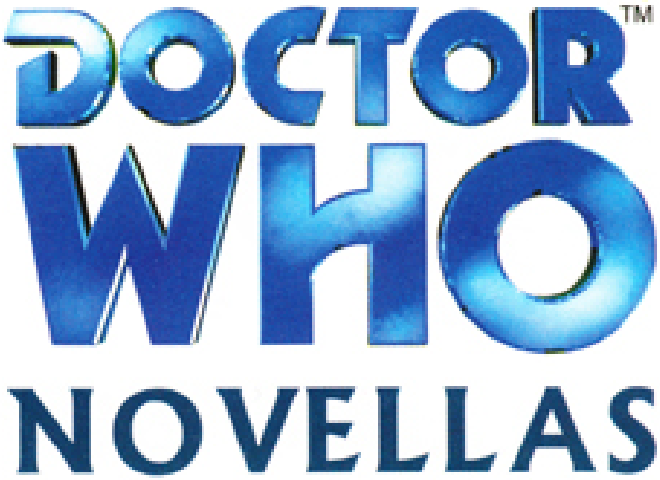
DOCTOR WHO™

NOVELLAS

THE EYE OF THE TYGER

PAUL McAULEY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Paul McAuley

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FOREWORD by NEIL GAIMAN
THE NATURE OF THE INFECTION

The years pass, and the arguments go back and forth over whether or not fiction, read or viewed, actually has an effect on the personality of the reader or the viewer. Does violent fiction make a reader violent? Does frightening fiction create a watcher who is frightened, or desensitised to fear?

It's not a yes, or a no. It's a *yes but*.

The complaint about *Doctor Who* from adults was always, when I was small, that it was too frightening. This missed, I think, the much more dangerous effect of *Doctor Who*: that it was viral.

Of course it was frightening. More or less. I watched it from behind the sofa, and was always angry and cheated and creeped out by the cliffhanger in the final moments. But the fear had, as far as I can tell, no effect on me at all as I grew. The really significant thing, the thing that the adults should have been afraid of and complaining about, was what it did to the inside of my head. How it painted my interior landscape.

When I was four, making Daleks out of the little school milk bottles with the rest of the kids at Mrs Pepper's Nursery School, I was in trouble and I didn't know it. The virus was already at work.

Yes, I was scared of the Daleks and the Zarbi and the rest. But I was taking other, stranger, more important lessons away from my Saturday tea-time serial.

For a start, I had become infected by the idea that there are an infinite

number of worlds, only a footstep away.

And another part of the meme was this: some things are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside. And, perhaps, some people are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside, as well.

And that was only the start of it. The books helped with the infection – the *Dalek World* one, and the various hardcovered *Doctor Who* Annuals. They contained the first written SF stories I had encountered. They left me wondering if there was anything else like that out there ...

But the greatest damage was still to come.

It's this: the shape of reality – the way I perceive the world – exists only because of *Doctor Who*. Specifically, from *The War Games*, the multipart series that was to be Patrick Troughton's swansong.

This is what remains to me of The War Games as I look back on it, over three decades after I saw it: the Doctor and his assistants find themselves in a place where armies fight: an interminable World War One battlefield, in which armies from the whole of time have been stolen from their original spatio-temporal location and made to fight each other. Strange mists divide the armies and the time zones. Travel between the time zones is possible, using a white, boxlike structure approximately the same size and shape as a smallish lift, or, even more prosaically, a public toilet: you get in in 1970, you come out in Troy or Mons or Waterloo. Only you don't come out in Waterloo, as you're really on an eternal plane, and behind it all or beyond it all is an evil genius who has taken the armies, placed them here, and is using the white boxes to move guards and agents from place to place, through the mists of time.

The boxes were called SIDRATs. Even I figured that one out.

Finally, having no other option, and unable to resolve the story in any other way, the Doctor – who we now learned was a fugitive – summoned the Time Lords, his people, to sort the whole thing out. And was, himself, captured and punished.

It was a great ending for a nine-year old. There were ironies I relished.

It would, I have no doubt at all, be a bad thing for me to try and go back and watch *The War Games* now. It's too late anyway; the damage has been done. It redefined reality. The virus was now solidly in place.

These days, as a middle-aged and respectable author, I still feel a sense of indeterminate but infinite possibility when entering a lift, particularly a small one with white walls. That – to date – the doors that have opened have always done so in the same time, and world, and even the same building in which I started out seems merely fortuitous – evidence only of a lack of imagination on the part of the rest of the universe.

I do not confuse what has not happened with what has not happened, and in my heart, Time and Space are endlessly malleable, permeable, frangible.

Let me make some more admissions.

In my head, William Hartnell was the Doctor, and so was Patrick Troughton. All the other Doctors were actors, although Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker were actors playing real Doctors. The rest of them, even Peter Cushing, were faking it.

In my head the Time Lords exist, and are unknowable – primal forces who cannot be named, only described: the Master, the Doctor, and so on. All depictions of the home of the Time Lords are, in my head, utterly non-canonical. The place in which they exist cannot be depicted because it is beyond imagining: a cold place that exists only in black and white.

It's probably a good thing that I've never actually got my hands on the Doctor. I would have unhappened so much.

A final *Doctor Who* connection – again, from the baggy-trousered Troughton era, when some things were more than true for me – showed itself, in retrospect, in my BBC TV series, *Neverwhere*.

Not in the obvious places – the BBC decision that *Neverwhere* had to be shot on video, in episodes half an hour long, for example. Not even in the character of the Marquis de Carabas, whom I wrote – and Paterson Joseph performed – as if I were creating a Doctor from scratch, and wanted to make him someone as mysterious, as unreliable, and as quirky as the William Hartnell incarnation. But in the idea that there are worlds under this one, and that London itself is magical, and dangerous, and that the underground tunnels are every bit as remote and mysterious and likely to contain Yeti as the distant Himalayas. Author and critic Kim Newman pointed out to me while *Neverwhere* was screening, that I probably took this idea from a Troughton-era story called *The Web of*

Fear.

And as he said it, I knew he was spot on, remembering people with torches exploring the underground, beams breaking the darkness. The knowledge that there were worlds underneath ... yes, that was where I got it, all right.

Having caught the virus, I was now, I realised with horror, infecting others.

Which is, perhaps, one of the glories of *Doctor Who*. It doesn't die, no matter what. It's still serious, and it's still dangerous. The virus is out there, just hidden, and buried, like a plague pit.

You don't have to believe me. Not now. But I'll tell you this. The next time you get into a lift, in a shabby office building, and jerk up several floors, then, in that moment before the doors open, you'll wonder, even if only for a moment, if they're going to open on a Jurassic jungle, or the moons of Pluto, or a full service pleasure dome at the galactic core ...

That's when you'll discover that you're infected too.

And then the doors will open, and you'll squint at the light of distant suns, and understand ...

In the tale that follows, when the doors open, they open on the light of India, in Kipling's time, and on a long sun in a generation starship. Walking through the doors we find ourselves in a baroque hard SF fantasy, which mixes high tech werewolfism with an inverted retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*. Meanwhile, almost in the background, a Doctor Who plot begins and continues and concludes.

Paul McAuley mixes the ingredients for this particular cocktail with panache and style, combining nanotech virus, Whovian Easter Eggs, and fabulism with the cocky delight of someone who knows he's going to take you on a remarkable journey, and that you're going to enjoy every moment in his company.

Drink it deeply.

There's a crystalline pillar in the middle of an hexagonal control board which is beginning to rise and fall, with a grinding noise like a universe in pain. And very soon now those TARDIS doors will open, to reveal

tygers, and the nature of the infection ...

Neil Gaiman
August 19, 2003

'We are all the sum of our memories,' the Doctor told me, as I lay on my sickbed in his strange ship. 'The way we faced the challenges of yesterday influences the way we will stand up to the trials of today. The past lives on in all of us, Lieutenant Fyne, and affects its own future.'

'I think you've spent too long with that swami of yours, Doctor,' I said. 'Fate, and the dead hand of the past ... That's just the kind of mumbo-jumbo those long-haired chaps in loincloths like to bang on about.'

I was so ill that even talking hurt me. My tongue was dry and rough and seemed too large for my mouth, rubbing uncomfortably on aching, loosening teeth, on the insides of my sore gums. Fever sweat drenched the silk sheet on which I lay, my hair was falling out, my fingernails and toenails were floating loose in seeps of straw-coloured serum, my joints ached, and my skin itched all over. My only comfort was that the four deep parallel furrows poor Singh had raked down my chest were healing over.

The Doctor blotted sweat from my face with a cool cloth. 'Even if you are physically transformed by the tyger-fever, and I promise that I'm going to do my best to prevent it, you'll still be the same person, because you'll have the same memories as you do now.'

'No,' I said. 'If the tyger-fever runs its course, I'll become one of the Tyger's creatures. You saw how it turned Singh and the rest into monsters and willing slaves. They all died trying to save their master. Aren't you frightened of what I might do if you can't fix your machine

and get me to a place where I can be helped?'

'It won't come to that,' the Doctor said lightly. 'You're your own man. And as the song has it, Britons never, ever will be slaves.'

'Of course it won't come to that. I would kill myself before then. Perhaps you would be good enough to help me, Doctor. It's a lot to ask of a man, I know, but there may be no other way. I'm very much afraid that the tyger-fever is not only changing my body, it is also affecting my mind. I've had such vile dreams ...'

I would not ordinarily have made such a confession to a man I had known for little more than a single day, but the tyger-fever was reaching its peak as, in every fibre and cell of my body, its tiny machines, smaller and more avid than any bacilli, strove to transform me. And my dreams truly had been dreadful – red and raw with bloodlust and bloodletting. If the tyger-fever was giving me the memories and lusts of someone or something else, and the Doctor was right when he said that memories make us what we are, what would these vile, violent memories make of me?

The Doctor shook back his shoulder-length curls and smiled at me with the fond patience of someone who knows a great deal more than he ever reveals. 'You're a brave and stubborn man, Lieutenant Fyne. Good qualities in a soldier, I'm sure, but they do tend to limit the imagination. There's more than one possible end to this story.'

'If I lack imagination,' I said, 'then I can't be imagining that you feel that you must offer me spurious philosophical comfort because you haven't yet fixed whatever it is that keeps us here.'

'There's still a little work to be done before we're under way again,' the Doctor admitted. 'As for the tyger-fever, there's good news and bad news. The bad news is that you are infected with millions of little machines that are transforming your body, cell by cell. If it isn't stopped or reversed, you will be turned into a chimera of man and Tyger, just like the poor men it made into its slaves. The good news is that the machines are coordinated in their work, and that's their weak point. There are pulses of transformation passing through you, set by a common clock. I can disrupt that clock by setting up a time-loop inside your body. The fever will be forced to cycle at the same point, and

because it can't perform the same operation more than once on your cells, the progress of the tyger-fever will be halted.'

'So you have a cure after all. We don't need to find help.'

The Doctor looked grave for a moment, although his voice was as light as ever. 'It's only a temporary solution. The time-loop will disrupt the fever's internal clock and slow its progress, but it will also begin to work irreversible and deadly changes on your metabolism. As soon as I can persuade the old girl to cooperate, we will have to get you to a place that can provide a permanent cure. One of the hospital worlds of the Flower Cultures is your best chance – they were fighting an interstellar war against an enemy that used nanoviruses very like those in your blood. The time-loop should hold back the transformation long enough for the Flower Culture doctors to work out how to reprogram the tyger-fever so that it will reverse the changes it has already made.'

This made so little sense to me that I thought I had fallen asleep for a minute, and missed some vital point of his explanation. I said, 'If I hadn't tried to rescue Singh on my own, this would never have happened.'

'You tried to save your friend. You weren't to know that he'd gone too far along the path to becoming a tyger-man.' The Doctor ducked under the high bed on which I lay, reappeared a moment later with a glass of clear liquid. 'The tyger-fever works very quickly, and that's why it's important that you take your medicine as soon as possible. As long as we can halt it before it progresses too far, the transformation can be reversed, and then the machines can be flushed from your system.'

I eyed the glass of clear liquid and said, 'What kind of medicine is it?'

The Doctor smiled. 'This isn't medicine. It's water, to help this go down.' He opened his other hand and showed me the capsule that lay on his palm. It was as big as my thumb. He said, 'If I'd had a little more time, I could have made it much smaller, but I promise you it will do the job.'

I had to massage my throat to get the capsule down. My fingers were stiff and clumsy, with hard shapes like rose thorns embedded in the flesh of their tips: tyger claws. I lay back and said, 'When will it start working?'

‘It already is.’

‘You seem very certain.’

‘Oh, I know something about time. Rest, Lieutenant Fyne, and the next thing you know we’ll be at one of those hospital worlds.’

After the Doctor had gone, I lay back and listened to the muted splashing of the fountain in the courtyard outside my little room, and the liquid chirruping of the bright red lizard that crept on tiptoe along the stone blocks of the wall by my bed. Time began to pass like the flickering of telegraph poles outside the carriage windows of a speeding train, the intervals of darkness growing longer and longer until at last I passed into sleep, and fell into a dream of the woods at the western edge of my father’s estate in Gloucestershire.

It was late afternoon on a fine midsummer’s day. Shafts of sunlight turned the leaves of the clumps of whippy ash saplings into a golden haze, and splashed on the green ferns and dog mercury that grew in the shade of sturdy grandfather oaks that had been planted in Nelson’s day. It was July 1914, the glorious summer before the beginning of the Great War. I was eleven, and I was following my father’s gamekeeper, Leach, along a narrow deer path that wound through the undergrowth between the great trees. I was trying to step as lightly and quietly as he did, and carried my air rifle broken open in the crook of my arm in just the same way that he carried his ancient twelve-bore shotgun.

I was the youngest of three sons and three daughters by a good six years. While my mother doted on me, my father was a remote and sternly forbidding figure. He was the local Member of Parliament, and often stayed up in town for weeks at a time. That summer, my two brothers, Charles (who had just graduated *summa cum laude* from Oxford, and would be lost at sea in the Battle of Jutland) and Harry (who was supposed to start university that year, but would instead join the Glorious Glosters, fight for four years in France, and return home without a scratch) were on a fishing holiday with my father in Ireland. I chafed in the company of my mother and my three sisters – the eldest, Evangeline, was engaged to a much older man who was Something in the Admiralty, and all they could talk about was the forthcoming

wedding – and Leach, patient and kindly despite his gruff manner, allowed me to accompany him as he went about his duties. We had just checked the pheasant cages, and were walking through the oak wood towards the crest of the beech hanger, where in late afternoon rabbits would pop out of the warrens they had dug in the stony soil and start to feed on the thin grass at the edge of the trees, when Leach discovered a set of deep, parallel furrows sliced into the trunk of an oak tree higher than I could reach. A little way off, he found a pile of pungent droppings. 'Scatter a little of this around the edge of my veg patch,' he said, 'and the bloomin' rabbits won't ever come near it again.'

'Is it close by?' I was breathless with excitement, and trying to look in every direction at once.

Leach stroked his mutton-chop whiskers. 'Reckon it was here yesterday, or the day before, judging by the signs. It's probably in the next county by now, but we'll go quietly, Master Edward, just in case.'

Beyond the ash coppices was a wide, grassy ride that cut through the wood. As we stalked towards the ride through a wide stand of bracken, Leach suddenly stopped and with the flat of his hand motioned to me to crouch down and be quiet. Hot sunlight fell on our shoulders as we squatted amongst the pungent bracken; sunlight lay brightly on the grassy ride and on the long margin of yellow elephant grass, taller than a man, on the far side. Shaggy palm trees leaned against a sky bleached by heat; a flock of green parrots took flight from one of them, calling to each other in alarm.

Leach turned to look at me. His kindly, wrinkled face was nut-brown and framed by exuberant side whiskers. He wore his greasy derby low over his eyes, and the collar of his many-pocketed tweed coat rode up behind his neck. I could smell his comfortable odour of Virginia rolling tobacco, boot blacking and old sweat. He put a finger to his lips and said, 'Someone coming, Master Edward.'

The elephant grass was shaking as something made its way through it towards the ride. I heard the snick as, with a blunt thumb, Leach eased back the safety catch of his shotgun. I raised my air rifle, and something parted the fringe of grass along the edge of the track like a curtain.

What emerged was no ordinary tiger, but a tiger twisted into the shape

of a man, with a tiger's low, flat-eared head and whiskered muzzle, and blazing yellow eyes that looked right and left before it stepped into the sunlight. Its back and flanks were striped orange and black; its chest was as white as swan's down. It wore a wide belt above its prominent hip bones, hung with all kinds of shiny tools, and there was a kind of shimmering in the air around it, as if it walked within a soap bubble.

Leach stood up and raised his shotgun. The tiger-man stopped, looked at Leach and opened its mouth in a toothy snarl just as he fired both barrels.

