

# DOCTOR WHO

## THE DISMAL SCIENCE

By  
Philip Boyes

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# **Part 3**

## **Market Forces**

# Chapter Seven

There's two kinds of blokes find themselves as lawmen. First lot spend their childhoods always in trouble: scraps over girls; warnings for shoplifting; a school record that's mostly disciplinary with a slender appendix for actual educational achievement. They're the ones usually wind up either as crims or coppers. In it for the thumping and, if they're very lucky, a chance to jump through the air firing an automatic plasma pistol and shouting. Your second bunch are the ones who spent their childhoods on the receiving end of the first's rowdiness. The punctilious, nerdy kids who want things to be fair, play by the rules and never so much as turned up to register late.

All right, I'm overstating things a tad. But you see what I'm driving at. Three guesses which one I was.

The first lot just sound so much cooler, though, don't they? Truth is, they're not. They're mostly thugs and arseholes. The white van man of law enforcement. Kids everyone idolises until about the age of twenty, when suddenly a switch goes in your brain and you realise just what a shower of class-A berks they are. So, yeah: I was the other kind. Small, slightly awkward. Too goody-goody for my own health. By the time I'd gone through all the indoctrination my old man and me granddad sent my way, all I wanted was to be in the Pearly Guard. Justice, Duty, Queen Mum and Homeworld mapped out my morality like directions on a compass.

Stupid to think about now. You ever seen the Pearly Guard? If you have, you'll know what I mean. The terrestrials look ridiculous enough in their black, rhinestone-spangled combat fatigues. The marine branch are even worse. With their little pearly lycra jerkins and darling weapons-harnesses, the tourists go potty for them. I found that culturally insensitive at the time; these days I err more towards 'hilarious'. Seriously, I know all the tradition behind it, but *really*? A society advanced enough to journey through the stars, cockniform a new world and build grand cities that straddle land and sea, and we choose to dress our elite royal guard in the ancient costume of eccentric East End costermongers?

Anyway, point is, even now the dutiful, rule-following kid in me still feels a pang of guilt about any kind of negative run-in with the law. Even when the law in question's a squad of paid-by-the-hour Type 1s subcontracted for this kind of work by the lowest-bidder justice provider. Somewhere, far from here, Dad would be scowling down his snout and blowing disappointed bubbles.

'Come *on!*' Anji shouted, yanking Fitz to his feet. He was still focused on Coralie, his mind still filled with the implications of what she'd said rather than the sudden and pressing need for us to get out of here distinctly sharpish.

He shook his head. 'God, yeah. Sorry. Coralie?'

The Doctor appeared in the doorway. 'What are you all waiting for? Now would be a really excellent time to run.'

A moment later we were all doing just that. Out of Occa's rooms and into the tumbledown stairwell. The Silurian emerged from the shadows under the partially-collapsed stairwell.

‘This way!’

There was a door. A luggage-storage locker, actually. For students to store their crap when they were away during the holidays. There were still cardboard boxes full of junk piled up on one side. The back of the cupboard had been crudely bashed through to reveal a dark space beyond. Occa waved us after him and disappeared down a concrete-lined tunnel strung with weak bulbs.

‘I like what you’ve done with the place, mate,’ I said to Occa as I plunged in after him. Anji, Fitz and Coralie bustled in after me. I guessed the Doctor was taking up the rear, but that was further back than I could see. ‘Knockin’ it all through really opens the space up. What is it? Wine cellar?’

‘Escape route,’ Occa called back, sounding breathless and testy.

Right. Because what self-respecting academic goes without one of those?

It must have been some sort of maintenance tunnel originally. Probably allowed workmen to service the utilities for this entire block without having to brave the student-infested areas up top. Through the gloom I glimpsed circuit-breakers and dust-strewn server racks. At one point we passed a side door that seemed to have been used more recently than others. I began to open it, but Occa gripped my hand.

‘Not that way.’

The right door was further along. On the other side the concrete walls gave way to bare rock: the dark, volcanic-looking, porous stone of Segovax itself. I felt like we were going downhill, burrowing outwards, closer to the skin of the asteroid. Some atavistic instinct tried to convince me I could feel the gravity getting stronger, but I knew we hadn’t gone nearly deep enough to make any noticeable difference in the centrifugal forces.

My senses reinitialised itself with one of those deeply disconcerting noises AIs make when all is not well. A swarm of error pop-ups swarmed my vision. I blinked them away and quickly assessed what functionality I could rely on. Not much, was the answer to that. The agents’ countermeasures were still playing merry hell with my ageing ware. Even so, I was pleased to find a few modules working that might be useful. For kick-offs I loaded up a low-light vision enhancement layer. It was grainy and washed the colour out of everything, but the added detail lowered the chances of my tripping up no end. And believe me, when a cetacean in a walker trips up it’s not just bad for him; it’s bad for the people around him. Especially in an enclosed space. Once I could see where I was going I tried to call up a mapping module for the area. No dice. The app was working but this tunnel wasn’t on any of the Rock’s official maps. That was good, though, I decided. Less chance of us being followed.

I risked an active scan back along the tunnel. A few low-level power signals showed up some way back, but they were static and didn’t look like weapons signatures. There were no aug location-pings, EM interference from comms chatter or anything else that might indicate the law were coming down after us.

‘I think we made it,’ I said, pulling up.

I remembered, too late, that Anji didn’t have my vision augments. She barrelled into the walker with a muffled cry of alarm. It swayed a bit but remained on its feet. Which is more than I can say for her.

Thankfully Coralie was augmented too, so we avoided an embarrassing pile-up.

'Have a nice trip, Anji?' Fitz asked, apparently trying to lighten the mood. The entrep girl scowled at him and muttered irritably as Coralie helped her to her feet. Mostly obscenities directed at me, I suspected.

Occa came back. 'We need to keep going.'

'Just give us a minute,' Fitz snapped. 'Are you holding up all right?' he asked Coralie. 'Jeez, stupid question. But...' He tailed off and waved an arm lamely.

Coralie shrugged. Give her credit: if you'd asked me to run from the law just after I'd found out Maisy's ship had disappeared and then asked me that question, I don't think that would have been the response you'd have got from me. And not just because dolphins can't shrug.

'I'm OK,' she eventually said, her voice small and distant as the sounds of dripping moisture that echoed down the tunnels. 'It's just... We just left her body. Cut open on the table.'

'I know,' said the Doctor, 'and I'm so sorry. We *will* find the people behind this. But right now we need to get clear.'

'We're already clear,' she said. 'They're not following us.'

'And that's a start. But Occa's right – better safe than sorry. We shouldn't stop yet.'

The Earth Reptile bobbed his head with gratitude. He scampered off again, away into the darkness. Being underground seemed to have taken years off him. I wondered if he felt the same way in the tunnels as I did in the sea. I hadn't enjoyed that sort of freedom of movement for years. The walker was so much a part of me these days that sometimes I feared that if I ever did succeed in getting somewhere with open water my body wouldn't even remember what to do. We pressed on, and my mind wandered, recalling the swaddling tides of the bay at Bow Bells, the smells of salt and fish and wind.

The tunnels seemed darker and more claustrophobic than ever.

The passage terminated abruptly in a metal plate. More like the tunnel had been dug up to a pre-existing wall, rather than the bulkhead being put there specifically to block our path. Either way, the result was the same.

'You're joking!' Anji exclaimed. 'A dead end?'

'Doctor?' prompted Occa.

He pulled out his sonic device and played it over the plate. I had to dial down half my senses while he did it: the sound-waves played merry hell with the old sonar, throwing up the kind of hallucinations and false echoes that you normally get only with a disturbed mind and serious chemical stimulation. Cetaceans don't do well with all that malarkey. I once nearly got speared by a junkie narwhal who was convinced he was constantly surrounded by shambling, crushing hordes. Admittedly, this was in one of Segovax's biggest shopping malls in the run-up to Christmas, but he could have been alone in ocean and it would have made no difference. Remember, kids: don't do drugs.

While I was quietly tripping away in my own private world of psychedelic echoes, the Doctor succeeded in finding a frequency that made something deep within the metal wall clunk satisfyingly. He snapped off the screwdriver and the pulsing, soupy fog in my head cleared in time for me to see Occa lift a section of the bulkhead away. Behind was only darkness, but my sencescape told me it was a more spacious darkness than the one we currently occupied, so I followed the old Earth Reptile through.

We spilled out into a metal tunnel, though that hardly conveys the scale of the place. It was wide as a main road and above us the ceiling was lost in darkness and a canopy of girders, gantries and great skeins of cable. I'd have been tempted to call it a machine-hall if it hadn't quite obviously stretched off into the distance in both directions. Ore conveyors lined the far side along its length, partially obscured by a forest of dormant robotic arms and processing machinery. There was a musty tang of engine-oil and long abandonment; everything glittered with a fine coating of micaceous rock-dust.

'Where are we now?' asked Fitz. 'Underneath the supervillain's secret lair? Are a squad of soldiers going to come buzzing down the passage in a little golf-cart?'

'We're in the old mining service-tunnels,' I said. 'I visited the preserved section over in the Glassheart a few years back.'

'Isn't that a kids' theme park?' asked Coralie.

'Heritage Learning Attraction is the phrase they use. You're never too old for history. Suspicious wife had me following this entrep. Turns out the fella had a whole nother secret family he spent weekends with. It was actually pretty interesting – the tunnels, I mean, not the case. Had no idea they extended out this far.'

