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DOCTOR WHO

DEADLY REUNION



TERRANCE DICKS AND BARRY LETTS



'With one glance he will destroy your body and wither your soul.'

Second-Lieutenant Lethbridge-Stewart gets more than he bargained for when he is assigned to check the mapping of Greek islands at the end of the Second World War. Even if he lives to tell the tale, will he remember it?

Years later, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and his colleagues at UNIT investigate a spate of unexplained deaths and murders. Meanwhile, the Third Doctor and Jo are caught up in strange events in the small English village of Hob's Haven.

As preparations get under way for a massive pop concert, a sinister cult prepares for a day of reckoning – business as usual for UNIT. But can the Brigadier help prevent the end of civilisation? His friends and colleagues are not so sure, because this time, the Brigadier has fallen in love . . .

This special 40th Anniversary Doctor Who adventure features the Third Doctor, Jo Grant and UNIT. It is written by Barry Letts – Producer of the Third Doctor's television stories – and Terrance Dicks – Script Editor for the latter part of the Second Doctor's era and all the Third Doctor television stories.

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DOCTOR WHO

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**DOCTOR WHO:
DEADLY REUNION**

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Second Lieutenant Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart winced as the jeep threw him into the air again, and he landed unerringly on the same bruise.

‘Slow down, Corporal! No, better still, stop! Time for a brew-up.’

‘There’s a couple of cups left in the flask, sir,’ answered the corporal, as he pulled up at the side of the lane.

Climbing stiffly out, Lethbridge-Stewart picked up his clipboard. ‘How fast were we going?’

‘Just about twenty-five, I’d reckon.’

‘Better make that twenty.’

Finding the little side turning on the scruffy pre-war road map of the island, the lieutenant made a note: Jeepable at 20 mph.

‘Did you have a good war, Clarke?’

‘Ended up in Palestine with this little lot. That was okay, but I must admit the desert wasn’t so hot.’

The corporal cocked an eye to see if his terrible joke had registered.

‘Oh, very funny, Corporal... Mmm. Good drop of coffee. Best black market. The navy always did do itself well.’

The corporal grinned and took an appreciative sip.

‘All that sand... Worth it in the end, though – just to give old Rommel a boot up the arse.’

Know what he means, thought Lethbridge-Stewart, remembering the almost guilty buzz he’d had from the intense fighting when they kicked the Jerries out of Crete.

‘Come on, Corporal. It’ll be getting dark soon. I think we’ve done quite enough for our first day. Let’s find somewhere to pitch camp. I’m starving.’

So off down the lane they humped, somewhat more gingerly,

quite missing the faded notice hidden in the undergrowth with an inscription in Greek – not that Alistair would have known the letters. Underneath, however, were the German words PRIVAT! EINTRETEN VERBOTEN!!, which even the language-deprived second lieutenant, limited to his sparse schoolboy French, would surely have been able to interpret as PRIVATE! ENTRY FORBIDDEN!!

His supper, conjured out of their large supply of tins by the corporal, was sauced by his hunger well enough to make the dram of raw Greek brandy that accompanied it taste almost as good as his grandfather's twenty-year-old malt.

‘Have another, Clarke.’

‘Won't say no, sir,’ said the corporal, pouring himself half a tumblerful.

They had found a clearing on the edge of an olive grove, and had built a crackling wood fire in front of their tents. It could have been a pre-war camping holiday if it weren't for the service revolvers lying near at hand.

It was hardly what Alistair had expected when he volunteered to be transferred to Intelligence. The prospect of sitting primly in Athens under the eye of old McGregor, who had already shown signs of returning to the stuffy traditions of peacetime, had appalled the young officer.

For a while it had seemed that the regiment would be involved in fighting the communist rebels in the north, but domestic politics back home had put paid to that.

Coming from a long line of soldiers, Alistair had been brought up with tales of daring and heroism in battle as part of his life – as familiar to him as his breakfast porridge.

And now, he thought gloomily, he had had to choose between the life of a glorified policeman, as part of the occupying force, punctuated by the rigidity of peace-time regimental etiquette, and this aimless chore of checking maps.

‘Look at it this way,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘Anybody would spend a fortune to have a holiday swanning round a Greek island. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘And here we are, all expenses paid, a luxurious four-wheel-drive tin bucket to drive around in, and an unlimited supply of triangular soya sausages and sloppy tinned tomatoes at our beck

and call, and yet we grumble.’

‘Not me. sir. Rather enjoying it.’

‘Mm... To be honest, I suppose I am too, in a way. In a masochistic sort of way. It’s just that...’

He paused and surveyed the scene, in the dim light of a capricious moon, playing peep-bo with the clouds.

In front of them, he could just make out an open field, bounded by a rocky outcrop in the middle distance. Lit by the flickering of the camp fire, the gnarled branches of the ancient olive trees behind the camp seemed to move, like miniature versions of those that had grabbed Snow White and so agreeably scared the young Alistair. some ten years before.

He gave a little laugh.

‘It’s just that I wish something exciting would happen, I suppose.’

Be careful what you wish for...

A blinding flash; the boom of a massive explosion.

At once the two soldiers were on their feet, their revolvers in their hands.

But this was clearly not a communist guerilla attack. Even before their eyes recovered, they could hear the hammering of heavy hooves on the sun-baked earth; a scream of panic.

An unearthly light illuminated a terrified man pelting towards them trying to escape from a gargantuan black bull – in vain, for the great horns tossed him in the air, and he crashed to the ground to be gored and trampled to death.

As they started forward to try to help him, another flash of light momentarily blinded them; and when they recovered their sight, all was dark.

There was no sign of the bull – and when they ventured out into the field, there was no bloodied corpse to be found.

‘Hände hoch!’

There was no denying the threat in the barked command. Corporal Clarke immediately lifted his hands in the air; and as Lethbridge-Stewart raised his revolver, the voice rapped out, *‘Oiche! Nein!’*

He reluctantly followed his corporal’s lead. And then he saw that they were surrounded, with three shot-guns aimed squarely at them. A fourth man, the swarthy leader of the group, moved forward.

‘What the devil do you think you’re doing?’

All the authority of generations of Empire was in Lethbridge-Stewart’s voice.

‘Ah! Eng-land! You come!’

As two of the men removed their captives’ guns and torches, the leader gestured with the Luger in his hand, and the two soldiers, the flower of His Majesty’s Intelligence Corps, stumbled ahead (with the aid of a mortifying shove) into the darkness of the olive grove.

‘Minesweeping? Rather you than me!’

Lieutenant George Spawton RNVR turned at the remark and grinned. ‘You have a point, Lethbridge-Stewart,’ he said. ‘Not exactly a spin on the Round Pond. But nowadays I’ll only take the flotilla out when it’s broad daylight, and in a flat calm. Not so funny when it’s blowing up to a Force Six in the middle of the night, and you’ve got a flotilla of landing craft astern of you.’

It was the day before Alistair’s mapping trip. The little bridge of His Majesty’s Motor Launch 951 was crowded. Spawton, the skipper – officially the commanding officer – who was only a few years older than Lethbridge-Stewart, was sitting on his perch in the starboard corner, with the cox’n, a grizzled mahogany-skinned veteran in his forties, at the wheel next to him. The first lieutenant, whose pale face proclaimed his recent arrival in the Med, was checking a bearing at the compass in the centre, before diving down into the chart-house; a couple of lookouts were looking out; Joe Snaith, the signalman, was keeping half a hungover eye open for a flashing Aldis lamp from any of the boats making up the rest of the flotilla, which were following them in line astern; and lastly, there was Second Lieutenant Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, honoured guest on passage from Corinth to the island of Zante, which sat waiting for them in the impossibly blue sea.

‘Anyway, that’s all behind us, now that we’ve cleared the minefields round the islands south of Athens. On the way to Malta to pay off and then it’s hey-ho for England, Home and Beauty. My demob number’s forty-five. What about you?’

‘Oh, I’m a regular for my sins. And it’s Alistair, by the way.’

As he spoke, he noticed Spawton’s eye flicking up and down,

obviously puzzled by Lethbridge-Stewart's civvies.

'Only fair to tell you why I'm in mufti,' said Alistair, moving closer and dropping his voice.

'None of my business. Spot of leave, I suppose.'

'That's what everybody's supposed to think – especially our hosts. It's a nationwide operation. Our maps haven't been updated for over six years. And you never know when they might come in useful again, the way the commies are carrying on.'

'You mean – for the Russian war?'

Alistair shrugged.

'Now there's a cheerful thought,' said Spawton. 'Port ten, Cox'n. We don't want to pick up this fellow's nets.'

'Port ten... ten of port wheel on, sir.'

As they altered course to avoid the fishing boat, Alistair wandered away to the back of the bridge, and took another look at the line of boats astern, with their funnels (purely decorative, he gathered; the engines ran on high-octane aviation fuel) and their elegant light-blue hulls. Motor Launches... Sounded like something from the Henley Regatta. But these were real little ships, part of Coastal Forces. And indeed, they actually looked more like miniature ships than like their cousins, the Motor Torpedo Boats with their speedy lines.

Suddenly, the MLs seemed familiar.

'Didn't I see you at Crete?'

'Could be,' said Spawton. 'Or one of the other flotillas. Sicily, Anzio, Crete, you name it. We only draw a fathom – six feet – so we can go close inshore, where the Fleet Minesweepers would go aground. I'm George. And the jack-in-the-box behind you is Bill, Bill Johnson.'

The other officer looked up from the binnacle and said in a worried tone, 'South seventy-two west...' and once more disappeared below.

'Relax, Billyboy!' called out George. 'That's Zante over there. If the cox'n's not careful, he'll bump into it. Right Cox'n?'

'That's right, sir,' said the cox'n with a grin.

Bill's serious young face appeared briefly in the hatchway. 'Better safe than sorry, sir,' he said, and vanished.

'I dunno,' said George, tilting back the scruffy old panama which had replaced his smart white cap as soon as the boat left

Corinth harbour. ‘Soon get his knees brown, I suppose.’

‘Knows his job backwards, this chap,’ thought Alistair. The jeep had been secured to the foredeck in double-quick time that morning (partly obscuring the giant white star which had identified the boat as part of the Allied forces). And the quite tricky business of leaving the quayside had proceeded with a minimum of fuss – six boats, each over a hundred foot from stem to stern, in strict order of seniority, from George Spawton’s boat in the lead to the tail-arse charlie bringing up the rear, clearing the crowded harbour with hardly an order from Spawton. A good man to have with you in a scrap.

Oh, well. Since VJ day, that was all over. Better make the most of the blue skies. Picnic time.

Corporal Clarke, having seen all the blue skies he ever hoped to see for the rest of his life, was sitting at a mess-deck table below, trying to quell the lurches of his stomach with swigs of ouzo, the aniseed aperitif that could take the skin off your throat.

‘Aren’t you having one?’

‘Not at sea, mate. The Old Man would go spare. Any case, I’ve got to keep an eye on my fairy cakes.’

‘Fairy cakes!’

Tiny Rowbotham looked hurt. His huge slab of a hand closed round the Ouzo bottle. ‘For the party. I’ll have you know my fairy cakes are famous right through the Andrew. Even more than my spotted dog.’ He took a swig from the bottle.

‘Your what?!’

‘Plum duff. Suet pud.’ He took another gulp of ouzo. ‘Just a taste,’ he said.

‘Andrew who?’ said the corporal, out of his depth.

‘The navy. Don’t you know nothing, mate? Anyway, Smudger Clagg on 954 had a go at fairy cakes after he’d tasted mine. Most of his ended up in the oggin.’

Corporal Clarke thought it best to let it go.

‘What’s all this about a party?’ he said.

‘In honour of Mrs Demeter,’ said George.

Alistair raised a questioning eyebrow.

George laughed. ‘You don’t know what company you’re keeping, old boy. Represent the entire Royal Navy, we do. “Take

your time,” they said – or rather Sam Steadman, the NOIC said. Mm? Naval Officer In Charge. NOIC. Commander Steadman.’

‘Ah,’ said Alistair.

‘Anyway, that’s what he said. “Take your time and show the flag. Let ’em know the British navy’s keeping an eye on things. Give the commies something to think about.” And so we’ve hopped round the Peloponnese in slow motion, popping into all the little fishing villages and seaside places, and staying for a while.’

‘Sounds more like a pleasure cruise,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘Give or take the odd swimming pool and orchestra.’

The cox’n joined in. ‘Young Clancy – he’s the leading stoker, runs the engine-room – he’s a dab hand at the harmonica, sir.’

‘And if you haven’t dived off the deck into thirty fathoms of Med, you haven’t lived,’ added George.

‘So who’s Mrs Demeter?’

‘The *Grande Dame* of the island. The last British ambassador’s best friend, according to Soapy Sam. Suggested we buttered her up a bit. I didn’t know whether to make it a tea party or a cocktail party, though. So we’ve compromised. Tea and fairy cakes, with gin for them wot wants it.’

‘Sounds like a typical naval do,’ said Alistair.

‘Sir!’

‘What is it, Bill?’

The first lieutenant ran an anxious hand through his tousled hair and peered at the island looming up ahead.

‘It’s okay. You were quite right. That is Zante.’

‘Thank you, Number One,’ said George, ‘I was starting to get worried.’

CHAPTER TWO

Joe Snaith doubled his job as signalman with that of officers' steward, so he was the natural choice to be in charge of the bar (the officers' duty-free spirit rations from several boats, supplemented by ouzo and a few bottles of a rough wine tasting of turpentine – which was all that Joe had been able to get hold of before they left Corinth). This left the dispensing of the tea and fairy cakes to their only begetter, Tiny Rowbotham.

The other COs and their number ones having been invited to meet Mrs Demeter, the tiny afterdeck of HMML 951 – too small even to be dignified with the traditional name of quarterdeck – was soon overflowing with chattering young officers in immaculately pressed white shorts. They were eagerly supping large gins, even though it was not yet four o'clock – to the astonishment of Lethbridge-Stewart, who confined himself to a small whisky (a *chota peg* his father would have called it, a *burra peg* being a socking great treble).

A respectful space had been established around Mrs Demeter, who was sipping a cup of tea and chatting to George Spawton, under a reasonable copy of a traditional awning, contrived from three of the officers' bed sheets. An upturned empty rum keg by her side held a plate of the little cakes – as yet unsampled.

Alistair surveyed her perfect profile and the white-gold hair escaping from under the brim of her old-fashioned straw hat. Good-looking old bird, he thought. She must have been a stunner in her day.

'Yoo-hoo!'

His head swung round, in perfect unison with the heads of some thirty assorted officers and men, from able seaman to petty officer to sub-lieutenant.

The owner of the voice was being handed down from the quay by the duty watch-keeper, and was well worth the turning of a head. Hair of gold, curly, short like a little boy's, with a gleam of redness in the highlights, a skin burnished by the sun to a light honey colour, the features and figure of a Grecian goddess and, yes, green eyes, thought Alistair, as she passed by, throwing him a glance.

'Catching flies?' she said.

Alistair hastily closed his mouth.

For a treacherous moment, he felt a pang of regret that he'd committed himself to Fiona Campbell. Jolly nice girl and all that, good family too, but you could hardly call her a beauty. Not that they were officially engaged, more of an 'understanding', but...

Following the girl was a youngster, looking to be about sixteen, who shared her colouring, but with the face of a cheeky urchin from an illustration in a Dickens novel. Casting eager eyes around the boat, he walked with the suppressed energy of his age, ready, at the slightest provocation, to leap or run or punch or shout.

'Ah, there you are, Sephie,' said Mrs Demeter, in the impeccable English of the pre-war upper class of Greece. 'Lieutenant Spawton, may I introduce my grand-daughter, Persephone – and her brother Hermes... Hermy! Come back! Don't be so rude!'

But Hermy, after a quick glance round, had turned and made his way back through the crowd of suddenly silent officers towards the foredeck, where Bill Johnson was supervising the off-loading of the jeep.

'Not much of a one for the social whirl, Hermy,' said Sephie.

'How do you do,' she went on, holding out her hand to George. (Green fingernails, thought Alistair. And they match her eyes!)

'How do you do,' replied Spawton.

'Manna in the wilderness!' said Sephie, holding onto George's hand longer than was strictly necessary.

'Erm... what?'

'You lot. A sight for sore eyes. The light at the end of the tunnel. Choose your own cliché! Men! That's what. There's a severe shortage on the island. Nobody to talk to – except Demetrios – that's the priest's son – and he's going to be a

monk. I mean, it's too too sick-making!'

'Take no notice of her,' said Mrs Demeter, with a smile.

'And look! Fairy cakes! My God! *Un embarras de richesses!* I haven't had a fairy cake since Glyndebourne in 1939..'

'Mmmm... Delicious!' she went on (to Tiny's secret delight). You could say that again, said Alistair to himself, as he turned away with a heavy heart, to find Clarke and set off on his trip. What would be the point of joining the mini-throng closing in on Sephie? He'd be off the island in a week and never see her again.

As the corporal (smelling strongly of aniseed) drove them away, Alistair took one last look.

The delicious Persephone, with a retinue of attendant officers, was trying to entice her brother down from the mast. Nearly thirty feet from the deck, he was standing on the yard, with one hand on the truck at the top, striking a Nelsonian pose, with the other hand shading his eyes as he gazed at the distant horizon. And laughing Sephie was so radiantly lovely that the looking was unbearable.

'Oh well,' thought Alistair, as he turned away. 'At least Fiona has a good seat on a horse.'

It wasn't a stable that they found themselves in.

'Goats!' said Corporal Clarke.

Probably one of the nastiest smells around, thought Lethbridge-Stewart. Except to another goat, presumably. Luckily the usual residents must have had business to attend to elsewhere.

'We've probably been locked in for the night,' he said. 'And I don't intend to stick around to see what they're planning for us in the morning.'

Some of the rebel guerillas had very sophisticated methods of interrogation – and some equally effective primitive ones. The only survivor Lethbridge-Stewart had met had to write down his experiences, having no tongue to speak of, or with.

'Not much we can do, sir.'

'Mm. Better save the batteries.'

One of their torches had been returned, when it became obvious that there was no way the two captives could navigate

the olive-tree roots without a light.

But now the darkness was their friend. On the wall they could now make out a small patch of moonlight.

‘Must be a hole in the roof...’

‘Yessir.’

‘Mm... Probably a loose tile... If we could get up there...’

Taking the torch, he did a swift recce, looking for things to climb on – mangers, food containers, field tools, whatever.

Not a thing.

They were inside a large barn, with the roof beam a good twenty feet up, and the walls bare and sheer. The only opening was the door, which was divided in half like a stable door, but very firmly bolted on the outside.

‘Hang on a moment,’ he said, and held the torch flat to the wall, shining upwards. The shadows told the story. This was no smooth-surfaced city construction. The stones were irregular and rough-faced, projecting at times up to an inch, or even two.

His mind went straight back to the golden triumph of his sixth-form days, when he – and only he, out of the entire membership of the climbing club (six all told, including two juniors) – only he had managed to scale the notorious north-east face of Ben Nevis; and that was a damn sight more than twenty feet.

His desert boots were okay – but he was at least a stone heavier. Would his fingers be strong enough now, or rather, his forearms?

Only one way to find out.

If he could make it to the irregular line of projections he could see a foot or so below the rafters, he might be able to traverse to the main cross-beam, about fifteen feet up. And that was well within reach of the missing tile.

‘Wish me luck,’ he said.

‘Yeah. Break a leg,’ said Ned Clarke.

By scrambling onto the corporal’s shoulders, he got a start of nearly five feet; and by dint of looking for the shadows (although they shifted around in a disconcerting manner as Clarke moved the torch) he managed to find the holds he needed. And though his fingers lacked the precise callouses of his climbing days, he soon felt the old skills flowing back into his body. Impossible to forget them.

‘Like riding a bicycle,’ he thought, just before he fell off.

The second attempt went more smoothly, as he gained the experience he needed. In a few minutes, his fingers had found the traverse, and, just before his fingers gave way again, he managed to grab hold of the cross-beam.

Hanging from his arms, he swung his legs up to wrap them around the beam as well.

And now what? No way was he going to get on top of the beam from this position. And the hole in the roof was still way out of reach.

‘Look out below,’ he said resignedly, unwrapped his legs, and dropped the eight or so feet to the ground.

Robert the Bruce and his spider... As he attained the top of the beam at the third attempt, and gingerly started to remove the tiles and pile them in a precarious pile in front of him, the poem they’d had to learn at school ran through his head: ‘...try, try, try again...’ Another stubborn bloody Scotsman, thought Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, perhaps a little smugly.

Getting through the eventual gap and clambering down via a convenient crumbling wall proved considerably easier – and it was a relief to be away from the stink of the barn. The door had no lock, merely bolts to confine any ambitious goat, so it was the work of a moment to let the corporal out.

The escape would have been a well-deserved triumph, if it hadn’t been for...

‘*Hände Koch!* Up the hands!’

‘Here we go again,’ thought Alistair wearily.

‘One doesn’t expect you to observe all the niceties,’ he said aloud, trying to see past the dazzle of the torch, ‘but is it absolutely necessary to shine that thing right in our eyes?’

‘One doesn’t expect to see a moustache on a ship of the Royal British Navy, but it has been known. Hello again,’ said an entirely different voice.

No doubt about it. Sephie.

Finding himself just across the dining table from the delectable Persephone – and with no competition in sight – had the unfortunate effect of rendering Alistair very nearly speechless. Desperately wanting her to see him as the suave man-about-town, he felt more like an amalgam of a country hobble-de-hoy

and a typical stuffed-shirt in line to become the next Colonel Blimp. Instead of easily shrugging it off, he found himself accepting Mrs Demeter's stiff apology with equally stiff politeness; and felt an almost physical pain as he saw the perfect chance he'd been given slipping away from him.

'Mark you, I couldn't find it in my heart to reprimand my people for being overzealous,' said Mrs Demeter, with a nod to the manservant who stood waiting to clear the plates.

'Come off it, Grandma,' said Sephie. 'Doing their job and all that jazz, yeah.' She shot a fed-up glance at their guest: 'Anybody with any nous could see that Lieutenant Lethbridge-Stewart is a true-blue Englishman.'

This wasn't intended as a compliment.

'Scotsman, actually,' said Alistair, very aware that he had a fibre of roasted kid stuck between two front teeth.

'Walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, so it must be a... what? A golden eagle?'

'You flatter me, Miss Demeter.'

'Don't kid yourself. I know a duck when I see one.'

Unfortunately, just as she said this, Hermy was taking a swig of wine. With a splutter of mirth, he sprayed the tablecloth in front of him.

'Hermes!'

'Sorry, Grandma...'

Happily, this broke the tension. As they ate their pudding, Alistair launched into an utterly fictitious account (in the style of *Three Men in a Boat*) of his 'holiday' trip so far, including a gross libel on Corporal Clarke, who, he said, had managed to forget the tin-opener, thus condemning them to plain unbuttered bread for their supper.

His dry way of telling this fairy story saved the day. Mrs Demeter was smiling gently; Hermy was openly guffawing; and Sephie was leaning forward, giggling, apparently hanging on to every word.

And then it all changed. His tale naturally led on to an account of the extraordinary things he'd seen just before they had been taken by Mrs Demeter's men. (Or had he seen them? In this ordinary room, it seemed impossible to believe.)

When he stopped, there was a long moment of silence, broken by Mrs Demeter.

‘Ah yes,’ she said. ‘At this season of the year, the villagers put on a... a pageant, I think you would call it in English. A series of performances, scattered around the countryside over two or three days. Myths, you understand. Local legends.’

That had been no performance. A man was killed. Though, on the other hand...

‘I don’t quite see...’

‘Come on, Alistair,’ said Sephie, pushing back her chair. ‘Let me show you your room.’

‘But... we do have our tents.’

‘We wouldn’t hear of it. You can send your batman to get your things.’

‘Oh, he’s not...’

‘But first... I’ll tell you what... we’ll have a jaunt down to the cliffs. It’s utter bliss when the moon is full. You’d think you were in Elysium...’

The Elysian Fields. The heaven of the ancient Greeks. He needed no more persuasion.

Mrs Demeter and Hermes sat in silence until they heard the front door slam.

‘It doesn’t sound too good,’ said Hermes.

‘If he’s woken up, it could be the end of everything,’ agreed his grandmother.

She shook her head in near despair, and sighed.

‘You’d better go and find out,’ she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Sephie had led him by the hand to the very edge of the cliff, which overlooked a small bay, a horse-shoe cove, which had contrived to clothe itself with just the right assorted vegetation, in just the right places, from the trees on the skyline to the seaweed on the strand, to achieve a shivery perfection in the silver of the moonlight.

The clouds had by now completely cleared, and the moon hung unveiled and unabashed against the blackness of the sparkling sky.

Alistair would have indeed been in a heaven of some sort, but for one thing. It would obviously be grossly impolite not to kiss the girl – or at least make the offer – but he had no notion of how to approach the subject. Then again, he hardly knew her.

His experience so far had been confined (on the one hand) to cousin-like experiments with Fiona, from the swift fourteen-year-old peck behind the horse-box at the last Pony Club gymkhana just before the Germans invaded Poland, to the surprising snog in the Craigs' conservatory on his last leave which led to the 'understanding', and (on the other) to the equally surprising loss of his virginity on the night of his passing out as a fully commissioned second lieutenant – and he remembered very little about that (apart from her name, Vera. Vera?!), being overfull of Bass and Glenfiddich at the time.

'Isn't it just too bliss-making?' said Sephie.

'Mm,' said Alistair. 'Very jolly.'

'Look here...' he went on. 'Er, do you think...?' He paused. 'Yes, very jolly,' he repeated, nerve quite gone.

Sephie laughed, and turned towards him.

'I was right. You are rather a duck. Come here.'

'What? Ah...'

With her firm arms round his neck and her soft lips against his own (not to mention the touch of her body through her thin silk dress), all doubts vanished.

As they paused for breath, Sephie whispered, 'Softly softly catch monkey, soldier boy...' at the same time gently dissuading a too eager hand. 'You don't have to poodle off in the morning, kiddo... You can stay for a day or three, surely?'

At that moment, if she had suggested it, Alistair would have sold the soul that he was not quite sure he possessed to the devil he definitely did not believe in, and considered it a bargain.

'Erm... I'll send Clarke to get our gear,' he said. 'I've... I've never met anybody quite like you. I think you're... erm...'

'You talk too much,' she said, and stopped any further words in the most efficient way possible.

When Alistair awoke the next morning – after a by no means dreamless sleep – he found the world transformed.

'God, what a lovely day!' he said to Hermy, the only one still at the breakfast table. Alistair caught his look of surprise. 'Very British, what?' he said with a laugh. 'Same blue sky as yesterday, after all... same as tomorrow, I suppose. It's just that everything seems to have a sort of... golden glow...' His voice tailed away, and he sheepishly poured himself a cup of coffee.

Keeping his head down, concentrating on the crusty bread and honey which seemed to be all there was to eat, he heard a stifled grunt. He looked up and saw that Hermy was making a rather ineffectual effort not to burst out laughing.

Hm. Poor show, he thought. What was so dashed amusing?

But then he caught Hermy's eye, and in a moment the pair of them were quite taken over by laughter – and they both knew what they were laughing about.

Hermy soon disappeared, still grinning, and Alistair was left to finish his fast sparse breakfast. After all, who'd want to waste time eating on such a perfect day? Just one thing was needed to complete the perfection...

He set off to look for Sephie, remembering the breathless, giggling, protracted farewell of the night before, and trying not to hope that her feelings were as tumultuous as his own.

He had to tell her how he felt.

But when he found her, away on the terrace that overlooked

the sweep of the lawn going down to the bay, speaking intently to her grandmother and her brother, it was a very different Sephie he saw.

The scatty young girl he'd met so far had vanished. In her place was a woman, and a woman full of strength and anger – and yet, although they were too far away for him to hear what she was saying, he could tell from the tone of her voice that she was frightened too.

Mrs Demeter's voice came clearly through the still air. 'Never! I won't have it! Never again!'

Whatever it was that Sephie was so passionately arguing, her grandmother would have none of it.

Should he go over? He was in plain sight; he could hardly turn his back and walk away.

His dilemma was resolved by Sephie herself.

'Alistair!' she called. 'I've been looking all over for you.'

She couldn't have looked very hard, he thought wryly, as he walked towards them, to exchange polite platitudes with his hostess. Yes, he had slept well; and no, he didn't have to rush away, his time was his own... And so on.

And then, at last, they were alone together once more, walking down to the beach.

It must be the light, the Mediterranean light, he thought. The very pebbles crunching under their feet had a richness of hue, a vivid solidity; every glowing blade of grass was stiletto-sharp; the sculpted branches of the olive trees were flawless in their convoluted shapes; and Sephie...

He looked at the back of her head, as she walked ahead on the narrow path. The tiny soft curls at the nape of her neck, the way they hugged the golden skin...

'Sephie...'

'What?'

'Er... nothing.'

Now was not the moment. Not yet.

But when they were sitting side by side on the soft powdery sand (which just asked to be sat on), listening to the splish splash of the lazy wavelets, and the time to seize the moment was upon him, Alistair was riven with indecision – which first, tell her or kiss her?

'Sephie...'

‘No.’ She lifted a hand to stop him. ‘Don’t say it.’

‘You don’t know what I was about to -’

‘I think it might be better if you went on your way.’

‘What? Last night you -’

‘Last night was... last night. Things have changed.’

This wasn’t at all what he’d expected.

‘How?’

‘It just wouldn’t be fair to let you get involved.’

Where was the sweet girl he’d kissed goodnight? Had it all been a pretence, a silly modern flirtation?

‘Involved in what?’

‘You could call it... a family matter.’

There was the anger again, the hard edge he’d heard in the garden.

Alistair took a deep breath, to steady his voice. ‘If that’s what you want...’

She turned to him, all her defences suddenly collapsing. ‘No, no! It’s not at all what I want. Oh Alistair, why didn’t you come earlier?’

The tears in her eyes were real enough.

All calculation gone, he took her in his arms; again they kissed, as they had the night before, but now the simple passion of the body was subsumed into a soft vulnerability of the heart.

Lying back onto the sand, she touched his cheek with a gentle hand.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘Promise you’ll forgive me...’

This was true; this was the real thing. This was what he’d been hoping for.

He took her fingers in his own and kissed the tips.

Now there was no hurry, no need to grab the moment.

‘My dearest,’ he said, for the first time in his life, and bent forward to kiss her again...

‘SIR! SIR! Mr Lethbridge-Stewart! Are you there?’

There was no mistaking the urgency in Ned Clarke’s voice. Alistair sat up, staring wildly around.

‘Over here, man! What on earth’s the matter?’

The corporal appeared from the depths of the olive grove. ‘Thank God I’ve found you, sir. Orders, sir. We’ve got to get the jeep back on board. We sail in less than an hour!’

War!

Or something very like it.

The Albanians, who had never forgotten the shame of being vanquished by Mussolini's army of toy soldiers in 1939, and the later German occupation, had, with the help of their friend Tito, recently found a new identity and a new courage in their Stalinist revolution.

Now they were ready to take on the world – and they had started by attacking ships of the Royal Navy.

'A couple of destroyers, apparently,' said George Spawton. He and Alistair stood on the bridge as the jeep was expertly made fast to the foredeck by a small team of seamen led by the cox'n, who was tactfully ignoring the quite unnecessary orders of the young first lieutenant, who was nominally in charge.

'Albanians took exception to them sailing through the straits between Corfu and their coast,' the captain continued. 'Or maybe they got too close or something. Anyway, they started lobbing the odd shell from their shore batteries.'

'Bloody cheek!' said Alistair.

'Them's my sentiments exactly. And the C in C's, apparently.'

Spawton glanced at the working party. 'How are we doing, Bill?' he called.

The first lieutenant looked up with a worried frown. 'Nearly there, sir. I think. Yes.'

'Good man.'

The engines of all six boats were already warming up.

'We've been ordered to "proceed at all speed" to Corfu,' George continued, 'just in case their lordships – or the government, I suppose – in case they decide to invade...'

'What!'

'That's what they tell me.'

'But that could get right up Stalin's nose. Bit dicey, isn't it? You know what the Russians are like.'

'I think the idea is more to warn them off.'

The cox'n came to the wheel, and Bill Johnson, arriving at speed, leaned over the edge of the bridge.

'Cast off for'd!'

'Stand by engines,' said Spawton.

The double ring of the engine room telegraphs signalled the

start of the voyage.

‘Cast off aft! Single up!’

‘I don’t know about you,’ said George to Alistair, ‘but once we’re clear of the island, it’s crashing stations for me.’

‘Er... crashing stations?’

‘Harry Crashers. Crashing the old swede.’

He laughed at Alistair’s expression.

‘I’m going to get my head down. I was up most of the night at the Purple Elephant – Zante’s idea of a night club. Slow ahead starboard. Stop starboard.’

The stern of the boat started to swing out.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to bunk down with Bill and me in the wardroom... Slow astern together.’

HMML 951 began to go in reverse.

‘Oh, I think I’ll stay on deck, thanks.’

‘All the way to Corfu? Stop both. Slow ahead together... Half ahead... Take her out, Cox’n.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

Alistair found his voice. ‘But... aren’t you going to drop us in Corinth?’

‘We haven’t got time. Your people said that you’ll have to come with us. Sorry, old boy. One of those things. You’ll just have to lie back and think of England.’

‘Scotland,’ said Alistair, automatically.

As soon as they were clear of the harbour, the smart efficiency of their leaving eased into the easy routine of a ship in passage. The cox’n relinquished the wheel to a duty helmsman and disappeared below, only to reappear moments later wearing nothing but a pair of abbreviated khaki shorts.

George Spawton resumed his battered old panama (unlike the all-but-naked cox’n who still wore his petty officer’s cap, no doubt to assert his authority). The crew members working on deck, coiling the mooring lines, heaving the stuffed rope fenders inboard and generally tidying up, pushed their caps onto the backs of their heads and relaxed into the unregimented life of the ship. Each knew his job and his worth as an individual, a quality that has marked out the British seaman from the earliest days.

If the voyage to Corfu had been a straight run across the

open sea, it would have taken some fifteen hours at the normal cruising speed of ten knots. The time was considerably extended, however, by the hindrances of travelling up the coast of Greece, which included various small fleets of fishermen, shallows marked on the chart but not visible to the naked eye (which added considerably to the anxiety quotient of Bill Johnson), and the necessity, when making their way through the narrow channel between the island of Letkas and the mainland, of slowing down to a saunter.

‘More like a trip through the Dutch canals,’ thought Alistair, eyeing with delight the houses barely the length of a cricket pitch away.

This was during one of his highs.

Sometimes there was a joy which filled his whole being, so that it was only the self-consciousness of his rank and his breeding – not to mention the lack of space – which stopped him capering about like a young colt turned out to grass.

But then there were the lows; like his deep, deep depression the next morning.

He was in the little wardroom, the officers’ cabin, where he’d spent a fitful night. A couple of double hunks, a wardrobe, a locker which doubled as a bookshelf, a table and a couple of folding chairs, and that was about it. Small as it was, it was luxurious compared with the cramped quarters of the fifteen-man crew, which he’d seen on the conducted tour he’d been given two days before, where Corporal Clarke had been found a narrow bed.

He was sitting on George Spawton’s bunk, now converted into a leather covered seat, waiting for his breakfast, and listening to the rumbling of the screws beneath his feet, driving them at a steady ten knots towards Corfu and away from Sefpie.

George was on watch, and Bill Johnson, hardly the most stimulating of companions, was sitting opposite.

And then it hit him.

He’d lost his chance. Even if he were sent back to finish the mapping job, and he managed to see her again, the moment had gone. Family matters, she’d said. Bloody families. He’d probably have enough trouble with his own, if he brought a Greek bride back home with him.

For a moment, he swooped up into a transport of rapture at

the vision of Sephie standing beside him at the altar of their little church. And then crashed again, as he remembered where he was, and why.

He stared gloomily at the plate the wardroom steward had just put in front of him. Bloody tinned tomatoes and triangular bloody soya bloody bangers. You'd think the Navy would at least run to a bit of decent fish.

'Sorry there's no fish, sir,' said Joe Snaith, as he put down Bill Johnson's plate. 'We was waiting for them to come back into harbour when the balloon went up.'

'Can't be helped, I suppose,' said Bill, with a worried frown. 'Perhaps we should have stocked up before we left Corinth.'

'Yes, sir. No, sir. Twice the price, sir.'

'Ah..' said Bill. 'Of course.'

'Victualling officer. One of my hats,' said Bill, with a mouthful of sausage, after the steward had gone. 'One and elevenpence a day per man. It's not a lot to feed a hungry matelot.'

A confused thumping on deck; raised voices.

'What the devil's that?'

A face appeared at the door.

'I think you'd better come, sir. It's a stowaway. In the dinghy.' As the first lieutenant grabbed his cap and hurried off, Alistair pushed his plate aside and glumly reached for a bit of toast.

But his curiosity got the better of him, and off he went, out the door, down the little passage and up the ladder.

At first, all he could see was a knot of men, including Bill Johnson, all speaking at once, arguing with the man they'd hauled out of the dinghy.

But then the stowaway glimpsed Alistair and turned a worried face towards him.

His face cleared and broke into a grin, and he waved a cheery greeting.

The stowaway was Hermy.

CHAPTER FOUR

George Spawton looked up from his pocket chessboard in some irritation, as the first lieutenant led his prisoner towards the bridge. He'd recognised Hermy straight away.

As if he wasn't going to have enough on his plate without a stupid kid hanging around. And it looked as if he was going to have to sacrifice his remaining bishop if he were going to save his king. He picked up the Aldis lamp and flashed his move in morse code to Tom Blaine, the CO of 954, the next ship in line astern.

'Beg to report, sir, stowaway, hiding in the ship's boat... You there! Stand up straight! You're lucky I didn't clap you in irons!'

Hermy cocked a quizzical eye and lounged onto his other foot.

'Thank you, Number One,' said George, 'I think we'll forget all that nonsense.'

Bill Johnson blushed.

Poor little blighter, thought George. Only doing his best, after all.

'He's quite right, though,' he said to Hermy. 'I could put you under arrest.'

Bill brightened and gave his prisoner a dirty look.

'You're not going to, though,' said Hermy, 'are you?'

'I think you'll be in enough trouble with your grandma. Just keep out of the way. If anybody spotted you in that shirt... We'll decide what to do with you when we get to Corfu. You hungry?'

'Running on empty.'

'Mm. Okay. Bill, you'd better take him down to the wardroom and give him some breakfast...'

Losing interest, he picked up the signal lamp to acknowledge Tom's reply.

Damn! *Queen to King's Knight Four*. Just what he'd feared...

Alistair watched with amusement as Hermy put away several rounds of toast and marmalade (having refused to believe that anything triangular could actually be a sausage).

Sephie's aura seemed to have attached itself to her brother. At any rate, Alistair felt a certain affection for the boy. Damnfool thing to do, of course, but it did show a bit of initiative.

'Fancied a trip out to sea?'

'Yeah. If you lived on the island, you'd be as desperate as I am. No gas for my bike. Nowhere to jive. No action at all. If I try to get into the Purple Elephant they throw me out. After a few months of it, I go stir-crazy.'

'Think yourself lucky you haven't ended up in a real cell,' said Bill Johnson, who had seemed to take Hermy's rejection of the official breakfast as a personal insult to himself and his ship.

'Excuse me, sir,' said Joe Snaith appearing in the doorway, 'but the Skipper said as how he'd esteem it a kindness if you would step up to the bridge and take the watch for a bit. He said as how he was in check and wouldn't answer for the consequences, like.'

As soon as Bill Johnson had left, and the steward had cleared the table, Hermy leaned forward and started to speak in a low voice.

'Listen,' he whispered, 'the real reason I'm here...' His head snapped round as if he'd heard a noise. 'Wait..' he said.

Leaping to his feet, he moved swiftly to the door and flung it open. Nobody.

After nipping up the ladder to check the upper deck, Hermy returned to the wondering Lethbridge-Stewart and pulled his chair close.

'You must promise never to reveal this to a living soul... and come to that...' he paused, looking worried, '...then again, if they're not alive it hardly matters, I suppose, but... No, I'm talking nonsense. Just give me your word. Okay?'

The same transformation that Alistair had seen in Sephie when she was speaking on the terrace had overtaken Hermy. In spite of his strange words the intense seriousness of his tone and the authority in his voice were a long way from his usual teenage

chatter.

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Alistair. ‘I can’t give you a blanket promise. You might be going to tell me about a crime or something. Sorry to be overscrupulous and all that, but...’

‘What if I tell you that Sephie’s in trouble, real trouble?’

‘What?’

‘That’s what I’ve come to say.’

Scruples? What scruples?

‘Tell me, for God’s sake!’

Hermý took a deep breath. ‘It’s difficult to know where to start...’

‘Where is she? What’s happened?’

‘All in good time. Take it easy. She’s not in immediate danger. Nothing we can do until we get to Corfu, anyway.’

‘Mm. Okay, so what is all this?’

‘You wouldn’t understand if I did tell you right out – or rather, you wouldn’t believe it.’

He paused again and looked at Alistair with the air of a farmer doubtfully assessing the quality of a sheep in the market.

‘You went to public school?’

‘Fettes, yes. Get on with it.’

‘Classics?’

‘Not really. We learnt Latin, of course, everybody did, but I dropped it in the sixth. What are you getting at?’

‘What about the gods – the Greek gods?’

Really, this was getting beyond a joke. If Sephie was in danger...

‘If Sephie is in danger...’

‘Answer my question!’

Again, the surprising authority in his voice.

‘The gods? You mean Zeus and Aphrodite and... Hermes... All that lot? A bit. The odd lesson. Why?’

‘That lot, yes. That’s us.’

He was talking in riddles, now.

‘Look, stop playing games. If you’ve got something to say, say it.’

And Hermý said, ‘I just did. I’m Hermes.’

‘I know that. Named after him, I suppose. What’s this nonsense got to do with Sephie?’

Hermý abruptly got up, pushed his chair back and strode to

the other side of the wardroom. He stood in silence for a moment, gazing out of the round scuttle at the distant horizon.

‘I said you wouldn’t believe me.’

He turned back.

‘I’m Hermes. Sephie is Persephone – and Grandma, well, that’s just what we call her. She’s Demeter, of course – and she’s Sephie’s mum...’

Persephone? Wasn’t she the one who was kidnapped by the king of the Underworld? By this time, Alistair was not just fed up, he was becoming angry. ‘I’ve had enough of your childish fantasies. Were you telling me the truth about...?’

‘Listen! No, wait! How do you think I got on board this ship?’

‘What are you talking about? They found you hiding in the dinghy.’

Hermes smiled. ‘Don’t you remember? I was standing by Sephie when you sailed away!’

How could he have forgotten? When they slipped from the harbour wall, there was no sign of her – but then, as the cox’n was steering the boat out into the open sea, she appeared, running, running, down to the end of the quay, just in time to lift a hand in farewell – and yes, there was Hermes following her...

‘But how...?’

‘Watch,’ said Hermes, still smiling; and vanished.

Reality shimmered in Alistair’s brain. He rose to his feet and almost stumbled cross the room to where Hermes had been standing, by the other bunk.

‘Over here,’ said a voice.

Alistair spun round.

There was Hermes, in the seat he’d just vacated.

As a scion of the Lethbridge-Stewarts, stalwarts of the British Army – and sometimes the Imperial Indian Army – for nearly two hundred years (four DSOs and one VC), Alistair would never have admitted that he’d nearly passed out. But his legs seemed to have lost their strength, and he found himself sitting on Bill Johnson’s bunk, with Hermes offering him a shot of the wardroom whisky (and how was he able to go straight to the locker where it was kept, when he’d never been in the room before?).

‘How... how did you do that?’

‘Ever read any science-fiction?’

Alistair grunted. ‘A bit,’ he said, reluctantly, as though admitting to trying a line of coke. ‘Magazines. At school. Astounding – and the others. Bug-eyed monsters and all that. Lot of rubbish.’

He sipped his whisky, in the hope that the world would firm up again.

‘Simple trans-dimensional teleportation,’ said Hermy, as he put the bottle away in the cupboard.

‘Of course, we’re not really gods,’ he went on. ‘It just made things easier to go along with it when hoi polloi made up their minds that’s what we were. It was quite fun for a while.’

Alistair drained his dram. He was beginning to get back some of his innate scepticism.

‘Look here. Just because you’ve managed to learn some sort of conjuring trick...’

‘But then they stopped believing...’ went on Hermy as if he hadn’t said a word, ‘...or rather, they started believing in all that stuff that Paul invented about Jesus. Odious little man. I couldn’t stand him.’

This was too much.

‘Now see here, fantasy’s one thing, blasphemy’s another. If you can’t...’

‘Not the man from Nazareth. He was one of the good guys. I’m talking about the tent-maker with ideas *audessus de sa gare*. Hey, did you see that play? *French without Tears*. At the Lyric, wasn’t it? Shaftesbury Avenue, anyway. It was wizard... About this group of...’

The old Hermy seemed to be surfacing again.

‘You’re saying that you knew Saint Paul? Are you pretending to be immortal?’

‘Not so’s you’d notice. I’m only three thousand six hundred and thirty-one. I tell a lie, missus. Thirty-two. Even Zeus and his brothers haven’t hit the five thousand mark.’

He studied Alistair’s face.

‘You don’t believe me, do you? How old do you think I look?’

‘Sixteen at the outside.’

‘That’s because I choose to be sixteen.’

He grinned.

‘You seem to like conjuring tricks. Here’s another one..’

He stood up and frowned in concentration.

‘Ready? Okey-dokey, here we go. Abracadabra! Hey presto!’

For a moment, it seemed as if nothing was going to happen. But after a few moments, with a crumpling of the face and a shrinking of the body, Hermy started to grow old.

Alistair watched in disbelief – and then in horror – as it became plain that this was no actor’s trick. The smooth taut flesh of the teenager’s face started to sag, and the outline of his skull started to appear. The rheumy old eyes sank into his head, and liver spots marred the yellowing complexion.

Hermy already looked at least ninety years old – and was growing rapidly older still.

‘Stop! Stop!’ cried Alistair, despite himself.

‘Yeah, perhaps I’d better,’ said the cracked voice of senility. ‘The wind might change and I’d get stuck like this!’

And the wheezing cackle of amusement brought on a paroxysm of coughing that obviously alarmed Hermy as much as his audience. In half the time it had taken him to lose his youth, he slipped neatly back into it.

He walked across to the mirror above the drinks cupboard and peered into it, blowing out his cheeks and pulling schoolboy faces as if to make sure he’d really returned to normal. ‘That’s better,’ he grinned.

‘Hang on,’ he said, after a glance at Alistair, and he raided Spawton’s locker again.

‘Okay, I believe you,’ said Alistair, a full *burra peg* later. ‘You’re not gods. So what are you, for Pete’s sake? Aliens from outer space?’

‘Good question. Some people think so. I think it’s far more likely that we’re some sort of early mutation. Nobody really knows. But we’re all over the world, and seem to have been here ever since *Homo sapiens* got cracking. *Homo superior*, would you say?’

‘So why don’t we know about you?’ said Alistair, his residual scepticism resurfacing as the medicinal whisky took effect.

‘Our human cousins have a gene for tribal warfare. A minority like ours, even with our advanced knowledge – what

you'd call supernatural powers – how long do you think we'd last, if we just came out into the open? A few of them tried it, and they were burnt as witches.'

'It was safer to be a god, mate. Some of us are still playing that game – the Haiti lot, for one. But if nobody believes in you, it can be pretty dull up there on Olympus, so...'

'Hang on a minute. Are you saying that Zeus is still up there – at the summit of the mountain?'

'Not exactly. That's where the portal is but... if you have the know-how, there's a whole parallel... well, not exactly a parallel universe, but an alternative world of trans-dimensional locations.'

The wardroom was starting to feel unreal again.

'I think I need another scotch,' said Alistair.

Hermes laughed and went over to the cupboard.

'Papa Zeus seems quite content to...'

'Papa Zeus?'

'Yeah, he's my dad – Sephie's too. She's my half-sister.'

He plonked the bottle down in front of Alistair, who gazed at it longingly, but then pushed it away.

'I think maybe I'd better keep a clear head. You were saying?'

'Zeus just sits there contemplating his glorious navel – if you ask me, he suffers from a bit too much self-esteem – only don't tell him I told you. He's a bit too handy with the thunderbolts for my liking.'

'There's one lot – used to be Mesopotamian gods, I think – that get their kicks from using men's lives like a chess game. Call themselves the Players. Give me the creeps. But you can't blame them. What else can you do all day, every day, when the days run into thousands and nothing changes?'

'That's why we've settled for *la vie ordinaire*. At least things can surprise you in the everyday human world. We let ourselves age a bit, so's not to make anybody suspicious; and eventually we move on somewhere else and start again. We had ten years in England – until the bombs started falling and we decided to come home.'

Hermes paused and looked expectantly at Alistair.

'That's it,' he said.

It made a sort of lunatic sense, thought Alistair. And lunatic was the operative word. He'd either got to credit the evidence of

his own eyes, or sign up for Colney Hatch.

‘I suppose I’ll have to take it all on trust,’ he said. ‘But what’s it got to do with Sephie, anyway? What sort of trouble are you talking about?’

Hermey took a deep breath.

‘She’s down in the Underworld. She’s been abducted by Hades again.’

CHAPTER FIVE

Pawn to Rook Eight. Queened and Check!

George flashed his triumphant move to 954's bridge and turned to Bill Johnson, who was waiting patiently to speak to him. 'What is it, Number One?'

'ETA Corfu, sir. 1213.'

George managed to suppress a grin.

'Are you sure it's not 1213 and a half? I'd hate the Admiral to think we were late.'

'Er, no sir. 1213 exactly, if we keep up this speed.'

'Well done for being so accurate. But I think we'll make it 1230. They won't be timing us with a stopwatch. Get Sparks to send the signal at once.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Ah! The Aldis was flashing from 954. Tom had certainly been quick. Perhaps he was ceding the game.

Bishop to Rook Eight. Takes Queen. Checkmate.

What!

Oh, God! There it was. A revealed check – and no way out. Even without binoculars, he could see Tom laughing.

Hades, the god of the Underworld, kidnapped Persephone to be his wife; and her mother, Demeter; who was goddess of the harvest, went in search of her, and so there was famine throughout the world.

And even after Zeus intervened, because she had been tricked into eating a pomegranate seed Persephone was condemned to spend a third of the year with Hades – and that was the reason for the barren season, because of Demeter's regular mourning for her missing daughter

Alistair looked up from the tattered guide book, with its truncated versions of the Greek myths, which Hermy had taken from George Spawton's bookshelf.

‘Are you trying to tell me that this is all true?’ he said.

‘Hardly,’ said Hermy. ‘But Hades – he’s Zeus’s brother – he was given the Underworld to be his place; his kingdom, if you like. One of these otherworlds I was telling you about. And he did carry Sephie off, and Zeus had to step in. A real hoo-ha, it caused, I don’t mind telling you.

‘But as for the other stuff – well – it’s true that Demeter used to keep an eye on the local harvest and give it a helping hand if it looked like failing – a sort of hobby really.

‘And the weather itself, well, that was more Zeus’s thing. He’d try to keep it ticking over in balance – yin and yang they’d call it in China...’

What on earth was the fellow talking about now, thought Alistair, eyeing the whisky bottle.

‘He only did it in Greece, of course, and later in Italy. I suppose he felt a sort of obligation to the people. But every so often, he’d chuck in a startler, a hurricane in August or something, just to keep everyone on their toes.

‘I remember he had a stinker of a row over one of his storms with Poseidon – that’s his other brother, who’d been given the ocean as his otherworld. Accused Zeus of trying to take over the sea. I never knew the details. Something to do with one of his love affairs – Zeus, I mean, not Poseidon...’

Alistair was starting to feel angry again. The boy (and he still couldn’t help thinking of him like that), the boy didn’t seem to be able to stick to the point. What had this farrago got to do with Sephie?

‘Very informative and all that, but this has nothing to do with Sephie, now has it?’

‘It has everything to do with Sephie. You see, when Zeus retired, if that’s the right word, he passed on his power over the seasons and the weather to Seph. And I think that’s the reason that Hades has grabbed her.

‘It was your black bull that told us something was up. So I did a bit of a recce. He hasn’t stirred for something like fifteen hundred years, and now he’s down there in a rage like you never did see. If he’d caught me...! He’s up to something. We don’t know what. And Sephie said...’

Sephie said, ‘I’m going down to find out.’

'Never! I won't have it! Never again!' said her mother.

'Don't you see? I'm the only one who can really feel safe. He'd never dare to cross Zeus, not after the last time. We've got to know what's going on!'

Mrs Demeter was still trying to dissuade her when Sephie spotted the young officer who had spent the night as their guest walking across the lawn, and deliberately broke of the conversation.

The other two watched in silence as the couple made their way towards the beach.

'We'll have to tell Zeus,' said Hermy at last.

As he said it, he knew the answer. Zeus's temper was as unpredictable as it was fearsome. There was no creature alive, who could safely intrude on his reverie. 'Perhaps not,' he said.

