

DOCTOR WHO

THE DISMAL SCIENCE

By
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Considia logo by Tony Lane.

Part 4

Aelita

Chapter Ten

It was one of those jokey-named private freighters. *Crippling Social Awkwardness*. What a name! More self-awareness in that moniker than the captain had showed the whole time he talked our ears off at Aran's. It had spiked Maisy's fascination and sent a jolt direct to the giggle-centres of her brain. On the way to the landing wharves she spent the whole time making up theories for why it was called that. Each was more bizarre and outlandish than the next, soaring confections of romance and tragedy; space-pirates, voidlarks, monsters and adventure. I laughed till it hurt, and marvelled at the carefree exultations of her fancy. She was always the imaginative one, the one who could make the connections and piece together the motivations. I wasn't half the detective without her.

We met the captain on a ramshackle hired dock down a Cheapside back alley that smelled of leaking fuel cells and rendered xeno grease. He leaned against the side of a bobbing shuttlepod so ancient and ill-maintained that it had somehow contrived to go rusty. In space. Rather than fix it, someone had long ago slopped a couple of coats of thin white paint over the brown encrustations, which was now stripped unevenly away by solar winds, radiation and micrometeor impacts. Still buoyed on the currents of laughter, I asked how he'd managed to get it so beat up just ferrying cargo and passengers to and from his ship.

Crippling Social Awkwardness itself hung over our heads, huge and grim as an unexpected tax bill. It was low in the darsena but high enough above to be partially lost in the damp smog. Running-lights flickered weakly. If I strained my aug I could just make out her name, glimmering across the bows in cheap, unenhanced neon holo.

He spat out his gum and judged me with a look somewhere between disgust and pity. Scratched his arse and assessed Maisy, up and down.

'Yer actually comin', then.'

She chucked her kitbag down at his feet, undaunted.

'Earn your fee. Stow that for me.'

The man prodded the haversack with his foot. Heaved in a deep, plumber-about-to-give-you-a-quote breath and smoothed back his sparse and greasy pony-tail. He chuckled.

'She's all right, this one,' he said, winking at me as if confiding some secret only the two of us would share. He lugged Maisy's sack up on to his shoulder and booted open the hatch on the shuttlepod. 'I'll give the pair of you a minute. Don't be too long. We're not out of dock within the hour, we lose our traffic slot.'

He disappeared inside and shut the hatch after him.

'Are you sure you're gonna be all right with him?' I asked.

'Without my white knight to protect me, you mean?' She was only a mite pissy. The playful twinkle hadn't gone from her eyes. 'I warrant I'll cope, love.' She brushed back her jacket to flash her pistol holster. Her Carrick and Vickers '75 gleamed with muted iridescence under verdigris lights. Good gun. The sister of my own. 'I'm not stupid,' she added. 'I'm chancing no risks. I'm more exercised about you. You *are* gonna eat true while I'm away? I don't want to come back and find the trash full of void sardine cans and nowt else.'

'I'm a dolphin,' I protested. 'I'm *meant* to eat sardines!'

‘Sure. And I’m an ape evolved to forage for nuts and berries. That don’t mean I can’t stream a cooking tute and throw together a mushroom risotto once in a while.’

‘And when was the last time you did that, Krau Cheesy-Pasta? You talk a good dinner but I’m not sure I remember if you ever had any skills to back up that mouth.’

She snorted and pressed herself against me. She had to crouch a little, her breasts rubbing against the side of my face. My heart beat like a piston.

‘You leave it a few days, love,’ she whispered, her lips brushing the skin of my face. ‘Then you’ll remember what skills I got to go with this mouth.’ Almost a kiss, but it quirked away into a wonky smile at the last moment. ‘You gotta learn to look after yourself, Flippers. Till then, I’m withholding my culinary favours.’

I nuzzled her with my nose.

‘And what about your other favours?’

Her hand slipped under my hat. I quivered as her fingertips brushed the sensitive edge of my blowhole.

She took off my hat and kissed me, once on the blowhole, once on the nose. ‘Depends how much I miss you while I’m gone.’

We held each other a good long while. Somewhere on the next quay a pint-sized squaw gawped and tugged anxiously at its mothers’ skirts. Still a lot of prejudice out here in the backs.

We pulled reluctantly apart.

‘Safe trip,’ I told her. ‘Bring back answers.’

‘Always do.’ She cocked her lopsided smile my way and settled my fedora back on my head. ‘Trust me: in years to come we’ll look back and remember Anta Odeli Uta as the big one.’

The shuttlepod hatch opened and the captain stuck his head out, clearing his throat pointedly. By which I mean he hawked up a gobbet of phlegm, spat it on the quay and rolled his eyes up towards his freighter.

‘Later, love,’ she said.

I touched the brim of my hat in wry salute.

Maisy Cajazeiras stepped into the shuttlepod and the hatch creaked imperfectly shut behind her.

I never saw her again.

The Doctor dashed this way and that around the floating simularity, frowning at the starships from every angle. His fingers worried at the roots of his curls.

‘An invasion fleet,’ he muttered. ‘But why? What *for*?’ He turned to me of a sudden. ‘What is there on Segovax that makes it worth invading?’

The question wrong-footed me. *Wrong-footed*. Back home we’d say it yanked me with an undertow. I’d been submerged in my memories, lost in my final moments with her.

‘The Glassheart?’ I answered. ‘No, obviously. It doesn’t *do* anything, does it? Just bullshit and chicanery. There’s nothing there to actually capture.’

'Maybe they just want it out of the markets. Set up some return on an investment somewhere else, let another financial centre rise to prominence. I wish Anji were here. She understands all this stuff so much better than I do.'

'You're the one who sent her away.'

'Yes. She's got a very important job to do. I still wish she were here.'

I wondered if she was still with Occa, still keeping that eye on him. I understood now why the Doctor had wanted to have her watch over the crazy old bastard. Still didn't understand why he wanted anything to do with him in the first place. I realised with a calm and abrupt certainty that if I saw the Earth Reptile again I was going to kill him.

I swallowed. Pushed the thought to the back of my mind as much as I could. Not out of guilt or shame. Just if I let on then I knew the Doctor would try and stop me.

'The Glasshouse is failing, Doctor. You saw it – the place has gone to the dogs. It's like an arse-faced old bat 'scaping herself to look like a young starlet. Whatever money went through it once, it dried up donkey's years back. The galaxy's spun on. Somewhere else has *already* risen to prominence.'

'So what then? Slaves? Raw materials? Do they want to install a drive core in your darsena and fly Segovax round like a giant spaceship?' He darted to the far side of the similarity, peering at me through the shifting colours of hyperspace. 'I know these spaceships! I...' He pounded at his temples with his fists. 'Somewhere in here I *know* them!'

They just looked like starships to me. Standard, snub-nosed bruisers. Cargo bays strapped to engines and covered in weapons pods. Not a configuration I recognised but not in any way exceptional. You've seen the same movies as me; you know the clichés about beemie ships. All strange geometry and twisted spires of alien gothic. Hulls of spun diamond or flidor gold or elements even stranger to known science. They're meant to be unknowable and against all we stand for. These looked like the kind of thing you'd hire by the dozen from some sleazer, no-questions-asked.

'Shame you knocked out my aug,' I said bitterly. 'We could look 'em up on Imperipedia image search.'

For the first time since the image appeared, the Doctor stood still. He looked at me, an expression of astonishment breaking a moment later into a rapidly-spreading grin. His bloody sonic screwdriver appeared in his hand.

I scrambled back in my walker. 'No you don't! Not again! Not after-'

I was bringing the pistol up again. Seriously, in case you didn't get the message, I was in no mood to be messed around with at that point.

Like the Doctor cared.

The sonic whine tore through my cerebellum like a spike made out of rainbows. I squealed. Not the human-friendly sound of my vocalised thoughts, mediated by the walker's systems, but a natural Cetacean cry of distress that went up the octaves like a rocket and answered his hypersonic assault with a shriek of discomfort in kind.

I lost control of the walker and its limbs palsied in a spastic movement somewhere between crab and dying spider. The pistol dropped from my hand and the Doctor kicked it away. He dodging in between flailing limbs, modulating the sound until the spike became a scalpel. I tried to hold still, knew there was no point trying to resist him. Knew there was no point anyone ever trying to resist him.

My bladder convulsed, and my last thought before I blacked out was to wonder if he would allow me to cling to any shred of dignity before he was done with me.



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...loss of control of the southern axial transmission array comes as government officials and representatives from the Glassheart's leading wealth-creation and investment businesses prepare for tomorrow's trade delegation. A spokesman for Considia CommsCast, which runs the installation, assured us that the downtime would not affect the summit:

'This is an old array and we have contingency plans in place for events such as this. It's unfortunate that the cosmic ray burst should affect its systems so close to a major event, but our other installations are more than capable of taking up the slack. This is why Considia has invested so heavily in ensuring Segovax is served by one of the most state-of-the-art internal communications networks in the sector. The southern axial array was due to be shut down for upgrades in the near future anyway, and this merely means that we have had to bring forward our schedule slightly. While we repair the fault, sumers are advised to disregard any anomalous or unusual signal transmissions.'

'In offworld news, the Potentate of Gallifraxion III is celebrating her two-hundred-and-first birthday today with what has been billed as the most lavish...

'So you got my news feed working again?' I moaned, opening one bleary eye. 'Oh joy of joy unbounded.'

The Doctor was sitting beside the slumped heap me and my walker, watching me with a concerned look on his face. He had my pistol, and was idly toying with it, as if it were some unfamiliar artefact of strange and unknown function. The engraved inscription on its side from Maisy glinted in the light and caught my eye. My aug detected the focus and zoomed in, clarifying the ornate cursive script and flashing up a pop-up telling me who Maisy was, where we had met, when she had given me the weapon, and the circumstances of our last meeting.

As if I could forget.

I blinked the windows away.

'You should have most of your usual augment functions,' the Doctor said quietly. 'No sensescape, though, and they won't last long. It's a bit of a bodge-job I'm afraid.'

'Always what you want to hear when waking from a forced neurotech procedure. So is this gonna blow my brain then, Doc?'

'Shouldn't. So long as you don't overdo it.'

'I don't supposed you installed any back doors while you were in there? Little hacks and loops so you can sneak in and tweak my thoughts?' I'd heard about disreputable neuro-jocks doing that in their squalid backstreet parlours. Lurid urban myths about dark ganglords with armies of obedient aug-zombies drifted through my still-swimming mind.

The Doctor seemed genuinely surprised. 'Why on earth would I do that?'

