

DOCTOR WHO

BUSINESS UNUSUAL



GARY RUSSELL



*A security force with no official identity...
a managing director with no name... a sinister creature on
guard patrol resembling some kind of hellhound... SenéNet is
no ordinary multinational company.*

The Doctor arrives in Brighton, 1989, travelling alone. He soon discovers his old friend, the Brigadier, has gone missing investigating SenéNet, whose new interactive games console is soon to be released at an absurdly reasonable price. He was last seen at their headquarters – based in the picturesque Ashdown Forest...

Investigating further, the Doctor becomes more and more entangled in a deadly web of intrigue. Together with Mel, a plucky computer programmer from Pease Pottage, the Doctor must overcome the conspiracy of silence, rescue the Brigadier and save the world once again – something that would be a lot easier if he just knew where to start...

*Featuring the Sixth Doctor and Mel, this adventure takes place between
THE TRIAL OF A TIME LORD and TIME AND THE RANI.*

ISBN 0-563-40575-9



9 780563 405757 >

BBC

£4.99

Doctor Who and TARDIS
are trademarks of the BBC.

DOCTOR WHO

BUSINESS UNUSUAL
GARY RUSSELL

B B C

Published by BBC Books
an imprint of BBC Worldwide Publishing
BBC Worldwide Ltd, Woodlands, 80 Wood Lane
London W12 0TT

First published 1997
Copyright © Gary Russell 1997
The moral right of the author has been asserted

Original series broadcast on the BBC
Format © BBC 1963
Doctor Who and TARDIS are trademarks of the BBC

ISBN 0 563 40575 9

Imaging by Black Sheep, copyright © BBC 1997

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of Chatham
Cover printed by Belmont Press Ltd, Northampton

*This one is for 'Uncle' Roy Baldry, who was
responsible for so many of my greatest childhood
memories of Doctor Who – books, pictures and even
'Doctor Who Fights Masterplan Q'!
Thank you.*

CONTENTS

Introduction

Prologue

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Epilogue

INTRODUCTION

Don't ask me why I wanted to do this – I really don't know – but essentially there was a desire to write a sixth Doctor story that I thought Colin Baker would have liked to be in.

Most people reading this probably haven't had the opportunity to meet Colin and know him only as 'the Sixth Doctor', but are aware of the 'bum deal' he got when he was making the show that led to his swift, unexpected and somewhat inglorious departure from a series he adored. This book is my way of thanking Colin for all that he's done *Who*-wise since, for never giving in and for being something of a good mate.

In a past life, I worked at Marvel Comics and had the opportunity to employ Colin to write a *Doctor Who* comic strip (*The Age of Chaos*). In doing so, I saw a version of the Sixth Doctor that Colin wanted to portray, as opposed to the one he had to play via the scripts he was given. I hope that this novel captures a bit of that essence and again provides us with a stab at what might have been the Sixth Doctor, given time and a decent go at it.

Many folk have helped me along the way. First, Alden Bates, who shares my enthusiasm (and sense of humour) regarding Melanie Bush, a much underrated companion and filled in so many background details of her. Alden has a Mel web page – <http://www.wn.planet.gen.nz:80/~abates/mel/index.html> – which is well worth a visit. Second, the real Trey Korte, for being a good sport and letting me use his name. And then everyone I met in the US during the past year, particularly Anne, Bea, Jenn, Rhonda, Jill, Bob 'n' Patti, Ruth-Ann, Shaun 'n' Chad, Christian, Tom, Scott and Laura 'n' Eric – there are probably bits (some obvious, some not so) of them all in here.

Thanks also to the usual moral-support gang: John A., David B., John B., Nick B., Neil C., Barney E., Nigel F, Bex

L., Nick P., Gareth R., Kathy S., Paul S. (bet none of you realised you were members of the Happiness Patrol, eh?).

Then to Steve Cole and Nuala Buffini at BBC Books, who are probably reading this and saying, ‘Why? What on Earth were we thinking of?’

And to Pip and Jane Baker, who understood how to construct *Doctor Who* stories and characters so much better than they ever got credit for. The Mel of this book is meant to be as much theirs as mine.

PROLOGUE

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
11 May 1989, 19.17

There was no rational explanation he could think of – it was simply an impossibility that was possible. Something in his mind told him that there was a posh word his grandson had once found when filling in a crossword to describe something that was impossible and possible at the same time. If he got out of the woods, he would run straight round to see that grandson, hold him, hug him and just be relieved that the world was all right again. He focused on the image of the young lad, trying to bring that fresh innocent face into his mind's eye, as he pelted through the bracken, ignoring the slight mounds and bumps that threatened to send him sprawling flat on his face.

But he couldn't picture the boy's face. He couldn't bring it to mind. Why not? What was wrong with him that an image he could summon up, almost incidentally, every other day of the week simply would not come to mind now?

The blurred memory vanished as his consciousness was interrupted by a crash in the undergrowth behind him. The thing was catching up.

He hurled aside the sports bag he was carrying. Perhaps it would follow that – his scent had to be upon it, surely? If he could get up a tree, maybe he'd be safe.

He stopped and looked around, precious seconds ticking away. *There!* He could try getting up that one. The tree had several low branches and at least one foothold with which to hoist himself up.

He ran and grabbed at a branch, willing his tired, old muscles to support this latest endeavour. 'Come on,' he spat. 'Come bloody on!'

Up. Up he pulled, aware that the thing chasing him was probably getting closer. It had to be. Every piece of logic told him so. Yet maybe the scent *had* been lost. Maybe it was getting tired and would give up. Maybe, just maybe, he had tricked it with the bag and was safe.

His hands gripped the branches, ignoring the pain as loose bark splintered into his palms, ignoring the spasms that wrenched through his back as muscles, unused in years, were called into adrenaline-pumping action. He had to ignore the logic that told him he wouldn't see his grandson again. If only he could get higher – get to the very top, get some bearings. Maybe there was a road nearby. Yes, he could flag down a motorist, get some help, then the police would swarm back here and arrest everyone. All he had to do was get to the top and see.

'Are you all right, sir?'

He stared down at the ground below. Looking up at him, a semi-comical smile on her face was a young, dark-haired woman, dressed entirely in white. For a brief second, it occurred to him that this was some kind of visitation. He was dead and this was his angel coming to take him to face the Supreme Court. Then, as his brain kicked into gear a little more practically, he realised she was an altogether different sort of angel. She was wearing the uniform of a nurse, from that big private place across the Downs.

'Do you need a hand down, perhaps?'

He found himself smiling at her soft, almost sing-along Irish accent. And he suddenly felt very ridiculous. If she could stand innocently down there, what was he doing in a tree? He stared down at her eyes and even from such a height he could see that they were like beautiful sapphires, questioning his movements.

He found himself clambering down, muscles relaxing, and aching, very quickly.

'I feel very foolish,' he began. 'You see, someone's... dog was chasing me. I hid up there to escape it.'

The Irish nurse shrugged. 'I don't blame you, sir. But I've not seen a dog to speak of around here. To be honest, you

don't find many animals in this part of the forest at all.'

She offered him a steady hand to hold as he dropped the last couple of feet to the ground. He mumbled an embarrassed thank-you and began brushing leaves and bark off his clothes. 'Robert McLaughlin,' he said, holding out his hand.

The young woman took it and he was momentarily taken aback by the sheer coolness of her skin – not simply cold but lacking any sense of temperature at all. He thought it might have been one of those – what did they call them? – prosthetics, but no, as he glanced down, he could see it was clearly skin, with tiny hairs, wrinkles and fingerprints. It then occurred to him to wonder why she didn't let go. He tried to extract his hand, but hers just gripped harder. So harder in fact that he gasped.

'My... my hand...'

There was a disturbance in the bushes and he noticed a young, dark-haired man come up behind the girl. He too was a nurse, probably from the same establishment. Maybe they had been, well, getting it together in the undergrowth, when his running had disturbed them. But then he noticed the face, the eyes. No, these two were identical. Twins perhaps?

'You're hurting Mr McLaughlin, Ciara,' admonished the newcomer in a similar Southern Irish accent.

McLaughlin's hand was released instantly and he whipped it away quickly. Maybe a bit rudely. 'Quite a grip you've got there, miss,' he said. 'Arm-wrestle up at the hospital, eh?'

The young woman – Ciara, the other one had called her – shook her head. 'Not much, Mr McLaughlin, not much.'

The male nurse raised a hand and clicked his fingers. From out of the shrubbery came a man with mousy-coloured hair, dressed in a black rollneck sweater and jeans, a rifle slung military style across his back. His eyes were concealed beneath blue-tinted sunglasses, in which McLaughlin could see himself reflected. He dropped his eyes towards the ground and there, level with the newcomer's waist, was the thing that he had been fleeing from, saliva dripping from its jaws.

Green saliva?

Green eyes? Staring at him, and for a brief moment McLaughlin thought there was an intelligence in them, greater than in most dogs. He noted as well the overdeveloped limb muscles, the taut neck and the jaws. And those teeth, all curved slightly inwards. Anything caught in the animal's jaws would be unable to escape as the teeth would act as barbs.

'Where's the bag, Mr McLaughlin?' asked the male nurse.

Without hesitation, McLaughlin pointed to the left. 'About thirty yards that way. I... I dropped it to shake that... thing off.'

The man smiled. Almost. 'The Stalker doesn't give up on its prey, Mr McLaughlin. It doesn't follow the scents as normal dogs might.' He tickled the top of the Stalker's head. 'No, it homes in on the pheromones of human skin, Mr McLaughlin. And a panicking man on the run is such good sport.' He turned to the guard. 'Lawson, nip back and get the bag, if you would be so kind.'

Lawson silently hurried in the direction that McLaughlin had indicated.

McLaughlin sighed deeply. 'So, what now?'

The female nurse suddenly kicked him at the back of his knees, dropping him on to all fours, and before he could move she pushed his head towards the Stalker. McLaughlin raised his eyes and realised that his face was level with the bizarre animal's. He felt its warm breath on his cheeks, smelt the bad breath from its teeth. Unable to move because of the woman's tight grip, he closed his eyes, feeling his back quaking in hot and cold shudders. A few seconds of silence passed and he heard Lawson return. He tried to look up, but all he could see was the Stalker's drooling mouth.

'It's all there. Intact,' Lawson said, unzipping the bag presumably so that the Irish man could check inside.

'Now, Robert McLaughlin of Lordship Lane, Lewes, why did you break into Garrett Manor and steal this bag of... items?'

McLaughlin tried to move, but the hand holding him tightened its grip. 'If you know who I am and where I live, you know why.'

The male nurse coughed politely. 'My information is that

you're a private detective, Robert McLaughlin of Lordship Lane, Lewes. Who employed you to snoop around at the Manor?'

McLaughlin fought the urge to panic and tell all. Client's privilege and all that. 'I cannot tell you.'

He heard the bag being zipped up.

'Never mind. We'll find out soon enough.' There was a pause, then, 'Oh, let him go.'

For a brief second, McLaughlin assumed that the man had spoken to the female nurse, because her hand released him. Then a whistle from the left, presumably Lawson, underlined his mistake. The sudden stink of awful breath right in his face and the momentary pain of the Stalker's teeth on his neck told him otherwise.

He never felt the teeth as they tore through his flesh, severing his head in one bite. The last thought that went through Robert McLaughlin's mind was that he still couldn't visualise his grandson's face.

Garrett Manor, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
30 June 1989, 14.00

'How punctual you are, sir.'

The speaker was dressed in a dark Armani suit, with an Armani shirt, Armani tie and, most likely, Armani shoes. He carried a slim briefcase that was definitely not Armani and smiled with the complete insincerity of an Armani model. The dark suit contrasted nicely with his tanned skin and thin blond hair cut into a French crop – all the rage with the boys back at Brendon, although this man was probably in his early forties, despite looking younger.

'One tries to keep to a schedule. Politeness and all that.' There was a pause and to pass the time, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart took the opportunity to look around the entrance hall of Garrett Manor.

Once upon a time this had been a fine Tudor home to some local aristocracy. Black beams lined the fairly low ceiling and at least three rooms branched off the main hall. A

twisting staircase went up from the back of the hallway, directly opposite the large oak front door and a tiny door beneath the curve suggested more stairs leading to a basement area –probably some early servants’ quarters or a simple coal cellar perhaps. Either side of the front door were two large windows, undoubtedly later additions, with their rather obscure stained glass looking frightfully *non de rigueur*. The light but enthusiastic sound of fingers on computer keyboards provided a background ambience that was both comforting and yet slightly wrong. The Manor was crying out to be restored as a dwelling and have the trappings of a modern office conversion ripped out. He could see the electrical alarm wires trailed in the beam grooves and computer terminal junction boxes that tried to hide in dark recesses and shadows cast by wooden filing cabinets.

‘I’m impressed by the set-up here, Mr –?’

‘Jones. I’m the executive officer of SenéNet.’ He passed a set of A4 papers contained within a tinted blue-tinted transparent plastic wallet. ‘Our prospectus. The managing director hopes you will find it to your satisfaction. If, once you’ve digested the contents, you or your headmaster feels you would like a better idea of what SenéNet can offer your boys, I’m sure something can be arranged.’ Mr Jones suddenly smiled, as if he’d remembered that was what he was supposed to do when greeting guests. ‘We do prefer to take in young trainees from the better private schools. State schoolboys are less... disciplined, if you get my drift.’

Lethbridge-Stewart was flicking through the papers. ‘Oh yes. Too ready to test the games, eh, and not spending enough time writing programmes.’

Mr Jones ran a hand through his cropped blond hair. ‘Those are our observations, certainly. And competition has never been harder in this industry. The big corporations such as ICL, ACL and IBM tend to swallow up many of our potential proteges. We are striving to attract a better class of worker to our company, offering excellent incentives, opportunities, conditions of service and all that. Everything you need to know is, we believe, in those documents.’ He

tapped the folder. ‘Of course, if there are things you feel to be missing, I’d be delighted to discuss them with you.’

Lethbridge-Stewart did not consider himself a snob but this Jones was a fake through and through. No amount of politeness could hide the fact that the voice, like the suit, was a front – a product of training. No, this was not his natural line of work. Someone with Jones’s background was unlikely to have been business-oriented, so how did he come to be the executive officer of such a major company?

Old habits died hard, he then told himself Time to stop jumping at shadows and get on with things.

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded appreciatively at the paperwork. ‘Well, that seems all in order. Of course, Brendon has broken up now for the summer, so I’ll not be able to discuss this with the headmaster until he returns from the Continent.’ Lethbridge-Stewart coughed slightly. ‘I was actually hoping to, ah, get a look around myself today. The headmaster... well, both of us really... believed that was the purpose of the visit.’ He stared at Mr Jones, waiting for a response.

Jones stared back at him for a second, then his head cocked very slightly to one side and his brow creased.

Only someone trained to observe such things would have noticed and Lethbridge-Stewart was far more than just an assistant mathematics master and bursar at an exclusive private school in Heskith, Hertfordshire. Once upon a time, he’d had a far more interesting career, full of risk, daring and adventure. A job that required him to be diplomatic to members of ever-changing governments, be they British prime ministers or representatives of the Tri-Planet Alliance of Calfadoria. A job that took him from the meteorologically challenged depths of southern England to the morally challenged planet Parakon. A job that saw him repel more than a dozen alien invasions, thwart countless technological terrorists and generally be held responsible for defending Earth against the sort of dangers and threats the conventional armed services around the world had little chance of dealing with successfully.

He had been a hero.

He had been Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, Commander-in-Chief of the British branch of UNIT, the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. He had been instrumental in setting the whole taskforce up and what had all those years of loyal service cost him? A marriage and family plus, briefly, his mental health.

He never felt much like a hero, not with the constant stream of letters to bereaved parents, wives and husbands of soldiers who had died under his command. He certainly hadn't felt much like a hero when he was demobbed, packing up his few mementos into three cardboard boxes as Colonel Charlie Crichton moved into his seat, both literally and metaphorically.

And he had felt very unheroic as his ever-loyal staff corporal, Carol Bell, drove him away through the UNIT gates and into the Buckinghamshire countryside, then crossing over the M1 and up into Hertfordshire, where she helped him unpack his few worldly possessions into a tiny wooden version of a Nissen hut that he would call home for the next decade or so.

He had often thought of his soldiering days, as he struggled to keep discipline in the frequently rowdy classrooms of Brendon. Oh, it was all very well for this Mr Jones to talk about Brendon boys as if they were some kind of intellectual superiors to those from the comprehensives in St Albans and Tying, but it seemed unlikely that Jones had ever tried to cope with the 'sons of nobility' passed into his care by parents concerned only with producing offspring to carry on the family traditions who unceremoniously dumped them on strangers for eight months of the year.

He'd caught up with some of his ex-colleagues over the years, many at the reunion party back in October '83. John Benton had returned to active service, while Mike Yates and Tom Osgood had set up their tiny tearooms just outside Reading. Even that awful Shakespearean-sounding man had been there. Carol Bell had left shortly after Lethbridge-Stewart went to Brendon, married and now had one child.

Hearing that had reminded him of his own daughter, Kate. Where was she? After his divorce from Fiona had come through, he'd lost track of her (or Fiona had used her father to ensure that Alistair never knew where she was). Other old faces had greeted him. Dennis Palmer, Masie Hawk, Liz Shaw and even that old curmudgeon Scobie had dragged himself away from whatever retirement home he'd absconded to. To top it off, Sir John Sudbury had been there, citing all the brave and wonderful things Alistair and 'his team' had done over the years. Charlie Crichton hadn't looked too pleased at that, which had made that part of the day so much sweeter. And, of course, to crown it all, the Doctor (well, four of them at least) had whisked him away for a while and conspired to make his first trip to his/their home planet, Gallifrey, a memorable one. It had given him a brief chance to pay his respects to old friends such as Miss Smith and Miss Jovanka again as well.

After his return, there had been much quaffing of a good selection of Californian reds, nibbling on quite decent sandwiches and a great deal of artificial pleasantries from Crichton. 'Bet they don't let you go for good, sir,' he'd said, clearly wishing they had been at Lethbridge-Stewart's wake rather than a reunion party.

When Lethbridge-Stewart had recently received a call from Sudbury, he quickly realised there was more to this than a social chat.

'Good to know you're keeping it all together, Alistair. When does term end?'

Typical Sir John Sudbury – straight for the jugular. 'In about seventeen days, Sir John.'

'Righto. Fancy doing a bit of work – you know, like in the old days? Bit of greyhound racing?'

Greyhound One had been the Brigadier's personal call sign back in his UNIT days. The inference was clear.

'Yes.' he said without much hesitation. 'So long as you clear it with the headmaster somehow.'

'He knows?'

'Merciful heavens, no,' Lethbridge-Stewart had said. 'But under my contract, he has to be informed of anything that'll

take me off school property for any length of time or any freelance work. I'm sure you'll find someone up in Whitehall who can find some way of explaining my absence to him.'

Clearly Sir John had found a way, as three days later a sheaf of papers arrived by courier, including notice of a hotel reservation in Ditchling, a hire car and a return train ticket to Brighton, from where he would pick up the car. The papers mainly concerned SenéNet, an Anglo-French private company based in Ashdown Forest that was in the computer-games console market. A company with some amazing technology which was so advanced that it warranted investigation, on the sly naturally, before other games manufacturers began to kick up a fuss.

So here he was, undercover, in the lion's den. Pretending to see if any of his more intellectual young students could get work experience with the company. And here was the astonishingly well-built Mr Jones with a face that suggested he was better suited to throwing punters out of a dodgy nightclub than escorting visitors around a business, and a very small bulge by his left hip which betrayed the presence of a small handgun. It was most likely a Compacta 25, as the weight of it clearly didn't affect the way his trousers hung on his left.

How many office executives greet visitors armed? Lethbridge-Stewart wondered. Either Brendon school had sheltered him from the real world for too long or, far more likely, Sir John Sudbury's fears had been justified. Beneath the charming exterior of SenéNet, something needed investigation.

Mr Jones suddenly beamed. 'My dear Mr Lethbridge-Stewart, of course you may have a tour. The full tour. Everything you could ever want to know about SenéNet is at your disposal.' He indicated the stairs. 'Shall we go up? The managing director is most anxious to... say hello.'

And for the first time, the Brigadier looked at the blond man with the concealed gun and thought that maybe everything was not going quite so well after all.

MONDAY

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 11.45

‘The most wonderful thing about computers during this period of your planet’s troubled history,’ the Doctor said, ‘is that they’re remarkably easy to hack into, completely rewrite the programs and hack out of without anyone noticing.’

It was warm inside the CID office. Too warm in fact, because the air conditioning had broken, as usual during the summer, and the windows that formed a majority of the walls on the three sides exposed to the elements outside were reflecting the heat right on to the desks. Detective Inspector Robert Lines was convinced that the back of his neck was getting enough sunburn to make the week in Majorca his wife had booked quite unnecessary. He was also fairly positive that the computer the Doctor was working on was probably about to explode in the heat. One of his detective sergeants had thoughtfully broken the blinds last month and so although the sunlight could successfully be kept off the screen, the rest of the office was baking like a potato in a microwave. And the strangest thing of all was that the Doctor, who was wearing the heaviest coat imaginable – red and a million other colours – had not broken into even the lightest of a sweat.

‘Is that so, Doctor? Well, if you could manage to avoid destroying the last eight years’ worth of records on our server, I’d be grateful. As would the twelve temps we had to employ for four months to type it all in.’

Bob Lines aimed another cigarette stub at the waste basket on the other side of the office and missed, again earning him another frosty look from Detective Sergeant Rowe. He smiled apologetically. ‘Sorry, Steph.’

Without looking up from the screen, the Doctor grimaced.

‘Of course, if you stopped smoking so much, poor Sergeant Rowe over there would not have a messy floor and my lungs wouldn’t have this thin coating of nicotine tar which they didn’t possess last week.’ He jabbed a couple of keys with a more jaunty flourish than usual, then sat up straight. ‘Ha! Get out of that one, you floundering fetid fungoid!’

There was a pause and then Bob Lines saw the screen go dark. A tiny icon showing a mushroom suddenly erupted into thousands of pixels, showering to the bottom the screen, where they vanished. ‘Is that good?’ he ventured.

‘Good?’ The Doctor stared at him. ‘Good?’ The Doctor stood up and then bent down so that they were face to face. ‘Good? It’s brilliant. It’s superb. It’s... it’s... really rather splendid actually.’ He straightened up again and reached over to Stephanie Rowe’s desk, whisking a cup of lukewarm tea off her desk and swallowing its contents in one gulp. ‘Now, I’m not one to boast about my computer skills, but that was really very good indeed. I think the vernacular you would understand is, “Cor blimey, guy, it’s a fair cop.” Or some other appropriate cliché pronounced in a theatrical manner.’ The Doctor sat once again in front of his screen. ‘Good? Hah!’

Bob Lines finished off his own tea and reached for a sheaf of papers from another, unoccupied, DC’s desk. He waved them towards the Doctor. ‘So, can I consider the case closed?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘No. Not entirely. Well, yes, sort of, actually. In a way. So to speak. Some might –’

‘Yes, thank you, Doctor, but a straight yes or no would do. I am, if I remember, some kind of “;plodding, dunderheaded flatfoot with the imagination of an Ogron”. I lack your intricate knowledge of other worlds, Doctor, but I do remember an insult when I hear one.’

The Doctor grinned at him. ‘Yes, and it really was a very good one, I thought. The subtle juxtaposition of the traditional impression of an authority figure with the extra-dimensional, otherworldliness which you could never appreciate, delivered with panache and –’

‘So,’ Bob interrupted again, ‘is it over?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Yes. On the whole, one might say

it is over. The Usurian Company has been locked out of the files and the Master's attempt to defraud the Dow-Jones of \$68 million and reduce the contents of Fort Knox to dust is scuppered. All I need now is to program a new subroutine into his system, from here or anywhere else, that will remove any trace of his shenanigans completely and everything will be tickety-boo.' He clapped his hands. 'Right now, his Usurian partner-in-crime will be retreating into his teapot-sized starship and abandoning Earth – for a few millennia at least – and the Master will be scurrying to his own TARDIS, tail between his legs in shame. And he didn't even know I was responsible.' The Doctor pouted suddenly. 'Which is a bit of a shame, but no doubt I'll get the chance to tell him someday.' The Doctor looked at Bob Lines and smiled. 'A good day's work, methinks, oui?'

Bob Lines shifted in his seat uncomfortably. let me get something straight, Doctor. You want to erase any trace of the Master's "shenanigans" from our computer files. Totally?'

'And utterly.'

'Why?' Rowe asked.

Bob Lines nodded. 'Yes, Doctor. Why? It will make things rather difficult for us to explain to our superiors, both here and at the various financial institutions who have been "ripped off", that although we've stopped the perpetrators, we have no prisoners, or even any evidence to show what they did.'

'Or,' added Rowe, 'that they even did anything in the first place.' She punched up something on her computer which Lines couldn't see. 'In fact, you've placed everything back as it was so efficiently, the whole last three weeks might never have happened.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Had to, I'm afraid. You see, the Usurian was using, perhaps unsurprisingly, Usurian technology. Combined with the Master's, and indeed my, manipulation of your computers, those kinds of processes are too dangerous to give mankind right now. In fact, I've often wondered just how you people discovered the microchip so suddenly. Maybe I should find out and... no, I suppose that

would disrupt the timeline even further if I changed that. Anyway, the most important thing is that it's all over now, and once I've uploaded the final defence codes, no one will be able to undo my work. It'll be at least ten years before anyone can come close to understanding any of this, and by then my virus will have eaten all the Master's information for ever. Untraceable, unrecoverable and irrevocable.' He swung around on his swivel chair, arms slightly outstretched as if he expected a round of applause. On being greeted by stony stares from Lines and Rowe, he realised he wasn't going to get one. Not from them, anyway.

'This final code you need,' Lines began, 'why can't you do that now?'

The Doctor brought his arms down and placed his hands on his lap. 'Yes, well, that's a bit tricky. You see, although I know a lot about computers, the actual version of ALGOL he's used to protect his files is so, er, basic that I'm way beyond it. Too primitive for me. No, I'll need a computer whiz from this era to upload that.'

Lines threw a quick smile at Rowe, who grinned back. 'Ah, well, Doctor. We'll see what we can do about finding you someone dense enough to operate it, shall we?'

Presumably oblivious to his sarcasm, the Doctor nodded. 'That would be a good idea, Detective Inspector.' The Doctor got up, sliding his chair back under its desk. 'I'll pop by tomorrow if you like, around elevenish, to see if you've found your expert, all right?'

Lines just nodded. It was safer that way. He smiled a farewell and the Doctor was gone in a blur of red and yellow and blue and green and...

'I hate that coat,' Lines muttered. 'The person inside it has some good qualities, but that coat has got to go.'

Stephanie Rowe wandered over to the computer. 'He's switched it off,' she groaned. 'I don't believe it.'

'Is that a problem?' Lines already had an inkling that it would be.

'Last time he switched off the computer we had to wait a week before he dropped by to switch it back on. He put some

kind of code on it to stop us “meddling in things we couldn’t possibly understand”. The DCI went spare.’

Lines shrugged. ‘Well, he’ll be here tomorrow and, with any luck, the DCI won’t want to use the computer till then’ His fingers were crossed, but he hoped Steph wouldn’t notice. ‘Until then, we shall just have to bask in the unseeable glory that is knowing the Master’s scheme has been stopped’ Lines flicked through a file on his desk. ‘Oh well, back to armed robbery, wounding with intent and bizarre sexual practices under the pier, I suppose’ He smiled at Steph. ‘As no one else is in yet, you get to pick, Steph. Barclays, Lenny the Greek or the pier?’

Rowe shrugged. ‘Don’t care. As long as none of them involves little green men from outer space –’

‘Or inner time, lest we forget.’

‘Or inner time. I’ll take whatever’s on the top, guy.’

Bob Lines passed her the file on Lenny the Greek. ‘Let’s see if we can put him away this time, eh?’

36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
24 July 1989, 11.58

‘Melanie? Melanie? It’s ready.’

Christine Bush’s perfectly manicured and “autumn russet” painted nails (Rimmel, of course) pressed down on the sticky tape a bit harder.

‘Melanie?’ she called out again, her voice half an octave higher. ‘It’s ready. Could you help me please?’

Christine glanced down towards the end of the garden. ‘Trey?’ she cooed. ‘Trey, I don’t know where Mel has gone. Could you find her, please?’

Trey Korte flicked the last few clumps of grass on to the compost heap, leaned the rake against the perfectly aligned wooden fence and wandered towards his host. ‘Can I help, Mrs Bush? If Melanie’s busy, perhaps I could lend a hand.’

Christine flustered slightly. Trey was grinning at her, his bright blue eyes contrasting wonderfully with his streaked blond hair and deeply tanned torso. Soft pale hairs

mushroomed up from his washboard stomach and expanded around his Adonis-like chest. She flustered further as he, absently of course – he couldn't possibly know the effect this had on her – traced one of his nipples with an astonishingly clean thumbnail.

'Thank you, Trey,' was the best she could get out, hoping desperately that her cheeks weren't flushing. 'I just don't know where Melanie has got to. I called her, you know.'

Trey just smiled and gently lifted her finger off the sticky tape. 'I'll hold it in place, Mrs Bush. You just wrap the tape around.'

Christine Bush smiled gratefully. 'I don't know what I'd, I mean we'd, do without you, Trey.' She stretched the sticky tape over the red wrapping paper and pushed hard. 'My husband,' she started, and then looked up at him hurriedly, 'who'll be back later, of course' – she tugged another strip of tape from the dispenser – 'was only saying yesterday how grateful he was that you're here to look after me. Us.' The wrapping paper was secure. 'I mean, you've come all this way, and the best we can offer you is a couple of trips around the Downs and some rather good weather in our back garden. Raking grass' She laughed embarrassedly. 'Cutting it, even.'

She heard the sound of the patio doors sliding open and was relieved to be distracted. Framed in the door was her daughter, a vision of padded shoulders, with her stick-insect body encased in a lemon trouser-suit and her hair a vast auburn mop, artificially frizzled into tight curls and hanging half-way down her back. She was painting her lips with a bright red lipstick (undoubtedly Body Shop) and gazing into a tiny compact mirror.

The compact was snapped shut and it vanished, along with the lipstick, into a voluminous trouser pocket with a speed that any master of sleight-of-hand would have been proud of.

'Melanie,' Christine admonished. 'I was calling you. Poor Trey had to help me out.'

Her daughter glanced over to them, a sardonic smile on her face.

'Sure, Mum. Sorry to make it *so* hard for you.'

Melanie walked on to the patio with a series of tiny but precise steps, the top half of her body not moving, proving to Christine that at least those very expensive dance lessons in Brighton with that frightful Miss Fairs had paid off. Melanie's poise was the envy of the Pease Pottage Women's Institute. Christine glanced back at Trey to see if he had noticed.

Such potential.

Melanie was examining the immaculately wrapped parcel, which was shimmering slightly in the midday sun. 'Very nice, Mum,' she said. 'Dad'll love it. Whatever's inside. I mean, the paper is so aesthetically pleasing.'

Christine couldn't quite detect any sarcasm, but Melanie was, like so many daughters – according to the books on teenagers she'd got from the library a couple of years ago – behaving with antipathy towards her parents regularly. The phase would pass, according to Chapter Eight. Except that Melanie was just twenty-five – a fact Christine had a great deal of difficulty remembering sometimes.

Trey moved a step towards Melanie and, without thinking, Christine countered with a move that placed her directly between him and his daughter. Melanie just smiled at them both.

'Still want to visit the Lanes, Trey?'

The young man nodded. 'I'll just get a shirt,' he said, sidestepping around Christine and back into the house via the conservatory.

After a moment's silence, Melanie sighed. 'Oh Mum, do stop acting like a lovesick adolescent. He's half your age.' Christine stared. Hard. 'I don't know what you mean, Melanie.'

Melanie laughed and took her mother's hand. 'Oh, mother dear, yes you do. But I think you're wasting your time. I doubt you're his type.'

Christine pulled her hand away, slowly. 'Young lady, I don't know what you mean at all. I think Trey is a nice young man and he's obviously got his eye on you.'

Melanie poked at her father's birthday present. 'Mum, Trey is a drama student. He's come all the way over from

Illinois for the Brighton Festival. He's cute, sweet, looks like something from an Yves Saint-Laurent advert and is probably the toast of Chicago. I also don't think I'm his type either, by the way.'

'And what "type" exactly are you?'

Melanie stretched her arms out and took a balletic walk around her mother, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on Christine's outraged expression. 'Do stop thinking of me as some sweet, naive little Shirley Temple, mother dear. I was twenty-five the other day and have just spent three years at university. In London, that great city of vice and despoilment.' She reached out and took her mother by the shoulders, speaking in mock doom-laden tones. 'Despite their best intentions, the Bush family of Sussex were unable to stop their daughter joining the twentieth century. No longer that sweet, innocent waif with a gift for mathematics and a photographic memory, Melanie Bush has been corrupted, twisted and bent into a dark shadow of her former self. She has lived. She has loved...'

'Melanie! The neighbours! Please!'

'And,' Melanie continued in the same affected tones, 'she has shared a cup of tea with a member of the opposite sex and wasn't made pregnant. How can her parents cope with this ungodly child who no longer needs to be wrapped in cotton wool?'

Christine pushed Melanie's hands away. 'Yes, well, if I'd known that London University would turn you into a crude and spiteful girl, we'd have sent you to Durham, where your father and I went.'

Melanie just sighed loudly. 'Oh for God's sake, Mum, relax. Be thankful I don't play loud Gothic music, try to sell Socialist Worker to your WI friends or have a drawerful of thirty-five different-flavoured condoms in my bedroom. Some mothers would be grateful to have me as a daughter.' She pointed at the garden stretching behind them. 'But by the same token, I'm getting fed up with playing middle-class snob in the backwaters of Sussex, trying to stand on my own two feet without shattering your feelings every other second when

I don't wear the lipstick you wear, watch the films you watch and read the Sunday Times you read. I am *me*, Mum. Not you. Not Dad. Mel Bush. Me.'

'Melanie.'

'What?'

'Not Mel. *Melanie*. You know I hate Mel. It's so... so ...'

'Common? Cheap?'

'No, Melanie. Not common. I'm not a snob. It just doesn't suit you.' Christine Bush sighed. 'And I know you're not ten any more, and I know you want to be you, but I'm still me and although I can see you change every day almost, I'm too old to change. I did my changing twenty years ago. I'm sorry, darling, but sometimes it's a bit difficult for me to adapt, you know.' She reached a hand out and Melanie took it. 'But I do love you, you know.'

Melanie kissed her mother's cheek. 'And I love you, Mum. Lots.'

The doors slid open again and Trey wandered out in a tight fitting white T-shirt and equally tight cut-off Levi 501s.

'Hi, Mel. I think the bus is due real soon. We ought to go.'

He turned back towards the conservatory and went inside.

As Mel turned to follow him, Christine whispered in her ear. 'You're right, darling. He does look good in those shorts. He'll make some young lady very happy one day.'

Mel kissed her mother again. 'Young man, Mum. Bad luck.'

'Oh.' Christine stared at where Trey had been.

'Welcome to the twentieth century, Mrs Bush,' said Mel. 'I'll see you tonight.' And with that, she followed Trey into the house.

A few moments later Christine heard the front door close. She stared at her husband's birthday present. 'There's no justice in the world,' she murmured, and began writing out a message on a gift tag. 'No justice at all.'

Madeira Drive, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 12.36

Plop!

The Doctor watched as the ripples tried to outlive the waves that washed towards the stony beach that was Brighton's biggest tourist attraction.

Plop!

The little boy doing the throwing giggled cheerfully as his tiny arms threw each pebble roughly three times his height along the beach, just hitting the edge of the waters. Beside him, his mother was reading a Winston Graham while a baby in a pushchair was carefully protected from the sun's rays and slept in splendid oblivion to the world around it.

How marvellous, the Doctor mused. To be able to just sleep, or read, or throw pebbles into the sea, caring only about where you were going to eat tonight, or whether you had set the video for *Neighbours*, or how long it was until your husband came back with an ice cream for both of you.

Yes, these were the people he had saved, but they would never know it. If the Master's little computer fraud had succeeded, Earth would be in ruins, ripe for an Usurian takeover and there would be no pebbles to throw into the sea, no ice creams, no books to read and certainly no *Neighbours* to record on a VCR.

Of course, maybe the Usurians had the right idea after all...

But no. Turning away from the beach, the Doctor looked back towards Grand Parade where the famous Pavilion, with its Eastern-style domes, could be seen poking over the top of the old bus station casting shadows across Victoria Gardens. A nice restful day sitting on the grass, that's what he needed. Detective Inspector Lines had used the space-time telegraph the Doctor had given him after a previous encounter and had dragged him away from a quiet fishing holiday on Majus Four. Anxious to continue his peaceful lifestyle, away from Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans and other assorted belligerent oppressors with a nasty habit of interrupting good holidays on the flimsiest of pretexts, he felt he needed a good rest. And Brighton was the right place. The people were nice, and if 1989 wasn't a particularly vintage year, nothing too drastic

was scheduled to occur either. Or was it? Now he came to think about it, maybe there was something actually, but after a few seconds' concentration nothing had sprung to mind.

Reaching Victoria Gardens, he tossed a fifty pence piece at a spotty youth apparently working as an attendant and scooped up a multicoloured deck chair. Unfolding it, he flopped down into the chair, removing a green sun visor from a coat pocket and fixing it on his forehead.

He sat back and stared through the tinted plastic at some of the passers by. Many were wearing shorts or bikinis and very little else. He, of course, was wearing his usual white shirt, flowery cravat, candy-striped waistcoat and heavy multicoloured overcoat. His yellow and black-striped trousers were immaculately creased, and his orange spats clashed horrendously with his green sneakers.

'It's called sartorial elegance, 'he muttered to one young couple who were staring at him. 'I doubt you'd understand, being bred with the famous English reserve.'

His normally wild blond curls had been cut a little shorter recently, adding to the slightly more respectable image he wanted to display. Deep down he knew getting shot of the coat and trousers might help, but somehow he'd become very fond of them and saw them as a trademark of his confidence and charm.

The Doctor was happy, contented and peaceful. He closed his eyes to snooze. Everything was just as he wanted.

'Jeez, what a stupid coat to be wearing in this weather.'

Sharply he flicked open one eye as what was presumably the speaker wandered past. The accent had been that of a male American, from the Chicago area by the way the vowels were dragged out.

'Jeez, what a stupid accent to have in this country,' the Doctor mimicked loudly, and closed his eyes again.

Then he opened them and sat up with a start, staring after the American boy. And, more importantly, his companion. Small, thin, with a precise walk and good-quality clothes. Worst of all, a mass of red curls erupted from her head and cascaded down below her shoulders.

‘Oh no...’ he whispered to himself ‘Sussex, 1989. Melanie Bush!’

He quickly got out of his deck chair, whipped his sun visor off and back into his pocket and stared at the retreating figures.

Melanie Bush, known as Mel. Memory like an elephant. Fond of carrot juice. Energetic. Always trying to make him slim.

A temporal anomaly he had desperately tried to avoid. That’s why 1989 had seemed to ring a bell. Should have been a warning klaxon – Mel was trouble.

Some time back, his peers, his fellow Time Lords on Gallifrey, had placed him on trial, initially accusing him of breaking one of their primary laws – a quite nonsensical one, of course – about interfering with other life forms. As the trial had gone on, that charge became one that required invoking Article 7 – genocide. The trial had been a sham, of course. The corrupt High Council had needed a scapegoat to cover their own ineptitude and he had been it. Although he had exposed them and been freed, two major events had occurred. First, the prosecutor at the trial had been the Valeyard, a malicious and twisted individual who delighted in trying to have the Doctor executed. In reality, the Valeyard was a shade of himself, an amalgam of the darker side of his personality, brought into existence by the High Council and promised the energy from the Doctor’s remaining lives if he won his case. The Doctor would have been executed and this evil, alternate Doctor from the future could have existed fully. For the Doctor to discover that such an evil being had the potential to exist was bad enough; to know it was actually him was terrifying. He had realised he had to stop that ever happening.

The other major event was his discovery that he would have a travelling companion called Melanie Bush. By using the Matrix on Gallifrey, the Doctor had presented an event from his own future involving a battle against the vile Vervoids as his defence, and in this future Mel had been with him. Later, she had been snatched out of her rightful timestream and brought to the courtroom to help him. She, of

course, knew him well. He had only seen her in the Matrix's future image. After leaving the court, the Doctor had returned her to the planet Oxyveguramosa, where she rejoined 'her' Doctor, his future, and he had departed. Hoping to avoid his own destiny, he had subsequently gone out of his way to avoid this time period in Earth's history, teaming up instead with other friends and new companions, facing all sorts of other dangers, hopefully altering what he perceived as his future. If he never met Mel, then the Vervoid incident that he'd seen within the Matrix might not occur and he might not even have to face the possibility that someone as evil as the Valeyard could exist. If he kept his psyche clean, then that dark future might be completely lost.

Until now. He realised that, without conscious thought, he'd allowed himself to be dragged into 1989 and towards Mel. What was worse was the realisation that, as he had explained to Detective Inspector Lines, he needed a computer expert to download the final program that would delete the Master's handiwork and Mel was just the sort of person to do it. Of course, the odds of against Lines knowing Mel and pointing her in the Doctor's direction were so vast that it might be a better course of action just to forget her, keep an eye out to ensure that their paths did not cross and then prepare to leave Earth. The holiday was over. Maybe if he headed back to Lines early, there might be some large, sweaty, bearded computer nerd up there, doing the work for him. Yes, the chances of him actually meeting Mel were very slight indeed.

Whistling tunelessly to himself, the Doctor crossed up through Edward Street and back towards the police station.

Madeira Drive, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 12.36

Mel was staring down at the front, over the beach and into the sea, watching as the waves broke one upon the other. She listened to the excited yells and screams of tourist children having a good day at the beach.

Kids. Why did parents have them? Mel had never quite got to grips with that one. Lots of her friends at university, especially Chantel, had been heavily into the idea of marriage and 2.4 children. Chantel had spent loads of her time on that new Internet thing, trying to get access to various information sites about babies. Bizarre.

Her own parents had never struck Mel as the having-kids type – she was an only child and there had never been any indication that Mum and Dad wanted more. Also, her parents were about five or six years older than Chantel's and everyone else's. OK, so that was no great indication of anything special, but back in the Sixties, there cannot have been that many couples in their later thirties who suddenly decided to start a family. And it wasn't as if Dad couldn't afford to have a large family. Somehow the world never seemed to have too many accountants and money rolled into chez Bush over the years with almost embarrassing ease. Such thoughts had frequently sparked Mel's interest – even as a rather precocious twelve-year-old, she clearly remembered asking her mother, completely deadpan, if she was adopted, or an accident. Her mother had, bless her, been horrified that Mel could think such things and immediately went into overdrive to swamp the young girl with love and affection. For a few weeks Mel realised she was on to a bit of a winner and managed to get a number of records by Abba and the Bee Gees and a couple of summer dresses, and even came dangerously close to a chestnut pony on her mother's guilt-ridden credit card. However, despite Christine Bush's flexible friend, Mel's own conscience brought this to an end and she became probably the first spoiled child in Pease Pottage (and there was an unlimited number of those) ever to say no thank you to a pony. Truth be told, Mel didn't like animals that much and if she wanted anything at all it was a pocket calculator. Which, of course, she got from her father, no doubt overjoyed that one of the women in his life had some degree of sense and realised that trying to keep a pony in their back garden was more than a little impractical.

Mel's reminiscences were broken by a tap on the back

which came from Trey, who was grinning from ear to ear and encouraging forward a young man who, in common with most English boys, looked like an advert for a successful bout of anaemia, had crooked teeth and one ear that stuck out further than the other. In every way he was as far removed from Trey's physical perfection as it was possible to be and that, no doubt, made him more attractive.

'Mel, this is Joe Hambidge. He works at the –'

'Theatre Royal box office,' completed Mel. 'Hi, Joe, it's been a long time.'

Joe looked slightly embarrassed and stared straight at his feet. 'Oh, hi, Mel.'

Trey looked at each of them. 'Have I missed something?' Mel laughed, nicely. 'No, not really. I know Joe's brother, Mark. We were at school together.' She looked at Joe again. 'How's he doing?'

Joe shrugged. 'All right, I s'pose. Stayed up at York. Wants to be a teacher. Can't see it myself.'

Mel nodded. 'Figures. You still want to be the next Laurence Olivier?'

Joe said that he did, then paused. 'Mel... ' he started.

Mel smiled at him. 'It's all right, Joe, I won't tell him. Or your mum if I see her.' She nodded towards the tiny cluster of tightly knitted nineteenth-century roads and shops back across the road. 'You going to show Trey the Lanes then?'

The two lads said that that was exactly where they were headed and that Mel was welcome to join them. She didn't doubt it for a moment, but playing gooseberry was something she'd had enough of at university with Chantel and every potential father she'd ever tried to hitch up with, so she declined. 'I might pop into work soon – going there for a couple of hours today might earn some more Brownie points, anyway.'

As the two lads headed towards the Lanes, Mel went the other way, towards the Aquarium and then Kemp Town where her new job was.

Well, truth to tell, it was not really her permanent job at all. She had graduated with a degree in computer studies that

few would sniff at. Indeed, she'd had offers from a number of companies interested in her abilities and although I²'s offer had contained the better financial package (and was therefore the one her mother favoured), the ACL deal had looked more potentially rewarding and so that was the one she had elected to take. Part of the deal, though, was some basic groundwork in management and a summer placement in a local firm to get the hang of office protocol. Mel believed it was more to get a grounding in how to operate faulty coffee machines and photocopiers, dealing with office politics and learning the difference between a managing director's PA and his secretary, so she would know which one to arrange coffee breaks with and which one to find the company diary with.

In fact, Mel's summer job was a lot of fun. Brighton Information Technologies wasn't ACL, but for a local firm it certainly had a good supply of the latest hardware and software. DTP and troubleshooting were its two specialities. Mel was working for the troubleshooting department under Peter Lovelady, with whom she had a good working relationship – he was the one who had seen her CV and phoned her immediately, offering her work without even an interview. Mel had been told back at university that her CV would impress the most cynical of bosses, that work would fall into her lap with ease, and this seemed to prove it.

BITS was a family business and one of Mel's favourite coworkers was the chairman's nephew, Luke Aspinall, who had greeted her on her first day with nothing short of exuberance and had kept it up ever since. Sometimes he reminded Mel of an over-eager collie dog, but she rather liked that.

Mel passed through reception with a smile for Kelly on the desk and then went straight up the two floors to her open-plan office. Most of BITS took the lift, but Mel avoided anything like that – she was slightly claustrophobic but, more importantly, climbing steps was infinitely better for you. Only Luke and a couple of others fully shared her fitness ethic and some of them frequently worked out together at the local gym, although she still couldn't get Luke to join her aerobics class.

‘Plenty of guys there,’ she had said, but he had just smiled, saying he preferred the weights. Fair enough. Frankly, anyone who spent their day on their backside in front of a flickering monitor needed to do a good thirty minutes workout a day and at least Luke did that. Mel wasn’t confident enough yet at BITS to start dragging all her work colleagues along to the gym, give it another month and she knew her class would be full of them. If nothing else, Mel was aware of how her continued pestering wore people down until they said yes, and it was for their own good, after all.

Luke smiled as she entered the office. ‘Hi, Mel. You’re eager.’

‘Bit of creeping never did anyone any harm,’ she said, dumping her handbag beside her hard drive and punching the keyboard switch to start it up.

Luke leaned over and pointed at a group of people on the other side of a glass partition, surrounding a monitor. One of them was the chairman. ‘You’re just in time to see your favourite chairman’s nephew get his heavenly reward.’

Mel frowned. ‘Explain?’

Luke tapped his head. ‘The guys with Uncle Rupert in there are some bigshots from SenéNet. They want someone from here to go up and program their new hard drives and write the manuals for them. Maybe a few days’ work at their main HQ in the Ashdown Forest.’

‘Sounds great,’ said Mel. ‘I think you ought to know that I’m jealous.’

Luke grabbed her hand in mock alarm. ‘I would be desolate, Melanie, if you were anything else.’ He straightened up, grabbing his notebook. ‘See you later.’

‘Hey,’ said Mel, ‘just remember your friends if they’ve room for someone else.’

Luke grinned and popped through the connecting door. For a few seconds, Mel watched as Uncle Rupert introduced his protege and then she turned to her own work, instantly becoming deeply involved in spreadsheets and a database for a local cattery and forgetting all about Luke and his friends at SenéNet.

West Street, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 16.17

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, do you possess even the most rudimentary auditory organs under those flowing locks of golden gossamer?’

Trey and Joe looked up from their Nessie’s ‘nutritious’ beanburgers and fries, along with a majority of the clientele and stared at the rotundish man in the stupidly colourful coat speaking forcibly, if not loudly, to one of the girls behind the counter. At first Trey had thought he was a representative from one of the rival burger chains, with the red patchwork coat and tight blond curls. Then he remembered having seen the man in Victoria Gardens. ‘Thought he was potty then,’ he muttered to Joe and turned back to studying the green plastic tray in the way that people do in burger bars when another member of the public decides to let off steam, so that they don’t actually have to be stared at.

The man in the coat was not being put off by everyone else’s lack of interest. ‘Look,’ he was saying, ‘I’m sorry to get cross, but I have been waiting for ten minutes and I thought this was a fast food restaurant. Or does that have an altogether antinomical connotation in Brighton?’

The girl sighed, Trey noticed, looking up once again as the man carelessly sprayed long words about. ‘I’m very sorry, sir, but I have ordered it for you. I’ll check with the chef.’ With which she hurried away behind the delivery chutes and milkshake dispensers.

The man turned to face his fellow diners. ‘One double Lochie Burger, that’s all I asked for. Ten minutes ago.’

