DOCTOR WHO

THE BLUE ANGEL

PAUL MAGRS & JEREMY HOAD
The Blue Angel

by Paul Magrs & Jeremy Hoad

This is a story about winter…

As the Doctor becomes involved in affairs aboard the Federation Starship Nepotist, his old friend Iris Wildthyme is rescuing old ladies who are being attacked by savage owls in a shopping mall.

And, in a cat’s cradle of interdimensional Corridors lies the Valcean City of Glass, whose King Dedalus awaits the return of his angel son and broods over the oncoming war…

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

1: Door’s Stiff. Frozen…?
2: The Ladies Were Having a Day Out…
3: Captain’s Log. Stardate Etc, Etc….  
4: He Met Her That Afternoon…
5: It Might Have Been Any Time of Day…
6: I Used to be a Lot Bigger…
7: When They Come it Will be Across the Waves…
8: At Last the Captain Deigned to Come Out…
9: This is a Story About Winter…
10: The City of Glass Was Raised Up…
11: They Call Me Big Sue…
12: The Doctor Advances Blithely…
13: Someone Has to Take Charge…
14: The First Thing You Notice…
15: One Night I Decided I Needed to Get…
16: The Back Stairs…
17: Over the Years, Sally…
18: He Wasn’t Huge…
19: He Was Meant to be a Man…
20: This is What…
21: The Doctor Rolled Over…
22: It’s a Place I Sometimes Go to
23: That’s Another Directive You’ve Breached…
24: The Astonishing Thing is…
25: Many Tales Are Told…
26: It Was Mad, Really…
27: In the Corridors…
28: Never Had Belinda…
29: Belinda’s Mother…
30: After Six Years of Treaties…
31: Before She Knew It…
32: Even Aboard the Bus…
33: The Bus Is Rattling…
34: Existential Angst is an Embarrassment, But…
35: Iris Made Fitz Come…
36: I Was Panicking Over Dinner…
37: Now The Great Beast…
38: He Was Astonished To Find…
39: The Throne Room Was…
40: Iris Had Come Down…
41: After I’d Had A Few Drinks…
42: As The Doctor Waited…
the blue angel arrives with thanks to…
Joy Foster, Louise Foster, Mark Magrs, Charles Foster, Peter Hoad, Rita Hoad, Jonathan Hoad, Rachel Hoad, Nicola Cregan, Michael Fox, Lynne Heritage, Pete Courtie, Brigid Robinson, Paul Arvidson, Jon Rolph, Antonia Rolph, Steve Jackson, Laura Wood, Alicia Stubbersfield, Sin Hansen, Paul Cornell, Bill Penson, Mark Walton, Sara Maitland, Meg Davis, Ewan Gillon, Amanda Reynolds, Richard Klein, Lucie Scott, Reuben Lane, Kenneth MacGowan, Georgina Hammick, Maureen Duffy, Vic Sage, Marina Mackay, Jayne Morgan, Louise D’Arcens, Julia Bell, Lorna Sage, Ashley Stokes, Steve Cole, Jac Rayner, Pat Wheeler, Kate Orman, Jonathan Blum, Dave Owen, Gary Russell, Alan McKee, Phillip Hallard, Nick Smale, Helen Fayle, Mark Phippen, Lance Parkin, Anna Whymark, Chloe Whymark, Stephen Hornby, Stewart Sheargold…
…and companions on the bus past and future…
Welcome to Valcea, everybody…
Love,
Paul and Jeremy

Spring 1999
Norwich
Chapter One
Door’s Stiff. Frozen…?

Door’s stiff. Frozen?

I haven’t been out the back for over a week. It’s been too wet. Soaking. Chucking it down constantly. I’ve barely been out of the house. Sent the others out for shopping. I’ve kept the central heating on and hidden myself away. Only thing to do.

But I want to check on the garden. See what damage has been done. All that planting and transplanting and the tender loving care we gave it at the end of the summer. I want to see if the weather has ruined it all.

Today there’s no rain. Too cold to rain. The sky is full and grey, the colour of Tupperware. Someone’s put a Tupperware lid over the town.

Our garden is tiny, walled in by bushes and redbricked walls. You can’t even see into next door’s either side or over the back. We have a secret garden. In the few sunny days we’ve managed to have here, I sat in a deck chair and read, bang in the middle of the lawn. I sat for hours while Compassion set about making us a path from fragments of flagstone she found in the shrubbery. She can be a good little worker when she wants. She dug out a curving shape for the path and dug it quite deep. Filled it with the rubble and dust from chipped plaster that we had bags and bags of after we did the downstairs walls, and then she put the paving stones on top. Scooped the earth in and, hey presto, we had a path. She made it a curve so as not to disturb me from my reading, in my chair, in the middle of the garden. So it’s in a kind of S-shape or, as Fitz has pointed out, a reversed question mark.

Actually, it’s more than cold today. It’s absolutely freezing. The grass is silvered and I can’t smell the honeysuckle at all.

That’s when I crouch to examine the herb garden, expecting the worst. The rosemary is dead, I can see that at a glance. Black in my hands, the needles like blades. And – worst of all – the bush that we moved to a place where it would be in shelter, treating it so carefully, so solicitously, even Fitz pitching in to help – the wild thyme has been split right down the middle. Its branches are snapped. In two halves, both lolled flat on the ground. Quite dead.

I straighten up and sniff the air and realise that it’s going to snow. This idea makes me shiver and that, I suppose, is because I’ve been dreaming about snow rather a lot lately. It’s figured everywhere – every scene I can recall having dreamed just recently. As if the seasons changed sooner in my nightmares.

There is a bang then as the window two storeys above my head is flung open. I look round to see Fitz glaring down, his palms on the wet sill. He isn’t even dressed yet. In the T-shirt he slept in, his hair tangled up, unwashed, a furious look on his face. Three days’ worth of stubble.

It was all some time ago. Now the worst had passed and this was his quiet time. He hadn’t had a funny spell in ages. He was still learning to be calm, however, and not let his mind tick over too quickly. His Doctor had warned him about the dangers of that. His private Doctor to whom he paid out vast sums of money. That Doctor worked from a Georgian town house by the North Park, across town.

– One Doctor to another, eh?
– Indeed. I hadn’t thought of that.
– Well, sometimes we all have to see a specialist.

And with a flourish, his private Doctor wrote him out an indecipherable prescription, at which he stared, all the way down the street, back into the centre of the town. He didn’t know what he was taking, but the Doctor seemed to think these funny green pills were just the ticket.

– I should be more curious. Don’t you think, Fitz?
– Oh, probably.
– I used to be more curious, didn’t I?
– You used to be insatiably curious.
– Hmm. I thought so.

He could still remember the things he said then, at the time he was having his funny spells. The things he went around saying in the thick of it all. But he couldn’t remember where he had been, what he had done, exactly who he had said these things to. Still the words came back to him, thick and fast, his irrepressible words of warning. His gift of the gab, his sixth sense, his gift for being seventh son of a seventh son. He had the knowledge and wanted to pass it on. His words had the ineluctable force of truth and he had to let them out. But people never listen. They told him these words were lies, just his lies, and none of them convinced anyone.

That had made him more anxious than anything.
Anxious was exactly what he wasn’t these days. He had learned to calm down.

– Is the garden wrecked, Doctor?
– My herb garden’s looking a little shabby.
– It’s nearly winter. The whole lot would die then anyway.
– No, no, no, Fitz. It would be all right. I’d see to it.
– But it’s too late now.
– The thyme is split completely asunder.
– What?
– The wild thyme. Dead. Lolling on the grass.
– It’s too cold to hang about here all day. I’m going back to my book.

He remembered telling everyone – who? – about the men who were made out of glass. Whose hearts were scarlet and could be seen, pulsing, alive, through the sheeny skin, muscle, sinew of their chests. These hearts, it could be plainly seen, had faces of their own – malign and watchful faces. These men of glass sat in golden chairs which ran on wheels and shot bolts of fire at those who stood in their way.

The Doctor was convinced – swore blind to anyone who would listen – that they were coming here. Heading to this world out of revenge. They were coming specifically after him.

It is winter now and this is my new house. In the mornings the windows are mapped in careful lines of frost. I suppose you could say I laze about. I like to cook. I spend a lot of time in the kitchen.

My watchword is optimism.

We’ve painted the kitchen bright orange, and all the crockery and utensils are cornflower blue. I had crates and crates of kitchen things, far more than I’d ever need. I can’t remember actually buying any of them. These blue things were bought in Italy, in Florence, and I don’t remember when I was there. A side effect of the green pills, I imagine. One of many. Very strange.

I cook and I put on the same CD again and again, shuffling and repeating. It’s the incidental music from all the Bette Davis movies between 1938 and 1953. I like a little drama.

I live optimistically with my lodgers, Fitz and Compassion. I call them my companions. That’s what they’re like. Compassion isn’t very well. She’s been having funny spells too, just lately. Fitz is languid, somewhat sarcastic. Sometimes he looks at me quizzically, as if there’s something he wants to ask me. We have a floor of this new house each. I don’t mind sharing. The attic is full of my boxes. I can’t be bothered unpacking all that stuff yet. Maybe I’ll do it on Christmas morning, and pretend someone has sent me presents.

Fitz has been up there, poking around among all my books. He’s a great reader, it turns out. Lately he’s been poring over an ancient leather-bound volume he found in a trunk in the attic. A warped and frangible text that he says is called the Aja’ib. He spends all day reading that.

I think… I think it was my grandfather who brought that book back from the East. I’m sure that it was. My mother passed on to me all my grandfather’s things. When Fitz has finished with the book I’ll take a look at it and find out.

At least the dreams that the Doctor was having were under control. That was the main thing. His private Doctor in the Georgian house by the North Park told him not to worry. Ever. There was nothing at all to be anxious about. Indeed, sometimes his Doctor would phone him in the middle of the night – just when the dreams were becoming perplexing – and murmur a few words of consolation. The Doctor thought that was very good value indeed. He felt he was being monitored all around the clock. That his welfare was being seen to.

He has a healthy imagination – that’s what the Doctor tells himself. But one that needs controlling and tempering. That’s all it is.

– And you don’t want any more episodes, do you?
– Oh, no! No more episodes for me!

Funny thing is, his private Doctor even infiltrates the dreams that he does still have and gives him words of advice there, too. Is nothing sacred? His private Doctor is an avuncular presence. A deeply lined face and a shock of silvery hair. He wears frilly shirts and bow-ties to work, his opera cloak flung on to the consultation couch. A touch of the old Empire about him. We’ll crack this little problem, Doctor. Nothing to it. Have more pills. He speaks winningly and sometimes he hypnotises his patient, spinning a kind of golden pendant in his face. He sings a sort of nursery rhyme – half familiar, terribly exotic.

The Doctor believes he is getting his money’s worth.

He hasn’t had an episode in ages.
These men of glass lived in a city called Valcea, which, the Doctor would insist, he had visited. An impossible city of glass, set up at an incredible height. He had gone there and visited the Glass Men and learned how brutal and sadistic they were. Their city had black-and-white parquet floors, which the Glass Men’s golden chairs couldn’t leave at all, because they seemed to run on something akin to static electricity. Something like that but, at any rate, this circumscription meant that the world – the real world – was safe from their incursions. The Glass Men were too precious to endanger themselves by leaving Valcea.

Yet, having foiled their plans that first time – their plans to destroy the Ghillighast, the race with whom they shared their world – the Doctor returned home. Soon he learned that the Valcean Glass Men were working on schemes to make themselves more powerfully mobile, so they could transport their avarice elsewhere.

They had discovered the means to motivate themselves, and could detach their glass city from their world and set it free, to float like an iceberg detaching from its mother berg in the frozen north. The city of Valcea was free to swim across vast expanses of murky space, to come to Earth after the Doctor, to come to this world. And he knew they were coming after him.

At the height of his queer, excitable spell, the Doctor had taken to alerting everyone – friends, relations, the authorities, people on the street – that the Glass Men were coming, and it was all his fault. He had led them to this world. Curses on his travels and his endless curiosity!

Any day now. That is what he suspected.

But the pills his private Doctor gave him calmed him down, calmed him down, calmed him down.
The ladies were having a day out. It was the worst day of the year they could possibly have chosen. They set off first thing that morning in Maddy Sharp’s off-white Morris Minor and even before they’d left town the snow was three inches deep with no sign of letting up. But they weren’t to be deterred.

Big Sue was wedged in the back seat, gazing at the clogged sky. ‘I reckon we should turn back now, Maddy. This is madness.’

Maddy didn’t like to talk when she was driving. She fixed her elderly friend with a quick glance in the rear-view mirror. ‘Look, Sue, we’re out now. It was enough of a job getting out this bloody morning. And it’s Christmas. So cheer yourself up.’

Big Sue was wearing a knitted tea-cosy hat, mustard-coloured. It was clamped down over her wig, which, in the dim light of the morning, looked as if it had been dyed indigo. Sue was using the mirror to check both hat and wig were straight. She tutted at Maddy for her stubbornness and sat quietly sulking for a while, sucking her teeth.

Beside Big Sue, the boy stared serenely ahead. He made no comment about Maddy’s determination to get them to the mall in all the snow. He had every faith in his mother. She wouldn’t let them down. Maddy gave him a quick smile, which he returned automatically, and turned back to the task in hand. Every time she looked at the boy she felt stronger. It was strange. He made her feel brave.

Secretly, though, as they rumbled through the undisturbed snow on the route out of Newton Aycliffe and rolled on to the country road that would take them to the A1, she was wondering if the trip wasn’t foolhardy after all. The radio had promised Snow Chaos this morning. And here it was. Listeners had been warned not to leave home unless the trip was vital. Maddy had been doing her hair in the living room with hot tongs and she turned off the weather report before it could finish. That was when the boy came downstairs, wearing the blue, diamond-patterned tracksuit she had bought for him from the market. He gave her a strange look for turning the radio off so abruptly. And in that moment Maddy just knew that she and her little party had to go ahead with the planned shopping trip today. Somehow she knew how disappointed the boy would be if she didn’t make the effort.

‘I think it’s nice,’ said the other woman in the back, Nesta, who was daft and skinny and glad to be rid of her kids for the day. ‘I think it’s like a proper magical Christmas adventure, seeing all the countryside like this.’

Big Sue grimaced. She wasn’t keen on Nesta’s company at the best of times. Nesta had this habit of getting herself involved in whatever was going on. She was a scrounger, too, always knocking at the back door, asking for milk or sugar. Begging off a pensioner! It was the pits, really. And Big Sue had seen Nesta stocking up on ciggies and cider at the small shop round the corner a couple of times in the past week. Big Sue thought Nesta was letting her kids do without. Nesta was meant to be living on the breadline, but she was keen as any of them to get out to the mall to do some shopping.

Big Sue looked across and watched Nesta staring entranced at the snow. They were pulling through the winding country roads outside of Chilton now. They hadn’t been out chucking grit on the roads yet. You could feel the Morris Minor’s tyres sliding on the fresh snow, and Maddy was wrestling at the wheel. This was going to be a stressful drive, and there was Nesta looking entranced out of that window. She was probably singing Christmas songs to herself. She was that type. Never lived in the real world all her life. The usual trials and tribulations just passed her by.

Big Sue was tutting when she realised that the boy was, in turn, staring at her. He was looking straight into her face with those wide, bright-blue eyes. An honest, searching gaze. His hair had flopped into one of them. There wasn’t the slightest expression on his face. She looked away.

Sometimes Big Sue found that the boy gave her the heebie-jeebies. She couldn’t help it. Usually she got on really well with kids, even the awkward teens. But this one, Maddy Sharp’s new son… well, there was something not quite right about him. He looked blankly at everyone, staring unashamedly into their faces. Everyone except Maddy Sharp, of course, his adoptive mother. On her he bestowed the most sickeningly sweet and loyal smiles. Maddy in turn glowed with pleasure. So you couldn’t really tell Maddy you thought there was something wrong with him. You just had to be happy for her. And Big Sue was happy for her friend. The boy had done her a power of
good.

Soon they were on the motorway. It was easier here, pushing on in the wake of the lorries, letting them clear the snow ahead, churning it into toffee-coloured mush. They could stay on the motorway now until they reached the Mall. No more winding roads. Maddy allowed herself to relax a little.

Half an hour and they would be there.

It was as light now as it would be all day. Everyone had their headlights on. You could feel the day turning, slipping back towards twilight already.

‘Everyone all right in the back?’ she shouted over the noise of her motor. The car rattled and roared and it was freezing inside. She glanced back and checked on her neighbours and her son. They grinned at her – Big Sue nervously, Nesta dreamily and her son enthusiastically, as if he couldn’t think of anything nicer than being taken out shopping in a blizzard by his mum.

She called him Icarus because that was what he had asked her to call him. It was one of the few things he had brought from his earlier life, one of the few things she knew about him.

He was sixteen and, in many ways, he was much the same as any other sixteen-year-old lad. There was, perhaps, a trace of something foreign in his accent. He spoke English as if it were an acquired language, sometimes lingering on words as if they were unusual to him and to be savoured. He turned them over as if he were turning pebbles and seashells over and over in his palms on the day she first saw him.

That had been last summer, at the height of the summer, in fact, on Marsden Bay, the beach at South Shields where Maddy had taken herself off for a sunny afternoon wandering on the sands. One of the perks of being on her own – she could take off whenever she wanted for a day out.

Marsden Rock was a vast, natural edifice about a hundred yards out from the cliffs. The size of the Albert Hall, perhaps, and the same shape, its ceiling crammed and noisy with a thousand gannets and gulls. You could walk out to the rock when the tide was out, and here were dripping arches and tunnels that led deeper into the rock, the water sloshing and lapping around the fallen shale. It didn’t pay to wander too far into the rock, of course. You could get lost and before you knew it the tide would be in.

Maddy poked around in the rock pools and balanced on the piles of stone, looking for bits of driftwood and interesting shells that she might use for a still life.

She was arty – that was how the other women round her street described her. If you went round her house, you’d see her setting up a new still life, or rolling out a fresh load of lining paper, on which she daubed spectacular renderings of scenes from the Bible, usually the Old Testament.

The other women from Phoenix Court thought she was a bit funny, doing all this stuff – all these apocalyptic scenes, these volcanoes and destruction, all this mayhem. But she certainly seemed to enjoy her painting. They’d seen her work herself up into a right old state – thrashing the paint on; splashing out the colour. Big Sue – though she thought Maddy’s paintings possibly blasphemous – said she thought the enterprise seemed quite therapeutic.

This summer gone Maddy had decided to branch out into sculpture and she was going to use natural materials. So she went poking around on the seashore and started to gather a host of gnarled and salt-washed objects.

She peered into the first chamber of the Rock and found it swimming in water, which reflected gorgeously, hypnotically on the dank, overarching ceiling. A circular space, like a womb.

And there, sitting on a rock in its centre, was the boy. He gave her quite a start. Already he was grinning at her. He was naked.

Maddy took fright. He was a big boy, after all – a teenager. He shouldn’t have been sitting there like that, where just anyone might walk in. She started to back away.

Then the boy’s voice came to her, echoing in the cavern. But it was as if the natural room were her own skull and it went resounding inside her head, and still the boy kept on grinning, showing each of his perfect teeth – and his lips weren’t moving at all.

‘Please don’t run,’ his voice said. That curious, halting tone. The odd, almost neutral accent. ‘I can’t do you any harm. You were meant to find me.’

Suddenly, despite the summer heat, Maddy felt chilled, as if this cavern had trapped the bone cold of the sea.

‘What does that mean?’ she asked.

‘I’ve been waiting for you here, Maddy. I’m here.’

‘Who are you?’

Instead he answered her in a way that stopped her breath for a moment or two, that made her head swim and
her fingers grab the smooth wall beside her.

‘Your son, Ian, didn’t he die at five? Hadn’t he just started school? Wasn’t he like an angel, Maddy Sharp? Wasn’t Ian your angel boy?’

She was starting to sob. Again she asked, ‘Who are you?’

‘How old would Ian be now, Maddy?’

Of course she knew. She knew precisely how old he would be now. She knew everything she was missing. She looked at the boy as he stood up and started walking through the shallow green water towards her.