It was an easy shot, and Leach could not have missed. I saw the tall grass behind the tiger-man quiver and fall as shot chopped through it, but the tiger-man did not even flinch, and charged straight at us. While Leach broke open his shotgun and plucked out two smoking cartridges and inserted a fresh pair, I shot at the monster with my air rifle, pumped the slide and fired again. Then, in the bright moment when the tiger-man leapt, Leach's shotgun exploded by my ear.

I jerked awake in the cool gloom of the small, stone-walled room, but I was too weak and too ill to remain alert for long, and soon drifted into a reverie of the recent past, and events as fantastic as any dream.

Although I had been too young to serve in the Great War, I went straight into the Army after school. My father, still grieving for Charles, tried his best to dissuade me. He wanted me to go up to university and then into law or the clergy, but I was headstrong and wanted to make my own mark. I joined the regiment in which Harry had served, but soon discovered that the Army in peacetime was not for me. The sentiment of the nation had changed utterly after victory over Germany. Everyone said that the Great War was the war to end wars, and where once there had been rallies in support of our brave boys in the trenches there were now rallies for universal peace and the newfangled League of Nations. I spent three years in charge of a platoon of clerks at a supply depot outside Reading, and another two as second-in-command of a training camp in Kettering. When I realised that my requests for transfer would never be acted upon (I suspected but could not prove that my father had brought his influence to bear), I resigned my commission and joined the

Colonial Police Force, and was given a posting as District Superintendent of Police in a sleepy town in Andhra Pradesh in the south of India, in the dense forests in the foothills of the Eastern Ghats.

The place had been entirely undisturbed by modern civilisation until the Railway Company decided it would be a good place for a terminus, where timber sawn from the giant trees of the jungle would be loaded onto long wagons for transportation to the coast. Only a few Englishmen lived there: the Deputy Commissioner, the two agents and manager of the timber company, the Divisional Forestry Officer, the Superintendent of the Railway, and an Episcopalian minister, who was also in charge of the local hospital. They and their families spent a great deal of their time at the British Club, with its mahogany smoking room, billiard table, and mouldering library of Victorian triple-deckers, bought in a job lot from Mudie's circulating library, and back issues of *Punch*, the *Field*, *The London Illustrated Magazine*, and *Blackwoods*. They drank a great deal and complained about their lot, the laziness and deviousness of the natives in general, and of their servants in particular. They refused to believe that the best days of the British Empire were over, thought the Amritsar Massacre an unfortunate but necessary assertion of British power, were convinced that the Rowlatt Acts did not go far enough, and would have cheerfully supervised the hanging of Ghandi and every single member of the non-cooperation movement.

With the exception of the Divisional Forestry Officer, who shared my enthusiasm for studying the birds and animals of the forest, the other Englishmen regarded me with suspicion, while I despised them for their drunkenness and bigotry. It did not help that I had little to do but shuffle paperwork. There were the usual cases of murder and thievery amongst the locals, of course, but those were mostly dealt with by Sergeant Singh, my second-in-command, and his squad of Indian police officers. So when I heard that a man-eating tiger was active at the northern edge of the district, I was glad of the chance to get out of the town. I had absolutely no experience of hunting tigers, but I was young and full of misplaced confidence, and I had read my Corbett. I took some advice on the habits of tigers from Jimmy Foster, the Divisional Forestry Officer, and with a mounting sense of excitement rode a motor launch upriver,

with Sergeant Singh, to the sugar cane plantation that was being terrorised.

The manager of the plantation, Harry McIlvery, was a slightly built man with a bitter and careless manner. When I arrived in the middle of the afternoon, he was already half in the bag, offering me whisky with my tea on the veranda, and it quickly became clear that he hated the forest.

'We should burn the whole bloody lot down,' he said. 'Get rid of it, make some money from the land. Bring some civilisation to this bloody hole.'

I brought him around to the subject of the tiger, and he told me that the workers claimed it had taken three men in just two days, and they were refusing to go into the cane fields because of it.

'They came here and demanded guns,' he said, and poured himself another large measure of whisky. 'Are you quite sure you won't take a little nip? It keeps the bloody mosquitoes off. Well, anyway: guns. They came to me in a delegation and asked for them. Can you believe it? Bloody cheek. Probably put up to it by that doctor fellow who's been poking around.'

It seemed that another European had recently arrived in the area. A man who spoke good English, McIlvery said, but who was certainly no Englishman.

'Consorts with the local holy man, fellow who lives in a tree. Been living there twenty years, according to the natives. Never touches the ground. Hauls his food up in a bucket, and claims to be a hundred and fifty years old. Not the kind of person you or I would spend a moment with – that's how I know this chap isn't English, d'y'see.'

I tried to steer the conversation back to the subject of the tiger, but McIlvery wasn't interested in talking about it. I quickly realised that he didn't believe that it existed, except as an excuse for the workers to refuse to go into the fields.

'If you want to know about it, you should ask this doctor fellow. He was here this morning, asking if I would help him scout out the lie of the land.' McIlvery snorted and slurped half his whisky and soda, spilling some down the front of his soiled white shirt. 'As if I don't have enough

to do around here, without any proper help.'

I asked after the man's name, and McIlvery looked at me owlishly. 'I don't believe he ever said. Some kind of doctor, that's all I know. Probably one of those socialists who prattle on about world government. I do know he's bloody cheeky. Soon as you've seen to the tiger, old chap, if you can find the fabulous beast, that is, what do you say we see to him?'

I made my excuses, and was glad to escape McIlvery's company for a tour of the spots where the tiger had struck. Singh and I were driven about in an old Morris truck by the foreman of the plantation, an agreeable and eager young fellow with a degree in agriculture from Bangalore University. He took us to the workers' settlement, where I arranged the purchase of a goat. Then, with the unfortunate animal hobbled in the back of the truck, we drove along the eastern edge of the plantation, where scrub-covered hills rose out of a fringe of forest.

Singh found some pug-marks at a place where a stream crossed the road, and said that it was a very large beast.

'Perhaps an old male,' I said, recalling something I had read. 'They can't hunt properly, so they go after people.'

'Perhaps,' Singh said. He was a solidly built, bearded man, dressed like me in shorts and puttees and a white, short-sleeved shirt, although of course he wore a turban and I wore my toupee.

The foreman said: 'It is a very hungry beast, to take three men in just two days.'

'Perhaps it likes to kill for the sake of killing,' Singh said. He was twisting the end of his beard between finger and thumb, and looking at the trees that stood all around us in the green, sweltering air.

'Come off it, Singh,' I said. 'What do you know about tigers?'

'Not very much,' he admitted. 'I grew up in Delhi. The only tiger I have ever seen was safely caged in a zoo.'

'We should be getting back,' the foreman said. 'It is getting near dusk, and all the incidents have taken place at night.'

'Then we must set up our trap at once,' I said.

'It will have to be a very clever trap,' someone else said.

My heart thumped. The man had somehow come up behind the truck

without any of us seeing him. He stood in a blade of sunlight, smiling sweetly. He was slender and of average height, dressed in a linen suit and a white silk shirt with elaborate ruffles at the neck and cuffs, and a straw hat perched on the mop of curls that tumbled around a pale, sensuous face that reminded me of a portrait of the poet Shelley that hung in my father's library.

I said foolishly, 'You must be the doctor.'

'The Doctor, at your service,' he said, and raised his hat and gave a little bow. 'If you are Lieutenant Edward Fyne, of the Colonial Police, then your friend here must be Sergeant Singh. You've come to catch the tiger, but I must warn you that it's no ordinary tiger. You're going to need my help.'

None of the awful business that followed would have happened if I had believed the Doctor's story about the tiger that wasn't a tiger at all, but was in fact a member of a race of chameleon creatures from the stars. But frankly, it was more fantastic than any of the lurid scientific romances that were occasionally published in *Blackwoods*, and it was not the kind of story to entertain in a hot, stuffy forest clearing, with the light going fast and a man-hunter on the prowl. I'm afraid that I tried to make light of it, saying, 'I suppose you've encountered this kind of thing many times before?'

'Far too often, I'm afraid.'

'Of course you have. That's why you just happened to be in the vicinity when the tiger started to hunt down men.'

'Don't you believe in fate, and the fortunate coincidence?' The Doctor fixed his gaze on mine. His eyes were very blue and, despite his wry little smile, very serious. 'You have to believe me, Lieutenant Fyne. Three men have already been taken by this creature. I need your help to stop it, and to rescue its victims if it isn't too late.'

'Please, gentlemen,' the foreman said. 'It is very late, and very dangerous, too. I must be getting back.'

The Doctor held my gaze a moment more, then smiled and said, 'He's absolutely right. Let's get back to civilisation. I'll tell you what I've found, and we can make our plans.'

The Doctor's presumption had rubbed me up the wrong way. I said, 'I have already made my plans.'

'I did notice the goat. I suppose it would do as bait if this were an ordinary tiger, but what this creature wants is men.'

'If it's hungry enough, it will take a hobbled goat, I think.'

'I can assure you that the appetite that drives it is not hunger,' the Doctor said. 'It won't stop at three victims, or even ten or a hundred. If it isn't stopped now, it will begin to spread through this district, through the country, the whole world –'

I'm afraid that I laughed.

The Doctor said, 'Why don't you ask the villagers about this? There's an old woman who saw it take its second victim. She said that it glowed, like a ghost.'

'That's true,' the foreman said. 'But she is a very old woman, and has blindness in one eye.'

I said, 'Am I to suppose that it is not some kind of Martian then, but a phantom?'

'Oh dear,' the Doctor said. 'You're one of those people who won't believe anything until you see it for yourself.'

'The foreman can give you a lift back to the village, Doctor. It really isn't safe for you to be wandering around in the forest at night.'

'You're going to stake out your goat, and wait for the beast to happen by.'

'I understand that's the usual technique.'

'Then I rather think I should stay with you.'

I put my hand on the pistol holstered at my hip and said, 'I rather think not.'

In the end, the Doctor went meekly, and drove off with the foreman after that good fellow had helped us unpack our gear and stake the goat at the edge of the stream. Singh and I found perches in trees about 200 yards apart, on either side of the stream, and settled down and waited. The sun set and the Moon rose, tipped on its side. Wedged on a forked branch, half-sitting, half-standing, I ate the sweaty chunk of Cheddar and the oatmeal biscuits that I had brought along, drank the cold tea in my flask. I longed to smoke my pipe, but knew that the smell of tobacco

smoke could frighten the tiger away.

At last, the goat, which had been placidly munching at the weeds along the edge of the stream, raised its head and began to bleat. I unslung my rifle. My heart was beating quickly and lightly, and my hands were trembling. I took several deep breaths to quell my excitement. The goat was trembling too, pale as a ghost in the moonlight. I had a good view of it, framed between leaf-laden branches. I was staring into the shadows behind it when two shots rang out. Singh shouted. I turned so sharply that I almost lost my footing and my grip on my rifle, and spied what looked like three men struggling on the road beneath the tree where Singh had taken his position. Then I saw, by the lemony glow that enveloped it, the creature that loped past the goat towards me.

It moved very quickly, but I was able to take aim and loose off a shot. A star bloomed and faded in the sharp yellow nimbus, right in the centre of the creature's chest, but it didn't falter. By the time I had worked the bolt of my rifle, it was directly below me. I aimed right into its avid, eager stare – and a sudden wash of red flame half-blinded me. I fired into it and worked the bolt and fired again.

'Pax!' a familiar voice shouted. 'Cease fire, Fyne, cease fire!'

It was the Doctor. I stared down at him, trying to blink away floating figures of green light. He stood in the moonlight in the middle of the road, looking up at me.

'I thought you were safely in the village,' I said, after I had climbed down. My legs were as wobbly as when I had first stepped ashore at Bombay.

'Luckily for you, I came back,' the Doctor said. He was flushed and excited and out of breath.

'It ran away because I shot at it,' I said, and raised my voice and called out Singh's name, expecting to see him step out of the darkness on the other side of the stream with his usual unruffled demeanour intact and his rifle slung over his shoulder.

The Doctor said: 'You scored several bullseyes, but your target was protected by a kind of inertial shield. You must have seen the glow around it. *Tyger, tyger, burning bright* ... Do you know Blake, William Blake? A countryman of yours. I met him once. A very fine artist and

poet, but rather eccentric, especially in the matter of clothes. Uniquely gifted, too, not that he fully understood his gift. He saw angels and devils – that's what he called them. Although as it turned out they weren't really angels and devils at all, but creatures like your Tyger –'

'I know who William Blake is,' I said, 'but I don't understand what you mean by "an inertial shield". More fanciful mumbo-jumbo, I must suppose. Singh! Singh!'

There was no reply, and I started towards the tree where he had found a perch.

The Doctor followed me. 'An inertial shield absorbs the impact of fast-moving objects above the molecular scale, but it has to allow gases through, or its user would quickly suffocate.' He held up a device like an electrical torch; a brief burp of red flame flickered at its hollow end. 'Fortunately, it also lets burning gases through. I believe I rather badly singed our monster.'

What was it?' I said. Although I was reluctant to admit it, I knew that what I had shot had been no tiger – and no man, either.

'I told you. One of the chameleon races.'

The Doctor and I waded across the stream. The goat shied away from us. Singh's unravelled turban lay on the ground next to his rifle. The rifle's walnut stock was splintered and scored.

'Poor chap,' the Doctor said.

'There was more than one of them,' I said.

'I did tell you that it makes more of its own kind.'

'They must have taken poor Singh.'

'Perhaps we can find him,' the Doctor said, 'before it's too late.'

When I woke again, I felt light-headed and a trifle transparent, but otherwise the fever seemed to have abated; the horse pill that the Doctor had fed me seemed to have done the trick. I rose from my sickbed and tracked my host to a large, marble-walled room like a cross between the drawing room of an Italian palazzo and a scientific laboratory. Sheaves of candles burned on top of tall wrought iron stands. A pair of club armchairs upholstered in red leather faced each other on either side of a crackling log fire. There was a china tea service set out beside a green-

shaded lamp on a side table, and on another table a Victrola phonograph was playing an unfamiliar jazz tune sung by a velvet-voiced Darktown crooner to a piano accompaniment. Across the room, the Doctor was working at an hexagonal pedestal. Its faces were studded with dials and switches and glowing lights, and a pillar of crystal rods rose from its centre, meshing with others that hung like stalactites from an unseen and shadowy ceiling. Racks of small windows flickered above the pedestal, glowing with electrical light and displaying lines of numbers and symbols.

The Doctor had removed a panel from the base of the pedestal, and was kneeling down and poking at a tangle of wires and ceramic acorns with something like a fat, silvery fountain pen with a glowing red acorn held in a loop at its top. He wore a brown cotton duster over a high-collared shirt and a grey cravat and grey trousers, and was muttering to himself as he poked and pried, and sparks spat and sizzled deep inside the wires. He had his back to me, but as I padded towards him he said cheerfully, 'You're just in time.'

'I am?'

'For tea,' he said, standing up and smiling at me. 'How are you feeling?'

'Like a new man.'

'I'm pleased to hear it. Although I should warn you not to wander around too much. It's very easy to get lost, and there are some dangerous areas, especially for a chimera like your present good self. How did you find your way here, by the way?'

'I followed your scent,' I said.

'Did you now?' The Doctor regarded me thoughtfully. 'You have changed more than I thought. Still, it's under control for the moment, I think.'

'I was hoping to find a mirror,' I said.

The Doctor walked across the room to a full-length cheval glass, half-draped in a drop sheet, that stood in the shadows to the right of the fireplace. He grasped an edge of the sheet and said, 'Are you sure you're ready?'

'I seem to be growing fur over my body, Doctor. My face has changed

shape, and when I first got out of bed I had some difficulty walking because the proportions of my legs are greatly altered. I think it's only fair that you allow your patient some idea of what's becoming of him. Or rather, what he's becoming.'

'Neither one thing nor the other, I hope, as long as the time-loop keeps working,' the Doctor said, and whipped away the sheet.

I gasped in amazement: the mirror gave back the reflection of my old self. But as I stepped closer, my reflection slowly changed, my legs and arms thickening, a thin fuzz striped amber and black spreading over shoulders and flanks, a white fuzz coming in on my chest, my face pushing out in a fearsome grin, half human, half tiger.

... *as time goes by,* the singer sang with soft regret, and there was a crackling as the needle slipped into the playout groove.

The Doctor said, 'I've been through changes myself. Not as radical as yours, of course, but I've always found that the best thing to do is to face up to what you've become. Stop worrying about what you used to be, and enjoy what you are. Finding the right clothes – that's important. Once you've done that, everything else follows.'

I turned this way and that, examining my new body. 'I expected worse,' I said. 'I seem quite noble, if I say so myself.'

'That's the spirit.' The Doctor's tone was encouraging, but his gaze was wary.

'I don't blame anyone but myself for my present condition,' I said. 'It was my decision to try to save Singh. I'm not sure if I believe in fate, Doctor, but I do believe in playing the hand that you have been dealt.'

The Doctor walked over to the Victrola, lifted the needle from the record and said, 'If you like, the mirror can show you what you will become if the tyger-fever runs its course.'

'I think I know what that will look like. But let's hope your hospital world can do something for me instead.'