A man in a stripy red shirt and a tiny badge that suggested some kind of rank to Trey, although he and Joe were too far away to see what it actually said, suddenly emerged from the rear of the bar, all smiles and acne. ‘Sorry for the delay, sir,’ he said, clearly hoping that would solve everything.

‘Delay?’ The larger man almost shouted. ‘Delay? This isn’t a delay, sallow youth, this is a positive breakdown. A protracted, prolonged... whatever!’ He waved his right hand

aimlessly. 'Yes, a whatever. So, am I going to get my burger, for which I might add I have already provided recompense?'

'Hopefully, sir,' said the youngster. 'Have you paid for it?'

The man just stopped. And stared. A complete hush settled over the restaurant, as if the volume control had been turned right down on the audio system. The man was staring right into the eyes of the young managerial type without saying a word.

'I'll take that as a yes, then, sir,' the younger man said after a moment, scurrying away to join his no doubt trembling female colleague in the kitchen area.

The aggressive man just stared at where the youth had been standing, without blinking. After about twenty seconds, the girl re-emerged, bearing a burger which she placed into the man's now outstretched hand. Lazily, he turned slightly to look at her, rather – Trey thought – as a rattlesnake stares down its prey, before snapping its jaws around the victim's neck. He snatched his now-filled hand back with a very curt 'Why, thank you.' Trey had to admire the girl's nerve. As if nothing had happened, she held out her other hand, which contained a four inch plastic Loch Ness Monster. 'With our compliments and apologies,' she said sweetly, held his gaze for another five seconds and then turned to another customer.

The noise level in the bar was suddenly right up again, as if the volume control had been turned full on. Trey watched as the colourful man rocked back on his heels and then surveyed the restaurant, looking for a seat.

His eyes seemed to settle on Trey and Joe – or rather, on an empty table behind them – and he slowly, with deliberate steps, marched towards it and sat down. Unwrapping his fresh burger as if it were a treasured Christmas present, he stared at the food.

'O joyous lump of sustenance, after the struggle to get you, to consume you seems almost criminal.' The man stared for another few seconds, then stuffed the whole burger into his mouth and chewed maniacally. He said something else which, Trey guessed, was akin to 'Tough luck, I'm starving,' and

swallowed his food. On the table beside him, the tiny Loch Ness Monster lay on its side.

A small girl, no more than five or six, wandered over and scooped the toy up. The man just stared at her, a slightly bemused look on his face. The child silently turned the toy over in her hand for a second and then walked off with it.

The man and Trey both watched as she scampered over to her mother, seated with two pushchairs and two babies. 'Look, Mum, I got the missing one!'

A look crossed the woman's face, a sort of weary 'Oh, that's nice, dear.' Then it clearly sank in that the little girl had not had her burger yet (Trey had subconsciously noted a husband/boyfriend earlier join the queue) and she must have swiped the toy.

She scanned the tables quickly, administering a savage 'Samantha, where did you nick that from?' rather loudly. More heads turned but Trey just looked across at the colourful man. He had a hand raised, palm forward. 'It's mine,' he said, 'but I don't want it. Have it with pleasure.'

The woman whispered to Samantha who then skipped back over and said thank you to the man.

The transformation was miraculous. Trey had assumed that after his belligerence at the counter, the man would be in enough of a grouch to give the little girl an admonishment for theft at least. Instead, he scooped her up and beeped her nose. She giggled. Trey cast a look at the mother, who by all rights should be horrified that a stranger had just touched her daughter. But the look she had was quite different. Trey looked back at the man and immediately realised that he felt – no, he knew – the man posed no threat to the child. Indeed, it was exactly the opposite, as if this man was the sort who would die rather than hurt a youngster. He was smiling, Samantha was smiling and everything was fine. The simple act of making a little girl laugh not only lifted everyone's spirits, but somehow Trey was sure the room itself had brightened.

'Are you Father Christmas?' the little girl asked.

'No, Samantha,' the man replied. 'He's still in the North

Pole, but he's a good friend. When Christmas comes, can I tell him what a good girl you've been this year?"

Samantha nodded. 'Please,' she said.

The Doctor put her down and pointed her back towards her mother. He then stood up and made to leave the restaurant. He got about three paces beyond Trey and Joe's table before turning back and looking Trey straight in the face. 'By the way, my colonial chum,' he said quietly, 'it might appear to be a stupid coat to wear in this country, but I happen to like it.' He then turned on his heel and left.

Joe frowned. 'What was that all about?'

Trey shrugged. 'I saw him earlier today and I guess I commented on his precious coat a little too loudly. I'm surprised he remembered me.'

Joe touched the back of Trey's hand. 'You're a memorable kind of guy, and I have to get back to the theatre or no one will have any tickets for tonight's show. You still coming?'

Trey nodded. 'Yeah, it's Mel's dad's birthday, so they're having a kind of family thing. I was asked but said no thanks. Anyway, I'd rather see you, even if it will be through a silly little window for ten seconds.'

'I'll see you in the interval,' Joe said and walked away.

Trey waited a few moments, then followed him out. He needed to find the strange, colourfully dressed man.

If only he could work out why.

Holland Road, Hove, East Sussex

24 July 1989, 16.18

'Stop! Here, please stop!'

He leaned forward, stuffing a ten pound note into the rather startled taxi driver's hand. 'Are you sure, mate?'

'Absolutely. Thank you.' He hauled himself out of the cab, aware that it drove away quite slowly. The poor driver probably thought he was a nutcase, dressed in the dirtiest clothes imaginable but chucking tenners around with wild abandon. Couldn't blame him, really. He looked a sight, with

mud caked into his jeans and all over his DMs. His sweatshirt was ripped across one sleeve and his bleeding hand was wrapped in a decidedly tatty handkerchief that had seen cleaner days. As soon as he made it back safely, the doctor would have to take a look at that. Probably need tetanus jabs and everything.

He went into the red public phone box, hoping it would work. Yes, there was a dialling tone. Weren't too many of these old fifties-style boxes left. Most of the modern BT ones were open air hoods with metallic phones, but this was a really old one, probably left intact for the American tourists to 'ooh' and 'ahh' at pointlessly. He dialled the number he wanted, cursing that it actually wasn't a more modern phone with push buttons. Slowly the dial whirled backwards after each number. 01 443 81

He stopped. There was a car pulling up outside. No, it was all right – a man in a grey suit, also looking for a public phone. He finished dialling and there were the customary three rings before the receiver was picked up.

'Westminster Sorting Office. Which department would you like please?'

'This is a special delivery request,' he said quickly. 'Requiring form C19. Please process my order quickly.'

There was no reply, just a quick hum, a series of beeps and another extension picked up.

'Sudbury.' The voice was quite old sounding, but with an air of crisp authority. 'We are secure.'

'Sir, this is Major Simmons, sir. Trying to recapture our greyhound.'

'Alex, it's a secure line,' said Sudbury. 'What is your report. We were worried about you. It's been four days since your last call.'

Major Simmons took a deep breath. 'I have not found the greyhound, but I know where he is. You were right. The operation is wholly bogus. There's a lot of big things going on at the Manor. And the nearby hospital. They're connected, I'm sure of it. And they're on to me as well.'

'Are you all right, Alex?' Sudbury's voice was

immediately all concern, and Simmons almost smiled – Sir John Sudbury was well known for his concern about field operatives, almost as much as his actual CO back at HQ was.

‘Bit shaken, to be honest, Sir John. There’s a creature there, stalking the grounds. A sort of dog, I suppose, but faster and nastier than any dog I’ve ever seen. Barely got away. Made it to Brighton, because it’s easier to get lost in than Haywards Heath or any of the smaller villages.’

There was a pause, then Sudbury spoke again. ‘We’ve got you, Alex. Holland Road, Hove. Should be a Post Office at the top of the street, opposite the church. Got it?’

‘Sir.’

‘Go there, Alex, and wait. Someone will meet you. Looking for the greyhound trainer. Got that, Alex?’

Alex Simmons let the phone drop. Outside the box, reflected in the little glass plate of emergency numbers on the wall, was a long, slim white Cadillac estate car from the fifties, with raised rear end fins. Stencilled on to the bonnet were backwards letters spelling AMBULANCE. The replacement windscreen was smoked glass, so he could not see who was inside, but he knew anyway.

He couldn’t afford to panic. Calmly he replaced the receiver and smoothed his hair, trying to look every inch an average person who had just used a public telephone. He shoved his crudely bandaged hand into his jeans pocket and looked up the street. The Post Office was clearly visible, and a handful of people were going in and out. Down by the phone box, though, there was just an old man and his dog, walking towards the seafront.

What could they do in broad daylight? He had only to yell and people would notice the commotion. They might try and follow him to the Post Office, so he’d head for a shop first. Even if Sir John had an operative in Brighton, it would take ten minutes for them to drive to the Post Office. A quick expedition into Boots or Smith’s and he could use the time to lose the enemy. If they followed him, he’d cause a scene, have the police called, whatever. Sir John wouldn’t like the attention, but police were dealable with. If he was right about

the occupants of the ambulance, they wouldn't be quite so easy to dismiss.

Major Alex Simmons, officer of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce under the command of Colonel Charles Crichton and married with two sons and a third on the way pushed open the door of the telephone box, which exploded in a huge eruption of two blasts of alien energy that came from inside the ambulance as its passenger window electronically scrolled down.

Yells and screams went up from the distant shoppers and somewhere a car alarm was triggered. The ambulance's red lights began flashing, accompanied by an old-style siren. The vehicle pulled away from the curb, did a superb U-turn and headed back towards the sea front.

The occupants were satisfied, secure in the knowledge that not a single molecule of Major Alex Simmons would ever be recovered from the debris. He simply no longer existed.

West Street, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 16.28

Trey Korte watched the man in the fascinatingly bad coat slip down behind the Nessie Burger restaurant, into a tiny service alley.

The man stood quietly in front of a tall blue hut-like thing. It had the words POLICE BOX stencilled just below the sloping roof, and Trey shrugged. The man didn't look like a policeman. He had what Trey assumed was a key in his hand and seemed to be on the verge of opening the door when he paused, sighed and turned away. He was making up his mind about something, counting off invisible somethings in the air. Choices, perhaps?

He moved away from the TARDIS and moved back towards the street and Trey...

TARDIS? What the hell was the TARDIS?

As that bizarre thought shot through his mind, Trey realised the man was looking at him, staring intently and frowning. He began to move towards Trey.

‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘Do you know how rude it is to try and read someone’s mind?’

Trey winced suddenly – as if someone had stuck a very large pin into his head. Yelling involuntarily, he slapped his hand to his right temple and felt himself drop to his knees. The impact jarred him enough to make him momentarily look up. Two people going into a hardware shop glanced at him and, with that typically British aloofness, decided that, as he was nothing to do with them, they would ignore him and move on.

However the man in the coat was suddenly kneeling in front of Trey, reaching out with his hands, trying to hold Trey’s head. Trey tried to twist away, but the pain stabbed at him harder and he moaned softly.

‘No, no, no. Don’t pull away from me, young man. I am trying to help you!’ The man pulled Trey’s head up so their faces were level. All Trey was suddenly aware of were the eyes, those cat-like eyes that seemed to bore into him, staring inside his head. The pupils were darting from side to side, almost as if he were reading something, and then, as if it was coming from miles away, but really close at the same time, he heard a voice telling him everything was going to be all right. Everything was just fine. All he had to do was relax. Just relax.

Trey felt his head getting heavier, like it did when he had been in hospital once, having an anaesthetic before the operation to remove his tonsils. He was drifting away now, and his head was filling with a large soft pillow, ready for him to sleep on... to just lie back and sleep as the anaesthetic took away all the pain, all the outside world, all the noise and bustle, and left nothing but a calmness, a serenity that seemed safe.

‘Right, wake up now!’ commanded another voice, much clearer. Right in front of him in fact.

Trey opened his eyes to find the strange man smiling at him. ‘Are you awake? Good.’

The man stood up and looked about. A couple of people were staring at them both. ‘Yes, can I help you?’ he asked

archly. 'Is there something you want? Or have you never seen anyone have a psychic attack before, hmmm?' He turned back to Trey. 'Amazing. They ignore you when you fall down, but so long as someone else makes the first move, they'll flock to you like flies around... whatever it is flies flock around.'

Trey felt himself being heaved up.

'Come on, my young friend. We can't stay here all day, attracting the attention of the good people of Sussex. Or the police,' he added under his breath. 'Move away now, please, just move back. My young friend needs some air. I'll take him to the front, thank you. Move away.' The man led Trey through the Lanes, across Kings Road and on to the Esplanade. 'Breathe deeply,' he said when they stopped walking.

'Who are you?' Trey asked quietly.

'Ah. Well, I'm known by all manner of people as Trouble. Or That Annoying Buffoon in the Stupid Coat. But nine times out of ten, I'm glad to say, they call me the Doctor.' There was a pause, until, 'And you are?'

'Trey. Trey Korte. And thank you for helping me, Doctor. I don't know what happened. It's not happened before.'

The Doctor smiled and put his hands into the pockets of his candy-striped trousers. 'No, I dare say it hasn't. I wonder if I was the cause. Or the TARDIS perhaps.'

'TARDIS! Yes, that hut-thing. How did I know it was a TARDIS?'

'Hut-thing,' murmured the Doctor. 'Hut-thing,' he said again, a little louder. 'Hut-thing?! That, young Trey Korte, is indeed a TARDIS. My TARDIS in fact.' He stared at Trey. 'Hut-thing indeed. You're from Chicago, going by your accent, aren't you?'

Trey nodded. 'My real name is Donald Korte the third, but when I was at college, I adopted Trey – you know, like in the Spanish. Tres. It's kind of a joke.'

The Doctor snorted slightly. 'Oh, very droll. Most amusing.'

'So.' Trey took the plunge. 'What do you do? And why did I know your, uh... blue box was a TARDIS?'

‘Ah, the most intelligent thing you’ve said so far. What do I do? Well, that’s difficult to explain. How did you know about my TARDIS? That’s easy. You, like everyone on this planet, have latent telepathic powers of some primitive sort. So does the TARDIS. I expect it has awoken them in you. A very useful commodity too, I might say. Thankfully in this time period, there aren’t people out and about trying to exploit you lucky few – if there were, you could be in big trouble. Talents like yours... are you listening to me?’

Trey wasn’t. He just stared at the Doctor and began to feel very uncomfortable. He went and looked over the Esplanade rail and down on to the pebble-beach below, where heaps of tourists were trying to get what passed for a tan in Britain. Bustling around them were loads more: kids with candy and ice cream, adults with beers and Cokes. At least he was safe. This madman who believed in telepathy could hardly do anything. Maybe he was one of those men who just liked picking up young guys. Hell, Trey had dealt with those before back in the Boy’s Town area of downtown Chicago.

He was about to give some kind of retort when he heard a siren behind him. It was only when he turned to look that he realised he was hearing an American-style siren and the ambulance concerned was an old-fashioned Cadillac, speeding along Kings Road, causing people to scurry across in alarm.

He wondered what was behind the smoked glass, as curious people do when something morbid like an emergency vehicle arrives, but then the ambulance slowed right down and one of the front windows was lowered. For a very brief second, Trey saw an astonishingly beautiful male face, registering that it was the kind that Calvin Klein or Yves Saint-Laurent would pay millions for.

Then the inside of his head exploded with pain again, just as it had when he’d seen the TARDIS hut-thing, and everything went black.

Madeira Drive, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 16.31

Her immaculate white smock uncreased, her hair perfectly styled, her face beautiful and unblemished, Ciara stared into the tiny monitor on the Cadillac's dashboard. On it was the face of a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, wearing Ray-Bans, his short jet-black hair gelled into a slightly spiky brush. Running down his left cheek, from under the dark glasses, was a scar that joined up with a slightly mutilated top lip. The colour monitor might as well have been monochrome, the complexion of the man's skin was so pale, almost albino, as if he'd not seen daylight for a number of years.

'Sir,' Ciara said, 'we are returning via Brighton seafront. I am transmitting a brainwave print we have detected.'

Slender, delicately manicured fingers punched a few buttons on another instrument on the dashboard.

After a second the pale young man nodded. 'Very interesting. It does not correspond with anyone else we have... investigated. It looks as if our search for a genuine esper has finally paid off.'

Ciara smiled. 'Quite a strong one too, sir. Not the normal undeveloped type, this one could have the potential to be very powerful. Exactly what we have been waiting for. We could pick him up.'

'Not yet, Ciara. But now we have the brainwave, we can track him. I will send one of you out to monitor him later. Try and get back here as soon as possible. I assume Major Simmons will not be rejoining us?'

'Correct, sir.' Ciara paused. 'Something else, sir. Apart from the esper, we found another interesting brainwave. It is more than that of a natural esper. It is... alien.'

'The Doctor?' The pale face leaned closer to his transmitter, as if it might help him to see Ciara better. 'Is it finally the Doctor?'

'It did not match his description, sir.'

The pale young man shrugged. 'The UNIT files we accessed years back alerted us to the fact that he can assume new physical appearances. Maybe the bait has been taken. It would be an extraordinary coincidence for an alien to be in Brighton at this time.'

‘May I respectfully point out, sir, it would be an equal coincidence for the Doctor to be here, in a wholly new body.’ Ciara waited for the response.

‘Ciara, someone once observed that the universe, the entire multiverse, is founded upon the most extraordinary coincidences. I will not dismiss this important discovery just yet. Keep me informed.’

The image vanished and Ciara sat back in her seat. At that moment her twin brother, Cellian, revved up the Cadillac and they sped off up and around Victoria Gardens, before heading for the London Road.

Madeira Drive, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 16.35

‘Trey? Trey Korte, can you hear me?’

Trey tried to haul himself out of the black treacle in which he was floundering. He could hear the voice distantly. ‘I’ve been here before,’ he muttered to himself. And the light flooded into his eyes as he woke up fully, back on the promenade with the Doctor shaking him gently.

‘Hello, Doctor,’ he said. ‘Why did that happen again?’

The Doctor pulled him to his feet. ‘I really have no idea, my young friend. But I think you could do with a sit down at home.’

The Doctor waved a taxi down and gently eased Trey into the back seat. ‘Tell the man where we’re going,’ he said, clambering in beside him.

Trey noticed that he had a small black box in his hand, a tiny monitor dish rotating on the top. Trey gave the address to the driver who, as Trey had expected, looked delighted at the prospect of the fairly lengthy journey and the money it would generate, and drove away.

‘Doctor,’ said Trey. ‘Two things. One, what is that? And two, I hope you have some cash, because this could be an expensive taxi ride.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ said the Doctor, dismissively. Trey sighed, too tired to really look or listen yet

fascinated by the Doctor's little device. 'And question one?'

The Doctor looked up and at the back of the driver's head. 'Are we going northwards?'

The driver grunted an affirmative.

'Good,' the Doctor muttered, then settled back and stared at his moving monitor dish.

Realising that he was unlikely to get a straight answer, Trey let his burgeoning headache flow into his temples and closed his eyes, wishing for the first time in two months, that he was back in Chicago.

BITS offices, Kemp Town, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 16.45

Mel was chewing the top of her pen, trying to concentrate on the programs she was writing, and failing pretty miserably. Luke had gone out with Uncle Rupert and the others, essentially for a brainstorming session at Alberto's, but something strange had happened. Uncle Rupert had returned half an hour ago and she had gathered (by listening at places she knew she oughtn't to listen) that Luke had gone on to SenéNet's main corporate headquarters. Which meant that he had gone about fifteen miles out of Brighton, in the Ashdown Forest, without his jacket or briefcase. Why this worried her she couldn't imagine, but it did. And Mel was one to go with her instincts.

No one was watching her, so she picked up the desk phone and called her father at work.

'Hi, Melanie. What can I do for you?'

Mel paused before speaking. 'Dad, what do you know about SenéNet?'

Before her father could answer, Mel put the receiver down as if it had burned her. The clatter as it landed on the cradle turned no more than a couple of heads, but Mel knew she was going red. She cast a look towards the executive office, but no one there had reacted. And why should they? They could hardly hear her. No, whatever had heard her, whatever had made the clicking noise the second she had said 'SenéNet',

probably wasn't human. A machine, somewhere, had recognised the word and begun recording.

'Mel Bush, just where do you get off on these ideas of conspiracy?' she asked herself. It was probably just the computerised exchange noting the number she had called, the click some kind of delayed reaction as it recognised her father's number at the Business and Commerce Centre at the East Sussex Council Town Hall in East Street. It was all perfectly reasonable and sound. So why didn't she believe herself? Why didn't she ring her father straight back and pretend she had dropped the phone or something?

She nearly jumped out of her skin when her phone rang. It was, as she guessed, her father.

'Sorry, Daddy, I dropped the phone,' she muttered lamely. 'But it doesn't matter now. I found the information out. See you tonight?'

'Whoa, hold on, young lady,' said her father. 'I happen to want to talk to you as well.'

'Oh, right.'

'Well, thank you for the warm welcome.'

Her father was obviously smiling. Mel could hear it in his voice in that way that you do. She smiled back. She adored her father, and knew the feeling was reciprocated. Normally she would chat aimlessly for ages, yet even now all she wanted to do was get off the telephone and finish work, then head home.

'Bob Lines rang me today. He's looking for a computer whiz to help him out tomorrow. D'you think you could do it? He says it'll only take a couple of minutes. In your coffee break?'

Mel sighed. 'Dad, it takes three coffee breaks to get from Kemp Town to the police station. There again, though, they do owe me a bit of time. I'll talk to Lu... I'll talk to Mr Lovelady about it. Shouldn't be a problem. Oh, and I hope it isn't about their files crashing or anything.'

'No, darling, it's an algae problem, I think he said.'

Somehow Mel doubted it had anything to do with plankton and opted for the safer bet it was an ALGOL system

error of some sort. And with the primitive programs there, it might take a while to trawl through her memory to relearn such mundane things. 'OK, Daddy. See you tonight?'

'Sure, darling. Is Trey going to be there? It's fun seeing the two of you together, you know.'

Oh no, not her father as well. 'No, Dad, he's out with his boyfriend.'

There was a silence. Had Mel overstepped an unspoken mark?

'I'll discuss it with you later, all right?'

'OK, darling. See you later,' and Mr Bush hung up.

Sorry, *mein Papa*, but them's the breaks.

As Melanie Bush replaced the telephone on her desk, one of her colleagues pressed a button on her intercom system, which was linked to Mr Rupert Illingworth's office.

'Yes?'

'It seemed to be an innocent conversation about boys, dinners and a trip to the police station, sir. No further references to SenéNet at all.'

'Fine, thank you, Anne.'

Anne Macko released the intercom button and watched as Mel swished past her desk and out of the office. It crossed Anne's mind that she really hoped Mel was in some kind of trouble with Mr Illingworth. Always telling her to lose her paunch, indeed. Stuck up red-haired bimbo.

Garrett Manor Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

24 July 1989, 16.46

The pale young man with the scar took his finger off the tiny electronic data pad on his desk. Beside it was an identical intercom device to the one on Anne Macko's desk, the two objects connected by a tiny plastic wire.

'The vocoder works very nicely, Mr Jones,' he said. 'How is the real Mr Illingworth coping back in his office?'

The blond man with the concealed gun shrugged. 'He'll wake up a bit later with no memory of anything after our lunch and go home as normal.'

The pale young man ran a thin finger down his scar. 'Food. I remember... a good steak, saute potatoes, fresh peas, Dijon mustard and a decent Australian red.' He looked through his Ray-Bans at Jones, who offered nothing other than a look back. It was safer that way. 'But now, Mr Jones, it all means nothing. Food is irrelevant. Air is irrelevant. Life is, frankly, irrelevant. Only the project is relevant.' He suddenly stood up, tugged his otherwise perfectly pressed suit down slightly, and crossed to a very small window. 'What colour are the flowers, Mr Jones. Those, down there?'

Jones was beside him in an instant, obediently looking down to where the pale young man was pointing. 'Yellow, sir. Yellow and orange. There are some pink ones behind. I'm afraid I don't know what they're called.' He tried not to sniff, because he was already aware of the unique scent that surrounded his employer. A sort of oily smell that immediately made him imagine his nostrils were full of microscopic pieces of grit.

The pale young man smiled tightly. Not a real smile, just the imitation of one, the one he always used when one of the employees was nearby. Jones knew that he did it to put them at their ease. He also knew that it never did, since it was like being smiled at by a corpse.

'Flowers, Mr Jones. If God really did create them, they are his most wonderful creation. They look nice. They smell nice. They feel nice. They are one of the most intricate products of this natural world. Perfect machines, keeping us all alive.' He stopped momentarily, another smile crossing his lips. 'All of you alive, rather.' He turned away from the window and moved back to his desk, turning the computer monitor around so that Jones could see it. 'Do you know what this is, Mr Jones?'

Jones nodded. 'It's a brainwave, sir. Of the sort you've been looking for.'

'Almost correct, Mr Jones. It is the brainwave of someone I have found. Or rather the delightful twins have found. Sadly he is a youth, unfamiliar with his potential, but at this stage beggars cannot be choosers. When they return, I want you to

take one of them with you and find out where he lives. If the opportunity arises, feel free to bring him back here. If not, learn as much as you can and we will get him tomorrow. He is not important enough to expose ourselves to danger just yet.'

A bleeper went off inside Jones's Armani jacket pocket. He looked at the message.

'Reception sir. Mr Futayomoto is here.'

The pale young man reached into a desk draw and brought out a plastic name strip with the words 'Managing Director' on it. This was followed by small metallic balls on strings, a see-saw affair and two thin pieces of glassware with oily coloured liquids sloshing slowly between them. Executive toys, the pale young man always referred to them as.

'Time to adopt my other persona, Mr Jones. And, as my executive officer, would you please escort our Japanese partner up here. Hopefully all is ready.'

'I'm sure it is, sir.'

Jones left the office, straightening his tie and buttoning up his jacket. Before going down the stairs, he paused to smooth back his thinning blond hair. He understood the charade of playing an executive officer for SenéNet. He understood that the plan meant he had to wear nice suits and be courteous and presentable, to speak eloquently and be charming. But it was a hard act to keep up. He preferred the old days, before he became deeply embroiled with his employer. Fifteen or so years back he could have just walked into reception and, doing what he was trained to do, take out twelve people in half as many seconds with his trusty Compacta 25.

With an involuntary sigh, he began to go down the stairs, the question of when he could next kill someone passing out of his conscious thoughts.

Breathing deeply as he came down the last step, he turned into the reception area. Roberta, the receptionist, swivelled in her chair towards him and waved a hand politely to a group of three businessmen standing by one of the windows, looking out on to the forest which surrounded them. Two of the men carried large cardboard boxes. Jones assumed that the one who didn't was probably Mr Futayomoto.

‘Futayomoto-san,’ he said, bowing his head very slightly.

The three businessmen did the same, but only the boxless one spoke. ‘A pleasure,’ he purred in perfect English. ‘Your establishment is a most delightful one. It makes a change from the concrete and metal jungles we see in London.’

‘We are very proud of SenéNet’s UK division. I am glad you like it. May I escort you up to the managing director’s office?’

Futayomoto was about to nod when the main door behind them opened. Roberta also looked up as Ciara and Cellian walked in. They glanced over to Jones, but then carried on to one of the other offices.

Futayomoto frowned. ‘Is someone ill?’

Jones put on a smile. ‘No, but we share the extensive grounds with a hospital. The staff often come over here on their breaks to play the games. To be honest, Futayomoto-san, they are far cheaper than testers from some agency.’

‘A good idea,’ Futayomoto said.

Jones shot a look at Roberta, who nodded slightly. His message to her was understood: Ciara and Cellian were to be severely chastised.

Jones was aware that Futayomoto and his aides had again been distracted, this time by Roberta, and he followed their gaze. From their vantage point, they could see her back and where, in place of her legs, her torso was grafted on to a small electronic chair, a couple of tiny nutrient pipes pumping down from her neck to the base of her spine.

Jones indicated that they should go on up the stairs and, covering their shocked expressions, the three Japanese men started to move. Once they reached the first landing, Jones explained. ‘Some years back, Roberta was the result of a tragic car accident in which she lost her husband and her legs. Rather than wither away in a nursing home, Roberta agreed to join our German branch, which specialises in cybernetics. Obviously I’m not too sure of the exact details, but she now works for us here and is very happy with her... little additions.’ Jones enjoyed the looks on their faces. ‘She’s also the fastest typist I’ve ever seen – 220 wpm.’ He pointed at the

small private staircase ahead of them. 'Shall we continue?'

A few moments later, the three Japanese businessmen were seated in comfortable plastic armchairs, arranged so that Futayomoto was sitting directly opposite the managing director. The other two were slightly back and to either side, while Jones stood behind them all, by the door, his gun tucked neatly into his Armani belt, hidden beneath his Armani jacket. Jones knew that if all went according to the managing director's plan, things were about to get pleasurable.

One of Futayomoto's aides placed the largest box on the desk. With a tiny look up at Jones, the managing director flexed his fingers and then effortlessly pulled the box apart as if it were nothing but an Easter egg. If the Japanese were amazed by the ease of this action, they registered nothing.

Cool customers, Jones decided.

The managing director lifted the compact red plastic machine out of the box and held it aloft. 'Nice colour,' he said. Jones made a slicing movement across his own throat, unseen by the Japanese.

'Blood red,' the managing director continued. 'My favourite.'

Futayomoto nodded. 'It is exactly to your specifications.'

The managing director swivelled the machine around, while the other business aide undid his box, revealing a few cables. Wordlessly, they were attached, the aide replaced the machine on the desk. Futayomoto stood up and presented it to the managing director.

'As you required. This, obviously, is the traditional power source input. This slot is for an MPEG card to enable playback of five inch laser disks currently being designed in Los Angeles. This cable connects the system to an existing music system, enabling you to play back regular audio CDs via this device. Finally there is a telephone cable, to British Telecom standards, to enable a link with the growing World Wide Web. The system has a 2800 modem built in. We predict a 5600 modem will be in the High Street shops by 1998. Since the Maxx system will not be outdated by then, we have made provision for shops to be able to insert a

replacement modem chip as and when.'

Futayomoto sat down again and removed a small black compact disc from his jacket. He held it up between finger and thumb for everyone in the room to see, even casting a look backwards to Jones, who just smiled in return.

'The Maxx has 64-bit technology, gentlemen. Current cartridge-based games systems are 16 bit. Sony and Sega are working on a 32-bit CD-based system for release early next decade. The Maxx will put them out of business before they even issue their first press release. The era of the cartridge is over. The future, as they say, is SenéNet.'

He pressed the lid release on the box and placed the black CD inside.

'And this is what?' prompted the managing director, scratching his left eye under his Ray-Bans. 'A game?'

'A straightforward platformer, using the characters from your Nessie Burgers chain. However, the 3D graphics are like nothing anyone has even imagined, let alone experienced.'

Futayomoto sat back in his seat, and Jones could see from the position of his shoulders that he was satisfied.

'And this will be ready for the shops when, Futayomoto-san?'

Futayomoto shrugged. 'To be honest, we are ready to begin mass production and shipment within the month. Down in our car we have the thirty fully functional demonstration models you required for local testing. There are no bugs, but even if your testers were to find one, they could still be on sale by September. A killer for the Christmas market.'

The managing director nodded and stood up. 'How apt a phrase, Futayomoto-san. Tell me, are the codes we supplied independently also on each disk.'

A look passed between Futayomoto and his colleagues. At a nod from his superior, the aide on Jones's left stood up. Hesitantly, he bowed to the managing director and glanced out of the window beside him, then back. 'We were unable to decipher your codes and therefore unable to inscribe them. We are sorry.'

The managing director shrugged. 'I expected as much –

although I am displeased that you attempted to decipher them. I did give instructions that they were to be burned on without examination.'

Futayomoto coughed quietly. 'I am afraid I could not allow that. You see, it is our policy that nothing is placed upon our merchandise without our full knowledge. Should anything of a... delicate nature be provided, we could be held legally responsible. There are cases of child pornography and ritual murder, examples of subliminal messaging and suchlike all being attempted. The Japanese authorities have clamped down heavily in the past. Manga videos for instance have only last month been subjected to -'

The managing director slammed the palm of his hand down on his desk. Jones grinned as he saw the shocked expressions on the faces of the others. The desktop had fractured badly and one of the executive toys was wobbling precariously before tumbling to the carpet. Embedded in the desk at the epicentre was a deep palm-print.

The two aides had quickly moved in front of their boss, but he now gently eased them back and stared straight into the managing director's face, as if trying to see through the dark glasses at the man beyond.

Jones just smiled.

'We have followed your every request, every dictum,' Futayomoto said calmly. 'Five years of time, energy and research, putting aside the question of your money, have gone into the Maxx. I feel I am justified in asking you what is so important about your special codes. And why you feel it necessary to demonstrate your anger in such' - he pointed at the damaged desk - 'a graphic manner.'

The managing director was picking tiny splinters out of his palm. 'What do you know about SenéNet, Futayomoto-san?' Futayomoto sat down, as did his aides, although they were clearly tense. The one nearest the window again glanced out and Jones followed the look. All he could see was the security guard, Lawson, walking around, alone - without the Stalker. If the aide had seen that...

Futayomoto was sitting back in his seat, legs crossed,

fingers steeped in a very Western stance of arrogance.

‘Your name was first associated with a series of computer manufacturers in northern France, and also a couple in Hamburg which you took over in 1982. Over the years, you became the major shareholder in a large number of electronics-based corporations. You had also diversified into clothing, music retail and fast-food stores – effectively ensuring that every major influence in the youth market had a degree of SenéNet presence. In 1987 you arrived in the UK, buying up various software companies, while strengthening your hold over your existing subsidiaries. In short, SenéNet is one of the world’s biggest independent development houses.’ Futayomoto sighed. ‘Oh, one last thing. Neither you nor any of your permanent staff exist on any census, data systems or even a fashion emporium’s mailing list. To be blunt, you and your people don’t officially exist. Only SenéNet as a brand does.’

The managing director sat smiling. Jones recognised that smile and found his hand moving instinctively towards his hidden gun.

‘You have done your research, Futayomoto-san. I am impressed, but I wonder why.’

‘Curiosity.’ Futayomoto reached forward and tapped the Maxx. ‘This machine is a product no one else in the entire world has come close to emulating. The technology is beyond most of my staff. We found ourselves creating from your instructions, frankly astonished that it worked. And that intrigued me.’

The managing director opened a desk drawer and produced a sheaf of papers. ‘Tax receipts, business plans, full running costs. We hide nothing here. The reason you won’t find my people on official documentation is, frankly, none of your business.’

‘I even checked possible criminal records.’

Jones gripped his gun tighter.

‘And apart from Mr Jones’s record in Europe and the USA as a professional assassin and wanted murderer, again nothing.’ Futayomoto coughed, but still looked straight at the

managing director. 'And, Mr Jones, I mean no insult by that. Please, remove your hand from your gun. You have no criminal record in Japan, so I am not here to expose you. I am just curious.'

Jones took his cue from the managing director and relaxed his grip, letting his hand return to his side.

The managing director suddenly laughed. 'Mr Jones, I think it is time for me to explain to Futayomoto-san our little secret.' He stood up again and crossed to the window. 'Why don't you show our other two guests the delights of the locale, while I give the guided tour?'

Futayomoto stood. 'I would prefer it if my associates could stay with me.'

The managing director laughed again. 'You are quite safe, you know. There is nothing sinister here. It's just that, as you yourself have said, there are technological secrets here. And the fewer people who know them firsthand, the better we all feel. It is entirely up to you.'

Futayomoto broke into Japanese and conferred with both aides. The one by the window seemed to Jones to be particularly irate, but Futayomoto was clearly adamant and agreed to see the sights by himself. Without waiting for further discussion, Jones opened the office door and indicated that the two aides should come with him. With a last anxious look at Futayomoto, they walked out, and Jones followed.

'The gardens here are especially pleasant at this time of year,' he said as they headed back down the stairs.

Moments later they passed Roberta in reception and went towards the back of the Manor. One of the aides stopped by a tiny doorway under the back stairs, so Jones went to push open the door.

'We keep a good stock of wine in the cellar,' he said, trying the door. 'Sadly, it is locked. I'll see if we can spare a bottle or two for you to take home for your families. We have a 60 per cent share in an Australian vineyard, I understand it has an excellent flavour.'

The aide who spoke English translated effortlessly for the other and then passed on their gratitude to Jones.

Jones moved back through a low archway and into an area that might have been a scullery or secondary kitchen at one point. To the rear was a heavily bolted wooden door, which Jones opened and sighed as the cool early evening air hit him.

They passed a small flight of steps barricaded behind wrought-iron bars and a padlocked gate which led down to another basement area and moved into a small garden. The more nervous of the aides reached out and touched a flower, caressing the petals between his fingers. He looked up questioningly.

‘Local market in Ardingly. Don’t worry. I don’t think we have any interest in florists.’

The aides did not laugh. One, the English speaker, looked up towards the top of the Manor, roughly where the managing director’s office was.

‘Time to show you SenéNet’s *piece de resistance*,’ Jones said, urging them on. He then called out to Lawson, who was munching on a sandwich but put it straight down and jogged towards them. ‘Mr Lawson, these gentlemen need to be escorted to the arena. Could you help?’

Lawson replied that it would be his pleasure and took charge of the two aides, the nervous one still looking longingly towards the loft of the Manor. Sometimes, thought Mr Jones as he watched them go, though a bullet might be less dramatic, it was far more effective.

Garrett Manor Annexe, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
24 July 1989, 18.00

Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart watched the catch on the very solid wooden door move. The man with half a face would bring in his dinner once again, engage in a single pointless comment about the weather and then leave.

This rigmarole had been going on for... well, however many weeks he had been a prisoner. They had given him clothes to wear, as much food and drink as he required and a not uncomfortable bed-sitting room which, from what few sounds he could hear, was the converted loft in an old cottage

or barn, probably not that far from Garrett Manor. The solitary window was shuttered from the outside and so he had been reliant on artificial light for far too long. Every day, the man with half a face would blindfold him, tie his hands behind him and lead him out for a walk around the grounds. That was how he knew he was not in the main house but not far away. Enough people were around, cars driving nearby and suchlike for him to have a rough idea that he was probably some way out the back or at the bottom of the long driveway. Only once had he even considered trying to make a break for it, but the man with half a face had kicked him down so quickly that he opted not to try to escape again.

The fact that he was still alive intrigued Lethbridge-Stewart. Why? What did SenéNet want him for? He reckoned he had been there for the best part of a month now, ever since Mr Jones had taken him up to meet the mysterious managing director.

‘Ah, Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart,’ the man had said, without looking up from his desktop computer. ‘Formerly of the parish of UNIT, and a old school chum of Sir John Sudbury, denizen of C19, deep in the bowels of Westminster.’ He had then looked up, and Lethbridge-Stewart took in the pallor, the scar, the dark glasses and the surprising youthfulness instantly. ‘I don’t think we’ve ever been formally introduced, Brigadier. Thank you for coming to see us. I hope your stay will be comfortable. If you need anything, well, I’ll ensure that someone looks after you.’

And with that, Lethbridge-Stewart had been cuffed and blindfolded and marched away without another word by Jones to be placed in this room, with only the man with half a face for periodic, if taciturn, company twice daily.

The man entered and walked, as always, crisply across the room, placing a tray of soup, cottage pie and some fruit cocktail on the oak tabletop. A plastic spoon, as usual, sat next to each dish.

For a few days now, Lethbridge-Stewart had used his time trying to work out the facts behind his odd companion. He walked stiffly, never catching Lethbridge-Stewart’s eye. His

conversation was limited and always curt. But it was his face that was interesting. Clearly there had been some kind of accident involving his head. His hair on the right-hand side was reduced to a few tufts, and the skin was scarred as if by burning. The right side of the face was covered with badly grafted skin, possibly done in a hurry and not by an expert. As a result his face was quite featureless, with the suggestion of a missing eye, and only a slight gap for his mouth. The graft went down his neck and under his shirt, which was always silk, further suggesting bad burning. But today's technology could have sorted out an awful lot of this – modern skin-grafting could easily work wonders. It was as if the man wanted to look damaged. And no matter how hard he tried, Lethbridge-Stewart could not get any answers out of him, not even his name. Just trying invoked a mood in his captor that Lethbridge-Stewart found unpleasant to cope with – as if he was yet another major inconvenience in the wretched man's life.

Yet there was something about him, something that the military side of Lethbridge-Stewart recognised. Maybe the way he carried himself, or the way he would scratch the unscarred side of his nose, or twitch his head at one of Lethbridge-Stewart's comments. There was something familiar, and today, Lethbridge-Stewart had decided, it was time for an experiment.

The man grunted about the temperature outside.

'Some flowers would be nice, you know,' Lethbridge-Stewart said.

The man paused, then shrugged. 'Maybe. I'll ask.'

'Thank you.'

Lethbridge-Stewart waited until the man was back at the door before standing to head for the table – a routine that had been drummed into him from the beginning of his internment. Just as the man touched the door handle, Lethbridge-Stewart shouted, 'Stand to attention in front of an officer. Who d'you think you are, shuffling there? Name, rank and number!'

It all came out so quickly, with such experienced barking, that there wasn't time to draw breath. And the reaction was

spot on.

The man with half a face was already at attention, his hand almost raising to a salute, when he stopped. For a moment, both men stared at each other, the disfigured one's single eye twitching very slightly.

'Nice try, Brigadier,' he said finally.

'Ex-Forces, then,' Lethbridge-Stewart replied.

'Could be police, though. Or just the TA.' The man laughed. 'You just don't know, do you, sir?' He opened the door and walked out backwards, deliberately locking it loudly.

Lethbridge-Stewart sat and started to taste the soup. So near, yet still so far.

Then something struck him. 'How could I have missed that,' he muttered to himself. And he smiled as he realised that he now not only knew the man's background, but could pinpoint exactly where his training had come from. All he needed to do now was try and get a name. And maybe then the reason for the loathing would become clearer.

36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
24 July 1989, 18.15

Christine Bush was a well-liked member of the Weald community. The area was named because of the vast expanse of green spread across the two counties of Sussex and Kent and her portion of the community centred around the Women's Institute, the Girl Guides and the Crawley and Area Dog Training (Obedience) Society – not that the Bush's owned any dogs, but Christine had somehow been elected Honorary President in her absence by some well-meaning chum.

Coffee mornings and jumble sales were among her stock-in-trade, with the occasional Amway sales evening just to put a few extra pennies in the housekeeping.

Over the years, then, she had become accustomed to various odd events and incidents that brightened the otherwise dull life of nightmare that was middle-class suburban Sussex road protesters, the anti-Moonie campaign (to think they had

wanted to buy Garrett Manor in the heart of the Ashdown Forest), even the disruptive anti-hunt saboteurs. Pease Pottage was not exactly famous for its fox hunts, but nevertheless a group of tawdry people had arrived on her doorstep one summer – and Mel had dragged them into the living room for tea and muffins in an attempt to ‘educate’ her ‘morally crippled parents’ about the horrors of bloodsports. Christine had never found hunting of any sort particularly pleasant and would happily have contributed to their rattled money tins, but Mel painted her parents pretty much as Satan and his wife and she’d ended up asking them to leave when some young woman casually asked if they’d be prepared to sell their house, live in a tepee in South Wales and give the profits to the cause. Mel tried to assure her mother that it had been a joke, but Christine wasn’t convinced, and that was the end of that afternoon’s ‘entertainment’.

On this particular day, Christine’s normally calm routine was disrupted when, on casually looking out of the living-room window while setting the table – resplendent with best china and large banana cake for Alan’s birthday – she saw a Brighton taxi drive up and watched the driver and some clown hauling a seemingly unconscious Trey out of the back.

She ran to the front door and yanked it open as the two men carried the American boy in.

‘Thank you, madam,’ said the clown. ‘Young Trey is not the lightest of youths.’

She looked at Trey, then back at the strangers.

‘Gay-bashers?’

The clown looked most upset. ‘Good gracious, no. He’s a taxi driver and I am the Doctor.’

‘No, I mean... My goodness, if you’re a doctor, is it serious?’

The clown who said he was a doctor suddenly clasped the lapels of his daft coat and Christine instinctively ducked in case a spurt of water from some concealed ‘humorous’ flower-head sprayed her. ‘I am not a doctor, madam, I am *the* Doctor.’

There was a cough of irritation.

The Doctor smiled, holding his hands out to her helplessly. 'I am afraid this cantankerous cabbie will not accept Andromedan Grotzits. Do you have –' He turned back to the taxi driver. 'What was it?'

'Twelve pounds and seventy pence.'

The Doctor smiled sheepishly at Christine, and offered her the twenty Grotzit note he'd previously waved in the uninterested driver's face. 'Perfectly acceptable everywhere else in the galaxy. Typically insular human attitude.'

Sighing, she went to her purse, found fifteen pounds and stuffed them into the driver's expectant hand. She waited until the car had driven away before going back to Trey, who was lying comatose on the chintz-covered sofa.

The Doctor ran a finger along the wooden mantelpiece, looked at the end of his digit and nodded. 'Very nice house here, Mrs Korte.'

Christine had got a damp cloth and was dabbing Trey's forehead. 'I'm not his mother. He's an exchange student we're putting up. What happened?'

'Oh, not much. He received two large doses of psychic energy.' The Doctor leaned over the back of the sofa. 'He'll be right as rain soon. Just needs rest. I made him sleep in the taxi. New espers can rarely take that much sudden punishment.'

'Esper? Psychic what exactly?' Christine stopped and slowly looked up at the Doctor, as if really seeing him for the first time.

He was grinning at her, not unkindly. He had a rather full face, short but wavy blond curls and the most amazing eyes – ice blue, yet full of humour and warmth. For all the ridiculous clothes and brusque manner, Christine immediately knew that this stranger meant no harm to her or Trey.

'How did you find us?' she asked.

'Trey gave the address to the driver. I don't know the area, so after Trey started sleeping, I rather had to rely on the driver getting us here. Quickly.' The Doctor crossed towards the hallway and out to the kitchen. 'I suggest some hot, sweet tea and –'

Christine waited for a few seconds and then followed him out to see why he had stopped speaking.

The Doctor was standing in the hallway, staring at the large family portrait photograph in the frame above the cupboard under the stairs. He had a hand over his mouth.

‘Is something wrong, Doctor?’

Slowly he turned to her. ‘You’re Mrs Bush, aren’t you? This is Pease Pottage, 1989, isn’t it? And your daughter, Melanie, will be returning home from her job at a computer firm soon, won’t she?’

Christine nodded.

‘I have to leave, Mrs Bush. I trust Trey will be safe with you, he needs looking after.’ The Doctor turned back towards the front door. ‘I know this is very rude of me, but I must leave.’

‘Where are you going? And why?’

‘Brighton.’

‘How? The taxi has gone.’

The Doctor looked momentarily stumped, then brightened. ‘Train. You have a train service here, surely?’

‘Faygate’s the nearest station,’ Christine said. ‘Change at Three Bridges, take the stopping train to Brighton. But why now? So suddenly?’

Before he could answer her, there was the sound of a key in the door, and a sighed ‘Oh no’ from the Doctor. The door opened and Melanie walked in.

‘Hi Mum. Is Dad back yet?’

Christine watched as the Doctor took a step away from Mel – as if he were frightened of her.

‘Oh, hello there.’ Melanie placed her blue jacket on a hook next to the large mirror by the doorway. ‘You must be Mum’s bit on the side. I’ve heard all about you,’ she said laughing, and kissed Christine on the cheek.

‘Melanie!’

With a sigh, Melanie turned back to the Doctor. ‘Sorry, bad joke.’ She held her hand out. ‘I’m Mel. You are?’

‘The Doctor,’ said Christine and the Doctor together. Melanie’s humour vanished instantly. ‘Are you ill, Mum?’

What's up?'

Christine shook her head. 'Not me, Melanie. It's Trey. He collapsed in Brighton. The Doctor here brought him home.'

Melanie rushed into the living room and dropped to her knees beside Trey. He stirred and frowned.

'Hi Trey,' said Melanie. 'Are you OK?'

His eyes opened. The hospital,' he muttered. 'I must warn the Doctor about the hospital.'

The Doctor was there in an instant. 'Trey? Trey, what is this about a hospital? Which hospital?'

The boy pushed himself up on to his elbows, wincing at the sudden movement. 'I have absolutely no idea, Doctor. Why did I say that?'

Mel shot a look at Christine, who just shrugged. 'I'll make that tea,' she said, and headed for the kitchen.

By the time she had filled the kettle, Melanie was beside her, staring up with those inquisitive eyes that Christine knew weren't going to go away without all the answers. And Christine didn't have any.

'I don't know,' she said before Melanie even spoke. 'In a cab. Psychic something or other. And maybe he's colour-blind.'

Melanie's mouth opened and closed, guppy style, a couple of times before she said, 'But do you trust him?'

'Yes,' Christine replied with a certainty that surprised even her. 'Yes, I do, and I don't know why. There's just something about him. Have you seen him before?'

Melanie immediately shook her head and then thought about it. 'Oh, actually, yes. He was in Victoria Gardens earlier. I thought he was some kind of tramp. Why?'

Christine paused. The Doctor had seemed very nervous at seeing Melanie's photograph. He'd tried to leave, until Melanie had arrived and changed that.

'Oh, nothing.'

The kettle boiled and Christine Bush made a very large pot of tea. By the time Alan Bush drove up, Trey was sitting upright, feeling, he claimed, 100 per cent.

Melanie was just coming off the phone as Alan strolled

through the front door. She waved to him, nodding at the phone. 'Cheers,' she said jauntily to the person on the other end and hung up, then followed her father in.

Christine was pleased to see her husband, but before she could make any introductions, the Doctor saved her the trouble.

'And what are you a doctor of, exactly?' Alan asked.

The Doctor shoved his hands into his pockets and smiled. 'Anything and everything. But especially everything.'

'Ah,' said Alan. You're Bob Lines's friend. The computer whiz.'

'You know the inspector? Why, that's marvellous.'