Hermy knew his sister well. She was a doer not a talker. Having made up her mind, she would present the world with a fait accompli, and dare anyone to argue.

'I'll go with her,' he said to his 'grandma'.

'She'll refuse to let you.'

'She won't know I'll follow her.'

'What could you do? Against Hades!'

The whiteness of fear he'd experienced as he watched the fury of Hades swept over him anew, and he felt his body shaking with terror.

'At least... at least we'd know what happened,' he said.

And then he nearly missed her. If he hadn't caught sight of her an hour later waving goodbye to the flotilla, she would have disappeared from the world, never to be seen again.

The portal to the Underworld she used was a crack in the rock near the olive grove where the soldiers had camped.

That poor creature who was done to death, thought Hermy, as he lurked out of sight. He must have been a whistleblower; that was what they'd call him nowadays. And Hades had sent the bull to stop his mouth for good.

Hermy felt himself shaking again.

Several times, as he followed Sephie into the depths, he felt that she had seen him; certainly she glanced back as if she knew she was being shadowed. Or perhaps she was catching a glimpse of the sad lost souls, the long-dead wraiths of ancient Greeks, who still believed this place to be their eternal destiny.

If he had seen them in time, the chimerical beasts with the slavering jaws and the six-inch roue-thorn talons, he would have shouted a warning,

but as it was he could only watch helplessly as they dragged her away, towards the light which flickered from afar.

He followed the sound of crackling flames until, rounding a corner into the full light of the furnace, he beheld a sight which came near to breaking his heart.

His dear Sephie, his dear; dear sister, was being held to the ground in kneeling supplication at the feet of the god of the Underworld in all his terrible glory.

And yet her spirit remained; for she was shaking her head in refusal of his demands; she was struggling to stand upright and face him; she was tearing her arms free despite the blood that ran down and dripped, sizzling, onto the rocky floor.

And Hades was laughing.

‘We must save her!’ cried Alistair, starting up from his seat. Hermes lifted a calming hand. ‘She’s safe where she is, for the moment. He’s imprisoned her in a force-field. She can’t get out, but, equally, nothing can get at her. Her wounds will heal quickly. And he’s not there.’

‘Not there? What do you mean?’

‘He’s left. Charon says he’s recently been going out for weeks at a time.’

‘But what was he asking of her?’

‘That’s the trouble. I wasn’t near enough to hear. It was clear that he wasn’t going to take her for a bride...’

Alistair shuddered.

‘...even if that’s why he wanted her three thousand years ago. I did catch a word or two which gave me a clue. “Tempest” was one of them; and “winter storm” another. He was obviously seething with rage that Zeus had given her his power over the weather.’

‘What’s it like, this Underworld?’

‘You’ll soon be able to see for yourself.’

‘What?’

‘There’s another portal in Ipiros – in what they call Albania these days. One way or another we must get you there. Whatever his plans are, he must be stopped – and Sephie must be rescued.’

‘And you’re the only one who can do it.’

But how to get to Albania?

At first, Alistair took it for granted that Hermes, with his trans-dimensional powers, would be able to whisk him across the Corfu channel and deposit him safely on the hillside just by the gateway to the realm of Hades (who, from Hermy's account, refused to go along with the accepted view of the rest of the ex-gods that their time had come and gone).

'Oh, that this too, too solid flesh should melt...' said Hermy, poking Alistair in the ribs. 'Not a chance, matey. Last time I tried that, only half of him arrived. No, we've got to think up something more subtle – like hijacking a helicopter.'

'Have another think. I'd be the one to be court-martialled.'

**'DO YOU HEAR THERE! DO YOU HEAR THERE!
HANDS FALL IN FOR ENTERING HARBOUR!'**

Tiny Rowbotham's booming voice, made even louder by the tannoy system, rudely intruded into their conference.

'We would seem to have arrived,' said Alistair.

'Yeah! Come on, let's go and see.'

As they emerged from the after hatchway, it was to a transformed craft. Gone was the scruffy straw hat; gone were the khaki shorts. Everybody was in well-pressed sparkling-white uniform; those of the fifteen-man crew with no immediate job to do were standing at ease, on the foredeck and the after deck, in two neat ranks.

As HMML 951 sailed into the harbour, and passed the destroyer that was flying the Admiral's flag, the tannoy burst into life again.

**'ATTENTION ON THE UPPER DECK! FACE
STARBOARD!'**

And at the shrill wail of the bosun's call, Bill Johnson on the foredeck and the leading seaman in charge of the after crew called their men to attention, the commanding officer saluted, and Joe Snaith dipped the White Ensign which was flying from the jackstaff at the stern of the boat.

Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, who had resumed his uniform that morning, hastily joined in, snapping up his best parade-ground salute; while Hermy, grinning with pleasure, climbed up on top of the hatch cover to get a better view.

At the new pipe by Tiny Rowbotham, doubling as bosun's mate (though there was no bosun, the position being included in the job description of the cox'n), the crew were released and

leaped into action, dropping the fenders over the side and standing by with coiled heaving lines attached to the mooring ropes, which were flaked out ready to snake to the shore.

‘Stop together... half astern port... stop port... Finished with engines.’

As George Spawton, with a minimum of orders, skilfully brought 951 alongside the quay, Alistair stood amazed. This was serious. The harbour was full of naval craft, from Fleet Minesweepers via Frigates to Destroyers; and down the other end, half a dozen landing-craft. Squads of Marines could be seen on parade, carrying out their immaculate drill, which they refused to allow was second to the Brigade of Guards.

The navy meant business.

It was Alistair who thought up the scheme – but first he had to get the co-operation of George Spawton.

George, however, was otherwise engaged. Even before the rest of his boats had joined him, secured alongside each other in two ‘trots’, he had been handed a signal by Joe Snaith, flashed from the senior destroyer.

‘It’s from Captain D, sir,’ he said as he handed it over. ‘I’ve already acknowledged it.’

‘Very good,’ said George, abstractedly, already reading the scribbled signal, which was addressed to the Senior Officer, 35th ML Flotilla: *You will place yourself under my command. Report to my cabin forthwith.*

He looked up. ‘Any idea who Captain D is, Snaith?’

‘Yessir. Captain Cole, Percy Cole. O’Brien was on the *Dauntless* when he was commander. Says he was a right -’

‘Yes, thank you, Snaith. That’ll be all.’

‘Well, that’s a good start, I must say,’ he said, handing the signal to Bill Johnson. ‘Straight and to the point. None of your “Welcome to jolly old Corfu... If you’ve nothing better to do, why don’t you drop in to my cabin for a quick snifter?”’

‘What do you reckon he’s on about?’ said the first lieutenant. Whatever it was, his expression proclaimed, it was bound to be his fault.

‘Search me. I’ve got a suspicion that forthwith means five minutes ago. Perhaps I was wrong about that stopwatch.’ And off he went.

When he came down to the wardroom to join the others for lunch, one look at his face told Alistair that this was not the moment to put forward his obviously harebrained plan for a pre-invasion recce of the Albanian hinterland.

‘The sun’s well over the yardarm,’ said George, as he spun his cap expertly onto the hook behind the door. ‘Why haven’t you offered our guests a drink, Bill?’

‘Sorry, George... Er... what’ll you have, gentlemen?’

Before either could answer, George carried on, ‘You can give me a large gin and lime while you’re at it, and go easy on the lime...’

‘Cheers.’ said Alistair, in a neutral voice, once he’d got his dram. ‘Huh! Here’s to His Majesty’s Royal Flipping Navy! May God bless her and all who sail in her!’

After he’d taken a good swig, he leaned back and shook his head.

‘Do you know what that bastard, Cole, said to me? Said he was well aware that we in Coastal Forces think that we’re some kind of private navy – that he’d seen the MTB wallahs in Pompey drinking in the Officers’ Club with their top buttons undone, aping the Brylcreem boys in the Battle of Britain – but that if our standard of discipline didn’t improve... well, he didn’t actually threaten me with court-martial, but it must have been quite a strain not to!’

He took another slug of gin.

Bill Johnson, white-faced, followed suit.

‘What on earth was he going on about?’ said Alistair.

‘Said there was a member of my crew dressed up like a refugee from a Butlin’s holiday camp – that’s you, Hermy; I told you to keep out of sight – (‘Sorry,’ said Hermy),’- and that the six boats of the flotilla don’t have ensigns of the same size...’

There was a pause, while they all digested this.

‘What else?’ said Bill, in a strangled whisper.

‘Nothing else. That was it!’

He drained his glass and went for a refill.

CHAPTER SIX

As they ate their lunch (Tiny Rowbotham's best corned-beef steak and no-kidney pie, quite delicious), Alistair tentatively mentioned his idea and suggested that it should be put to the Admiral.

'Of course, you're a regular,' said George. 'Speaking personally, I was rather hoping that I might get home in one piece. The war being over and all that. We don't even know if the invasion is on yet.'

'You'd only have to drop me – well, me and Corporal Clarke – off and then pick us up a couple of nights later.' His intention was that Clarke could do the actual job of sussing out the Albanian guns and so on, while Alistair kept his rendezvous with Ancient Greece.

'Mm. I did a bit of gun-running from Malta across to Tito's lot. Creeping inshore in the pitch black... you only knew there was a rock if you hit it. I don't mind telling you I was shit-scared the whole time.'

Alistair gave a helpless glance at Hermy. There was no way he could help – and in any case, he seemed far more interested in mopping up his gravy with a piece of bread.

'I'm not saying I wouldn't do it,' went on George. 'It is a good idea, I suppose. The Admiral ought to jump at it. The only thing is... chain of command and all that... We'll have to put it up to Genghis Khan.'

'Who?'

'Our friend Percy. Captain Percy Bloody Cole.'

'I've never heard such a load of rubbish in all my time in the navy,' said Captain D, not bothering to look up from the pile of papers he was signing.

'We're just not getting through to this man,' thought Alistair, giving George an exasperated look, quite forgetting that his plan was only a means whereby he could get across the strait.

'You'd be bound to get captured, and I don't doubt they'd have ways of getting our invasion plans out of you. These men have been in the resistance for years. They won't pussyfoot around. You'd be lucky to escape with your toenails intact, let alone your...'

'Forgive me, sir,' said Alistair, trying not to show his fury. 'In the first place, I don't know your plans; and in the second place, I have no intention of being taken. My regiment was making raids on the mainland of Europe before the Commandos were even formed. In the invasion of Crete, I...'

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Cole, looking at him properly for the first time and rapidly backpedalling, 'I don't doubt your professional expertise, or your courage. But in my opinion, the possible cost of your scheme far outweighs the slight advantage it might give us. I'm certainly not going to bother Admiral Urquhart. Forget it.'

He returned to his task. The interview was clearly at an end. Neither Alistair nor George Spawton moved.

'I'm afraid I must insist,' said George.

This certainly got through.

'What?! How dare you speak to me like that?'

'With respect, sir, I think it's imperative that we're allowed to put this suggestion to the Admiral. He might see it differently from you, and if he were to find out that you'd turned it down...'

The implication was left hanging in the air.

'Are you threatening me, boy?'

The red-veined face was turning purple; the tufts of ginger hair on his cheeks bristled like the hackles of an angry dog.

'Yes sir, I think I am,' said George quietly, with all the courage of one who knew he would be a civilian again in a month or so. The captain put down his pen and stood up. For a moment, it looked as if he was about to call for the pair of them to be put under close arrest.

After a pause, he turned and walked over to the other side of the cabin, where he spent another long moment closely inspecting a print of HMS *Victory*, Nelson's ship.

'Very well,' he said, as quietly as George, not turning round.

‘I’ll have a word with him.’

He turned back. ‘Now, get out!’ he said.

‘Do you play cricket?’ said the Admiral.

The finest hotel in Kerkira had been taken over as the Officers’ Club, and the NOIC, much to his disgust, had been turfed out of the best room to make way for Admiral Urquhart.

A fine time to be making social chit-chat, thought Alistair. Why couldn’t he give them an answer?

‘Not a bad bat, sir,’ he replied, ‘I was in the first eleven. Used to go in at number four.’

‘And what about you, Spawton?’

‘The last two games I played, sir, I was last man in, nought not out.’

‘Ha! Couldn’t have a better batting average! Infinity, what?’

The cheerful round figure shook gently. He turned and looked back out of the window at the cricket team playing in the middle of the wide green esplanade.

‘Extraordinary thing,’ he said. ‘We took over this island after Napoleon was kicked out, you know. Kept it for nearly fifty years. But then the Highland regiment that was garrisoning the town objected to their band having to join in the procession when they carried their saint around the town – his mummified corpse, you understand, not even an image. Presbyterians to a man. Near mutiny.’

‘And do you know what Victoria said? “They’re quite right,” she said. “Give the place back to the Greeks.” And they did!’

He shook with laughter again.

‘And after all these years you can still get pretty decent chutney – and ginger beer! And what’s more to the point, they still play cricket...’

‘We’re getting up a team to play the town tomorrow. Short of the odd batsman. Glad to have you on board, Lethbridge-Stewart.’

‘The silly old fool!’ thought Alistair. ‘We were lucky to win the war if this was the sort of...’

‘You couldn’t go on your little jaunt for a couple of nights anyway. Have to wait for the right moon. It won’t be dark enough until Thursday... Bloody good idea,’ said the Admiral. ‘Well done.’

‘But why me? Why do you say I’m the only one who can get her out?’ asked Alistair, spitting out a pip.

He and Hermy were sitting in the shade of a big old orange tree, surrounded by sun-ripened globes of sweetness, quenching their thirst after the long pull up the hill out of the town. (‘Help yourself,’ the old lady in the cottage had said when they offered to buy some fruit.)

Their hired bikes – which must have been solicitously cared for since the twenties, judging by their shape and condition – patiently waited in the lane.

After what had happened at the cricket match the day before, Alistair had nearly refused to come when Hermy suggested the trip out into the country. But it soon became obvious after breakfast that they were severely in the way on board 951, where the crew were busy preparing the boat for the night’s foray into the sea space of the putative enemy.

All things metal, such as the ship’s bell and the decorative brasswork on the binnacle, where the bearing compass lived, which had been lovingly restored to their peacetime glory after VE day, had to be given a coat of drab paint. The store of ammunition for the Oerlikon, the 20mm automatic cannon that was the main armament of the ML, had to be replenished, as well as that for the Tommy guns on the bridge. The Tommy guns were just like those that Al Capone and his gangster friends had used, judging by the movies, thought Alistair, who was more familiar with the cheap and cheerful Sten gun. The jeep was to be temporarily off-loaded. And of course, the boat had to be refuelled and the water tanks filled, which meant moving it across the harbour.

Bill Johnson, having had no experience of action, had been equally surplus to requirements until, to his relief, George Spawton sent him off to trawl the pursers’ stores of the larger ships in the harbour for a set of six brand-new White Ensigns of identical dimensions.

‘Let’s get out of this,’ said Hermy, when they’d been moved out of the way for the third time. ‘We can hire a couple of bikes and..’ He stopped when he caught sight of Alistair’s face. ‘I don’t know what you’re so browned off about,’ he said. ‘We won, didn’t we?’

Indeed they had. The Royal Navy scratch team had thrashed

the town team, who were the champions of the island league, beating them by 231 runs. Alistair had no idea of what was going on until he went in for his own innings, in spite of noticing some odd occurrences on the way.

There was, for instance, the ball which had been heading for a clear six (taken at the half-volley by the Edam captain, who had a mighty wallop), which seemed to have met a rogue breeze in midair that steered it neatly into the bucket-sized hands of Tiny Rowbotham, the only other member of the crew to take part.

And then there was the groan of dismay from the crowd when the opening batsman (the son of the mayor, who was expected to knock up his usual century) was run out for a paltry fourteen, by a ball flung with more hope than accuracy, which managed to flatten the stumps even though it had missed them by a good three inches – or so it appeared to Alistair.

But it wasn't until, after a useful thirty-three, when his own wicket had been saved in an equally surprising way, that he guessed. Nicking a deceptive swinger with the edge of his hat, he expected to hear an immediate 'Howzat!' from the wicketkeeper, but turned to see him sprawling on the ground with empty hands.

'Ouch! That hurt!' said a voice. And it wasn't the wicketkeeper's.

'I've a good mind to tell the umpire,' he said in low angry tones to Hermy, who was waiting for him with glee, when he was eventually clean bowled with a score of ninety-five.

'Tell him what?' said Hermy. 'That you've been helped by an invisible god?'

'It's just not... it's not cricket!'

And Alistair stalked off to remove his pads in the highest dudgeon he'd experienced since Flynn minor had pinched his new rugger boots just before the Junior Cup match.

'Why you?' answered Hermy, plucking his third orange from the branch above his head. 'I'll tell you why. Because you're not one of us. And because you're in love.'

They were on speaking terms again, but it was evident that Hermy's apology had been more politic than heartfelt. Even after he'd said that he was sorry, he couldn't help adding, 'Still, we did win, didn't we?'

Alistair had decided to let it go, not knowing whether Hermy's lack of scruples was due to his belonging to a different species, or was merely because he suffered from the undeniable disadvantage of not being British.

'I should have thought you'd have been more suitable. You'd have the edge on an ordinary human,' he said, ignoring the reference to his amatory condition. 'You can make yourself invisible, for a start,' he added, drily.

'Okay, okay, don't go on about it,' said Hermy. 'Obviously the invisibility dodge only works with humans, otherwise it'd be a cinch to slip in and set Sephie free.

'The worst he can do to a human is to kill him off. Sure, he can give you a hard time on the way – torture and stuff -'

'Well, thanks a bunch,' said Alistair.

'Yes, but, don't you see? In the long run you'd be well out of it. But if he got hold of one of us...'

He shuddered.

'It wouldn't quite be an eternity of torment, but I've got a feeling that it might feel like that after a couple of thousand years.'

'And only someone in love would be fool enough to have a go. Right?'

'It's not only that. You've heard of Orpheus?' said Hermy, stuffing a quarter of an orange into his mouth. 'Orpheus and his lute? There was a song that we...'

'All that stuff about the animals and the trees and whatnot listening to his music? Come off it!,' he said, with his mouth full.

'It was a lyre, anyway. Bit limiting musically, but he certainly could play it. Not a bad voice, either. Though I must admit I prefer Frankie myself. Orpheus's phrasing was dead ordinary. Straight down the middle. Now, Sinatra..'

He was off again.

'What about Orpheus?'

Hermy popped in the last segment of orange.

'You know that he went into the Underworld to get back his wife from the dead? Some say that Hades was sorry for him, but I'm not so sure. That's not the Hades we know. I reckon his love for Eurydice protected him.'

Alistair considered this.

'So you're asking me to risk my life, just on the off-chance?'

Hermie got to his feet, wiping his fingers on his shirt. 'Butterflies in the tummy?'

Alistair stood up too. He gave Hermie a contemptuous look and strode to the bikes. But as he picked his up, he stopped.

'Look, it would be ridiculous to pretend that I just don't care. I've always had what you might call a healthy respect for ghosts and ghoulies and... and things that go bump in the night. You know? But that doesn't mean that I'm not going through with this. You're right. I do love Sephie. And what mortal man can do to get her out of there, I'll do. No matter what.

'Come on,' he added, 'I've got to go to the Admiral's briefing at 1500. And I'll treat you to lunch in the hotel. I've got a feeling we'd be lucky to get a cheese sandwich on board 951.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tiny Rowbotham looked at Ned Clarke with some concern. 'You don't look quite the thing, mate. You all right?'

Cheese sandwiches were the last thing on the mind of the corporal as ML 951 sailed out of the harbour into the blackness of the moonless night. The days in harbour had taken away his hard-won sealegs, and a long low swell, the remains of a gale on the far away North African coast, was rolling the boat from side to side like Rock-a-Bye-Baby's cradle.

The corporal nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. The mess-deck seemed abominably stuffy, and a strong reminder of the crew's recent meal hung in the air. In accordance with age-old naval practice, they were going into possible action with full stomachs – on this occasion, full of fish pie – all except Corporal Ned Clarke. Even before they'd left harbour, the gentle motion of the ship had rendered eating a non-option for him.

He'd rather have been in the fresh air, but he'd been ordered to keep out of the way until they got clear of Corfu. None of the crew was below save Tiny. As the cook was a 'dayman' (one who doesn't keep a watch), his place at action stations would normally be on the bridge, as a messenger, but George had decreed that he would be more useful standing by to dish out kye – the navy's sweet cocoa enriched with Bird's custard powder – and other sustaining beverages (George's own favourite in the middle watch being Bovril with a large dash of sherry).

'Don't worry,' said Tiny. 'I had a shuftly at the chart. It's only about five miles across. We'll be there in a couple of shakes.'

The corporal shook his head. 'No. We're heading up through the strait. Landing to the north.'

'Ah. And then doubling back to suss out their guns.'

‘How’d you know that? It’s supposed to be top secret.’

‘Well, that’s the buzz. I’m not wrong, are I?’

Ned shook his head. An extra large swing had lifted his bunk, and dropped it as violently, leaving him temporarily hovering in mid-air. As he landed, he gulped and swallowed in an attempt to keep his innards in place.

What was he doing here anyway? This was one of the reasons he’d volunteered for the army, instead of waiting to be called up. ‘You don’t half look chocker, mate. Anything I can do to help?’

‘Chocker?’

‘Chock-a-block. Two blocks. Fed-up!’

‘You could say that.’

Tiny nodded wisely

‘I know what the trouble is. You got an empty stomach. Not a good idea. Tell you what.’ he said, brightening, ‘I’ll make you a nice thick bacon butty. That’ll fix you!’

Ned’s eyes opened very wide. He clapped a hand to his mouth and took off for the upper deck. There were some orders made to be ignored.

‘Shall I stand down the watch below, sir?’

Spawton didn’t answer at once. He was scanning the darkness to starboard through his powerful naval binoculars, which had large objective lenses to pierce the blackness of night by taking in more light than the naked eye.

Alistair, quite out of his element, kept to the back of the bridge. ‘Have a look, Bill.’

The first lieutenant lifted his own glasses. ‘I can’t see anything at all – except the shoreline. Just.’

‘Want to have a go?’ said George holding his glasses out to Alistair.

Alistair lifted them to his eyes somewhat hesitantly. What was he supposed to be looking for? At first he found it impossible to use the things at all with the rolling of the boat. But even when he’d jammed himself into a corner, like George, there was nothing to be seen, as Bill Johnson had said, bar the extra dark of the distant land with its rim of white surf; not a boat... not a light... not a... ah, of course!

‘There’s not a light to be seen,’ he said.

‘Well done,’ said George, taking back his glasses. ‘We haven’t seen a single light since we passed the Greek border. You can understand why the fishing boats have kept well away in the circs. But no light on land? That looks like a wartime blackout to me. I think we’ll stay at action stations, thank you, Number One. And dowse our own navigation lights.’

‘Aye aye, sir.’

‘Lighthill, Allison, keep your eyes skinned, for God’s sake.’

‘Aye aye, sir,’ said the lookouts in turn.

George took another look, and then swept the horizon ahead. ‘Right now, I’d give a month of my demob leave for radar,’ he murmured.

Alistair stood behind the skipper, feeling the engines lose their throb as the revs were dropped to a gentle murmur, easing them down to a steady five knots. He peered into the nothingness to the east, trying in vain to make out the land – and in particular the mountains he knew lay on the skyline, way behind the cliffs.

Somewhere there lay the portal to the Underworld, pinpointed on the map for him by Hermes before he left the boat.

As he looked, his heart went out to his Sephie, in an agony of helplessness. What was she going through? Would he be in time? Even the gods were not immortal, it seemed.

Hermey had happily allowed himself, in his persona of teenage rascal, to be installed in a room in the Officers’ Club, having been told (in a complete breach of security) the details of the Admiral’s plan. He had discreetly promised Alistair he would be waiting at the rendezvous when he arrived. But could he be trusted? His code of morals seemed to be very different to Alistair’s own.

Of course he would be there. He wanted Sephie rescued as much as Alistair. She was his sister, after all. But then, he’d run away from Hades as soon as things looked difficult, leaving her to be made captive – and worse, maybe.

Alistair tore his imagination away from the unbearable pictures it was painting and forced himself to look at the practicalities of the immediate future, running through the official plan yet again. As Bill went down to the wheelhouse, the momentary light gave Alistair a glimpse of his fellow member of

the military, forlornly sitting on the engine-room roof, leaning against the funnel.

‘May I use the wardroom for a briefing?’

‘My dear fellow, make yourself at home,’ said George. ‘We shan’t be interrupting you. You’ve plenty of time. At this speed, it’s going to take us at least another hour to get there. That right, Bill?’

‘That’s right,’ said Bill, who had reappeared. ‘Estimated time of arrival 1130, give or take twenty-six and a quarter seconds.’

George laughed. ‘I’ll do my best,’ he said.

‘Get down!’

Ned Clarke threw himself into the dry sandy soil alongside his boss, and peered through the undergrowth trying to see what had alerted him. He felt Lethbridge-Stewart’s hand on his arm telling him to keep as still as he could.

The same darkness which had allowed 951 to approach the beach close enough to land them in the tiny dinghy was obviously going to hamper their operations ashore. The only light – and thank God for it, thought the corporal – came from the astonishing array of stars, brilliant in the velvet sky.

It was the murmur of voices which gave him a clue where to look, and the sound of slow footsteps coming nearer. Yes, there they were: two men with rifles; with bandoliers of cartridges, and grenades at their belts.

If the road was patrolled, their plan was compromised from the very start.

In spite of the doubts of Captain Cole (who had been included in the three o’clock briefing as a matter of courtesy), Admiral Urquhart had chosen to share his thoughts about the planned punitive expedition with Alistair and George Spawton.

‘Fair enough, Percy,’ he said, when Captain D vehemently voiced his objections, ‘I take your point. I just happen to see things differently. If I turn out to be wrong you can apply for my job.’

Cole’s bloodshot eyes popped and his mouth gaped like a newly caught trout. With an effort, he compressed his lips and said not another word.

‘Now then, you two,’ went on the Admiral. ‘Not in the

business of invasion, are we? Don't want to start a third world war. Just singe the beggars' beards for 'em. Teach them not to play games with the Royal Navy.

'No. If we put their guns out of action, and then get out of it smartly – Marine Commandos, got their boots dirty many a time – probably met 'em at Crete, eh, Lethbridge-Stewart?'

He'd done his homework, thought Alistair. Apart from George, Cole was the only one he'd told about Crete.

'If the guns are there, sir, you'll be landing right under them.'

'Exactly. So we stand off and bombard them at a distance while we land the troops on the beaches to the south. Trouble is, that's precisely where the blighters would expect us.

'So I've got a little plan. A fiendish plan!'

The Admiral's shoulders shook as he chuckled.

'To start with, Spawton, you'll land Lethbridge-Stewart and his chum on the beach here...'

He pointed at the chart spread out on the table.

'... well to the north of the strait. Then if you're seen, or if they're caught, the assumption will be that our people will be landing in the same place.'

Some plan! Using them as decoy ducks?

'Hurt your pride, have I, Lethbridge-Stewart? Don't worry, I have every confidence that when I'm eating my hard-boiled eggs the day after tomorrow – extraordinary thing, they don't seem to be able to grasp the concept of a proper four-minute egg – when I'm sitting here eating my breakfast, you'll be sitting over there, having a cup of tea, and filling me in with all the details of the gun emplacements, or mobile artillery or what not – wretched fellows, do you realise we gave them most of their armament? Or Tito passed it on... Where was I?'

'Your fiendish plan, sir,' said George, with a straight face. The Admiral gave him a suspicious look.

'Ah yes, my plan,' he said. 'As you've guessed, that's not all. Not by a long chalk. And ML 951 is absolutely central to the rest. You're going into the broadcasting business...'

The Admiral explained. In the invasion of Italy in 1943, a landing craft had been fitted with a powerful amplifier and massive loudspeakers, and had aimed a recording of a fierce gun-battle at the shore, several miles up the coast from the scene of the real landings, in order to lure the enemy defence away. And

the Combined Ops craft in question was sitting in Corfu harbour at this very minute.

‘Only thing is, it wouldn’t do for the job on this occasion. Chugging up through the strait. Like asking a Heffalump to do the tango.

‘Do you see? You’ll be up there on the north side, having your own private war, while we get on with the job in the south! What do you think of that?’

‘Truly fiendish, sir,’ said George.

A flash of annoyance – which gave way to another burst of laughter.

‘Be that as it may,’ said the Admiral at last, ‘we’ll fit your boat up with the necessary gubbins ASAP before you set off, in fact. Just in case your little trip precipitates things. Any questions?’

‘Yes sir,’ said Alistair. ‘Do you think you could make that a cup of coffee? I’m not much of a one for tea.’

By the time the dinghy was tossing in the choppy seas that had replaced the swell from the south as they came into the shelter of the land, the proposed descent into the Underworld of mythology seemed to Alistair to be nothing but fantasy. Would he meet Cerberus, the three-headed dog? The idea was totally absurd.

Only the thought of Sephie and the glow of the memory of their interrupted moment on Zante beach kept him going.

The plan for the recce that Corporal Clarke was told had one small but vital difference. Alistair, turning his back without a qualm on his usual immaculate honesty, explained that the Admiral wanted him to cast the net wider by checking on the military installations in the hinterland behind the coast.

So Clarke would do the navy’s job, while Alistair was freed for the expedition’s real purpose.

It would have been an impossibly long task for the two of them to travel south along the line of the coast itself from beach to beach. So the plan was to make their way inland and follow the coast road – which was little more than a stony mule track – down to the strait, where they would separate.

But now, it looked as if they were stopped in their tracks.

Two soldiers – resistance fighters, partisans? – were almost

on top of them.

Ned Clarke had refused the chance to carry a gun like Alistair's, on the grounds that the .45 Service revolver was too heavy and too noisy. The razor-sharp commando dagger he now produced was much more to his taste. Alistair felt him tensing, ready to leap up, and put out a restraining hand. Their status was none too sure. The war was over. Any killing could be construed as murder – and even though they were in uniform, they could be shot or hanged as spies.

The Albanians wandered past, deep in their murmured conversation, and away up the road to the north.

‘What now, sir?’

‘It'll slow us up, but we've no choice that I can see. Come on, we'd better get cracking.’

Keeping to the line of the road, but whenever possible staying in the olive groves alongside, they set off to the south. Twice more they had to take cover from patrols, luckily as slack in their duty as the first.

The reason for the patrols became evident after they had covered a little more than two miles. The road swung round a corner to reveal what was clearly an encampment, set back in the cover of a rocky hill like a little cliff by the bank of a stream. By now the sky was beginning to lighten, and they could make out makeshift shelters jostling with bell-tents, and wooden tables standing near an old-fashioned field-kitchen and a small marquee. Standing near the rocky road was a decrepit van with solid wheels, painted in camouflage. If this was an army camp, it was housing a unit of some size.

As it was by now past three o'clock in the morning, all was quiet. Apart from another pair of sentries, there wasn't a soul to be seen.

The Admiral needed to know about this, thought Alistair, even though the camp was some miles away from the planned strike. How many men were there? It could be vital information.

With a jerk of his head for Clarke to follow him, he flattened himself against the stony wall of the little hill, and inched his way towards the tents.

And nearly ran into the arms of a figure coming out of a concealed cave.

Holding their breath, they shrank into the darkness of an

overhang as the man walked past, no more than a couple of yards away, and stood looking out over the distant sea towards Corfu.

He was tall, imposing, dressed in the high-necked uniform affected by Marshal Tito, the conquering hero of nearby Yugoslavia. A man of authority.

He was waiting for something.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At first it was like the hum of a distant mosquito, and then the buzz of an angry bee, but soon enough the deeper throb revealed it for what it was: the sound of a rapidly approaching aircraft.

The officer gave a nod of satisfaction and withdrew to his cave. Alistair and Corporal Clarke froze. Maybe the dimness of first light would make their khaki battledress camouflage enough.

By the time they might have been able to move unseen, it was too late. The aircraft was upon them, diving on the camp with all guns blazing.

'It's a Spitfire, by God!' said Alistair.

The fighter was all too recognisable, with the five-pointed star on its wings and tail fin, which was the Allied sign of identification for the latter part of the war.

One of the sentries shouted a belated warning, and fell to the ground, shot dead. His fellow threw himself down alongside, and scrambled on his belly towards the false haven of the wooden tables.

The plane swooped over the tents, the tracer that marked the flight of the shells bright against the dawn, and turned in a tight arc as it clawed its way back into the sky to get enough altitude for another attack. Men tumbled out of the useless shelter of the canvas, and ran for the olive groves that bordered the camp.

Alistair seized the chance, and took off for the metal field-kitchen, and threw himself behind it, followed closely by the corporal.

All too soon, the Spitfire was back, the roar of its engine and the clatter of its guns deafening the ear and shaking the brain. Against all his instincts, Alistair raised his head to see. Half a dozen men caught in the open fell into the sandy soil. Dead.

Or were they?

The running men fell to the ground as if they had been tripped. And the sentry, the first victim, had clutched his belly and buckled at the knees, like an actor in a run-of-the-mill Western.

The .303 machine-gun bullets would have ripped them to shreds, and any man who was struck by a 20mm round, which was designed to destroy aircraft and disable tanks, would be flung through the air as though he had been clouted by the fist of a giant – and lose large pieces of himself into the bargain.

The noise died as the plane climbed again, swung once round the camp as though surveying the damage it had done, and peeled off, retracing its track to the west, dwindling to a speck and vanishing over distant Corfu.

The depth of the silence was broken by the tentative voices of the men emerging from the trees, growing to a jabber of confused rage as they discovered their fellows lying dead.

The sprawling corpse of the sentry, the first man to be hit, was only a few feet away.

‘I don’t get it,’ whispered Clarke.

‘It would have blown a hole clear through him,’ agreed Alistair.

There wasn’t even any blood, he thought. And yet the man was undoubtedly dead. As two of his comrades pulled him over onto his back, his head flopped, his mouth gaped open, and the whites of his eyes stared blindly at the sky. Alistair had seen too many corpses to be mistaken.

He watched the men as they lifted the body and carried it away – and noticed that now there was blood on its chest. He could have sworn... The men disappeared into the marquee.

‘Now’s our chance,’ he murmured to the corporal.

‘I think not, gentlemen.’

A rich deep voice behind them.

The sharpness of Alistair’s reflexes, honed by war, nearly finished him off then and there. As he rolled over, revolver in hand, he was deafened by a simultaneous shot, which smacked into the ground an inch from his left ear.

‘The next one will be in your belly. Throw down your gun.’

There was no choice.

‘Stand up, the pair of you, and put your hands in the air.’

It was the Yugoslav officer from the cave, with a Luger automatic in his hand.

At the sound of the shot, a couple of men came running. A snapped word of command, and they ran their hands over the bodies of the two captives, quickly finding the corporal's stiletto dagger.

Time for a bit of bluff, thought Alistair

'You have no right -' he started to say.

'Silence! You are the ones who have no rights. Two spies – armed and ready for murder? Am I to ask you for your passports? I could shoot you as you stand there.

'Or shall I turn you over to my Albanian friends?'

By now a small crowd of scowling partisans had gathered. There was a smile on the hawk-nosed patrician's face.

'When I explain to them that it was your doing that the plane attacked us, I think they will -'

'That's not true!'

'You know that and I know that. But they'll believe anything I tell them.'

He turned and spoke to one of the men, an officer of sorts, who nodded and gave an order to a young man standing nearby. With a clumsy salute, he set off at a run, disappearing round the corner of the road.

'Don't worry. We're not about to shoot you or hang you. At the moment you're too useful to me. Young Noll has gone to fetch his brother from the northern patrol. He's the only one with a camera.'

A camera?

'Proof, you understand. After you've told us everything you know – and believe me, you will – we'll take your portraits and send them to the Admiral.

'And then we'll shoot you.'

Hermy wasn't used to hanging about doing nothing. Assuming the body and persona of a teenager carried with it both a blessing and a curse – restless energy.

The hotel room was beginning to feel like a prison cell. He couldn't just settle down and have a ziz, for Pete's sake, until the time came for him to teleport himself to the Ipiros gate. And yet there was even less point in going out to wander the town.

He'd sent a mental image to Demeter, to let her know that things were on course, that Sephie was still all right...

But was she? He'd sounded the right note of confidence when he was talking to young Lethbridge-Stewart, but he couldn't deny the taste of fear that permeated his brain whenever he tried to contact Sephie through the force-fields that kept her captive.

At least he could go and find out. The rendezvous was planned for dawn, or as soon after as possible, at the portal in Ipiros, but there was no reason why he shouldn't take himself there earlier. Maybe Charon would be able to give him an idea of the situation. The old ferryman was always full of the day's gossip – just like an Athenian cab-driver...

For a moment he shut his eyes, and summoned up the image of the second lieutenant.

'There's not a light to be seen.'

'Well done...'

The darkness of the bridge. Things were on course.

Hanging the *Do Not Disturb* notice on the outside of his door, Hermy returned to the middle of the room and turned his attention inwards, diving down into the stillness at the centre, while holding the image of the gate to the Underworld across the strait. With a flick of his will, as light as the touch of a hand on the tiller of a sailboat, he jumped the gap.

His eyes took a little while to get used to the starlight after the brightness of the hotel room. What was it? Night adaptation? Something to do with rods and cones, whatever they might be. Who cared, anyway?

He was standing by a hill – little more than a hillock – at the foot of a mountain, part of the range of mountains that ran to the north and to the south.

Just ahead was a narrow gap, a split in the rock, half hidden by an overhanging creeper.

Squeezing his way through (his uncle Bacchus would have a job, with his belly!), he emerged in the familiar cavern which was the gate to the Underworld.

Just as, at the north pole, no matter which direction you look, you're always facing south, so the multiplicity of portals to the Underworld, all over the Earth, gave entry to the same gate; the gate guarded by Cerberus, the giant hound with three heads,

each fiercer than the next.

And here he was, bounding towards Hermy, foam flying from the massive mouths of his two outer heads, in a frenzy of barking, while the larger one in the centre howled like a demented wolf.

Hermes stood his ground. As the beast came nearer, he held up a commanding hand. The sprightly teenager had disappeared. Here was a figure of power, of mastery

‘Back!’ he cried, in a voice that whipped the air.

Cerberus, as if taken by surprise, veered to one side and came to a stop, the great tongues slavering, and the cacophony of barking dwindled to a trio of menacing growls.

Marching straight ahead, stiffly holding his head up to hide his trembling, Hermy made it to the other side of the cavern and through the low arch to the bank of the river.

In this otherworld, where the book of rules was that of its lord, Hades, Hermes could no more teleport himself than could a human (alive or dead). To get across the river that barred him from going further into the Underworld, he’d have to take the ferry.

‘Well, if it isn’t Master Hermy,’ said Charon, accepting the small coin, and peering at it with his faded eyes. ‘Come to visit poor little Miss Sephie, have you? Jump in, then.’

And as he paddled the boat across the black waters of the Styx, the ancient ferryman kept up a stream of chatter, just as Hermy had hoped. But his message was far from hopeful.

‘She’s not taking it well,’ he said. ‘Only way down here is Lord Hades’ way. If she don’t do as he says, well, what do you expect? They do say her sobbing was drowning out the wailing of the dead’uns, and that’s some wailing, as well you know...’

And so on and so on.

He’d have to go and see her. He’d still got time before he met her new boyfriend – and what did he expect Alistair to be able to do anyway?

It’s very uncomfortable, sitting on the floor, with your ankles tied together and your hands tied behind your knees. And what’s more, you haven’t a hope of struggling free.

As soon as the soldier had gone, shutting the van door

behind him, Alistair wriggled experimentally.

He had no idea how long they'd got. The colonel – Colonel Nicolevic, as he'd introduced himself with sarcastic politeness – had apologised for his discourtesy in not subjecting them immediately to the well-practised 'interrogation' of his colleagues.

'A previous engagement, you understand, gentlemen. My friends will look after you. You can spend the time making your peace with whatever god you think you're going to meet after my return.'

This seemed an odd turn of phrase to come from a Serb, thought Alistair. The Albanians would probably all be Muslims, but with a name like Nicolevic, this man should come from an Orthodox Christian background.

He had no time to consider the matter, however. As the colonel turned his back the partisan officer gave a curt command and the two British soldiers soon found themselves trussed up like a couple of chickens ready for the pot, and dumped in the back of the ramshackle old van.

'My old woman's going to be right brassed off if I turn up missing in action a year after VE Day. She'll think I've gone off with some bint from the bazaar. She never did believe me when...'

'Yes, well, just shut up a minute, will you? I can't hear myself think.'

'Yes sir. Sorry sir.'

Alistair's thoughts were rushing blindly back and forth like a squirrel in a cage.

What about Sephie, now? And in spite of his bravado to Commander Cole, how long would he hold out once the colonel got to work on them? The Admiral might guess that his plans had been compromised, but if not, Alistair could be responsible for hundreds of deaths.

They must escape. But how? Already the tightness of his bonds was numbing his hands. There was no way that... no, wait a minute. If he fell onto his side...

'Listen, Clarke. If I fall onto my right side, and you fall onto your left, we might be able to manoeuvre ourselves round so that I could undo your knots – or vice versa. Do you see what I mean?'

‘Yeah. Great. Let’s have a go.’

After a deal of squirming, they ended up with Ned Clarke’s face squashed against the rusty floor and his bottom in the air, with Alistair lying on his back, with his legs across the backs of the corporal’s knees – and yes, his fingers on the knots around his wrists!

And that was as far as they got.

Agonisingly and frustratingly linked together like a pair of lovesick snails, they found the possibility of escape as far away as ever. The thick coarse ropes were knotted so tightly that they would have to be cut free.

‘No good,’ panted Alistair. ‘I can’t get any purchase on the knot.’

‘Do you think you could get off, mate – I mean sir?’ Ned’s voice sounded as if somebody had him by the throat.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry,’ said Alistair, rolling off the corporal’s legs. ‘We’ll just have to think of something else.’

But what?

CHAPTER NINE

Hermes was accustomed to visiting the Underworld. In the glory time – the time when they were gods – one of his jobs had been to lead the dying, as they left their earthly bodies, to Hades’ gate, and escort them across the Styx to where they believed they would spend eternity.

Then he had been accepted on sufferance by the band of demonic ‘gods’ and other assorted creatures who served Hades, but now... now, the deeper he dared to go into the realms of the tyrant king, the more his guts melted into terror.

He was as much at risk, as much at the mercy of the monsters, with their insatiable craving for the stuff of life, as any foolhardy mortal who ventured here – more so, because of Sephie and the renewal of Hades’ enmity.

Yet now all seemed quiet. Hugging the sides of the rocky passages, lit by the light of the flames that jetted out of the walls like torches, crossing the shadowed caverns where the keening ghosts relived the sadness of their loss, nipping past the crevices and crannies that might contain the nightmares of a million dead, he met no hellish creatures, no demonic guards he’d have to fight.

And when he looked down into the great central chamber where Hades held court, the pit of fire in the middle was merely giving off a hellish glare, rather than the leaping flames he’d seen on his previous visit; and the few living creatures in sight, whether minor ‘gods’, such as the distant cousin he recognised in desultory conversation with a centaur, or the chimaera (half lion, half goat) dozing on the steps of Hades’ throne, hardly gave him a glance as he sidled down the winding stone steps that led through the crags to the floor below.

And then it struck him. As Charon had said, this was Hades’

realm. It was Hades' power that held it in existence. That must be it! Hades was still away and until he came back his power was at a minimum, like a hibernating grizzly... or an idling engine, barely ticking over, but ready to roar into life at a touch.

A shudder of fear swept over Hermy as he realised the implication. This could be his chance. He could rescue his sister himself... But what if Hades returned at the wrong moment?

By now he was getting near to the place where Sephie was incarcerated. And as Charon had said, her voice could be heard, a counterpoint to the distant chorus of the dead, sobbing with abject fear.

Taking a deep breath, Hermy peeped round the corner.

Sephie was curled up, hugging her knees, leaning against the craggy wall of the cave. Her eyes were tight shut and her voice had sunk to a low moaning which spoke of nothing but the utmost despair. It seemed that she had given up.

Leaning against the wall nearby, picking his teeth, a young satyr was on guard. Or was he? After a moment of inspection of the quarrying fingernail, the Pan-like figure pushed himself upright and wandered off, the clip-clop of his hooves echoing through the caverns.

With a quick glance each way to make sure the coast was clear, Hermy sidled along the wall until he reached the hollow that was Sephie's prison.

Maybe, with Hades out of the way, the force-field would have lost some of its power. His sister was so demoralised she might not have even tested it.

Putting out a tentative hand, he placed his palm against the invisible barrier and pushed.

Ha! It resisted him, but not with the steely rigidity he'd expected. More like a sponge or – no, like the softness of a deep feather bed. If you really pushed hard, maybe...

'Seph!'

Her eyes snapped open. 'Hermy! What the heck are you doing here?'

This was not the reaction he'd expected.

Gone was the despairing victim of a moment before. This was the Sephie he knew so well, the sparky Seph who bossed him around like any elder sister since the beginning of time.

'Are you all right? A moment ago you seemed..'

‘That was for his benefit.’ She nodded after the departed satyr. ‘If Hades thinks I’m near breaking point, I’ve got a chance of taking him by surprise.’

It made a sort of sense.

‘Listen...’

‘Keep your voice down, you clot!’

‘Yeah, well...’ continued Hermý in a desperate undertone. ‘Now’s your chance to get out. The force-field...’

‘You think I haven’t tried?’

‘Yes, but it’s not at full power at the moment. If you...’

‘Go on, you have a go, if you’re so clever,’ she said, in the bossy way that had irritated him for some three thousand years.

With another glance to make sure that the guard wasn’t coming back, Hermý took a deep breath and pushed himself against the softness that separated him from his sister.

At first it resisted. But then it gave way, as abruptly as if he’d burst a bubble, and he was through into...

Into nothing.

There was no sound, there was no ground beneath his feet, and there was a greyness that was emptier than the blackest of black nights.

If he didn’t hold on tightly, he would vanish into the nothingness. Already he could feel it seeping into his skin and pushing its tendrils into the folds of his brain.

Panic was rising in his chest and into his throat. Feeling blindly behind him, he found the yielding something that was nothing and pushed his way back into the cavern of the Underworld, his heart beating as if he’d run the hundred yards in ten seconds flat.

‘I’d rather take my chance with Hades than face that again.’ said Sephie quietly.

Hermes took a deep, shuddering breath.

‘But what does he want of you? What’s he after?’

‘It’s like the Players. This is his game. He’s never accepted that Zeus was the winner last time round. But this time the stakes are even higher.’

‘What do you mean?’

And Sephie told him what she’d managed to glean.

Hades had bided his time until he felt that the tide of faith was ebbing in the Western world. Now was the chance he’d

yearned for over the dark centuries, the chance to displace Zeus as the god of gods and become the supreme being worshipped by the human race – not only in the mini-world of Greece, but throughout the planet.

The arrogance of this blasphemy took Hermes' breath away. Not even Zeus had aspired to usurp the Absolute that held the world in being.

'But how? What's he going to do?'

Sophie shook her head.

'He needs the world to be in chaos; he wants the people to be paralysed with fear; and the countries to be tearing each other apart. And then he'll reveal himself – as the saviour of mankind.'

It could just work.

'But how do you come into it?'

'Good question. You've seen for yourself how many ships they're getting ready in Corfu...'

'Yeah. Quite a fleet. What's that got to do with it?'

'Just think what would happen if they were all sunk when they tried this raid of theirs.'

Despite himself, Hermý laughed. A few partisans from the hills with a couple of pop-guns against the might of the Royal Navy? 'Fat chance of that happening.'

'Not if more than half of them go down in a storm – and the Albanians just have to finish them off.'

It suddenly started to make sense.

'I get it. He wants you to whip up a typhoon or something.'

'He knows that I have the power – the power that Zeus gave me – and the power to stop him doing it himself. If he's going to carry out his plan, he needs me on his side – or out of the way. And if it works...'

Hermý was there already.

'The Yanks would step in – and that would mean the Russians...'

'You've got it, sonny boy. I think he means to start the Third World War...'

Something sharp to cut the cord. That's what they needed. Alistair looked round the empty van. It was quite dark, but by the little light coming through the small pane that gave onto the driver's cab he could see that there was nothing that they could

use.

‘Sir!’

‘What?’

‘I’ve got steel tips to my heels. Maybe I could smash that glass and...’

‘...and use the splinters to cut the rope! Worth a try, Corporal. Well done!’

Any fool can make plans. It’s part of being human. But if it was as easy to carry them out, we’d all be living in Utopia.

To start with, Ned Clarke had to sit up again and manoeuvre himself (heel and bum, caterpillar fashion) across the floor of the van to the front. But when he rolled onto his back, his feet were still a good two feet away from the partition.

And even when he managed to push his heels, inch by inch, up the wall by walking on alternate shoulders, his feet were still a good three inches away from the little window; and there seemed to be no way that he could lift his back.

‘If I can get my feet under your backside,’ said Alistair, ‘maybe I could lift your legs.’

But when he tried it (and it took an age just to get in position) the extra push upset Ned’s uncertain equilibrium, and he rolled sideways onto the floor.

And it was just as well that he did.

A rattle of Sten gun fire; a sudden bunch of sunbeams shining across the dimness of the van...

If Ned Clarke had still been in position, his legs would have been cut off.

It was time to face the facts. Sephie wasn’t going to get out until Hades came back and let her out. And Hermy had no intention of hanging around until then. Back to plan A.

‘Listen. I’m going to bring someone down to help.’

‘What good will that do? Hades knows us all too well – how our minds work. I’ve as much chance as anybody of taking him off guard.’

‘Not one of us,’ said Hermy impatiently. ‘A human. A normal. He’s...’

Sephie’s eyes lit up. ‘Of course! He’s been out of touch with the normals for yonks. The way those crazy minds work – Hermy, you’re a genius! If anybody could wrong-foot him...’

Hermý turned his head sharply. Was that the sound of approaching hooves?

‘Listen...’ he said urgently.

‘Winston might be a good bet,’ went on Sephie, ‘and he can’t be too busy at the moment, what with -’

‘Will you listen! It’s your new boyfriend. That young soldier you want to go to bed with.’

‘Alistair! For Pete’s sake. what good will that do? You’ll just get him killed!’

‘He’s in love with you – or haven’t you noticed? And that gives him a better chance than anybody.’

For once Sephie was silenced; and Hermý could see from her face the conflict in her mind. Good grief! She hadn’t fallen in love too?

Throughout the aeons of their sharing of the planet, the gods had used humans for their pleasure. The difference in their lifespans alone ruled out anything deeper and more long lasting. Emotion was a dangerous luxury.

The click of the satyr’s hooves.

Definitely nearer.

‘I’ve got to go. He’ll be waiting for me at the gate.’

He vanished round the corner just in time, and the last glimpse of his sister, as the bored satyr resumed his position against the wall, showed him a Sephie he’d never seen before: an uncertain Sephie, a Sephie who’d lost her way.

Hermý tiptoed past the sleeping Cerberus (whose left-hand head was snoring slightly, like an ageing Pekingese) and safely made his way out of the crevice in the hillside to his rendezvous. So far so good.

But where was Alistair?

He should have had plenty of time to get there, even allowing for the rocky terrain when he left the coast. Had he got lost?

Hermý closed his eyes and brought Lethbridge-Stewart into his mind’s eye.

‘...steel tips to my beds. Maybe I could smash that glass...’

Both of them ignominiously tied up!

And shut up – but what in?

It wouldn’t be much help to just turn up. There might be a

guard in with them; and he was as vulnerable to a bullet in his guts as any human.

Given the strange location, and without a living subject to focus his mind, he hadn't a hope of seeing what was outside their cell (or whatever it was).

If he didn't free Alistair, the whole plan had gone for a burton. He'd just have to take a chance.

A deep breath, a dive into the depths; the familiar sensation of an unearthly wind, and... *Zzzp!*

Thanks be to Zeus! He'd arrived in the shelter of an olive grove! Dismissing the cynical thought that, in fact, his celestial father would be too engrossed in contemplating his own transcendental radiance to give a toss, he scanned the scene before him.

There were few soldiers about. One was standing by the kitchen, drinking from a tin mug. Another was sitting at a table, his head in his hands. And there were two sentries, one with a rifle and one with some sort of machine gun.

There seemed to be nothing to match the dim interior he'd seen. The two captives had certainly not been in a tent, and as far as he could see... No, wait! The van! That must be it.

A quick check... Yes! There they were...

Zzzp!

He landed with a bump on the hard bench in the driver's cab. Searching the unfamiliar dashboard for a starter button, he mentally probed the ignition circuit, and sent a shaft of energy to fuse the gap. But there was no sign of a starter. To turn the engine by sheer force of mind would be well-nigh impossible.

Perhaps the starter was on the floor?

Not a sign of it.

He stared through the dashboard at the simple engine. There was no starter motor.

As he realised with a jolt that a vehicle as old as this (it looked as though it pre-dated the Great War) would have to be started by swinging a handle at the front, he caught sight of one of the sentries – the one with the machine gun – staring at him open mouthed.