'I dunno, Doc? Why do you use my car to steal a body? Why do you break into my apartment? Why do you lobotomise me with a screwdriver without so much as a "do-you-mind"? Why do you hide the fact that one of your chums was responsible for the death of my girlfriend? Maybe you've got a good reason. Maybe it'd just make things more convenient for you down the line. Maybe you've just got *no chuffing idea* where the line is?'

'The line?'

'For the record, you crossed it somewhere around K'tkkrk's bar.'

He sighed. 'I didn't install any hacks or back doors. Your mind is your own.'

Like he'd tell me if it wasn't.

'You can't overrule me?' He shook his head. 'Can't make me do what I don't want to?'

Another no.

I moved laser-fast. The walker pounced up to its feet, snatching the pistol from his hands and spinning it round to hold at arm's length, pressed against his forehead. He looked a little hurt, but not as surprised as I'd thought. He made no move to escape or to stop me.

'So if I decide to pull this trigger right now, there's nothing you could do stop me?'

'If you've already decided to become a murderer, Flippers, then no. But I don't believe you have.' I thought of Occa but said nothing. 'So I'm going to ask you very nicely to put the gun down and help me stop this invasion.'

I wasn't going to pull the trigger. Not now. The white heat of rage had subsided some and ven after everything he'd done, I still didn't really believe he was one of the bad guys. Dangerous? Sure. A bit of an idiot? Definitely. But the kind of man I could shoot in cold blood?

I lowered the pistol.

The Doctor breathed. 'Thank you. I'm sorry, Flippers. I know you think I've acted thoughtlessly towards you, betrayed your trust. And you're right. I can only apologise and promise that everything I've done has been to try and help Segovax and to try and help you.' He closed his eyes as if pondering something. 'There's more going on than you know. More than I'm able to tell you.'

'There always bloody is.'

I turned and looked at the similarity, blinking an image and sending an AI splinter off on a datanet hunt with it. It returned almost instantly.

'Those ships are Usurian enforcement frigates. Hayek-Class.'

‘Usurians!’ He was on his feet in a flash, dancing back around the similarity. ‘Of course! It’s not an invasion force at all. They’re bailiffs! Someone around here’s made a very bad deal and their creditors are coming round to repossess the silverware!’

‘Repossess?’

‘The Usurians are the most ruthless businessmen this side of the Aquila Rift. They make the Mentors look like Trotskyists. They use those enforcement ships when someone defaults on a loan. They repossess the collateral and asset-strip it for whatever value they can get. Lock, stock and barrel... and livestock.’

I didn’t like the sound of that. ‘And the collateral?’

‘Depends on the size of the loan. From what Coralie and Ra said, I rather think it’s something very large indeed.’

I shivered. ‘Segovax.’

‘We have to stop them, Flippers. If the Usurians take control of this asteroid they’ll strip it bare and flog every nut and bolt of it – every man, woman, child and dolphin – to the highest bidder, no questions asked. Like some sort of colossal, depraved car-boot sale.’

‘Then we have to help Ra.’ I couldn’t believe I was saying it, but what other option did we have? ‘He’s the only one with the troops to stop them.’

‘Troops?’ The Doctor snorted dismissively. ‘Because turning this into a war’s really going to help!’

‘Then what?’ I demanded angrily. ‘What can we do? What’s all this been for?’

‘Calliope had a plan. She knew what was coming and she came here with a plan to stop it. If we can find out what that was, we might still have a chance to prevent this.’

‘And how do we do that? Calliope’s dead. Her contact was Coralie and she doesn’t know a thing about it!’

The Doctor crouched to face me, pressing his palms against the sides of my head. ‘Think about it, Flippers. You’re an agent with details of a secret threat to Segovax and a plan for how to stop it. You’ve got an appointment with a contact when you make landfall but while you’re still *en route* you’re attacked by an assassin. Now, you’re a smart, tough woman. You’ve been to business school. You did the impossible and dropped off the Imperial grid, even though it meant having every augment removed from your body. You didn’t stay hidden all these years by being a pushover. So let’s say you realise the assassin’s on to you before he makes his move. You’re on a spaceship in interplanetary space. What do you do?’

Alert the authorities? But on a ship they’d be the corporate security of the ferry line, I realised. I searched for the registry of the *Dulcibella*. Sure enough, a Considia subsidiary.

‘Run,’ I said. ‘I’d make for an escape pod. Failing that I’d get into a spacesuit – we’re assuming I’m human here, right? – and take a running jump out into the big black. Better chance than inside.’

‘Agreed.’ The Doctor let me go and began to pace. ‘But you’ve got to know your chances wouldn’t be great. A lone figure floating out there on the spacelanes. Do you even dare activate a beacon? The people with the resources to rescue you are the people who are trying to have you killed in the first place.’

‘Crap.’

‘What do you do, Flippers?’

'Fight? No, she'd have no chance against Teszil. I don't know. I guess I'd still take the space-jump. Bugger, what a choice.'

'The poor woman. She must have known she was probably going to die. But she had a mission. An important mission, and a contact she could trust.'

'She'd leave a message,' I said with final realisation. 'Her secrets, her plan! She'd have hidden them somewhere on the *Dulcibella*. Somewhere she could trust that Coralie would find them!'

'Assuming she had time before Teszil caught up with her,' the Doctor added sadly. 'It's still only a hypothesis.'

'Naa, it's a good one. You're right, Doctor.' I felt hope surging within me, the old adrenaline-rush of a case that was beginning to crack. This is what it had been like with Maisy. I fired off another net search. 'We need to get on board that ship. If we're lucky it'll sti- Oh.'

He didn't say anything. Just raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'Damn it! The *Dulcibella* left port three hours ago. It'll be halfway to Vercingetorix by now. Even if we could get hold of a ship, there's no way we could catch up and get back before those bailiff ships get here.'

'No,' said the Doctor, 'there isn't. It's a good job we've already got people on board, then, isn't it?'

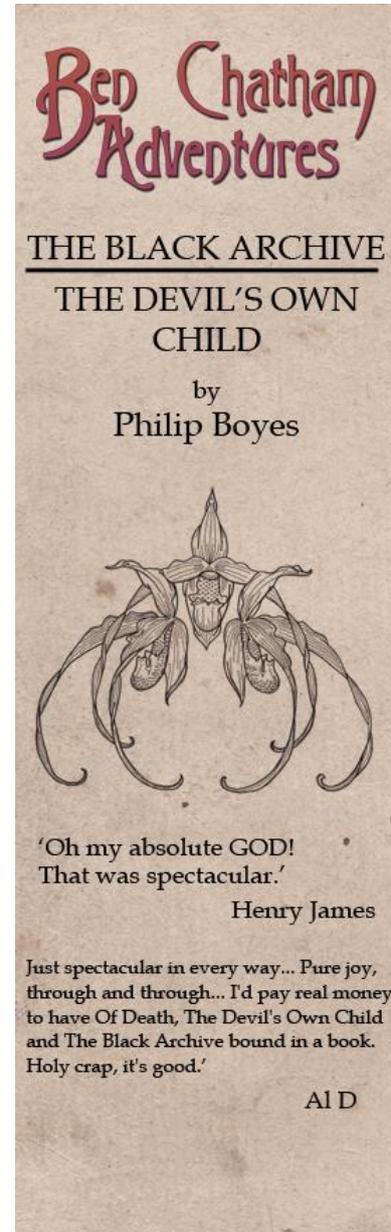
Chapter Eleven

No back-doors or mindjacking Trojans, then, but he just hadn't been able to resist adding a little something while he tinkered round in my loaf. And what a little something! Telepresence suites are the stuff of dreams. Not just idle fancies of what you'd do if you got that raise; *proper* dreams. Sweaty, delirious, kinda sexy dreams. Because, yeah, own up: who *doesn't* immediately start envisaging the rumpy-pumpy potential when they comprehend exactly what a fully-operational TP suite is capable of?

Where the 'scape just makes a few discreet edits around the edges of your sensorium, the TP does a wholesale cut-and-paste. It's only a whisper away from the sense-sim cages they use for prisoners or to give the irreparably injured the illusion of a normal life. Only difference is, those are recorded sense-data; TP uses quantum entanglement or some other crazy science guff to gather it all in real time from anywhere else it can establish a link with. You can be languishing in a mouldy Cheapside bedsit and with one of those up and running every sense in your body would believe you were sunning yourself on the dunes of Calastair or attending an Imperial council on Io or, yeah, enjoying the sweet attentions of Jujjunna's fragrant odalisques. No wonder there were all those urban legends about high-level entreps who lost themselves to soul-surfing, shifting endlessly from bed to bed on a thousand worlds, a never-ending carousel of vicarious cheap thrills.

Prurient arse-swill, of course. I had no doubt there was a skein of truth running through them, but mostly those stories were spread by envious sumers with a taste for salacious holonovellas and trashy litzines. The kinds of entreps who could actually afford TP had by and large become so rich by being business-savvy enough to realise that the technology was far more than just a new and exciting method of getting their ends away.

Take a moment yourself. Put the sex out of your mind just for a moment and imagine the possibilities. Anywhere in EarthSpace a mere thought away. Least, anywhere not shielded or with unknown co-ordinates. In theory there's nothing to stop you manifesting anywhere in the universe, but without the fixed points of Imperial stellar cartography, focusing on a point with enough precision's meant to be virtually impossible.



Look, you know by now that you'll have to go somewhere else if you want the science bit. But you take my point: this was High End Tech. Eye-wateringly expensive and closely monitored by the more paranoid branches of the Imperial security infrastructure (which, like as not, were its most avid users). Only the very richest entreps, the most favoured diplomats and research institutes, the most trusted spies got to play with this kind of toy.

Which begged the question: just how in hell had the Doctor managed to install one in my brain while hiding out underground in a slum?

And why did the 'About this program' information pop-up give a copyright date seventy-three years in the future?

The Doctor breezily lectured me on how it worked while I booted up the aug. Like I was gonna remember all that. I was lost even as I tentatively prodded around the initial set-up options. I had to ask him to backtrack and talk me through it one stage at a time. This he did with no obvious dent to his enthusiasm. Maybe he was just happy I wasn't pointing a gun at him any more.

'I've downscaled it as much as I could,' he told me. 'But I didn't have as much time as I'd have liked, and the rest of your software's so full of bugs it's like Vortis in the rainy season. It'll run on your system and it should be safe enough, but I can't promise there won't be compatibility issues.'

'Right,' I said sceptically. 'That's proper reassuring to hear about something hard-wired into your brain.' I thought about how it would work, what it would feel like. 'I'm not really going to be there, am I? So what? I'll just be like a ghost? I'll be able to see and hear and feel things but not affect them.'