‘Aren’t I that age? Aren’t I exactly like your son would be?’

She had a picture in her head, one she took with her everywhere, of how Ian should look now. Each year she had aged him, watched him grow towards maturity. She had looked at the boys that were Ian’s contemporaries and tried to keep him in line. Only she knew that image in her head. Yet here it was before her. This boy.

‘I’ve been waiting for you, Maddy Sharp,’ he said.

She said, ‘You aren’t Ian.’

‘No.’ He was standing quite close now. His skin was pale, quite beautiful in the light. He didn’t seem at all chilled. ‘I’m not your son. But I could be.’

Once more she asked, ‘Who are you?’

‘I could be better than a son to you, Maddy Sharp,’ he said, and took her in his arms.

And, once he was home and installed in her council house and given a room of his own, he’d settled in to the extent that Maddy could hardly believe that he hadn’t always been there, and the neighbours had accepted him and didn’t think it odd that Maddy should suddenly adopt a cousin’s child and they understood because she’d had a lot of tragedy in her life. It was only after a week or two that the boy who wasn’t her son, but who pretended to the outward world he was, told her his name was Icarus.

When they drove into Gateshead the traffic was thicker with others who had decided to hang the weather and go Christmas shopping anyway. But the snow was thicker, too, and they were at crawling pace, but they could see the lights and the low, flat, expansive roofs of all the shops in the dark valley ahead.

The ladies stared at the statue on the hill as they passed it, cooing and craning through their windows. It was a massively tall man with wings, rusted orange by now and white all down one side with plastered snow. The Tyneside Angel. It turned out Nesta had brought her camera with her, a cheap Instamatic, and she flashed up at the colossus as they swept by in its shadow.

The flash filled the car and made Maddy swerve and swear. ‘Will you watch out, Nesta?’

‘Sorry, Maddy.’

Maddy said to the boy, ‘Will you take that thing off her while I’m driving?’

With a smile he pulled the camera out of Nesta’s hands.

‘No need to snatch…’ she said. Then, ‘Hey!’ when she saw that he was opening the back of it and touching the taut black film inside with his fingers. Even Nesta knew that had ruined her pictures.

‘Hey, you silly lad,’ Big Sue barked. ‘You’ve gone and…’

But Icarus wasn’t listening. He picked at the slippery, shining spool until it had all come free and was tangled in his fingers. The empty camera dropped into his lap. He stroked at the film, each blank frame, with the tips of his fingers. Then he started to breathe on it, short gasps of frosted air.

‘Hey,’ Nesta shouted. ‘Your bloody son has broken my film!’

‘What’s he done?’ Maddy asked distractedly. She was concentrating on the road, but she felt a glow of pleasure that Nesta had called him her son.

‘I said –’

‘Hang on there,’ cried Big Sue. She was staring at the strip of film in the boy’s hands. He showed it to all of them. He looked pleased with himself. And there, frozen in each still frame of Nesta’s thirty-six potential exposures, was the perfect image of an angel. Far brighter and clearer and much more extravagant than the statue she had attempted, so clumsily, to shoot.

And soon they arrived at the shopping mall.

They parked in the red quadrant and Maddy tried to construct a mental map so she could find her car again. It was almost dark now, with a purple cast to the light. No stars at all. They wrapped up well, even though it was about a hundred yards to the main doors of the place. And inside it would be warm, air-conditioned, perfumed, and full of the crush of Christmas shoppers.
Except that wasn’t true. They would find that out when they got inside. Things had already started to go wrong in there.

But let them find this out gradually. And leave them for a moment as they lock up the Morris Minor, fasten up their coats and scarves and check they have everything they need before going inside. Let’s leave them for now beside Maddy Sharp’s Morris Minor, which is parked in the shadow of a red double-decker bus.

No one in their party has remarked on the strangeness of this vehicle’s presence. Or that fact that the bus is labelled quite clearly as the number 22 to Putney Common.

The ladies are thinking about different things. Nesta is thinking about the bright lights and the shopping; Maddy is thinking they can’t leave it too late before turning back; Big Sue is wondering what trick the boy did with that film, and the boy is thinking…

Well, the boy is thinking many things. And among them, in fact, jostles the thought of this errant red bus. He knows exactly what it is and who has brought it here.
Chapter Three
Captain’s Log. Stardate Etc., Etc. . .

Captain’s Log, stardate etc., etc. . . . Dispense with the formalities. Dispense with the protocols. Dispense with the captain while you’re at it, why don’t you? I’ve had it.


I want that bloody Doctor off my ship and I want it now. One mad medic is enough for any crew.

This is Captain Robert B. Blandish recording.

I’m in my oval office, just off to one side from the bridge, where everyone is, as usual, getting on, quietly, calmly, with the task in hand. So efficiently. They’re good, my crew. Very professional. Trained to be so. And it’s my number two, Garrett, watching over them, and he’s very good too, especially at maintaining that particular cool equilibrium on the bridge while the Nepotist is in flight. But he hasn’t quite got it yet – that slick sense of command that comes only with experience.

Me, on the other hand, I’ve got that innate sense of leadership that instills loyalty in my crew. OK, so I cause scenes. But I’m only the captain. Who cares? I’m just the one who has to command three hundred and seventy-nine souls and make sure they return from this tour of duty intact. I’m the one who has to report back to the Galactic Feds. Oh, there’s not much pressure on me. Oh, no. I’ve absolutely no right to be blunt and courageous on my very own bridge. And if I ever do I should be packed off to my little oval office just off the bridge to bring my report up to date.

It’s not the same since that damn counsellor visited. ‘It’s more productive to engage with the feelings people have in order to motivate them with respect and sensitivity.’ That’s what I should do. It’s sooo obvious. Well here I am. And I think it’s more productive if I give the orders and people obey them instantly without question.

You see, the thing is, I’m used to having the Nepotist to myself. She’s mine. My responsibility. Everything we engage with, well, it’s my fight, it’s my show. Even Garrett – that appeaser, that charmer, that backstabber in embryo – realises that fact. There are few things I’d deny Garrett, it has to be said – what with his expertise in most areas and all – but there are parts of my life that are sacrosanct. The Nepotist is mine and mine alone.

Even with Galactic Fed VIPs on board, swishing around in their oh-so-space-age gold and silver lame frocks with their high collars and their ever-so-exotically-alien physiognomies, even then, when I have to wine, dine and wheedle, I’m still the big cheese on board. I still get to fire phasers when I want. I still get to fly as fast as I want. I still get to fight hand to hand with whichever warmongering bastard wants to meet up with me – and me alone – planetside, as they so often want to. It’s still me. And I definitely get the first choice of the ladies, whatever colour they are. I’ve got a reputation to keep up.

But I can’t help thinking things are slipping out of my hands. Just the last few days or so. Things aren’t the same.

Then, two days ago, we came to Valcea. The City of Glass, hanging in space within a strange and erroneous region of… nebulosity, my second-in-command Garrett called it, with one of his rather prim and humourless smiles. Valcea, the City of Glass. That’s where we are, in stationary orbit around its outer rim, drifting helplessly beside it.

And, what’s more, a day ago, the Doctor arrives. In he swishes in his velvet coat, and starts interfering big time. Should have had him thrown in the brig.

Computer. This coffee stinks. Something stronger. Thaurian whisky. Now.

Meanwhile the bridge of the Nepotist was as hivelike in its activity as its commander Captain Robert B. Blandish supposed it was. The deck crew were sitting in their usual semicircle, at their consoles and desks, with lights blinking, flashing spasmodically, claiming their attention; these tiny controls and devices and levers they would tweak and adjust as necessary. A very highly trained and practised crew. No rush here, no matter what the situation. And the crew of the Nepotist had seen a good many of those. And they knew how to behave with the utmost decorum whenever their captain was in his chair.

They were all, as usual, focused on the viewscreen at the front of the chamber. A vivid wide-screen affair, size of a private cinema, except the Nepotist wasn’t equipped with one of those filmic wide screens. More of a two-way telly, really. It showed them the inscrutable gleaming westernmost side of the glass city Valcea, suspended in space. A kind of dirty, contaminated space here, though, full of errant bits of matter and fragments fallen off other worlds. Nebulosity, Garrett had called it – a hazardous region for the ship to proceed at more than, say, five point nine. But Blandish had demanded more and more speed, damaging the hull and shields en route and then – typically – they had hit upon this unquantifiable obstacle, this blue-green gleaming city in space – an inscrutable, impossible edifice
just hanging there and now holding them ineluctably by unseen devilish forces, and their journey was delayed hopelessly now. It didn’t even respond to their scans or probes. Garrett knew Blandish’s crossness was mostly directed at his own self, and his demanding that they cross this patch of queer nebulosity posthaste, for the sake of saving a day’s travel to their next port of call. But there was nothing to be done now. They wouldn’t be getting to Peladon and its revolting miners and hostaged royal family and VIP Feds or anywhere near it in the foreseeable future, and the situation (code A) would just have to wait.

Here they were. Stranded.

Chief science officer, second-in-command, all-rounder and prodigy Mr Garrett didn’t share his commander’s impetuous dislike and distrust of their recent visitor. He rather hoped the Doctor might provide the key to this whole somewhat baffling affair.

Garrett turned in his rather plush swivel chair and asked their communications expert, Belinda, to call the city again.

Belinda gave him a look. She was a big, Scottish woman squeezed into regulation tight velvet minidress, harassed and uncomfortable, her own workstation a tangle of leads and dismantled circuitry. Hers was the messiest and least efficient station of everyone on the bridge, but the captain was fond of her, so there it was.

The look she gave Garrett wasn’t quite as fond. There was no love lost between those two. She had the idea that he thought of her as a kind of receptionist and she wasn’t far wrong. She thought of the irony that she felt trapped by a glass ceiling and rampant tokenism in her job and here she was, trapped in space by a glass city.

‘They are deflecting all calls at the moment, Mr Garrett,’ she said primly. Garrett was sure she was eating as she said this. She had a mania, it seemed, for sugar mice.

‘Hail them again. Do it on every frequency. Tell them we will send a delegation down to the city to find out what’s going on if they do not respond immediately.’ Garrett had had enough of waiting about. His captain’s impatience had at last rubbed off on him.

Belinda returned to the task in hand, with a sigh, swallowing.

‘Mr Timon,’ Garrett called the chief security officer on the bridge. Instantly, a tall, calm black man appeared at his side. ‘Would you fetch our visitor, please? I think we might need his help.’

Timon nodded and, with a quick glance at Belinda, left the bridge. Garrett was sure those two were lovers, though nothing had been said. He didn’t think it did much for morale on the bridge, that sort of thing, between senior officers. He wouldn’t let that sort of thing go on when he had his own ship.

It was Timon’s job to know where everyone was aboard the Nepotist at all times. No easy feat, within its miles of corridors and its scores of decks. Especially when it came to those loose canons, the visiting dignitaries and the occasional strange interlopers, such as the Doctor, who refused to be contained. Already, in the Doctor’s first twenty-four hours here, he had appeared and made a nuisance of himself in almost every department. Timon had tried to keep a tighter reign on his whereabouts, but the Doctor was infuriatingly able to pop up everywhere. He knew far more about the running of the ship than Timon thought possible or desirable. He wasn’t the sort of guest they liked having aboard at all.

The Doctor’s own craft – a tiny object, the size of a wardrobe – was in a docking bay, where it had first manifested itself. Timon knew for a fact he hadn’t been back to it yet. He was happier involving himself in the affairs of the Nepotist. Captain Blandish thought it would be simpler if the Doctor just decided to take himself off again, but Garrett disagreed, thinking the Doctor may actually be able to help out somehow. Almost despite himself, Security Officer Timon was inclined to chime in with this thought. Belinda, too, though Timon wasn’t pleased by her enthusiasm. That was simply a case of her fancying him, as she tended to do with most new faces turning up on board.

Timon went straight to the recreation deck, where the Doctor had last been seen. He must make the Doctor wear a comm badge.

Three settees arranged in the corner. Bright-yellow velvet plush, focused around a brown smoked-glass coffee table. The three guests had been served coffee and between them they had emptied the bronze pot and now they were waiting rather listlessly as crew members of the Nepotist wandered by, to and from their various activities here on the recreation deck.

To Fitz it all looked horribly energetic. Various bipeds went strolling by with squash rackets, towels draped over one shoulder. Others rushed back and forth, gabbling, from something called the hollow deck. He couldn’t work out what that was at all, but it sounded awful.

Two very excitable Alpha Centaurans settled to a game of multidimensional chess at a nearby arrangement of sofas. Fitz couldn’t believe how ridiculous the acid-green hermaphrodites looked. The Doctor hushed him a number
of times as he snorted with laughter at the appearance of various crew members.

‘This is really like being in outer space, Doctor,’ he said, snatching up his cigarettes and fishing out the last one. ‘I mean, this is really a proper spaceship.’

The Doctor was cross with him. Since arriving on board Fitz had done nothing but be sarcastic. But to Fitz this was a self-determined show of sarcasm. He almost felt he had to be like this, as if it made him more himself. Fitz Kreiner was sarcastic; that was the kind of fella he was. Always had been, always would be, no matter how messed around his head may be. Aboard the Nepotist, Fitz was trying desperately to revert to type.

Compassion had drifted off into a bit of a trance.

Not many laughs there, Fitz thought, not for the first time. Under the lights, bright and oddly unlike any kind of natural lighting at all, her skin seemed different from everyone else’s. There was a peculiar cast to it. She had her auburn hair tied back and was wearing an outfit that the Doctor had suggested – a glittering, gauzy affair that didn’t look too out of place in the… whatever century it was supposed to be.

Fitz looked at the Doctor – languid, yet alert, propping his chin on one palm – and wondered again if all of these adventures were just something the Doctor had made up for them. This was too much like outer space to be real. There were even great slabs of glass in the walls with the stars swirling and shifting by.

‘Doctor,’ Compassion said suddenly, ‘I think I’m fed up now. Waiting around. I think I want to know what’s happening now.’

She blinked solemnly at him.

Idly the Doctor flicked at his cravat. She was urging him, quite politely, into action, with a rather determined undertone to her voice. (What a peculiar voice, too, Fitz thought.) But she also sounded as if she didn’t want to offend the Doctor.

The two of them were playing out some kind of power game. And Fitz Kreiner, once again, was just the spare prick at the wedding.

They were joined by Timon, the security guard.

Fitz wanted to laugh at his tight-fitting security guard’s outfit, his gold badge of insignia, the bright-blue blaster gun holstered at his hip.

‘Timon,’ said the Doctor smoothly, with a warm smile. ‘We’ve been missing you. Is the captain ready to see us again?’

Timon flinched at the Doctor’s overfamiliar tone. ‘Second-in-command Garrett is waiting for you on the bridge.’

‘I’m sure we can.’ the Doctor grinned, and looked at his two, rather nonplussed companions as they followed him from the pastel-shaded, potted-plant haven of the recreation deck.
Chapter Four

He Met Her That Afternoon...

He met her that afternoon in a café in town.

This was the extent of their involvement these days. Perhaps every three weeks or so they would get together for a longish lunch in this upstairs café with its whitewashed walls, scrubbed wooden tables, its pitchers of iced water and its home-made ice creams.

In recent months it had become a somewhat busier place. Less calming, because of the advent of the computer terminals. It was now an Internet café and neither the Doctor nor his friend, Sally, could approve of that.

Today she was waiting at their usual table, bang in the middle of the spacious back room, gazing out over the town through louvred shutters. Such windows, they had often said, ought to look out upon a much more picturesque town. Bell towers and pretty churches; a green slow-surge river. Instead, a market town, grey municipal buildings, car parks and endless exhausting traffic.

Still, they made the best of it. These regular lunches were, after all, an attempt to rekindle and reflect upon their youth – a youth spent together. And it was, perhaps, the force of that nostalgia that transformed the venue for both of them.

He shrugged himself out of his long green coat and hung it where the waiter told him.

They knew him in this place now. He rubbed his hands warm and ruffled his long dark hair back into order.

She hadn’t seen him yet. She was feeding her Jack Russell brown sugar lumps from the bowl on her table. The dog had a chair all to himself and the Doctor smiled to see Sally talking to her pet, and listening, as if he could reply.

She looked like a smart, professional woman. Perhaps forty – chic in a cream linen suit and silk blouse. Her hair was glossy and dark and she was smoking as she concentrated on feeding and communicating with her dog.

There was just a hint of eccentricity about her. Her notebook was open on the table, as it always was, with the black pen uncapped beside it.

Briskly the Doctor made his way towards her, the bare wooden boards creaking pleasantly as he stomped along.

– You’re having mozzarella?
– Why not?
– I couldn’t eat it.
– Oh, one of your little prejudices. Why ever not?
– Because, Sally, I believe they make it from the curd of buffalo milk.
– Don’t be ridiculous.
– It’s true!
– You make things up.
– That’s true, too. But they definitely use buffalo milk.
– I’ll ask Canine. He’ll know.
– Canine. I forgot. I knew you called him something silly.
– It’s not silly. It’s what he is.
– Anyway, he can’t talk.
– He can talk to me.

Funny that I can be so intolerant of other people’s eccentricities. I mean, that afternoon Sally started to get on my nerves. Maybe it was just that we were getting bored with raking over the past. There are only so many times you can go over the old days. Yes, we had some laughs and we got into some scrapes, but do we really want to churn them over endlessly?

As I recall, however, that afternoon we did try to move on to other topics. These were no more entertaining though. The awful thought crept up on me: perhaps Sally and I had outgrown each other.

I talked a little about my private Doctor, and told her about my medication and how my Doctor even phones me in the dead of night. Sally seemed singularly unimpressed.

She wanted to talk about her writing. She wanted to talk all about her plans.
– But you always hated science fiction. I remember giving you books, forcing them on you, years ago. In the 1970s. You just laughed at them. Said you didn’t need your mind expanding, thank you very much.
– Oh, well. I was younger then. I knew my mind, I thought.
– Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss, J.G. Ballard, Edmund Cooper, Edgar Rice Burroughs… I bought them all for you!
– It was like you could see something in them that I couldn’t. I just couldn’t get the hang of that stuff. Stepping into other worlds. Other lives, other dimensions, what-have-you. I didn’t want to know there were alternatives. When I was that young, I didn’t like to know anything that wasn’t real.
– They were books, Sally. Of course they weren’t real.
– I mean realistic. With realistic things happening in them.
– Oh, that.
– Anyway, the point is, my taste has changed. Those kinds of books seem realer to me now.
– I suppose, especially after the lives we’ve lived.
– Exactly.
And she liked the way he would throw back his head and laugh. He’d let his hair grow much longer. There was something almost carefree about him. He wasn’t knotted up with anxiety as he had been in recent years. She was starting to remember why she enjoyed being with him. She felt a surge of enthusiasm again for their friendship. A daring spark of desire.