'They extend everywhere,' Occa said, setting off confidently and gesturing for us to follow him. 'The whole Rock's riddled with them – they're what it was built for. They moved the ore the mining ships brought back from the Belt to all the different processing and transshipment facilities. Ninety per cent of Segovax's industrial infrastructure was down here in the Warrens – the main chambers were mostly just for habitation and the few parts of the process that needed human supervision. When the corporations seized the Rock and decided mining wasn't economical any more they shut off the entry points and a few of the upper levels but left everything else intact. They wanted to be sure – if mining ever becomes sufficiently profitable again everything's right here where they left it, just waiting for them to fire up the reactors again.'

'And in the meantime,' added the Doctor, 'they provide us with a handy way of moving about without raising suspicion.'

'Hang on,' Anji objected. 'How do we get out if all the entrances were sealed?'

'Do pay attention. All except one. Flippers just told you.'

'I did?' The penny dropped even as I spoke the words. 'MineWorld?'

The Doctor beamed. 'If you're good, we can even stop at the gift shop on the way out.'



Even if you've never been within half a dozen parsecs of Segovax, I guarantee you've been somewhere like MineWorld. It's the kind of tourist attraction that corporate boards love as ways to meet their social responsibility compliance targets. Recipe's tried and trusted: take one piece of old real estate, too unsuitable or too expensive to adapt into Today's Modern Workplace. Spruce it up a bit and sprinkle with a few hands-on interactive sencescape dioramas. For added authenticity, garnish with a few out-of-work sumers desperate enough accept a pittance to don their grandfather's overalls and pretend to be a miner so that visitors can have their similarity taken with them (at only a few extra opeks a pop); serve with a liberally-stocked gift shop full of overpriced memorabilia for the kids and a tearoom for the harassed adults. Bob's your uncle! One Educational Heritage Experience celebrating the rich history of your asteroid/colony/site of government-sanctioned massacre.

They kept the lighting in MineWorld low as Cheapside self-esteem. This was utterly out of keeping with how the tunnels would have been when in use (health and safety!), but it suited the company that ran it for a number of reasons. It was 'more atmospheric', it hid the worst of the rust and the shabbiness of the 'restoration' efforts (along with a bit of 'scape airbrushing); and, most importantly, it was what the punters expected. First rule of marketing: sumers hate surprises: always give them what they expect. That also accounted for the antiquated mine-cart tracks had been installed alongside the automated ore-processing lines.

It might have been naff, but the dinginess suited us just peachy. Under its veil of shadows, we slipped unobserved through a service door into the cleaner, more orderly and generally faker surroundings of MineWorld. The change in smell was immediate. From the grandpa's-garage oil-and-rust tang of the sealed tunnels to a chemically-synthesised equivalent that had more in common with the kind of cloying spiced pot-pourris entreps like to scatter about their homes around Christmas.

A nearby group of sightseers drifted among the gargantuan machinery, viewing the spectacle through the cramped viewfinders of sim-recorders. Unusually for this kind of place, they were all grown-ups. We caught up with them and I recognised the Vervoid-arrangers from the spaceport.

Small world. Literally.

Smiling politely, and with a few murmured pleasantries from the Doctor, we merged groups. For the next twenty minutes we trailed round the exhibits with them and listened to the 'scape avatar tour-guide explaining the history of the workings. Occa tutted and huffed at near-enough every word. Eventually it got a bit too loud and we began to attract irritated glances from the horticulturalists. The Doctor made some excuses and ushered us away.

By then we were within spitting-distance of the exit anyway. We set our faces like happy sumers brimming with delight at our newfound reconnection with our collective past and sauntered out into the gift shop. The simulated staff acknowledged our warm grins with plastic gratitude. If they were at all put out by us leaving without having ever apparently entered, they didn't show it. So long as we bought a few souvenir rubbers, plastic dinosaurs and packs of fudge, they probably wouldn't have cared if we'd been down there since the coup itself.

Anji and the Doctor queued up to do just that, leaving the rest of us to kill time pretending to be interested in the desultory memorabilia on the shelves.

‘Considia Heritage Sumer Products,’ Fitz read off a bookmark. ‘I keep seeing that name. Is there anything on Segovax Considia *don’t* run?’

‘Of course,’ Occa said bitterly. ‘It would hardly be a “competitive free market” otherwise. But Considia’s the biggest company, and all the senior board members of the others go to the same golf club as Ra.’

‘Ra?’

‘You know,’ Coralie said, ‘Gideon Ra? The CEO?’

‘As in the Egyptian god?’

‘Well it’s spelt the same,’ I said. ‘But he isn’t one.’

‘Right. You absolutely sure of that? Just, travel with the Doctor for a while and you find it pays to check.’

‘Just an entrep, like any other. Sharp suit, sharp tongue, no conscience. They’re all kinda the same.’

Occa shook his head. ‘He’s the worst.’

‘Oh aye?’

‘He arrived during the coup. Did you know that?’

I didn’t, but mostly because I’d never given him more than a moment’s thought. I called up his Imperipedia article and tried to scan his biog, but my AI seemed to be on the blink and the window kept fizzing and dropping out of my ’scape. Chuffing ware was on its last legs.

‘So what?’ I said. ‘He’s a youngish guy. Can’t have been more than about ten.’

‘He was twelve,’ Occa said. ‘And he was on the first ship into the darsena.’

‘Along to watch Daddy seal the deal?’ Fitz asked lightly, a hint of distaste in his voice.

‘Oh no,’ Occa replied. ‘It was *his* ship. By that point his father was a washed-up bankrupt drinking away his days on the family moon above Sionne. Lost everything when an insider sold financial secrets to one of his rivals. Take three guesses who the insider was.’

‘Jesus,’ muttered Fitz. ‘And he was twelve? Like twelve *Earth* years?’

‘He inherited his father’s instinct for profit. And lack of scruples. And that was *before* he went to business school on Eden.’

Coralie took the bookmark from Fitz, tilting it so the silvered, iridescent Considia logo glimmered in the lights. ‘So if there’s some sort of corporate plot here, Gideon Ra’s got to be our prime suspect.’

‘He’s the only suspect,’ Occa said confidently. ‘No company on this Rock does anything without his say-so. The civil government’s a rubber-stamp office to enact his social policies. I’m sorry to say it, my girl, but it’s almost certain Ra’s the one behind your mother’s death. And that means we’re going to have the devil’s own work getting you justice.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ The Doctor breezed in to re-join us, laden with bags. He began distributing gifts like a nineteenth-century paterfamilias having his annual meeting with the children. Coralie got fudge and a necklace; I was given a tie with the MineWorld logo on it (handy when you don’t have a neck) and Fitz a red plastic triceratops. Occa didn’t get anything, presumably because anything from this gift shop would be tainted by association with the capitalist-imperialist pig-dogs who’d usurped his workers’ utopia. Not that he was

averse to accepting a chunk of toffee when Anji offered it on the way out. While all this was going on, the Doctor continued to give us his cheerful assessment of Ra. 'He sounds like just the sort of chap I normally manage very well with.'

That perked Fitz up. Face like a dog at walkies, he slapped Occa heartily on the back. 'Dust off your protest placards, Occa, old son! We'll have you a revolution by sundown.'

Anji looked unimpressed by the whole idea.

We rode a long escalator back towards the surface. Fitz's pockets weren't large enough for his toy dinosaur, and the Doctor had returned the empty bags to the cashiers. So he carried the toy in plain view, much to the amusement of a couple of young children heading in the other direction. When they laughed and pointed at him, he pulled a goofy face and waggled the beast in their direction, accompanied with an almost-fearsome 'RUAAAGGHHH!' They hooted all the louder. Coralie smiled, for the first time since she'd arrived at Occa's house. Her fingers twined between his.

I'd hoped that as we got nearer the surface my 'scape would start working properly again, but I was still having drop-outs. Like I said before, the thing wasn't exactly top of the line to begin with, and whatever those security agents had infected it with had shot the suite to buggery. The advertising similarities that played along the walls of the shaft kept vanishing, stuttering and randomly switching language and species. The sophisticated young couple settling down to enjoy a glass (in moderation) of fruity and sophisticated Valaian Reserve Burgundy fluttered through configurations at a dizzying pace before they finally resolved themselves into sketchily-defined French-speaking Ogrons and, a moment later, disappearing from my sensorium altogether. No great loss, that. But without the 'scape I felt isolated, blinded and vulnerable: a private eye without its contacts in.

I was about to complain to the Doctor when, without warning and to my immense relief, the full enhancement suite popped back into place, layering my sight with entoptic displays and auging my hearing back to normal. When we stepped out on to the bustling pedestrianised boulevard of Enterprise Way, it filtered the artificial sunlight until my eyes adjusted, tweaking the colour-balance and contrast to give me the optimum possible vista of the Glassheart. An overlay dropped across my vision, neat labels telling me the names, function and corporate owners of every gleaming skyscraper. I'd been here before, of course, many times. But I spent enough time grubbing round dingy Cheapside backstreets and tawdry commuter suburbs that the glittering, airy grandeur of Segovax's central business district always took me back a little. There was a public sky here: not just a misty blueness overlaid above our heads, through which the inverted rooftops of the antipodal districts were visible; this was like being on a world, right down to the simulated blue disc of Vercingetorix hanging overhead. I knew it was an illusion, but damn, it was a good one. Only the best for the cream of the Rock's entreps.

I became aware that the Doctor, Fitz and Anji were standing stock still, seemingly as taken by the vista as I was. Fitz and Anji were open-mouthed; the Doctor wore a pensive frown.

'Bit of a difference from the rest of the Rock, innit?' I asked, unable to keep a note of pride from my voice.

'Flippers,' the Doctor said. 'What do you see?'

‘What do you mean? I see the Glassheart.’

‘Describe it.’

‘I... err... Right-o, then. Sure, if that’s what you want. We’re in a little square – I guess they probably call it a plaza or something, opening up from one of the big main streets through the city. In front of us is the Eurogen Building. Over there is Anima Tower. That’s the Frontier Worlds Needle...’