'Golf,' Alan said in that way that golfers do as if it explains their entire social life. Christine was going to add that he and Bob Lines had grown up as next-door neighbours and schoolfriends since their days in Small Marshes, near Hastings, but the Doctor didn't seem to care. The word golf clearly expressed everything Alan assumed it would.

'Lovely chap. Dreadful handicap'

'Not a good loser either.'

The Doctor and Alan then began swapping 'golfing with Sergeant/Detective Sergeant/Detective Inspector Bob Lines stories' (the Doctor, it appeared had known Bob for some fifteen years), so Christine turned her attention back to Trey and Melanie, who were discussing Melanie's phone conversation.

'So Joe said he'd see you tomorrow,' said Melanie. 'If you were well enough,' she added schoolmarmishly. Christine opted not to ask who Joe was – although she realised it didn't take much imagination to work it out.

'Thanks, Mel. You're terrific, you know.'

Melanie smiled and hugged him. 'It has been said now and again.'

Alan interrupted them. 'Melanie, this is the Doctor.' 'I know.'

'No, I mean, this is the man you're going to be helping tomorrow You know, with Bob Lines at the station.'

'Oh, great,' enthused Mel.

‘Oh wonderful,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘I never stood a chance did I?’

Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
24 July 1989, 19.05

The ambulance was parked a few doors down from the Bushes’, outside one of the small bungalows which had sprouted up on the land sold off by old Mr Sharp’s family after his death. Most of Downview Crescent had been constructed in the late fifties for the post-war *nouveau rich* to escape from blitzed London, but the bungalows had been built early in the yuppie-inspired eighties to accommodate the trendies who wanted to earn thousands in the City but live in the country.

By the late eighties of course yuppie culture had crashed, thousands had lost thousands and most of the bungalows were now owned by companies who rented them out to overstressed executives who wanted somewhere to take the wife and kids for a fun weekend or the mistress for a dirty one.

As a result, during the week the bungalows tended to be empty, with just a paid caretaker checking security once a day, so Ciara and Cellian’s Cadillac ambulance had no problems sheltering in a gravel drive to watch the Bush household. Cellian, silent as always, was playing a taped recording of Mel’s latest telephone call through the dashboard back to the managing director of SenéNet.

‘Interesting. Locate this Joe Hambidge, Ciara, and make him one of yours. Ensure he leads us to the American esper without attracting the attention of the others in the household.’

Ciara looked at the image of the managing director on the dashboard monitor. ‘And the alien?’

‘If it is the Doctor, he will make a move soon. But for now concentrate on the esper.’

The image vanished and Ciara turned to look at her counterpart. ‘Time to make use of one of our agents, Cellian. I always knew we’d have a use for him.’

8 Stanley Street, Brighton, East Sussex
24 July 1989, 21.45

Shaun Lyon was staring straight ahead at the wall, his eyes blinking at a slower rate than normal for a human. He was twenty-three, dark-haired, of quite average build and totally unremarkable looking. He was wearing jeans, trainers and a tatty T-shirt with a dazed-looking smiley face on it, with the words 'Have a Nice Trip' written across it.

He was sitting on his bed, looking as if he had not slept for about a week. In fact it had been only two days and no one else in the street had noticed. And few probably would. Shaun was nothing more than another ex-student caught in the impossible situation of trying to earn enough to live on whilst simultaneously paying off a crippling personal loan. As a result, he rarely went out, rarely socialised and owned nothing more than a handful of clothes, a broken cassette player and a rusty bicycle upon which he made pizza deliveries on a Saturday night for a local firm who had employed him more out of pity than anything else.

Shaun was, however, unaware of all of this. He was unaware of anything currently except the steady white noise that bounced around his brain as a result of the stereo earphones he wore, attached to a rather expensive-looking personal portable CD player that lay beside him.

He had been sitting in the same position, listening to the same automatically replaying CD, for forty-eight hours, with no sign of battery wear in the player and no hint of movement. A dried path of spittle was caked down his chin where he had dribbled after twelve hours of denying himself any kind of liquid refreshment, but apart from that he might as well have been hibernating.

If he was able to think about such things, he would know that his last clear thoughts had been at about 10 p.m. on Saturday night, when he had delivered two medium vegetarian pizzas plus a bottle of Cherry Coke to a house in Madehurst Close.

Cycling up the hill towards the Neolithic park, he had seen

what appeared to be an old-fashioned ambulance on the side of the road, a young male nurse attempting to repair a puncture. Being the general good Samaritan he was, Shaun had offered to help. The male nurse had remained totally silent but the beautiful dark-haired female nurse had been over-generous in her praise, flattering Shaun incredibly. And then, as a thank-you she had presented him with the portable CD player – ‘I won it in a hospital raffle,’ she had explained, ‘but I don’t have CDs.’

Shaun didn’t have any CDs either, but he was too awed by her stunning looks and perfect smile to refuse. The ambulance had eventually driven off with its replacement tyre, so Shaun, after finishing his shift, had returned home and opened the CD player, only to find a disc inside. It was gold on one side, jet black on the other, with no writing or marks of any kind. Even the spindle run-off did not have a manufacturer’s mark. With a shrug, he had sat on his bed, put the earphones on and pressed play.

Within four seconds, his brain was irrevocably scrambled and his memory wiped, waiting for something new to fill it up. Now, two days later, that something came. A series of electrical impulses entered his brain via the stereo system, telling him what to do. It was as if a script were being typed directly into his consciousness, determining his life for the next twenty minutes.

After a few moments, he started blinking normally, as if someone had switched his humanity back on, albeit at a low volume. His head nodded forward slightly and the earphones slipped to the floor. Then he slowly moved away from the bed and crossed to the kitchen. He pulled open the refrigerator door and took out a slightly out-of-date carton of orange juice, took a swig and dropped it on the floor, ignoring the sticky splashes that hit his jeans. Revitalised enough, he returned to his room, and put on a coat. The earphones moved by themselves, the cable rearing up like a spindly snake and popped themselves back in his ears. Shaun then slipped the CD player into his pocket and headed for the front door, pulling his bicycle away from the wall. Once outside in the

warm air, he rode towards the town centre. Within moments he was along Grand Parade and then up Church Street. Just past the turning, the Cadillac he had seen two days before was parked. Without a word, he pulled up beside the driver's window. It scrolled down, the smoked glass giving way to the perfect face of Cellian. Soundlessly he passed a brown box to Shaun who then rode away with it.

He took a left into New Road and cycled up to the canopy of the Theatre Royal. The moment he stopped the bike, it was as if his usual behaviour had been restored. His body language became completely normal and he wandered into the foyer, catching the eye of a female usher.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm looking for Joe Hambidge?'

The usher gave Shaun a quick once over and then marched towards the box office. 'Joe? Someone to see you,' she said *sotto voce*. 'Doesn't look quite your type, though. Bit rough.'

After a few seconds, Joe emerged from the side of the box office, frowning slightly. 'Hello?'

Shaun turned and smiled. 'Joe Hambidge? I've a delivery for you.' He held out the box. 'From Trey,' he added.

Joe's face lit up immediately, a broad grin spreading from ear to ear.

With a nod, Shaun headed back out into the night air.

'Hey,' Joe shouted after him. 'Don't I have to sign something?'

Shaun slipped the earphones back on, took his bike and cycled back down New Road. He turned right into Church Street, passed the Cadillac as if it did not exist and, without looking, came straight out on to Grand Parade, where he died instantly under the front wheels of a large van which crushed most of his torso, the bike and the CD player in two seconds.

Back on Church Street, the Cadillac ambulance sped off towards the railway station, away from the cries and yells just beginning to be heard on Grand Parade.

Garrett Manor Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
24 July 1989, 23.30

‘There you have it, Mr Jones. Everything we need to take over the world.’ The managing director scratched at his scar. ‘Well, Britain. Well, all right, Mr Jones, Sussex! But, as the saying goes, today Sussex, tomorrow the world.’

Jones nodded and said nothing, as his employer stared intently from his seat at the plastic red box on his desk.

‘With this one tiny contraption, everything we have built up over the last twenty-odd years will come to fruition.’

Jones simply chose to nod once again.

‘Oh, I know, you have heard me say it before. But rarely, oh so rarely, with such sheer excitement.’ The managing director stood up. ‘Time to pay a visit to some of our guests, I think.’ As he crossed towards the door he stopped. ‘How are Mr Futayomoto’s associates?’

Jones shrugged. ‘Fine. For about another thirty minutes.’

The managing director moved quickly back to his desk and punched his keyboard. Jones could not actually see what appeared, but a few coloured images reflected eerily off his employer’s pale face, like a projection on a screen.

‘I see the Stalker has not had a decent meal since that private detective joined us a while back. It will be very hungry.’ Any hint at jocularly or warmth vanished from his voice very quickly. ‘Nothing must go wrong, Mr Jones, remember that. And I trust Mr Lawson is aware of this.’

‘He knows,’ Jones said. Lawson had also been with them for many years – indeed, he had been one of those involved in the creation of the Stalker. ‘Nothing will go wrong.’

‘Good.’ The managing director stated levelly, and then he left the room.

Jones crossed over to the window. It was a very clear night and here, in the centre of Ashdown Forest, city glow barely existed. Therefore, he could see each and every star, some glowing brightly, some just barely flickering. No matter how hard he stared, every time he looked back to somewhere he’d already examined more stars seemed to have appeared. Or moved.

Fifteen or so years ago, it would have meant nothing. Back then he was an assassin for hire, on the run from a

number of federal agencies across the globe, but well paid. After the death of his wife (well, he had had to do that, she had guessed about him), he had vowed never to return to England. But then he had met his current employer, apparently a lowly private secretary in the British government but in reality bleeding off resources and technologies from all sorts of sources for his own ends. And so Jones had gone to work for him, safe in the knowledge that he was well protected. By operating right under their noses, the very people who wanted him caught were too stupid to notice him.

The irony satisfied him. But now, as he approached his mid-forties, he began to wonder whether or not this was still the career he wanted to pursue, or the life. He had adopted the 'Jones' personality at the managing director's wishes – it had been so long since he had used his real name that he sometimes couldn't remember it. And anyway, it was pointless – that life was a long time ago. But recently the urge to kill for a living had begun to fade. Sure, he still enjoyed the act, but it had lost that high, almost sexual thrill of watching another human being's life just shut off.

His employer's latest scheme bemused him. Adopting the personality of executive officer in SenéNet was no big deal, but he was aware that gradually he was beginning to live it, to become second-in-command of operations for his employer.

Brazil looked attractive. No extradition orders, no cooperation between South America and the rest of the world, meant he could retire there quite happily. A future life of sun, sex, sea and freedom. Or Sardinia. He had enough contacts in the Mafia to buy his way into Italian society and never be exposed.

He looked up at the stars again. Maybe out there – where life was as varied and interesting as it was on Earth. Not many people believed in such things, but he knew. He'd seen so much under his current employment that he wondered if there was any way to get out there. Some kind of intergalactic gunslinger, like the Han Solo guy from *Star Wars*. Yeah, that could be fun. Unlikely, but fun.

His thoughts were broken when a bleeper sounded from

inside his jacket. He withdrew a tiny portable phone-like device, an example of 'borrowed' alien technology that had come into the possession of his employer. Maybe they should stop trying to take over the world, get a patent on this technology and move the cellular telephone business on by forty years.

'Yes?'

'It's me.' It was Lawson. 'Are we ready for the off, then?' 'Yes.' Jones took a last look at the stars, then with a sigh told Lawson he was on his way.

Han Solo. If only...

Outhouse, Garrett Marton Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
24 July 1989, 23.40

Ryuichi Futayomoto was in the dark, figuratively as well as literally. He was aware of certain objects around him which, after a few minutes of thinking they were people, he had realised were mannequins, shunted just to the right, on the edge of his perception, in the corner of whatever room he was in. There was a range of lifeless PCs opposite and some machinery behind him which hummed. But whatever had happened to him, he could not turn around to see what it was.

He knew that he was paralysed, but that it was unlikely to be permanent. There was a general tingling all over his body, like a mild attack of pins and needles coursing through him, so he assumed that whatever had knocked him out was slowly wearing off.

It had been something to do with SenéNet, he knew. He had not entirely trusted the strange managing director who had come to Japan two years previously, casually displaying his technological wonders and promising all sorts of riches for those who joined his grand enterprise.

But Ryuichi Futayomoto had been gullible and greedy enough to go for it. All he had to do was adapt the technology into a video games console – the blossoming industry throughout Japan, and one into which his company needed to get a foothold. And SenéNet offered that with ease.

Developing the Maxx, as the console was to be called, had proved remarkably easy. The combination of micro-technology and plastics had revolutionised what his company could do and, provided they kept it quiet from their competitors, they would be rich beyond their wildest dreams. The managing director of SenéNet had ensured this security by adding a great deal of money to the pay packets of Futayomoto's staff over the two-year gestation period. And money easily bought acquiescence in Tokyo, or at least at Futayomoto's company.

So now the Maxx was ready. 64 bit CD technology, a variety of optional plug-ins, including Internet access and, with one of SenéNet's European software houses working in tandem, a series of 3D, real-time platform and adventure games to dominate the market.

When the lights in the room came on, it actually took Futayomoto a second or two to realise that he had not blinked at the change. He had not really found it uncomfortable.

He couldn't blink!

He couldn't even move his eyes!

The managing director was in front of him, staring through those stupid dark glasses. Did he ever take them off?

'Let me show you something, Futayomoto-san,' he said quietly. 'I am glad you are awake. I feel a debt of gratitude to you for your work on the Maxx and so owe you an explanation. Of sorts.' He went quiet for a moment, staring at Futayomoto quizzically.

'Oh, of course, you are wondering where your aides are.' Actually, they had never entered Futayomoto's mind, but now that he mentioned it...

'Dead, I am afraid. Or at least, they soon will be. The Stalker is a remarkable beast, created from a common-or-garden Dobermann. All we did a number of years back was enter a few extra elements of a primordial nature into his brain and organs. Changed him quite a lot, I can tell you. And gave him a voracious appetite.'

Futayomoto did not know how to react. He did not know if he *could* react. But he was fairly sure he should be either

frightened or dismissive. Instead he just remained calm. As if something was holding back his instincts. He knew this was wrong, but couldn't do anything about it.

'So, as I said, it is time for you to understand what we are doing here at SenéNet. And why. And what part you are to play in it.' The managing director moved towards him and actually swivelled him round, making Futayomoto realise that he was on some sort of tiny rotatable platform.

He could see the mannequins clearly now. There were three Westerners in total. One was an elderly man in a dark suit. Next to him was an attractive blonde woman in a smart trouser suit. The third was a young man with wild hair and glasses, in a casual jacket and jeans.

The managing director had crossed to one of the PCs. He opened a tray and inserted a CD-ROM into it. The PC leapt into life, a series of self-loading commands flashing downwards, faster than anything Futayomoto had seen before.

'All three of them have had the same guided tour of Dr Krafchin's establishment as you, Futayomoto-san. However, they are already aware of their new roles in life.'

Futayomoto wanted to frown, to express his lack of comprehension, but his body refused to comply. He did not remember any Dr Krafchin, or an 'establishment'. The last thing he remembered was... was... what?

The managing director was still talking. 'Yes, you see they are not mannequins or waxworks or anything like that. This one' – he reached over and tapped the younger man – 'this one is Luke Aspinall. His uncle runs a useful subsidiary company of mine. Well, as of teatime today it was mine, when it was signed over to me. Sadly Uncle Rupert is destined not to survive the night, and tomorrow dear Luke here will assume his position as chairman, thus making the sweeping changes he will enforce that bit more understandable to his staff. Oh, I would have gone for Rupert, but we realised he was rather set in his ways and so the proposed changes would have looked suspicious.' The managing director pointed at the other two figures. The Right Honourable Laurence Byrne and his Permanent Under Secretary Miss Goodwin. He's one of

Mrs Thatcher's leading technology ministers and, coincidentally, the local MP here as well. They will have their parts to play in a couple of weeks. At the moment it is believed that they are on a business trip to New York.'

He crossed back to the PC and pressed something on the keyboard. A series of binary notes raced across the screen at a phenomenal speed.

'I am uploading the new programming for young Luke here. Tomorrow morning, he will return to BITS unaware that anything has changed. We have given him an entirely new set of brain patterns, memory, personality and so on. You see, we downloaded his, added what we wanted, removed what we did not need and also made a few physical improvements.'

He walked back towards Futayomoto, blocking the businessman's view of the hapless people and the PCs. 'And we are doing the same to you, Futayomoto-san. Already, Dr Krafchin has replaced most of your nervous system with an artificial one. Your blood has been totally drained and instead a synthetic fluid has been inserted, carrying a series of polymer molecules on to which we have imprinted chains of commands which you will obey as and when we upload the relevant information.' He turned away for a second and then looked back again. 'Oh, I forgot, Futayomoto-san. Goodbye.' He smiled insincerely, walked over to the PCs and activated another, inserting a different CD into the ROM drive.

The last thing the self-aware Ryuichi Futayomoto ever heard was the managing director saying, 'I imagine this is most unpleasant. But that, as they say, is progress.'

And then his memory, his personality, his very soul were permanently erased.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
24 July 1989, 23.50

'He's a magnificent creature, isn't he?' Lawson was unclipping the heavy duty reinforced plastic muzzle, rubber gloves protecting his hands from tiny rivulets of green saliva that had gathered in it.

‘If you say so,’ muttered Jones.

The look on the faces of the two Japanese businessmen said it all. Stripped down to T-shirts and shorts, with running shoes on their feet, they were sweating profusely despite the cool night air and their eyes bulged in terrified anticipation.

‘It’s very simple,’ Lawson said to them. ‘I allow you a ten-minute start. Then I let the Stalker go. If you want a word or two of advice, think on this. He can’t chase two people at once. Also, you are both going to die at some point during the chase. He doesn’t give up and can track you from half a mile away. I suggest you make whatever confessions you want to to whatever deity you believe in and keep your fingers crossed that you are first. With two of you, he’ll kill the first easily, saving the other for a bit of a plaything.’ Lawson looked at his watch. ‘Off you go, then.’

The two men stared at each other and fled across the large open garden towards the edge of the untamed wooded area. ‘You enjoy this, don’t you, Lawson?’

Lawson shrugged. ‘So did you, once upon a time. You’ve gone soft, mate. Let’s hope his nibs doesn’t think so, otherwise you are going to be next.’

Jones shrugged. Lawson’s opinions didn’t particularly interest him. ‘Cheat,’ he said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Let the Stalker go now. I want those two dead in fifteen minutes.’

He stared at the animal, which was snarling and spitting green saliva everywhere. He noted a small area of Lawson’s trousers where the spit had landed – and the smouldering hole that was there now.

‘Have we ever analysed what’s in that goo?’

Lawson shrugged. ‘Might have done. Most of the research was up north, in the old place before we went abroad. Our, er, swift departure, meant that a lot of stuff had to be dumped. The Stalker was augmented originally by a guy called Traynor. I was just his lackey really, just did what he told me to. When Traynor died, a lot of the secrets went with him. All I know is that some green sludge they found when drilling

underground added to the dog's body. Turned him into the beast he is today.'

Jones watched as the exaggerated muscles on the dog's shoulders pumped in and out, at the green eyes, lit by some very alien-looking glow, and at the face, bestial and twisted, like it had reverted to some kind of prehistoric monster. 'Let it go,' he repeated.

Lawson bent down and unclipped the plastic leash. Without the bark or growl of a normal dog, the Stalker ran towards the woods.

'How come it doesn't take your arm off, Lawson?'

Lawson smiled. 'It knows who's boss, mate. And let's face it, no one else around here has anything to do with it. I feed it, exercise it and pet it. It knows me.'

Jones shrugged and turned back towards the Manor, saying, 'I want confirmation of their deaths before one o'clock, Lawson.'

He opened the scullery door and took one last look back. Swallowed up by the darkness, there was no sign of either beast or businessman. The thought of making a pet of a creature like that revolted him. 'Never liked pets,' he murmured. 'Always turn on you in the end.'

TUESDAY

56 The Cliff Roedean, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 03.18

Susan Illingworth woke up as soon as she heard the sound. Ever since she and Rupert had upped and left Bradford to make Rupert's next million in Brighton, she had been nervous. The south of England was a frightening place, packed with unhappy, uncommunicative people, rude and brusque, whereas she was used to the friendliness of her fellow Yorkshiremen. She had tried to become part of the community, but people, in her eyes at least, held up her broad accent as an indication of being too working class for Brighton society. Despite Rupert's attempts to placate her, all she had wanted to do was go back home.

Back to safety.

Here they were, living in what was supposed to be a fashionable and safe area of the town, overlooking the sea and Rupert's wretched golf courses and still she awoke nightly as soon as a car door slammed, or a voice carried from the road or Volks' electric beach-front railway terminus, which was a popular haunt for the down-and-outs.

But this sound was different from the usual ones. This was clearly outside their home, outside their front door. She glanced over to the clock – surely no one would be outside the house at this time?

She was going to nudge Rupert awake, but knew he'd grumpily say she was imagining things and to go back to sleep. He would do so with ease and she would spend another sleepless night believing they were going to be murdered in their beds.

This was too much. She was being silly. A glass of warm milk would settle her – and to get down to the kitchen, she

didn't have to go that near the front door either.

As she eased out of bed, Rupert stirred, but rapidly turned over and carried on sleeping. She put on her silk dressing gown, slipped her feet into some furry slippers and left the bedroom, crossing the hallway and descending the stairs, casting only a brief look towards the front door.

Had Susan Illingworth, beloved wife of Rupert Illingworth, owner and chairman of Brighton Information Technologies, liked cats, she might have remembered old wives' tales concerning felines and how curiosity tended to curtail their string of nine lives. If she had thought about that, or even if she had stuck by her normal timid code of conduct, she might have avoided the next few moments. As it was, the moment she took a step towards the front door, she set irrevocable events in motion.

She peered through the tiny spyhole in the door, expecting to see nothing. However, what greeted her was a tall, dark-haired girl in jeans and a red jacket, one of those personal stereo things so favoured by the youngsters of Brighton blaring music into her ears. It was the indistinct but steady drone of unrecognisable noise that Susan hated so much about them. If the music was identifiable, it was not such a nuisance, but standing behind people in shops when all you could hear was a distorted version of the higher notes was aggravating to say the least.

And why was this girl standing on her doorstep, listening to music at three in the morning? The front door of the house was at the top of a small set of concrete steps which rose from a narrow path from the shrub-enclosed gate, so this was no casual drossing about. And standing at that gate Susan could see two figures in white, with the hint of some white estate car parked in the road. They looked like nurses, dressed in those strange tunics that buttoned up the side – Nehru jackets – and wearing spotless white trousers.

Susan frowned as the girl, perhaps realising that she was being looked at, suddenly turned and stared straight into the spyhole, blotting everything else out. With a tiny gasp, Susan stepped back, knocking into a coat stand which also contained

Rupert's golf clubs. The sudden noise as they clattered across the floor brought a strangled cry from upstairs and the sound of scurrying feet as Rupert jumped out of bed.

'Susan?' he called.

Susan was too frightened to call back, her hand over her mouth. She was seeing the impossible.

A small circle was being cut into the doorway, around the lock, burning through wood and metal with ease. As the circle was completed, the girl's hand punched it out, and Susan could see her flesh scald as it brushed the red hot metal of the remaining bits of the lock.

Apparently unconcerned at the pain, the girl shoved the door open and stared at Susan. Then she stepped forward and bent over, placing her portable CD player on the ground, removing the earphones from her head, and then unplugging them from the machine.

Susan saw the two nurses, one male, one female, walk up and stand behind the girl, who was staring ahead, almost as if she had been switched off at the same time as the noise from the CD. The female nurse clicked her fingers and Susan watched as the earphone cable suddenly moved of its own accord, crawling across the floor with perfect movements like a snake Susan had once seen in a David Attenborough film, dragging the little earphones along behind it, the socket jack reacting like the snake's head.

Susan was aware that Rupert had arrived, his 'What the bloody hell...' being as good an announcement as any of his presence.

The earphone cable reared up suddenly and launched away from the floor, wrapping itself around Susan's neck. It actually took her a few seconds to realise that she was being throttled – the implausibility of what she had witnessed suddenly becoming less important than getting this thing away from her throat. She tried to ask Rupert for help, but something else had caught his eye, although she could not see what. As she struggled against the pressure, she saw a bright flash and smelt an odour like the burning left after an electrical short. She then realised that Rupert was lying on the

floor, a huge, plate-sized hole in his chest smouldering slightly. Something inside her clicked. She knew her husband was dead, but as she tried to scream, the constriction round her neck increased. There was another flash and her husband's body simply vanished in a puff of smoke which itself shrank away to nothing.

Susan Illingworth's last ever thought was that this would never have happened in Bradford.

People were far more polite in Yorkshire...

36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
25 July 1989, 06.45

The Doctor awoke with a start, rolling off the sofa and landing on the floor with a thud which reverberated around the room.

'Now, that was uncalled for,' he muttered at his own subconscious. 'I was rather enjoying that little snooze.' He crawled up on to the sofa again, shook his head for a second and then wandered towards the back of the living room. He pushed open the door into the conservatory and looked out on to the beautiful back garden. A high wooden fence protected it from nosy neighbours. There was a goldfish pond in one corner and a compost heap in the other. Garden tools were leaning against the side of a shed and a grass roller sat right in the centre of the lawn, just in front of a immaculate white stone birdbath.

'Not a trace of mildew anywhere,' the Doctor murmured, impressed. 'Few birdbaths get cleaned that often. Our Trey has been earning his keep, obviously.'

'He's very good at helping my parents,' said a breezy voice behind him. 'My mother is especially grateful. She hates hard work, as I expect you've noticed.' The ebullient tone, the way every other syllable was stressed (regardless of whether it needed to be) and the way the last word of each sentence was almost underlined in red three times suggested just one person.

'Good morning, Melanie.' The Doctor did not turn around.

‘Mel, please. I prefer my friends to call me Mel.’

‘Ah.’ The Doctor carried on staring at the birdbath. ‘So, we are friends suddenly, are we? After just a few hours in each other’s company, we have bonded, we have merged our minds and hearts and entwined our very sanguine souls, ready to face the day together. How charming.’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ Mel grumbled. ‘I only wanted to say hello, Doctor. Excuse me for breathing.’

The Doctor let his shoulders drop, and turned around, arms out in a gesture of apology.

Mel was gone.

The rattle of the kettle drew him towards the kitchen, where he found her going through a cupboard in search of exotic teas, standing on tiptoe as she reached up.

‘PG Tips will do fine for me,’ he said. ‘Please don’t go to any bother on my account.’

‘I wasn’t,’ she replied, still looking in the cupboard. ‘I was making myself a peach and passionfruit one. If you want something, get it yourself.’ She shoved an apple into the pocket of her powder-blue dressing gown.

‘Mel,’ he cried.

She swung round. ‘Oh, do belt up, Doctor. You’ll wake everyone else up.’

‘Mel,’ he repeated, in a much quieter voice this time – which, for him, was no mean feat. ‘Mel, I came to apologise. We got off on the wrong foot back there.’

‘I don’t believe “we” did anything of the sort, Doctor. You are just rude, obnoxious, arrogant and fat. I don’t think –’

‘Fat? I am *not* fat!’ He tapped his waistline. ‘I have been slimmer, I’ll concede, but I’ve also been taller and shorter. And when I was very much younger, I looked a good deal older. But I am *not* fat!’

Mel shrugged. ‘Well, I don’t know what you’re babbling about, Doctor, but in my book you are fat. Not obese, I grant you, but a bit of aerobics, a touch of muesli and some tomato or carrot juice regularly, and you could shed a stone easily.’

The Doctor patted his waistline again. ‘I see. Fat. Well, forget the tea, I’m going to read the paper.’

He anxiously looked around to see if he could find a newspaper with which to illustrate his petulance but failed. As he turned back to confront Mel, she shoved a mug of tea into one hand and a rolled-up paper in the other. 'It's last week's and not very interesting, but there's a good article on the television adaptation of *Death Under Sail*. You might like it.'

'I love a good C.P. Snow book, Mel. How did you know?'

'I didn't,' she said, squeezing past him. 'But the director is described as an arrogant pig who believes that only his opinions matter. The article was written by some poor makeup lady forced to work with him. There seem to be parallels with something in our lives there, but I can't for the life of me work out what.'

As Mel trotted up the stairs, the Doctor shook his head.

'Well, I never saw you as an arrogant pig, I have to say, Mel,' he mumbled uncomprehendingly and, cup of tea in hand, returned to the living-room sofa.

He sat, sipped and flicked. Each page featured some mundane local news – the Cuckfield Operatic Society's adaptation of *HMS Pinafore* had beaten their Haywards Heath counterpart's version of *The Mikado* hands down, according to the arts reviewer, while someone had stolen old Farmer Cheshire's prize tomatoes two days before the village fête in Wych Cross, and three youths had been arrested stealing a video camera from the Crawley Youth Centre.

'Well, this is exciting, I have to say. I had no idea that Sussex was such a hotbed of danger, artistic endeavour and... and tomatoes!'

He began flicking through, past the television page, and found the crossword – which someone had given up on having completed about six lines. 'I love crosswords. Especially *The Times*. I used to do *The Times* crossword all the time a life or two back. Now, three down: "Reflecting in one's own glory". Ten letters, with an S in the middle'.

'Narcissism,' came a quiet voice behind him.

'Thank you, Mel,' he said. And smiled. And he could see her smiling, reflected in the glass of a framed print hanging above the fireplace.

‘Shall we be friends, Doc? I mean, we do have to solve your computer problem together this morning.’

The Doctor leaned back and hung his head over the back of the sofa, so he was looking straight up at Mel, if a little upside down. ‘On one condition, Mel.’

‘Which is?’

‘Please,’ he said, in a voice which suggested it was the most important thing in the world, ‘please don’t call me Doc.’

‘All right. Please call me Mel.’

‘Hello, Mel.’

‘Hello, Doctor.’

The Doctor sat up and held out a hand. ‘Good to meet you properly this time.’

‘This time?’

‘Ah.’ The Doctor shrugged. ‘It’ll make sense one day, I promise you.’

‘Fine. Anything else good in the paper?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Just some prize tomatoes and a story about a cat caught in a tree. Nothing very exciting. It’s last week’s.’

Mel was emptying out her tiny handbag on to the living room table. ‘New one comes out today. We can pick one up on our way to the police station if you want. And actually I want to see if there are any cheap flights abroad – I want to take Mum on a week away somewhere. It’s her birthday as well soon – all three of us around the same time. Great fun. Dad’s yesterday, my twenty-fifth two days before that and Mum’s next Thursday.’

‘That’s nice. Oh, by the way, may I ask something?’ Mel nodded.

‘Last night, your father seemed less than enthralled by the coffee grinder your mother gave him for his birthday. I thought it was very nice. I’ve always wanted one like that.’

‘Dad hates coffee. Mum’s been trying to get him into it. I suspect she’ll use it rather than him. She’s dreadful at buying presents. Got him an electric-blue tie last year.’

‘Sounds nice.’

Mel cast a look at the Doctor, resplendent in his stripy

trousers, shirt and multicoloured waistcoat. Then she looked at the patchwork overcoat hanging on the back of a chair. 'Yes, well, it wasn't really something he could wear to the office. It went to a jumble sale very quickly afterwards.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I can see why you like Pease Pottage, Mel. A nice house, nice family, a good job. I expect you're planning to stay here for a while.'

Having located whatever it was she wanted, Mel scooped the contents of her bag up and dumped them unceremoniously back in. 'Rest assured, Doctor, I want to stay in Pease Pottage about as much as you want root canal work at the dentist's three times a day.'

The Doctor winced. 'That much?'

'That much,' Mel confirmed. 'Why? You offering me a trip somewhere?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Oh no. I just think that you should learn to appreciate this more. I wouldn't want to leave here if this was my home.'

'Oh, and just where is home, Doctor?'

The Doctor ignored her and headed for the kitchen. 'Shall I make breakfast. Egg, bacon, fried bread, mushrooms and some hash browns?'

Horrified, Mel followed him. 'Doctor! I'm a vegetarian. So should you be. It's wrong to eat meat.'

'One day I may agree with you, but this body likes its food bad. Very bad. Bubble and squeak?'

Leaving the Doctor to ruin his health, complexion and probably set the smoke alarms off, Mel headed for the shower.

The Doctor began assembling breakfast, determined to show Mel that he could be responsible. He was not sure exactly why he was bothering. After all, it was essential to his future well-being to ensure that Mel did not elect to join him in the TARDIS but stayed safely on Earth. That way, hopefully, he could avoid the future portrayed in the Time Lord's Matrix back on Gallifrey during his trial and thus avoid sowing the seeds of the Valeyard's creation.

However, by the time she came down, he had prepared a breakfast for two consisting of muesli, tomato juice (he hated

carrot juice), very lightly buttered wholewheat toast, a fresh fruit salad with natural yoghurt and a large pot of rosehip tea.

As Mel walked into the kitchen, he stood, tea towel over his wrist like a waiter, and pointed to the table and chairs. With a broad grin, she sat, and he sat opposite.

‘Does madam approve?’

‘I don’t care if madame approves,’ said a voice from the doorway, ‘but the American tourist wants to know where his is.’

‘Trey!’ Mel leaned back and took his hand. ‘Pull up a chair. There’s more than enough for three.’

The young man happily sat with them and together they welcomed the new day with a deliciously healthy breakfast.

And, in the Doctor’s case, a larger than usual amount of foreboding.

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 08.30

Detective Sergeant Stephanie Rowe wandered into the CID ops room, expecting to find it empty. Instead her inspector, Bob Lines, was there already, tea in one hand, sitting in front of the terminal the Doctor had used, feet up, blocking anyone else from using it.

‘Bit anxious aren’t you, guy?’ she said, taking a swig of her own tea and settling into her desk. ‘He’s not due for another three hours.’

‘You never know with the Doctor. He could be here in five minutes or not for another three weeks.’ Lines sat up straight. ‘But with two of us here, Steph, we can take it in turns to guard this wretched computer. I need a leak.’

‘When did you get in?’

Lines tapped his chin, indicating a good degree of stubble. ‘What makes you think I left, Steph?’ He smiled at her. ‘Believe me, if he doesn’t turn up, I’ll have his knackers on a chain around my neck. And if he rings while I’m away from my desk, tell him that will you.’

‘Did you find someone to help him?’

Bob nodded. 'Alan Bush's girl. Smart one, that. She's going to wrap the Doctor, ego and all, around her little finger. They'll hate each other.'

Lines left and Rowe sighed. It was going to be one of those days.

Garrett Manor Annexe, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 09.00

Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart was woken by the unusual sound of the door being unlocked. Unusual because the man with only half a face rarely came before lunchtime to take him out for his constitutional, so he was instantly awake and alert, none of his military training failing him. Sure enough, it was his usual visitor, shuffling forward.

'I'm awake, man, there's no need to prowl.'

He had opted to go on the offensive, stop playing the passive house guest and try to upset the man enough to get some kind of reaction. But it would take time to build up, to create an atmosphere of tension and dislike, to make him eventually boil over.

The man shrugged. 'Thought you'd like to see the paper today. The classifieds, page eighteen.' He threw a newspaper across the room and it flopped neatly on to Lethbridge-Stewart's lap. Before he could react, the man had gone, locking the door behind him.

The date was 25 July apparently. Assuming the paper was genuine and not a week or so old, then he had been a prisoner for nearly a month. It didn't seem that long, he had to say.

He found the classifieds, turned to page eighteen and immediately saw the box. It contained a simple message: MISSING: ONE GREYHOUND. TRAP EMPTY. This was followed by a box number to reply to.

To the man in the street, this was clearly a message about a missing dog, but to Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart it was far more. It was a coded message from Sir John Sudbury to any UNIT operatives. He himself was Greyhound One, while Trap Empty referred to the lack of communication.

A terrible thought struck Lethbridge-Stewart. For old Sudbury to go to these lengths, the once-traditional C19 method of placing a seemingly harmless advert in a local paper, other attempts to rescue him must have failed. This indicated that there was either another prisoner here, a UNIT intelligence officer of some sort, or, worst-case scenario, whoever had been assigned to rescue him was dead. Another death on his conscience, another letter to write.

Or maybe Sudbury had played it so close to his chest that no one at UNIT knew. Crichton wouldn't send anyone, anyway. Probably glad to see the back of his predecessor. But Sudbury had his own favourites among the troops – people the two of them had hand-picked years ago to perform undercover operations. Lieutenant Sullivan had been one – used him to go undercover at that Think Tank place during the missile crisis. Then there had been RSM Champion, who had helped root out that Lacaillian, trapped on Earth before the Russians had found it. God knows what they would have done to the poor bugger if they had got it out of Yugoslavia first. Yes, there were a good number of reliable people in UNIT, loyal to himself and Sudbury. Hopefully, none of them had been used on this mission.

Trying to put the thoughts of men dying on his behalf out of his mind – the sort of thoughts he had not forced himself to cope with since leaving active UNIT service – he began to skim the rest of the paper. If he had been a prisoner for over three weeks, there was probably a lot going on in the world he needed to know about and even a copy of the *Brighton and Hove Advertiser* might have some national news in it.

Ten minutes later, he was dismayed to discover that most of the news concerned local fetes, prize-vegetable growers and some local thugs, caught for stealing a video camera, getting away with it because the local magistrate considered their home life was at fault and that social services should have done their jobs better. For a moment, he thought about conscription, national service and suchlike, but the memory of the boys at Brendon, most of whom would probably accidentally blow their own feet off at a parade service,

stopped him. The youth of today, he decided, either came from the privileged background where the ability to do complex algebra and chemistry was there but the common sense necessary to apply it to life wasn't or were thugs like those petty thieves who knew far more about real life than the average Brendoner ever could but would probably nick the rifles and sell them to Afghani mercenaries. Of course, he was aware that he was tarring the entire youth population of Britain with a fairly wide brush, but decided that the forces being able to select its recruits rather than having the great unwashed drafted in was probably a better option all round.

Then something caught his eye on the education page. It seemed that SenéNet, his captors, had become very generous and run a competition in tandem with the Nessie Burger chain for kids to give a name to the new plastic figures given away with children's portions. The competition, a local one, had been won by thirty children, all of whom were to be presented on Tuesday 25 July with their rewards – a free Maxx games console plus four CD games.

Video games were something of a modern marvel that had failed to ignite Lethbridge-Stewart's curiosity over the past few years. Although he was aware that Sonic was a blue hedgehog and that the Mario Brothers were some kind of workmen, he had yet to work out whether Bub or Bob was the blue or green dinosaur. Aware that being considered 'Brigadier Fuddy-duddy' at Brendon meant he had an obligation to live up to the epithet, he had allowed the junior house masters to become embroiled in such technological wonders and their problems.

But the thought of SenéNet top brass indulging in such an unseasonal display of gift-giving worried him. It just didn't fit. So what were they planning?

*36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
25 July 1989, 09.05*

'All right, who is going into Brighton today?' yelled Alan Bush from the front door.

Christine was standing, rather inconveniently, by the kitchen door when she was all but knocked sideways by the melee that erupted from within. The Doctor's huge overcoat was the most recognisable blur that Alan picked out, but he was pretty sure that Trey was in there as well. At first he assumed Mel had not bothered, but then realised she was literally hidden under the Doctor's coat, albeit unintentionally.

Alan's hand stopped Trey in his tracks. 'Oh no, young man, you are ill.'

'No, I'm not,' Trey protested.

'Yes, you are,' called Christine from her temporary shelter of the living room. She poked her head out, rabbit-like, to check that the coast was clear and her hallway no longer resembled Clapham Junction. 'So you'll stay put. I could use a hand around the house.'

Trey made a rather petulant whine. 'I wanted to go with the Doc and Mel to the police station.'

'I would have thought you had grown out of visits to police stations, fire stations and box factories by now, young man,' Alan said.

'Oh, hardy har-har.' Trey looked at the Doctor. 'Hey, Doc, tell them I have to come. Please.'

The Doctor looked at the Bush family. 'A moment, if you please,' he said, then threw an arm around Trey's shoulders and walked him away from the front door and down a bit of the lane.

'Trey, first, I don't know what happened to you yesterday. Well, that's not entirely true. I know exactly what happened, but I don't know why. Second, your subsequent attack was nothing to do with me or my TARDIS. It was something to do with that Cadillac ambulance. Which means you could be in danger if you return to Brighton. Tonight, we'll have a long talk about this possible power of yours, but until then I think you'll be safer here with Mrs Bush.' The Doctor turned Trey around and began to escort him back, then stopped. 'Oh, one other thing. Don't call me "Doc" – I am not some quack from a cowboy movie. Is that clear?'

'Sure, Doctor. Perfectly clear. I guess I'll stay put.'

They returned to the others, Alan tapping his watch meaningfully. ‘Some of us are gainfully employed, Doctor. Can we go?’

The Doctor got into the back of the car, Mel into the front. Alan kissed his wife on the cheek, only to be distracted by the Doctor’s impatient cry of ‘I thought we were in a hurry!’

Sighing, the Bush parents finished their daily farewell ritual, then Alan got into the car and they drove away. The Doctor turned to look at Christine and Trey as they receded into the background.

Alan switched on the car stereo system, which included a CD player, and Mel automatically selected her father’s favourite Pink Floyd album.

‘Ah, *Piper*,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘Syd’s greatest hour.’ After a few moments’ listening, Alan asked the Doctor about Trey. ‘So, what exactly is this mental thing of Trey’s, then?’

‘You seem remarkably calm about something most people would dismiss as hokum, Mr Bush.’

Turning the car on to the A23 towards Brighton, Alan shrugged. ‘Just because I’m some desk-bound accountant at the Town Hall, Doctor, does not automatically mean I have a closed mind. Being inquisitive runs in the family.’

The Doctor shot a look at Mel, who was smiling at her father. ‘So I see.’

‘Well,’ prodded Mel. ‘What’s the verdict?’

The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘To keep it simple, Trey is exhibiting signs of some very latent telepathic powers. He was affected by some... equipment of mine –’

‘The TARDIS?’ asked Mel.

‘Yes, the TARDIS,’ the Doctor confirmed, making a mental note to suggest Trey kept his oversized orifice closed next time. ‘That runs on a similar wavelength and it seems to have kick-started his powers, or whatever they are.’

‘Are they dangerous?’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t think so. Trey’s hardly the power-mad world dictator type, is he?’

Alan sighed. ‘I meant realistically, Doctor. Dangerous to him. I am responsible for his general well-being.’ He threw a

look at Mel. ‘Even if I can’t seem to stop him sleeping with half of Brighton’s burgeoning non-heterosexual community.’

‘I hardly think Joe constitutes the entire –’ started Mel, but the Doctor interrupted.

‘Oh, no, I doubt it’s of any harm to him. It’s a natural power which just about everyone possesses. It’s only that in this time period, very few of you humans exhibit it.’

They were nearing Brighton now, and the traffic was getting heavy. ‘A bit like my eidetic memory,’ suggested Mel.

‘On a much larger scale, Mel, yes.’

‘Can I just put something in here?’ asked Alan, curving around a mini-roundabout. ‘How can I put this, Doctor? You just implied, well, said...’

The Doctor leaned back. ‘The answer is yes, Mr Bush.’

Alan, after a deep sigh, shrugged. ‘Of course, that does rather put your arguments about Trey and these powers in a slightly less – how can I say it – automatically acceptable light.’

‘So, you’re happy to accept ESP and all the rest of it, but the fact that I’m an alien from another planet throws you completely. I see.’

‘Oh come on, Doctor. There have been tests, there is a certain amount of scientific evidence to at least back up the assertion of Extra Sensory Powers. But aliens? I think not.’

‘Roswell,’ interjected Mel.

‘Unsubstantiated,’ was her father’s reaction.

‘Crop circles.’

Alan Bush sighed. ‘Melanie, you’ll be suggesting that von Daniken was right, next.’

‘Well, actually, old Erich wasn’t too far off the –’

‘I’m sorry Doctor. But aliens do not come to Earth, wander around amongst us and try to ingratiate themselves into society.’

The Doctor leaned forward. ‘Oh, I see. They’re all going to come from Mars, have three heads, wear green jumpsuits and laser you to death, I suppose.’

They had entered the outskirts of Brighton now, passing Preston Park on the left and joining the traffic clogging up the

southern end of London Road. ‘No, I’m saying that if an alien had the technology to visit Earth, I think they’d announce themselves.’

‘What, so we could blow them up, you mean?’ Mel folded her arms.

‘No, Melanie, but I think we’d notice. Mankind isn’t quite so backward that our satellites couldn’t see a flying saucer in orbit.’

‘Or a dimensionally transcendental TARDIS,’ muttered the Doctor.

Alan turned the car into Trafalgar Street. ‘I’ll drop you two by the railway station, if that’s OK.’

‘But we’ll have to walk in completely the other direction to get to the police station,’ protested the Doctor. ‘We alien invaders don’t like walking, you know.’

‘It’ll do you good,’ muttered Mel.

Alan had stopped the car. The Doctor jumped out in a flurry of coat-tails and stripy trousers. He tapped on Alan’s window and it was obligingly wound down.

‘May I just say, Mr Alan Bush, resident of one rather dreary little planet, whose dominant life form has barely crawled out of the slime from whence it came, that I *am* an alien, I *do* travel through time and, for reasons that escape me right now, I usually risk my life trying to save yours. And’ – he put a hand over Alan’s mouth before any retort was forthcoming – ‘if you don’t believe me, ask your golf-mad school chum Robert Lines at CID. See what he tells you.’ With a self-satisfied nod, the Doctor straightened up, extracted his arm and walked away.

Mel ran around and kissed her father on the cheek. ‘See you tonight.’

‘If we aren’t under the yoke of marauding Martians or vicious Venusians by then.’ Alan restarted the car.

‘Yes, that’s it, Dad. You articulate alliteratively with old bossy boots back there tonight. Mum and I could do with a laugh.’

Alan looked up at Mel. ‘Sometimes, I think you were adopted. We probably found you under some bushes, left

behind by sinister Saturnians.’

‘Or jolly Jovians!’

Sighing, Alan Bush drove away.

Mel caught up with the Doctor, who was striding back down the way they had driven, towards Victoria Gardens.

‘Well, we’ve time to kill,’ she said.

‘I thought you had to be at work before meeting me at the police station?’

Mel shrugged. ‘Hey, no one will notice if I’m not there.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Mel, go to work. I need time to think about things. Something is wrong here.’

‘Brighton?’

‘Brighton. The whole area. Apart from Trey’s second psychic attack yesterday, there was something back at that burger bar. Something about the plastic toy I got. I recognised it. Or something about it.’ He stopped outside a newsagent’s, then darted in.

Sighing, Mel stayed outside, twiddling her fingers and skipping from one foot to the next. Just as her impatience was getting the better of her, a car horn tooted beside her and a dark Volkswagen Polo slid up. Inside was Jennifer Fletcher, one of the nicer employees of BITS and someone who had been an easy convert to Mel’s health regime. Realising that the Doctor wasn’t coming out in the foreseeable future, Mel accepted the offer of a lift and got in the car.

Two minutes later, the Doctor wandered out of the newsagent’s engrossed in his paper and, assuming he even registered Mel’s absence, simply walked on down towards the gardens.

By the time he reached them he had seen the piece about SenéNet’s generous prize-giving. Wondering why he recognised the name SenéNet, he continued flicking through – noting that Mel’s hoped-for cheap flights were on page eleven – and began scouring the classifieds. After all, he had acquired many a knick-knack and much bric-a-brac from classified ads over the years. First editions of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *1984*, his favourite carved-eagle lectern, the complete collection of Laurel and Hardy movies on Betamax and a huge

gallows with a hangman's noose on the end, for which he had never found a good use, although it propped closed the boot cupboard very successfully.

And then he spotted the message that, unbeknown to him, his old friend Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart had seen earlier that same morning.

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 10.00

'Have you seen this?' bellowed the Doctor as he shoved open the door to the CID room.

Somewhat anticlimactically, the room was empty bar one uniformed constable, who clearly thought the station had been invaded by some carnival barker and grabbed the nearest phone to call for help.

'That won't be necessary, Harry,' said the calm voice of Detective Inspector Lines, entering behind the Doctor. 'This man is, and it's hard to believe, I know, a man of superior intellect, vast knowledge and precisely zero manners.'

The young constable nodded and slowly edged out, trying not to actually brush the Doctor's coat, in case he caught something. The Doctor watched him intently, keeping meticulous eye contact. As Harry was directly face to face, the Doctor smiled and said 'Boo!' quietly. Harry ran the last few paces out.

'Fascinating life cycle, the uniformed policeman,' the Doctor said, sitting at Stephanie Rowe's desk. 'But such limited capacity for intelligence.'

Bob Lines perched on the edge of another desk. 'Well, if you've quite finished frightening the lower ranks, maybe you can explain what that shouting was all about.'

The Doctor looked sheepish. 'Dramatic licence?'

'Melodramatic entry, more like. What is it in today's paper that's upset you anyhow?'

The Doctor poked at the relevant classified. Bob Lines leaned over, read it and sat back. 'So?'

'So? So? *So!* So this is vitally important. I have to contact

someone in authority.’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘Someone with responsibility.’

‘Oh, and Brighton’s friendly DI won’t do, then?’

‘No, not in the police. I need to contact the government. I can’t remember the fellow’s name. Dreadful bridge player.’

‘Anything to do with your old friends at UNIT?’

‘Well done, Robert! C19 – Sir John Sudbury.’ The Doctor looked at Lines, suddenly very affectionate. ‘What would I do without you, eh?’