The waiter brought more coffee and soon she was reeling with too much caffeine. The waiter brought some sausages for the dog, left over from lunchtime. Canine wolfed them.
– So I ditched the thing I was already writing. My novel. My realistic novel. I’m saying ‘realistic’ like it was a dirty word now, aren’t I?
– You haven’t ditched it! Sally… you’ve had that on the go for years…
– And it wasn’t going anywhere. I’d outgrown it. I started writing this other thing. It’s almost done.
– Can I see some of it?
– That’s what’s in the bag. A present. It’s the whole thing so far. I’d love to know what you think.
– You haven’t given me anything in years.
– I lost a lot of confidence.
– You?
– Absolutely. But now… I feel like I could write anything. Take my characters anywhere. It’s freed me up. Well, you’ll see.
– What’s it about?
– That’s hard to explain in a few lines.
– You’ll have to. For the blurb on the back…
– My agent says she’s already got publishers worked up about it. On the strength of the first few chapters. But wait till they see the rest… It’s quite mad.
– Tell me about it.
– It’s in two parts. The first half is a story about an arid world. A desert world ruled by a Queen who sits in a vast jar of jam. Don’t laugh.
– I’m not!
– And the second half of the book is wintry. Like today. It’s about an everlasting winter and a city of glass that travels through space. This city comes to our world and rests just inside our atmosphere. It is ruled by a godlike being called Daedalus… and he invents these Corridors – a labyrinth of passageways through space and time…
– Who’s the hero of all this?
– There’s a woman. But you’re in there, too.
– I am?
– Someone a bit like you.
– Write about what you know, eh?
– The woman is called Iris and she can travel anywhere in the cosmos in a red double-decker bus…
– Sounds like my kind of woman.
– Oh, really?
– Iris, did you say she was called?
– A joke, really. She’s like this woman who lives next door to me.
– Also called Iris?
– Yes… but, Doctor, what’s…?
That was when he had his funny turn.
There was the most surprising and sudden pain in his left leg. It felt like a burn, but one that originated from within.
He cried out, seized by the shock of the pain. He slipped sideways from his seat, and fell on to the polished wooden floor. He knocked the milk jug and his cup from the table.
The dog barked, affronted. Sally jumped up and the waiter came running.
The Doctor passed out and came to, moments later, with his concerned friend looking down at him.
There was something quite wrong with his left leg. It was numb from the knee down. He didn’t dare touch it yet. He would look at it when he got home. He would go home now. He wouldn’t talk about it any more. He would act as if he’d had a twinge of cramp, so as not to alarm Sally. But it wasn’t cramp.
He brushed off her concern.
He put down his funny turn to the pills his private Doctor was making him take.
Then he was getting up to be gone, taking her manuscript with him. He clasped it to his chest, rustling the plastic bag, and trying to mask the wince he made as he put his weight on to his leg.
– Will you come to dinner this week? You can meet Fitz and Compassion.
– I’d love to. Who’s Compassion?
– She’s only just moved in. A new friend. Sort of.
– Compassion. Honestly, Doctor. These women you hang around with…
It might have been any time of day. Once the ladies were inside the shopping mall time outside could be conveniently forgotten as they, like all the other shoppers, surrendered themselves happily to the brightly lit, perfumed, air-conditioned halls and walkways and amphitheatres. There wasn’t a scrap of natural lighting here, nor of air – and all the potted palms and Christmas trees were triumphantly plastic. The water in the many fountains and pools that glistened and rumbled beneath the busy escalators had a golden quality to it, as if that, too, were somehow artificial.

‘Stay close by, girls,’ Big Sue said, as they braced themselves for the crowds. ‘We don’t want to get separated in here.’

‘That can spoil your day, that,’ said Nesta gloomily ‘You spend the whole time looking for each other and, before you know it, it’s time to go home.’

They were standing by one of the entrances to British Home Stores. Each of them was itching to be off to her own favourite departments. Really, though, Maddy was in charge, since she had driven them through the perilous snow, and by rights it should be up to her where they went first. This was the kind of democracy the ladies operated by.

Maddy was preoccupied just that minute, however, with her son, who was drifting off into the department store already. He took no heed of the others’ careful plans.

She called after him and he ignored her. She watched the back of him, disappearing into the push and crush of the Bhs parfumerie. She shrugged and laughed to the others. ‘He’s seen something that interests him, obviously.’

Big Sue and Nesta exchanged a look. Maddy let that lad get away with murder. It was as if, Sue thought, Maddy felt that, if she reprimanded him properly for his behaviour, he would just wander back out of her life. But that was no way to bring up a wayward son, Sue thought, letting him have his own way all the time. Maddy was just making more problems for herself in the future. Big Sue bit her lip though, and nodded.

‘Well! Your Ian’s gone and made the choice for us. Come on, Nesta… follow us!’

Maddy smiled gratefully and led the way after her son.

They found him two floors up from the parfumerie. The ladies had been dogged in their pursuit, jumping on escalators behind him, hunting through the forests of racks and hangers in Ladieswear. They caught up with Ian at last in the music department.

‘I didn’t know he was interested in music, Maddy,’ said Nesta, looking round.

‘Neither did I,’ she said.

And there he was. On a podium among a whole set of podiums, he was standing poised above the many keyboards of a rather complicated-looking electric organ. He was testing out several sounds and, it seemed, had the volume turned up full. Maddy winced. He’d make a show of her.

Ian was in a world of his own as he flipped through a book of songs from the sixties and settled on his choice. Then he flipped a switch and the machine began pumping out a slowed-down bossa-nova beat. Then his fingers went to work, ranging over all of the keys and playing, note perfect, a Cilia Black song that all the ladies half recognised as they rushed up to him.

Ian’s face was solemn at first, as he wrestled with the complications of the tune, the first few tricky bits. Then he appeared to relax into it, and he started smiling. He looked completely serene.

Nesta and Big Sue started to applaud, then clapped along, keeping time with him, delighted that they had something to praise him for. Maddy glanced about nervously, waiting for the manager to come over and give them a shouting-at. There was indeed a salesman, in a black suit, hovering beside a display of golden saxophones and things, pink and green lights bouncing festively off all their intricate keys and nodules. But the salesman didn’t look very cross at the commotion her son was making.

What was that song? She would have to ask him afterwards.

And then Maddy looked round behind her as the song reached its rather melancholy climax and there, perched on the seat of a glossy black baby grand, was a woman some years younger than herself, dressed rather slinkily in a kind of catsuit affair, with her head in her hands, weeping buckets at the song Ian was playing.

Maddy could never stand to see someone upsetting herself. She drifted over to the poor woman, taking in the details of her eccentric outfit. She was wearing yellow plastic boots that came up to her knees, and it really was a
catsuit, of the sort Maddy hadn’t seen in years, since the sixties in fact. It was pink and purple, extremely close
fitting, and fastened right up to the neck. The weeping woman had masses of honey-blonde hair, which covered her
face as she sobbed and heaved.

‘Excuse me…’ Maddy patted the stranger’s shoulder. The metallic stuff of the catsuit was oddly warm to the
touch.

The woman took her gloved hands away from her face and looked up. Her mascara had run, bleeding black
down her inflamed cheeks. Her eyes were terribly puffy and her lipstick was smudged. But she was beautiful.
Almond-shaped eyes, heart-shaped face, slightly upturned nose – all the clichés of sex-kitten beauty applied. She
had, thought Maddy suddenly, a look of the young Jane Fonda about her.

‘Yes…?’ asked the stranger.

‘You looked upset,’ Maddy said. ‘I thought…’

At this moment Ian finished his rendition of the nostalgic Cilla Black number with a grand flourish and silence
fell for a second with a crash, and then the other ladies, a small crowd which had gathered, and the salesman himself
started clapping enthusiastically. The stranger in the catsuit applauded likewise, her green eyes gleaming.

Then she said to Maddy, ‘I’m not upset really. Just that song… caught me unawares. Made me nostalgic for a
second.’

‘I know.’ Maddy nodded. She herself who was known to become very morose whenever she heard ‘Goodbye,
Ruby Tuesday’. ‘Everything you regret, every lost chance, the end of your youth…’

The stranger nodded tearily and thrust out her hand for Maddy to shake. ‘Thanks for your concern, anyway. I’m
Iris.’

‘Maddy,’ said Maddy. ‘That was my son, Ian, playing the organ, by the way.’

‘You’ve got a very talented son.’

‘Yes… I didn’t even know he could do that.’

‘A very good-looking son, too,’ noted Iris approvingly. Across the way, the others were trying to cajole the boy
into playing for them again. ‘He’s quite beautiful.’

‘Beautiful?’ For a second Maddy thought the word sounded odd. But, when she looked at Ian, there was a kind
of glamour radiating off him. Glamour also in the older sense – that of witchcraft, of a kind of spell about him.

‘I don’t think he’ll play another song for them,’ Maddy said, breaking the moment and watching the boy move
away from the instrument.

‘My nerves won’t stand it anyway,’ Iris smiled. ‘I feel quite wrung out.’

‘Mum?’ Ian came towards them. ‘You aren’t cross at me, are you? For playing?’

Maddy hugged him. ‘Course not. It was fabulous. Here, look, you’ve got a fan. This is Iris…’

Maddy turned then, back to the woman by the baby grand, but when she did she caught her breath and blinked.
Iris had slunk away.
Chapter Six
I Used to be a Lot Bigger…

I used to be a lot bigger. Perhaps I’m not used to being this slender and perhaps I never will be. When I’m in
crowds – like this one, Christmas shopping – I still tend to turn sideways and I get the urge to cry out, ‘Coming
through!’ preserving my bulk against the masses. Now, of course, I needn’t bother. I can squeeze through the
tightest of crushes blithe as a spirit.

When I was the old me I used to exaggerate my size. I loved being a big woman. I would wear layer upon layer
of cardigans and coats. It was always freezing aboard the bus. It was full of draughts and, when I drove it through
the night on long hauls, the window panes would rattle and let in the freezing air. I also used to wear those
disgusting woollen stockings. I found those again recently and couldn’t imagine wanting to wear such things. What
had I been thinking of? Practicality, I suppose. The old Iris was nothing less than a practical dame. Sometimes the
old me seems like an entirely different person. An awful, pushy, tasteless person. A funny old aunt of mine.

The two of us met up, I seem to remember. In the Death Zone, a breezy bleak place, and we were brought
together to solve something and the two of us looked at each other with wary disdain. And the other Irises, the other
five, all of whom were somewhat hazy to me, looked on with their own appalled reactions. I can see that scene now,
the seven of us with all our friends in that freezing mausoleum at the climax of our adventure together, and I can see
it through seven pairs of eyes. Though I don’t think this particular me has been there yet. Which means I have to
brace myself to be scooped back there at some point, someday soon, and live it through again. Ah, me.

These days I wear these tall boots in black, yellow, red or silver. Colossal heels. Not exactly practical for the
scrapes I get myself into.
But they do turn heads.

One other thing I used to be – in the days when I was large, elderly, obstreperous and Valkyrie-like: I was in
love.
It was something I felt quite definite about. Its pressure was as insistent and unmistakable as my own two good
hearts. Today I feel ambivalent about my erstwhile object of desire. Funny, to change like that.
But… I haven’t seen him in a while. How will I feel when I see the Doctor again?
I know it must happen someday soon. There are plans of mine afoot that will bring us into certain contact and, I
fear, conflict.

Ambiguous as my feelings might be about that mysterious traveller in the region where time and space are
one… I do still feel obliged help him out now and then.
I can’t let him fall into danger when I see a way of letting him out. He doesn’t know it yet, but he’s gone
freezing into a terrible situation. One of the worst yet.
And, if I can just shunt him along into safety with a harmless little nudge, then so be it. I know he hates being
tampered with, timelines and all, but I can’t help it. He’s safe. Confused but safe.
And that leaves me to deal with the rest of it.

This is where it starts. With that boy, the one who played us that tune. That has to be him.
But that song he was playing. I hadn’t expected that. A song from the sixties, by Cilia Black. ‘Love’s Just A
Broken Heart’. How would the Doctor react if I told him that was Our Tune? In it, Cilia recants her love for her
perfect fella, tells him that they are worlds apart now and that she has been warned off him. He’s had too many
lovers in the past, he’s seen too many things. Now they are worlds apart and she can have nothing more to do with
him. It gave me quite a start to hear that boy playing it – such an obscure Cilla classic – on the organ. It quite caught
my breath and, when I was meant to be acting like a proper double agent, there I am bursting into tears sitting by a
baby grand piano in Bhs.

It’s ten to three local time. Soon that first wave of shoppers will be leaving. Maddy and her small band will be
tiring and thinking of turning back home. Outside, the snow has piled up ceaselessly and, with every hour, the
journey home becomes a more terrifying prospect. They have had their lunch (sandwiches and tea in Marks and
Spencer’s café) and they have spent all of the money they brought with them. Maddy will have told herself that three o’clock is her limit. Her nerves are frayed, and she’s feeling tired. Three o’clock is her limit and that’s when she will tell the others that it’s time to go.

So now I have to slip myself into position. Because at three o’clock it will all start to happen.

The electricity will fail, the lights will flicker and dim. The exits and entrances will seal up. That’s when our disaster movie starts up. We’ll be stuck inside our Poseidon Adventure, our Towering Inferno, our very own Earthquake.

Except it won’t be any of those things. It’ll be hundreds of people trapped inside the frozen interior of a shopping mall. And beasties outside slavering – slavering to come in.

Five to three. Got to get to the exit.
Red Quadrant: here I come.
Oh, so much zippier, this new body.
Tearing about in my knee-high boots…
Chapter Seven
When They Come it Will be Across the Waves…

When they come it will be across the waves. Washed clean by the waves, washed supple and bright, gleaming gimcrack, crazed with veins of light.

The Men of Glass will be clean, naturally, with only a slight rinse of salt and silt and sand caked on their cool skin.

Their chairs, metal, will be covered with barnacles, encrusted, deep-sea ferns and weed choking their spokes. Quite a struggle for them as they manoeuvre clumsily out of the surf and up beaches, crunching their gold-rimmed tyres on shells. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

White in the winter sun, only their hearts untouched by frosty salt water. Their hearts the sea has left warm, pumping red, vital, grimacing. Unaffected, unassuaged by the currents and crosscurrents they have traversed.

The faces on the hearts clenching in anger, like fists. They leave the sea behind them and now they are here.

From the bottom of the sea, from the back of beyond, from, perhaps, some other world.

And yet, we are always told they come from such a great height. A land far loftier, far more remote than any height we will ever attain.

It is winter and we have been brought into the dangerous orbit of the Glass Men.

Their wheelchairs glisten and settle on the sugar-soft sand of the beach. Weary conquerors contemplate the infinite grains.

Look back at the expanses of water. ‘Come…’

‘Come on…’

‘Come on up. Time’s over. We’ll finish up the job.’

‘We must…’

‘We must head…’

‘We must head on.’

‘Not…’

‘Not much…’

‘Not much daylight left.’

‘This is…’

‘This is how…’

‘This is how we seek shelter. We cannot stay out in a storm.’

So fragile. So caring of each other. So delicate with the glassy perfection of their collective selves.

They wheel themselves up, achingly, cautiously, on to the mainland.

‘There…’

‘There is…’

‘There is a fresh wind. Quite pleasant really. Drying out like this.’

The Glass Men pretend to have sensation. Fake their responses to the stimuli of this new world.

But they have no nerve endings. Or their nerve endings were frozen and cauterised when they were turned to glass.

Still, they pretend to register these sensations. A game and a complicity that pleases them.

They each of them hum and whistle, pleased with the chilling draught that comes in behind them, off the sea.

Here they are now.

They have arrived.
At Last the Captain Deigned to Come Out…

At last the captain deigned to come out of the relative sanctuary of his oval office. As the doors swished open he tugged his mustard polyester top straight and glared round at the assembled heads of department. No one turned to look at him. They were all fixated on the image of the glittering city of glass suspended on the viewscreen before them.

It was like a wedding cake, an ocean liner, a mountain of ice. And it had to be dealt with. The Feds wouldn’t be pleased with an anomaly like this hanging about. It was Captain Blandish’s sworn duty to smooth out ructions such as this…

He stepped up to the raised dais and his cushy captain’s chair. The small huddle of officers noticed him at last and Garrett whipped around. ‘Captain on the bridge,’ he noted with just a hint of that insufferable sarcasm of his. Beside Garrett, tapping away at a bank of sensors and looking perplexed, was the Doctor.

‘Who gave that man permission to carry out a scan?’ barked Blandish.

‘Captain, Captain, Captain…’ grinned the Doctor, hurrying over. He had loosened his cravat and to the captain’s eyes he looked crazy. His two unauthorised companions were hanging about, staring at the city on the screen. The scruffy-looking man they called Fitz was talking to Belinda and she was gazing dreamily up at him.

‘Captain,’ said the Doctor, grabbing his hand and shaking it. Blandish snatched his hand back. ‘I’d like to take a… um, party down there, to the city. See what’s going on.’ There was a gleam in the Doctor’s eye.

‘Mr Garrett,’ said Blandish in a carefully controlled tone. ‘Do you realise how much a sensor scan like that actually costs? You’re letting an untrained man dabble with our most sensitive and expensive –’

‘I am well aware of the cost, sir,’ purred Garrett. He gave his captain a swift glance up and down and produced the small and incredibly complex calculator on which he habitually computed the Nepotist’s budget. Every laser fired, every minute calibration and acceleration, every transmat operated, Garrett would plug it all into his Ship’s Kitty. ‘But the Doctor knows precisely what he is doing. I saw it as a necessary expense.’

The Doctor beamed.

‘If people are going down there,’ said Compassion suddenly, ‘I am coming too.’ She was looking at the city rather strangely. ‘You will need my help. I’m hearing all sorts of interesting things. I’m more useful than this –’ she nodded curtly at Belinda – ‘communications person. I’m picking up messages that she never would.’

The Doctor frowned at her quickly. Of course. Her earpiece. He tried to signal her to keep quiet but she went on.

‘I am going to come with you. Obviously.’

Fitz snorted. ‘Well, I’m not. I’m going back to the TARDIS.’

‘Neither of you is coming,’ said the Doctor, rather sternly. You can wait here on the ship. I’m taking the TARDIS.’

‘No, you’re not,’ Blandish put in smoothly. ‘You’re transmuting down with me. I’ll head the away team and I’ll consent to let you advise.’ He glared at the Time Lord. ‘And no funny business.’

Minutes later Belinda was dashing into the corridor, heading for the lift. She had a bag to pack, her hair to wash, and she had to change into planetside gear. She had been chosen, as communications expert, to join the team.

She was thrilled.

Timon, too, had been picked by the surly Captain. This was usual. Blandish went nowhere without his heavily armed Timon. Timon took it for granted. Already he had gone off to put on his regulation red top.

Compassion and Fitz had been packed off to the Doctor’s TARDIS. Fitz eagerly, Compassion seemingly in a fit of pique. As soon as they were off the bridge the Doctor had seemed to forget their very existence, applying himself to the matter in hand, evidently itching for the off. He bristled with curiosity, Belinda could tell.

By the time she got to her cabin she was huffing and puffing with exertion. She flung open the door.

Inside there was the usual strewn mess and gentle, coloured lighting from the lava lamps placed at intervals around her bed. Something was wrong, though. As the door whispered shut behind her she knew she was not alone in her room. For a second her heart leapt up and she wondered if Garrett had at last taken the hint and gathered the import of the various sly winks she had shot his way while they were on the bridge. Maybe he had secreted himself in here.
Then she became aware of a point of green light on the wall, about a foot above her headboard. It grew in size and intensity and Belinda was rooted to the spot, staring as a green shape started to materialise before her. Emerald smoke and fumes, coruscating lights. Someone trying to connect with the communications expert and, well trained as she was, she held her breath and waited until the message came through.

It was the head of an elephant. A peculiarly malevolent-looking creature with ears stretched wider than her headboard. Its tusks thrust two metres into the room, threatening to skewer her. Its eyes blazed with fury. It bellowed at her soundlessly and green fumes rolled around it. She was reminded of Ganesh, the Hindu god, who was said to always take this form. Garrett was the anthropological expert on board ship and for more than one reason Belinda wished he were there.

Then the apparition spoke. ‘Your coming here will set events in motion. You do know that, don’t you? It will be the step that makes the War inevitable.’

He tossed his gargantuan trunk at her with a snort of derision. He trumpeted down the intimidating length of it and the sound made Belinda’s ears burn. It was the fanfare for the beginning of a war. Then the elephant’s head faded away.

She didn’t tell anyone about this. She was sure the eminently practical Blandish would prevent her coming on any planetside missions if he suspected she was going doolally.

The transmat room was clinically clean. They had to step through a number of locks and barriers to get anywhere near it. The Doctor had never seen so many precautions taken with such a device – he who had been zipped and beamed and shot across the galaxies and through time by such a ramshackle assortment of rather hazardous means. But the crew of the Nepotist dreaded anything going wrong with the transmat. They said a little prayer before shooting off anywhere. They evidently took to heart the alarming possibilities of disaster and prayed that their bodies, once dissolved and transported, would reassemble neatly and properly at the other end. They found it all traumatic and, of course, it was fearsomely expensive. As the away team prepared themselves, going through the ritual solemnly – to the Doctor’s bemusement – Garrett was totting up the cost of the sortie on his Kitty.

‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained…’ smiled the Doctor, hopping into the odd bathlike arrangement from which he gathered he would be beamed. Blandish, doing likewise, scowled.

They had to lie in these empty baths, one of them in each, and wait as the engineers in the gallery did their stuff, hovering over controls with crossed fingers.

The Doctor had never seen such an arrangement before. Usually, he mused, as he lay in the cold, dry tub, humanoid species invented upright contraptions to beam themselves from: stand on a luminous disk, walk into this cupboard-type contraption, and so on.

He shrugged and settled himself down to be transported.

Actually, it felt just like being swept down the plughole. There was even a disturbing gurgling noise. He steeled himself and looked forward to being reconstituted.

And then, the five of them – Garrett, Blandish, Timon, Belinda and the Doctor – were standing in the midst of a mild snowstorm, standing up to their knees in fallen snow. It was dark with the pitch-dark of space all around them, and the sleek lilac shape of the Nepotist looming above them.

Ahead was the grand shining spectacle of the City of Glass. Its turrets, minarets, its baubles and towers. And now they could see its glints of lights burning and they fancied they could see shapes flitting about in those thousands of apertures. Inside, the natives of this errant land were aware that they had visitors.

‘We’re here,’ breathed Blandish, as if he couldn’t quite believe it.

The Doctor rubbed his hands for warmth and grew expansive.

‘It’s like… the Emerald City! The City on the Edge of Forever! It’s… Valhalla!’

And he set off at a run, stumbling through the snow.
This is a story about winter.
You’ve guessed it already, of course.
It is the kind of winter in which you will never be warm enough, no matter how you wrap up. You will still shiver down to your bones. It’s the kind of winter that settles itself in and intends to stay. It will be unshakeable, sealing this town off from the outside world, forcing the cables and gutters and pipes that keep the building fed, clean and alive into a stifling, deadly, icy torpor. Everything will be made brittle and dead.

There are always animals in the winter.
Creatures who, needing to survive, take their chances and creep closer to the town and its bewildered, unwary inhabitants.
The townspeople sit by meagre fires, burning anything expendable that they can lay their chilled fingers on. At the Doctor’s house Compassion urges the burning of the Doctor’s books. His library will keep them warm through many days. He has so many thick, dry volumes they might feed the flames through the whole festive period.
Compassion claims – quite modestly – that she has an infallible photographic memory – she has illimitable recall and she will gladly remember everything they consign to the grate.
Fitz is appalled by her attitude. He won’t hear of it. He carries on reading his way through the Doctor’s books. He carries on with his reading of the arcane *Aja’ib*.
– It is the sensible thing to do. You can’t get fuel anywhere. We will freeze.
– It’s barbaric, Compassion. It’s ridiculous.
– Have you seen the attic, Fitz? It’s crammed full with dusty old things. He never looks at these things. He never will. He says he will, but have you ever seen him sit down and read anything?
– Maybe he doesn’t have to. Maybe it’s all in his head. Maybe he has illimitable recall, too.
– I don’t think so. I think he’s even forgotten how to read. He doesn’t know what books and papers he’s got up there. It’s as if they belong to someone else. He wouldn’t miss anything.
– I would. I’m telling you, if you touch anything of the Doctor’s…
– What, Fitz? Are you threatening me?
– You’ve not known him – or me, not really – long. You’re still new around here.
– That doesn’t mean I have to freeze to death.
– You’re not going to touch any of the Doctor’s stuff. Look, he’s having a hard time of it just now. You can see – even you can see – he isn’t a full shilling. Don’t take advantage.
– How would you ever know, Fitz? I could be up in that attic at any time. Any time you’re not paying attention, or you’ve braved the cold outside. I could be up that silver ladder, poking my nose in anywhere. I could burn anything from his messy old library just to keep my feet warm and you’d never know, would you?
– I’ll just have to trust you, Compassion. Won’t I?
– Think about it. I might already have burned things. This fire now could have come from the Doctor’s precious volumes…

His living room was deep violet, so it was dark, too dark for reading in. It was here that the Doctor and his lodgers came to sit by the fire and talk through the long evenings. It was here he described his lunch with Sally and his subsequent funny turn. His companions made concerned noises about this and he waved their compassion aside.

There were two fish tanks in here. One was stocked with angel fish, lit baleful blue from beneath. The fish were languid, silver, haughty, swishing about and watching the human inhabitants of the room as if they were the specimens to be kept an eye on. The other glass case contained lizards, which crept across and across their small space of sandy rubble and stopped every now and then to sigh. The largest was a green, spined creature that Fitz couldn’t put a name to at all. The Doctor, however, could, and he called this lizard Gila. Its eyes shone with what Fitz thought was a malevolent pink.

This living room was quiet; only a golden clock ticked on the mantle above the fitfully burning fire.
The Doctor talked quietly that night about Sally and how she had given him her book to read and how he would take it to bed with him that night.

He also said he had invited Sally for dinner, one night soon, and his current lodgers might meet this long-time friend of his. They acted pleased at this. The Doctor was in a strange, pensive mood, however, and soon he drifted
off to bed.

– He’s acting strangely.
– I told you. He’s not himself.
– Neither are you, Fitz.
– How would you know? How long have you known me?
– Not long. I can’t remember.
– No. I can’t either, Compassion. Isn’t that odd?
– Probably.
– And I can’t remember coming here. I don’t know how any of us came here.
– No.
– Doesn’t that make you worry, Compassion?
– I’m going out.

Compassion was full of energy. She was restless and bored. Her limbs tingled and stung with potential, with a kind of bristling irritation that she knew would be assuaged only by exercise.

She walked, she ran, she tore around the town.

It was deserted outside. The streets were laminated with a terrible black frost. All the trees were sealed in ice. There was hardly a sound and, above, the stars were invisible, as if they were no longer there.

It made Compassion want to scream.

There was something out there, calling to her. Something that belonged to her, or that she belonged to. It would tell her what her future would be.

This town was keeping her down. These people she was living with were constricting her.

The winter that encroached all around them was the epitome of the stifling sense of frustration that imposed itself upon her. She could feel her anger mounting as each day went by, and so she went running out into the night.

If anyone had observed her, they wouldn’t have thought she was exercising. Nor would they have thought she was running into the grateful arms of whatever destiny beckoned her.

They would have imagined that she was fleeing something. As she ran, skidding on the thickening ice in the North Park, Compassion looked stricken.

Late that night she paused for breath by the bandstand in the park. It was wrecked – seemingly held together by the rime of ice that coated its ceiling and struts.

The park was pitch black. Not the best place to stop for a rest. She leaned to catch her breath.

There was a slight rustle in the trees beside her. Just the breeze. But there was no breeze tonight.

There was the call of an owl.

And then it was upon her.

She grunted and fell, winded.

The creature stank. A rancid, foxy smell.

It slavered and drooled and she could see its teeth as it wrestled with her.

She felt those teeth nipping, almost playfully, at her coat. It didn’t bite hard. It didn’t bite into her skin.

It was playing with her. It had wanted to frighten her.

They had fallen on to the black and white squares of the giant chessboard by the bandstand.

As they rolled and struggled they knocked the giant chess pieces aside, sent them scattering across the paving stones.

Toddler-sized pawns were sent sprawling as Compassion clasped the stinking creature, pulling and ripping at its matted coarse fur.

There was a yell then, cutting through the night.

Someone scraped a match somewhere on bricks. The scrape of the sulphur on stone was the most sinister thing Compassion could imagine. She tensed.

There was a flicker of soft yellow flame nearby. She could almost feel the heat from it. It wavered and approached.
In the slight glare of the flame there was the deeply lined face of a man. He had silver hair and wore an expression of concern as he hurried up to her.

He was in some kind of cloak, old-fashioned, velvety stuff. He said, helping her on to her feet, ‘This is a foolish time for a young woman to be out in the park.’

Compassion merely grunted.

‘That creature wouldn’t have harmed you. I think you scared it as much as it scared you.’

‘What was it?’

‘Something rather like a fox. Something halfway between a fox and a rabbit. Didn’t you see?’

The man blew out the match and promptly lit another. ‘Poor things. They are being driven into the town from the country. They’re feeling the winter far worse than we are.’

‘Thank you for…’

‘That’s quite all right. I suggest you get yourself home. No bites? No twisted ankle?’

‘I’m surprisingly resilient, thank you.’

Compassion was already moving away across the park, leaving the man in the opera cloak. His face seemed to hover in the match light, receding behind.

‘Goodbye, my dear,’ he called.

Compassion hurried on wordlessly.

She found herself negotiating a kind of maze of box trees before she was out of the park. Here there was a scant, brief glare of moonlight and she could see that the bushes were all holly, studded with the rippest of scarlet berries.

Enough roaming around for one night.

She thought about crawling under the duvet back at home.

Suddenly the Doctor’s house didn’t seem quite so unalluring.
Chapter Ten
The City of Glass Was Raised Up…

The City of Glass was raised up on a bed of stone.
It was only as the small party who’d beamed down from the Nepotist came within a mile of the place that they realised this.
The black rock was riddled with caves, each of them lined with ice blistered and cracked like mouths and throats plagued with ulcers.
The team were spoilt for choice… which cave to take?

Captain Blandish picked one of the hazardous apertures quite at random and determined this would be the one.
‘But how do you know?’ the Doctor teased.
‘Instinct,’ grunted the captain. ‘When you’ve been on as many missions as I have, you learn to listen to your gut feelings. And right now my guts are gurgling pretty insistently that this is the one.’
The cave mouth glittered with ice, drawing them in. ‘Quite,’ said the Doctor. ‘I bow down to your greater um… instincts and experience.’

‘Huh,’ said Blandish, and scowled at the Time Lord, who was now egging everyone up the glassy slope.
‘Captain!’ Belinda was panting a little with effort and irritated by the fake fur of her snorkel hood. ‘Captain, communications with the ship are breaking up. Once we’re inside the cave we won’t be able to speak with them at all.’

We’re being jammed,’ the captain growled.
‘Indeed,’ said Garrett, who was peering into the pale cavern.
Timon brought up the rear, blaster drawn, looking somewhat nervous.
The Doctor led the way. Blandish let him. Let him handle the danger. If anything leapt out at them, let the Doctor get it first. It would be no loss.

As they pushed along, their sheepskin boots started to fill with meltwater. It was becoming wetter as it grew darker, and yet there was a definite sense of walking up into the Glass City of Valcea. Perhaps they were succeeding after all, in creeping up on the inhabitants unsuspected.

Captain Blandish was quietly excited. He tried not to give his feelings away as they inched up the sheeny tunnel, but his mind ran with images of what they might come across in the city above. It was his explorer’s instinct taking the helm. This was the reason he was Captain, after all.

Garrett made them pause while he felt around in his backpack. Then heapproval at this, drowning out entirely whatever view their betters might have on this matter. Marn grinned wolfishly.
‘I have your agreement, madam?’ he asked Meisha.
‘We must consult our Queen Belinda.’
Belinda was staring at them blankly. ‘Hmm?’
Marn glared at her. ‘Tell them, Belinda. Tell them we have to go back to Valcea.’
She wrinkled her nose. ‘Oh, not there again.’
Marn couldn’t believe it. ‘It’s your only chance of seeing your ship again, your people!’
She shrugged. ‘It was a rubbish job anyway.’
Marn’s voice went steely. ‘Belinda…’
‘Oh, very well, then,’ she conceded, giving a surprisingly effective regal wave.
The Ghillighast shouted their approval again and Meisha cried, ‘Fetch the dogs and the sleds! We prepare for action immediately, on this the very cusp of our brilliant new age!’ She swung round on Marn. ‘And you can find this Corridor that you say will deliver us to Valcea?’
‘I can indeed, ma’am.’

Meisha was exhilarated at the idea of at last bringing the age-old antagonisms straight to the home of the Valceans. She was less forgetful of the past than she was outwardly feigning. ‘Then we embark within the hour!’
She hurried off to make arrangements for the dogs and sleds.

‘Well, thanks a lot, Marn,’ grunted Belinda. She hefted the flagon of brimming liquor. ‘I might as well finish this off if we’re going out in that bloody cold again.’
Marn said, ‘You want to see Timon again, don’t you?’

‘Timon!’ sighed Belinda. She had almost forgotten her lover. Her eyes grew misty and she nodded and gradually sank into a doze as the preparations went on around her.

When Belinda woke, she and Marn and all of the Ghillighast were in transit, across shining, luminous fields of ice, on robust wooden sleds pulled by huskies.

As the small boat glided directly under the bridge he reached up and clasped the stone and tried to heave himself up on to it. He wasn’t terribly successful and depended on Compassion grasping his hands as his own grappled for purchase. ‘Thanks.’

He grinned and steadied himself.

Compassion stared coolly at the dishevelled Time Lord. She slipped her gun away.

The Doctor tried to start again. Compassion’s appraising silences could be disconcerting and he found himself covering them up with bluster. She wasn’t the most sociable of companions. He thought she may be rather shy.

‘Well, I’m certainly glad to see you,’ he said. ‘And the trusty old bus! The number twenty-two to Putney Common! When did you meet up with Iris, then? She’s a card, isn’t she?’ He faltered. ‘Where is Iris by the way?’

‘She’s dead,’ said Compassion. ‘She was taken off screaming by some giant owls. The same thing happened to Fitz. They were probably eaten.’

The Doctor’s face fell. ‘What happened? I mean…’ He took a hesitant step. ‘They can’t be dead! Iris couldn’t… How did you escape?’

‘I hid on the bus. They overlooked me.’

The Doctor became businesslike. ‘We’re going after these owl things. We’re going to find out what’s happened.’

‘I wouldn’t bother,’ said Compassion.

‘You certainly don’t seem very bothered.’

‘There isn’t any point,’ said Compassion. ‘As far as I can see, what we should do is find our own TARDIS again. Iris had taken us off after some women and a boy, looking for these civilians who had gone off and lost themselves in the Corridors. It was a very foolhardy plan. We should find the TARDIS and leave.’

The Doctor was depressed by her attitude. ‘Where did you leave the TARDIS?’ And then he interrupted himself with, ‘And how did you operate her?’

‘I don’t know.’

And what’s more, he thought, how did you even find me here?

Wasn’t it a tad convenient that she should just swan out of the ether in a red double-decker? He found he was staring at her earpiece again, which glinted in the blue twilight of the Corridor. He knew that thing put her in touch with all sorts of unfathomable frequencies. But then perhaps the TARDIS had alerted her, tuning itself to the Doctor’s biorhythms in the Corridors, good and trusty, ever-vigilant companion that it was?

Even if not, he decided perhaps he should tinker with that contraption of hers, so it was the TARDIS’s own signals that had dominance over any others she might quietly picking up. A kind of friendly filter. If she was to travel with him, he wanted to be sure she was on his side. And with the TARDIS’s help, he was sure she could become an all-round better person and happier in herself.

Compassion was bold before his scrutiny. She turned and led the way back on board Iris’s bus.

It seemed that everyone was converging on Valcea.

Or what remained of Valcea. The crust of land that was only, really, part of a world, that ringed the ruined City of Glass.

A new night was coming down on the Valcean remains and with it came the promise of war.

The Nepotist charged its engines and its weaponry, preparing to engage with the Sahmbekart fleet that bristled and shone with malevolence all around it in the murky atmosphere of the Enclave.

In the Corridors, stretching and warping and radiating out from the City of Glass, where ten thousand sparking forms lay dead and dying, forces were gathering to converge on this final battleground, from which would spring conflict that Daedalus was sure would spread throughout galaxies that even in their outermost quadrants dwarfed the confines of the Enclave.

Daedalus sat in his wrecked and shattered stateroom and concentrated on his further plans. With only a few surviving favourite Valceans surrounding him, he drew tighter the web that would urge the denouement on.

He sent Corridors deeper, deeper into the galaxy foreign to him, lashing them like tripwires, like grappling hooks, into the paths of unwary races on the other side, knowing how intrigued, how curious they would grow.

And how, slowly but surely, they would find themselves drawn into his web.
He sent them out, unfolding them across space like invitations; through time, too, to the locations he had memorised from the journals and diaries of a traveller he had once known.

Corridors extended to far-flung worlds with names like Telosa, Skaro, Wertherkind, Sonturak. And it was Daedalus, not the Nepotist, who alerted the Federation to the possibility of war on their doorstep.

Fitz found his admiration for this woman growing, even in the midst of their flight from the heart of the volcano and the ransacking owls.

With the shrieks of the ragged primitives – as they were seized up and eaten – ringing in his ears, he kept his mind on pursuing Iris and her horse up the perilous track to the lip of the volcano.

It took every ounce of his energy to get his own mount to follow in the right direction. He watched Iris’s back and her golden hair bouncing on her shoulders and tried not to think of the carnage back in the dusty arena they had left.

But what a woman. What a fantastic bird.

He wondered, when all of this was over, what she’d say if he… well, not made a move exactly… but suggested that he… well, not swap allegiances exactly… but asked if he… well, not swap allegiances exactly… but asked if he could join her on her bus… off into whatever startling adventure she was off to next. And then, as time went by, she might think more fondly of him… who knows? She might already think he was sexy. He caught himself thinking such lecherous things, and grinned to himself even as he felt himself choke up. Perhaps the TARDIS hadn’t done such a bad job of putting him back together.

Up they came to the very lip of the volcano, the apex of the dead mountain and they could see the sterile landscape stretched out before them for hundreds of craggy miles around. Geysers blew and glaciers crept in the crotches of mountain ranges in every direction.

The pathway led back down the sheer side of the mountain and Fitz felt his bile rise and his head whirl at the sight of the gradient they now had to deal with.

‘Depressing, isn’t it?’ beamed Iris cheerfully. For a second he was sure she was giving him the glad eye.

‘I don’t think I’ll make it,’ he said.

‘Yes you will, my sexy little fella. Come on!’

Iris plunged her horse down into the hazardous decline.

Fitz’s heart jumped several beats at her epithet and then he persuaded himself, just as swiftly, that she talked to him like that only to get him to do exactly what she wanted.

Now they were on the other side, they could hear nothing of the owls or the pathetic remnants of human beings they had left behind. Fitz was glad to block them out of his thoughts and stop himself from feeling guilty.

They thundered down the blackened mountainside and his brains were becoming addled, he was sure; they were turning into mincemeat, into scrambled eggs, by the jogging and thudding and the pounding of hooves on diamond-hard magma.

Could he leave the Doctor’s company for this woman? What would the Doctor say?

He couldn’t imagine never seeing the Doctor again. There was so much they hadn’t said and done, and since Sam left…

He’d never said goodbye to her, either.

If he left the Doctor now… And who was to say he hadn’t already? He felt a nasty pang, somewhere in his gut, and suddenly he could see the Doctor’s face before him and he remembered how he had laughed when Sam told the story of her erstwhile infatuation with the Time Lord.

But Fitz could see how it might work. All that power and intelligence, that charming intensity… Even if he was raving mad.

Fitz swallowed hard. He was the one who was raving mad. He was in the midst of the most ridiculous danger, horse-riding down a mountainside, probably about to die and, in the final few minutes of his life, what was passing through his mind? Not the greatest, most fulfilling moments in this life – but a consideration of his chances of getting laid by Iris… and even of getting laid by the Doctor. What was it about Time Lords? What had really happened to his poor old head?

He tried to keep his mind on the horse-riding.

Iris shouted back at him, hair streaming in the smoky air: ‘There’s some kind of rock formation coming up. Look! The ground flattens out, but we’ll be in a kind of…’

Maze. The word was maze.

As soon as they got themselves, breathless but safe, to a less steep incline they were wedged into walls of filthy, sooty rock, a narrow passageway that only just let them and their horses through.

It was a labyrinth of petrified lava and they were rattling quite blithely into it, losing themselves in its
obscurity.
And then there was something worse to add to Fitz’s growing list of grievances.
They hadn’t left the owls behind after all.
Their shrieking cries heralded them as they flew straight over the mouth of the volcano, and came whistling
down out of nowhere, to pick the fugitives out of their maze.
‘Iris!’ yelled Fitz. ‘They’re coming after us!’
Iris just spurred on her horse ever harder and led the way left, right, left, left, right again, plunging ever deeper
into the heart of the maze.
And Fitz just had to follow, watching the froth on the lips of his exhausted horse fleck pink with exertion.