'Yes. Yes, of course.'

'Forgive me for saying so, Doctor, but you're not a very good liar. We're still stuck here, aren't we?'

He ran a hand through his tangled curls. 'I'm sure I'll be able to fix it.'

'I don't suppose there's anything I can do.'

‘You can sit down with a cup of tea, and keep out of my way.’

After my first sip of tea (a rather stewed Orange Pekoe), I discovered that I was ravenously hungry. It wasn’t surprising, the Doctor said: my body had been forced to put on new musculature, and was also supplying energy to the myriad microscopic machines to which it was an unwilling host. ‘Perhaps you would like some rare steak?’

I settled for roast beef sandwiches, which the Doctor produced from a dumb waiter in the wall to the left of the fireplace – like the mirror, I had not noticed it until he went to use it. The Doctor resumed his work and I settled in one of the armchairs and wolfed down the sandwiches. When I had finished, and had wiped my widened, black-lipped mouth on a corner of the drop sheet which I had wrapped around myself, toga-style, I said, ‘I hope it isn’t a serious problem.’

The Doctor was lying on his back under the pedestal, with only his legs showing. ‘We’re near a black hole,’ he said, ‘and there’s some kind of resonance in the local region of space-time.’ His voice was muffled. ‘It’s like being in a boat on the very edge of a whirlpool, able to keep from being dragged in, but without enough power to escape. It’s definitely something to do with the black hole, but I haven’t encountered this kind of distortion before. Of course, this is a very important black hole. Or it will be, in several tens of billions of years ...’

I had put off asking where we were, because I had the unsettling feeling that I would not like the answer, but now I had to ask what a black hole was, and if it meant that we were in the vicinity of Calcutta. The Doctor laughed, and said that the easiest way to explain everything was to show me. He scrambled to his feet and briskly rattled his fingers across what looked like a typewriter set in one of the facets of the hexagonal pedestal.

The ceiling, which hitherto had been nothing but vague shadows, suddenly cleared as if clouds had pulled away, revealing a vast panorama that at first I took for a sunset: an egg of dull red light framed in wispy veils that stretched out to one side across the black sky, a ragged tail that grew thinner and brighter, coiling at its end into a point that shone as hard and bright as a diamond. The whole thing looked like nothing so much as a giant red eye with a tear sparkling in one corner.

That diamond spark or tear was where the black hole was, the Doctor said, locked in a common orbit with a red giant star roughly forty times the size of the Earth's sun. He stood with his hands on his hips and his head tipped back, admiring the view. 'You can't see the black hole, of course,' he said. 'The point of light is the flare of its accretion disc – the energy released as matter dragged from its companion falls into it. The black hole itself is quite invisible because its gravity is so high that not even light can escape from it. It has roughly the same mass as your Earth's sun, but all that matter has been crushed down into a region with a circumference of only eleven and a half miles, less than that of London. Of course, measurements don't mean much in a place like that, where space-time is so greatly distorted. Its event horizon may have a circumference of only a few miles, but that boundary could enclose a volume with a radius of many millions of miles, enough to hide an entire solar system. In fact, that's just what it will be hiding, in the far future.'

'Really? How do you know?'

'Oh,' he said carelessly, 'I was here before, in another incarnation.'

'You mean that you will be here.'

'Not at all. It may lie in your future, but it's in my past, and as far as I'm concerned, that's what counts. If only I could remember all the details,' he said, and began pacing up and down along the margin of the Persian carpet, muttering to himself and once or twice knocking his forehead with the heel of his palm, as if hoping to dislodge something.

After a minute, I asked him what was troubling him, and he looked at me, as startled as if I had appeared before him in a puff of smoke. 'I was trying to remember the whole story,' he said. 'My predecessors have long and complicated histories, and it's sometimes difficult to keep things straight. I've never been one to worry much about consistency, but I'm beginning to think that what happened back then might have some bearing on what is happening to us now. I do remember that in the very far future, towards the end of the history of the universe, this black hole was one of the last places where you could find life. It was, in fact, inhabited by distant descendants of the human race. They called themselves ... the Preservers, was it? No, that's another story entirely. Ah, I have it! The Conservers. Of course.' He was growing more and

more animated. ‘This was – or from your point of view will be – in an era when every star in the universe had guttered out. What was left of life was huddled around black holes, because that’s where the last proper energy gradients were, and every information processing system needs some kind of energy gradient to function. Yes, I do remember something of it! Fascinating! The universe had continued to expand and cool, and galaxies had disappeared from each other’s view. All that was left of this galaxy, all hundred billion suns, was cinders and a few black holes, and only this black hole was inhabited, by the Conservers. Yes, and that’s exactly what they did. Conserved all of history. I remember they had stowed away stars inside the black hole, and every planet around every star was transformed into a huge library.’ He banged at his forehead again. ‘If only I could remember exactly what I did! There was some kind of trouble, I’m sure of it. Well, it was a long time ago, or it will be ...’

He went away inside his own head again, standing perfectly still, his gaze fixed on infinity. When I made a discrete cough (which sounded rather too much like the rumble of a great cat), he blinked and said, ‘The important thing is that although we’re outside the event horizon of the black hole, the TARDIS is behaving as if we were inside it. That’s why we’re stuck here.’

I said stupidly, ‘The TARDIS?’

The Doctor gave me a boyish grin. ‘I don’t think it makes much sense either, but it was handed down to me, so there we are. Time And Relative Dimensions In Space. The old girl. All this,’ he said, making a grand gesture.

I said, ‘Then this is some kind of spaceship. Like the Tyger’s spaceship – only much bigger, of course.’

‘Oh, much better than that! The TARDIS can move both in space and time. Not always in a predictable manner, but that’s part of the fun.’

I pointed to the bloody eye above us and said, ‘If the TARDIS is a spaceship, am I to suppose that this sun is another star?’

‘It’s a red giant. Much bigger and cooler than your sun, although, unlike most red giants of its age, it’s well advanced on the carbon-nitrogen cycle. I suppose its evolution has been distorted by its

companion, which is drawing off vast amounts of matter from its outer shell.

'That's the whirlpool I can see.'

'Exactly. And in the very centre of the whirlpool is the black hole. This poor star was captured by it, I suppose, and now it's being eaten alive. As the star shrinks, so the black hole gains in mass.'

Even though I was comfortably seated in the armchair, I was beginning to feel dizzy. I said, 'And we have moved through time as well as space?'

'We're a long way in the future by your reckoning – about a million and a half years. And about two thousand light years from your Earth's sun, well towards the outer rim of the galaxy. I asked for a random jump, to take us away from Earth as quickly as possible, just in case you broke free and started spreading the tyger-fever, and the old girl did rather more than I expected. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder ...'

He went away inside his head again. I said, 'Do you think these Conservers had something to do with it?'

'They don't exist yet. Not for a few tens of billions of years,' the Doctor said, as casually as if mentioning something that might happen next week.

'So they can't help me. We have to get to the hospital worlds you mentioned.'

'If we're to cure you, yes.' He scratched amongst his shoulder-length curls. 'I have been rambling on. I suppose I should get back to work.'

'At first I thought you were making everything up,' I said.

'That's all right. Most people do, at first.'

'It's all so ...'

'Startling? Amazing? Fantastic?' The Doctor smiled. 'It's all those things and more.'

'I've made a considerable nuisance of myself. I'm very grateful for your generosity.'

'Nonsense,' the Doctor said cheerfully, as he pulled himself under the pillar again. 'This is what I do.'

'You beat off invasions of shape-changing Martians.'

He looked up at me for a moment. 'Amongst other things. I'm very

fond of your world, and you humans. You mentioned fate. This seems to be mine. It could be much worse. I could be the defender of methane-breathing octopuses.'

'I suppose such things exist.'

He was back under the pillar again. 'They're all too common. Live mostly in cold gas giants like Neptune – Damnation!'

Blue sparks cascaded over him.

I said, 'Can you fix your machine, Doctor?'

Meaning, of course: will you be able to fix me?

'It's just a matter of rerouting power. The old girl is cantankerous, but very sturdy. As long as the main buses hold, we'll be fine ...' '

While the Doctor worked, I sprawled in the armchair and watched the great star displayed above me, admiring its mottling of leprous black spots and the delicate filigrees of its corona. At last, the Doctor pulled himself to his feet and started throwing switches set in one of the faces of the hexagonal pedestal. Constellations of lights twinkled in the hollow glass pillar and a deep droning hum shivered the air, like the vibration of the great turbines of the ship on which I had sailed to India. The Doctor pulled down one of the electrical windows, rapped it with the knuckle of his long, pale forefinger, turned a dial, peered at the screen, turned the dial a little more.

The drone deepened. I could feel it in my bones.

'Hold on,' the Doctor said, and folded down three knife switches, one after the other. The crystal pillar sank into the pedestal, rose again, sank. There was a great hoarse groaning. The delicate bone china tea service rattled. The flames in the fireplace flared and went out. The arm of the Victrola slipped down and the record started up again.

You must remember this ...

I clutched the arms of my chair. My budding claws pricked through tanned leather. I said, 'Is it always like this?'

'Oh no! Sometimes it's much worse!' The Doctor braced himself against the pedestal and grinned at me over his shoulder. 'Here we go! Hold on!'

... as time goes by ...

Everything heaved. Overhead, the great red star went out.

***

I suppose I should tell you now about what happened when I went hunting for the tiger – or as the Doctor called it, the Tyger. There'll be no time for it later, and it's the key to everything that follows.

As soon as I discovered what had happened to poor Singh, I was struck clean through by grief and anger and shame. Singh had been a good man and a fine colleague, and I felt that it was entirely my fault that he had been kidnapped. I wanted to follow the creatures who had taken him at once, but the Doctor restrained me, and I quickly realised that it would be foolish to try to track them through the dark forest to an unknown destination. In the end, I turned the goat loose and we started back along the road towards the cane plantation.

As we walked, the Doctor told me that there were many caves in the hills above the forest, and he was certain that the Tyger had made its lair in one of them.

'At first I thought it was an ordinary animal, just as you did,' he said. 'It was a mistake that almost got me killed. It had made over two poor fellows by the time I started to try to find out where it lived, and they tried to ambush me. I was lucky to escape. A third victim was taken that night; your man is the fourth.'

'Why does it look like a tiger?'

'What better form to hunt down victims in this forest than that of the top predator? It must have caught a tiger and used it as a template, put on its shape as you or I might put on a coat. And now it has infected men, and turned them into copies of itself. That's how its kind reproduce, you see, by making a slave race. If it isn't stopped ...'

'It will make more of its kind.'

'Exactly.'

'And poor Singh will suffer the same fate if we don't rescue him in time.'

'I'm afraid so. You saw it with your own eyes, but you still don't quite believe it, do you? Well, I'm not surprised. Your race is able to believe in a thousand kinds of foolishness, but can't see what's in front of its face until its nose is rubbed in it.'

'My race, Doctor? If you mean Englishmen, I think you'll find us quite

the most practical of races.'

'I mean the human race,' the Doctor said.

I could see the lights of the workers' huts ahead of us, and felt a strong, sudden relief. Until then, I had not known how scared I was.

I said, 'How do you know about this monster, Doctor? Where are you from?'

'I'm a traveller, from nowhere in particular. I'll find you tomorrow, Lieutenant Fyne. I suggest you round up as many able-bodied men as you can. Follow the road into the hills due north of the plantation. I'll meet you there,' he said, and strode away down a path and vanished into the darkness under the trees.

He was as good as his word. The next morning, I was leading the men I had recruited up a scrub-covered limestone slope when I spied him perched on a crag some way ahead, wearing a straw hat and loose red trousers and a linen jacket and stout boots. A canvas haversack was slung over one shoulder and a long iron-tipped staff rested across his lap, and his manner was as casual as if he had been out on a constitutional in the Lake District.

He shook hands with the foreman and several of the men, and said to me, 'You've brought guns. I do hope they won't be needed.'

I'd had quite a row with McIlvery over the guns. The man had been in a foul temper because of his hangover, and when he refused to hand over the key to his gun cabinet, I'm ashamed to say that I rather lost my patience. I knocked him out of the way, and shot off the lock of the cabinet with my own revolver. There were just two shotguns and an old Webley revolver; the rest of the men were armed with the machetes they used to cut cane, some nets, and spears fashioned from knives and stout bamboo poles. My revolver and rifle completed the arsenal.

I offered the Doctor one of the shotguns, but he refused, saying that it wasn't his style. I said, 'What do you propose to do, Doctor? Talk these monsters into giving themselves up?'

'Oh, I'll think of something. I've been scouting the area since first light,' he said, as we continued up the gully. 'The Tyger's converts have been out hunting – the transformation takes a great deal of energy, and they need plenty of protein to replenish it. I was able to follow one of

them to their lair, just before dawn. It's not far.'

'Did you see Singh?'

'I saw three of them moving about, but it was hard to tell one from another. I expect your companion is probably lying up somewhere, undergoing his metamorphosis. If we're lucky, he won't have suffered any irreversible changes.'

'If he has,' I said, 'I'll take the responsibility of dealing with him.'

The Doctor glanced at me, his blue gaze sharp and thoughtful under the brim of his straw hat, but he said nothing more until we had scrambled up the steep staircase of a dry stream bed to a wide apron of green scrub and white rocks that baked in the sun under a sky as perfectly blue as a newly enamelled basin. Then he pointed to the east, where he said there was a ravine, and the caves where the Tyger and his converts had their lair.

A handsome young fellow with the blackest eyes I had ever seen said that his grandfather had told him all about these caves. 'Long ago, the first men on the Earth lived in them. You find bits of their pottery and burnt stones there.'

He scratched a diagram in the dirt and showed us how the caves were linked together, how a passage from one led back under the little plateau and emerged in a rock-filled hollow.

The Doctor said that we should smoke them out. 'The Tyger itself will be the biggest and quickest of them all. Kill him, and the rest should give up pretty quickly. Remember that no matter how much they've changed, they're still your brothers and uncles and cousins. Drop nets on them, drop rocks if you have to, but do try not to kill them. They will look fearsome, but they have been affected by the tyger-fever for only a few days. They won't be much stronger than you. Two men should be able to overpower one of them easily, but take care – don't let him scratch or bite you, or you could become a victim of the fever too.'

The foreman said, 'You can cure them of this disease?'

'I'll do my best,' the Doctor replied, 'but I can't promise anything.'

I dropped back to talk with the foreman as we walked across the little plateau. 'Do you think he knows what he is talking about?'

'He is a good man,' the foreman said, 'but he is too gentle. Too kind in

his heart to do what needs to be done.'

'I think we're of one mind about that,' I said, although I still hoped that poor Singh was not yet changed, and that I could rescue him and return him home safe and sound.

The foreman said, 'Two of them tried to come into the village. We drove them back with fire when we saw what they had become. They were our brothers and uncles, but no more. They are animals now, and like any animals that prey on men they must be destroyed.'

The hollow was just where the young man had said it would be, with a narrow cleft amongst the loose rocks at its bottom. The men cut dry thorn bushes and grass, bundled them up, and dropped them into this natural chimney; when this tinder was set alight, the Doctor said, the smoke should drive the whole gang of tyger-men out into the open.

We left three men to tend the fire, and, with the foreman and the others I had recruited, I followed the Doctor across the wide apron of rock to the edge of the ravine. Below us was a shallow cliff fretted here and there with long openings, and fans of scree that sloped to a narrow floor of boulders and thorn trees. Something was moving amongst the thorn trees – a tyger-man, furred orange and black, bent under a small deer that he carried on his shoulders as he plodded up one of the scree slopes. As he climbed closer, one of the men jumped to his feet and cried out a name. The tyger-man looked up, shrugged the deer from his shoulders, and scampered into a cave; the Doctor stood and turned to face the way we had come and waved his hat, the signal for the fire to be lit.

Pretty soon, blue smoke started to roll out of the caves, and soon after that three tyger-men popped out of three separate cave mouths. I shot the nearest in the head, killing him outright; a second was bowled over by a shotgun blast, and dispatched by the foreman with the ancient revolver I had liberated from the manager's gun cupboard. The third tyger-man rolled down the scree slope in a cloud of dust and small stones, picked himself up and started running along the narrow floor of the ravine, dodging through the thorn trees. The Doctor tried to grab my rifle, but the foreman and another fellow held him back as I tracked the tyger-man and shot into a clear glimpse as he dashed between two big white boulders, and saw him fall and kick out and lie still.

The Doctor, pinioned by the two men, looked at me angrily. I said, ‘They are infected, Doctor. You said so yourself.’

‘We put an end to it,’ the foreman said stoutly. ‘We kill them, and we burn the bodies. It is the only way to contain the disease.’

Smoke was still rolling out of the cave mouths. I stood above them with my rifle up at my shoulder, ready to shoot the Tyger if it tried to escape. Suddenly a scream sounded behind me, in the direction of the thread of smoke that marked the seat of the fire, in the narrow chimney. The Doctor shook free of his captors and ran; I chased after him, jumping from rock to rock, dodging between bushes. I lost sight of him for a moment, chased around a boulder, and came face to face with the Tyger.

