

DOCTOR WHO

THE DISMAL SCIENCE

By
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Considia logo by Tony Lane.

Part 2

Koudelka

Chapter Four

...al preparations are underway to welcome a trade delegation from some of the corporation's biggest out-of-system partners.

You think you've had bad starts to the day? Try this on for size, mate.

CEO Trau Ra yesterday described it as a shot in the arm that will on-stream new markets and opportunities for entreps throughout the Rock going forward.

The first thing you're aware of is a dull throbbing in your head, like the bass-line to an Ogron symphony. You know, the four-hour long ones where the bass-line's all there is? Your skin's dehydrated, your blowhole feels as if it's full of dust and your throat like the jellied eels you had last night were wrapped in barbed wire. Your tail's so heavy you find yourself checking no-one's tied a fridge to the flukes. Despite a hundred instructions to the contrary, your piece-of-crap third-party datanet AI has decided to wake you with the news, pumping your sensory cortex full of a succession of unremittingly banal headlines, all accompanied with an ever-present corporate-approved background muzak track. You've had hangovers before; you've woken in gutters after punch-ups, bruised, battered and six feet away from your upended walker. For sheer misery it still doesn't come close to being woken by those blandly attractive AI avatanchors and their relentlessly upbeat chirpiness.

Analysts are hoping this will finally be the stimulus needed to revitalise Segovax's flagging economy.

You open your eyes, just a crack at first, recoiling from the fear of daylight. A vestigial instinct from your days on a world. Here the skies are dull and the light thin. The simulated morning sun seeping greasily through the slats of the blinds is as half-baked and etiolated as everything else in this town. Last night you fell asleep at your desk and a proliferation of screens and similarity holos are still blinking around you. Some are real, others senscape overlays. All too gaudy and bright to focus on. Dim memories of last night seep back. Got in late. Never even made it to the immersion tank. Too many hours trawling blearily through missing persons reports, a tumbler of hooch your only companion.

Gods. No wonder you feel rough.

You mumble your disgust and try to shut off the babbling confusion of digital neon, but you've overestimated what your brain's capable of in its present state. Instead of a simple, clear thought command to shut down the newsfeed, all you manage is a dyspraxic jumble of motion. Your walker jolts back. One arm swipes spastically out. You almost knock the head clean off the desk.

And that, my friend, is the clincher. That's when your vision comes into focus and a single thought breaks surface in your mind like a swimmer from the deeps.

You've woken up eye-to-dead-staring-eye with a severed human head.

This is what your life's become.

I coughed, moistened my throat with the dregs of last night's drink. Closed my eyes and gathered myself. Opened them again, and I was Flippers McKenzie: Cheapside's finest private eye. I looked again at the head. After last night's fruitless attempt to recognise her in the roll-call of the sector's missing, absconded or mislaid, the features were daubed across my mind. Female, human, mid-to-late forties. Narrow face and short dark hair. Probably fairly attractive in life; rather less so now in death. Was there any doubt this was the head that went with the body from the spaceport? Not in my mind. No subdermal rupturing here, though. It hadn't been exposed to vacuum.

That was interesting.

It confirmed one working theory. She'd probably been beheaded before the torso was chucked out of an airlock. But then why keep the head separate? And why tail me through town only to dump it in my flat?

The man in the coat had pegged himself top of my suspects list. I was no rookie; there were a thousand ways he could have come by it. It didn't necessarily mean he was the killer. But I had questions and getting him to answer them was my new number-one priority. The Doctor would be pleased.

Dream of a free Lacaille 8760.

What the buggery-hell was that supposed to mean, anyway?

I glanced at the clock ticking away at the bottom of the newsfeed pop-up. There were still a couple of hours till the time given on the message. Least I hadn't slept through it. I mulled the phrase while I scraped together some fresh coffee. It sparked no obvious connections in my mind. A datanet search and a quick browse of the Imperipaedia article confirmed what I already vaguely knew: Lacaille 8760 was a system a few parsecs away. Red dwarf, one inhabited world. Indigenous intelligent life but long ago incorporated into the Empire. Long paragraphs on local customs and political wrangles. Didn't ring any bells. I'd never visited; don't think I'd ever even met a Lacaillean.

But the guy wouldn't have given it to me unless he expected it to mean something.

...ody was stolen from the TyvarriCorp Commercial Spacepo...

'Hang on, what?!' I said aloud, almost spilling my coffee.

The news avatanchor frowned, shuffled its papers and began the piece again from the top for me. This time it took extra care to enunciate the syllables, evidently pinning me as a particularly subnormal sumer.

A body was stolen from the TyvarriCorp Commercial Spaceport overnight. Security and local law-enforcement contractors are hunting the culprit. Spokesman Barnabas Cuff urged citizens not to be alarmed and to report any suspicious activity...

With typical newsfeed efficiency they defused the unhappy story with some forced banter and awkward laughter before segueing swiftly on to a story about a sumer couple who'd won the lottery. This was something they evidently intended to cover at considerably greater length. I shut down the newsfeed and opened a comms channel to my flitter. I hoped

the Doctor was still with it. If he'd wandered too far, Gods knew how I'd contact him. What sort of person doesn't have *any* augs?

He answered the ping after three seconds.

'Flippers?' He seemed distracted, his long face bobbing anxiously in the camera's field of view. His eyes kept darting up, and he glanced back over his shoulder every so often. He was driving, I realised. Fast, by the looks of it.

'Doctor, you're not gonna believe the night I've had.'

'I... er, might.' Another glance over his shoulder. Was that a sudden flash of light? He definitely flinched at something.

'What's that supposed to... No, never mind. Doctor, listen. Someone's stolen the body.'

'Yes, I know.'

'You know?'

'Yes. I was there when I did it. She's in the back seat now.'

In the time it took me to register the full implications of that, he pulled off some sort of elaborate manoeuvre with the flitter. Even though the tiny dashboard-mounted 2D camera I could tell it was way outside the remit of normal rush-hour driving.

'You stole the body?'

'Uh-huh.'

So many questions. I swigged at my coffee and settled wearily for one which seemed to cover every angle. 'Doctor, what's going on?'

He grinned. 'Finally you're asking the right questions. Right now, Flippers, what's going on is that I'm driving your flitter very fast along the edge of Cheapside with a stolen cadaver in the back seat and several rather miffed security people are trying to stop me.'

He didn't seem particularly concerned about that.

'I lent you my car and you used it to break into a spaceport and steal a murder victim's body?!'

'Yes, it does sound a bit like unreasonable behaviour when you put it like that, doesn't it? Somehow it never feels that way at the time.' There was a definite flash now.

'Are those lasers?' I demanded. 'Have you got them shooting at my flitter with *lasers*?'

'Some sort of projected plasma weapon, I think, actually. And if it makes you feel any better I think it's *me* they're shooting at. Your car's just kind of in the way. Don't worry, though. I'm actually a very good driver.'

'Oh, well that's just cushty then.' I took a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. 'Why did you steal it?'

'I didn't. You lent it to me.'

'The *body*, not the flitter.'

'I wanted to know who she is. The only way we're going to find that out is if I can examine her properly.'

'Doctor, I've got the head.'

That surprised him.

'Some guy followed me home last night. He left it for me on my desk.'

'I had a cat do that for me once,' he replied. 'It's a sign of respect and affection. That was with a bird, though. Not a severed head. Did you talk to him?'

'He wasn't in a chatty mood. He left me a message.'

'Oh yes?'

"Dream of a free Lacaille 8760". That mean anything to you?"

'Lacaille 8760?' He shook his head. 'Mince pies in a marble ballroom. Painting watercolours at the foot of an ultramarine mountain. Knitwear and opera. The taste of cough sweets'

'Very helpful.'

'I'm sorry. Once I'm sure I'd have been able to tell you every detail of its history, give you the names and addresses of dozens of friends and acquaintances across as many centuries. These days it's like there's shutters across my memory. All I get are flashes of light, shining through the cracks.'

'You're amnesiac?'

'I suppose I must be,' he confessed. 'I don't really remember.'

He had to stop talking for a few moments to concentrate on what gave every appearance of being a piece of ludicrously dangerous flying. Where'd he learnt those kinds of skills? Was he some sort of agent? I recalled the ease with which he'd called up those records at K'tkkrk's. Imperial?

I called up my search AI, asked it to cross-reference Lacaille 8760 with beheadings. It returned a moment later with results.

'Doctor, have you ever heard of QiLarria Vimanji?'

He pulled the flitter out of a loop-the-loop. There was a loud bang and a shower of orange sparks from somewhere off-camera. I had the uncomfortable suspicion one of his pursuers had just smashed into a building. The Doctor glanced behind him and grimaced.

'Vimanji?' he asked. 'No, I don't think so. Should I have?'

'I don't think it got much coverage off-world. Or maybe you have heard of her and you just forgot?'

