared at him. The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'Does that help the debate? At all?' he wondered.

Sabbath seemed about to say something. Then he changed his mind, turned back towards Octan. 'Well?'

'He's lying.' But the certainty was gone now. 'You were never in the Tower. I know your every move, your every moment from the cradle to now.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Suit yourself. Some people just won't be told, will they?' He fixed Sabbath with a steady stare. 'But Sabbath and I are the ones who have been planning for this moment. We have been together every step of the way. And I tell you, if you want proof that he too is a Rogue Element like me, then send an Agent to the Tower to check.' He made a play of slapping his forehead in mock realisation. 'Oh, but you can't can you? You can't have another Agent arrive while we were there, because we didn't see it, did we? So we know it wasn't there. And,' he added, eyes still fixed on Sabbath, 'making a false prediction that is never fulfilled is

an embarrassment, but getting a prediction wrong – completely and utterly wrong – well, that would be catastrophic, wouldn't it?"

For the first time, Octan seemed genuinely concerned. He took a step towards the Doctor, then seemed to remember that Sabbath was aiming the Vortex Gun at him. He stopped, his face a transparent mask of anger. 'Liar,' he spat. 'Liar!'

The Doctor's hands went to his chest – what me? He looked down, affronted. 'But, my pants aren't on fire.' He checked his nose. 'Doesn't seem as long as a telegraph wire.' Under other circumstances he might have been enjoying himself.

'Logite!' Octan shouted.

The screen that was a window into the Council Chamber seemed to shimmer. The figures that had been watching the scene before them, transfixed, now shuffled uncomfortably. Logite stepped closer.

'Did you hear that? Can you scan the Tower, immediately after the princes were removed?'

Logite nodded, hurried out of sight of the screen.

'Calling my bluff?' the Doctor said. 'That should be interesting.'

'Perhaps I left no trace,' Sabbath said slowly. 'Perhaps there will be no evidence that I was there.'

'You are only human. There will be evidence,' Octan snarled. '*If* you were there.'

The image on the screen changed, fading from the view of the Council Chamber to a mass of data. Over it, Logite's voice said: 'Here is the scan you wanted. I have highlighted the relevant data. What do you –'

Octan cut off his voice with a gesture.

A string of alpha numerics rose from the data, as if lifted from the page.

'Well now,' the Doctor said quietly. 'There's a thing.'

'What is it?' Sabbath demanded.

'Your DNA. In the princes' rooms. In 1485.'

'No!' Octan shouted. 'No, it's a trick. I know every moment of your life.'

'Evidently not,' Sabbath told him.

'It is your own data, your own scan,' the Doctor pointed out. 'Sabbath may yet surprise you. Perhaps he already has.'

'No,' Octan said again, but quieter now. 'No, I see what you have done.'

'Oh? I'm not sure that I do,' the Doctor replied.

'Sabbath was in the Tower in 1485. That is now proven.'

‘If you say so.’ He almost pulled out the handkerchief to wipe his brow. Almost. It was a temptation to wave Sabbath’s dried blood in his face, but it was one that the Doctor resisted. Too much was at stake for gloating. And he didn’t feel like gloating, only cold anger. Besides, he wanted to hear how Octan would rationalise it.

‘But he has not been there *yet*.’

‘Oh, that’s clever,’ the Doctor admitted.

Octan raised his voice. ‘Logite, are you listening?’ He did not wait for a reply. ‘After he has killed. . . one of us, send Sabbath to the Tower of London, to coincide with the scan. Do it before the star-killer is charged.’

‘Ha!’ The Doctor’s cry made Sabbath flinch. ‘Gotcha! Why order Logite to do that, when you could do it yourself. *If*,’ the Doctor said, ‘Sabbath kills me.’ He turned to Sabbath. ‘He’s predicted you will kill *him*. Don’t do it.’ He took a step forwards, fiercely angry and intently serious. ‘Sabbath, it is vital – it is absolutely essential to the survival of History – that you kill *me*.’ Another step, and the Doctor was beside Sabbath, standing in front of the gun. ‘Do it now.’

‘But can you be sure?’ Octan shouted across the room. Was there a note of desperation in his voice? ‘Perhaps I have predicted this too?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But what does Sabbath think? Assuming he has any will of his own. He is not your lackey, Doctor. You’ve maintained all along that this is *his* decision, not mine. It is not yours either. And for all your conceit and arrogance, you could be wrong.’

‘Getting a bit worried now, are you?’ the Doctor asked. He wondered if he should feel worried himself. Scared even, at the prospect of eternal agony. But he just felt numb and empty.

Sabbath reached out his free hand and pushed the Doctor firmly aside. ‘I have made my decision,’ he said quietly. ‘I know what I must do.’

‘At last,’ Octan breathed. ‘As I have foretold. Now it begins.’

‘Kill me,’ the Doctor pleaded.

But Sabbath shook his head. ‘Oh no, Doctor. He’s right – that could indeed be what he wants. And even if it isn’t, it would be a victory of sorts for him. You said that if he has predicted wrongly – not just said that something will happen that then does not, but actually decided on an incorrect outcome of events, staked his very existence on it – that will be catastrophic.’ He looked deep into the Doctor’s eyes. ‘Is that true?’

'I believe so,' the Doctor said quietly, beginning to understand.