It was bigger than I had remembered – at least a yard taller than me and very broad shouldered – and it wore some kind of silver mesh over its muzzle. Its short muscular arms were spread wide, black claws extended; its tail lashed to and fro, exactly like a cat before it pounces on a mouse. I jerked up my rifle and exhausted my magazine, but every shot bloomed and faded harmlessly in mid-air. The Tyger swiped at me, caught my rifle and snapped it in half and tossed it aside. I stepped back and drew my knife. The monster smiled a dreadful smile behind the mesh of its mask and moved forward.

Flame washed around it, pale in the hard sunlight but so hot and close that I felt my skin wither and the hair on my head crackle. The Tyger was alight from head to toe, slashing at its own hide as it tried to put out the flames, howling and then running headlong, trailing a tail of fire and smoke, tripping and rolling over and picking itself up, staggering forward a few steps and finally collapsing.

The Doctor jumped down from a boulder, shoved the metal tube in his belt, and said, when I began to thank him, ‘We had better see what happened to the other men.’

The Tyger’s mask must have been a device to filter out the smoke; the creature had climbed through the chimney and surprised and killed the men who had been feeding the fire. They lay sprawled in their own blood around the smoking mouth at the bottom of the hollow. As the Doctor carefully checked for pulses, I remembered that only three tyger-

men had emerged. I ran back towards the ravine, certain that Singh was still inside one of the caves, paralysed by the tyger-fever and perhaps choking to death on the smoke.

I dropped over the edge of the cliff to the loose stones below, clamped my handkerchief over my nose and mouth, and ran through an outpouring of smoke into the nearest cave. Thick waves of smoke rolled above an irregular floor of polished stone littered with bloody bones and scraps of torn hide. I bent double, choking and coughing, and found in the back of the cave a slot about a yard high that connected it to its neighbour. I ducked through, calling Singh's name, and that's when he pounced on me. He was naked, covered in a dusting of new fur, and his face was flattened into a tiger-mask. He delivered a tremendous blow to my chest and knocked me across the cave. I staggered to my feet, pulled my revolver and fired a warning shot through the smoke, and then he smashed into me again. My revolver went off as we fell down and the shot took him in the throat. Hot blood pulsed over me, and poor Singh shuddered and gasped his last breath into my face and died.

A few moments later, the Doctor and the surviving men appeared, and pulled Singh's body away. I was shaking and breathing hard and soaked in blood, some of it my own – Singh's brand new claws had scored deep furrows in my chest. But I was more shocked than hurt, and insisted on helping the Doctor find the spaceship in which the seed of the Tyger had arrived. It was no bigger than a melon, equipped with a dozen pairs of jointed legs, and had scuttled into a crevice where it hissed and shot sparks at us until the foreman fired both barrels of his shotgun and blew it to smithereens. And that would have been the end of it, except that the tyger-fever was in my blood. I was overcome by it before we reached the village, and knew no more until I woke up and found myself being tended to by the Doctor. The villagers had wanted to kill me before I turned into a monster, but had been frightened of what might happen if they killed an Englishman; the Doctor had taken advantage of their hesitation, and had promised to take me away.

So he had, further than I could ever have imagined. It was supposed to have been a random jump, but given what I was becoming and where we ended up, it was soon clear that something had profoundly influenced

his space and time machine.

The next jump had been meant to take us from the black hole and its baleful companion to a hospital world where, perhaps, I could be cured of the tyger-fever. It did no such thing, of course.

There was a tremendous shudder that seemed to wrench everything out of shape; the candles flared like exploding stars; the groaning noise of transit died away. The Doctor snapped a row of switches shut and stared intently into one of the electrical windows, then ran to the other side of the hexagonal console and began to type furiously.

I got up from the armchair, stalked across the room and looked at the strings of meaningless numbers and symbols in the windows. 'I take it we weren't successful,' I said.

'We went somewhere,' the Doctor said, still typing, 'but judging from the relative time dilation, I don't think we have gone very far. I believe that we're in close orbit around the black hole, but the odd thing is we also seem be inside something with breathable air. Some kind of spaceship, I think, but as to why it's here, and what kind –'

'Why don't you take a look?'

The Doctor stared at me for a moment, then smiled. 'What a wonderfully simple idea! No wonder I didn't think of it.'

He came around the console and flicked a switch. Green light flooded the ceiling.

We were looking at the interior of a huge hollow cylinder with a hazy thread of sunlight stretched in mid-air down its axis, and a map of green and blue and ochre wrapped around its inner surface. There was much more ochre than green at the far end, which was plugged with a disc of rugged black rock.

'Well, well,' the Doctor said.

'You know where we are?'

'I don't know where this is, but I do know what it is – it's a colony ship.'

'Like an ocean liner?'

'A ship that sails through space, rather than across oceans, but the principle is the same. It's a rather primitive design, but effective. You

hollow out a cylindrical asteroid and start it spinning so that centrifugal force substitutes for gravity, seal the cavity and pump it full of air, deposit soil and water on the inside, do a bit of landscape gardening, and there you have it.'

'We're inside a rock?'

'A very big rock. Spinning,' the Doctor said, demonstrating with his hands, 'around its long axis, with people living on its inner surface as it makes its way between the stars. It's probably a generation starship, travelling slower than light. People who go to the trouble of building something this size usually don't have one of the faster-than-light drives. Whole generations are born and die during the voyage, which is why they've landscaped the interior. The interesting question is not what it is, but why it's here. Relative time dilation suggests that it's in orbit around the black hole, just above the event horizon. Whipping around and around very quickly – almost as fast as light travels, in fact, so that shipboard time is very much slowed down with respect to the rest of the universe. Have you read Einstein? Do you know his theory of relativity?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'You really should. He has done some fascinating work on the effect of speed on the perception of time, and published a popular book explaining everything in terms of railway trains and elevators. You must look him up, if you're ever in Princetown. Mention my name; that should do the trick.'

'I hope I'll get the chance.'

'Oh, we'll find some way of getting you to that hospital world. Anyway, if I'm right, this would explain why we are having so much trouble. Entanglement. Of course.'

He went away inside his head.

I said, 'If you know why we can't leave, can you do something about It?'

'Hmm?' The Doctor blinked, focused on my face. 'Oh, that. Yes, I think so. The time-loop that I set up inside you has become entangled, relatively speaking, with the time-loop this ship is making as it orbits the black hole. There's an equivalence somewhere down at the quantum

level ...'

'But you can fix it.'

'I could neutralise your time-loop. That would end the entanglement, and away we go.'

'Good. I was beginning to think that we were trapped here. Well, I'm ready whenever you are, Doctor.'

'My dear chap, we can't possibly leave. Not yet, anyway. Not until we find out why we are here.'

'You said we're here because the time-loop became entangled –'

'Exactly! But why did it become entangled, eh?'

'A coincidence?'

'Nonsense. For that kind of equivalence to happen by simple chance ...' He went away inside his head again, frowning as he counted on his fingers, then said, 'The odds that the quantum state of your time-loop could become entangled with the quantum state of this ship by mere chance are something like one in ten to the power of three thousand eight hundred and ... forty-one. Or forty-two, it depends if you round up or down. Anyway, it's a number rather larger than the number of atoms in the universe.'

'You mean that this didn't happen by chance.'

'I mean that it's highly unlikely that it happened by chance.'

'Are you saying that someone has deliberately trapped us?'

'Bravo! That's exactly it.'

'But surely we were already stuck before you started up the time-loop.'

'Cause and effect are not always linear, Fyne. I don't think it was someone on this ship. It's far too primitive. Still, we should go and take a look, don't you think? Do you feel fit enough?'

'You said that there are people living there. Suppose I infect them with the tyger-fever?'

'You're not infectious while the time-loop is operating. Of course, if you don't feel well enough, and as long as you promise not to touch any of the controls, you can wait here while I explore our new surroundings.'

'And miss the chance to see this extraordinary inside-out world of yours? I'm as fit as a fiddle, Doctor, all things considered. But I rather think that before we sally forth, I should find some clothes.'

***

There was a dressing room somewhere beyond a kind of cathedral cloister where autumn leaves skittered across stone flags under a gunmetal sky. It was full of steamer trunks and wooden chests and racks, with hat boxes piled in an unsteady hill in one corner, and pairs of shoes lined up around the walls. An ancient Chinese screen was draped with dresses, and I could smell face powder and faint traces of several kinds of perfume – at some point in one of his lives, the Doctor had had female companions. While he exchanged his duster for a black velvet frock coat and tried on a variety of hats before an oval mirror, I found a pair of twill trousers that, held up by red braces, didn't fit too badly, and a russet jacket with wide lapels and leather patches on the elbows. When I put it on, I discovered a bag of Peace Baby sweets in one of its pockets.

'Jelly Babies,' the Doctor said, when I showed him what I had found. 'They do have a habit of turning up unexpectedly. What do you think of this hat?'

It was a pearl-grey snap-brim Homburg. He tried it at various angles, turning this way and that before a mirror before deciding that it would do.

'What about a hat for you?' he said. 'And we must find some shoes, too.

I ran a hand over the furze that covered my flattened skull. 'I'm happy to go barefoot. And I think I'll have more difficulty finding a hat than a shirt.'

'I suppose a cat in a hat would look rather strange,' the Doctor said, and grinned at me and clapped his hands. His mood was as changeable as English weather. 'Why are we waiting? It's time to go for a little walk.'

We stepped outside into what felt like the middle of a warm, late summer day in England. The light from the long sun that dwindled away overhead fell evenly on every part of the inner surface of the strange little world, so that nothing cast a shadow. On either side, gentle hills sloped up and kept climbing; it was as if we were in the trough of two great green waves that met overhead, behind the sun's buttery glow. In

front of us, beyond a fringe of low trees a little like cypresses, if cypresses had branches that wrapped around their trunks in spirals, were what looked like perfectly ordinary rice paddies. But none of this was what first took my attention.

'You all do that,' the Doctor said, after I had walked around the blue police box from which we had emerged. 'There's the technical explanation, and there's the simple explanation.

'The simple one is ... ?'

'It's a lot bigger inside than out.'

'Like the black hole.'

'Well, not exactly, but if it helps you ... What is it?'

I was sniffing the air. There was the smell of water, of green, growing things, of dry earth and the brown needles that cushioned the ground under our feet. And a sharper, livelier odour ... Suddenly, disgustingly, my mouth was flooded with saliva, as if I had smelled a juicy steak frying in a pan with sweet onions.

'There are people nearby,' I said.

'Excellent!' the Doctor said. 'Let's go and find them.

The first people we met were a pair of boys who were scraping little nets on bamboo poles along the edge of one of the flooded fields, just as I had fished for newts and minnows in the ornamental lake when I was a boy. They ran as soon as they saw us, leaving behind their nets and a lidded basket of woven grass that the Doctor tipped over, releasing a cascade of bright yellow frogs into the brown water of the rice paddy.

'I'm sure I scared them as much as you did,' he said, when I self-consciously wondered if it was my appearance that had caused the two boys to flee. 'This is such a small world, after all; just five miles long, half a mile across. They would have run from any stranger.'

One of the advantages of this strange inside-out world was that it was easy to see where you were going, because most of the land curved up on either side. There was a village beyond the fields: a collection of long, grass-roofed huts straggling along the edge of a lake tilted somewhat above us, and in the middle of the lake an island where a white tower rose out of a froth of treetops. The Doctor and I turned

towards the village, walking along raised embankments between a patchwork of flooded fields and at last finding a track paved with triangular slabs of rough black stone that led through a stretch of boggy ground. There were green pools fringed with reeds and what looked like cotton grass, and trees like dull red pines, and shaggy willows covered in tiny white flowers that smelt strongly and pungently of hot candle wax. As we walked, the Doctor showed me that, by throwing stones and noting how their trajectory curved, you could work out the spin of the cylindrical ship; apparently, we were walking antispinward. Once, there was a tiny flash like distant lightning far off in the distance, and I saw a minuscule spurt of smoke at the joint between the ochre ground and the plug of black rock at the end of the cylinder.

The Doctor saw it too and, although he refused to speculate about what it might be, I saw that it worried him greatly.

A few minutes later, we were ambushed.

Men with pale skins and bright blue eyes and shaven heads, dressed in baggy white trousers and densely embroidered waistcoats, burst out of the skirts of white-flower-willows on either side of the road, surrounding us in an instant. They were armed with a variety of wooden farming implements, and had the wild look of men who had nerved themselves up to confront their worst fear.

The Doctor laid a restraining hand on my arm, and said loudly: 'Good day to you. We're travellers. Can any of you tell me –'

Two men darted forward, flung loops of silky rope over our shoulders and drew them tight, pinning our arms to our sides. The Doctor's Homburg fell off, and one of the younger men snatched it up and danced away, holding it high while the others laughed.

'Remain calm,' the Doctor said, as we were led towards the village. I did my best. Our captors refused to answer any of the Doctor's questions, but talked excitedly amongst themselves. I heard the word *spy* often, and *officers*, and the names *Tx* and *Seraph* and *Casimir*.

'They speak English,' I said.

'A little twist in the language centre of your brain,' the Doctor said. 'A Time Lord gift I've allowed you to share. I believe, though, that the dialect is based on English – the ancestors of these people were from

your Earth, Fyne. Perhaps some of them are your many times great-grandchildren.'

'You assume I'll be able to return to Earth, and that I'll be able to have children.'

'Nothing is certain,' the Doctor said, 'but we mustn't lose hope.'

Half a hundred men and women had turned out to watch as we were dragged through the village to the triangular plaza in its centre. The ends of the lassoes that pinioned us were made fast to stakes hammered into the earth, and people crept around in a circle to stare at us, pointing and making comments. The Doctor tried to talk to them, smiling benevolently and asking over and again what they wanted of us and who was in charge, but no-one would answer his questions.

'Do try to look pleasant, Fyne,' he said to me. 'We have to show them that we mean no harm.'

'I think I might be strong enough to loosen this rope,' I said.

'And what will you do if you get free? Kill as many of these people as possible, before one of them kills you? No, the best thing to do in situations like this is to cultivate patience. Do you see that curious structure, beyond the biggest house?'

It was a precarious scaffolding of bamboo. Three men were crowded on the tiny platform on top of it, doing something with a mirror that flashed quick blinks of reflected light.

'I believe they're signalling,' the Doctor said. 'Sooner or later someone in authority will be here to talk to us.'

He sat down and assumed a meditative posture. I stood my ground, staring at the people as they stared back at me, dodging the occasional stone flung by mischievous small boys, taking a drink of water from a long-handled ladle held by a nervous woman who shied away when I thanked her.

At last, I heard a buzzing noise, far off but growing rapidly closer. The Doctor got to his feet and the crowd parted as half-a-dozen men roared up on machines like motorcycles with fat, squashy tyres. The men were dirty and unshaven and wore black one-piece coveralls, with what looked like crossbows slung on their backs. Their leader was a tall, slim young man with a cap of platinum-white hair and a thin face with a

sharp-bladed nose and keen blue eyes. A large pistol with a flared muzzle hung from the wide belt of red leather that cinched his black coveralls. He stood with his chin propped on a fist and watched us closely as two of the villagers explained how we had been caught. Someone passed the Doctor's Homburg to him, and he turned it around and around in long, thin fingers and sniffed at it before tossing it aside. Several boys scrambled for it, and the one who snatched it up was chased by the others.

'Do be careful with that,' the Doctor said, as the boys ran about amongst the adults. 'It has sentimental value.'

The white-haired man pointed at him and said, 'Are you cargo?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Cargo? Not at all. I'm a traveller. This is my companion. Who are you, may I ask?'

The man said, 'What kind of creature is your companion? Does it talk?'

I gave my name and rank, and said that I wasn't used to being treated as a criminal by men I had never met.

The white-haired man looked around at the crowd and asked them to note my arrogance, saying that it was typical of my kind. I asked him what he thought my kind might be, and he said, 'A spy. Are you cargo? What race are you? When did they wake you?'

I drew myself up as best I could and said, 'I have only just arrived, sir.'

'You mean that you have only just been woken,' the white-haired man said, and raised his voice and addressed the crowd. 'Listen, my friends and comrades. The officers are getting desperate. There's no need to be frightened by this creature. That the officers must resort to such shabby tricks is a sign of our coming victory.'

The Doctor said, 'So there is a war. Crew against officers, is that it? And you must be the leader of the crew.'

'I am Tx,' the white-haired man said. 'And I am no leader, merely the mouth of the people.'

There were cries to the contrary from the crowd, and Tx smiled and bowed to them before turning back to the Doctor and asking who he was.

'I'm the Doctor.'

'His, I guess,' the white-haired man said, nodding at me. 'Still wobbly,

is he, after being woken?'

The Doctor smiled. 'You have people on this ship in some kind of cryogenic suspension, and you think that we are two of them – that we have just been woken by these officers.' He lifted his head and pointed with his chin towards the far end of the cylinder. 'Is that where they're holed up? In the bow? Or is it the stern – the engine-room?'