'Who is she?'

'Was. Lacaillean campaigner. Feminist, socialist, pro-immigration and non-Terran rights. General pain in the Imperial arse.'

'All the best people are.'

'Apparently a few years ago she was leading a campaign to give the indigenes more say in how the planet was run. Not just the usual wristbands and celebs though. Seemed to be making a real splash at Court, it says here. Rumour was, the Empress was going to issue a decree in her next speech.'

'Good for her.'

'Yeah. Right up until the point Vimanji went berserk in the middle of the Palace of Trade. The Tri-Systems Responsible Commerce Guild was meeting at the time. Fourteen



dead including delegates, journalists and security staff. The whole building dangerously irradiated. Vimanji herself was found dead in the middle of it all. Cut her own head off.'

'Really? That's what the official records say?'

'It's not what you'd call terribly convincing, is it?'

'No.' The Doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. I'd never seen anyone look pensive while engaged in a high-speed flitter chase. Impressive multi-tasking there. 'No it's not. Flippers, does it say what her organisation was called?'

'Yeah but it's in Lacaille. Hang on, I'll transla- oh.'

'Dream of a Free Lacaille 8760?'

'It's snappier in the original.'

I ran another search. 'They had a mission on Segovax. Office down in the Docklands.'

I was already reaching for my hat, calculating the fastest route.

'Careful, Flippers. If these people had something to do with what happened on Lacaille, they could be very dangerous.'

'Oh, I don't doubt it, Doctor. Don't worry, I can handle myself. What about you?'

'I'm sure I'll muddle through. I'll lose these agents and then do a full examination on the body. She's already looking very interesting though.'

'Interesting how?'

'Everyone on Segovax has implants, right? Datanet connection right into the brain. Sensory augmentations. Communications?'

'Sure. Sensescape. Everyone's got it. Not just on Segovax – everyone. Except you.'

'Well I'm not local. Our unfortunate victim had them once too, but not any more. They were removed. Years ago, by the looks of it.'

'Doctor, that ain't possible. People get their augments fitted when they're still in pre-school. They're wired into us, part of us. They're how we connect to the world.' I shuddered. 'Taking them out would be like putting out your eyes.'

'Quite,' he said quietly. 'And yet she did it. Or someone did it to her.'

'Gods.'

A plasma bolt shimmered across the similarity, disrupting the camera. Something exploded close by to the right.

'More of them,' the Doctor muttered. 'That's the trouble with car chases: they always seem to go on past the point where you've got bored of them. I'll call you back, Flippers. Take care.'

He severed the link.

I was alone again in my flat, my head buzzing with new questions.

I may have given the impression the Docklands are all much of a muchness. And sure, they look that way when you're not used to them. But look harder, past the greyness and the darkness and the damp and all the variety you get in any city reveals itself. There are the old industrial installations – postmodern duraluminium-and-steel mills for processing the precious ore dragged in from the Belt. They moulder derelict now, or else have been colonised for flats and workshops. Serried around and between those old sentinels are the old residential terraces, built in archaic style from the dry stone of Segovax itself. Huge irregular sectors are scabbed over with new-builds. Shanty-shacks and cheap prefabs arrayed in grim ranks over

demolished communities or encrusting the bones of the old like metallic tumours. Tiny temporary survival shelters, meant for people who found themselves stranded on hostile worlds, were now pressed into service as housing stock for those priced out of the real houses, which lay dead and empty. It wasn't always like this: oppressive and threatening and dark. Pick the right neighbourhood, the right day and it could be the most vibrant and friendly place you'd ever hope to wind up. If we'd wanted to, Maisy and I could have left years ago. There was a reason why we hadn't.

Those good times seemed far away now, as I picked my way between the towering black skeletons of old ingot-forges. Last night's booze was playing merry hell with my 'scape. The sky was utterly 404d. There wasn't even the natural cavern roof above me, just a blank off-white placeholder and an error message where the sun should be.

The Free Lacaille office squatted apologetically among the industrial behemoths, like it was just another scrap of detritus that had come to rest in the gutter. An old warehouse, abandoned, converted and abandoned again. Above the entrance was a long-dead holo-sign; behind it a painted mural of Lacaillean vistas and political flags. My 'scape wasn't up to translating the slogans at the mo but by now I recognised the Lacaillean glyphs: *Dream of a Free Lacaille 8760*. A stately female with an amphibian sheen to her lapis, air-brushed skin smiled benevolently down.

'Krau Vimanji, I presume.' I tipped my hat, drew my pistol and stepped inside.

'For three-hundred years we have been loyal subjects of the Empire. Our shillah plantations feed the multitudes of Earth; our sons serve in the Imperial Navy or build the merchant fleet in the shipyards of Ponten. The great hall of the Imperial Palace itself is paved with caillestone gifted by the last thronelord herself. Let no-one question Lacaille's loyalty. We ask not to leave this great and bountiful Empire of humanity. We ask only for our right, promised us at Xeshinku. The right to be counted as equals in the eyes of the law, to travel without let or hindrance within the borders of Earthspace, to elect our own rulers and decide our own destiny. We ask only for a free Lacaille 8760. Free within the Empire!'

She had the gift of the gab, this Vimanji, I'd give her that. Her words played in my head as I advanced cautiously through the offices, dredged across the datanet and the years. I was only half-listening. It took the edge off the creepy silence of the place but the content was nothing I hadn't heard before, back home. Every few year some new Cockney Nationalist demagogue would pop up, filling the newsfeeds with nonsense about independence and self-determination. My old dad used to block them from our podhome. Good royalists, we were. Gods save the Queen Mum and the Divine Empress who told her what to say! They were all the same, these independence leaders. A few rabble-rousing speeches but they never amounted to shit in the end. Still, Vimanji didn't sound like a bad old bird. As these sorts went, her voice was soft rather than strident and I detected a thoughtful intelligence behind her words. She didn't sound like someone who deserved to end up decapitated in a corporate meeting-hall.

Then again, who does?

The offices smelled strongly of damp and the lingering tang of coryllion ore. That must have been there even when they were occupied. There were incense burners fastened here and there on the walls, a vain attempt by some long-gone dissident to mask the odour of industrial past. The entrance opened on to a small room containing a few desks and benches round the walls. A reception and waiting area. It showed clear signs of having been overturned by professionals. I found myself imagining the aftermath of Vimanji's rampage, Adjudicators and Landsknechte breaking down doors to offices like this on a dozen or more worlds, tearing flags from the walls and rounding up the starry-eyed young radicals and bitter old revolutionaries. The Empire's fine until you overstep the line. Do that and it falls on you like a shark. Then you know how the bemies feel when we 'liberate' their worlds.

'Hello?' I called. 'Anyone here? The name's McKenzie. But then I guess you already know that.'

I didn't know if he would be here waiting for me. Maybe this wasn't a meeting at all. Maybe I was meant to find something. Only thing certain was that I didn't want to take anyone by surprise on their own turf. That's a sure-fire way of fetching up browned.

No reply. Like I really thought there would be.

The walker read my tension. Titanium fingers tightened on the pistol grip.

I moved on, through the reception area into offices, parcelled off from the original warehouse space by flimsy partition walls daubed in the yellows and greens of the free Lacaille movement. The walker's feet crunched on the remains of shattered datapads and handheld processors. A thick layer of dust and Cheapside grease covered everything, the tiny tracks of vermin trailing dot-to-dots through the dirt.

I thought I saw something move. It was 'scaped, though, not real. A data-ghost. The evanescent flash of signal, years-old information trapped looping in the local datanet. It happened sometimes, especially if the same sort of data was being transmitted again and again. Like a sencescape image, screenburned into the ether, ready to imprint itself on the perceptions of any who happened to come across it.

I rewound my 'scape telemetry and checked the single-frame image flash. It was nothing. Just a distorted similarity of Vimanji. I recognised the image. A publicity shot from years back, when she was a young woman. It was all over the movement's dataspace. I saved it anyway, told my AI to tune out but record any future ghosts, and pressed on.

'Earth Central declared Dream of a Free Lacaille a proscribed organisation at 230110 local time yesterday. All members and affiliates are requested and required to surrender themselves to local Adjudication lodges, where they will give statements and be treated in a fair and measured manner in accordance with Imperial statutes. Syfishha Zinawit, deputy-leader of Dream of a Free Lacaille 8T60 spoke out yesterday from the compound on Vestifar where he is being held under house-arrest. He denied Krau Vimanji was responsible for the outrage and blamed unnamed "dark forces". In accordance with Imperial Datacasting Statutes, his words are spoken here by a non-

Turing AI. Loyal Imperial subjects may find some of the sentiments expressed in this statement upsetting...