'And you know, you believe with complete certainty,' he said to Octan, 'that I have never yet been to the Tower of London in 1485? He did not wait for an answer. 'You are right, of course. I was never there. But for your prediction – your absolute certainty of future events to come about, for the power you need to be generated, I shall have to go there in the future, my future. Before that future is destroyed, and after I kill one of you two in this room. Otherwise. . . ' He paused, sighed, his whole massive frame heaving as he did so. 'Catastrophe.'

'Sabbath,' the Doctor said quietly, shaking his head, 'no. . . '

Sabbath was laughing now, great guffaws that echoed round the room. Octan was staring at him as if he were mad. Then, as if he suddenly had an inkling of what was about to happen, he started to run, hurling himself towards the Vortex Gun.

Just as Sabbath stopped laughing. His face was immediately grave, set in stone. As he raised the gun.

'So, predict this!' Sabbath shouted as the barrel of the gun touched his own temple.

Across the room, an hourglass exploded. Iron-like crystal and glass rained down as the sound of the shot echoed round the room. A rush of wind, the first hints of an eternal scream of rage and anger and pain and triumph. Then Sabbath was gone.

Opening Time at the Lost and Found

Worlds away, a man ran through the jungle. Frantic.

She had been here. Just moments ago she had called out to him. But now, no sign. He stopped, caught his breath, looking round all the time. She could not just have vanished – gone in the blink of a thought. Impossible.

And yet he could see no sign of her, nothing to say she had ever been here. Ever existed. Tears rolled down his face and he wiped at them with the back of his hand, dragging Amazon mud across his cheek. He would have to get back to the camp, get help, organise a search.

Professor Clifford Jones threw back his head and shouted – not worried any longer about scaring or alerting the animals that shared the jungle with him. He screamed for her at the top of his voice:

‘Jo!’

The Doctor walked stiffly across to the TARDIS. The key was still hanging from the lock and he opened the door, pocketing the key.

‘You know,’ he said, his tone light but his face dark, ‘you couldn’t predict anything. Not really. You think you’re in control of History, but in fact you’re just a part of it like everyone else.’

Fitz stepped out of the TARDIS, his face drained and pale. Behind him Zezanne fell into the Doctor’s embrace. He held her tight for a moment, then stood her on her feet next to Fitz.

‘I am so sorry,’ he said. ‘So very sorry.’ Then he turned back towards the enraged Octan. ‘So, what now? Any more predictions, or are you ready to accept the inevitable?’

‘I shall get the power,’ Octan was shaking with anger. ‘Somehow, I shall get it.’

‘Oh really?’

‘I control you, Doctor. Your whole life.’

‘Oh really?’

‘And the lives of your companions, past and present.’

The Doctor sighed. 'Not that again. Can't you understand? You have lost. You're running on empty. Pretty soon, without the injection of energy you were planning, this place will fall apart – and you with it.'

'I still have the Schrödinger Cells, and I can still force you to my will.'

'And how is that?' the Doctor asked, polite as afternoon tea.

Octan did not answer, but turned and strode from the room.

'I think maybe we'd better follow him,' Fitz said.

The Apes were waiting outside the room. They had changed their Victorian uniforms for straightforward body armour and heavy boots. It made them look dull, brown, unremarkable. The only real adornment was a thick sash of material that ran from the belt up and over the shoulder.

'Bring them,' Octan ordered, something of his confidence apparently restored, as soon as the Doctor, Fitz and Zezanne stepped out into the corridor.

'Where are we going?' Fitz wanted to know, struggling to remove a large hairy paw from his shoulder. 'I can manage, thank you.'

They stopped outside a blank door in the wall of the corridor. Stretching ahead of them, Fitz could see that the whole corridor was lined with identical, featureless doors. He could not see the end of the corridor, it was so long. Infinite, perhaps.

'A Schrödinger Cell, I imagine,' the Doctor said.

'Not any more,' Octan told them. 'I had reason to open it. Now it is just a cell.'

He reached up and placed his glass hand on a small crystal pad beside the door. 'Only I can open the cells,' he explained. 'They are keyed to my crystalline infrastructure. As a precaution, a security measure.'

'Because you don't trust your colleagues?' the Doctor suggested.

The crystal shutter slid back to reveal a small room. Inside was a table and two chairs, each carved out of pale crystal. Two figures were seated at the table. Two boys. One of them stood up as the door opened.

'Chad,' Fitz said.

'That isn't really his name,' Octan said dismissively, as if it didn't matter what the boy was called.

He had already moved on to the next door as the two boys stepped out into the corridor to join the Doctor, Fitz and Zezanne.

'She misheard me,' Chad said, nodding at Zezanne. 'When we first met at the Institute. I was nervous, frightened. I didn't like to correct her.'

‘So what is your name?’ Zezanne asked him.

But Octan was speaking again. ‘*This* is a Schrödinger Cell,’ he said. ‘And there are more than enough here to provide the energy we need to maintain stability until I can devise an alternative way to power the star-killer. Perhaps a slow build-up of energy will suffice.’ He nodded to the Ape by the door, and he placed his hand on the sensor panel. ‘Adding to the reserves of power little by little. Death by death.’

As the door slid open, the lights dimmed and the floor beneath their feet seemed to drop away before stabilising again.

‘Sure you can afford to waste energy like this?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Every door you open, the power is dissipated, seeps away forever as History finally chooses a path.’

‘It’s Richard,’ Chad said quietly to Fitz and Zezanne. ‘My name is Richard.’

But Fitz was not listening. He was looking into the room, a room identical to the one where Chad and his brother had been kept. A room where two people were rising to their feet from crystal chairs and looking in surprise at the figures grouped in the doorway: Professor Ernest Fleetward and Trix.