The Nepotist, it turned out, had actually used most of its power reserves in the demolition job it had unleashed
on the City of Glass. So when it came to dealing with the Sahmbekarts the best it could do was muster a force-shield
and sit waiting for the worst.
Tai-Nur, the ship’s engineer, shouted out through the intercom, above the horrendous noise of the engines, that
he was giving the best power he could. He couldn’t give the captain any better.
Blandish threw himself back into his command chair and rapidly weighed up his options. He glared irritably at
Garrett, who seemed fairly unperturbed, as ever, by their predicament. But this was worse than anything they had
faced in any of their missions. Five years exploring the furthermost reaches of the galaxy and several subsequent
years policing the dangerous barriers between empires – none of it compared to this.
The Nepotist was a sitting duck and there was little they could do to defend themselves.
Where was the Federation backup? They hadn’t even made contact yet. They couldn’t be that far away, could
they?
But this was a strange and unknown space.
The presence of these Corridors, etched in mesmerising blue on the viewscreen, shifted the usual perceptions of
time and space into unforeseen dimensions. Really, none of them knew what they were dealing with yet.
But the Federation should have been in contact by now.
‘Garrett?’ In desperation Blandish turned to his second-in-command. ‘What can we do?’
The other members of the bridge crew looked askance. Never had they seen their Captain without a plan or a
scheme up his sleeve.
On the viewscreen, the vast and demoniac Sahmbekart mother ship loomed up.
Then it fired off its opening salvo.
Impact was virtually instantaneous and, even with the toughest, least penetrable shields up, the Nepotist rocked
in its orbit, sending everyone aboard flying across the room.
Blandish leapt to his feet. ‘Garrett!’ he shouted at the impassive science officer.
There was a second blast then from the Sahmbekarts and the Nepotist lurched again, more violently.
Tai-Nur’s voice crackled over the comm. ‘The shields are going, Captain… we…”
Garrett marched straight up to the command chair.
‘It’s quite easy. We use the Nepotist itself. We take ourselves out of the firing line and we do the most damage
we can.’
‘How?’ Blandish whispered. ‘How do we do that?’
Garrett was inhumanly cool. ‘We switch off our shields. And then, quite simply, we crash through the
Corridors. We take the whole lot with us. And then, finally, we crash-land on Valcea.’
The bridge crew were silent at his words, until the ship was hit again, and the last tatters of their force-shield
were stripped off them like tin foil and the Sahmbekart moved in easily, so easily, for the kill.
Chapter Thirty-Two
Even Aboard the Bus…

Even aboard the bus it wasn’t plain sailing.
The Doctor drove on through the Corridor and gradually the buildings pressing in around him grew larger and more ornate.
They lost sight of the blue canal and the landscape was taking on a different aspect – a mismatched one.
It was a weird mélange of alien architectures, as if these were buildings snatched at random from all times and places and reassembled in haste to line the bus’s route in sinister fashion.
The Doctor drove on relentlessly, refusing to be deterred from the route he had determined would lead him back to Valcea.
He drove with an air of mock cheeriness which clearly irritated Compassion, who was watching him narrowly from the gangway. He could feel her presence at his back and wished she would make more small talk. But no. She wasn't that kind of girl, he knew.
He fumbled through the loose cassette tapes in Iris’s glove compartment. ‘She usually has quite a selection. Shall we have some Shirley Bassey? Abba?’
‘No,’ said Compassion.
‘Dusty Springfield!’ the Doctor cried, and jammed the tape into the deck. As Dusty swept into ‘I Just Don’t Know What To Do With Myself,’ he went on, ignoring his companion’s simmering silence: ‘When I was exiled on earth in the 1970s, I met Dusty Springfield once, you know. She was hired – incredible though it might sound – privately by UNIT to go undercover in Memphis. There’d been abductions and whatnot. Anyway, I was called in and met her. She’d been kidnapped herself by then and I had to free the poor girl. She was lovely. Quite charming.’
He was shouting over the rattle of the engine, glancing over his shoulder now and then and tossing his hair out of his eyes. Suddenly Compassion lost all patience with him.
‘Doctor, you’re babbling at me.’
His face fell. ‘I am?’
‘It happens when you get nervous or overexcited. It’s very distracting.’
He blushed. ‘Babbling? No one else has ever complained,’ he lied.
‘You ramble on about nothing when there are more important things to discuss.’
‘Ah.’ He grinned and tapped his nose. ‘I don’t think you’ve cottoned on yet to the incredibly sophisticated way in which I operate.’
‘Yes I have. It’s wasteful and ostentatious.’
‘Right.’ With a sudden burst of energy he pulled the bus into an emergency stop, switched off the music and jumped out of the cab.
‘You, madam, are stepping out of line. You’ve not said a decent word to me yet since you… um, rescued me.
In fact, I’d go so far as to say you rarely have a decent word to say to anyone at all!’
Compassion tutted. ‘I’d agree with that.’
‘But that’s awful!’ He grabbed her elbows and found himself shrugged off. ‘You have to give people more time. Look at Fitz… He’s really not Kode, you know. He’s a new man – well, his old self, I suppose.’ He sighed. ‘If you tried a little harder, I’m sure you’d see he’s all right, actually… he’s a good man.’
‘He’s dead anyway. I told you. And that woman. Iris.’
The Doctor shook his head firmly. ‘I don’t believe it.’ He smiled. ‘See? I’ve got intrinsic faith in my friends.’
‘Then you, Doctor,’ said Compassion, ‘are a fool.’
He paused, fixing her with a cold glance that she found she couldn’t shake.
Very slowly he inclined his head towards hers, until their noses were only an inch or so apart.
‘I would suggest, Compassion, that you make just a tad more effort with your social superego. Your manners are appalling. And what’s more, I should like to point out just how tactful I am being in not demanding to know, right here and now, exactly how you found me.’
It was a second or two before she could even find her voice. When she did, it shook very slightly.
‘I don’t know what I did, Doctor. I don’t know what happened at all…’
He nodded grimly. ‘That’s what I thought.’ Then he went back to the driver’s seat, turned Dusty back on, and they started off again.
kicking up clouds as they went, that the walls of blackened volcanic rock were pressing in ever tighter and that soon
he and Iris would be crushed.

Heedlessly Iris pressed on, slowly now, then galloping fiercely, and all the while the cries of the savage circling
owls echoed above them.

‘Iris!’ he yelled over the choking fumes. ‘We’re causing a dust storm! They’re bound to find us!’ He could only
imagine how conspicuous they would be from the air.

She reined her horse in. ‘You’re right.’ And she jumped off again, slapped the creature’s rump, and let it pelt
off, back the way they had come. ‘That should distract them.’

Fitz did the same and carefully unwound his borrowed scarf. ‘Hey, we could use this to… like, if we unwound
it… we could use it to find our way through the labyrinth.’

‘It’s been done before. I’ve seen the Doctor get through more scarves than Salome does fans during a dance. In
fact, I saw Salome doing a fan dance with one of the Doctor’s scarves once upon a time. Anyway, that old laying‐a‐
trail ruse never comes off.’ She set off again on foot. ‘Come on.’

‘I’ll be bruised head to foot in the morning,’ said Fitz ruefully. ‘I never thought riding was such hard work.’

Iris snorted. ‘You’ve never been riding with me before.’

‘Quite.’

She turned on him with a raised eyebrow. ‘Let’s get this straight, sonny Jim. Any more of your double
entendres and I send you home this minute.’

‘I wish you could. Anyway, what do you mean, double entendres?’

‘You know. You’ve been flirting away like mad with me, from the very first moment we met.’

She hurried on, pacing easily through the narrowing passageways. Fitz felt through his pockets for his
Woodbines and tried to keep up. ‘I’ve done no such thing!’

‘Pretending to be the Doctor and all. Oh, I know your game, my lad.’

‘And?’

She whirled around to find him grinning and lighting a bent cigarette. She took a step towards him.

‘And you, sweetheart, don’t stand a chance.’ She flicked dramatically at her hair.

‘Oh no?’

‘I’m out of your league.’

‘Aren’t we all travellers in the fifth dimension together?’

She laughed. ‘What do you want, some interdimensional version of the Mile‐High Club? We aren’t the jet set.’

He smiled. ‘I think that’s exactly what you are.’

‘Flattery.’ Iris darted forward and kissed him suddenly, grasping his unshaven face smartly in both hands and
forcing her tongue into his mouth for the briefest of instants. Then she let him go.

Fitz turned crimson and coughed.

‘Don’t tell the Doctor.’ She grinned.

An owl screeched almost directly overhead and Fitz found himself dragged bodily, by Iris, around the next
twist in the ravine.

‘Come on!’ she cried, as if it had been him holding them up.

The owl screeches became louder, almost deafening.

The birds were upon them now.

And as the two fugitives rounded the last corner they saw that they had arrived at the dead centre of the maze.

Here there was steam and a pool of black mud, popping with sulphurous fumes. In the middle of this expanse,
like a trophy, was a vast green egg, gilded in gold and platinum.

And, guarding it, were the owls, massed and resplendent in ivory.

Iris swore.

From behind them came the owls that had pursued them through the maze. They soared straight overhead,
mission accomplished, and joined their mates.

‘They’ve got us now,’ said Fitz, gulping, as each pair of baleful eyes turned to stare in the newcomers’
direction.

From the private journal of Captain Robert B. Blandish

Where are the empirical laws of physics?

Call me prissy, pedantic if you like, but I do like to know where I am.

How can races and worlds a million light years apart be brought into the same arena like this? My Science
Officer Garrett points out, not for the first time, that any alien technology, sufficiently advanced, will look, to the
uninitiated, like magic. Well, I say: bullshit. We all live in the same universe, don’t we? So we all have to operate by
the same physical laws.
We do all live in the same universe, don’t we?
Even when we all went to that crazy alternative mirror dimension, years ago, where we found all our identical
evil twin counterparts, even then things weren’t that different. The world still made some kind of sense.
I don’t think we’ve ever been anywhere as messed up as this.
As soon as we fired on the crackling loops of energy that were apparently Corridors, radiating from Valcea,
which, according to Garrett, were Corridors stretching themselves through space and time, the place all went to hell.
The Corridors buckled and whipped around, lashing themselves against the hull of the *Nepotist*, as if they were
alive, like tentacles, and resisting the ship as it drove at them. I wanted to snap those bonds. I wanted to see what
happened. I don’t know what it was with me, but I still wanted to cause more damage.
But the more damage we tried to cause, the more we pitched the whole might of our vessel against the
Corridors, the more we became ensnared.
It seemed that they really were alive, to some extent. Like creepers and vines they lashed themselves on to us
and we were caught in the cat’s cradle of this luminous tangle.
The Sahmbekart fleet hung still in space, holding their fire power for now. A relief.
At least we had baffled them with our foolhardy attempts to cause more chaos and they had desisted from firing
any more. We couldn’t have taken much more of an assault.
But when we had caught ourselves up, ravelled ourselves thicker in the Corridor, what did the Sahmbekart
leader do but contact us again?
His vile image reappeared on our screen and he oh so politely asked for permission to come aboard.
I granted it.
And so it was Garrett, Timon, ‘Forceps’ Felixstoe and myself waiting in the demat chamber as the Sahmbekart
supreme commander had himself scintillated aboard the *Nepotist*.
He arrived standing up in one of the tubs.
He was far more frightful in the scaled and gleaming flesh than he had been on the screen. His jaws seemed so
much bigger. You could see the constant stream of saliva coursing between his broken teeth.
And his legs were a shock. Each of the two was twice the thickness of his torso. He also had a tail, which
swished impressively behind him as we led him down the corridor to the chamber where, we had determined, we
would talk this thing through.
‘I would prefer to talk on your bridge, Captain Blandish,’ he said, quite politely. ‘And from there I may keep an
eye on my fleet. Reasonable, yes?’
He turned one of those gimlet eyes on me then, and I, involuntarily, gulped. I agreed. ‘Just so long as we can
come to some amicable agreement.’
The Sahmbekart shrugged as I showed him to the elevator. I noticed how small and puny his forearms actually
were.
‘I am not here to bargain with you, Captain. I am here to tell you what is to happen to you. You are in no
position to bargain with me.’
And then he fell silent as the lift took us whizzing back towards the bridge and my fellow officers and I were
squashed against the walls by the bulk of his saliva-damp legs.

Extract ends

The Ghillighast had erected a kind of pagoda, all of pale-pink silk, for their honoured guests to sit in.
It was placed on silver runners at the head of their procession across the ice fields and the sheer impenetrable,
unending night.
The dogs ran for hours, their muzzles frosted and bearded with ice, and now and then they would let out the
most ghastly moans and ululating howls. They howled at what they thought was the moon, but they were confused.
These past few days, there had been an increasing number of moons and Corridors in the sky above Ghillighast,
as had there arrived more and more ships, emerging like the newly born from the Corridors. The sky was looking
almost congested.
In other sleds, the Ghillighast sat hunched up, staring keenly into the way ahead, their vestigial velveteen wings
folded up around them like shawls.
The High Priestess Meisha rode alone as usual, seated on the back of a wolf, which pounded along, kicking up
plumes of snow.
‘Something very bad is happening,’ Marn said worriedly, as he drew aside the pink drapes and looked up into
the hectic night sky.

‘I shouldn’t worry about it,’ Belinda said, sitting back on the cushions. ‘What can we do?’

‘We can fight.’

‘Who?’

Marn’s eyes were gleaming again. ‘Daedalus. He’s behind this. For hundreds of years the races of the Enclave
hardly bothered each other at all. Now he’s stirring it all up.’

They entered the Corridor.

The wolves and the huskies and the dogs howled louder.

The fire engine was rolling impressively over the remains of the outer walls of Valcea.

There was a terrible sound of breaking glass as wall after wall went under the metal wheels.

Inside, the occupants held their breath. It was as if their vessel was too heavy for the city to hold any more. It
creaked and groaned under their mass.

As they listened, the Steigertrudes and the ladies and Ian could hear the cracking and splintering and the
groaning of glass.

Emba turned on Ian and demanded, ‘Where is your father? Where will he be hiding?’

‘The throne room,’ said Ian, without thinking. He could hardly remember being there. He barely remembered
anything at all before being taken away by the Ghillighast. His earliest memories were of their chilly, dirty moon
and living in caverns, kept there like an animal.

But there was still the glimmering of a memory: his father’s throne room in the very heart of this city. He could
almost see it.

And his father?

He remembered tusks, a powerful, rank, bestial smell. And a booming voice.

He gave Emba the nod. Told her to head for the heart.
Chapter Thirty-Three
The Bus Is Rattling…

The bus is rattling so much.
This is because the end of the Corridor is nigh. This should come as some consolation, for the disturbance, the
kerfuffle, the discomfort of it all will be over soon.
But the travellers on the bus don’t know yet that they have almost escaped from the Corridor.
In a final constrictive effort the Corridor is wondering how it might go about keeping these travellers and their
bus lost up its own voluminous sleeves. How to ensnare them further and for ever; gollopped and gobbled up in its
huge and awkward peristalsis.
But the Doctor is no fish-bone to be choked on!
Both his hearts jump up in horror at the idea of being eternally swallowed in an anomaly such as this – no
matter how diverting it may be.
He revs the engine of his borrowed bus. The fabric of the Corridor itself shivers pleasurably at his stubborn
resistance, his trickiness, his unwillingness to be contained by it…
And the Corridor plots and schemes in its own not entirely vacuous manner.
It wonders how to keep him here.

As does the bus. Iris’s ship has been with her for so long, and she with it, that it thinks along much the same
lines as she does.
When the Doctor is aboard, Iris is happy.
And so is the bus. It is as if the master were home again. The bus feels like Nelly Dean, hovering at the hearth
at Wuthering Heights, waiting for Mr Heathcliff to come home – with all the attendant awkwardness of their
relationship.
So while the Doctor is here aboard, as he has been again and again through all their many and sporadic lives,
the bus is reasonably happy and pleased with itself.
As pleased as it can be with its mistress missing and presumed to be dead.

As the bus enters a new phase of Corridor – a murky stretch, a cavern, a moist, unnerving space – Compassion
sits still and tries to compose herself.
It seems that every muscle of which she is in possession is twitching.
Her legs cramp up, her fingers spasm.
Is it something to do with this place, or something else? Nervously, she plays with her hair.
The bus rattles fit to burst.
The bus rattles as if someone were determined to shake it until the interior dimensions come loose and peel and
fall away from the external, robustly buslike exterior. Compassion knows that, given that this is a TARDIS, this isn’t
actually that impossible.
She feels as if something had come loose inside her and were rattling around.
She starts to feel she isn’t even inside her own body any more.

The Doctor is on his feet, hands on the wheel, staring out at the new stretch of tunnel.
‘I can’t drive through there.’
Compassion goes to look through the smutty windscreen. At first she can make out nothing in the cavern.
The Doctor gently pulls the bus to a stop, and kills the music.
Then he whooshes open the door and leads them both out on to a floor that gives, surprisingly, underfoot.
A sapphire heart-shaped cavern, and it is occupied.
From ceiling and walls depend coils and fleshy tubes. They twist and ravel and from them hang weighty
objects, slightly larger than ripe melons.
They drift out as if there were no gravity in here, though the Doctor and Compassion remain on the ground with
the bus.
‘What are they?’
The Doctor looks grim. He looks ashen.
He nods to make Compassion look again, to look harder.
Then she realises that the tubes she sees are twisted and coiled like umbilical cords because that is exactly what
they are.

And from the end of each floats a baby.
Each hugging itself, head lowered, eyes shut.
There are perhaps ten thousand bright-blue babies afloat in this room.

As the Doctor steps tentatively into the chamber, one tiny blue fist closes on the calf muscle of his left leg. He feels those tiny fingers squeezing tight on his flesh. He cries out and the hand relaxes.

But the fingers have left a mark. He can feel it.
Existential angst is an embarrassment, but…

If I were to get stuck in the blue Corridors – toddling up and down ad infinitum – where is it I’m actually stuck? In blue vortices for ever, shot from one end to the other, never able to re-enter real time?

That sounds to me like never getting back to real progression – even regression – ever again.

You know how Shirley Bassey sings themes to James Bond films, but she’s never actually in the film itself? All we get is her voice, warning girls to watch out for Mister Goldfinger, et cetera, et cetera… But she herself is never fool enough to become embroiled. Well, that will be me. I’d be in a title sequence only. I’d never get to be in the actual story.

I will be the voice of the frame.
Exempt from plot!
But me – I’m a mover-shaker, aren’t I?
I am implicated, I interfere, I tamper and transgress. That’s always been my role. I am a man made to make Old Enemies and blissfully we cross and recross one another’s helter-skelter path; our reunions and run-ins infinitely recurring and all of it takes place within some kind of real time. Exemption’s no fun.

Never to be in my own adventure!
No more episodes for me!
Oh no!
But even then there’s a kind of implied adventure, isn’t there? And it would be about how I inveigle myself back into the functions of story. How I break out of a crippling stasis. And I can see it all now.

But – horrors – the thought of this for ever.
Me, merely gracing an endless title sequence.
As if archived, canonised. A dead Cultural Artefact in a museum of flotsam, jetsam, trash. Unreinventable.
Stories all ravelled up and done with. As if novelty were the key! And I were not free just to rewrite, remake, replay, repeat! Ha!

Gracing an endless theme, though – end credits, title sequence – never to impeach again.
impeach:
to accuse of a crime
to challenge or question
to entangle
Safe for ever!
What if that’s how I’ve ended up?

And his companion for this seemingly last, endless, safe adventure was called Compassion. She was one of the least companionable of his many assistants. Was she called Compassion because she was abetting this stasis? The thought did flit through his troubled mind. Perhaps she was one of those saving him from himself.
Chapter Thirty-Five
Iris Made Fitz Come...

Iris made Fitz come and sit cross-legged with her around the fire she had built. He was reluctant, still thinking the owls were going to pounce at any moment and rip the pair to shreds. But Iris talked him round and said that nothing like that was going to happen at all. They just wanted to talk. Under the shadow of the huge, ornate egg, Iris set to work on the fire with her pistol.