‘How do they look to you?’

‘Like any city centre,’ I replied irritably. I didn’t know what he wanted me to say but I knew this wasn’t it.

‘It’s all glass,’ said Coralie. ‘Glass and chrome and duralinium. Expensive, sleek, clean, kind of futuristic. I think some of them were done by quite famous architects...’

‘Are we looking at the same city?’ asked Fitz, nonplussed.

I opened my mouth to ask the Doctor for an explanation when my senscape glitched again. The info overlays vanished. And with them, just for a second, did half the buildings, the sky, the gleaming glass and shining, clean streets. For less than an eye-blink I glimpsed a different Glassheart. A grey and ageing one, where some of the ’scrapers were gone; others were dark and abandoned. The streets were strewn with litter and defaced with static graffiti. Amid it all, the entreps and tourists and happy sumers out for shopping expeditions wandered on in their teeming, oblivious crowds.

Then it was gone, and the sunlit paradise of glass took its place once more.

‘What was that?’ I exclaimed. ‘Jesus, Doctor! What the hell did I just see?’

He skipped over, peering at my head curiously as if he thought he could see into my augments if only he tried hard enough. That sonic screwdriver of his was in his hand again, but I batted it away with a flipper before he could use it on me. The others were looking at me in concern. Occa and Coralie looked confused. Of those of us with augs, I was the only one who’d seen it.

The shining city disappeared a second time, for longer.

‘Your senscape augmentations are malfunctioning,’ the Doctor said worriedly.

‘You don’t say!’

‘I need to deactivate them. If this keeps up it could do irreparable damage to your neural connections.’

He brought up the screwdriver again. *Screwdriver*. Can you believe that? He was talking about performing surgery that would leave me half blind. In the street. With a screwdriver.

No wonder I panicked. ‘You can’t!’ I shouted, backing away. All I could think of was the effect that gizmo had had on me in the tunnels. I was making a scene but I didn’t care. No way was I letting him do brain-surgery with that thing. We were getting funny looks from passers-by. Lucky there weren’t any agents in the area. My mugshot had to be on wanted pop-ups all over the datanet by now.

The Doctor ignored my protestations and thumbed on his device. The sonic warble pierced through my sonar, compounding my disorientation. I felt the walker convulse, its legs scrabbling in dying-spider spasms. I almost fell.

I drifted and spun and swirled in a confusion that lasted forever and no time at all. My head was full of lights and the colours sounded like agony.

Then reality reasserted itself. *Real* reality this time. No enhancements, no datanet connection, no corrective overlays superimposed. The Doctor stepped back. Breathless and exhausted, I forced open my bare eyes and looked undeceived on the Glassheart for the first time.

My voice emerged as a croak. 'Gods!'

After a few moments I'd regained enough composure to shape proper words, but my heart was still beating like a mad thing. I gabbled, words pouring out in astonishment and fear. 'I don't get it. The place is a wreck! It was all lies. All 'scape illusions. The prosperity, the wealth... Where is it, Doctor? What's happened to Segovax?'

I was after reassurance, but when he looked back at me, what I saw in those eyes scared me deeper. More than the blinding, more than the disorientation, more even than discovering everything I thought I knew about my little world was a sham. I don't know if even he knew it was there, this funny little man with his strange clothes and his childlike excitement.

They were the eyes of a man who really could bring your entire world crashing down around you without breaking a sweat. Destroy the economy. Overthrow the government. Upend the social order. He would do it all and he would think no more of it than he would having a friend casually break into someone's house to collect a severed head. He was unbound by the laws of society that applied to everyone else, from the lowliest sumer to the most exalted entrep. He was anarchy. He was revolution. He was a complete bloody psychopath.

He looked at me.

'There's something rotten in the heart of Segovax,' he said in a voice like frost. 'And you and me, Flippers: we're going to find out what it is.'

# Chapter Eight

What does Segovax actually *do*?

It was a question that hadn't exactly loomed large in my mind before today but as we made our way through the Glassheart it nagged insistently at my thoughts.

Thirty years ago it would have been easy enough to answer. Segovax was founded as a mining base, a staging and refining post for the ships that snared rocks in the Belt, ground them for their bendeziium, tarantium and lucanol, and shipped the ore back to avid manufactories on Vercingetorix to be pressed into pads and biochips and a thousand other sumer products. Simple days: back then everyone on the Rock was involved in mining, directly or less so. These days things were more complicated. Aren't they always? Now there were two Segovaxes with two populations seemingly immiscible as oil and water. In Cheapside and the midtowns and infesting all the cracks between society's polite façade, were the sumers. Mindless drones, the shirkers and the mediocre, scratching by on a meagre breadline or below, stumbling from one unskilled short-term job to another. No security, no quality of life, no prospects. They consoled themselves with a diet of trash datanet culture and throwaway products on a year-long obsolescence cycle. I'm a sumer, I guess. Just one who doesn't care too much about actually suming.

Fewer in number, but the only ones the media pay any attention to, were the entreps. Go-getters, innovators, hard-workers. We've all heard the fountaining paeans of praise politicians and business-leaders recite like liturgy. A favourite phrase was *wealth-creators*. What they did – *whatever* they did – was the wellspring from which wealth poured into Segovax. Scant little of that trickled down to the rest of us, but that was the nature of society, they said. You work hard, you're flexible, you innovate – you end up in the gleaming spires of the Glassheart, sipping champagne and shooting up vraxoin at the corporate shindigs. You don't – well, it's Cheapside for you. And if it wasn't for the wealth the entreps brought in, Cheapside would be even worse for everyone. So you just had to accept your lot and be thankful. Let the entreps in their skyscrapers make their deals and manipulate their numbers in the dataspace. You don't have to know what it is they're actually doing, if you even have the IQ to understand – it just works, and the Glassheart is that covenant made manifest: promise and proof in shining metal and glass.

Except the Glassheart was a lie. A paper mask over an aged and diseased face. The buildings we walked between were – well, not exactly *ruined*, but very, very shabby. There wasn't a spare opek being spent here on upkeep, beautification or luxury where it could be avoided. I remembered being at school, and the simularities they showed us of bemmie cities outside the weal of the Empire (they actually used that word: *weal*. I had no idea what it meant. Even the teacher AI couldn't explain it). All plasticrete and food lines: a nightmare of urban deprivation. *Be thankful, kiddiewinks, that you live in the Great and Bountiful Empire of Earth, where under the benevolent guardianship of the Divine Empress everywhere flourishes in happiness and wealth!*

The only difference between those alien cities and the Glassheart was that they were cleaner and the citizens knew what kind of society they were living in.

So if there was no money in the Glassheart, what were all the wealth-creators creating? All those entreps lost in their senscape illusions, scurrying around in their endless hamster-wheels of *Innovation!* and *Economic Growth!* and *Profit!* I wondered if, deep down, they had some inkling that it was all ultimately pointless. If they did, they could never have guessed quite how right they were.

But what had gone wrong?

What the hell *were* they all working for?

What does Segovax actually *do*?

I guess if I was gonna find an answer to that anywhere it was going to be here. It felt like the very centre of the Glassheart, though I guess topologically that doesn't make a lot of sense when your city loops around the inside face of a hollow asteroid. It was a consequence of the architecture as much as anything. The skyscrapers grew taller and taller all around, until they suddenly seemed to hit a watershed and drop away again, hollowing out a bowl in the middle of the skyscape. And at the very centre of that, set among what looked through the senscape like exquisitely tended gardens, was the triple-tiered gold-and-crystal pyramid of the Segovax Chambers of Commerce. The place where deals were made, where the stock exchange was housed and where, in massively-fortified vaults, the financial AIs of Considia and the other main transplanetaries operating on Segovax were installed in mainframes built like houses.



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When the Doctor had said “you and me”, he wasn't kidding around. He took first Anji and Occa and then Fitz and Coralie to one side for whispered conversations. Afterwards they headed off in different directions, disappearing into the crowds of workers and passers-by. Did I ask him where they were going? You bet I did. Did he answer? Well, if your idea of an answer is an enigmatic smile and a murmured assertion that they had jobs of their own, then yeah, he answered.

Maybe ten minutes ago that would have satisfied me. Maybe not. After that look I'd seen in him, no way was I gonna be fobbed off so easy. On our way through the Glassheart's neglect-grimed boulevards, I repeated the question a dozen ways. Same reaction. He seemed to find it amusing, like he didn't get why I wanted to know. Like he found it cute that his puppyish enthusiasm and blithe charm wasn't enough to convince me to just shut up and accept that everything he did was in our best interests. I found myself wondering when I'd first shifted to trusting the guy; I found myself wondering why. I didn't reckon he was the killer – not any more – but he *was* dangerous. More dangerous than I think even he knew. He

had a self-awareness blind-spot a mile wide. Hell, he didn't even remember half his own past. He seemed comfortable with that – brimming with puckish adventure as he darted through the streets. *Now*, this one moment – that was enough for him. He could live a life in that eternal present. He might be cool with that; I sure as hell wasn't.

Beyond the watershed around the Chambers of Commerce precincts the deadening shadows of the skyscrapers fell away and the greyish dome of the chamber's antipodal side opened up overhead where the sky should have been. Across a broad, annular avenue gardens lay spread out for us. The trees that had once lined the road were desiccated and withered, their branches crudely docked where they impinged on flutter flight-paths. Once there'd been an ornamental ironwork fence marking the edge of the park – least, I presume it had really been there at some point. Whether solid or 'scape illusion, it was gone now. In places notionally-temporary chainlinks or coiled barbed wire replaced it; elsewhere it had just been ripped out and muddy vehicle tracks told of heavy traffic through the gaps.