The slender, white-haired man, Tx, ignored the Doctor's questions, and said to me, 'You came here to try to free Casimir, and stir up trouble. Well, now we have you. We're loyal to the three-fold way here, and that's why we'll win the war.' The crowd cheered, and Tx waited until the noise had died down before he said, 'We're loyal to the three-fold way, and to Seraph, and we'll show the likes of you a thing or two.'

'Put 'em to the question!' someone shouted, and someone else said, 'Make 'em tell us that Seraph lives!'

Tx raised his hands and the crowd quietened. He said, 'These are our prisoners, and we'll treat them as we would hope to be treated if we were prisoners of the officers. Bring them food and water, and while they eat and drink I'll talk to them, man to man, and see what I can learn. Is that agreeable, comrades?'

The cheers of the crowd could have left him in no doubt that it was. After the Doctor and I had agreed that we would not try to escape, we were freed of the loops of rope, and low three-legged stools were brought, and bowls woven from grass containing boiled fish and rice. Tx sat with us while we ate, and asked many questions, but we couldn't answer any of them to his satisfaction. Everything seemed to turn on the fate of someone called Seraph, the leader of everyone aboard the ship. The ship had been on its way to some kind of promised land when it had diverted its course and fallen into orbit around the black hole. Seraph had vanished, or died, or fallen silent; the officers had refused to tell the rest of the crew what had happened to him, and so the mutiny had begun. Tx clearly suspected that we were emissaries or spies sent out by the officers to cause mischief, and nothing we could say would convince him otherwise.

The Doctor, at his most earnest, said, 'You must take me to the battle front. I'm sure I can be of help in settling your little local difficulty.'

Tx smiled. ‘That’s just what a spy would say, to gain the confidence of a commander and learn his secrets.’

The Doctor said, ‘It’s what any sensible man would say, when he saw two sides locked together in a futile struggle. Do you love your people, Tx?’

Tx looked at him and said seriously, ‘With all my heart.’

‘Then why prolong the war, when it means the deaths of so many?’

‘If the officers surrender, the ship and everyone in it will be saved, and all will be as it was before. But if they do not, and refuse to resume our journey, we must take control from them.’

The Doctor said, ‘You want to leave the black hole.’

‘It’s a trap. The ship should never have come near to it.’

‘Let me talk to these officers. I’m sure I can make them see sense.’

Tx smiled again. ‘You make it sound so simple.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘I can’t trust you with the lives of my people, Doctor.’

The guards around us stepped closer when the Doctor drew something from one of the pockets of his frock coat. He smiled and showed them the crumpled paper bag, took a Peace Baby from it and popped it in his mouth, and then offered the bag to Tx. The young man leaned over and took one of the sweets, and the Doctor suddenly had the big pistol in his hand. The guards shouted and raised their crossbows, I started up from my stool, and the Doctor, still smiling, presented the pistol to Tx, who took it calmly and hooked it back on his belt.

‘I trust you with my life,’ the Doctor said. ‘I hope you can return the favour, and trust me.’

Tx said, ‘I will tell the officers that their trick has failed, and judge from their reaction whether or not they know anything of you. We’ll talk again soon, I promise, but meanwhile you and your friend must remain my prisoners.’

A procession formed, with the Doctor and me marching at its head in front of the drawn and cocked crossbows of Tx’s men. A gang of boys scampered alongside, jeering at us. The tallest had the Doctor’s Homburg on his head. We were marched through the village and along a narrow causeway that led out across the lake to the island. There was a

gate guarded by men wearing armour fashioned from staves of wood and strips of leather, and armed with crossbows and bamboo spears. Tx talked with them, and told us that he would return the next day. Then the gate was pulled open, we were shoved through, and it slammed shut behind us.

We were at the edge of a small wood. Briars bearing white roses as big as cabbages grew in huge unruly banks and threw spiny tendrils through the branches of tall trees with shaggy heads of feathery leaves. The stone tower rose out of the trees ahead of us. It had taken on a bloody tint; the light of the long sun was growing dimmer and redder, deepening shadows between the trees, under the great heaps of rose briars.

'They keep a diurnal cycle,' the Doctor said, and then asked me what was wrong.

The scent of roses was strong and sweet – for a moment, I remembered my mother's bedroom, and the dressing table on which an army of perfume bottles and lipsticks and jars of powder had stood – but I could smell something else, too, something that made my entire skin prickle and the nascent claws in the tips of my fingers itch. 'Someone is here,' I said. 'Someone is watching us.'

'The guards at the gate, I expect,' the Doctor said, and pulled down an overhanging briar, buried his face in one of the giant blooms and sniffed deeply and appreciatively.

Something growled, deep in the shadows. I saw a face floating there, a face as fierce as my own, with a great mane of hair falling around it.

'You are welcome as my guests,' a deep, melodic voice said, 'but do not harm my roses.'

Casimir was the only daughter of Seraph, and had been a prisoner ever since the rebellion had begun. If I was a chimera of tiger and man, she was a chimera of lion and something wild and strange and utterly beautiful. Her face was broad and black, with a wide mouth and flat nose and close-set golden eyes with cross-shaped pupils. An abundance of untamed hair the white-blonde of freshly cut pine flared around her face and fell across her broad shoulders. She was taller than either the Doctor or me, and wore a leather corselet and a short skirt of leather strips. She

walked with a graceful sway, sometimes dropping to all fours for a few paces as she prowled about the looted hall in the base of the tower, while the Doctor and I sat at a triangular table and ate slabs of rich fibrous meat – mine raw and bloody, the Doctor's half-burnt – and drank plain water, and the last light faded in the narrow windows that pierced the high walls of the hall.

Casimir told us that the people aboard this ship-world were followers of her father and his three-fold path of peace, harmony and enlightenment. The Doctor was much more interested in this philosophy than was Casimir, who said that it wasn't her place to explain her father's teachings. There were copies of his books somewhere in the tower, she said, when the Doctor pressed her; it seemed that he had written ten pages every day, and everything he had written had been collected and printed and bound; a vast library with but a single author.

She also told us that her race were very long-lived, and natural travellers of the star-roads. 'When we first landed on Earth, we found a race trying to rebuild its civilisation after a great catastrophe –'

'Caused by solar flares,' the Doctor said. 'Humans built a space-ark to save their science and art, and as many plant and animal species as possible, and the best of their race were chosen to go into hibernation until it was safe to return to Earth. They slept far too long, as it turned out, but that's another story.'

Casimir said, 'My father and I helped them rebuild their world, and showed them how to contact the star-faring civilisations, but as they grew strong and confident, certain factions turned against us. My father bought this ship and gathered up more than ten thousand followers, and we set forth for a new world. We will build a Utopia there, with a society based on the three-fold way, and a land of villages and farms and wild gardens. I have made many plans for the gardens, and with my father's permission tried out several here. In the morning, we can use my telescope and I will show them to you, although I fear that they are no longer the glories they once were. The people have let them fall into ruin since the revolt began, and those at the bow are already turning to desert – the water supply there was damaged in the first of the fighting, and has not been restored.'

The revolt of the crew against the ship's officers had begun a year ago, when Seraph had turned the ship towards a signal or beacon, and brought it into orbit around the black hole. Malcontents in the crew had taken advantage of the confusion to try to take over the ship, Casimir said; although the officers still had control of the ship's navigation and power systems, they were trapped in the bridge and in the engine pods.

'Tx and his kind are farmers,' Casimir said. The black claws of her three-toed feet, capped with steel, struck sparks on the stone floor as she walked to and fro. 'They know nothing about the ship, and they'll destroy it if they're not stopped.'

The Doctor was more interested in the beacon than in the war. He asked many questions about its nature, and its effect on Seraph, but Casimir said that she knew little about it, except that it had captivated her father.

'My father contemplated the star-roads, and I had my gardens. At first, I did not even know that he had been beguiled by this message; the officers were scared and hid the truth.'

'It must have been a very beguiling message indeed,' the Doctor said, 'because your father obviously thinks it is more important than the war on his ship.'

Casimir agreed, and said that Seraph had fallen into a deep meditative state while studying it. 'I believe that he has contacted a great being that lives in the black hole. Some wild god, perhaps, so far advanced in thought that, compared with it, we are as ants. The officers grew frightened when the revolt began, and wanted to wake my father, but his mind has voyaged far from his body, and has not yet returned:

She lifted her noble head, and her liquid eyes caught sparks from the flaring cressets that jutted from the white wall. She had long lashes, tipped with white at the ends. She looked at that moment both utterly sorrowful and indescribably beautiful. She said, 'When his mind does at last return, when he awakes, what a reckoning there will be! I was taken captive by Tx –' she spat the name '– and imprisoned here, in my personal garden. In truth, I do not much mind. It is the favourite of all my gardens, and as good a place as any other to wait for my father's return. But when my father has charge of the ship once more, Tx will be

punished for his presumption.’

The Doctor said that the key to all this was to discover the true nature of the mysterious siren song, but Casimir had lost interest in talking about it. ‘It’s late,’ she said, turning away from us to stare through one of the narrow windows and breathe in the night air. ‘It’s late, and you must be tired. I’ll show you where you can sleep, and we can talk again in the morning.’

She left us in a half-circular room on the third floor of the tower, with windows that looked across the tops of the rose-covered trees towards the lights of the little village, which sat above their reflection in the black water of the lake. The lights of other villages were scattered across the dark lands that curved up on either side. I breathed in the air. It was heady with the scent of roses, but there was the pungent, exciting scent of Casimir, too, and other, fainter scents that stirred my blood ...

I was wakened from my brief reverie by an intense point of light that flared and faded at the far end of the ship, a point no bigger than a star yet so bright that it briefly illuminated the whole cylinder. Birds woke in the trees around the tower and flew out across the lake, calling hoarsely to each other; a moment later, a sound like thunder rolled through the air and I felt a gentle vibration in the stone sill on which I leaned.

‘It’s an old-fashioned siege up there,’ the Doctor said. He was leaning at another window. ‘Let’s hope they don’t have access to more powerful weapons; they could split the ship apart.’

‘We should help them,’ I said.

‘We should? And who should we help?’

‘The officers, of course.’

The Doctor gave me a gentle smile and said, ‘There’s no "of course" about it.’

‘Of course there is! You said yourself that the ship could be destroyed by this civil war, and so did Casimir. We should help the officers restore order, and then perhaps we can wake Seraph. Or at least find out if the beacon that drew him here is from the same agency that has entangled us.’

‘Yes, the beacon. I had been wondering about that too.’

‘Then what is there to discuss? This place isn’t well guarded. We can

escape, and make our way to the bridge, make ourselves known to the officers and offer our assistance –'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You haven't thought it through, Fyne.'

'It's clear that the same thing that beguiled Seraph and trapped this ship has also trapped us. If we can get the ship free of the black hole we'll be free too.'

'I've been wondering why the officers haven't already freed the ship,' the Doctor said. 'They control the bridge and the engines, so it should be a simple enough matter. I rather believe that Casimir hasn't told us the whole story.'

'I doubt that she knows all the technical details,' I said. 'That's why we should make our way to the bridge as soon as we can, and offer our help to the officers.'

The Doctor put his head to one side. He was amused. 'Casimir is quite lovely, in her way, isn't she? I'm not surprised that you've become infatuated – especially in your present condition.'

'That has nothing to do with it.'

But her scent was brought to me by the night breeze, and it made my blood tingle. I was sure that she was walking the paths of her garden, down there in the soft darkness.

The Doctor said, 'Your condition has everything to do with it. You don't realise it, Fyne, but you're not the man you used to be. You're seeing the world through different eyes – tyger eyes. One thing is certain; we can't stay here too long. The time-loop can't hold back the progress of the tyger-fever forever. Either it will cause irreversible damage to your metabolism, or it will begin to break down, and all those little machines in your blood will start their clocks again, and finish their transformation.'

'The first thing we must do is escape from this island. And then we can make our way to the bridge, and reunite Casimir with her father.'

'First we escape. Then we decide what to do.'

'It's quite clear that the natural order of command has broken down. It has to be restored.'

'My dear fellow, there's no such thing as the natural order of command anywhere in the universe.'

‘Passengers can’t run a ship, Doctor.’

‘I haven’t seen any passengers, with the possible exception of Casimir. Tx and his men are workers. Perhaps they know more about the running of the ship than the officers.’

‘They are no more than farmers,’ I said. ‘Peasants.’

‘Appearances can be deceptive, Fyne. There’s a world inhabited by creatures who look very much like the angels depicted in sentimental illustrations of scenes from your Bible. Beautiful golden-skinned men and women with white hair and broad snowy-white wings. Yet they possess only rudimentary intelligence, and are deadly carnivores. Judging someone purely on their appearance can be a deadly mistake.’

I laughed. ‘You claim that I’m beguiled by Casimir, but I rather think you’ve fallen under the influence of that young oaf, Tx.’

‘Whatever else Tx might be, he’s no oaf. His people clearly love him, and he seems to care more about the fate of the ship than the officers do ... What is it? Have you seen something?’

It was Casimir. She stood at the base of the tower, looking up at me, her face a small pale flower glimmering in the near dark. One moment she was there, the next she was gone. Without thinking, I threw off my jacket and swung out of the window, my fingers and toes gripping the crevices between blocks of white stone as I climbed head first towards the ground. If the Doctor called after me, I didn’t hear him, but plunged heedless and headlong through thickets of briars. The long sun held a residual glow that was little brighter than starlight, but it was enough for me to be able to pick a way along narrow winding paths towards the scent of open water, and of Casimir.

Just as I reached the shore of the lake, there was another blink of light from the far end of the ship, and I saw Casimir standing on a little beach of white pebbles a few hundred yards away. I heard her low voice and thought for a moment that someone was with her, floating a hand-span above the black water. But perhaps my eyes had been dazzled by that distant flash, or tricked by some combination of light and shadow, because when I walked up to her and she turned to me, she was quite alone.

‘I knew you’d come to me,’ she said, and bared her sharp white teeth,

and held out her hands.

We chased each other through the trees that covered most of the island, flushing up a deer not much bigger than a rabbit and bringing it down and feeding each other morsels of its warm tender flesh. We returned to the lake and washed blood from our faces, found a patch of soft white sand between the roots of a tree that leaned out over the water, and slept in each other's arms as innocently as children.

When I awoke, sprinkled with rose petals fallen from the briars that looped overhead, the long sun had rekindled, and the air was growing warm. Casimir was gone, although the soft sand still held the scent and shape of her body. I studied it as I picked shreds of rabbit-deer flesh from my teeth, remembering the thrill of the chase and the kill.

The Doctor was right. I was already greatly changed by the tyger-fever, and for a few hours it had possessed me completely.

I tracked Casimir across the island to the beach of white pebbles. She stood with her noble face tipped towards the light of the long sun, her arms outstretched as if to gather up the fresh light of the morning, reciting a verse that I later learned was from an ancient human tragedy:

This is a dungeon of dole that I am to dight.
Where is my kind bewcome, so conely and clear?
Now am I loathest, alas, that ere was light.
My brightness is blackest and blue now;
My bale is ay beefing and burning:
That gars me go gowling and grinning.
Out, ay welaway! I well enough in woe now.

She bowed, a trifle embarrassed, at my soft applause. I supposed that she had also been reciting poetry when I had surprised her last night. Together, we walked back to the tower, where we found the Doctor on the flat, circular roof, using a telescope to examine the war at the far end of the ship.

'Fascinating,' he said, straightening up and beaming at us across the telescope's fat, brassy barrel. 'You really must take a look, Fyne. I'm

sure you were taught about sieges in military school, but I doubt that you've ever seen one in the flesh, so to speak.'

I bent to the eyepiece and found the traverse screw and turned it as lightly as I could, swinging the view across the battle front. A complex of covered trenches, some smashed in and obliterated by big circular craters, sprawled across the ochre ground in front of the huge cliff. Tottering towers built of lashed-together poles leaned here and there against the black rock. There was what looked like a pit, shielded by a raft of tree-trunks, with spoil-heaps on either side, and I could see dots moving in and around the trenches furthest from the foot of the cliff – Tx's soldiers, the enemy.

The Doctor began asking Casimir about ways of escape. 'Is there a boat? Or perhaps material to build some kind of big kite. If we can catch the air currents just right, we could climb near that big light tube at the centre of the world. It must be hung in free fall at the axis of spin, yes? So the centrifugal force will lessen as we near it, making flying easy. We could fly all the way there. What do you think, Fyne?'

I turned the traverse screw further, sweeping the view up the black Cliff. I said, 'I can't see this bridge.'

'It is deep inside the end wall,' Casimir said.

'Well, that's where we need to go,' I said. 'As for escaping, all we have to do is wait for nightfall, and then we'll creep out and overpower the guards at the gate. It should be easy enough. We can swim out alongside the causeway –'

'No,' Casimir said.

I looked up at her fierce beautiful face.

'I gave my word to Tx,' she said, 'that I would not hurt anyone.'

'This is war,' I said. 'No-one will think the worse of you if you break a promise for the greater good.'