With a shock of terror he grabbed at the crankshaft with a surge of his mind, just as the sentry, with a shout, raised his gun. The engine took a quarter turn and seemed to jam.

Panic kills all chance of the stillness needed for teleportation. Hermy's only hope was to dodge the bullets which his danger-sharpened mind could see emerging from the muzzle of the gun. One, two, three... here it came! The fourth round was coming straight at him.

As it crashed through the door, he pushed with every atom of his will, raising himself into the air.

But not quite far enough.

He felt the short sharp burn as the passing bullet singed his bum. He fell back onto the seat, adrenalin coursing through the arteries of his brain, giving his mind its much needed boost; and, with a rattle and a cough, the ancient engine burst into life.

CHAPTER TEN

Alistair pushed his way through the gap in the rocks of the little hillock, into the cavern which was the gateway to the Underworld, and stopped in amazement. It was immense.

‘Good grief,’ he said.

‘What?’ said Hermy.

‘It’s bigger on the inside than it is on the outside!’

‘Yes, well...that’s because it’s dimensionally transcendental.’

More sci-fi gobbledegook.

‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means it’s bigger on the inside than it is on the outside,’ said Hermy.

Alistair frowned. The boy obviously felt that he was just a thickheaded soldier.

‘Would you like me to explain how the para-dimensional continuum interacts with null-space and the space-time vortex?’ went on Hermy, innocently.

Alistair was saved the embarrassment of an answer by a low growl, coming from the depths of the cave, followed by a fury of savage barks, as Cerberus woke up, recognised that there were intruders in his domain, and leapt to its defence.

Alistair looked at the charging beast with an open mouth. He’d been told to expect the hound with three heads (and only half believed it was anything more than a legend) but he’d heard nothing about its size. This thing was as tall as an elephant; and it was coming at them with the speed of a charging rhinoceros.

Hermy stepped forward, lifting a noticeably shaking hand.

The boy obviously knew nothing about dogs.

‘Keep still!’ barked Alistair.

Hermy stopped in surprise.

The great creature came straight for them. Its three heads

with their cacophonous chorus of barks had bared fangs that could snap a tree trunk.

Alistair, who was at the front, didn't move a muscle.

At the last moment, it swerved. Alistair turned on the spot, keeping his eyes on those of the central head.

Swinging round the two of them in a tight circle, the creature skidded to a stop. Alistair (and the astonished Hermy as well) kept facing it.

Its voice now a fearsome growl, it lowered its heads to the ground and began to creep menacingly forward.

Alistair stood his ground.

As the beast came nearer, and nearer, he slowly lifted his arm and held out the back of his hand.

It stopped, puzzled.

'Good dog,' said Alistair.

The three heads, each as big as that of an ox, reached out to sniff his hand. The largest gave it a tentative lick.

Alistair stroked the coarse hair, and gave it a rub behind the ears – and at once the two outer noses pushed against his arm, jealously demanding some of the same.

'Fair dos,' said Alistair, and shared his favours.

'Been around dogs since I was a wee bairn,' he said. 'Better get on, hadn't we?' he added.

The astounded Hermes pulled himself together, nodded, and set off towards the low arch that gave onto the river.

Giving Cerberus a final pat, Alistair came after him, followed a moment later by three hopeful heads and three wagging tails.

It had been a damned close-run thing, getting away from the army camp. Racketing onto the mule-track at a perilous thirty miles an hour, under a hail of bullets, the van had swayed and bounced and nearly turned over as Hermy wrenched it round the bend. And then, a mile or so away from the camp, a tyre burst.

It was a pity that the tyres weren't as solid as the wheels.

Hermy had managed to run the van into a little wood where it would be out of sight, and set about the tedious job of untying the captives' bonds.

Ned Clarke was somewhat taken aback when he saw who his rescuer was.

Okay, the kid could have stowed away again. But how the

heck had he managed to get ashore? He certainly hadn't been in the tiny dinghy. Still, the lieutenant didn't seem too surprised, so he'd better just be grateful for small mercies. Small? Huh! The kid had just saved their lives!

'Thanks, mate,' he said, rubbing his wrists where the cord had cut into them.

'Any time,' said Hermy, and climbed out of the van to join Mr Lethbridge-Stewart.

The corporal felt a bit left out when the other two drew aside, obviously for a conference of war, especially as a couple of times they glanced his way. Bloody officers. Still, taking it all round, this Lethbridge-Stewart guy seemed to know what he was doing.

'Change of plan, Corporal. Mr Demeter here has a certain amount of local knowledge that could be very useful. So we'll split up here instead of at the strait. I'll see you at the rendezvous as arranged. Right?'

'Okay sir. Midnight to 0300. Tonight or tomorrow. And good luck, sir.'

'You too, Clarke.'

'I've got a feeling we're going to need it,' thought Ned, as he watched the other two setting off towards the distant mountains. 'I feel bloody naked without my knife.'

'Can't take you across without my obol. More than my job's worth.'

The old ferryman's face was stern.

Obol? What was an obol?

'The payment,' said Hermy, worried. 'The smallest coin they had in the old days. I used my last earlier on.'

A lot of use that was.

This was ridiculous! If he had to get across the river Styx to rescue Sephie, then that's what he was going to do. But he didn't even have any drachmas in his pocket. He'd cleared everything out that wasn't necessary for the operation, in accordance with normal practice in the Intelligence.

What to do? Take the boat? Apart from his natural distaste for clouting an old man, it was by no means sure that he'd win a fight with an immortal, or whatever he was.

Ah! of course!

‘What are you doing?’ said Hermy.

‘You can see what I’m doing. Taking my bloody shoes off.’

It only dawned on the puzzled Hermy when Alistair hung them around his neck by the laces.

‘No! You can’t do that!’

‘Can’t I? Watch me!’

As he surfaced, he had immediate doubts. The dim light of the other shore was almost impossible to make out from water level. Still, in for a penny...

By the time he’d taken a dozen strokes, he’d come to the conclusion that he’d made a bad mistake. The water, which had seemed from the shore to be quite still, almost stagnant, had an insidious but implacable current, which was carrying him downstream into the blackness.

Not only into blackness. A flurry of splashing and a screech that split the mind; a glowing in the darkness and a stink of decaying fish. He was being swept into the arms – no, the tentacles! – of... of what?

As one of the serpent limbs of the beast smacked into the water a bare foot from his head, and then another, six inches nearer, he caught a glimpse of a monstrous head lit with the eerie luminescence of the deep, a cavernous mouth and two staring eyes. There was no possible defence from the dozen or more flailing tentacles. Sooner rather than later one would make contact, and then...

This subaltern of the Intelligence Corps would be a mere snack.

Another tentacle – an inch away.

The genes of Alistair’s forebears sent him a desperate message: If you have no defence – attack!

Aided by the current, three powerful strokes brought him to the head, and with all the strength that had nearly won him the middleweight championship in his last year at Fettes he punched the creature fair and square in the middle of the eye.

The effect was gratifying. With a shriek of agony, the creature shrank back, retracting its tentacles into itself like a sea anemone in a rock pool; its glow switched itself off and, a harmless blob, it sank beneath the surface.

But Alistair had no time to rejoice. Attracted by the disturbance, scores of smaller heads were erupting from the oily

surface of the river, like a pack of curious seals – but seals with a difference, seals with the snapping jaws of the great white shark.

Where was the Lethbridge-Stewart inheritance now? He had to try to escape.

Taking a deep breath, Alistair was about to duck beneath the water, when he was seized from behind.

He struggled to get free with the desperation of a man at the point of death.

‘Stop that, you fool! You’ll have us over!’

Nearly strangled by Hermy’s grip on his collar, he found himself hoisted up and dropped into the bottom of Charon’s boat.

‘I’d really be terribly grateful if you didn’t do that sort of thing too often,’ said Hermy, rubbing his shoulder as they clambered ashore. ‘We may be stronger than normals, but I’m not Superman, you know.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ said Alistair. ‘Thanks. How did you manage to...?’ he went on, nodding towards Charon.

‘Oh... he settled for a couple of drachmas. Sorry about that.’

‘Now just you be careful, Master Hermes,’ called the old ferryman, as he paddled away. ‘You could find yourself in real trouble, now that Lord Hades is back.’

‘What? How do you know he’s back?’

‘Why do you think the river-folk got so uppity? They mostly goes to sleep when he’s away. We’ve had some right quiet times over the last thousand years or so. Course he’s back.’

Hermy stared after the receding boat, his face aghast. Alistair looked up from lacing his shoes.

‘Does that make much difference?’

‘Difference?’ said Hermy. ‘Would you walk into the cage of a hungry lion?’

He couldn’t disguise the tremor in his voice.

‘If I had to.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t. I thought the cage was still empty.’

He turned and walked disconsolately down the rocky passage.

Alistair followed, squelching.

Sephie tried to pull herself together. It was no good sitting there

with the same thought going round and round her head like a stuck gramophone record. If Alistair was coming, so be it. But even if he managed to get her out – though how was he supposed to manage that! – even if he did, he'd still be in the greatest danger from Hades.

At the thought of losing him, a pang struck her like a cry of pain from the heart. It couldn't happen; it mustn't happen!

She looked across at her guard, the horned satyr. Although he was leaning against the wall again, his hooves were clicking and scraping the rocky floor as he kept shifting his hairy legs. He was considerably more on the alert.

He must be there for one reason only. His was the mind that held the force-field in place. Brought into being by Hades himself (that was pretty obvious; only someone of his power could have created such a sophisticated idea as a barrier of nothingness) it had to be kept secure by constant vigilance. This job must have been delegated to the satyr.

Tentatively she reached out with her mind and touched the barrier. Such things as psionic force-fields created such strains in the fabric of space-time that they were almost palpable.

The satyr frowned and stood up, darting quick glances from side to side like a feeding animal.

She was right. He was her jailer and he held the key.

Pretty stupid, satyrs were. Only interested in one thing; and that wasn't food.

Maybe...

Standing up, she smoothed her wrinkled summer dress down to emphasise her figure, ran her fingers through her hair, and ran her tongue over her lips. If only she had her lipstick!

'What's your name?'

'Huh?'

'I bet a big strong boy like you must have a big strong name.'

His eyes flicked up and down her body.

She could see at a glance that she had aroused his interest.

'They call me Dog. On account of the bitches don't see me coming.' He sniggered coarsely.

'There you are, you see. A big tough name for a big tough feller.'

Blatantly rocking her hips, she moved as close as she could to the invisible wall. As she got nearer to him, the rank goatish

stench nearly made her heave, but she forced herself to stare up at the satyr's face with fascinated, adoring eyes.

'Come here,' she said.

He moved towards her, suspicious but intrigued.

'You know,' she murmured, 'all the men I know are so weak. They're just... just wet. And their bodies are so soft. A girl like me needs somebody to bring out the animal in her...'

He reached out a hand to touch her – and it vanished into the barrier.

With a grunt of annoyance, he pulled it out, shaking his head in frustration.

'O-o-oh!' Keeping her mind lightly touching the barrier, she did her best to produce a groan of disappointment that was also a moan of desire.

It did the trick. Not even bothering to check if anybody was watching, Dog let go his hold on the psionic shield and, as it vanished, lurched towards her.

With a swirl (perfected by half a decade of foxtrotting at London's *Café de Paris*) Sephie side-stepped, dodging his outstretched grabbing hands, and fled.

Stumbling forward he let out a howl of anger, and with the automatic reflex of his job, switched on the barrier again.

Too late. Sephie was well away, scooting down the passage towards the central chamber.

A quick glance over her shoulder saw the thwarted satyr turning and leaping after her – and vanishing, straight into the force-field.

She stopped. No sign of him. All was still.

Judging by her earlier experience, unless you were quick off the mark, you would dissolve into the emptiness like a lump of sugar in a hot cup of tea.

Nothing.

He'd gone for good.

So that was that. She grinned ruefully. If only over the years, the many many years, other unwanted suitors could have been so comprehensively dismissed!

Shaking the turmoil of memory from her mind, she turned back to the present problem. The way out would take her through the central chamber – and if Hades had come back...

Only one way to find out.

Keeping close to the wall, she crept up towards the end of the passage, trying to stay in the flickering shadows. As she approached the opening, the light of the flames from the pit flared on the ceiling.

Inching up to the corner, she took a deep breath and peeped round the edge.

‘Well, well, well,’ said Hades, ‘if it isn’t little Miss Persephone. We were just on our way to have a word with you.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'It's no good,' whispered Hermes. 'We'd never get through.' Alistair couldn't help but agree. Hearing a sound ahead, a melange of shrieks, growls and piercing howls, they had climbed to the top of a nearby crag, from where they could get a good view of the main passageway ahead.

'What would you call them. Demons, monsters?' muttered Alistair, surveying the throng of creatures with some distaste.

For these beasts were very far from the usual idea of the denizens of hell. A slug, six feet long, with a face like a distorted vulture; a single great eye, which progressed by small bounces, swallowing up smaller creatures in its path; a giant spiderish thing with far too many legs, a proboscis the size of an elephant's trunk and a gross parody of an abdomen so full of blood it flopped along the ground like a balloon full of water; and so on and so on...

'It's not what they're called that matters. It's what they do. They're ravenous. All the time.'

As they watched, they saw a bat-headed skeletal monstrosity with a swollen belly, grabbing with all-too-human hands a small furry beast, which it stuffed into its mouth, swallowing it live, as if it were a Whitstable oyster.

'See what you mean,' said Alistair. 'So what do we do now?'

'There's another way through. What you might call the back doubles. Come on.'

The back doubles proved to be a maze of tunnels, obviously artificial, which seemed to be the service network for what had to be Hades' palace.

Catching a glimpse of a sumptuous bedroom, with silken hangings, a carpet of fur and a gold bedstead, Alistair stopped. 'Good grief!' he said. 'It's like a whore's boudoir...! Manner of

speaking. Never been in one,' he added, hastily suppressing the memory of Vera's scruffy bed-sitting room.

'Being King of the Underworld is no guarantee of good taste,' said Hermy.

'But you'd expect...'

'Ssh!' Hermy held up a warning hand.

The sound of voices, men's voices.

With a jerk of his head, Hermy moved up the passageway ten feet or so, and stopped.

Alistair cautiously joined him and found him peering through a crack in the wall into a smallish room where four men were sitting round a large table.

'Thank you, gentlemen, I think that concludes our business,' said the man at the head of the table, who had his back to them.

'A board meeting? Here!' said Alistair.

'Quiet!' hissed Hermy. 'That's Hades.'

'Perhaps you would each be so good as to sum up your findings in a few words,' continued the man. 'Comrade Stanislas?'

The man in the high-buttoned tunic answered without a pause. 'Stalin is ve-rrr-y jealous of Tito. He would welcome the excuse to intervene in the region.'

'Sir Edward?'

The Englishman he addressed, the very image of the top-ranking civil servant, in his black jacket and immaculately pressed pinstripe trousers, paused to think, before giving a measured reply.

'Attlee has his principles. He could err on the side of caution. But Bevin is a pragmatist with a temper. A very unstable combination. Give him another push, he'll go over the edge.'

The last man to speak was wearing the uniform of a three-star general of the United States of America.

'It's a pity we've lost Macarthur. All the same, the Pentagon would leap at the chance to settle the Russkies before they can develop their own atomic bomb. Little Harry wouldn't have any say in the matter. Okay?'

'Very satisfactory...'

The 'chairman' stood up and the others followed suit. And then...

Zzzp! Zzzp! Zzzp!

One by one, the three men vanished.

‘What the...?’ muttered Alistair.

‘He’s teleported them back home.’

‘But you said you couldn’t do that!’

‘I said *I* couldn’t Hades is Zeus’s brother, mate. Come on.’

Hermý set off again down the tunnel. Alistair followed, but as he went he caught a fleeting glimpse of Hades’ face as he turned to leave the room.

Hades was Colonel Nicolevic. Colonel Nicolevic was Hades.

‘But if Nicolevic... if Hades can just conjure an aircraft out of thin air, what’s to stop him dreaming up a squadron of dive-bombers and sinking the whole fleet?’

‘A hallucination couldn’t sink a rowing boat. That’s what you were seeing, old man, a mass hallucination.’

It was somewhat tricky carrying on such a complicated conversation when it had to be conducted in whispers, and you were on hands and knees crawling through a series of narrow tunnels, but Alistair was desperate to know what was going on.

‘How could a hallucination kill somebody? That aircraft was firing genuine rounds. We could see them kicking up the sand,’ said Alistair, as he climbed out after Hermý into a small chamber, stopping to catch his breath.

‘If you’d been hit, would you have been killed?’ Hermý asked.

‘You’d better believe it.’

‘That’s it. That’s it exactly. There’s practically no limit to the power of belief. Mind and matter are just two ways of looking at the same reality. If your mind believes it, with no doubts at all, then your body will too.’

That certainly explained the undamaged corpses and the lack of blood.

So Hades had been making quite sure that the hatred he’d whipped up stayed at a peak. And you could be sure that it wasn’t just one Albanian unit that received a visit.

‘But why did...?’

But Hermý wasn’t listening to him. He was peering into a low archway through which could be heard the heart-rending voices of the ghosts, the wraiths from the Greece of ancient days.

‘Listen. This is the main cave where most of the ghosts are. We’ve got to go through them. It’s the only way on from here. It’s not pleasant, but if we just keep on going, we won’t come to any harm.’

Before Alistair could ask him what he meant, Hermy clenched his fists and dived through the hole. There was nothing to be done but follow.

At once Alistair felt the suffocating touch that was no touch but a whisper; heard the confused babble of discordant cries that made the skin crawl; found himself pushing his way through a softness that felt impossible to penetrate.

An insubstantial face floated up and peered into his eyes and fell away with a despairing moan, ‘Never, never, never...!’

A soft shove from the side, and again, and again, with an ever growing strength. until the gentle violence of it brought him to his knees, while a voice cried in his ear (and yet sounded far off, echoing, as if from the depths of a well), ‘Why? Why? Why did you kill me?’

Struggling on through the tumbling, swaying mass, which crowded towards him with desperate hope, as if he’d brought deliverance at last, he caught sight of Hermy, head down with his arm across his face, doggedly pressing on to the exit which glowed its welcome from the far side.

Leaning into the eager pile of meltingly solid beings as if he were ploughing his way into a high wind, Alistair was hardly aware of the pleas for help, the curses, the anguished sobs that filled his ears, all the time growing louder and louder. He shut his eyes and concentrated on pushing; and shoving; and shouldering his way through.

Step by step, gaining less and less ground, he struggled in vain against the irresistible yearning for life and love of the ancient dead.

Finally, stopped in his tracks, immobile, with no hope of even one more step, Alistair was filled with fury. Sephie needed him. Nothing, nobody, alive or dead, was going to stop him!

As he forced himself upright, he took a deep breath and, with all the force of a voice that not so long ago had made the parade ground of Sandhurst ring, he cried above the noise, ‘Get out of my way, the lot of you!’

The racket of the voices instantly ceased. The pressure of the

bodies that were no bodies melted away, and the way was clear for him to stride to the exit, where an astonished Hermy awaited him.

‘I never thought of speaking to them,’ he whispered.

‘Wretched lot,’ said Alistair. ‘They just got my goat...’

His mind jumped back to a day in the countryside during his training to be an officer. In the course of a TENT – a Tactical Exercise Without Troops – he’d slipped up badly and condemned a whole battalion, some three hundred imaginary men, to certain slaughter.

‘Wait,’ he went on, as Hermy turned to go. ‘Surely there must be another way out of here?’

All good soldiers make sure they have a line of retreat. To go into action without one is nothing but foolish bravado.

Hermy paused for a moment before he replied.

‘There’s...’ He swallowed nervously, and continued, ‘...there’s Hades’ private way to the gate...’

‘And where’s that?’

‘The only way to it that I know of is through the archway behind the throne. But I... I wouldn’t dare to..’ He couldn’t go on.

Where was the fearless teenager who’d swarmed to the top of the ML’s mast?

‘Which way now?’

Hermy nodded to the right, where the passageway curved out of sight, and Alistair set off once more.

Hermy scuttled after him, catching up just as he reached the bend. Less than twenty feet away, the end of the passage opened out into the glare of the central cavern.

‘We’re nearly there,’ he breathed. ‘Sephie’s just around the corner.’

Alistair started forward, but Hermy put out a restraining hand - a trembling hand, Alistair noticed.

After all, he’s only a kid, he thought, and shook an exasperated head as he remembered that this kid had said that he was over three thousand years old.

Hermy, gesturing for Alistair to follow, started to lead the way cautiously towards the opening.

And immediately stopped, with a warning look.

To Alistair’s surprise, he heard the clip-clop of hooves.

Horses? Down here?

But it wasn't horses. Crossing the opening were two creatures that looked like the drawing of Pan in that rather soppy chapter of *The Wind in the Willows* – the one where the otter cub got lost – horns, goat's legs, the lot.

But more to the point, following closely behind them was Nicolevic, a.k.a. Hades, no longer in his colonel's uniform, nor in the sober business suit of the 'chairman of the board', but resplendent in the garb of a king of ancient Greece.

Alistair glanced round at Hermy. He seemed to be trying to become part of the wall. Leaving him to get on with it, Alistair moved swiftly but silently to the end of the corridor and looked round the corner, keeping his body out of sight, Intelligence-fashion, just in time to see the group come to a stop by the opening of a similar passageway.

'Well, well, well,' he heard Hades saying, 'if it isn't little Miss Persephone. We were just on our way to have a word with you.'

Alistair drew back as Hades returned, followed by Sephie, head held high, in the rough grasp of the two satyrs. Thrusting the anguish of seeing her so to the back of his mind, he forced himself into action. He was going into battle, and every sense had to be sabre sharp.

Taking the risk of being seen, he moved onto the high ledge outside to watch where they were taking her.

The walls of the central cavern where Hades held court (which was as massive as the interior of a medieval cathedral) were a tumble of crags, clefts and caves, which owed nothing to human hand. Here and there were the signs of centuries of occupation, such as the roughly carved steps down which the group was going.

At the bottom a motley crowd of humans, satyrs, centaurs and so on was waiting, all watching avidly. (Alistair caught a glimpse of a woman who undoubtedly had a head of writhing snakes instead of hair.) As Hades reached them, there was a ripple of movement and they formed a respectful aisle, leading to the other end of the chamber where the solid rock had been carved into a dais. On the dais were, surprisingly, two thrones, also made of stone, carved with intricate esoteric patterns. In front of it, lighting up the whole chamber, was the pit of fire

with its leaping, greedy flames.

The first thing was to suss out a safe way down, out of sight of the floor. Amongst the crags there were plenty of alternative routes.

Alistair turned to beckon Hermy out – but there was no Hermy. Ah well, it wasn't the first time he'd seen it. All the signs were there – and now the boy's nerve had cracked completely. A pity, but there it was. He was on his own.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hades turned as he reached his throne, and watched inscrutably as Sephie was half dragged, half carried up the steps of the dais.

‘Let me go! I’m perfectly capable of walking!’

Hades gave a nod, and the satyrs relaxed their grip.

‘Well, my dear,’ he said, the coldness of his eyes giving the lie to the warmth of his words, ‘have you changed your mind?’

‘Get lost, you creep,’ said Sephie, rubbing her arms where the satyrs had held her.

‘And they told me that you had learnt your lesson! You disappoint me.’

He sat down on his throne and surveyed her thoughtfully. ‘Stick or carrot?’ he said. ‘We’ve tried the stick...’

Sephie, hardly listening to him, was looking around her to assess her chances of escape.

Zero minus minus, she concluded gloomily. Not only were her personal attendants still standing by, but two more satyrs, Hades’ bodyguards, were only yards away.

‘You do realise,’ went on Hades, ‘just what I’m offering you? Not only to take your rightful place alongside me as Queen of the Underworld...’ and he gestured to the companion throne, ‘...the place which has been waiting for you for over three millennia, but in the fullness of time the expectation of sharing with me the worship of every living creature on this planet.’

There was no trace of exaltation in his voice, or even of bombast. He spoke quite matter-of-factly, as if he were discussing a new job he’d been offered.

‘This very world shall be mine, I say. I shall become God. And you shall share in my glory.’

The man’s gone nuts, thought Sephie. He really believes this rubbish.

But it was dangerous rubbish.

His face hardened.

‘If you do as I say...’

‘Well now,’ said Sephie, ‘on the face of it, not a bad offer. If you throw in a date with Clark Gable and a bottle of Bollinger ‘37, I’ll have a word with my agent.’

That did it.

The thin lips tightened. Another nod to the two satyrs and Sephie found herself being dragged towards the unoccupied throne, turned and plonked down to sit on it, where she was held firmly. Too firmly.

‘Okay guys,’ she said. ‘Take it easy, will you?’

This had no effect whatsoever.

‘Very well,’ said Hades. ‘If that’s your choice... Let’s see what I can find to amuse you.’

What now? Cabaret time? Hutch at the piano? Or Robert Houdin doing card tricks?

‘How did you escape, I ask myself,’ continued Hades. ‘And where is your guard?’

He put his head back, and his face slackened. He seemed to be looking inside and outside at the same time.

‘Ah... So that was it.’

He straightened up and looked at Sephie. ‘A foolish mistake on my part. But it’s good to know that I haven’t underestimated you.’

He stood up and stared straight ahead, with a slight frown on his face. The air in front of him, some ten feet away, seemed to thicken, or shimmer or... and yet nothing was happening.

Oh, yes it was. Out of the nothing appeared a cloven hoof; and a leg covered with shaggy hair; and then another; and falling on the floor at Hades feet, there was Dog.

There was a gasp from the assembled court.

Hades looked up at them.

‘Behold me!’ he said. ‘I am your Lord and your God! This creature has failed me. See what awaits you all if you fail to do my bidding!’

Even as he spoke, the confused, bewildered Dog was hoisted into the air, as if on an invisible rope.

‘I didn’t mean to!’

He sounded like a guilty frightened child as he swung

towards the open pit of fire.

‘No, no! You mustn’t do it!’ cried Sephie, straining to get free of the satyrs, who were staring at their fellow with open mouths. Hades turned and looked at her.

‘You can save him if you like,’ he said quietly. ‘Just agree to do as I say.’

By this time, the hapless satyr was dangling directly over the flames. A curious shout for help, which wasn’t quite a scream, was coming from his mouth.

Sephie tried to speak. But what to say? How could she condemn shiploads of sailors to death? And yet...

‘Too late,’ Hades said, and dropped Dog, screaming, into the fire. The screaming stopped abruptly; there was a brief roar as the flames flared up. and then silence.

Sephie realised that she was free. Her two captors stood mesmerised by the sight of their brother’s end.

‘Sephie! This way!’

Alistair’s voice!

And there he was, waving her frantically towards the archway behind the thrones.

Leaping to her feet, she turned and ran, up and over the back of the trocky throne, pursued by the bodyguards, and after a moment by the other two satyrs as well.

Reaching the uncertain sanctuary of the arch, she turned to help deal with this immediate danger.

Alistair’s boxing prowess was only just adequate for the task. Ducking under the wildly swinging fists of his first opponent, he aimed a blow at his solar plexus – and nearly broke his knuckles on the armour of muscle; but the automatic follow-up, a right hook to the jaw, sent the creature staggering away to collapse amongst the scattered boulders, leaving Alistair to deal with his colleague who was close behind.

In the meantime, Sephie, not having been schooled in the gentlemanly arts, had found a far simpler way of coping. which was perfectly suited to the anatomical grandiosities for which satyrs are renowned. A precisely placed knee, a grab and a twist, and both her former tormentors were doubled up, gasping, clutching vainly at their damaged pride.

There was no time for greetings. Alistair, having dealt with the second bodyguard with a classic straight left, seized hold of

Sephie's hand and they took off together into the tunnel.

Sephie caught Alistair's eye, and at once both were shouting with laughter and childish glee, almost skipping as they ran.

If they had been able to see Hades' face, they might not have been so happy.

He was smiling.

'I'm sure that we've passed that rock before – that one that looks like a giant toad.'

Alistair, who was leading the way, turned back to look.

'Can't say I recognise it. I expect it just looks the same.'

Sephie still looked doubtful.

'We've been going for nearly two hours. I think we're lost.'

'It can't be far now,' said Alistair. 'Look, the floor's not rock any longer, it's earth. We're getting near the surface.'

'Okay. You're the boss, boss.'

Just before he had passed out of Sandhurst, Alistair had been given a surreptitious look at his final report by the ATS officer in charge of records (who rather fancied the cut of his jib). For OLQ (Officer-like Qualities) he'd been awarded 93%. Nobody was ever given the full one hundred. For the sub-category, Leadership, 90%, with the caveat: *Lethbridge-Stewart seems to believe that he is always right.*

But not on this occasion. Of course, he'd automatically assumed that he would be in charge; after all, he was trained in this sort of thing. Like most of his kind the years of map-reading had developed in him a sort of instinct that kept him constantly aware of the direction he'd come from, and he'd used all his skills in reading the terrain. But his confidence had been severely dented by his experiences with Hermy.

Suppose Sephie was right. That would mean that he had been leading them in a circle. And that just wasn't possible. Even without a compass (the needle had just spun aimlessly), he was quite sure that, even allowing for forced diversions, their basic vector through the caves had been straight, following all the indications of those who had come before.

It just wasn't possible.

'Ha! I knew it! Look!'

Sephie was pointing at the ground just behind him. They were going through a soft patch, and their footprints were clearly

visible. And alongside them, two identical tracks. It wasn't the second time they'd been this way. It was the third.

By the time Hermy was waving for the ferry to come over and fetch him, he'd stopped shaking, but only just. He pushed away the thought that he'd left Sephie at the mercy of the most ruthless of the gods. After all, he'd said he'd bring Alistair to rescue her, and that's what he'd done, hadn't he?

'No Miss Sephie, then? Given up, have you? And where's that foolish young man? Got swallowed? Wouldn't be surprised. No common sense the young people of today. My old grandad used to say... Where are you going?'

Hermy, without turning back to him, called out, 'Sorry, Charon. I've changed my mind!'

If he turned round, he might change his mind again. And if he did, how could he ever face Demeter? How could he ever face himself?

'I've got it! It's Hades. This is his doing.'

'What do you mean?'

'We're trapped in a dimensional loop.'

God help us, not more scientific tommyrot! She was as bad as her brother.

'I've no idea what you're talking about, I'm afraid.'

Sephie grinned, and gave him a little kiss on the cheek.

'Don't look so worried. It's quite simple. You know how, if you travelled to the other end of the universe, you'd find yourself back where you started?'

'Would I?' he said hoarsely, not really listening. The flickering light from the torch flame in the wall gave her little curls a gleam of gold...

'You would. Because space is curved.' She paused. looking up into his eyes, and then said softly, 'All Hades has done is curve the path through the next dimension. Into a loop. As I said, simple.'

'Simple,' agreed Alistair. Her eyes weren't really green – there was quite a lot of blue there. A sort of turquoise...

'And I know..'

But what she knew became at that moment quite irrelevant. Some timeless time later, Sephie put her hands on his chest and

pushed him gently away.

‘Oh Alistair,’ she said gently. ‘We’ll get out of here. I promise. And then...’

Again she was interrupted.

This time, when she broke away, she moved firmly out of reach, and spoke brightly and almost severely.

‘No. We mustn’t... Now listen... no! I mean really listen. Otherwise we’ll *never* get out of here – unless he lets us out.’

Alistair sighed.

‘I suppose you’re right,’ he said. ‘Go on, then.’

‘As you know, the mind is an inextricable component of the multi-dimensional matrix. Are you listening?’

Hermý had said something of the sort, surely. Though what it meant...

He nodded glumly.

‘Hades set up the loop by his will and belief. We have to cut across that. So what we have to do is to believe the opposite.’

‘Say again?’

‘We believed the wrong path was the right path, because he’d set it up so that the right path was the wrong path. So if we deliberately go on the wrong path, believing with all our heart and soul it’s the right path, it will be. Understand?’

He felt like Pinocchio being lectured by Jiminy Cricket. He shook his head.

‘Uh-uh. But I believe you do.’

‘Attaboy, Pinoke. Come on then...’

Had she really said that?

He hadn’t a clue what he was going to do. Somehow he’d got to cause a diversion, so that they could escape... or find some way of getting past Hades’ defences, whatever they were, or...

It was no good. He didn’t know where to start even thinking about it.

By now Hermý was crawling down the tunnels that led to the ghost-cave. Already he could hear the indecipherable noise of its inhabitants, and he could already feel the near-horror of the journey through. As he clambered out of the tunnel into the little antechamber, he was wishing he had the nerve to follow Alistair’s example.

‘Get out of the way, the lot of you!’

He tried it out in an undertone. It didn't feel at all the same. Again, he was tempted to give up altogether. He just wasn't cut out for this sort of thing. What difference could he make?

That was when he had the idea.

Of course! It was so blindingly obvious! There was no guarantee that it would work, but...

He quickly ran through his plan. No, there seemed to be no snags. None at all.

Now he was eager to get in there, so full of the new notion that he quite forgot to be nervous.

Best to be away from the entrance. Not too far in, but far enough to be heard by every one of them.

Getting his head down, he pushed like a rugby forward in a scrum, and shoved his way through the yielding unyieldingness, feeling on his skin the cold, damp dryness that was like no living touch.

Right. That should do it.

He was near the middle, nearly deafened by the groaning, the moaning, the shouts and the cries.

Now!

But when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a gasping squeak.

He stopped, took a deep breath, tried again, and this time succeeded in producing a creditable copy of Alistair's parade-ground roar.

'QUIET!'

Those in his immediate vicinity fell away from him, and ceased their lamentation. Further off, however, the noise continued. He just hadn't been heard.

'I said, QUI-ET!'

This time it got through, the silence growing from the centre like the spreading ripple from a stone thrown into a pond.

A shocked, expectant stillness as all the beings turned towards him.

How would Alistair do it?

'Now, listen to me, you lot...!'

And they listened.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alistair did his best to do as he had been told, and believe that the way that Sephie took was the right way, but he had a hard job suppressing the years of conditioning that told him that, in spite of her perverse zig-zagging (vertically as well as horizontally), they were heading back towards the central chamber.

And the pace she set! Of course, in the months since the end of the fighting, he'd become soft, in spite of all the hard games of tennis. But he hadn't felt like this since his first cross-country at the age of ten, five hilly miles, and legs made of jelly by the time he'd passed the three-mile mark.

'Hey! Could we – could we – slow down a bit?'

Sephie stopped and looked round in surprise.

'Alistair! I'm so sorry. I just wasn't thinking. We'll stop and have a rest.'

Of course, when he sat down, he sat close to her on a convenient sofa-sized rock, and took her hand.

'Oh, Sephie...' he began, still out of breath.

'No!' she said, jumping up. 'I don't trust you – and I don't trust myself. And let's face it – this is hardly the most romantic place for an assignation. Talk about something else.'

'Okay,' he said, a trifle sulkily. 'It might be a good idea,' he said after a moment, 'if you gave me a briefing. I still don't get it. Hermy told me what Hades was up to, but why does he need you? Why doesn't he just get on with it?'

She thought for a moment.

'I know. Close your eyes...'

He did as he was told, and a moment later felt the soft touch of her fingers on his temples. He put up a hand, which was lightly smacked away. 'Now be good or I shan't show you.'

‘Show me what?’

She didn’t answer, but pressed a little more firmly.

All at once, he seemed to be high in the air, looking down. He’d done very little flying – one trip, in fact, bumming a lift in an RAF Dakota from Athens to Naples on his first peacetime leave. But he was much higher up now. It was as if he’d been whipped up into the stratosphere.

He could see the whole of Italy and Greece, and more, green and brown, with the blue of the sea and the little white clouds throwing their shadows. But there was something else. He felt as if his whole being was there below. In some inexplicable way, he could feel the winds, the showers, the heat of the ground.

‘Ah! There we are, over near Kythira – that island just up from Crete...’

As she spoke, it was as if he swooped from the sky towards the sea near the island, and could feel in his very bones the violent squall of wind that was heading for the tiny fishing boat. He felt himself pushing the wind – *pushing the wind?! –* into the safely empty region to the south.

Sophie took her fingers away. ‘Open your eyes,’ she said.

He was back in the flickering darkness of the Underworld.

‘This is the job Zeus gave me. When I’m near home, near Greece, it’s like... like being a mother listening for her baby. I can get on with my life, but I’m watching all the time. I can’t help it.

‘Hades knows that I’ll stop him if he even tries to raise this storm of his. If his plan is to succeed, he has no choice. Either he gets me on his side – or he destroys me.’

Alistair thought this over.

‘You could have pretended to go along with him, let him start the storm, and then stop it before it did any real damage.’

She shook her head. ‘Once something starts, it has to blow itself out. Zeus could have done that, but not me. I know, I’ve tried.’

She put out her hand and touched his cheek.

‘I should have said, “I’m watching *nearly* all the time.” I can be distracted – which is why we must wait, my dearest, dearest soldier boy.’

She moved up close to him and gave him a tiny kiss.

Before he had a chance to argue (or do anything else appropriate to the moment) she was off.

‘Come on, lazybones. We’ll never be home by teatime!’

‘Eh?’

‘I did a stint as a Kensington nanny,’ she said, laughing at his puzzled face, and was away, back to her mountain-goat act.

It took them almost another hour. After struggling up a near-vertical cliff, which quite obviously couldn’t be part of a proper path, aiming for an almost invisible opening some thirty feet up, they got through it – and there, stretched out below, was a river and, what’s more, a clear path over a high narrow bridge.

‘Is that the Styx?’

‘No,’ answered Sephie. ‘The only way across the Styx is by the ferry. That’s the Lethe.’

‘The Lethe? The river that makes you forget?’

‘That’s right,’ said Sephie. ‘You’re not one of us, so one sip of that water and you’d forget all that’s been happening to you. So don’t fall in!’

Once across, it was no distance to the Styx itself – and Charon was so pleased to see them that he took them across without paying.

Almost running in their eagerness to get outside, they found the entrance to the gateway cavern; and there Cerberus was waiting, almost as if he had been expecting them.

To Sephie’s amazement, he greeted Alistair like the friend of a thousand years, and eagerly followed them to the cleft that would take them back to the world.

They had made it.

Ever the gentleman, Alistair stood back to let Sephie go first, then pushed his way after her with his heart overflowing with gratitude and love.

‘Welcome back,’ said Hades. ‘Did you enjoy your little walk?’

They were in the central chamber, standing just inside the arch behind the thrones of rock, surrounded by satyrs, a dozen or more.

It nearly went badly wrong. Yes, the ghosts listened to him, but the result wasn’t at all what he’d intended.

At first, they just didn’t believe him.

‘It’s true, I tell you! The only reason why you’re all stuck in the Underworld – and have been for so many centuries – is because you *believe* that’s your fate.

‘All you have to do to get free is let it go, that belief. Just look at the world without making up your mind about any of it, and then... well, you’ll find out for yourselves!’

There was a low grumbling and a few shouts, and the mass of unhappy angry faces moved closer. This made no sense to them. Their whole experience told them it was a lie.

The threatening sound was growing. Hermy shrank back. This hadn’t been a good idea after all.

But a few more hardy spirits must have decided to believe him, for a few cries of joy shone through the fog of ugly noise. ‘The light! Oh, look at the light!’ he heard.

Before his eyes, more and more were disappearing. Soon more than a quarter had gone.

‘No, wait!’ he cried. ‘Don’t you want to know who has done this thing to you?’

He had their attention again.

‘Your Lord! That’s who. Hades, the King of the Underworld!’

‘But why?’ came a whisper, a whisper that spread and multiplied like the echo of an echo: ‘Why... why... why... why...?’

‘Because he enjoys your misery! Because he glories in the thought of the anguish and the desolation you suffer!’

Now there was real fury growing.

Now they were really listening to him.

‘Zeus! You think I’m afraid of Zeus? My brother is far too consumed with his own self-love to come to your rescue.’

Alistair and Sephie, each held by a couple of the satyr bodyguards, were standing before the god-king on his throne, like two criminals awaiting judgement. Down below in the body of the cavern, the crowd listened intently, waiting for the inevitable end.

‘That may be true,’ said Sephie, defiantly. ‘But if you kill me, you’ll have to face his anger when he finds out.’

‘I’ll settle with His Royal Arrogance in my own time, when I choose. How dare he assume the title of King of the Gods! How dare he condemn me to spend my life in darkness! For over forty centuries I’ve longed for this moment.

For nearly half that time we’ve been forgotten by the world. And the all-powerful Zeus didn’t even notice the years I’ve spent

in his so-called realm, waiting and watching for the time to be ripe.'

Did he mean he'd played the Nicolevic game before, in historical times, thought Alistair.

'Why yes,' said Hades, as though Alistair had spoken the thought out loud. 'Several times I thought my time had come. Haven't you ever noticed the resemblance between Niccolò Machiavelli and Cardinal Richelieu? And if you change Robespierre's hairstyle... Have a look at their portraits when you get home...'

He smiled.

'Oh, but of course, you won't be going home, will you?'

A fleeting image of the burn at the end of the garden – and his brother – the dam they built...

'And that ridiculous moustache I wore when I got rid of Douglas Haig and took his place! That was a disguise in itself. I really thought that battle – the Somme, you remember? – might have tipped the balance into chaos.

'But now I realise, I've been waiting all this time for the atomic bomb...'

His face hardened. The time had come.

It was a curious thing, waiting to be killed. Alistair could find no trace of fear; just a cold anger that Sephie was to die, and a deep sadness, a grief of sorts, for their lost love.

'Well now,' said Hades. 'How are we to do this? Oh, I don't mean, "How are you to die?" I know that already. You will die screaming, burning, melting, with your skull exploding to finish it. *Pour encourager les autres*, you understand. Nothing personal.'

'That's a relief,' said Sephie. 'I should hate to think you were enjoying this.'

Hades smiled.

'And in case the people get the idea that this is not a willing immolation, a sacrifice of love for your lord and your god, we'll let them see you walk into the furnace of your own accord. Let her go.'

To Alistair's astonishment, the satyrs let Sephie loose. Now she could run! They'd got away before...

Sephie was under no such illusion. She turned her head to Alistair and murmured, 'Goodbye, my darling.'

He tried to reach out to take her hand, but the satyr

wrenched back his arm.

‘No, no! It *can't* be like this...’ he cried.

Her head snapped back as Hades’ will took hold. Her left foot lifted stiffly and was placed just so; and then her right, and her left, and her right, as she turned on the spot.

Down the steps she went, limbs robotically stiff, a fiber-marionette; and advanced, foot by rigid foot, to a certain death.

‘Stop!’

‘Yes?’ Hades turned his head politely to Alistair. As he lowered his concentration, Sephie came to standstill, one foot in the air, like a clockwork toy that needed winding, a yard away from the pit of fire.

‘Take me. Kill me, if you have to. But let her go!’

‘Oh dear,’ said Hades. ‘I’m afraid you’re under a misapprehension. Of course I’m going to kill you. But first, we have some unfinished business, you and I. Surely you haven’t forgotten?’

The Admiral’s plans. Of course.

‘Sephie!’ he cried out, in the agony of his heart. ‘I love you!’ There was no hope left.

But Alistair’s intervention had saved Sephie’s life. As Hades turned back to take hold once more for the last couple of steps, there was a shout from the high ledge opposite the dais.

‘There he is!’

Hermes.

Out of the cave mouth behind his head, with a whoosh and a sigh, came a hundred score of phantom figures.

As Hades, stupefied by a sight unprecedented in his experience, lost his hold on Sephie, she staggered back from the edge and fell to the ground.

Down they came, a solid soft-edged mass, aiming directly at the King of the Underworld. Too late he realised the danger he was in, and turned to flee.

But they were upon him, smothering him, squeezing and squashing him, with the sheer weight of their weightlessness.

They picked him up, as helpless as if he were tied at hand and foot; and carried him effortlessly through the air; and dropped him in the furnace.

The satyrs started forward; Alistair was free. He ran to Sephie and picked her up from the floor.

A great shout went up from the whole assembly. Was it glee? Was it fear? Was it anger?

But it was drowned by a sound, like the song of a thousand bells, or the triumphant peal of an anthem: the very sound of joy as the prisoners of the Underworld found their freedom, and faded like a morning mist.

But Hades was not yet dead.

Clutching at the rim of the pit, even though the flames had already taken hold, he was screaming for the help of his faithful bodyguard.

For a long moment, every satyr stayed still. At last, there was one who moved across, lifting his arm to shield his face from the heat. He stood for a moment, looking down at his master... and deliberately, dispassionately, stamped down hard on the back of his hands with his sharp goat's hoof.

Goodbye, Hades.

The rest of the satyrs went wild with delight, shouting and jumping, punching each other and leaping one upon the other like a victorious soccer team.

The rest of the crowd took off. Those who had hats threw them high in the air; there was back-slapping; there was hugging; and kissing; and laughing. The tyrant was no more.

Alistair looked down at Sephie, held tightly in his arms.

'Let's go,' he said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Don’t ask!’ said Alistair, when he saw Ned Clarke’s astonishment at the sight of Sephie.

A light flashed from the sea – one, two, three – to signal that the ML was waiting.

In spite of the sea being as calm as a seaside rockpool, Joe Snaith, who was rowing the tiny dinghy, wouldn’t take them all in one go, so Alistair was left on the shore with the corporal, with the unspoken question hanging in the air.

“‘Need-to-know’”, Clarke. Right?’

He’d have to be satisfied with that. And when he congratulated the corporal on a good job, well done (five gun positions, pinpointed with precise map references), he could see he’d have no further trouble from that quarter.

As he climbed up the ladder from the boat onto the deck, though, he knew that sooner or later he was going to have to devise some explanation for George Spawton.

It could wait.

His whole being – his mind, his heart, his body – yearned for one thing only: to be alone at last with Sephie.

‘You lucky devil!’ said George, when he privately broached the subject as they waited for the dinghy to be hoisted inboard.

It’s not like that, he wanted to say.

‘Leave it with me,’ went on George, with the ghost of a wink. ‘Wardroom out of bounds. Not for the first time, either!’

As Alistair walked aft and went down the ladder to join her, he felt somehow besmirched. And when Hermy, who was lounging with his feet up, a large gin in his hand, sprang to his feet and said, ‘Just on my way, old bean,’ knocked back his drink and, with his three-thousand-year-old teenage clumsiness, lumbered out and away up the ladder, he was almost blushing

with the embarrassment of it all.

But when... oh! when she put down the comb... and turned from the mirror... it was all swept away in the shining innocence of first love.

‘Come here,’ she said, holding out her arms.

‘Will you tell me,’ said Able Seaman Sid Hogben to his mate Sandy Goldman, ‘just why we’re sitting here at action stations in the middle of the effing night, when the effing enemy hasn’t come to the party?’

‘I thought the old girl and me was going to have a night out,’ he added, nodding towards the Oerlikon, his pride and his joy.

‘Search me,’ said Sandy, taking another sip of kye.

‘Full ahead together.’

The trr-i-ng, trr-i-ng of the telegraphs from the bridge signalled the throb of the engines as they crept up to maximum revolutions.

Given the lack of interest from the shore during their trips so far George felt that it was safe to get home as fast as possible, although it was prudent to stay at action stations until they were well away from land.

‘What’s that?’ said Hermy pointing through the darkness to the large conical object that could just be seen on the foredeck, replacing the jeep.

George gave him a sharp glance.

‘It’s a loudspeaker,’ he said shortly.

‘It’s a whopper. What on earth have you got that for?’

It was all very well, he might be the grandson of the ex-Ambassador’s best friend, but you never knew. If he was told about the Admiral’s ‘fiendish plan’ he might pass it on – and what about those posters, ‘Careless talk costs lives’, which you could still see plastered all over the walls in Malta?

‘In case we need it, okay?’

Hermy got the message.

Bill Johnson came up from the wheelhouse.

‘Alter course, sir. One nine three.’

‘Thank you, Number One. Port ten. Steer one nine three.’

‘Steer one nine three... Course, one nine three, sir.’

‘Very good.’

They were clear of the headland with its savage rocks. His Majesty's Motor Launch 951 sliced through the water, the creamy bow wave cheerfully breaking the black glass surface of the sea.

They were going home.

Up to now, fate had decided to limit the amours of Alistair and Sephie to a few interrupted kisses.

And she hadn't finished with them yet.

After refreshing his memory of the bliss he'd so far experienced, limited as it was, Alistair decided, with passion scarcely containable, that the moment had come to be rewarded for his restraint. Sephie was lying on George's bunk at least as intoxicated with desire as he was, gazing up at him with misty eyes of overflowing tenderness, waiting.

A thunder clap that pierced the ears – and the boat heeled over nearly sixty degrees as the wind and the sea took hold.

Alistair rolled right across the wardroom and cracked his head on the table; and Sephie fell off the bed.

He scrambled up, hanging on to the other bunk.

'Are you all right?' he yelled over the din.

But there was no time to answer as the boat rolled as far to starboard as she had to port, and Alistair fell again, sliding across the floor to join Sephie.

'This can't be happening!' she shouted in his ear as she clung to him. 'There was nothing! I know there was nothing...'

'Oh no!' she cried. 'Hades!'

By the time they had reached the bridge, George Spawton had brought the bows round into the wind, which was coming from the west, and so the motion of the boat was less extreme, a pitching rather than a roll, though the cox'n was fighting to stop her yawing from side to side. If she swung round beam on to the sea again, there was a real danger that she might roll right over and founder.

'I've never known anything like it!' George yelled to Alistair and Sephie. 'It's at least a Force Ten – and that first squall must have been Twelve! Hurricane force!'

The guard rails had been swept away on the starboard side; the funnel had been uprooted and was listing drunkenly to port;

Sparks, who had come up from the stuffy little wireless cabin for a breath of fresh air, had gone over the side on the second roll – only to be swept back on board by the massive wave that broke over the deck.

Bill Johnson was at the binnacle, trying to get a bearing on the headland.

‘Sir! We’re going astern! It’s a lee shore!’

And so it was. In spite of going full speed ahead, with all the power of the engines, they were being swept backwards towards the rocks which surrounded the point.

‘Right! We’ll drop anchor...’

Hermy had luckily taken refuge in the chart-house just in front of the bridge, tucking himself into a corner out of the way while he tried to make sense of his feelings. When the hurricane hit, he’d just decided that it was his hatred of Hades and all that he stood for, as much as his love for Sephie, that had turned the corner for him.

But the storm! What was going on? Surely Sephie would never let such a thing happen?

He could hear the rattle of the anchor chain as he struggled on to the bridge in time to hear Sephie saying desperately, ‘It’s all my fault! I stopped watching. I gave him his chance.’

‘But he’s dead!’ said Alistair.

As the anchor took hold, the wild yawing from side to side ceased. By now the thunder had stopped, and the wind had dropped to mere gale force, and it was possible to speak without actually shouting.

‘Can’t you stop it?’ said Hermy.

‘Not a chance! Only Poseidon could put an end to it. Or Hades himself.’

Another crack of thunder... but no! This was a laugh, a thunderous laugh!

‘Look!’ cried Bill Johnson, who was at the compass, again taking a bearing.

His unseamanlike cry brought every head round.

‘I knew it!’ said Sephie, despairingly.

For there, on the headland, on the very peak, stood Hades – and a Hades transformed. His entire figure was glowing, as if he was lit from within by the very blaze that should have destroyed

him. He was twice the height – and even as they watched, he was growing, growing, until he was at least twenty feet tall – and he had a voice to match.

‘You thought to kill me! How should Hades be consumed by the flames of his own heart? *I* am the law; *my* will creates *my* world; and soon the whole Earth, and the sea and the very sky above will become my world!’

‘You see?’ said Sephie. ‘He’s raving mad!’

The sky was lit by a continuous net of lightning, sweeping across from land to sea.

‘Good God Almighty!’ said George Spawton, getting his voice back. ‘What the devil is it?’

‘You’re not far wrong,’ said Alistair.

The sight of Hades rekindled in Hermy the hate he’d felt ever since he saw his sister first tormented. It had been hidden by his own terror, but now! He’d finished him off once – or thought he had – surely there was something he could do to stop him now? Alistair evidently had the same thought. ‘Is your Oerlikon ready to fire?’ he said urgently.

‘Of course, we’re still at action stations.’

‘Then give the order!’

‘Not until I know what’s going on,’ said George.

‘He’s not immortal, man. Give the order, for God’s sake!’

‘No.’

Alistair turned and ran to the back of the bridge and leaned over the edge.

‘Fire!’ he said.

‘What the...! Ignore that order!’

‘You won’t fire on him?’

‘I will not. And you have no right to...’

But Alistair was no longer listening. He was no longer there. ‘Out of the way,’ he said to the bewildered Sid Hogben, who automatically obeyed.

Swinging the mounting round, Alistair aimed the gun with its big circular sight full at the centre of Hades’ chest and fired, just as the furious skipper arrived at the gun platform.

‘Get out of there! That’s an order!’

Alistair took his hands off the gun and raised them in mock surrender. ‘It’s no good, anyway. They’re just bouncing off his chest.’