I was just starting to wonder if I was wasting my time here. It wasn't a big warehouse and it was silent as the void. My AI had already sworn blind there was nothing larger than a rat alive in the place. It wasn't hard to fool such basic scans, but there weren't many places left where anyone could hide. So maybe it *was* a thing I was meant to find? Gods knew what. Nothing had stood out as unusual. Was there something recoverable on one of the pads? But that made no sense. I'd been sent here for a reason. Whoever had done it had a clear expectation of me doing something. The datapads were too obscure, the chances I'd find what I was meant to too tiny.

Something to do with the data-ghost, perhaps? I ran a quick check while I searched another office cubicle. No embedded signals, no codes, nothing. Far as I could tell, it was exactly what it appeared to be. Maybe the Doctor could pull something from it, but this cetacean was drawing a blank.

There was one room left to check. I checked it out on the floor-plan overlaid on my sensescape. Larger than the others, near the back of the building. Maybe a meeting room or telecasting suite. I found the door. It creaked when I opened it.

I'd been right with my second guess. Telecast studio. Lectern at one end of the room for giving public statements, a few uneven rows of mostly upended plasteel chairs. Someone had ripped out the broadcast suite's electronics but you could see where they used to be.

The guy in the trenchcoat who'd followed me was right in front of me, leaning back against the lectern. He didn't look up when I entered. Not surprising, because he was missing his head.

You ever thought how you'd react to a scene like that, mate? Walking in on a body that's not more than a few hours fresh? I'd bet you my last opek whatever you think you'd do you'd be wrong. No-one ever knows how it'll be, their first murder scene. Me, I'm man enough to admit that the first time I screamed like a girl and lost my lunch. Donkey's back, that, though. This one I just took in with the even, weary acceptance of a bloke who knows it's gonna make his job that much harder. Murders work on a logarithmic scale. You know that? Two are ten times as much work to solve as one.

Still, least I wasn't against the clock to examine this one. I made sure my 'scape was set to record full-band and moved in for a closer look.

The guy was huge. Even without his head there was no doubt it was him. Built like a piece of mining machinery. Tall, but so broad with it that he looked almost squat. His coat was open, the overalls underneath (definitely spaceport) torn and charred to expose a torso blistered with plasma burns. What I couldn't take my eyes off, though, was the bandolier slung from his right shoulder down across his chest. He might have been one head down from the neck up, but if you counted the ones fastened to that belt he was still about a dozen to the good. They were old, shrunken, almost tanned. Not just human, either. One, retaining a blue-ish hue despite whatever mummification process had been used to preserve it, I recognised as that of QiLarria Vimanji.

'Gordon Bennett,' I muttered.

'Note that the suspect has identified the deceased.'

I span. 'What?'

Four Imperial Landsknechte stood fanned out between me and the door. Their black combat-armour struck a disconcerting balance between 'cybernetic' and 'insectile'. Their faces were hidden behind mirror-visored helmets. They had guns about the size of my tail pointed at me.

'State your name, citizen.'

'You just force-pinged my AI: you *know* my name.'

'State it for the record, Trau McKenzie. Not to do so will be recorded as a failure to co-operate with Imperial security services.'

I sighed out my blowhole. 'McKenzie. Flippers McKenzie. Look, I know what you're thinking. This ain't what it looks like. I didn't kill the guy. I'm registered private law-enforcement.'

'You're advised that everything you say can and will be recorded and used to confirm your guilt.'

'Gee, thanks. I know the drill.'

One of them – his sleeves blazoned with the insignia of captain – stepped forward, shouldering his weapon. The others made no move to lower theirs. He looked at the body and shook his head.

'Christ on a bike,' he growled. 'Where the bloody hell's his goddamn *head*?'

'Maybe you should ask the killer?' I suggested.

'Good idea.' The soldier nodded at two of his comrades. 'You two: stay here, guard the body till forensics get here. McKenzie, you're with me and Private Dadure. We're heading back to the fort.'

'Gonna help you with your enquiries, am I?'

'You might say that. You're under arrest for murder.'

Chapter Five

'You used to work for Considia.'

Captain Markys Arkwright slapped the statement down on the table between us like a dossier of incriminating evidence.

'Who hasn't, on this rock?' I replied. He wasn't a very intimidating man. Slight, blond with a fine-boned and sensitive face. He acted tough but I got the feeling he didn't genuinely think I was guilty. He was playing out the game. I respected him for that.

He momentarily did that blank stare people have when they're checking the datanet in their sence. 'Security guard with Jessamin Datamedical Systems. They make augs, don't they?'

'Yup. One of the biggest independents in the sector till they got bought up.'

'You enjoy working for them, Trau McKenzie?'

'It was a job.'

'Your contract was severed after a disciplinary incident; am I right? How did that make you feel?'

Really? That's the angle he was taking? I said nothing.

'You wanna elaborate on it?'

Not really. I did anyway. 'There was a security breach. Some protestors made it into the compound. It was my job to stop that kind of thing. The company was within its rights to let me go.'

Arkwright raised an eyebrow. 'So you didn't harbour any resentment after your dismissal? Jobs aren't easy to come by round these parts. Not the slightest hint of ill feeling?'

Resentment? I almost laughed. That night was one of the best of my life. The night when it all changed. Years I'd plodded round that patrol beat, hoping somehow I'd eventually save enough to get off the Rock, maybe even buy passage back to Blitz Spirit; deep down I knew I never would. Segovax's economy just wasn't set up that way. I was in a dead-end rut and I knew it. Then one night, out of nowhere, there's an alarm. I run outside to see four anti-corporate activists have made it through the perimeter using wire-cutters and a force breacher. They're only kids. A few years earlier they were probably arguing about who'd ring the neighbour's doorbell to ask for their ball back. Students, anarchists and starry-eyed idealists. I think they were still a bit surprised they hadn't talked themselves out of it yet. We were a bunch of trained ex-military and mercenaries with a full suite of anti-intrusion measures at our disposal. We apprehended them before they made it thirty metres.

I was set to keep an eye on them while my mates did the paperwork and we waited for the duty officer to arrive. He was meant to be on site at all times. Instead he'd sodded off to some gentleman's club in the fleshpots of Cheapside. While he was lapping hooch off a floozy's décolletage, some opportunistic scallie had made off with the flash motor he'd left parked outside. It took him an age to crawl back on the underfunded public transport net.

I got talking to the prisoners. Three of them were every bit as wet behind the ears as they'd first seemed. Idealists and dorm-room radicals with as much experience of real politics and economics as I have of Terileptil opera. The fourth, though! She was something else. Slightly older and twice as sharp. While the others spouted insults and pat anti-

corporate slogans, she sat in silence and watched me. I could feel her sizing me up, figuring my angle. She was the brains of the operation, no mistake; even if one of the others was clearly the nominal leader. After a while she asked me about Blitz Spirit, about how I'd ended up in the job I was in. I was surprised: it's not a common accent. Before I knew it we were discussing my backpacking days and wondering together what happened to youthful idealism. The other kids seemed to fade away, first into silence, then irrelevance.

Her name was Maisy Cajazeiras. I helped her and the others escape that night. It cost me my job and I didn't give a damn. A week later we were renting rooms together, setting up a private detective agency. Partners, in more ways than one.

Did I resent Jessamin or Considia for giving me the elbow? Hell, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I smiled back at Arkwright. I sensed my ease unsettled him. 'Are you trying to suggest I killed the guy because of something to do with Jessamin?'

'Just exploring possibilities.'

'You know I didn't kill him.'

'So you say. The corpse was recent. You were found with the body. There were no other spoors in the building.'

'Sure. But he was wounded with plasma burns and decapitated. Where was my rifle? Where was the head?'

Arkwright said nothing.

'You saw the heads on his bandolier. No doubt you're doing ID tests on them now. Yesterday spaceport security pulled a headless corpse out of the darsena. I don't think it's a great leap to suppose this guy was the killer.'

I immediately regretted mentioning the heads. If they searched my flat and found the one on my desk it wasn't going to do my pleas of innocence any good at all.

'That case is outside the Imperial Landsknechte's purview. If we have a view on the matter, you can be assured that we will make it known to the relevant authorities.'

So that was a "yes", then.

'The body was stripped of all implants. That's why you asked about Jessamin.'

'You're remarkably well-informed.'

'It is my job.'

'And one you're evidently more punctilious about than your one at Jessamin.'

'*Miaow.*'

The captain looked at me for a moment, then got up and left the table. The rest of the interrogation room was shrouded in darkness, but I could make out a couple of other figures looking in the shadows. One was the trooper who'd escorted me here – Dadure, Arkwright had called him. He still had his helmet on, impassive as a robot sentinel. The other Arkwright deferred to. Possibly a higher rank. What I could make out of his silhouette didn't have the bulk of armour. Civilian observer? Arkwright exchanged words with him briefly, then left the interrogation-room. When the door opened I saw a brief glimpse of the brightly-lit Landsknechte operations room beyond. Half a dozen troopers at terminals writing up reports or going over Imperial dispatches. A young civilian woman with dark hair was arguing with the duty sergeant. The door shut, and I was in near-darkness again.