'That would be frustrating, wouldn't it? Don't worry: Fitz has a small drone with him that's designed to interface with the quantum signal. You'll be able to control it and it'll generate manipulator fields. That'll let you interact with things, up to a point.'

'But don't get carried away, right? I'll still be a little robot.'

'The people who built it would be horrified to hear you call it that, but essentially yes.'

'A robot who thinks he's a dolphin, being operated by remote-control from half a star-system away, on a spaceship designed for humans. This could descend into slapstick real fast.'

'You'll be fine.'

'Sure.' The TP suite finished initialising and a simple blinking prompt in the corner of my vision asked me to choose a destination. 'And what about my body while I'm gone? My *real* body, I mean?'

'Oh, don't worry. The autonomic functions will all tick along fine. Your heart will still beat and you'll keep breathing. Lights on but nobody home.'

'Some people would say I've been like that for years,' I muttered. 'I was more worried about what happens if those cops upstairs come sniffing around.'

'I won't let anything happen to you.'

That would have been a hell of a lot more convincing if he hadn't already, but I resisted the urge to say anything smart. 'Guess I've got to trust you then, don't I?'

'You can, Flippers. I promise.'

He seemed earnest. I decided to push my luck. 'You gonna tell me who you're working for then? Who all this communications equipment's for keeping in touch with? You gonna tell me where Anji and Occa are?'

'Walls have ears, Flippers. I can't. I'm sorry.'

'Yeah, figured you'd say that.'

I activated the suite.

There was a moment's disorientation, a sense of stumbling out of darkness and into light.

I was somewhere else.

If the crates I'd dossed around the spacelanes in back in my hitching days had been half as nice as the *Dulcibella* I'd have counted myself a very lucky dolphin. It didn't so much make luxury into an art-form as into a bland but attainable mass-produced commodity. Soft carpets, fabric-covered walls, soft furnishings scattered in conspiratorial little clumps like children in a playground, frozen when the whistle goes. The perfect fusion of middle-tier designers and vaguely competent focus groups; a testament to the heyday of the starlines a few years back. And if it was starting to look a little threadbare and grimy round the edges, the thick senscape glammers made sure most of the passengers were none the wiser.

I manifested in a corner of the first-class lounge. I was low to the ground. My first instinct was that I'd fallen out of the walker and I began to panic. I realised how absurd that was a split-second later and shifted instead to wondering why I was clasped between a pair of male knees.

Fitz blinked in surprise and let me go.

I bobbed back, steadying myself and drifting up to my usual height. Of course: I was seeing from the drone's perspective.

For a few moments I felt strangely disconnected from reality as what I experienced and what my brain was conditioned to expect fought each other, reinforcing the artificiality of my presence there. Then the drone succeeded in synchronising its movements to my thoughts and it faded from my consciousness. I was simply there. If I tilted my head my view shifted accordingly. I could smell the lingering odour of cleaning spray and air freshener, the salty richness of a bag of peanuts open on the table in front of Fitz.

'Flippers?'

It was Coralie who'd said my name. She was in a chair behind me, her eyes wide with surprise.

'So this is where you two got to,' I said with as much nonchalance as I could muster. 'I was starting to wonder.'

'Unbelievable,' she said. 'It's actually you. You're solid and real and... God, I can even smell the brine from your walker!'

'Just looks like the drone to me,' Fitz admitted.

'It's interfacing with my 'scape,' she said. 'Changing what I see. You haven't got an aug so you see the drone. I see Flippers.'

I cocked a thumb at the other passengers, wandering obliviously between the shops and the bar. 'And what about them? What do they see?'

‘Well no-one’s shouted “Where did that talking dolphin just appear from” so I assume they don’t see anything they didn’t see before,’ Fitz said. ‘The Doctor said the drone should generate a sencescape field of its own, so they’ll have trouble spotting it. Just try not to draw too much attention to yourself.’

I adjusted my fedora and grinned. ‘When do I ever do that?’

Fitz just shook his head. ‘God, it’s weird hearing your voice come out of a little floating egg.’

‘Fitz, we should show him,’ Coralie said.

That sounded ominous. ‘Show me what?’

‘Oh, yeah.’ Fitz got up, unfolding his lanky limbs from the armchair. ‘This is kind of cool. In a worrying and creepy sort of way.’

We crossed over to the huge curved plastiglass observation windows which made up the entire outside edge of the lounge.

‘Look at that.’

‘I just see stars.’

‘Yeah, that’s one thing,’ Coralie said. ‘We ought to be in hyperspace. And look over there, just between Vercingetorix and that spar. You can see the sunlight glinting off it.’

I followed where she was pointing, zoomed in and enhanced. It was subtle, but definitely there. Something large and artificial, hovering in the dark between the planetary disc and the window-frame. I could only see a portion of its outline, but it was enough to recognise it as one of the Usurian ships.

‘They’re here already.’

‘Tell me you’ve got a better idea than we do what’s going on here,’ Fitz said.

‘Nothing good.’ I looked again at the looming vessel. ‘Has it done anything?’

Coralie shook her head. ‘We dropped out of hyperspace about ten minutes ago. Engine readjustment, the captain said. We’ve just sat here ever since. I don’t know whether the other passengers can’t see it or just haven’t noticed it.’

Fitz sighed and fingered a cigarette anxiously, evidently regretting that he couldn’t light up. ‘Man alive’ he complained. ‘Do you lot ever actually see the real world around you?’

‘Not if we can help it,’ I replied. ‘If you haven’t got an aug then I hear booze helps. So, what did the Doctor tell you when he sent you aboard?’

‘Pretty much bugger all,’ Fitz said, brightening. ‘You know, just for a change. Just have a shufti round and look for any evidence for what happened to... Coralie’s mum. Nothing about –’

PASSENGERS OF CONSIDIA VESSEL *DULCIBELLA*!

The voice boomed out all around us. I say boomed – to be honest it was more of a whine. High-pitched, nasal and unpleasant. It had an artificial quality about it. Synthesised. No doubt by the lowest bidder.

The other passengers definitely heard it. They stopped what they were doing and looked around in astonishment and fear. At the far end of the lounge someone dropped a daiquiri and made a mess of the upholstery.

THIS IS THE ENFORCEMENT VESSEL *WEAPONISED INCONVENIENCE*, OPERATING UNDER CONTRACT FROM THE USURIAN EXOCOMMERCE AGENCY, IN ACCORDANCE WITH LOCAL LAWS

AND STATUTES. DUE TO AN INFRINGEMENT A LOSSES-RECOVERY OPERATION IS CURRENTLY IN OPERATION IN THIS STAR SYS-

The announcement cut off abruptly. There was an awkward moment of silence which did nothing to quell the rising disquiet among the other passengers, then – of all things – some light music, as if this were just a routine interruption in datanet service.

An announcement came a few moments later., uncertain-sounding and somewhat flustered. ‘Krauen and trauen, this is your captain speaking.’ He was as frightened as everyone else, but doing a pretty stalwart job of keeping a lid on it. I could hear frantic hushed conversations in the background. ‘There’s no cause for alarm. We’re currently working to resolve this... ah... situation. Local and Imperial authorities have been informed and response units have been dispatched.’

‘That isn’t true,’ I whispered to Fitz. ‘No way the military moves that quickly. He’s just trying to reassure the passengers.’

‘I’m not feeling a whole lot of reassurance right now.’

‘Please remain calm and stay in your assigned areas. I assure you we are under no immediate threat.’

First rule of space travel: no-one ever says “there’s no immediate threat” when that phrase is true. Actually, I think the first rule of space travel may be “spend as little time awake as you can afford”, but this was definitely in the top ten.

The captain’s announcement apparently done, the muzak returned and the sumers around us began to panic in earnest.

‘This is all we need,’ said Fitz.

‘No, we can use this,’ Coralie said. ‘We can use the distraction to get out, have a look round the ship. Mum wouldn’t have been killed in here.’

She spoke the words tightly, but I was impressed how well she was holding it together. A lot of strength there. More than I’d realised last time I saw her.

‘Coralie’s right,’ I said. ‘Let’s head down to the service decks. Fewer security cameras and monitoring pods. More dark shadows for our assassin to hide out.’

‘Yeah,’ Fitz said. ‘We figured that. We wanted to look at the airlocks and docking ports down on the lower decks but it was hard getting past the stewards.’

There were a couple of heavies stationed near the doors. They were dressed in the same corporate uniforms as the men and women who served drinks and manned the duty-free counters, but these guys were about twice their size, muscles bulging under the cheap blue fabric. They were responding to the shouted questions of panicked passengers with the tense, throbbing expressions of men about thirty seconds away from giving up any pretence of diplomacy and starting to crack heads together.

We didn’t need to wait long. A couple of entrep kids were standing at the window, scouring the black for any sign of the ship. The older one was a boy, around nine maybe. Suit and haircut so sharp you could have scaled him up and he wouldn’t have looked out of place in a Glassheart boardroom. His kid sister wore her designer gear with less aplomb, having contrived to smear them with snot and food and the other assorted gunks children seem to attract. The boy, it seemed, had had his augs fitted recently and was keen to brag. He spotted the Usurian craft and proceeded to boast ludicrously to the girl, who couldn’t pick it out.

'It's bigger than an Imperial Battlehammer!' he proclaimed. I'm not ashamed to say I had no idea what an Imperial Battlehammer was. Presumed it was some ship class in the Navy that I'd never heard of. I've looked it up since and it turns out it's what the baddies fly in some trashy Saturday morning sim-series they have on Vercingetorix. 'How can you not see it, even with *baby* eyes?'

If it had stopped there, there would have been no problem. Just a couple of obnoxious kids squabbling. But the boy wasn't content. He spiralled his description out into the realm of pure fantasy.

'It's got guns all over it! Hundreds of guns! And missile launchers and arc cannons and plasma blasters and whopping great meson destructors the size of this ship!'

'Meson destructors?' asked an old lady standing nearby, unable to help overhearing. By which I mean she'd been carefully listening in purely so she could tut and wonder loudly where the children's guardian had got to. She grabbed the nearest stewardess and rudely yanked the poor girl round to face her. 'Is it true? That boy says he can see meson destructors!'

The startled employee didn't even have time to stammer out a placeholder answer while she checked. Kids were one thing, but a venerable old dear was another. Panicked whispers soaked through the crowd like oil.

The old lady says it has meson destructors!

...meson destructors, pointed at us?

...getting ready to fire!...