Military-issue prefabs shanty-towned the gardens. Between them moved countless soldiers and vehicles: trucks and flitters, APCs and mobile artillery. In the distance I thought I could see a parked skytank, but it was hard to tell without a functioning magnification aug. Whatever real landscaping there might once have been had been ground down to brown slurry by heavy-duty tyres and booted feet. Hi-grip plasteel duckboards lay in trails between ruined ornamental flowerbeds.

We stopped by a tourist souvenir shop on the near side of the avenue; pretended to look through a rack of postcards outside as we snagged glances at the military build-up across the road. I felt deeply unsettled: weirded and uncanny. Not so much at the fact that someone had turned the Gardens of Commerce into an army base as by the continued existence of tat-shops like this on its doorstep. Did sightseers actually come to Segovax? Did they actually post little card-backed similarities of the Glassheart back home? How many years would those take to reach their destination? I watched the visitors to this quaint little shop with a sense of dislocation as deep as the dark blue. I couldn't understand their laughter at the trinkets; I shuffled awkwardly out of shot when they blinked 'scape images of each other posing, trying hard not to look like that's what I was doing. The Doctor didn't seem to care. *Quelle surprise.*

In contrast to the steady stream of people buzzing around the shop, the gardens went unnoticed by all. There was what looked like a staging-post for an Imperial takeover of a bemmie world right under their noses, and the weirdest thing they could find to pay attention to was the postcards. Gods, no wonder the corporations spent so much time trying to flog us all senscapes.

Belatedly, the Doctor noticed my discomfiture. 'Not exactly the gardens of Versailles, are they? Personally I don't mind the odd gnome, but I do draw the line at men with guns.'

'I hate gnomes. Those things give me the creeps.'

'Very wise. Trust me: once one of them turns out to be a time-eating predator from beyond space, you never look at them the same way again.'

Sure. Whatever. 'Is this for the trade summit, you reckon?'

'Trade summit?'

'You know, like security? It's been all over the news for days. One of those fancy shindigs where a gaggle of overpaid suits from off-rock get together to play golf and drink

champagne and talk about business regulation or rates or whatever it is entreps talk about at these things. I don't know, Doctor! I don't follow-

'You don't follow the news. Yes I know. Tell me, Flippers: do you ever feel you might have a better sense of what's going on around the place if you did?'

Cheeky bugger.

He went on. He was talking fast, but I reckoned his mouth was lagging behind whatever calculations were going on in his mind. 'Security must be pretty tight if these people are as rich and powerful as you say.'

*As rich and powerful as I say?* I'd just told him I didn't have a clue who was coming or for what! I just said, 'I guess so.'

'It does seem like a *lot* of soldiers, though, doesn't it?'

Even as he spoke, a squadron of troop transports rumbled low overhead, the downdraft from their gravity drives thrumming the air. Descending as they passed, they disappeared from sight behind the Chambers of Commerce, presumably to land on some hidden pad. They flickered and warped in my vision as their military-grade 'scape shrouds tried to interface with my failed ware and edit them out of my perceptions. No-one else around us noticed them at all.

'This isn't security,' I said. 'This is a bloody army. What are they doing? What are *you* doing?'

The Doctor had launched himself into the gift-shop and begun rooting around in a pile of novelty Glassheart T-shirts piled up on the floor in the corner. He chucked them out of the way and moved on to burrowing through packets of teddy bears in miners' overalls.

'Is this what you do?' I asked, trying not to add to the mess he was making as I manoeuvred the unwieldy walker through the pokey space of the shop. 'You topple regimes by scrabbling round in every tat shop you find?'

The shopkeeper looked about ready to chuck us out, but didn't seem to have ruled out the prospect that the Doctor was genuinely looking to buy something. I imagined a security alert window open in her 'scape, just waiting for her to think the command and report the disturbance the Doctor was causing to whatever security company she subscribed to.

'Doctor...'

He shushed me with a wave of his hand. He had that bloody sonic screwdriver out again. A moment of disorientation for me and something exploded on the wall near the floor. An access panel swung open and he yanked something out, brandishing it like a trophy.

I looked at the little black gizmo. Could have been anything.

'Local sensory illusion transmitter,' he proclaimed, wagging it.

'You pulled out the wi-fi hotspot? Why?'

I looked out the door, expecting to see the passers-by stopping and noticing their real surroundings for the first time. There was nothing out of the ordinary.



‘Not so much a hotspot as a flickering candle. Probably just serves this shop.’

The shopkeeper looked alarmed. Without that thing broadcasting its shiny illusion, everyone would be able to see this place as it really was, peeling paintwork, damp-stained ceiling and all.

‘What have you got against this place?’ I hissed at him. ‘I mean, it’s tacky, sure, but the poor woman’s gotta make a living!’

‘This place is perfectly charming!’ He waved reassuringly at the proprietor. She looked singularly unpersuaded. ‘And you needn’t worry – it’s got a built-in back-up. Your senscape façade’s still up and you won’t see any difference for hours yet. I’ll have it back to you before then. Probably.’

Before the woman could say anything, he was striding out of the shop, already yanking open a small hatch on the back of the transmitter and starting to fiddle with the electronic gubbins he found inside.

‘Doctor, what are you *doing*?’

‘Just tweaking the illusion slightly – ah! There we go!’

‘What have you done?’

‘This thing interfaces with your augmentations and taps into the perception centres of the brain. You can make people see things. Or not see them, depending on what you’re after. With a bit of luck, I’ve jemmied it so it’ll now change how people perceive us.’

‘You’ve made us invisible?’

‘No no no. More trouble than it’s worth. It’s bad enough people bumping into you all the time, but you definitely don’t want a troop carrier driving over you or something. No, I’ve made us look like hairdressers.’

I stopped, tried to wind back my ‘scape record of that last sentence. With the aug still offline I had no choice but to assume I’d actually heard that right.

‘You’ve made us look... like... Did you just say what I thought you said?’

‘Probably. Of course since neither of us actually have an operational augment at the moment there’s no way to be sure it’s worked until we give it a proper try.’ He stuffed the transmitter into his pocket and clapped his hands. ‘Right, no time like the present!’

You’ll have got enough of an idea of how this worked by now to realise I got very little say in this. He moved surprisingly fast on those short legs of his and was already halfway to the security checkpoint at the nearest entrance to the gardens before I had quite got my noggin round what he was about.

‘Hello!’ he called to the guards. ‘Hello, yes, you! We’re here for Trau Ra. We’re part of his.. err... personal styling team. To get him ready before the summit.’ He affected a false accent for this performance. It weren’t subtle.

‘Styling?’ asked a thickset marine with a head like a bowling ball.

‘His hair and suchlike.’ The Doctor tossed his own luxuriant mane. The marine scowled as if struggling with the concept.

‘If you’re his stylists, why does he need two of you? And why’s one of you a dolphin?’

I smiled indulgently. ‘My good sir, I can see that you don’t follow the world of high-fashion hairdressing. But let me assure you that Trau Ra does. And he wants to look his best for the Trade Delegation. That’s why he hired us in from Malitte.’

‘But there isn’t a real summit!’ protested the guard. ‘It’s just a cover for–’

'Jesus!' shouted his companion, clipping him round his bald skull, 'tell the world, why don'tcha?'

'Look,' the Doctor said reasonably. 'You know there isn't really going to be a trade summit and we know there isn't really going to be a trade summit. But Trau Ra has gone to very great lengths and expense to make it appear that there is going to be a trade summit. How do you think he will react if he is unable to look the part?'

'Can't he just 'scape it?'

'You want him to *fake* style?' I asked, faux-scandalised. 'My good sir! That might suffice for a lowly squaddie too lazy to take a shower in the morning, but can you really think it would do for a man in Trau Ra's position? You can fake everything else in this universe, my friend, but you can't fake class.'

The guard gave up. 'Fine,' he grunted. 'Get in. If Ra wants the likes of you wafting round, that's his look-out.'

Ah, the razor intellect of the professional security guard. How I'd missed it.

'So, there's not really a trade summit?' I asked once we were clear of the guards. I kept my voice down. I couldn't see anyone nearby but there was no telling what people or AIs might be using their augs to listen in from a distance.

'Apparently not.'

'You knew that before?'

'I did wonder. As I said, it is rather a lot of troops just to keep an eye on the Ferrero-Rocher.'

'Makes sense though, don't it? The news has been saying the talks were about regulation or something. But Considia hate all that red tape. They're always harping on about how it's a burden to free enterprise and what have you. There's no way Ra's gonna roll out the red carpet and sit down for a nice cosy chat with someone about it.'

'You'd be amazed what you can achieve with a nice cosy chat.'

'Nah, not his style. Damn it, Doctor; I should have seen it! There can't have been this many troops on the Rock since the coup. What the hell could he want them all for?' Even as I said the words, it hit me. Hard and nasty, right between the eyes like an executioner's bullet. 'Gods, Doctor! He's finally going to do it, isn't he? He's going up against the government. He's finally gonna take Segovax for himself!'

'I thought the government's been in his pocket for years? That's what Occa said.'

'Sure, Considia hold every contract worth a sou on this Rock. But since when's that ever been enough for an entrep? The whole game's about *owning*, isn't it? Having what nobody else has, putting your competitors out of business. At the end of the day it doesn't matter how ineffectual and corrupt the civilian politicians are: they're the ones who get the audiences with the Imperial Viceroy; they're the ones on the stamps. They're rivals for power and Considia wants the monopoly. Coralie's mam must have found out. No wonder he had her bumped off.'

'All very neat,' the Doctor murmured. He sounded distracted, as if he thought it was anything but.

'You got a better idea?'

'Hmm? No. You're probably right. Why don't we ask him?'