Casimir shook her head; a wholly human gesture. Her mane flew from side to side. 'Tx and his army want to overthrow the officers, but they are still our wards. It would be against the three-fold way to harm any of them. They will be punished, when my father returns, but it will be a subtle chastisement.'

'The officers are fighting back,' I said. 'I can see craters everywhere

amongst the trenches.'

'They drop explosive charges to damage the siege trenches only when they are sure that no-one will be hurt. Otherwise, they dare Tx to do his worst.'

'So the officers have retreated inside this bridge because they will not fight,' I said, 'and Tx and his men are trying to starve them out.'

'There is plenty of food,' Casimir said. 'Tx's men have cut off the water supply, but the artificers found a way of distilling water from the air.'

'And so both sides are locked in a stalemate,' the Doctor said, 'because neither wishes to hurt the other. I suppose that is why the officers have not evacuated the air from the main body of the ship, a logical move that would have ended the war at once.'

Casimir shook her head again. 'They would never do such a thing! It would kill everyone who could not take shelter, and it would wreck the gardens. It is forbidden –'

'By this three-fold way,' I said. 'Well, I must say that although your officers are behaving in a noble fashion, they're also being very foolish. We have to find a way of reaching them so that we can organise a proper counter-attack.'

'My father will wake soon,' Casimir said. 'Then all this human squabbling will end.'

'Alas,' the Doctor said, 'we can't wait that long.' He walked to the edge of the roof and put a foot up on the low wall and shaded his eyes, looking towards the circular cliff. The morning breeze lifted his shoulder-length curls and blew them back from his face. He said, 'I rather fancy flying there. It might impress Tx, don't you think?'

'We have to reach the bridge without alerting Tx,' I said.

'Really, Fyne.' the Doctor said, turning to look at me. 'You are a very difficult man. You make up your mind too quickly, and then you are too slow to change it back again.'

'And you must always be right,' I said.

'Not always, but the exceptions are few and far between. Well, since we need to get away from here as quickly as possible, I suppose we don't have time to make kites. A log or two will do. We can float across

to the shore, and then walk the rest of the way.'

Casimir pointed to the sky of earth and water that curved above us. 'The village at the outer curve of that bow-shaped lake has a telescope, and the people there use it to keep watch on my garden. If they see us trying to escape, they'll heliograph my jailers.'

I shaded my eyes and saw the cluster of huts almost directly overhead, just to one side of the soft glare of the long sun.

'We could try to float across the lake after nightfall,' I said.

Casimir said, 'There is another way. A way into the service tunnels. But it is locked, and besides, the tunnels are dangerous.'

'There's no better puzzle than a lock,' the Doctor said cheerfully, 'and danger is relative. You two might grow bored of chasing those miniature deer, and decide to chase me instead.'

Casimir and I had run past the entrance to the service tunnels the previous night, but I had thought then that the waist-high circular wall of black stone, standing in the middle of a glade shaded by trees and tangled briars, had been some kind of old well. The Doctor dropped a pebble into its maw, listened to the echo that came a few seconds later, then swung over and found his footing on the iron-runged ladder that dropped into darkness. He flashed a grin at me, said, 'Don't dawdle, Fyne.' and started to climb down.

'You don't have to come,' I told Casimir, when she hesitated. 'I'll quite understand if you don't want to break your promise to Tx.'

'I said that I wouldn't hurt anyone,' she said. 'I didn't say that I would never try to escape. But it's dangerous down there, Edward.'

How exotic and exciting my name sounded in her mouth!

I grinned and said, 'We'll face whatever dangers there might be together.'

'The ship was old when father bought it. It has been used by several races, and odd things have come aboard over the centuries, and made their home down there. Things that are tough and smart and fierce, that have survived vacuum purges and the cold of interstellar space. Even the recyclers are frightened of certain tunnels.'

'Recyclers?'

‘They look after the machinery that drives the ecological cycles. Air purifiers, water-recirculating pumps, sludge pumps, and so on.’

‘Perhaps they’ll help us,’ I said, imagining for a moment myself astride some fabulous horned, dragon-like mount at the head of a ragged desperate army that swarmed through the trenches and toppled the siege towers ...

Casimir’s laugh was a fierce yowl that shocked birds from the trees all around. ‘You’re so wonderfully naive,’ she said. ‘Recyclers won’t help us. They are part of the ship. They don’t pay attention to anything but their own work. It’s their nature.’

The Doctor’s voice floated up from the shaft. ‘Stop your canoodling, you two, or I’ll leave you behind!’

We climbed down. Casimir went first. Because I was still unused to the altered balance of my body, she reached the bottom of the shaft long before I did. When I stumbled after her down a short, slanting tunnel, I found her holding a small electrical torch. The Doctor was working by its light at a panel he had opened in the rock wall beside a metal door, and arguing with a thin, querulous voice that came from the air around us.

‘If you’ll just do your job and let us past,’ the Doctor said, ‘I won’t have to rewire you.’

‘It is my job,’ the voice said, ‘to keep people like you out.’

‘You’ve never met anyone like me before, so how do you know I should be kept out?’ The Doctor was poking at a tangle of wires and blinking lights with the pen-like tool I had seen him use before. Its red acorn glowed brightly and it made a busy whine as the Doctor touched it here and there. ‘If you open up,’ he said, ‘I won’t have to use my sonic screwdriver on you. I promise we’ll be out of sight and out of mind in a moment.’

‘I am to let only authorised personnel through,’ the voice said. ‘You are not authorised. Besides, there is a Level Two security alert. I have been asked to let no-one in or out.’

The Doctor said, ‘Do you see the lady with the lamp? She is Casimir. Her father owns this ship, so she must be authorised.’

‘I do not recognise any of you,’ the voice said, and added, as the

Doctor dug into a tangle of wires, ‘Stop this at once.’. I have called for the guards.’

‘Guards?’ I said. ‘Doctor, perhaps we should rethink our plan –’

‘This silly machine is operating under rules centuries out of date,’ the Doctor said. He was up to his wrists in wiring now. ‘Any guards it tries to call will have retired long ago.’

‘That’s what you think,’ the voice said. ‘There is a Level Two security alert. If you get past me, you will all be sorry that you didn’t listen – Stop. Stop that at once!’

There was a whistle that went up beyond the range of hearing – Casimir clapped her hands over her tufted ears – and with a grating sound the door began to lift up, shuddering to a halt halfway.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ the voice said petulantly.

The Doctor twirled his pen-like tool like a Wild West gunslinger, winked at me, and stowed it away inside his jacket.

‘The guards are coming,’ the voice said, as we ducked under the half-open door. ‘Yes they are, and then you’ll be sorry. Just wait there! There is a Level Two security alert. Wait! Wait!’

We could hear it all the way down the long, dank corridor.

‘You’ve let in the rats!’ it howled.

Water ran down bare rock walls. Pipes snaked overhead, hissing and gurgling. A few dim lights flickered behind wire cages. It was so cold that our breath fogged the air, and something lodged far beneath the wet rock floor was making a deep, rhythmic thumping. Then the corridor made a sharp turn, and we came out onto a short platform, beside a glass capsule the size of a motor car. Its door was firmly shut, and I expected another argument with a disembodied voice, but the Doctor said that the machine was merely switched off. He used his pen-like tool – his sonic screwdriver – to undo a panel in the metal band that ran around the equator of the capsule, and flicked a few of the switches that this operation revealed. Lights flickered on inside the capsule, a curved section of glass pushed out and slid up, and a voice exactly like that of the door asked us where we wanted to go.

The Doctor looked at Casimir, but she shook her head and said that she had never used the service tunnels.

I heard a faint scratching behind us, and turned and saw a small horde of rats scuttle around the bend in the corridor. They were all wearing scraps of leather harness. Several carried leaf-wrapped packages on their backs, and two pulled a tiny cart piled with bits of metal and lengths of wire. I aimed a kick at them and they scattered, squeaking crude insults, and poured one after the other into a vent from which white vapour curled.

The Doctor was amused. 'I know it's becoming second nature to you, Fyne, but try to restrain your impulse to chase after small mammals. Train, you will take us to your terminus.'

The voice told us that the estimated journey time was three minutes, and we climbed aboard. The door shut and with a barely perceptible jolt we were on our way. I stepped up to the nose of the capsule, where the Doctor was watching rock walls rush past on either side, and asked him, 'What if this is taking us in the wrong direction?'

'Then we'll ask it to go the other way – or find another one that does.' The Doctor looked at me, and said, 'You're feeling more yourself by day, Fyne.'

My cheeks prickled. I said, 'You don't have to worry about me.'

The Doctor glanced at Casimir, who leaned against the glass at the other end of the capsule, her arms folded across her leather corselet. He said, very quietly, 'Casimir was imprisoned in a tower, and I suppose her father is a kind of king, but she isn't a princess in need of rescue. Remember that you have your own problems.'

I held up my hands, showed him the fine golden furze on their backs and the thorns lodged under my loosening fingernails, and said, 'I'm hardly likely to forget.'

'The important thing is to find out about the siren voice that seduced Seraph, and to do that we must first end this silly siege.'

'I agree. Once Casimir has rallied the officers –'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Follow my lead, Fyne, and try not to do anything rash. You might make things worse rather than better.'

'The only way wars end, Doctor, is when one side wins –'

The capsule's voice said sharply, 'A problem! Danger! A problem!' and the capsule braked so hard and abruptly that the Doctor and I were

knocked down in a heap. Casimir wailed in alarm, on all fours now, the claws of her hands and feet dug into the rubbery floor. As I started to crawl towards her, the capsule slammed into something unyielding. There was a tremendous bang and the lights that studded the roof went out. After a moment of eerie quiet stillness, we all got to our feet, reassuring each other that we were uninjured. The only illumination was a fall of sparks from somewhere above, spluttering and flaring as they dripped onto the cracked glass nose of the capsule, which had come to rest at an angle against the rear end of what appeared to be its twin.

It took all three of us to haul up the door. Casimir stepped out and looked left and right, showing all her teeth is a fearsome grimace. 'This is a trap,' she said. 'I can smell it. I told you bad things lived here, and now you've delivered us straight into the lair of one of them.'

Beyond the two capsules, the tunnel was half-blocked by a spill of rubble. Water poured down from a broken pipe, splashing noisily onto the stones. A cold, musty smell like graveyard earth made every hair of my new coat of fur stand on end. The Doctor was examining the capsule into which our own had smashed. It was filled with an irregular lattice of cords and stalagmites and stalactites of what looked like blackened spun sugar, and things were caught in this web – bones and parts of skeletons and what looked like a streamlined suit of armour that suddenly raised its head and said in a croaking voice, 'Save yourselves.'

The Doctor ignored this advice, of course, and swung up into the wrecked capsule and started snapping the web of brittle spars and ropes that pinioned the armoured man. Casimir took several paces towards the tongue of rubble that half-blocked the tunnel ahead of the wreckage, then hissed and turned back, her tail lashing back and forth, and grabbed my arm.

'Forget the Doctor,' she said. 'Come with me.'

'We should help the poor chap stuck in the –'

'It's only a recycler. Come with me, Edward.'

'I can't leave the Doctor behind, Casimir. I need his help.'

'And I need yours,' she said, and stalked away and started to climb the heap of rubble.

'Wait,' I said, and ran after her.

She had almost reached the top of the slope when what looked like a nest of white snakes poured smoothly and with sinister silence over the crest of broken rubble, their heads crowned with knots of thorns and feather fronds and little beaked mouths that snapped at the air. Casimir wailed in alarm and lost her footing and rolled down the slope amidst an avalanche of dust and small stones. The snakes darted after her, twisting this way and that, and Casimir froze as one reared above her.

I picked up a stone and took aim and threw it as hard as I could. I had been a useful bowler on the school cricket team, and my skill had survived my transformation; the stone bounced off the head of the snake that menaced Casimir, and it promptly withdrew. 'Run!' I shouted, and threw a second stone. But this time a snake caught it in midair and snapped it back at me faster than any ball I had ever faced at the crease. I ducked, and the stone cracked into the glass of the capsule behind me, raising echoes and getting the attention of most of the snakes for a moment. The Doctor jumped down from the doorway, and began working at something underneath the capsule. Inside the glass bubble, the silvery man was, with the arm the Doctor had freed, methodically snapping the struts and cables that imprisoned its legs.

I began to shout and wave my hands, and managed to distract most of the snakes. Casimir tried to run then, but a snake caught her ankle and she went sprawling. I ran to her as she slashed at the snake with both hands, her claws slicing away feathery fronds in sprays of blood the colour of milk. The injured snake withdrew, but three more caught Casimir's arms and waist and started to drag her up the rubble slope, while the rest thrashed the air in a mad fit of rage, catching up bits of stone and flinging them in every direction. A snake coiled around my knees and pulled hard. My feet flew up and I fell on my back, and saw, upside-down, the Doctor run past me, carrying a fat canister that was emitting a rising wail. A dozen snakes writhed towards him. He drew back his arm, threw the canister as hard as he could and dropped to the ground. There was a flash of pure white light, and we were assailed with a blast of hot air filled with dust and flying shards of rock. The snake that had caught me went limp for a moment, then twitched and pulled away, following its fellows in headlong retreat. Something massive

dragged away beyond the ridge of rubble, and I realised that the snakes were not snakes at all, but the tentacles of some kind of monstrous, tunnel-dwelling squid.

Casimir was unwinding a severed tentacle from around her waist, and snarled at the Doctor when he tried to help her.

'Our new friend suggested that I make use of the power pack from the capsule train,' he said to me, after I asked him how he had caused the explosion. He slapped dust from his velvet frock coat, ran his fingers through his curly hair. 'Luckily for us, it was fully charged. How are you, Fyne? You're bleeding.'

I examined my wounds and found that they were no more than superficial cuts and grazes, and said, 'Nothing is hurt except for my pride.'

'Then you can give me a hand with the poor robot,' the Doctor said.

He meant the armoured man, which was indeed a kind of machine, with a slight build, silver skin, and red, glowing eyes in a mask that was a mere sketch of a face, and a voice like that of the door and the capsule.

'You should not be *here*,' it said, as we helped it snap the last resinous strands that held it fast.

'I quite agree,' the Doctor said. 'My ship was caught by a quantum equivalence, and as soon as we've found out why, I hope we'll be on our way.

'I mean, you should not be here,' the metal man said, stepping down from the capsule and indicating the spill of rubble with a graceful sweep of its hand. It was as self-assured a creature as I had ever met, as if it had long ago made a precise inventory of its qualities and found nothing wanting. It said, 'This obstruction is a trap made by one of the passengers. It overrode the safety devices so that it would not register on the transport system.'

The Doctor nodded, 'So that's why the capsules crashed.'

'That is why the first capsule crashed,' the metal man said. 'After that, this line was taken out of service.'

For the first time since I had met him, the Doctor looked bashful. 'I'm very much afraid,' he said, 'that I switched it on again. But what were you doing here?'

‘I came to find out what had happened. Some of the passengers who live on the inner surface have recently begun to make extensive use of the transport system. Perhaps it has something to do with the argument between them. A capsule and three passengers were reported missing, but the cameras and the safety circuits showed that the line was still active, because the passenger which lives in this part of the tunnel had sabotaged them. It is a cunning passenger. I had thought it long departed, but it seems that it was only sleeping. Perhaps it was woken by the argument. I was caught by it, like the three inner-surface passengers. They were still alive when I was caught, but the passenger ate them, piece by piece. It could not eat me, of course, and that is why you found me.’

The Doctor said, ‘No one came to rescue you?’

The metal man said, ‘I made a report. It was decided that while the passenger was still active it was too dangerous to retrieve me, so the line was shut down, and a Level Two security alert was instituted. Unfortunately, it was not foreseen that other passengers would attempt a manual restart of the system.’

‘Just a moment,’ I said. ‘If the thing that attacked us was a passenger, surely the men who were killed by it can’t also be passengers.’

‘There are passengers, and there is the ship, no more and no less.’

‘It’s no use talking to recyclers,’ Casimir said, kicking at a length of tentacle that twitched on the ground. ‘They never make any sense.’

‘Perhaps he can help us get to where we want to go,’ the Doctor said. ‘The terminus can’t be too far away.’

‘Passengers are forbidden to use this line because of the passenger,’ the metal man, the recycler, said. ‘However, because you rescued me, I am willing to escort you to the nearest exit.’

‘An excellent idea,’ I said. ‘The thing that attacked us could come back at any moment.’

‘You are correct,’ the recycler said. ‘The passenger has withdrawn, but it is not terminally injured. We should make haste.’

It led us over the spill of rubble and past a ragged crevice in the curved rock wall of the tunnel, from which a foul wind blew. I thought that I heard something large moving deep inside the crevice; after we had

passed it, it was difficult not to keep looking back. The Doctor chatted amicably with the recycler, asking all kinds of technical questions about the ship that we had accidentally boarded. He was particularly interested in its orbital position around the black hole, but the recycler said that navigation was not part of its duties.

'I would like to talk more,' it said at last, 'but we have reached the exit. You must leave, and I must continue with my work.'