I didn't even see what it was finally set them off. Didn't matter. Once a crowd's in that state anything will do it. One moment it was barely-restrained fear and a torrent of stupid, anxious questions. The next the stewards had a full-blown panic to contend with. People screaming, shouting, shoving each other aside and trampling them underfoot. Gods only knew where they even thought they were trying to go.

We had no trouble slipping past the door stewards in the chaos.

There's not even any such thing as a damn meson destructor.

We picked our way down through the infrastructure of the ship. Liner vessels are all the same. Once you get outside the designated passenger areas the luxurious décor gives way to a spare warren of utilitarian spars and gangways. No corporation wastes a sou more than it has to on the crew. Now and then we heard the clanging of booted feet running along the metal catwalks, heard worried shouts from crew. As we passed the hatches leading to stowage we heard dreadful wails from inside. Fitz flinched and hesitated. I pressed on and tried not think about what was causing the noise. Fitz and Coralie soon caught up.

The service airlocks were about three decks below the first class lounge. They were spaced out about ten metres apart along a wide passageway running the length of the ship, right up against the exterior bulkhead. Spacesuits of various descriptions were hung behind plastiglass screens facing them.

'Do you know what we're looking for?' Fitz asked. 'They'll have cleaned before they sent the ship out again.'

'This isn't a public area,' Coralie said. 'The cleaners aren't apid to waste too much time here. There'll still be traces. Blood, hair, DNA. Am I right?'

'On the money,' I agreed. 'We should start with the airlock doors.'

Coralie found our clue not long after that. Second or third hatch she'd checked. She stifled a choked little noise but by the time Fitz and I got over to her she'd regained her composure. She crouched in front the metal doorway and pointed.

'There. You see it?'

There was a faded residue of dark, rusty red smeared along the bottom edge of the door. Dried blood. I scratched off a few flakes with my fingertips to make certain.

This wasn't just from some small cut or wound. Someone had scrubbed this, even if only with a token effort, and still it remained thickly coating the bottom edge.

'This is where it happened,' I said, quiet and low. 'The door was open. She was running past it. Tripped – or Teszil knocked her to the ground.' As I was speaking I spotted a scuff mark on the gangway in front of the hatch, as if something – or someone – had hit the deck full-force. 'She crawls away... tries to get into the airlock. I dunno, maybe she thinks if she can lure him in she might be able to trap him there. Maybe she's desperate enough to try a spacejump. She don't make it, though. She's halfway through when Teszil whacks the hatch release. Door comes down.'

I mimed the guillotine-drop of the metal plate with my hand. Coralie closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Fitz squeezed her arm.

'So we know how she died,' he said quietly. 'What now?'

'If we're lucky she left Coralie some message. Something that would give us an indication of what she knew about Ra and the Usurians and how she hoped to stop it. We retrace her steps. Look for anything out of the ordinary.'

We worked our way back along the gangway, following a trail of scuffs and blood-spatters and chips in the paintwork. Fitz and Coralie were on hands and knees. I felt like I was squatting low in the walker, my head pitched down towards the ground. In fact I guess the drone was just hovering a bit lower.

It wasn't a difficult trail once you had it. The forensics teams hadn't exactly busted a gut to solve this one. Teszil must have known. He'd made scarcely any effort to cover his tracks.

I let Fitz and Coralie follow it. Fitz evidently fancied himself something of a detective and soon got the hang of working out what movements and reversals in the chase lay behind each faint vestige. Coralie just fancied him. I guess that was the only thing taking the edge off what must have been a wretched task for her. She needed it, though. I remembered my own investigations into Maisy's disappearance: the determination to go on that was so overriding that the horror of what I was uncovering – or in my case the complete absence of anything to uncover – faded temporarily into the background. The grief would hit her again hard when this was over. I hoped Fitz stuck along to see her through it.

While they were doing that, I held back and let my aug AI do a bit of discreet exploring in the local datascape. There were strange data-eddies and glitches. Fragments of surreal half-images, vague semi-coherent noises ghosting in and out on the limits of detection

range. Data-ghosts, but unlike anything I'd experienced before. I struggled to make sense of them, until I felt a sudden tug on my hand.

Not my walker hand, you realise. My *actual* hand.

Which, you'll recall, I don't actually have.

'Bugger me!' I breathed. 'It's 'scape data! This whole place is a soup of old 'scape data-ghosts!'

Coralie looked up. 'I felt that too. I thought it was just... my mind playing tricks on me.'

'No, this was someone else playing tricks on your mind. Or more likely your mum's mind.' I remembered Vimanji and her murderous, out-of-character rampage on Lacaille. The sencescape taps into your sensorium, alters how the world appears to you. Most of the time it's used to advertise, to hide things or to tart up the faded and derelict. Sometimes that's done on a massive scale, like in the Glassheart. But what if you used it as a weapon? The thought was so clear and lucid I couldn't believe it had never occurred to me before. What if you directed it at someone and used it to make them think they were under attack, or to disorientate them with fever-dream worlds, or just to drive them mad?

I felt a chill. How many people had Teszil driven to their ends this way?

A near perfect-crime, if you could do it. You don't have to kill the person. You just need to work out what to feed their sensorium until they do it to themselves. Neat. Very neat. Too neat for Teszil. He was a kid from the barrios of Kerkouane; he thrived on the visceral, solid physicality of it all. That was his weakness. That was why he took their heads.

Was that what had led to the chase with Calliope in the first place? Had he got impatient with weaving his spells around her and moved in for the kill too soon? Had he tipped his hand early and given her a chance to realise what was happening to her, a chance to run?

And then I remembered. She didn't have any augs.

Teszil's tricks wouldn't have worked on her. Calliope had seen right through them; hadn't even realised they were there. But in his overconfidence the assassin had given himself away. She realised he was on to her and tried to run.

'Your mother was quite a woman,' I said to Coralie.

The girl looked up. Tried to smile but couldn't quite pull it off. Her dark hair fell raggedly across her face. 'Yeah, guess she must have been. Shame I screwed everything up with her.'

'Hey,' said Fitz. 'Don't talk like that. Don't be daft. You were young. A teenager. Who *doesn't* want to get away from their mums at that age? You can't feel guilty about it for the rest of your life because something bad happens to her.'

He sounded like he was talking from experience. I wondered what his story was, how he'd ended up out among the stars with Anji and the Doctor.

'I just wish...' Coralie began and then tailed off. 'Oh what's the use? I can't find anything here! You look at me like I should be able to read her mind, like we had some sort of connection that'll let me figure out where she stashed whatever secrets it was she had. Well I'm sorry! I don't! I haven't seen her since I left home, and we didn't exactly speak before ...'

She stopped, pulling up short. The sadness in her young eyes froze; gave way to something else. A half-formed idea resolving out of static. I followed her gaze. There was

nothing there. Just a battered old coffee vending-machine, its dull and flickering holo advertising 'Black Frontier Coffee. 100% Real Gallissan Beans!' All but the last word had faded almost to illegibility.

'What is it?' Fitz asked. 'What's the matter?'

She nodded dumbly at the machine. 'Beans,' she murmured slowly. 'Coralie and Beans.'

He got it. Whooped a cry of triumph and grabbed her arms, spinning her round in a clumsy swirl.

'Fi—'

'Coralie!' he exclaimed delightedly, 'You are fantastic!'

She grinned and kissed him.

I rooted around in the machine's various openings and eventually hit pay-dirt in the slot where the paper cups were dispensed. There was a tiny chip lodged up against its inside lip. It must have been shoved there hurriedly, but no way accidentally.

Fitz frowned at it, measuring it against the nail of his little finger. 'I'll never get over how small these things get.'

'It's a datachip,' Coralie told him. 'Now we just need to work out what'll access it.'

'Surely there's a slot for it on robo-boy here?'

It took me a moment to realise he meant me. I'd almost forgotten I was piggybacking on the corporeal form of the drone.

Fitz lunged in to take hold of me. Which was just weird, so I decided to get out of the way. The drone allowed me to manipulate things, but the telepresence worked on quantum entanglement – it wasn't tied to the machine's receptors. A thought was all it took and my consciousness drifted out of the drone's body. There was no obvious difference in sensations, but now I was as insubstantial as a ghost. Without the drone's speakers there was no way I'd be able to talk to Fitz, either. Coralie would have to relay my words as the TP implanted them directly into her 'scape.

'Sorry, mate,' Fitz mumbled as he manhandled the drone, checking its various sockets and drives for one that would fit the datachip. It was the first time I'd seen the machine. It was about half a metre high, satiny-white in colour and shaped like an elongated egg. 'Can't be very dignified for you.'

'About as dignified as talking to an inanimate object,' I said. 'Coralie, tell him I'm over here, would you?'

She did, and eased Fitz aside from the drone. Where he'd been fumbling and uncertain with the technology, she handled it with easy familiarity, prising open a panel and



locating a receiver for the chip in just a few seconds. There was a chirrup of acceptance and a flurry of display panels blossomed in our sensoria.

‘Did it do anything?’ asked Fitz, oblivious to the changes in the ’scape.

‘This is it,’ Coralie said, scrolling through the file headings just as I was. She was opening them at random, exploring what we’d got our hands on. ‘This is what Mum found out.’

There were hundreds of files. Thousands, probably. All stamped with metadata indicating that they’d been lifted from the innermost recesses of the Considia corporate databanks. It was a hell of a hacking job. Maybe the biggest data-heist in a century, even more. And no-one had any idea it had taken place. I remembered the old data-pirates I’d crossed paths with at Jessamin and who I’d occasionally hassled into slipping me illicit ware since I set up in the investigation business. Proper old-school cyberpunks the lot of ’em. They cared about the history and the culture, treasuring and passing on the tales of their predecessors right back to the twentieth century. They didn’t just spin yarns like the spacers who clogged the Cheapside bars; they *curated*. To spend time with them was to hear an oral history of the datanet’s virtuoso buccaneers. The mavericks who acknowledged no flags and knew no creed but unfettered data-freedom.

If only they knew the details, this was an act of piracy they’d tell of for years to come.

Of course, for many it was the ones who’d left the fewest traces which had the greatest mystique.

Calliope had attracted someone’s attention, though. Enough for Ra to dispatch Teszil fa Shazsik zin’Tassin after her.

It would take months to go through the files. Years, even. The experts and lawyers and historians would be dining out on this little lot for a very long while. But the gist of what they showed was obvious very quickly indeed.