Arkwright returned a few minutes later. He slid back into his seat and resumed the questioning without a word of explanation.

‘Tell me, Trau McKenzie, have you ever been to Ctesiphon?’

‘Ctesiphon?’ I tried to search it, but they were jamming my datanet connection. It was an isolating feeling, having to rely only on the information stored in my own head. I wondered how the woman from the darsena had managed, her senses hobbled like that every day of her life.

‘One of the worlds round Fomalhaut. Big and arid. You’ve probably sumed the news reports about the barrios.’

‘I don’t follow the news.’

‘You should. It’s terrible out there. Millions living in the kind of poverty that makes Cheapside look like Europa. Half the planetary population subsists on Imperial food parcels. It’s a disgrace. People actually die of cholera there. *Cholera!* Me and the missus donated what we would have spent on presents to the Christmas appeal last year.’

‘How jolly admirable of you,’ I said, only half-sarcastic. I’d been in his shoes, just doing a job. I didn’t think he was a bad bloke, really. ‘This is relevant somehow, I take it?’

‘Our vic – the man you murdered–’

‘Didn’t.’

‘– was from one of the worst slums on the planet. Place by the name of Kerkouane. About ninety per cent of the population there are what’s called Koudelka. No-one’s quite sure any more whether they’re alien or some kind of augmented human or a godawful hybrid of the two. They’re big, fast and strong. Most of the legal corporations in that part of space use them for muscle, and *all* the criminal ones do. It’s a local tradition to keep the head of a defeated enemy as a kind of trophy. Barbaric. Plus hideously illegal, of course. Still, you know what it’s like trying to educate natives out of their customs.’

‘Tell me about it. The indigenes on Blitz Spirit do this horrific morris-dancing thing and they just won’t be talked out of it...’

He glared at me. ‘The barrios are run by gangmasters. You want to get out, you’ve got to go through one of them. People-smugglers, whoremongers, slavers. Pick any way out you want, they’re all a dead-end ticket to a short life of misery.’

‘Why would a barrio crime-boss send one of his goons to Segovax? The Rock’s a shithole, but it’s not *that* bad.’

‘You misunderstand. The dead man – his name was Teszil, by the way. Teszil fa Shazsik zin’Tassin. He didn’t work for the gangmasters. There’s ways of telling. Initiation practices. I’ll spare you the details. What matters is this guy found some other way off Ctesiphon.’

‘What?’

‘You tell me. He’s on the system up to the age of six and then just drops off the grid. Impressive bit of concealment. Beyond the means of a kid from the slums, even one with a gift for illegality.’

There weren’t many could organise a vanishing trick like that. For anyone, let alone a tot from the gutters. Possibilities narrowed in my mind.

‘One of the assassin corporations?’

‘Seems like.’

I'd had dealings. A couple of cases that had their grubby fingerprints. It was enough to have got a sense for the shadowy power they wielded. They weren't exactly illegal but they relied on some pretty tangled legislative loopholes. Their lawyers and accountants were so practised that every lead disappeared out of reach behind court orders and offworld financial havens. Apart from one or two that had got sloppy, the corporations offered a masterclass in walking that fine line between what was permitted and forbidden in Earthspace. A catspaw like Teszil was just their style. For the first time I felt a pang of sympathy for the big Koudelka. Or rather for the little Koudelka he'd once been. When they'd offered him a way out of Kerkouane it must have seemed like mana from heaven. A route offworld, money, the chance to use his skills. I knew what it felt like to want to get away from home, that sense that the place you grew up offers only humiliation and a slow decline. When you're young it seems that all life has to offer is out there in the black. I would have done anything for it, and I was a nice middle-class calf from Bow Bells. All I had to do was work a couple of crappy summer jobs and add it to my severance package from the Pearly Guard and I had enough for steerage-class to High Venice. To someone with Teszil's background, the corporations' offer must have been irresistible.

I wondered how long it had been before he had realised that assassins' contracts always end the same way.

I know what you're thinking, by the way. Just been old Flippers on his lonesome for quite a while now. Watching me swim rings round Captain Arkwright's fun enough to run down the clock, but the gender balance is way the wrong side of optimum. *Where are the dames, Flippers?* your cynical old eyes are asking. To which I'd tell you that we really don't say dames any more – it ain't exactly respectful and if this one heard you call her that, she'd probably lamp you. She arrived in the interrogation room like a final demand on a peaceful Saturday morning, shouldering her way through the door with a datapad under one arm, a coffee in the other and a couple of vainly arguing troopers in train.

'...restricted area, krau! You can't go...'

'...no legal basis for detaining him. You're in contradiction of a list of Imperial decrees as long as my arm!'

'...not allowed to have contact with detainees!'

Arkwright was on his feet. Dadure levelled his rifle at the intruder.

'What's this about?' There was a quiver of surprise in the captain's voice. The glance towards his shadowy superior was subtle but I caught it. The man gave a slight nod but said nothing, apparently content for now to stand back and watch. 'Who is this woman?'

'Anji Kapoor, Whifflekin and Whifflekin Legal Services. I'm here to secure the immediate release of my client.'

Humans are crap at reading cetacean emotions. Just as well, because any dolphin would have seen my surprise a mile off when she said that. The day I could afford a lawyer was a day when I wouldn't be within parsecs of this godsforsaken Rock. I'd never heard of Whifflekin and Whifflekin and certainly not this Kapoor woman.

And she was the kind of bird I was pretty sure I'd have remembered. Not my type, but undeniably striking. Mid-to-late twenties; pretty, in a frowny sort of way. Mocha-brown

skin and glossy black hair cut in a businesslike bob. She wore an understatedly stylish jacket and skirt that shifted like night between dark blues and purples.

The kind of lawyer you saw on TV dramas set in the Glassheart, not the dishevelled Cheapside shysters I usually had dealings with.

And as bent as a nine-opek note.

Something about her credentials must have checked out, though, 'cause nobody shot her right there on the spot.

'About time you got here,' I told her. 'Honestly, what do I pay you for?'

She scowled at me. 'My apologies, Trau McKenzie. I was... stuck in traffic.'

After a moment of fluster as he called up datarecords and IDs, Arkwright sighed and addressed her with forced politeness.

'Krau Kapoor, if we might discuss this in private for a moment?'

She accompanied him back outside. The two troopers who'd followed her in hung around, looking sheepish and uncertain. A couple of minutes later, Arkwright and Kapoor were back. She was impassive as a statue; he just looked resigned.

'Trau McKenzie, the Imperial Landsknechte thanks you for your assistance and regrets any inconvenience caused. You are free to go. Please don't leave Segovax until further notice, in case we have further questions for you.'

His tone was rueful but not angry. He'd played the game long enough to know how it went sometimes. I doffed my hat at the captain and his colleagues and allowed Krau Kapoor to escort me off the premises.

'You're a dolphin,' she exclaimed when we were safely in her flitter. 'A cockney dolphin in a hat and it didn't occur to him to mention it!'

'Racial tolerance is a wonderful thing, innit?' I said, craning in the walker to make sure the Landsknechte weren't about to suddenly change their minds and come after us. Kapoor seemed unconcerned. She didn't even put the flitter on manual for take-off. She had more confidence in her AI to fly it than I did. Then again, the AI in this thing probably hadn't already got a string of points and minor accidents on its licence when she bought it.

'He just calls me up out of the blue, no explanation, and tells me to walk into an army base, pretend I'm a lawyer and persuade them to release a murder suspect. "I've set up all your ID" he says. "I've tweaked the Imperial detention regulations. All you need to do is be charming. Walk into the cell and act natural." Can you tell me how I'm supposed to act natural when I suddenly find out my client is a talking dolphin in a hat?'

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‘You did very well,’ I pointed out. ‘But I do sympathise. Imagine how I felt when I discovered my lawyer was a human woman in a posh skirt!’

She opened her mouth as if to protest, then seemed to get my point and closed it again.

‘So the Doctor sent you?’ I asked after a while. I couldn’t think of anyone else who could hack into Imperial systems so easily.

‘I did suggest he do it himself but apparently he’s busy. Also, he looks rubbish in a posh skirt.’

‘I can imagine. But I kind of wish I hadn’t. So is Anji your real name, or some sort of cunning alias to fool the Imperials?’

‘It’s real. Did you really kill someone?’

‘What do you think?’

‘I’m a futures trader from twenty-first century London. What do I know about judging character in space-dolphins?’

‘I have a trustworthy face.’

‘I’ll take your word for it.’

She took us out of Cheapside and through Sector 2. I assumed we were heading for the Glassheart, but after we’d been flying through Sector 3 for a couple of minutes the flitter peeled off the main transit artery and went into a descent pattern.