The Doctor had first met Lines when he had been a young police sergeant in a small village station near Hastings. They had helped each other solve a few problems and become good friends. He had been forced into revealing his top-secret status with UNIT back then and, as a result, the two had helped each other out on a few occasions since. Of course, as Bob rose through the police ranks, so the Doctor had shed a few bodies, but once Lines had accepted that each new face belonged to the same old Doctor, their mutual trust had grown. The Doctor had quite a few friends like that on Earth, apart from his old UNIT associates. There was a fish and chip seller in Bolton, Harry in his Shoreditch tea shop, two dear old ladies who spent most of their time gossiping about their neighbours in Seattle, a Safari driver in Africa, dear old Wilkins at St Cedds, who always reminded him of Billy Bunter, and even a mad Austrian who lived half-way up a snow-clad mountain hut always had ways of getting scuba gear for exploring under water in any part of the globe. And as for that dotty Welsh beekeeper... No matter which face or body he assumed, they always knew who he was and what help he needed.

And Detective Inspector Robert Lines was one of the best friends he had in England.

The Doctor came out of his reverie when Bob handed him a phone. ‘I have ways and means.’

Not immediately comprehending, the Doctor took the receiver. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello, Doctor, is that you?’

‘Sir John? How the devil are you?’ The Doctor gave a thumbs-up to Bob, who nodded and wandered away to

politely busy himself at a filing cabinet, desperately trying not to look as if he was listening in.

‘Can’t complain. Well, not much. Heading for retirement later this year, off to grow my roses in Swanage. Those bushes you gave Mary are still coming into bloom every year, you know.’

‘Excellent, Sir John. I’m so glad. Now then, what’s this note in the *Brighton and Hove Advertiser* today?’ There was a pause, then, ‘Glad you saw that. If you’d have let me know you were visiting our humble little globe, I’d have got in touch personally. It’s for Lethbridge-Stewart, actually.’

‘The Brigadier? What’s he doing down here? He should be –’ The Doctor whipped a diary out of an inner pocket and began flicking through. ‘Here we are: 1989 – still at Brendon. Not married to Doris yet... Oh, don’t pass that little gem on, Sir John. Laws of time and all that.’

‘Oh, absolutely. Anyway, you’re quite right. He is still at Brendon, but I needed a chap down there who could go undercover. And Brendon was the perfect disguise really. Trouble is, Lethbridge-Stewart’s vanished. I sent one of his old A-team down to flush him out but I think the poor chap got offed. I put that in the paper in case I’ve got it all wrong and he’s perfectly safe.’

‘Needless to say, you’ve not heard from him.’

‘Well, Doctor, give the poor blighter twenty-four hours at least. He’s got to read the dratted rag, hasn’t he?’

The Doctor tutted. ‘Come on, Sir John. You think he’s in trouble, otherwise you wouldn’t have sent your unfortunate A-teamer down here. Now, why don’t you tell me what this is all about.’

Bob Lines watched as the Doctor was being told some story or other, watching concern rapidly etch itself across his face. He knew the Brigadier, on a basic level. After he and the Doctor had first become acquainted, it had been Lethbridge-Stewart who had turned up, in civvies of course, to get him to sign the Official Secrets Act. And they’d met at least once more since, when the Doctor had been very tall with a daft scarf. One thing about the Doctor – absurd clothes were

always a good barometer of whether it really was him.

The Doctor was saying his farewells to Sir John and slowly replaced the phone.

‘Doctor,’ Lines said. ‘You’ve done me a big favour over this Master computer-fraud business. Is there anything I can do in return. Is something up with the Brigadier?’

‘What do you know about SenéNet, Detective Inspector?’

BITS offices, Kemp Town, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 10.45

Mel knew there was something wrong when she signed in. Kelly, the usual receptionist, wasn’t about, and instead some middle-aged woman wearing far too much make-up was on duty.

Frowning, Mel skipped up the steps to her floor and walked in cautiously. Sure enough, the air of tension was thicker there – Anne Macko was striding around like she owned the world and of Luke Aspinall there was no sign. Mr Lovelady was sitting in a corner, his head in his hands, while Anne shot him looks of disdain.

‘Morning, everyone,’ Mel said chirpily, and immediately wished she hadn’t. Lovelady didn’t move, Anne smiled (Anne never smiled at her – Mel always thought the frumpy old cow hated her usual buoyancy – so she knew something was wrong) and a couple of the others just looked up, one shaking his head subtly.

‘Good morning, Miss Bush,’ said Anne. ‘Could we have a word, please?’

Why Anne should be having a word, when she was no more in charge than Mel, seemed strange.

‘Melanie, some changes have occurred to Brighton Information Technologies this morning. First, I have some very sad news. Mr Rupert Illingworth resigned this morning. He and his wife have returned to Bradford. I know this seems very sudden, but I have long suspected something like this was going to happen.’

Yeah, I bet, Mel thought. Truth is, you’re as surprised as

me, so why the pep talk?

'This means that Mr Luke Aspinall has become the new chairman.' Anne smiled, and Mel did too. Good old Luke.

'However, Mr Aspinall has already decided to make some important changes.' Anne leaned forward conspiratorially. 'Clearly he knew this was going to happen but probably had to be very hush-hush about it.' She straightened up again. 'BITS is changing its policies and concentrating on providing technological support for just one main company, SenéNet, and they, as I am sure you are aware, have bought heavily into the company. They now own forty-nine per cent of us, I believe. Mr Aspinall has been provided with Mr Rupert's shares to give him a controlling interest.'

From Anne's delight in all this, anyone would think she had been promoted from her position in the typing pool to head of resources or something.

'This morning.' Anne continued, 'Mr Aspinall asked me to become his manager of human resources. That means, to be blunt, I am in charge of the day-to-day staffing and management of the company, while he concentrates on the business side.'

Mel felt like Alice Liddell, trying to believe thirteen impossible things before breakfast. So far, her American house-mate had become psychic, a man from another planet had told her he could travel through time and she had eaten a healthy breakfast prepared by someone other than her. Anne Macko becoming in charge was just the icing on the cake really.

'Of course, the change in company policy means that many of the projects we were working on have been stopped. Our clients have been given the work to date, free, and asked to find another company to do any further work, and therefore there has been a slimming down of staff.'

'Bet that leaves you with a lot less people to be resourceful with,' said Mel, understanding Mr Lovelady's head-in-the-hands mood. He'd obviously been given his marching orders. Perhaps Kelly on reception had been the same. Then it dawned on Mel that she, too, was being

dismissed. Well, she'd get her oar in first then.

'And I suppose I'm a resource you can do without as well?' she said.

Anne Macko laughed. 'Heaven's no, Melanie. No, Mr Aspinall is very keen that you remain. He's offering you a permanent job – the one formerly occupied by Peter Lovelady in fact.'

Bitch! She's enjoying this. She hates Peter as much as she hates me – he's gone, I've been offered his job and she hopes out of loyalty to Peter I'll say no. Jumping into barely cool graves and all that.

'Sounds very exciting, Anne. What do I have to do exactly?' Mel was not disappointed by Anne Macko's reaction.

'Oh,' she said simply. 'Oh, well, I'll tell Mr Aspinall that you will do it then.'

'Why don't I do that, eh? Luke and I are good friends.' Before Anne could do anything about it, Mel hopped up and moved towards Luke's office, not even pausing to offer condolences to Peter Lovelady.

She walked into Mr Illingworth's old office, where Luke Aspinall was talking to another of the project managers from one of the groups whose work had, no doubt, suddenly expired, along with his contract.

The man, head bowed slightly, wandered out as Mel came in.

'Hi, Luke. Just wanted to say congratulations. And thank you for the job offer.'

Luke Aspinall stared at her, and something inside Mel shuddered. This was not the same Luke Aspinall who yesterday had been so playful and enthusiastic. This Luke Aspinall looked like the entire world had died in his living room. There was nothing there, no recognition, no smile, nothing. He just stared at her.

'Yes,' he said dully. 'Good. Talk to Anne Macko, she has become –'

'Head of human resources, I know,' said Mel. 'Just proves that even the devil can find work for idle hands.' She

wandered in and touched his hand. 'Just thought I'd –'

She stopped and looked at her hand on his. And withdrew it quickly.

'Is there anything else I can do for you, Miss Bush?' asked Luke. 'Isn't it time to start work? I'm sure Anne will tell you where to begin.'

'I know where to begin, Luke. We both know how qualified I am.'

Luke cocked his head very slightly, as if trying to remember something. 'Oh yes, of course you do.' He began to shuffle some papers. 'Well, please carry on. I have work to do.'

'For SenéNet?'

'Of course for SenéNet,' he replied tonelessly. 'They are the sfuture. We are here to help them carry us into the next century.'

Mel left the office and went back into her own, throwing a quick look through the plate-glass window back at Luke, who was now standing by it, looking every inch as powerful and in charge as his uncle had previously. He flicked his hand and a roller blind came down, quickly shutting them off from each other.

Mel looked around her office. Lovelady had gone, as had one of the other guys, Phil. Miles was still there and so was Jodie, trying to look busy rather than doodling on her notepad as she normally did. And then there was Anne Macko, triumphantly tidying her desk up, her eye clearly on Peter Lovelady's black ash and steel one, currently clean and empty.

'Sorry, Anne, but I don't want the job. Some of us don't like to be vultures.'

It wasn't much of a parting shot, but it was the best Mel could think of. And she was quite sure Luke wouldn't care if she stayed or not.

As she began descending the stairs, she thought about the brief second when her hand had touched Luke's. He was not just cold, he was like... like... She didn't know what, but it was weird. And he was not the same Luke she had known before.

Something told her it was less to do with his sudden acquisition of power and more to do with... something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Oh well, she would head up to see Bob Lines, help the Doctor and then go home and talk to Mum. Maybe she could help put things in perspective. Well, perhaps not, but she'd be good company anyway.

As Mel walked out of reception and into the warm Brighton morning, she looked back at the building. Despite what had just happened, she felt that business between her and BITS was not yet concluded.

She would be back.

36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
25 July 1989, 11.10

Trey was bored out of his mind. Christine had been edgy around him all morning and for a long time he thought he must have been rude or offended her in some other way. It was not until he had made her a mug of tea (he'd sussed a long time ago that the English could be relaxed very easily simply by mentioning the word 'tea') that it had occurred to him.

She had accepted the tea casually and then, just as she had been about to start sipping at it, whatever was worrying her snapped back into place. A bit too hurriedly, she'd said the tea was too hot and she would drink it later.

Trey had shrugged that off until spying her from half-way up the stairs five minutes later tipping the tea down the kitchen sink. Then she had made another, using the same mug (which she washed out first), and drunk some of it. He had dodged up a couple more stairs until she couldn't see him but he could observe her. She carefully replaced the new tea on the same coaster and sat in the same place, reading the same paper. The precision reminded him of something out of *The Stepford Wives*, that movie where men replace their wives with robot duplicates to act as the perfect partner. Christine Bush was being very exact.

He made some play of coming down the stairs, to alert her of his presence, and went into the kitchen, made himself a coffee and headed into the living room.

Christine tried not to flinch when he sat beside her on the sofa. She was too polite to actually move away.

Trey sighed. ‘Mrs Bush, this is ridiculous.’

‘What’s that, Trey?’

‘Oh, come on. You being suddenly nervous around me.’

Christine tried her best to look shocked, but just went red. ‘Nervous, I don’t know what –’

‘If, and it’s a big “if”, the Doctor is right and I have got some kind of weird brain power, tipping away tea and hoping you don’t bump into me is not really going to make any difference. I’m not going to brainwash you into murdering half of Sussex.’

Christine sipped her tea very quickly and made an embarrassing slurping noise of the kind she would never normally make. ‘I’m sorry, Trey. It’s just a bit... unusual.’

‘Yeah, you’re telling me. One day I’m eating a hamburger, the next I keep being hit inside the head by these wild thoughts and impulses. Then I meet a man who claims to understand this, who brings us back here and you and Mr Bush accept him because he’s a “chum” of another friend of yours. I have a raging headache, think I might be some kind of freak, and have to learn to cope with the fact that you, and probably Mel and Mr Bush, are going to treat me like a reject from *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*.’

Christine shook her head. ‘I’m so sorry, Trey. I’ve been selfishly thinking about myself and not realising that this must be frightening for you as well.’

‘Hey, it’s not frightening me,’ he said rather unconvincingly. ‘But it’s just weird and... and... well, yeah, damned frightening. Actually very damned frightening.’

‘Do you want to contact home?’

Trey shook his head. ‘Dad would freak and be over here, taking me to the best, and worst, quacks money could buy.’

Christine nodded. ‘When we first met you at the airport, my immediate reaction was how nice it would be if you and

Melanie sort of, well, started seeing each other.'

Trey laughed. 'Yeah, Mel and I guessed that straight away. She had me pegged in the first few minutes though â€‘ that's what university life does for you, Mrs Bush. Makes you more aware of these things.'

'I suppose one day she'll get her head away from books and computers long enough to notice boys.'

Trey finished his tea. 'Mel'll be fine. One day, there'll be a Mr Mel and you'll wonder where the time went. Right now, I don't think her life is on that path, though. She's kind of weird, too, but in a real nice way. I like her a lot. We're friends and, I think, will be for a long time.'

The front doorbell went and Christine frowned. 'I'm not expecting anyone,' she muttered, looking out of the window, but whoever it was seemed to be standing right up close to the door and was blocked by the porchway.

'Shall I go?'

Christine shook her head. 'No, it's all right.' She went to the hall but stopped and looked back at her lodger. 'Trey, I am sorry for my behaviour this morning.'

He smiled.

Christine opened the door and all Trey could hear was her saying hello and getting no response. Just a strange muffled thumping... like the person at the door was wearing a personal stereo.

Christine popped her head back, a frown on her face. 'It might be for you, but he's not said a word.'

Trey walked over and immediately felt a warm glow inside. 'Hi, Joe!'

Joe Hambidge's face instantly became animated. 'Hi, Trey, feeling better?'

'Oh, it speaks to certain people then,' muttered Christine, walking back to the living room.

Trey made a face at Joe which suggested they'd offended his hostess, but Joe didn't react. 'C'mon, Trey. We've got to go.'

'Go where?'

Joe shrugged. 'I don't know, just go. Now!'

‘OK, OK already,’ said Trey. ‘I’ll get my wallet. Hang on.’

He bolted up the stairs to his room. What was Joe planning? And why didn’t he call first? If he knew Mel, he presumably had the number – especially if he knew the address. Trey stuffed his wallet in his back pocket, ran a comb through his hair and scratched his chin. He hadn’t shaved that morning, but what the hell, it didn’t look too bad. Kind of cool, actually.

Then he heard the thump from downstairs. The door closing? No, too soft for that... Christine’s sudden screech made him dash to the stairs, taking them three at a time. The front door was open, no sign of Joe. Into the living room and there he was standing at the back, where the room became L-shaped leading to the Welsh dresser and the hatchway to the kitchen. Joe turned to look at him, but the expression on his face was somehow not real. Not Joe. And not, for want of a better word, human!

This thought passed through Trey’s mind in a split second as he ran forward and saw Christine Bush on the floor, clutching at something around her throat.

Trey tried to join the struggle to get it off her, but it fought back, like a snake. His fingers got caught under it and he could feel the circulation being cut off instantly, so tight was it. He knew Christine couldn’t survive much longer and then he realised what it was. A cable, like the one from Joe’s personal stereo... He pulled away and looked at Joe.

No stereo.

As he tried once again to help Christine, something smacked him across the back of the neck. For a split second it just felt annoying, but then he felt himself tip forward into an abyss of darkness...

28 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex

25 July 1989, 11.20

Ciara got out of the ambulance as soon as the new boy reappeared in the doorway of the Bush house.

Beckoning her brother, who joined her in a few easy strides, she walked towards the porchway.

‘Where?’

The new boy pointed to the living room and she went in. On the floor was the esper, unconscious, with a broken tea mug beside him.

‘I hope the head isn’t damaged,’ she said.

The new boy shook his head. ‘I was careful.’

Beside the esper, snaking about and rearing its jack-plug head, the stereo cable awaited fresh orders. Ciara clicked her fingers and it slid across the floor, up the new boy’s leg and up his body, finally settling on his shoulder, where it turned and reinserted itself into the portable CD player in his inside jacket pocket. The earphones immediately returned to their place on his head and slowly, as the noise returned to his ears, the boy marched out of the house and into the back of the ambulance.

Cellian scooped up Trey’s body as if it were no heavier than a sleeping bag and followed the boy out.

Ciara looked at the body of the woman in the corner and then turned to study the rest of the room. Something was here, a presence, a brainwave imprint, a feeling of...

‘The Doctor. He stayed here all night,’ she hissed. ‘He may suspect something if he has focused his investigations on the American youth.’

Cellian returned, a frown on his face. ‘No, Cellian, I’m not ready to go just yet. I –’

She leaned down to touch the sofa, feel its softness, feel its warmth. Except she could not feel anything. She traced the chequered pattern stitched into the arm with her finger and then sat in it. Cellian reached for her, but she waved him away.

‘I had forgotten... to touch, to feel...’ She looked up at her brother. ‘Do you remember? Ever?’

Cellian took a step back, then pointed at the body.

‘No, it’s still alive. I think it might be advantageous if we took it to the hospital.’

Cellian wandered over, hoisted Christine Bush up and

took her away. As he left the room, Ciara took a final look around the. A living room, a place where a family lived, ate, laughed and loved. Somewhere, a long time ago, she knew that she and Cellian had been in a living room, with a family who loved them and whom they loved in return. Somewhere with a sofa that was soft, warm and soothing to the touch. And a couple of parents into whose arms they could throw themselves and feel safe and secure.

She ran her finger down the arm of the sofa again, but still nothing registered – no textures, no temperatures, nothing at all. Once upon a time the sacrifice she and her twin brother had made for their mentor had made so much sense. They were to be the start of something new, something glorious. Something that would make their actions worthwhile and understandable. Something that would make losing the sense of touch, of smell and of taste was a necessary evil. That losing every piece of their humanity was a small price to pay.

For the first time in around twenty years, in which time neither of them had aged, become frail or ill, in which time neither of them had touched, felt or loved anything, Ciara wondered if it had actually been the right thing to do.

If she had had the ability in the form that she referred to as her body, Ciara might have cried. But she couldn't even do that.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 11.30

WPC Nan Ainsworth was not a woman easily intimidated – the specifications of her job demanded that whether facing an armed robber in a sweet shop or a rampaging group of Brighton FC thugs after their team had lost 4-0 at home to some theoretically dismal London club, she kept her head and her wits, and protected herself and her other colleagues as best she could.

She was tall, slim, but fit and very capable. She was proud of the way she had achieved everything, from overcoming her parents' initial reservations about her choice of career in

‘today’s mad world’, via the scorn of male ‘colleagues’ at Hendon, through to the odd bit of sexism at the William Street nick. Nan had been in the thick of most local bad moments during the last four years, since transferring to the East Sussex force, and the resultant respect and admiration from her colleagues was well on the way to earning her a promotion to sergeant and a probable transfer to Guildford or Basingstoke.

However, as she stood on the side of Inchmere Lane, which ran along the southern end of Ashdown Forest, she was having difficulty keeping her breakfast down. She slowly walked back to her car, keeping her eyes firmly on the gruesome sight, in case it vanished and turned out to be a dream, or rather a nightmare.

‘Whisky Sierra from 574.’

‘Go ahead, Nan.’

‘Sarge, I’ve got a body... or what’s left of one... on Inchmere Lane. Could do with some backup and an FME. It’s a nasty one sir. Might be some sort of ritualistic killing. It’s an IC4 male.’

There was a lengthy pause from the CAD room as messages were relayed, then, ‘No reports of any mispers, Nan. I’ll let CID know. Tim and Darren are on their way. Whisky Sierra Out.’

Nan sighed and sat in her car, ready to wait for the backup. She was watching her rear-view mirror for a few minutes when something in the trees above the body caught her eye.

Grabbing her baton, she got out of the car and looked up. There it was again. Something was moving up there. An animal of some sort? Was it responsible for the death of the man?

She stood right under the tree, using her baton to part the lower branches, when something suddenly screeched horribly and crashed down on to her.

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 11.35

‘Nan Ainsworth’s just reported in, guy. She’s found a dead body, on the skirts of the forest,’ said Stephanie Rowe as she came into the CID room. She nodded a greeting to the Doctor, who was seated by the computer, and he waved back.

Bob Lines gave her a ‘so what?’ look. ‘Can’t you and Robin deal with it?’

‘Nan reckons it could be ritualistic. She didn’t going into details but it’s an Oriental male and he sounds pretty cut up, if you get my drift.’

The Doctor stood up. ‘Why ritualistic?’

Rowe shrugged.

The Doctor had crossed to the giant map of the locality on the far wall. He jabbed a finger at the forest area. ‘And this Inchmere Road is where precisely?’

Rowe showed him and the Doctor dragged her finger up to a red mark he had drawn ten minutes earlier. ‘Oh, look. SenéNet’s headquarters.’

Bob Lines gaped. ‘You cannot seriously believe there is any connection between one dead Oriental and your conspiracy theories about SenéNet.’

‘It’s an amazing coincidence, Doctor,’ Rowe agreed. ‘There’s an old adage, Stephanie, that says the universe, indeed the entire multiverse, is founded upon the most extraordinary coincidences. Let’s not overlook anything.’

‘What’s a “multiverse?”’ mouthed Rowe at Lines, but he just shook his head.

‘Mel is late,’ the Doctor suddenly announced. ‘I’d like to see this body, just to satisfy my curiosity.’

‘You’ve got a morbid sense of curiosity, Doctor,’ Rowe muttered. She scooped up her handbag. ‘But I don’t have a problem with that. OK with you, sir?’

Bob Lines threw his hands in the air. ‘All right, I suppose. But I’ll come with you. I want to keep an eye on the Doctor.’

‘Why?’

‘Because without you that computer over there is not going to get its problems solved today.’

‘Oh yes it is,’ said a voice from the doorway. ‘Hello, Mr Lines, Doctor.’

‘Morning, Melanie,’ said Bob Lines. ‘Just in time.’ He smiled humourlessly at the Doctor. ‘If you and Miss Bush can sort that out, Steph and Robin can sort out our dead Oriental.’ And with that he almost shoved Rowe and a male DC out of the office. Mel sat at the computer and flexed her fingers.

‘Thank you,’ hissed the Doctor. ‘Your timing couldn’t have been worse. I was about to get nearer SenéNet.’

‘Why?’ Mel looked at him.

‘Because last night over dinner, you and your father were discussing it. Today I learn from Detective Inspector Lines that they arrived here a few years ago and slowly took over lots of companies, including the burger bar where I saw that toy.’

‘They’ve also taken over BITS this morning. Rupert Illingworth has just upped and gone while Luke, now in overall charge, has become a totally new and decidedly unpleasant person. Yesterday we were good friends – today he’s, well, horrible.’

The Doctor pursed his lips. ‘The pressures of command?’ ‘No, Doctor, Luke’s not like that. And there was something else as well. Something –’

The Doctor put a finger on Mel’s lips. ‘Not here. Later. The sooner you can close off the Master’s computer programs, the quicker I can investigate.’

‘We can investigate.’

‘No, I can –’

‘Doctor, suppose I tell my friend Mr Lines about my fears over SenéNet. He’ll have policemen tramping all over the place and neither of us will get any answers.’

The Doctor stared at her. ‘Apart from your cynical attitude towards your wonderful police officers, you, Melanie Bush, have a frightening knack of coming up with the perfect blackmail. I like you.’

‘Good. Apart from your overbearing assumption that no one on this planet is as clever as you, I like you, too.’

The Doctor patted her patronisingly on the head. ‘Let me guide you through the Master’s handiwork, then we can be on our way.’

On the other side of the CID room, DI Bob Lines watched the two 'experts' with an understandable degree of suspicion.

After a few moments, there was a cry of, 'Is that it?' from the Doctor, followed by a, 'Yes, I don't know why you couldn't do it yourself,' from Melanie Bush. 'It was too easy, too obvious,' was the Doctor's response. 'I expected him to be cleverer than that.'

Before the Doctor could get on to the woeful state of the human computer and Mel's supremacy over him, Bob Lines interceded.

'Is it done, then?'

'Yes,' muttered a grumpy Doctor. 'Yes, it's all over. The Master's work is finished, you are all saved and Mel has shown me never to overlook the downright simple and obvious again.'

'Actually, Mr Lines,' said Mel impishly, 'it was exceptionally difficult and there was the odd moment when I thought I wasn't going to be able to override the passwords and locate all the hidden files at all. But it's done now.'

'So we're off,' finished the Doctor. He grabbed Lines's hand and shook it. 'Do give me a call next time you need to see off marauding Macra or zealous Zygons. Bye-bye.'

Mel smiled at Lines. 'What can you do with him?' Then she waved at him. 'Dad sends his regards.'

'Me too,' Lines replied, lost for anything else to say. 'And to your mother...' but Mel and the Doctor had gone.

A few moments later and the Detective Chief Inspector wandered in. 'Bob, can I use this blasted computer yet?'

'Oh, yes, sir, that case is closed completely.' Lines stomped into his own office. 'Not that we'll ever get any credit or thanks for it.'

William Street, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 12.05

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair and stared up into the midday sun.

'Aren't you cooking?'

‘What?’

‘In that coat, Doctor. Aren’t you really hot?’

‘Mel, let’s not waste time talking about coats, eh? I want to know everything you know about SenéNet.’

They wandered down Edward Street, across the Victoria Gardens and over towards Ship Street, while Mel told him what had been happening at BITS over the last couple of days. The Doctor nodded, grunted and generally acknowledged everything she said, asking for clarification only once or twice. By the time she had finished, they were at the Nessie Burger restaurant.

‘Lunchtime,’ he said.

‘Oh no,’ she replied. ‘You know I can’t eat any of that stuff.’

‘Wait here then, fair damsel, whilst I partake of a repast.’

The Doctor walked in and Mel went and leaned on a shop front opposite. Then something caught her eye next to the restaurant, down a service driveway. It was a blue box, a police box it said, but she wasn’t sure what one of those was anyway.

She was about to investigate it, in the way that Mel always had to investigate anything new and curious, when the Doctor reappeared, a huge bag of burgers in his hand, and they resumed their march.

‘I think I’ve got the entire collection as a result,’ he said. ‘Of what? Potential heart attacks?’

‘No, Mel, no. A collection of the Nessie Burger toys.’

He stuck his hand into the bag, rummaged a bit and came out with a handful of plastic figures.

‘Here we have Nessie. Then Lochie. Oh, and here’s McTavish the Monster Hunter. Here’s Wee Willie the Ghillie, Lady McArthur, Lord McArthur and finally... Ta-da! Auld Uncle McArthur.’

The Doctor ranged them all along the top step of a small flight leading up to the shopping precinct. People tried to walk around them, muttering quietly, and Mel kept smiling pointless apologies.

‘Doctor, do we have to do this here? It is rather

inconvenient for people, you know.'

'Inconvenient? Yes, I imagine it is. Tough luck. Here, hold this.' He tossed her Wee Willie the Ghillie. 'Well?'

'Well what? It's a plastic toy.'

'Notice anything about it?'

'In what way?' She turned it around a few times. 'Oh. Well, it's lightweight, but not particularly flexible. It's quite detailed. The colours look plastic rather than painted on... Anything else?'

'They're plastic, I agree. Of sorts. It's quite hot out here. And I've just removed them from a warm bag of burgers, fries and all that.'

Mel looked blankly at him. 'So?'

'Think, Mel, please think.'

Mel rubbed Wee Willie the Ghillie again. 'It's cold. Plastic usually absorbs some heat and this is stone cold. It feels like... Doctor!'

'What!'

'I was going to tell you about Luke, how cold his hand felt. It felt like this – Luke's hand was the same texture and temperature.' Mel dropped the figure. 'I don't like this, Doctor.'

The Doctor scooped all the figures up, dropped them into a coat pocket and stood up. 'Neither do I Mel. I think it's time we paid SenéNet a visit.'

They walked through the precinct – the Doctor passing the bag of burgers to a couple of down-and-outs sitting on a bench, shrugging off their gratitude – and headed for the bus stops that lined Western Road.

'Shall I tell you what I think, Mel?' said the Doctor, as they waited for a 144.

'Why don't you tell me what you think, Doctor?' she replied.

'I think those toys are more than toys. I think they could be something rather sinister. And I think it's a bit worrying that so many people all over southern England have those toys in their houses. I also think it's very worrying that, according to today's newspaper, SenéNet are giving away thirty video-

game consoles to local children with technology that shouldn't exist for another five or six years, and, above all, I think a dear friend of mine is in a lot of danger, probably trapped somewhere in the vicinity of SenéNet's headquarters in Ashdown Forest.'

'You've missed out BITS and the dead Oriental man.'

The Doctor was silent for a while. Then, as the 144 arrived and Mel paid two fares to Nutley, he said, 'It does occur to me that Japan is known for its expertise in all things electronic and your ex-firm supply programs that could be stored on microchips inside games consoles built on a continent known for its expertise in all things electronic.'

They sat on the upper deck, at the front. 'And I,' said Mel, 'don't like the way your thoughts are going.'

'Which way is that, Mel?'

'Logically. And I find that a bit frightening.'

Garrett Manor, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 12.15

Jones was standing back, letting Lawson take the brunt of the managing director's anger as the two of them stood in front of his desk, the fist imprint newly smashed into it a reminder to them both of the managing director's changeable moods. Jones was ignoring Lawson's feeble explanations, not just out of self-preservation but because he knew that his turn would come, in private. Whereas Lawson was likely to get knocked around a little verbally, as security was ultimately the responsibility of one Mr Jones, said Mr Jones knew that he'd get it far worse.

It was like being back at school, and then borstal, where whoever had the most money, was older or bigger could bully everyone else. One of the reasons Jones had taken up weights was so that he could leave the borstal knowing that by his last day, he was ready to take revenge on all those who had systematically bullied him during the three years he had been there.

As with all the very best revenge plans, he had taken five

years to slowly exterminate his tormentors. First there had been Stephen Jenkins, who had mysteriously taken a dive in the shallow end of Maidstone Public Swimming Baths late one night. Then Oscar Garcia had been involved in that terrible accident with the scaffolding lorry that had left him impaled and dying very slowly and painfully in a lock-up for two days. And that screw, Simpson, who had been blinded when a glass shattered in his face during a fight in a bar.

Finally, there had been one from school, Tom Callaghan, who had spent two years as his daily torturer and extortionist. That had been the best. Jones had tied the Callaghan family up, doused the wife, boy and baby in petrol and said that if Callaghan didn't allow him to cut off his hands, he'd set them alight. It always amused Jones that the screaming family had screamed louder not only as Callaghan's hands were chopped off but, even better, as he'd burned them to death in front of Callaghan anyway. The final shooting of Callaghan seemed almost an anticlimax really.

Those were the days when he knew what was what. Days he increasingly missed.

He wondered what the managing director had planned for him – one thing was certain. He was not the sort of guy you took revenge on. There were certain advantages to the managing director's 'body' that meant pain and suffering were unlikely to affect him. Bastard.

Lawson was slinking away now, remarkably unscathed. Jones had thought there would be a metaphorical broken limb or some stitches involved somewhere, but Lawson's explanations must have been accepted, his apologies noted.

The managing director turned to Jones and looked at him. 'Surprised?'

Jones shrugged. 'Not up to me. Lawson failed.'

'No, Mr Jones, the Stalker failed. We now have PC Plod stomping all over the bottom half of the forest, wondering why half a businessman is lying there. Do we even know if the Stalker got the other one? No, we do not.'

'It seems likely it did, though, otherwise why eat only half the man they found. Its appetite must have gone.'

The managing director sat down.

‘That was Lawson’s reasoning, as well. Which, if you had been listening to him instead of fantasising about murdering people – we have worked together too long for me not to recognise that wistful look, by the way – you would have known. Something tells me, Mr Jones, that our little dog somehow failed to catch its prey.’

‘It is getting on a bit. On the whole, dogs don’t live fifteen years and still run around like a puppies.’

‘It has Stahlman’s gas racing through its guts for God’s sake, Jones!’

The managing director leaped up, his chair tipping over backwards. He reached forward and grabbed Jones, pulling him closer, until the assassin could feel his breath, like engine oil, on his face.

‘It should live for ever, Mr Jones. That creature is the result of genetic engineering involving one of this planet’s most natural and harmful substances. It should not fail. It should not get old, it should not go wrong. But it has and I need to know why. That, Mr Jones, is your job for today. I don’t care if you have to take someone from the typing pool as live bait, you and Lawson will discover why it failed to kill two unarmed, unfit, untrained, wet-around-the-ears businessmen at midnight last night.’

He released his grip and Jones had to grab the desk to steady himself. The managing director removed his glasses to scratch at his scar and Jones flinched away, unable after all these years to look at the eyes that were so rarely exposed to daylight.

‘I am not a happy man today, Mr Jones,’ he said, replacing his glasses. ‘By teatime I expect to be happy again, preferably with the other corpse accounted for.’

The intercom on his desk buzzed. ‘Yes, Roberta?’

‘Sir, the Irish twins have returned with the esper.’ The cybernetic receptionist was talking as if a delivery boy had arrived with today’s newspaper. ‘Shall I send them to Dr Krafchin?’

‘No, I want to see Ciara up here. Her brother can take

them to the hospital afterwards.’ The managing director snatched his hand back. ‘I tell you, Mr Jones, in half an hour Mr Futayomoto is delivering the Maxx prototypes to our oh so lucky winners. ‘When that happens, stage one of our plan will be under way. Now I have the esper, stage two will commence by the morning. By tomorrow afternoon, Stage Three will be running and we will be two short steps away from dominating this country. I want nothing to go wrong. Now go.’

Mr Jones turned to leave as Ciara entered. A look of mutual loathing passed between them, and Jones went out.

Garrett Manor Annexe, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 12.30

‘Why don’t you like me?’

If the man with half a face was surprised at the bluntness of Lethbridge-Stewart’s question, he certainly opted not to show it.

‘I’m not here to like or dislike you.’

‘So,’ continued Lethbridge-Stewart, prodding at the newly delivered food with his plastic spoon, ‘why do I see total loathing in your face whenever you look at me?’

The man laughed – an unpleasant gurgling sound, like a badly blocked drain. ‘To be frank, I don’t think either you or anybody else can see anything in my face. Not in the state it’s in, anyhow.’

There was a slight trace of a Welsh accent there, which made Lethbridge-Stewart realise that he’d rarely had more than monosyllabic grunts from his captor before. Something northern, west coast probably.

‘Any idea how much longer I’m going to be kept here?’ The man with half a face shrugged. ‘They don’t tell me anything. Just to feed and exercise you. And not talk.’

He turned to leave, so in desperation, Lethbridge-Stewart hurled his tray of food at him.

As the food splattered across the door and the man’s sweater, Lethbridge-Stewart winced. If he was a well-trained guard, he would ignore the food and still leave, while

Lethbridge-Stewart would go hungry until the next day.

The man clearly was not that experienced at guard duty. He turned back to his charge, his one eye staring hard. 'Was there anything to be gained by that?'

'Your attention. I want... I demand to talk to someone. You, your commanding officer, whoever runs this place. Wherever it is.'

'The managing director is busy. He will see you eventually.'

'When?'

'Today. Tomorrow. Next year. I don't know.' The man took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped some bits of food off his shoulder. 'As far as I'm concerned, you could just die.'

'Why?'

Lethbridge-Stewart wondered if he had gone too far as the man with half a face began wiping his hands.

'Because of this.' He was pointing at his ruined face. 'Because of what you did to me all those years ago.'

Lethbridge-Stewart let out a sigh. 'I was right then. You were in the army. In UNIT?' That was a risk. He was not supposed to acknowledge the existence of UNIT to civilians, but it was the only explanation for this man.

'Oh yes, sir. Brigadier, sir. CO, sir.' The ability finally to let something out was making the man's voice rise slightly 'Private Bryan Erskine, sir.'

It came to the Brigadier as instinctively as breathing. Joined UNIT shortly after serving a term in Northern Ireland. Highly recommended by Major-General Scobie. You are married, one child – a little girl, I seem to remember. Captain Yates was impressed by you.'

'Oh yes, very good, sir.' The bitterness was undisguised now. He was beginning to shout. 'So nice that you remember *now*. But *then*, no. Then you left me for dead, blasted down by some orange blob while protecting some stupid installation that got blown up anyway. Do you know what it feels like, Brigadier, sir?' Erskine was coming back across the room, his sole eye unblinking as the years of pent-up resentment began

to boil over. 'I lay there, hit in the face by a blasted Axon, and you watched. You saw me go down but you left me. Assumed I was dead, like all good UNIT troops were supposed to do. Die to protect you, and Captain Yates, and the Doctor and that pretty bit of totty he dragged about. Protecting the world from the unknown, that's how Captain Yates sold me the concept of UNIT After Northern Ireland and shooting innocent people, anything seemed easy. And after two months, bang! Dead.' There was a pause and then he brought both fists crashing down on the table, his whole body shaking with anger. 'You even wrote a letter to my Shirley, saying I had died heroically, defending my country.'

Lethbridge-Stewart stared at the man, determined not to react, wanting him to expend all his energy, all his frustration.

'Bull, sir. Goddamned bloody rubbish. You *assumed* I was dead, you *assumed* my body had been blown up inside that place.' Erskine moved closer, slowly edging around the table. 'But I was still alive, screaming for help, dead mates all around me. On top of me. In little pieces everywhere. Until the C19 clean-up crews moved in, sifting through the wreckage before any member of the public found a dead Axon and asked questions of his MP.' He stopped, resting his fists in the edge of the table. 'But they didn't find any Axons, Brigadier, sir. Just one dying man, his face scorched off. And they brought me back to life – offering me something to replace my old one. I tried to get in touch with Shirley, with Marie my daughter, but no, I was dead. They had buried an empty coffin, grieved and needed to move on. I stood there, sir, and watched my own funeral take place, unable to give comfort to my wife, my child. All because you didn't bother checking up on your men. And you had the sheer audacity to bloody well go to my funeral yourself. You stood there, offering condolences about someone you didn't even know.'

'I know... knew every one of my soldiers, Private! Lethbridge-Stewart swallowed and then spoke slowly. 'And what happened then? How did you come to work for SenéNet? If that's who you work for.'

Erskine laughed. 'SenéNet? Yes, I suppose I do work for

them. I work for the managing director – a man who helped me find a new life for myself, to keep me off the streets and out of the homeless shelters. He's amassed equipment, weapons, people, technology. All the remains that you and Captain Yates and Sergeant Benton and the Doctor left for scrap. And he's going to use the technology to take over this country, put everything to rights. Give people a decent second chance.'

Lethbridge-Stewart went cold very suddenly. He remembered a time, years ago now, when he discovered that someone was siphoning off resources, setting up their own mini-army, using alien technology purportedly going for storage with the government but really ending up in the hands of some nameless people. They had used the alien technology on themselves, 'improving' their bodies, their minds. However, UNIT had discovered all this, closed them down. But the main people had escaped, although they were never heard of again. UNIT and C19 had always assumed they had died or given up. But no, if Erskine was talking about the same fanatical group of people, they had simply moved on and continued their work. Heaven knew what technology they had now, bearing in mind how many alien races had attempted to visit Earth, just while he had been in charge of UNIT

When Lethbridge-Stewart spoke, his tone was quiet but very hard. He was determined to keep the tremble – through anger or shock, he was not sure which – from his voice. 'You've carried this inside you for a long time, Mr Erskine. And I am sorry for that. I can never apologise enough for leaving you for dead, but you must know that that is the danger in any kind of war, whoever the protagonists, be they the Third Reich, the Vietcong, the Argentinians or the Iraqis. Innocent soldiers die because it is assumed they are already dead, when five minutes' searching might have saved them. That, Mr Erskine, is a responsibility I faced every day. Please don't think that when I went to your funeral, or the funerals of anyone else in UNIT, I didn't wonder if, had I tried that bit harder, or been that bit quicker, or made that other decision, there might have been one less widow, one less fatherless

child. Because, frankly, no matter what happened to you, you don't have the right to assume that I didn't care?' Lethbridge-Stewart stood up. 'And I am forced to ask you this, Mr Erskine. If SenéNet and your mysterious managing director were really there to help you, with all that technology at their disposal, alien or otherwise, why hasn't he repaired your face? Because they can't or because they won't? Because if they did, all that hatred, all that resentment would lose its potency. And you'd be no more important to them than an odd-job man.' He breathed very deeply, telling himself to relax. Mustn't let the blood-pressure get too high...

Erskine was staring hard at Lethbridge-Stewart, perhaps seeing past the greying hair, the extra pounds, the sports jacket and flannels, and instead seeing the Brigadier, clipped moustache, slicked back hair, muscular frame, as he barked orders, leading his men by example, by doing rather than saying. Taking the same risks he asked of them.

Or was that just how Lethbridge-Stewart liked to think he had been? Had there been moments of weakness? Moments when he had faltered, when his men had taken a decisive move without him saying to? Moments in which men died under Cyberguns, Auton energy blasts, Axon electrical surges or Zygon stings? All needlessly, because he had hesitated or been wrong?

Blast it, he had been an officer, trained to take risks on behalf of Queen and country. And, as it had turned out, every other country's king, queen, president or dictator.

The two ex-army men stared at each other, neither wanting to speak first.

'I need time to think,' was all Erskine said, then he turned and left, locking the door behind him.

Former Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart was left with a ruined dinner and a lot of new questions about his own life.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 12.40

The first thing which puzzled Detective Sergeant Stephanie Rowe as she drove up Inchmere Road was exactly how a report of one dead body had suddenly become a big enough operation to require two ambulances, a police car, a plain car plus a transit van.

‘Well, Robin,’ she said to DC Keston beside her, ‘this looks like fun.’

The second thing which puzzled DS Rowe was the number of tree leaves on the side of the road, considering autumn was still a long way off. She gazed around to see what else she could glean just by looking.

Seated in the back of one of the ambulances was WPC Ainsworth, a wad being pressed against her head by a paramedic. The second ambulance had two other occupants – one under a blanket, clearly the dead body (or whatever was left of it), the other another Oriental man, who seemed to be in a state of shock (was he the murderer?). Rowe waved over one of the young constables wandering around.

‘Darren?’

The constable shrugged. ‘Nan found the body, saw something in the trees and the other guy jumped on her. He’d been hiding up there, badly bruised and exhausted, according to the medic, but apart from being cold and hungry, there’s not much wrong with him. There’s no sign on him that he was responsible for the first guy’s murder, but forensics are checking around.’

Rowe nodded her thanks and the PC wandered off. Rowe then walked towards Nan Ainsworth, who smiled and said, ‘Bloody well dropped on me, like a stone!’

‘You OK?’

Ainsworth was fine, just a bump where she had hit the ground. ‘He was very excitable. He knew the other guy was dead, but kept looking behind him, towards the forest. My gut reaction, Sarge, is that he didn’t do it. Someone probably tried to kill them both.’

‘Thanks, Nan. How is his English?’

‘Nonexistent, as far as I can gather, but that could be shock.’ Nan was alerted by the paramedic, who wanted to

attend to her head again. 'See you back at the nick.'

Rowe then wandered over to where a young woman wearing a dark trouser suit and wearing clear plastic gloves was on hands and knees by the roadside. She looked up as Rowe and her associate approached.

'Hi. Jane Castell, forensics.'

'Stephanie Rowe, and this is DC Keston. Anything yet?'

Castell shook her head. 'Bit early to say. Hell of a lot of blood, probably our body's.' She paused, then shook her head. 'Anything else will have to wait.'

'Come on,' Rowe said encouragingly. 'I know that look in a forensics expert.' She smiled at Castell. 'What's troubling you?'

'Wild animals,' Castell said after a while. 'What wild animals roam these woods, Sergeant?'

Rowe shrugged. 'Squirrels and the odd badger, about as dangerous as the Ashdown gets. Too many visitors. I imagine there might have been some wolves once, but not for donkey's years. Why?'

Castell seemed uncomfortable, but she carried on. 'Look, this is not a professional opinion, all right? It's mine, unsubstantiated and wholly instinctive.'

'Sounds good to me. My guv'nor and I prefer gut reactions.'

Castell gave a short laugh. 'Appropriate wording. Most of what I'm finding here are guts. Entrails of all sorts. I think our corpse was eaten.' She carried on quickly, before Rowe or Keston could offer a view of their own. 'I know I know it's crap, but there you are. From what I saw of the body, and what odds and sods I'm finding here, I think our man was running from something, it caught him – probably at groin level –'

Keston winced, and Castell nodded appreciatively.

'And that'd stop anyone running, believe me. I think whatever got him began chewing indiscriminately. I'm no animal expert, but I always thought hunting animals caught prey for food. This creature didn't eat him like that. It... it played with him, tossed the body around like a cat with a

mouse or a dog with a rubber bone. There's parts of the body over a wide area and I can't explain that any other way.'

Rowe took this in her stride. 'Why an animal, though? Why not people?'

Castell pointed back at the ambulance. 'Our IC4 in there was chewed – I could see that at a glance – so I immediately thought of an animal. Back in the lab, I'll take a cast, try and identify teeth. It was no human that mauled this man.'

'Could he have been dead beforehand?'

Castell shrugged. 'That's your job. My guess is that as his mate wasn't, he probably wasn't either. Again, a post-mortem will determine that.'

Rowe thanked the scientist and left her to scrape up the bloody scraps that she would need for her researches. They wandered back towards Rowe's car, and the radio.

She called her boss and within seconds was speaking to Bob Lines, passing on all they had learned, including Castell's supposition.

'Not much we can do till she does her post-mortem, Steph,' came his reply. 'If Nan is OK and the other guy's ready to be interviewed, you might as well get back here.'

Rowe agreed. 'One thing, though. I think we might need an interpreter – this guy doesn't seem to speak English.'

'Fine, Steph. Is he Japanese, Chinese, Korean or what?' Rowe wanted to kick herself for not finding that out first. 'I'll get back to you, guy.'

Keston hurried over to the ambulance and was back in a few seconds. 'I think he's a Jap, Sarge. It was the only word he responded to, anyway.'

Rowe relayed this possibility to Bob Lines, then added, 'Do we know where the Doctor is, guy? I think he might help us on this, especially if Castell is right about some giant man-eating monster.'

'Yeah, and it could be an escaped bear or tiger. Let's leave the Martians out of it until we have to, OK, Steph?'

'OK, guy. We'll be back in an hour or so.'

Rowe and Keston gave the area one last look around, noting that the police car had already left and the ambulances

were just going. Only Castell was still there, gathering her samples.

'Let's go, Robin,' Rowe said, and seconds later they were on their way back to Brighton.

Garrett Manor, Ashdown Forrest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 13.00

The managing director of SenéNet and Ciara were deep in conversation when there was a knock on the door.

'Come,' said the managing director.

Former UNIT Private Erskine walked in and stood to attention in front of the desk, like the good soldier he was. 'Reporting in, sir.'

'Go ahead, Mr Erskine.'

Erskine smiled. 'He has finally worked it out, sir.'

The managing director nodded to Clara. 'You win our wager, Ciara.' He looked back at Erskine. 'I thought the Brigadier was brighter than that and would work it out much sooner.'

Erskine relaxed slightly. 'Sir, I think this might be a good time to take him for a walk without the blindfold, relax him further. He may think I am coming round to his way of thinking.'

The managing director agreed. 'I think you should also drop into the conversation the sad fate of Major Simmons, Mr Erskine. Well done. You may go.'

'Thank you, sir.' Erskine walked crisply back to the door, but stopped, his fingers on the handle.

'What is it, Mr Erskine?'

'Er... nothing, sir.'

The managing director sprawled back in his chair, a broad grin on his face. 'Oh, come on, Mr Erskine. We've been together all these years. Feel free to talk.'

Erskine touched his disfigured face. 'I have often thought, but never asked...'

'Why I haven't offered to repair your face properly? You never asked. You always seemed to wear it like a badge of

courage, a sign of your strength in adversity. Would you like it repaired? I can have it done very easily when the project is over.'

Erskine paused. 'May I think on that, sir?'

'With pleasure, my friend. The decision is entirely yours.' Erskine muttered his thanks and left.

The managing director waited for a minute or two, while Ciara quietly sat, watching and waiting. Eventually he got out of his seat and crossed over to the window. Ciara joined him. Below, Erskine was crossing the back yard, past a couple of the outhouses. To the far left was the pen where the Stalker was kept, with Lawson's rooms above it. In the distance on the far right was the cottage where Erskine lived, with their prisoner above. A few other cottages for other staff were dotted around. Behind all of this were the fields and hills of the Downs themselves, with heavily wooded areas splattered randomly throughout, the largest to the distant right, where the Stalker hunted.

'Sadly, I believe Mr Erskine is weakening.' The managing director leaned on the windowpane.

'You think Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart has made an impact on him?'

'Mister Jones said it was a mistake to use Erskine. He may have been correct. I thought the Brigadier would be so ashamed, so distraught that we could break him. Mr Jones did not think Erskine was the man to do it, said that Erskine was more likely to snap. He was probably right.' The managing director moved back into the dimly lit office. 'The project needs more of UNIT's contemporary secrets, Ciara. We know so little of UNIT's recent encounters, where they now store everything they collect.' He slammed his hand on his desk, adding another dent, this time to the corner. 'I want a Zygon, Ciara. I want to know how their metamorphic properties work, how cells can transmute on such a scale. And I want to understand how Rapine grows, why the Nunton nuclear complex didn't blow half of Avon into the stratosphere and what properties Validium offers us.'

'He wasn't the Brigadier during many of these episodes,

sir,' Ciara offered gently.

'Yes, but from what we know of them through our sadly depleted sources in C19, I do not believe for one moment that that old twerp Sudbury did not keep Lethbridge-Stewart up to speed. That is why he is here, Ciara – John Sudbury sent him to investigate us. If C19 have an interest in SenéNet, then I need to exploit that in turn. And win!' He looked at her, through his dark glasses, almost daring her to argue. 'Am I becoming obsessed Ciara?'

'No more than usual, sir.'

It was rare for Ciara to hear the managing director to laugh, but when he did it was a nasty sound, accompanied by a heavy blast of his oily breath. 'Very droll, Ciara. But probably true. Ever since I was given this wretched body, I have sought greater power, greater understanding of the alien technology which created it. Only by amassing every scrap of information on alien visitations can I hope to better myself. Ourselves. I take it you are still happy with the modifications I made to you and Cellian?'