‘Brought from the end of History itself, by one of my Time Agents,’ Octan said proudly.

‘Looks like you’ve saved me a journey,’ the Doctor said. He was trying to smile, trying to sound casual and offhand. But there was a tiredness and a steel to his voice that he seemed unable to shake off. ‘I was intending to pick them up in the TARDIS when I’d finished here.’ He turned to Trix. ‘Sorry about that. I know now that there was no cataclysmic event.’ He glanced at Octan. ‘Just a megalomaniac with a rather insecure grasp of temporal physics.’

Octan ignored him. ‘Get them out of there,’ he ordered one of the Apes. It lumbered heavily into the room, but Trix and Fleetward were already on their way out, hands up to show they were harmless.

‘Now what?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Tea and shortbread, perhaps?’

One of the other Apes thrust Richard – Chad, as Fitz still thought of him – and his brother forward so they were standing opposite Trix and Fleetward.

‘A little demonstration,’ Octan said. ‘To show the power of prediction, and to prove that I can harness that power.’

He held up his hand, the glasslike fingers stretching upwards, elongating, becoming blades. When they were a good nine inches long, Octan reached across with his other hand and snapped off two of his fingers. Two brittle,

razor-sharp edges of crystal. A shake of his hand, and it was back to normal. He held out the knives he had made to the two boys. 'Take them,' he ordered.

'What are you doing?' Fitz demanded. He had a sudden, unpleasant premonition. From the way Trix was pulling away, trying to break free from the Ape that now held her tight, he guessed that she too realised what was about to happen.

The boys looked at the crystal daggers, then at each other. Finally they turned to Octan.

'You know what I am going to tell them to do,' he said to the Doctor. 'And I know that they will do it.' He turned to the boys. 'Because, you both know what will happen to your hourglasses – to each other's hourglasses – if you refuse.'

Fitz could see the fear in their eyes. Each held his dagger tight, like a talisman.

Octan nodded at Trix and Fleetward. 'Kill them,' he said simply.

Trix seemed to have accepted her fate. She watched Chad approach her, the knife held out before him, trembling slightly. His brother mirrored his actions, advancing on Fleetward.

'Come on,' Octan encouraged. 'When you come from death is cheap. A knife in the guts an everyday event.'

When Trix spoke, her voice was different. Fitz expected her to be nervous, frightened – God knew, he would be. The knife was inches from her chest. But instead she seemed to draw herself up, gain in stature and confidence, and her voice took on a haughty, almost aristocratic quality as she flicked her head so her hair was away from her face.

'That is why,' she said, 'nobody ever lives happily ever after in real life.'

Chad stopped dead in his tracks. He looked at his brother, who had also stopped.

'Not like in the stories,' Trix went on. 'Not like in *Cinderella*.' She sighed. 'Your uncle is dead,' she said quietly. 'He lost the battle.' She sounded sad. 'No happy ever after for him either. I'm sorry.'

An almost metallic, almost musical sound as Chad's crystal dagger fell to the floor, bounced, twisted, fell again, shattered. His brother's was a moment behind.

'Aunt Beatrice?' Chad said. 'Is it really you?'

'Hello Richard,' she said, pulling free from the Ape, who seemed as surprised at events as everyone else. She turned to the boy's brother. 'Hello

Edward.’ Then, to Fitz’s amazement, she curtsied. ‘My lords.’

Octan was also staring in amazement. The Doctor laughed. Fitz was standing beside him, could see into his burning eyes – he could tell that while he sounded like he was amused, inside the Doctor was blazing with anger.

When he spoke, the Doctor’s voice was controlled, quiet. But it had a hard, sharp edge. ‘You couldn’t predict the toss of a double-headed coin,’ he told Octan.

Octan swung round. ‘How dare you!’ he screamed at the Doctor, point blank. ‘You are ruining everything.’

‘I think that rather depends on your viewpoint and your definitions,’ the Doctor replied, still outwardly calm. ‘It isn’t me that has tried to manipulate History itself. And failed. It isn’t me who has killed – and worse – just for my own irrelevant survival. And failed. It isn’t me –’

But Octan cut him off. ‘I have not failed. I have never failed.’

The Doctor tilted his head to one side. ‘Well, excuse me. You killed, caused the death of my daughter.’ Now his anger was apparent. Now he shouted back, just as loudly, just as vehemently: ‘For nothing!’

‘We shall be lords of all Time.’

‘No you won’t,’ Fitz said. ‘The Doctor’s got you beaten. Even a dork like me can predict that.’

‘Sabbath’s death, his manner of death. The fact that he defied and destroyed your prediction has started to unravel the chain of causality you so carefully tried to establish,’ the Doctor said. ‘You can’t stop it now. You can’t put the universes back in the bottle.’

‘The Schrödinger Cells will continue to provide the power we need,’ Octan said. He was regaining a little of his composure, asserting himself again.

But the Doctor shook his head. ‘Trix and Professor Fleetward would have come here anyway. I had already decided to collect them in the TARDIS.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ Trix said quietly. She had her arms round the two boys. Zezanne and Fleetward were standing beside them.

‘So their being here was hardly an indeterminate,’ the Doctor went on. ‘It’s only the manner of their arrival that was in doubt.’

‘No matter. The other cells will provide power.’