Considia had made some very bad business decisions. Terminal kind of bad. Ra had run Segovax into the ground in his efforts to reposition its economy. Letting the traditional mining business that had sustained the Belt habitats for centuries fall by the wayside, he’d bet the farm on turning Segovax into the system’s financial capital; a paradise for entreps sustained by the constant, invisible flow of finance, the certainty of ever-increasing sumer appetites to buy anything – anything at all – that was new and shiny and aspirational.

He’d bet the farm and lost.

These records told in grim, objective statistics and accounting figures, confidential market report after report, what had been obvious for years to anyone who’d spent any time in Cheapside. The sumers had no money and they couldn’t work any harder. Other markets were poaching Segovax’s share of the financial business. Little by little the Glassheart had decayed from glittering jewel in the crown of the system to a near-empty husk. All façade and nothing behind it.

Around a year ago Considia’s board had realised the game was up. If they didn’t get a substantial injection of capital soon, they were going to default on loans to half a dozen lenders, including the Imperial House itself. The implications would be deleterious in the extreme to their continued ability to do business in EarthSpace. It’s very hard to run a company when your heads are on spikes outside Earth Central’s Chancellery.

All other avenues exhausted, they were desperate. Typically the Considia board fell to infighting. People began manoeuvring in preparation for the inevitable collapse. Exit-strategies, back-stabbings and blame-shifts were carefully prepared. A final, desperate plot was hatched to wrest control of the company from Gideon Ra, the entrep wunderkind who'd built it from nothing.

But Ra did the impossible. At the very meeting where the board had gathered to vote for his dismissal, he strode calmly into the boardroom and announced that their troubles were over. He had concluded private negotiations which would see the Segovaxi economy recapitalised to the tune of billions of opeks. Considia would remain at its heart. Indeed, their market-share would, if anything, rise.

All the new investors asked in return was an 'efficiency drive'. Swingeing cuts to the quality of goods and services the sumers bought with their scant opeks and sous. Reduction of security patrols and healthcare provision, less maintenance of sewerage and building structures. I'd noticed it, of course. Everyone had. Sumers moaned all the time, but everyone had agreed that things had been getting worse for months. The news and other media assured everyone it was a myth, that nothing had changed and many things were getting better. Me, I never watched the news but Segovax's underbelly is my business. I had my nose to the ground and a 'scape on the blink. I knew what my senses were telling me.

The food tasted like cardboard and dust. The eels and sardines started to smell funny and to give me the runs. The air grew stuffy and polluted as the refresh cycles were reduced below the bare minimum safe levels. There was more violence. A fractious tension settled over Cheapside. People who listened to the media too much began to get suspicious of their neighbours, of the poor, the immigrants and the sick. I'd seen so-called freeloaders hounded out of neighbourhoods; caught in riots; worse.

I was cynical and my horizons were small. I figured it was just the crappy world we live in.

Considia had orchestrated it from the start. Divide and rule. Make life so cheap and spare and shitty that people will buy any bauble you offer them for the hope of something better.

It didn't work. People lost their jobs. They stopped spending. The amount of money around spiralled ever lower and the company responded by tightening the screws. The temporary boost to their accounts levelled off, then went into reverse.

Within just a few months, Considia was right back where it had started. Only this time it had a restive and disordered population and the loan sharks were calling, asking where their return on their investment was.

There was nothing more that could be done. I scanned the summary of that final board meeting where the senior actuaries confirmed that there was nothing possible within the corporation's economic power which could prevent a Usurian attempt to repossess the Rock. I watched the mad, arrogant gleam in Trau Ra's eye as he listened to the news, thanked them and calmly informed the board that in that case they must prepare for a war.

'This is what we need,' said Coralie, after we'd worked out this story and passed it on to Fitz. 'This is the proof. If we make this public there's no way anyone will be able to cover up what Considia's done. Earth Central will have to take action.'

‘If we don’t handle this carefully, the panic could be as bad as the invasion itself,’ I said. ‘If people just find out that they’ve been life for years; that the people who run their lives have mortgaged them off to a bunch of bug eyed monsters from beyond EarthSpace. They’ll lose hope... The troubles there’ve been these last few months will be nothing compared to what’ll come.’

‘There must be something else,’ Fitz said. ‘Calliope was on her way to Segovax for a reason. She had a plan, right? She had some way of stopping all this?’

I’d had my AI searching the contents of the chip for anything that looked like that. The desultory findings were like a kick to the gut.

‘There’s nothing,’ I told him. ‘Just a few frags of garbled code. Probably left over from something that got corrupted when she hacked their system.’

Coralie relayed my words, checking the broken code-strings herself as she did so.

‘These don’t look like corrupted data... More like... I dunno, a code transform or something. For decrypting something hidden in another signal.’

‘There’s something else?’ Fitz looked pained. ‘We don’t have time! The Usurians are out there right now playing chicken with the captain. The rest of their fleet’s on its way to Segovax. How are we supposed to find *another* secret message? There’s no time and no more clues!’

‘It’d have to be on Segovax – that’s where Mum was going,’ Coralie said. ‘But Fitz is right: it could be anywhere. There’s a million hiding-places and we have no ideas.’

‘We found this,’ I pointed out. Your Mum left it for you. She must have expected you’d be able to do something with it when you got it. Whatever this other signal is, I reckon it must be somewhere obvious. Somewhere in... plain... sight.’

I swore. Loudly and extravagantly.

That one signal. It was at the heart of everything, wasn’t it? The one signal which had been ghosting round the system for years. The one that Occa had been broadcasting, that had drawn the Doctor here and had stolen Maisy away from me.

This was all the same case.

‘You bastard, Doctor!’ I shouted. ‘You knew, didn’t you? All along, you knew!’

I have no idea if he could hear me, but at that moment something changed. Occa’s signal coalesced in my mind. As if he’d patched it through into my AI.

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

Seven syllables of shit which had ruined my life.

‘What are you all about, you git?’ I asked it, and ran the code transform.

Information bloomed in my mind. A whorl of colours and images and sounds and knowledge. A map of the system with co-ordinates gleaming in gold, a point far out between the rings of Taximagulus, the great cold gas giant in its slow and distant orbit, out way beyond the Belt.

A habitat.

A gleaming, manmade cylinder tumbling its lonely way through space, out beyond civilisation.

‘Hello there,’ said a female voice in my head. ‘If you’re hearing this it means you’ve either cracked the encryption protocols or we’ve released the code transform. Either way, I’m sure you’ve got a lot of questions. I’d imagine the first one’s probably “Who the hell are you and why have you been hiding?”’

‘It’s my pleasure to answer that for you. I’m a representative of the habitat Aelita, and we’re working to–’

There was a discontinuity. A sharp, searing break across my consciousness, interrupting the message.

For a moment I was falling.

I blinked open real, bodily eyes, confused and disorientated. I was facing down the barrel of a gun.

I looked for the Doctor, my brain sloshing slowly and painfully in my skull as I moved it. He was over to my left, being firmly restrained by a security agent in heavy body-armour. The officer’s face was hidden behind a faceplate as smooth and black and shiny as a beetle carapace. The Doctor cast me an apologetic smile.

There must have been a whole platoon of agents. Not civil law enforcement but paramilitary mercenary shock-troops, the kind we’d seen by the Chambers of Commerce. Their guns were big and nasty even by the standards of the growing catalogue of thoroughly unpleasant hardware I’d been exposed to over the last few days. I knew at once that we didn’t have a cat in hell’s chance of getting out of here, even if I hadn’t still been as woozy as if I’d gone swimming in a pool of hooch.

Even if I hadn’t just seen and heard what I had.

The troopers by the door stepped aside to allow Gideon Ra into the room. They didn’t salute. He was their paymaster, not their superior.

‘Doctor, Trau McKenzie,’ he purred. ‘So nice to see you again. You’ve caused a lot of trouble and expense, you know. It’s a debt that’s going to cost you rather a lot to repay.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Debt’s more your area of expertise than mine.’

Ra gave a signal and trooper twisted the Doctor’s arm sharply and brutally. He clearly intended to break it. I don’t think he succeeded but he was too proud to have a second attempt. The Doctor’s shout of pain was evidently sufficient as it was.

Ra didn’t react to the sudden violence, instead making a show of inspecting the antiquated equipment of Occa’s communications room. ‘And what is your area of expertise, Doctor? Troublemaking? Dissidence?’ He sniggered. ‘*Revolution?*’

'For starters.' It took the Doctor a moment to be able to say any more. He was still breathing heavily from the pain. 'I'm a sort of all-round trouble-shooter... I find places that are ailing... make them better.'

'So you really are a Doctor.'

'Oh yes. And if you want my diagnosis, Segovax is dying of consumption.'

Ra shook his head. 'Oh, very good. Very *witty*. You can't put a price on wit, can you, though? And if price is our way of measuring value, then it doesn't count for anything in the end, does it? You see, Doctor, the trouble with people like you is that you just don't understand economics. You've never grown up and got a proper job. You can't or won't make yourself into something society wants, so you just drift around its edges gnawing at it like rats, trying to break it down into something that'll have you. You're failures, oddballs, virgins and nerds.' He sneered over at me. 'Fish out of water.'

'But it's time to give up,' he went on, his attention squarely focused back on the Doctor. 'There's no sanctuary left for nihilists like you. We'd known about the signal for years, of course. *Anta Odeli Uta*... some of the backroom boys eventually dredged up the reference. Very cute. Impressive encryption but we knew one day we'd crack it and find out where your employers are hiding. Now we know. Your fishy friend here has given me the key.'

'You think you can onstream illegal TP ware in the middle of a crisis without anyone noticing? We were tapping the feed from the moment Trau McKenzie manifested on the *Dulcibella*. Those leaked accounts you found will get you nowhere, and we know everything we need to find Aelita. I'll liberate it like I liberated Segovax. Let the Usurians have this Rock. I'll just start again there.'

He leaned over and smirked in my face. 'How do you feel about that?'

'To be perfectly honest,' I said truthfully, 'I'm finding it hard to give a flying monkey's right now.' I turned to the Doctor, unable to keep the elation from my voice. 'It was her. I heard her. I recognised her voice. She's on Aelita. Doctor, *Maisy's* alive!'

Chapter Twelve

I woke with blood and broken teeth filling my mouth. My blowhole was badly bruised and each time I breathed pain arced through me, accompanied by a bone-and-cartilage clockwork of clicks and cracks. My skin was badly dehydrated. I tried to move but couldn't. My humiliation was complete: I'd been stripped of my walker and slapped down on the floor like the catch of the day on a trawler-deck.

'Back with us, I see.'

It was Ra speaking. I could see him pacing around some way in front of me. A blurry dark shape between a colossal desk and the bright white-blue expanse of huge windows. I couldn't bring him into focus.