It pointed to an oval opening that gaped above a short flight of stone steps carved into the wall of the tunnel, then started to turn away.

'Wait,' the Doctor said. 'Since I saved your life, I hope I can ask another favour.'

The metal man swept him with its glowing gaze. 'I was alive, as you put it, when you found me. I was merely waiting for the passenger to leave, so that I could be retrieved safely. However, I will thank you for freeing this unit – there is always much work to be done.'

Casimir was amused. 'I told you that recyclers make no sense.'

I said to the recycler, 'You serve the ship.'

'In a sense,' the metal man said.

The Doctor said, 'Don't you see, Fyne? It's all one mind – the locks on the doors, the capsules, these robots, and presumably all the other machinery that services the life system of the ship.'

'We are all in service of the ship,' the recycler said.

'Then you must serve the daughter of the ship's owner,' I said.

'Although the life system takes up a disproportionate volume, the passengers are only a small part of the operation of the ship.' the recycler said. 'Much of our work is elsewhere, in parts inaccessible to most passengers.'

'Recycling sludge,' Casimir said.

'Part of our duties is removing excess silt from lake bottoms, yes. If we did not do it, then the lakes would quickly turn to bogs, and ruin the disposition of your landscape designs.'

The Doctor said, 'You mentioned the argument between the passengers. Well, we want to put a stop to it, before it damages the ship.'

The recycler said, 'The ship is very robust. It will be very difficult for passengers to harm it.'

The Doctor said, ‘But not impossible. A single passenger seriously damaged the transit system; think how much more damage will be done if the argument – the war – escalates. You don’t have any experience of war, I think, but I do. One side is already using explosives against the other. What will happen to the ship if the other side starts to retaliate in turn?’

The recycler stared at him. ‘How will you stop this argument?’

‘Perhaps you can show me how to get into the bridge.’

‘The passengers have shut down the airlocks.’

‘I’m sure you know of other ways in. If you help me, I’ll help the ship.’:

The recycler held out its arm. A pattern of black lines appeared on its forearm, like a tattoo rising to the surface. The patch of silvery skin crinkled, and the recycler peeled it off, handed it to the Doctor and said, ‘You may find this helpful.’

The Doctor studied it and said, ‘This is a way in?’

‘A service entrance.’

‘And no-one knows about it?’

‘No passenger. Please use the exit carefully, and warn other passengers who wish to trespass that this part of the transport system is inoperative because of the actions of a passenger.’

The metal man turned and, with a peculiar dignity, walked away into the dark of the tunnel.

‘Cheeky beggar,’ I said.

‘It isn’t a servant,’ the Doctor said. ‘You really must refrain from attempting to impose your own values on this place, Fyne.’

We climbed out into a roofless, ruined building. Part of one of the walls had fallen or had been knocked down, and this ragged hole framed a view of ochre ground studded here and there with dead trees, stretching away to a looming black cliff that rose as high as the sky – the end wall of the ship’s great chamber. Although we had spent several hours underground, the shadowless, even light was exactly as it had been when we had first climbed down into the service tunnels.

The Doctor leaned at the edge of the hole in the wall and looked out in

every direction. ‘We’ve come out somewhat antispinward of Tx’s camp,’ he said, ‘but it isn’t a very long walk –’

Casimir ran forward and with her doubled fists struck him behind one of his ears. He staggered and went down on his knees. I cried out in shock. Casimir hit the Doctor again, and he fell flat on his face on shattered tiles.

‘I should have killed him,’ Casimir said, as she rifled through his pockets, ‘but he saved my life, so I owe him his.’ She held up the silvery sheet of recycler skin and gave me a fearsome grin. ‘What are you staring at, Edward? This man would have delivered this map into the hands of the enemy of my father.’

‘Perhaps he chose the wrong side, but he isn’t a bad man.’

‘He’s your friend.’

‘I suppose he is.’

Casimir said, ‘And am I not your friend, too, Edward? A better friend, I think, than he will ever be. Come with me. Together we will end the war.’

I insisted on making the Doctor as comfortable as possible, and propped him up in a corner of two walls with his head pillowed on his folded jacket. He was beginning to stir, trying to focus his eyes, and I leaned close and whispered that I was sorry, but this was the best way to end the war, and that I would find him when it was all over.

Casimir was crouched by the hole in the wall, her tail lashing from side to side. She looked over her shoulder, said, ‘Follow me, if you dare!’ and bounded away.

As I chased after Casimir through dry dead scrub, kicking up clouds of dust as we jinked this way and that, I felt a thrilling liberation, like a schoolboy at the end of term, with all summer stretching ahead. It was not merely my infatuation with this strong, fearless, beautiful woman. At that moment, I was convinced that I was right and the Doctor was wrong; my foolish pride blinded me to the fact that his was the sharper mind, that his experience was so much broader and deeper than my own.

Casimir and I ran from one clump of rocks to the next, ran through a copse of dead trees into a colonnaded plaza of white marble as big as a rugby pitch, with dry fountains and stepped, square pools silted with

dust. We rested there until nightfall, taking shelter in a kind of tent that stood in the dead pleasure gardens that surrounded the plaza. Tx's encampment was just ninety degrees around the curve of the landscaped interior of the ship now, its trenches like strange hieroglyphs scribbled across the ochre land. I observed that the far side of the world seemed much closer, and Casimir said that it was. It seemed that the ship's hollow interior was in shape something like a bottle or flask, and we were in the narrower part – the neck.

'It was always hotter and drier here,' Casimir said, 'because the surface is closer to the long sun than elsewhere. I made beautiful rock gardens here, and a desert wilderness. It's all dead now, but I will regrow everything, Edward, and make the world beautiful again.'

The tent was sculpted from a white material as thin as silk and strong as steel; its soft, yielding floor was scattered with dusty cushions and bolsters. A voice – the same voice as that of the door, the capsule and the recycler – bid us welcome, and the air began to grow cooler.

'I regret that I have no refreshments to offer,' the tent said, 'other than a little fresh water, distilled from the air.'

Casimir took hers from the spigot in the wall at room temperature, lapping it from a wide silver bowl with her rough tongue, but I asked for mine to be chilled. It ran from the spigot in a slow trickle, but was ice-cold and immediately refreshing. Casimir was amused by this affectation, but admitted that it had a curious piquancy.

'India couldn't be run without ice,' I said. 'It is the only way we English can stand the heat.'

We talked about the world I had left only a little longer than a day ago, but which seemed as distant to me now as any star – as indeed it was, cast away hundreds of thousands of years in the past, if the Doctor was right, and growing more and more distant with every tick of accelerated time aboard the ship. Casimir told me about the world her father had planned to settle with his followers, but I confess that I was baffled by the technical details of what she called planoforming – a kind of gardening on a worldwide scale that included changing the very atmosphere and weather – and our talk quickly moved on to Casimir's scheme to gain entry to the bridge.

She said that we would make our way there as soon as the long sun dimmed. ‘We will have the advantage then. Men have poor night vision, and I know that while yours isn’t as good as mine, Edward, it will be more than adequate.’

‘How will we get in? Through this service tunnel the recycler mentioned?’

‘A door will be left open for us,’ Casimir said. She lay sprawled amongst cushions, utterly at ease, regarding me with affectionate amusement. When I asked how she knew about the door, she said casually, ‘I was a prisoner of Tx, it’s true, but I was a willing one, and not without certain resources.’

‘You mean to say that you gave yourself up?’

‘I went out to demand the capitulation of the enemy, but when they took me prisoner, I decided not to resist, and I have been spying on them ever since. Whenever Tx came to talk to me, I was able to extract information from him, and I passed everything to my father’s officers. One of them sent his eidolon to me last night, using a farcaster, and I told him about you. And about the Doctor, too, of course – but you, dear Edward, are more important than that posturing fool.’ She paused, and then added, ‘In more ways than one.’

(I thought you were reciting poetry,’ I said stupidly.

‘I was hoping that you would come to me. I’m so glad that you did.’

‘I can’t help worrying about the Doctor.’

He’s a wise man, but also a fool. If he had not chosen the wrong side, I would have brought him with us. Don’t worry about him, Edward. I’m sure he’ll be all right.’

‘He is a very resourceful fellow ...’

‘Of course he is. Don’t worry. Everything is in place.’

‘As soon as we reach the bridge, I will need to find out everything about the disposition of the enemy forces. You can call a meeting of your officers, and I will work out a plan of counter-attack.’

‘Whatever you want, dear Edward,’ Casimir said, and opened her arms. ‘Meanwhile, why don’t you come over here?’

‘Ours is a strange meeting,’ I said, some time later.

‘Strange and wonderful,’ Casimir said.

But she seemed troubled, and turned away when I reached for her.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘My feelings for you ... I have to confess that I did not expect ...’

She looked at me through her tumbled mane, shy and vulnerable. I saw that she was weeping, and my heart turned over. ‘Everything will work out,’ I said, foolishly, helplessly. ‘I promise.’

I tried my best to comfort her, but I had slept little the previous night and the adventure underground had tested me more than I cared to admit. I fell asleep in her strong embrace, feeling the heat of her body against mine, breathing in her heady musk. When I woke, it was twilight, and Casimir was crouching by the entrance of the tent.

‘I have seen lights moving in this direction,’ she said when I joined her. ‘And lights where we left the Doctor. He must have found some way of signalling to them.’

I felt a clean shock of relief that the Doctor was still alive, and a stirring of guilt, too, about my complicity with Casimir. ‘He’s a very resourceful fellow,’ I said. ‘We must see that he’s all right, when this is over.’

‘I am beginning to regret that I did not kill him,’ Casimir said.

‘Please, Casimir, don’t talk like that. It doesn’t become you.’

She shrugged away when I put a hand on her muscular shoulder. Her manner had changed. She was suddenly distant and abrupt, as if she had made an unpleasant but necessary decision. She said, ‘We have to find a way past the search parties, and get to the door. It will be open only a little while – the officers are afraid that Tx’s men will find it.’

We left the dried-up oasis at a fast run. Although I was astonished at my strength and speed, I had trouble keeping up with Casimir, and she urged me on with sharp whispers. The night land rose up on either side and wrapped around us overhead. Camp fires twinkled around the trenches of Tx’s siege force like so many stars. Fainter, smaller constellations moved on the slopes behind us and on either side, and I could hear whistles and voices faint and far off in the darkness.

One party of men went past us not a hundred yards away as we crouched inside a stand of dead, dry bushes. They were trying to move

stealthily through the near dark, but we could hear their footsteps and the rustle of their clothing, and smell their sour, buttery scent. The light of their single dim lantern seemed as bright as a shard of the Moon. They carried crossbows and crude handmade rifles with flaring muzzles. Several had nets slung over their shoulders. Casimir pointed at them and made a grabbing motion with her clawed hand; she wanted to spring up and ambush and kill them. I laid a hand on her shoulder and shook my head, and after a moment she nodded and relaxed.

As soon as the party had passed by, we jumped up and ran on. The great cliff loomed above us, as oppressive as an oncoming thunderstorm. Apart from the irrational idea that the cliff might at any moment topple forward and mash us flat, I felt no fear. It was night, and the tyger-fever was strong in me – perhaps even then, the time-loop was losing its power over the clocks of the myriad machines coursing through my blood, and the change was beginning to tick forward once more. In any event, I was possessed by a thrilling exhilaration that drove away all thought. I knew only the power of my body; the rush of dry air as I chased after Casimir; the steady thump of my feet; the thump of my pulse in my head; the tide of my breath. I ran like a man possessed: I was possessed. I felt that I could have run forever.

We covered the half mile of flat ground in less than a minute, and ran on up increasingly steep slopes of rock. It seemed that the base of the cliff at the end of the world met the surface at a clean junction only at the place where Tx's force laid siege to the main gate; elsewhere, steep foothills cut by tangles of gullies and ravines rose up to meet it. Here and there were great slumps of glassy lava – the remnants of the great melting that had hollowed out the world. Most of the scrub forest in the hollows and the winding gullies had died in the year-long drought, but little pockets of life clung on wherever water dripped from seeps and springs, and at one point Casimir and I flushed up something like a dwarf kangaroo. I would have chased after it, but Casimir caught my arm.

'We don't have time,' she said, and pointed back the way we had come. Little constellations of lights were bobbing, climbing steadily towards us. The search parties had found our trail. Casimir said that they

had dogs, and pointed spinward and then antispinward, where two little clusters of lights were moving towards each other, cutting towards the cliff. ‘They’ve found out about the door,’ she cried, and began to run again.

It became a desperate race. The search parties below us had cut off our line of retreat; we could only move forward and hope that we could reach the door before the two parties converged above us. I heard whistles and shouts and the muffled barking of dogs, and an unreasoning panic began to grip my mind as I chased after Casimir. She ran so very fast, mostly on all fours, her blonde mane streaming over her shoulders. We plunged down a steep glassy slope, and I lost my balance and slid and then rolled to the bottom, the breath knocked out of me, a sharp pain twisted into one of my knees. Casimir pulled me up and we ran on, but I was limping now, and my breath burned in my chest. A narrow path led into a deepening ravine between tumbled boulders as big as houses. On either side, steep cliffs rose almost vertically into the darkness. I could hear dogs barking somewhere above, and men calling to each other, and then a faint light stained the black air ahead of us and coalesced into a ghostly figure: the Doctor.

I cried out. I couldn’t help it.

‘Fyne! Can you hear me, Fyne.’?’ His voice rolled around the rocks, hollow and booming. ‘We’re coming to help you.’

The ghostly image brightened and grew sharper. The Doctor’s eyes looked straight past me.

‘I think I know why Casimir wants you, Fyne. Don’t go any further. Fight the fever. Remember who you are.’

‘Don’t listen to it, Edward!’ Casimir shouted. ‘It’s only an eidolon – a farcaster projection! He’s trying to trick you!’

She caught my arm and pulled me towards the glowing figure. I flinched and closed my eyes as we passed through it; then I was able to run again.

The Doctor’s voice boomed out of the darkness, rolled around the rocks and the narrowing ravine. ‘Fight the fever, Fyne! Remember who you are!’

There was another light ahead: a grainy red glow that defined a square

shape at the top of the path. Casimir yowled in triumph.

'The door! The door!'

I stumbled after her. My heart was thumping in my throat and I was as breathless as if I'd just taken the Ketteridge assault course in full kit. Sticks rattled off the rocks around us – crossbow bolts. One lodged in the cloth of my trouser leg and I plucked it out and flinched at the sharp, bitter smell of the tarry stuff that coated its metal tip: poison, without a doubt.

Men shouted high above. The Doctor's glowing figure floated down through the black air, straight towards me.

'Don't do it, Fyne! She wants to use you!'

Casimir yelped, and clutched at her arm. The shaft of a crossbow bolt stood up between her fingers. She looked at me with a mixture of fear and astonishment, and then her expression melted and she fell to her knees. I caught her up in my arms and ran on, into the red light. Something ground down behind me: the door of the gate. The Doctor's voice cut off in mid-sentence. I was bathed in bloody light, holding Casimir's body and breathing hard and looking all around. A vast space stretched before me, its high ceiling propped by thick metal ribs: it was as if I had stumbled into the belly of a leviathan. Shadows stepped towards me, resolving into men in silvery, one-piece suits.

'Help her,' I said. 'She was hit by an arrow. There's poison –'

One of the silver-suited men pointed a black tube at me. Pain spiked my ears and something punched the entire length of my body, and I collapsed like an unstrung puppet.

I learned later that I had been incapacitated by a weapon that focused a short, sharp burst of powerful sound waves. It did not quite knock me out, but it winded me and turned my muscles to water. I was unable to move so much as a finger while the silver-suited men trussed me up, laid me next to Casimir on a kind of metal cart, and sped us across the floor of the huge, red-lit cavern, passing through a series of doors and climbing a corridor that spiralled upward. I felt myself grow lighter and lighter, felt as if my soul would float right out of my body, and at last must have fainted, for some time later I found myself strapped to a bed,

looking up at a curved ceiling that glowed like fog with the setting sun behind it. Sharp needlepoints pricked all over my head, and Casimir was leaning over me.

I tried to tell her how pleased I was to see her safe, but my tongue felt as if it had swollen to fill the whole of my mouth. My jaws ached, and my teeth were larger and sharper. I knew then that the time-loop had failed and the myriad tiny machines of the tyger-fever were trying to complete my transformation.

With surprising gentleness, Casimir dabbed at my lips with a wet sponge, and asked me if I knew where I was.

'The bridge,' I managed to say.

I was lying on a pallet that floated in the centre of a spherical room flooded with foggy red light. Because it was at the axis of the ship, there was no gravity. A wide window looked out onto a chamber where ranks of what looked like upright coffins receded into the distance. There were padded niches elsewhere in the walls, with panels of lights above them. Only one was occupied, by a stocky lion-man with an iron-grey mane. I knew at once that he must be Casimir's father, Seraph. Thick white bands held him in place. He appeared to be asleep. The barrel of his chest rose and fell with mechanical regularity, a tube fed a pink liquid into the crook of his elbow, and a white machine not much bigger than a cricket ball floated by his head.