The booming laugh again. 'Play your games! Fire off your toy gun! You are no further use to me. You have tried to annihilate me. It is fitting that you should die, knowing that your god has the power to wipe you from the face of the Earth!'

It seemed that he was right, for Bill was shouting from the bridge, 'Sir! The anchor's not holding. It's dragging!'

It seemed that nothing could prevent them hitting the rocks – and a wooden boat wouldn't stand a chance.

That was the moment that Hermy had his second big idea. He turned round to tell Sephie. But as he turned... *Zzzp!*... she'd gone.

He couldn't blame her for running away. After all, he'd done the same thing.

He grabbed hold of the first lieutenant's arm.

'Bill! That loudspeaker thing. Has it got a mike?'

'No, it's for... wait a minute... yes, it has. There, the skinny-looking one by the RT mike. Why?'

This was one of those times when being a teenager definitely wasn't helping.

'Please, there's no time! Is it working?'

'It will be if I switch it on,' said Bill, doubtfully.

George swung onto the bridge and immediately went to the binnacle to check the bearing, followed by the crestfallen Alistair. 'Tell him!' said Hermy. 'Tell him I can be trusted!'

'What?' said Alistair. And then to Bill, 'Yes, yes, he knows what he's doing.'

Bill gave an appealing look at George, who, after a bewildered moment, gave an equally bewildered nod.

Bill switched on the amplifier, as Hermy seized the microphone.

But when he spoke into it, it wasn't the lightweight voice of a sixteen-year-old that emerged from the vast loudspeaker on the foredeck.

'Well, brother,' came the deep bass of a giant. 'In trouble again?'

Poseidon, God of the Sea, brother to Hades – and to Zeus. That's what Sephie had said. Only Poseidon could stop it.

Hades looked up, troubled, seeking the speaker in the darkness. Hermy fought to keep the quaver from his voice. He forced it even lower.

‘This is my realm, given to me by Zeus! How dare you! How dare you crawl from your hole in the ground... and usurp my powers!’

Hades drew himself up. Was he going to fight back?

‘Cease this storm! Put an end to it, I say, and escape my wrath!’ Hades put his head on one side like a mischievous toddler. ‘I’ve a better idea,’ he said. ‘Stop it yourself!’

A long pause.

‘Hear me, Hades! I say to you, if you do not follow my...’

There was a definite wobble there! Keep going...

But the giant Hades had already interrupted.

‘Good try, Hermes! But not good enough. Your friends are going to die, and very soon.’

As if in confirmation, the singing of the wind in the rigging became a shriek; the waves were towering over the mast; the boat reared up like an angry stallion. Every man jack aboard HMML 951 was hanging onto anything within reach, just to stay alive. The anchor cable would surely part and the boat would be tossed onto the rocks.

‘Enough!’

The great voice, twice as loud as before, echoed off the headland.

The wind died away to a gentle breeze. The forty-foot waves sank down to a soft swell. ML 951, the engines having long since given up, lay at her anchor as quietly as if she were safe in Valetta harbour.

All eyes in the boat were staring transfixed out to sea, in fascination, in awe. Twice the size of Hades, the great shining figure of Poseidon, with his crown of seaweed and his trident in his hand, stood knee-deep in three fathoms of water.

‘Well, brother? In trouble again, I see...’

I got that bit right, thought Hermy, and suddenly realised that Sephie was standing by him.

‘Well done!’ he whispered – and she winked.

Hades was standing rigid, head up, as if refusing to accept what he was seeing.

‘Begone from this place!’ boomed Poseidon. ‘And take warning. If I should again be summoned from my slumbers, you will be banished to your hole in the ground...’

And that bit, thought Hermy.

‘... for a thousand years. Begone!’

No reaction.

Poseidon leaned down, scooped up a handful of water, and almost lazily tossed it at the motionless Hades.

Knocked headlong by the torrent, the suddenly diminished figure tumbled head over heels backwards down the hill and vanished from sight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

That's very nearly the end of the story. ML 951 limped home on her one remaining engine, not arriving until several hours after breakfast, so Admiral Urquhart ate his eggs alone.

(Not that it mattered. Without the malign input of the ex-god Hades, the diplomats had a chance to do their stuff, and the Albanians ultimately climbed down.)

But what about the eighteen men, from Skipper George Spawton to Cook Tiny Rowbotham, who had a tale to tell that would earn any one of them a fortune from the Sunday papers – or alternatively a place in the loony bin?

Simple. Clutching a small bottle (ex-Angostura bitters, used for making pink gin for visiting commanders), Sephie teleported herself to the river Lethe at the point it left the Underworld.

At first, the plan was to dilute the rum ration, but Joe Snaith and two more seamen were under-age ('threepence a day in lieu') and of course the two officers didn't get it. It was Hermy who suggested putting it in the water tank – and found himself 'volunteered' to do the job, while Alistair kept watch for any member of the crew.

By the time the boat reached Corfu, the memory of their adventure had all but vanished. All that remained was the tale of the freak storm that nearly sank them, and how they were saved by their superb seamanship, which was to be told and retold in every bar in town.

Alistair, of course, for the rest of the voyage, didn't even have a cup of tea, confining himself to the occasional dram, taken (as always) neat.

And what of Sephie?

The Islands of the Blessed. An 'otherworld' where those blessed by the gods

go when they die, says the legend.

‘A load of old cobblers,’ Sephie had said. ‘It’s where we come on our hols.’

Every day a new island, all to themselves. Every day a new vista of such poetry that shivers and goose-pimples were the only possible reaction. Every day a new place to explore the wonders of each other’s body. Every day a new place to picnic.

‘I can’t believe we’ve been here a fortnight,’ said Alistair, taking another sip of nectar. ‘You do know my leave’s up tomorrow.’

Sephie didn’t answer for a moment. She was lying on the velvet grass, gazing out over the pool in front of her.

They were at the foot of a great waterfall, a rocky cataract that tumbled down, in a glory of misty rainbows, from an opening in the hillside some thirty feet above.

‘By the way,’ he went on, ‘have I mentioned that you have the most perfect bum I’ve ever seen?’

‘You’re not so bad yourself in that department,’ she said, not looking up.

She rolled over and looked at him.

‘Oh my love,’ she said. ‘I don’t think I can bear it. My life has been full of goodbyes, but this time...’

She couldn’t go on.

He reached out and gently wiped the tear from her cheek.

‘But Seph, it needn’t be goodbye! That’s what I was about to say. I only need the permission of the colonel – and the marriage allowance isn’t half bad. I’m sure we could manage – and when we get home...’

She shook her head, and put a finger on his lips to stop the eager flow of words.

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-one. What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘On my next birthday I shall be three thousand seven hundred and two.’

She looked at his appalled face.

‘You hadn’t remembered, had you? Don’t worry, you’ll soon forget all about me.’

‘Never!’

She stood up.

‘We’re getting far too serious. Come and give me a kiss, and

then we'll have a swim. Okay, big boy?'

He kissed her. And kissed her again. And kissed her lightly on the tip of the nose.

'I shan't give up, you know,' he said.

She stroked his cheek and looked deep into his eyes.

'Come on,' she said. 'Last one in's a sissy!'

He watched her for a moment as she ran to the water's edge and dived in. He hadn't known it was possible to be so happy.

And Second Lieutenant Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart followed his love – deep, deep, into the waters of forgetfulness.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

DOOMSDAYS

The tunnel entrance loomed ahead.

Ted Ryan, homeward-bound commercial traveller (fine quality lingerie – ‘I’m in ladies’ underwear,’ always got a big laugh), settled himself behind the wheel of his Ford Anglia and sighed. He hated this particular tunnel. For some reason it always depressed him. Which was ridiculous.

Ted drove thousands of miles a year, most of it on motorways populated by speeding idiots, flashing past him at ninety. He drove cautiously, carefully, *defensively* and he’d never had an accident. Never.

Yet the tunnel got him down somehow. It was only an insignificant little tunnel under a new shopping centre that bridged the road. It marked the last stage of his journey home, and he was always glad when he got out the other side. The other side meant open fields merging into cosy suburbs, leading eventually to 17 Chepstow Crescent and plump, dull, dependable Molly. Home.

Things were made worse today by a rotten hangover and a sense of guilt. On his last lonely night in Birmingham he’d met some friendly young people in a pub. Hippy types, all free spirits. They’d gone on to a party and things had gone a bit far... Not that he remembered all that much. Some of those pills had been powerful stuff.

Still, no real harm done, and Molly need never know. He drove into the tunnel.

Tiled walls, semi-darkness, a queue of cars ahead and behind, two parallel lines of spaced lights in the grimy ceiling.

A tiny circle of light ahead, growing bigger and brighter. A gloomy old joke floated into Ted’s mind.

‘Sometimes that light ahead isn’t the end of the tunnel – it’s an approaching train!’

In his depressed mood the idea seemed all too real.

Ted peered at the fuzzy circle and saw a dim shape forming inside it. But it wasn’t a train. It was a demon.

A classical demon, straight from the hell that had haunted his Catholic childhood. Skull-like face, glowing eyes, leathery wings beating the fiery air as it hurtled towards him, clawed hands reaching out...

The kind of demon old Father Rafferty had described in his Bible-study class, waiting in hell with a red-hot pitchfork for had little boys.

Ted hadn’t been inside a church in years, but he *knew* in his tainted soul that he had sinned and that the Devil was coming to drag him down to hell.

He spun the wheel in a senseless attempt to escape his fate. The petrol tanker behind swerved in an attempt to avoid him and smashed him into the tunnel wall, crushing the Anglia and Ted into a mishmash of flesh and blood and metal. The car behind the tanker smashed into it, and the tanker burst into flame.

Ted’s dying thought was that he was seeing the fires of hell.

Driver John Martin settled back at the controls of the giant diesel engine as the train glided smoothly into King’s Cross. Edinburgh to London was a long run, even in these days of hi-tech computerised controls. He was tired, he was getting old. Retirement soon.

He checked his instruments and signals, everything clear. It was all too easy these days. Martin had a sudden pang of nostalgia for the old days of steam. He could see himself as a keen young driver on the old Highland line, hurtling in clouds of steam through the twists and curves of the winding track. How he’d love to see the old line again.

Suddenly he *was* seeing it.

The grimy station walls melted away, and the old familiar scenery was there before him. Distant mountains, sparkling lochs, rolling moors. He could feel the vibration in the cab, and he was aware of the stoker shovelling coal behind him. Suddenly he realised that he was late, he must make up time. He’d be late

pulling into Mallaig, late for the first time ever. And Morag was waiting on the platform.

Martin's hands moved over the controls and the train ceased to slow down and began gathering speed. He heard a muffled shout from behind him, and someone tried to pull him away from the controls. He ignored them.

The express train had almost reached full speed when it smashed into the buffers ahead.

The Reverend McMurdo sat in his gloomy study and pondered the problem of sin. Why had he, of all the righteous, been saddled with the most sinful parish in all Scotland? He had tried, God knew he had tried, but he had failed, and the wicked continued to flourish like the green hay tree.

But not for much longer. The solution had come to him in a vision and soon the evil ones would feel the hammer of the Lord. A few necessary examples. and then, surely, the rest would return to the paths of righteousness.

He rose, went into the little hall and opened the cupboard.

Tall, black-robed, his long craggy face harsh and grim, Reverend McMurdo stood in the pulpit, watching the congregation of the damned file into his bare little church with its whitewashed stone walls and take their accustomed places on the hard wooden benches.

Sinners though they were, they were assiduous in attendance. The more he berated them for their evil ways, the more he threatened them with hellfire, the more they flocked to his sermons. When the congregation were in their places, McMurdo raised his harsh, creaking voice.

'There'll be no hymn of the day. Your sinful mouths are no fit to sing the praises of the Lord.'

The congregation settled back expectantly. The Reverend was evidently on good form. They'd leave the little church positively singed by the fires of his eloquence. An hour of McMurdo's fire and brimstone and they felt they'd already done penance for their sins, and were free to go out and sin again.

The Reverend McMurdo pointed a long bony finger at a burly red-faced farmer in the front row.

'You Angus Mackay, stand up!'

Uneasily, Mackay got to his feet.

'You're the great man of the village, are you not?' rasped Reverend McMurdo. 'The biggest landowner, the richest farmer?' A complacent smile spread over Mackay's face. It seemed he was being singled out for some sort of accolade.

'Aye, mebbe so,' he muttered. 'The Lord has been good to me.'

'But have you been good to the Lord?' thundered McMurdo. 'You that fornicate nightly with that bonny young housekeeper of yours, aye, and beat your puir auld wife if she dares to protest.'

Mackay's face went scarlet with rage. 'Now, see here, Reverend, I'll no put up with slander, even from a man of the cloth...'

The Reverend McMurdo reached down in his pulpit and came up with a double-barrelled shotgun. 'Die, sinner,' he roared, and blew Mackay's head off with a charge of heavy buckshot.

CHAPTER TWO

DAY OUT

Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, Commanding Officer of the British section of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, skimmed through the rest of the file in mounting irritation, then slammed it down on his desk.

‘Captain Yates!’ he bellowed.

‘Sir!’ The slim young officer appeared from the outer office with magical speed, almost as if he’d been waiting for the call.

‘This is what the modern army is coming to,’ thought the Brigadier, who was in a foul temper. He studied Captain Yates with disapproval. Thin, sensitive face, uniform too well-tailored, hair a fraction too long. Looked more like a poet or an intellectual than a soldier.

In his better moods the Brigadier knew perfectly well that Yates was a lot tougher than he looked, and extremely efficient at his duties. But at the moment he didn’t feel like being fair. Why should he when everyone was persecuting him?

The Brigadier thumped a fist down on the closed file. ‘Why is this file on my desk?’

‘Which file is that, sir?’

The Brigadier peered at the file label. ‘It’s called the Unexplained Incident File – origin Central Intelligence Clearing House.’

‘Yes, sir, I’ve just been looking at it myself. I thought you ought to see it.’

‘Why? It’s just a list of random disasters. Driver crashes his train, bad car-crash in a tunnel, some cleric goes potty and shoots up his congregation...’

Yates took up the tale: ‘Barber cuts his customer’s throat

with an open razor, hospital consultant deliberately poisons six patients, football fan runs amok with machete...'

'Exactly!' said the Brigadier irritably. 'What's it got to do with UNIT? No connection with intelligence or any – alien influences.'

By alien, Yates knew, the Brigadier meant extra-terrestrial. The Brigadier was still reluctant to formally admit the existence of alien lifeforms – despite having encountered several very unpleasant specimens.

Yates sighed. It was hard enough to get the Brigadier to admit the reality of some alien menace when it was landing spaceships on his lawn or trying to bite his head off. Persuading him to admit the significance of the UIF file wasn't going to be easy. He tried to ease into the subject.

'You know how Central Intelligence Clearing House collects information from every possible source, sir? Police, MI5, MI6, newspapers, radio, TV. They sort it, collate it, file it for future cross-reference. The police might come across something of interest to the security service – or vice versa, of course. CICH makes sure the information is passed on.'

The Brigadier thumped the report again. 'I've served in Intelligence for some years, Captain Yates. I've a rough idea of how the system works. The process produces limitless amounts of bumph like this!'

Yates winced but persevered. 'Recently CICH set up a new programme – the Unexplained Incidents File. Things that didn't seem to have any logical explanation. Naturally we get a copy.'

'Helping to drown us in yet more useless paperwork,' growled the Brigadier.

'Not necessarily useless, sir,' said Yates obstinately.

'What possible use is it to me to know that a Scottish vicar's gone potty?' roared the Brigadier. 'Or that some train-driver's nodded off at the controls?'

'The vicar was a man of the strictest religious principles, sir. He killed one of his congregation and wounded another before they got the gun away from him. Now he remembers nothing about it. And the train driver had a spotless record for twenty-five years. But his mate, who survived the crash, says he deliberately drove the train into the buffers at top speed.'

The Brigadier shrugged. 'Stressful jobs, both of them. Strain

got on top of them and they cracked.'

'I agree, sir. Every single one of these incidents could be explained away by a sudden breakdown.'

'There you are, then!'

'That's where the file comes in, sir.'

'How do you mean?'

'Every single one can be explained separately, sir. But when you look at them all together... There seems to be some kind of pattern. All happening so suddenly, in the same time frame. There's a nationwide epidemic of crack-ups!'

'I still think it sounds like police business,' said the Brigadier obstinately.

'I've already talked to the Yard, sir. They're completely baffled. Say it's right outside their experience. I really think we ought to take a look at it.'

The Brigadier brooded for a moment. He hated bureaucracy and his instinct was to toss the file in the waste-paper bin. But his sense of duty overcame his impatience. Suppose there was something in what Yates was saying?

'What do you want to do?'

'I'd like to investigate a few of these incidents, sir. See if I can find some common thread.'

The Brigadier pushed the file across his desk. 'Very well. You can give it a day or two. Take Benton with you, it'll be good experience for him.' A thought struck him. 'And get the Doctor to take a look at the file. It's just potty enough to appeal to him.'

'I'll do it as soon as he gets back, sir.'

'Back? Back from where? I didn't authorise him to go anywhere. How can I run an Intelligence outfit if my staff keep disappearing? All right, send for Miss Grant.'

Yates swallowed hard. 'Miss Grant's gone too, sir.'

'What? Where?'

'Miss Grant persuaded the Doctor to take her for a drive in the country, sir – in Bessie. Said it was far too nice a day to waste working.'

A small, yellow, open-topped Edwardian roadster sped through the narrow Essex lanes at improbable speed. At the wheel was a tall, beaky-nosed man with a lined young-old face and a shock of white hair. His blue velvet smoking jacket and frilly shirt blended

perfectly with the antique appearance of the car.

Beside him in the passenger seat a very small, very pretty girl was wrestling with the folds of a map. In contrast to that of her companion, her outfit – a brightly coloured yellow trouser suit – was the epitome of the swinging seventies.

As he drove, the Doctor surveyed the flat Essex countryside with benign approval. It wasn't the most picturesque scenery in the world, but on a fine summer's day it had its points. The flat marshy fields were bathed in sunshine, and a broad winding river gleamed in the distance.

The Doctor pulled up at yet another crossroads. 'Well, Jo? You're navigating.'

Jo Grant peered at the map through an enormous pair of sunglasses. 'Give me a minute Doctor, it's a bit complicated. We seem to have got onto another section of the map.'

The Doctor sat back patiently and folded his arms, while Jo wrestled with unfolding and re-folding the map. The delay didn't bother him. He was in a mellow mood today, so mellow that it faintly alarmed him.

By rights, he ought to be in a state of raging discontent. The problem of the TARDIS dematerialisation circuit was far from solved, his knowledge of time-travel theory still seemed inaccessible, his exile to Earth continued – but he wasn't all that bothered. Not today, anyway.

Could he possibly be getting used to his exile? Worse still, was he getting to like it, like some institutionalised long-term prisoner?

Despite his frequent complaints and grumbles to the Brigadier – well, he had to keep the dear old fellow on his toes – the Doctor had to admit, at least to himself, that life as UNIT's Scientific Adviser wasn't too bad. Research facilities, despite the Brigadier's routine groans about an overstretched budget, were more than reasonable. His own daily duties were light to non-existent, except for the occasional crisis – and the crises themselves provided enough excitement to prevent life from becoming dull.

What *was* the Master up to these days, wondered the Doctor. He'd disappeared after his last piece of dastardliness and was, no doubt, plotting something exceptionally nasty somewhere. 'Well, good luck to him,' thought the Doctor. 'Time will tell, it always

does.'

Lazily the Doctor went on analysing his own reactions. He'd always been restless, discontented, sceptical. In the first of his lives it was an attitude that had taken him away from a position of power and prestige on Gallifrey to become a hunted fugitive. His capture by the Time Lords had ended in forced regeneration and exile to Earth.

Now, in his third incarnation, was he beginning to settle down? Was he *tamed*? He was, after all, a Time Lord. He walked in Eternity. Was he declining into a loveably eccentric boffin, a character from some Ealing comedy?

It was a problem that needed further thought, decided the Doctor. But not today. Not on a fine summer morning when he was taking a pretty girl for a spin in the country. A girl for whom he felt the greatest affection – purely platonic of course.

Jo tugged at his sleeve, pointing to the left. 'That way, Doctor – I think!'

'Right you are, Jo,' said the Doctor cheerfully. He started the little car and swung it smoothly to the left. He was fairly certain that Jo was lost, but he didn't care. They were sure to arrive somewhere sometime, and one pretty village was as good as another.

Though not, perhaps, to Jo Grant. She seemed particularly keen to reach a village called Hob's Haven – quite why, the Doctor wasn't sure. She'd been pretty vague when proposing the expedition.

'What's so special about this Hob's Haven place, Jo?' he asked idly.

Jo Grant looked up at him with her most convincingly innocent expression – the one that was a sure sign she was lying. 'Nothing really. It's supposed to be particularly pretty, that's all. Won some sort of award. And there's a good pub there apparently, we'll be able to get lunch.'

'How did you come to hear about it?'

'Oh. I don't know. It was in a guide I think.'

The Doctor nodded and abandoned his questioning. Jo had some kind of hidden agenda, but she wasn't going to tell him about it, not yet. Never mind. No doubt all would be revealed when they reached Hob's Haven.

They arrived an hour later, though not until they'd followed

several false trails. Jo insisted it was a triumph of her map-reading. The Doctor's theory was that it had been a process of elimination – if you visited every obscure village in Essex, one of them was bound to be the one you were after. He didn't say anything though, not wanting to spoil Jo's pleasure.

At first sight, Hob's Haven seemed to justify all their trouble. It had a village green, a village pond, complete with ducks, and a picturesque old inn – *The Devil's Footprint* – with chairs and umbrella-covered tables outside. It had wooden-walled cottages, and cottages with thatched roofs, each with its colourful cottage garden. It had a village store and post office and an antique shop. It even had a working watermill. The whole thing looked like a poster for the English Tourist Board.

Jo turned to the Doctor, 'See?'

'Very nice,' agreed the Doctor. 'Almost too good to be true.'

He parked Bessie on the grass verge outside the inn and they got out. He stood looking up at the inn sign for a moment. It showed the imprint of a large clawed foot. *The Devil's Footprint* was inscribed in curly golden lettering across the top of the sign. Across the bottom in smaller lettering ran the words, *Josh Bartlett, Prop.* They went inside.

The interior of the inn lived up to the village's old-world image. A long, low room with flagstones on the floor, heavy oak chairs and tables and wooden booths around the walls. There was a dartboard, a shove-halfpenny table and some kind of skittle game. The place was empty, except for a big-bellied, red-faced balding man in a spotless white apron, polishing glasses behind the counter.

One picturesque village innkeeper, straight from central casting, thought the Doctor, deciding he might as well go with the flow.

'A pint of your best local ale, landlord,' he boomed. 'And for my young friend...' He looked inquiringly down at Jo.

'A coke please,' said Jo. She looked at the Doctor's baffled face and added, 'Coca-cola.'

The landlord glanced at the clock over the bar. 'A pint of Hob's Old Peculiar it is, sir, and a coke for the young lady.' He looked hopefully at the Doctor.

'Oh, and have one yourself,' said the Doctor, realising he'd forgotten his line.

‘Thank you kindly, sir, I’ll join you in a half of ale with pleasure.’

The landlord served the drinks and the Doctor paid. He downed his pint in one, with the swallow perfected in the *Golden Grackle* in Gallifrey’s Low Town, and ordered another.

The landlord surveyed him with renewed respect. ‘You want to go careful with that, sir, specially if you’re driving. That Old Peculiar’s a sight stronger than it looks.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll take the next one more slowly.’

The landlord drew a second tankard, put it down in front of him, and surveyed his two customers. ‘Down for the festival, are you, sir?’

‘What festival’s that?’

The landlord looked surprised. ‘Big open-air pop concert, next week, down at Rowley’s Farm. Thought you might be down here to rehearse.’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘No offence sir, but you do look a bit... well, showbusiness, like. Thought you might be lead guitarist in one of them groups. ‘Ere, you’re not that Mick Jagger are you?’

‘Certainly not.’

The landlord looked disappointed. ‘I was sure you was some kind of pop star – and the young lady’d be your vocalist. That or one of your groupies, like.’

Jo looked amused and the Doctor looked outraged.

‘I’m afraid we’re just simple tourists,’ he said. ‘Can you provide us with some lunch?’

‘Do you some sandwiches, sir. Cheese, ham or beef.’

‘One of each,’ said the Doctor, ‘and bring another round of drinks with them. We’ll be outside.’

They settled themselves at one of the tables outside the inn. The Doctor looked at Jo, who had been uncharacteristically silent for some time. ‘Pop festival, eh?’

Jo sighed. ‘Perhaps I’d better come clean.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘Perhaps you had!’

‘Well,’ said Jo. ‘Like the landlord said, they’re holding this pop festival in the village next week. Going to be the biggest and best ever. Make Glastonbury look like a kiddies’ tea party.’

‘Whatever that means,’ said the Doctor. ‘If the festival’s not

till next week, what are we doing here?’

‘Tickets,’ said Jo.

‘What about them?’

‘All the London agencies are sold out. Tickets are a fiver each, and the ticket touts are selling them for fifty. Now even the ticket touts have run out.’

‘But?’ said the Doctor.

‘But there’s a rumour that the site office down here kept back a few tickets for the locals. And apparently the local yokels aren’t all that interested in pop... Most of them disapprove of the festival anyway.’

‘So there might be one or two tickets left over?’

‘Right!’ said Jo. ‘Mike Yates says he’ll take me if I can get hold of a couple of tickets.’

‘Aha!’ said the Doctor. ‘All is revealed. Why didn’t you just ask me, Jo? I’d still have driven you down here with pleasure.’

Jo looked contrite. ‘I suppose I thought you might disapprove. I thought you were anti-pop if anything.’

The Doctor looked offended. ‘I’ll have you know, Jo, that in my younger days, my much younger days, I played lead perigosto stick for the Gallifrey Academy Hot Five – until the Faculty closed us down. The Master was on drums.’

Jo looked amazed, ‘Somehow I just don’t associate you with the swinging pop scene, Doctor.’

‘The innkeeper did.’

‘Absolute nonsense – you don’t look a bit like Mick Jagger. You’re much too tall. Anyway, will you take me down to this Rowley’s Farm place when we’ve had lunch?’

‘I suppose so,’ said the Doctor. ‘If you want to do permanent damage to your eardrums, who am I to stand in your way!’

The landlord appeared with plates of sandwiches and more drinks and they began tucking in. The Doctor asked the way to Rowley’s Farm and the landlord said, ‘Straight through the village and about a mile on. You can’t miss it. They got tents and them temporary huts up there already.’ He gave them a knowing look. ‘So maybe you got something to do with the festival after all?’

Before the Doctor could reply Jo said, ‘As a matter of fact you guessed right. Don’t tell anyone though, we’re here

incognito. Mr Jagger hates signing autographs.'

The Doctor was about to protest when something caught his attention. A robed and cowled figure was pedalling an ancient bicycle towards the village shop on the other side of the green. For a moment it seemed oddly familiar. 'Who's the monastic gentlemen?'

The innkeeper snorted. 'One of that lot from the abbey.'

They watched the robed figure park his bike outside the village store and go inside.

'He's not a real monk though,' added the landlord.

'What is he then?' asked Jo.

'A Child of Light,' said the landlord in disgusted tones. 'Some hippy cult, took over the old abbey about a year ago.'

Jo opened her mouth, closed it again, then nodded. 'I think I've heard of them.'

'We don't see much of them in the village, except when they come in for supplies. They goes all round the local towns and villages though, begging mostly. Shocking the way some of those girls carry on.'

The landlord went away and the Doctor glanced at Jo. 'Why the reaction?'

'The name rang a bell that's all. The Brigadier's got a file on them.'

'What have they been up to?'

'Nothing really. There's just a general feeling they're a bit dodgy. They believe in spiritual enlightenment through hallucinatory drugs.'

'Dangerous nonsense,' said the Doctor. 'You know what it takes to become enlightened?'

Jo, a bit of a hippy herself, was intrigued. 'No, what?'

'Years,' said the Doctor solemnly. 'Years and years of study and contemplation. I knew an old hermit once, lived in a cave on a mountain...' He broke off, lost in reminiscence for a few moments. He looked at Jo and grinned. 'Still, you don't want to hear about all that. Let's go and get these tickets of yours and then get hack to HQ.'

Jo nodded. 'The Brigadier's probably screaming for us.'

'Let him,' said the Doctor lazily. 'Teach him not to take us for granted.'

When they'd finished their lunch, the Doctor settled up with

the landlord and they set off for Rowley's Farm.

Jo automatically made for Bessie but the Doctor shook his head. 'Remember the landlord's warning. I've got three pints of Hob's Old Peculiar inside me. I'd better walk it off.'

The Doctor set off at a great pace, with Jo scurrying to keep up.

'All very well for you long-legs,' she said. 'Hey, Doctor, slow down!'

Rowley's Farm was easy enough to find.

It was a shabby, derelict looking place, with a run-down farmhouse and a scattering of decaying out-buildings. A few depressed looking animals, cows and sheep, stood around in adjoining fields. By contrast, the big field behind the farm was buzzing with activity. Through the gaps in the farm buildings they could see workmen setting up a high wire fence. At the far end of the field, more workmen were assembling a giant stage.

The Doctor and Jo pushed open a creaking five-barred gate and went into the cluttered farmyard. It was a semi-derelict sort of place with bits of rusting farm machinery scattered about.

'Not going to win the Best Kept Farm award, is he?' said Jo.

A big-bellied, red-faced man in grimy overalls appeared in the farmhouse doorway. He clutched an old-fashioned scythe in one hand and a sharpening stone in the other. 'Bugger off,' he roared. 'Private property!'

'Or the Most Hospitable Farmer either,' murmured Jo.

The Doctor looked at him with distaste. 'And who might you be?'

The man staggered, shoved the sharpening stone into an overall pocket, and clutched the door jamb for support. 'I might be the king of bloody Siam, but I'm not. I'm Sim Rowley, and this is my farm. You're trespassing.'

Jo clutched the Doctor's arm. 'Careful, Doctor, he looks dangerous. And he's drunk.'

The Doctor produced his most charming smile. 'See here, old fellow, we're here on official festival business and...'

'You're trespassing. Clear off before I set the dog on you.'

'If you'd just let me explain...'

'I warned you,' snarled Rowley. He stepped forward and to one side, and yelled, 'Killer!'

An enormous black Alsatian dog appeared in the farmhouse doorway. It had red eyes, yellow fangs, and looked, thought Jo, like the Hound of the Baskervilles on a very bad day.

‘See ’em off,’ shouted Rowley.

Snarling, the dog streaked towards them.

CHAPTER THREE

HEADLESS HORROR

The Doctor stretched his arm out towards the slavering dog, pointed a long bony forefinger and bellowed, 'Sit, sir!'

The dog skidded to a halt – and sat.

'What kind of a way is that to behave?' demanded the Doctor. 'Where are your manners, Killer?'

The dog looked thoroughly ashamed of itself. It hung its head, wagged its tail and whined apologetically.

'That's more like it,' said the Doctor. He patted the dog's head and it licked his hand. 'All right, boy, inside.'

The dog trotted back inside the farmhouse. Sim Rowley stood beside the doorway, still clutching his scythe, as if frozen with shock.

'Come on Jo,' said the Doctor, and they walked across the farmyard. As they passed Rowley the Doctor said, 'You want to be careful with that scythe, old chap. Dangerous things in careless hands.'

They headed towards the big field.

'If you get fed up with UNIT you can get a job in a circus, Doctor,' said Jo. 'After a dog like that, lion-taming would be a cinch.'

'As an old friend of mine says, there are no bad dogs, only bad owners,' said the Doctor. 'That was a perfectly nice dog, led astray by its singularly unpleasant master.'

Sim Rowley came to and staggered back inside the farmhouse. He stood in the middle of the filthy kitchen, aimed a kick at his dog, missed, and nearly fell over. He grabbed the wooden table to support himself, snatched up a bottle of gin and took a long

swig to steady his nerves.

Sim was in the last stages of acute alcoholism and the incident with the strangers had already faded from his mind. There was something he had been going to do... He laid the scythe on the table and weaved his way over to the telephone on the wall. Squinting in concentration he dialled a familiar number.

‘Get me the boss,’ he snarled. ‘Tell him it’s Sim Rowley.’ After a longish pause he said, ‘That you? Did you get my message?’ Another pause. ‘Yeah? Well, you better think again. I meant what I said. Yes, I know we had a deal, but I didn’t know how much money there was in this racket when I signed. You robbed me and no London crook swindles Sim Rowley. Double the money or no festival. I want the money tonight.’

He slammed down the phone, went back to the table, sat down in a rickety wooden chair and took another swig of gin. He noticed the scythe and picked it up, laying it across his knees. Fishing the stone from his pocket, he began sharpening the long curving blade.

The Doctor and Jo made their way across the festival field, more or less ignored by the busy workmen. In a far corner of the field was a wooden hut labelled ‘Site Office’. Inside they found a harassed, bespectacled young man sitting behind an architect’s desk that was piled high with papers and drawings.

He looked up as they came in and peered irritably at the Doctor over his spectacles.

‘Look, how often do I have to tell people? No rehearsals or sound checks till tomorrow – if then! We haven’t even got the stage up yet.’

Equally exasperated the Doctor snapped, ‘And how often do I have to tell people I am not a pop star!’

‘So what do you want?’

The Doctor stepped aside. ‘You’d better explain, Jo.’

Producing her most appealing smile, Jo Grant explained why they’d come.

The young man frowned. ‘Tickets? I don’t think so. We did have some but they went ages ago.’

Jo’s face fell, and she looked to be on the verge of tears.

‘Are you sure? We’ve driven all the way from London and I so wanted to go. You’re my last chance. *Please!*’

'Hang on a minute,' said the harassed young man. He rooted around in his pile of papers and unearthed two embossed cardboard oblongs. 'Here you are, two VIP passes. Admission any time, access all areas.'

Jo's face lit up. 'That's wonderful! Er, how much...'

'No charge. They were meant for some idiot rock journalists and they didn't even bother to collect them. No sense in them going to waste.'

Jo dived behind the desk, flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

The young man blushed and patted her on the back. 'That's all right, love.' He gave the Doctor an embarrassed look. 'Sorry, I snapped at you. This job's driving me crazy.'

'I can imagine,' said the Doctor. 'That was a very generous gesture Mr -'

'Hollings, Tim Hollings.'

'This is Jo Grant, and I'm the Doctor.'

They shook hands.

'Mind you, there's a chance those passes might not be much use to you.'

Jo looked worried. 'Why ever not?'

'Old Farmer Rowley who owns this muckheap is pushing the management for more money. Unless they pay up he's threatening to chuck us all off the site.'

'And will they?' asked Jo.

Hollings shrugged. 'Maybe, maybe not. Trouble is, he's bumped his fees up a couple of times already, they're getting quite fed up with him. He's a pretty obnoxious type.'

The Doctor nodded. 'We've met.'

'Anyway, they may decide to cut their losses. In that case, there won't be a pop festival, not here anyway.'

'Let's hope it doesn't come to that,' said the Doctor. 'If only for my young friend here's sake. Now, we mustn't disturb you any longer.'

They thanked him again, said their goodbyes and headed back towards the farm.

'Do you think they will cancel?' asked Jo anxiously.

'Maybe not, Jo. With preparations so far advanced they may decide to pay up. Or perhaps they'll find some other way of dealing with him.'

As they crossed the farmyard Jo glanced apprehensively at the dark doorway.

Suddenly the Alsatian dog appeared in the doorway, something in its mouth.

‘What’s it carrying Doctor?’ asked Jo. ‘A ball?’

As the dog trotted forward, the Doctor said, ‘Don’t look, Jo!’

The dog was carrying Sim Rowley’s severed head, holding it by one ear and leaving a trail of blood drops dripping behind it.

Seconds later an even more ghastly sight appeared in the doorway. It was Sim Rowley himself – what was left of him. The hideous figure shambled towards them, a fountain of blood spouting from its headless neck. Jo screamed...

CHAPTER FOUR

QUIET VILLAGE

Jo turned to run, but the Doctor grasped her arm. 'It's all right, Jo, it can't possibly hurt us. It's already dead.'

The headless corpse staggered a few more steps towards them, then crashed to the ground, almost at their feet.

Jo screamed again and jumped back.

The Doctor glanced round and saw the black Alsatian trotting across the farmyard, still carrying Sim Rowley's head.

Obscurely outraged by the mixture of tragedy and farce, the Doctor roared, 'Here, sir!' The dog hesitated, then turned and trotted obediently towards him. 'Drop it!' said the Doctor sternly, and the dog dropped the head at his feet. It rolled a little way towards the body, as if struggling to reunite with it, and then came to a halt, wide eyes staring up at them from a face still twisted in anguish.

'Sit,' said the Doctor and the dog crouched by its late master's body, whining uneasily.

The Doctor looked at the dark farmhouse doorway and said, 'Stay here, Jo. Try not to look.'

'Don't worry,' said Jo shakily. She turned to look back towards the festival field, ever conscious of the horror on the ground close by.

The Doctor snapped his fingers and said, 'Here, boy!'

The dog at his heels he headed for the farmhouse doorway. Inside the gloomy kitchen he paused, looking round. It was a once-pleasant stone-flagged country kitchen, the floor scattered with litter, sink and tables piled high with unwashed plates and empty bottles.

There was nobody there, no sign that anyone had been there.

There were other doors leading off into the farmhouse and the assassin, if there'd been an assassin, had had time to make his escape. He could be hiding somewhere in the building of course... The Doctor looked down at the dog and said, 'After him, Killer!' The dog whined and gave him a baffled look.

The Doctor nodded. 'I don't think there was anyone here either. Though how...' He went back into the yard, the dog trotting after him. 'Nobody about, Jo,' he said, and knelt to examine the body.

Jo turned and saw what he was doing. 'Any clues?'

'Not really,' said the Doctor, peering at the bloody stump of the neck. 'The cut seems to slant downwards from the back... it's an uncommonly clean wound.'

'He believed in keeping his tools nice and sharp,' said Jo, with a shaky attempt at bravado. 'He was sharpening that scythe when we first saw him, remember?'

The Doctor stood up. 'Do you know how hard it is to cut off somebody's head?' he said severely. 'The human spinal cord is uncommonly tough. In the good old days the executioner often had to take several swipes – and that was with a proper headsman's axe, designed for the job. I remember when they beheaded Anne Boleyn...'

'That's enough horrific historical details,' said Jo. 'Hadn't we better tell someone about this?'

The Doctor nodded. 'There was a phone in that kitchen, but I don't want to touch it. Let's go back to the site office.' He turned to the dog and snapped, 'Stay! On guard! Come on, Jo.'

As they moved away the dog raised its head and gave a mournful howl. Maybe it had loved Sim Rowley in its way.

The site manager received their news with stunned resignation. Just one more aggravating problem in a bad day. He used the office phone to call the local police, and brewed up strong sweet tea for himself and Jo.

Leaving them to it, the Doctor went back to guard the body and await the arrival of the Law. The dog still sat guarding its master's body. When it saw the Doctor it raised its head and gave another mournful howl.

The Law arrived fifteen minutes later, in the shape of a plump, red-faced police sergeant on an ancient bicycle. Once

again the Doctor had a sensation of unreality, a feeling he'd been cast in an old Agatha Christie movie.

The policeman clambered off his bike and leaned it against the farmyard gate.

He came into the yard, touching his helmet. 'Afternoon, sir. Sergeant Bob Slater, from the police house in the village. I had this call... I gather there's been some trouble here.'

The Doctor stepped aside and waved a hand towards the headless body. 'You might say that.'

The policeman peered down at the body. 'This is a bad business. Poor old Sim. He was a miserable bastard, but I wouldn't wish this on him. How'd it happen, sir?'

The Doctor gave a brief account of events, and the policeman jotted down a summary in his notebook. He sighed and put the notebook away. 'Poor old Sim,' he said again. 'He always was careless with his tools.'

The Doctor was outraged. 'Careless with his tools? What do you imagine happened here, Sergeant?'

'Well, to be honest with you sir, old Sim had a weakness for the bottle. You say he was aggressive with you when you first saw him? He was probably half drunk even then.'

'I think he was,' admitted the Doctor. 'But even so...'

'Well, it's obvious, innit, sir? He went back inside, had a few more drinks and went on sharpening that there scythe. Then he got careless and his hand slipped...'

'His hand slipped and he cut off his own head?' said the Doctor. 'That's impossible. Physically, psychologically and anatomically impossible.'

'Well, it happened though, didn't it? You said yourself the scythe was in his hand, and there was nobody else about – except you, sir!'

'I hope you're not suggesting that I had anything to do with this. Why the devil should I drive all the way down here just to decapitate someone I'd never met?'

'No, course not, sir,' said Sergeant Slater soothingly. 'Like I said, it was an accident.'

It was all absurdly casual, reflected the Doctor. He knew that agricultural accidents were all too common. Nevertheless, this fellow was treating a lopped-off head as no more significant than a severed finger. Still, there seemed little point in his insisting

that it must have been murder. Not in the face of such obstinacy – and not when he himself seemed to be a promising candidate for main suspect.

The Doctor felt a sudden urge to get away from this place. ‘Very well, Sergeant. I’ll collect my young friend from the site office and be on my way.’

‘I shall need an official statement, sir, just for the record like. Any time that’s convenient.’

‘We’ll be at the inn if you want us. If we have to leave before you arrive, I’ll give the landlord my address in London.’

‘Right you are sir. I’ll just use Sim’s phone to call an ambulance. Can’t leave a nasty old thing like that lying around, can we?’

The Doctor made his way to the site office, where he found a much-recovered Jo and the still-harassed Tim Hollings drinking tea.

‘I’ll have to find out who’s next of kin and get the festival contract confirmed,’ said Hollings.

‘Any idea who inherits?’ asked Jo.

‘I gather there’s a sister in the village, it’ll probably be her. Still, she can’t be any worse to deal with than old Rowley.’

‘It’ll be a shock for her,’ said Jo.

‘I doubt it. Apparently they hadn’t spoken for years.’

It looked as if the dead man would have few mourners, thought the Doctor. Apart, perhaps, from the dog.

They said goodbye to Hollings and crossed the field. More of the ring-fence was up by now, and a line of portable toilets was being installed.

‘Never enough toilets at a pop festival,’ said Jo.

The Doctor shuddered.

‘Can we avoid going out by way of the farmhouse?’ asked Jo. ‘I don’t really want another look at the headless horror.’

The Doctor looked round. ‘There’s a stile over there that will let us into the next field. If we cross that we’ll be able to get back into the lane.’

The Doctor climbed nimbly over the stile, and turned to help Jo down.

They set off across the big, empty field.

‘What really happened back there?’ asked Jo. ‘I’ve been

thinking about it and it doesn't seem to make any sense.'

'It doesn't,' said the Doctor grimly.

'I mean, did someone sneak into the farm and cut the poor man's head off?'

'And then put the scythe back in his hand and shove him out of the door towards us? While his dog was playing 'fetch' with his head?'

'*Could* he have done it himself?'

'I don't see how. Think about it, Jo. He might have cut or wounded himself, though even that wouldn't have been easy. But how could he swing the scythe with enough force to sever his own head? Nobody could do it. Not unless...'

'Unless what?'

'Perhaps if they were drugged. Some drugs give abnormal strength. Or – possessed in some way.' The Doctor shook his head. 'A headless body, still walking... It's impossible!'

'Chickens do it,' said Jo.

'Do what?'

'Run round with their heads cut off. Or so they say. Mind you, I've never seen one.'

On the far side of the field the air seemed to *shimmer*. Suddenly a great black bull stood in the field. It was enormous, twice the size of any ordinary animal, a classical statue come to life. Long wickedly curved horns gleamed in the sunlight, red eyes blazed with anger. It threw up its head and bellowed.

The Doctor and Jo heard the sound and turned.

The bull lowered its head and charged.

The Doctor looked round assessing the situation. There was no cover and only one hope, to get out of the field before the bull reached them. The bull was still some way away – but so was the stile in the hedge at the edge of the field.

'Run Jo!' he yelled, grabbing her hand.

They ran. The bull ran after them – and the bull ran faster. They could hear the thunder of its hooves behind them growing louder, louder.

The Doctor risked a glance over his shoulder and was appalled to see that the bull was hard on their heels. He judged the distance to the hedge, compared their relative speeds and came to one unavoidable conclusion.

They weren't going to make it.

CHAPTER FIVE

NIGHT OUT

Captain Yates and Sergeant Benton drained their pints at virtually the same moment and let out a simultaneous ‘Ah!’ of satisfaction.

‘We earned that,’ said Yates.

‘We did, sir,’ said Benton. ‘My shout – I’ll get a couple more in.’

Yates shook his head. ‘I’ll get them. This is on the Brigadier – expenses. And drop the sir, we’re under cover, remember.’

He got up and went to the bar, returning minutes later with two more pints.

Both men were in civvies, Yates in a dark suit, Benton in cavalry twill trousers and a loudly checked sports jacket. The car parked in a nearby back street was an inconspicuous blue Ford Popular.

They were sitting in a crowded City pub, an old-fashioned boozers’ bar with grimy smoke-stained walls and ceilings. It was a favourite with home-going commuters, popping in for a quick drink, or two, before facing crowded buses and trains.

They’d spent a long, hot day interviewing people in connection with the Unexplained Incidents File, concentrating on those within reasonable reach of London.

They’d talked to the widow of the engine driver who’d crashed his train, and she had told them of her husband’s lifelong devotion to the railway, of his love of his work and his spotless record. A man with no vices, except for his evening pint in their local pub.

They’d talked to another widow whose commercial-traveller husband had died in a mysterious car crash in a tunnel. A car

crash he'd apparently caused – after years of accident-free driving. The police had asked her if her husband could have been drunk. 'He liked a drink, my Jack,' she'd sobbed. 'But never when he was on the road, only afterwards in the evening.'

They'd talked to the friends and family of a football fan, now in a secure mental hospital, who had run amok and had been told of a mild, amiable man who hated violence and deplored football hooliganism. A moderate drinker, a couple-of-pints-a-night man. They'd talked to the shocked colleagues of a respected hospital consultant who had deliberately poisoned several patients, and then taken his own life – after years of dedicated service.

Finally, and in some ways most painfully of all, they'd talked to a fellow soldier who'd returned from sentry-duty, had a pint in the camp canteen and shot down three of his closest friends in their beds.

They'd come up with nothing.

No mysterious contacts, no hidden addictions, no alien influences. No recent changes in habits or behaviour; no, 'He seemed so strange recently.'

'A big fat load of nothing,' Benton summed up gloomily.

Yates sipped his pint. 'Only to be expected. People are always reluctant to speak ill of the dead – or run down friends or relatives in trouble. Anything discreditable they knew about them they'd try to hide.'

Benton shook his head. 'I don't think those people were lying. Not any of them. They were all knocked out by what had happened. Sort of stunned, like.'

Yates nodded, accepting the verdict. During the series of painful and awkward interviews he'd realised that Benton was a lot better at this sort of thing than he was. Yates himself found it hard to get through to strangers, especially those of a different class. But people liked and trusted Benton, responded to his genuine interest and concern. They talked to him. And the big, bluff sergeant was a surprisingly sensitive judge of human nature. He'd have known if he was being lied to.

'So,' said Yates, 'we tell the Brigadier we've drawn a blank – a whole series of blanks.'

'We can try again tomorrow,' suggested Benton. 'Cast the net a bit wider.'

'Yes of course,' agreed Yates. 'Though somehow I doubt it'll do us much good. Not that the Brigadier will mind. He thinks it's none of our business anyway.'

'All the same, sir, I think you're right,' said Benton. 'There's *something* going on. You know the old saying. Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action. And we've got a lot more than three times here.'

'But where's the link?' asked Yates. 'I was looking for a pattern. But the only pattern is, there *is* no pattern!'

'We could try the computer,' suggested Benton.

UNIT had just been equipped with a new computer system which occupied a huge air-conditioned room in the basement. Everyone treated it with awed respect (except the Doctor, who avoided it), largely because nobody really knew what it could do.

'I thought computers just sort of filed facts,' said Yates.

'They do a lot more than that,' said Benton. 'The Brig sent me on this course, said someone ought to understand the bloody thing. One of the things computers do best is look for patterns. If we fed in all the information...'

'Worth a try, I suppose.'

They discussed the possibility over their pints, and were thinking of leaving when a noisy little group pushed their way into the bar. There were three of them, two men and a girl. The men wore ragged jeans, colourful ponchos and sandals. Their long straggly hair was bound back with headbands. One was massive. more of a bruiser than a flower-child, who looked oddly uncomfortable in his hippy gear. The second was small and skinny with a goatee beard.

The girl, a black-haired gypsy type, wore a skimpy linen dress, a colourful silk shawl and rows of multicoloured beads. There were flowers in her hair.

Yates noticed that Benton was studying the newcomers too. 'Weird-looking lot. Must be left over from the sixties!'

'Still a surprising number of them about,' said Benton tolerantly. 'Mostly harmless. Though there's something about those three... they're half-drunk, for a start.'

'So?'

'Aren't your hippies into drugs, not booze? You know, blow open the doors of perception and gambol through rainbow fields under a tangerine sky.'

Yates nodded thoughtfully. He'd got nothing against hippies himself and usually found them mildly amusing. But these three didn't look harmless and blissed out. They looked wild-eyed and dangerous.

'Girl looks as if she'd clean up quite nicely though,' added Benton.

Yates grinned. 'Scrub the sweeper's daughter and bring her to my tent!'

'Come again, sir?' said Benton, looking rather shocked.

'Just a quote from the good old days of Empire.'

The three hippies pushed their way to the bar and ordered three pints of cider. The landlord looked dubiously at them and didn't move.

'Worried about getting the dosh?' sneered the big hippy. He jabbed the girl with an elbow. 'Tip out the old tin, darling.'

The girl produced a battered collecting tin from under her shawl, took off the top and emptied the tin on the bar.

The little hippy pointed to the pile of grimy coins. 'Take it out of that, man.' He giggled. 'We been out collecting for our favourite charity – us!'

Benton was indignant. 'Hear that, sir? That's obtaining money under false pretences. Someone should nick them for that.'

'Not us,' said Yates firmly. 'We're not coppers, remember.'

'All right,' the landlord was saying. 'I'll serve you one drink and then you're on your way.' He produced several bottles from behind the bar, and opened them.

'You can't refuse to serve us anyway, that's good money.'

The landlord, a burly ex-soldier, leaned menacingly over the bar.

'That's where you're wrong, sunshine. I can refuse to serve anyone I like.'

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at a notice behind the bar.

'THE MANAGEMENT RESERVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE ADMISSION' He put three glasses next to the bottles on the bar.

'Typical bourgeois conformism,' said the girl haughtily. Her voice, Yates noticed, was surprisingly well educated, though her sibilants were slurred. 'What'sh wrong with us anyway?'

'You're dirty, you're smelly, you're half drunk already, and I don't want you in my bar,' said the landlord concisely. He fished some coins out of the pile of small change and shoved the rest towards them. 'Now drink up and clear off.'

Collecting their change and their drinks, the three moved away from the bar.

'Shall we be on our way?' suggested Benton.

Yates shook his head. 'Let's hang on a bit. I've a feeling those three are up to something.'

'What do you reckon? Selling drugs?'

'Maybe. Or buying.'

Benton looked dubious. 'The Brig won't like our getting involved. Like you said, we're not coppers.'

'We're concerned citizens, doing our civic duty.'

Nursing their drinks, they observed the three newcomers as they wandered round the crowded bar. Now and again they'd start a conversation with someone, chat for a bit, and move on.

Not surprisingly, the girl had more success than her two companions.

Yates watched curiously as she flirted briefly with a big labourer, downing pints at the bar. As she leaned forwards, distracting his attention, the bearded little hippy hovered nearby. Yates saw his hand hover briefly over the labourer's glass and then move swiftly away. The girl blew the labourer a kiss and moved on as well.

Yates jumped to his feet and ran to the bar. 'Don't touch that beer, that girl's friend put something in it.'

The bemused labourer swung round. 'You what?'

'Don't drink that beer. Give it to me, I'll get it analysed.'

'Bollocks,' said the labourer. 'You buy your own beer.'

He raised the glass to his lips. Yates knocked it from his hand, and the labourer knocked him down.

A big hand tapped the labourer on his shoulder.

He turned. Sergeant Benton said, 'Sorry, mate,' and dropped him with a savage left hook. He reached down and hauled Yates to his feet. 'You all right, sir?'

Yates shook his head to clear it and raised his voice. 'Listen everybody! Don't touch your drinks. These hippy types have been putting something in them. Some kind of drugs, maybe even poison. Hang on to them, don't let them get away.'

Landlord, call the police.'

Nobody moved. Suddenly the big hippy erupted out of the crowd, grabbing Yates by the throat. 'I'll do for you, you interfering nonce!

Yates broke the choke-hold by swinging his clasped hands upwards between his attacker's arms. He hit the hippy hard on the nose, producing a fountain of blood.