The Doctor leaned forward, his face close to the glass of Octan’s. ‘No they won’t,’ he said, his voice quiet and assured. ‘The Schrödinger Cells don’t work either. They are empty.’ He spoke clearly, separating each word for emphasis: ‘Every single one is empty.’ He straightened up again. ‘Your whole

plan, your whole existence, is based on a false premise. It works – or rather worked, for a while – only because you believed in it.’ He gave a short laugh. ‘Fuelled by your own gullibility. And that’s what will destroy you.’

For a moment, Octan stared back at the Doctor. His whole transparent form was shaking with anger. ‘You’re lying,’ he hissed.

The Doctor simply shook his head.

‘Prove it!’ Octan shouted.

The Doctor shook his head again. ‘I don’t have to prove it. I know.’

The glass man stood there, uncertain what to do. Then he came to a decision, and turned abruptly. He walked to the nearest door, hesitated a moment, his hand over the opening panel. He slammed his hand on to the panel, and the door hissed quietly open.

To reveal an empty room.

The floor shook beneath their feet, the lights flickered. Octan seemed not to notice. He was staring into the room. ‘No,’ he said, so quietly that Fitz only just heard. Then he stepped back, lifted his head and bellowed: ‘No!’

Slowly he turned, head down, to retrace his steps through the jungle. Alone.

Then, distant at first and echoing as if they were in a corridor, he thought he heard footsteps. Closer now – the tramp of feet on the jungle floor, crushing through the vegetation, clumsily running towards him. She was always clumsy, since they first met.

Cliff looked up – to see her running towards him. From exactly where she should have been. Exactly where she *had* been just moments before.

‘Cliff, what is it? Why were you shouting? What’s wrong?’ Jo gasped.

‘Nothing,’ he said, hugging her close to him. ‘Not now, love. I thought...’ He laughed, it was so silly. ‘This place must be getting to me. I thought I’d lost you.’

Jo grinned back at him. ‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she said.

The events in the corridor were displayed on the crystal table in the Council Chamber. The seven members of the Council watched as the door opened to reveal the empty cell.

‘He’s very clever,’ Fear said. There was more than a hint of admiration in his voice.

‘He’s destroying us,’ Hexx pointed out.

‘But with such style. Don’t you think?’

Duvar nodded. 'So obvious, yet our esteemed leader can't see it.'

'His anger makes him blind,' Trilon agreed. 'He was always rather volatile, haven't I said so?'

'We can't just sit here and talk about it,' Penter snapped.

Sept laughed. 'What else do we ever do?'

'Has he realised?' Hexx wondered. 'Or will he open another cell?'

Soul stared at the table. When he spoke, it was in barely more than a whisper. When he spoke, the others listened. 'At the moment the door is opened, History is forced to decide, to determine the indeterminate state. It's a simple choice in each case – were the occupants of the cell really brought here, to this Vortex Station, or were they left to continue their lives uninterrupted?'

'Sabbath's death has given the Doctor the upper hand,' Fear agreed. 'So in each case, History will decide that they were not brought here.'

'So the cells are found to be empty,' Duvar said. His tone implied he thought this was obvious. 'Because opening them destroys us. And if we are destroyed, we cannot have sent the Agents. And if we never sent the Agents, they were never brought here.'

'So the cells must be empty,' Trilon agreed. 'That proves that they do actually work. And so it goes on – a process that fuels itself. Ironically.'

'Just what Octan was trying to achieve,' Penter said.

'And soon we will never have existed,' Soul added.

The lights dimmed noticeably, the floor shifted beneath them. Fragments of crystal fell from the vaulted ceiling and scattered across the image on the table. The image of Octan opening another door.

Again the cell was empty. Again Octan stared in anger and amazement.

'It is not possible,' he said.

'Not what you expected?' the Doctor asked, over polite.

Somewhere deep within the structure of the Vortex Station there was a ripping, tearing sound. As if the whole place was being torn apart. Fitz looked at the Doctor.

The Doctor looked back. And winked.

While Octan moved swiftly, angrily, blindly to open another door.

The walls of the Council Chamber were shaking. The whole room seemed to be getting smaller. The ceiling shifted, slanted, slumped. The image on the

screen was slowly disappearing in a mess of static and a snowstorm of white noise.

‘How much longer, I wonder?’ Trilon said. ‘Not that it matters.’

‘Think of the energy loss when he opens Cell Number Eight. . .’ Hexx left the rest unsaid. They all knew what would happen. What was inside.

The ceiling shifted lower again.

‘Space contracts,’ Penter said. ‘Infinity becomes finite.’

‘And we just sit here and observe,’ Soul said. ‘As we have always done.’

‘What else is there to do?’ Hexx protested. ‘Just by observing we have condemned ourselves to death, to never-having-existed.’

‘There is one way we could survive,’ Fear said. They all turned to look at him. He grinned, as if about to deliver the punchline to an after-dinner joke. ‘You mentioned infinity. Now, if there were infinite possible histories and choices. . .’

‘But there aren’t,’ Sept said. ‘We made sure of that.’

‘Mmm. Another mistake, perhaps?’

Soul opened his mouth to reply. But before he could manage it, the ceiling collapsed. A great slab of crystal smashed down and shattered across the table, blocking the room. Seated closest to the door, Soul was on the other side from the others. He could hear Fear’s deep, confident voice booming through and around the crystal barrier.

‘That saves us asking for volunteers.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Soul replied, though he doubted they could hear him. ‘I shall make sure that the cell is opened.’

As he hurried from the room, the ground shaking beneath his feet and the walls dripping shards of broken crystal, he wondered if he would make it, or whether Schrödinger Cell Eight would be sucked, unopened, into the vortex. . .