Sector 3’s professionals, mainly. Not as upmarket as Serrano’s neighbourhood but not bad. It was the best most people on the Rock could aspire to, and few of them would even make it this far. We flew low through the rush-hour traffic, dodging between oversized rugged-armour transports designed for untterraformed worlds with only rudimentary air-traffic control systems. Like 99% of such vehicles across Earthspace, they were being used here on the school-run, their gleaming paintwork untainted by even the slightest exposure to unmanaged atmo. Down below there was a seemingly endless patchwork of terracotta roofs, front lawns and artisan shopping precincts, a sprawl of suburban mediocrity. The air around us was alive with ever-shifting senscape ads and celeb news digests jostling for attention like E-number-fuelled pre-schoolers.

‘Christ! This place is like LA in space,’ Anji muttered to herself. ‘No, crapper. It’s like Essex. Space-Basildon.’

She dropped the Earth place-names like she expected me to know where they were. Typical Earther. Not a thought that there’s a whole galaxy out there; still trying to prove Copernicus wrong after all these years. I lapsed into enjoyably grumpy silence, running a quick search trawl of the local newsfeeds to see if they’d picked up on Teszil’s death yet. Not a whisper. After so many hours, no way was that chance. They’d lost interest in the Doctor’s bit of body-snatching too, and had alighted on the self-evidently world-shattering reports that some minor reality-telecast star had come out as Catholic, interspersed with occasional mentions of the trade summit scheduled for later in the week. Boring. I tried to contact the Doctor but he didn’t return my pings. Presumably he’d made it out of his flitter chase okay if he’d found time to dispatch Anji and her fake documentation after me. I was more worried about my car.

About a quarter-turn spinwards from where we'd come in, the residential neighbourhoods gave way to a rash of brown-grey retail parks and the kind of bleak commercial development that sounded great when waved in front of planning committees under the name of 'entrep zones'. Shapeless modern prefabs interspersed by sketchier areas of old brick-and-stone buildings. We scooted low over the caved-in rooftops of pubs and apartment blocks, disturbing a flock of bats from the rafters.

'This is Sump End, isn't it?' I asked, even as my aug layered my 'scape with handy labels and information pop-ups. The neighbourhood had gone downhill even in the five years or so since I'd last been here. What was left of it, anyway. Back then it had stretched across a significant arc of circumference and a fair way along the length of the sector; now there was little more than an enclave of ageing and abandoned student digs and boozers on the edge of the campus for the new Segovax Business Academy. It was a mark of how neglected and unimportant it was that there wasn't even a nominal sponsor willing to affix their name to its in the official directory. Give it another couple of years and I had no doubt even this last remaining corner would be gone.

Anji set the flitter down in a street at the top of a small hill, between a row of burnt-out flitters and what looked suspiciously like an abandoned and decaying barricade. Or rather, she sat back and twiddled the steering column curiously while the vehicle's AI handled the actual landing. It had no compunction about parking us slap bang in the middle of the road, which told me all I needed to know about the average traffic statistics for this area.

'Is this where you turn out to be a crazy head-case who's brought me out to the middle of nowhere to do terrible things to me?' I asked Anji.

She shot me a sidelong glance. 'You should be so lucky.'

A voice called out to us. 'Sorry about the mess. There was a bit of a riot here when they shut down the university. I've been asking the civic maintenance company to clear things up a bit for years now, but it seems it's not worth the expense just for one ageing old buffer.' A man was clambering gingerly over the detritus between us and one of the houses. No, not a man. An Earth Reptile. His olive hide had faded to an ochre-grey around his crest and fin-like ears and he wore triple-lensed wire-frame spectacles over his three eyes. Odd that he hadn't paid out to have his vision repaired – he evidently had money enough for whatever gene treatment had allowed him to grow the moustache. I pegged him instantly as an anthropophile. Quite apart from the soup-catcher, he'd eschewed his kind's habitual netty fabrics for a thoroughly human tweedy ensemble that I suspected would no longer fasten over his middle-aged spread.

He offered a gallant claw to help Anji down from the flitter.

'A successful trip, then?' he observed, eyeing me as the walker unfolded itself.

'He's a dolphin,' Anji pointed out with a frown. 'In a hat. What's that all about? When I signed up for this, Occa – travelling in time and space, I mean – no-one ever told me how silly it was all going to be.'

'Yes, well,' the old Silurian gruffed, 'my lot say much the same about life.'

'Earth Reptiles?' I asked.

'No, old son. Academics.' He gave a little bow. 'Occa Bikdellin, at your service.'

I doffed my fedora. 'McKenzie. You can call me Flippers.'

‘Indeed. Indeed.’ He nodded towards the house he’d emerged from. ‘The Doctor’s already inside, waiting for you. Well, I say waiting. Truth be told, he got impatient and started examining the body about half an hour ago. We suspected you probably wouldn’t mind too much.’

‘I’m sure I’ll get over it.’ I was looking around for a sign of my flitter. Couldn’t see it. Why had I even lent it to him in the first place? Gods! What had I been thinking? How in hell would I do my job if something had happened to it? I could hardly get the bus everywhere...

Occa led the way inside. The building was large – it had evidently housed a couple of dozen undergrads in its day. Like most blocks of its period it had a narrow entrance corridor that led out into a central stairwell where steps coiled upwards to three upper storeys. The roof was open to the elements. Age, rather than design choice.

Judging by what I’d seen from Anji’s flitter, the place was in better shape than most of the rest of the neighbourhood, but it was still dilapidated in the extreme. The walls of the hallway were scrawled with anti-capitalist graffiti and lewd doodles, the hand shaky enough to make me worry for the mental well-being of whoever was behind them. Occa was, as far as I could tell, the only regular inhabitant of the place, but he clearly didn’t bother with most of it. He’d set up a home in a couple of knocked-through student sets on the ground floor, lit by the orangey glow of portable lighting units and travel gennies. It was homely enough. The floor here was free of rubble and litter and the walls were covered in bookshelves. Most of the volumes that filled them were electronic but there were a few paper ones too. I knew without having to look that, unlike Serrano’s, these ones wouldn’t be blank. In what had been the second student room, Occa seemed to have set up a modest lab-cum-study, though from the motley assortment of curios and equipment that filled it I wouldn’t have liked to have hazarded any guesses on what it was he actually studied. The reheating element from an old cryopod had been jury-rigged into an open stove and heater. A ginger tomcat luxuriated in front of it. It raised its head and observed my arrival sceptically before settling back down with an almost palpable shrug of disdain.

The body from the spaceport lay in the middle of the room, spread out on what I guessed served as both Occa’s kitchen table and work-desk. Thawed now, she was splayed open for a particularly old-fashioned bit of dilettante autopsy. The Doctor was prodding around in the chest-cavity with stainless-steel instruments, looking like some sort of Gothic vision of an off-the-rails scientist with his frock-coat covered in a bloodstained apron and his hair clumping in wild, sweaty curls.

At the sight of the body Anji made a disgusted noise and retreated back.

The Doctor looked up, a sudden and childlike grin spreading like dawn across his face.

‘Anji! Flippers! You’re back! Now the fun can really begin.’

Chapter Six

'How can you do that to a person?' Anji hovered at the opening between the two rooms while the Doctor probed and prodded around in the corpse's chest cavity. 'She was a human being, with a life, hopes and dreams. And now she's lying on a table and you're cutting her up like a science project.'

He didn't look up. 'I know that, Anji.' A hint of gritted teeth there? 'But we need to know what happened to her. How she died. What happened to her augmentations.'

'She's not just a puzzle. She's not just some machine you can tinker about with until it coughs up its secrets for you.'

I chimed in: 'Look, Anji, love. I know it ain't pretty, but we gotta do this if we're gonna solve this. There's a reason all the law enforcement companies have path-labs.'

'Don't you "Anji-love" me! You don't get it. You can't "solve" a murder! You can find out who did it, but that doesn't fix it. Doesn't make the problem go away. She'll still be as dead as she is now.'

'Anji...' The Doctor scampered over, making as if to grasp her shoulders. She recoiled from the blood on his hands. 'Anji, Anji, Anji. You're right. There's nothing we can do to bring this poor woman back. Nothing we can do to make it right. But we can find out how and why she died; make sure whoever did it doesn't hurt anyone else. Discover the reasons and try to do something about them. That's all we can do.'

'But there's always more deaths. It doesn't change anything.' She looked between the Doctor and me. 'If it did, you'd both be out of a job.'

The Doctor sighed. 'It might make things better. That's all we can hope for.'

Anji said nothing, and walked away.

The Doctor resumed his work, but with less enthusiasm than before. I watched from the edge of the room. I've seen this done a few times, and I'll admit to a certain admiration for the technical aspects, but it still turned my stomach. After maybe half an hour he laid down his tools, rinsed off his hands and dialled up a contact on a wall-mounted vidcom unit – the old might-as-well-be-Bakelite kind they used to give people who couldn't use augs, back while they were still ironing out the neural compatibility kinks. Fitz replied instantly. He was in my flitter.