Soon it was crackling away busily and warming them through. She started to talk breezily about other occasions she had gathered round the campfire with friends, on other outings, and then she asked Fitz how many cigarettes he had left. The sky was a broiling purple now. Night had set in with a vengeance, and the mountainous land was chilled right through.

The owls gathered once more and their leader arrived and settled before Iris and Fitz wearing a cloak which, he claimed, sported the feathers of every species of bird in the Enclave. It was this that enabled him to speak to them. Iris shrugged. She’d heard of odder things. ‘Go on, then, she urged.

The owl blinked its baleful eyes and, with everyone’s eyes upon him, began.

‘There are two eggs belonging to our race. The story goes that they were entrusted to us, when we were quite young, by our god. They were never to leave our grasp.’

‘Your god?’ asked Fitz. Iris nudged him.

‘A great white bird,’ said the owl solemnly, ‘who, when the galaxy was half its present size, roamed everywhere looking for somewhere safe to bury his eggs. They were not to be hatched. They were simply to be watched until their time came. If they were hatched early, there would be calamity, and we were to murder the offspring.’

‘That sounds a bit harsh,’ said Iris worriedly.

‘For generations we owls have mulled over the meaning of the white bird’s instructions. Now we think, for the most part, that there was only a metaphorical truth to the warning. We were simply to look after the eggs.’

‘Where did the white bird go?’ asked Fitz.

‘No one knows,’ said the owl. ‘We only know him as the great white bird who began time.’

‘I see.’

Iris bit her lip. ‘And someone stole one of the eggs?’

‘That was the reason we left our world. We are not an aggressive race. We prefer to remain here, going about the task we were given in the first place.’

‘Who stole it?’

‘Daedalus,’ said the owl. ‘The self-styled king of Valcea.’

Iris blanched. ‘Daedalus, you say? But –’

‘Years ago he sent out the first of his Corridors and arrived with the evil Glass Men who are under his thrall. What chance did we stand? We had to watch as he marauded on to our world and took one of the eggs. The other we hid, deep inside the volcano.’

Fitz looked at Iris. ‘Do you know this Daedalus?’

She pulled a face.

‘The egg has hatched,’ said the owl, stirring its cloak of feathers. ‘This much we know. To taunt us, soon after, Daedalus sent us the shattered remnants of the shell. The mucus inside was still fresh.’ Then he looked at Iris, and, with only a touch of accusation, said, ‘You have seen the offspring.’

‘I believe I have, yes. Ian.’

‘Ian?’ said Fitz. ‘That young lad?’

‘When we attacked you in the place with the glass ceilings and the fountains, it was him we were seeking. You prevented us.’

‘I thought you were going to kill all of us!’ said Iris. ‘You didn’t exactly explain yourselves. You just attacked.’

The owl was unperturbed. ‘Our real enemy, against whom we must join forces, is Daedalus.’

‘Yes,’ she said slowly. ‘I think you’re right.’

‘We fly to Valcea, this very night.’ The owl drew itself up to its full massive height.

The damage was less extreme the deeper into the Valcean city they travelled. Here there were only pillars fallen, walls hanging in shards, metal grilles fallen in.
There wasn’t a single Glass Man to be seen. They had all retrenched somewhere, left to lick their wounds.
The Steigertrude tank rolled on through the shards and debris.
When they came to the roomfuls of glass statues and *objets d'art* they stopped. A kind of primal instinct
overtook the women.
They clambered out of their engine and unspooled the hoses. They couldn’t move on till they had reduced the
precious glass objects to molten pools.
Maddy witched in dismay from inside.
Big Sue was saying, ‘It’s barbaric.’
‘This is your city, then… Icarus?’ said Maddy.
‘All of it ruined,’ said Ian. He gathered his wings about him. He looked at the controls of the engine.
A slow smile, one Maddy had never seen before, stretched across his face.
‘We can leave them,’ he said suddenly, realising that Emba and the others had left them unguarded.
‘Help us out of these chains and things!’ Big Sue commanded, but Ian didn’t have time.
He leapt at the controls he had watched the Steigertrude women operate so skilfully and the engine burst into
life.

Outside, Emba felt the hose jerk and pull and she turned with a roar.
‘Those idiots!’
The engine was starting to rumble towards the wall.
The other women shook themselves out of their reverie of righteous art censorship, and turned to look in horror
as the glass wall collapsed and the tank rolled through.
The roof began to cave in. Chunks of masonry and glass dropped into the hall.
Emba shrieked at them to fall back, to drop the hoses and run. She saw two of her fellows fall under the weight
of debris before she, too, fled.
And then the tank was gone.
Remorseless, Icarus headed deeper and deeper into the Glass City.

Behind one wall were paralysed Glass Men, waiting for the power to come back on. They let out barely a cry as
the tank rolled over them, and stamped them into shards.

The supreme commander of the Sahmbekarts looked out on his fleet with some satisfaction.
Behind him he knew the Federation crew were watching nervously, knowing that he held all the cards.
His was the power to call off all hostilities now.
He could pacify his fleet and his people; he could tell them the Federation meant no harm.
He could explain that the whole situation was, as Blandish had told him, and as he believed it to be, due to the
machinations of Daedalus of Valcea.
But he wasn’t going to.
This was his chance.
For years the Sahmbekart people had been aware of the worlds beyond their Enclave.
And the Enclave was much too small for the Sahmbekarts.
For years they had monitored the radio transmissions from beyond their space and gradually they had become
aware of what a big place waited out there. Somewhere they could go to plunder, one day.
And now it had come to them.
Here was a chance to take on the representatives of the wide universe beyond with impunity. And these
representatives were no match for the Sahmbekart fleet.
It was delicious.
‘Will you talk with them?’ Blandish asked quietly. He was sweating. Beads stuck out on his forehead. He was a
repellent creature, decided the Sahmbekart commander. Hardly a worthy opponent. But he would be the first of
many.
‘I promised no such thing,’ he told Blandish.

And then he did an astonishing thing.
He yawned. Right in front of the captain he opened his massive jaws and yawned.
But he was gargling at the same time, and flames burst from his mouth and with a kind of sneeze he spat them
into the air before him.
He generated a column of vicious flame before the startled eyes of the bridge crew.
Then he did another and another.
And within the brief columns of flaming light materialised Sahmbekart warriors, in full dress armour, armed with lasers.

By the time Timon and the Federation guards could even gather what was going on, six of the lizards had appeared. They in turn began spitting flame around the place, so that the number of creatures increased exponentially by the second.

The commander laughed. ‘Do you mind, Captain, if I invite my friends along? And then you can tell them yourself?’

There was a squawk of the intercom then.

The chief engineer’s voice managed to squeal something about Sahmbekart docking on to the Nepotist, the ship was being boarded and invaded.

And then his voice cut out.

The commander clashed his jaws with glee and told his minions to round up the bridge crew.

They had triumphed.

‘What are they?’ Compassion stared about her. ‘Are they real?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘It’s no illusion. Nothing in the Corridors is unreal. Everything has been brought here from somewhere, from some time. But it’s all without rhyme or reason…’

They were still staring at the chamber of floating babies.

‘We have to pass through,’ said Compassion. ‘Whoever put these here are depending on your soft-heartedness. They want to keep you here for ever.’

‘So what do you suggest?’ snapped the Doctor. ‘That we roll right through in the bus? Squash them flat?’

‘We don’t even know what they are. They’re nothing to do with us.’

‘We have to leave the bus.’

She shook her head. ‘It’s the only bit of protection we have.’

He took her arm and pointed at the room. ‘Look – there are babies growing out of the walls, the ceilings, the floors… We can’t just ride over them.’

‘Then do what you should have done before.’

‘What?’

‘Her bus is a TARDIS, isn’t it? Use it like one. Dematerialise. Come out the other end. Take us to Valcea.’

She stalked back into the bus.

He followed.

‘You’ve no idea how erratic this thing is. I found out last time – and we’re in a region of great instability. We’ve no idea what the Corridors will do.’

But Compassion was already at the controls as he closed the doors behind them.

Before he even knew what was going on, she was plunging the dematerialisation switch.

One minute they were charging and howling through the windswept blue of the Corridor.

The next, the dogs had dragged them into a white glass space, crazed with fractures and filled with the sound of distant explosions.

Meisha screeched in exultation. ‘We’ve made it! Praise be to Pesst for bringing us safely to Valcea!’

The dogs pulled their sleds to a halt and stood panting as the Ghillighast stared in some awe at the cathedral-sized space around them.

Belinda poked her head out. ‘Back again.’

Marn was appalled. ‘There is little left of my city. This was our most sacred building.’

Behind them the blue Corridor sealed itself and vanished with barely a whisper.

The High Priestess Meisha was barking with triumph.

She had seen something none of the others had seen yet.

At the far end of the shattered cathedral, in a patch of pearly, spectral light, a glass pillar had fallen and, pinned beneath it, bleeding but still alive, lay the great leathery body of Daedalus.

One of his tusks had snapped. (Oh, how like Ganesh! God of the broken tusk! Daedalus was ever alert to his own status as iconography.) He was breathing stertorously, glaring at them with contempt. His hide had turned an ashen grey.

As Belinda helped Marn out of the pagoda and back into his chair, and pushed him across the rubble-strewn floor, she watched the Ghillighast gather around the fallen king.

‘Help me out!’ he started to bellow: ‘Help me out immediately!’

The Ghillighast shrieked with laughter. One or two picked up slivers of glass and pricked at his hide to see him...
bleed and what colour flowed fresh from his wounds.

He moaned piteously and flapped his taloned hands. ‘Let me out and I will give you this world. The Ghillighast will rule her unimpeached.’

Meisha was unimpressed. ‘Daedalus, we already do.’

Blandish, Garrett and the rest of the bridge crew were shepherded into the captain’s oval office.

They were locked in and forgotten about as the lumbering creatures ran amok on the bridge and throughout the ship.

There came the sounds of slaughter as the Sahmbekarts thinned down the crew numbers, but the prisoners in the oval office knew that they, at least, would need to be kept alive for now.

They were the ship’s pilots. Only they could take it back to the worlds beyond the Enclave that the Sahmbekarts so coveted.

Garrett was overcome with misery and remorse.

‘We should never have agreed to arbitration.’ He glared down at his Ship’s Kitty and, in a moment of rare anger, flung it to one side. ‘It was an expensive decision.’

Timon was even more bitter. ‘We gave in. We should have gone down fighting. While they were firing on us, we should have given it all we had. We should have flung ourselves at the mother ship. Taken them with us.’

Blandish seemed curiously quiet. They looked at him and suddenly they knew he had hatched a plan. Just like his old self.

He hurried around to the other side of his desk and flipped open a hidden panel.

‘The Sahmbekarts don’t know about this. I had this installed after the first five-year mission. How many times before that did we need something to override the main controls? How many times was our bridge taken over by hostile alien forces?’

He was grinning now, full of bravado once more.

‘Forty-seven times in all,’ said Garrett.

‘Exactly!’ cried Blandish. ‘And we always came through, didn’t we?’ Then he started tapping and typing busily at the buttons on the hidden controls. ‘We always come through.’

‘What are you doing?’ asked Timon.

‘I’m taking your cue. Since you’re in the mood for a kamikaze mission, I’m giving instructions to override the bridge. I’m telling the Nepotist to crash-land – on Valcea!’

It was Belinda’s voice that startled them all then. Hers was the prerecorded voice that spoke, with chilling calm and precision, counting down the moment of impact for sixty seconds.

‘Everyone,’ said Blandish, with a rakish, somewhat hysterical grin, ‘brace yourselves.’
Chapter Thirty-Six
I Was Panicking Over Dinner…

I was panicking over dinner.
The potatoes had turned mushy at the parboiling stage. And then I was diverted by noise in the hallway.
Fitz was greeting our guests.
They were swaddled up in winter things, coated in fresh snow.
Sally was breathless and pink-faced, beaming, glad to be here, brandishing a bottle of expensive red wine.
Under her other arm she carried that strange dirty dog of hers.
With her stood the fattest, oldest woman I had ever seen. She wore about twenty layers of coats and cardigans which she enlisted the gallant Fitz to help her remove.
Fitz stifled his laughter as he helped the old woman with her endless layers and hung them on the hatstand in the hall.
‘This is my neighbour, Iris,’ said Sally brightly.
And the old woman fixed me with a roguish look. I didn’t like it at all. When I took her hand it was scratchy and dry.
She looked like Baba Yaga in the old Russian fairy tales my mother used to tell me on long snowy evenings like this one.
The long snowy evenings we had been stuck in for weeks.
Baba Yaga flew about the world in a mortar and pestle, and she lived in a shed on chicken legs. Her home could run about the place.
She wore a cloak woven from the feathers of every bird in the world.
This old Iris took ages to let go of my hand. Behind her Fitz was dying to laugh.
‘And so you are the Doctor,’ she cackled. ‘Sally has told me a surprising amount about you, young man.’
‘Has she?’
‘You have a very great destiny,’ she said, eyelashes fluttering, as if she were in a trance. ‘Or a very great past. Which is it?’
I gulped. ‘I must go and check on dinner.’

I made Fitz show them into the dining room and told him to persuade Compassion – never at her best in strange company – to be sociable and nice.
I heard Iris asking about the lizard and the angel fish in our tanks.
Sally followed me into the kitchen. I didn’t hear her until I had my head inside the oven.
‘Don’t mind Iris. She likes to go on all mysterious.’
I was balancing the roasting dish, carrying it spitting to the bench, where I set to work carving the meat into delicate slivers.
‘I feel like I’ve seen her before,’ I said.
‘Perhaps you have.’ She pinched a bit of meat. ‘Melts in your mouth,’ she smiled. ‘You always could cook.’
‘I saw my mother this week.’
‘How is she?’
I shrugged. Sally and my mother had never approved of each other. Each convinced that the other was about to take me away.
As I started transferring the meat to the warmed plates, Sally said, ‘You haven’t said anything yet.’
‘What about?’
She looked hurt. ‘My book. That I gave you last week. You’ve had a whole week to read it.’
‘You know I’m not a fast reader. My concentration has been all over the place.’
She pulled a face, disappointed.
‘And… I went on, straining vegetables over the sink, ‘with the weather like it’s been…’
‘What’s the weather got to do with it?’
‘Everything’s been… like a struggle for survival recently. As though we were slipping into a second ice age.’
‘And that stops you reading a book by your oldest, dearest friend. Who really needs your opinion.’
Whoops. I’d hurt her feelings.
As I started arranging things nicely on the plates she was poking away at something on the kitchen table. A leather-bound volume on the oilcloth.
‘At least you’re reading something,’ she said, sounding even more hurt.
‘That’s Fitz. He found it in the attic among my family’s old stuff. I’m not reading it. Honest.’
She flipped through the ancient pages.
‘The Aja’ib. Hmm. “Chapter One Hundred and Ninety-Seven… In Which Our Hero Knocks Down the Bridges Into the Citadel To Allow The Green Men To Conquer, Little Knowing That The Grey Men Are Not Far Behind.”.’
She flicked again. “‘There were seventy elderly sisters in that ghastly mountainous realm and they set out with some trepidation one horrid night to destroy the filthy remnants of that man they most despised, the man already dead, whose head was made all of cracked glass, so that his brains, bruised, dashed, already sent mad, could be seen pulsing within.’” Sally looked at me. ‘Sounds like rum stuff. “In Which Pale Shadows From Another Land Impersonate Everything Familiar to Our Heroes”.’
‘Fitz likes that sort of stuff.’
‘Hmm. Maybe he’ll like my book.’

By the time the hostess trolley was loaded and Sally helped me push it through, we found that Compassion was lighting the candles on the table.
Fitz was drinking.
‘Where’s Iris?’
‘Fitz upset her,’ said Compassion.
‘What did he say?’ I was furious. The tone was all wrong.
‘He said her bus in the street outside was an eyesore.’
‘Her bus?’
Sally nodded. ‘She drove us here.’
‘Where is she now?’
Compassion rolled her eyes. ‘Up in the bathroom. Sobbing her heart out.’
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Now The Great Beast...

Now the great beast was shackled and slumped in the corner of what had once been his throne room, his stateroom; the glass cathedral in which once he had sat resplendent, passing out his querulous commands, and watching the games that he had demanded for his own hellish amusement.

Now he sat defeated, hunched over, examining the jagged edge of his broken tusk with his talons.

He seemed almost oblivious to the Ghillighast as they skittered about his city.

Meisha had settled herself on his throne and flung the odd taunting word in his direction, but he didn’t respond.

Marn the Glass Man watched on in horror. Belinda couldn’t understand her friend’s attitude.

‘But you hate Daedalus,’ she said. ‘You wanted to see him fall. And he has! Without us doing anything. He has just given himself up.’

Marn looked at her gloomily. ‘What makes you think the Ghillighast will be any better?’

Belinda shrugged. ‘They seem rather decent to me.’

‘You know nothing about them. There’s no telling what they’ll do now that… now that my people are extinct.’

‘Not quite extinct, Marn. You’re still about.’

‘There is only me!’ he moaned. ‘Daedalus didn’t know what he was doing letting the humans fire on the city.

Belinda was kneeling down by his chair, whispering conspiratorially. ‘If there’s one thing I’ve learned from travelling with Blandish, it’s don’t reckon on the ending before you get to it. Anything might happen yet.’

‘Don’t mention that man’s name to me.’

‘You blame him for attacking Valcea?’

‘Of course I do.’

Belinda shook her head. ‘I don’t believe Blandish would do such a thing. Honestly, I don’t. For one thing, Timon would never let him… and Timon controls the weaponry aboard the Nepotist.’

‘You don’t understand, Belinda,’ said Marn wearily. ‘Daedalus can make people do what he wants. He has a brain the size of a wheelbarrow. He can control you without you even knowing it. Make you see what he wants you to see, say what he wants you to say. How else do you think he got most of the Glass Men to do what he wanted?’

Belinda blanched. ‘So… even captured like this, tied up, and defeated-looking, he could still try to…’

Savagely Marn nodded. ‘Of course he could! Don’t let him fool you!’

The pair of them stared across the shattered rink of the floor to the bowed-down, bulky green figure now sitting at Meisha’s feet.

Belinda thought she saw the elephant’s eyes glinting with something other than abject misery.

‘So… he could be messing about with our minds now, and we might not even know it?’

‘Exactly,’ said Marn firmly. ‘We have to be on our guard. Hallucinations, everything.’

Belinda gulped.

Meisha was speaking now, addressing those excitable Ghillighast who weren’t already exploring the city and gathering spoils.

‘So this is how our history recommences. In glory and victory and the effortless sacking of our enemy’s city. Thanks be to Pesst and his delectable bride, the Lady Belinda.’

All of the Ghillighast applauded and chattered at this and, once more, Belinda found herself at the centre of everyone’s attention.

But then she saw the elephant’s eye burn with a peculiar malevolence and she started to feel herself change.

‘Belinda!’ Marn was shouting. ‘What’s happening to you?’

Belinda was feeling rather hot.

Around her the Ghillighast were gibbering in terror.

They ran about the place, encircling her, heedless of the shrieked commands of their equally startled High Priestess.

Belinda had no idea what was happening to her. She felt too warm, and itchy somehow and, in a way she couldn’t quite define, she felt bigger all of a sudden.

The Ghillighast stared up at her in horror. Even Marn seized the wheels of his chair and attempted to manoeuvre himself backwards.

To all intents and purposes the Lady Belinda had been transformed into a squid.