The beatings had started in Sump End and had got progressively more severe without interruption since. They left the Doctor alone – all their tender mercies were focused on me. Never said why. Because I was an offworlder, I guess. Because I'm a Cetacean. Because I'm anthropomorph. Because they were drugged-up thugs who didn't need a reason. I pulsed with throbbing, tarry pain.

The charges were homicide. Murder of Calliope and the assassin for me; death by dangerous driving for the Doctor. Plus a supplementary rap sheet as long as my tail. Dissidence and sedition were particular highlights. Most of the charges were as patently bent as a nine-bob note, but they'd make 'em stick. I'd worked as a private eye long enough to be in no doubt that when people not even half as rich and powerful as Gideon Ra let it be known how they wanted court cases to turn out, things had a funny habit of very quickly going their way.

And hells, it wasn't like they were even pretending to do this by the book. Otherwise they'd have taken us to one of the licensed and regulated private law-enforcement detention facilities and filed claims with the corporate magistracy. Instead we'd been shipped straight to Considia's central HQ, dumped in a bare office in one of the lower levels, and a couple of guards had proceeded to kick seven bells out of me until Ra was ready to see us again.

After the first hour or so, my 'scape was malfunctioning, compounding the listless, painful drift of my semiconscious mind with sharp bursts of random sensation. Pain ebbed and eddied in currents, mingling with colours and smells and strange textures. My mind wove it into a synaesthetic tapestry where blue was a sharp, piercing agony and cracking hide smelt like peaches and the constant pressing of my lungs against broken ribs played alien harmonics and unearthly chords.

Through it all I saw Maisy. Not a constant or clear vision, but fleeting glimpses of her in the breaths between the screams. The scent of her perfume and hair-dye. A momentary brush of her gentle, delicate fingers across the rim of my wrecked blowhole.

I'm a representative of the habitat Aelita, she'd said.

What did that even mean? What kind of crazy, messed-up chain of events had led to it?

‘You knew,’ I’d said to the Doctor during one of the short respites my tormentors allowed me. I didn’t have it in me to be angry any more. I just needed to understand.

He tore his shirt-sleeves and dipped the cotton in a jug of water they’d left, using it to dampen my hide. The moisture felt good but we both knew it wasn’t enough. Unless I was immersed or returned to my walker soon, I was gonna dry out and die. Not that I thought they’d allow that to happen. Not yet. But they were pushing it as close as they could.

‘My ship decrypted the signal,’ he said. ‘It took us to Aelita. Maisy told us there was a threat to Segovax. They’d lost contact with their agent and they were worried. They asked us to come here and help. She told me to find you.’

‘You knew all along what was going on, who Calliope was, what she’d found. Gods, Doctor! Why’d we go through all that?’

He shook his head. ‘No, no. I didn’t. I promise. We were barely on Aelita a few hours. They were confused and worried and they didn’t know whether they could trust us. We’d just appeared, unannounced. Half the people there thought we should be sent away as fast as possible; the others were worried we’d reveal their secrets. They weren’t sure we should ever be allowed to leave at all.

‘Maisy trusted us. She believed we wanted to help. But she couldn’t take risks. She wouldn’t tell us any more than she had to. Wouldn’t even let us leave the building where we arrived. I don’t know a thing about Aelita. Didn’t even really know where it was.’

‘How...’

‘My ship’s a little... erratic.’

‘So she wanted you to come here and help, but she didn’t tell you what with?’

‘She couldn’t. They’re scared, Flippers. They’ve been hiding so long.’

‘So what *did* she tell you?’

‘She told me to find you. She told me to trust you and help you.’

I let that sink in.

For so long I’d assumed she was dead and gone. I thought about her but it never occurred to me that somewhere out there she was thinking about me. I wondered whether she missed me. Whether she still cared for me the way...

I slammed the door on that line of thought. It only led to pain and heartache. Nothing had changed. I was a prisoner now: the chances of my getting to see Maisy ever again were minuscule. I was still facing the rest of my life apart from her and wondering. All that was different now was that the rest of my life had probably just got a whole lot shorter.

I had so many questions. What was Aelita? Why were they hiding? What was the signal for? What did Occa think he was bloody doing? How did Maisy get there and why hadn’t she got word to me? Why did the Doctor never tell me she was alive?

But I could hear the guards returning. There was no time.

Before the door opened and my punishment resumed, I asked the Doctor, ‘How did she seem?’

He smiled reassuringly, stoically, and said, ‘She seemed like one of the good guys.’

*

‘Look at him!’ the Doctor bellowed at Ra. ‘Look at what your men have done to him! He needs water and medical treatment at once!’

I tried to turn to follow the conversation, but without my walker I was useless. Like one of my idiot ancestors pre-uplift, scattered from its pod and beached on some godsforsaken shore, I lay on the floor and wobbled, four hundred kilos of helpless blubber and meat.

‘I can’t be held responsible for what independent security contractors get up to.’

‘They’re *your* mercenaries!’

‘Nevertheless. It says so in their contract.’

‘You really are one of the most repellent...’

‘Now, now, Doctor. We both know that name-calling gets in the way of blue-skying and positive outcomes. More than that, it’s the last resort of the defeated scoundrel. I’d rather hoped you were of a higher calibre.’

‘Oh really? What was it you said earlier? Failures, oddballs, virgins and nerds? I must have misunderstood your tone of voice. I didn’t realise those were meant as terms of endearment, then.’

Ra ignored him.

‘Why are we here?’ I asked. Even if I couldn’t move, I was damn well going to make my voice heard. It came out desiccated as salt herring. ‘If it’s just so you can taunt us I think I’d prefer to go back to my cell.’

‘It’s not a cell,’ Ra said coldly. ‘It’s a reception office and bookable client-meeting room. What kind of corporate headquarters has *cells*?’

‘An evil one?’ the Doctor suggested.

‘Whatever you want to call it,’ I said. ‘Just answer my damned question.’

‘I wanted you to see how all this was going to outcome, going forward. I wanted you to understand that you don’t sunset issues by running around causing chaos and blowing things up...’

‘What about assassins?’ asked the Doctor.

‘...You sunset them by calmly and carefully working out what deliverables everyone wants and then actioning them in a mutually beneficial manner. You do it, in short, through business.’

At some invisible thought-command, a similarity sphere unfurled in the centre of the room. A three-dimensional representation of the Considia logo rotated within it.

‘Connect me,’ Ra ordered.

The image changed. A small, bald humanoid with skin the colour of sick kelp appeared in the sphere. He sat surrounded by the brutalist utilitarian metalwork of a spaceship command centre.

‘Trau Ra,’ the figure said. Its voice had the same synthetic, wheedling quality as the Usurian spaceship captain. I couldn’t tell whether this was the same individual. ‘I hope you’re about to tell me you have elected to repay my employers what they are owed and to resolve this situation in a... professional manner.’

‘Repossessor Slent. Tell me, how *professional* is it to blockade civilian passenger and freight ships making their peaceful way around their home system?’

The Usurian hissed and narrowed its eyes. It had large, weed-like eyebrows. They reminded me more of vegetative fronds than any part of an animal. No, I realised. Not vegetable. Fungus. Mould.

'We are interdicting assets from removing themselves unlawfully from the loss-reclamation zone,' Slent said huffily. 'No property or livestock has been damaged. No laws have been breached.'

'By livestock, do you mean people?' the Doctor interjected.

'Who is this?' Slent demanded, swivelling in his command chair to look at him.

'An observer. No-one important,' said Ra. 'He is not a part of this negotiation.'

That got Slent's attention.

'Ahh,' he whined, making a liquid gurgling noise which I presumed was his species' equivalent of a laugh. 'So there is to be a negotiation?'

'Considia is a reputable company which always outcomes excellent returns for stakeholders. If the Usurian ExoCommerce Agency had been a little more patient and a little less eager to launch grossly outside-the-box direct action, this whole sorry mess could have been avoided.'

'Are you going to pay my client or not?'

'Considia's just about to on-stream a new asset. A new market entirely untapped up to this point.'

The Usurian laughed again. '*Entirely* untapped?' he asked derisively. 'No market is entirely untapped!'

'This one is.' Ra blinked a command and a new similarity appeared in front of the Usurian image. It displayed the images from the Aelita message. The white and silver cylinder of Aelita itself tumbled serenely at the centre of them.

'This is Aelita,' Ra said. 'A moderate-sized O'Neill habitat in orbit around the gas giant Taximagulus. As your clients are aware, before the reforms my company spearheaded thirty years ago, this system was crawling with leftist-anarchist dissidents. They depressed free-market commerce and negatively impacted entrepreneurial remuneration outcomes for this whole sector. Since the liberation of Segovax, there have been persistent rumours that remnants may have managed to leverage certain secret enclaves and hiding-places in order to maintain a presence in the system's fringes. Mostly myths, of course, but there *have* been rogue signals, as well as occasional incidences of dissident activity and protest. Considia always took seriously the possibility that one anti-capitalist community may have been overlooked during the enforced sunseting of the previous economic maladministration.

'We have just on-streamed confirmation of the existence of this community. Aelita, they call it, and for thirty years or more, it's been its own little self-contained, backwards world. The ideologues who run it have prevented the people from suming any external goods or services, from even *knowing* about them. Its only exports have been political subversives and agitators. Aelita's location has now been discovered, and my company intends to make it a priority to expand into this new market. Just blue-sky with me the commercial opportunities this offers. Does your imagination stretch that far or do you need me to spell it out? New labour-forces. New markets. Tens of thousands of people utterly naïve about the power of advertising, about how business works, about what they can expect under a free-market system.'

Slent's eyes were widening the whole time. An avaricious, almost sexual expression of anticipation slithered across his tumorous face.

Ra noted this, and went on with an impresario's theatricality. He must have been itching for a PowerPoint. 'You think the financial rewards after the liberation of Segovax were bountiful? That will be nothing compared to the margins to come on Aelita. It'll be like the conquest of some primitive bemmie world, but these won't be bug-eyed-monsters in loincloths – no offence. These'll be real people, whose needs and desires my company has made it its business to cater to. People who don't even know what it *means* to be sumers. We can sell them *anything!*'

The Doctor was disgusted. 'A whole new world to corrupt and enslave. You took Segovax and bled it dry. And now you want to do the exact same thing to Aelita.'

'Thus the onward march of progress, Doctor,' said Ra gleefully. 'It's what makes the Earth Empire great!'