'Have you got it?'

Fitz flashed a lopsided grin. 'Hello to you too. Don't worry – no problems. We got there just before the coppers.' He raised a box in front of the camera eye. I recognised it instantly. He'd been in my apartment 'Are you going to tell us what's inside?'

'Fitz,' the Doctor said firmly, 'don't open that box.'

'All right, all right. I've been doing this long enough to know when not to peek. Just tell me this: is it dangerous?'

'Not if you don't open the box. Just get here as quickly as you can.'

He ended the call.

‘You got him to break into my gaff,’ I said. Somehow the Doctor’s casual assumption that that was fine hit me more than the implication that security officers had been in too. I expected it of them; they understood the escalation they were making in the game. With the Doctor it was as if he just didn’t really understand the boundaries of socially-reasonable behaviour. He was pursuing some abstract personal agenda which intersected with the rest of society only tangentially and in ways largely unforeseeable to him. Only belatedly, if at all, did it occur to him that using a borrowed car for bodysnatching or breaking into a friend’s flat were probably not the kind of thing most people did.

‘I lent him my sonic screwdriver,’ the Doctor told me breezily. ‘There was no actual breaking involved. Though I can’t vouch for the security company that came later.’

‘Still, Doc!’

‘Would you rather I’d let them get the head? I’m sorry, Flippers. I’d have asked first but you were a prisoner of the Landsknechte. Once they took you it was inevitable someone official would come to investigate your flat.’

True enough. I was still narked, though. ‘Why don’t you want him to know what he’s carrying?’

‘Because it’d be a nasty shock to get while driving,’ he replied, as if that was obvious. Which, I guess, it was. Still, the flitter AI was more than capable of making sure no harm came to Fitz, whatever its foibles. I couldn’t shake the suspicion that the Doctor just liked secrecy for its own sake. He had a theatrical streak a mile wide that made him want to control how things were revealed. Hark at me there with the great psychological insight: as if when someone dresses like an extra from Dickens and affects not to have a real name a heightened sense of drama doesn’t kind of come with the territory.

He beckoned me over to the body. ‘Come and look at this.’

‘What am I supposed to be seeing?’

‘Look at the way the nerve endings have been repaired around where the implants were.’ To be honest it just looked like so much meat to me, but I tried to appear knowledgeable. I may have made an appreciative “hmm” noise. ‘Being cut off from the datanet and her senscape would have been traumatic, I have no doubt, but I don’t think it was meant as torture. This was done with care and attention, by someone with concern for the patient’s suffering.’

‘Plenty of good doctors being paid by bad people,’ I said. ‘Lot of torturers take pride in their work.’

‘Perhaps. I prefer to think the best of people till proved wrong.’

‘You really are new to the Rock, aren’t you?’ I decided to change the subject. ‘The bloke who tailed me and left me the head? Apparently he was a Koudelka, from Ctesiphon. Bit of a penchant for beheadings.’

‘Yes, Teszil fa Shazsik zin’Tassin. I’ve been keeping an eye on internal Landsknechte communications.’

‘Think he’s the killer?’

‘The severing of the head was certainly the cause of death. I think your friend Teszil was very likely the person directly responsible. I’m more interested now in who was paying him and why.’

‘And who killed him when he tried to contact me.’

‘An assassin with pangs of conscience is a dangerous thing.’

‘Conscience? What makes you think that’s what it was? I’ve been thinking, Doctor. This woman was killed in space, right? She isn’t on the *Dulcibella*’s passenger manifest and she’s invisible as far as the net’s concerned. When Teszil chucked her out the airlock I reckon he expected that’d be the last anyone would hear of her. No-one’s looking for her; the chances of anyone stumbling across the body by chance’d be smaller than a baby Graske’s dolly. Bob’s-ye-uncle: perfect crime. But he forgot the slipstream effect, didn’t he? Next you know, the body’s washing up in our darsena. Way I see it, he buggered up, and bad. He knew it, and he had a notion how whoever hired him was liable to respond. So he follows me to size me up, see how I play the game, whether he can trust me. I think he wanted an out.’

‘Would you have given it to him?’

‘I don’t think I could.’

The Doctor had more tests he wanted to run, deep scans he hoped might help identify the dead woman. I’d seen my fill of death these last couple of days, and left him to it.

In the other room I found Occa sitting alone, reading an academic book by the tangerine glow of a portable sodium lamp.

‘Anji not around?’

‘She took the flitter, went for coffee.’

‘You don’t have coffee here?’

He smiled. ‘Anji’s the kind of lady who feels that coffee should come from a chain-café, wrapped in a cardboard slip. I fear my tastes are too simple for her.’

‘What’s the deal with you and her?’ I asked. ‘If that’s not too personal a question.’

‘Deal? There’s no deal. I’m not as young as I used to be. It’s helpful having another pair of hands about the place to help with the upkeep and get the shopping in.’

‘Live-in home help?’

‘If you want to put it like that.’

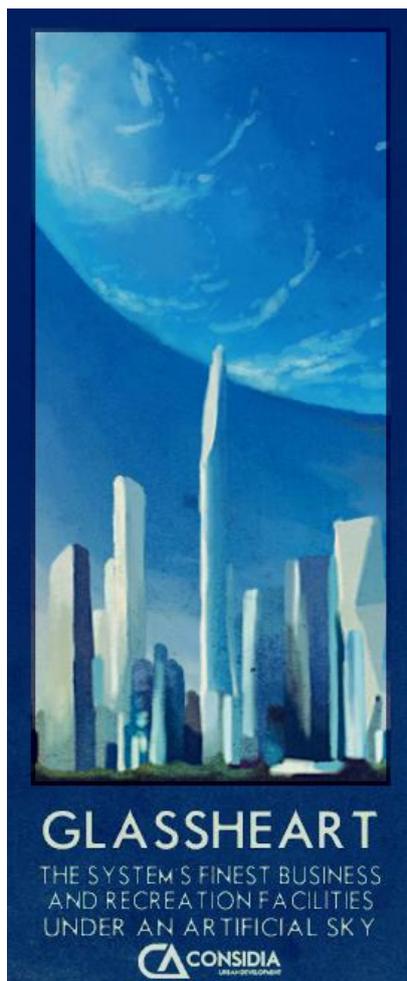
‘And out of the goodness of her heart, right?’

His eyes twinkled. ‘Don’t be so quick to judge, son. Not all entres are quite as mercenary as the ones we have here on Segovax.’ He leant in closer and lowered his voice. ‘To tell the truth, I rather suspect she’s here to keep an eye on me.’

‘What? Why?’

He smiled that peculiar, unreadable Earth Reptile smile of his again. ‘That, old son, I’m afraid you’d have to ask the Doctor.’

After a while the Doctor started singing to himself



and we had to leave. Occa's hearing was very sensitive to certain high-frequency sounds and I just can't stick opera. We wandered up the hill together, threading our way between potholes and derelict vehicles.

'Why are you still here?' I asked the old Silurian. 'No-one else is. Even the drifters and the tramps don't come here any more – the booze bottles in the gutters are ten years old. But you're still here.'

'It's the Earth Reptile way,' he answered. 'Others come and others go. We abide. It's our blessing and our curse.'

'Knock it off, mate. You can't fob me off with all that "ways of my people" crap. What's the real reason? You're an academic, a smart guy. You're not telling me you can't afford something better?'

'Do you see that?' Occa stopped and pointed at something in the distance. We were near the crest of the slope now and could see a long way over the rooftops. A kilometre or so away, where the ground began to curve up to meet the distant sky, the crystal-and-metal campus of the Segovax Business Academy glittered in the artificial sunset. Occa nodded at the wreckage and detritus around us. 'That's what all this was about. About what learning's *for*. Some of us – lots of us, back then – were still of the belief that education is valuable in its own right. That bettering ourselves, pushing back the boundaries of sentient knowledge, is what life's all about.'

'That's all well and good, prof, but you can't blame people if they want an education that's a bit more... useful. The economy's been on the ropes for years. High thoughts and fancy philosophies don't help that. Don't put food on the table.'

He shook his head fiercely. 'No, no, no! You see, that's just the mindset they've spent the last thirty years putting about. Everything has to be in service of the economy. All that matters is the bottom line. If it doesn't turn a profit, it's worthless.'

'Supply and demand, Occa. That's the law of the market.'

'The market's not a law,' he said quietly. 'It's a choice.'

He was getting agitated; I was glad we cetaceans had managed to more or less avoid the vestigial race-fear that still added that extra layer of complication to human dealings with Silurians. If I'd been a land-mammal I'd probably have been getting stabbing pains behind the eyes round about now. As it was, I just felt a pang of social embarrassment and tried to ease the subject on to something less contentious.