Across at the Chambers of Commerce pyramid, someone in a dangerously sharp suit was sauntering out of the main entrance. He was barely visible behind a crush of security, lawyers and all the other assorted parasites high-level entreps tend to accumulate. Even without working amplification I knew who it was in an instant.

‘Well, what do you know?’

Do I really need to describe Gideon Ra? Everyone on Segovax sees his face more times a day than their own lovers’, but maybe he’s not so well-known offworld. He’s like every genescaped entrep you ever saw, but turned up to eleven. Tall, neither young nor old; attractive in a bland kind of way. He evidently relied on the sencecape to touch up his public image though – in the flesh his features were slightly small, bunched up in the middle of a too-smooth, too-pink face. Like a sneer drawn on an inflated condom. The kind of face that invited punching.

The Doctor was already fiddling with the wi-fi box of tricks. I’ve never seen anyone rip open a piece of tech so readily and rewire its innards with so little concern. Obviously a man who’d never had to save up for new hardware in his life. He probably made his own out of toilet-roll tubes and lollipop sticks.

‘What are you doing?’

‘We need to get rid of the entourage. We’ll never get near him while they’re there.’

‘What, not even by impersonating hairdressers?’

‘Some of those people will be *real* hairdressers, Flippers,’ he replied ominously. ‘Do you really want to bet your life on fooling *them*?’

He continued making adjustments to the device as we crept closer. Ra’s goons escorted him across a patch of lawn towards a waiting flitter. They were about halfway there when the Doctor snapped shut the panel on the box, gave a dial on the front an almighty twist and all hell broke loose.

Every head in the place snapped round to look at the same spot, a nondescript corner of garden on the far side of the park. I saw a few of the nearer soldiers’ eyes darken noticeably as they tried to shield them from a sudden burst of light. I’d seen the effect a thousand times in schlock action simularities with nukes or laser battles. It was weird to see it in reality.

‘Specially since there was nothing happening.’

Alarms flared up all over the compound. Security stiffs and mercs began shouting curses and orders and whooping with excitement and rage, grabbing massive oversized guns from racks as they pelted en masse towards that quiet and empty corner.

‘What do they think’s happening?’ I whispered.

‘An explosion breaching the perimeter. A few hundred protestors breaking in to cause trouble.’

‘Goddamn it!’ a soldier shouted as he ran past just metres from where we were hiding. ‘I didn’t think penguins even *came* that big!’

I couldn’t help laughing. The Doctor frowned at the device, shook it slightly, and shoved it in a pocket.

As soon as the ruckus started, Ra’s personal heavies sprang into action the way heavies do. They closed ranks, drew pistols and began bundling their charge at breakneck speed towards the waiting flitter. Except this time they made one basic error. Have you ever watched rugby? It’s big on some of the inner worlds; the ones where they still drink warm

beer and think a pork pie or barbecued spare ribs are the height of culinary sophistication. Not my kind of thing, to be honest. I was never much of a sports fan – who would be on a world where jumping through hoops and balancing beach-balls on your nose is considered the height of macho competition? But once, back in my travelling days, I got passage on a freighter whose home port was Pitterjaxen. It was a two-week haul and pretty much the only entertainments the crew had brought along were similarities of a few hundred rugby matches. It was either that or ancient religious propaganda movies about hobbits. Anyway, tell the truth, I never really wrapped my nut around what was meant to be going on in rugby. But they have these bits where they all line up and both sides kind of lock together in a big, vaguely homoerotic, hug-of-war into which some official shoves the ball. I think the idea is that each side tries to shove the other back and tries to hook out the ball to their own teammates. What inevitably happens is they get so caught up in their man-grappling that with much grunting and effort the scrum wanders off down the pitch, leaving the ball far behind, and they have to try again.

That's what it was like watching the evacuation of Gideon Ra. This great, throbbing fist of seven-foot-tall beefcakes (if they weren't Ogrons in shades, then gods know, they needed to lay off the steroids) closes ranks around the anxious lawyers, media consultants and – yes – hairdressers, chugs them hurriedly across the duckboards and begins shoving them efficiently into the waiting flitters. Ra's vehicle's away first, disappearing skywards with a speed which is no way legal at that height. His cronies aren't far behind, their own, slightly less gleaming, vehicles arcing away after the leader.

What none of them seemed to notice was that Ra himself was still standing where he'd been when the whole palaver had kicked off, his expression caught between bewildered affront and anxiety about whatever it was he imagined to be transpiring in the garden's far corner. Standing there all alone, poor little lost soul. What would any self-respecting lawman do but go and offer his assistance?

We split up and approaching from different directions. Naturally, with all the noise my walker makes, Ra spotted me first. He looked frightened, unsure whether I was a threat or not. I bobbed my head and doffed my fedora with the minimum possible sarcasm. That made up Ra's mind for him. Unaccountably reckoning me to be a sort he didn't want to fraternise with, he turned to hurry away in the opposite direction, only to find himself face to face with the Doctor, who slipped a companionable arm around his shoulders.

'Trau Ra,' he said enthusiastically. 'How very nice to meet you at long last. Don't be afraid of my good friend Flippers here: he might look a little fishy at first glance but I promise you he's a fine, upstanding gentleman.'

'Oy,' I countered good-naturedly. 'That's racist!'

'Who are you?' Ra demanded. 'What's happening? Where are my security? Where in God's name did all those damn penguins come from?'

'Don't worry about the penguins. You're quite safe. Please, come with us.'

Ra actually took a couple of steps before seeming to realise what he was doing. He stopped, shook himself free of the Doctor's arm.

'No! No, get your hands off me, you terrible little poofter! Do you know how much this suit cost?'

‘More than good manners, I should think,’ the Doctor replied with a sweet smile. ‘But then, those cost nothing.’

‘Who are you? Guards! GUARDS!! Get your bloody arses over here! You useless bloody plebs! What the bloody hell do I pay you for?’

Some of those ‘bloodies’ may in fact have been somewhat stronger. But I’m a good, clean-living dolphin: I try to keep things family-friendly.

I’d worked out the Doctor had done something with the sencescape projector to edit Ra out of people’s perceptions – the same kind of illusion Ra had pulled himself to hide the troop build-up. But I didn’t know exactly what, or what the limits of the trick were, and all his shouting was starting to make me nervous. Most of the soldiers were over the other end of the park kicking up all kinds of noise and hullabaloo fighting imaginary giant penguins (or whatever), but there were still plenty near enough to be in earshot.

I pulled my pistol and pointed it at Ra. ‘Pipe down, boss. Now if you don’t mind, we’d like a little word. About Calliope van Oyen.’

‘Calliope... God, I haven’t heard that name in years. Not since Eden. I always wondered what became of her going forward. Not, y’know, *much*. But I did wonder. To have so much and to throw it all away... She always thought she was better than the rest of us. Couldn’t take a joke. Real ice-maiden. Still, her parents were berg-magnates, weren’t they, so what do you expect? You make your fortune plundering comets for water, you don’t complain when your daughter turns out to be a frigid bitch with no head for profits.’

‘She’s dead!’ I snapped, jabbing my pistol in Ra’s direction. ‘Damn it, she’s got a kid. Have some respect!’

He pulled a face, his arrogance deflated not an inch. I could have got angry then. Would have, I think, just a few days ago. I had to put up with too much crap from men like him when I was with Maisy. I don’t like jerks who talk about women that way.

The Doctor saw, and placed a hand gently on my fin. *Now’s not the time*, the touch seemed to say.

We’d brought Ra to an empty room in one of the outbuildings around the edge of the gardens. From the soil and detritus on the floor, I reckoned it had probably been used to store garden tools back when anyone round here actually gave a toss about the plants. They’d been cleared out and replaced with a few rugged military storage crates, arranged in the desultory and dusty fashion of something put there temporarily and then forgotten. Ra was sitting on one, now, at the far side of the room to the door. The Doctor was on the other. My walker squatted between, spider-like and – I hoped – intimidating.

‘It’s a while since I’ve been to Eden,’ said the Doctor. ‘She wasn’t there for the flora, I take it?’

‘She went hunting in the forests, same as the rest of us,’ Ra said. ‘Never seemed to enjoy it much. She was never one of the guys.’

‘And what were you doing there?’

‘What do you *think* I was doing there? I was at the Academy. Learning how to run a business and turn a profit. All the top entreps in EarthSpace still sent their kids to Eden in those days. It was the making of me.’ He snorted a laugh.

‘Calliope was training to be an entrep?’

'Her parents wanted her to inherit the family business. Waste of time. Any fool could see that. Hell, even Calliope could see. No margin in capturing comets when you can just synthesise water.'

'She didn't much want to be an entrep, did she?' the Doctor asked.

'Oh, she did at first. I think she eventually realised her core competencies lay elsewhere. Leastways, I presume she had some and they lay elsewhere. Though I can't say I really saw much evidence. To be honest with you, I don't really see much margin in a filly who can't pay out and won't put out.'

'You're a real charmer, ain't you?'

'Charm, like everything else worth having, costs extra, kid. I'm not going to waste it on the likes of you.'

'What happened to her? Back on Eden?'