The gap between her opening her mouth to speak and actually saying 'Yes' was so small as to be unnoticed by anyone else. But the managing director of SenéNet possessed a brain kept alive and augmented by technology from another world, by a race of beings who had willingly sacrificed their humanity to become the perfect machine creatures. He noted the delay.

'Ciara,' he said smiling at her, 'I think you should take the esper and the woman to the hospital and pass them over into the capable hands of dear Dr Krafchin. Begin preparations on both of them, but avoid actually instigating transferrals. She may prove a useful hostage if she is associated with the Doctor.'

'If the alien is the Doctor,' Ciara reminded him.

'As you say, Ciara, as you say. And the esper may be willing to help without undergoing the process. His mental powers will be rawer and more useful if he is not bestowed with our "gifts". We will see.'

Ciara nodded and left.

Ciara had doubts, he now knew that. Cellian probably as well. Erskine was obviously troubled, Lawson was not up to much and Mr Jones was emotionally unreliable, as he always had been. The man was a sociopath and, as a result, something of a psychopath, preferring to kill people with as little direct contact as possible. They had worked together on and off over the years, often for other agencies, especially if they both required funding for whatever else they were doing at the time. Could he afford to surround himself with such a potentially hazardous core team?

The managing director stared out again at the gardens – to him, a sea of different greys. Twenty years or so before, he had willingly allowed himself to become an experiment, placing himself inside an artificially constructed body, prepared from Cyber-technology prior to their abortive invasion of Earth, launched from London's sewers. Back then his new body had been magnificent, giving him limitless energy, the strength of ten men, and building his confidence and personality into the man he was now. However, over the last few years he had begun to realise that it was beginning to slow down, because whatever Cybermen used to keep themselves alive came from whatever planet or space station or ship they existed within, and there was no one on Earth with the right technology to replace the decaying pieces of his body. First, he noticed that his skin tones were paling, that he was thinning and starting to weaken. Then he began to lose the sight in his artificial eyes. Once he had boasted that he could see colours beyond the range available to normal men, but now he could see less than a dog and there was nothing he could do about it.

He needed a replacement body, and that was just what he was building. But the technology he was planning to use was different – sentient and inert. It needed a vast amount of extra-sensory input, which hopefully this American boy would provide. And if not, well, if it really was the Doctor wandering around Brighton, then maybe his mental power would be enough to awaken his new hosts.

He wandered out of his office, down the stairs, past

Roberta on reception and to the tiny concealed door that went under the stairs. He removed his glasses and a tiny beam of light shot out from what to anyone else would look like a knot in the wood. Recognising the artificial retinal pattern, the door swung open as six carefully concealed locks were released simultaneously.

‘Light,’ he muttered, and the stairs going down towards the old cellar were bathed in a bright blue light. ‘Close,’ was his next command, and the door slid shut, followed by six individual clicks as the locks operated, sealing him in.

One step at a time he went down, his body ignoring the fact that the air was cold and somehow thick, like in the freezer store in an abattoir. He reached the ground and again asked for light. One by one blue ceiling lights snapped on, illuminating a cellar that went on further than it should have if restricted to the boundaries of the Manor.

Despite the size of the room, it was remarkably Spartan. One wall was lined with deep shelves but the other walls were either the dull brickwork of the Manor or the reinforced concrete of the interminable extension.

Taking pride of place in the middle of the open area was a huge glass casket, about twelve foot square. Various tubes and cables led from it to wall attachments, supplying electrical power and other essential sources to the casket. Some of the tubes pulsed rhythmically with blue light, moving in time with his breathing. Others contain viscous fluids – green, blue, white – all pumping into the gelatinous shifting mass that filled the casket.

The managing director walked over and touched the side of the casket. ‘Soon,’ he said, his voice barely more than a rasping whisper. ‘Soon we will be joined and this planet will be ours. Together we will be better than individuals. Together we will be supreme.’

As if in response, a weak turquoise glow pulsed from the centre of the mass. And moving towards his hand on the glass were two joined shapes, basically spherical but with tiny craters indented, giving them a more multisided look without actually breaking the geometry. The two linked spheres

pressed up against the side of the glass.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, soon we will be one.’

Moving away, and letting the spheres weakly roll back to the centre of the casket, he wandered further into the cellar, past the join of old brick and new concrete, and paused at one shelf. On it was the cracked stone head of a gargoyle, its body long since powdered in a massive explosion.

‘Alas poor Bok,’ he said, ‘I never knew you well. But UNIT did – like they knew you too,’ he said, now speaking to an inert futuristic gun. ‘Recovered from the grounds of Auderley House. I wonder what stories you would tell, if only you could. Who made you? Who brought you to Earth? How does your energy charge work and at what range?’

The managing director stepped back and regarded his collection of trophies, dating back to the thirties and all representative of alien life or technology, siphoned off from under the government’s nose via his careful manipulation of the overwhelming bureaucracy that was Westminster, and so lost to their military advisers, each assuming someone else had taken charge of it. If the British government had weapons like these, he reasoned, they would use them. Imagine the Falklands War fought with disintegrator guns, or the Gulf War, where enemy bases could have been invaded by giant maggots, carrying a lethal plague that could kill a man in fifteen minutes. No, such irresponsible use would be criminal, but to learn from the technology, to adapt Earth’s technology to it and use it for good... for the furtherance of SenéNet and to make the planet a safe place with no more wars, no more conflict, with everybody held in a state of détente in case SenéNet chose to use a Yeti’s web gun or a Methaji virus on anyone who was proving disagreeable.

With his team of researchers, scattered across the globe to preserve anonymity, working hard on such things, it could not be far off. Although his Cyber-enhanced body was failing him, by using the sort of resources he had once expended on Ciara and Cellian, he would survive. However, his new body would be a wholly prosthetic one, into which only his mind would be placed. The key to living for ever.

And all this would be possible when the American esper's mind was linked with the life forms in the casket. With their combined mental powers, they would touch his mind and pass it into the new body. On occasions he had linked minds with the aliens, but with limited success. He needed the boy to strengthen the link, to achieve his goal.

He had reached a metallic box, eight feet high, three feet wide and five feet deep. 'Open,' he said and with a hiss of hydraulic hinges his instructions were followed.

Facing him was the body of a man, clothed in rough denim overalls, with a webbed scarf tied around the neck, and black Dr Martens boots on the feet. It was the face that was astonishing. Three weeks ago, when he had last looked at the body, the head had been virtually featureless: bald, with dark recesses for eyes, a lipless slit for a mouth and a rough lump of a nose. What he was looking at now was the face of a handsome man in his late twenties, with high cheekbones, dark hair swept back, piercing blue eyes, a strong jaw and a slightly quizzical smile etched into the fully formed lips.

'Hello Martyn Townsend,' he breathed. 'How nice to see you again.'

If anyone else had been present, they would have seen the managing director looking at a mirror image of himself as he had been twenty years ago, before the accident which scarred his face and the surgery that replaced his limbs, organs and dreams with those of Cyber-technology.

'How does it feel to know that within a few days you will be up and about, ruling the world? Yes, I know. It feels very good indeed.'

49 Warleigh Road, Brighton, East Sussex

25 July 1989, 14.35

Joe Hambidge was, for the first time in his life, wearing clothes that came from a designer shop and not off the peg at Top Man. He was wearing a dark Le Beija suit, with Dupree shoes and a Versace shirt and tie. The only thing that looked slightly odd was the portable CD player in a special inside

pocket and the earphones playing subtle white noise into his ears.

He rang the doorbell of the house and within a minute, the door opened. A woman in her mid-thirties was standing there, frowning. 'Hello?'

'Are you Tim Curtin's mother?'

Cautiously, she nodded. 'Is there a problem?'

'Oh, no, not at all.' Joe smiled broadly, displaying newly perfected white teeth that almost sparkled. 'No, he won a competition through the Nessie Burger chain and I'm here with his prize.' From behind his back, Joe produced a large cardboard box.

'The Maxx?' asked Mrs Curtin.

Joe nodded.

'When he gets back from town, he'll be so pleased.'

Joe gave her a piece of paper. 'If you could just sign for receipt. And SenéNet may be in touch about trying to organise a winners' photograph session. It isn't obligatory, but it would be nice.'

Mrs Curtin signed and gave the paper back. Joe passed her the Maxx, smiled again and walked back to the car parked at the bottom of the road, driven by the Japanese businessman.

8 Albion Hill, Brighton, East Sussex

25 July 1989, 14.45

Some hours earlier, Janine Gilbert had been knocking on the door of Rupert Illingworth's house at three in the morning, dressed in her usual T-shirt and jeans, chewing gum and being an accessory to murder.

Now, as she passed over a Maxx to the eight year-old Sally Myers, whose older brother cheerfully signed for it (he was over eighteen), she was dressed in a smart Katherine Hamnett beige trouser suit, her hair flowing immaculately over her shoulders, wearing the best, most attractive make-up money could buy and the latest Chanel perfume.

Over the next hour, Janine, Joe Hambidge, and another teenager, also smartly dressed, all three wearing stereo

earphones and listening to white noise, delivered thirty boxes, each containing a Maxx, complete with four games based on the Nessie Burger characters and a full set of plastic figurines. And every time they returned to a nice olive-green G-registered Ford Sierra driven by the silent but immaculately dressed Ryuichi Futayomoto.

The first stage of SenéNet's programme was over and done with.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

25 July 1989, 15.00

The Doctor and Mel had been traipsing through the woods for about an hour now. The bus had deposited them in Nutley and they had headed straight for the edge of Ashdown Forest, hoping to make their way towards SenéNet's headquarters.

'What exactly are you hoping to find there, Doctor?'

'The Brigadier.'

'Who's he?'

The Doctor suddenly smiled. 'A friend, Mel.' He took her by the shoulders, looking earnestly at her. 'If he wasn't involved in all this, I'd be tempted to get back into my TARDIS, take off and leave it to Detective Inspector Lines to sort out.'

Mel was horrified. 'You can't do that! There have been murders, Trey's power, Luke's changes... Bob Lines can't possibly deal with all those, put everything back as it should be, can he?'

'Oh, Mel, you must understand that, in the great scheme of things, what has happened here is of no relevance to the universe at large. And I must look at the bigger picture now and again, and remember my place in it.' He wagged a finger at her. 'And so should you.'

Mel was indignant and shook his other hand away. 'Well, I think that's a horrible attitude. If that's what people from your planet think, I should hate to go there.' She pushed past him and headed further into the woods.

The Doctor shook his head a little sadly, but it had to be

done. Mel had to be convinced not to travel with him, not to become part of that awful future he so desperately wanted to avoid. If that meant disillusioning her, then so be it.

Mel had stopped. ‘Anyway, putting aside my surprise that you care about one human that much, you still haven’t told me who this Brigadier is?’

Never one to give up, our Melanie. The Doctor sighed. ‘He was a very dear friend to me some years back, relatively speaking. He saved this planet from destruction on more than one occasion, and he often looked after me far more than I ever gave him credit for at the time. I had a tendency to be a bit arrogant and thoughtless back then, and he got the brunt of it.’

Mel gave him a look which the Doctor could not, or maybe chose not to, decipher.

‘He’s probably getting on a bit by now, a bit delicate and old.’ The Doctor suddenly stopped and threw his arms wide. ‘But like the trooper that he is, he will have embraced the adventure with open arms. I just hope it hasn’t got the silly old fossil killed.’

‘I’m pleased you care,’ Mel groaned as she staggered through the thickening undergrowth.

‘You can place a monetary value on most things in this universe, Mel, but friendships, they have a different value. They are what make us worthwhile people. A good set of friends, Mel, is worth far more than a couple of lovers or a multitude of acquaintances. And in that respect Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart is one of the most valuable commodities in the cosmos.’

Mel gave him another one of her looks – they were becoming rather annoying, the Doctor decided, mainly because he could not quite work out if she understood and appreciated him or was thinking him a madman. In a way, he hoped all three. Life was far more fun that way.

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 15.10

Stephanie Rowe looked up eagerly as Jane Castell wandered into the CID room, a sheaf of papers in her hands, a heavy bag slung over her shoulder.

‘Well?’

Castell looked around. The only people there were Keston, whom she had met back in the forest with Rowe, and a man in a small office at the back who, she assumed, was either DI Lines or DCI Ashton.

‘Shall we involve your DI?’

Rowe and Keston followed her to the inner office and Keston knocked on the door.

‘Robin?’

Keston pushed the door open. ‘The post-mortem report, guy.’

Bob Lines was immediately alert, waving Castell to a seat, while Rowe and Keston hovered by the door as introductions were made.

‘What have you got for us then?’

Castell looked at them all, took a deep breath and then stared Lines straight in the eye. ‘What would you like, sir? The version that’ll go on file here and at the CPS or what I really think?’

‘Both, Jane. Give us both. The official one first.’ Bob Lines cast a look to Rowe, who nodded almost imperceptibly. Castell took another breath and, without consulting her papers, said that the post-mortem revealed that the as yet unidentified man, assumed to be of Japanese origin, died somewhere between one o’clock and three o’clock that morning. The massive trauma he received meant that he died instantly, the lower half of his body having been removed rapidly, up as far as the duodenum. The cause of this trauma was unknown, there being no indication of clean cuts of the sort made by a machete or similar implement. The wounds might be consistent with some kind of accident involving heavy farm or plant machinery, such as a thresher or harvester, except again none of the wounds were clean enough to have been made artificially. ‘I recommend that the cause of death remain unconfirmed and under investigation.’ Castell shrugged. ‘So,

that's the file version that'll blot my copybook for a few years, I can tell you.'

Bob Lines encouraged her to carry on. 'And what you really think?'

Castell reached into her bag and pulled out something wrapped in a Tesco carrier bag. She placed it on Bob Lines's desk and unwrapped it. 'It's a plaster cast I took from the indentations on the wounds, especially around the surviving hip and pelvis area. I think that says it all.'

The police officers were staring at a fairly major set of teeth and jaws. Castell looked straight at Rowe. 'Like I told you then, I think he was bitten in half.'

She sat back and waited for Lines to laugh at her, or at least demand more evidence. Instead he just stared, poking at the teeth with a pen.

'I can see why this isn't in your report, Jane. How long can you hold off filing it?'

'I can't really, sir. I've got to get back to Brighton General this afternoon. They've a teenager who was whacked by a lorry last night – not a pretty sight, I can tell you.' Castell indicated the cast. 'But you're welcome to keep that, if you want.'

'What I'd really like, Jane, is your opinion on this monster set of chompers. What are they?'

'Well, sir, the canines and incisors immediately suggest a dog. I'm not a doggie person really, but to be that size, and have a ferocity to do that much damage, I think it must be a Dobermann or a Rottweiler. Too wide for an Afghan or wolfhound, and they are too pronounced for a German shepherd. My money's on a Dobermann, to be frank. But it's bloody big, bloody ferocious and bloody lethal. Personally, I'd like to see it locked away before some other innocent hiker gets his.'

Rowe shook her head. 'They weren't hikers, Jane. They were both wearing shorts and T-shirts. No bags, no provisions. More like cross-country runners, but just at a daft time of night.'

'I'd be doing bloody cross-country running quite happily

if I was being chased by this bugger,' said Jane, getting her stuff together.

Keston showed her out, and then went to make some phone calls. Stephanie Rowe and Bob Lines stayed looking at the cast.

'It's not nice, guy.'

'It's not natural either, Steph. I think you were right. Get in a car and find the Doctor. I'd like his opinion on this.'

Keston wandered back in, passing a couple of telephone messages to Rowe. As she stood to go back to her desk, she threw a quick look at the map behind the DI's desk. 'Any idea roughly where to look?'

'Oh yes, I know exactly where he'll be – right where I told him not to be. He and poor Melanie Bush will be in the vicinity of SenéNet. He's got a bee in his bonnet that they're involved in all this. And you know what?'

'What's that, sir?' asked Keston.

'I have a nasty feeling he's right.'

Garrett Manor, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

25 July 1989, 15.30

Mr Jones literally crashed into the managing director at Roberta's desk. The young receptionist wheeled herself over to answer a bleeping telephone line, trying not to smile as they disentangled themselves from each other.

'Where is the fire, Mr Jones?'

'PC Plod, as you put it, is on the warpath. Basically they are about this far off discovering everything.' He was holding his thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. 'They have sussed the Stalker got the Jap guys and think there's a connection between it and us.'

'A remarkable leap of unfounded logic for the British policeman. Anyone would think they had help.'

'They have.'

The managing director nodded and smiled. 'The Doctor?'

'They're searching him out now.'

'Excellent, Mr Jones. Time to tidy up a few loose ends.'

Do we know where the Doctor is?’

‘He and some computer geek of a girl are nearby apparently.’ Jones was getting agitated.

‘Oh, do calm down, Mr Jones. Your job is to split them up. Arrange an accident for the girl and pass her along to Dr Krafchin. I want the Doctor to find his way here without knowing he is being aided.’

He walked into the main working area, where about thirty young men and women were working on devising games and programs for the Maxx. Each wore a personal CD player and earphones.

‘We’re getting there, Mr Jones.’

But, the managing director reasoned, Jones probably didn’t much care about the Maxx at that moment. His job was security and he would undoubtedly be frustrated, at the thought that there might be a breach. The managing director knew that needed resolving quickly, however risky, or Mr Jones might become more unstable – and an even bigger risk – than he saw everything else becoming. Paranoia was such a ridiculous fear.

‘Where is the surviving example of the Stalker’s missing meal?’

‘The Jap guy? At the police station at William Street, near –’

‘Oh spare me details, Mr Jones. Just send Cellian to deal with that little *aufrichten*.’

Mr Jones, unsurprisingly, look confused by the German word.

‘Cock-up, Mr Jones. Error. Mistake. Alarming inefficiency on your behalf, remember?’

Jones’s jaw hardened a fraction and he breathed a bit too deeply. He clearly did not take criticism very well these days. But he did not reply, just nodded his understanding and went to find Cellian.

The managing director took a last look at the workers at their computers. ‘Today Brighton, tomorrow the world’, to borrow a phrase.’ He turned back to the main hallway and headed for the stairs. ‘Oh, Roberta?’

She looked up. 'Sir?'

'Get Lawson for me. I want to see him in my office again. In three minutes.'

As he began the climb to his office, he noted with satisfaction that Roberta never argued, never complained and was startlingly efficient. A shame he had been forced to implant those memories of a horrific car accident into her, so that she accepted his cybernetic modifications to her. That had been one of his first experiments, but he still remembered the young legal secretary that Mr Jones had picked up in a bar one night when they had been based in Northumberland. He recalled how, less than three minutes after they had engaged in sex, Mr Jones had cheerfully handed her over to the research team led by Dr Krafchin, who had begun removing her legs only a few seconds after the anaesthetic had silenced her very loud and very persistent screams of terror.

And he remembered the look of pleasure on Jones's face as he watched her operated on. At the time, the managing director had wondered if it had been the sex that pleased him, but now he knew it was just Jones's lust for violence, for inflicting pain on others, that had turned him on.

And, for the first time, the managing director wondered what would happen if Roberta's real memories ever resurfaced. Whatever the answer, he somehow imagined that Jones would take delight in dealing with the problem.

Garrett Manor Annexe, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 15.40

Lethbridge-Stewart was resting on the sofa, his eyes closed, thinking back. Some of Erskine's words had stirred memories within him, thoughts and feelings he had believed buried years ago were resurfacing.

Flashes of dead men and women who had served under him. He knew all their names, all their details. He remembered funerals, cremations and some wakes where there simply hadn't been bodies to pass on to the grieving relatives. Blasted by Ogron disintegrator guns, or that K1 robot with its

stolen disrupter. Or men crushed to virtually nothing but pulp under the robot's giant feet, or the heavy flippers of the Skarasen. Men lost for ever in the crevices of underground tunnels or the bellies of large intelligent plants.

His own losses – his marriage and the joy of watching his daughter grow up – were so very insignificant when compared to all the deaths. But the one thing that had never really occurred to him was the effect on the survivors, people like Erskine, who had tried to rebuild their lives.

However, none of that really mattered now. What was important here was discovering what SenéNet were up to, and he could see that Erskine was going to be useful in that. It was time to change tack, to become the willing prisoner, helpful and charming. That ought to throw the man off his guard, because no matter how much sadness Lethbridge-Stewart felt at Erskine's loss, he was, for now, one of the enemy and would probably try and manipulate him in turn. Until he could be 100 per cent positive that Erskine would return to the side of the angels, Lethbridge-Stewart was forced to assume he was against him.

The door opened and Lethbridge-Stewart lazily opened one eye.

'We need to talk, Brigadier, sir,' Erskine said simply. Lethbridge-Stewart pointed to a chair, but Erskine shook his head and passed him a note. It read: 'We could be spied on here. This room might be bugged.' He then said, 'It's time for your exercise.'

Quietly and slowly, Lethbridge-Stewart pulled himself out of the comfort of the sofa and looked expectantly for the blindfold. Again Erskine's head indicated the negative.

'I think it's time you saw the real world again, sir.'

If Lethbridge-Stewart had possessed hackles, they would have stood on end. This was too cosy, too nice – and just too easy.

'Thank you,' he said simply.

Erskine pointed out of the door. 'This way, sir.'

Moments later, Lethbridge-Stewart realised he had spent the last few weeks in a converted loft to an old brick cottage,

with a wrought-iron fire escape down one side. As they reached the bottom, he could see Garrett Manor about half a mile away and a few other cottages scattered about.

He was overdoing the blinking, adjusting to the bright summer afternoon, giving himself time to see more of the immediate area. There was a rusted old Austin just to the right of the house, little more than a shell, and a few sawhorses and other useless farm implements were scattered around. By another of the cottages, he could see a massive pen, like one seen at those places dog owners leave their pets when they go on holiday. Brendon had a couple for tortoises and rabbits owned by some of the older boys, but this was on a much larger scale. Whatever used that pen was about the size of a small bear.

‘I must say, Erskine, this is far more civilised. Where do we normally walk around? I never manage to get my bearings.’

‘Roughly in small circles, sir. But today, we’re going to go nearer those woods. I’ve cleared it with the managing director. He thinks I’ve suggested this as some kind of reward for good behaviour.’ Erskine’s voice dropped a bit. ‘I used to do it for Major Simmons too, until he escaped.’

‘Alex Simmons? Is that who was sent to find me?’

‘Probably, sir. I didn’t know him. Bit too Oxbridge and Sandhurst for my liking. Not one of the old school, sir.’

‘Damn fine officer actually, Erskine.’ Lethbridge-Stewart knew that Simmons was probably dead – he would have to be, otherwise why tell him about all this? ‘Glad he got away from all this.’

‘Well, sadly, sir, I’m afraid he didn’t. The Irish twins got him. He’s dead, I’m sorry to tell you.’

Blast Sir John Sudbury, wasting good lives just to rescue him. Simmons was young, had a wife and kids. He had a right to a life, rather than throwing it away trying to locate a damn fool ex-brigadier stupid enough to have got himself captured.

‘I’m very sad to hear that, Erskine. I dined with Simmons and his family only a couple of years ago. His oldest boy was hoping to go into the forces, like his father.’

Erskine shrugged. 'You know what it's like, sir. When we sign on, we take the risk.'

'Indeed we do, Erskine, indeed we do. And it never goes away.'

It was only about 200 yards to the wood. He could make a run for it. But they must expect that, so why was he being given the opportunity? Whatever the reason, he would not take it. Not yet. Erskine had given him the information about Simmons for a reason. To shake him up? Demoralise him? Prove there was no way out or 'the Irish twins' would get him?

He began walking away from the wooden area, towards the other cottages, particularly the big pen.

Erskine was beside him in a second. 'I don't think you want to go that way, sir.'

'I don't?'

'No, sir. Not that way.' Erskine pointed back towards his own prison. 'I think we'd best go back now, sir. Don't want to test the managing director's patience, do we?'

So, this had either been a test or, if Erskine was on his side, a chance to survey the surroundings. Either way, it had proved very useful.

However, Lethbridge-Stewart was confused. There was something missing. 'Other people,' he said, thinking aloud. Turning to Erskine, he said, 'Why did I not see anyone else?'

'Busy, I suspect, sir.'

'Of course. A big company like SenéNet must be very busy. What is being done at the moment?'

'I don't think you really expect me to tell you that now, sir, do you?'

Lethbridge-Stewart shrugged. 'I suppose not.' And with a sudden movement, he swung both fists up and under Erskine's misshapen chin. There was a satisfying crack, and Erskine went crashing back into the grass. 'If you're really on my side, Erskine, you'll forgive me when you wake up. And if you're not with me, then I hope that hurt. Either way, it was really very satisfying.'

Lethbridge-Stewart rummaged in Erskine's pocket and

found an old service revolver, placing it in the top of his own trousers, out of sight at the back. He then dragged Erskine round to the rusted Austin and pushed him inside it. Checking that no one had seen him, he headed for the other cottages, particularly the one with the pen. It was his duty to follow Sudbury's request and find out what was going on. If only to honour Alex Simmons.

He walked up to the fencing of the pen. It wasn't chicken wire, as he had assumed from the distance. It was a very fine silvery plastic, remarkably inflexible considering how thin it was. He could see nothing in the pen, so whatever it was built for had to be in the concrete bunker at the far end. And things that needed unbendable plastic caging and a concrete home were not the sort of things he wanted to disturb. Not yet, anyway.

Crossing to the back of the nearest cottage, he gently eased the door open. There did not appear to be anyone inside, so in he went. He passed through a kitchenette and into a hallway. A flight of stairs led up. There was a doorway under the stairs leading to either a cupboard or a cellar, and a solitary living room, also empty. He tested the first step. It failed to creak, so he put more weight on it. One by one, he climbed the steps, until he reached the landing. Three doors, one ajar, which turned out to contain a small bath and toilet overlooking the back. The middle room was locked. The room over the front of the house was slightly open. He gripped the revolver with one hand, without drawing it, and slowly eased the door wider open. Nothing, no one, just a single bed and a gas heater. The curtains were closed and he mentally pictured the front view – it would look on to the rear of Garrett Manor. Someone might notice if he disturbed the curtains, so he went back down the stairs. The cupboard door under the stairs was not locked either. 'Good security,' he muttered. Pulling the door open, he saw immediately that it led to a cellar, with only a tiny window high up in the right hand corner, presumably level with the ground outside but impossible to reach from inside the cellar. Besides which, it had no catch – a skylight only. He was three-quarters of the way down the wooden

steps, treading carefully in the dark, when it all went wrong.

‘Come on down, Brigadier,’ said a voice, and the cellar was suddenly illuminated with harsh electric light.

At the foot of the steps was the Armani-suited blond man he’d met three and a half weeks before, carrying a gun. Lethbridge-Stewart was pleased to note he had been right – a Compacta 25 indeed. Limited issue, special security only. He wondered how the blond man – Jones, wasn’t it? – had got hold of one. Another man, dark hair and unshaven, with a black rollneck and jeans, was holding a length of lead piping.

‘Where is Erskine?’ asked the blond man with the gun.

Lethbridge-Stewart shrugged. ‘Back out there somewhere. He fell asleep.’

Tutting, the other man offered to go and find him.

Jones, or whoever he was, shook his head. ‘Leave him for now, Lawson. I’m going to talk to the managing director. Make sure the Brigadier here does not get out of this, his new cell.’

The blond man with gun moved towards Lethbridge-Stewart, and Lawson reached out and pulled him down the last few steps, grabbing his hands and tying them roughly behind his back, unafraid to twist a wrist or an arm in the process. The blond man then walked up the stairs and Lawson followed, swinging out with his piping, which shattered the light bulb.

Framed in the doorway at the top, Lawson turned and said, ‘You sit tight now, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart,’ then he closed the door, plunging the cellar into almost total darkness, with just a tiny amount of light seeping through the high window. There was the sound of a lock being turned and, after that, nothing.

A few moments passed and then Lethbridge-Stewart clambered backwards up the stairs and reached for the door, only to realise that on this side it was not wooden at all, but coated in a hard plastic, with no door handle, hole or anything even to grip on to. This really was a prison cell.

‘Damn.’ he said. ‘Damn, damn and damn again.’

Garrett Marion Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

25 July 1989, 15.55

It took Jones only three minutes to find Erskine, shoved in the back of the car wreck. He almost pulled him out through the windscreen, but Erskine struggled away and got out through the door.

'Well done, Erskine,' said Jones. 'Luckily for you we saw him wandering around the Stalker's run. He's in Lawson's cellar.'

Erskine mumbled an apology and rubbed his chin.

'Don't worry about me.' Jones said viciously. 'Just hope your pension is paid up with the managing director.'

As Jones turned to walk away from the still staggering Erskine, he stopped. 'Damn.' he muttered to himself, then called back to Erskine, 'Have you still got your gun?'

Panicking, Erskine felt at the pocket of his jacket, where he always kept his service revolver. 'Yes.' he shouted. 'Yes, at least he didn't take that.'

'No thanks to you, moron,' Jones growled, and stomped off, back to the Manor.

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 16.00

Bob Lines was still poking at the plaster cast of the dog's teeth when Robin Keston tapped on his office door.

'Robin?'

Keston stood there. 'Er, guy, the translator chap is here. For the Japanese guy. Shall I sit in?'

Lines shrugged. 'Yeah, Robin, start it off. I'll join you afterwards. Make sure he knows he's not under arrest, please.'

'Course, sir.'

Keston marched away, grabbing his jacket off the back of his chair. He went down the two flights of stairs and into the public area.

'Should be a guy to see me, Steve,' he said to the duty constable.

'Oh yeah, that one over there, I think. Hasn't said a word

since he walked in. Ignored me, actually, so I assumed he was the guy you said you were expecting.'

Keston could imagine he'd get another twenty minutes' observation and gossip from the constable if he didn't stop him, so he wandered over to the man in the black bomber jacket and white trousers.

Glancing out through the glass doors, he could see a white Cadillac parked nearby. 'Nice car,' he said, but the man just looked at him, and Keston shuddered as the man's gaze seemed to bore through him. He looked like something out of a fashion magazine – very good face, nicely kept black hair and piercing blue eyes. Still without a word, he stood up and the duty constable activated the security door that provided access to the back of the station.

Keston was talking far too loudly as they went through the door, not only for the benefit of the constable but to cover his own bad feeling about the situation. 'Our poor man is this way,' he said. 'Can't get a response out of him.'

By the time the door clicked shut, they were in a long, empty corridor. 'Custody is this way,' Keston said. The young man just looked straight ahead and, not for the first time, Keston wondered what he had got himself into.

It had all started three months back, when some local woman had made a complaint about a SenéNet employee, something to do with him being abusive and chasing her away from the woods, threatening to set a dog on her.

Keston had overheard most of the complaint and, although uniform were meant to be dealing with it, he had helped calm the woman down. She had recalled that the man's name was Lawson – she had heard someone else calling to him.

Ever aware of the public's lack of faith in the police, the duty sergeant had promised to look into the company. And later they discovered that, according to local tax records, SenéNet did not have any employees, despite the fact they clearly did. Further investigation revealed that very little paperwork about SenéNet actually existed. No one even knew how or when they had purchased Garrett Manor.

Keston had thought no more of it, until he heard that,

unable to make an official investigation on such little information, the uniform inspector had got a local private detective to investigate the building and see if he could find any information about the place and the people there. Three nights later, Keston had been on his way home from a strictly illegal gambling room, having lost a great deal of money and self-respect, when a white Cadillac ambulance pulled up alongside him.

A blond man in a smart suit had got out and they'd traded a few words about the unusual car before the man put £3,000 in his hand. 'I think you might need this,' he had said. Keston was aghast, and learned that all he had to do was ring a number next time anything was mentioned in the station regarding SenéNet. This seemed simple enough, and although Keston knew it was wrong, the blond man had pointed out that should the DI or even the DCI find out about Keston's gambling problem, he'd be needing more than three grand to keep him away from the dole queue.

Since then, he'd had cause to call the number about four times, just to say that things were happening in the area. It was not until this morning's corpse and the other Japanese guy that he had been asked to become directly involved. All he had to do was keep whoever manned the number (a nice young girl by the sound of it, well brought up, with a posh accent) up to date on the Jap. When he told her that his DI was intending to get an interpreter, she told him to expect one in half an hour. And this good-looking, silent type, was him. Keston was beginning to wonder if he was more than slightly out of his depth.

They entered custody and the custody sergeant had the Japanese man brought to the desk. Keston then led his two silent partners into an interview room. He and the interpreter sat on one side of the desk, the nervous Japanese, now dressed in warm jeans and a shirt, was on the other.

'This is an informal interview,' Keston said, 'not on tape, and you are not under arrest or in any trouble. This man is here to help us understand each other.'

Keston looked to the silent man to translate for him. The

Japanese man frowned but also looked at the silent man. The silent man leaned his right arm out on the desk, pointing his hand at the Japanese. Keston heard a strange click and then stared in amazement as the man's fingers dropped away on a hinge. His astonishment turned to a cold fear as a tiny nozzle emerged from within the hand. It could have been only a split second but it seemed like for ever as Keston stared at the nozzle until it flashed brightly, sending the Japanese man back against the opposite wall like a sack of potatoes. He slumped to the floor and vanished in wreaths of brown smoke as a second blast hit him. Keston dived for the panic button by the door.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 16.30

'I'm trying very hard not to get upset, Doctor, but I think I ought to tell you we have been here twice before.' Mel stopped walking and sat on a tree stump.

'And you've said that twice before,' retorted the Doctor. 'But I can't see any evidence of it.'

Mel sighed and got up, grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him towards another tree. 'Last time I said this to you' – she pointed at the bark – 'I commented on this inscription. I had also seen it the time before. A third time seems a little too much like a coincidence, don't you think?'

The Doctor stared hard at the inscription. 'Kirk 4 Claire', it read. He looked back at Mel, who was holding her head on one side, hands on hips. She had tied her red hair into a short bun at the back and stuffed her trousers into the top of her boots. It made her look even smaller and more petite than normal.

'Well?'

'Well, it could be a coincidence. Maybe they liked each other a lot and wrote it on three trees.'

'Nice try, Doctor? Mel laughed at him, but nicely. 'Oh, Doctor,' she scolded mockingly, suddenly hugging his arm, 'you just don't know how to admit you're wrong, do you?'

‘Ah, Mel,’ he said, patting her hand, ‘that’s because I so rarely am.’

‘Well, of course.’ Mel nodded off to her left. ‘Let’s go that way?’

‘Why?’

‘Because every time we’ve gone your way, we’ve ended up back here. And I don’t want to be stuck in the woods at night.’ The Doctor was surprised this time. ‘You, Mel, frightened of the dark?’

‘No, not exactly. But when I was little I saw *Babes in the Wood* and it spooked me a bit. I’ve been irrational about it ever since.’

The Doctor nodded, knowingly. ‘At least you know it’s irrational. That’s a start.’

‘And I don’t like bats, and there are lots of them in these woods. I once got a baby bat caught up in my hair and had to have it cut free.’

‘In a wood?’

‘In a cathedral actually. My parents took me to Durham cathedral once and I got a bit too nosy.’ Mel shivered. ‘Looking back it was nothing really, but I was scared witless at the time.’ She began parting some shrubbery. ‘Shall we go on?’

‘Of course, otherwise you might go batty trapped in here.’ Mel shot him a venomous look, but at his mock-hurt expression she could only smile. He was just like a big kid really, always needing attention and assurance that he was perfect. Back at university, where she had been a good three years older than most of the others, she used to find it a bit annoying in the other students, but the Doctor as just so nice you couldn’t hold it against him.

University life, however, had not prepared her for this. She had left school with five A-levels, ten O-levels and, according to a test she had taken as a joke, she had an IQ of 162. Believing that all this would be enough for life, she had gone to France for a summer to pick apples and, with a useful handout from her father, spent eight months exploring Europe.

She had then found employment in Scotland at a nature

reserve, but after an owl tried to take a lump out of her hand one feeding time, she opted to run the office, using her instinctive computer skills to create various databases for them. After a while she realised that, fun as it was, she would be better honing her skills and, aged twenty-two became a mature student at London University. Four weeks later, she had the job at ACL to go to in September, her BITS job had been fine (until this morning) and now she was clambering over trees, rummaging in thorn bushes and generally having fun trying to solve whatever mysteries there were at SenéNet alongside a man from another planet with a lovely smile, a large girth and dreadful taste in clothes.

Life could be weird, but it was also a lot of fun.

She stopped suddenly, and turned and looked back at the Doctor, who was angrily trying to remove a sticky plant stem from his trouser legs. ‘Doctor, what planet are you from?’

He looked up. ‘Is that a serious question, or are you humouring me?’

‘What do you think?’

He appeared to be thinking. Then he shrugged.

‘You’re not stupid, Mel. What are the odds of life on other planets?’

Nice smile, bad clothes, big tummy and a habit of answering questions with other questions.

‘Quite high, I should think. Infinite life in infinite combinations, someone once said. Personally, I find it hard to accept that of the supposed billions of planets and stars out there, life exists only on this one. And evolution has shown us how adaptable the species here are, so most places might be capable of supporting some kind of life, even beyond our accepted laws of physics. After all, just because we use physics to decide what is and isn’t real, doesn’t mean that we know everything yet.’

‘Of course. Some of your ancestors thought the world was flat, others believed the Beatles wouldn’t last without Pete Best.’

Mel nodded. ‘Exactly. So yes, I have no problem accepting there are others out there. And if we are anything to

judge by, some nice, some not so.'

'Then, yes, Mel. I am, by your definition an alien. But I've always had various reasons to consider Earth as good a home as my real one.'

'I'd like to see your home, then. Can you take me there?' The Doctor stopped moving. 'I don't know about that, Mel. I could take you to Argolis or Zeos, or to the Eye of Orion or Paradise Towers. But Gallifrey is somewhere I'd like to stay away from just now. Sadly not everyone has as nice a home and family as you. I think you would be better off enjoying them than traipsing through the stars. The novelty wears off after about ten minutes.'

Mel looked hard at him. He was hiding something, he had suddenly become very serious, very cold. 'But that ten minutes might give me enough memories for a lifetime.'

'Or enough nightmares, Mel.' He had caught up with her and took her hand. 'Stay here, Mel. It's safer, nicer and prettier. And anyway, what would your parents say?'

She knew that was rhetorical, but replied anyway. 'Mum would worry, and Dad would say "Go for it". So long as I sent a postcard from Venus once in a while, they'd be very happy.'

The Doctor was doing it again, staring through her, past her, as if looking into some weird past or maybe a future she could never understand.

'I don't think so, Mel,' he said finally. 'It's not as romantic as I might make it sound.'

He pushed past her and crashed on through the undergrowth, ignoring the various obstacles that five minutes previously he had made such a show of finding a nuisance.

She followed him in silence, pondering on this sudden mood swing, hoping that it wasn't entirely her fault and that he would talk more about outer space soon. Despite his protestations, it sounded good fun and, if he could move around it that easily, he could have her back in time for her ACL job in September with no problem.

No problem at all.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

25 July 1989, 16.45

He had been watching them for a while now, waiting for them to get sufficiently separated. So far no luck. Like a bloody ball and chain, he whinged to himself. Why he couldn't just put a bullet or ten into both of them and be done with it, he didn't know, but orders were orders.

Jones checked his rifle for the umpteenth time, caressing the barrel and the sights. It was a long time since he had needed to use this and he had missed it. Small firearms were all right, but the rifle was like an extension of himself – no doubt Freud would have an opinion on that – and he felt immediately calm and content when it was time to use it. The silencer on the end made it slightly more cumbersome than usual, but years of experience had taught him how to adjust so that he could still take the core out of an apple at sixty paces or obliterate a gunman's finger from 100 yards without taking off his whole hand.

Jones and his rifle were always very good at their jobs. It was just that the jobs had a habit of unexpectedly moving or suddenly disappearing behind obstacles or, in the case of these two, were never out of each other's sight.

At the foot of the tree he was perched in was another SenéNet employee, ready to ship their victim to the capable hands of the ferocious Dr Krafchin at the hospital. He glanced down at the waiting man, who was digging a cigarette packet out of his pocket. Just what they needed, a plume of fag smoke to reveal their position. Jones dropped a twig on to the man's head and angrily waved the cigarette away as he looked up in surprise. Grumpily, the man shoved the offending items back into his jacket.

Idiot, Jones thought.

There! An opportunity. The Doctor, if that was who it really was, had moved quite some way ahead of the redhead. There was no way he could see her right now.

He aimed and fired in less than a second, the bullet neatly grazing the girl's scalp just above her left ear. She dropped soundlessly and the man below was already on his way.

Two minutes later, he was carrying her back and still the Doctor hadn't noticed she was gone. He dug out his tiny portable phone and pressed a button. After a second's pause, he spoke into it. 'Mission successful. The Doctor is nearing the edge of this patch of woodland. He should be in your vicinity within moments.'

He dropped from the tree and landed expertly, barely rustling a twig or a leaf. He was jogging after his girl-carrying associate within seconds.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 16.55

The Doctor pushed aside the final few branches and found himself at the edge of a clearing. Garrett Manor, SenéNet's UK headquarters, were visible in the distance.

'Mel?' he called softly. 'I think we're in sight of our goal.'

There was no response and he looked back. No sign of her, so he wandered back into the undergrowth but no matter how far back he went, there was no sign.

'Mel?' he yelled, abandoning all caution. 'Mel, shout if you can hear me.'

His hearing was far more acute than any human's, but he could not detect any sort of reply. Angry with himself at losing sight of her, he trudged back, hoping he'd be able to retrace his steps easily enough. Yes, he remembered that stump, that pile of bracken, that rabbit hole.

This was where they had last spoken. There was that 'Kirk 4 Claire' engraving on the beech tree. He began to walk forward, his senses keener than normal, suddenly deadly serious in his attempt to search for clues to explain Mel's disappearance.

It took him a few moments, but the bullet hole in the tree had not been there before. The casing was warm, he could feel it in the hole. He had not heard a shot, but there again, he had not been listening for one. If Mel had been shot at, or hit, then there was a reason. If someone wanted them dead, why had no one shot at him, and where was her body? No, Mel had

probably been taken somewhere, alive most probably.

To be used to get at him. Was that ego or was that fact? Sadly, it was probably fact, in which case he was not going to walk into the lion's den that easily.

He turned back and ran straight through the woods and back towards the road, hoping to find the bus stop and get back to Mel's house. He would need Trey's help in finding her.

Ten minutes later, he emerged from the trees, barely breathless. This was too important to let exertion and exhaustion take him now. Which way had the bus been going? Why were there no markings on the road? Wait! There was a sound. A car. If he could get a lift or at least a sense of direction.

The car came round a bend, flashing its lights at him. As it slowed down and he dashed to the window, he recognised the occupant.

'They've got Mel,' he said.

'Oh great,' said Detective Sergeant Stephanie Rowe. 'That's all we need.'

He got in beside her and they drove off. 'How did you know I'd be there,' the Doctor asked after a moment.

'I didn't,' she replied. 'I've been driving around for an hour now, looking for you two. We need you back at the station. There have been developments.'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'No, I must get back to Mel's house. I need to find that American boy living there. He can help find her.'

'I'll make a deal, Doctor. We'll go via Pease Pottage, pick up your American and then go to the nick. If I don't get you back to my guv'nor, I'm dead. And if they've kidnapped Mel, she'll be all right for now until they make a demand.'

The Doctor wanted to argue, but her logic was sound. 'All right,' he said eventually. 'But via Pease Pottage. I need to see Trey.'

Garrett Marlon Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 17.03

‘Stage one ready to go, sir.’

‘Excellent.’

The managing director stood amidst his earphone-wearing programmers, all thirty of them staring intently at their computer screens, millions of data bytes flashing before their eyes at incredible rates.

Standing by the door were Ciara and Cellian, their little army of earphone-wearing zombies dressed in their expensive designer clothes, a glazed Futayomoto, and a handful of other SenéNet employees, including Lawson and Erskine.

Roberta’s face was on a screen on a far wall, confirming the project’s readiness.

‘How is PC Plod?’ he suddenly said to the Irish twins.

Ciara looked at Cellian before replying. ‘Extinguished, along with Futayomoto-san’s fast-footed assistant.’

Jones suddenly wandered up to the back of the group. ‘And the Doctor?’

‘Gone. He went back instead of forward. The guards missed him. But we have the girl.’

Jones tried to look positive.

The managing director decided that Mr Jones was rapidly trying his patience, but chose not to let on. This was an important moment for the plan and he would not let anyone or anything spoil it.

‘Countdown beginning. T-minus two minutes,’ said Roberta’s magnified face.

The managing director acknowledged this with another satisfied ‘Excellent’, followed by, ‘Begin.’

Immediately, the thirty computer users, made up of teenage schoolchildren, lifted their heads simultaneously. As one they raised their left hands, using the right to unscrew the left at the wrist. They placed their left hands on the floor and, from their wrists, a series of plastic cables emerged which wriggled and moved, as if they were alive, seeking nourishment like newborn worms. The cables suddenly all snaked towards the computer drives, shooting into a series of specially prepared sockets on the sides.

Without flinching, the children then began tapping

commands into their respective keyboards, their left arms still slightly raised as the cables moved more and more.

‘T-minus one minute,’ said Roberta’s calm voice. ‘Maxi systems online now.’

The managing director threw a huge grin to the assembled audience by the door. The gathered employees smiled back, apart from Ciara, Cellian and Jones.

‘T-minus thirty seconds. Toys activating now.’

The managing director leaned towards the nearest computer, watching the data flow across the screen. He removed his dark glasses, his artificial eyes following the letters and numbers with equally superhuman speed. ‘It is perfect,’ he breathed.

‘Ten seconds. Nine, eight, seven...’

‘Yes, yes, yes!’

‘...Three, two, one! The Maxx prototypes have been launched.’ said Roberta’s face.

The managing director stepped back and walked through the crowd, who were applauding gently. Roberta was at reception, of course, but she looked up, and cut her link to the computer room.

‘I suggest we keep an eye on the six-thirty local news, sir.’ The managing director smiled. ‘I agree, Roberta. Wholeheartedly.’

*49 Warleigh Road, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 17.05*

Tim Curtin had hurried home from school, happily deserting all his friends who were off to kick a ball around the park. He had known what would be waiting for him at home.

He had opened the front door and said hello to his mother, who had grinned and pointed into the living room. And there it was, shiny red and brand spanking new. And his mother had arranged all the Nessie Burger toys on top of it, just for the hell of it.

He carefully removed them and began flicking through the box. The plug-ins to the television set all looked the same as

his existing Commodore, so he unplugged that and began fitting up the Maxx. Once that was done, he plugged the machine into the mains and heard a satisfying hum as it came to life. Then he sat down and began flicking through the CD games, lying on his tummy, legs in the air.

If he had looked to the left, he might have seen something impossible. Or at least improbable. He had bunched the Nessie Burger action figures in a heap and, one by one, they moved, by themselves. Wee Willie the Ghillie was the first, righting himself, pushing up with his hands. Then the three McArthur figures, followed by McTavish the Monster Hunter. Finally, the large Nessie and the baby Lochie wriggled like snakes and pushed themselves up.

It was like a bizarre committee meeting as the figures seemed to be silently arguing among themselves, then the Nessie figure moved away from the pack, crawling forward. The others just turned and watched.

Tim Curtin finally saw it out of the corner of his eye, a tiny movement. The Loch Ness Monster, all three inches of it, was actually crawling towards him. His mouth dropped open with surprise – and Nessie launched itself up and in, diving down his throat.

Unable to call out as the plastic toy blocked his windpipe, Tim's surprise gave way to panic. He tried to get up, go to his mother, but something stabbed his ankle. He saw McTavish the Monster Hunter jabbing at him with a sword. Then he began retching silently and collapsed to the floor, unconscious from lack of oxygen. Ten minutes later, the Nessie figure crawled out of his mouth and, with a final spasm, twelve-year-old Tim Curtin suffocated.

When his mother came into the room with a plate of chips, she never even noticed the inert toys grouped together, huddled around the plastic cabling that connected the Maxx to the house electrical supply. She was too busy screaming.

8 Albion Hill, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 18.35

The television was on, but no one was taking any notice of it. The Myers family were holding hands, united in grief and shock. A couple of family friends were bustling around, making strong cups of tea, red-rimmed eyes glistening, unable to believe that little Sally, who had been alive just ninety minutes ago, was now lying in the hospital mortuary, having suffocated for no obvious reason.

One of the friends happened to catch sight of the television just as the *South Today* newsreader was solemnly intoning: 'Reports have been coming in all over Brighton this evening of a wave of mysterious child deaths. At least five youngsters are known to have died under mysterious and seemingly unconnected circumstances, all in their homes. A Brighton General Hospital statement explained that there seemed to be a massive coincidence in the deaths, but nothing more sinister than that. We will bring you more on this local tragedy as soon as more information comes in -'

The neighbour switched the set off.

Garrett Marlon Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
25 July 1989, 18.37

'Only five? Oh well, we cannot expect a 100 per cent success rate.'

The managing director scratched at his scar, then switched Roberta's television set off.

'How many were set to issue the commands?'

'Nine. Nine out of thirty, hopefully ensuring that no one will point the finger at us. And if they do, we will have twenty-one others to prove our innocence.' He shrugged. 'At least we know it works, to some extent. And who knows, the other four might not have been reported yet.'

'Indeed, sir.'

The managing director waved Ciara and Cellian across. 'How are our new charges at the hospital?'

Ciara explained that they were intending to go over there early the next morning to find out. 'Should we take Lethbridge-Stewart?'

‘Why?’

Ciara paused. ‘I don’t know really, but now that he’s failed to help us and escaped, I thought he might not be of any further use in his current state. But once Dr Krafchin has done her work on him –’

‘No, Ciara. No, I think Lawson’s cellar will continue to serve as the Brigadier’s home for a while longer. It will help to break his spirit soon.’

Ciara nodded and left, taking her twin brother with her.