Her clothes had dropped off her and her skin had turned tough, rubbery and mauve.
And there was a great deal more of it.
Now she had numerous lithe and densely muscled serpentine legs and they struck out in all directions, terminating in deadly flippers the size of sleds, so that she squashed one or two Ghillighast stone dead on the spot, even before she was aware of the very nature of her transmogrification.
Her two eyes were huge now, almond-shaped and like two rocks of amber; there was a desperate pleading in them – and she looked at Daedalus in his chains, to get him to free her, but he was still.
Belinda flailed her new limbs and the remaining columns in the throne room trembled precariously.
‘What has become of the Lady Belinda?’ shrilled Simaf, clutching hold of his mistress’s wings.
She shook him off. ‘How am I to know?’ She stared in horror. ‘It’s all the doing of Daedalus! It must be!’
‘What do we do, madam?’ asked Simaf. ‘Shall we kill her?’
‘Kill the Bride of Pesst?’ screamed Meisha. ‘Why, that is blasphemy, Simaf! No… it is Daedalus we must slaughter! And do it now – before he causes worse disasters to befall us. We were fools to let the monster live even this long! Guards!’
Meisha regained some measure of composure when her most loyal Ghillighast guards advanced then, bearing their tiny but deadly silver daggers.
They saluted her calmly, as if nothing untoward was even going on around them, and then they advanced on the crouched figure of Daedalus.
‘Slaughter him!’ Meisha howled. ‘Tear him to pieces! The Ghillighast will never live peacefully here on Valcea, or anywhere else, until Daedalus is killed!’
So the Ghillighast rounded on the apparently helpless elephant.
And Belinda, equally helpless, thrashed around her purple limbs.
Hers was a gurgling, oceanic lament, an endlessly salty caterwaul.
Marn tried to calm her and turned, breathless, to watch the killing of the hated Daedalus.
At last, under the manic, shrieked commands of the haggard bat queen; the Chiropteran High Priestess, Daedalus was about to die.
Marn licked his dry glacial lips and watched.
The Ghillighast raised their daggers to strike.
And with a tremendous wheezing groaning sound – like the aeolian harp of Hades itself – a crimson double-decker bus materialised smartly, stubbornly before them all.

‘It’s really happening,’ said Garrett dully.
The room was now very hot. Blandish leapt up from his desk chair. It was metal and, like the walls around them, starting to scorch.
‘We’re really destroying the Nepotist,’ said Garrett. ‘After everything. After all our years together. This is it.’
Blandish looked almost jubilant.
‘And we’ve given ourselves a fighting chance. We destroy the commander of the Sahmbekarts, and give the fleet something to think about. We do what we always do – we save the day.’
Timon didn’t look impressed. ‘And kill ourselves in the process.’
The noise was unmistakable now. A keen roar of protest from the engines beneath them. Blandish hardly dared think of what he had committed his beloved ship and crew to.
He knew the engines would already be cracking under the stress and he knew the engineers down below would already have died a terrible death.
But the Sahmbekarts couldn’t do anything about this. They were stuck with the ship as it went down.
They might survive the crash-landing, but they stood only the same chance as Blandish and his fellows.
He would show them that he meant business.
The heat and the noise became unbearable. He knew that the bridge crew would have started slipping unconscious to the ground as the lights shorted out and the room began to shake.
Blandish found himself laughing uncontrollably as he himself sank to his knees and the room rocked, and the door slid open abruptly, to reveal the bridge beyond and the chaos out there.
The Sahmbekart commander filled the door frame. Over the tumultuous noise he screamed. ‘What have you done?’
And then nothing.

Once more Iris was aloft.
She tried not to look down through the entire voyage. If she looked she would pass out for sure, and this was one of those times when passing out was not a good idea. Instead she looked across at Fitz, in the clutches of his
own owl, and he seemed all
He was a brave boy, really, she thought. All the owls had come on this flight. They knew the way through the tunnels. Of all the races of the Enclave caught up in the blue Corridors, the owls seemed the most proficient. They seemed to scent, instinctively, the way to go.
She looked backward as they emerged, at last, from the swirling blue of the Corridor, and into the frigid air high above Valcea.
She drew in her breath at the sight of the owls bringing up the rear.
It was an impressive sight. It took twenty of them, or thereabouts, to carry the gleaming green egg between them. Since they were all coming on this assault on Valcea, they had brought their precious relic with them for safekeeping.
Iris looked back at the country ahead and gasped once more.
She gasped at the snapped shining pinnacles, the shattered glass turrets of Valcea.
And then there was an explosion that buffeted them and made the air around them, even this high up, shudder and distort.
Some distance away from the city there was a searing light.
She could pick out a trail of fuel and a scorch mark on the night sky.
And in the frozen tundra there was a pall of smoke, a wad of black fuel and drear steam.
‘What was that?’ she yelled across to Fitz as the owls made their determined way down to Valcea, beating their powerful wings against the turbulence.
Fitz looked shaken. ‘It was the Nepotist!’ he cried. ‘Didn’t you see it? It fell out of the sky…!’

The Doctor had stumbled out of the bus and started gabbling almost immediately.
The assembled party gazed at him in amazement, seeming unable to ignore him or get on with what they were doing.
The Doctor took everything in his stride. The Ghillighast and the creature who appeared to be their leader or Priestess, and the prostrate, defeated Daedalus. He paused when he saw the Glass Man Marn and recognised in the globular, astonished eyes of the giant squid the stricken expression of the erstwhile Belinda. He rallied himself and decided to make the most of having everyone’s attention. There was still time to save the day.
‘I’m always doing this. I’m sorry. I’m interrupting again. It’s funny, though. It seems that whenever I’m in Iris’s bus, the old thing drops me in the most hectic and embarrassing spots. Nothing like my own ship, which makes a habit of landing me on the outskirts of things, so that I usually have a long walk to get to where the action is. It must be that Iris is terribly lazy or impatient or something. But anyway, here I am again, back in the thick of things. And goodness! It seems like I’ve got some catching up to do!’
At this he gazed up at the distraught serpent that Belinda had become. ‘Hello, Belinda, old thing,’ he grinned.
‘You’ve grown a bit!’
She flailed around at this. He patted one tentacle to calm her and winked. ‘I’ll sort it out. Don’t you worry.’
He whirled on one heel, saw that Daedalus was about to be executed and rushed over.
‘Oh, am I in time to watch a decapitation? I’ve never cared much for that kind of thing. I’ve always thought there were more interesting methods of dealing with people like this.’ With that he snatched the silver blades out of the hands of every one of the Ghillighast guards. It was one single, easy movement and the bats were hardly aware he had done it until he was absentely stowing their weapons away in his capacious pockets.
‘Mind you,’ he said, ‘when I say “people like this”, you realise of course I really mean “villainous scum”. Because that’s exactly what I think of you, Daedalus.’
The others jumped back then, as the elephant opened both eyes and fixed the Time Lord with the most vicious of looks.
‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘You can give me the evil eye all you want, but I still think you’re a… well, you’re a… swine!’
‘And who are you?’ a voice asked imperiously.
The Doctor turned to face the Priestess. ‘I might be any number of things. And who, exactly, are you?’
Meisha’s eyes blazed with fury. ‘This is not how our new history is supposed to be.’
A single shot rang out then, and everyone turned to see Compassion, standing by the bus and brandishing her weapon.
‘Nobody move,’ she said in a steely tone. ‘Anyone makes a move towards the Doctor, and they’re dead.’
He clapped a hand to his head. ‘Compassion, that really isn’t necessary. I’m really doing fine without –’
At this point there was another new arrival.
The tall twin doors into the throne room crashed inward and teetered on their ancient hinges before dropping to the floor.

Everyone turned to stare at the Steigertrude tank as it lumbered up to the end of the room.

The Ghillighast Priestess seemed completely lost by now. ‘And what is this?’ she asked.

Daedalus himself seemed shocked by this apparition. He stood up, stiffly, groaning, casting off his shackles with almost no effort.

There was something strange in his look.

As if something were happening that he hadn’t counted on.

He spoke hoarsely as the Steigertrude engine drew to an arthritic halt.

‘It is my son! My son has come for me!’

Even the Doctor was baffled now. ‘Who?’
Chapter Thirty-Eight
He Was Astonished To Find…

He was astonished to find himself alive.
But Blandish had always known his was to be a glorious destiny.
He had always known, from his earliest years in the Federation training corps, that his was to be one of those names that would stick in the annals of starfaring history.
And so he was alive to fight another day.
The room was on a slant.
He was lying on the moist corpse of the Sahmbekart commander.
He struggled to his feet in the dark and kicked the body for good measure.
Good. But there might be others around. He had to be on his guard.
Who else was alive? ‘Garrett?’ he hissed. ‘Timon?’
Timon spoke up and, as the captain’s eyes became accustomed to the new, rather dreary light coming in from somewhere, he saw Timon struggling through the heaped dead and unconscious bodies towards him.
‘We made it,’ said Timon quietly. ‘But who else did?’
They found Garrett then, his head split open, lying face down over the desk.
His own expensive brains were spilled all over his captain’s paperwork.
‘Anyone else?’ asked Blandish hoarsely.
Timon hunted around for a moment, but he knew it was hopeless. ‘It’s only us.’
‘I thought…’ said Blandish, and covered himself. Made his tone hard again. ‘I thought so.’
He began to pick his way out of the slanted room, back towards the bridge.
Timon followed and it seemed this was where the light was coming from.
The translucent ceiling of the bridge was cracked completely asunder and the frosty light of Valcea was peering through. They could climb out and on to the surface.
‘You thought a lot of Garrett, I know, sir,’ said Timon, as he watched his captain gaze up at the crack in the ceiling.
Blandish dragged his command chair over so it was under the hole.
‘More than that, Mr Timon. We never spoke of this. No one realised this in all these years. We never talked about it much. But Garrett and I were lovers from our first assignment on this ship.’
Timon’s jaw dropped.
Blandish seemed to be controlling himself by an immense effort of will.
‘Shocked, are you, boy? You shouldn’t be.’
He braced the chair with the fallen body of one of the massive lizard warriors, and prepared to hoist himself up through the ceiling and outside.
‘We loved each other. We may not have shown it publicly. Not like you and Belinda. But we did. And now he’s gone.’ For a second Blandish seemed to lose control. ‘We were supposed to die in battle together.’
He was up on the surface of the ship now, and reached down to give Timon a hand.
‘So, you see, I’ve got nothing to lose now.’
Timon struggled up through the cracked hull of the Nepotist. ‘I see, sir.’
Then they were both out in the night sky, overlooking the shining miles of ice.
Blandish pointed at the ruined glass city, a mile or two distant.
‘We caused that. And because of it, because of us, there is bound to be war. What say we go and deal with Daedalus once and for all, eh?’

The Doctor stood back and let others take centre stage.
He was as baffled as Belinda, and Marn, and the Priestess by the appearance of the trio that stepped out of the Steigertrude tank.
There was an old woman, pulling her wig and hat straight, bundled up in a sheepskin coat.
A younger woman in glasses, and a rather beautiful boy with livid blue wings stretching out around him and his chest bare.
It was the boy that the room was staring at.
It was the boy that the suddenly restored Daedalus addressed: ‘You came back to me, after all.’
‘I received the call,’ said Icarus.
‘You were on the Earth?’
Icarus nodded. ‘This woman took care of me. She treated me as her own.’
Daedalus looked at Maddy. ‘Then she shall be rewarded.’
Big Sue and Maddy were both staring at Daedalus.
They could hardly believe what they were seeing. They were struck dumb.
‘Have you nothing to say, Earth woman?’ Daedalus asked.
‘But…’ Big Sue stammered. ‘It’s a bloody elephant!’
Icarus interceded. ‘I promised these women that, if they brought me here, Father, to you, they would be
rewarded with their youth again. It is what they most desire. Another chance.’
Daedalus grunted in amusement. ‘Don’t we all?’
Then he clench and unclenched the talons of both hands.
They shimmered and glowed with light.
Big Sue and Maddy found themselves doing precisely the same thing.
Sue turned on Maddy: ‘What is he doing to –’
‘Of course,’ said Daedalus mildly. ‘Their minds will be wiped. They will recall nothing.’
And then, standing where the two women had been, was a single figure.
It was Maddy thirty years younger.
She was fifteen. She was dressed as Maddy still, but she looked like a whole other person.
She looked confused and on the brink of tears. In her arms she held a squalling baby wrapped in sheepskin.
Daedalus addressed her directly. ‘I am sending you both back home. This moment. The child I give you,
Madeleine, in exchange for my own child. On the condition that you name her Susan.’
The girl Maddy nodded quickly. She was scared. ‘Yes, sir.’
Icarus stepped forward. He kissed the girl on her cheek. ‘Goodbye, mother.’
Maddy stared at him hopelessly. As if she could remember his face but couldn’t place his name.
And then Maddy and Big Sue faded away.
Icarus turned to his father. ‘You will get them home safely?’
‘For my son,’ laughed Daedalus, ‘anything.’
Meisha had been watching all of the proceedings narrowly. ‘He is your son? Your true heir?’
Daedalus nodded grandly ‘He is indeed.’
‘Then you shall both be our prisoners. And we shall execute you both!’
Daedalus threw back his gargantuan head and laughed. ‘What do you think the Ghillighast are, Meisha? Do you
really think they are destined to rule the Enclave? Is that the glorious destiny left to them?’
The High Priestess stood resolute. ‘I do believe it.’
Daedalus wearily shook his head. ‘You should have listened to the vermin you routinely consult, Meisha. You
should have listened more closely. Because the Ghillighast themselves are just so much vermin themselves. You’re
nothing! You’re not fit to rule your own moon, let alone anyone else’s world! You’re finished and useless! I only let
you live so close to Valcea because you amused me. Do you really think you can threaten me now?’
Meisha had tears standing in her eyes. ‘But this is the time of the Bride of Pesst… This is her apotheosis…’
‘Ha!’ cried Daedalus, with a magnificent shrug of his trunk. ‘I think you’ll find this is no one’s apotheosis but
mine!’
As he was laughing fit to burst at this, the Doctor was backing away towards Compassion. He had noticed
something no one else had.
‘Get back into the bus,’ he warned his companion fiercely.
‘What?’ Compassion wasn’t used to being told what to do.
‘It’s safer on the bus!’ he urged. ‘Now, go!’
‘But…’
He tutted, and pointed up at the wrecked ceiling above.
Compassion saw the owls arriving en masse, an immaculate formation of perfect white plumage.
They rose up above the ceiling of the palace of Daedalus and then, inexorably, they crashed through the
remains of the glass.
‘What…?’ bellowed Daedalus and looked up to see the owls descend.
The Doctor and Compassion turned and pelted towards the bus.
The owls filled the air of the throne room. With them they carried their precious egg.
And Iris and Fitz.
Chapter Thirty-Nine
The Throne Room Was…

The throne room was silent now.
Until the huskies started barking.
Up till now they had been slinking in the shadows, puzzled, frightened, out of their depth as their masters the Ghillighast went about their business in this strange new world.
But now the huskies started howling and barking and they longed to rush in and attack the newcomers.
The owls were standing in the centre of the floor, perfect, huge, gazing impassively at the occupants of the room. There were thirty of them and their egg sat protected, a great green-gold jewel, in their midst.
They ignored the protests of the dogs and fixed their gaze on Daedalus, the bleeding, battered king of this world. And his son who, raising his own azure wings to protect himself, began to back away, knowing that it was for him that they had come. Suddenly the boy grew defiant.

‘Kill me if you must. If the compulsion
is so great
if the force of your mythology
of what is bred
in your hollow bones
leads you to desire
my desecration;
the bursting of my gizzards
the shredding of my wings;
then do it
act out your history
figure your mission out
upon me.’

‘In the bus,’ said the Doctor again.
‘You aren’t the kind to run away,’ said Compassion.
‘I don’t care,’ he snapped. ‘Get aboard.’
Then he turned back to the frozen knot of figures and bellowed.
‘Iris! Here!’
From among the owls emerged a tall golden-haired figure in lime-green plastic. She threw back her head and laughed.
Beside her was Fitz, somewhat cowed by recent events.
The Doctor turned on Compassion with gleaming eyes. ‘I told you they were alive.’ She shrugged. ‘You don’t know yet’, he said, ‘how we do things round here.’
While the owls were still taking things in, getting their bearings – solemnly gazing at the Ghillighast, the shattered remains of the stateroom, the elephant and finally, finally, with their huge eyes burning in terror at Icarus – the Doctor seized his chance.

‘Run!’
Iris and Fitz pelted across the chrome floor, skidding on snow and broken glass, towards the bus.
They tumbled inside, with the Doctor bringing up the rear.
Iris seized the antiquated controls and, with a few sharp jabs and wrenches, plunged them into the vortex.
The Doctor stepped back in horror. She had taken them out of time.
He hoped she knew what she was doing.
‘Why are we here?’ asked Compassion, as she gave the swirling continuum outside a scornful glance.
‘We’re buying time,’ said Iris. ‘We can pop back when need be. I’ve bookmarked the exact moment. Don’t worry.’
Fitz was back on the chaise-longue, fishing out a bottle from the drinks cabinet. ‘I’ve had more than enough. Why don’t we just sod off for good?’
But there was no answer.
Iris seized the Doctor and gave him a rough bear hug. A surprisingly powerful one for such a svelte woman. He coughed and found himself responding.
'It’s been far too long,' she said. ‘But I knew you were here.’
‘Hmm,’ he said, through a mouthful of honey-coloured hair.
‘I just know when we’re embroiled in the same adventure. I can feel it in my water.’
‘Hmm,’ he said again, trying to shake her off.
‘You just took so long getting to me! I had to get to you!’
‘Quite. What were those owls?’
‘Ah.’ She relinquished him at last and started to explain about the giant egg and its connection to the boy Icarus, and how the owls were pledged to protect one and destroy the offspring of the other, and how she and Fitz had hitched a ride, and how Daedalus was the father of the angel boy, and how the boy had been secreted on the Earth and…

‘Why don’t we just have one of our little mind-melding thought-transfer Time Lord telepathic conference things?’ she asked brightly, flexing her fingers and brushing her hair back from her temples.

The Doctor shuddered. ‘It always feels as if someone’s rummaging through my sock drawer.’
‘Good,’ she said. ‘Then I can see what you’re hiding in there.’

With that, she clamped her fingers to his forehead and he had no choice but to reciprocate.

F Fitz and Compassion looked on as the two of them silently apprised each other of their recent respective doings. Compassion looked faintly nauseated.

At last the two of them broke off contact.

‘Of course,’ said Iris to Fitz, ‘we don’t really have to touch each other to make contact. It’s just that the Doctor likes running his fingers through my hair.’

The Doctor looked grim. ‘So we’re in quite a pickle.’

Iris tossed her head. ‘The whole Enclave is in a pickle. And it’s all down to Daedalus!’

He looked irritated. ‘So while I was stuck in the Corridors, you’ve been busying about causing even more trouble! Bringing the owls to Valcea, of all things! How is that supposed to help?’

‘I had to get here somehow,’ she said grumpily.

‘But I’d almost sorted the whole thing out! Daedalus had got Icarus back – that was all he wanted really, I’m sure of it. He’d just stop all of this nonsense – and then the Federation people could have come and taken him away.’

Iris shook her head. ‘The Nepotist has crashed itself. A kamikaze mission. You know that.’

‘I could have prevented that! I could have saved Blandish… all of them… I could have sorted it out…’

‘No, Doctor. And don’t even think Daedalus would have stopped at getting his son back. That was hardly the point.’

‘Well, now those owls are there, they’ll rip him to shreds! And that’s your fault, Iris! You’ve caused that!’

She sighed. ‘As I said. I’ve bookmarked that point. It doesn’t have to happen.’

‘That not the way I do things.’

‘It’s how I do them.’

They were at loggerheads.

‘Doctor, Iris…’ began Fitz placatingly, taking a swig of brandy. ‘Why –’

‘Shut up,’ Iris snapped at him. She went on: ‘Daedalus wants this war to happen. He knew that if he caused enough trouble within the Enclave, he would get it to draw the attention of the rest of the universe. A universe which had, hitherto, been completely oblivious to it. He wants that kind of unpleasantness.’

Compassion put in, ‘Why should the rest of the universe be so interested in a little cul-de-sac like that?’

Iris snorted with impatience. ‘Because the Enclave is part of the Obverse. It would be terribly valuable for all sorts of reasons. You’ve seen how things work there. You’ve seen the Corridors. Obverse physics could have a profound effect on our – on your – universe. It should have remained a secret.’

‘Obverse?’ The Doctor frowned.

Iris smiled sadly. ‘Yes, I’ve not told you much about that before, have I, Doctor?’ She started to move back towards the cab of the bus. ‘The Obverse is my home.’