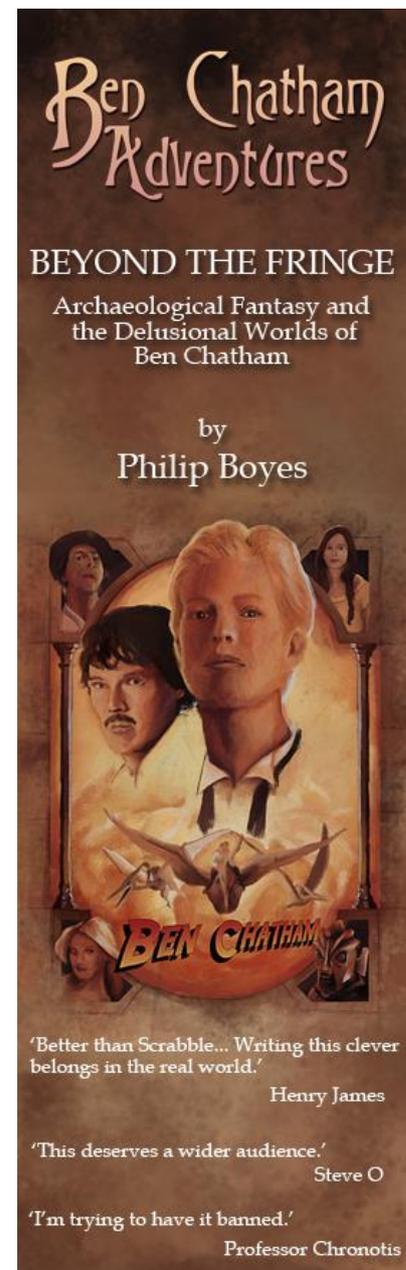
Ra shrugged. 'She left. How should I know what happened to her? She hadn't been delivering a positive, enthusiastic workplace attitude for months. Bloody unprofessional. A real drag to be around – she sucked the energy out of everything, you know? Only thing she *would* suck... She just kept droning on about "workers' rights" and "ethical policies" the whole damn time. I mean, who takes that crap seriously any more? It was like talking to one of those hairy ape-women from the twentieth century. Eventually she just wasn't around any more. No-one knew when she'd gone, exactly. We didn't really notice until one day someone realised life wasn't quite so depressing any more. Maybe she got expelled – she never seemed to outcome any of the key deliverables: I don't think she turned a profit in any of her assignments. Maybe the parents couldn't pay the fees any more; maybe she got so damn miserable she slit her own wrists. I guess not, if you say she was on Segovax.'

'She never even made it to Segovax,' I said. 'You know that. You were the bastard who had her killed!'

He laughed. The smug bastard literally laughed in my face.

'So that's what you think, is it? What, you think I've harboured a smouldering resentment these last twenty years because glum old Calliope wouldn't let me cop a feel? You think I'd on-the-line everything I've built up here and actually action something so preposterous as having her killed? The woman was nothing! She was nothing to me at the time and since then I've banged a thousand girls more beautiful, more intelligent and a good deal more fun than her. Why on Earth would I waste the effort?'

'Because she knew about this,' I said. 'About the soldiers and what you're planning. She was coming here to expose you.'



He raised an eyebrow. 'You have quite a talent for deduction, Trau... Flippers. And what *am* I planning? Please do enlighten me.'

'All the soldiers, the weapons, the armoured vehicles. The trade delegation's nothing but a front to cover up the fact that you're planning a coup! You mean to overthrow the civilian government and seize Segovax for yourself. Calliope wasn't working alone. She told her contact she'd discovered something which threatened the lives of everyone on the Rock. Right before she was killed by an assassin who worked for Considia.'

'You can't prove that.'

'That's not a denial, I notice. But it doesn't matter anyway. I don't have to prove it. I've recorded everything that's happened here and uploaded it to a secure store on the net. I only need to think one thought and it goes public to every media corporation in the sector. You don't control them all. You're finished, Ra. You've lost!'

I don't know what I expected him to say or do. Perps react in different ways when confronted with the truth behind their crimes. Some break down and confess everything, begging forgiveness, offering bribes. Others fly into a rage, or run, or go for a gun. They're the ones that tend not to end well. Gideon Ra didn't do any of these things. He just sat there for a little while, on his crate, then shook his head very slightly.

'No.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'No. I don't believe you. Oh, it was a good performance. Very good.' He clapped his hands slowly, ironically. 'You're the very model of the dashing dick. But I don't buy it. Your friend here used that device he keeps glancing at to override the local senscape settings and distract my security. That's probably what's stopping me connecting to the net myself, right? How am I doing so far?' He'd mostly ignored the Doctor up to this point, and for his part the Doctor had been content to sit quietly and listen to the story. He had been fiddling with the wi-fi box more and more over the last few minutes though. 'What's the matter?' Ra went on. 'On the fritz, is it? Running low on time?' He turned back to me. 'The thing is, the 'scape's shrouding me, making it so people can't see or hear me. But you two can. Now either you did whatever jiggery-pokery you did in such a way that it didn't affect you two. A complicated job, I'd guess, and you can't have had much time.'

'Oh, I'm very good.'

'I'm sure. But that good? No, I don't think so. Or we have the alternative – that neither of you are running a working suite of augments at the moment.'

'Maybe we just switched off our 'scapes,' I said. 'That wouldn't affect a net connection.'

'But then you would have just searched all that stuff about Eden on the net. There are a dozen bios of almost everyone who was there at that time: you wouldn't have had to ask me. You're bullshitting. You don't have net access. I don't think you even have working data backup. You've got nothing.'

'Very clever,' the Doctor admitted.

'You're not the only one who can play at detective,' Ra said to me, with a nasty little smile.

'Maybe not. But if you were any good at it, you'd know the first rule of investigation.' I unclipped a small attachment from the harness of my walker. 'Never rely on your own

senses, augged or not. Always carry a backup.' I showed him the miniature camera. 'Believe it, mate. I got the whole thing. Sight and sound. Now you're right, I can't upload it right this minute. But I only have to get to a public access node. That'd take – what? – all of about two minutes in an area with the fine business infrastructure of the Glassheart.'

He thought on this. 'You're good,' he admitted. 'You're good, but you're chasing red herrings.' He raised a mocking eyebrow. 'Suppose I can't blame you for that.'

Ah, the herring joke. Never heard that one before.

'I'm not trying to seize Segovax. The Rock's been mine for decades, bought and paid for. Yeah, there's a democracy, but people think what the media tell them to think, and who controls the media? People vote based on what's going on in the economy, and what happens in the economy is decisioned and actioned in my boardroom. When I can just leverage that, why on Earth would I suddenly go to all the expense and energy-sink of a military takeover? The very best that would outcome from that would be a whole lot more political interference. More likely I'd have an angry population at home and the Imperial authorities breathing down my neck trying to make sure I wasn't trying to throw off the Empress's yoke.' He leant forward as if to impart some great wisdom. 'War's a great business opportunity, my friend. But not when that war's on your own doorstep.'

He had a point and I knew it. The same point the Doctor had made earlier. I'd been too caught up with the thrill of the idea then, but there was something in what Ra was saying. You get a sense when you crack a case; all the pieces slot into place. There were still too many ragged ends to this one. Too much that still didn't make sense. Not for the first time, I wondered if I was swimming out of my depth. I was an okay detective when it came to cheating spouses and backstreet shankings, but when the stakes were this high, the machinations this convoluted, I wondered if I could really hack it. I wished Maisy were still with me. She was always better at the brainy stuff than me. Failing that, it'd be nice if the Doctor would actually say something. I looked over to him, but he was engrossed in the device again, an expression of concentration knitting his brows.

'The delegation was supposed to be about regulation. Okay, so how about this? The talks are a sham, but the regulation was real. You're doing this because they're clamping down on corporate control.'

Ra shook his head. 'Now you're just embarrassing yourself. Scrabbling round for stories like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie-jar. Do you have cookie jars where you come from? Obviously you don't have hands.'

I bunched my mechanical fists. 'Hands enough to sock you one, mate.'

'I don't give a damn about any regulation. I welcome it. It's just another smokescreen to make the public feel like the corporations aren't getting too big for our boots. Has it ever once occurred to you that I'm not the villain here? That I might actually have Segovax's best interests at heart?'

'You've got Considia's best interests at heart. And your own.'

'What's good for Considia is good for Segovax.'

I sighed through my blowhole. 'Right, fine then. I'll bite. You're just a misunderstood philanthropist, labouring away for the good of us all. Explain the army parked outside. What can you possibly need that for?'

'For the real enemy,' he replied. 'You blinkered idiot: I've not been trying to seize Segovax. I've been trying to *save* it.'

# Chapter Nine

'I think our penguins just said goodbye.'

'You know, Doctor, as a way of telling me everything's about to go pear-shaped, that's definitely a new one.'

A smug grin cracked across Ra's face. 'I think you should know, I just got my datanet connection back. Congratulations: you two are now the most wanted men on Segovax.'

'Well it is always nice to be wanted,' the Doctor said. 'Flippers, I think it's time we were leaving.'

I grabbed Ra and shoved him towards the door.

'You're coming with us.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'They're tracking him. We take him with us, they'll find us in moments.'

I'm a straightforward detective. I can play it smart when I need to – or at least smart enough. But dolphins aren't naturally patient fellas: I play the long game with about the same natural aptitude as I do Subbuteo. Once I've got my fins on a perp, it goes against every instinct I've got to let him go. But I knew the Doctor was right. I could already hear a change in the noise coming from outside. The laser-fire against the fictional marauding penguins had stopped and there was an ominous, increasing rumble of boots and matériel drawing closer to us by the second.

The Doctor grabbed my walker and yanked me outside. He was surprisingly strong – all those mechanics aren't light. I had no choice but to release my grip on Ra. The entrep smiled and waved, sitting back on his crate and waiting for his cronies to turn up.

Outside things were even worse than I'd expected. About thirty feet away were two hundred soldiers, four APCs and even a couple of zero-G combat mechas. I scarcely had time to register their presence before a mad disco of laser-beams began parcelling up the air around us into tiny chunks. It's a miracle they didn't hit us in that first instant.

The Doctor used his sonic screwdriver and a cache of weapon power cells between us and them exploded. Minimal danger of shrapnel with that kind of thing, but the flash from the discharging energy dazzled them long enough for us to reach a military flitter parked in what had formerly been a bed of orensmiels. The once-garish flowers were now crushed in the mud, their deep-red petals scattered and dull.