The managing director slowly shook his head. ‘Very sad, those two. I think they are becoming unreliable. Challenging. I do not mind a bit of argument, an intellectual toing and froing of ideas, but they are becoming sullen and resentful.’ He suddenly smiled at Roberta. ‘Look up their employment records, Roberta and terminate their contracts from, oh, the end of this month.’

Roberta frowned. ‘Sir, the Irish twins do not have contracts. None of us does.’

The managing director sighed. ‘Be inventive, Roberta. Create contracts for them, backdate them by about nineteen or twenty years and build in a redundancy clause. As far as I can see, it is a fairly standard practice in this country. Oh, and while you are at it, do the same for Mr Jones.’

‘Yes, sir. Right away.’

The MD always liked that about his ‘new-improved’ Roberta – no matter how illogical his requests, she found a way to do it. Good staff like her were so hard to come by these days. He made a three-hundred and sixty degree twirl around, gazing at the ceiling of the Manor. ‘Before long, Roberta, you and I will relocate to SenéNet’s new London offices. Where shall we go? Docklands?’

‘I’ve always admired Richard Rogers’s work, sir.’

‘An excellent choice, Roberta. We will take the Lloyds Building.’ He headed for the staircase. ‘A new start, a new building, a new kind of leadership. And, of course, a new body.’ He gave Roberta a last look. ‘By September, Roberta, we will be in London. Prepare a launch party for the Maxx to end all launch parties. Invite every captain of industry, every

media mogul, every newspaper editor, television producer and information technology driver. With all of them linked to the Maxx, we cannot be stopped.'

'Right away, sir. I'll begin making inquiries about the lease on the Lloyds Building tomorrow morning.'

'Thank you, Roberta. It is so nice to have someone I can rely on.'

He turned and went up the stairs to his office, hoping that Roberta's original memories really were permanently buried.

36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
25 July 1989 18.45

Rowe found the Doctor sitting cross-legged amidst the wreckage of the living room, trying to piece back together a shattered glass vase as if it were a jigsaw puzzle. Despite the absence of any kind of glue, he had somehow managed, just using gravity and, she presumed, some kind of bizarre determination.

'Beauty is a strange thing, Sergeant,' he said without looking up.

Rowe grunted in affirmation. 'He's not upstairs. No one is. The struggle seems to have been restricted to this one room.'

The Doctor appeared not to have heard her. 'Someone, a long time ago, spent hours of his or her life creating this vase from pieces of sand, using a lot of heat, a lot of patience and a lot of skill. It took someone just a few seconds to destroy it.' He fitted a final piece in at the top. 'Not perfect any more – some fragments will be so small that I'll never find them – but I've put them back as best I can.'

'How... how did you do that?'

'The logical application of mathematical solidity and gravitational centrifugal forces, I imagine.'

Rowe frowned. 'Come again?'

The Doctor looked up at her for the first time and smiled. 'I have no idea really. I used to do things like this when I was... young. Things got broken a lot at home.'

Rowe decided that she did not need to get into where the Doctor called 'home'. Instead she began to repeat her comments about nothing being disturbed upstairs, but he waved her down. 'Yes, yes, yes, I heard.' He carefully placed the vase back on the table it had originally been on. The flowers were placed beside it, like fallen soldiers laid to rest by caring fellow troopers. He then went back to examining the carpet.

'Incidentally, Alan Bush is on his way, Sergeant. I think you should warn him before he comes in.'

Rowe had not heard anything but went out to the lane. After a few seconds she realised a car was approaching and, sure enough, it was pulling up outside the house.

'Mr Bush?'

The man nodded. 'I'm Detective Sergeant Rowe from Brighton CID. I work with DI Lines.'

'What's happened?' Alan Bush asked very calmly.

'We're not entirely sure, sir. We arrived about ten minutes ago to locate your American lodger, only to find your house in some disarray –'

'Christine?' Alan suddenly looked panicked, and rushed past Rowe towards the front door. 'Christine?'

'She's not here, Alan,' said the Doctor, blocking the doorway to the living room.

'Doctor! What's going on?'

The Doctor led Alan in and pointed to the disturbed area. 'Someone came here today and a struggle took place. Either Trey, your wife or both were, it appears, kidnapped.'

'My God.' Alan sat down heavily on the sofa and the Doctor put a finger out to stop the vibrations destroying the perfectly reassembled vase. 'Why?'

Rowe shrugged. 'No idea, sir. I have checked with the hospitals but neither a Christine Bush nor a Trey Korte have been admitted today.'

Alan looked up at the Doctor. 'Where's Mel?' He saw a look flash between the Doctor and Rowe. 'Oh great. My entire family unaccounted for. Why, Doctor, do I suspect that you may be at the centre of all this?'

‘Me?’ The Doctor looked aghast. ‘*Me?* Why should I be respon –’ His eyes widened. ‘But then again, that would make sense, wouldn’t it. Mel taken, your wife taken, Trey taken... all roads do rather lead to me, don’t they? But why? No one knows I am here.’

‘They must do, Doctor,’ said Rowe. ‘After all, if someone took Melanie, it was to get at you, surely?’

‘Even better,’ said Alan. ‘My family are live bait.’

The Doctor was staring closely at them both. ‘But this is ridiculous. Only two groups of people even know I’m here. The Bush family and the CID officers at William Street.’

‘Well, just me and DI Lines, really,’ said Rowe. ‘Oh, and Robin Keston.’

‘Keston?’

‘He was my DC this morning when we found the Japanese guy I told you about.’

‘With the dead friend bitten by a dog. Yes...’ The Doctor walked out of the room, through the kitchen and into the conservatory. As he wandered into the back garden, Alan Bush and Stephanie Rowe followed, rather like sheep, throwing helpless glances at each other, trying to fathom out the Doctor’s alien thought processes.

‘OK, let’s pool what we know. First, SenéNet are investigated by my old friend Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart of UNIT.’

‘Really?’ Rowe interrupted. ‘Our uniformed lot were doing the same...’ She trailed off.

‘What?’ prompted the Doctor.

‘Well, Robin Keston was involved in that as well, just on the periphery.’

‘All right. So, you investigate SenéNet, C19 ask a retired UNIT officer to investigate SenéNet and subsequently both cause me to investigate SenéNet. Near to SenéNet someone is murdered by a giant dog.’

‘A what?’ Alan Bush was incredulous. ‘Doctor, this is getting as silly as our conversation this morning.’

‘Meanwhile, I discover a mild esper living in this house and, less than twenty-four hours later, he vanishes.’

‘Esper?’ That was Rowe.

‘Someone displaying extrasensory powers, apparently,’ Alan said, reciting what he had learned the previous evening like some kind of litany.

‘Telepathy? Setting fire to things just by thinking about it?’ Rowe raised an eyebrow. ‘In your house? I see.’

‘Hey,’ muttered Alan, ‘it’s you who accepts the giant-dog theory. And him –’ he pointed at the Doctor. ‘Someone in my home capable of reading our minds is hardly that weird, is it?’

‘I think,’ the Doctor announced to Alan, ignoring what the others had been saying, ‘it is very important for you to be reassured, Alan, that Christine and Mel are most unlikely to be in danger, if indeed Christine is not out shopping in Brighton or visiting friends in Crawley.’

‘She doesn’t have friends in Crawley.’

The Doctor just stared impassively.

‘Yes, all right, Doctor. I’m sorry. And thank you. The weight on my mind is lightened by, oh, about half an ounce.’

‘Good.’ said the Doctor as if he had solved everything. ‘Now, what are SenéNet up to? Mel’s firm have been taken over by them as of this morning. How many fingers do they have in other pies around here?’

‘Lots,’ Alan said. ‘I mean, I see most of these mergers as they cross my desk. I’d say SenéNet have a stake in quite a few companies around here. I could probably find out if you want.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Go back into work? Oh, well, I suppose I could.’

‘Now?’

‘Now? Oh, all right then.’ Alan began to head back to the house.

‘Oh, Alan,’ called the Doctor. ‘There really is no need to worry, I promise you. We’ll meet you later at Bob Lines’s office.’

After Alan Bush had gone, Rowe turned to the Doctor. ‘Did you mean that? Are they safe?’

‘I doubt it... doubt it very much. He’s a very clever man, and he probably suspects I’m lying, but by repeatedly telling

him I'm not, there'll be sufficient doubt in his mind to stop him going off and doing something stupid. We ought to get to your station. I want to see this cast of the dog's teeth.'

They went back into the house, gathered their belongings and left, Rowe slamming the front door behind her. And inside the living room, the Doctor's carefully reconstructed vase fell apart again.

William Street Police Station, Brighton, East Sussex
25 July 1989, 20.00

'It's all been a bit of a disaster, really.'

The Doctor was in Rowe's chair, feet on the desk, holding court. Stephanie Rowe, Alan Bush and Bob Lines were sitting opposite. Alan had a pile of photocopies in front of him. A map of the Sussex area had been attached by Rowe to an easel beside the Doctor. There were pots of coffee were arranged on the desk and Alan was already downing his fifth cup.

'You're telling me. I've mislaid my entire family, and this place has mislaid the only witness who could connect SenéNet with everything.'

'We hope he could have connected SenéNet,' corrected Rowe. 'We have no proof.'

'Well, we don't now,' muttered Alan darkly.

Lines snorted. 'Hardly our fault –' He stopped abruptly, realising that in fact it was. Luckily, Alan Bush seemed not to want to rub that in.

'And apart from your Japanese guest, this Robin Keston has also disappeared.' The Doctor waved a hand dismissively.

'They were last seen by the custody sergeant going into Interview Room 3. After an hour, he went to offer them some refreshments and found the room empty. The lights were still on, but no one was in there. The interpreter was gone as well.'

'What interpreter?'

'Well, that was the point of the interview, Doctor. This Jap guy clearly spoke little or no English – all we got was a name – so we called an interpreter.'

'Where from? Who called him?'

'Robin Keston,' said the inspector. 'Damn. In it together?'

'I doubt it. I suspect both your Japanese friend and this Robin Keston are long since dead, and I imagine the interpreter was the assassin. Which is Keston's desk?'

Rowe pointed to a desk on the other side of the room, and the Doctor got up and walked over to it. The others joined him, watching as he rummaged through papers, used coffee cups and a copy of the morning's local paper. 'Nothing,' he said finally and was about to go back to his seat when he stopped. Smiling suddenly, he pressed the redial button on the telephone. A series of digital bleeps was heard, then the ringing tone. After three rings, a female voice answered.

'Good evening. SenéNet UK, how may I help you?'

The Doctor broke the connection with a flourish. 'Inspector, I think your young constable was in it, right up to his neck. I think he told them you had their intended target and someone was sent to dispose of both of them.'

Lines sat down, feeling unsteady on his feet. 'Damn,' he said again.

Alan Bush began rummaging through his paperwork. 'Nope, mostly electronics firms, component manufacturers, places like BITS really. No Japanese language schools seem to be associated with SenéNet, I'm afraid. In fact, Doctor, on the face of it, only one company stands out as unusual in SenéNet terms.'

The Doctor sat back in Rowe's seat. 'I know, Alan. I know what you are going to say and that worries me. Why?'

Rowe interrupted the Doctor's train of thought by calling over from a computer terminal. 'His name was Yoshi Ohata, a financial rep for the Futayomoto Corporation in Tokyo. According to the computer he was here on a three month visa to see... Oh, guess who.'

'SenéNet UK, perchance?'

'Spot on. Company arrangement, flew here with JAL, arrived three days ago, with two others, including Futayomoto-san himself. There's a note from Customs about some packages they brought with them, but it doesn't list what was inside.'

The Doctor was at her side. ‘Bet I can guess. What can your little box of tricks here tell us about the Futayomoto Corporation. Was it was a subsidiary of SenéNet?’

Rowe did some more digging, but eventually shook her head. ‘Small-time games hardware manufacturer, but no direct connection to SenéNet, I’m afraid.’

‘Games manufacturer, sergeant. And what were SenéNet launching today?’ The Doctor stared at her, rather as a teacher might at a prize pupil, expecting to hear a faultless recitation of the 486 times table. He was disappointed. She looked at him blankly. ‘It’s in today’s paper,’ he said, pointing to the one on Keston’s desk.

‘The Maxx,’ said Alan Bush suddenly. ‘I remember reading that. Some kids won a prize.’

‘Exactly,’ said the Doctor. ‘And the competition was in conjunction with our spurious non-electrical anomalous SenéNet division, Nessie Burger.’

‘Oh my God,’ said Bob Lines quietly. ‘There’s something else that happened this evening that might complicate things. A wave of deaths, seven in total. All youngsters, all unconnected.’

‘Tragic,’ said the Doctor with genuine sadness, ‘but I don’t see –’

Lines was waving a report around. ‘Look, five of the seven investigation teams noted that near the bodies were those Nessie Burger toys. It might be nothing, but I’ll check with the officers who didn’t note this fact and see if I can jog their memories.’

The Doctor dug his own collection of toys out of his pocket, and Alan Bush took a step backwards. ‘Not a bad idea, Alan,’ the Doctor said nodding. ‘Inspector, any reference in any of those reports to a Maxx console in the vicinity of the deaths?’

‘Doctor,’ said Alan Bush. ‘According to the paper, SenéNet gave out thirty Maxx things. If we’ve got only seven deaths, is it likely there’s a connection? It seems a bit of a coincidence.’

‘Everything about SenéNet seems to rely on coincidence,

Alan. And as I told your charming daughter this morning, this universe exists due to obscure coincidences. However, this many coincidences quickly turns into a conspiracy in my book.'

Lines walked back. 'Neither of the other two officers can recall seeing the figures, but they don't know for sure there weren't any. And yes, three reports also make mention of a Maxx having been nearby.'

The Doctor was in his element. He crouched down beside Rowe. 'Sergeant, can you get on to the local paper, find out if they have a list of winners for the Maxx competition. I'll make a daring mental leap and predict that all seven dead children are on that list.'

'But why kill even unconnected children, Doctor? Have we got a serial child-killer on our hands?'

'Oh, no. I don't think these killings are anything other than part of a cold-blooded experiment. This games system, going by the description in the paper, is vastly superior to anything around today. One might wonder where the technology came from, even. I'll wager this: it's alien technology, being exploited by SenéNet. This murder today was a controlled experiment. All thirty and a connection would have been obvious. Less than five and no real result.' He scooped the Nessie Burger toys up. 'I asked Mel about the plastic on these figures. It's permanently cold, even in sunlight, yet soft and malleable. This isn't plastic in its truest sense. The Maxx system didn't kill those kids, it merely triggered these toys off. And the name SenéNet is a display of such arrogance that someone as arrogant as myself was too blinkered to see it!' He faced his three colleagues. 'I regret to inform you that this planet is being threatened by an alien intelligence known as the Nestene Consciousness. Any kind of plastic has the potential to be a receptacle for their consciousness. Earth is being invaded, and only I' – he paused impressively, rubbing his finger slowly over the black cat badge on his left lapel – 'have any chance of stopping them!'

The Hospital, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

25 July 1989, 23.00

Mel woke with a splitting headache and could not remember why. It took a few moments for the various jumbled memories of the day to sort themselves out and then she remembered that she had been following the Doctor through the woods towards SenéNet's headquarters at Garrett Manor. Except she was not in the woods any more. Instead, she was in a large otherwise empty room with passageways at either end. A couple of shuttered windows kept out any suggestion of daylight and the walls were painted a brilliant white. Everything looked very Spartan, almost sterile, as if precautions had been taken to ensure that the walls had no rough surfaces.

Mel had been lying on her back, but was now sitting up on the bed. She was wearing a long white smock, tied at the back, her jewellery and watch had, as well as her clothes. She slid off the bed, wincing at the cold touch of the white-painted concrete floor.

And now she understood. She had been in an accident and this was a hospital. Perhaps her parents had put her in some strange private place. Mind you, how many private hospitals could afford to build private rooms the size of a small church hall? Maybe they didn't have very many patients.

Mel walked slowly across the room and down to the left, towards one of the passageways. It seemed gloomy despite the bright white walls, but she opted to explore rather than wait for attention. Checking back, she noted there was no bell to ring for attention anyway. Nor were there bowls of grapes, vases of flowers, bottles of barley water. Not even a medical chart. Strange hospital...

After a few moments' walk down the long, unbroken corridor, she finally found a door. Pushing it open, she saw a very smart office, spotlessly clean, modern and very empty. On one of the desks there was a selection of files and papers. A letterhead she found suggested that she was somewhere called simply 'The Hospital', which was exactly the kind of pompous-sounding place to which her mother would send her.

The proprietor (odd choice of phrase) appeared to be a Dr I. Krafchin, whose name was followed by a string of letters that were probably very impressive at the BMA but meant sod all to Mel.

However, it was the rest of the letterhead that made Mel's eyes widen. 'The Hospital,' she read aloud, 'Europe's Leading Centre for Plastic Reconstructive and Prosthetic Surgery.' What the hell was she doing here? Her head still throbbed, but on touching it there was a normal bump, rather than any indication that someone had grafted half a pound of flesh on to her temple. Still, a mirror might be useful, just to see, and a toilet was the obvious place to find one.

Moving out of the office, Mel continued down the passageway, which rapidly ended in a T-junction. Still no sign of anyone. It was not until she opted for the right hand turn that she became aware of a steady rhythmic thump-thump thump-thump sound, like heavy machinery coming from beneath her. Indeed, the floor seemed to be vibrating slightly. Thinking that this was potentially more interesting than the hunt for a mirror, Mel decided to explore.

After about two minutes, which felt more like six hours, she reached a flight of stairs. The machine noise was markedly louder now, so she continued down the stairs. At the base she was faced by a massive metallic grid, from the floor to the ceiling. The noise appeared to emanate from behind it.

Mel's feet were getting rather cold and so before investigating any further, she dashed back up the stairs to see if she could find shoes. At the top of the staircase she saw a side corridor she had missed before, so she opted for that. It wound round a bit, but thankfully soon became carpeted.

Mel realised that she was approaching what appeared to be another ward. There were half a dozen beds in there, all with figures in them, seemingly asleep. Again the windows were shuttered, so it was only the overhead electric lighting that illuminated the place – still and that never-ending, unblemished white everywhere.

She went up to the first bed. Once again, there were no creature comforts, no charts, nothing vaguely medical. The

first patient's head was all that was visible, the rest of the body being covered by very tightly tucked-in sheets. The head was, unfortunately, covered in bandages, looking like something out of a Hammer horror film. She could see the shape of a nose and there was a space where she ought to have been able to see eyes, but there was just darkness underneath.

Moving on, she found two more patients in the same state. Were they all victims of some terrible accident perhaps? It was the fourth patient who shocked her.

'Trey?' Her voice was a hoarse whisper. 'Trey, are you all right?'

Her friend was lying flat on his back, his eyes wide open, not showing any signs of recognition. Drugged probably, because he was certainly breathing, albeit shallowly.

Mel was pleased that she was not panicking but doing what seemed natural, taking things slowly and thinking them through. The facts confirmed then what her instincts had told her already: this was no normal hospital.

Trey had been drugged and there did not seem to be anything wrong with him. Hoping that he would forgive her for this, just in case, she yanked the bedclothes back. OK, so she'd not seen a naked Trey Korte before, but this one seemed to be in perfectly good shape, with no sign of injury, plastic surgery or otherwise. So why was he here? And why was he so unresponsive?

He blinked, slowly.

Was that as a result of the cold air or something else? Mel felt his neck, where she knew there was a far better way of finding a strong pulse than the wrist. It was there, but slow, like his blinking. After replacing the bedclothes, she continued watching for five minutes. Trey blinked, very slowly, once every fifteen seconds. It was as if his metabolism had been slowed right down.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I'll get you away from whatever nightmare this is.'

She moved on. The next bed contained an Oriental man, possibly Japanese. She touched his shoulder and whipped her hand away. He felt exactly as Luke had that morning – if it

was still that morning and not yesterday or three weeks ago. And just like those toys the Doctor had got.

She moved down the line of beds, and here was the biggest shock. Lying prone, in exactly the same catatonic state as Trey, was her mother.

Before she could think of anything, a noise behind her made her swivel around, her breathing hard, her adrenaline pumping. The figure she had seen, whose head was revealed by the falling bandages, had stood up. He was stark naked but, despite the flesh colouring, quite inhuman. No matter what the situation, Mel thought, when a naked man walks towards you, there are certain things you notice about him. This man had nothing to notice, the whole body was featureless, flat, like a shop-window dummy, although the walking movement was perfectly fluid. There were no obvious joints, so it didn't walk stiffly, like she imagined a robot would. The face was crude and unfinished, with just a few bumps and dips where eyes, nose and ears ought to be.

As her mind raced, taking in all this information, Mel watched as the featureless walking dummy raised its right arm. The outstretched hand split across the palm, the fingers dropping away on a hinge. When a tiny nozzle emerged with a whirr, Mel knew this was no time to be standing around and she flung herself under a bed on the opposite side of the room, keeping the man-thing away from her mother and Trey.

She didn't see the blast, but felt the heat and heard the noise as a large lump of concrete floor just by the bed exploded towards her. Shaking her head, she saw a smoking dinnerplate-sized hole in the floor.

She scabbled out from under the bed and ran for the doorway furthest away from the man-thing. It was locked. She turned back as the arm and handgun were aimed once more, and this time Melanie Bush did something she had never done in her life before: She began screaming in sheer, unmitigated terror.

64 Worcester Villas, Portslade, West Sussex
25 July 1989, 23.15

When the front door opened, Alan Bush did his best to look sheepish.

‘Hello, Tom,’ he said. ‘Sorry to call so late.’

Tom Marsh was smiling, however. ‘No, problem, Alan. What brings you to this neck of the woods so late?’

Alan looked at his feet. ‘It’s a bit awkward really. I’m here with the police.’ He followed Tom’s gaze behind him. In the car were a stony-faced DI Lines and DS Rowe. In the back, the Doctor, resplendent in his multicoloured coat, leaned out of the window and waved boyishly.

Alan wanted the ground to open and swallow him whole, but he struggled on. After all, this was the fifth old friend he’d called on tonight. And Tom was, at least, the last.

‘Oh dear,’ said Tom, winking. ‘Bit of trouble with the wife, eh? Need an alibi?’

Alan, who had already heard that one three times already, laughed uproariously. ‘Oh, very good,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘No, could you come over to the car?’

Frowning, Tom Marsh did as asked. The Doctor hopped out and showed him into the back, followed by Alan. The Doctor then promptly sat on the pavement, blissfully unaware of the strange look Tom was giving him.

‘Friend of yours, Al?’

‘It’s a long story, Tom. This is Detective Inspector Lines and this is Detective Sergeant Rowe.’

‘Good evening, Mr Marsh,’ said Bob Lines. ‘Sorry to drag you out so late, and into the car, but we’re having to be ridiculously security-conscious.’

‘Oh, really? This all sounds exciting.’

‘Not really, sir. We’re trying to investigate the sudden death of seven young children earlier today.’

‘Oh.’ Tom Marsh looked down. ‘Sorry. I saw that on the news. Terrible stuff. How can I help you, Inspector?’

Alan, as rehearsed, took up the story. ‘You were bought into recently, weren’t you?’

Tom looked astonished. ‘I don’t see... Well, anyway, yes, we were. Had to really. All our competitors suddenly started cutting their prices ridiculously low. We tried but couldn’t

compete, so I needed new support. Why?’

‘Marshlands Electronics, isn’t it?’ asked Rowe. ‘Based in the Bevendean Industrial Estate?’

‘That’s right, Sergeant. Units 36-42.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Lines took up the story. ‘So, Mr Marsh, who did you go into partnership with?’

Marsh looked at Alan, who nodded, so with a shrug he answered. ‘SenéNet, the French lot that moved into Ashdown Forest a while back. All legit, I’m positive.’

‘Oh, it’s all right, sir,’ said Lines. ‘We don’t think you’ve done anything wrong at all. It’s SenéNet were trying to find out more about.’

‘Couldn’t we do this in the house, then?, Cheryl has just put the kettle on.’

‘As I said, security sir. It’s a bit complicated, but we’ll try not to keep you much longer.’

Suddenly the Doctor’s head popped up at the rear window, frightening the life out of Alan Bush, and probably Tom Marsh as well.

‘Hello, Mr Marsh. After SenéNet arrived, did you notice anything odd about them. Or your staff? People who came into a lot of contact with the upper echelons at SenéNet?’

Tom stared open-mouthed, so Alan patted his arm. ‘This gentleman is an expert in –’

‘Coaxial line electronics equipment, Mr Marsh,’ said the Doctor. ‘Your company supplies cabling for electrical goods, doesn’t it?’

Tom nodded. ‘Yes, plastic coated-stuff. In fact, since merging with SenéNet, our profits have soared quite significantly.’ He looked straight at Alan Bush. ‘Finally managed to get Cheryl that car she wanted.’

‘Yes, if we could stay on the subject, Mr Marsh,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘What input did SenéNet have into your actual work?’

Tom tried to reply, but couldn’t. The Doctor’s audacity was astonishing.

‘It is important, I’m afraid, Tom,’ said Alan. ‘Please trust

me on this.'

Tom Marsh took a deep breath. 'If any of this leaks out, Alan, I'll assume it came from Business and Commerce at the Town Hall.'

Alan had expected this. All the previous people they had visited had become defensive and suggested he was abusing his position to gain inside information.

'It's nothing like that, Tom, I promise you.'

'Let me try putting it this way, Mr Marsh,' interrupted the Doctor. 'I imagine they found a way to replace traditional copper wiring with a conductive plastic substitute, a revolutionary method so outrageous that you tried it. And it worked, yes?'

Tom Marsh nodded. 'Spot on. Said they were developing it for telecommunications, fibre-optics, and for use in electronic games for kids...' He trailed off.

The Doctor reached through the window and shook Tom's hand. 'Mr Marsh, you've been most useful. Thank you.'

As he removed his arm, Alan took this as a sign to end the meeting. He got out and led Tom back towards his house, but before they reached the door the Doctor was beside them. 'By the way, you never answered my first question. Did you ever notice any personality changes in any of your staff? Any unusual changes made after SenéNet's arrival?'

Tom shook his head. 'No, not at all. Sorry.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Ah well, never -'

'Except... No, that was nothing to do with this, I'm sure.' The Doctor was attentive. 'No, go on, Mr Marsh.'

'Well, Alan, you remember Bobby Lands?'

'You partner. Retired, didn't he?'

Tom Marsh nodded. 'He was older than me, yes, but retiring seemed a very strange thing to do. And the SenéNet deal was his really. He did all the work on it and then just jacked it in. Overnight in fact.'

'And what was Mr Lands like when you next saw him?'

'Well, that was the odd thing. None of us did. His letter was on his desk the next day, saying he was taking early retirement - no pay-out or anything. He and his wife were

booked on a cruise but were killed in a traffic smash on their way across to Southampton.'

'I remember,' said Alan quietly. 'Terrible.'

'I am very sorry that you lost your friend that way, Mr Marsh. I think we've taken up enough of your time already.' The Doctor grasped his hand. 'Thank you so much.'

As the Doctor headed back to the car, Alan smiled weakly 'I'll call and explain once we're finished with all this, Tom. Love to Cheryl.'

'And to Christine,' Tom said and went indoors.

Yes, Christine. Hopefully the Doctor was right, and she was safe. When Alan got back to the car, the Doctor was inside, animatedly offering another explanation.

'...so they send these chains of commands down through the polymer links that make up the plastic wiring. These commands then activate the toy animals, instil them with a fragment of the consciousness that is the Nestenes. Then, once the deed is done, the intelligence is reabsorbed and the killers become just toys again.'

'And you say these Nestene things can animate any kind of plastic?'

'Or rubber or anything with the particular polymer chains that, when artificially brought together, create an oil-based malleable substance.'

'Let's hope they don't move into the safe-sex area,' murmured Rowe, and Lines shot her a look that underlined the inappropriateness of the comment.

'The thought had occurred to me, Sergeant. Your civilisation uses plastic, polythene, rubber, all sorts of artificial compounds that the Nestenes have access to. This is really very subdued and small scale for them. I think SenéNet may be just a spearhead for something much larger and more deadly on a worldwide scale.'

'Yes, well, before we begin to panic Downing Street, the White House and the Kremlin, I suggest we set up surveillance on Garrett Manor first thing tomorrow morning.' With that, Bob Lines started the car up and pulled away.

'Tomorrow might be too late for my wife and daughter,'

said Alan Bush, so quietly that only the Doctor could hear.

Unseen by those in the front, the Doctor tapped Alan's arm and mouthed 'patience' to him.

The Hospital, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

25 July 1989, 23.55

It could have only been about fifteen minutes that Mel had been lying there, on the cold stone floor of the broom cupboard, but it felt like hours.

Of those fifteen minutes, the first three were spent with someone's hand clamped tightly over her mouth, stopping her from doing anything other than breathe deeply through her nose. After a while the hand was moved away, and Mel was sensible enough not to start yelling. Whoever her new assailant was, he had drawn her quickly away from the dummy with the gun in its hand and clambered into a tiny storeroom, lying as silently beside her as he could.

She had moved her head quickly to look at him once she had been released, but in the darkness all she could really make out was his finger pressed against his lips, so she kept quiet. After lying there for a while, she felt him relax and heard his exhalation of relief.

'I think it's gone,' he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

'What was it?' she asked, rather louder than she intended. She was trying to speak quietly, but Melanie Bush had never been famed for her dulcet tones, and there was little she could do about it.

He moved and when, a second later, the light flicked on, Mel found herself looking up at a slight boy, a few inches taller than herself, aged about nineteen, dressed in a baseball jacket and jeans. He had short, strawberry-blond hair, tons of freckles and very bright grey eyes. In short, totally normal looking compared to everything else in this hospital.

'A guard dog of some sort. There are quite a few of them scattered about. Once they track you, they don't give up.' He helped Mel to her feet. 'The name's Ashley. Ashley Moby.'

How long have you been here?’

‘What’s the time now?’

‘Just before midnight,’ he said, glancing at his watch.

‘A few hours, then. I woke up in a bed somewhere. No one else was around, so I went exploring and found that... that thing. I also found my mother and a friend of mine here. I have to get them out.’

‘Your mother? Why? Who are you?’

‘Melanie Bush. Mel. And thank you for saving me. How did you find me?’

Ashley shrugged. ‘I heard the thing move and fire its gun. Having once been on the receiving end of it myself, I thought it best to investigate.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Same as you. Trying to get out. Have been for about eight or nine hours now.’

Mel frowned. ‘Have you seen anyone... normal?’

Ashley shook his head. ‘Unlike you, I didn’t wake up in a bed, but just in a corridor. I’ve explored every staircase, every corridor, every room I could find. All the windows are barricaded from outside and I haven’t found anything that resembles a door. Oh, and I can’t actually find a ground floor. Every level has at least one staircase going down, which in turn leads to another where a corridor goes up – you know, a sort of ramp. It’s like a maze or something.’

‘Well,’ said Mel, brushing herself down, ‘I’d like to get dressed first and then we’ll find a way out. Two heads and all that.’

Ashley nodded. ‘Are your clothes by your bed?’

‘I haven’t the foggiest idea,’ said Mel, ‘but let’s see what we can find. Do you think if it’s safe to go?’

Ashley tugged the door open slightly and looked up and down the corridor. ‘Nothing. Come on.’

They crept back to the ward where Trey and Christine Bush were. The far bed was now empty. The killer guard-thing had obviously not come back.

Mel stroked her mother’s hand. It was warm. She suddenly remembered the feel of Luke’s hand, and the toys

that the Doctor had made her examine. They had felt the same, like plastic. Like the plastic guard-thing. But her mother was normal. ‘Mum?’ She gently stroked her mother’s face. ‘Mum?’

No response.

She crossed to Trey, who was still comatose but thankfully also warm to the touch. Then with a last look at them both, she wandered back the way she had originally come. Ashley followed, anxiously looking over his shoulder, no doubt worried that the plastic guard-thing would be back.

A short while later, they reached Mel’s empty bed and found her clothes in a white plastic bag underneath. Ashley had the decency to turn away while Mel got dressed quickly. He nearly died of fright when she tapped his shoulder to say she was done.

‘I want to find a way out, and then come back for my mother and Trey,’ she announced, marching off in the direction she had not taken before. ‘How did you get here, then?’

‘No idea,’ said Ashley. ‘I know I was in the amusement arcade by the Palace Pier, losing as always. Then I was here.’ He stopped. ‘No, wait... there was a disturbance of some sort, by the entrance. A couple of kids wearing Walkmans or something. Yes, that’s right, the security guard tried to chuck ’em out and I wandered over to see, with loads of other guys.’ He started patting himself down. ‘Hmmm. I suddenly wondered if maybe I’d been injured, but nothing hurts.’

‘And why dump you in a corridor? I mean, OK, so the NHS is slimming down, but this place isn’t exactly brimming with full beds, is it?’ Mel reached back and tapped his jacket. ‘And they left you with your wallet and stereo.’

Ashley opened his jacket, pulling the personal CD player out of the inside pocket. ‘This isn’t mine. Where the hell did it come from?’

Mel nodded slowly. ‘Ah, yes, right. Honest, officer, I ain’t never seen it before.’

Ashley looked bemused, and then it dawned on him what she was getting at. ‘Hey, no way. I might not be Percy

Pureheart, but nicking personal stereotypes isn't what I do, OK? I really don't know where this came from.' Grumpily, he shoved it back in his pocket and did the baseball jacket up. 'Nice bit of machinery, though,' he muttered.

Giving him a look which she hoped implied she didn't believe a word of it, she carried on. Some company, even a petty thief, was better than none.

When the plastic guard-thing walked straight out in front of her, Mel had the presence of mind not to scream. This time, she calmly turned around.

'Ashley! Run!'

However, as Ashley turned away, another guard-thing had positioned itself directly behind him.

'Damn!' he yelled. 'We're trapped.'

'Indeed, my young pretty things,' said a new voice. 'Trapped with nowhere to go.'

Mel stared at the newcomer, the biggest, or rather widest, woman she had ever seen. She was both stout and tall, dressed in a white blouse, and burgundy cardigan and short tweed skirt, from which poked out two little stumpy legs strapped into brown sandals. Around her neck hung a pair of glasses on a bronze chain and her hair was pulled up into a ferocious bun. A wide smile curved her lips but was totally unreflected in her eyes which stared at them with a completely dead expression. She looked more like the librarian from hell than anyone medical.

'Hello, pretties. My name is Irma Krafchin and this is my hospital. You, I very much suspect, are trespassers.'

'No, I'm not,' Mel retorted angrily. 'I was a patient, though goodness knows why. There's nothing wrong with me.'

'Is that so? Well, I could ask Tommy and Tuppence here to give you an injury or ten that would justify your presence. Who are you?'

'That's none of your business. If you don't even know who is and who isn't a patient here, you clearly don't run the place very well.'

Dr Krafchin placed her glasses on her nose and gazed

down at Mel. 'Is that so, madam. Well, I'll be the judge of that. Know a lot about plastic surgery, do we?' She reached down and yanked Mel off the ground by grabbing her blue sweatshirt in one pudgy fist. She brought Mel up in line with her nose, exhaling strange-smelling breath into the younger woman's face. 'Because I can always arrange it for you to need immediate and quite drastic reconstruction work if you want.'

'Leave her alone,' yelled Ashley, throwing himself at Krafchin.

If the doctor even noticed his attack, she gave no sign of it, and let one of the plastic guards wrench him to one side and smash him into the wall with so much force that he crumpled like a burst balloon.

Mel stared down at Ashley. He wasn't exactly her friend, but he had saved her life, and she was worried about him. 'If you've hurt him...' she yelled.

Krafchin laughed. 'Ah, I didn't know you cared,' she sneered, before dropping Mel to the concrete floor. 'Take them both to my office,' she told the plastic guards. 'I need to contact the Manor.'

Mel's ears pricked up. 'The Manor? You, you're involved with SenéNet! The Doctor was right.'

'The Doctor? So, he is around. Thank you, little pretty.'

Mel wanted to kick herself but could do nothing more as one of the plastic guards scooped her up under its arm. She let herself go limp. She knew when it was time to struggle and when it was time to conserve energy. At least the other guard had picked up Ashley, which suggested that he was still alive.

Not bothering to raise her head, Mel stared at the floor passing beneath her. What was the Doctor up to? Somehow, despite the time, she doubted he was asleep. No, he'd be out looking for her. Somewhere out there.

WEDNESDAY

*36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
26 July 1989, 07.15*

Sontarans in his TARDIS! It was an outrage, but he had outwitted them, oh yes! One quick blast of coronic acid and there the two of them were, no more Mr Potato Heads. Of course, there was always the question of how Sontarans had breached his TARDIS but he would sort that out when he... when he... Would he wake up?

‘Wake up, Doctor!’

He was being shaken awake, rather violently. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘All right! All right!’

The Doctor sat bolt upright, taking in his surroundings in a second. The Bush family house. The living-room sofa. He hadn’t intended to fall asleep, but wasn’t going to let Alan Bush know that.

‘Thank you, Alan! I was having a marvellous dream about a victorious battle against the armed might of a thousand Sontarans, every one of them trying to destroy my TARDIS and I had to use all my wits, all my intellect and all my courage to deal with them.’ He looked the man straight in the eye. ‘And you, with your shaking and shoving, have spoiled it. Next time that one comes around, I’ll probably forget how to defeat them and they will rampage through time and space.’ He stood up, jabbing Alan Bush’s chest. ‘And it will be all your fault,’ each jab underlining each syllable. He looked around the room. ‘What do you want anyway?’

‘To know if you have come up with a way to rescue Christine and Melanie yet. And Trey!’

‘Well, of course I have,’ he said in a voice of outrage, despite having come up with nothing of the sort. ‘But it relies on tact, discretion and subtlety. In which case, I will venture

back to SenéNet on my own. You will go to work and act as if nothing has happened!

Alan was astonished. 'Work? As if nothing has happened? How on earth am I expected –'

'Because,' snapped the Doctor, 'if you act strangely, SenéNet might hear about it, know we're on to them and do something to your family. And neither of us wants that on our conscience, do we?'

It was a miserable lie to tell, but guaranteed to panic Alan enough into going to the office and doing what he was told. It worked, and over the next few minutes, Alan scurried about, getting ready. He shoved a rather large cellular phone into the Doctor's hand.

'Call me the moment you have anything to report,' he ordered.

The Doctor looked at the cumbersome object. 'In five years, people will look at this as an antique, you know.'

'That, Doctor, is state of the art. And bloody expensive to boot.'

'A good kick into the history books is about all it's good for. But for your sake, I'll take it.'

Despite its bulk, the Doctor dropped it into a pocket, noting with some satisfaction that Alan clearly could not work out how it fitted in there and also seemed suddenly to weigh nothing.

'Can I take you into town?' asked Alan.

The Doctor agreed that this would be a good idea, but first: 'I need breakfast. I once told old Napoleon that he ought to let his troops eat before battle or they would lose.'

'They did,' said Alan caustically.

The Doctor looked back through half-closed eyes. 'Then he obviously didn't feed them enough. I will be ready to leave in twenty minutes and not a second earlier.'

Three fried eggs, six rashers of bacon, a couple of fried tomatoes, a slice of fried bread and a jug of extra-strong black coffee later, the Doctor re-emerged from the kitchen, leaving behind a mound of washing-up and the acrid smell of burnt frying pans.

‘I needed that after Mel’s so-called breakfast yesterday,’ he said.

Alan’s face fell at the thought of his daughter and the Doctor suddenly put a hand on his shoulder compassionately. ‘Will you please stop acting like you’ll never see them again. I promise, they’ll be back here, around this table, tonight, and you and I will cook them a marvellous welcome-home feast.’

Alan, of course, had no way of knowing that behind the Doctor’s back his fingers were tightly crossed.

They left Pease Pottage and reached Brighton by eight thirty. The Doctor went straight to the CID room at William Street and booked a car out with Detective Sergeant Rowe, who, he noted with some puzzlement, also had her fingers crossed when she explained that Bob Lines would certainly not mind and that she had every confidence in the Doctor’s ability to drive despite his lack of licence.

‘Some people have no faith,’ he grumbled, getting into the appointed vehicle, neatly reversing into a shrub and smiling cheerfully at a horrified constable returning from an early-morning beat who clearly wondered why a clown was driving a panda car.

About an hour later he was pulling up outside the gatehouse to SenéNet.

‘Time for the direct approach. Skulking around in the woods got me nowhere,’ he muttered. And he thought of Mel. The Mel he knew, the future Mel, who was well versed in time travel and adventures he himself had yet to experience, would be totally unperturbed by incarceration and would probably be using her charm to free herself. But this Mel might not be quite so adept at the prison / escape / recapture / escape again routine that all his travelling companions had to get used to. ‘Maybe I should have some kind of written test,’ he muttered. ‘Question 1: Are you allergic to rope? Question 2: Which would you prefer to be tied up in: a) a castle; b) a spaceship; c) a cellar? Question 3: How long do you want to wait before you realise that the Doctor has got held up in rescuing you and opt to find your own way out: a) one hour; b) one day; c) one week?’ Hopefully Mel would go for option

c. Otherwise there might be trouble.

There was an entry-phone system at the gates, so he left the car and punched the buzzer. After a while a female voice answered. It was the woman who had answered the telephone the previous day at the police station.

‘My name is the Doctor. I imagine your managing director is expecting me.’

‘He is not expecting anyone today, I’m afraid. Would you like to make an appointment?’

‘Not really, no.’ The Doctor reached out and stabbed the buzzer again for half a minute and then let it go.

‘Why did you do that?’ said the voice.

‘I just felt like it. And I will probably feel like it for another ten hours.’

He buzzed again, this time for a full minute.

When she could speak, the voice, starting to sound rather annoyed, said, ‘I will inform the managing director that you are here and ask if he is prepared to receive you. What name was it again?’

‘My own,’ he said.

‘I see,’ said the voice.

The Doctor then got back in the car and dug around in the glove compartment. He found some clear plastic ballpoint pens, stripped the cartridges out and was left with just what he had wanted: three hollow tubes. He jammed the slightly pointed top of one into the bottom of another until he had a long line of them. He then wound down the car window, rested the pointed end on the buzzer and adjusted the car’s wing mirror until the blunt end of his pen-line was held permanently in place. The buzzer was presumably now sounding continuously. The Doctor sat back, well pleased. After about four minutes, the electronic gates silently opened inward and the Doctor rolled his car forward, allowing the pen tubes to drop to the ground.

‘Plastic,’ he said to himself and reversed the car, crushing the three tubes under the back wheel. ‘Better safe than sorry.’ He drove around to the main entrance and parked outside the huge wooden double doors. He looked across the beautifully

maintained circular lawn, its fountain shooting up water and a couple of seagulls pecking at the ground. He wandered to the right, towards the back, but found his way blocked by a high wooden wall. Moving across the front of the building, he found the same to the left. The only open areas he could see were the forest edges which surrounded the driveway.

He wandered back to the doors and pushed the bell. With an electronic click, the right hand door swung back slightly and with a small push, the Doctor entered.

The interior of the Manor was, he was pleased to note, pretty much as it would have been originally, wooden beams and suchlike. He took in the computer room on the far right, the massive staircase facing him and the reception desk that ran along the panelled stair wall. The wall itself curved back out of sight, and opposite the reception desk were some nice padded seats along the vast windows.

‘Very plush,’ he said to the receptionist. Not really my style, though.’ He walked over and leaned on her desk with an easy familiarity. ‘And I really don’t think the burgundy cushion covers go with the original wood, do you?’

He took the opportunity to glance over the top of the high desk, and saw that the young receptionist was cybernetically attached to her chair, her own legs missing. He chose not to say anything, pretending to be flicking through some typing. The receptionist coolly snatched the pages back and pointed at the burgundy cushions. ‘Please take a seat,’ she said in a tone that could have sunk the Titanic. ‘The managing director will not be long.’

The Doctor paused for a moment and then, with a smile, nodded his acceptance. ‘I’ll take a seat, then.’

He sat on his hands, gently rocking from side to side like a bored schoolboy, his face a picture of angelic innocence. After a few moments, he moved to the far end of the cushions, enabling him to see beyond the receptionist’s desk where the tiny doorway was cut into the panelling. To the left of that was another doorway which, he guessed, would lead to the old kitchen and scullery area.

The door under the staircase did not appear to have a

handle, or any kind of electronic sensor. Could it be opened only from the inside? Unlikely. The cellars of old houses like this would have had just the one access point – so there must be something else.

He got up and moved across before the receptionist could wheel herself towards him.

‘Open sesame,’ he tried.

There was a click, but only a short one, as if the door had half opened.

‘It operates on the managing director’s voice or retinal print alone,’ said a man behind him. ‘For security reasons.’

The Doctor continued staring. ‘I thought it might. Got some way myself, so we must have similar tones. I doubt we have similar eyes, though.’

He turned to face a man in his late thirties, maybe early forties, blond hair, a good tan and a sharp suit. He was also carrying a gun that he thought was concealed, although the Doctor recognised the slight bulge under the arm.

‘My name is Mr Jones. I am the executive officer of SenéNet. The managing director has asked me to see you until he becomes free. You caught him... unexpectedly.’

‘Oh, I doubt that,’ said the Doctor, ‘but thank you for covering for him. I’d be delighted to get the grand tour from you. I assume you aren’t planning to use your gun on me... a Compacta 25, is it?’

The blond man with the gun raised his eyebrows in surprise. ‘I wasn’t planning to, Doctor, no. Unless I’m given provocation.’

‘That’s better, Mr Jones. I’d much rather we stopped pretending to each other. You know who I am, why I’m here. I know what you are doing, but not why.’ The Doctor walked past the reception area and towards the computer room. Before Jones could stop him, the Doctor was amidst the earphone-wearing teenagers, their left arms still attached cybernetically to their consoles.

‘Gruesome, but the technology is excellent. I’m impressed.’ Mr Jones was beside him now.

‘Appalled,’ the Doctor continued, ‘but I am definitely

impressed. I assume the signal to activate the Nessie Burger toys came from here, downloaded through the Maxx games machines. An excellent appliance of alien technology.’ The Doctor wandered further into the room, found an empty seat and sat down.

‘Now, let me tell you a story about a man I met many years ago. He was an insider at Department C19, Great Britain’s governmental department that handles extra-special security, such as UNIT. He was stealing equipment, bodies, technologies and devices left behind from alien invasions and other menaces faced by UNIT. His plan was to use them for his own ends, after he had been augmented himself by them. The technology of the Cybermen had already been used on him, but all this stuff with the Maxx, that’s Nestene technology. So, he has found a way to communicate with the Nestenes and will provide Earth for them – in return for what? A new life somewhere else? Dictatorship of this planet? We thought we had closed him down years ago. Clearly we were wrong. Hot, cold or spot on?’

The Doctor held his hands out, inviting Jones to respond. ‘I could not possibly say, Doctor. That is up to you to discuss with the managing director of SenéNet.’ He pointed back out of the room. ‘We could, of course, be a legitimate plastics company specialising in the Maxx, a game to revolutionise the video industry the world over.’

‘Nonsense. I saw your advertising stuff about the Maxx – 64-bit CD technology. Not in 1989, Mr Jones. Don’t take me for a fool. Clothes do not make a man, any more than an Armani jacket hides the fact that you are little more than a cheap underworld hoodlum with delusions of grandeur.’

‘You won’t manage to rile me, Doctor. Don’t insult me by trying.’

‘Oh, I’m not,’ said the Doctor, following him out of the computer room. ‘No, I’m just wondering what place there will be in a world of Nestenes for a cheap hoodlum in a flash suit and a gun that can barely dent plastic, let alone stop an Auton.’

‘A what?’

The Doctor stopped walking. This Mr Jones was not a great actor – he didn't carry himself properly for that. Yet to have been sent to meet the Doctor, he was clearly some way up in the hierarchy of SenéNet. In fact, he probably *was* the number two he claimed to be. But his reaction on hearing the word Auton, the faceless plastic killers so favoured by the Nestenes, had surprised him. It was not a word he appeared to have heard before.

'How interesting.'

'What is?' asked Jones.

'Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself.' They started up the stairs. 'May I ask just one question. No, two actually, but they're related.'

'I can't promise an answer, but if I can give one, I will.'

The Doctor suddenly shrugged off his charm, his outward veneer of bumbling pomposity, and spoke with in very serious tones – very dark, with a hint of menace. The Doctor rarely let this side of his nature show, but when he did he used it to good effect.

'Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and Melanie Bush. Are they alive and well?'

The blond man with the gun was clearly taken aback. He paled, as if someone had walked over his grave. He found that he could not help but answer the Doctor. 'Yes, they are both alive. I don't know about the Bush girl's status beyond that, but the Brigadier is fine.'

The Doctor switched his joviality back on. 'Good, good, excellent news. Thank you so much.'

They were standing outside a small door. The words 'Managing Director' on the nameplate rather obviated the need to ask if this was their destination. Without waiting, the Doctor opened the door and walked in.

'It is you,' he said to the pale young man behind the desk, seeing his own reflection in the dark glasses. 'A little greyer in the face, but unmistakably you. Still collecting things are we? Still building empires out of other people's misery?'

The managing director shrugged. 'If that is the way you wish to see it, Doctor, then yes. I suppose so,' He looked

behind the Doctor. 'Thank you, Mr Jones, that will be all.'

The Doctor turned. 'Well, you heard him. Leave us.'

Jones looked confused for a moment, but then did as he had been ordered.

'You know I am here to stop whatever it is you are doing?' began the Doctor.

'I do not doubt it. You would not be the famous Doctor, the alien specialist who helped UNIT thwart so many alien invasions all those years ago, otherwise. You are the one being whose intellect I recognise as being equal to, or perhaps beyond, my own.'

The Doctor smiled benignly. 'Why, thank you. A nice summary. Would you like to see my CV? I could do with a job and I imagine that carefully locked cellar downstairs contains many more alien artefacts than even I've seen on Earth. After all, you've had many years with which to build this little empire.'

The managing director took his glasses off. Cybernetic eyes whirred and dilated at the Doctor. 'I'm not a well man, Doctor.'