‘Stop it! You have to stop it!’

The Apes had fled as the ceiling of the corridor collapsed. Trix, Fitz and the others were huddled in a doorway as crystal that was sharp as glass rained down around them.

Along the corridor, Octan opened another door – and the wall close to where Fitz was standing shattered and collapsed. A gale seemed to be blowing through the corridor, whipping the crystal fragments into a deadly blizzard.

Logite was struggling towards where Octan stood, the Doctor beside him, hands in pockets, watching like an enthusiastic student.

‘Can’t you see what’s happening?’ Logite screamed above the howl of the wind as Time itself began to rip through the Vortex Station. ‘Can’t you see what he’s made you do?’

Octan hesitated. He lowered his hand from the panel of the door he was about to open. He looked round, as if realising for the first time what *was* happening. As if realising for the first time that he had done this himself.

‘You tricked me!’ he roared at the Doctor.

The Doctor tilted his head to one side, all sympathy. ‘You fell for it. Predictably.’

Octan was looking round desperately. ‘I shall stop this,’ he said.

The Doctor threw back his head and roared with laughter. ‘You can’t stop it,’ he said between guffaws. ‘Don’t you understand? You have no influence on History at all. You make no decisions, you change nothing, you don’t act – you just observe. You can’t stop anything.’ His eyes fixed on Octan’s. ‘You couldn’t stop a butterfly from flapping its wings.’

Twice upon a Time

Logite grabbed Octan's arm. 'We have to get out of here. The whole place is breaking up, can't you see? Maybe we can get home.' He paused, as if aware of how ridiculous that must sound. The Station seemed to creak and groan around them. 'There's barely any power left. Space is collapsing in on itself and the Time Winds will –'

Octan shook himself free. 'I can see that. I know what's happening.'

'And he's powerless to do anything about it,' the Doctor said.

'I am not powerless!'

'Then prove it.'

'We have to get out,' Logite repeated. His voice was quieter now, or perhaps it was lost in the howl of the Time Winds. 'Only, there's nowhere to go.'

'Come on, Doctor!' Fitz yelled down the corridor. 'We have to go!'

The Doctor ran back towards where his friends were sheltering from the destruction. 'Soon,' he said. 'Just one small detail to sort out, then we can go. You head back for the TARDIS.'

'But it's just a box,' Zezanne said.

'Not once this place breaks up. Hurry.'

'Come on,' Trix urged, grabbing Richard's and Edward's hands, and leading them away.

Fitz and Fleetward followed. Zezanne hesitated for a moment, looking at the Doctor. He forced a smile. 'I'll see you soon. I promised I'd look after you.'

He watched her nod, turn, run after the others. Then the Doctor turned back to face Octan and Logite.

They were arguing, shouting over the increasing noise, oblivious to the larger chunks of crystal that were now crashing down around them.

'Just do it!' Octan shouted.

'But what's the point? It will use more power. And you can never get back.'

'I'll show him,' Octan snarled, pointing at the Doctor – as if his finger were a gun. 'I'll prove to him that I could have won.'

'Not in a million years,' the Doctor retorted. 'Not in all eternity. I challenge you. The tiniest of creatures, the smallest of events. A butterfly's wings. Go on – stop the butterfly. If you can.' He did not wait to see Octan's expression, he did not wait to hear the answer to his challenge. He turned and walked away. Through the devastation that rained down, through the cloud of debris and the roar of destruction. And none of it touched him.

Logite caught up with the Doctor. Will he manage? Tell me he will do it – this one small victory, to prove to himself it was possible.'

The Doctor shook his head without looking at Logite. 'No.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because it has already happened. You can't change History.'

Zezone was waiting round the corner. She looked embarrassed as the Doctor's eyes narrowed. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded. 'I sent you all back to the TARDIS.'

'I wanted to be with you.'

The Doctor grunted. It might have been disapproval, or it might have been acceptance. 'The unpredictability of youth,' he muttered.

'Are we going back to the TARDIS now?'

'In a minute. Logite here is going to show us something first. If there's enough power left.'

'What?' Zezone asked, running to keep up with the Doctor's purposeful march through the disintegrating crystal corridor.

'Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end of things.'

'He must do it,' Logite muttered. 'He must do it...'

The star-killer, was locked into a console in the main Monitoring Suite. Soul saw it as he hurried through. He paused, considered. He could not just leave it here. Even though the Station was breaking up, it might survive, might be found by...

There was only one technician left. And as Soul watched, he exploded into fragments. Soul could imagine the technician's hourglass, crushed by the infinity-collapse, shattered into fragments, its fate visited on its owner. He had to hurry. It was only a matter of time before his own glass was destroyed, and then...

He strode across the room and took the star-killer from its bracket, disconnecting the potential energy supply linkages. An adjustment, and the crystalline structure was reconfigured, the glasslike rod folded, contracted, split into five stubby rods. A smaller device, like a spiked ball, that would fit into the pocket of Soul's cloak. It looked, he thought as he pushed it inside, like a distorted, misshapen glass hand.

As he turned, the Doctor and Logite came into the room, followed by the girl Zezanne.

'So it ends,' Soul said.

'So it does,' the Doctor replied. 'Or rather, like this.' He turned and gestured to the screen that Logite was operating. An image swam hazily into view on the cracked slab of crystal.