'Must be nice having Anji and the Doctor around after so much time alone.'

He chuckled; a dry and bitter sound. 'Poor Anji. She doesn't understand either. Keeps telling me to "get on my bike", "sell myself". Like I'm just another must-have accessory. She keeps bringing me job adverts for consultancy and entrep services she's found on the datanet; asks me to give them a try. I try to tell her: I'm a scholar. One of the foremost minds of my generation in hyperspace communications theory. My skills are in research and answering questions, delving into the unknown. That's what I live for. I don't care a jot for profit. Money bores me utterly. I've got no interest in the stuff.'

'Maybe you should become a detective.'

Occa wasn't listening. He tapped his head with a claw. 'All that matters to me is up here. I won't compromise who I am, what I believe in, for a steady paycheque and a 6-to-8 grind propping up a system I despise.'

‘Even if that means wasting your life here, alone and forgotten for ever?’

His third eye glowed for a moment, the faintest of ember-lights. ‘I come here often, Trau McKenzie. I stand on this hill and look down at where the old University used to be. Watch the shiny new Academy churning out shiny new entreps – identical cogs in the machine, all spouting the same management-speak, repeating the same corporate mantras and competing to own the same hollow gewgaws. I doubt any of them have had a single original thought since their childhoods. They worship wealth. Those fortunate enough to have it they idolise as dynamic, wealth-creating entreps. Those who’ve not had their opportunities or who don’t feel the same burning desire for profit but work every hour of the day to make them rich, they despise as feckless grasping hands – not people but *sumers*. There are a great many people on Segovax who are wasting their lives, my boy. My own mind is at ease that I am not among them.’

‘If you hate it so much, why don’t you just leave? Plenty of others did.’

‘Because then they’ll have won, and what they started thirty years ago with the coup will be complete.’

I sighed. I didn’t want to get into an argument but I could feel myself getting exasperated. It wasn’t that I disagreed with Occa – gods knew I’d spent enough time reflecting on the pointlessness of it all during the endless, mindless security patrols for Jessamin. But he was living in a dream-world. One old man stubbornly eking out a pitiful existence in the last ruined corner of the world he yearned for. He was like an old widower, lost in grief for twenty years, surrounding himself with the relics of his loved one and refusing to acknowledge the reality that she was gone and that the world had moved on.

‘It is complete, Occa. It was complete the day the Committee surrendered. You can’t keep refighting old battles when the other side doesn’t even care that you’re here any more. For better or worse, they won. *They* get to build the world. We just have to live in it.’

‘I don’t expect you to understand. You weren’t even born then, and you’re not from here. I don’t mean that as an insult, you understand. I’m not one of those who rail against the immigrants and level every imagined moral crisis at their door. But we’re born into our history; it twines itself around us as we grow, until we don’t know where one ends and the other begins. We have a special connection with the past of the worlds where we are born, and the events we live through etch themselves on our bones.’

I said nothing. I was thinking of my podhome in Bow Bells, the proud relics of my family’s past displayed in similarity and actuality around us as my sisters and I grew. As a fat little calf I’d been as boisterous and scrappy as any young dolphin. I’d rather be balancing a ball on my nose or jumping through hoops than listening to my dad talk about his time in the military or my grandfather telling us about the Cockney diaspora that had brought my people to the stars. But Occa was right: as I’d got older, that history had enmeshed me anyway. By the time I was coming to the end of primary school I was fascinated by Dad’s medals and insignia. I pestered him for three full years until he finally allowed me to try on his Pearly Guard uniform and weapons harness. From that day on, following in his wake was all I wanted to do.

The day I failed the probationary assessment was the most shameful of my short life. Even now, in my personal torture-chamber of painful memories it’s second only to the day I lost Maisy.

'I can remember it clearly, you know,' Occa said. 'The day after the elections. No-one had believed we could do it but we did. We'd actually unseated the Imperial-approved party and elected the Popular Committee. We all thought they'd just rig the vote or invalidate the results or something like that. But the party structure on Segovax was so inept by then that they couldn't even manage that. Naturally they tried to cut deals, buy the Committee off, all the usual tricks. We couldn't quite believe it when they held firm. They nationalised the mines, improved workers' rights. Those few months were extraordinary. We believed anything was possible.'

I recalled a sim-documentary I'd once seen half of. Or was it a movie?

'It damn near destroyed the economy, didn't it?'

'Depends how you define an economy. Profits went right down, but we weren't *trying* to make profits. We were trying to run things fairly for the equal benefit of the community. What really did the damage were the corporate embargoes and the Naval blockade.'

I remembered that bit. The scenes of Imperial gunships ranged around the Rock were iconic. No supplies in; no ore out. At the head of the blockade, the flagships were resplendent in the colours of the mining corporations whose political puppets had been ousted. To this day the Peace Party and their lefty cohort held the incident up as the moment when the Imperial administration had abandoned all pretence of being anything other than the political and enforcement wing of corporate policy. The docs didn't tend to dwell on how things had been inside Segovax at that time, but I'd spoken to enough old-timers to know it was pretty bad. Food-queues and sawdust-in-the-flour bad.

"Acute financial mismanagement", they called it! Occa snorted derisively. 'Had the cheek to blame the Committee and say it was "harming the Segovaxi people". I was there when the landers breached the darsena. I was in the crowd watching when they seized the *Red Star* and turned its mining batteries on the Committee Hall. "Liberation", they called it. There were eighty-three people in that building. Elected officials, public servants and their families. They slaughtered our democratically-elected government and sold us to the highest bidder. And they called it "Liberation".'

You know when the family's all gathered round for Christmas or whatnot and some remark or thing on the datanet sparks Grandpa off on a bit of a racist diatribe? You all kind of look at each other and just hope – please, Gods, won't he just stop because it's all so bloody awkward and embarrassing. That's kind of what I felt like with Occa. Nice enough old bird but his politics were so much of their time he might as well have been voicing his support for the Dominators for all the common ground we had. I didn't care about all that crap. I don't follow the news. I have enough problems in my life without refighting thirty-year-old battles.

I shifted awkwardly. Bear in mind I'm in the walker, right? The mental command needs to be above a certain threshold for it to register. So this wasn't just your average unconscious cringing shuffle. This was awkwardness so palpable even a machine could sense it. Even so, as he rambled on I felt a pang of guilt. Maisy would have had so much to say. She'd have lapped this stuff up. The two of them would probably have been arguing political theory and the merits of various forms of direct action all evening. But Maisy was gone. Never more so than at times like this.

It was almost a relief when the upper storey of an apartment block exploded on the other side of the street. I yelled my surprise anyway. A flitter streaked overhead, low enough and fast enough that the turbulence from the gravmotors damn near whisked the walker off its feet. Not just any flitter, either. Mine. And people were shooting at it. *Again*.

'For the love of the gods!' I started to shout, but the end of the exclamation was drowned out as a plasma bolt cracked open a ruined arts cinema a few hundred metres away. Two corporate security flitters were in pursuit and their pilots were evidently taking full advantage of the fact that the neighbourhood was abandoned to exercise their twitchy trigger fingers.

'We need to get back,' Occa urged. He started down the hill but stumbled as we were rocked by another blast. I supported him, and we ran for his house.

Anji was back and waiting for us by the door, a large latte clutched incongruously in her hand.

'Where did you go?' she asked as we piled inside. 'What the hell did you *do*?'

'Not us, lady,' I retorted. 'This one's on your chum Fitz.' I raised my voice and aimed it towards the other room, where the Doctor was still working. 'You realise even if we survive this I'm never going to be able to use that car again?'

The door opened again and Fitz himself barrelled in, breathless and sweaty. He wasn't a particularly fit bloke. Trim for someone who had to be approaching his mid-thirties, but lacking in muscle-tone. Coralie was half a step behind him, carrying the box.

'Coralie? What are you doing here?'

She looked at me and shrugged. 'Just hanging out with Fitz.'

'Ah,' announced the Doctor, emerging from his makeshift path-lab. 'You're back. And you brought company. How nice.' That seemed a bit rude, I thought, till I twigged he meant the agents, not Coralie.

'No need to get sarky,' Fitz shot back. 'We've just been chased across half the city by coppers.'

'Private security contractors,' the Doctor corrected him. 'Everything on Segovax is out to tender. Justice by the lowest bidder, after this message from our sponsors. And I did warn you.'

'You said "be polite and don't bother them. They've got no reason to suspect you of anything". That's what we did. Went in, picked up the box, left. It's not like we mooned them and chucked stones at their car as we went past.'

'They were waiting for us,' Coralie said. 'Or for someone, anyway. This lot were hiding out of sight before the normal investigators even got there.'

'So you brought them straight to us,' the Doctor said with a frown.

'We thought we'd lost them!' Fitz objected.