The Doctor hotwired the flitter even before I'd finished asking whether he could. Its antigrav repulsors flared, lofting us skyward and blasting the nearest of our pursuers back off their feet. Laser-fire and plasma-bolts shimmered and aurora'd around us, dispersed by the powerful magnetic shielding, then the Doctor cut in the afterburners and we accelerated with a speed even military-grade inertial dampers couldn't quite mask.

We speared higher and higher – the military flier lacked the safety cut-offs that nobbled commercial models so we were able to soar way above the standard public flight-paths. Without a sence to make it readable, the insane topology of Segovax made itself known with powerful effect. The horizon dropped away and twisted round. Down was no

longer just beneath us, it was all around us. Roads and skyscrapers and houses laced a cocoon that surrounded us on every side.

My stomach lurched uncomfortably. Dolphins, even more than humans, are hard-wired to need to know which way is up. When you live in the oceans and breathe air, up is the surface and losing it means the ghastly death of crushing pressure and flooded lungs. I swam in a zero-G ocean in orbit around Marettia once. The waters were hyper-aerated; there was no possibility of drowning. But I still have nightmares about those dark and directionless depths; the sense of panic and disorientation when the traditional cues were stripped away. On ground-level it was easy enough to forget we were all living on the inside-face of a giant, hollowed-out walnut shell. Up here, there was no avoiding it. Segovax unfurled herself in all her strangeness.

*What are we doing here*, I wondered. *What are any of us doing here?*

Vaguely I registered that we were still being chased. Flitters and those mechas were coming after us hard. I didn't want to know. I'd seen enough of the Doctor's driving to know that if I tried to follow what was happening I'd probably lose my lunch only slightly before I lost my marbles. I retreated into my thoughts, the wave of frustration and anger that had been building for hours breaking across me like a deep-ocean swell.

'Bloody waste of time!' I shouted. Something loud and metallic creaked in the flitter chassis. For half a second I wondered if the Doctor had exceeded some design tolerance. Then I realised I'd punched the fuselage with my metal fist. Hard enough to leave a dent. Have to admit, in retrospect I'm pretty proud of that. 'We had him, Doctor! We had him right there and he just laughed at us.'

'I know how you feel, Flippers, believe me. But we had no choice. If we'd stayed there any longer we'd be dead by now.'

No denying that. Didn't make me feel a krill-weight better.

'I know, I know. It's just... We didn't even learn anything useful.'

'Everything's useful. Were you telling the truth back there, about the recording?'

'Sure. But he's right – there's nothing I can do with it for now. Not till I can upload it at a datanet node. And by then Ra will have half Considia's data-security division assigned to stopping it. It'll be eaten by data-oomphs before it can even go live.'

'He certainly didn't seem very worried, did he? He kept on talking even after you told him about it.' Something whipped past our heads and exploded massively a few metres off to our left, pitching the flitter in a crazed tumble before the Doctor managed to yank it back under control. 'It's almost as if he doesn't expect us to get out of this alive.'

I muttered a particularly filthy Blitz Spirit curse.

The Doctor grinned at me. 'Not to worry. Overconfidence is always the downfall of men like him.'

'Yeah, and getting squashed like flies by massive corporations with big guns is always the downfall of men like us.'

The Doctor laughed and pitched us down into the Glassheart. We plunged faster than gravity then jack-knifed level and braided a path between the shattered glass shards of the city towers. The pursuing flitters hung back, keeping pace overhead. The mechas threw themselves after us. In the glittering maze of skyscrapers, their nimbleness made them alpha predators. They leapt and pirouetted from building to building, pulse engines and

afterburners flaring to carry them across the gaps. Where we had to fly between buildings and dodge overpasses and monorail lines, the mechas just danced through them, or where they could not, deployed plasma blades and idly slashed themselves a path.

‘We must be armed!’ I protested as we narrowly avoided another volley of weapons fire. ‘Can’t we shoot back?’

‘Are there people inside those things?’

‘Yeah. But they’re Considia people!’

‘So were you, once. They’re just doing what they have to to make ends meet. Nine to five. What a way to make a living!’

‘But..!’

‘No guns, Flippers.’

We smashed through the glass picture-windows of an open-plan area near the top of a tall office-block. Workers scattered as we shot through what seemed to be a coffee shop and lounge. Dreary pot-plants and threadbare sofas blurred past on either side. An instant later, we exploded out of the window on the far side and dived downwards into the streets again.

‘And what about everyone who just happens to get caught in the crossfire?’ I asked when I’d managed to get my breath back.

He didn’t have an answer for that.



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We shook off one of the mechas near the edge of the Glassheart. I say shook off... I didn’t see what happened to it, but I have a nasty feeling it may have misjudged a jump and snagged its foot on a skyrail. There was a muffled thump somewhere behind us and I craned back to see a plume of smoke rising from an abandoned skyscraper. The other mecha was still matching us, shimmering alongside and unloading gatling cannons in an attempt to overload our shields. As if that wasn’t bad enough, once the skyline opened up again the flitters re-joined the fray.

‘Do you think he was telling the truth?’ I asked as we scattered a flock of synthetic birds that had been forming corporate logos in the sky.

‘Ra? Oh yes. At least, as far as he sees it.’

‘So there really is someone worse out there? Someone he’s trying to protect us from?’

‘There’s always someone worse out there. Always a bogeyman under the bed. Always someone different and frightening who’s out to threaten our very way of life. He believes it. It’s how people like him justify what they do.’

‘So it’s not real? He’s just paranoid?’

‘That would make things simpler, wouldn’t it?’

‘It is real?’

‘I don’t know, Flippers,’ he admitted. ‘I don’t know any more than you do.’ Lie of the century, right there, ladies and gentlemen. ‘But I’ve got a few suspicions. We need to get back to Occa’s.’

‘Occa’s? Whoa, Doc! We only just escaped from there! It’s still going to be crawling with investigators. Even more so after what we just pulled.’

‘Yes. We’re going to have to be very quiet. And go in the back way.’

Another missile exploded just in front of us. We arrowed straight through the fireball, the flames billowing off our shields and licking away to nothing in the damp air.

I sighed. I knew by now there was no point arguing with him.

‘You should probably do something about this lot first, then.’

Three-quarters of an hour later we were back among the mouldering empty stacks of Sump End, picking our way on foot between decaying concrete-and-brick shells and over the detritus of long-abandoned pickets. We’d left the military flitter far behind, a write-off embedded in the crooked steeple of a derelict Gaztak church. A desultory twine of black smoke coiled away upwards from ruined propulsion units, sprinkling the surrounding streets with the tiny, smouldering confetti-scrapes of the Considia flag whose accidental trip through the particle intake had finally done for it.

Of our pursuers, only that second mecha had made it through the chase in one piece or anything like. It sustained so much damage trying to match the Doctor’s insane manoeuvres that it was lagging far behind by the end and managed to miss the final catastrophic fireball which had engulfed its companion flitters.

It skittered and stumbled to a landing; its pilot staggering out of the smoking, tottering machine to call for backup. By then the Doctor and I were already a good quarter of a mile away, sprinting through narrow alleyways reclaimed by jekrats and dry ivy and Toledo knotweed. Sump End had never been intended for occupation. Back in the day, when Segovax was thriving and it seemed there was no limit to the wealth that could be ground from the rocks of the Belt, fortune-seekers had colonised the waste-ground around the old drainage channels that had fed the cooling and lubrication systems of some village-sized piece of mining equipment, deep underground. In time the university opened and the students moved in. The channels were roughly covered over, buried and forgotten and the area began its slow, incomplete and temporary crawl towards respectability. Now, as it decayed, some of the channels were caving in again, etching great concrete-and-steel gashes through streets and houses. We used them to conceal ourselves from passing aerial spydrones or skyscourers on the antipodal face of the Rock. When two security personnel-carriers lumbered overhead, we sheltered in one, pressing our backs into the shadows of a plasticrete and rebar overhang and feeling the warm damp moisture drip down the walls. The APCs were followed at a brisk pace by a few dozen rank-and-file guards and investigators, their booted feet hammering and echoing on the thin skin of ground as they passed overhead. They were heading in the direction of the crash site.

‘Better and better!’ the Doctor said. ‘We’ve managed to draw people away from Occa’s house. And you said I made too much of a scene!’

‘Oh yes,’ I retorted drily. ‘I take it all back. That was all clearly deliberate. I’m sorry: your plan was so subtle I failed to spot it in among all the gunfire and explosions and screaming.’

The security personnel passed and the streets were silent again. We scrambled out on to the surface.

‘That won’t be all of them,’ I warned.

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘We’ll still need to be very quiet.’

‘Easy for you to say.’ I flexed a leg of my walker and it squeaked and ground.

‘You really should get that thing oiled,’ he said with a thoughtful frown. ‘Never mind. We’ll just have to hope they take you for a mouse in the wainscoting.’

‘Yeah,’ I grumbled. ‘And we all know what fat cats do to them.’

Two blocks later we were at the bottom of the hill, crouching in the burned-out husk of an old bus tipped on its side and looking through the shattered windscreen up the road towards Occa’s house. With perfect predictability, artificial night was falling, murky and sulphurous darkness settling thickly over Sump End. A blueish glow betrayed bright floodlights trained on Occa’s apartment block. I could see the silhouette of a security flitter parked next to Anji’s, sleek, jagged and threatening as any predator of the depths. There were still company men here, though the incline hid their numbers. Anything could be waiting for us inside. Coppers, agents or worse. The Doctor seemed to consider a direct approach for a moment. I dragged him away, back into the shadows. We jemmied our way into one of the other abandoned buildings. I was so used to the Doctor’s skills at breaking and entering by now that they barely even registered. Inside, the place was of the same basic plan to Occa’s place. More run-down, and a different arrangement of rooms, but close enough that we knew where to look. It didn’t take long rooting around the rubble at the foot of the stairwell to uncover a rusted metal access panel in the floor. The service tunnels would spread out below. I gritted my teeth while the Doctor worked on it with his screwdriver.