'Did he open Schrödinger Cell Eight?' Soul asked Logite. When he got no reply, he grabbed Logite's hard, crystal shoulder. 'I have to know.'

Logite paused, turned for a second, no more, then his attention was fixed back on the screen. 'He wasn't that stupid.'

'Then I must do it,' Soul said.

The screen showed a jungle clearing. Data and monitoring information flowed across the bottom of the image. As they watched, the air seemed to shimmer and split, and a creature faded into view...

>> Tracking...

>> Portal established. Stable. Agent emerging into real time...

It was like a man, but it was also like an ape – a distorted mixture of both species, and of more besides. The huge figure stood motionless, perhaps sniffing the air. Its shaggy head turned slowly towards the screen and the creature took a massive, lumbering step forwards. It gathered speed as it crossed the clearing. Its feet, its paws, thumped into the ground and made the foliage shake.

>> Target position locked and located...

>> Proceeding...

>> Real time co-ordinates established and verified...

>> Countdown to Event Initiation... No-interruption to be tolerated...

But before the Time Agent reached the other side of the clearing, another figure staggered into view, blundering into its path. A man made of glass.

Octan.

He was waving his hands, shouting, screaming at the Time Agent to stop, to wait, to abandon its mission. Not to release the butterfly.

But the creature seemed not to notice. It knocked the glass man sideways, backwards, sent him sprawling, cartwheeling head over heels. Back towards the rift in the air where it had itself appeared.

For a moment Octan was caught on the very brink, arms flailing, trying to regain his balance. But the forces within the Time Corridor took hold, hauling him backwards. He seemed to stare at the screen – through the screen at the Doctor, his face a glass mask of fear and realisation. Perhaps he could see himself, trying desperately to communicate at the Institute, trying to warn his own past self what was to happen and knowing he must fail. Knowing that the Vortex Gun would plunge him screaming into eternity itself.

Then he fell backwards. The raw power of the Time Winds was stripping the crystalline flesh from the glass bones until his face was a deathly skull and his body an icy skeleton, ripped apart, scattered along the Time Corridor that the creature would return to once its mission was complete. . .

The butterfly's paper-thin wings beat gently as it lifted itself into the air, dark red against the brilliant yellow of the sun and the blue of the sky. It fluttered along its unpredictable course without a care in the world.

Another shelf in the room full of hourglasses collapsed, sending glass and crystal flying.

'Where is he?' Fleetward shouted. He had given up hammering on the door to the police box. Now he was huddled with the others in its shelter as the room fell apart around them.

'He'll be here,' Trix shouted back. 'He won't abandon us.'

'That,' said Fitz, 'is the one thing we can predict.'

An hourglass toppled from a collapsing shelf, twisting and tumbling before smashing to pieces.

And in the Monitoring Suite, Logite exploded into a million crystal fragments.

The Doctor spared him a glance, shook his head sadly. 'Come on.' He reached out his hand for Zezanne's. Almost caught her fingers before the roof came crashing down.

Almost.

'Doctor!' Her voice came through from the other side of the mass of debris. A crack opened in the floor at his feet as the Doctor scrabbled at the barrier between them. But to no avail.

Then a hand appeared, thrust through the wall of collapsed crystal. A hand apparently made of quartz.

The Doctor grabbed it, held on.

'Is she all right?' he shouted.

'Yes,' the old man called back. 'But we are trapped this side.'

'Is there no way out?'

'Yes,' Zezanne called back, afraid, a child. 'But the whole place is breaking apart.'

'There's no time to get right round the Station and back to you. Even if it were intact,' Soul called. 'And I have to open Cell Number Eight.'

'But why?' He was breaking his nails trying to prise a way through with his free hand. Still holding the old man's with his other. 'What's inside?'

'Everything.'

The Doctor paused. Stopped trying to pull away the mass of crystal. 'I understand,' he said.

'If we can open the cell. That is worth my life.' A pause. 'Our lives.'

Another shelf collapsed. A high shelf, the hourglasses on it ornate and grand. They had no names on them. Just numbers. One by one they slipped and slid and fell. . .

In the Council Chamber, six men made of crystal sat in silence.

One of them cracked, splintered, and fell to pieces.

Another seemed to be melting.

A third simply burst apart. His face exploded inwards – as if he were made of glass and had been dropped.

The others watched impassively. Awaiting their inevitable fate. . .

The Doctor felt the hand he was holding crack. Hairline fracture: skittered out across it. The hand was brittle and old and fragile.

‘Hold on!’ the Doctor shouted. ‘You must open the door. Don’t fall apart on us now. Zezanne – look after him!’

The old man’s voice was tired and strained. ‘I can realign my crystalline structure to match any form. If I can still match Octan convince the door I am he – then it will open.’ The hand tried to pull free. ‘I must go.’

‘No, wait. Just a second,’ the Doctor shouted back. The floor was collapsing now, shattering underneath him. ‘Look after Zezanne. I promised. And feel my hand – feel my form and structure. Model yourself on that as Octan modelled himself on Patterson. Add that to the crystalline matrix. It will give you strength, it will give you knowledge.’

‘Knowledge?’

‘There is a way out, an escape,’ the Doctor shouted. The hand he was holding was warm – old, lined, weak, but warm. Almost human. ‘Take the knowledge to use it. My knowledge, and Octan’s structure.’

The hand was snatched away.

The Doctor grasped at space. ‘Wait – there is more! You haven’t taken enough of me.’ He collapsed to his knees. ‘I let her die,’ he said simply, quietly, to himself. Then he remembered the others – Fitz and Trix and Fleetward and the princes. He pulled himself to his feet, and ran across the floor, hopscotching on the last few solid stepping stones over infinity.