Ignoring the blood, the hippy came at him again. Benton grabbed him by the arm and flung him across the room – straight into a quiet little man drinking a bottle of Guinness at a corner table. Table and Guinness went flying and the quiet little man stood up and hit the hippy on the head with his chair. The hippy fell backwards into a table full of drinks.

Fights started all over the bar and Yates turned to the landlord. 'Now will you call the police?'

Benton went across the room, shouldering his way through the brawls, grabbed the stunned hippy and dragged him over to the bar.

'We'd better hang on to this one, sir. The other two have disappeared.'

'And then the police turned up and arrested *us*,' said Yates indignantly. 'Said we'd started it.'

They were standing, a little bedraggled, on the carpet (in more ways than one) in front of the Brigadier's desk.

'Well, we did in a way,' said Benton fair-mindedly. 'With the best possible motives, sir,' he added hastily.

'At which point you produced your UNIT credentials?'

'We had to sir,' said Yates. 'It was that or spend a night in jail.'

'May I remind you Captain Yates, that we are a secret organisation. It does little for our prestige in the Intelligence community if I have to go down to Bow Street to bail out two of my agents after a drunken brawl.'

'Yes, sir,' said Yates.

'Sorry, sir,' said Benton.

The Brigadier glared at them a moment longer and then said, 'All right, at ease. Sit down both of you. Now then, you're certain about what you saw?'

'Perfectly, sir,' said Yates. 'They'd got a definite technique.'

The big one and the girl distracted their victims, the little ratty one slipped them the Mickey Finn – or whatever it was.’

‘We don’t know what it was,’ said the Brigadier. ‘If anything. Most of the drinks in that pub got spilled – and we’ve no way of telling which ones were spiked and which weren’t. The police forensic team are analysing what they could find. No results so far.’

‘What about the bloke we caught, sir?’ asked Benson. ‘I bet he’s got form.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘He just didn’t look like a very convincing hippie. And the way he talked...’

‘What do you mean?’

Benton looked embarrassed. ‘He called Captain Yates a nonce, sir. That’s not hippy talk, that’s prison slang.’

‘So he did,’ said Yates. ‘What does it mean?’

‘Sexual offender, sir,’ said Benton. ‘It’s – very rude’ he added primly.

‘As it happens you’re right, Sergeant,’ said the Brigadier. ‘He’s a minor thug called Sammy Barker. Convictions for mugging, GBH, that sort of thing.’

‘So what was he doing with those others, in the pub?’ asked Yates.

‘Apparently they hired him,’ said the Brigadier. ‘All the beer he could drink and fifty quid at the end of the night.’

‘For what, sir?’

‘Dressing up like them, going round the pubs and seeing off anyone who gave them trouble.’

Benton grinned. ‘Like us!’

‘Did he say what they were up to, sir?’ asked Yates.

The Brigadier shook his head. ‘He swears he didn’t know and didn’t care. Thought it was maybe some kind of drug deal.’

‘Which it was,’ said Yates thoughtfully ‘Only they weren’t buying or selling, they were giving it away!’

‘Weird business,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Still, nothing to do with us. Best thing to do is turn it over to the police.’

‘No, sir,’ said Yates. ‘With respect, I think it’s got a great deal to do with us. It could be the explanation of the Unexplained Incident File. You read my report, sir, on the cases we looked into?’

‘And discovered precisely nothing,’ pointed out the Brigadier unkindly.

‘I think we made our discovery later, sir. In the pub.’

‘I hope you’re not losing your sense of proportion, Captain Yates. This file seems to be developing into something of an obsession.’

‘If you’d hear me out, sir,’ said Yates stiffly.

The Brigadier leaned back behind his desk. ‘Very well.’

In fact he was considerably less displeased, and far less sceptical than he sounded. The extent to which a man was willing to defend his ideas, especially in the face of opposition from his superiors, was, in the Brigadier’s opinion, a good indication of his character.

‘That pub we went into,’ began Yates, ‘it was very close to Liverpool Street.’

‘What of it?’

‘Commuter country, sir, hub of a transport network. Buses, tube trains, taxis, commuter trains. Some of the customers were locals, but a lot must have been commuters.’

‘Go on.’

‘Most of the people we interviewed tonight said the, er, afflicted took an occasional drink. In other words they went to pubs.’

‘Everyone goes in pubs,’ said the Brigadier wearily. ‘What’s that got to do with the file?’

‘Choose a pub in that position – and there must be hundreds of them – spike some of the customers’ drinks with some delayed-action drug... The customers finish their drinks and scatter. Later on you get a series of violent incidents – in different places and at different times.’

‘What about that priest?’ objected Benton. ‘He doesn’t sound like a boozier.’

Yates shrugged. ‘Maybe somebody spiked his tea at the Women’s Institute.’

The Brigadier grunted. ‘All this sounds a bit far-fetched. Is there such a drug?’

‘There could be, sir. We could look into it. The Doctor would know.’

‘And who’s doing all this? And why?’

‘Don’t see that *why* matters much,’ said Benton unexpectedly.

The Brigadier frowned. 'Indeed, Sergeant Benton.'

'If the Captain's right, we know *how*,' said Benton. '*Why*'s not important – probably some loony motive we'd never understand. What we need to know is *who* – so we can find them and stop them.'

'A very pragmatic analysis, Sergeant.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Benton, not sure if he was being complimented or not.

'So how do we go about finding our *who*?' asked the Brigadier.

'We could ask the police to check pubs for anyone at the same game, sir,' suggested Benton. 'Going round spiking drinks. I know there are lots of bars to cover – but all the coppers I know spend a lot of their time in pubs anyway. We got lucky, so might they.'

'There's something else,' said Yates. 'I take it the police got names and addresses for the people in that dust-up tonight, sir?'

'I imagine so. As far as I can gather they took brief statements from everyone and sent them off home. The only arrest, apart from you two, was that thug I told you about. Why?'

'All those people must be monitored, sir,' said Yates. 'It took a while before I realised what those hippies were doing. They could have spiked quite a few drinks before then. They could have been in lots of other pubs come to that. If any of those people are involved in an unexplained violent incident...'

Unexpectedly, the Brigadier smiled. 'Very well, I'll pass your suggestions on to the police. You've done well, both of you. If the police come up with any more leads we'll follow them up.' The phone rang and he picked it up. 'Lethbridge-Stewart.'

Captain Yates and Sergeant Benton watched as the Brigadier listened for a few minutes, his face becoming steadily more grave. Finally he said, 'Thank you for letting me know. We'll keep in touch,' and put down the phone.

He turned to Mike Yates. 'The police had the same idea as you did, about monitoring those people in the bar. One of them, a quiet little bank clerk called Charles Deacon, got home late as a result of all the fuss. When his wife nagged him about it, he strangled her. When he realised what he'd done he hanged himself.' The Brigadier rose. 'You were right, Sergeant. We've got to find these people and stop them.'

CHAPTER SIX

BULL FIGHT

The Doctor and Jo were *almost* at the hedge, the charging bull was *almost* upon them...

The Doctor acted with blinding, instinctive speed, making full use of the very small margins of time and space that were left to him. He grabbed Jo around the waist, spun around like an athlete throwing a discus and hurled her clean over the hedge.

Still spinning, he wriggled out of his velvet jacket, held it out in front of him and turned to face the advancing bull, now so close he could hear its angry snorts.

The bull charged and, with a cry of 'Hey, *toro!*' the Doctor swept the coat to one side. The bull thundered past and crashed into the hedge, smashing halfway through the tangle of thorns.

The Doctor backed away, and the bull backed out of the hedge, shaking its head and bellowing angrily. It spun around, moving astonishingly quickly for its bulk, and spotted its opponent.

For a moment the two confronted each other, motionless.

On the other side of the hedge, Jo picked herself up, shaken but not hurt, and ran over to the stile where she could see what was going on.

Horrified, she saw the Doctor and the bull facing each other. She heard the Doctor's mocking cry of, 'Hey, *toro! Toro!*', and saw him give a provocative wave of the coat.

The bull charged, the Doctor made another graceful sweep of the coat, and the bull thundered past, so close that it passed under the Doctor's upraised arm.

Unable to check the momentum of its charge, the bull thundered towards the middle of the field.

‘Quick, Doctor, this way!’ yelled Jo and the Doctor turned and sprinted for the stile.

Behind him the bull spun round, pawed the ground and hurtled towards him.

By the time the Doctor reached the stile, the bull was on his heels. Whirling round, the Doctor draped the coat across its horns, blinding it, ran for the stile and vaulted over.

The bull tossed its head and bellowed.

Landing on rough ground, the Doctor stumbled and fell to one knee. He stayed there for a moment, regaining his breath, and heard a gasp of astonishment from Jo.

‘Doctor, look!’

He straightened up and turned, looking over the stile.

The bull was gone. The Doctor’s abandoned coat lay crumpled on the ground.

‘It just disappeared,’ said Jo dazedly. ‘I looked to see you were all right, looked back, and the bull was gone.’

‘Scarcely surprising,’ said the Doctor. ‘If it can appear then it can disappear. It wasn’t in that field when we went into it.’

‘So what was it? An illusion?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘It was real enough while it lasted. I felt its hot breath down my neck.’

‘So what was it?’

‘A manifestation, Jo. I’m not sure it wasn’t a kind of joke.’

‘Some joke!’

The Doctor started climbing the stile.

Jo grabbed his arm. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting my coat back. I’m very fond of that jacket.’

‘Are you sure it’s safe?’

‘Oh, I think so, Jo. The performance is over for the moment.’ The Doctor retrieved his jacket and came back out of the field. He looked at Jo who was brushing at her trouser suit with her hands and trying to untangle her hair. ‘Are you all right?’

‘More or less. Now I know what they mean by “dragged through a hedge backwards”.’

‘Sorry, Jo. It seemed a good idea at the time.’

‘It probably was.’

Brushing themselves down, they resumed their walk towards the village.

‘That was a pretty impressive display in that field, Doctor,’ said Jo.

‘I don’t really approve of bull-fighting. But old Ernie was crazy about it.’

‘Ernie?’

‘Ernest Hemingway. We ran the bulls together in Pamplona, back in the thirties...’

‘You what?’

‘They run the bulls through the streets and volunteers from the crowd are allowed to run with them. It’s a point of honour to go as far as you can without getting hurt.’

‘Crazy,’ said Jo. She had long ceased to be surprised at the range of the Doctor’s acquaintances and activities.

‘Anyway, Ernie dragged me along to quite a few bullfights.’

‘Disgusting business!’

‘Yes and no,’ said the Doctor thoughtfully. ‘There’s a horrible fascination about it, lots of grace and skill and courage mixed up with the cruelty. Ernie liked to watch the matadors training, and a chap called Manolito taught me a few of the basic moves. Said I was a natural actually, wanted me to turn professional...’ He broke off, pointing to a squat grey stone building just to their left. ‘Look, Jo, there’s the village church. Let’s take a look.’

‘If you like. What for?’

‘You can tell a lot about the history of a village from its churchyard.’

The little grey stone church was an unassuming affair, undistinguished to begin with, shabby and run down after years of neglect. The moss-covered headstones in the little churchyard around it were tilted at crazy angles and the grass borders needed trimming.

They went through a gate, overshadowed by a huge willow tree and followed the stone flagged path that led around the church. From time to time the Doctor paused to study the worn and faded lettering on some ancient headstone.

‘Same few family names, recurring again and again.’

They went around the back of the church and found a very different scene. The churchyard had been extended here and the extension held row upon row of headstones, all new-looking.

At the edge of the area a gnarled old man was digging a

grave.

The Doctor strolled over to him. 'Looks as if business has been brisk.'

The old man looked up at him, took off his cap, wiped his forehead and said. 'Ur.' He put his cap back on and resumed digging.

Once again a strange sense of unreality stole over the Doctor, a feeling that he was playing a predetermined role. 'Enter the comic grave-digger,' he thought.

He studied the inscriptions on the nearest headstones. Some of the names on the older tombstones recurred but many were different. The death dates were all very close to each other, the deaths separated by months and weeks, sometimes only by days. And all within the last year or so.

He turned to Jo. 'People seem to have been popping off at a great rate recently. Mostly newcomers rather than the old-established families.'

'Maybe there's been some sort of epidemic?'

'Maybe.' He turned back to the gravedigger, raising his voice. 'Has there been sickness in the village? Influenza, something like that?'

The old man went on digging.

'In the midst of life we are in death,' said a voice behind them.

They turned and saw a tall white-haired old man in a shabby cassock. He had a thin, ascetic face, and looked kindly and a little unworldly.

(More type-casting,' thought the Doctor. 'But who's running the show?')

The old man smiled benevolently at them. 'I'm afraid my little flock has been sadly diminished of late.'

'So we noticed,' said the Doctor. 'We wondered if you'd suffered some kind of epidemic.'

'Not as such. Some of my parishioners are aged of course, and fall victim to the ills to which the flesh is heir. But all too often there are unfortunate accidents. Carelessness with animals or with machinery. Rural life can be very dangerous, you know, you townsfolk simply don't realise.' Suddenly his face changed, twisting into an expression of fear and anguish. 'There is danger,' he whispered. 'Great danger – and great evil.'

‘What danger?’ said the Doctor urgently. ‘What’s happening in your village, vicar? Tell me, perhaps I can help.’

‘The abbey. It comes from the abbey. Since they came...’

‘What are they up to?’ demanded the Doctor. ‘Are you saying they’re behind all these deaths? How? Why?’

Suddenly the old priest’s face changed again, taking on an expression of sublime content. ‘These things happen, we must just accept them I’m afraid. It’s the Lord’s will, after all.’ He gave them another saintly smile. ‘You must take care while you are in our village. Still, I don’t imagine you’ll be staying very long.’

He turned and walked slowly back towards the church. ‘Weird,’ said Jo. ‘He seemed to be in two minds about things.’

‘Not exactly that,’ said the Doctor slowly. ‘He wanted to tell us something, but his mind was under some kind of control. It broke free for a few moments, then the control was re-imposed.’

‘Very weird!’ said Jo.

They left the gloomy churchyard with its mixture of old and new graves and headed back towards the village.

‘I’ll be glad to get away from this horrible place,’ said Jo, as they walked along the lane. ‘I’m even having second thoughts about the concert now.’

‘Don’t you want to find out what’s going on?’ asked Doctor.

‘No I don’t,’ said Jo emphatically. ‘I’ve seen too much already. Impossible suicides, disappearing bulls, creepy vicars...’ She shuddered. ‘I can still see that headless man walking towards me.’

‘It’s macabre,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘I can’t help feeling that someone’s playing some kind of game with us.’

They heard the chugging of a motor from somewhere ahead of them.

Jo jumped. ‘What’s that?’

‘Tractor by the sound of it. We must be near another farm.’

Sure enough an ancient red tractor came out of a gate some way ahead and turned towards them. It chugged along giving out clouds of black smoke and steadily gathering speed.

‘It’s going very fast for a tractor,’ said Jo.

The lane was narrow at this point and they moved closer to the hedge to let the tractor go by.

The Doctor shaded his eyes and peered at the tractor’s grimy windscreen, trying to make out the shape of the driver. Then he

realised. There *was* no driver.

‘There’s nobody driving it!’ he yelled.

Suddenly the tractor swung round and headed straight towards them.

‘Jump!’ yelled the Doctor and they both leaped aside. The tractor shot between them, crashed into the hedge and jammed there, still chugging angrily and sending out clouds of black smoke.

The Doctor took Jo’s arm. ‘All right?’

Jo nodded. ‘What was that all about?’

‘Another little joke,’ said the Doctor grimly. He raised his voice a little. ‘You know, I think you’re right, Jo. The sooner we’re away from here the better!’

A gust of titanic laughter swept through the underground cavern, vibrating the stone pillars and making the flames of the black candles that burned on the elaborately carved altar flicker.

‘You see?’ said the deep voice. ‘These humans have little courage. He will flee. He will not tell of what he has seen because no-one will believe him.’

The stocky black-robed figure before the altar bowed his head. ‘You are all-seeing, all-knowing, O Great One. Yet I urge caution. I know this person and he is not human, not in the sense you mean. His courage is great, his curiosity greater still.’

‘He will go, or he will die,’ said the deep voice indifferently. ‘It is of no importance.’

‘Great One, I have a suggestion. I beg you to hear me.’

‘Speak!’

‘This person comes of my race. He has abilities similar to mine. Inferior, of course, but similar. He could be of use to you.’

‘I will consider it. I return, for a time, to my domain.’

The presence faded and the black-robed man turned away, bowing his cowed head to bide the anger in his eyes. Thoughtfully he stroked his beard, considering his next move.

The trouble with working for a god was, it was very hard to tell him anything...

CHAPTER SEVEN

LADY OF THE MANOR

As the Doctor and Jo crossed the village green towards the inn, an ancient open-topped Rolls Royce, driven by a uniformed chauffeur glided along the main street and drew up outside the inn. There were three passengers on the wide back seat. Two were women, one young, one considerably older than the other. The third was a slender young man.

As they came closer Jo looked at them with interest. 'I think we're in a time-warp,' she whispered. 'Look at them – pure twenties.'

The gleaming Rolls Royce was a car from another age. The older woman with her aristocratic profile, her immaculately styled white hair beneath a wide straw hat and her flowing white dress, was a grand duchess to the life.

The two bright young things with her completed the period picture. The girl was quite simply a beauty. Her eyes were green and her classic profile was a younger version of her older companion's. Her curling red-gold hair was cut short, and a simple white tennis-dress revealed an excellent figure and lightly tanned bare arms and legs.

The young man wore white flannels and navy blue blazer with an open-necked white cricket shirt. He had neatly waved hair. He was very young, maybe sixteen or seventeen, though desperately trying to seem older. His colouring was much like the girl's – all three must be related, thought Jo. His attempted air of weary sophistication was undermined by cheerful, cheeky features and an endearingly roguish expression. He was fizzing with energy, and ready for mischief.

The chauffeur jumped down, opened the passenger door,

and helped the older woman to alight. Her clear, upper-class voice floated across the green.

‘Sophie, Herbert, you may as well stay where you are. We shall only be here for a few moments, I don’t want you wandering off.’

Ignoring her, both young people got out of the car and stood looking around them. The young man wandered to the edge of the pond, picked up a pebble and skimmed it across the water, to the noisy indignation of the little flock of ducks.

‘Stop being tiresome, Herbie,’ ordered the girl in a clear voice that held echoes of her relative.

‘Stop nagging, Sophie,’ muttered the young man, and skimmed another pebble.

The older woman sighed and turned towards the inn doorway, where the landlord was emerging, bobbing his head and wringing his hands at the same time.

The expression ‘bowing and scraping’ popped into Jo’s head. ‘Good afternoon, Lady Dempster,’ said the landlord obsequiously. ‘An honour and a pleasure as always.’

‘Good afternoon, Bartlett. Has the claret arrived?’

‘It has indeed, your ladyship. Come down by carrier this morning.’

‘And the port?’

‘Port too, your ladyship. The cases are stacked by the bar door. just fetch them out for you.’

‘Simms will help you.’

She nodded to the chauffeur who touched his cap and headed for the inn.

An imperious old bird, thought Jo, accustomed to instant obedience.

She turned to the Doctor to see what he made of the little group. To her astonishment, the Doctor seemed transfixed. For a moment Jo thought he must have fallen for the little beauty, and felt a pang of irrational jealousy. Then she saw that it was Lady Dempster who was fixing his attention.

He was staring at her as if hypnotised, or as if there was some mysterious link between them. She became aware of his gaze, returned it for a moment, then frowned and turned away, watching the landlord and chauffeur as they carried wooden cases from the bar and loaded them into the capacious boot of

the Rolls.

Jo elbowed the Doctor in the ribs. 'What is it? Do you know those people?'

'Not exactly. But there's something about them. I can sense it. Especially her ladyship...'

'What sort of something?'

'They're not what they seem.'

'That's the lot, your ladyship,' said the landlord as the chauffeur closed the boot.

'Thank you Bartlett. Come along you two, back in the car.'

'It's terribly hot,' said the girl, Sophie. 'Can't we have a drink first. Have you got any of your delicious lemonade, Mr Bartlett?'

'Got a jug fresh made, Miss Sophie. Shall I bring you some out?'

'Good idea,' said Herbie. 'I'll have a pint of old ale.'

'You'll have lemonade and like it,' said Lady Bartlett crisply. 'Very well, Bartlett, lemonade for all three of us. Simms, you may have a drink in the bar. Better make it shandy since you're driving.'

The landlord was so wrapped up in his aristocratic client that he scarcely seemed to be aware of the Doctor and Jo. As he turned to go back in the inn the Doctor said quietly, 'Landlord?'

The quiet authority in the single word brought the landlord spinning round.

'Ah, you're back then, sir,' he said foolishly.

'We'd like something to drink, please,' said the Doctor. 'When you've attended to your other customers.'

'Of course, sir. What'll it be?'

'I'll have a pint of your excellent ale,' said the Doctor. 'What about you, Jo? How about a large brandy?'

'That child is far too young to be drinking spirits,' said a clear upper-class voice.

The Doctor turned and saw Lady Dempster looking at him with icy disdain.

'She's older than she looks,' he said mildly. 'And the offer was medicinal. She's had a number of unpleasant shocks this afternoon.'

'Hot sweet tea would be much better for her.'

'I'm obliged to you for your opinion, your ladyship,' said the Doctor dismissively. 'What would you like, Jo?'

The expression of astonishment on Lady Dempster's face was almost comical. It couldn't be often, thought Jo, that she encountered a personality as formidable as her own.

Jo was tempted to order the brandy just to annoy the bossy old bat, but she didn't dare. Besides, she didn't like spirits anyway.

'Lemonade will be fine, honestly,' she said. 'The shock's worn off by now, I'm just tired and thirsty.'

'Ale and lemonade it is, sir,' said Bartlett and hurried away.

The boy Herbie looked at the Doctor and Jo with mild amusement. 'You two look as if you've been in the wars.'

'I suppose we do,' said the Doctor. 'So far this afternoon we've encountered a particularly messy suicide, a mad bull and a runaway tractor. That sort of thing tends to play havoc with your standard of grooming.'

'Suicide?' said Lady Dempster sharply. 'Who's committed suicide?'

'A farmer called Rowley – owned the field where they're holding the pop festival.'

'I knew no good would come of that,' said Lady Dempster. 'I advised Rowley to refuse permission, but he wouldn't listen.'

'Poor old Rowley,' said Herbie. 'Wonder if they'll cancel the festival.'

'I hope not,' said Sophie. 'It's not often we get any excitement round here.'

'I doubt whether this gentleman would agree with you,' said Lady Dempster dryly.

The landlord appeared with a tray holding a jug of lemonade, four glasses and a foaming mug of ale. When they were all served Lady Dempster said, 'Thank you Bartlett.' She waved him away, and he retreated, bowing.

They stood sipping their drinks for a moment, then Herbie said, 'I say, is that your old crock over there?'

'Don't be disrespectful, young man,' said the Doctor. 'Her name's Bessie and I'm very fond of her.'

Jo leaped to Bessie's defence. 'She's not such an old crock as she looks either.'

'Really?' said Herbie sceptically. 'What will she do?'

'More than you could possibly imagine,' said the Doctor. Lady Dempster was regarding the Doctor appraisingly. 'I'm

afraid I don't know your name, Mr – ?'

'Doctor, actually,' said the Doctor. 'Doctor John Smith.'

'I am Lady Dempster. These rascals are my grandchildren, Herbert and Sophie.'

The Doctor completed the round of informal introductions. 'This is my colleague and assistant, Josephine Grant.'

'Assistant in what?' asked Herbie.

'In what I do,' said the Doctor. Herbert looked crushed and the Doctor relented. 'I'm a scientist of sorts – Scientific Adviser to a government institution.'

'I'm sorry you've had such unpleasant experiences in our village, Doctor Smith,' said Lady Dempster. 'You must allow me to make amends. Come to dinner at the Hall tonight, seven for seven-thirty, dress informal, Bartlett will give you directions.'

'We were supposed to wait here for that policeman,' said Jo. 'To give a statement about the suicide.'

Lady Dempster wasn't going to have her social arrangements interfered with by a village policeman.

'If he doesn't arrive before you have to leave, Bartlett will send him on to the Hall. Finish your drinks, children. Simms!'

The chauffeur appeared from the bar wiping his lips, and within minutes Lady Dempster had hustled her party into the car. 'Seven o'clock, Doctor,' she called imperiously as they drove away.

'Likes her own way, doesn't she?' said Jo. 'I thought you wanted to get away from here?'

'Get away?' said the Doctor. 'Oh no. When I said that, I had a strange feeling we were being overheard. On the contrary, I was thinking of booking us a couple of rooms at the inn. There's something going on under the surface in this village, and I'm not leaving till I know what it is.'

As the car drove along the quiet country lanes towards Dempster Hall, Sophie said, 'It's not like you to take up with strangers, Grandma.'

'Jolly pretty little thing, that girl,' said Herbie.

'The girl is nothing,' said Lady Dempster. 'But the man, the Doctor, he intrigues me.'

'Why?' asked Sophie.

'There's something about him. I could sense it. He's not

what he seems.’

Captain Yates stuck his head round the door of the Brigadier’s office and saw that he was immersed in paperwork. Entering quietly, he put a file on the Brigadier’s desk and backed cautiously away.

He had almost reached the door when the Brigadier snapped, ‘All right, Yates, what is it?’

‘Supplement to the Unexplained Incident File, sir, just arrived. More reports flooding in. Explosion in a chemical plant, stabbing on the Underground... oh, and a Minister tried to throttle his opposite number on the floor of the House.’

‘Anything in from Five, or the Branch?’

‘Nothing yet, sir.’

After Yates’ and Benton’s experiences in the pub, the Brigadier had set up a liaison meeting with his opposite numbers in MI5 and the Special Branch. It had been agreed that all the events in the Unexplained Incidents File should be re-examined. Meanwhile, Five and the Branch would plant undercover officers in as many pubs, clubs and cafes as they could cover, to look out for suspicious groups or individuals spiking drinks.

‘Benton and I could go out again,’ offered Yates. ‘We were lucky once...’

‘If you think I’m going to dispatch you and Sergeant Benton on a series of subsidised pub crawls...’ The Brigadier broke off. ‘Sorry, Mike, that was unfair. We just haven’t the manpower to carry out that sort of operation. Let Five and Special Branch get on with it, you and Benton have shown them what to look for. Our job is to liaise – and to work out what’s behind all this. Is the Doctor back yet?’

‘No sir.’

‘Dammit, doesn’t anyone know where he is?’

‘As a matter of fact I do, sir. At least. I know where he was heading.’

Yates told the story of the upcoming pop festival, and of Jo’s intention to try to obtain tickets. ‘She thought if she could persuade the Doctor to drive her down to this village... I should have thought they’d be back by now, it’s only a couple of hours’ drive.’

‘Hob’s Haven, I see.’ The Brigadier stood up. ‘Well, it’s a

case of Mahamad and the mountain, it seems. Since the Doctor won't return to base, base will have to go and fetch him. Unless he's left a contact telephone number as per standing orders? By any chance?'

Yates shifted uncomfortably and avoided comment. 'I'd be happy to drive you down, sir,' he offered instead.

'No, I'll take Benton, I need you here on the spot. Tell Benton we'll drive down in mufti. I'll call in as soon as I've found the Doctor.'

'Do you think he might be in trouble, sir?'

'Who knows? But I'll tell you this, Mike. If there's trouble anywhere around that village, the Doctor will find it.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

MURDER IN THE LIBRARY

If the Doctor was in trouble, there was no sign of it at the moment. In fact, he was enjoying the high life. He and Jo were sipping sherry on the terrace of Dempster Hall. Roses, geraniums and fuchsias grew all around in antique stone pots in a riot of reds, yellows, whites and purple. Below the terrace balustrade, landscaped gardens gave way to flat, marshy fields, ending in the broad silver band of the slow-moving river.

Thanks to an energetic wash and brush-up at the inn, the Doctor was his usual elegant self. Jo, too, was at least neat and clean, though she felt outclassed by Sophie's elegant cocktail dress and Lady Dempster's evening gown.

Herbie wore a dark-blue lounge suit and an elegant silk tie, and was doing his best to seem sophisticated beyond his years. He was paying great attention to Jo, which was flattering if a little wearing. Jo listened patiently to his tales of foreign travel, his exploits on the polo field and his expertise at the wheel of various speedboats and fast cars.

Sophie listened to Herbie's boasting with an indulgent smile.

'Take no notice of him, Miss Grant. I can still remember the day they took the training wheels off his first two-wheeled bike. He was terrified!'

In fact, Jo was only half listening to Herbie anyway. She was far more interested in the conversation between the Doctor and Lady Dempster. Without a doubt, the two had hit it off. Both were widely travelled, and their conversation ranged through a wide variety of topics. Jo was amused to hear the way the Doctor countered Lady Dempster's every reminiscence with one of his own.

They spoke of ancient temples in remote parts of the world, of travels across dangerous deserts, of the long-lost wonders of Greece and Rome. Lady Dempster gave an account of the shamanism of the Amazon basin. The Doctor capped it with fascinating stories about Haitian voodoo. The conversation moved on from travel, taking in science, literature and philosophy.

It was obvious to Jo that there was more going on than a little polite conversation. The two were sizing each other up, circling warily, like two duelling swordsmen each testing the other's strength and skill.

Eventually, it seemed, Lady Dempster decided to call it a draw.

'You're an interesting man, Doctor. It's a great pleasure to talk to someone whose interests go beyond such rural concerns as sheep, cattle and silage.'

'You can scarcely blame them,' said Sophie. 'Most people in this village were born here and never leave.'

Suddenly Jo decided she'd had enough of being an attentive audience.

'Some of them don't live long enough to have a chance to leave,' she said.

Lady Dempster raised an eyebrow at the interruption. Jo got the distinct feeling that she, like the other two young people, was meant to be seen and not heard.

The Doctor came to her support. 'Jo was referring to your exceptionally high death rate.'

'Oh, the peasants are always snuffing it,' said Herbie cheerfully. 'Nothing they like better down here than a good funeral.'

'Herbie, you're disgusting!' said Sophie.

Lady Dempster quelled him with a look. 'I take very little interest in village affairs, Doctor. *Is* our death rate abnormally high?'

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor. 'We visited your local cemetery on our way back to the inn. We found an abnormal number of comparatively recent graves.'

'We talked to the vicar about it,' said Jo.

'Indeed?' said Lady Dempster. 'And what did he have to say?'

‘He seemed to have rather mixed feelings,’ said the Doctor.

‘He hinted it might have something to do with the people at the abbey,’ said Jo. ‘That the village might have become dangerous since they arrived.’

‘Those hippy nutcases at the abbey?’ said Herbie quickly – a little too quickly the Doctor thought. ‘They’re harmless, surely. Too busy chanting and contemplating their cosmic navels to get into mischief.’

The Doctor turned to Sophie. ‘What do you think of them?’

Sophie shrugged. ‘I don’t think of them at all. The abbey’s some way from us, on the other side of the village. We very seldom see them.’

Lady Dempster looked challengingly at the Doctor. ‘What are you implying? Do you think there’s something sinister going on here?’

‘All the evidence points that way,’ said the Doctor calmly.

‘Because of a few fresh graves in our cemetery?’

‘Rather more than that. Since we arrived here today, Jo and I have seen a particularly grotesque, and extremely suspicious, suicide.’

‘And we’ve been involved in two near-fatal accidents,’ said Jo. ‘And that’s just in one afternoon!’

‘Fascinating,’ said Lady Dempster, in a tone that implied the exact opposite. ‘I really can’t say I’m aware...’

‘That’s just the thing,’ said the Doctor. ‘Nobody seems aware. Your village policeman treated one of the most suspicious deaths I’ve ever encountered with benign indifference.’

Herbie laughed. ‘Sergeant Slater? He’d miss the St Valentine’s Day Massacre if it happened in his back garden. His idea of a major crime wave is a stolen chicken.’

‘That’s true enough,’ said Sophie, smiling herself. She became more serious. ‘But surely, Doctor, Sergeant Slater will have to make some kind of report?’

‘I imagine so.’

‘Well, that will be passed up through the system until someone competent reads it, a superintendent or a chief constable or someone. If this suicide was suspicious, there’ll be a proper investigation – eventually.’

‘Ah, but will there?’ said the Doctor. ‘A village like this is very isolated, very self-contained. Who’s to say the sergeant will

make a report at all? Or if he does, that he won't fudge the facts so the death seems a routine accident or suicide. Another new grave in the cemetery, and life goes on – until the next death.'

There was a moment of silence. Then, providentially, a plump, silver-haired figure in a morning coat appeared on the terrace. He had a large pale face and soft, immaculately clean white hands.

'Dinner is served, your ladyship,' he announced in deep and sonorous tones.

Lady Dempster rose. 'Thank you, Jenkins.' She glanced round the group. 'Not before time. I fear the conversation was taking a somewhat morbid tone. We must try and do better over dinner. Miss Grant, Doctor, if you will come this way?'

As they left the terrace Jo whispered to the Doctor. 'Is that really a *butler*?'

'That's right,' the Doctor whispered back. 'A genuine Old English butler. Probably one of the few left in captivity!'

The butler led them to an elegantly proportioned, oak-panelled dining room. At Lady Dempster's direction, they took their places around a mahogany table, set with silver cutlery, and plates and dishes of fine antique china. The butler poured wine into crystal goblets and uniformed maids served soup from a silver tureen.

Searching for a topic of conversation, Jo saw that the room was hung with elaborately framed portraits, everything from ribboned and bewigged cavaliers to stern-looking, whiskery Victorian worthies.

'Family portraits?' she asked.

Herbie laughed. 'A job lot from the local auction houses,' he said. 'We thought it added a touch of respectability.'

'Really,' said Lady Dempster. 'I hardly imagine that our guests are interested -'

'Oh don't be so stuffy, Grandma,' said Sophie. She smiled at the Doctor. 'You see we're all fakes too,' she said. 'We're not nearly as typically English as we may seem.'

The Doctor gave Lady Dempster a look of polite enquiry.

She smiled resignedly. 'All too true I'm afraid, Doctor. My late husband was English, of course, he was a diplomat, but my own family is Greek in origin. I came back to England with my

husband after our marriage. Herbert and Sophie were both orphaned in the war, so I brought them back with me.'

The Doctor raised his glass. 'Greece's loss is England's gain,' he said gallantly.

The soup was followed by roast lamb, new potatoes and peas, all fresh, beautifully cooked and delicious.

Pudding was something of a surprise, a sticky-sweet, cake-like confection.

'*Paklava*,' said Lady Dempster apologetically. 'Blood will out, you see! It's disgustingly sweet, but the children love it and so do I!'

The butler came back into the room apologetically and whispered in Lady Dempster's ear. She nodded and looked up.

'It appears that the vicar has arrived, Doctor. He says he needs to speak to you urgently. They told him at the pub that you were here.' Before the Doctor could reply, she turned back to the butler. 'Make the vicar comfortable in the library, Jenkins, he'd probably like a brandy. Tell him the Doctor will be with him as soon as he has finished dinner.'

The Doctor half-rose. 'Perhaps I'd better go at once. If the matter's urgent...'

Lady Dempster fixed him with a steely eye. 'Please sit down, Doctor. I very much dislike having my meals interrupted. My late husband used to say that the clergy are all very well in their way, but one must never allow them to encroach.'

The Doctor didn't care for being dictated to, but he was trapped by the rules of good behaviour. He sat down. 'As your guest, Lady Dempster, I must, of course, respect your wishes.'

He finished his pudding, waited until everyone had finished and the plates were being cleared, and then said firmly, 'Now if you'll excuse me?'

'Bear with me for a few moments, Doctor,' said Lady Dempster. 'Jenkins, go and tell cook to make coffee. Find Kate and tell her to serve coffee on the terrace in ten minutes' time, it's still a fine evening. Then come back here and conduct the Doctor to the library.' She rose. 'If you'll excuse me? We'll meet on the terrace.'

It was clear that nothing must interrupt the smooth running of Lady Dempster's household.

The others drifted off, and the Doctor waited in solitary

state at the polished dining table. After some little time, Jenkins reappeared and led the Doctor along gloomy carpeted corridors to a heavy oak door. He tried to open it, but it would not budge.

He gave the Doctor a puzzled look. 'I'm sorry, sir, it appears to be locked. The vicar must have shut himself in.'

'Why should he do that?'

'I couldn't say, sir. He did seem extremely nervous and agitated when he arrived.'

The Doctor rapped on the door. 'Vicar? It's me, the Doctor. We met in the churchyard. You wanted to see me?'

There was no reply.

'I'll fetch the spare key from the butler's pantry, sir,' said Jenkins. He disappeared down the corridor.

The Doctor waited. He rapped on the door several times and called, 'Vicar, are you there?'

Still no reply.

Jenkins reappeared looking baffled. 'The key appears to be missing, sir. It should be hanging on a hook by the door of the butler's pantry, but it's gone.'

'Never mind,' said the Doctor. He fished an oddly shaped torchlike device from his pocket, adjusted the controls, then aimed it at the lock. A thin beam of intensely bright light shot from the device into the keyhole, and the lock glowed bright red, then white hot.

The Doctor switched off the device grabbed the door handle and shoved hard. There was a loud crack and the door swung open.

On the other side of the book-lined study, opposite the door was a large leather-topped desk. The vicar was sitting, or rather lying, at it slumped forward with his arms outstretched and his head resting on the desk.

From between his shoulder blades protruded the elaborately decorated hilt of an oriental dagger. The back of his white summer jacket was stained red, and a pool of blood was spreading across the desk.

CHAPTER NINE

THE DOCTOR INVESTIGATES

On the terrace a neatly uniformed maid stood by a serving trolley that held a silver coffee pot, cups and saucers, a cake stand and a big silver cake knife. Lady Dempster and Sophie sat at a wrought-iron table, Herbie and Jo stood chatting by the low stone parapet that ran along the edge of the terrace. It was a pleasant little social scene, thought the Doctor. A pity to break it up.

‘Come and have some fruit cake, Doctor,’ called Herbie. ‘It’s jolly good!’

‘Not just now,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m afraid I have some very serious news. The vicar has been murdered.’

The announcement was met with a stunned silence.

The Doctor studied the little ring of astonished faces. Were they really all as surprised as they seemed?

‘What did you say, Doctor?’ said Lady Dempster. ‘Is this some kind of joke?’

‘Scarcely a joke,’ said the Doctor in a tone as cold as her own. ‘The vicar has been murdered. I found him dead in your library with a knife in his back. We must call the police. If you’ll allow me to use your telephone...’

Astonishingly, Lady Dempster said, ‘Is that really necessary?’

It was too much for Jo. ‘Yes it is,’ she said, outraged. ‘I don’t know what you’d do back home in Greece. Bury him in the flowerbed. probably, and wait for the next vicar to arrive. But this is England, and when someone gets murdered we call the cops.’

Lady Dempster flashed her an angry glance, and was clearly about to say something crushing when the Doctor intervened.

‘All right, Jo,’ said the Doctor. ‘Let’s keep calm. I’m sure her ladyship will recognise the necessity of calling the police when she thinks it over.’

Jenkins the butler came on to the terrace in time to hear the exchange.

‘With respect, your ladyship, the police are already here. Sergeant Slater has just arrived, asking to see this gentleman.’

Jo gave the Doctor an astonished look. ‘Now there’s service for you!’

‘All right,’ said Lady Dempster wearily. ‘Show him out here, Jenkins.’

Moments later Sergeant Slater entered, helmet under his arm and bobbed his head to the assembled company. ‘Beg pardon for interrupting, your ladyship, but I need a few words with this gentleman.’ He turned to the Doctor. ‘It’s about your statement, sir. I asked for you at the pub and they told me you were here.’

‘I’m afraid the statement will have to wait, Sergeant,’ said the Doctor. ‘Something rather more urgent has turned up.’

Sergeant Slater looked down at the vicar’s body, then back up at the Doctor.

‘Well, you are unlucky, aren’t you sir? Two nasty accidents, and two dead bodies, all in one day.’

‘Accident?’ said the Doctor scathingly. ‘You’re not trying to tell me this is an accident as well? Look at him, man, he’s skewered between the shoulder blades, practically pinned to the desk. What do you suppose happened? He got a nasty itch he couldn’t reach, picked up this oriental dagger, tried to scratch it and his hand slipped?’

‘No call to talk like that, sir,’ said the sergeant reprovingly. He peered at the blood-soaked figure slumped over the desk. ‘There seems a terrible lot of blood.’

‘This dagger’s very long – almost a short sword.’ The Doctor looked round the room. ‘It was one of a pair. Look, the other one’s still hanging on the wall.’ He studied the body. ‘The wound’s just to the left of the spine. I think the knife must have gone clear through the body and severed the aorta.’

‘Come again, sir?’

‘It’s a main blood vessel – *the* main blood vessel. Runs through the centre of the body.’

The sergeant gave him a suspicious look. 'You seem to know a lot about this sort of thing.'

'I've had a certain amount of experience of violent death – though not, I assure you, as a murderer.'

'No, of course not, sir.' Sergeant Slater rubbed his chin. 'Well, this is a pickle and no mistake. Let's go over what happened, far as we know. The vicar arrives here, says he wants to see you urgent. Lady Dempster has him put in this study while you finish dinner. You turn up – how much later?'

'Ten minutes or so. Fifteen at most.'

'So – you and this butler fellow, Simpson, arrive and find the door locked. You get it open, and there's the vicar. Dead at the desk. Was the door locked from the inside?'

'It certainly seems that way,' said the Doctor.

'Was the key still in the lock?'

'No, there was no sign of it.'

'And them French windows, the only other way out. They were locked from the inside as well?'

'Yes. I looked straight away. They were locked with the key in the lock and bolted from the inside as well.'

'So how could the vicar have been murdered?' demanded Slater triumphantly. 'Whodunnit, eh? Proper little locked-room mystery, isn't it sir? Like one of them old detective stories.'

'And what's your theory, Sergeant?'

'Since nobody could have got in to kill him, he must've done it himself.'

'How?'

'He arrives nervous and depressed, wants to talk to you. Confess something maybe, who knows? Once he's here he changes his mind, locks himself in...'

'What about the missing key?'

'Most likely we'll find it in his pocket. Or maybe he chucked it away. Anyway, once he's locked himself in, he stabs himself!'

'How man? The position of the wound alone...'

Sergeant Slater thought hard. 'Say he held the dagger behind his back, point forward, then slammed himself backwards into a wall. Or maybe he fell back on to it. Then he staggers about a bit, collapses into the chair behind the desk and slumps forward.'

The Doctor stared at him incredulously. 'That's the most unbelievable description of a suicide I've ever heard. It's about as

likely as – as somebody cutting their own head off with a scythe!

‘Ah, but that happened too, didn’t it?’ said Slater cunningly. ‘We both saw it. And if these deaths aren’t accidents or suicides – well...’

‘Well what?’

‘Maybe I better think about taking you in charge, Doctor. I mean, here you are first on the scene in two murders – if they were murders. Looks to me like you’d be my main suspect!’

‘That is an outrageous suggestion!’

Sergeant Slater chuckled. ‘Well, of course it is, sir. Like I said, a nasty old suicide. Now, you leave it to me and I’ll get all this mess cleared up. Her ladyship won’t want her study cluttered up with corpses, will she?’

The Doctor gave him a baffled glare and stalked from the room.

‘He did it again,’ he thought to himself as he marched along the corridor. ‘The same trick as at the farm. If I don’t agree that it’s accident or suicide, I’m prime suspect in a murder! But why is he doing it? Why?’

The Doctor made his way to the terrace, where the shocked company was talking in low voices. Jenkins the butler was serving drinks. He was still white-faced and shaken, and his pink-skinned hands were trembling with shock.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Jo when he appeared.

‘Very little,’ said the Doctor bitterly. ‘Sergeant Slater has decided that the vicar’s death is another unfortunate accident. That or a rather elaborate suicide.’

‘How fortunate,’ said Lady Dempster placidly. ‘Once the poor man’s body has been removed we needn’t trouble ourselves further.’

‘How can it be accident or suicide?’ demanded Jo. ‘According to you, the man was found stabbed in the back inside a locked room.’

‘Sergeant Slater has a theory to explain that. I won’t trouble you with it, it’s too ridiculous.’

‘So what did happen?’

‘He was murdered of course,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘Probably by someone here.’

‘That is absurd,’ said Lady Dempster.

The Doctor strolled over to the low parapet and leaned against it.

‘Is it? Who else is in the house, besides those of us here?’

It was Sophie who answered. ‘The other maid, Emma, and Mrs Holly, the cook. They don’t seem very likely candidates.’

‘Mrs Holly can be pretty violent,’ said Herbie. ‘She chased me with a soup ladle once.’

‘You were stealing raisins from her kitchen cupboard, and you were seven,’ said Sophie. ‘Shut up, Herbie.’

‘If we discount the cook and the maids, for the moment at least,’ said the Doctor. ‘All the likely suspects are here on this terrace.’ He looked round the little group. ‘Tell me, did you come here in a body after dinner, or did you split up and reassemble?’

‘We split up,’ said Jo. ‘I’d spilled wine on my jacket, and I wanted to dab it with cold water. Sophie directed me to the bathroom. I soaked the stain.’ She pointed to a damp patch on the front of her coat. ‘Then I came back here.’

‘Would the rest of you account for your movements, please?’ said the Doctor. Such was the authority in his voice that nobody queried the request – not even Lady Dempster.

‘I needed to make a telephone call,’ she said. ‘I went to my study, called, and then returned to the terrace.’

‘I wasn’t comfortable in my suit, so I went upstairs to change,’ said Herbie. ‘As you can see!’ He was now resplendent in white flannels and a red-and-white striped blazer.

‘I went to my bedroom to powder my nose,’ said Sophie. ‘This heat plays hell with a girl’s make-up.’

The Doctor looked at Jenkins.

‘I conveyed her ladyship’s instructions to the staff and returned to the dining room,’ said the butler. ‘After that I was with you, sir. I conducted you to the library, and we found the door locked. I left you for a few minutes while I went to look for the key, and you waited outside the door until I returned and told you the key was missing.’

‘So,’ said the Doctor, ‘nobody really has much of an alibi. While I was waiting for Jenkins in the dining room – you were quite a time, weren’t you, Jenkins – any one of you could have taken the key from the butler’s pantry, gone to the study, stabbed the vicar and left, locking the door behind you.’

‘Why lock the door and keep the key?’ asked Jo. ‘It just makes the whole thing more puzzling.’

‘I think that was the point,’ said the Doctor. ‘Somebody thought it would be highly amusing to present us with a classic locked-room mystery.’

‘You talked about someone having a joke before,’ said Jo. ‘The headless man and the bull and the tractor.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘That’s right. Someone with a sick, sadistic sense of humour – and absolutely no respect for human life.’

‘My money’s on Mrs Holly,’ said Herbie. ‘Religious mania. She’s strict Baptist, and the vicar was very high church. They fell out over a point of ecclesiastical doctrine and she did him in.’

‘We’ve forgotten old Glossop, the gardener,’ said Sophie. ‘The vicar won first prize for his roses at the village flower show, and Glossop was mortified. He brooded about it, sneaked into the house and took his revenge. Look for the print of a muddy Wellington boot, Doctor.’

They might all have been playing some game, thought Jo. The Murder Game, perhaps. She’d read about it in some old-fashioned country house mystery – Agatha Christie or was it Ngaio Marsh? You drew cards and somebody was secretly chosen as murderer, someone else as victim. Then you put out all the lights and everyone roamed about for a bit. The murderer had to find the victim, tap him, or her, on the shoulder and whisper, ‘You’re dead!’

The victim screamed and fell down, the lights went on, and everyone had a jolly time trying to detect the murderer.

Lady Dempster and her grandchildren seemed to be approaching this very real murder in much the same spirit. Nobody was really concerned about the vicar’s death. Charming as they all were, there was something inhuman about them.

In the book, too, Jo remembered, there’d been a real murder instead of a pretend one. Hercule Poirot, or was it Inspector Alleyn, had turned up to sort things out.

‘In most of those old detective stories the butler did it,’ said Jo.

Jenkins looked horrified and Jo said hastily, ‘Sorry, Mr Jenkins!’

‘My dear Doctor, this whole thing is totally ridiculous,’ said

Lady Dempster. 'Why should Jenkins, or any one of us for that matter, wish to kill the vicar? Rather a tedious little man, but perfectly harmless.'

'The vicar was killed to prevent his talking to me,' said the Doctor. 'He tried to tell me something this afternoon but he couldn't go through with it. I think he was determined to try again – and someone made sure he didn't succeed.'

'Grandmama's right,' said Herbie. 'The whole thing's absurd.'

'I quite agree,' said Sophie. 'Besides, if one of us did do it, how are you ever going to find out which one?'

'Oh, I've already done that,' said the Doctor.

Herbie gaped at him. 'How?'

The Doctor leaned back against the stone balustrade. 'By exercising the little grey cells. Jo got it right, actually. The butler did it!'

Everyone looked at Jenkins, who backed away his face twisting in horror.

'How can you say that?' he whispered. 'I was with you, sir, when you opened the door.'

'You were with me *then*,' agreed the Doctor. 'But you were alone when you took the vicar to the library. You stabbed him, sat him down at the desk, locked him in, and then came to fetch me.'

Jenkins turned to Lady Dempster. 'Your ladyship, help me, please. It's not fair I should be accused like this.'

Lady Dempster's voice was icy. 'Jenkins has been in my service for years. Moreover, he's a regular church-goer, one of the vicar's most valued parishioners.'

'I'm not discussing his moral character, Lady Dempster. Merely his actions.'

'Have you any evidence for this charge?'

'Look at his hands,' said the Doctor.

Jenkins held his hands out before him appealingly. 'My hands are clean.'

'Indeed they are. But at what cost? Why are they so clean?'

'I don't understand, sir.'

'When I first saw you, I noticed how white your hands were,' said the Doctor. 'Now they're almost red.'

Everyone could see that it was true. The butler's once white

hands had a raw-looking reddish tinge.

'You got the vicar's blood on you when you killed him,' the Doctor said. 'The knife severed a major artery and the blood gushed out. You rushed back to your pantry and scrubbed your hands red-raw. But you missed something.'

Jenkins glared wildly at him.

'There's a spot of blood, on your right shirt-cuff,' said the Doctor.

Jenkins held up his right cuff and studied it frantically. 'It's not true. There's no blood!'

'No, there isn't,' said the Doctor. 'But you didn't know that, did you? You believed me. Why did you kill him?'

'Because he was the spawn of the Anti-Christ,' screamed Jenkins. 'I had to kill him. Now I must kill you!'

Snatching the big silver knife from the cake-stand, he hurled himself at the Doctor.

CHAPTER TEN

AFTERMATH

Shocked as she was, Jo wasn't really frightened for the Doctor. She knew that his combat skills were formidable. He could certainly handle a fat, elderly butler armed with a cake knife. He'd disarm him easily enough...

She wasn't surprised to see the Doctor step nimbly aside. She *was* surprised to see Jenkins rise up in the air and plunge headfirst over the balustrade like someone diving into a swimming pool.

The crack of his breaking neck merged with the thud as his body hit the ground.

Jo joined the Doctor, who was looking over the balustrade at the huddled shape below. It wasn't much of a drop to the lawn below – but it was quite enough to finish off an overweight man hitting the ground head first.

'That was a bit drastic, wasn't it?' asked Jo. 'Couldn't you just have disarmed him?'

Even the Doctor seemed a little shaken. 'Believe it or not, Jo, I didn't touch him. I just dodged.'

Jo started at him. 'But he...' She swept her hands upwards. 'He sailed through the air.'

'Something, some force, picked him up, turned him over and slammed him into the ground head first. I felt it brush past me, like the edge of a cyclone.'

They turned to face the shocked little group behind them.

Before anyone could say anything, Sergeant Slater marched officiously on to the terrace. 'Ambulance is on its way, your ladyship. I took the liberty of using the telephone in the library. Soon have this little mess cleared up for you.' He registered the

tense silence on the terrace. 'What's going on? Has something happened?'

'You'd better come over here, Sergeant,' called the Doctor. 'We've got another little accident for you to investigate!'

It was some time later and the darkening terrace was empty, except for the Doctor.

Considering the dramatic events of the afternoon there had been surprisingly little fuss. Both bodies had been removed and Sergeant Slater had gone away happy.

Jenkins the butler had killed the vicar in a fit of religious mania, and had then died accidentally in the course of a murderous attack on the Doctor.

Two deaths accounted for, two cases solved.

'All very neat,' thought the Doctor.

He turned as Lady Dempster came on to the terrace.

'They've all gone,' she said. 'Policeman, doctor, ambulance, corpses. All gone. Now perhaps we can have some peace.'

Moving slowly and wearily, she came to stand beside him. They stood silent for a moment gazing over the darkening countryside. A blackbird sang somewhere in the distance. It was an extraordinarily peaceful scene.

'This can't go on, you know,' said the Doctor.

Lady Dempster made no reply.