'Physically, perhaps not. Mentally, well, you probably never were.'

The managing director shrugged. 'Don't play silly games, Doctor. You're above that. What I mean is that this body is falling apart. The technology that built it has, to use the current vernacular, passed its sell-by date.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I see. So you've joined forces with the Nestenes and they've promised you a new body in exchange for this planet.'

The managing director said nothing. He just looked the Doctor straight in the eye for a whole minute. Then he exploded with laughter rocking back in his seat.

'Wonderful,' he managed eventually. 'Quite wonderful. You think I'm working with the Nestenes, helping them plan another pointless invasion? Oh, Doctor, I am so very sorry to disappoint you.' He sat bolt upright again, all humour gone from his face and voice. 'I don't need any disembodied alien intelligence to help me! I have everything I need here already.'

You believe we're planning an attack? No, Doctor, there is no such thing as the Auton invasion. I wouldn't know how to contact the Nestenes even if I wanted to.' He stood up. 'What colours are in your coat, Doctor? How many reds, greens, yellows and blues? I have no idea, because these eyes no longer work properly.'

'That explains the cushions in reception, at least.'

The managing director ignored him. 'But down in the cellar, I have my new body built. Pure plastic, created with Nestene polymers, unique on this planet. No one else will have a body like mine.'

'Luke Aspinall? I think that is his name. A friend of my friend Melanie.'

The thin, pale young man shook his head. 'No, Aspinall, like the others, is still in his own body. But all the fluids, all the nerves have been replaced. His flesh will wither and die with age, but he is mine to control. Observe.'

The managing director swivelled his desktop computer around. On it was a series of green lines, beating rhythmically like those on an ECG machine in a hospital.

'Luke Aspinall can also be switched off. He has done his work, he has put into place all the relevant orders that I needed him to. BITS is no longer of any concern, because without them my supplies for the Maxx will still come.'

He punched a button on the computer and, one by one, the lines flattened.

The Doctor leapt up.

'No!'

'Sorry, Doctor, but you did so want to learn the truth.'

BITS offices, Kemp Town, Brighton, East Sussex

26 July 1989, 09.45

Anne Macko was at her new black-ash desk, still emptying some of Peter Lovelady's papers into the bin, when Mr Aspinall came out of his office.

'Oh, good morning, sir. I didn't realise you were in yet. We have interviews lined up this morning to find a

replacement for that dreadful Melanie Bush.’

Aspinall seemed to be thinking about what to say to her, so Anne got up.

‘Can I get you a coffee, Mr Aspinall?’

By way of answer, Luke Aspinall suddenly convulsed and bright yellow liquid sprayed out of his eyes, ears and mouth, drenching the front of Anne Macko’s brand new dress.

His dead body flopped across her desk, soaking everything on it in a now dark-yellow viscous ooze that continued to pump out of his mouth until the body slowly and lazily eased off the desk and crumpled to the floor in a heap, staining the carpet.

Anne Macko was still screaming hysterically when Jennifer Fletcher arrived for work ten minutes later.

The Hospital, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 10.15

Blast it. She had been asleep. How stupid.

The two plastic guard things were at either end of the ward, the ward she’d originally woken up in, and she had fallen asleep on the bed. Thank goodness she had put her watch back on when she had dressed. She could now at least take a glance at the time without drawing attention to herself.

Damn it, Mel, you’ve been asleep for nearly ten hours!

Ashley! Where was Ashley? And why was she spending so much of her time recently worrying about the safety of her male friends. Trey, the Doctor and now this Ashley Moby. Hell, at university she could never keep men around her long enough – they were either put off by her rather strait-laced upbringing (she had tried to be different but it always made her seem fake) or her incessant need to demonstrate her brain power (which always scared them off, leaving her mentally kicking herself for days afterwards). Now, when she least needed it, she was tripping over men throwing themselves at her affections and needing rescuing. Typical!

Aha. There was Ashley, in the far corner, asleep on the cold floor, which couldn’t possibly be very good for him. As

there seemed little point in trying to be subtle, she opted for making a bit of a racket as she yawned and moaned herself in apparent wakefulness.

Sure enough, both plastic guard-things turned to look at her. 'Morning,' she said brightly. 'Is it time to see Dr Krafchin yet?'

The guards, of course, ignored her. Their mouths were unformed, so they couldn't speak. Mind you, their eyes were just dark recesses, but they seemed to be able to see well enough.

Mel scuttled over to Ashley, who was coming round himself. 'Hi, Mel,' he said. 'Ouch. I hurt. Ouch!'

Mel shook her head. 'Oh, come on, you big baby. You just got smashed into a wall very hard by one of those two things. It can't be hurting now.'

'Can't it?'

'No.' Mel stared at him very hard. 'You need to be strong, Ashley.' She glanced back at the guards and made her voice a fraction louder. 'I hope we get to see Dr Krafchin again. I've lots I want to say to her.'

'Is that so, Miss Bush?' Dr Krafchin had appeared at the other end of the ward. 'And, yes, they can relay messages to me, just in case you were wondering.'

'Why am I here? I mean, what right have you to keep me?'

'Legally, none whatsoever, but if you're thinking of escaping, just remember what those two can do to you.'

'That's the risk I take.'

'Or,' Krafchin continued, 'think what they might do to your mother and boyfriend.'

Mel stared helplessly, feeling all her defiance draining away, as Dr Krafchin turned and marched out, her stumpy legs carrying her heavy body with no difficulty as she swayed from side to side.

After she had left, Mel turned to Ashley. 'We have to rescue Trey and my mother and get away from here. Maybe we can use their firepower against this place, blow a hole in a door or something.'

Ashley stared at her. ‘Oh, right, and who’s going to draw their fire? No, don’t answer that, I know how your mind is working.’

‘Well,’ Mel snapped, ‘I don’t hear you coming up with any escape plans.’

‘Listen, Mel. I don’t know who these people are, what they want of me or anything. But I do know that I wasn’t getting bashed about until I met you, and it’s you that Krafchin is concerned with, not me. I’m sorry. I’d like to help you, but not at the cost of getting beaten up again.’

‘Oh... oh, damn you,’ said Mel and walked away. Trouble was, she thought, he’s right. Why should he risk himself to help her? He wasn’t being really selfish, just pragmatic. What would she do in this sort of situation? Help or ignore.

But this was important to *her*. Her mother and Trey were important enough to get her into this trouble in the first place. Or maybe it was because of her that her mother was here. Either way, it was up to Melanie Jane Bush to get them away from this awful place. And if Ashley wouldn’t help, that was his decision.

She turned and looked back at him, but he was studiously ignoring her observations, preferring to listen to his personal CD player, staring vacantly ahead in that way people do when earphones cut them off from the rest of the world.

She crossed to one of the plastic guards, the one standing at the end of the ward she knew led to both Krafchin’s office and also, eventually, her mother.

‘Tell Dr Krafchin that I am coming to see her,’ Mel announced and ducked under its arm, scampering away.

She had no idea if the creature would follow, but as no great lumps of wall were blasted away behind her, she assumed not. She almost threw herself into Dr Krafchin’s office, prepared to argue, but the office was empty. Mel was overjoyed that there was a telephone there. She grabbed it, putting the receiver to her ear, and was about to dial 999 when she heard a soft, female voice.

‘SenéNet? How can I help you?’

But she hadn’t dialled anyone. Mel tried cutting the

connection, but all she got was a series of clicks and then the female voice came back on.

‘Dr Krafchin, is that you?’

Mel carefully replaced the receiver and looked around the office for something else that might be useful. She nearly died of fright when the phone rang. Throwing herself under another desk, she curled up tightly and hoped no one would come in.

The door opened, and Mel immediately recognised Dr Krafchin’s thick legs.

‘Krafchin here.’ There was a pause before she spoke again. ‘No, Roberta, I did not. Oh yes? How interesting. No, the Bush girl is running around. I have a drone searching for her as we speak. Oh, really? Well, that changes everything...’ There was silence for a few moments and then, ‘No, I’ll bring them over. And can you send the twins along with the Cadillac? Thank you, Roberta.’

Dr Krafchin replaced the receiver and for a while nothing seemed to happen. Then there was the noise of a drawer being opened and something being removed from it. Mel heard a high-pitched whine, which slowly faded, as if controls were being adjusted. Then Dr Krafchin spoke: ‘Drone Three, find the Bush girl and meet me by Exit Three. As soon as possible.’

Whatever had been used to contact the drone was replaced in the drawer and Dr Krafchin left the room.

Giving her a couple of minutes, Mel silently slid out and looked around. She tugged the desk drawer open and spotted a tiny device with a couple of LEDs on it and a tiny fader lever. On the top was a small grille – a condenser microphone presumably. This had to be how Dr Krafchin passed her orders to those plastic guard-things. Mel pocketed the device and fled from the office, heading back to her ward. With luck, the guards – drones, whatever – would be off hunting for her, working on whatever plan that mad woman now had.

As she rounded the corner, she was overjoyed to find that she had been right. The plastic guards had gone. And there was Ashley, his head in his arms, his CD Walkman lying by his side.

‘Ashley,’ she called softly.

He looked up slowly, red-rimmed eyes staring at her. He had been crying!

‘What’s up, Ashley?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry, Mel,’ he answered after a pause. ‘I let you down, ignored you. This place frightens me, Mel. I don’t know why I’m here and can’t find a way out. It’s a prison.’

‘Hey, silly,’ she said, kneeling in front of him. ‘Hey, there is an exit. In fact I happen to know there are at least three. All we have to do is find one.’

‘But your mum? Your boyfriend?’

‘Trey is not my boyfriend,’ Mel said, noting that Ashley’s eyes lit up immediately and a slight smile crossed his face. She moved on, quickly. ‘But yes, we must get them out. Come on.’

Ashley was up in a second, stuffing his discarded CD into his jacket, wrapping the earphones around his neck. The two of them then scurried back down the corridor and towards the other ward.

Ashley, who was ahead by a few yards, stopped as they neared the ward. Mel suddenly went very cold. Why had he stopped? Then she saw: the ward was empty. Both her mother and Trey Korte had gone.

‘We must find an exit, Mel. This is getting too spooky.’

‘But Mum, Trey. Where are they?’

Mel then remembered the one-sided conversation she had overheard in Dr Krafchin’s office. ‘I’ll bring them over,’ the tub of lard had said. Mum and Trey were being taken somewhere. And the caller had obviously known Mel had used the phone and called Krafchin to find out what had happened. In which case, they were probably being taken to SenéNet.

‘I know where to go, Ashley. We have to leave now. I can get to Mum and Trey later.’

‘Best news I’ve heard all day,’ Ashley said. ‘There are a couple of places I didn’t try. Meeting you rather interrupted that!’

‘OK, let’s go.’ Mel started to leave but realised that

Ashley was not moving. ‘Well, don’t just stand there. Let’s go!’ Ashley pointed down the corridor. One of the plastic guards was approaching, cutting them off.

‘Back!’ Mel screamed.

Ashley did not need telling twice. He started to pelt down the corridor, reaching back for Mel’s hand at the same time. She took it, and was nearly pulled off her feet by her new friend. He suddenly swerved and Mel nearly flew right past, her shoulder painfully jolted by the sudden jerk as she too took the unexpected corner.

They were on a flight of wooden steps, leading into darkness.

‘Down here,’ he hissed. ‘I haven’t been this way before’

‘Yes, but *he* might have,’ suggested Mel, pointing back to where their hunter must be by now. She listened carefully and realised that she could hear the same thump of machinery that she had heard on her original recce of the hospital. It was coming from below.

Ashley had noticed it as well. ‘Hey, let’s live dangerously,’ he said, smiling.

Mel smiled back. Ashley was all right – and she had always had a thing about freckles.

‘I thought we already were,’ she replied. ‘Come on.’

Mel took the lead down the steps, trying not to make them creak, and Ashley followed her example. As they entered the darkness, Mel’s eyes began to adjust to the dark. There was a small door in front of them with a big 3 on it and Mel pulled it open a fraction.

‘This is it,’ she whispered. ‘It has to be.’

But the only reply she got was a quiet, steady buzz, like the noise made when a radio isn’t tuned in properly. She looked back at the outline of Ashley, framed in the darkness. For some reason, he’d put his earphones on and started his personal CD player.

‘Ashley, this is not the time to listen to music –’

Suddenly the area was bathed in harsh bright light from the small room, the door of which Mel had just opened. Standing inside, beside a huge wooden door which

presumably led outside, was Dr Krafchin, flanked by three of the plastic guards, two of them carrying the unconscious bodies of her mother and Trey.

The room was packed with massive transparent plastic tubes. Yellow ooze was slopping about in them, being pumped from one to another. That was what was making all the thumping, the machinery to drive them. On the far side of the room was a metallic shutter, pulled to the floor. Last night she had been on the other side of it – so near freedom...

‘Oh no,’ she murmured, looking back at Ashley.

He was staring straight ahead, eyes unblinking, the tinny sound of white noise escaping from his earphones.

‘I’m sorry, pretty one,’ Dr Krafchin said, sounding anything but, ‘but *he* is the drone.’ She held out her hand. ‘The relay device, please?’

Mel’s fingers tightened round the object she had stolen from the office and she brandished it above her head. ‘I’ll smash it first.’

Dr Krafchin sighed. ‘Oh dear, poor pretty.’

The door behind her opened and Mel saw daylight. She also saw a white Cadillac ambulance with two nurses standing beside it. With them were a girl and a boy, both wearing earphones.

‘Joe? Joe Hambidge?’ Mel suddenly realised. ‘My God, that’s how you got Trey and my mother, isn’t it? The same way you used Ashley to get me. That’s horrible.’

‘What is far more horrible, pretty one, is that the device you are about to destroy is also connected to their brainwaves. At this range, the feedback when that breaks will fry all three youngsters’ brains.’

‘Why should I believe you?’ As she spoke, Mel realised that the plastic guard that had been following her and Ashley was now behind them, blocking the steps.

‘No reason,’ Dr Krafchin answered. ‘But you may well regret trying to call my bluff.’

There was a short pause, but Mel knew when she was beaten. She handed the device over to Dr Krafchin, who took it carefully and passed it to the empty-handed plastic guard.

‘Take that back to my office and remain there. If anyone returns to the hospital before me, kill them.’

The plastic guard marched past Mel and Ashley, climbed the steps and was gone.

Dr Krafchin pointed towards the ambulance. ‘I think it is time we took a trip to Garrett Manor, young lady. Your friend the Doctor has pre-empted us by turning up for a visit. I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you one last time before he dies.’

Mel winced as one of the white-clad nurses, the man, jabbed her arm with a needle. As she felt her legs begin to go, the last thing she saw was Ashley, standing beside Joe and the girl, all three of them staring vacantly ahead, listening to their earphones. She tried to call out to Ashley, but her mouth didn’t seem to work. She had to close her eyes, had to...

*The Garrett Manor Estate, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 11.00*

The cellar in Lawson’s cottage was colder, less comfortable and a great deal darker than the room above Erskine’s place had been, but for former Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, it was a better base of operations from which to work out his next move. With no comfortable sofas, no daily newspaper, no promise of a walk in the sunshine, the years as a well-groomed mathematics master whose biggest worry was whether Caldwell in 3C would actually hand his prep in had just melted away. Instead of lessening his mood, the blond man with the gun had done Lethbridge-Stewart an enormous favour. He had reminded him what it was like to be a soldier again – to worry about survival, to think about his future... his loneliness.

His former wife Fiona had long since walked out of his life, taking young Kate with her. Heaven knows where either of them was now. It had also made him think of Doris Wilson, his one-time love before both of them had married. And George Wilson had been killed in Northern Ireland back in the seventies, leaving Doris a young widow. Not that she wanted for much. Her father was not short of a bob or two, and Doris

had a nice little place near Pyecombe, a gift from some maiden aunt, he thought.

But Doris was still the past. Much as he might like her to be the future, what rich widow was going to marry a less than well-off mathematics master at a rather dull boys' boarding school?

He turned his attention back to the present. He was in danger. It seemed unlikely that they would risk keeping him alive much longer now he knew what was going on. He had faced these people before, when he was much younger. There had been an incident that was never placed on UNIT records because it would have been so compromising for the government of the day – who, after all, were responsible for the running of C19 and had allowed the traitor to flourish in their midst. Only Sir John Sudbury, his old friend, had benefited from the whole sorry business. No matter which party came into power, Sudbury was assured of continued involvement in C19 because it would be too awkward to remove him – he knew far too much. As did Lethbridge-Stewart, when he thought about it. He and old Sudbury probably knew more about politicians, pop stars and movie actors than MI5 ever would, and had between them enough secrets in their heads to expose far more than was good for any kind of national security. And that must have been what had made him a target of these SenéNet types. They wanted that information that was kept in his memory – details of alien contacts, sites where wreckage and bodies were kept, so that, like some contemporary Howard Carter, they could go grave-robbing regardless of the risks and then hold the world to ransom.

That information was so important, it must never fall into their hands. Lethbridge-Stewart had always known that one day he might be called upon to die for his country, to protect this kind of information. If that was the case, he was prepared to do it, but by the same token, he was not going to sit back and just let it happen. While he could walk and breathe, he could think of ways of escaping, of defeating SenéNet and, maybe, perhaps, of getting in touch with Doris Wilson.

Fully rested after a few hours of sleep, it was the image of her face that had kept him going during the early morning, as he prepared ways of getting out of his new prison. And he still had Erskine's revolver, which was very strange. He could not believe that Erskine didn't realise it was gone, so what was the man up to?

Garrett Marlon Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 11.30

The Doctor was alone in the managing director's office – and had been for nearly thirty minutes. The door and windows were locked and the computer was off. No matter how much prodding and poking it had received at the Doctor's hands, it would not reboot itself.

He might as well have been in a dungeon for all the freedom he had. Perhaps it was patience that was needed now. The managing director obviously had some use for him.

But what of Mel and her mother? And Trey? This had to be linked to his powers, to his collapse by the seafront. And then there was Lethbridge-Stewart to think about – possibly the most important consideration of all. The Doctor had many acquaintances and loads of old friends dotted around on various planets. And, of course, there had been countless fellow travellers in his TARDIS. But there was no one with whom he shared such a deep friendship, such a level of understanding, as the Brigadier. They had known each other for more lives than the Doctor cared to remember, always looking out for each other without ever expressing their friendship in words, without ever saying how important the other's well-being was. If anything happened to Lethbridge-Stewart here, now, while the Doctor was nearby and could do nothing, well, he would never forgive himself. Many of his friends had passed away over the years. Some of them he had known longer than the Brigadier, such as his old Time Lord friend Azmael. Then there were alien beings he had encountered many times, such as the Keeper of Traken or the Monitor of Logopolis, all people whose company he had

enjoyed and whose passing he regretted. And those travellers he had become attached to who were now dead, as even he could not break the Laws of Time: Adric, Katarina... But if anything happened to Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, the perpetrators would regret it.

He jumped slightly as the door opened behind him, admitting the managing director.

‘I have been having a word with my... sponsors, if you will. I think it is time to show you what is going on here, Doctor. And I have some friends of yours who are just dying to see you. Or, they will be if you upset anyone.’

‘Spare the melodramatics, that’s my area of expertise.’

With an insincere smile, the managing director pointed to the door, where Mr Jones was waiting. Jones himself pointed to the stairs and, with a defiant shrug, the Doctor was escorted down them, past the smug receptionist and towards the door he had failed to move earlier.

‘Open,’ barked the managing director, and the door opened. ‘Lights,’ he snapped.

The Doctor walked down the stairs, taking everything in: rows and rows of shelving disappearing into the distance, stacked with guns, bodies, parts of spaceships – alien technology from races even he didn’t realise had visited Earth.

‘UNIT has managed to keep going over the years without your help or supervision, Doctor,’ said the managing director. The Doctor ignored him, staring around like a tourist. ‘This extension goes back some way – right to the gatehouse perhaps?’

‘Not quite. It stops just after the fountain, actually, but it is large enough for my use.’

‘Well, I am impressed. Cyberguns, Dalekanium – highly volatile that, by the way, you don’t want to jog it around too much – and, yes, even a Kraal android, I’d recognise that skeleton anywhere.’

‘Really, is that what it is?’ The managing director was at his side in an instant. ‘Mister Jones and I could never work that one out.’

‘This is a marvellous collection. Abhorrent and pointless,

but good, nevertheless. You could do a lot with this.'

'Like, take over the world perhaps?' The managing director was now standing next to a cupboard.

'Oh, I don't doubt it. But why?'

'Because I can?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not a good enough reason. Most power-mad dictators dream of something higher than power. They want revenge, or succumb to the temptations of wine, women and song, or money.'

The managing director shrugged. 'Those are more in Mr Jones's line, I suspect. No, Doctor, I want to take over the world simply to give myself something to do. You erroneously thought that I was in some kind of deal with the Nestene Consciousness. I concede that Nestene technology that has been left behind has enabled me to achieve all this, but no, the Consciousness itself, wherever it may be in deep space, has no part to play. The only help I need from them is this.'

He yanked open the cupboard doors, revealing the model of himself, as he was before the Cyber-surgery that was now betraying him.

'Ah, an Auton body, ready for you to put yourself into.'

'Correct. Unlike machinery, the plastic is living, when activated. It does not wear out and cannot be harmed. The Nestenes are a tremendous race, Doctor, by far the greatest threat this planet has ever known, simply because they are a mental gestalt, able to add fragments of the whole consciousness into anything made of plastic, and equally easily remove them. And on this planet, just about everything is plastic.'

With that, the managing director leaned against his new body, smiling.

The Doctor looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, 'Including tiny Loch Ness Monster toys.'

'Indeed. Once this body has been activated, I shall merge my consciousness into it and, voila, I shall live in literal perfection for ever.'

'And the Maxx. Where does this fit into your plan?'

‘Directly, it doesn’t. But over time, it has the greatest power of all. It has been built from Nestene plastic. Each machine, each cable, each plastic-coated game, is part of the same thing, all ready to fall under my will. A series of subliminal message relays have been built into its construction. The children are my future, Doctor, children conditioned to follow my commands via the innocent games. Nothing will surpass the Maxx, no system can run faster, and unlike cartridges, CDs do not wear out or damage easily. And SenéNet will mass produce them very cheaply. No one will want to make a games console better than the Maxx, and even if they did, they couldn’t afford to. I have the leisure industry sewn up for the next thirty years.’

‘It’s a long-term plan, then, this world domination of yours.’

‘Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein – all wanted to rule this planet and failed for one good reason. They were in a hurry.’

‘Alexander and good old Jules actually didn’t do too badly.’

Ignoring him the managing director continued. ‘But through the Maxx, I will have world domination so easily, and so bloodlessly. The Maxx is not just a games console, you see. People will also use it to view Films. Video discs cannot fail to replace analog VHS tapes, and then there is the Internet connection. By 1999, half of this planet will have regular access to the net. Everything from communications to shopping will be done from home. By the time the millennium comes, this planet will be mine.’

‘Under your benevolent control, of course. And then what? When boredom sets in, introduce a few gladiatorial games to amuse yourself?’ The Doctor wandered over to the glass container in the centre of the room, trying to peer through the blue murk at what was inside. ‘What happens if you make a wrong decision and starve half of China? Or press the wrong button and nuke Birmingham? Some people may go for these options, but on the whole I don’t imagine it’ll be too popular. Or will the people not be allowed to think

anything you do is unpopular?’

‘It’ll be for the best if they don’t. And once we have a united world, we can venture out into the stars. Find the Nestene Consciousness, perhaps, and rule the universe together.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Ah, right. Easy, really. Can’t think why Hitler and Genghis didn’t think of it themselves.’ He turned slowly to face the managing director. ‘And just how do you propose to place your mind into your plastic passion over there?’

The managing director pointed at the casket the Doctor was examining. ‘Show him,’ he said loudly.

The Doctor watched as two Nestene globes rolled towards him under the glass. He burst into laughter. ‘Oh, that’s good. That’s very good indeed. You have two whole Nestene energy spheres, each containing a fragment of the Nestene Consciousness itself. But you don’t have the mental power to link with them and project yourself in there.’

‘Yes, I do now.’

‘Me?’

‘Well, that was a secondary option, Doctor, but I have to deflate your ego, I’m afraid. You see, I have a true esper, one with the portion of his brain that uses such powers already slightly open. By linking him with the Nestene spheres, that mind will expand, providing the interface I need, the link between me and them. Then – I’m in my new body.’

He clicked his fingers and the door at the top of the steps opened, allowing Krafchin, her plastic guards and the comatose Trey and Mrs Bush to walk down.

‘The lady, before you ask, Doctor, is just here to protect my interests. I doubt you or the American boy will do anything stupid while she is threatened.’

The Doctor threw a look to Jones, standing by the foot of the stairs. He pointed at Dr Krafchin’s helpers. Autons, Mr Jones. I don’t think you’ve ever seen one before, have you? Just so that you know what I’m talking about next time.’ He turned back to the managing director. ‘I’m impressed that you can build and control Autons.’

The managing director indicated Dr Krafchin. 'That is the good doctor's responsibility, actually. Show him, my dear.'

Dr Krafchin suddenly shook and split straight down the middle, her two portions neatly sliding apart on a hinge at the back, revealing a misty interior, a single Nestene energy sphere held there by its own mental force.

'I actually found three of them, Doctor. This one was fully functional and healthy. It had created this human form, taken on human characteristics. A sort of higher-level copy, a step above the cold, emotionless Auton leaders you have met before.'

'You think it is a sort of First Lady to President Nestene?' the Doctor asked her. 'A Sheriff of Nottingham to the Consciousness's King John? I don't believe this.' The Doctor had had enough. 'You really think that sphere is any different from these two in here?' he exploded. 'Don't be stupid, man. There is no difference between them. They are the same thing. The same energy controls one as it does a thousand. No wonder you found it so easy to devise the Maxx with their help. They gave you everything you wanted. You've spent so long hiding from the world that you've begun to believe your own publicity. They are not on your side at all! These two are as *compos mentis* as that one. They aren't sharing with you: they are using you. I presume it was they who told you to find an esper, to "feed them and make them better", to help you link into your new body. I bet you didn't think all of that out by yourself, did you?'

The managing director shrugged. 'I'm disappointed in you, Doctor. I never thought you would descend to cheap theatrics.' He turned to Dr Krafchin, who had re-formed as the bulbous doctor. 'Link the boy up and wake him. And the woman.'

'Where's Mel?'

The Doctor tried to keep his voice level, to stop any panic showing. But if he did not stop this, he realised, the Nestene invasion he had feared, then thought he was mistaken about, was in danger of becoming a complete reality.

'With the Brigadier,' said Jones.

The managing director smiled at the Doctor, his glasses reflecting the blue haze of the room.

‘Go and get them, Mr Jones. I think it might be advisable to bring the Doctor’s entourage together. I do so dislike people being apart.’

As Jones left, the Doctor tut-tutted. ‘I bet you do. But separation will be the least of your problems if you let the Nestenes use Trey’s mind. They will then have the channel they need into this world via him, not you.’

But the managing director was gazing up at his plastic replacement body, ignoring the Doctor.

The Garrett Manor Estate, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 11.50

‘Oh, you’re awake, then?’

Mel shook her head, trying to clear the fuzz and noise. The speaker was male and did not sound unfriendly, even if his tone was somewhat military.

She opened her eyes and a man slowly came into focus. Mel wanted to say something, but her mouth would not work properly and all she could hear were strange gruntings. When she realised the gruntings were hers, she gave up.

‘That’ll be the drugs, I imagine. Same happened to me when I first woke up. It’ll pass, so don’t worry.’

The man hauled himself up and Mel could see that his hands were tied behind his back. Then she realised that hers were as well. He walked over and knelt before her. She looked him squarely in the eyes, holding her chin up defiantly.

Her jaw was beginning to feel more flexible and she tried again, but ‘Shoo, huuu ahhh 0000?’ was the best she could do. The man raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m impressed,’ was all he said before going back to his side of the room, where he slid slowly to the floor again.

Mel took in her surroundings. She and her companion were inside a small, high-ceilinged room with only a tiny window near the top. The small amount of light that came through it revealed drab brown walls, a stripped dado rail and

stripped floorboards. There was a door in the opposite corner, up a flight of wooden steps and directly opposite the window. It was clearly not the original door and had been reinforced, no doubt with extra wood or something, because it was shiny. Come to think of it, bearing in mind what she'd seen at the hospital, it was probably solid plastic.

'We're in a cellar,' she managed to spit out. Her jaw immediately felt better for having moved properly, so she battled on. 'Georgian house? Servants' quarters?'

The man smiled. 'Tudor, but converted about eighty years or so ago to a hotel. It's now an office.'

'SenéNet?'

The man nodded again.

'So, they're in this up to their metaphorical armpits.' Mel hauled herself up, then looked at the man. 'Well,' she said, 'are you going to sit there all day or shall we try to escape?'

The man shook his head this time. 'No chance. The door's reinforced. Some kind of plastic moulding and no handles on this side.' He stared at Mel for a second or two, and she wondered why.

'Something wrong?' she asked. 'You don't like my hair? Or clothes?'

'No, not at all. Gracious, where are my manners? Lethbridge-Stewart, Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart. Sorry we can't shake and all that.'

'Melanie Bush. Mel to my friends.'

Lethbridge-Stewart gave her another look. 'This may sound very daft, Miss Bush, but do you know the Doctor?'

She looked at him suspiciously. 'Not at all. Never seen her before. Were you at Dr Krafchin's hospital, too?'

Lethbridge-Stewart seemed disappointed. 'Hospital? No, no, I've been here for quite some time. They look after me well, lots of food and exercise, but no explanations or anything. I recently became a naughty boy and got thrown in here for my troubles.' He seemed to sag slightly. 'Ah well, no knights in TARDIS-armour to save me this time.'

Mel stopped walking towards the steps and slowly turned. 'So, you *do* mean *the* Doctor, then? You do know him?'

Lethbridge-Stewart was on his feet in a second, his whole face and body suddenly energised by her comment. ‘You *are* with the Doctor! Excellent.’

Mel was still determined to be cautious. She knew that the Doctor was looking for a Lethbridge-Stewart but, after all she’d been through, she wasn’t going to get taken in, regardless of the fact that this man didn’t have a personal CD or earphones anywhere in sight.

‘Well, I’ve met someone called the Doctor. Did some strange computer work for him. I’m a programmer. Something to do with some criminal called the Master.’

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded urgently. ‘Ah, the bounder’s still up to his old tricks, then? But, the Doctor – where is he now? Oh, and what face is he wearing? Still the young one with the penchant for cricket?’

Mel took a step away. All her hopes vanished. This man wasn’t just a bit weird, he was mad. Literally insane. Different faces?

As if reading her mind, Lethbridge-Stewart laughed. ‘Sorry, that must sound bizarre. But then, working alongside the Doctor does that to you. I end up speaking of things like him changing faces without a second thought. How long have you known him?’

‘About thirty-six hours. Give or take thirty minutes, but I got to know him quite well yesterday. Have you known him long?’

Lethbridge-Stewart shrugged. ‘That depends on how you look at it, I suppose. About twenty years on and off. We served together in... well, we worked together, let’s leave it at that. OSA and all that.’

Mel thought for a moment. ‘OSA? Oh, the Official Secrets Act. Are you an MP then?’

‘No, Miss Bush. I’m a schoolmaster. Mathematics. Trying to install the basics of algebra into young boys emerging into manhood who would rather know more about acid house and Madonna than two plus two.’ Lethbridge-Stewart seemed lost in thought. Or reminiscences. ‘Of course, that’s not where I met the Doctor. No, that was in the London Underground. A

long time ago.'

Mel feared this might turn into a verbal version of the Lethbridge-Stewart photo album, so she broke in. 'Well, I got caught as he and I were carrying out a recce on this place.' She was satisfied that this probably was the Brigadier, but just in case... 'He said he'd lost something very old, delicate and valuable to him. A fossil or something.'

Mel then recounted her bizarre journey from Pease Pottage to the woods, to Dr Krafchin's hospital, her discovery of the patients and the strange effects on Ashley, Joe and the other girl.

'The last thing I remember is being told that my mother, Trey and I no longer had to be kept there. Then someone grabbed me and jabbed a needle into my arm and wham-barn, thank you, ma'am, I was here. With you.'

Lethbridge-Stewart took this all very calmly.

'I imagine there's a link here. SenéNet are up to something, that's for sure. Linked in some way to those video games.' Mel realised that the man had stopped and was staring at her, a look of horror on his face. She swung round, but there was nothing behind her, so he looked back at him. 'Are you all right?'

'Miss Bush, I have just had the most dreadful thought. And if I'm right, we need to escape and find the Doctor. Urgently.'

'I think I suggested that five minutes ago,' Mel snapped. 'Look. Let's try each other's ropes and see if we can do anything.' Her fingers began feeling her bindings. 'Oh, it's not rope at all. It's cold. Like plastic. How odd.'

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded. 'Makes sense. Plastic, of course.' Without continuing his downright obscure train of thought, he asked Mel to describe the Doctor. She did so, but he shook his head. 'Now, I know it can't be an earlier one, because I've seen all of him now. This could be the sixth, or the twentieth for all I know. But at least he'll know me and that's a start.'

'Excuse me, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart,' said Mel. 'What are you talking about?'

‘The Doctor, Miss Bush. He’s not human. He travels in time and space, popping up every so often to help us defeat Cybermen, Daleks, Zygons and so on.’

‘I gathered that,’ she said smartly.

‘Oh, good. Well, he’s a splendid chap and all that, but he has the tendency to change his physical appearance in much the same way as you’d change your blouse. Stops him dying, you see. Very useful, of course, but confusing at times. Last time I saw him, there were four out of the five I’d met, all together. The egos were phenomenal, but they won. Of course.’

‘So there are five other Doctors?’

‘Not exactly. It’s the same man but in different bodies. And travelling in time can make it confusing. One day you’re working alongside one with white hair and velvet jackets, the next he’s regenerated, as his people – the Time Lords – say, and he’s all teeth and curls and a long scarf. Or young, blond and playing cricket. Your description proves he’s the Doctor, though.’

‘Why? If you’ve not met this particular... version, how can you be sure it’s him?’

Lethbridge-Stewart smiled, a really warm smile that relaxed Mel completely, as if the man had just seen all his problems solved in one fell swoop.

‘Because, Miss Bush, no one else could wear such ridiculous-sounding clothing and get away with it. That and the fact that he’s defeated the Master yet again. I wonder if that old mixer is involved with SenéNet?’

‘The Doctor said the Master wasn’t on Earth any more.’ Mel shook her head. ‘You know, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart, ever since I first realised he was an alien, I took it all in my stride. I mean, he’s certainly not a normal person.’

‘That sounds just like the Doctor.’

‘But when you sit and think about it, it’s really odd. I mean, we’re sitting here, talking about aliens in Sussex! That is very weird.’

‘That, Miss Bush, is nothing. You should get the Doctor to take you for a trip – although goodness knows when you’d get

back. Poor Miss Grant and Miss Smith, they never knew whether they were coming or going.'

'Had lots of young misses in his TARDIS, has he?' she asked, rather more aggressively than she intended.

The Brigadier laughed. 'Not in that way, no. But he enjoys company. I assume from what you've said, he's travelling alone at the moment.'

'I think so. He hasn't mentioned anyone else.'

Mel considered this. The Doctor didn't seem to like being alone. He'd latched on to her and Trey very quickly, as if he needed people to talk to. Or boast to. Maybe she'd ask him again to take her away, but choosing her moment better than last time. She could fancy a trip to the stars...

Her reverie was broken by the door opening. A blond man stood there, holding a gun at them.

'You are wanted,' he said coldly. 'Both of you.'

'Must be time for my daily constitutional,' the Brigadier said, and began climbing the stairs.

However, just as he reached the top step, he stumbled and pitched forward, unable to break his fall because of his bound wrists. Instinctively, the blond man with the gun tried to stop the older man falling, but instead just got in the way and both of them hit the floor of the cottage in a jumble of hands and legs.

Mel was unsure of what to do until the Brigadier yelled at her, 'Run, Miss Bush. Find the Doctor and help him!'

Angrily the blond man cuffed the Brigadier with his gun, but Mel, far smaller and more nimble, had already dashed up the stairs, leapt over both men and started to run for the back of the house. However, once through the door she found herself in the arms of another man. She screamed and squirmed as he held her, more so when she saw his horribly disfigured face. With one eye malevolently staring at her, he pulled her to the ground by tugging on her tied hands.

From inside the cottage she heard what she could only suppose was the Brigadier being pistol-whipped by the blond man, but the army man himself made no sound.

The disfigured man let Mel go and she fell to the floor.

She watched as he looked into the back of the house, peering through his legs to see what was going on.

The blond man was indeed repeatedly hitting the Brigadier with his pistol. ‘Damn you,’ he was screeching at the Brigadier. ‘Damn you to hell!’

There was a blur of movement directly above Mel, as the disfigured man seemed to flap his right arm about. Instantly the blond man stopped attacking the Brigadier, and dropped his gun to the floor. Both the badly beaten Lethbridge-Stewart and the blond man stared in surprise at the hilt of the combat knife, which was poking suddenly out of his assailant’s chest. The blond man turned and stared at the man who had grabbed Mel.

‘Erskine?’ he mumbled, blood beginning to bubble at his mouth. He stumbled slightly and Mel saw his eyes looking straight at her, almost begging her to do something, and then they slowly closed. Without uttering a sound, he toppled down the steps of the cellar, landing with a crash at the bottom.

‘Erskine?’ This time it was the Brigadier who spoke, but with equal astonishment, if tinged with a measure of exhaustion. ‘Good throw. Spot on target.’

‘Sorry, sir, I tried to get here earlier.’

The Brigadier smiled as Erskine wiped some blood away from a cut above his eye. ‘Erskine, do you realise that you have just assaulted a superior?’

Erskine chuckled – a sound Mel did not find very pleasant.

‘It was a choice of two evils, sir,’ he said untying the plastic rope on the Brigadier’s hands.

‘Assist Miss Bush, please,’ said the Brigadier, bravely pulling himself to his feet with the help of the doorjamb.

As Erskine did so, Mel tried not to stare at his face. What pain he must have gone through to receive such awful burns, she thought.

The Brigadier was standing as erect and alert as could reasonably be expected after his beating. ‘Thank you, Private. For a dead man, you are remarkably well.’

Erskine offered his hand. ‘I think I may have made a few

mistakes, sir,' he said. 'I cannot apologise for those, sir, but I can try to make amends.'

'You began doing that when you left me this,' said the Brigadier, pulling the pistol out of the back of his trousers and passing it back to Erskine. He then picked up Jones' dropped gun and placed that in the top of his trousers.

Mel was feeling impatient. 'This is all well and good, but shouldn't we try to help that poor man. He could be bleeding down there.' She was pointing back at the cellar.

As she saw the look pass between the Brigadier and this Erskine man, she suddenly understood. 'Oh, my God. He's dead, isn't he? You... you killed him?'

The Brigadier put a hand on her shoulder, but she flinched. He looked slightly hurt. 'I'm sorry, Miss Bush, but yes, he is dead. Private Erskine was doing... doing his job, saving my life and yours.'

Mel was too confused to accept this. 'But... but...'

She had never encountered death before. She had never even considered it. All the stuff at the hospital with Dr Krafchin and the plastic men, all the running through the woods with the Doctor – even though she knew there was danger, it had never really occurred to her that people could die. Would die. When Dr Krafchin had threatened Ashley and the others, she had just accepted it, as if this were some movie at the cinema, or a television show. Somehow, she saw these people as actors, imagining they would get up again after the gunfire.

But this was actually horribly real, horribly nasty. That man had threatened them, had assaulted the Brigadier, but did he deserve to die? She felt weak, and knew she was going to fall, so it came as no surprise when she crumpled. She had no idea for how long she lay still, breathing deeply. It seemed like hours but could only have been a couple of seconds, as the man, Erskine, was helping her sit up.

Mel looked up at his face, immediately trying to see past the disfigurement to the man inside. What kind of person could just pick up a knife and calmly kill someone? She had always been philosophically against armies and wars and

things, joining CND and Troops Out of Northern Ireland marches and suchlike. But those were things you did, part of university life. She had held those beliefs, thought that they were really important things that could change people's lives, that they mattered – but now she was facing the reality of a man's death. He had been looking at her – the last thing he'd seen must've been her – as forty-odd years of existence came to a sudden stop.

Mel could not shake that final image of his eyes, boring into her, knowing that he was dead. She looked up at both men and realised that this was something the Brigadier must have faced many times.

'How?' she said quietly. 'How do you live with yourself?'

The Brigadier looked her straight in the eye. 'By never forgetting, Miss Bush. By not letting one face, one name, ever fade away.'

Erskine shuffled his feet and said nothing.

Mel shook her head quickly and breathed out. 'And when do you get used to it? When does it just become something you do?'

She allowed Erskine to help her back up.

'Never,' he said.

The Brigadier agreed with him, adding, 'If you become complacent about death, Miss Bush, if you let it take you over, you become like Mr Jones back there, when it becomes a pleasure. Believe me, neither Mr Erskine nor I ever see death as a pleasure. Just a horrible necessity to survive.'

Mel was not convinced, but realised that all this introspection was not going to help find the Doctor. He would put things into perspective for her, help her understand, she was sure of that.

Determined not to look back at the open cottage door, she led them towards the Manor.

'I assume the Doctor is in here somewhere?'

Erskine nodded. 'I don't know where exactly.'

Their train of thought was interrupted by a yell from behind. All three turned and Mel saw a man in a black rollneck sweater, waving a pistol at them. Not again, she

thought.

‘Lawson,’ gasped Erskine. ‘He must’ve found Jones!’

The Brigadier gripped his own pistol tighter and Mel saw him look at her. ‘I’m sorry Miss Bush, I don’t think today is going to be the easiest of days for you. We’ll cover you. You get to the Manor.’

‘Damn!’ interrupted Erskine. ‘He’s releasing the Stalker!’

‘The what?’ the other two said turning their heads in unison.

‘That!’ was all Erskine could say.

It was the largest dog Mel had ever seen and even from this distance she could make out the green glow around the eyes.

‘I take it,’ she snapped, ‘that even the dogs around here aren’t entirely as nature intended?’

Erskine nodded, muttering something about hellhounds, green slime and unshakable determination that was lost under a terrifyingly loud growl.

Mel prepared to dash for the house, then looked at the two men. ‘How fast can it run?’ she yelled.

‘Very,’ was all Erskine said.

Mel took charge. With an, ‘OK, you two head for the Manor’ and ignoring the Brigadier’s squawk of ‘But Miss Bush’, Mel pelted towards the woods. Sure enough, the Stalker saw her as the better option and pelted after her.

This, Mel considered as she crashed through the undergrowth, might not have been the best idea she had ever had.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 12.10

Ciara and Cellian were standing beside the ambulance parked in the woodland to the side of Garrett Manor. They had delivered Dr Krafchin and the others to the Manor and were now waiting for orders.

Except that they were not in their proper place, waiting by Roberta in reception. Instead, Ciara had instructed her brother

to drive into the woods, away from the immediate influence of SenéNet. Seated in the back of the ambulance were their three drones, Joe Hambidge, Ashley Moby and Janine Gilbert.

Ciara was studying the inanimate faces, staring ahead, unseeing and blinking irregularly. She ran a hand down Ashley's young cheek.

'I can't feel anything, Cellian.' She stood up and stepped away from the car, gazing at her beautiful brother, his perfect model-like features frozen in time, like hers, for twenty years now. She couldn't help remembering the first time they'd encountered Dr Krafchin, at a hospital in Northumbria, hundreds of miles from where they were now... and hundreds more from home.

Back then, the Irish twins had been two fun-loving kids, training as nurses but in trouble with their hospital for procuring pharmaceuticals for uses not 100 per cent medical. A big party had been planned, to celebrate the release of the new Beatles LP, and all the nurses were going to be there. The two had already earned a reputation for being a bit taciturn and offhand with the patients during their training and they weren't very well liked around the student bars. They thought that if they could supply the drugs for the party, people would change their opinions and welcome the Irish twins, as they became known, into the social whirl. Just as the party began Cellian had begun offering the drugs, whereupon hidden police swooped in, arresting him and Ciara. Within days, their careers were over and they faced deportation back to Eire to face the wrath of their Catholic parents.

Then Dr Krafchin had contacted them, explaining that she worked for a private medical facility, concentrating on plastic surgery in new and interesting forms, and asking if they would like to work for her.

Over the next couple of years, they became Krafchin's right-hand people, using their basic medical knowledge to help on a variety of strange experiments, and leaving their consciences at home in return for some very good salary slips.

Then one day, Krafchin had offered them immortality. Straight out she had said it, no beating about the bush. She

explained that a new technique had been mastered by which plastic could be inserted into the bloodstream, slowing down the ageing process.

It was only when they awoke from the operation that they realised the full extent of the transfusion. Dr Krafchin had removed all their blood and replaced it with a new substance known as the Nestene Compound. They had then been introduced to the man they now thought of as the managing director, who had explained that he needed people to whom morality was a fairly irrelevant concept and who would help with his plans.

And so the Irish twins became his contract killers and helpers, disposing of anyone awkward who got in the way of his plans. They had sacrificed their souls, really, for immortality and a built-in handgun, based, they later learned, on Auton technology. Subsequent experiments with the transfusion system also involved a degree of mental manipulation – over the years Krafchin had developed a process which could imprint whole new personalities on or install a series of commands in people who had undergone the treatment, effectively creating walking puppets for the managing director. Once the SenéNet scheme had been established, more and more businessmen seemed to undergo this.

And thus it was that Ciara and Cellian were the only transfusion patients to keep their own personalities intact – something they had always been grateful for. More recently Krafchin had also given them the technology to control a series of drones, operated remotely through a series of encoded signals on special CDs. When not operating, the drones appeared to be totally normal, but at a signal from their Nestene-created personal stereos, they would wear the earphones and become tools for their masters once again, receiving a series of mental instructions that they could not disobey. No matter how outwardly normal they seemed, they were forever Ciara and Cellian's tools.

But then, in the Bush household, Ciara had felt something die. Looking back now, she realised it was the last of her

humanity. Together, she and her brother were responsible for more deaths than either of them could remember, including the three drones in the ambulance. They still breathed, their brains still operated, but they were unlikely ever again to be the people they once were. Their lives, like hers and her brothers, were no longer their own.

‘I can’t feel anything,’ she said again. ‘I touched the sofa in that house, I touched that boy’s face. These hands, this body, Cellian, I can’t use it properly. I never realised I would miss that, but I do.’ She looked at him, hoping he would understand. ‘We both still look twenty-one – why can’t we feel it too? So much has happened. I don’t know if I like it any more.’ She sat on the grass. ‘I just want to be able to touch something again and feel something back. To know whether it is hot or cold, hard or soft, sticky or dry.’ She laughed humourlessly. ‘Is this some kind of Nestene menopause I’m going through, do you think?’

Cellian just shrugged, but his eyes offered understanding. He looked back at the Cadillac, reached in and removed the car keys. He tossed them to her.

She caught them – running her fingers, beautifully perfect fingers, of course – along the ridges of the keys, knowing the bumps, watching her finger make minute up-and-down movements as she rubbed the contours. But her brain couldn’t tell her anything about the key, for she felt nothing. She had never held the keys before, as Cellian had always driven the Cadillac. It was some sort of agreement between them and the managing director: Ciara was the contact person, Cellian the driver – the killer.

They were both distracted by something crashing through the trees not very far away. They activated their handguns instinctively, but while Cellian was immediately wary, Ciara could only look down in shame at her prosthetic attachment. Without thinking, she had engaged it; without thinking, her brain had stimulated the constantly replenished power source that was linked to it, ready to emit a blast of raw energy that could cut someone in half if they came close enough, vaporising the human tissue completely and utterly, leaving

no trace of a single atom if need be.

She was still staring in bewilderment at herself, at these new thoughts, when the girl from the hospital threw herself into Ciara's back, sending them both crashing to the floor.

Ciara rolled over, pushing the slight girl away easily and stared up as the green eyes of the Stalker dived towards them both. Even from five yards away, she could see tiny acid droplets of green spittle bouncing off its jaws as it jumped. She had seen the beast at work over many years, watching as it devoured humans, without a second thought for the pain and terror it brought to its victims. But as she sat there, knowing that by moving the girl away, its jaws would snap around her own throat, ripping her apart in less than one second, all she could think was, 'Good.'

The jaws never came. Cellian dived in front of her and the beast's jaws clamped down on his right arm, the teeth and white hot acid crunching and burning through his very human flesh, spraying green spittle and the yellow Nestene nutrient fluids everywhere.

Ciara had never heard her brother scream before. He had never been hurt by anything that she could recall. As a child, he had been strong, aggressive and never in pain. If he was cut or burned, he just dealt with it – sensibly, stoically and quickly.

The sound she heard now made her heart lurch. Her twin brother was in agony and, as everything she had read about twins should have told her, the pain stabbed in her brain too, causing her to scream out in sympathetic anguish.

Then there was a massive flash and Ciara felt the acid splatter down on her. Instinctively, knowing that she would feel nothing, she rolled on to the young girl, protecting her from the damage.

After waiting a couple of seconds, she moved away again, as did the girl, who was clambering to her feet. Both of them looked at the carnage beside the car. Cellian was on his knees, clutching at the stump of his right arm, severed just above the elbow. Ripped pieces of flesh and muscle flapped in the slight breeze, while pools of yellow ooze were forming on the

ground as the Nestene fluid that pumped through his augmented veins dripped out.

Lying on the ground were the head and shoulders and one leg of the Stalker, the rest of it having been blasted to nothing by Cellian's reflex firing of his Nestene armament. Its eyes were mercifully closed.

'Cellian?' whispered Ciara.

'I just hope that Nestene technology ensures that wounds self-heal,' he said calmly, 'otherwise I'm probably going to bleed to death.'

It had been a long time since Ciara had heard her brother speak so softly, almost with humour, and she hugged him.

'You're right. What have we become?' he asked her.