An old hand touched the panel. The door slid open.

Then another. And another – as many as the old man could manage as he staggered along the corridor with the girl.

Then at last, Cell Number Eight. His shaking hand stretched out, touched. . . The door opened – silent in the storm.

The possibility of multiple universes, an infinity of choices, leaped into existence. And with it, every possible outcome of every possible decision in History – even the survival, somewhere in another universe, of the Council of Eight.

The Doctor skidded into the hourglass room. He paused to glance at the broken glass and scattered crystal. He reached out a hand in time to catch a falling hourglass, saw the name on it – Fitz – and lowered it gently to the ground.

Then he plunged towards the TARDIS and dived inside. Fitz, Trix, Fleetward, Richard and Edward followed.

He slammed the door control. Dematerialised.

Six hourglasses faded with the TARDIS.

The roof fell in and the floor gave way.

A cracked hourglass embossed with a '1' fell twisting, broken, into the void. Beside it, crystals leaked from another – this one labelled 'Zezanne'.

Soul staggered, and clutched his chest. Zezanne supported him. Dragged him. She was almost collapsing herself.

A door. A circular hatch that blended almost seamlessly into the corridor wall. Except that the wall was giving way, disintegrating, while the hatch remained solid and whole.

Zezanne pushed the hatch open, and the two of them fell inside.

The hourglasses that were breaking up in the void faded into nothingness.

Above, behind, beside, before and after them, the Vortex Palace collapsed and shattered as the Time Winds ripped through it, scattering its broken remains to the corners of the Multiverse.

Somewhere beyond that, a spherical black eye, its iris a white disc, swung over the bank of controls it was monitoring. Watching, as it had been watching for what seemed like forever. It had seen the Vortex Station breaking apart, reality re-invoked and the multiverse restored. And now it tracked the star-killer on its journey through time and space. Watching. Planning. Waiting...

Alpha and Omega

‘Why have we come back here?’

‘There’s something here I need. Two somethings, actually.’

‘But, won’t there be trouble? Questions?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘It’s tomorrow night. Probably quite quiet.’

Fitz thought he looked haggard and drawn. Ever since they had come into the TARDIS, the Doctor had been quiet, lost in his own thoughts. Fitz tried going and standing beside him – offering his help, *being* there. But the Doctor had seemed not to notice. He was muttering, under his breath. Fitz only caught one phrase of it – repeated over and over:

‘She’ll be all right. I know she will. She’ll be all right. . .’

He did not have to ask who the Doctor meant. He felt guilty himself that he had not even noticed she was gone until they reached the hourglass room. And then – should he have gone back? Could he have found her? Saved her? Questions to which he would never have any answers, any more than the Doctor would.

As the TARDIS landed, the Doctor seemed to come to. His head lifted and he looked round, as if surprised to find he was not alone.

‘Ah. Fitz,’ he said. ‘Good.’ Then he saw the others, sitting at the table in the kitchen area, almost hidden among the remains of the mass of equipment that the Doctor had assembled what seemed like a lifetime – several lifetimes – ago. Fleetward and Trix were laughing and joking with the boys.

‘I promised to take you home,’ the Doctor said sadly to Richard and Edward. ‘But I’m afraid I can’t do that. At least, not in the way I meant. History cannot be changed.’

‘We sort of gathered,’ Trix told him. ‘So what do you suggest?’

‘Uncle is dead,’ Edward said quietly. ‘There’s no point going home.’

‘Henry Tudor will kill us,’ Richard said. It was not an emotive statement, just a fact he seemed resigned to.

The Doctor nodded. ‘He will. He would. In a universe somewhere close by, he did. And in another. . .’ He blew out a long breath. ‘Well, that’s a

different story altogether.'

Now here they were, in the Institute of Anthropology in the middle of the night. Again.

'Can I leave you here?'

Fleetward smiled and nodded. 'I can find my way home. Assuming I can get out of this place.'

'That should be easy enough now. One other thing, just to demonstrate that no matter what I might have told Octan, History really can be changed, and that it isn't actually all that difficult.'

'Yes?' Fleetward said. 'Anything.'

'Your tremendous invention of an unbreakable form of glass. Revolutionary, change-the-world stuff, you remember?'

'Yes.' His eyes seemed to glisten in the dim light as he recalled. But the Doctor was shaking his head. 'Forget it,' he said. 'Bad idea. And anyway, there's no material left to experiment on, is there.'

Fleetward's face fell into shadow. 'Oh. Oh, right then.'

The Doctor clapped him on the shoulder. 'That's the spirit. Now, I'll just open the doors for you before we go. For all three of you.' He walked quickly across the foyer to the main doors, fiddled a moment with the locks and bolts, and then threw them open.

'All three?' Fleetward asked as the Doctor returned. He seemed to have gone pale.

The Doctor looked back at him as if they had discussed this in detail, which they had not. Or as if it was obvious, which it wasn't. 'I can't take Richard and Edward home, to their home, now can I?'

'Well... ' Fleetward conceded. He looked as if he knew he had already lost whatever debate was about to take place.

'And roaming about through time and space having adventures is no life for young lads like these used to courtly matters, now is it?'

'I suppose not.'

'We'll go with you, Doctor,' Edward said suddenly.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows.

'We would be no trouble,' Richard promised.