'There seems to be a well-established mechanism in this village. A mechanism for covering things up. Everything from accidental death to sudden outbreaks of rural madness – with the guilty tidied neatly away, like today. But this is the bureaucratic seventies. The statistics will give you away. Sooner or later, somebody, somewhere is going to notice that this village has a higher death-rate than Al Capone's Chicago. There'll be an official investigation, the world's media will turn up on your doorstep and lay siege. You'll spend every minute of your lives under a blazing spotlight of publicity. Is that what you want?'

Lady Dempster shuddered, but still didn't speak.

'Why not let me help you?' the Doctor went on. 'I have connections with the authorities. Tell me everything you can and I'll see that things are handled discreetly. Cooperate fully and I may even be able to keep you and your family out of it.'

There was a moment of silence.

‘What if I told you that we were part of it?’ she said. ‘What if I said we were responsible?’

‘I shouldn’t believe you.’

‘And why not?’

‘You and your family are distinctly unusual,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suspect that you may even be amoral to some extent. You all took Jenkins’ death very lightly. But I don’t think you’re evil. And whoever’s behind this is evil personified.’

‘That’s truer than you know,’ she whispered. ‘Evil personified.’ She turned to face him. ‘Doctor, I need time. Time to gather my thoughts and assess the risk – to you and to us.’

‘I’m not sure how much time we have.’

Before Lady Dempster could reply, Jo came hurrying onto the terrace, peering through the dusk. ‘There you are, Doctor. Everything seems to be sorted out now. Hadn’t we better be getting back?’

‘I suppose we had.’

‘I’d better call the office, tell them we’ve been delayed. May I use your telephone, Lady Dempster?’

‘Yes, of course.’

Jo went back into the house.

‘What exactly did you say you did, Doctor?’ asked Lady Dempster.

‘I didn’t – exactly. I’m Scientific Adviser to an organisation called UNIT – the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. It’s a rather specialised organisation, concerned with – unusual events.’

‘So that’s why you’re so interested in this village.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I came here purely by chance. Miss Grant wanted to get tickets for your pop festival. My subsequent involvement was rather thrust upon me.’

‘Fate,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘You were obviously meant to come here, Doctor. There’s no point in struggling with your destiny.’

Jo came back on to the terrace, this time with Sophie and Herbie. ‘I got through to Mike Yates, Doctor. He says Benton is driving the Brigadier down here to see us. He should be here soon. I said we’d meet them at the inn.’

‘Quite right,’ said the Doctor. ‘If you’ll forgive us, your ladyship? Duty calls, I’m afraid.’

‘You’re welcome to meet your colleagues here.’

‘Wouldn’t hear of it,’ said the Doctor. ‘We mustn’t impose on you any further. We’ll meet our friends at the inn, and then we can all go back to London together.’

Lady Dempster regarded him anxiously. ‘You’ll come back and see us soon though, Doctor? We still have much to talk about.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll come very soon. Now, we’d better go.’

‘I’ll show you out,’ said Herbie.

They hurried from the terrace.

Sophie and Lady Dempster watched them go.

‘Why did you invite them to come back?’ asked Sophie.

Lady Dempster smiled. ‘You know the old saying. “Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.”’

‘And which is the Doctor?’

‘I’m not sure. He offered me his help.’

Sophie looked appalled. ‘You’re not thinking of taking it? If we oppose *him* he’ll destroy us all. Our only hope is to stand aside.’

Lady Dempster’s reply made Sophie shudder with fear. ‘I’m beginning to feel we’ve stood aside too long.’

In the library Herbie was on the telephone. He sat at the desk, ignoring the pool of caked blood just in front of him, and spoke into the receiver in a low urgent voice.

‘They’re just leaving, but he’s planning to come back. She *asked* him to come back. And they’ve got friends driving down to join them. One of them’s a Brigadier. They’re going to the inn to meet them.’ He paused. ‘You’ll see to it then? And you’ll tell *him* I helped you? Make sure he knows.’

Herbie put down the phone. He sat for a moment, half exultant, half ashamed. It was a terrible thing to betray a guest, of course. Guests were sacred. Besides, he liked the Doctor and Jo. Especially Jo. Then again, self-preservation was the first law of being, and anything, any act of treachery was better than facing *his* wrath and being blasted into nothingness.

The thought of non-existence, of dying like some mere mortal was intolerable – especially after thousands of years of life...

The Brigadier sighed with exasperation as Sergeant Benton halted the UNIT Land Rover at yet another shadowy crossroads.

‘Lost again, Benton?’

‘Just checking, sir,’ said Benton stolidly. ‘These lanes are a right maze, and nothing seems to be where it should be.’

He shone a big torch on the four arms of the faded signpost. Then he got back in the Land Rover and shone the torch on to the folded map on the dashboard. Then he started the engine.

‘Everything’s okay, sir. Little Gittings is down there to the left, and Hob’s Haven is just after that, so we’re still on course.’

He swung the car to the left.

As the tail-lights of the Land Rover disappeared down the narrow winding lane, the arms of the sign post swivelled round to their original position – showing Little Gittings and Hob’s Haven to the right – where they had always been.

The Doctor and Jo were driving the much shorter distance from Dempster Manor to the village inn – so far without incident. Bessie’s unexpectedly powerful headlamps lit up the twisting lane ahead. From somewhere quite close by came the mournful hoot of an owl.

The Doctor drove in silence, clearly preoccupied.

Jo, on the other hand, was full of questions. ‘So what’s going on here? And what has the country-house set got to do with it?’

The Doctor’s answers were pretty unsatisfactory – and far from reassuring.

‘There’s something very sinister going on. This entire village, and everyone in it, is under the influence of some incredibly powerful force. One of the most powerful I’ve ever encountered.’

‘Everyone?’

‘Pretty much. Except, perhaps, Lady Dempster and her family.’

‘Why not her? Do you think she’s behind it?’

‘Not behind it, necessarily, but involved in some way. And not too happy about it. She could tell us a great deal if she chose. That’s why I accepted her invitation to come back and see her. I’m still hoping to persuade her to talk to me.’

Jo persisted with her questions. ‘This evil influence – is it a person? The Master, or someone like that?’

‘The Master? No, no, this is way beyond his range.’

Jo shuddered. To her recollection, the Master’s *range* had been pretty extensive. The owl hooted again, louder this time.

‘Who then? What sort of someone?’

‘I don’t know, Jo. Not yet. Someone who can control thoughts and emotions and manipulate matter. A being, an entity... I doubt if it’s human.’

Before Jo could digest this extraordinary idea there was another hoot, louder and closer, almost a shriek. They heard the beat of great wings and something huge and white and fluttering, yellow eyed and sharp clawed, swept down out of the darkness and flew straight at the Doctor’s face...

Sergeant Benton and the Brigadier were driving along a long straight road beside the river. There wasn’t a village in sight. Benton drew the Land Rover to a halt in a lay-by beside a gate in a field. Beyond the field the broad and placid river gleamed in the moonlight.

The Brigadier eyed him stony faced. ‘Well, Benton?’

With the aid of his torch, Benton was peering at the map. ‘I’m afraid we’ve gone wrong somewhere, sir. We should have reached Little Gittings ages ago and besides...’ He pointed to the river. ‘Judging by the direction of that river, we’re driving upstream, not down. We’re going in entirely the wrong direction, we’re probably half way back to London by now.’

The Brigadier was tired, hungry and for some reason, apprehensive. This dismal announcement did little to improve his mood.

‘When I asked you to drive me down to Hob’s Haven, Sergeant Benton, I assumed that this relatively simple task would be well within the capacity of a trained soldier armed with an excellent map.’

‘Something’s wrong, sir,’ said Benton obstinately. ‘I might have gone wrong once. but not again and again. We’re being misled. I can feel it. Somebody doesn’t want us to reach Hob’s Haven.’

‘The Doctor managed it.’

‘We don’t know that, sir. Nobody’s seen him since he set off...’

There was a crackle from the radio. ‘*Greybound to Trap One,*

Greyhound to Trap one...?

The Brigadier snatched the receiver from the dashboard. 'Trap One receiving.'

'Captain Yates here, sir. I've had a call from Miss Grant. She and the Doctor are still at Hob's Haven. I told them you were on the way down and they say they'll meet you in the village pub, place called The Devil's Footprint.'

The Brigadier thought for a moment. 'Listen, Yates, see if you can get through to Miss Grant, your transmitter's more powerful than mine. She should have a UNIT radio in that jalopy of the Doctor's. Tell the Doctor to call me on it. Tell him we're having... navigational difficulties. Possibly the result of enemy action. Right away, please. Trap One, out.'

Suddenly the Brigadier heard Benton's urgent voice.

'Sir, look – the river!'

The Brigadier turned and saw that the broad and placid stream was suddenly heaving and boiling. A wall of water rose up and rolled across the fields towards them.

Without waiting for orders, Benton started the engine, swung the wheel and sent the Land Rover speeding back the way they had come. With sinister, silent speed, the great wall of water surged after them.

The Brigadier glanced over his shoulder. 'Faster, Benton, it's gaining on us!'

Benton, who was a superb driver, sent the big Land Rover hurtling along the narrow lane as fast as was possible, and much faster than was safe. But it was no use.

The wall of water was upon them, curling high above the Land Rover.

Suddenly it crashed down.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NIGHT JOURNEY

The Doctor fought desperately to retain control of the car, the giant white owl clawing savagely at his face. Holding the wheel with one hand he swung his arm and batted it away. It swerved away for a moment and then returned to the attack.

Ducking his head, the Doctor reached for a knob projecting from the dashboard. He shoved it in then took another desperate swipe at the owl, which once again sheered off and swooped down again.

There was a click from the dashboard and the Doctor grabbed the projecting knob and snatched free a stubby metal cylinder projecting a broad beam of intense bright light. He jabbed it at the owl, which was caught in the searing white beam. It screeched, swerved away, and then disappeared into the darkness.

The Doctor drew the car into the verge and looked down at Jo. ‘All right?’

Jo rubbed her eyes. ‘I think so. What is that thing anyway?’

The Doctor looked proudly at the fiercely glowing cylinder.

‘It’s the cigarette lighter – at least, it was. You know I’ve been making a few modifications to Bessie? Well, I souped up the cigarette lighter as well. Since I don’t approve of smoking, I converted it into a laser-torch.’ He aimed it upwards. ‘Look, it’ll put a spot of light on the surface of the moon.’

‘Can’t you turn it off? It’s hurting my eyes.’

The Doctor clicked the cylinder back into the dashboard, plunging them into soothing semi-darkness, illuminated by the glow from Bessie’s headlights on the road ahead.

‘I may have overdone it a bit,’ he admitted. ‘I’ll adjust it

when I finish the modifications.’ The Doctor started the car. ‘We’d better get on to the inn, the Brigadier should be there by now.’

‘If the local wildlife will let us,’ said Jo. ‘What next? An attack by bloodthirsty badgers or savage stoats?’

There came a crackle from the floor of the car.

‘Greyhound to Trap Two, Greyhound to Trap Two...’

Jo fished a khaki-coloured tin box from the floor of the car, adjusted controls set into the top and unclipped a built-in microphone. ‘Trap Two receiving.’

‘Jo, this is Mike. Message from the Brigadier. He’s still trying to reach you. Says he’s having navigational difficulties, possibly caused by some kind of enemy action. He wants you to call him.’

‘Understood, Mike. Trap Two out.’

Jo readjusted the radio controls. ‘Trap Two to Trap One, Trap Two to Trap One, are you receiving?’

The radio produced a series of ear-piercing howls.

‘Must you fiddle with that contraption? Why are we carrying it anyway?’

‘Brigadier’s orders, he likes to keep in touch with the troops. You won’t let him fit a radio in Bessie so I had to bring this.’ The radio produced another howl and Jo switched it off. ‘I’ll try again when we get to the inn. I wonder what’s been happening to the poor old Brigadier?’

Blinded, deafened and half stunned by the crushing weight of water Benton and the Brigadier clung desperately to the Land Rover. The wave broke over them and flowed past, flooding the road ahead.

‘Keep going, Benton!’ roared the Brigadier. ‘It’s our only chance!’

Axle-deep in water the Land Rover ploughed ahead. Gradually the water became more shallow as they left it behind. The Brigadier glanced over his shoulder and saw that the road had become a lake.

Driving one-handed, Sergeant Benton brushed water from his face and hair and made futile attempts to wring water from his sports jacket.

‘Back to London, sir?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Certainly not. If the Doctor can get to Hob’s Haven so can

we. I'll get there if it's the last thing I do.'

Benton thought that was very likely given the way things were going, but he didn't say so. 'Suppose I drive on till we find some sort of landmark, sir? There seems to be some kind of wood just ahead. If I can find it on the map maybe we can get our bearings.'

The Brigadier brushed water from the lapels of his tweed suit and wrung out his regimental tie. 'Carry on, Sergeant Benton.'

Soggy but determined, they drove on their way.

'I'll check the map when we get to the other side of this wood, sir,' said Benton as the trees closed around them. 'Quite a trip, eh sir? Still, I don't suppose much else can happen.'

The Brigadier sniffed. 'Benton, can you smell smoke?'

'Matter of fact I can, sir.'

There was a crackling sound from all around them, and suddenly the surrounding woods burst into flame. All at once they found themselves driving through a tunnel of fire. Ahead of them the fires on either side joined up and they found themselves heading for a wall of flame.

'Step on it, Benton,' roared the Brigadier. 'Just keep going, it's all we can do.'

Benton floored the accelerator and the powerful Land Rover surged forward. They hurtled into the flames, into searing heat that cracked their skins and choking smoke that seared their lungs.

It was, thought the Brigadier, rather fancifully for him, like taking a trip through hell. The idea triggered some faint memory, but it faded almost at once.

Somehow Benton kept going and gradually the heat and smoke lessened as they left the blazing woods behind them and drove clear of the blaze.

When the air was clear at last, Benton pulled into a lay-by and they sat gasping for a few minutes, sucking in the cool night air.

'Lucky to make it that time,' gasped Benton. 'I thought the petrol tank would go. Probably helped that everything was soaking wet!'

Suddenly the radio crackled into life and they heard Jo's voice 'Trap Two to Trap One, Trap Two to Trap One, are you receiving

me?

Before the Brigadier could answer, he heard another voice.

'Never mind all that ridiculous jargon, Jo, give me that thing. Are you there, Brigadier? What's keeping you? I gather you've been having one or two problems.'

Under the circumstances, the Brigadier's answer was a model of restraint.

'You might say that, Doctor. So far we've encountered constant misdirection, a flash flood and a forest fire.' He gave a brief account of recent events.

The Doctor's voice came again. *'It's essential that you get down here, Brigadier. There are things going on here that you ought to know about, and I may need your help.'*

'I'd be very happy to join you, Doctor. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell me how.'

There was a brief pause and the sound of distant muttering.

'There's only one thing for it, I shall have to guide you in. Here's what I propose to do.'

It was some time later and the Doctor and Jo were in the inn's private parlour, an old-fashioned room furnished with Victorian opulence. never used except on great occasions. The Doctor had commandeered the room with ruthless efficiency. Jo had soothed the landlord's protests with all her available cash and promises of even more handsome financial compensation once the Brigadier arrived.

Sheets of newspaper were spread on the mahogany dining table and on top of them lay the disassembled parts of the UNIT radio. The Doctor had fetched his tool-kit from Bessie and taken the set to pieces. He was now reassembling it, with the addition of several electronic extras from the bottom of his tool bag. He completed the assembly and sat back, rubbing his chin.

'That should do it,' he muttered and flicked a switch. 'Can you hear me, Brigadier?'

'Trap One receiving. Kindly observe proper RT procedure Trap Two.'

'Never mind all that nonsense, Brigadier. Now listen!'

The Doctor flicked a switch, a light began to flash and the reassembled radio emitted a series of loud, regular beeps. 'Can you hear that?'

'I could hardly miss it, it's deafening! Does it have to be so loud?'

‘Yes. Now pay attention, Brigadier. I’ve built a homing device into your UNIT radio. Those beeps are your tracking signal. As long as the volume is steady, you’re going in the right direction. If they start to fade you’re going the wrong way. The nearer you get to us, the louder the beeps will be. Got it?’

‘Got it!’

‘Move as quickly as you can and keep an eye out for trouble. Someone doesn’t want us to join forces. Good luck.’

‘This had better work, Doctor! Trap One out.’

The Doctor sat back and studied his device. ‘There you are, Jo. All we can do now is wait.’

‘Well, you heard the Doctor,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Let’s get moving. I just hope this gadget of his works.’

‘They usually do, sir.’

They drove along the narrow lane until they came to a T-junction. Benton turned to the right. The beeps began fading. He swung the Land Rover around and turned to the left. They recovered their full strength.

‘So far so good,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Carry on Benton. And get a move on, you heard what the Doctor said.’

The Land Rover sped on through the winding lanes. At each junction and crossroads they ignored signposts and took guidance from the beeps before hurrying on their way.

‘Wonder if there’ll be any more surprises, sir?’ said Benton.

‘Perhaps not,’ said the Brigadier. ‘With any luck our unknown enemy thinks we’re either drowned or roasted – or so discouraged that we’ve given up. Is it my imagination, or are those beeps getting louder?’

‘I think they are, sir. We must be getting close.’

They swung around a blind corner, the beeps grew louder – and suddenly there was a high stone wall blocking the road ahead, stretching away to either side.

‘I don’t believe it,’ muttered Benton, slowing down.

‘Neither do I,’ said the Brigadier grimly. ‘Don’t stop. Benton.’

Benton was horrified. ‘Sir?’

‘Put your foot down. Drive straight for that wall.’

‘But sir -’

‘That’s an order. Do it! Go!’

Benton put his foot down and the Land Rover hurtled towards the wall. He could see the giant stone blocks that composed it, great squares of rough-hewn rock. They came closer, closer till they filled his entire field of view.

He braced himself for the shattering impact – and the wall melted away. Suddenly they were driving along a quiet lane towards a little church. Some way beyond the church lay a village green with buildings huddled round it, and welcoming lights shining from an inn.

‘Hob’s Haven, I presume,’ said the Brigadier with quiet satisfaction.

Benton let out a sigh of relief. ‘How did you know the wall was an illusion, sir? I mean, the flood and the fire were real enough.’

‘I didn’t know. It just felt wrong somehow. However they were caused, the flood and the fire were natural events. But a bloody great Hadrian’s Wall running right across Essex... I just couldn’t believe it!’

As they drove up to the inn they saw Bessie parked outside. ‘Looks as if we’ve come to the right place, sir,’ said Benson. ‘Finally,’ said the Brigadier, and switched off the radio bleep, which was now insistently loud.

As they parked the Land Rover and climbed stiffly out, the inn door opened and two figures appeared, silhouetted by the light streaming from the doorway. One was small and slight, the other tall and thin.

‘Brigadier! Sergeant Benton!’ called Jo joyously. ‘You made it!’

The Doctor strolled towards them and gave a casual nod. ‘Sergeant Benton, Brigadier, good to see you. Come in and have a pint of Hob’s Old Peculiar.’

The Brigadier brushed a fragment of charred bark from his lapel and straightened his crumpled regimental tie.

‘Doctor,’ he said, ‘that sounds like an excellent idea.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

CONFERENCE

Several pints of Hob's Old Peculiar – and rounds of sandwiches – later, the Doctor and the reunited UNIT party held a conference in the private parlour. Ruthless washing and brushing had restored the Brigadier and Benton to something like their usual soldierly smartness, though both were a little crumpled around the edges.

Both groups had already narrated their recent strange experiences. Now they were trying to decide what to do about them.

The Brigadier attacked the problem with his usual directness. 'Exactly what are we up against here, Doctor? And how does it tie in with all these strange incidents over the rest of the country?'

The Doctor looked up from the Unexplained Incidents Folder, which he'd been speed-reading at his usual incredible rate. 'We don't know that it does tie in,' he said mildly. 'But it does seem likely.'

'Why?' demanded the Brigadier.

'Instinct.' said the Doctor. 'Strange and violent incidents have been cropping up at random all over the country. Here, in this peaceful little village, there's a positive concentration of them. Their cemetery is crammed with fresh graves. Jo and I have seen two, no, three grotesque and violent deaths in just one day.' He paused. 'It's as if these outbreaks of random violence were some kind of disease. This village is at the centre of the epidemic, the breeding ground. From here the disease spreads all over the country.'

'Which brings me back to my first question.' said the

Brigadier. 'Who's behind it? And why?'

The Doctor paused. 'I don't have an answer for you, Brigadier – not yet.'

'So what do we do next?'

'We investigate. The more we know about what's going on the better. Once we're clear what the problem is, we'll be in a better position to deal with it.'

'Very well, we investigate,' said the Brigadier, feeling himself on more solid ground. 'Where do we start?'

'I've been thinking about that. What are the unusual features of this lovely little village besides an unusually high death-rate?' The Doctor paused, then answered his own question. 'In my view there are three. First, the Dempster family, who I believe to be involved somehow, perhaps only marginally. Secondly, it's to be the site of a pop festival, which will bring young people flooding in from all over the country. I can't help feeling that may be significant. Thirdly, and most mysterious of all, there are the Children of Light, the hippy cult who've established themselves in the old abbey. Religiosity, drugs and gullible young people – a potent combination. They'll certainly bear investigation.'

The Brigadier yawned. 'They'll have to bear it tomorrow. It's a long drive back to London. Better get moving, Benton.'

He turned to Benton who was dozing peacefully in his arm chair. Jo too was asleep. curled up in her chair.

'Why not stay here?' suggested the Doctor. 'This is where we want to be.'

The Brigadier looked horrified. 'No kit!'

'You can rough it for one night, surely, an old soldier like you? These two will be no use till they've had some sleep and you look pretty done-up yourself.'

The Brigadier yawned. 'Maybe you're right. What about you?'

'Sleep is for tortoises,' said the Doctor. 'I'll maybe have a cat-nap later on. Let's call the landlord.'

Some time later, the Doctor sat alone in the parlour. His long body was sprawled out on a sofa, but his mind was obstinately wide awake.

The landlord had reluctantly admitted to having two vacant

rooms, and a handsome down payment in advance had secured them for his luggage-less guests.

One twin bedded room would do for Benton and the Brigadier, the other for Jo. All three had stumbled sleepily off to bed and the Doctor fancied he could hear a chorus of distant snoring.

The Doctor was studying a guide book he had found in the parlour bookcase. He closed it, rose, and returned it to its place on the shelf.

He went over to the window, drew the curtains and looked out over the village green. The pond gleamed in the moonlight, and the sleeping ducks were arranged around the edge, their heads tucked under their wings.

The Doctor came to a sudden resolution, went out of the parlour, down the wooden staircase and into the bar. It was empty except for the landlord, washing glasses behind the bar. The clock behind him showed a quarter to midnight.

He looked up as the Doctor came in. 'Evening, sir. Fancy a nightcap? No restrictions, seeing as you're a guest.'

'No thank you, Mr Bartlett, not right now. As a matter of fact I can't sleep, so I'm going for a midnight stroll. Can you let me have a key so I needn't disturb you when I come back?'

'Well, I can sir,' said Bartlett dubiously. 'I don't know as I'd advise wandering round the village this time of night.'

'Nonsense,' said the Doctor. 'What could happen in a peaceful place like this? Anyway, I'm not just walking round the village. I've been studying that guide book of yours and I've a fancy to see the abbey ruins by moonlight.'

Bartlett looked positively panicky. 'You don't want to be doing that, sir. It's a fair piece away the abbey, too far for this time of night.'

'Just a couple of miles beyond the village, you said. Nothing at all on a fine night like this.'

'And there's all them hippies, sir. A queer lot they are.'

'They'll all be sound asleep.'

'Don't you believe it, sir. I hear they roam about all night, moaning and chanting and up to all kinds of devilry.'

'Sounds exciting,' said the Doctor. 'Still, if I don't bother them, I don't suppose they'll bother me. The key please.'

Reluctantly Bartlett took a heavy key from a nail behind the

bar and handed it over. With a cheery wave, the Doctor went out of the bar.

Bartlett hesitated for a moment. With dragging steps he made his way to the telephone on the wall behind the bar. He stared at it for a moment and then unhooked the old-fashioned receiver and dialled.

After a moment he spoke. 'It's me, Bartlett, from the *Devil's Footprint*. Yes, I know it's late. I thought you might like to know you're going to have a visitor. Somebody wants to see the abbey ruins by moonlight...'

Bartlett had nothing against the Doctor. But the village innkeeper has to keep in with everybody. It wasn't healthy to get on the wrong side of those folks at the abbey.

The Doctor strode along the village street, noting that every shop and house and cottage was dark. Country folk rose early; no doubt they favoured early nights.

It was a fine summer night, still mild despite the lateness of the hour. The full moon rode peacefully in the sky, disappearing occasionally behind black clouds, and a gentle night-breeze rustled in the trees.

The Doctor marched along at a brisk pace, his eyes taking in the peaceful scene, his mind tranquil. A being that could put a mind-lock on an entire village would be unusually sensitive to mental vibrations. Approaching with anger and suspicion would be like ringing an alarm bell. Using techniques learned long ago from his hermit mentor on Gallifrey, the Doctor kept his mind calm and peaceful – and shielded.

He soon left the village behind and strode along the country lane. It was dark except for the fitful moonlight. but it's never fully dark outdoors, and the Doctor moved along sure-footedly.

Despite the dangers that might lie at its end, he was genuinely enjoying the walk, and he was surprised how quickly the abbey ruins appeared on the skyline.

The Doctor studied their jagged outline. According to his guidebook the abbey had been one of the richest and most powerful in the country, until its proud and obstinate abbot made the mistake of defying Henry the Eighth.

Never a patient man, Henry sent royal troops and the royal cannon. They knocked most of the abbey down and looted its

treasures. The surviving monks dispersed and fled. The Old Chapter House had suffered less damage than the rest of the abbey, and parts of it formed a habitable if dilapidated residence today.

In recent years the abbey had been home to an artists' colony and a recording studio, but all had found it too isolated and inconvenient and moved on.

Today, said the guide book, the abbey was once more home to a religious organisation, one devoted to herb gardening, naturopathy and New-Age enlightenment. The order was secluded and visitors were strictly forbidden. However, the ruins could still be viewed at a distance from various vantage points.

The Doctor climbed the next gate he came to, and headed across the field, making for the jagged hulk of the abbey.

As he came within its shadow he felt the first touch of the mind field. It was a barrier of fear and dread that would have sent most intruders scurrying away.

The Doctor stood still for a few minutes, preparing his mind. The trick was to penetrate the barrier without setting up so much psychic disturbance that its creators would be warned. His mind prepared, he moved slowly forward, slipping through the barrier like a shark gliding through still seas.

Above him the abbey loomed menacingly – waiting.

The pressure of the mind-field grew stronger as he advanced, and then started to fade as he reached the remains of the abbey walls. Of course, thought the Doctor. The mind-field was a protective ring, a barrier to deter unwanted intruders. It would scarcely do for everyone inside the abbey to exist in a perpetual state of fear and terror.

The Doctor came up to the ruined walls and clambered through a gap. Once he was inside, the mind-field faded away. He paused, looking around in astonishment. A huge area inside the ruined walls had been converted into an enormous greenhouse. The Doctor moved over to the nearest door. It wasn't locked. No doubt the mind barrier was protection enough.

He went inside the greenhouse and surveyed the scene before him, row upon row of tall green plants stretching ahead. There were elaborate heating-lamps high on poles, beaming down a strange violet light. The atmosphere was musky and

stifling. The Doctor had an odd sensation of being on another planet, and suddenly realised why. It was the climate of another planet that was being created here – to grow a crop that was never meant for Earth.

He examined one of the plants. He plucked a leaf. The texture was thick and fleshy, faintly slimy. He crushed the leaf between thumb and forefinger and sniffed, recognising the strange pungent smell. ‘Sarg,’ he muttered. One of the deadliest drugs in the galaxy, in a class with the notorious skar. Worse in some ways, since it was so much more readily available. Skar was a crystalline salt, found only on one restricted planet. Sarg on the other hand was made from the dried leaves of an easily cultivated plant. Now someone was growing it here, on Earth.

The Doctor had seen whole planets ruined by Sarg, their civilisations collapsing in an orgy of violence. He was so absorbed by his horrific discovery that he failed to see the circle of black-robed, black-hooded figures forming around him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REUNION

Turning round, the Doctor became aware that he wasn't alone. He looked around the circle of black-robed, hooded figures more with irritation than with fear. Suddenly he'd moved from an Ealing comedy to a Hammer horror film.

'Good evening, gentlemen,' he said politely. 'I take it you're the gardening club?'

Nobody laughed. They set off through the giant greenhouse, moving as a group, the Doctor at the centre. He considered felling the two nearest guards and disappearing into the jungle of Sarg plants, but he was curious to know where they were taking him. Escape could come later. What he wanted now was information. They walked the entire length of the greenhouse, and the Doctor was appalled to see the sheer volume of Sarg plants and how well they seemed to be flourishing. The unknown cultivators still had to dry and powder the leaves, but it was a simple process, and no doubt they had the equipment to do that too.

The whole crop would have to be destroyed of course, and the Doctor was busy considering the best method when they emerged from the greenhouse and went through a stone archway. Beyond was a flight of black stone steps, curving downwards. With his silent escorts the Doctor descended the steps, which were lit by flickering torches set into the wall. As they went deeper and deeper he heard the sound of drumming, accompanied by low chanting.

'Good grief,' said the Doctor out loud. 'Not another black mass, surely? All those Hellfire Club legends have got a lot to answer for. Not to mention Dennis Wheatley.'

Nobody responded, the drumming and chanting grew louder, and when they rounded the final curve in the stairs, the Doctor's worst forebodings were fulfilled.

They were at the end of a long, low chamber with a vaulted roof. Originally, no doubt, it had been some kind of crypt. At the far end of the chamber was an altar of black stone, black candles burning on either side. Behind the altar hung an inverted crucifix.

'The usual childish blasphemy,' thought the Doctor. 'It's a tribute in a way. Why bother to blaspheme something unless at heart you believe in it? Unless it secretly terrifies you?'

In the open space before the altar dancing figures writhed and chanted and moaned. Some wore black robes, and others wore nothing at all.

Behind the altar stood a figure in scarlet robes, its face concealed behind a demonic mask. Two acolytes dragged forward a black goat, bleating piteously. Its throat was slashed, and blood gushed into a silver bowl.

'Thank goodness it wasn't a naked virgin,' thought the Doctor. 'Then again, virgins might be in short supply round here.'

The sacrifice complete, excited figures crowded round to be daubed with goat's blood. The drumming and chanting and dancing resumed, and grew even more frenzied, and the scarlet-robed, demon-masked figure disappeared through a concealed door behind the altar.

The celebrants began merging into writhing couples and groups and the Doctor turned to his captors. 'Would you mind if I gave the orgy a miss?' he asked politely. 'Honestly, when you've seen one, you've seen them all.'

He was led through a door in the left-hand side of the chamber, along a gloomy stone corridor. They turned right at a junction and halted before an iron-studded wooden door. One of the Doctor's captors opened it, two others shoved him through, slamming the door behind him.

The Doctor stood for a moment, taking in his surroundings. He was in a Victorian-style study, with walls lined with leather-bound books, a deep Turkish carpet, overstuffed velvet armchairs and sofas. There were mahogany occasional tables draped with antimacassars and loaded with bric-a-brac. There

were animal heads mounted on the walls, a glowering hippo and a melancholy-looking moose. A stuffed bear reared up in a corner, and there was even a tiger-skin rug.

On the far side of the room a black-clad figure was hanging up scarlet robes in a concealed closet. The figure turned and the Doctor saw a medium-sized, powerfully built man in a close-fitting black suit with a high-collared jacket. He had a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, a high forehead, and deep-set burning eyes. It was, of course, the Master.

‘Good evening. Doctor,’ he said. ‘I imagine you’re surprised to see me?’

The Doctor was pretty surprised, as a matter of fact. He remembered what he’d said to Jo, that this whole affair was beyond the Master’s range. Could he have been wrong? In any event, he had no intention of betraying his true feelings.

He dropped into an armchair. ‘Surprised? Not really. I knew you’d turn up sooner or later. It’s called the bad penny effect.’

The Master looked disappointed, but made a swift recovery. ‘And I, of course, was expecting you. From the moment I saw that you were in the village – yes, that was me on the bicycle – I knew *you* would turn up. So when I heard an unscheduled midnight visitor was on the way, I gave orders you were to be brought to me unharmed.’

‘Otherwise I’d have ended up on the altar, substituted for the goat?’ suggested the Doctor.

‘It’s a distinct possibility. Some of our disciples can be a little overzealous.’

‘This is all a bit of a come-down for you, isn’t it? Master of ceremonies at a half-baked black mass! It wasn’t even a proper ceremony. A mixture of voodoo, a black mass and a Babylonian orgy.’

‘The proceedings are a trifle eclectic,’ admitted the Master. ‘A bit of blasphemy, a few drugged potions. Drumming, dancing, chanting, blood sacrifice, and – other activities. Whatever works. The old methods are still the best, you know.’

‘And there’s no business like showbusiness,’ said the Doctor. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself.’

The Master shrugged. ‘It has its sordid side, I agree. But it all helps to keep our young followers properly enthusiastic. But where are my manners?’ He waved towards a side-table, loaded

with decanters, bottles and glasses. ‘A drink, Doctor? A Havana cigar – no, you don’t, do you? Napoleon brandy, single-malt whisky, champagne? There’s quite a tolerable Krug.’

The Doctor was about to refuse on principle. but he changed his mind. The Master seemed to be in a strangely talkative mood. There was a hint of underlying nervousness that the Doctor had never seen in him before. And if the Master wanted to talk, the Doctor was prepared to listen.

‘I wouldn’t mind a brandy. It’s been rather a tiring day.’

The Master chose a decanter and two crystal goblets, splashed generous drinks for himself and the Doctor. Handing the Doctor his drink, he sank into a nearby armchair.

The Doctor sipped his drink. ‘Of course, there’s no such thing as Napoleon brandy,’ he said conversationally. ‘If there were it would be undrinkable here in the twentieth century. Brandy doesn’t age in the bottle, it decays. But this is quite a respectable cognac.’

‘Ever the connoisseur, Doctor,’ murmured the Master.

The Doctor surveyed him sardonically over the rim of his glass.

‘All right, when do we get down to business?’

‘I don’t follow you, Doctor.’

‘The gloating, the death-threats, the description of the horrible fate in store for me.’

The Master looked hurt. ‘My dear Doctor, I’m simply enjoying a nightcap with an old friend. Do you see any guards?’

‘I’ve no doubt they’d appear at the snap of your fingers.’

‘As a matter of fact they would.’ admitted the Master. ‘But they’re not here now. If I intended to harm you, would I risk being here with you, unarmed – not even my Tissue Compression Eliminator – and alone?’

‘Perhaps you’re conceited enough to think you could dispose of me on your own.’

The Master laughed, and held up his hands. ‘My dear Doctor, I am well aware that you’re not nearly as feeble as you look. You’re quite capable of defending yourself adequately if I attack you – or even of attacking me yourself.’

The Doctor looked puzzled. ‘Well, if we’re not playing out the usual scenario, what the devil are we doing here?’

‘The devil is very much the point.’ The Master leaned

forward urgently. 'Believe me, I didn't bring you here to threaten you.'

To his astonishment, the Doctor saw that the hands holding the Master's goblet were trembling. The Master drained his brandy, poured himself another and offered the decanter to the Doctor, who shook his head.

'You'd better tell me what's going on,' he said quietly.

Recovering his poise, the Master sat back and began his tale.

'Some time ago I picked up rumours of this cult, the Children of Light. It occurred to me that, in these credulous times, a cult of one's own might be a useful thing to have. So, I infiltrated it.'

'With a view to taking it over, of course.'

'Of course. However, I soon found that underneath the hippydippy mumbo-jumbo the cult was more serious than I imagined. There was a formidable personality behind it – a man calling himself Hadley.'

The phrase seemed odd. The Doctor frowned. 'Calling himself? Who is he then?'

'It's more a matter of what he is, Doctor. His name isn't Hadley – and he isn't a man.'

'What is he?'

'I'm not sure. A being of incredible power – though I didn't discover that until later. As soon as we met, Hadley realised that I, too, was exceptional. He took me into his confidence. He said he was often away – the cult was no more than a hobby for him, a trifling amusement. He wanted someone to run things while he was away. Very soon he offered me the leadership of the cult – everything I'd wanted for the asking.' The Master paused. 'He wanted something in return.'

'What?'

'The basis of the cult is enlightenment through the use of drugs. Drugs are used to keep a grip on established members and recruit new ones. But there was some further scheme planned and for that Hadley needed supplies of a drug not yet known on Earth.'

The Doctor remembered the greenhouse full of alien plants. 'Sarg! You provided him with Sarg.'

Even the Master looked just a little embarrassed. 'I'm not proud of it, Doctor.'

‘I imagine not. Some things ought to be too low even for you. How did you come to have the filthy stuff?’

‘I’d been engaged in trading in it. at a time when my fortunes were at a low ebb. There was a scheme to establish plantations on an uninhabited planet and supply the galaxy. Unfortunately my partners were all drug users as well as smugglers and they ended up killing each other.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said the Doctor.

Sarg’s main side-effect, apart from an instant high, was that of ever-increasing, hallucinatory paranoia, marked by suspicion and fear of everyone around, and outbursts of murderous rage. Its effect on a gang of violent and unstable drug-smugglers wasn’t hard to imagine.

The Master shrugged. ‘After the scheme collapsed I was left with a supply of the drug and the seeds to grow more. It was exactly what Hadley needed. I found the village, bought the old abbey, set up the greenhouses. Soon we’ll be able to produce the drug in quantity.’

‘Why?’ demanded the Doctor. ‘What do you plan to do with it?’

‘The cult disciples have been distributing the drug wholesale. At first they concentrated on the village and there were – incidents. Quite a few of them. Later they extended distribution all over the country, and there were even more incidents.’

‘Deaths, you mean,’ said the Doctor. ‘Violent deaths. And another thing – why doesn’t anyone care? Here in the village, I mean.’

‘Hadley,’ said the Master simply. ‘I told you, his powers are incredible. He imposed a sort of blanket mind-lock on the entire village, so that anything that happens is accepted as normal and explained away.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Hence Sergeant Slater, the laughing policeman. I take it this Hadley killed Rowley, the farmer? And the vicar? And Lady Dempster’s butler?’

‘Rowley provoked and defied him, demanded more money. He could easily have paid, but it was more amusing to make him behead himself. The vicar had an attack of conscience and threatened to betray him. Jenkins was a way to kill the vicar, and a sacrifice to explain away his death.’

‘More amusements?’

‘Precisely. He already knows about you, by the way. And your friend the Brigadier.’

‘Really?’

‘Come now, Doctor! He has made several attempts to kill you. He tried to prevent your friend the Brigadier from reaching the village.’

‘Without success in either case.’

‘He wasn’t really serious, Doctor. Once again he was amusing himself. If he ever decides you’re a real danger to him... As a matter of fact, I saved both your lives.’

‘How?’

‘I convinced Hadley the Brigadier was a bumbling fool, whose death would cause more trouble than it was worth. And as for you...’

‘What about me?’

‘I told him you were an old friend, a compatriot. Someone who might make a useful servant.’

‘And?’

‘He’s considering it. He’ll either employ you, or kill you.’

‘I await his decision with interest. You still haven’t answered my main question.’

‘What question?’

‘Why?’ demanded the Doctor. ‘What’s all this for? Mindless malevolence? Pointless evil for its own sake?’

The Master shook his head. ‘Far from it. Hadley has a plan. My task is to keep things on course, moving towards his ultimate conclusion.’

‘What conclusion?’

‘I’m not sure. Something cataclysmic, something that will change this planet forever. It will be revealed tomorrow night at the festival.’

‘Sounds just your sort of scheme,’ said the Doctor caustically. ‘What makes you so eager to change sides?’

‘Hadley knows that I’m not human either. He may even know of my connection with the Time Lords. He thinks I might cause him trouble of some kind.’ The Master laughed bitterly. ‘Not much trouble, of course, he’s too arrogant for that. Just some petty irritation. So, when my usefulness is over, he’ll destroy me.’

The Doctor frowned, obviously still unconvinced. ‘I take it

you still have your TARDIS? A working TARDIS,' he added bitterly.

'It is close at hand.'

'Then why don't you simply leave the planet? Go and make mischief in some other part of the galaxy?'

'You don't understand, Doctor. Hadley – the being that calls itself Hadley – is trans-dimensional. Time and space are no barrier to him. He would track me down and annihilate me. Get me away from here, give me safe refuge and I'll help you to destroy him. Only then will either of us be safe. Oh, and you'll have saved your precious planet Earth as well. Well, what do you say?'

'To be honest, I find it hard to trust you.'

His voice low and urgent, the Master made his final appeal. 'Doctor, we are, we were, both Time Lords. We grew up together, we were friends in our first lives. I beg you, in the name of that old friendship – get me out of here!'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE DEAL

The Doctor sat back, considering the Master thoughtfully. Then he said, 'No.'

The Master jumped to his feet. 'Doctor, please! Do you realise how humiliating it is for me to beg like this?' Suddenly his mood changed to anger. 'If you won't help me, I can still destroy you. You can still end up on the sacrificial altar, you know, we're running short of goats. Or I could simply hand you over to Hadley as a captured enemy. With one glance he will destroy your body and wither your soul!'

'Calm down,' said the Doctor calmly. 'I didn't say I wouldn't help you.'

'Then why -?'

'I simply meant that I wouldn't help you to get away from here. Not yet.'

'Why not?'

'Because I need you here, on the inside. You must stay here and fulfil your role just a little longer, until we discover the full extent of Hadley's plans. Once we have the information we need, I'll see you're placed under UNIT protection. When this is all over, I'll try to get you some kind of amnesty. Well, is it a deal?'

The Master sighed. 'Very well, Doctor, it is, as you put it, a deal.'

The Doctor rose. 'Excellent! Now, you'd better escort me out of here, my friends will be getting worried.'

'And how do I explain your departure to my disciples? Or to Hadley, if he gets to hear of it when he returns.'

'Simple. You tell them you called me here to recruit me,

according to your original suggestion, and you succeeded. I've changed sides.'

'Why?'

'You won me over. Now I'm returning to act as your agent in the enemy camp.'

The Master regarded him admiringly. 'Doctor, I sometimes suspect that you're almost as devious as I am. Come along, then, I'll see you out.'

The Master escorted the Doctor through a series of tunnels. They passed through the mind barrier – somehow the Master diminished its effects – and emerged at a side gate of the abbey.

'I'll be at the inn,' said the Doctor. 'You can contact me there if necessary. Be careful.'

They exchanged brief nods of farewell, and the Doctor strode off into the night.

The Master made his way back to his study. He poured himself a brandy and stood gazing down into the dying fire, and smiled grimly.

'UNIT protection,' he said. 'Amnesty!'

He hurled his crystal goblet into the fire.

Next morning, the day of the festival, the Doctor was awakened from a light doze on the sofa by an excited Jo Grant. 'Rise and shine, Doctor, breakfast meeting in half an hour, your turn in the bathroom.' She tossed him a plastic bag. 'Benton knocked up the local shop and bought us all some toilet things, here's your share. The Brigadier got through to Mike Yates on the radio, and he's bringing down some clothes for us.' She dashed out.

When the Doctor came down to the dining room, he found the Brigadier, Benton and Jo tucking into an enormous breakfast.

The Brigadier waved him to an empty chair at the big table. 'Come and join us, Doctor. A good old English breakfast will set you up for the day. Porridge, bacon, eggs, kidneys, kedgerree...'

The Doctor sat down. 'Actually I'm more of a toast and coffee man myself.'

He was also, he thought, more of a late-night than an early morning person. Everyone, especially the Brigadier, seemed appallingly bright and cheerful.

'Right, Doctor,' said the Brigadier. 'Let's assess the situation

and plan our next move. As I recall, last night you spoke of three areas needing investigation. The pop festival, the Dempster family, and this cult that's established in the old abbey.'

The Doctor spread marmalade on a piece of toast. 'That's right. And while you were all snoring last night, I took it upon myself to investigate the abbey. I ran across an old friend.'

The breakfast party listened in fascination as the Doctor described his adventures of the previous night.

'The Master!' said the Brigadier. 'I might have known he'd be behind it.'

'Don't jump to conclusions, Brigadier,' said the Doctor. 'If he's telling the truth he isn't behind it. He's merely a front man – and a very frightened front man at that.'

'If he's telling the truth,' said Jo. 'And how often does the Master do that?'

'You prepared to trust him, Doctor?' asked Benton bluntly.

'To be honest, I'm not sure. He was very convincing last night, but then again, he's the Master – and a master liar. In a sense, it doesn't really matter.'

Benton looked baffled. 'How come?'

'He's offered us a pipeline into enemy headquarters. Whatever he tells us can be useful – whether we believe it or not.'

'You've lost me,' said Jo.

The Doctor smiled. 'It is a bit confusing. Look at it this way. Either he's on our side, in which case he can give us useful help. Or else he's still working for the enemy, and he'll lie to us and try to trap us. As long as we're alert to that possibility, we can still learn from his lies and tricks.'

'We'll leave the Master to you for the moment,' said the Brigadier. 'That leaves the Dempsters and the pop festival.'

'May I suggest that you and the Doctor pay a call on the Dempsters, sir?' said Benton. 'I'd be no good with the upper classes, and you're the top brass after all.'

'That's right,' said Jo. 'Sergeant Benton and I will take a look at the festival site. I already know Tim Hollings the site manager. He gave me those passes, remember. I think he fancies me.'

'I'm not surprised,' said the Doctor. 'The way you flung yourself around his neck...'

'I was merely expressing gratitude,' said Jo with dignity.

‘Anyway, he’s friendly enough and I don’t think he’s mixed up in anything dodgy.’

‘I rather agree with you,’ said the Doctor. ‘All right, Jo, you and Sergeant Benton investigate the festival, and the Brigadier and I will pay a call on the lady of the Manor.’

The Doctor drove through the gates of Dempster Manor, up the gravelled drive, and parked Bessie by the impressive entrance. The Brigadier climbed out of the passenger seat with some relief – he always felt that travel in Bessie compromised his dignity. However, since the Doctor refused to let anyone else drive Bessie, he’d been forced to turn the UNIT Land Rover over to Jo and Benton.

He surveyed the neatly trimmed shrubbery, the lawn and the formal flower-beds with approval. ‘Nice to see a well-kept country house. Not so many left these days.’

‘The other side’s very handsome as well,’ said the Doctor. ‘There’s a very fine terrace overlooking the river.’

‘The one you threw the butler over?’

‘I did no such thing,’ said the Doctor indignantly. ‘He threw himself. Anyway, let’s not dwell on past disasters, this is supposed to be a social call.’

They climbed the steps to the impressive pillared portico and the Doctor rapped on the heavy old-fashioned knocker. They heard the sounds booming through the house. Nothing happened for quite a long time, and the Doctor was about to knock again when the door creaked open a little way. A timid-looking maid peered through the gap.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Doctor John Smith and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart to see Lady Dempster,’ said the Doctor formally. ‘I’m afraid we haven’t cards with us.’

The maid peered at him apparently struck dumb with awe.

‘Pull yourself together, girl,’ snapped the Brigadier. ‘Go and see if her ladyship is at home.’

‘Yes, sir. If you wouldn’t mind waiting here, sir.’

She scurried away.

‘Sorry about this, Brigadier,’ said the Doctor. ‘There’s probably a bit of a staff shortage.’

‘And we know why, don’t we?’ said the Brigadier caustically.

‘Try not to throw any more domestics over the terrace Doctor, the servant problem’s quite bad enough already.’

The Doctor gave him a reproachful look, but maintained a dignified silence.

After a few moments they heard rapid footsteps. The door was opened wide, not by the maid, but by Lady Dempster herself, elegant in a grey silk morning dress.

‘Doctor, how nice to see you again!’

The Doctor bowed. ‘You’re very kind. I told you I’d come back. I only hope it isn’t too soon.’

‘Not in the least.’ She glanced enquiringly at the Brigadier.

‘Allow me to present my friend and colleague Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart,’ said the Doctor. ‘Lady Dempster, the Brigadier. Brigadier, Lady Dempster.’

The Doctor turned to the Brigadier expecting a few polite words, and saw that he was staring hard at Lady Dempster. ‘Brigadier!’ said the Doctor sharply.

‘How do you do?’ said the Brigadier stiffly.

There was a moment’s awkward silence.

‘Come through to the terrace,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘We’re just about to have morning coffee.’

She led them through stone-flagged corridors to the other side of the house and out onto the sunlit terrace, where a waiting maid served coffee from a trolley.

The Brigadier took his coffee cup like a man in a daze, still staring fixedly at Lady Dempster.

‘Forgive me, your ladyship, but haven’t we met before?’

‘Not to my recollection. I’m sure I would have remembered you, Brigadier.’

The Doctor looked on with keen interest. Was there something artificial in Lady Dempster’s smile? A little strain in the light, flirtatious tone of her voice?

‘But surely,’ persisted the Brigadier, struggling to retrieve old memories. ‘It was in Greece, that’s it – no, the Greek Islands just after the war.’

‘That is a *very* long time ago, Brigadier,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘I’d have been quite a young girl then.’

‘No, not young,’ muttered the Brigadier. ‘That was... No, you looked the same – exactly the same. You haven’t changed a bit.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lady Dempster firmly. ‘You must be

mistaken. Brigadier?’

Her tone suggested that she wished to put an end to the subject, but the Doctor intervened. ‘You did say that your own family was Greek in origin, Lady Dempster?’

Lady Dempster said eagerly, ‘Yes, of course, that’s it. You must have met one of my numerous relatives. We all bear a strong family resemblance, there’s a kind of family face. Perhaps you met one of the Demeter branch of the family, for instance.’

‘That’s it,’ said the Brigadier eagerly. ‘That was the name, Demeter. A Mrs Demeter.’

‘There you are, then,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘The mystery is explained. Mrs Demeter was my great-aunt. And she certainly lived in the Greek Islands after the war. She died years ago but I’ve seen old family portraits, and the resemblance is quite strong. Now I’ve grown older, I’m told I look exactly like her.’

It was a plausible enough explanation and the Brigadier might even have accepted it – or at least pretended to – if Sophie hadn’t chosen that moment to come onto the terrace.

She was wearing a brief white tennis dress and looked quite extraordinarily beautiful.

The Brigadier stared at her like a man entranced. ‘Sophie!’

She stared wonderingly back at him. ‘Alistair?’

The Brigadier put down his coffee cup, strode determinedly forward, took Sophie in his arms and kissed her passionately on the lips.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MEMORIES

Sophie strained against him and for a moment she seemed to be responding to the kiss. Then she tore herself free, stepped back and slapped his face hard.

‘How dare you?’

The Brigadier stood motionless, his face scarlet, except for the white imprint of Sophie’s hand on his cheek.

It was a moment of supreme embarrassment. Then, to make matters, if possible, worse, a very young man in tennis whites appeared on the terrace.

‘Unhand my sister!’ he cried. ‘You sir, are a cad and a bounder, and I demand satisfaction!’ Herbie was enjoying himself.

‘Shut up, Herbie!’ said Sophie. She put a hand on the Brigadier’s arm. ‘I’m sorry if I hurt you. I was startled. I’m not used to being greeted with such enthusiasm.’

‘I think it must be another case of mistaken identity,’ said Lady Dempster brightly. ‘The Brigadier was convinced that he’d met me before, until we worked out that he’d confused me with my great-aunt, Mrs Demeter. Now, Mrs Demeter had two grandchildren who lived with her. One was a scapegrace lad, much like Herbie here. The other, a girl called Sephie, was the beauty of the neighbourhood – like my Sophie. Now, if the Brigadier met *her* long ago...’

‘Sephie,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Yes, that was her name. Sephie. I could have sworn...’

‘My Sophie can’t possibly be your Sephie,’ said Lady Dempster gently. ‘After all, Sephie would be my age now, if she’s still alive.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the Brigadier. ‘It was a moment of complete mental aberration. I can only apologise for my behaviour. Forgive me, Miss Sophie, Lady Dempster.’ He turned to Herbie. ‘As for you, young man, if you were a few years older, I’d be happy to give you the satisfaction you asked for. Since one doesn’t fight children, I can only offer you my apologies as well. Doctor, I’ll wait for you in the car.’

There was a moment of astonished silence. The Brigadier turned and marched stiffly from the terrace.

‘See the Brigadier out, Emily,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘We shan’t need you any more after that.’

The maid hurried after the Brigadier.

‘That man is straight out of the middle ages,’ said Herbie. ‘He really thought I wanted to fight a duel with him – just for kissing Sophie. As if that mattered!’

‘The Brigadier is a soldier, and an old-fashioned man of honour,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘If you’d been a few years older, he’d willingly have met you with swords or pistols, whenever and wherever you chose. You should be careful about issuing challenges, young man. I’m a bit old-fashioned myself.’

Herbie flushed with anger, but didn’t speak.

‘Can’t you persuade your friend to come back?’ asked Sophie. ‘I feel terrible. As Herbie says, what does a kiss matter?’