'Good job,' Anji chipped in.

'Look, far be it from me to interrupt this,' I said, 'but those agents are gonna be here any second. Can we postpone the bickering until after we've – I dunno – scarpered or something? I'm on bail for suspected murder!'

'Abandoned district with a history of dissident unrest,' said the Doctor. 'And we're holed up in a large, potentially unstable building. They're not going to come wading in mob-

handed without knowing what's waiting for them inside. They'll hold off, keep an eye on the place, wait for back-up.'

'You sound very certain of that,' said Occa.

'I do, don't I? I suppose I must have a fair few run-ins with the law.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' I muttered.

'So are we getting out of here?' asked Anji.

'In a moment.' The Doctor nodded to the box. 'If I may?'

Coralie handed it to him. 'What's in there, Doctor? What's got them so excited?'

I expected him to give some sort of warning before he opened it. No such luck. He just released the lock and pulled out the head with the flourish of a conjuror with a rabbit.

Anji gurgled out an incoherent shocked noise and ran for the bathroom. Fitz swore elaborately.

It was Coralie's reaction I wasn't prepared for. The girl's eyes went wide as plates and she staggered back as if she'd been punched. 'N... no!'

Even the Doctor looked surprised. 'You recognise her?'

Coralie nodded, trying and failing to shape words.

'It's... m... It... Mum?'

I checked out of an upstairs window while Anji and Fitz tried to calm Coralie. I suspected even the formidable soothing and restorative powers of a nice cup of tea and a couple of chocolate hobnobs were going to have their work cut out blunting the shock of seeing your mother's severed head pulled out of a box you've been carrying around for the last couple of hours.

Outside I could see the bulky armoured shapes of ConSec specialist security response vehicles parked at intervals in the street. They weren't making any effort to hide them; on the contrary, the vehicles were blanketing the local dataspace with invasive pop-ups and warnings urging us to give ourselves up and surrender to the authorities and spelling out the full range of potential legal sanctions if we did not. I loaded a pirated grey-market plug-in into my 'scape's privacy module and the onslaught diminished somewhat. I scoured the buildings and debris around us, trying to spot where the agents had set up. While they were happy for us to know they were there, though, they were being rather more cagey about revealing their exact numbers or positions. Apart from a couple of dozy plods who'd forgotten to turn theirs on, interference and shrouding ware blurred everything into a shifting, ghosting multiple-vision. It was enough to give anyone a migraine and I quickly gave it up as a bad job.

The Doctor was waiting at the foot of the stairs as I came down. 'Any luck?'

'There's three vans and the two flitters that came after Fitz, so they're serious. I can't get a handle on exact numbers.'

He nodded. 'More is good. It means they're being cautious; gives us time to make our move.'

'How's Coralie?'

'I didn't know it was her mother's head,' he said morosely. 'I would never...'

'You knew it was *someone's* head. She's only a kid. Did you really think she'd react well?'

'I didn't think...' he began, and tailed off.

That was true enough. I believed him, though. Coralie had told me she was from Gesima, halfway to the galactic core. Backpacking from there to Segovax wasn't the usual gap-year jaunt. It took determination, wanderlust or just being very *very* lost. The chances of anyone else at all from her homeworld crossing her path here were minuscule – the chances of it being her mother and her being involved in a murder on the very same ship Coralie had arrived on...

Well, let's just say I don't believe in coincidences that big.

The two of us re-entered Occa's rooms. Coralie was sitting in an armchair by the sodium-lamp, sipping sweet tea and listening to Fitz, who was talking to her in low, earnest tones I couldn't make out.

Anji interposed herself between her and the Doctor before we could approach.

'Ah-ah. You've done enough damage for the time being. How about you keep your distance and put that supposedly big old brain of yours to work figuring out how we're going to get out of here?'

She let me pass.

I squatted down beside Coralie.

'How're you holding up, kid?'

'How do you think?' asked Fitz.

She put a hand on his shoulder. 'No, Fitz. It's OK.' She took a deep breath. 'I wasn't expecting it to be her. The contact.'

'Contact?'

She looked really young then. Under all the seen-the-universe, experienced-backpacker chic, she really was still just a kid. I wondered idly if I'd looked so naïve and vulnerable when I'd first wandered off the boat. She took hold of my flipper and looked me in the eye. The right one, incidentally – with cetaceans, unlike humans, eye-contact really is pretty much just one at a time. 'I haven't been straight with you, Flippers. I'm... I'm not from Gesima. And my name isn't really Coralie and Beans.'

Somewhere, on a distant world, a bear wiped its bum on a leaf and loped off through the forest. I bit back a smart comment. Now wasn't the time.

'I *am* Coralie. When I was a kid I used to play in the hydroponics gardens, way past time when hide-and-seek stops being fun and the adults start to get worried. First couple of times I caused chaos. There were all kinds of people out looking for me. Eventually they worked it out, though. I always hid in the same area – in the tall Gaffney Beans near the vaporators. People started calling me Coralie and Beans.'

'And your real name?'

'Van Oyen. Coralie van Oyen. My mum's Calliope. Don't bother searching the databases: you won't find us.'

'Why not? Where *are* you from?'

'I can't say.'

'Come on, Coralie,' said Fitz. 'We're trying to help. We want to find who did this to your mum.'

She shook her head. 'I'm sorry. Don't you think I'd tell you if I could? But there's more at stake here than just us and Mum. I can't put the others in danger. Please don't ask me again.'

I decided to change tack. 'The *Dulcibella* isn't a massive ship. How could you and your mum both be on board at the same time without you realising?'

'Because I was never on the *Dulcibella*, that's why. I've been on Segovax for months.'

'Why lie about that?'

'I only bent the truth. Someone had killed my contact. I didn't want anyone connecting me with them.'

'What do you mean "contact"?' asked Fitz. 'Coralie, you need to tell us what you're doing here.'

She took a deep breath. 'Don't look at me like that, Fitz. Most of what I told you was true, I swear. I did the whole teenage rebellion thing, needed to get away from home. So I packed up, left and spent the next two years wandering the space-lanes.'

'So you didn't get on with your mum?'

'It wasn't like that. Look, I was sixteen! We didn't fight. I just needed my own life.' She looked to me. 'You know how it is.' I did at that. 'So, a few months ago I was riding a grain boat on course to Skovholt. We were halfway through the Cygnus Rift when we dropped out of hyperspace, no warning. The automated systems woke me from cryosleep and I went to find the captain to ask what had happened.'

'I found him halfway through setting a new heading, in completely the opposite direction to Skovholt. We'd got a message, he said. We had to change course. I asked him what it said and where we were going but he wouldn't tell me. Forced me back into cryo and the next thing I know I'm crawling out of my pod in a back-street in Cheapside, watching the grain boat sail out of the darsena without me. They'd put word round before they left, too. None of the other ships would take me off the Rock. I was stuck here.'

I knew the feeling. I'd been making for the Psychic Circus. Realised my mistake only when I was halfway through customs. In a galaxy this big there's a disconcerting number of similarly-named worlds to trip up the unsuspecting wanderer. From Segonax to the nearest hubworld was a short, cheap hop. From Segovax to get anywhere I stood a chance of making a quick opek cost more than I had left in my account. I'll never forget trudging out into the damp, humid streets of the docklands, feeling the greasy coriolis wind on my skin and realising I was stuck here for the long haul. Even so, I hadn't guessed quite how long that would be.

'I managed to get by,' Coralie went on. 'Even here there's people who'll help you if you're alone and lost. They don't have much to give, but they made sure I had food and a roof over my head until I managed to find a way of making money. After a couple of weeks I'd almost forgotten about the message. Chalked it up to just one of those things bastard space-jocks do sometimes. But then I got my own message.'

'What did it say?' asked Fitz.

'It was a code. From home. They needed my help, they said. They'd uncovered something big about Segovax. Something the corporations want hidden.'

I heard a muffled pop and shouting from outside. My 'scape flashed up a warning that a smoke bomb had detonated nearby and large numbers of armed people were converging at

speed on our location. An instant later it flickered and dropped out completely, overpowered by whatever countermeasures the agents were using.

Anji ran into the room. 'They're coming! We need to go, Fitz. Now!'

Fitz waved her off, his attention focused on Coralie. 'What did they find? What's all this about?'

She shook her head. 'Damn it, Fitz! I don't know! They're so bloody secretive the whole damn time! That's half the reason I left. They didn't tell me *anything*. They said someone who knew would arrive on the *Dulcibella* and meet me at the spaceport. They didn't even tell me it was Mum.'

'Corporate secrets,' I hissed. I couldn't keep the distaste out of my tone. 'Are they really worth killing for?'

'This one might be,' Coralie replied. 'They did tell me one thing; to convince me to cooperate, I think. If we don't do something about it, whatever they stumbled on could mean the end for every living being on Segovax.'