'Out of the question,' the Doctor told them sternly. 'And anyway, it would be impolite to turn down Professor Fleetward's kind offer to look after you. *In loco parentis*. Isn't that right, Uncle Ernest?'

‘Well...’ Fleetward said again. ‘That is...’

‘Good,’ the Doctor decided. He strode off into the gloom. ‘Now I think what I want is over here. If you *could* just come and help, Fitz,’ he called back impatiently without turning.

‘Sorry,’ Fitz said. ‘Got to dash. Probably just a universe or two to save before we nip off again. You know what it’s like.’ He hurried after the Doctor.

Fitz found the Doctor standing by a display case. It seemed undamaged, but it was too dark to see what was inside. The Doctor had already lifted up one end and nodded enthusiastically for Fitz to take the other. Together they carried it back to the TARDIS.

‘Come along, Trix,’ the Doctor called as they passed. She was handing Fleetward a piece of paper. Then she shook his hand, before leaning forward and kissing each of the boys on the cheek. She knelt down in front of them, a hand on each boy’s shoulder as she spoke seriously to them – like a favourite aunt saying goodbye, Fitz thought. Promising to visit again soon, and tell them bedtime stories.

‘What was that you gave him?’ Fitz asked her as they got back to the TARDIS. He could see what was in the display case now, but why the Doctor wanted them he still had no idea.

‘I told him I knew someone who could help with adoption papers, child benefit, tax breaks. Even child care. Plus a friend for the boys.’

‘Another surrogate auntie?’

Trix just smiled.

‘Anyone I know?’ Fitz asked. But she didn’t need to answer. ‘I’m not sure she’ll thank you for it,’ he said.

But Trix ignored him. ‘Why does he want the skeletons?’ she asked.

‘He wants the skeletons,’ the Doctor replied, walking between them and draping an arm round each of their shoulders, ‘to leave under a staircase in the Tower of London.’

‘Ah,’ Fitz said.

‘Oh,’ Trix agreed.

‘No rush though.’ Already he was on his way across the console room, head down, hands jammed in pockets. ‘So long as we get them there in time to be dug up in 1674.’

‘And where are we going in the meantime?’ Fitz wanted to know.

‘Wherever the TARDIS takes us,’ the Doctor called back. ‘But first, I have to go and see an old friend. At least, he tells me he’s an old friend.’ He paused

in the doorway thinking about this. 'I'm afraid I really don't remember. But then,' he added, as he turned and left the room, 'sometimes that's the best way, isn't it?'

There is a room in the TARDIS where the Doctor never goes. . .

He is in there now.

Talking to an old friend – a face on a screen: wise and whimsical with hard eyes and a beard flecked with grey.

'I got her killed, perhaps both of them,' the Doctor is saying 'But what could I do?'

The face on the screen sighs. 'You did save the universe, Doctor. Again. It does seem to be becoming something of a habit.'

'I suppose it does.'

The face considered. 'And that,' it said after due deliberation, 'is hardly a bad thing, after all.'

'But the cost. . .'

'Yes, there is always a cost. Just look at me. Trapped in here.' The face twisted into what might have been a smile. Or a snarl. 'Old friend.'

But the Doctor was not watching. 'I suppose,' he said quietly, 'somewhere, somewhen, in a universe far far away. . .'

'Yes?'

'The tea will be getting cold.'

There is a room in the TARDIS where the Doctor never goes. . . When he leaves, he always locks the door.

Time and Time Again

‘Who am I?’

It was as if his memories had seeped away with the crystals from his hour-glass – his mind cracked and broken. He struggled to his feet. The girl helped him.

‘I don’t remember,’ she said. ‘It’s like my mind has leaked away leaving just a fog.’

‘Yes. . .’ Together they made their way slowly across to the central control station. Some of the controls seemed familiar, but others he had no idea what they did or how they did it.

‘I think we’re landing.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed.

‘Am I. . .?’ He struggled to remember, to claw back memories on the edge of his mind. ‘Am I the Doctor?’

‘Yes,’ she said hesitantly, as if trying to remember. Then, with more certainty: ‘Yes.’ She nodded as she thought she remembered.

He held up his hand, gazed at the old, wrinkled skin that was lined and textured like quartz. ‘Well,’ he said, shaking his head in an effort to clear the fog, sending his cascade of white hair into a frenzy. He held up his hands, tapping the tips of the fingers together. ‘Let’s see where we are then, shall we, hmm? Open the scanner, would you, my dear?’

‘Yes, Grandfather.’

And on a foggy evening in London in 1963 in just one of many universes, the *Jonah* blended into its surroundings for only the second and almost the last time. A police telephone box, in the corner of a junkyard at the end of a dark lane at the start of a long journey. . .

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I am indebted, as ever, to my editors Stephen Cole and Jacqueline Rayner – not least as they have helped to define and control the sequence of stories for the Doctor that *Sometime Never...* brings to a close.

Also, I would like to thank Lawrence Miles and Lance Parkin for creating such memorable and enduring characters as Sabbath and Miranda. Somewhere in another universe no doubt their adventures with or without the Doctor will continue no matter what I choose to have them do in this book. And that universe will be the richer for it.

Finally, thanks to all the authors who have contributed to the Doctor's ongoing story, and for you, the readers, who have, I hope, enjoyed the adventure. There are many more ahead.

About the Author

JUSTIN RICHARDS has written many *Doctor Who* novels as well as lots of other things, including *Doctor Who: The Legend* – the BBC’s official fortieth anniversary book about the series.

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