‘It matters a lot to the Brigadier,’ said the Doctor. ‘You seem to have stirred up some very deep-seated memories. It would be kind to leave him alone to come to terms with them.’ He turned to Lady Dempster. ‘I’m sorry the social side of things has gone so much awry, but as you know, this isn’t entirely a social call. We spoke last time about your knowledge of, and involvement with, recent events in this village. I asked you to help me, and you asked for time to think. I’m afraid time is running out, Lady Dempster. Events will reach some sort of climax at the festival tonight. If your help is to be of any use, I need it very soon.’

Lady Dempster looked from one to the other of her two grandchildren and turned back to the Doctor. ‘I’ve discussed things with Herbie and Sophie, and they’ve agreed I should tell you what I can.’ She sat down. ‘I’m afraid it involves some rather shameful family secrets. I’ve already told you that I’m Greek by birth. Have you ever heard of an organisation called Herkos Odonton?’

The Doctor frowned. 'Behind the teeth? No, I can't say I have.'

'It's a Greek phrase meaning "dead secret",' said Herbie. 'Herkos Odonton is the Greek version of the Mafia, but far more powerful.'

'And more cruel,' said Sophie.

'Many of the Greek ruling classes, the aristocrats and the politicians and public officials, were involved with the society,' said Lady Dempster. 'Just as with the Mafia in Italy. My own family was no exception. Much of our wealth came from criminal sources. When I married and came to England, I hoped I'd left all that behind me – that's why I brought my grandchildren too. Unfortunately the evil has followed me here. Perhaps because I was here, the society has established itself near the village.'

'At the abbey?'

'At the abbey.'

'And what are their plans?'

'All I know is that they are planning some vast criminal enterprise, involving drugs. They wanted our help, but I refused to be involved.'

'Did they accept that?'

'Reluctantly – and only on a promise of the strictest neutrality. I refused to help them – but I had to swear not to harm them. If I break that oath they will kill my grandchildren. You see my position, Doctor? I cannot, dare not, help you. I must not be involved.'

'I see your dilemma, Lady Dempster. Thank you for being so frank. If you'll excuse me? Don't worry, I'll see myself out.'

The Doctor left the terrace.

'Congratulations, Grandma,' said Herbie. 'You did that very nicely.'

'Do you think he believed me?'

'I'm not sure,' said Sophie.

'It doesn't matter,' said Herbie. 'The important thing is that you can honestly tell *him* that you didn't help the Doctor. that you tried to put him off the scent. You may just have saved our lives.'

The Doctor found the Brigadier sitting in Bessie's passenger

seat, staring into space. The Doctor put his hand on his shoulder. 'All right, old chap?'

'As all right as a man can be who's just made a total bloody fool of himself,' said the Brigadier savagely.

'Not such a fool as you think, perhaps.'

'What do you mean?'

'The girl recognised you,' said the Doctor. 'I saw it in her eyes. She called you Alistair and she had no chance to hear the name before you saw her.'

'But it can't be the same girl. It can't. Not unless -'

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. 'Not unless she isn't human. You may have fallen in love with an immortal, Alistair. Always a tricky business, look at the old legends.'

'I just can't take it in,' said the Brigadier as the Doctor started the car. 'What else did they tell you in there?'

'Her ladyship spun me a story about some kind of Greek Mafia.'

'You don't believe it?'

'Not a word. No gang of Greek crooks could be responsible for the things we've seen here. I think she's been got at by her grandchildren not to talk to me. I got a distinct sense she was under pressure. I'm going to try again, as soon as I can manage to get her alone.'

The Brigadier nodded, though without showing much real interest.

'What next?'

The Doctor looked worriedly at his old friend. Action was the thing, he decided. The Brigadier was essentially a man of action. Give him some task, preferably dangerous, and he might snap out of it.

'We head for the festival site,' said the Doctor. 'Let's see how Jo and Sergeant Benton are getting on.'

Jo and Sergeant Benton were in a queue of vehicles, heading for the festival site. The pace was hotting up since Jo's earlier visit and the line of vehicles included everything from equipment trucks to Porsches and Alfa-Romeos, presumably the property of pop stars. There were rickety old jalopies and battered vans. The latter were mostly painted in bright psychedelic colours and bore such slogans as 'Peace', 'Love', and 'Chill Out Man.'

The slow-moving convoy was good-humoured enough, positively mellow in fact. This may have been accounted for by the faint haze of acrid smoke that hovered in the air.

Jo said as much to Benton. 'You could get a high just from breathing in this motorcade.'

Benton grinned. 'You know what they say. If you can remember the sixties you weren't there. Looks like the seventies are going the same way.'

'It's a wonder the police didn't arrest the lot on the way down.'

'There are always drugs at pop festivals,' said Benton. 'If they decided to clamp down the cops would have to close the whole festival and arrest everyone in sight which would cause a riot. Mostly they turn a blind eye.'

'Don't they do anything at all?'

'Might send a few drugs-squad blokes down in disguise to see things don't get out of hand. Anyone caught openly flogging the hard stuff – coke, heroin, stuff like that – would probably get nicked. Mind you, it still goes on under cover.'

As they approached the outer field gate they saw it was manned by two burly black-uniformed security guards. As they came up to the gates, drivers were showing various papers and passes and being waved on. Others were trying to talk, or argue, their way through. Some made it, others were turned away.

Benton nodded towards the security guards. 'How do we get past King Kong and his mate?'

'Don't worry,' said Jo. She fished the two Press passes from her pocket and gave one to Benton. 'Just remember you're a famous rock journalist. Try and look literary.'

Benton regarded the pass dubiously. 'Me?'

'Don't worry,' said Jo. 'You know what they say about rock journalists.'

'No, what?'

'People who can't write, interviewing people who can't talk, for the benefit of people who can't read!'

The security guard looked suspiciously at their passes. 'You're a bit early, aren't you? Festival's not started yet, not many celebrities about.'

'I don't care about celebrities,' said Jo. 'I'm doing a background article about the people who do all the hard work

behind the scenes. Roadies and sound engineers and so on. People like you. What's your name?

'Desmond. miss.'

'People like you, Desmond. Perhaps I could come back and interview you later?'

The security guard blushed. 'Be my pleasure, miss.'

'Thank you, Desmond,' said Jo. She gave him a dazzling smile. jabbed Benton in the ribs with her elbow, and they drove through the gate.

They parked the Land Rover in a corner of the field, now rapidly filling with other vehicles. It took a little time because Benton, ignoring the hooting of other drivers, insisted on backing into their parking spot.

'Might want to leave in a hurry, you never know. Where now?'

Jo pointed. 'Over there, in the main field. The site office.'

The festival field had changed a great deal since Jo's visit with the Doctor. The central stage was almost complete, a giant half-shell enclosing and sheltering the performance area. The audience presumably stood in the open space before the stage and took their chances with the weather. Both sides of the stage were crowded with complicated lash-ups of amplifying equipment, and some roadies were assembling a drum-kit in the centre.

A black-clad figure stood before a bank of microphones. and the melancholy howl of an electric-guitar riff rang out over the field.

They went into the site office and found Tim Hollings at the same architect's desk behind another pile of papers.

'Remember me?' said Jo. 'Just popped in to say hello. This is my friend, Ben..' (She'd suddenly realised she didn't know Benton's first name. Did he have one?)

'Hi,' said Benton, cheerfully accepting his new name.

'How are things going?' asked Jo.

'Terrible,' said Tim gloomily. 'Several of the big names have pulled out. No Spangles, no Stones, no Slade.'

'Why?'

'Some rumour going about that the festival's dodgy, that there's going to be trouble. The Osculators are still coming though. They *like* trouble.' Tim sighed. 'Funny thing is, nobody

seems to care. Not the management, not the public. No complaints, no returns, nothing. It's as if the music didn't really matter, as if the festival was really about something else. And there's another thing.'

'What's that?' asked Jo.

'Some very funny people have set up camp in the far corner of the field. Supposed to be managers and so on. Look more like villains to me. The festival opens tonight and we're nowhere near ready. Guess when the opening ceremony is? Not till midnight. It's crazy! I'm seriously thinking of packing the job in and leaving them all to it.' He sighed. 'Care for a cuppa? I could put the kettle on.'

'Looks to me as if you've got enough on your plate,' said Benton. 'We'll just have a wander round if that's okay? Come on, Jo, man's got work to do.'

As they came out of the hut he said, 'Ben? I'm Ben Benton?'

'Top of the head,' said Jo.

In one corner of the vast field a small tent colony had sprung up. Little groups of men were standing around in front of it. They seemed to be waiting and watching, but not actually doing anything.

'I wonder who that lot are,' said Benton.

'Tim's funny people, presumably.'

'Let's take a closer look.'

They strolled over to the tents, glancing casually at the little groups of men as they passed by. Tim Hollings was right, thought Jo, they were an odd group. For the most part they were a tough-looking lot, though one or two, more shabbily dressed than the others, were pale and sickly looking.

They paused by the far edge of the row of tents, looking back at the scattered groups. Most had ignored them as they passed, though one or two individuals had given them hostile glares, probably just to demonstrate how hard they were.

Jo looked at Benton. 'Funny looking bunch of happy campers!'

'You don't know the half of it,' he said grimly.

'What do you mean?'

'You remember how me and Captain Yates spotted people spiking drinks in a pub? Well, afterwards the Narcotics Branch got me to go through their drug-dealer files to see if I could

recognise anyone.'

'So?'

'I didn't then – but I do now. Half the faces in those files are right here in this field!'

Jo stared incredulously at him. 'Are you sure?'

'Positive. I spent hours going over those files and I've got a good memory for faces. This isn't a pop festival, Jo. It's a drug-dealers' convention!'

As they spoke someone came stumbling out of the nearest tent. He was small and skinny, with a straggly goatee beard. He stopped, eyes widening in surprise and then hurried away. He went up to the nearest group of men and began talking urgently.

'We're in trouble,' said Benton quietly. 'Start walking back towards the car. Don't hurry.'

He started walking away, and Jo fell in beside him.

'What's happening?' she whispered.

'I recognised that bloke who just came out of the tent. He's one of the people I spotted in the pub. The one who was in charge of them. Trouble is, he recognised me as well. Now he's spreading the word amongst his mates.'

They saw the skinny little man running from one group to another. As he spoke, each group turned and looked at Jo and Benton, spread out into a line and started walking towards them.

The lines linked up and turned into a semi-circle, a semi-circle that was closing in on them.

They were surrounded.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RESCUE

With a loose semi-circle of bodies barring their way, Jo and Benton came to a halt. Jo studied the group in front of them. It was an unappetizing sight. About a dozen men, age ranging from youngish to middle-aged, dress from smart suits to expensive casual. Lots of gold rings, gold chains and flashy watches.

The one in the centre seemed to be the leader. Short and stocky, deeply tanned and totally bald, he wore, despite the warm day, a shiny black leather coat and black leather boots. A jagged knife-scar ran down the left side of his heavy, brutal face.

‘It’s a deliberate performance,’ thought Jo. ‘An act. Look at me, I’m a gangster!’

The skinny man who’d first spotted them ran up to the scarred man.

‘It’s them all right, Dave. They interfered when we was doing that little job for you in the boozier. They brought down the law on us, got Sammy Barker nicked.’

The man called Dave fixed them with a steady unblinking stare. It was the old prison-yard stare, thought Benton, an established hard-man’s technique to gain psychological dominance.

He met it with a friendly smile. ‘Morning mate,’ he said loudly. ‘Lovely day!’

The hard man made no reply.

‘Out for a bit of the old camping?’ Benton went on. ‘I must say you look it!’

Still nothing.

‘Cub Scout master are you? Or is it Girl Guides? I suppose this is your troop – The Ponce Patrol.’

The man called Dave did blink at this. He was used to terrifying people with a look, and the big man's reaction threw him for a moment.

'Are you mad?' hissed Jo. 'Things look bad enough already, don't make them worse!'

'Can't afford to let them see you're scared,' said Benton quietly.

'I'm *not* scared,' whispered Jo. 'I'm bloody terrified!'

'Stay cool,' said Benton in the same quiet tone. 'And when I say run – run!'

He continued to meet the scarred man's stare with an amiable grin.

The man called Dave knew he had to regain the initiative. Didn't this idiot realise he was dead meat? He was outnumbered ten to one – ten to two if you counted the little tart, which you couldn't. He was a big, tough-looking bloke – but nobody was tough enough to cope with those odds.

'Coppers' narks, eh?' he said. 'I don't like coppers' narks.'

'Well, you wouldn't, would you?' said Benton reasonably. 'Seeing as you're a criminal scumbag. Dave Hutton, isn't it? Drugs, prostitution, protection rackets. Likes to call himself the King of Soho.' Benton laughed. 'King Rat, more like.'

Dave played his ace. He slipped his hand from his pocket, touched a button and the long blade of the flick-knife sprang into view. That always worked.

Except this time.

'Put the toothpick away, sonny,' said Benton wearily. 'You might cut yourself.'

'I'll cut *you*,' said Dave and leaped forward.

Benton sprang to meet him. As Dave lunged with the flick-knife Benton's arm swept his knife-arm aside, and seized the wrist in a savage arm-lock, forcing Dave's arm high up between his shoulder blades. Dropping the knife, Dave fell to his knees with a howl of pain. There was an audible crack...

'Run, Jo!' yelled Benton. 'Make for the Land Rover.'

The little band of thugs gathered around their wounded leader long enough to give them a bit of a start.

'Get after them,' sobbed Dave. 'Bring them back here, I want them alive. I'll slice that big bastard to pieces myself.'

The gang at their heels, Benton and Jo pounded across the

big field. They had one big advantage, they were a lot fitter than most of their pursuers. Their lead increased and they might have got clean away – if Jo hadn't stumbled on the uneven ground, twisting her ankle.

Benton stopped, spun round and helped her to her feet. 'Are you all right? Can you run?'

Jo put her injured foot to the ground and winced. 'Can't even walk.'

Benton picked her up, slung her over his shoulder and ran on.

Jo was a featherweight, but she slowed him a little all the same. And the fall had delayed them. Their pursuers were much closer now – and they were gaining...

The Doctor's rather unusual appearance, and the equally eccentric appearance of Bessie, caused a certain amount of astonishment at the gate. However, the Brigadier's official credentials, and a few sharp words, got them through without too much trouble. The security man had been in the army and he recognised the voice of authority when he heard it.

'I wish you'd get a more normal-looking vehicle,' grumbled the Brigadier. 'I feel embarrassed every time I have to ride in this damned go-kart.'

The Doctor wasn't listening. He stopped the little car and rose to his feet, shading his eyes with his hand.

'There seems to be some sort of commotion going on in the main field – with Benton and Jo in the middle of it. Hold on, Brigadier!'

The Doctor dropped back into the driving seat, and Bessie shot forward.

There was nothing Benton liked more than a good fight, but this one was going on too long. Their pursuers had caught up with them not far from the hedge at the edge of the field. Unable to fight and carry Jo at the same time, Benton had dropped her and turned to face his pursuers.

Now he was standing over Jo with a circle of attackers around him. Not all of them were still on their feet. He had dropped the first few with a series of savage blows, and the rest had become noticeably more cautious.

All the same, there were still too many of them. Sooner or later someone would get behind him with a cosh and that would be the end of it.

Suddenly arms clasped him from behind and another thug sprang forward, raining blows on his unprotected torso.

Swinging backwards with his elbows Benton knocked away the man behind him and dropped his attacker with a left hook.

His attackers fell back and he stood gasping for a moment. His strength was draining away and he knew that the next rush would be the last.

Suddenly a yellow thunderbolt burst through the hedge and dropped down close by. Joyfully Benton realised it was Bessie. The Doctor jumped out and joined in the fray, throwing one attacker with a neat piece of Venusian aikido, and dropping another with the straight left he'd learned from John L. Sullivan.

It was the Brigadier, however, who saved the day.

Standing up in Bessie he shouted, 'All right, that's enough!' He took a revolver from under his coat and fired it in the air.

The battle froze.

A burly thug muttered. 'That ain't fair. English cops don't carry guns.'

'I am not a policeman, I'm a soldier,' said the Brigadier crisply. 'I am trained to shoot at the Queen's enemies, and at the moment that means you. I'll kill the next man who makes a hostile move.'

There was not the slightest doubt that he meant it.

The group of thugs started melting away, slowly at first and then more quickly. disappearing to the far side of the field.

The Brigadier put away his revolver and got out of the little car. He went over to Jo and helped her to her feet. 'Miss Grant, are you all right? You look a little battered, Sergeant Benton.'

'What's all this Wyatt Earp stuff?' demanded the Doctor indignantly. 'I didn't know you were armed. You know I don't approve of guns.'

'I am a serving soldier, Doctor, and guns are the tools of my trade,' said the Brigadier crisply. 'In view of what's been happening here, it seemed a sensible precaution. Incidentally, what *has* been happening here, Sergeant Benton? Just immediately, I mean.'

Benton explained about the assembly of drug dealers, and

the man who'd recognised him.

'What do you make of it, Doctor?' asked the Brigadier when he'd finished.

'It confirms what we knew already. Some criminal operation concerning drugs is under way, and it's connected with the festival.'

'Now, now, what's going on?' said a voice behind them. 'Firing off guns in a public place? Can't have that, you know.'

They turned and saw Sergeant Bob Slater, red faced and sweating, wheeling his faithful bicycle.

'We're all safe enough now.' said the Doctor sardonically. 'The forces of law and order have arrived. A bobby on a bike!'

Sergeant Slater was still looking sternly at the Brigadier. 'Well sir? I'm waiting for your explanation.' He took out his notebook.

'I fired the weapon, which is fully authorised, once, in the air, to protect my friends. You would do better to concern yourself with that group over there by the tents, Sergeant. I am reliably informed that they are criminals to a man!'

Sergeant Slater looked shocked. 'Criminals? Oh no, sir, you got the wrong end of the stick there. Those gentlemen are businessmen from London, connected with the festival. Managers, record company executives, entrepreneurs and the like.' He put away his notebook and gave them a cheery grin. 'Well, I don't see as I need take official notice of this. Just high spirits I dare say. We all get a bit carried away at festival time.'

'A village Candide,' murmured the Doctor.

'Come again, sir?'

'Everything's for the best in the best of all possible worlds.'

'So it is, sir,' agreed Sergeant Slater. 'Now, you and your friends leave quietly and cause no more trouble and we'll say no more about it.'

He touched his helmet in salute and wheeled his bicycle away. 'Us cause trouble?' said Jo indignantly.

'I don't think we're going to get much help from the police,' said the Doctor. 'Not at this local level anyway.'

'I could bring troops down,' said the Brigadier. 'Put the whole place under martial law if necessary.'

The Doctor nodded. 'It may come to that – but not yet. Let's get back to the inn. Get in the car, Jo, I'll drive you. The Brigadier and Sergeant Benton can travel respectably in their

Land Rover.’

‘Have you got a plan, Doctor?’ asked the Brigadier.

‘I certainly have. Several pints of Hob’s Old Peculiar, followed by lunch.’

‘And after that?’

‘After that, I shall pay another visit to Lady Dempster. I still think she’s the key to the whole thing...’

Back at the inn they found Mike Yates, together with a UNIT trooper, unloading big suitcases from a truck.

‘I raided each of your quarters and filled a suitcase for each of you,’ he explained. ‘I just slung in anything that looked useful, hope it’s all right.’

Some time later, bathed, changed and refreshed, they were all at the end of an excellent lunch – cold roast beef salad and new potatoes, followed by apple pie.

They filled Mike Yates in about recent events in the village. although the Doctor left out the Brigadier’s reaction to Sophie.

He had no news for them, other than the fact that the spate of violent incidents all over England was continuing, and even increasing.

‘What are we going to do next then?’ he asked. ‘There doesn’t seem much point in going back to the festival site. From what you’ve told me that leaves this Lady Dempster, and the Master and his devil-worshipping chums at the abbey.’

‘Not a wonderful pair of prospects,’ said Jo. ‘Someone the Doctor says could help us but won’t.’

‘And someone who says he’ll help us, but can’t possibly be trusted,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Why don’t I just send for some troops and raid the abbey, Doctor? We could shut down this drug-growing operation at least – and we’d be in a much stronger position with the Master as our prisoner.’

‘Yes, but *he* wouldn’t,’ said the Doctor. ‘He can give us much more help – if he’s going to help – as a free agent.’

They were still arguing about this when the landlord came in and addressed the Doctor. ‘There’s someone asking to see you sir. Clerical gentleman.’

The Doctor looked surprised. ‘It can hardly be the vicar – not unless the new one’s arrived already. All right landlord, show him up.’

A few minutes later the landlord showed a black-robed figure into the room. A medium-sized man with a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, a high forehead and deep burning eyes.

It was the Master.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A MEETING WITH THE MASTER

‘Good afternoon, Doctor,’ said the Master, and bowed to the assembled group. ‘Miss Grant, Brigadier, Captain Yates, and Sergeant Benton. *All* my dear old UNIT friends. Quite a reunion! How nice to see you all again!’

There was a collective gasp of outrage.

The Brigadier spoke for everyone.

‘Since your recent relations with UNIT include planting a bomb, delivered by a hypnotised Miss Grant, in our HQ and installing a murderous telephone wire in an attempt to destroy the Doctor, that remark is a pretty astounding piece of insolence – even for you!’

The Master smiled. ‘Too kind, Brigadier.’

The Brigadier turned scarlet and started to splutter.

‘Let me thump him, Doctor,’ pleaded Sergeant Benton. ‘Just once!’

The Master produced a large immaculately white handkerchief from under his robes and waved it in the air. ‘Please Sergeant, no militarist aggression. I come under a flag of truce.’

‘Now see here, you scoundrel,’ began the Brigadier, ‘you can take your flag of truce and -’

‘Please, Brigadier,’ said the Master in shocked tones, glancing at Jo. ‘Ladies present!’

‘Don’t mind me, Brigadier,’ said Jo. ‘I could make one or two suggestions myself!’

The Doctor waved them to silence. ‘Don’t let him provoke you, Brigadier.’ He turned to the Master. ‘I can’t exactly say it’s a pleasure to see you, but it’s not without a certain interest. Why

are you here?’

‘If I might sit down?’ murmured the Master, and sank into a chair. ‘It’s a very warm afternoon, Doctor.’

The Doctor picked up an unused wine glass and a bottle of the wine they’d been drinking with lunch. He filled the glass and handed it to the Master. ‘It’s a perfectly respectable little claret. Not up to your Krug of course.’

The Master sipped his wine and raised his glass in a hint of a toast. The Doctor regarded him quizzically and Jo was struck, not for the first time, by the curious relationship between them.

You couldn’t call it friendship, though they might once have been friends. After all, the Master had made several determined attempts to kill the Doctor. All the same, there was something, a certain mutual regard. As if each felt that the universe would be a less interesting place without the other.

‘Well?’ said the Doctor. ‘Get on with it, old chap!’

‘I bring information, Doctor,’ said the Master. ‘Information – and an invitation.’

‘Go on.’

‘My – proprietor Hadley has returned.’

The Doctor guessed that the word ‘master’ had stuck in the Master’s throat. There was only one Master, as far as he was concerned, and he wasn’t used to being anyone’s number two. Was that why he was betraying his employer?

‘He wants to meet you.’ the Master went on. ‘As you know, I told him about you.’

This was too much for the Brigadier. ‘Why?’ he demanded. ‘If you’re supposed to be helping us, why betray the Doctor?’

Ignoring the interruption, the Master went on talking to the Doctor.

‘I also told him about your visit to the abbey, since he would certainly have found out anyway.’

‘How?’ asked the Doctor. ‘I thought you were in charge at the abbey. Couldn’t you have ordered your, er... disciples to keep silent?’

‘I could,’ said the Master. ‘Much good it would have done me. I’m surrounded by traitorous nincompoops, all devoted to Hadley, all jealous of my superior position. There would certainly have been at least one informer amongst them.’

‘Hard to get good help these days,’ murmured the Doctor.

‘There’s another reason,’ the Master went on. ‘Hadley’s not exactly a mind-reader, but he’s enormously sensitive to mood and atmosphere. Even if, by some miracle, I hadn’t been betrayed, he would have *sensed* that something was wrong.’

‘Quite a dilemma. What did you do?’

‘I told him the truth – well, almost the truth. As you know, Doctor, there’s nothing like a substantial portion of truth to strengthen a really good lie.’

‘And what lie did you tell?’

‘I told him you’d stumbled on our operation, discovered I was at the head of it, and thought there might be some profit in it for you. I said you’d offered your services.’ The Master smiled. ‘You might say you’re invited to a job interview, Doctor.’

‘Where and when?’

‘At the abbey – tonight.’

‘Of course. A night meeting in a ruined abbey full of devil-worshippers. Where else would one arrange to meet the Prince of Darkness?’

Their audience had been listening in increasing consternation.

‘You mustn’t go, Doctor,’ protested Jo. ‘You can’t possibly trust him.’

‘Out of the question,’ agreed the Brigadier. ‘It’s an obvious trap.’

‘Don’t risk it.’ said Benton.

‘Not unless we go with you,’ said Mike Yates.

‘We can discuss that later,’ said the Doctor impatiently. He turned back to the Master. ‘I’ll consider your invitation. You said you also had information for me.’

‘I do indeed.’ The Master looked at his empty glass. ‘Thirsty work, all this talking.’ The Doctor refilled his glass, and the Master went on. ‘Hadley was in a relaxed and boastful mood last night. He wanted an audience, and I provided it. He told me something about himself, about his past history.’

‘Did he tell you anything about his aims?’

‘World domination of course. What else? He and others of his kind ruled as gods in ancient times. In the later ages of Reason and Enlightenment they fell from favour. People stopped believing in them, and their power waned. Hadley tried to make a comeback in the chaos after World War Two.

Somewhere in the Greek Islands...’

The Brigadier gave a convulsive start. The Doctor looked at him and saw that he was staring straight ahead, his face pouring with sweat.

Jo went over to him. ‘Brigadier, are you all right?’

‘Yes... fine... thank you... Miss Grant,’ said the Brigadier with an effort. ‘Just... the heat. Carry on...’

The Master glanced curiously at the Brigadier, and went on with his story.

‘The attempt failed for some reason – he didn’t want to talk about that. But he did let one thing slip.’

The Doctor looked worriedly at the Brigadier, then looked back at the Master.

‘Go on.’

‘You’ve made the acquaintance of Lady Dempster and her family?’

‘We’ve met.’ said the Doctor briefly.

‘Hadley and the Dempsters are related in some way,’ said the Master. ‘At least, they belong to the same species. What’s more, the Dempsters are connected in some way with Hadley’s earlier defeat. He hates them for it.’

‘Why hasn’t he destroyed them?’

‘He doesn’t dare. They’re protected in some way – by someone even more powerful than Hadley.’

The Brigadier rose to his feet, his face convulsed.

‘Zeus!’ he gasped. ‘Must tell Zeus. Only one who can -’

He crashed to the ground.

The Doctor leaped up and went to kneel by the unconscious man. ‘Fainted,’ he said, after a brief examination. ‘Some intolerable mental strain. Get him to bed, he should be all right when he’s had some rest.’

Yates and Benton lifted the Brigadier’s body and carried him from the room. Jo hurried after them.

The Doctor and the Master were left alone.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor,’ said the Master. ‘I had no intention -’

‘You know, I believe you – for once.’

‘What do you think happened?’

Enmity apparently forgotten, the two were consulting like colleagues.

‘The Brigadier has some previous connection with this

business,’ said the Doctor. ‘Something that goes back a very long way. He had a very powerful reaction to the sight of Sophie, Lady Dempster’s granddaughter. Whatever happened has been buried, suppressed somehow. Seeing Sophie, what you said just now about Hadley and the Greek Islands, must have triggered those memories. The Brigadier is battling against some kind of mind-block. Hence the faint.’

‘I could hypnotise him,’ offered the Master.

It was a tribute to the strength of their temporary alliance that the Doctor actually considered this for a moment. Then he shook his head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why not? There may be vital information buried in his mind.’

‘I don’t want to risk harming him. He’s very obstinate and it might not work. Besides, it would be most improper – giving you access to the world’s security secrets.’

The Master shrugged. ‘Just a thought. The offer remains open.’

‘Perhaps as a last resort. But I have a modest skill in mesmerism myself. *I’ll* do any hypnotising that needs to be done. And it may not be necessary. After all, he’s told us something very valuable already.’

‘He has?’

‘You heard him mention Zeus?’

‘I assumed he was babbling.’

‘You said your friend Hadley and his kind ruled the ancient world as gods?’

‘What of it?’

‘Zeus was King of the Gods.’

‘So?’

‘You just told me yourself. Zeus must be Lady Dempster’s powerful protector – and very probably, the one who frustrated Hadley’s earlier plans. You heard what the Brigadier said. “Tell Zeus!” But how?’

‘You could try praying.’

‘Or sacrificing a goat? No, I think I’ll try talking to Lady Dempster. She’s the key to this whole thing.’

The Master rose. ‘I’ll leave it to you, Doctor. You won’t forget your appointment tonight?’ He smiled. ‘Do you know Hadley’s name, in the ancient world? It was Hades, Doctor. The

King of Hell. You're invited to sup with the devil, so to speak.'

'I must take care to bring a very long spoon!'

The Master raised a hand in farewell, and went from the room. A few minutes later, the Doctor went to the window and watched him ride away on his ancient bicycle.

Jo came into the room and joined him at the window.

'Bit of a comedown for the Master, isn't it?'

'He's very adaptable. How's the Brigadier?'

'Sleeping peacefully – well, restlessly actually. Keeps muttering about someone called Sophie. Mike and Benton are rather shocked. What's going on, Doctor?'

The Doctor gave her a brief account of the Brigadier's reaction to meeting Sophie, and told her his theory about long-buried memories.

'Poor old Brig,' said Jo. 'Hard to see him as the great lover.'

'Everybody was young once, Jo!'

'Even you, Doctor?'

'Don't be so cheeky!'

Jo was silent for a moment.

'You're going to that meeting tonight, aren't you?'

'I expect so.'

'But why? Can you really trust the Master?'

'Yes and no.'

'Do you really think he's on our side now?'

'Again – yes and no.'

'Doctor, please, give me a proper answer.'

'I'm trying to Jo, but it's complicated. Not all questions have a yes or no answer. The Master's afraid that this Hadley will turn against him and destroy him. So he wants to come over to us. But he's equally afraid that Hadley will prove too much for us and win after all – so perhaps he'd better stay loyal to Hadley after all.'

'So what's he decided to do?'

'He's trying to have his cake and eat it. He's playing one side against the other until he sees who comes out on top.'

'So we don't know which side he's on?'

The Doctor grinned. 'There's only one side for the Master, Jo – his own.'

'So what happens now?'

'You and the others stay here and look after the Brigadier.'

‘What about you?’

‘I’m going to see Lady Dempster.’

‘She wouldn’t help before.’

‘She might now. Things are coming to a climax.’

‘And if she won’t?’

The Doctor’s face was serious. ‘She must. It’s our only chance.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

APPEAL

The summer afternoon was quiet and still as the Doctor swung his long legs out of Bessie outside Dempster Manor. The countryside dozed under a heat haze and even the chirp of some distant bird sounded sleepy. It might well be, thought the Doctor, the calm before a most terrible storm.

He went up the steps and hammered on the door knocker. As before, a timid maid answered the door.

‘Doctor Smith to see Lady Dempster.’

This time he seemed to be expected. ‘If you’ll come this way sir?’

He was shown to the terrace where Lady Dempster, Herbie and Sophie were being served afternoon tea by the other maid. (The Doctor never did quite work out which was Emily and which was Jane.)

Lady Dempster looked tired and strained, but she was her usual impeccably hospitable self. ‘Doctor, how nice to see you again.’

‘Nice to see you again,’ said Herbie effusively. ‘I hope we have a more restful visit than we did last time – when your lustful soldier friend tried to ravish poor Sophie.’

‘Shut up, Herbie,’ said Sophie and Lady Dempster in chorus.

‘How is your friend?’ asked Sophie.

‘Resting,’ said the Doctor. ‘He’s deeply mortified about his behaviour. Sends his sincere apologies.’

‘Please, tell him to forget it,’ said Sophie.

The Doctor smiled wryly. ‘He *had* forgotten – now he’s starting to remember. That’s what’s causing him so much trouble.’

There was a moment of tense silence, broken by Lady Dempster. ‘Come and have some tea, Doctor.’

The Doctor accepted a seat and a cup of Earl Grey. He took a token sip, put down his cup and got straight to the point. ‘I need to speak to you, Lady Dempster, on a matter of some considerable urgency.’

Lady Dempster did her best to look mildly surprised. ‘Of course, Doctor. I am at your service.’

The Doctor glanced at Herbie and Sophie. Both were trying to appear relaxed and casual – and both were clearly tense and anxious.

‘I’m sorry if this seems rude,’ he said. ‘But I need to speak to you alone.’

‘Of course. Sophie, Herbie, if you’ll excuse us?’

Herbie and Sophie looked far from pleased, but they didn’t dare to disobey. Silently they finished their tea and left the terrace. ‘More tea, Doctor?’ asked Lady Dempster.

The Doctor refused to be distracted. ‘Thank you, no. Last time we spoke, Lady Dempster, you were good enough to tell me something of your family history.’

Lady Dempster held up a protesting hand. ‘Please, those are painful memories.’

‘I don’t see why. There wasn’t a word of truth in them.’

‘Doctor!’ said Lady Dempster in outraged tones.

The Doctor said, ‘Please don’t keep up the charade. Certain information has come into my possession. I now know who you are and what you are – all three of you.’

Suddenly he was facing a completely different Lady Dempster. Gone was the outraged English aristocrat and in her place was a stranger, far more powerful being.

‘Indeed, Doctor? And what do you think you know?’

‘All through human history there have been accounts of supernatural beings, a whole spectrum of them, who interact with humanity. They’re more or less immortal and they can take human shape.’

‘What an extraordinary idea!’

The Doctor knew that she was trying to make him feel foolish. Undeterred, he carried on. ‘Some become kings and emperors or saints – or monsters. Others seek positions of influence behind the scenes and play a kind of chess-game with

human history.’ He paused. ‘In ancient times the most powerful were worshipped as gods. Like you and your family.’

‘Really, Doctor? Do you actually believe that you are sitting on the terrace of an English country house on a summer afternoon, taking tea with a goddess?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘A retired goddess, perhaps? Let me ask you the rudest question of all, Lady Dempster. How old are you?’

She studied his face for a while, saw the determination in his eyes and abandoned her pretence. ‘My dear Doctor, I can’t possibly remember. Many thousands of years.’

‘You were a goddess in ancient Greece?’

‘I was thought to be so. I was Demeter then.’

‘And your grandchildren?’

‘Sophie was Persephone. In fact, she’s my daughter. Herbie was Hermes.’

‘Ah yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘The messenger of the gods. Said to be somewhat tricky, and unreliable. Patron of merchants, messengers and thieves.’

‘Herbie’s a good boy at heart,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘A little volatile, perhaps.’

‘And after Ancient Greece?’

‘Times changed, Doctor. The ages of Reason and Enlightenment arrived, the age of Science. People didn’t believe in us any more, and our power waned. We wearied of being gods, some of us at least, and sought existence as ordinary mortals. We stayed in Greece for many years – until the end of the latest human war.’

‘When you met my friend, the Brigadier?’

‘He was a young lieutenant in those days. He fell in love with Sophie – she was called Sephie then – and became involved in some distressing and dramatic events’

‘Events connected with Hades and his attempt to regain his old power?’

She bowed her head. ‘That is so. Alistair behaved nobly, indeed he saved Persephone. Afterwards, we thought it best to take away his memories.’

‘Which were triggered when he met you all again?’

‘It would appear so. I’m sorry if it caused him distress.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘So much for the past. What concerns

me now is the present. I believe that Hades has returned, and is making another attempt to regain his power. Isn't that so?"

For a moment Lady Dempster didn't reply. Then she said, "He wanted us to help him, to join him. We refused, all of us, even Hermes. Hades was angry. He warned us, if we wouldn't help, we were not to interfere. We must stand aside."

"Which you have done – at some cost to yourself."

"What else could I have done? He threatened the children."

"Nevertheless, I must ask for your help. Another of the Brigadier's memories returned a little while ago. He spoke of Zeus. He said that Zeus was the only one who could foil Hades' plans."

"Zeus is Persephone's father. He is the most powerful of us all. The greatest and the wisest and the most noble. But he has gone."

"Where?"

"Away," said Lady Dempster simply. "Into some far dimension where he can be at peace. He was the greatest of us – but the oldest and most weary as well. He wearied of his godhead, of the problems and passions of humanity. He wants no more to do with them – or with us, I'm afraid."

"Can you contact him?"

"Perhaps. Our minds, all our minds, are linked telepathically to some degree. But Zeus is remote now. It would be hard."

"Will you try?"

Lady Dempster didn't answer.

"Please," said the Doctor urgently. "Don't you owe this planet something? It was a playground for you and your kind for untold thousands of years. More recently it has been your refuge. Do you really want to see it plunged into chaos under the rule of Hades? You've seen what he has done here, in this little village. Can you imagine the carnage he will cause on a worldwide scale?"

Still she did not speak.

The Doctor continued his plea. "All I ask you to do is to contact Zeus, and tell him what is going on."

"Even if I do – he may refuse to interfere."

"We must risk that. If he is as great and as good as you say, he will act to foil Hades once again."

"And if he doesn't?"

"If Zeus won't help, my friends and I will try to defeat Hades

alone.'

'He will destroy you.'

'Very possibly. But we will have tried.'

'Very well, Doctor, I will try to reach Zeus, tonight. I will tell him what is happening here, and await his judgement.'

'I thank you – for all humanity. Not that I'm human myself, of course, but I have a certain fondness for the species...'

'What are you, Doctor? Who are you? I sensed that you were no mere human as soon as we met. Are you one of us?'

'Nothing so exalted. I'm simply a visitor to this planet. For the moment, I'm exiled here. One day I hope to resume my travels.'

It was clear that he did not intend to say any more. He rose. 'I must be on my way. With your permission I'll call again, later tonight. I very much hope you will have good news for me. Don't trouble your maid, I'll see myself out.'

The Doctor gave a little bow of farewell and left the terrace. Moments later, Lady Dempster heard the front door close behind him.

No sooner had the Doctor gone than Herbie and Sophie were back on the terrace. They didn't enter from the house. They simply appeared from nowhere. These days their powers of teleportation were little used – for one thing, Lady Dempster discouraged anything that might call attention to them. But in times of emergency...

Herbie looked accusingly at Lady Dempster. 'What have you done?'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Really, Herbie, your manners...'

'He's talked you into it, hasn't he? You've promised to help the Doctor.'

'I have merely agreed to do what I should have done long ago. To contact Zeus, if I can, and let him deal with the situation.'

Sophie too was concerned. 'Is that wise?'

'Wise?' sneered Herbie. 'It's suicidal. If Hades learns that we've come out against him he'll blast our souls to the furthest reaches of the cosmos. We may be immortals, but I've no wish to spend eternity wandering through nothingness.'

'Hades will not dare to harm us.' said Lady Dempster, with rather more confidence than she felt. 'He knows that we are

under the protection of Zeus.’

‘Zeus is far away,’ Sophie pointed out gently. ‘Even if you can reach him, he may not trouble himself to help us – or the humans.’

‘My dear child, there is no way of telling what Zeus will do.’ Lady Dempster sighed. ‘There never was. However, the Doctor has convinced me that it is my duty to try to contact him and that is what I intend to do. The matter is closed.’

‘You must do what you think best,’ said Sophie. ‘When will you try?’

‘Tonight. I shall try to reach him tonight.’

‘You’re mad,’ said Herbie. ‘Raving mad the pair of you!’

He was so annoyed that he vanished like a puff of smoke.

Sophie sat down close to her mother and took her hand. ‘There were so many of us once and now there’s only the three of us left – and Hades.’

‘Our time has gone,’ said Lady Dempster gently. ‘Once we were all powerful here and did as we pleased. All that is over now. But as the Doctor says, we owe this world a debt. And I will not permit Hades to reduce the entire planet to bloody chaos in a fit of pique.’

‘But can we stop him, Mother?’

‘To quote the Doctor again – we can try!’

Herbie found that he had unthinkingly teleported himself to the library. Or perhaps, not so unthinkingly. He stood by the desk staring down at the telephone, wondering what to do now.

Herbie’s predominant characteristic was a strong sense of self-preservation. It was for this reason that he had formed a sort of loose alliance with Hades, feeding him odd scraps of information from the Dempster camp, so to speak. He tried hard to give the impression that, much as he himself was in sympathy with Hades, his duty to Lady Dempster, to Demeter, prevented him from giving open support.

If Hades failed, he could always deny everything. And if he succeeded – well, it would do no harm to have been of some help to the new ruler of Earth.

Lady Dempster’s decision presented him with something of a dilemma. He was genuinely fond of Demeter, and of Sophie of course. It would hurt him to betray them. But his fear of Hades,

and of Hades' wrath was equally genuine.

Herbie didn't believe that Demeter would succeed in reaching Zeus. But that was scarcely the point. If Hades learned that the attempt had even been made, he would take it as a hostile act and wreak his revenge on all three of them.

Unless somebody warned him – in which event, that person, at least, should be safe.

Herbie picked up the phone and dialled the number for the abbey.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CONFLICT

The minute the Doctor arrived back at the inn he was seized upon by Jo.

‘Thank goodness you’re back, Doctor. The Brigadier’s been screaming for you. He’s having a planning conference in the private parlour. He’s commandeered it for his temporary HQ.’

‘Up and about again is he?’ asked the Doctor.

‘I should say so. He woke up soon after you left, bounced out of bed and started shooting off orders like a firecracker. He’s been on the phone to Whitehall for hours.’

It occurred to the Doctor that the Brigadier, having shown a few moments of uncharacteristic weakness, was now determined to make up for it with a display of military efficiency.

‘Oh dear,’ he muttered as he followed Jo upstairs. ‘I hope he’s not overcompensating.’

The Brigadier was not only up and about again, but crackling with energy – not just his old self, but more so. He was back in uniform and so were Benton and Yates. Benton sat at a newly installed communications set-up, issuing orders and receiving reports.

The Brigadier and Captain Yates were standing over a map-strewn table, Yates nodding and taking notes as the Brigadier pointed to various strategic spots with his swagger stick.

Standing in the doorway, the Doctor surveyed the military trio.

‘What’s all this?’ he asked disrespectfully. ‘A re-run of D-Day?’

‘Time for action,’ said the Brigadier briskly. ‘The pop festival starts tonight!’

'I'm well aware of that,' said the Doctor testily. 'As a matter of fact, I've just been taking some action myself.'

'Splendid!' said the Brigadier. 'Tell us about it!'

It occurred to the Doctor that this was going to be easier said than done – especially with the Brigadier in his present brisk, no-nonsense mood.

'I've been to see Lady Dempster,' he said. 'I've persuaded her to try to contact someone very influential.'

'And who is this someone?'

'Her brother. He happens to be Hades' elder brother as well. The point is, his authority is acknowledged by all the members of this particular group of beings. He's a kind of father figure. And he's the only one who can put a stop to Hades' plan.'

'His name?'

The Doctor was becoming irritated by the Brigadier's tone. 'Well, if you want names... I don't know what he calls himself now, but in ancient mythology he was known as Zeus. Father of Apollo, Athena, Artemis, Castor, Pollux, Dionysius, Hebe, Heracles, Minos and, of course, Hermes and Persephone. Your Sephie, Brigadier.'

'Quite a family man!' whispered Jo to Mike Yates.

The Brigadier winced at the mention of Sephie, but soon recovered himself.

'Do I understand, Doctor, that your proposed solution to this problem is to call upon the aid of an ancient Greek god?'

'Well, it was your idea in a way – though you probably don't remember.'

'I see,' said the Brigadier. 'Thank you, Doctor. I wish you every success.'

'Very kind,' said the Doctor sardonically. He suddenly realised that, perhaps because of his recent traumatic experiences, the Brigadier was dismissing all the supernatural elements of the situation, and clinging to military certainties.

The Brigadier tapped the map with his swagger stick. 'Now, allow me to tell you what I propose to do. I've been in touch with Whitehall and informed them that the festival is the scene of a major drug deal, and a possible civil insurrection. I've been given the authority to call in troops, not just UNIT forces, but regular army and armed police. Anyone who wants to go to the festival will be allowed to go – in fact they're flooding in now,

roads are jammed. But there's a cordon of troops moving in behind them. Once the festival is under way, that cordon will close in. There'll be a ring of steel around this village. They can all get into the festival, but they'll never get out.'

'I see,' said the Doctor. 'And what happens next?'

'*Every* person at that festival will be detained, interrogated and searched. Special camps have been set up. All drugs will be seized. In due course the innocent will be released, the guilty arrested, and the operation will be over.' The Brigadier tucked his swagger stick under his arm with a triumphant flourish. 'What do you think of that, Doctor?'

'I'll tell you what I think, Brigadier. It would be a risky enough scheme if you were only dealing with a practical civil order problem. Your troops will descend upon thousands of hippies, crowded into a relatively small space. People with a natural hatred of any kind of authority, already inflamed by sex, drugs and rock and roll! But civilians, nonetheless, Brigadier, and unarmed. Will your troops open fire if they're attacked?'

'Minimum necessary force will be used.'

'In addition there'll be a sizeable contingent of professional criminals – we found that out this afternoon. In all probability, some of them *will* be armed. What will happen to the relatively innocent bystanders if the shooting starts? You could have a massacre on your hands.'

'We're talking about trained and disciplined troops, Doctor. There'll be no massacre.'

'There were trained and disciplined troops at Amritsar. Things will go wrong, they always do! Don't you soldiers ever learn?'

'I'm sorry you feel that way, Doctor, but my mind is made up. Besides, the operation is already under way.'

'Don't you see, man, you're ignoring the real problem. We're not just dealing with crooks and hippies, but with a supernatural being with abnormal powers. Think of all that happened to you on the way down here, the floods and the fire. Think of the things that have been happening in this village.'

'I can't cope with the supernatural -', began the Brigadier.

'You have coped with the supernatural,' said the Doctor urgently. 'Think of what happened when you were young, when you first met Sephie. You met Hades too, and defeated him –

but not with troops, not with guns and bullets.'

As soon as he had spoken the Doctor saw that it had been a mistake. Not only could the Brigadier not remember what had happened so long ago, he didn't want to remember it. He didn't dare.

'That's enough, Doctor,' he snapped. 'I can't permit you to interfere with the performance of my duty. I shall leave the supernatural side of things to you. I must act as I think fit.'

The Doctor made a last despairing appeal. 'Brigadier, please, you mustn't do this! I won't let you.'

The Brigadier's face hardened. 'Captain Yates, Sergeant Benton, carry on with the operation as planned. If the Doctor gives you any trouble, place him under arrest.'

Suddenly the Brigadier staggered and reached for the map table to steady himself. For a moment his face was haggard with exhaustion. Then, with a mighty effort, he straightened up.

'Are you all right, sir?' asked Mike Yates.

'Perfectly all right, thank you, Captain Yates. Just a little tired. I shall be in my room. Inform me of any fresh developments immediately.'

The Brigadier turned abruptly and marched out of the room. There followed a moment of embarrassed silence.

Then Mike Yates said, 'Sorry about that. The Brigadier isn't quite himself, he's a bit – hyped up.' He looked apologetically at the Doctor. 'All the same, orders is orders.'

'All right, Mike,' said the Doctor wearily. 'You won't have to arrest me, I won't give you any trouble.'

'He's not well,' said Jo. 'Threatening to arrest the Doctor like that. Can't you take over command, Mike? Declare him non compos mentis or something?'

'I'd get shot,' said Yates simply.

'Mike's right,' said the Doctor. 'In military terms the Brigadier's behaviour is perfectly normal. The trouble is, we're not dealing with a normal military problem.' He looked round the room. 'Well, good luck, all of you. I'll see you later.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Jo.

'First of all get some rest. Even non tortoises need *some* sleep. Then I shall go and see Lady Dempster. If her efforts have been successful, you may not need to stage World War Three after all.'

When the Doctor came onto the terrace, Lady Dempster stood by the balustrade, her hands resting on the parapet. Her face rapt. she was gazing up at the skies. She wore a classically styled white evening gown, and looked, the Doctor thought, very like the Demeter of ancient times. Not daring to disturb her, he waited silently.

Time passed – how long the Doctor wasn't sure. Suddenly Lady Dempster shuddered and seemed to come to life. She turned and became aware of the Doctor's presence. 'I tried, Doctor. I promise you. I tried my utmost.'

'Were you successful?'

She shook her head. 'I'm sorry. Zeus must have travelled unimaginably far, beyond the reach of my mind and of my soul. I projected myself as far as my powers allow, further than I have ever gone before. I could find no trace of him.'

The Doctor said, 'We must reach him. We must!' He moved to stand beside her. 'There is one more hope. If you will cooperate, it may be possible to boost the power of your mind. It's not without its dangers, but -'

One of the maids ran on to the terrace. 'Your ladyship, it's Miss Sophie...'

Lady Dempster swung round. 'What about Miss Sophie?'

'She's gone,' sobbed the maid. 'Vanished!'

'Vanished? How? What happened?'

'She went for a lie-down, your ladyship. Later on she called down on the house phone to say would I bring her some hot chocolate. When I went up with the chocolate, not ten minutes later, the window was wide open and she was gone.'

'Perhaps she changed her mind and went for a walk.'

'At this time of night, your ladyship? In her robe? The clothes she'd been wearing were still on her chair. Besides, there was this, on the bed.'

She held out a parchment scroll.

Lady Dempster took the scroll and unrolled it on the stone parapet.

It was inscribed in glowing red letters. The message was simple.

I HAVE TAKEN PERSEPHONE. REFRAIN FROM INTERFERENCE AND SHE WILL BE RETURNED TO YOU UNHARMED. INTERFERE ONCE MORE AND

YOU WILL NEVER SEE HER AGAIN.'

The words glowed brighter and suddenly the parchment scroll burst into flame. In seconds it had crumbled into ashes, which blew away in the gentle night breeze.

'There is your answer,' said Lady Dempster. 'I can't try again. I dare not.'

The Doctor strode up and down the terrace, thinking furiously. 'How did he know? How did he know you'd agreed to help me?'

'Nothing is hidden from Hades,' said Lady Dempster fatalistically.

'Nonsense,' said the Doctor. 'He may be powerful, but he's not all-seeing. Besides, he's got a lot on his mind at the moment. If he knows, it's because somebody told him. Somebody here.' He stopped pacing and swung round. 'Will you call Herbie, please?'

Lady Dempster raised her voice. 'Herbie! Come here at once!'

And Herbie was there, standing on the terrace before them.

Lady Dempster said, 'Herbie, Sophie's been kidnapped. Hades has taken her.'

Herbie bowed his head. 'Yes, I know.'

'You know because you told Hades that Lady Dempster had agreed to help me,' said the Doctor sternly. 'The responsibility is yours.'

Herbie made no attempt to deny it. He went over to Lady Dempster. 'I'm so sorry. I'd no idea something like this would happen.'

'Why not?' said the Doctor. 'What did you think he'd do?'

'I don't know. Turn up here, perhaps, warn you off somehow. I never dreamed he would attack you through Sophie.'

'It was the obvious move,' said the Doctor. 'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

'What can I do?'

'Help me to get her back.'

'Do you think you can?' asked Lady Dempster eagerly.

'Anything's possible,' said the Doctor. 'Well, young man?'

Herbie, genuinely penitent, at least for the moment, summoned up his courage.

'I'll do anything I can.'

The Doctor turned to Lady Dempster. 'If I bring Sophie back safely, will you make one more attempt to reach Zeus?'

'Once I see her here, yes.'

'What are we going to do?' asked Herbie.

'He'll be holding her captive at the abbey, at least for the time being. As it happens I have an appointment there myself tonight.' A sudden thought struck the Doctor. 'When you sent your message to Hades. did you mention me?'

'No, I didn't see any reason to involve you. I'm not all bad you know, Doctor, and I've got nothing against you. I simply said that Demeter was trying to reach Zeus.'

'Excellent,' said the Doctor. 'Then there's still a chance. I've got one rather unreliable ally on the inside, and with you helping as well...'

Actually that made two unreliable allies, thought the Doctor. He looked at Herbie, wondering if his nerve would hold. Herbie and the Master! It wasn't exactly the back-up team he would have chosen, but it would have to do.

'Is there anything I can do to help?' asked Lady Dempster.

The Doctor shook his head. 'Stay here, rest, gather your strength. I'm afraid you're going to need it, if we're to succeed in reaching Zeus.'

'You said something about boosting the power of my mind? Can you really do that?'

'I have certain mental abilities of my own. Not in the same class as yours, but there's a remote possibility that together... Herbie and Sophie can help too. We can go into all that later, when I return with Sophie.'

'You're very confident, Doctor.'