‘My augs aren’t working, remember,’ I whispered once he swung it open. ‘There could be any number of them down there and we wouldn’t know. We’ll be going down blind.’

‘More fun that way.’ He grinned encouragingly. ‘Mice in the wainscoting, Flippers. Squeak squeak! Alley-ooop!’ With that he hopped down.

‘You’d better get clear,’ I warned him wearily. ‘You don’t want to be under this thing when it lands.’ I waited a moment then spidered the walker through the gap after him.

‘What are we doing here?’ I asked. ‘Is it to do with the body? They won’t have left her here, you know. She’ll be in one of the high-security morgues by now. Not the spaceport this time. No way we’ll get another look.’

‘We’re not here for Calliope.’

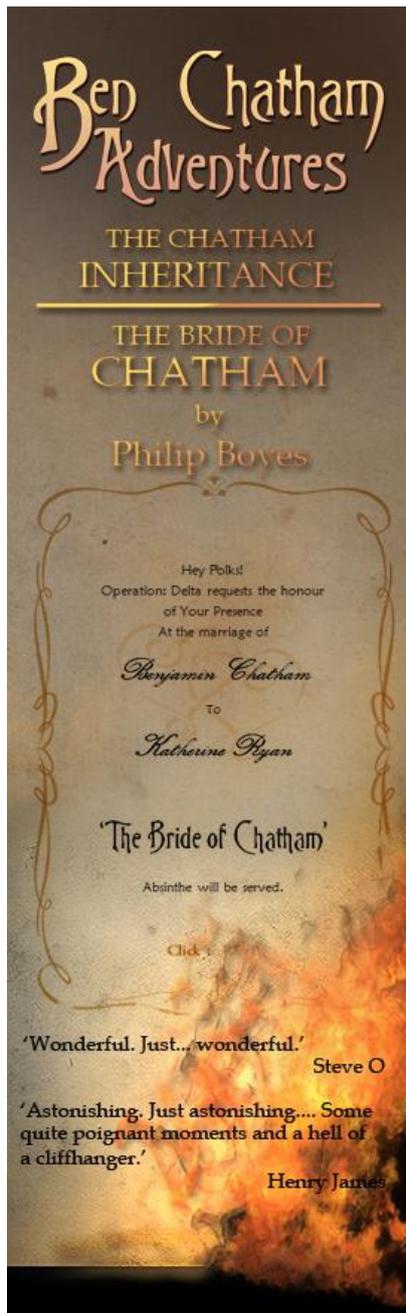
‘Then what? What else is here? Occa’s books? Where is he anyway? Where are Anji and Fitz?’

The Doctor paused, leaning close so that I could see him in the darkness.

‘Flippers, do you trust me?’

I had to think about it.

‘You scare me, Doc. I don’t know what you’re gonna do.’



‘Neither do I sometimes. I’m still learning who I am.’ He tapped his curls. ‘There’s a lot up here that I can’t get access to. A lot hidden in the darkness and the fog. It scares me.’

‘Is there nothing you can do? To get your memories back?’

‘Maybe. If I wanted to. There’s always something.’

‘So why don’t you?’

‘A feeling. A sense that I shouldn’t. And... And a certainty. It’s not my memories that make me who I am. Even after a hundred years I’m still feeling out the nooks and crannies of who I am. I’m still finding the odd surprise. But nothing that scares me as much as the thought of lifting that veil and seeing who I used to be.’

‘What if you’re not the bloke you thought, right? I understand. Look, Doctor. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’ve got much to worry about. I think you’re all right. Nuts, and dangerous, but all right.’

He smiled. ‘So you *do* trust me.’

‘I suppose I do. You still scare me, though.’

‘Good. Remember that, Flippers. Remember that trust when I do what I’m about to do.’

The anxiety came back in waves. What could be so bad that even the Doctor felt he needed to warn me? This was a guy who unwrapped a severed head like a Christmas selection box.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Open the door.’

He shoved at the wall and I realised we were standing beside that door I had seen in the tunnel earlier on our way out. The recently-used one that he’d dragged me

away from. It swung inwards smoothly, revealing dim green light beyond. Something sensed our presence and the lights came up.

I stepped into a room from another age, a room from a nightmare.

The walls were lined in consoles and access-points. Illegal datanet-taps, hacktraps, control banks for powerful communications equipment. Stacks of mouldering political pamphlets and crumbling data-wafers towered up to a dangerous height, spilling over desks and floor where more papers rustled in the disturbed air like fallen leaves. There were similarities pasted to the sides of the consoles. Dissident leaders, ancient student radicals, an ageing ex-academic with an arrogant sneer.

‘Serrano,’ I hissed, recognising the man who had hired Maisy and me all those years ago. Something hollowed out deep within me.

‘Careful, Flippers,’ the Doctor said quietly, knowing what was coming a moment before I did.

My eyes adjusted to the gloom and I made out the juddering, madman’s scrawl that covered every surface.

ANTA ODELI UTA. ANTA ODELI UTA.... ANTA ODELI UTA.... .... ANTA ODELI UTA.... ..... ANTA ODELI UTA.

Those three words were everywhere. Madman-chant; empty mantra. A meaningless phrase that had come to be the lodestone for all the pain and heartache the Rock could hurl my way. The rattle-tin nothing that had lured Maisy out into the black, snatched her away from me.

The communications equipment was active, ticking over on a lighthouse signal. I couldn’t hear what was being transmitted, but on a dark and dusty screen in a far corner I could see its waveform. Three words. Seven syllables.

Betrayal burst inside me like a cyst.

‘Occa!’ I shrieked. ‘Occa, you *bloody bastard!*’ Again, maybe not my *exact* words.

The Doctor flinched at the noise. He touched my fins, trying to calm me. I shook him off and without conscious thought my gun was in my hand.

‘You knew!’ I pointed the pistol at him and he backed away, grimacing and raising his hands. ‘You ask me to trust you and all this time you *knew!* He was the one who blackmailed Serrano. He was the one who was broadcasting that signal. He was the one who took Maisy!’

‘Flippers, please!’ He glanced anxiously over his shoulder, fearful lest the flatfoots up top should hear. That should have been the last of his worries right then. I’d known he was keeping something from me. I’d known it and all this time I’d been trying to tell myself it was paranoia, too long in this screwed-up Rock making it impossible for me to trust anyone who didn’t play by its rules.

‘How could you?’ I shouted at him. I was ready to blow. I tell you, I really could have shot him at that moment. I could have done anything. I was instinct and rage and that old Cetacean propensity for violence savage and capricious as the sea. If he’d known dolphins half as well as he thought he knew humans, he’d have been bricking it. ‘I *loved* her, Doctor. The thing that was bright and good in this shitty, mouldering Rock and your cosy little Silurian pal took her from me! And *you* just stood there and pretended to be my friend while you hid it from me! Gods, were you in on this from the start? Are you one of his little bunch of pathetic revolutionaries? Che Guevara from beyond the stars? *Who the deepest bloody hell do you think you are, Doctor?*’

‘Flippers, please calm down. This isn’t what you think it is.’

‘Oh really? Is that a chuffing fact? Did he not threaten Serrano then?’

He didn’t answer.

‘Did he not send that signal?’

I could see from his eyes that Occa had.

‘Do you know what happened to Maisy?’

He sighed. A long anguished sigh. He chanced a look over his shoulder again, then fixed his attention back on my pistol. When he spoke, his voice was bladed with steel.

‘Flippers, I know you’re hurting but we don’t have time for this. You’re making too much noise. They’re going to find us. We need to do what we came here for before then.’

‘Are you telling me to forget about it?’ I waved the gun dangerously. The walker was picking up on my excitement, its movements becoming spasmodic and violent. ‘Are you *actually* telling me to forget about it?’

‘I’m asking you,’ he hissed sharply, ‘to put the lives of everyone on Segovax before your own pain for five minutes!’

That stopped me dead. It was the first time I’d seen him come close to losing his rag. Truth is, the spill of anger and grief had redded out everything else. I’d forgotten Ra and the threat he feared.

We stood facing each other for a long moment. Not a word, barely breathing.

I lowered the gun, glacier-slow.

‘This ain’t over, Doctor. Not by a long damn shot.’

He just nodded and ran to one of the communications consoles. I watched him do one of his lightning-fast rewiring jobs, tearing innards out of half a dozen other consoles to transform this one. I felt like one of those disembowelled machines. My faith in him lay shredded. I feared a trick.

‘What are you doing?’ The gun jerked in my hand, almost levelling at him again.

‘Occa’s transmission rig’s remarkably complex, as you’d expect from someone who worked on hyperspace communications. It dummies the signal off proxies and relays halfway round the system. That’s why no-one could ever trace it.’

‘You did.’ Realisation came with the words, unpremeditated.

‘Yes. The signal led me to Occa. But I had a few technical advantages.’ He twisted some clutch of wires and circuits inside the console. ‘If I can just reverse the polarity, change it from “send” to “receive”, that relay network is ideal for a medium-range DIY sensor-array. Perfect for seeing what’s – ’ He yanked a switch and a three-dimensional similarity shimmered into existence in the middle of the room. Dozens of ships, brutal, boxy and armed to the teeth. Heading through hyperspace at high speed. ‘ – heading our way.’

‘A battle-fleet,’ I breathed, and a new dread compounded my misery. ‘It’s not about a coup at all. It’s an invasion.’