‘Obtuse, more like,’ muttered Fitz.

The Doctor was confused. ‘Are you saying you’re not who you claim to be?’

‘That and more besides!’ laughed Iris. ‘Now, shall we get back and wrap up the end of this thing?’

Although a squid, and having to learn to cope rapidly with a whole new way of being, let alone thinking, Belinda found a surprising amount of continuity between her usual and her present form.

She had watched the arrival of the owls with some perplexity, and then the fleeing of the Doctor and the others into the bus.
Her heart had hammered inside her chest at the thought of their abandoning her to this chaos. Her new, powerful heart, thudding away in panic as the bus vanished. She had stared at the spot as the sound of dematerialisation faded away.

Then the owls rose as one and started screeching again. It was as if the bus’s disappearance had freed them into action.

They attacked the boy Icarus.
They fell upon him, shrieking.
He disappeared under the blur of wings.
There was a storm of white plumage and then scarlet.
Daedalus howled.
The Ghillighast were frozen in horror and their dogs were silenced and stilled.
Chapter Forty
Iris Had Come Down...

Iris had come down at last, looking rather blotchy and red. But she had rallied through their first course and began to regale her audience with stories about parapsychology, which she absolutely believed in.

The mind could play some funny tricks, she said. Then, gamely, between courses, and picking over the shredded remains of the duck carcass, she moved on to cryptozoology; a much-maligned science, she claimed. Bigfoot was absolutely real, too. And she’s had first hand experience of loch monsters and alien incursions of all kinds.

Fitz excused himself and went out into the back garden to smoke. On the way he picked up the Aja’ib; which had become a sort of talisman to him.

In the garden he inspected the herb garden again and found that Sally’s dog, banished out back, was eating the wild thyme.

‘Hey boy; stop that. Stop!’ The mangy dog looked up at him quizzically.

‘What did Sally call you again? Something tautological, wasn’t it?’ The dog coughed wearily. ‘Canine. It’s purely descriptive. Nothing tautological about it at all.’

Fitz’s mouth dropped open. ‘You can talk.’

The dog rolled his eyes. ‘Why should that be such a surprise to you? Look at that book you’re reading.’

‘This old thing? It’s all fantasy.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Canine.

‘But it is! Look at the things it talks about. All of it is meaningless. The Shaft, the Obverse... the Enclave. Those terms make perfect sense in the book... but not in the everyday, the rational world outside this book.’

‘Oh?’ asked the dog, sounding rather withering. ‘Listen, Fitz. Learn to think of all these things as stories. And stories can’t contradict each other because, in the end, they’re all made up. Nothing can take precedence then. All right?’

‘I’m not sure I know what you’re on about.’

‘Well, you reckon the world you live in takes precedence over the world you’re reading about. So you’ve established a hierarchy, yeah?’

‘Of course! I’d be out of my tree not to!’

The dog was looking sceptical again. He gave a kind of shrug and started nibbling the herbs once more. ‘Maybe. But think how happy you might be if you didn’t have to make those choices about what you should invest belief in. Here in the Obverse you can think of it all as a kind of fugue.’

‘Fugue?’

‘Hmm,’ said the dog, chewing. ‘No contradictions anymore. Every story holding equal sway. It means there are always alternatives. And it means no natural ending.’

Fitz took his last drag on his cigarette and ground it out on the window sill. ‘I don’t believe it.’

‘No?’ asked the dog.

‘No. One reality has to be more valid than the other. It has to be realer.’

The little dog laughed and said, ‘Well... what if you found out that the one you’re in was the less real one? What if you found out that you yourself are less than real?’

Fitz laughed and looked at the moon. ‘You’re one hell of a dog. Do you know that?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Canine primly.
Chapter Forty-One
After I’d Had A Few Drinks…

After I’d had a few drinks and managed to blot out my panic over dinner and also the nagging pain in my leg – which seemed, at times, to be reaching an almost unbearable pitch – I decided to come clean with Sally.

Around the table, the others fell quiet as I turned, rather blearily, towards her and said, ‘I did read your book, you know. Every bit of it. I read it twice. I stayed up four nights running with it. Sat up in bed, afraid to go to sleep.’

She looked shocked. ‘Then why did you lie to me? Back there?’

‘I don’t know.’ I cried out then, as the pain dug in harder. They all looked at me.

‘Are you all right?’ Iris frowned.

‘It’s my leg.’

She glanced under the table. ‘You should see a doctor.’

I needed to explain to Sally.

‘It’s very hard, when someone you know writes something. Especially when it implicates you. And you have to say what you think. I mean, what if it wasn’t what you expected… or you’re disappointed? Or it’s actually really good and you can’t depend on your own ability to say why you think it’s good and you come across sounding all insincere?’

Sally smiled. ‘I just wanted to know what you thought. I wanted your honest opinion. I’d respect that.’

I went on.

‘I was afraid to go to sleep because of the dreams I’d been getting. But the dreams I’d been getting were just like your book. How did you know, Sally? How did you know what went on in my head?’

The Men of Glass with their ruby hearts, the Scarlet Queen of Jam, the Mock Turtle, the Bearded Lady, the savage owls, the angel boy, the demoniac elephant – all of them from my dreams.

The ones I was meant to suppress.

Even the twin confrontations at the close of both halves of the book, in the equivalent throne rooms at the heart of Hyspero and Valcea – even these oddly mirrored denouements were all too familiar.

And, above all, Iris. She had been the biggest shock of recognition.

‘I made it all up,’ said Sally simply.

And it was Iris who tipsily replied, ‘Darling, there’s no such thing.’
Chapter Forty-Two
As The Doctor Waited…

As the Doctor waited for Iris to take them all back to the precise moment they had left, he already knew what he had to do.
The owls. He would persuade them not to kill Icarus.
Icarus and his father would be sent back to the Federation. Daedalus would stand trial.
The Enclave would remain secret.
He would find out what the Obverse truly was.
He would find out where Iris came from.
He would find out where Daedalus had come from, and how Iris knew him.
He would engineer some way for the Ghillighast, owls, Steigertrudes and Sahmbekarts to return peacefully to their own, secret worlds.
He would never let Compassion out of his sight again.
He would tell the owls to look after their remaining egg. To never let it hatch.
He would have to look into the destiny of Icarus.
He would find out what bearing he was meant to have on the universe the Doctor knew.
He would find Blandish.
He would…

‘We’re arriving,’ said Iris, plunging the dematerialisation switch.
The Doctor took a deep breath, watched the swirling mists dissolve, and turned to tell his companions to wait aboard as he went off to solve everything.
He paused first, however, to see that the throne room appeared around them in precisely the manner it was meant to.
He waited for the glowing light of that chamber. The smashed glass and the assembled alien species. The owls and bats and giant squid.
Instead, outside, were winter woods.
Black trees.
Silvered snow.
Howling wind.
He turned, speechless, to Iris.
‘I’m sorry, Doctor,’ she said.

Blandish and Timon had arrived in the outskirts of the ruined City of Glass.
‘This is a real kamikaze mission,’ Blandish said. ‘We’re going the whole hog.’
‘What do you mean by that?’ asked the weapons expert.
‘I mean, I am activating the weapon that I’ve never tried before.’
‘You don’t mean…’
Blandish nodded grimly. ‘I don’t see why not.’
As they picked their way through the rubble, they were approaching the Steigertrude women, who were still looking for their stolen engine.
‘What are they?’ asked Timon, appalled.
‘As dead as the rest of us,’ said his captain, who had slipped into a very peculiar mood.
Emba stepped forward.
‘I suggest we join forces,’ she said reasonably. ‘And find the heart of this city and seize it.’
Blandish shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter now.’
Emba looked at him curiously. ‘What kind of soldier are you?’
‘The Federation will be sending ships soon. So will the Draconians, the Daleks, the Martians, the Sontarans and Cybermen. Everyone will be coming here. We don’t stand a chance. And neither does the rest of the universe while this city is still here.’
‘Then,’ said Emba. ‘We must burn it,’ said Emba.
Blandish nodded. ‘Agreed.’

They agreed this just as the same thought struck the transformed Belinda.
And she knew that, if Blandish had in fact escaped and survived, he had the perfect means to bring all this to an end.

She was one of the few crew members of the *Nepotist* to have the privileged knowledge. The knowledge of how exactly Blandish was armed.

He could tick himself down to annihilation. Any Federation ship’s captain could. It was seen as a necessary precautionary measure.

The captain’s spleen had been replaced, at the outset of his career, by a tiny warhead.

As this memory drifted through Belinda’s mind, the captain was making the necessary adjustments to activate the timer.

And as he led Timon and Emba and Steigertrudes into the wrecked City of Glass, he was ticking very quietly.

---

The Doctor hurled himself out into the black wind.

Iris followed with the others.

He howled out of rage and frustration.

‘You did it on purpose! You stopped me helping everyone!’

Compassion looked curiously at Iris. ‘Did you?’

Iris shrugged. ‘There was no way I could really get back to that exact moment. He should have known that. I saved our necks. Isn’t that enough?’

She shouted over the noise of the wind at the Doctor. ‘Is that enough?’

‘No!’ he roared. ‘I could have done it! I could have stopped this war!’

Iris shook her head. ‘No. You can’t always win. It had to go on.’

‘It did not! I was there! I could have made them —’

‘Doctor,’ said Iris, moving towards him. ‘It is inevitable. The universe and its Obverse. You couldn’t impose yourself between them.’

He looked at her, his face twisted in horror. ‘I don’t know what you’ve done.’

Iris shook her head. ‘It’s your TARDIS you should blame, lovey, not me. You think it’s coincidence it keeps plonking you right in the middle of all these dimensional disturbances encroaching on your precious Earth?’

‘What are you saying?’ the Doctor demanded.

‘I’m saying your own ship knows more than you do… It knows what’s going to happen, what has to happen. It’s doing the rounds, it’s been trying to prove itself wrong – but you mustn’t go back to the Obverse, Doctor. You simply mustn’t.’

The Doctor stared at her. ‘I don’t even know who you are any more.’

Iris shrugged. ‘I’m just glad I could save your life. All our lives. That’s enough for me.’

The Doctor pulled away from her.

‘I wish I’d let you die on Hyspero.’

She gasped. ‘You don’t mean that.’

‘I want to go into the Obverse,’ he said.

‘You can’t.’

‘You know about it. You can tell me how to get there.’

‘I can’t.’ Iris looked away from him. ‘Not yet.’

‘You have to tell me, Iris.’

‘I don’t. You can’t go there yet.’

‘When, then?’

‘Trust me, Doctor. I’ve sorted it out. I’ve sorted it out so you don’t have to go there…’

---

‘Fitz! Compassion!’ he shouted. ‘We’re leaving!’

Fitz came hurrying up. ‘How? I mean, where are we?’

The Doctor pointed through a gap in the dark trees.

Fitz looked through.

There was a sharp hill, drifted with snow.

Further afield lay the lights of Tyneside.

The angel statue, aglow with orange.

The shopping mall, blazing with late-night shopping lights.

The car park, packed to bursting.

And, closest to them, in all this regular hubbub, the TARDIS. Solid, blue, waiting for them.

‘How did you know…?’ he turned to ask the Doctor.
‘I’m going now, Iris,’ said the Doctor quietly.
She nodded. ‘One day you’ll see. There are things we really can’t get in the way of.’
‘Perhaps one day you’ll care enough to explain it to me,’ he said, in a very level tone.
Iris was fighting to stop her eyes watering. ‘I will. You know I will.’ She laughed bitterly. ‘Gods, if you don’t
know already, you ought to. Doctor, one day you’ll sit and listen to me, and I’ll tell you the whole lot. Everything.
One day you’ll stay with me long enough.’
He looked her up and down. ‘Iris… I don’t think I want to stay with you that long… not just yet.’

He turned away from her and led his two companions through the black trees.
He turned his back on the bus and its lights blazing aboard and Iris silhouetted in their glow. She waved once
but he had stopped looking back.
He led Compassion and Fitz through the trees and down the sharp, snowy hill, to the car.

‘Why did you ever trust her?’ Compassion asked him. ‘She caused all of that. She made that war inevitable.’
He fished around in his pockets for his TARDIS key. ‘It’s just like I said. I’ve got to look again at the people I
trust. I never used to be so… gullible. Pliable.’
Compassion looked stung at this.

They had to climb over a metal fence to get to the TARDIS.
Fitz tried to make the Doctor smile, passing his old scarf over to help him.
‘I hate the feeling that Iris knows something I don’t,’ said the Doctor, as they walked up to the ship. ‘It’s like
something hanging over my head.’
Compassion’s eyes narrowed.

Fitz spoke up as he followed them into the vast, dusty, darkened console room.
‘Don’t you wish… sometimes… we lived a quieter life?’
Chapter Forty-Three

My Mother Warned Me…

My mother warned me about nights like these.
She was a mermaid, so she knew all about existing in more than one world.
Nights like these leave you prey to the demands of numberless worlds.
They sparkle and gleam and try to seduce and lure you into places you’d only dream about otherwise.
They tell you that this town isn’t the only one where you might live.
Fitz and Compassion went off blearily to sleep.
Sally went to check that her dog was all right, had a quick word with him, and a fag, and then passed out drunkenly on the sofa.
Iris pulled a rug over her and then announced that she was going off for a midnight walk, as she often did, and would I care to join her?
It turned out she was a naturist. Her idea of a midnight walk in the snow was to throw off every last stitch of clothing in my hallway and go galumphing out into the night starkers.
I was appalled.
Her old woman’s body looked so much thinner than I expected under all those layers.
She stood on the welcome mat and I hardly knew where to look.
At least the alcohol had soothed the pain in my leg a little.
And it made me less likely to wonder what the neighbours would say about a naked grandmother leaving my house this time of night.
‘Why don’t you try it?’ she grinned rakishly. ‘Cast off your Edwardian finery, Doctor?’
And before I knew it, she was helping me off with my green velvet coat and my waistcoat.
I was folding up my moleskin trousers and pulling off my cravat. We were giggling like school children.
Off flew my shoes and my socks. She stood back as I shucked the rest of my things and folded them neatly. I looked up blushing and she smiled.
At last we were ready.
She opened the front door and let in the freezing night. Up came my goose pimples. She turned to smile at me again, still egging me on.
I was covering up my nakedness with both hands and then decided, oh, hang it – and strode out after her.
The cold drew us out of the house and the door slammed behind us with a resounding note of finality.
Here we were, ploughing through the snow.
Suddenly, gloriously free.
‘See?’ she said. ‘Don’t you wish you’d done this before?’
We walked into the park.
Strange how warm I started to feel.
She stopped and looked down at my leg.
She was staring at my swollen calf muscle.
The flesh stretched obscenely.
‘Something is growing in there,’ she said, simply.
That’s what I’ve been thinking.’
‘It needs letting out.’
‘How?’
I thought she was mad.
Then I realised how mad I must be, to come out with her like this in the night.
She reached up into the branches of the dark tree next to us.
She snapped off the sharpest, most jagged icicle she could see.
‘What are you doing?’
She bent with a grunt, at my feet. She seized my leg.
‘Iris…’
And before I knew it, she had plunged the diamond-sharp icicle into the flesh.
I watched, curiously detached, as the scarlet blood ran freely straight on to the blue snow.
There was an instant release from the pain.
She murmured, tearing open the swollen muscle, and my flesh inside looked like peach flesh, parting neatly
down to the clean pit of the bone.
And there, nestling in the warm meat, was a tiny blue body.
She touched it and it moved slightly.
It started to make a noise.
Iris tugged at the tiny creature inside my leg and, with one deft movement, tugged it free.
There was a slight sucking noise as it came away.
Then it was in her hands.
‘He comes from the Enclave,’ she said. ‘A space filled with corridors in which he was free. A space between
two worlds. He has to stay free to move between worlds.’
I clasped my leg.
‘We’d better get you home. And I can stitch that leg,’ she said. ‘I’m a dab hand.’
The wound wasn’t so bad.
I was just glad it was over.
I wanted to know what she was holding in her hands.
She showed me.
She opened both palms to reveal the tiny thing lying there.
It was a very small baby boy, all of blue.
As he dried in her elderly skin, his wings were shaking loose and fledging out.
I didn’t know what to say.
She stepped back and held her hands aloft.
‘Off you go,’ said Iris quietly.
And the blue boy ruffled his wings experimentally.
As both Iris and I watched, breathless, my child took off and soared up into the black sky.
Twenty Questions

1. Was it completely fitting that Belinda was transformed into a giant squid, thrashing her newly granted tentacles as the captain of her ship stormed into the throne room on Valcea?
2. Or was it an ad hoc, impromptu, arbitrary change of form, perpetrated by a Daedalus embittered by his own metamorphosis, a Daedalus who laughed aloud in glee as Captain Blandish informed the assembled rabble that they were all about to die?
3. Or was it all to do with Belinda’s eventual, heroic status as commander-in-chief of the defending armies on the frontier water worlds during the final push that the worlds of the Obverse made on the Enclave, and was she destined to find a new element?
4. And did Blandish’s personalised weapon really go off as devastatingly as he had planned, destroying what remained of the throne room at the heart of the City of Glass?
5. Or did it merely set off a bizarre and unforeseeable chain reaction which splintered and shattered the transdimensional Corridors, causing them to mutate beyond anybody’s wildest dreams?
6. And did those fractured conduits open up even further complex channels into known and unknown universes, so that even more spaces were jeopardised and even more races were sucked ineluctably into the bloody fray?
7. And was it so unforeseeable? Did Daedalus already know that the captain of the Nepotist was bound to seek to detonate his secreted device? Did Daedalus set the whole plan in motion, everything dependent on Blandish’s incendiary internal organ?
8. Did Daedalus rule supreme in the chaos and did he lord it over the ravening hordes?
9. How did he deal with the first new arrivals – the first being, naturally, the Daleks – who entered the space of contention, the threshold between thesis and antithesis bristling, buzzing, swivelling with fury?
10. Did the Steigertrudes and Ghillighast, led by Emba united with Meisha, form an army between them to defend the Enclave and maintain its fragile integrity?
11. At what point did the Doctor arrive?
12. And in which incarnation?
13. Was it really several, as many sources claim, and was it a tale as the legends have it?
14. Did Iris forge an alliance between Cyber factions and insect races and lead an assault on the homeworld of the first of the unknown races to emerge, hungry, from the Obverse?
15. Did Iris ensure that the earlier, merely eighth, Doctor was safely out of the way, on purpose?
16. Did she know what a can of worms had been opened?
17. Had she already been there and seen the outcome?
18. Did she live, like Merlin, backwards through time?
19. In the end, did she remove her Doctor, because she knew what must eventually become of him, or simply because she couldn’t bear to see him there on the battlefield again, again, again and over again?
20. Did she want to prevent her Doctor from seeing what really did happen next?

paul magrs and jeremy hoad
norwich, spring 1999

# Table of Contents

- Chapter One Door’s Stiff. Frozen…?
- Chapter Two The Ladies Were Having a Day Out...
- Chapter Three Captain’s Log. Stardate Etc., Etc....
- Chapter Four He Met Her That Afternoon...
- Chapter Five It Might Have Been Any Time of Day...
- Chapter Six I Used to be a Lot Bigger...
- Chapter Seven When They Come it Will be Across the Waves...
- Chapter Eight At Last the Captain Deigned to Come Out...
- Chapter Nine This is a Story About Winter...
- Chapter Ten The City of Glass Was Raised Up...
- Chapter Thirty-Two Even Aboard the Bus...
- Chapter Thirty-Three The Bus Is Rattling...
- Chapter Thirty-Four Existential Angst is an Embarrassment, But...
- Chapter Thirty-Six I Was Panicking Over Dinner...
- Chapter Thirty-Seven Now The Great Beast...
- Chapter Thirty-Eight He Was Astonished To Find...
- Chapter Thirty-Nine The Throne Room Was...
- Chapter Forty Iris Had Come Down...
- Chapter Forty-One After I’d Had A Few Drinks...
- Chapter Forty-Two As The Doctor Waited...
- Chapter Forty-Three My Mother Warned Me...