'It's what's made Earth's empires obscene for centuries!' he snapped back. 'I've been to Aelita. Its people were happy. They've been hiding because they've built a system that works for them and they don't want the likes of you marching in and wrecking it all!'

'I'm sure their dictators have decided that,' Slent sneered. 'But what about the ordinary sumers? Or... what do you call sumers who don't sume? Do I mean livestock? Sorry – *people.*'

'There are no dictators,' the Doctor said. 'It's run as a direct democracy. If the people wanted to, they could have opened up to the rest of the system at any time in the last thirty years. They chose not to. How strange: perhaps they haven't seen what a brilliant job you've done improving the lives of everyone here on Segovax?'

'Oh, just shut up.' Ra waved a hand dismissively at him. 'I thought you'd be more fun.' He turned back to Slent. 'I trust your client will be interested in a constructive partnership in the Aelita franchise?'

'I trust they will, though the details will have to be negotiated. Investments, timetables, rates of return...'

'I don't see any need for this to drag out,' Ra said. 'Rapid economic readjustment and market saturation always incentivise the best results. The shock doctrine and all that. Your client will be able to make good on their investment within months.'

'So you really do mean just to asset-strip the place and then sell tat to the poor people left in the wreckage?' The Doctor shook his head. 'You make me sick.'

'Everything makes people like you sick,' Ra snapped back. 'You've got so little stomach that if you had your way, we'd all still be living in caves.' He glanced at me. 'Or snuffling round the oceans. Or whatever.'

'No.' Something subtle changed in the Doctor's demeanour. The defeated, outraged prisoner was gone in an instant. He was suddenly dangerous again. He strode forward. 'You want to see what I've got the stomach for, Ra? *Do you?*'

The entrep quailed slightly but recovered almost at once. He laughed, a little thinly. In his similarity sphere Repossessor Slent looked like someone had pissed in his cornflakes. This wasn't the way these meetings usually went.

'Are you threatening me now, Doctor?' asked Ra. 'What, are you going to hit me? Just try it. See how long you last before the security systems end you.'

‘Tempting,’ he replied. ‘Especially after what you’ve done to poor Flippers here. But as you point out, it wouldn’t really get me very far, would it? I’m going to hit you, Trau Ra, but where it hurts.’

He turned and seemed to speak into thin air.

‘Now, I think, please, Occa.’

I didn’t see anything change. Not at first. That’s the trouble with not having a working aug. If something’s important it happens first in dataspace. You can’t see that, you might as well be living under a rock. Or indeed a Rock, come to think of it.

But I could see the effects, right enough. Ra jolted as if a shock had gone through him, his pupils dilating in horror.

Slent saw it too. ‘What’s wrong?’

Ra was all over the place, his eyes darting this way and that as he struggled to take in a hundred swarming pop-ups and warning windows that only he could see. He half-glanced over at the similarity when the Usurian spoke but was distracted before his eyes had even fully focused. A film of sweat made his face look more like greasy rubber than ever.

The Doctor, on the other hand, looked thoroughly pleased with himself.

‘Care to share the joke with the rest of the class?’ I asked.

As Ra dithered and stared, the Doctor strode past him and activated a manual control on the desk. A third similarity sphere appeared. Close-ups of Occa and Anji filled it. Both looked a little frayed around the edges. Tired and grimy, but no worse than the Doctor. Considerably better than me. Behind them were the cramped walls and clustered screens of some sort of control room.

Supplementary windows were bubbling off the main sphere all the time. In grave, serious tones but with a certain unmistakable relish, Occa explained the images and streaming columns of figures that filled them. The data I’d retrieved on the *Dulcibella*. The recording of our encounter with Ra back in the Glassheart. Even footage of this very office just a few minutes ago, as Ra pitched his Aelita scheme to Slent. It was shot from somewhere high up. I looked for the spot in the real room and spied the tiny glint of a barely-visible security eye. Back on the sim, the angle shifted slightly and I caught a glimpse of myself, tiny and pitiful in the back of shot.

‘This is streaming public, right?’ Weird. This would change everything, but when I asked that question the thing foremost in my mind was how I was ever gonna get anyone to hire me again after people had seen me looking so pathetic. How’s that for perspective, huh? I told you I have body issues.

‘Anji and Occa have broken into a communications array,’ the Doctor explained. ‘That’s the trouble when you pay your staff peanuts. They get sloppy, don’t lock up properly. This is being widecast across the whole local datanet. The entire sector, at least. And I’m sure certain authorities further afield will have taken notice too.’

‘The Empire?’

Slent raged. ‘This is a gross infringement of my data protection rights! Those negotiations were conducted in confidence! In confidence!’

‘The reason Considia was able to intercept your telepresence data was that I was relaying it all to Occa,’ the Doctor said to me. ‘I’m sorry: it was a risk, but we needed this to be public. I sent your recording from the Glassheart too.’

‘And hacking the security eyes in here?’

‘I suppose Occa must have done that on his own. He’s pretty enterprising with media technology.’

‘Yeah, he’s a real hero,’ I agreed, without much enthusiasm. ‘So what happens n-’

Ra wailed. Not just a shout. A proper, full-blown shriek of despair and agony. Like a man who’s just learned the hard way the risks of operating an electric pencil-sharpener naked. Even Slent looked taken aback.

‘I think EarthCentral just froze Considia’s accounts,’ the Doctor said.

Occa announced as much to the whole system a moment later. His eyes were sparkling with excitement. Literally, in the case of the third one – it punctuated his words with flashes of twinkling ruby light. This was what he’d dreamed about. He must have played this moment out again and again in his most fevered fantasies, never daring to hope it could ever come true. Never imagining he’d be the one announcing Ra’s downfall to the Empire. Beside him, Anji just looked tired.

‘It’s over,’ the Doctor announced. Ra barely even acknowledged him. Fair enough; he didn’t need the Doctor to tell him what his aug was shunting at him through every sense he had.

Besides, it was Slent the Doctor was interested in right now. He stood before the Usurian contractor a ragged figure: hair wild and shirt torn and loose. But he carried himself like some avenging Greek god dispensing justice and vengeance at the end of a play. Apollo or someone. Is that who I mean? Theatre was never really my bag. Back home it was just silly: *you* try doing Oedipus when half the cast are dolphins. Maisy had dragged me to see a few things here on the Rock, but I could never get over the product-placement and advert-breaks every two minutes. Even I knew Lady Macbeth should never be sponsored by antibacterial hand-wash...

You think I’m getting off the point. But, honest, this is what was running through my head then. I think my grip on consciousness was getting kind of sketchy. Pain and adrenaline were mixing to give me an intoxicating, breathless head-rush.

‘You can see what’s happening,’ the Doctor told the Usurian. ‘Considia has been involved in some very murky business practices. Probably terminally murky. Its assets have been frozen. I’d imagine there’ll be a full investigation by Imperial authorities. You’ve got no legal right to repossess anything here now.’

‘My clients had an investment!’

‘I’m sure. And if it turns out to have been legally made, I’m sure Earth Central will make sure you get an appropriate cut of whatever’s left when Considia’s broken up. But you won’t be getting Segovax and you won’t be getting Aelita. You won’t be getting anything until Earth has its say. Things would probably go better for you if you weren’t hanging around when the investigation starts.’

Slent said nothing for a long time. His eyes glazed over as he consulted something only he could see. Legal advice. Contracts. Whatever. Finally he looked back at the Doctor

with the crestfallen slump of a man who's realised the jig's up. He might have had an invasion fleet, but at the end of the day he was no different from any Cheapside hoodlum.

'You may be assured that my clients will be mounting a legal challenge at the highest level. They *will* recoup their investment. They always do. But remaining here for the duration of such proceedings is not within my company's contract of employment. Nor do we have any desire to become bogged down in petty local politics. You haven't heard the last of this, Doctor. You, Gideon Ra, *certainly* haven't.'

The similarity vanished.

Occa announced to the public that the blockading Usurian ships were turning away.

Outside the office I heard sounds of confusion and disturbance. Whatever shock or astonishment had held the entreps of Considia HQ rapt these last few minutes had clearly worn off. A few hundred very rich people had just realised their jobs, pensions and bonuses had suddenly gone up the swannie. They were reacting in the age-old manner of economic elites everywhere: by throwing their toys out of the pram and loudly protesting about the unfairness of it all.

Judging from the distant sounds of gunfire, some were going further.

And this wasn't the only place seeing trouble. From his nest in the southern axial communications array, surrounded by screens and feeds and sim-spheres, Occa sent out one clip after another, all telling the same story. From one end of the Rock to the other, sumers were realising exactly what kind of boot had been pressing down on their necks these last few decades. Whether through sudden political will, long-repressed frustration, desperate avarice or blind rage, they turned on anything connected to Considia. And on Segovax, that was pretty much anything that wasn't the mould. There was rioting in Cheapside. The spaceport was burning. Those great gleaming windows which remained in the Glassheart were being shattered and the contents of the corporate palaces dragged out into the streets.

Occa got his revolution.

Finally his enjoyment seemed to fade. He watched the violence and the fury and the destruction and I could see his dreams of glorious freedom crash up against the dangerous, nihilistic storm of it all. In a shaking voice, the old Earth Reptile urged the people to restraint.

Ra stood by the plastiglass windows and watched his empire fall. Occasionally he muttered frantic snippets I couldn't catch. Whether to loyal subordinates communicating across the net or just to himself, I don't know. He didn't look like a man in the most stable frame of mind.

Eight minutes after his accounts were frozen, the glittering skyline of the Glassheart flickered twice and then went out. I could tell this from Occa's similarity. The protestors must have got the central 'scape generator. The shining mask fell away and the city's broken degradation was exposed for all to see.

That was the final straw. Ra turned and ran.

The Doctor tried to stop him but the entrep shoved him bodily aside. He vaulted me in a messy leap, catching me a heft clunk round the dorsal fin with his trailing foot. It made

him stumble and he almost went flat on his face. And then he was on his feet again and there was nothing between him and the door.

Irrational as it seemed, I had a sudden terror that he was actually going to make good his escape.

The door opened automatically as he reached it. He couldn't even have had time to clock what stood behind it.

A burnished titanium fist shot out and connected with his perfect, sculpted jaw. A spectacular uppercut! He flew back and skittered across the polished floor, coming sprawling dazed not far from where I lay.

My walker strode into the room. It was empty.

'You know,' Coralie's voice said from its speakers, 'I bloody enjoyed that.'

I rolled back and erupted with chains of giddy laughter. The metal arms lifted me gently into the harness and the device started misting my desiccated skin with cool brine.