'I daren't be otherwise,' said the Doctor. 'My friend the Brigadier has set up a military operation that may well turn into a massacre even before Hades turns his attention to it. Once he does, it'll be a bloodbath. And that will only be the opening move. The first step towards a world of blood and chaos and anarchy. ruled by the Prince of Darkness. So you see we can't fail – we mustn't. The stakes are too high.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

HADES

When the Brigadier returned from his second nap he found the temporary HQ humming with activity. Benton was at the radio, dispatching orders and receiving information. Jo sat beside him, filing and collating reports, Mike Yates was studying a list of troop movements.

Jo studied the Brigadier closely as he came into the room. He looked more like his old self. Much of the tension was gone from his body. He was, thought Jo thankfully, coming down from his previous exalted state of military fervour. Maybe he'd cancel the whole operation.

He returned Yates and Benton's salutes and gave everyone an amiable nod of greeting. 'Miss Grant. Captain Yates, Sergeant Benton. Everything on schedule?'

'Yes sir,' said Benton. 'All units in place and ready to move.'

'Excellent. Where's the Doctor?'

'Gone off somewhere, I'm afraid, sir,' said Mike Yates. He looked at the Brigadier cautiously, wondering if there'd be another explosion, more threats of arrest.

The Brigadier didn't seem too perturbed. 'Typical! Still, I expect he'll turn up at the last moment, he usually does. How are things at the festival Benton?'

The festival ground was being monitored by a top-secret spy satellite, courtesy of the CIA, with the reports passed on to the Brigadier's temporary HQ

'Crammed to capacity apparently, sir. They don't seem to be turning anyone away though.'

'What time's the official opening?'

'Not until eleven o'clock, sir – there's some kind of opening

ceremony at midnight. After that it's an all-night job.'

'Very good. We'll move in just before the ceremony.'

Jo Grant and Mike Yates exchanged worried glances. Despite his return to a more normal mood, the Brigadier seemed determined to go ahead with the operation. Both of them had been impressed by what the Doctor had said. But could they, did they dare, protest?

Suddenly Sergeant Benton rose to his feet, standing rigidly to attention.

'Permission to speak, sir?'

The Brigadier looked at him with mild surprise. 'Yes, of course, Sergeant.'

'With respect, sir, are you quite certain about this whole operation? Only – the Doctor seemed very set against it, sir. And – well, he's usually worth listening to.'

There was another silence.

Then the Brigadier said, 'I was a bit harsh with him, wasn't I?'

Nobody said anything.

'Must have been a bit overtired,' the Brigadier went on. 'I'll sort it out with him later.' In the same quiet voice he went on, 'You see, the problem is this, Benton. As far as I could gather from what he says, the Doctor thinks we're facing a paranormal problem, and he's trying to fix up a paranormal solution. Well, good luck to him. Perhaps it'll work, and we can all go home without firing a shot. Believe me. if that happens, no-one will be more pleased than I will.' He paused. '*But we can't rely on that! We can't sit on our hands and hope for the best. We're soldiers, even you in a way, Miss Grant, and we must try to solve the problem with the means at our disposal. Perhaps the Doctor's right, and we're heading for disaster. But we have to do our best to defend the realm, even if it costs lives – even if it costs us our own lives. That's what soldiers do. Understood, Sergeant Benton?*'

'Yes sir. Thank you, sir.'

'Miss Grant? Captain Yates? Any questions?'

'No questions, sir,' said Mike Yates.

'No sir,' said Jo Grant.

'Very good,' said the Brigadier. 'Carry on!'

The black-robed figure of the Master stood waiting at the abbey

gates as the Doctor drew up in Bessie.

‘Welcome, Doctor. You come most carefully upon your hour.’

The Doctor gave him a quizzical look. ‘You’re a cultured villain, I’ll say that for you. Shakespeare, I fancy?’

‘Hamlet.’

‘Ah yes, the play that’s full of quotations. We didn’t name a precise hour as I remember. How did you know what time I’d arrive? Have you been hanging about here all night on the off-chance? Or am I being telepathically tracked?’

‘Nothing so elaborate, Doctor. A minion with a telescope in one of the ruined towers.’

‘I see.’

The Doctor hoped that the minion hadn’t spotted Herbie, whom he’d dropped off close to the abbey. Still, Herbie, who proposed to enter the abbey by some private route of his own, was a regular visitor. Even if spotted, he could probably account for his presence.

‘Come this way, Doctor. Your future employer is waiting.’

As they walked up the long drive that led to the ruined abbey, the Doctor noticed that the protective mind-field with its oppressive atmosphere of fear and terror was no longer present.

‘What’s happened to the Ring of Confidence?’

‘The mind barrier? No longer necessary. Events are approaching their climax Doctor, there’ll be much coming and going tonight. Besides, I think it cost our host a certain amount of mental effort to maintain. He has much to do tonight, and he wants nothing to detract from his concentration.’

‘So he’s not all-powerful?’

‘He’s something very close to it,’ said the Master. ‘As you’ll shortly discover. I warn you Doctor, don’t provoke him with any of your usual flippancy, he has no sense of humour. And don’t lie to him any more than you have to. His instinct for self-preservation is uncanny.’

‘It’s a wonder you’ve survived so long yourself. Though, of course, your talents for deception and treachery are exceptional.’

‘Thank you, Doctor.’

As they turned a corner of the ruins, the Doctor saw a line of trucks on the driveway. Tough-looking, roughly dressed men were carrying crates and boxes from nearby outbuildings to the

trucks. Every now and again a fully loaded truck drew away.

As they entered the giant greenhouse by a side door, the Doctor stopped and stood for a moment, looking round. The plant racks were stripped and bare.

‘Harvested, Doctor. Harvested, dried, processed – we’ve got quite a factory here – and ready for distribution.’

‘Those crates contain Sarg?’

‘Sarg and various other drugs, compounds and derivatives. Quite a cocktail of drugs – with some very diverting side-effects.’

‘Where are the trucks going?’

‘To the festival of course. It’s the distribution centre. Dealers from all over the country are waiting to move the drugs on and distribute them. There’ll be lots of free samples for the genuine festival-goers of course. It should be quite a party.’

The Doctor was appalled. ‘Do you realise what will happen if you flood the festival – and the country – with unlimited supplies of the most dangerous drugs in the galaxy? Bloodshed and chaos, the breakdown of society... Is that what Hadley wants?’

‘Yes, Doctor, that’s precisely what he wants. What could be more delightful for the Lord of Misrule?’

‘Where do the drug dealers fit into all this – the professional criminals?’

‘They believe Hadley is an international drug lord, with a scheme to hook the entire country on a new drug. Once that’s done they think that they’ll control future supplies and make a fortune.’ The Master laughed. ‘The poor fools don’t realise that they’re putting themselves out of business. Hadley has no interest in money, he’s happy to give the drugs away.’

‘Why involve the drug dealers at all?’

‘They have a useful distribution network. Besides they’ll provide useful scapegoats, someone to take the blame. Just until his rule is absolute, of course. After that it won’t matter.’

The Doctor looked curiously at him. ‘You’re being very frank.’

‘Why not? I’m simply telling you what is going to happen.’

‘You’ve changed your tune, haven’t you? Why ask my help if you’re certain Hadley will win?’

The Master glanced around the empty echoing greenhouse. ‘The situation has changed, Doctor. I’ve been having second

thoughts.'

'I rather thought you might.'

'Can you blame me? Your only chance of success was to contact Zeus – and you've failed! Hades has checkmated any further attempts by kidnapping Sophie. The Brigadier's military manoeuvres will only make matters worse.'

'Then what am I doing here?'

'I'm offering you a chance to join the winning side, Doctor! Join me and serve Hades loyally – at least until it's safe for us to overthrow him. We may yet be able to turn all this to our advantage.'

'You're so twisted you'll end up stabbing yourself in the back some day! Are you serious?'

'Deadly serious. You were going to pretend to let Hades recruit you, weren't you? Just do it in reality. It's your only hope.'

'And if I refuse?'

'Then I shall have to provide an explanation for your presence here. And the only acceptable one is...'

The Doctor completed the thought. 'That as a loyal servant of Hades you brought me here to trap me. In other words, you'll betray me.'

'Only with the greatest reluctance, Doctor. Please don't make it necessary.'

'I'll think about it,' said the Doctor. 'Now, hadn't we better be getting on? We don't want to keep our future employer waiting.'

The interview was crucially important to the Doctor. Not that he had any intention of serving Hades, but the Master and Hades were the most dangerous beings in the abbey. The longer he could keep them occupied, the more time Herbie would have to succeed in his task.

The Master led the Doctor down steps, along corridors and into the comfortable study where they had talked before. He rapped on the door and a deep voice said, 'Enter.'

The Master said, 'My colleague the Doctor, Lord Hades.'

He stood aside and waved the Doctor forward.

A man, what appeared to be a man, stood by the fireplace. He was tall and thin and he wore an immaculate dark suit. His long, thin face was darkly handsome, his green eyes a little slanted and his hair jet-black. He looked, thought the Doctor,

like a distinguished foreign diplomat. For the Prince of Darkness he was something of an anti-climax.

Nevertheless, the Doctor bowed low. 'A great honour to meet you, Lord Hades.'

'I sense disappointment,' said Hades.

There was an ear-splitting crash and a blinding flash of light. Suddenly Hades' body glowed, blurred and grew...

The glow faded and there, towering over them, stood the Devil himself. Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, the Lord of Misrule.

It was the Devil of medieval tradition. The great horned head, the burning yellow eyes and savage fangs. Clawed hands, clawed feet, great leathery wings folded about the massive black body.

'Do you find this more impressive, Doctor?' boomed Hades.

The Doctor had seen too much of the galaxy to be impressed by a bang and a flash and a bit of shapechanging. He stood his ground and bowed again. 'Most impressive, Lord Hades. Perhaps a little intimidating for everyday use.'

The Devil-form blurred and vanished, and once again the elegantly suited human stood by the fireplace.

'You do not lack courage at least,' said Hades. 'You wish to serve me, Doctor?'

'From what my colleague here tells me I am destined to serve you, Lord Hades – together with everyone on this planet. I merely seek to render service to your supreme greatness in a position worthy of my humble talents.'

'What was it old Disraeli used to say?' thought the Doctor. "Everyone likes flattery – and when it comes to royalty, lay it on with a trowel." And the king of hell is royalty after all.'

It seemed to work. 'You answer well,' said Hades. He glanced at the Master. 'You should learn from your compatriot, he knows how to show proper respect.'

The Doctor suppressed a smile. Clearly the Master's grovelling hadn't been up to scratch recently.

There was a quickly concealed flash of anger in the Master's eyes.

'Your pardon, Great One,' he said. 'I shall endeavour to mend my ways.'

Hades turned his attention back to the Doctor. 'Tell me of yourself. You are not a native of this planet?'

'I come from the same race as this one who calls himself the Master.' The Doctor let a hint of scorn creep into the final words. 'Like him, I am a renegade, a fugitive from my own people. They immobilised my transport, and exiled me to this planet.'

'You do not care what becomes of it?'

'This world is my prison. You may destroy it with my good will.'

'Excellent! I accept your service, Doctor. You may assist the Master in his duties. After tonight, I may find other work for you. I sense that your intelligence is superior to his. You may leave me now. I have matters to discuss with your colleague.'

The Doctor bowed low and withdrew. The interview had been short. Had it been too short? He needn't have worried.

As soon as he emerged into the corridor, an exultant Herbie appeared in front of him. 'I've found her, Doctor! All we've got to do now is get her out!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ESCAPE

The Doctor took Herbie's arm and drew him quickly along the corridor. 'Sssh!' When they were well away from Hadley's door he said, 'Well done, Herbie. Where's Sophie?'

'Just along here, under guard. There's a force-field as well. I think I can cope with it if you can deal with the guards.'

Herbie led the Doctor along a maze of stone passages until they came to a corridor leading off at a right angle. They peered cautiously round the corner and saw a short cul-de-sac with a heavy metal-studded door at the end.

'Looks like a wine-cellar or a storeroom,' thought the Doctor.

Two guards lounged outside the door, smoking. They were thuggish. roughly dressed types, much like the men who'd been loading the lorries.

'Low-level criminal labourers,' thought the Doctor.

'I still say it's a waste,' one of the guards was saying. 'Nice-looking bird like that, all ready and waiting in her dressing-gown. I could just pop in and socialise for a bit. Who'd know?'

'*He'd* know,' said the other guard. 'He'd know someone had been interfering with his prisoner. Know what he did once to some bloke who'd really annoyed him?'

'No, what?'

'Turned him inside out. Just looked at him and there he was, all the bits on the inside on the outside. Still alive and moving. So I wouldn't risk it if I was you.'

'Don't think I will. I prefer me bits where they are...'

The Doctor turned to Herbie. 'I'll go and talk to them. You pop up and distract them at the right moment.'

The Doctor turned the corner and strode towards the two guards.

‘Hullo there!’ he called. ‘Seem to have got myself lost. Could you direct me to Mr Hadley’s study? He’s just sent for me, and I don’t want to keep him waiting.’

The guards glared suspiciously at him.

‘Who’re you then?’ growled one of them. ‘Haven’t seen you before.’

‘You wouldn’t have, I’ve just joined the staff – I say, who’s that?’ The Doctor turned and pointed, and Herbie popped out of nowhere at the end of the corridor.

‘Hey you!’ called the second guard.

Both guards moved automatically towards Herbie, which left the Doctor just behind them. He dropped a hand on each one’s shoulder, his steely finger’s tightened on the pressure points and they crumpled to the ground. ‘Over to you, Herbie.’

‘Right,’ said Herbie. ‘All I’ve got to do now is get through Hades’ mind barrier. It’s maintained by his will and he’ll be busy tonight.’

‘Can you do it?’

Herbie grinned. ‘I’ve done it before! Come and help.’

The Doctor came up to the cell door and stopped abruptly as the air seemed to solidify. He stretched out his hands and pushed the invisible barrier. It was spongy, jelly-like, resistant but soft.

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Stand beside me and help me to *push*. Not with your hands but with your mind.’

Herbie went up to the cell door and stood facing it, fists clenched, face scowling in concentration. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and ran down his face. The Doctor joined his mind and will to Herbie’s, both thrusting against the barrier.

Suddenly Herbie vanished.

Seconds later he reappeared, an unconscious Sophie over his shoulder.

‘Well done,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now let’s take the quickest way out of here.’

They hurried along the corridors, Herbie carrying Sophie without apparent effort.

‘Why did he bother with a mind barrier as well as guards?’

asked the Doctor.

‘To stop her teleporting herself, of course. He’s put a sleep spell on her as well. I’ll lift it when I get her home. Come on, hurry. it’ll be quickest if we go back the way we came.’

‘Can’t you teleport out with her?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Of course,’ Herbie said. ‘But Hades would know. Best to get outside the abbey, away from his influence. Then he won’t notice. Probably,’ he added.

The Doctor nodded and turned to lead the way back out. But he realised too late that their chosen route out led past the door to Hadley’s study. just before they reached it, it opened. The Master stood framed in the doorway. He stood looking at them, at the Doctor, and at Herbie with Sophie over his shoulder.

Nobody moved or spoke.

Hadley’s voice boomed from within the study. ‘Send me your colleague the Doctor, I would speak with him further.’

The Master still didn’t speak.

His eyes met the Doctor’s for a long moment. Then he turned a little, facing into the study. ‘I sent him to assist with preparations at the festival ground, 0 Great One. He will attend you there.’

‘Very well,’ said the voice of Hades indifferently. ‘You may go.’

The Master bowed, then turned and closed the door behind him.

He stood for a moment, dark burning eyes fixed on the Doctor. He seemed to be making up his mind. Then, still without speaking, he gestured for them to follow him. He took them to a concealed and locked side door, opened it with a key and waved them impatiently through, closing the door behind them.

They emerged into the warm night air.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor. ‘Well, well, well!’ He turned to Herbie. ‘Bessie, my car, is at the front gate. I’ll drive you home.’

Herbie shook his head. ‘If you don’t mind, we’ll go on ahead. I want to get Sophie away from here. I’ll see you at the house.’ And he and Sophie vanished.

The Doctor made his way along the side of the ruined abbey, wondering how he could reach Bessie unobserved. It couldn’t be

long now before the two guards came to and gave the alarm. Or would they?

The trouble with being a ruthless tyrant is that nobody wants to bring you bad news. Which means people tend not to tell you things you really need to know. It was likely, or at least possible, that the two guards, realising they'd lost their prisoner, would simply make off rather than face Hadley's wrath.

The Doctor turned a corner and found his way barred by the line of trucks. It was much reduced now. Only three trucks remained, the last one still being loaded. The Doctor considered. He could avoid them by making a huge detour. But time was pressing now, and he wanted to reach Lady Dempster as soon as possible. 'In an authoritarian society,' thought the Doctor, 'people obey the voice of authority.' He strode boldly towards the trucks.

The man supervising the loading looked up suspiciously as he approached. The three thugs actually humping the crates stopped working and stared at him.

Before the supervisor could speak the Doctor snapped, 'Are these the last three trucks?'

'You can see they are, can't yer?'

'None of your lip. Get them loaded and away, you're behind schedule.'

With that the Doctor marched past the trucks and disappeared down the driveway.

The supervising thug thought for a moment, then shrugged. He didn't recognise the bloke but there had been a lot of new faces lately. Must have been someone big though, laying down the law like that. And you couldn't get into any trouble obeying orders.

He turned to his workers. 'You heard what he said. Get cracking.'

As the Doctor drove towards Dempster Manor he heard the three trucks rumbling along behind him. He pulled over and waved them past, and watched their tail-lights disappear into the distance. The festival would be starting soon. There wasn't much time.

A steady *thump-thump-thump* came through the open windows of

the inn parlour.

‘What’s that?’ snapped the Brigadier.

‘It’s the festival,’ said Jo. ‘I think they’re warming up.’

‘You just get the bass notes at this distance, sir,’ said Mike Yates helpfully. ‘It’ll sound different, close to.’

‘Worse, probably. Confounded racket.’ The Brigadier looked at his watch. ‘We’d better start moving out.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Mike Yates. ‘Er, where to sir?’

‘The festival of course. We need to be on the ground to direct the operation. Benton, get all the communications gear in the truck and operational.’

‘Sir!’ Sergeant Benton raised his voice in a parade-ground bellow that rattled the windows. ‘Private Higgins, Private Rattray!’

There was a thunder of booted feet and the two UNIT troopers, who’d been happily whiling away their time in the bar, clattered into the room. Rattray was still wiping the foam from his pint of Hob’s Old Peculiar from his lips.

‘You two!’ barked Benton. ‘Communications gear in the truck, up and working, now!’ As they began unplugging the equipment and carrying it out, Benton turned to Mike Yates.

‘Did you bring any arms down, sir?’

Yates nodded towards a big steel chest in the corner. ‘I scrounged what I could from the armoury before I left.’

‘What have we got, sir?’

‘Not much. Two rifles, two Sten guns, two revolvers. Ammo, of course. And a box of grenades.’

‘Better get them issued, sir. From what the Doctor said it could get ugly down there.’

The Brigadier was saying much the same thing to Jo.

‘You’d better stay here. Miss Grant. Things might turn nasty, and a riot’s no place for a lady.’

Jo Grant was quite determined not to be left out of all the action.

‘Forget it – sir,’ she said. ‘I’d go crazy left here on my own, not knowing what was happening.’ Desperately she sought for a cunning argument, and came up with one that would appeal to the Brigadier’s sense of chivalry. ‘Suppose there is trouble and it spreads to the village? Rioters would be bound to make for the pub. There’d be looting and raping and pillaging... You can’t

leave me here alone and unprotected.’ Jo looked up at him, big eyed and appealing, and did her best to look helpless. It was against all her feminist principles, but sometimes you just had to compromise.

‘Very well, Miss Grant,’ said the Brigadier. ‘You can ride in the communications truck. But keep your head down and try to stay out of trouble.’

The Brigadier looked round the fast-emptying room, battling a faint, lingering sense of unease. He had a good team, and he was confident that his plan of operations was the best that could be devised.

Only... where the devil was the Doctor?

The Doctor was attending a champagne party.

The party had been under way on the terrace of Dempster Manor when he arrived. There was Lady Dempster, radiant with happiness at the restoration of her daughter. There was Sophie herself, now awake, dressed in a gauzy white gown and as exuberantly happy as her mother. And finally there was Herbie, his self-esteem restored, inclined to boast about his brilliant and daring part in Sophie’s rescue.

The Doctor’s arrival had been greeted with rapturous enthusiasm. He had accepted a glass of champagne, and modestly waved aside everyone’s thanks and congratulations.

He stood leaning against the balustrade sipping his champagne.

It would have been pleasant to while away the summer night on the lantern-lit terrace, drinking champagne and chatting with three people he had grown to like. But the distant *thump-thump-thump* from the festival site returned him to reality.

‘I hate to interrupt such a pleasant occasion,’ said the Doctor. ‘But we have an important task before us, and time is very short. Lady Dempster, if you recall...’

Lady Dempster’s face became serious. ‘I promised to make another attempt to contact Zeus when Sophie returned. I shall keep my word, Doctor. You spoke of a way of boosting my telepathic range. What do you propose?’

‘I want us to combine our minds – all of us.’

‘You too, Doctor?’ asked Sophie.

The Doctor thought of his link with the TARDIS, now so

sadly severed. It was as if part of himself was missing.

‘I have some telepathic ability,’ he said, ‘and some training in its use. My powers aren’t equal to yours, but I think I can act as a channel. Sophie, Herbie, I want you to combine your telepathic powers and send them through me, to Lady Dempster.’ He turned to Lady Dempster. ‘Now this is very important. I want you to ride those powers until they reach their utmost limit. Only then must you start to use your own powers.’ He looked round the circle of puzzled faces and smiled. ‘It’s a clumsy metaphor I know. But you Sophie, and you Herbie, are like the booster rockets. Your task is to take the main rocket – you, Lady Dempster – to a point where it can use its energy to reach the outer limits.’

‘It is a strange concept,’ said Lady Dempster. ‘But we will do our best to do as you say.’

They sat in a circle around one of the wrought-iron tables. The Doctor held Lady Dempster’s hands across the table, both pairs of hands resting at its centre. On his left and on his right, Sophie’s and Herbie’s hands rested on his own.

‘It’s a bit like an old-fashioned Victorian seance,’ thought the Doctor. ‘There’ll be mysterious knockings, the table will rock and we’ll see strange clouds of luminous ectoplasm and floating tambourines. Then we’ll hear the ghostly voice of Aunt Ethel, dispensing enigmatic advice from the Beyond.’

Clearing his mind of such frivolous thoughts with a determined effort the Doctor said, ‘Shall we begin?’

On the outskirts of the festival, the Brigadier halted his jeep, appalled. He had forgotten, or at least underestimated, the main features of a festival – people.

A sea of people. so many they looked like swarming ants, like bees from a hive. In the centre of the sea of heads and bodies was the huge raised stage shell, ablaze with light. On it four capering costumed figures in devil masks thumped drums, hammered keyboards and twanged electric guitars, producing a shattering howl of noise.

‘That’s the Osculators,’ said Jo excitedly. ‘Big American heavy-metal group. People say they’re Satanists. Play their records backwards and you get diabolical messages.’

‘Diabolical’s the word,’ muttered the Brigadier. He surveyed

the seething crowd. 'No use going down amongst that lot, we'd be swamped.'

'There's that mound sir, just to one side of the field,' suggested Mike Yates. Like all good soldiers, he'd studied the terrain. 'Some kind of ancient monument, it's called Hob's Hill. We could get there round the back, over the fields. There's some kind of track, according to the map. I reckon the jeep and the truck could make it.'

'Be better for communications too sir,' said Benton.

'Very good.' said the Brigadier. 'We'll establish a base on that hill and direct the operation from there.'

Turning off the road the little two-vehicle convoy began jolting across the fields. Jo Grant stood by the side of the road and watched it disappear. She'd slipped unnoticed from the truck while the others were conferring.

She'd been waiting a long time for this festival, she had a pass in her pocket and she had no intention of watching events from a distance. And whatever the Brigadier said, she was a fan of the Osculators. She had a worried moment when she remembered the Doctor's dire prophecies. Still, wasn't she a highly trained UNIT agent, perfectly capable of taking care of herself? Anyway, so far the festival appeared to be going ahead all right. If things got rough she'd just leave and re-join the Brigadier.

As she headed towards the festival Jo unconsciously echoed the Brigadier's earlier thought. Where on earth was the Doctor?

In a sense the Doctor wasn't on Earth at all. His physical body still sat at the table on the terrace with his companions, all four as still as statues. His mind, however, was roaming through the infinite – through an infinity of dimensions. He could feel the power of the minds of Sophie and Herbie surging through him. With the power came a flavour of their personalities.

Sophie, young and exuberant, filled with a passion for life.

Herbie, complex and self-doubting, a mixture of strength and weakness, but good-hearted despite everything.

And beyond them, propelled by their minds, the calm spirit of Mrs Dempster.

It was an extraordinarily pleasant experience being free of one's body, thought the Doctor as dimension after dimension flowed past, an infinite universe of inner space. One might be tempted never to return.

Suddenly he became aware that something was happening. The energies of Sophie and Herbie were flowing back towards him, the spirit of Mrs Dempster surged away. 'Lift-off,' thought the Doctor; vaguely remembering his former words.

Suddenly a terrible scream brought him back to reality.

The Doctor found himself back at the table. Opposite him, Demeter, Lady Dempster in her human form, had collapsed face down on the table. The hands clasping his own were ice cold. Gently he lifted her head. Blank eyes stared unseeingly at him.

Sophie and Herbie were staring at him in horror.

'She's dead,' whispered Sophie. 'I felt her mind breaking away. She gave one terrible scream and collapsed.'

'Congratulations, Doctor,' said Herbie, his voice filled with bitter reproach. 'You've done something nobody has ever managed before. You've killed a goddess.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CLIMB

The Doctor's mood was bleak as he drove Bessie towards the ever-increasing boom of the pop festival. Things weren't quite so bad as Herbie had made out, but they were bad enough.

To begin with Demeter, Lady Dempster, wasn't dead.

She was in a coma, a trance – some strange state suspended between life and death. Not that Herbie had been much mollified when the Doctor had pointed this out.

'Thanks to you, her spirit has left her body, gone so far it can never return. She's doomed to wander distant dimensions, while this body dies and rots.'

Firmly repressing a strong impulse to throw him over the balustrade, the Doctor ignored him and turned to Sophie. 'I'm desperately sorry that this has happened, but she's still alive. While there's life there's hope.'

'What should we do?' whispered Sophie.

'Don't try to move her. Just stay with her, watch her. There's still a chance she may return...'

But not much of one, thought the Doctor as he neared the festival. His last desperate hope, his attempt to enlist the help of Zeus, had failed. Soon Hades would announce the beginning of his reign, accompanied, no doubt by some spectacular and vainglorious gesture. Whatever it was the Doctor wanted to be there. There might still be something he could do. 'One can always improvise,' he muttered hopefully.

The thing to do now was to find the Brigadier and make him see sense. The best move would probably be a strategic retreat. Back in London they could warn the rest of the world, and try to devise some defence against the powers of Hades.

The Doctor had already called at the inn only to find he was too late. Now he was in pursuit of the Brigadier, hoping to find him before he did anything too disastrous.

When he reached the outskirts of the festival, the Doctor, like the Brigadier before him, stopped, appalled by the sheer volume of the crowd. 'How am I supposed to find anyone in this lot?' he muttered irritably. He remembered Jo's radio and dragged it from under her seat. He jabbed at the controls and shouted, 'Hello, anybody there? Brigadier, can you hear me?'

There was a crackle and an annoyingly calm voice said, 'Greyhound to Trap One, receiving. Is that you, Doctor? Please observe proper RT procedure.'

'Proper RT procedure be – bothered. Just tell me where you are!'

'We're on a small hill close to the festival site. Give the Doctor directions please, Captain Yates.'

'You there, Doctor?' said Mike Yates' voice. 'We're on a small hill, more of a mound really. Take that stage thing as twelve, we're at nine o'clock. I'll give you a signal, three flashes.'

Standing up in Bessie, the Doctor took his bearings and saw three torch flashes from the low shadowy mound. 'Got you, Mike, on my way.'

'I'd come on foot if I were you, Doctor. There's only a rough track and I doubt if that jalopy of yours will make it.'

'Nonsense,' said the Doctor. 'Anything those khaki-coloured tin cans of yours can do, Bessie can do better. Over and out, or whatever I'm supposed to say.'

Tossing the radio aside, the Doctor swung Bessie off the road.

Jo found she didn't need her pass – gate security had totally collapsed, and the giant Desmond and his fellow security men were nowhere to be seen. It was as if nobody cared any more. She edged through the crowd, trying to get closer to the giant stage, where a tiny figure in black leather was wailing to an electric guitar. Her lack of height meant that she felt hemmed in by the legs and backs and shoulders of people taller than her – which was almost everyone. When she looked up, trying to get her bearings, she found herself dazzled by the huge stadium lights that had been set up to turn the night into day.

By and large it seemed to be the usual sort of crowd. Mostly trendily dressed young people, with a sprinkling of determined golden oldies. There were black-robed Children of Light scattered throughout the crowd. They carried satchels over their shoulders and seemed to be distributing something. Leaflets? Sweets?

And there was an assortment of hard-bitten faces, like the ones she'd seen earlier, and the occasional gaunt, white-faced shambling figure. Crooks and junkies, thought Jo.

She had been to pop festivals before, and there was something different about this crowd. It seemed tense and edgy, and the usual good-natured jostling was being replaced by savage shoving. Quarrels were breaking out and the occasional fight.

A scruffy-looking little man carrying a leather satchel tapped her on the shoulder and held out his hand. In his grimy palm lay a selection of multicoloured pills and capsules. 'There you are love.'

She looked suspiciously at him. 'What's this then?'

'Free samples. Real good gear, stuff you never tried before. Uppers and downers and round-the-worlders. Go on, try some. All free, I tell you.'

Jo took a few of the pills and pretended to put one in her mouth. 'Cool thanks.'

The little man giggled. 'When that kicks in, you won't know where you are. Tell you what, come and find me later and I'll show you a good time.'

'Look forward to it,' said Jo, and moved away shuddering.

If they were handing out drugs like sweeties. no wonder the crowd was tense.

Jo moved on through the crowd, her eyes alert for trouble.

She was edging through the crowd when a stout man close beside her bumped into a smaller, skinny one.

'Sorry, mate,' said the tubby man amiably.

The skinny man grabbed his lapels and spun him round. 'Don't give me sorry, you done that on purpose. Trying to pick my pocket are you, after my gear?'

'It was an accident,' protested the tubby man.

The skinny man was shaking with rage and his eyes were wild. 'I'll teach you, you bastard!' he screamed and his hand flashed under his coat. There was a gleam of steel and blood

sputtered from the tubby man's throat, some of it splashing on Jo, as he fell choking and writhing to the ground.

She screamed and jumped back and an angry crowd swirled around the man with the knife. 'Come on the lot of you,' he yelled.

Somebody tripped him from behind and the trampling crowd rolled over him, kicking him to death before Jo's eyes. She hurried away. Behind her lay two crumpled, bloodied bodies. Nobody seemed to care.

From the brightly lit stage the music pounded on.

The Doctor's cross-country journey took him over fields, some ploughed, through hedges and finally up a steep, winding track. Whizzing past the astonished Privates Higgins and Rattray who were on sentry duty at the bottom of the path, he parked Bessie by the UNIT vehicles and jumped out. Looking round he saw Yates and Benton by the communications truck. The Brigadier was standing up in his Land Rover, studying the festival crowd through oversized binoculars.

The Doctor ran over to him, and he lowered the binoculars.

'Ah, there you are Doctor!'

'Have you ordered your troops to move in yet?'

'I'm just about to.'

'You mustn't. You can't arrest a mob, Brigadier. You'll just get a lot of people killed. Civilians down there and your soldiers as well. Go back to London, and re-group. *Reculer pour mieux sauter*, old chap. Retreat to advance.'

The Brigadier shook his head. 'I can't Doctor. You prophesied a bloodbath and you were right. People are being killed down there. Here, take a look!'

The Doctor took the binoculars, adjusted the focus, and swept them over the crowd. He saw, as he had expected, little knots of the angry crowd locked in vicious combat. The violence was steadily spreading like a disease.

'If I act now I can nip it in the bud,' said the Brigadier.

'If you act now, you can only make it worse,' said the Doctor. 'Believe me, you're in a no-win situation. Even if you survive, even if you win, your name will be forever linked with a massacre of civilians. Your career will be over. Do you want the name Lethbridge-Stewart to stink in military history like that of

General Dyer of Amritsar?’

‘A soldier must be ready to sacrifice everything to his duty, Doctor. Even his honour.’

‘The man’s mad,’ thought the Doctor, still sweeping the crowd. ‘He’ll do what he sees as his duty if he gets himself killed – and everyone around him as well.’ Suddenly he froze, locking the binoculars onto a small fair-haired figure. Her bright clothes stood out in the glare of the huge lights. She was crouching down by the edge of the stage, trying to keep clear of a group of furiously struggling men and women.

‘That’s Jo! Jo Grant’s down there!’

‘Nonsense,’ said the Brigadier. ‘She’s in the communications truck.’

Benton ran to check. ‘She isn’t, sir. Must have sneaked off earlier. She was dead set on seeing the festival.’

‘She’s down there I tell you,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’ve got to give me time to get her out, Brigadier.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Yates.

‘Me too,’ said Benton.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘More people, more targets. I’ll stand a better chance alone.’ He turned back to the Brigadier. ‘It’s almost midnight – and at midnight Hadley is planning some sort of demonstration. Whatever you do, don’t call in your troops and attack till then. It’s the best time for you anyway – they’ll be distracted down there, and you’ll have a chance of nabbing the main villain with the rest.’

‘Very well, Doctor. Until midnight.’

The Doctor knew he was being disingenuous as he sped down the hill in Bessie. He knew the Brigadier had no chance of capturing Hades with a squad of soldiers. But there was at least a chance that the apparition of Hades would persuade the Brigadier to retreat after all. And the midnight deadline gave him a chance of getting Jo free of that murderous crowd.

Jo crouched under the edge of the stage, wondering what to do next. Above her yet another rock group pounded out a pulsating rhythm that seemed to vibrate right through her body. In front of her an increasingly ugly and violent crowd swayed to and fro. She shrank back as two fighting girls rolled by tearing each other’s hair, clawing each other’s faces. What shocked Jo was

that the women, some of them at least, seemed just as violent as the men, attacking men and one another with savage ferocity.

She glanced at her watch. It was nearly midnight. Wasn't something supposed to happen at midnight?

It took the Doctor some time to force his way through the struggling crowd. His height and his elegance made him conspicuous, seemed to serve as a challenge. More than once members of the crowd hurled themselves upon him, gibbering obscenities. The Doctor disposed of them with calm efficiency, hurling one or two of them aside and then, losing patience, dropping others with ferocious punches.

At last the edge of the stage came into sight.

"Ullo darlin'," said a throaty voice. 'Looking for a good time?'

'Looks a little cracker,' said another, similar voice. 'Let's winkle her out.'

Jo shrank back as two dishevelled forms tried to drag her from her sanctuary. But she could retreat no further and grimy hands reached out for her. Two long arms reached out from behind them, seized each of her assailants by the collar, and banged their heads together with a satisfying 'clop'.

Casting the semi-conscious bodies aside the Doctor reached out his hand and pulled her to her feet. 'Come on, Jo, time to leave.'

He dragged her through the crowd, shoving aside anyone in their path with unaccustomed ferocity.

'What's the hurry, Doctor?' gasped Jo. 'I'm as keen to leave as you are, but let me get my breath.'

'It's nearly time for the grand finale,' said the Doctor. 'I'd just as soon watch it from a safe distance.'

They broke free of the struggling crowd at last, ran to Bessie and jumped in.

'Hold tight, Jo,' said the Doctor. They sped across fields and through hedges and up a steep, winding path to the little group of UNIT soldiers by their vehicles.

'Glad to see you made it, Miss Grant,' said the Brigadier. 'We can discuss you disobeying my orders later.'

Benton and Yates gathered round, making a fuss of her, welcoming her back.

‘Sure you’re all right?’ asked Benton.

‘You’re crazy, Jo,’ said Mike Yates.

Feeling a little tearful, Jo gave a defiant sniff. ‘Didn’t want to miss the concert, did I?’

‘Nick of time – as usual, Doctor,’ said the Brigadier. ‘It’s midnight.’

There was a sudden crack of thunder and a blinding flash.

The Doctor pointed. ‘Look! It’s beginning.’

Suddenly a tall, black-clad figure was standing on the brightly lit stage below.

‘Greetings, my people.’ said a deep, resonant voice. Somehow it carried everywhere, without amplification. ‘I am Lord Hades, and I come to rule you!’

‘Gerroff!’ shouted a burly figure at the front of the crowd. ‘We want music, not your jabber.’ There was a roar of assent from the crowd.

Hades pointed a finger and the burly man burst into flame, burning where he stood like a blazing torch. As the sound of his screams died away, the voice spoke again. ‘Silence, all of you!’

The silence was absolute.

‘You have seen tonight what I offer you,’ said the deep seductive voice. ‘Drugs, sex, violence – that *is* what you all want, isn’t it? Complete freedom to do whatever you want, whenever you want, to whomever you want! All I ask in return is that you obey. Do you accept?’

The crowd spoke as one. ‘We accept, Lord Hades. We obey.’

‘Mass hypnotism,’ said the Brigadier.

‘The seduction of evil,’ said the Doctor. ‘If they were sober and rational some at least might resist him – but they’re not. That’s why he created these conditions. If he has his way there’ll be scenes like this all over the country. All over the world in time.’

Hades spoke again. ‘Here is your first task.’ He pointed – directly at the Doctor and the Brigadier. ‘On that hill are those who are your enemies and mine. Those who wish to impose discipline and order and all the old boring values. Those who want to deprive you of the delights I offer you. Destroy them.’ The voice rose to an ear shattering bellow. ‘*Tear them to pieces!*’

Moving as one, the crowd turned and surged towards the little hill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RESOLUTION

The Brigadier sprinted to the communications truck and grabbed the mike.

‘This is Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart. All units move in immediately. This is a Mayday call, repeat, a Mayday call. We are under attack by a large and hostile crowd at Hob’s Hill, repeat Hob’s Hill, map coordinates to follow. The crowd is hostile and aggressive but not, repeat not, armed, except for a few individuals. Take extreme care and use minimum necessary force. Brigadier out.’ He turned to Captain Yates. ‘Send map coordinates, will you Mike? Sergeant Benton, issue arms and ammunition.’

He went over to the Doctor, who was watching the approaching crowd. They had left the festival ground by now and were streaming across the fields.

‘How long will your reinforcements take to reach us?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Half an hour – twenty minutes minimum. I didn’t want the ring too tight so as not to alarm the crowd. Plus it’ll take them a little time to get moving.’

‘The crowd will reach us in five.’

‘If I’d sent for the reinforcements earlier...’

‘It wouldn’t have made any difference. The people in that crowd are creatures of Hades’ will. They won’t scatter at the sound of gunfire, they don’t care about dying. You can only stop them by killing them – and they’ve got more bodies than you’ve got bullets.’

The first of the crowd had reached the bottom of the hill by now. There was a single shot and a sudden terrible scream.

Private Rattray came running up the hill. ‘They got Higgins, sir. He was on sentry at the bottom of the hill. They just – ripped him apart.’

‘Stand by, everyone,’ said the Brigadier. ‘You may fire over the heads of the crowd or at their feet. Nobody is to fire into the crowd until I give the order.’

He stood waiting, revolver in hand, flanked by Benton and Yates with Sten guns.

The first of the crowd came pounding up the path. They were dishevelled and wild eyed, and their hands and clothes were stained with blood.

‘Now listen to me,’ said the Brigadier. ‘You are attacking lawful representatives of the state. We are armed and ready to defend ourselves. I advise you to leave immediately.’

The crowd edged forwards.

‘Sergeant Benton, Captain Yates, warning shots,’ snapped the Brigadier.

Benton fired a volley of shots over the heads of the crowd. Yates stitched a line of bullets at their feet. The crowd recoiled – and then moved forwards again.

There was an agonising pause. The Brigadier’s only possible order was to fire into the crowd. It was against all his instincts and training.

The irony of it was, thought the Doctor, that it would do no good. However many they shot down, the crowd would advance and kill them.

Private Rattray said, ‘There’s a spare pistol sir.’ He held it out to the Doctor.

The Doctor glanced down at Jo, who was standing beside him. Should he take the gun – especially when it would be useless anyway?

‘Give it to me if you don’t want it,’ hissed Jo. ‘If I go I’m taking a few of them with me!’

The Doctor looked at the Brigadier.

The Brigadier opened his voice to give the word of command.

And a great voice said, ‘STOP!’

It was as if the Earth itself had spoken. The voice, not loud or strident, was simply everywhere.

The crowd froze.

‘HADES!’ said the great voice.

The Doctor and the others turned. The tall black-clad figure on the stage below was as motionless as the crowd.

‘RETURN TO YOUR OWN DARK REALM,’ said the voice. ‘THERE YOU SHALL REMAIN FOREVER, TO TROUBLE HUMANITY NO MORE.’

Hades vanished – and with him, his grip on the minds of the crowd. They stared at each other in confusion. They saw they were facing armed soldiers, and began backing away.

The voice spoke one last time, ‘AND THE REST OF YOU – COOL OFF!’

There was a crash of thunder, a jagged bolt of lightning and the heavens opened. Rain came down in buckets, in stair-rods, solid, pelting heavy un-English rain. Monsoon rain.

It washed the dazed crowd down the hill, and flooded the festival ground.

The Brigadier made his way to the communications truck.

‘This is Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart. Your previous orders are countermanded. The crowd is no longer hostile, and has dispersed. However, freak weather conditions mean that festival attendees and civilian population may need assistance. Stand ready to provide flood relief... Food, blankets and clothing may be required...’

As the Brigadier issued his orders the Doctor and Jo stood happily in the pouring rain, watching the last of the great Hob’s Haven Pop Festival disappear in a sea of mud.

There was something cleansing about it, thought the Doctor. It was as if the cloud of evil that had hung over the village for so long was being washed away.

‘You’ve got to admit it worked out pretty well for you, Brigadier,’ said the Doctor as they drove through the gently steaming village next morning. ‘Your attack force turned into a mercy mission, and instead of the Butcher of Hob’s Haven, you’re now the blessed Saint Alistair, much-loved dispenser of corned beef and army blankets!’

It was a fine sunny morning, and there were army trucks everywhere. Cheerful soldiers were giving assistance to flooded-out villagers and stranded festival attendees. At the sea of mud that was the festival field, a batch of soggy drug-traffickers were

being rounded up and taken back to London.

Yates and Benton were staying behind to help with the relief operations, but the Brigadier had to return to London to report to Whitehall. Since the UNIT vehicles were needed for relief work he had been forced, most reluctantly, to accept a lift back to London in Bessie with the Doctor and Jo.

Since Bessie wasn't really meant for three it was pretty crowded. Jo was perched in the back on a kind of rumble seat.

The Brigadier made no reply to the Doctor's teasing remarks. As always, when travelling in Bessie, he felt faintly ridiculous. He sat up very straight, returning, poker-faced, the waves of the villagers and the salutes of the soldiers.

Moreover, they were to pay a farewell visit to Dempster Manor on the way back to London and the Brigadier was feeling nervous.

When they reached the manor, the front door was standing wide open and the steps were piled high with luggage. As they went up the steps, Lady Dempster came out to greet them.

The Doctor took the hand she held out to greet him. 'I can't tell you how glad I am to see you looking so well.'

'I'm happy to see you, Doctor, and your friends. Come out onto the terrace and have a farewell glass of champagne.'

Sophie and Herbie were waiting on the terrace. Herbie uncorked the champagne and poured for them all, passing round the glasses.

At the sight of Sophie the Brigadier stood quite still, gazing at her as if hypnotised.

'Chin chin!' said Herbie happily, and they all raised their glasses.

'I take it you're leaving the village, Lady Dempster?' said the Doctor.

'My dear Doctor, we're leaving the planet!' She glanced upwards. 'After this latest exploit of Hades', *he* insisted. He said we deserved a rest from this planet – and the planet from us!

'Do you know where you're going?'

'Somewhere peaceful – and we'll be with *him*. We had quite a reunion.'

'That pleases you?'

'Oh yes. He can be difficult, but I love him dearly.'

'What happened – last night?'

It was Sophie who answered. ‘It was wonderful, Doctor. A few minutes before midnight, she suddenly came to and said everything was going to be all right. Then it started to rain and we all went to bed!’

‘Sorry if I got a bit shirty last night, said Herbie. ‘All rather a shock.’

‘I’m the one who should apologise,’ said the Doctor. ‘Especially to you, Lady Dempster. I made you take a terrible risk. I’m only glad it turned out to be justified.’

Suddenly Lady Dempster cocked her head. ‘What’s that dear? All right, don’t fuss, we’re coming. I’m afraid we must be on our way, Doctor. He’s getting impatient, he always hated being kept waiting. Come along children.’

She waved goodbye to Jo and the Brigadier, kissed the Doctor on the cheek – and vanished. Herbie shook hands all round and he too disappeared.

Only Sophie was left. She kissed Jo on the cheek. ‘Goodbye, my dear.’

She shook hands with the Doctor. ‘Goodbye, Doctor – and thank you.’

She went up to the Brigadier. He still hadn’t spoken from the moment he came on the terrace and saw her – and he had been unable to take his eyes off her.

‘Goodbye, Brigadier,’ she said. ‘*Dear* Brigadier. Goodbye my Alistair.’

She took him in her arms and kissed him. His arms tightened around her and once more he felt her body against him and her lips on his. Then she was gone.

The Brigadier stood for a moment, embracing nothing. Then he straightened up and drew a deep breath. ‘Come along, Doctor, Miss Grant. Time to go.’

As they walked along the corridor the Doctor said gently, ‘Better to have loved and lost, and all that, Alistair.’

‘Do you think so, Doctor?’ said the Brigadier. ‘Sometimes I’m not so sure.’

They got into Bessie and headed back to London.

As they bowled along the country lanes, Jo asked, ‘By the way, Doctor, what happened to the Master?’

‘No idea, I imagine he slipped discreetly away.’

‘Damned scoundrel,’ growled the Brigadier.

‘So he is,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘But he saved us all last night!’ He told them what had happened. ‘One word and he could so easily have betrayed us to Hades – who would undoubtedly have killed all three of us in a rage. There’d have been no Zeus, and Hades would have won.’

Suddenly Jo pointed. ‘Doctor, look!’

Some way ahead, a black-robed figure on a bicycle was toiling slowly along the lane.

‘Good Lord,’ said the Brigadier. ‘It’s him! Get after him, Doctor.’

The Doctor speeded up a little, drove up to the figure and pulled up. ‘Good morning.’

The Master dismounted from his bicycle and stood holding the handlebars. There was, the Doctor noticed, a bulging covered basket on the front of the bicycle.

‘Good morning, Doctor. Brigadier, Miss Grant.’

‘On your way back to London?’ asked the Doctor.

‘I thought it best to make an inconspicuous departure.’

‘I’d offer you a lift, but, well, you can see we’re a little crowded.’

‘Don’t worry. Doctor. I’ve made my own travel arrangements.’

‘Well, they’ve just been altered,’ said the Brigadier. He was on his feet, revolver in hand. ‘Get on that bike and ride back into the village. There are UNIT troops there and I’m taking you into custody. Captain Yates and Sergeant Benton can escort you back to London. I’m sure we can find some manacles somewhere.’

‘Really, Doctor, can’t you restrain your impetuous military friend? I should hate this little encounter to turn ugly.’ There was a hint of menace in the Master’s silky tones. ‘I thought we were allies – temporary, no doubt, but allies all the same. If that’s no longer the case...’ The Master’s hand slid into an inconspicuous pocket in his robe.

‘Found your Tissue Compression Eliminator, have you?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Don’t worry, you won’t need it.’ He turned to the Brigadier. ‘He’s right, you know. Last night he saved me, Sophie and Herbie, by keeping silent and assisting our escape. In so doing, he saved us all. We owe him a debt, Brigadier. A debt of honour.’

For a moment the Brigadier and the Master confronted each other.

They looked, thought Jo, like two gunfighters at high noon.

Then the Brigadier sighed, and holstered his revolver. 'I ought to arrest you, but since the Doctor tells me we're in your debt, I'll let it pass – this time.' He laughed, trying to make the best of things. 'Particularly since you seem to have fallen upon hard times!'

The Doctor knew the Master better than to think that. 'I hope you didn't come too badly out of things?' he asked, nodding at the basket.

'I did put aside a few trifles to provide for my future.'

'No drugs, I hope?' said the Doctor.

The Master looked shocked. 'No, no, I've finished with all that. Just hard cash and one or two baubles.' He lifted a corner of the cloth covering the basket and the Doctor saw the glint of gold and jewels. 'Our late employer was very extravagant, and I abhor waste.'

'Well, better be off,' said the Doctor. He paused, looking curiously at the Master. 'Why did you do it?'

'Spare your life?' The Master stroked his beard. 'I really don't know. A moment of mental aberration, perhaps. I never *liked* Hades, you know. And I didn't much like the idea of the world he wanted to create.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Limitless licence, cruelty, violence and crime? I should have thought it was made for you.'

'My dear Doctor, if everyone in the world was evil, I should scarcely stand out in the crowd!' The Master paused. 'There's another, final reason.'

'Yes?'

'If anyone's going to rid the universe of you, Doctor, it isn't going to be some half-baked godling from another dimension. It's going to be me!'

The Doctor smiled. 'That'll be the day. Well, goodbye.'

'Au revoir, Doctor.' The Master waved farewell to Jo and the Brigadier, mounted his bicycle and pedalled away.

As they drove past him and over the crossroad ahead, Jo said, 'Poor old Master, I could almost feel sorry -' She glanced over her shoulder as she spoke and gasped. 'Stop, Doctor. Look!'

The Doctor stopped the little car and they all turned to look.

A large, gleaming Rolls Royce Silver Ghost had turned out of the side road and drawn up beside the Master. A smartly uniformed chauffeur jumped out and saluted. The Master got off his bicycle. He unhooked the basket from the bike and handed it to the chauffeur, who stowed it in the back of the Rolls.

The Master threw the bicycle over the hedge.

He stripped off his black robe and threw it after the bicycle, revealing his usual immaculate black suit. He drew a cigar case from his breast pocket and took out a very large cigar.

The chauffeur sprang to light it for him, and held open the rear passenger door.

The Master got in and sank back into the leather upholstery, and puffed out a cloud of smoke.

The chauffeur jumped into the driving seat and started the Rolls. As the big car swept by them, the Master raised his hand in a lordly wave.

They all looked at each other in astonished silence.

Then the Doctor said, 'Ah well, who says crime doesn't pay?'

They drove off after the departing Rolls Royce.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Barry Letts

I took on the job of being the producer of *Doctor Who* just after Jon Pertwee became the Doctor, with the intention of staying for a year. Not only did that stretch to five years but, astonishingly, here I am still involved thirty-four years later.

In fact, what with radio plays, hooks, and of course conventions, the good Doctor has been my companion, on and off, throughout my time as producer and director of the Sunday Classic serial on BBC1 (*Gulliver*, *Alice*, *David Copperfield*, for example), which I did for twelve years; and my time as a freelance, directing *Brookside* and *EastEnders* and teaching young directors; and the last ten years when I've concentrated on writing.

I've thoroughly enjoyed meeting the Brig when he was a young officer, and introducing him to some of my experiences in the navy just after the war.

'Good grief!' as the Doctor would say – am I that old? How time does fly!

Terrance Dicks

TERRANCE DICKS joined *Doctor Who* as a junior assistant trainee script editor in 1968, when they were producing *The Web of Fear* and desperately trying to make a roaring Yeti sound less like a flushing lavatory. He worked on the show during the end of the Patrick Troughton years, and co-wrote *The War Games*,

Troughton's last show, with Malcolm Hulke. He stayed on as script editor for the whole of the Jon Pertwee period, and left to write *Robot*, the first Tom Baker story. (This was in accordance with an ancient *Who* tradition, which he'd just invented, that the departing script editor writes the first show of the next season.)

In the years that followed he wrote a handful of *Doctor Who* scripts, finishing in 1983 with *The Five Doctors*, the programme's twentieth-anniversary special.

In the early 1970s he was in at the beginning of the *Doctor Who* novelisation programme and ended up, more by luck than judgement, writing most of them – seventy-something in all. He has since written a number of *Doctor Who* 'originals', including *Exodus*, part of the opening *Timenyrm* sequence published by Virgin, and *The Eight Doctors*, the first original novel published by BBC Worldwide.

He has written two *Doctor Who* stage plays, one a flop d'estime (great reviews, poor audiences), the other a bit of a pantomime but a modest touring success. He has also written about a hundred non-*Who* books, fiction and non-fiction for young adults, but nobody ever asks about them.

In over thirty years with the Doctor he has grown older, fatter, greyer and grumpier. But not noticeably wiser.