Already Ciara could see microscopic nanites, a product of their artificial nervous system, beginning to repair the torn veins. She wished she could feel repulsed.

'We are programmed to act like this,' she replied. 'Something in that Nestene technology means we will always be dependent on these people, because without them we are nothing.'

'Are you all right?' asked the young girl behind them.

Ciara did not bother to look at her. 'No, and we never have been. Tell the Doctor that Krafchin is the key.'

'I'm sorry,' said the girl, 'I don't understand.'

Ciara ignored her and just held her bewildered brother, looking so perfect, feeling so dead.

Garrett Manor Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

26 July 1989, 12.15

The Doctor was flanked by two of the prototype Auton things that the Krafchin Nestene had created. He watched quietly as she (the Doctor smiled to himself, still thinking of Krafchin as a 'she') placed the unconscious Trey on a surgical trolley which had been brought down the steps by the third prototype. She then wheeled it forward, until it was alongside the central plastic casket containing the other two Nestene spheres.

She produced some electrodes from under the casket and

attached them to his forehead.

‘Bit primitive, isn’t it?’ he asked.

Krafchin just smiled. ‘Simplicity has always been the way of the Nestene Consciousness. We see no need for clumsy apparatus when something small and simple will do what is required.’

She looked down at Trey and produced a syringe from inside her cardigan. Without testing it for air jams, she stabbed it into his neck and even the Doctor winced at her aggressive manner. As the liquid entered Trey’s bloodstream, he began to shake and then woke with a start.

Dr Krafchin wandered back and did the same to Mrs Bush. ‘Now, pretty boy,’ she said to Trey, ‘you will do whatever I say, or this woman will die.’

Trey stared at Christine, now fully awake and clearly terrified.

As if poor Trey wasn’t, thought the Doctor. ‘It’s all right, both of you,’ he said.

Dr Krafchin shot him a look. ‘You will be silent.’

‘Oh, all right. I was going to tell Trey that he was to do exactly what you say.’ He called to Trey. ‘No heroics, Trey. Whatever Dr Krafchin here wants, you give her.’

As if he was suddenly aware of what was happening for the first time, the managing director turned away from lovingly admiring his future body and pointed to the Doctor. ‘Move him away,’ he instructed the prototypes. ‘If he speaks again, break his jaw in six places.’

The Doctor opted not to speak. Being moved away from the action was exactly what he needed.

The prototypes moved him directly backwards, so that he was against the shelves of alien trophies. Not quite in arms’ reach of the Dalekanium (good fissile material) or any guns (the Sontaran Mezon rifle was powerful – how had that got here, though?). He looked up to the ceiling, noting the diffused blue electric lighting. The cables ran around the walls to a junction box by the cellar steps. He twisted around and stared in the direction of the far wall, where the room was darkest. He would have perhaps one chance, but not yet.

He shoved his hand in his pocket until he gripped the chunky cellular phone Alan Bush had given him that morning, and turned it on. His finger found the battery casing – the last thing he wanted was to dislodge that – and found the moulding that separated the two pieces that, when pushed together as they were now, made the phone casing. Carefully he probed the casing with expert fingers, concentrating on finding the most sensitive bits, where the joining clips would be inside. He found both of them and pressed very carefully, twisting his fingers slightly. Yes! The casing sprang apart and he had access to the tiny chips and circuits inside.

Think, Doctor, think. This was 1989, cellular phones were still very primitive, which was ideal. They worked in pretty much the same way as shortwave radios, hence the need for cumbersome aerials. The Nestenes communicated telepathically – the minute fragments of Krafchin’s segment that inhabited the two prototypes could be disabled easily simply by interfering with the frequency that controlled them. Once blocked, they would become useless mannequins.

He had to do all of this from memory, with just one hand, inside his pocket.

Life was never easy, was it?

Garrett Marion Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 12.20

The Brigadier and Erskine dashed into the reception area of SenéNet. The first thing they saw was Roberta, diving for an alarm switch. Without even thinking of anything other than duty, plus a healthy dose of self-preservation, Lethbridge-Stewart fired straight into her right shoulder.

With a cry, Roberta spun wildly and fell face forward on to her desk, unable to drop any further because of the cybernetic attachments to her chair.

‘Sorry,’ he said gruffly. He hated shooting women and once upon a time would not have done so, but these days he knew that women were as capable of killing as any man – it had just taken a while to break through his conditioning,

which told him that women were more fragile than china and should never be hit, let alone shot.

He bent over, to see if he could staunch the bleeding, and then ducked back as she took a swipe at him with a heavy-duty hole punch. As she flailed about, Roberta jerked back once more, a new bullet hole in the centre of her forehead.

Erskine placed his revolver in the back of his trousers, and turned away, glancing out of the window by the entrance to the computer room. 'Your girl must have distracted the Stalker, but Lawson's running this way.'

'Never mind him,' said the Brigadier. 'What about these poor souls?' He pointed to the thirty teenagers, still linked through their cybernetic left arms to their computers.

'I don't know how any of this works. Turning things off might just fry their heads.'

'Better leave that to the Doctor, then,' the Brigadier said. There was a crash as the front door flew open and Lawson rushed in, pistol ready. He was on one knee, hardly out of breath, covering both of them in a second.

'Drop it, Lethbridge-Stewart,' he said, indicating the pistol with his own.

The Brigadier did as instructed, kicking it into the far corner of the computer room, so that at least Lawson would not be able to get it.

'Move, both of you.'

Still covering them expertly, Lawson nodded towards the cellar door on the other side of reception. As they wandered towards it, Lawson followed them intently with his gun.

The Brigadier spared a last look for the dead receptionist, wondering who she was before SenéNet got their claws on her. Poor girl.

Lawson felt under the reception area and pressed a concealed switch, causing the cellar door to open. He ushered them into the blue-tinted darkness.

'Well, well, Lawson.'

The Brigadier recognised the voice of the managing director.

'Two more to join our party. Say hello to Mrs Bush, Trey

Korte and Dr Krafchin. I believe, Brigadier, you are acquainted with the Doctor?’ He looked at Lawson. ‘Where’s the girl?’

‘Playing hide-and-seek with the Stalker,’ Lawson said gleefully.

‘Yes, well, that has not proved to be our most reliable resource recently, Lawson. Go and check.’

Lawson walked backwards up the steps, then out and closed the door.

Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

26 July 1989, 12.25

Mel was actually a bit lost by now. She had fled from the dying Stalker and the creepy nurses but quickly realised she could not find her way out through the woods again. Far better to find a road. It might take longer initially, but it was a more secure way of getting back to the Doctor in the end.

Finding the road had been quite easy. Working out whether left or right took her to or away from the Manor was something else entirely. Her photographic memory was great when it came to maps, instructions, photographs or exam papers, but was fairly lousy when you were as directionally impaired as she was right now.

A car could be heard... No, there were quite a few cars, moving towards her.

Young girl, side of road, hopelessly lost, please give directions. Ah, blow Women’s Lib, play the damsel in distress.

She was preparing for her acting role when the first car came around the corner. Mel’s mouth dropped open. Behind it were another couple of cars plus three police vehicles. And driving the very familiar car at the front was her very familiar father!

As they stopped, she almost jumped through the windscreen to get in.

‘I want you to know,’ said Alan Bush, ‘that I’d like to give you a big hug right now, more than anything in the world. But

DI Lines might toot his horn again – he already thinks I’m being an over-cautious father.’

Melanie turned round and gave a big grin and a thumbs-up to Lines and Rowe in the car behind.

‘Have you seen your mother, Melanie?’ Alan asked, not knowing if Mel realised Christine had gone.

‘Yes, and Trey. They are both alive, but SenéNet’s got them.’

‘Thank God they’re still OK.’ Alan let out a deep sigh and Mel could see the white knuckles where he was gripping the steering wheel tightly. ‘Let’s hope the Doctor forgives me for disobeying him.’

‘Pull over, Dad, and relax. I want to talk to the inspector and tell him what’s going on.’

Alan did so and within seconds their car was surrounded by CID and uniformed officers. Mel, sensibly, began at the beginning and told them everything.

Garrett Marton Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

26 July 1989, 12.45

Lawson could find no sign of the Stalker or the girl, no matter where he looked. He was just coming round the front of the Manor when a load of cars, including police cars, smashed their way through the locked gates and pulled up on the lawn by the fountain.

‘There’s one!’ shouted a voice, and Lawson realised it was the girl who should have been the Stalker’s lunch by now.

He brought his gun up and fired, watching as the girl was hurled to the grass.

‘Freeze! Police! Drop the gun!’

Lawson fired again in the direction of the voice – another female, probably some detective constable.

Somewhere not quite in this reality

26 July 1989, 12.45

>> What are you? >> Where do you exist? <<

‘Who are *you*? Where am I?’ Trey saw it as grey waves, rolling on to a grey beach. No, green leaves falling on to a green field. No –

>> You have a singular corporeal existence >> You can be terminated >> You are inferior >> You will not be communicated with <<

The voice was everywhere, in his head, in the sea, in the leaves, on the never-ending sand he was seeing now ‘Wait! Please! Who are you? What is going on?’

>> Your primitive nature is feeding us >> Such raw strength, such raw power, you can be used >> Fed off>> This must be your purpose >> That is why you are here >> To feed from <<

‘Stop! My name is Korte. Trey Korte. What is yours? Why can’t I see you?’

>> See? What is see? <<

‘See? Well, I... I –’

>> Your corporeal existence requires certain extraneous senses >> You are not evolved enough to use just the one <<

Trey called out again, called out to the stars and planets he could see gyrating around him. ‘How did I get here? With you?’

>> You were provided by the agent of the Third Planet >> For food >> Your mind is linked to ours >> Through it, we shall re-establish our link with the Nestene Consciousness >> Through that link, we shall return to your world <<

‘I thought you were already there. You’re beside me. I saw you, in the casket thing.’

>> You are like the agent. Limited in your perception of what we are >> We have existed in this universe since it was born from out of the former >> We existed in that universe since it was born from the former >> We existed in that –<<

‘Enough already, I get the idea.’ Trey needed to understand more about this Nestene link: he knew that anything he could find out might help the Doctor defeat them. ‘Where are you?’

>> Everywhere <<

That was a great help. Concentrate, Trey. It’s clear that

wherever you are is not real. The Astral Plane, perhaps? He'd heard of people having near-death experiences, or mediums reaching out to the departed and meeting on this so-called Astral Plane. But he never believed in any of that. Perhaps this was a good time to begin doing so. 'So, why do you need me?'

>> You are not needed >> The agent believes you are because it served a purpose >> A beast of the Third Planet with strong psychokinetic abilities was required to help our growth, increase the link with ourself >> We have done that >> We are the Nestene Consciousness >> We exist >> We survive >> We cross the voids, linked for ever <<

'Then let me go. If I am of no use to you, let me go!' Trey guessed that was probably a fruitless request, but if it gained even a morsel of extra information...

>> You will be our new agent on the Third Planet >> Our link with you is established <<

'No! Leave Earth alone! Please!'

>> The Nestene Consciousness must colonise >> We grow, we expand, we link >> That is our function, our purpose >> You are the spearhead, you are the new agent >> You will arrange receptacles for us on the Third Planet to build, to create new vessels for us <<

'No, never! I will not help you!'

>> Do not fight the Nestene Consciousness, beast of the Third Planet >> It is everywhere, in all places in all times at once >> You have bridged us, created our link >> We are one again! We are all the Nestene Consciousness >> You will be the Nestene Consciousness >> We will all be the Nestene Consciousness <<

Trey needed a distraction; he could feel them in his head, in his brain. Picking through his mind, searching out his weak spots, his darker places where there were no dreams, no hope. No love. Just dark, emptiness. Exactly what they needed. Abcdefghijklmn... opqrs... tuvwxxyz... zy... xwvu... tsrqponm... No, they would not use him... not... use...

>> We are complete >> We are supreme >> You are complete >> You are supreme >> We are now the Nestene

Consciousness <<

'No! Zyxwvutsrq... ponmlkj...' He had to concentrate, hold them out of his mind. But they were there, inside, prodding and poking at his memories, his feelings, his desires, everything that was truly him. And they were absorbing it all. His body was lighter – he could feel himself lifting up. Up and away, leaving behind all sensations of touch, or feeling, of reality... He could see a massive grey, wispy cloud, sparkling with blue energy, hovering in his mind's eye, stretching out, across everything. Blotting out his vision, his hearing, his smell. He wouldn't need those senses any more, not as part of the Nestene Consciousness...

No! He was Trey Korte...

No! He was the Nestene Consciousness...

'I .. am... Trey...'

>> We are the Nestene Consciousness <<

'I .. am... Nestene... <<

Garrett Marion Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald

26 July 1989, 12.46

Detective Sergeant Stephanie Rowe tried not to look at the unmoving body of Melanie Bush, huddled on the grass. To her right, DI Lines was holding back Melanie's hysterical father.

'Freeze! Police! Drop the gun!' Rowe called out, hoping to God he would. But no, the bloody fool was on a roll. Stupid people with guns always are, she remembered being told at Hendon. If someone has shot one person, chances are they'll have no problem with taking out a few more.

The window of the car door she was sheltering behind erupted in tiny fragments and she was not sure if it was the glass or the bullet that nicked her ear. Either way, she fired three shots back, one to the stomach, two to the chest.

Whoever the gunman was, he was dead as he hit the ground.

Before anyone could check any further, Alan Bush was beside his daughter, screaming out her name.

'I'm not deaf, Dad,' came her voice. 'I just jumped when

he fired, that's all. Sorry about the car.'

They all looked at Alan's car, one light shattered and a large hole in the bonnet. Water was leaking over the grass. 'Radiators are replaceable,' Alan said. 'Mel's aren't.'

'Hey, you actually called me Mel,' she said.

'That's because I love you very much,' he replied.

They were hauled off by Lines and Rowe, who were wanting to get on with the next stage of their plan: they were going to storm the Manor.

Another officer was dragging away the body of the dead gunman, calling for an ambulance. Mel was clearly trying not to stare at the body.

'No sirens,' warned Rowe. 'After all, there's not exactly a hurry, is there?'

Slowly Lines and Rowe entered the Manor, closely followed by a couple of armed uniformed officers in flak jackets. Mel and Alan were at the rear. Mel saw the computer room and darted off into it.

Lines was looking at the dead receptionist, so Rowe and Alan Bush followed Mel in.

Rowe just stared in horror at what she saw, and Lines drew a breath as he arrived. Mel, meanwhile was darting around, looking at the earphones, remembering what Dr Krafchin had said about those drones under the influence. Of course, that might have applied only to the mobile agents of the two nurses, but... Mel carefully eased the earphones off the nearest girl and listened. Just white noise, and none of the team appeared to be working – their screens were blank.

'Could this be how they sent those messages to the Maxx machines?' asked Lines.

Mel needed to be filled in, and once they had told her what they had learned about the Maxx devices and the killer toys, she came to a decision. She told them not to move and ran out of the Manor, returning a few moments later with a CD.

'I only hope they're not all Pink Floyd fans,' she muttered. 'Because this rubbish would be enough to stop me.'

'Hey, is that the one from our car?'

Mel nodded as she traced the earphone wires. Unlike the two nurses' drones, these ones did not use CD players. Instead, they were using CD-ROM drives, which meant the input signal was different, a different frequency.

She slid open a CD-ROM tray on the nearest machine and swapped the disc. She heard the click and the machine instantly rebooted.

'Oops, this might get tricky,' she said but luckily, a CD icon appeared.

There was no mouse plugged in. Being cybernetically attached, the drones presumably accessed the hard drives using their minds. Mel began rummaging through the drawers until she found a mouse. Plugging it in, she clicked on the icon, bringing up the CD's own icon, listing the track numbers. Selecting one at random, she started the Pink Floyd CD going.

The effect, not just on the person next to her but on all the teenagers was instantaneous. As one, their heads turned and looked straight at Mel, impassive faces offering not anger or surprise or relief at her action, just acknowledgement. Then, in one swift movement, the cybernetic threads from their left arms retreated and twenty-nine other CD-ROM drawers opened, twenty-nine other hard drives rebooted and twenty-nine other screens flicked into life.

Unfortunately, thirty mutilated teenagers who, last time they had been aware of anything, all possessed left hands, woke up from whatever dreams they had been having and, as one, started screaming and yelling in pain. The noise was heart-rending.

'Get them outside,' yelled Lines, herding his men in, 'or God knows what will hear us!'

Garrett Marton Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 12.50

'What the hell was that?'

The managing director was at the foot of the cellar steps in a moment. Pointing to the other prototype that was not

guarding the Doctor, he yelled, 'Get up there and find out what that screaming was!'

The Doctor realised that somehow either the cavalry had arrived or something worse had occurred. The reactions of both the managing director and Dr Krafchin hopefully suggested it was the former, so it was time for a distraction.

He yanked his arm out his pocket, sending the fascia of the mobile phone skidding along the floor. This attracted the attention of the prototypes beside him, allowing him to activate his customised mobile phone. He just hoped it would work.

The effect was both instantaneous and very satisfying. The two prototypes beside him crumpled to the floor like marionettes whose strings had been cut. Both Dr Krafchin and the third prototype staggered slightly, but not enough.

The Doctor threw himself backwards and ran for the darkened far end of the cellar, where he faded into the shadows.

The third prototype was moving swiftly now, chasing him. Dr Krafchin or the other two Nestene energy spheres must have adapted frequencies to override the Doctor's phone.

'No!' screeched the managing director and, pushing Krafchin out of the way, adjusted the controls for the machinery attached to Trey's head.

The boy began screaming in pain and, before the Brigadier could stop him, Erskine ran forward.

The Brigadier was gripping Mrs Bush's hand. It crossed his mind that surely Dr Krafchin should be helping the managing director, but she just stood there smiling. Lazily she turned and looked straight at the Brigadier, the fixed smile not vanishing as her body split straight down the middle, revealing the now glowing furiously blue Nestene energy sphere, absorbing Trey's psychic energy and sating itself, becoming more attuned with its compatriots in the casket, who were also glowing brighter.

'It's working! Yes, it's working.' The managing director was about to increase Trey's torment further when Erskine jumped on his back, trying to pull him down.

‘You used me,’ he spat. Suddenly brandishing his concealed pistol, he smashed it against the managing director’s head. However, it just bounced off, as if it had struck a solid surface.

The managing director casually shrugged the shocked Erskine back, his Ray-Bans dropping to the floor. Erskine stared in horror as the dead eyes facing him, and then died swiftly as the managing director’s fist connected with the side of his neck with the force and weight of a fifty-mile-per-hour car crash.

Christine Bush buried her face in the Brigadier’s jacket as Erskine flip-flopped into the corner, by the cupboard displaying the managing director’s new Nestene-constructed body.

While all this was going on, the Doctor was trying to draw the attention of the prototype guard. Eventually he saw with satisfaction the fingers drop away to reveal the crude Auton handgun concealed inside. What he was planning needed perfect timing. He darted one way, then the other, and jumped up to the ceiling, grabbing on to the heavily lagged electrical wiring he had seen there earlier. Swinging his feet up, he felt the heat and heard the distinct sizzle of the Nestene energy blast drilling a hole beneath him and blasting the wires apart. Then two things happened – one expected, one not so.

First, as he had hoped, the electrical wires were ripped apart but still dangled from the ceiling, live and sparking ferociously. The Doctor kicked one towards the prototype, knowing it could not hurt it as such, although the power might knock it back a bit.

In the meantime the destruction of the electrical source had cut off the power to the esper machine to which Trey was connected and also plunged the room into darkness.

But, it wasn’t total darkness, and the Doctor realised with a shock that the Nestenes had replenished themselves – the room was brighter than before thanks to the blue natural radiance of the glowing spheres.

The unexpected thing that happened, however, was that the section of wall blasted by the prototype gave way, letting

earth, brickwork and some piping tumble into the end of the cellar.

The piping had to be the fountain supply – and if water poured in, with all that electricity around, the room would become the most lethal underground swimming pool imaginable.

The Doctor ran full pelt back towards the others, pursued by the prototype, who was suddenly hit by a jet of water from a ruptured pipe.

As electrical cables sparked, the Doctor dived for Trey, pulling him away from the trolley.

‘Up the steps!’ he yelled at the Brigadier and Mrs Bush. ‘Quickly. Now!’

They did not wait to be told again, and as water began seeping across the floor, the Doctor almost threw the dazed but awake Trey at them.

‘Outside,’ he cried. ‘Beyond the fountain! Go!’

And they went, leaving the room filling with water and the Doctor facing an angry managing director and three Nestene energy units.

‘Look at them,’ urged the Doctor. ‘They have all the mental energy they require. They are linked with each other and the Nestene Consciousness once again. But they haven’t offered to help you into your new body yet, have they? They’ve used you. Ever since you set this whole abomination up twenty odd years ago, they have been using you.’

‘Nonsense,’ was the best the managing director could manage. ‘By causing all this chaos, all you have done is sign your own death warrant!’

‘They are Nestenes, man! Somewhere, deep inside you, you’re still a human. Look at the difference. They are an alien life form, with a completely different sense of morality and with different instincts from you and me and everyone else on this planet. You are unleashing an unstoppable force. Do you really think they’d be satisfied with the Maxx? You’ve given them the means to colonise his planet on a plate and all because you want to live for ever!’

There was a massive spray of sparks as the rising water

level touched the ends of the cables. The lights, although already dead, exploded as gigawatts of power surged through them. And then the first sign of smoke emerged, from the prototypes the Doctor had floored. Their clothing had been hit by a spark and within seconds the two prototypes burst into flames and start to melt.

The managing director followed the Doctor's eyeline. The Dalekanium on the shelves, the Mezon gun, the Cyberguns – all the weapons and alien technologies, surrounded by a rapidly spreading fire.

The managing director ran forward, but the huge blast as the Mezon gun exploded hurled him into the rising water. And everything moved so fast, all the Doctor could do was watch, rooted to the spot in sheer fascination, as the destruction played itself out before his eyes.

A chain reaction went off on the shelves, hurling a massive ball of hot plasma, acid and goodness knows what else, melded together to make one huge bomb!

The Doctor watched as the cupboard and the plastic body it contained vanished, melted away in a second. He watched as the surviving prototype, reaching out for the casket which now contained the three Nestene energy spheres, probably being urged to find safety, was swept aside and dispersed by the ferocious heat, the casket turning over and tumbling on the floor. As the casket filled with water the three spheres bobbed out. And he watched as, with one final explosion of something alien, the ceiling came crashing down on top of everything, bringing with it the three floors of Garrett Manor above.

As the steps and wall behind him gave way, the last thing the Doctor saw was the managing director trying to get up before he was crushed, watching as all three Nestene energy spheres splintered into millions of tiny plastic shards as several tonnes of brick, concrete, wood and stone crushed them out of existence.

Garrett Marlon Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 12.58

They had been in the computer room when the Brigadier had burst in, yelling for them to leave.

Once she had known what SenéNet were up to with the computers, Mel had sat down and called up the various submenus.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Bob Lines.

‘We cannot afford to leave things like this,’ she said. ‘Someone might come in and try to use the Maxx machines again.’ She was tapping furiously on the keys. ‘All I’m doing is creating a self-replicating virus, and sending it through the SenéNet modem. Every time someone switches on one of the thirty Maxx machines out there now, the virus will go straight in, scramble all the stuff stored on the drives and make the machine useless. They’ll be no more killer toys, no more subliminal CD games, nothing.’

‘Is that going to be enough?’ Lines was looking around the room. ‘Is it really all controlled from here?’

‘The games side of it, yes. The innocent kids being controlled, being forced to lie, murder and cheat, no, that’s at the hospital. But one thing at a time.’ Her fingers flashed over the keyboard so fast, her father was able to understand why so many companies had been competing for Mel’s expertise and acumen.

‘Done it,’ she said, and with a final flourish sent the signal. ‘Not that different to the Master’s one actually – and I bet even the Doctor couldn’t have done it better.’

In the corner, a massive server flashed its lights rapidly and went out. The thirty screens did likewise.

The virus has already activated,’ Mel said. ‘Somewhere in Brighton some very lucky child is facing the disappointment of having switched on his Maxx and found it doesn’t work.’ She smiled at her father. ‘Now, let’s find the Doctor.’

At which point Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, who was not as young as he had once been, sprinted into the room, almost throwing Christine Bush at her elated husband, while still supporting Trey, and told them all to get the ruddy hell out of there.

Outside, by the fountain, the ambulance men were

escorting the last of the wailing teenagers into their ambulances as Detective Inspector Lines ran screaming out of the door to the Manor.

‘Get away from here,’ he yelled. ‘Move it!’

Policemen, ambulancemen, arrested SenéNet workers and teenagers all ran as fast as they could down the driveway, towards the gatehouse.

Lines stood still, counting his officers out. One of the last was Rowe. Melanie Bush was almost carried under her arm, protesting wildly. Then Christine and Alan Bush and finally the Brigadier, who was grateful when Lines took Trey from him.

The Brigadier, Lines and Trey had just reached he fountain when the ground started shifting beneath them. They all dived forward, scrabbling towards the parked cars.

‘Keep moving!’ yelled Trey suddenly. ‘I know what’s going to happen next!’

Lines and Trey now helped the wheezing Brigadier along as the first explosion shot out of the ground, obliterating every police car and two of the ambulances.

They just made it to the safety of the gatehouse as Garrett Manor vanished in a massive explosion that rained masonry everywhere.

Outhouse, Garrett Manor; Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 13.02

The Right Honourable Laurence Byrne and his Permanent Under Secretary, Miss Goodwin, had been reportedly on a business trip to New York, but no one ever saw them check into a hotel or attend any meetings. The simple explanation for this was that were still awaiting their programming after, like Luke Aspinall, they had been adapted by Dr Krafchin.

Standing in the same pose as they had done for a number of weeks, surrounded by banks of computers and servers, they were roasted to nothing when Garrett Manor exploded. Part of the huge fireball obliterated the servers, the computers, the alien technology and them.

Apart from the SenéNet executive, only one other person had known they were ever there...

JAL Flight 644, Gatwick to Tokyo
26 July 1989, 14.02

The aeroplane was flying over Germany when the incident happened, although no one could ever offer any reasonable explanation of what the incident was.

The business class section of the plane was not particularly full, but New Zealand businessman Scott W. Grey was watching his video monitor when the young Japanese executive across the aisle suddenly started convulsing. Grey had just pressed the steward's call button when the Japanese man bent double and spewed a couple of pints of yellow mucus all over the seats in front and the floor, before dying.

The steward came running, with a rather pointless cry of 'Futayomoto-san, are you all right?' when it was painfully obvious that Ryuichi Futayomoto was most definitely not.

The Hospital, Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 13.03

The entire building was ablaze. The fire had spread quicker than anyone could have expected in such a large building, although the copious amounts of petrol, oil and kerosene that had been poured over every floor, wall, bed and ceiling probably helped.

Luckily no one was nearby when an explosion occurred in one of the ground-floor storerooms. If anyone had been inside, they would have seen the last surviving piece of Nestene technology, massive tubes of yellow goo destined for the veins of more people, explode into millions of melting plastic fragments.

As the third floor gave way under the heat and the building's interior collapsed in on itself, the perpetrators of the crime were satisfied to know that only one piece of alien technology from the hospital still existed.

Garrett Manor Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 13.06

Mel looked back at the few odd pieces of corner brickwork that still stood. The first few steps of the staircase that had led from reception to the upper offices were still there, but so badly charred that a good gust of wind would reduce them to fine ash.

‘One of the finest Tudor manors left in Sussex,’ mumbled a police constable sadly. ‘All gone.’

Mel walked to the front of the rest of the group, where one man stood alone, hands clasped behind his back, head bowed slightly.

‘He was still in the basement, wasn’t he?’ she said softly, reaching out to take his large hands in her small ones.

‘Yes,’ was the Brigadier’s quiet answer. ‘Yes, getting us out safely was, as always, his prime consideration.’

‘I suppose he was what people used to call a hero, in the old days.’ Mel could feel her bottom lip trembling, but she wasn’t going to let go. She just wouldn’t allow herself to. If the Brigadier could hold himself together, after all their years of friendship, then bearing in mind she had known the Doctor for just two and a half days, Mel would not insult the Brigadier by crying for him.

‘I saw him for all of five minutes this time. We didn’t even say hello, let alone goodbye.’ The Brigadier shuffled slightly. ‘I always imagined that whenever it was time for one of us to slip off this mortal coil, Miss Bush, the other would be there to say *bon voyage*.’

‘Oh, are you going somewhere then, Alistair?’

They both turned together, to see the Doctor leaning against the side of the gatehouse.

The subsequent cacophony of ‘I don’t believe it’s and ‘We thought you were dead’s and ‘Glad you’re alive’s left those unfamiliar with the Doctor in various states of bewilderment.

Amidst all this, Detective Inspector Bob Lines shook his head. ‘You know, Steph, he’s done it again. Just like with the Master and that blasted computer. Between him and Melanie

Bush, they have just eradicated all the evidence we would need to prove that this case actually occurred.'

DS Rowe laughed. 'C'mon, guy, there's still Lenny the Greek to sort out.' Then she saw the traumatised youths gathered around the ambulances, shock and terror in their eyes. She shook her head slowly, aghast that something so hideous could happen to the youngsters. She became more serious. 'And someone is going to have to explain why thirty-odd teenagers have suddenly lost their left hands and any memories of the last few months.'

Lines looked back at the wreckage. 'Better get one of the paramedics to call base, Steph. We just lost an entire fleet of cars and I don't fancy walking back to Brighton.'

They moved off to help with the injured and arrested, nodding a hello to Christine and Alan Bush. 'She's a good girl, our Mel,' said Alan, hugging his wife tightly.

'That she is,' Christine agreed. 'And you're going to need a new car too.'

'Uh-huh. And a new copy of *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, thank you, Melanie Jane Bush.'

They looked across to their daughter, who was sitting beside a shaken Trey, his temples and face badly bruised by the clumsy attentions of Dr Krafchin and her wiring techniques.

'You saved us, you know,' she said.

'I'm responsible for all this, you mean,' he murmured. 'If I hadn't been an "esper", they wouldn't have involved you, or your mother or...'

'Hey.' Mel caressed his ear. 'Hey, they would have found someone. But probably not someone who could resist them for so long.'

Trey pursed his lips. 'It was a frightening thing, Mel. I... I suppose I touched their minds, caught a glimpse of how vast that Nestene Consciousness is. But I would not let them have all the power they wanted, just enough to keep them busy. I knew the Doctor was up to something. I had to buy him time.'

'And you did,' said the Doctor. 'Without you, we'd all be but slaves to the plastic population.'

‘How did you get out, Doctor?’

‘Ah, yes, well, I wish I could claim genius or forward planning in that, but, alas, I cannot. No, I actually fell into a servants’ corridor which ran behind the cellar – a scullery, I think. It led to a back staircase and I just ran like the clappers.’

As the Doctor and the Brigadier walked off, Mel smiled at Trey. ‘See, even the heroes have good luck.’

Trey tried to smile, but he was crying, and Mel hugged him tightly. ‘Is he dead?’ he asked, trying to keep it down. ‘Did Joe go up with the rest of them in that building?’

Mel simply did not know what to say. Was it better to say yes? After all, to all intents and purposes both Joe and Ashley were dead – Dr Krafchin had seen to that. Although Joe’s body still walked and talked and could probably be programmed to care again, it would be fake. It would not be real. Was it better to say he had died in the inferno, or to tell the truth and maybe set Trey on a pointless quest to find him? And if, by some miracle, he did so, be devastated at what he found? Mel just did not know what to say.

Trey sighed. ‘It’s not a quandary I’d want to be in, Mel, either. But thank you. For caring.’

‘You... you read my mind?’

‘Not intentionally, but I could picture it all from what you were thinking about. Just like I knew that explosion was going to happen by picking up stray thoughts from the Doctor’s mind. Hey, maybe I’ve taken a few Nestene brainwaves with me, who knows?’ They stood up and rubbed his face. ‘I think it might be best to consider that Joe has gone away and leave it at that.’

Mel hugged him again and wondered what the Doctor would have done. She watched him walking around with the Brigadier and tried to imagine what they were talking about.

Out of earshot of everyone, the Doctor and the Brigadier were in fact discussing the managing director.

‘Do you think he is dead?’

‘You know, Alistair, I’ve been accused at times of being quite callous, quite unkind, since I obtained this adorable anatomy. Maybe this is one of those occasions, rare as they

are mind you, when that accusation is justified, because I hope so, I really do hope so.'

'And the stolen equipment?'

'You ought to keep a better eye on that stuff, you know. Have a word with Sudbury, eh. Get him to incinerate the next Martian machete or Chelonian carapace you get hold of, please?'

'Oh, that reminds me, Doctor. I heard talk of some "old and delicate object".'

The Doctor opened his mouth, perhaps to offer some explanation, but all that emerged was an embarrassed 'Ah, yes...'

The Brigadier raised an eyebrow. 'And something about "an old fossil", I believe I recall.'

The Doctor nodded quickly. 'Now I think about it, I do remember saying something along those lines. But I also remember stressing that, above all, I valued it considerably. Despite everything else, I knew it was exceptionally valuable and precious.'

'Well, that's all right then,' the Brigadier said, smiling. The two men stopped their banter, basking in the warmth of the afternoon. And maybe a little something else, such as friendship.

The Brigadier coughed. 'I've, er, well missed you, it has to be said, Doctor. Splendid to see you again, despite the fancy dress.'

'Fancy dress? I'll have you know, my good man, this is *haute couture* in the Acteon galaxy. And on Kolpasha, I have had to patent the design just to stop the cheap imitations. Fancy dress, indeed.'

The Brigadier just beamed at him.

And slowly, a huge grin spread across the Doctor's face. 'Well, I suppose the coat is a bit over the top...'

They wandered further away, towards the edge of the forest, recalling old times, old friends, catching up on news about old acquaintances and reliving old battles.

And as Melanie Bush sat on the grass, her mind simply incapable of taking in all the events of the morning, and now

seeing everything so serene, she laughed.

Somewhere beyond Leeds, Yorkshire
26 July 1989, 16.25

A white Cadillac, an American style ambulance from the late fifties, speeding up the dual carriageway towards Scotland was not of any real interest to the two patrol officers following them.

‘She’s doing nearly eighty, Terry.’

‘So what, Rich? Doing a ton and I’d say go for it, but it’s a nice sunny day, there’s not much traffic and maybe they’re in a hurry. An accident maybe. Let ‘em go. What harm can two nurses and three teenage kids do on a day like this. Let’s stop off and have something to eat.’

As the police car pulled away, Ciara sighed, and looked at her brother, his stub of an arm in a sling. ‘Good thing I can drive, really,’ she said.

Cellian nodded. ‘Good thing I taught you.’

‘Hey, guys,’ Ciara called to the three in the back, ‘I know a nice remote part of the Highlands. Cellian and I will set up a place there and we’ll work on some way of getting you free of this thing.’

Cellian waved a small black box at them, with a fader switch on one side and a bank of flashing LEDs on top, next to a condenser microphone.

Ciara stared at them in her rear-view mirror. Three teenagers, staring blankly ahead, like three autistic friends.

She had done this to them, she and Cellian had stolen their lives. And now it was time to try to put things right.

Garrett Manor Ashdown Forest, Sussex Weald
26 July 1989, 18.18

The heat had died down at last. The weight was gone from his body. He was ready to get up and start again.

After all, he had been the managing director of SenéNet, one of the largest companies in Europe. After all, he had been

the first human being to sell his soul to alien technology not just once, but twice. After all, he had once been a simple electronics packer on the shop floor of a leading transistor manufacturer. And after all, he had once been a man called Martyn Townsend. And nothing, especially not the Doctor, was going to stop him now.

So why could he not move?

He forced one blast-damaged cybernetic eye open. The water had been turned to steam in the explosion, the same explosion that had cleaned the world of all trace of the hundreds of alien items that had been stored here. And destroyed all hope he had of building a Nestene-based body for himself. But he would fight on, nothing could... nothing could stop him rebuilding his empire and... and... Why was his head hurting so much? Why could he not concentrate properly.

Why were his massively powerful hands not pushing him up?

He twisted his head down as far as he could see and, with horror realised exactly why. The heat had fused his mechanical body to the floor, reducing it to nothing more than a solid pool of molten metal. And that meant his head was failing, his eyesight was going, and shutting down. Everything that had artificially kept his brain powered for twenty years was betraying him... betraying... Something?

What was he thinking of?

Where was he?

Who was he?

The approaching blackness seemed comforting. It was easier to embrace it than try to think. Thinking hurt. Thinking just... just...

Finally, after over twenty years of artificial stimulations and augmented life preservation, the brain of Martyn Townsend died and, without the artificial nutrients that fed it, it atrophied in less than thirty minutes.

EPILOGUE

36 Downview Crescent, Pease Pottage, West Sussex
26 July 1989, 22.24

‘They say it’s impossible to see the stars at night near a big city,’ Mel said, ‘but, you know, Doctor, that’s just not true. On a night like this, you can see them as clearly as if you were in the middle of the desert.’

Mel was lying comfortably on the grass in the garden. She rolled over on to one side, brushing her red hair back, and stared at the Doctor’s profile.

He wasn’t making eye contact.

‘Or from somewhere out there. Among them.’ She watched his face for some flicker of... well, anything. A reaction of some sort. A laugh. A derisive snort (he was so good at those). A frown. But there was nothing.

She had never really considered it before, but looking at him, lying on his back, wrapped in that silly coat, his greying blond hair fallen back into the grass, he looked totally alien. It was something in the eyes – those windows on to someone’s soul. The Doctor had some kind of soul, she knew, but it was as if in him the eyes were shutters for it. They kept the outside world just there – outside. Or maybe they kept something inside.

‘Hey, Doctor.’ She nudged him. ‘Penny for your thoughts? Thinking of home? Family? Fellow travellers?’

The Doctor did not look at her, but blinked slowly just once. ‘Minds, Mel. Memories are for cluttering, like dusty attics. Then one day you explore them and bingo! Memories – and it’s all there. Just what you need. When you need it. But if you keep them up front, it’s like a perpetual jumble sale. Lift up one memory and you find another you’d much rather forget.’ Mel sighed and flopped on to her back again. ‘And is

this what it's like up there, Doctor? Unwanted memories.'

'Sometimes. Sometimes, it's the future memories you have to hide away. To suppress. Remembering the past can be bad, Mel, but remembering the future, that can be worse.'

'How can you know your future, Doctor? That's silly.'

'No, that's the curse that is time travel, Mel. You're safe here in Pease Pottage. Oh, you may consider it drab and boring, but a human life can be so rich. So full of excitement and adventure and thrills if you make it so.'

'That would be far more convincing if you weren't lying on your back and sounding as if you were eulogising at your own funeral.' Mel propped herself up again. 'Do you know, Doctor, that what is out there fascinates me. When I was about five or six, I was allowed to stay up late one night. Or rather, Mum came and woke me up. They were showing a moon landing, I can't remember which one, but it was part of history and Dad thought I needed to see it. And I can still remember that image, people jerkily jumping on the moon. And I thought then, "I want to do that. I want to see Earth from outer space. I want to see the Arm of Orion, the Great Bear and the North Star from somewhere other than down here." And you can do that. I can't. Trey can't. Mum, Dad, even the Brigadier can't. But you can. We're stuck here, on this one planet, but you've got the whole cosmos to play with. I have to say, I'm really rather jealous.'

The Doctor sat up and looked down at her. 'I'm sorry, Mel, but it's not for you, what is out there. Not with me for company anyway. As a friend of mine once said, "Trouble comes hand in hand with you, Doctor. And brings his cousins Murder, Lies and Corruption along for the ride." It's not all sugar and spice, Mel. Sadly.'

He turned to look her straight in the eye and she realised that she was suddenly holding her breath. This amazing alien, with the green eyes, ludicrous clothes and a humanity that outweighed any negative points seemed to be staring into her. No, past her. Into her life, her past and... her future? Did he know what lay in store for her? Was he trying to protect her? He had to know what she wanted, what she desired. Indeed,

what she needed. To explore, to grow and to understand. To discover what kind of universe could spawn aliens as diverse as the Doctor and the bizarre races which had created the energy and resources used by the managing director of SenéNet. To know the same sort of wonders about which the Brigadier had remained so tight-lipped.

‘Doctor,’ she heard herself saying. ‘You have to realise that I can’t stay here, not now. Not on one small planet when there’s so much to find out out there. Please don’t say I have to stay behind.’

The Doctor was still staring, silently.

Mel carried on, rushing to get her words out before he cut across them with the inevitable “no” that would come unless she convinced him otherwise. Mum and Dad are fine. I’m not going to go for ever. You could bring me back, or I’ll hitch a lift. There’s bound to be some equivalent of a galactic number 9 bus out there. And they’ve got Trey to look after. I mean, he needs to recover. He can’t travel home in his state, and anyway, he won’t want to. And Mum and Dad have each other. I have no one. Except you. Please. And I promise, no carrot juice, no quips about your weight. I’ll be so quiet you’ll never even notice me.’

It flashed through her mind that even she knew the latter was unlikely. And she would have to get him to slim a bit – for his own good. His heart... hearts, rather... wouldn’t carry on for ever. And that TARDIS-thing must surely be able to get her to a store that sells carrot juice somewhere.

‘No.’

It was like he had winded her. If she hadn’t been already on the grass, she would have dropped in disappointment. And she was not going to cry, no matter how many tears were suddenly welling up in her eyes.

‘No?’ she whispered.

‘No,’ he repeated. Firmly. Brooking no argument. ‘Mel, this is your home. Look around you. Everything you know and trust is here. You belong to 1989, not 1489 or 3689. I don’t have the right to take you away from all this. It’s dangerous and impractical. I’m sorry, Mel. Give my regards to

your parents and Trey. One day I may pop back. My face may be different, I may be six inches shorter, with a thirty-two-inch waist. I may be taller and even larger' – he smiled at that – 'but I will try to come back. I promise.'

Mel closed her eyes, holding back the tears of rage and frustration. And the disappointment that came with the knowledge he might well be right. When she opened them again, the garden was empty.

She heard the patio doors slide open behind her, but as she turned it was just Mum and Dad. Christine called out to her. Mel stood and stared at her parents. Then, very quickly, she walked towards them. Christine Bush was about to say something when Mel held out her hand to shush her.

'Mum, Dad, I'm going out for a while. If I don't come back tonight, please don't fret. All this has been a bit of a strain, you know, and I might go and see someone in London.'

Alan Bush nodded, before his wife could speak. 'We understand, angel. Do you want to take the car? It's a bit late for the train.'

'That'd be great, Dad. But its in little pieces in the middle of Ashdown Forest. No, I'll get a cab to Brighton station.'

Christine was aghast. 'That'll cost a fortune. Let your father at least pay for you, please.'

Mel started to say no, but Alan just smiled at his daughter. 'I know how you feel, angel. I'll give you the cash for the cab. At least let me do that. You go and throw some things together.'

Mel hugged them both and ran upstairs. She did not go straight to her room, but knocked on Trey's door.

'Hi, Mel,' he called from inside, and she went in.

He was propped up in bed. His arm in a sling and the bruising around his face made him look like an over-ripe pear. A book was lying in his lap. 'I wasn't really reading it,' he said with a smile. 'Actually it's pretty crap, but Joe thought I'd like it, so I made the effort to start it.' He showed her the cover and she laughed half-heartedly. 'C. P Snow. He had even better taste than I thought. But no, you're right, *Death Under Sail* was his first and it's not one of the best, and

they've recently made a bad television version of it. Try the 'Strangers and Brothers' series. *The Corridors of Power* is really good. There's a copy on my shelves. You'll like that more.'

There was a pause, then Trey spoke quietly. 'You're going after him, aren't you?'

'Oh, I have to, Trey. Surely you understand that?'

Trey nodded, as Mel sat on the end of the bed, twirling a thread of blanket around her finger.

'I mean, you know what I'm like. I have to go exploring. To see if what he said is true.'

'And if it isn't?'

Mel shrugged. 'I'll ask to come home. I doubt he'd say no to that.'

'I doubt he'd say yes to you going at all.' Trey took her small hand away from the blanket and held it between both of his. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

Mel nodded. 'Look after Mum and Dad, Trey. Please.' He nodded.

'And yourself. And one day, you never know, Joe might find a way back.' She leaned over and kissed him. 'It might just wear off without the Nestenes around.'

'Hey, Mel,' Trey said as she started back towards the door. 'Can I have your job at ACL?'

She laughed. 'Why not. They'll take anyone, after all.'

She left his room, and crossed the hallway to her own. It seemed months since she'd been in here rather than a couple of days. The tidy bookshelves, the clean walls, with only a tiny framed photo of her with her university friends above the bed. The duvet neat and tidy, her drawers all closed, no doubt packed with freshly ironed clothes. A single flopsy bunny on her pillow.

'Get a life, Melanie Bush. You're as boring as they come.'

She hauled a weekend bag out from under the bed and threw her hairbrush, a few tops, trousers and skirts, some underwear and her toothbrush into it. And the flopsy bunny.

It took a total of two minutes and she was ready to leave her room, for goodness knew how long. A week? A month?

Ten years? It might be a matter of hours if she didn't get to his TARDIS first... Mel stopped. Somewhere, deep in the back of her mind, there had been a flaw in her plan. And now she knew what it was. The TARDIS. It was dimensionally transcendental, whatever that was. It was supposed to alter its appearance wherever it landed but the Doctor's was broken. All this, she had learned from the Brigadier, and her memory brought that fact, together with a hundred other useless bits of information she'd discovered about various things in the last forty-eight hours, swimming into her consciousness. But no one had told her where it was parked. Landed. Materialised. Whatever.

Grabbing her bag, she tapped in Trey's door again and opened it. He was listening to the radio, and she could hear something incoherent that she was positive she remembered from college. Something Leonora Pridge used to listen to. But that was irrelevant to her now – that was the past. And her future was in danger of leaving her behind.

'In the Lanes,' Trey said quietly. 'Behind the Nessie Burger bar on the corner of North and West streets. Looks just like a police box.'

Of course, that strange thing she had seen there! Mel nodded. 'Thanks.' She slipped back out. With her photographic memory and his latent psychic powers, they would make a good double act. Maybe work for the Brigadier and his old friends at that UNIT place – assuming she didn't make it to this TARDIS of the Doctor's.

Her parents watched silently as she threw her bag in the waiting taxi. She had hugged her father tightly, then held Christine for longer. She held back more tears – unlike her parents, Mel knew she wasn't returning. Not for a long time. But she would find some way to let them know from time to time that she was all right.

The cab drove away a few moments later, and in the relative privacy of the back she finally allowed herself to cry.

West Street, Brighton, East Sussex
26 July 1989, 23.47

There was the police box, just standing there in the small alleyway that ran along the back of the burger bar. Metal shutters had been pulled down around the place and a notice stuck on one grille declared that it was closed until further notice. For ever, more like.

The cab had dropped her outside the police station on William Street and she had slipped a note in for Bob Lines, telling him what she was planning to do, asking him to stay in touch with Dad and thanking him for his help. She knew Lines would ask no questions. He was a good man.

She had been hovering by the TARDIS for nearly twenty minutes, ignored by the smattering of passers-by leaving the various pubs and restaurants which dominated the Lanes. She gripped her bag tightly, just in case anyone took an above-average interest in her.

The Doctor arrived suddenly. Somehow, in the dark of the tiny streets, his outrageously coloured clothes seemed muted, as if they had almost darkened down so as not to bring too much attention to their wearer.

He reached into his pocket and took out what was obviously the key. Mel timed it exactly. The key went into the lock, the Doctor twisted it and the door opened a fraction, letting a slim beam of very bright light eke out into the street. Mel hurled the cluster of pebbles she had picked up earlier at a nearby car. The little clatter of stones bounced harmlessly off the windscreen, but it was enough to distract the Doctor. He took four steps further down West Street and Mel skipped nimbly into the TARDIS so silently that the Doctor did not hear.

She wanted to stop and stare at the impossibly large control room in which she stood. She wanted to prod and poke at the mushroom shaped console that dominated the centre. And trace her fingers around the indented roundels in the wall. And examine the hexagonal spiral light-fitting above the console, hanging a few inches from the bright ceiling. But there wasn't time. There was an open door leading to a corridor and she ran through it, stopping just the other side. At least she now knew what dimensionally transcendental meant.

After a few seconds – by which time she was worried in case she fainted from holding her breath – the Doctor entered the large room. Muttering to himself, he seemed to be pressing switches. After a few more seconds, Mel heard a sound quite unlike anything she had ever heard – maybe hundreds of trumpeting elephants, nearby and then far away, over and over again. Then silence, and she was aware of nothing but a soft hum and a few recurring clicks and whirrs. ‘How about a trip to the planet Herec, Mel?’ called the Doctor.

She dropped her bag, sighed and then smiled, walking slowly back into the room.

‘How did you know?’

The Doctor was hunched over the mushroom-shaped console.

‘Time, my dear Mel, brings with it a degree of inevitability. One day, you will understand why I said no to you, and after that I’m sure everything will fall into place.’ He beamed at her, a smile so dazzling, so wonderful and so full of life that Mel could only grin back. ‘And, of course, the fact that I saw you throw the stones.’

He walked over to her, threw an arm around her shoulders and gestured dramatically around the room. ‘Say hello to the TARDIS, Mel. You’re going to get to know her ways quite well during the time we’re together. Look after her and she’ll look after you.’

‘Oh, right.’ Mel rummaged in her bag and presented the Doctor with her father’s long-abandoned coffee pot. ‘It hasn’t got any coffee in it, though.’

‘Ginger pop?’

‘Carrot juice, I’m afraid.’

‘Somehow, I just knew you were going to say that.’ He beeped her nose. ‘Now, shall we find you a bedroom?’

Mel put a hand up. ‘How long till we reach Herec?’

‘Time enough for you to get some sleep, Melanie Jane Bush.’ The Doctor tried to look stern, like a school matron. ‘Then tomorrow I’ll show you the universe.’

Mel grinned again. This was living!