The TP link had never been properly shut down, even though my aug had been wrenched out of it. Whispering softly in my ear, Coralie explained that the drone still had a lingering connection. Not enough to interface with my defunct AI, but enough to ping the walker's less complex and less battered software. Using the drone as a relay, she'd found she could interface her own sensorium with the walker's limited telemetry, much as I do when I'm occupying it. Across light-minutes of empty space, she'd threaded her consciousness through the metal exoskeleton and brought it up through the building to find me.

I told her I was sincerely grateful that she had.

'You saved me, back at the docks,' she said. 'Only seemed fair to return the favour. The Usurian ship's gone. We don't have enough fuel or air to make Vercingetorix so the *Dulcibella*'s heading back to Segovax. Later, Flippers.'

'Later, kid. And thanks.'

She withdrew, and the walker was mine again.

I crabbed my way over to Ra. He was conscious, mewling and cradling his bust jaw like a child after his first brawl. I planted my front legs either side of him and lowered my face to his.

'How does it feel?' I asked him. 'The pain I mean?'

He whined something incoherent.

'Yeah. Figured. It's shitty when you're not used to it. Mind you, it's shitty when you are.'

The Doctor came over to watch. He looked concerned. I didn't care.

'Just so you know,' I told Ra. 'That last punch was from the girl whose mum you had killed. I wanted to be clear about that. Because this one's from me.'

I struck him once, in the face.

He finally stopped whimpering and lay still.

Epilogue

Taximagulus filled half the observation port, its salmony, banded orb bigger than anything had any right to be. The gas giant had a coterie of moons large and small; a shimmering, flattened disc of elegantly-braided rings. The light of the distant sun twinkled on them, starlike and cold.

I stood before the windows and tried to pick out the tiny, manmade pinprick that was Aelita from among all that splendour. Even if I'd had a working augment, it would have been beyond me.

'Are you nervous?' Occa asked. By unspoken agreement we'd avoided each other the whole way here. The *Dulcibella's* not a big ship, but we'd managed not to see each other since a fleeting glimpse as we left the spaceport. Only when the faint shudder came to tell us that we'd finally been welcomed into the outer reaches of Taximagulus' vast gravity well had the old Silurian joined us in the observation deck. I ignored him at first. Pretended not to notice as Fitz and Coralie and the others discreetly made their excuses and left. When he came and stood beside me I said nothing. For a long while we stared at the planet's majesty together.

I glanced across at him now. He looked grey and tired. For a moment he evaded my gaze.

'Are you?' I asked him.

A question, you see. I'm a detective; I ask questions so much more easily than I answer them.

Was I nervous?

Five years. We'd been apart longer than we'd been together. Maisy had been so young when we met, and I'd been a child compared to how I felt now. I still knew so little of her life during that time. We were different people than we had been. For so many years I'd clung to a memory of her, loved an image perfected in the imagination. It was the only kind of love that can stay perfect: one that never has to butt up against the realities of a living and breathing human being. Like all dreams, it would never survive first contact with the reality.

I should have been nervous.

The fact that I wasn't sure whether I was ought to have scared the hell out of me.

'I've never been to Aelita,' Occa said. 'I was there when we decided to set it up. When we picked out that habitat from all the junk in the system and towed it out to Taximagulus. It was to be our refuge, our sanctuary. Our last utopia. But I had to stay behind. Someone needed to be the link to Segovax and relay information about the outside universe. It had to be someone completely sound. Someone who knew all the comms tricks. It had to be me. I've served Aelita for more than twenty years and I've never set eyes on it.' He finally looked at me. 'What if it's not all I hoped? What if they haven't built a society I can be proud of?'

I didn't have an answer for him. Just more questions. 'The Anta Odeli Uta signal. That was your information feed to Aelita? Encoded under the nonsense?'

'Yes.'

'And what about the people who disappeared in space?'

He sighed. 'Maisy told me, of course. Long ago. I knew you were around somewhere. Never expected we'd ever actually cross paths. I am sorry, you know. We never meant it to happen.'

'Just tell me what did.'

'The carrier signal burned itself into the datascape. At certain nodal points the ghost came through strong enough to detect, but with some of the security features degraded. A few smart people manage to decode it, or at least get a fix on where it's being sent. You have to understand, we had no choice then. We couldn't let them get word out. We had to jam the whole volume and bring them in.'

'You kidnapped people.'

'We didn't want to,' the Earth Reptile insisted. 'Aelita's a democracy. Freedom's our founding principle. But it was a matter of survival. You've seen what would have happened if their existence became public knowledge.'

'And that makes it all right to steal innocent people away from their lives and families? Away from people who love them?'

'No. It doesn't make it right. But it made it necessary. I'm sorry.'

I felt my walker's fists bunching. It was only the fact that he sounded so pathetic that held me back from decking him. I imagined doing it; ran through the moment in my head. I still do, sometimes. It's never like with Ra. When I struck him it was catharsis. A final full-stop to make his defeat personal before the Landknechte finally turned up and took him into custody. Hitting Occa would finish nothing. For as long as I loved Maisy, this would never be over. Which basically meant forever.

To strike him would just be thumping a sad old man who had regrets enough to be going on with.

'And that whalecrap with Professor Serrano?' I asked. 'How exactly did that help Aelita?'

Occa cringed in shame. 'I... I made a mistake. One that's haunted me ever since. It hasn't been easy for me, living here, trusting no-one. No friends, no lovers, no place in society. I've been a ghost from a world long gone.'

'My heart bleeds for you.'

'Some times were... very dark. I struggled. Became depressed or angry.' I remembered those juddery scrawled graffiti on the walls of his building, the ones I'd attributed to drifters and students. 'During one of those periods I caught Serrano on the net, talking about his involvement in shutting down the university. About finding our secret meeting-room. He was so smug. So pleased with himself as he spouted those lies about us, about our cause. I don't know... it was stupid and reckless. It could have ended everything we'd worked for but I couldn't help myself. I just wanted to bring him down.'

'You blackmailed him. For money. Some anticapitalist you are, you bloody hypocrite.'

I almost regretted that. Almost but not quite. It kind of felt like I *had* hit him. He shrank back, his cranial flanges colouring a deeply-ashamed teal.

'I don't blame you. And I will answer for what I did. For all these years there was no choice but for me to remain on station, but now when we get to Aelita I will answer to the citizens for my error.'

Was that enough? I had no idea what constituted justice on the habitat. The picture that people were painting of it, I had a nasty suspicion it'd be a slapped wrist and a harsh ticking off. It probably depended how narked Maisy herself still was about it. In the end everything came back to her.

'We treated them well,' Occa went on, as if desperate for some sort of absolution. 'Understand, they were never prisoners. We welcomed them as guests, gave them every help we could to adapt to their new lives. You've seen how it was with Maisy. She became a valued member of some of the most important committees. There are no leaders on Aelita, but talented and driven people can become influential. Maisy made a place for herself.'

I couldn't put it off any longer. The big question.

'Why didn't she tell me?'

'She couldn't risk contact. Anyone outside Aelita who knew about it was a threat.'

'She could trust *me*!'

He shook his head. 'You live a dangerous life, son. You cross paths with dangerous men. The knowledge would have endangered you as well as us.'

'What about the Doctor? They sent him and his friends back from Aelita and they didn't know them from Adam.'

'That was *Maisy's* mistake,' he admitted. 'But the Doctor can be very... persuasive. Almost preternaturally so. And I think by then she was getting very worried about poor Calliope's situation.'

Perhaps worried by the growing tension between us, the Doctor joined us.

'I wanted to tell you about her,' he said.

'So why didn't you?'

'What would you have done if I had?'

'Got on the first ship I could and come out here!' I glanced out at Taximagulus again. There, trailing behind one of the shepherd moons that eddied its rings, Aelita hung tiny and precious in its orbit. My heart missed a beat.

'Maisy wanted you to be part of this,' Occa said. 'But she knew you needed more than just to know she was alive. She kept an eye on your career when she could. I used to send her snippets now and then, when you made the news. She knew you weren't exactly... happy.'

That I was washed-up and old before my time, he meant. Barely scraping by on nothing cases and squandering my evenings with a bottle or my memories, watching the darsena from some dead-end Cheapside bar. I imagined her hearing of me like that and felt a sudden urge to swim away and hide under a rock.

'She thought if we could get you to help, let you be part of something that mattered...'

'It'd snap me out of my funk?'

'Something like that,' the Doctor said with a smile. 'And if you don't mind me saying, it seems to have done you the world of good.'

'Doc, since I met you I've been tortured, beaten, chased, lobotomised and gods-know-what-else!'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'And I think you and I both know sometimes that's when you feel most alive.'

A few minutes later the *Dulcibella* began final approach manoeuvring. Fitz and Coralie and Anji re-joined us at the windows and we watched the shining white and silver scroll of the habitat grow to enormous size before us. Through great plastiglass strips that ran the length of Aelita's surface I glimpsed forests and hills and... gods below, they had lakes! I prayed at least one of them would be saltwater.

We didn't speak much more during that time. Each of us had our own anxieties and apprehensions. Lost loves and unseen utopias. Fitz and Coralie clutched hands and I knew they would be parting soon. Anji watched Occa and seemed lost in thought. She'd always been an enigma to me. An entrep by nature. What did she really make of all we'd done?

And then there was the Doctor. He stood in the middle of our little band, his lips pursed and his fingers twirling absently at a pocket-watch. I wondered if he'd ever recover those memories he'd lost. I wondered if, when he did, he'd regret it.

The *Dulcibella* docked with a satisfying shudder. We processed silently to the passenger boarding locks as announcements ran through the protocols for entering Aelita. A couple of medical attendants were waiting at the hatch with a long white capsule. Coralie touched in tenderly as we passed. Calliope was finally coming home.

Those final moments of checks and pressure-equalisation dragged on for an eternity.

'Doctor,' I said.

'Yes, Flippers?'

'You ain't gonna be staying on Aelita, are you?'

'No. Not for long, I shouldn't think. Our ship's waiting.'

It's what I'd figured. 'I just wanted to say... thanks.'

He shook his head. 'No, thank *you*.' He thrust out a hand. 'It's been a pleasure, Micklewhite McKenzie.'

I laughed. 'I'm not gonna give you the satisfaction of asking where you heard that name.' I took his hand in my flipper and shook it.

At long last, the light above the airlock turned green. There was a soft hiss of pneumatics and the door glided smoothly upwards.

A phrase my dad used to come out with rose unbidden to mind. An old fragment, a traditional prelude to action, said to bring luck among my people.

'Ave a banana,' I sang, and stepped ashore on Aelita, where Maisy was waiting for me.