Casimir said, 'This is the hospice of one of the hibernation chambers. Blink if you understand me, Edward.'

'Your father ...'

'His mind has gone, but the machines keep his body alive.' Casimir gently raked her claws through my hair. 'Don't worry, Edward. He's very healthy, and will live for a thousand years. Your body on the other hand ...'

'The tyger-fever,' I said. 'Unless it's stopped now, the change will be irreversible.'

'All will be well now,' Casimir said. She was trying to sound cheerful, but I saw how her incisors dented her dark lips.

The little white machine swooped through the air and came to a halt above my chest. It was studded with black thorns of different shapes and

sizes. Little dabs of black glass circled its waist.

Casimir said that I had to relax, said again that everything would be all right. ‘The doctor is going to measure the patterns of your brain activity. All you have to do is watch the pictures it’s going to show you.’

‘You must relax,’ a voice said. It was the voice of the recycler, the capsule, the door. It came from the little white machine.

I said to Casimir, ‘I’m changing. You must find the Doctor. He knows how to stop it.’

‘All will be well,’ Casimir said, and then spoke to the little machine. ‘If anything does go wrong, I’ll unseam you.’

‘I will take control of his vital functions during the operation,’ it said. ‘I do not anticipate any problems.’

I tried to speak again, but Casimir laid a finger on her lips, and then on mine, and withdrew into the shadows behind my pallet. The little machine rose up a little way into the air, and my sight was suddenly full of patterns and geometric shapes that flew at me out of velvety blackness: it was as if my old algebra text had caught fire and exploded in my face. I tried to look away, but the flying shapes were right inside my head, and now interlocking lines of different lengths and colours began to spin like skeletal cartwheels.

‘The test will be over soon,’ the machine’s voice said. ‘Please relax.’

I tried my best. Light and sound and smell assailed me. I felt my limbs flex and rotate. I flew over a landscape of undulating grids into nothing at all, and suddenly woke.

There was a sharp, sour smell of smoke. More than a dozen silver-suited men and women were huddled in urgent conference by a round door in the spherical chamber’s quilted wall. Sheets of transparent material hung in the air around them, filmed with glowing pictures. I glimpsed the white-haired leader of the rebels on one of them, but then he pointed something at whatever was taking his picture, and the view broke up in violent black jags. Other sheets showed tense-looking silver-suits waiting behind hastily built barricades, silver-suits directing hoses that played clouds of white vapour into the heart of a fierce fire, bodies tumbling over each other in a long corridor.

Casimir leaned over me and said, ‘Your Doctor is doing this, Edward!

He's found a way into the bridge!'

'He remembered the map,' I said, and blood filled my mouth because I had cut my tongue on teeth grown long and sharp.

'I should have killed him,' Casimir said bitterly.

A shaven-headed woman with a hawk's face was speaking quietly but forcefully into the ear of an elderly man with a round, wrinkled face and a shaven head freckled with liver spots. He listened to her with a grave expression, then tapped with his thumbnail one of the sheets that hung in the air in front of him, which promptly reconfigured itself to display a diagram. The old man indicated various places on it, and several of the silver-suits touched their fists to their foreheads and shot through the circular door. Then the old man turned to Casimir and said, 'I must go. They are close to the control level now. There's hand-to-hand fighting in the corridors all around it. We're having a hard time of it, I'm afraid.'

Casimir said, 'It will end as soon as they see my father alive and well, Captain Sha. They'll obey him at once when he tells them to lay down their weapons and surrender.'

'Of course. But meanwhile, I'll leave you with three of my men and will post others at key points outside. If we have to, we'll fall back here. I'm certain that even if all else is lost, we can hold this position for long enough.'

'When you return, Captain, my father will be waiting to receive your instructions.'

The old man, Captain Sha, bowed his head and said, 'Forgive me, Casimir, if I say that I can only wish that were so.'

'You'll give him the respect my father deserves. If any one of us fails to do that, the trick will be exposed, and all will be lost.'

'We are all agreed that this is the only way. I'm glad that you understand it too, Casimir. I'm glad that you came back.'

'I'm doing this for my father, Captain. If there was any other way –'

'Have courage, Casimir,' Captain Sha said. 'We will prevail!' He touched his fist to his forehead and swam through the door, closely followed by the hawk-faced woman. Blue ribbons of smoke swirled in for a moment; then the door slammed shut.

The three remaining silver-suits arranged themselves around the quilted

walls, and they and Casimir watched as the little white doctor-machine settled itself behind my head. I felt its busy hum, glimpsed from the corner of my eye one of its black thorns extending, becoming flat and sharp at its end, and felt a rasping in the bones of my skull as it began to cut away the fur on my head. Other extensions sucked up the strands of shorn hair and neatly wound them into little balls. The fur was much longer than it had been. My arms were covered in a thick pelt striped with orange and black. My skin felt hot. I flexed my fingers, felt my claws puncture the quilted material of the pallet. I was still changing.

I said, 'You have to find the Doctor. There are tiny machines inside me, Casimir. They're trying to change me into a tyger-man. The Doctor can restart the time-loop, stop them ...'

Casimir said, 'What is happening to your body soon won't matter any more, Edward. Please, you must trust me, and try to relax.'

The buzzing of the doctor-machine's razor vibrated inside my skull. I tried to pull my head away, but it was securely clamped. Casimir said to the doctor-machine, 'Can't you put him to sleep?'

The doctor-machine said, 'It is necessary that he stays awake during the procedure.'

I said, 'What procedure?'

Casimir said, 'They tried it with a volunteer, but it didn't work. His mind couldn't adjust to its new home.'

The doctor-machine said, 'The mind–brain mapping was insufficiently contiguous.'

'The man's mind didn't fit its new home,' Casimir said. 'It faded away. After that failure, the officers wanted to use me. But I couldn't do it, Edward – it would have been a blasphemy.' Her teeth dented her lower lip. She looked away, looked back, said quietly, 'I admit that I was frightened. That's why I ran away. I went to speak with Tx. I thought that I could end the war, but I am not my father. I do not have his powers of persuasion. I do not have his authority. Tx listened to me, but he wouldn't agree to end the war against the officers, and I can't force Captain Sha to leave the black hole. He still believes that my father's mind is out there somewhere. All the officers do. They cling to the hope that my father will make contact with them, and tell them what to do.'

‘He will,’ one of the silver-suit guards said, his voice hoarse with barely suppressed emotion.

Casimir shot a hard look at the man. ‘If he was able to return he would already have done so, to put an end to the rebellion. That’s why we have no choice but to go through with this charade. If there was any other way ...’

I understood then what they planned to do. They were going to rip my mind from my body and use it to reanimate Seraph. And then, as Seraph, I would order Tx and his men to lay down their arms, and end the war. I tried to sit up, but the straps around my body were too strong.

Casimir put her hand over mine. ‘I wish there was some other way, Edward.’

‘It won’t work,’ I said. ‘I’m not like you. I’m a man. I’ve been changed, I’m *being* changed, but in my mind, where it matters, I’m still the same person.

The doctor-machine said, ‘As a matter of fact, the brain-mapping procedure shows considerable deviation from the human norm.’

Casimir said, ‘Edward, you told me that your fever was changing you into something else. If that’s true, then what difference does it make if you find yourself in my father’s body?’

‘My body is changing, Casimir, not my mind. I still remember who I am ... Who I was.’

Casimir grinned fiercely, showing all her sharp, yellow teeth, her rough pink tongue. ‘No man could have run with me like you did, Edward. And you have the bloodlust, too. You give yourself entirely to the hunt, just like me.’

She took my hand. There were tears in her large, lustrous eyes, but because there was no gravity, they swelled without falling. She said, ‘I’m sorry I tricked you, but there was no other way. Will you forgive me?’

‘We’ll always have last night, Casimir, whatever else happens.’

Casimir blinked, and her tears broke free. Some clung to her lashes; others flew through the air, and one broke on my lips. It tasted of the sea. She said softly, ‘We’ll run together every night once this is over, Edward. I promise.’

‘You must make him ready now,’ the doctor-machine said.

Two of the silver-suits pointed black tubes at me while the third helped Casimir undo the straps and haul me through the air to one of the padded niches in the wall. The fever was very strong now, and I was as helpless as a baby. My every muscle seemed on the verge of cramp. My bones were creaking as they changed shape. Casimir and the guard settled me into the niche, and bands sprang from the edges of the quilted material and clamped around my arms and legs.

‘This is the machine that took my father’s mind away,’ Casimir said. ‘He used it to talk to the sleepers. He would stand in their dreams and reassure them that all was well, that soon they would wake and build a new world. That’s what he was doing when he first heard the siren voice, and soon he could talk of nothing else. He ordered the ship’s course changed, and when we entered orbit around the black hole he came back to this room, to this very machine. He sent out his mind to walk where the siren voice walked, and he did not return. I sometimes think that he did it deliberately, Edward, that he found heaven and left us behind ...’

Over her shoulder, through the window, I could see the stacked rows of coffins receding in red light. Something moved at the far end of the space between two of the rows. I tried to speak, but Casimir put a finger on my lips.

‘Don’t try to talk, Edward. It will soon be over.’

The doctor-machine said, ‘I am calibrating now.’

Casimir said, ‘Your mind will be uploaded into the buffer, Edward, and then we’ll put my father’s body in your place, and you’ll be downloaded into his brain. You won’t feel anything. It will be like the most profound sleep, and when you wake, you’ll come with me and put an end to the rebellion.’

The thing I had seen moving between the rows of coffins was the Doctor, swimming strongly through red-lit air. At first, I thought he was being chased headlong by a horde of silver-suits, but then I saw that he was leading a small army of recyclers. No-one else in the room saw him; they were all watching me as Casimir folded a square of cloth over my shaven head. I felt it contract as it fitted tightly to my skin. The Doctor

was at the window now. He saw me looking at him and winked and put a finger to his lips. Casimir was saying something about quantum monopoles. Behind the window, a recycler touched the tip of a pole to the very centre of the glass, which, with a high singing sound, promptly shattered into thousands of fragments that blew out like snow.

The room filled with a freezing fog. Casimir threw herself across me as recyclers and guards briefly struggled in billows of red-lit mist. She struck at a recycler and it spun away head-over-heels, caught the frame of the window and shot back at her, joined by three of its fellows. Casimir spat and struggled, but they quickly overpowered her. The Doctor came towards me, and the white doctor-machine got in the way, bristling with razor-tipped extensions.

'Don't be silly,' the Doctor said, and showed it his sonic screwdriver. 'You're a brave little thing, but you're outnumbered. If you don't surrender, I'm afraid I'll have to reduce you to your components.'

'If you don't surrender,' the machine said, flexing its extensions, 'I'll reduce you.'

'It is trying to transmit a warning,' one of the recyclers said. 'I have blocked it.'

Other recyclers pinned Casimir and the silver-suits to the various parts of the wall of the spherical room. The doctor-machine flexed its extensions again, then withdrew them and drifted aside in what was clearly a crestfallen manner.

'How are you, Fyne.'?' the Doctor said.

'I've been better.'

'The tyger-fever, eh?'

'I rather think something must have damaged the time-loop. Perhaps when I was incapacitated by a weapon.'

The Doctor touched his sonic screwdriver to the bands that held me in the niche. They sprang apart, and the Doctor helped me sit up. 'The fever is running at full strength,' he said. 'If I'd arrived just an hour later, who knows what I would have found.'

'I would have been in Seraph's body,' I said. 'But I don't know if I would have survived the experience.'

'That's what they wanted you for, eh? They thought that because you

look a little like Seraph, your mind must be compatible with his body.'

'It isn't too late,' Casimir said. She hung in mid-air, pinned by four recyclers. 'Edward is dying. I can save him.'

'I don't think his mind would survive long in your father's brain,' the Doctor said. 'Despite his appearance, he's still all too human.'

'The mapping was not one hundred per cent contiguous,' the doctor-machine said, 'but it was sufficient.'

The Doctor said sharply, 'He would have lasted long enough to convince Tx, eh?'

Casimir looked at the little machine and said, 'You told me he would live!'

'Captain Sha felt that it was a necessary sacrifice,' it said.

'There's not much hope for me whatever happens,' I said. I felt faint and dizzy. I could feel internal shifts – joints, organs, muscles. Black rags fluttered at the edge of my vision. 'I've changed, Doctor, since you last saw me. I want to help these people if I can. I want to help end the war.'

'I rather think it's almost over,' the Doctor said. 'I'm afraid I forced it by recruiting these brave recyclers, and finding a way into the bridge through the service levels.'

'How did you convince the recyclers to help?'

The Doctor looked sheepish, and said, 'I reprogrammed them. It's rather against my principles, but it was the only way to move things along. As soon as this is over, I'll reset them, and they'll go back to their routines. They won't even remember how they helped the passengers. But first, we have to help you, Fyne. I said that I would take you to a hospital, didn't I? Well, here we are.'

'You can change me back?'

'This will help me,' the Doctor said, pointing his sonic screwdriver at the little white machine. 'After I've made a few adjustments, it will be able to reprogram the tyger-fever to reverse its changes and return you to your original state.'

'I'm not sure if I deserve to be cured,' I said. 'I've made rather a mess of things.'

'You fell in love with a princess,' the Doctor said. 'That's always

risky.' He looked at Casimir and said, 'You care for him as much as he cares for you, I think. When this is all over, perhaps you would like to come with us.'

'There is still much to do here,' Casimir said. 'Tx may have won the war, but he does not know how to run the ship. Perhaps I can mediate between him and the officers.'

'You said that you are not your father,' I said.

'I must try.'

'If your father could talk to them,' I said, 'they would listen. They would do what he asked, and set aside their differences.'

Casimir tried to get free, but the recyclers, held her with implacable force. 'If you download your mind into my father's body, you'll die!'

'I have another idea,' I said. 'Doctor, if you can change me back, I'm sure that you can also change me into something else. What would the machines of the tyger-fever need for a template?'

The Doctor looked at me thoughtfully. I think that he had already guessed what I had planned to do. He said, 'I believe that the Tyger's species use their own blood to program their nanoviruses.'

'If blood acts as a template, then the tyger-fever will make me into a replica of whoever the blood comes from.'

'Not an exact replica. The nanoviruses of the tyger-fever will read genetic material in cells in the blood, and use it to rewrite your own genetic material. It will turn you into a chimera, rather than an exact replica of the donor of the blood.' The Doctor looked at me. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

I looked at Casimir. 'I don't want to leave the ship,' I said.

After the Doctor had reprogrammed the little machine, it sat in the air above my body and extended all its thorns. They branched as they grew, and the branches branched and rebranched, each thorn becoming a bush of tens of thousands of filaments so fine that their long tips could slip between the cells of my skin without spilling a single drop of blood, growing through my body as filaments of fungus invade a rotting log. I passed out at that point, and lay in a deep coma as the millions of filaments sought out and reprogrammed the myriad microscopic

machines of the tyger-fever. Within the almost invisible thicket of filaments spun by the doctor-machine, my body was returned to its original state, and then the Doctor injected into one of my veins a cupful of Seraph's blood, and the tyger-fever began to work on me a fresh and final transformation.

I learned later that while I lay in a coma, as the tyger-fever changed me cell by cell, Casimir persuaded Captain Sha and the rest of the officers to accept the inevitable and surrender to Tx. The Doctor and the recyclers kept everyone away from the hospice, and a day later I was able to rise from my sick bed. I was still weak, but my mind was clear. Casimir dyed my new mane grey, to match that of her father, and she and the Doctor supported me on either side while I made a short speech to Tx's ragged army and their prisoners. Casimir had told me what to say, and had coached me in the speech patterns of her father. It was not, I have to say, a fine performance, but my audience wanted to believe what I had to tell them.

When I was done, the war was over.

The transformation had used up every spare ounce of fat and muscle, leaving me starveling thin with a ferocious appetite. Later, as I hungrily devoured the fresh haunch of a rockhopper that Casimir had especially caught for me, the Doctor told me that he had used the mind apparatus to try to discover where Seraph had gone, and to see if he could bring him back.

'In that I failed,' he said. 'But I did make contact with something, and I need to discuss it with you before I leave.'

'You found the Conservers,' I said. I had stripped every scrap of meat from the thigh bone, and now I cracked it open with my strong teeth to get at the marrow.

'As a matter of fact, I didn't. The Conservers can't exist in this era – the fabric of the space-time continuum is too dense for them. It would be like expecting you to survive on the surface of a star.'

'But you made contact with something.'

'With messengers. Avatars. The Conservers know their own history – in fact, they know every moment of it, because it's in their nature to

cherish the past. So they opened a way between the far future and this present moment, and sent avatars through it. It was the avatars who contacted Seraph, and had him bring the ship here. But he got too close to them, poor fellow, and was burned up by the experience.'

I sucked up the last of the delicious, fatty marrow, tossed away the bone, and said, 'But you were able to talk to them. What did they have to say for themselves?'

'They have a gift for you, if you want it. Do you remember what I told you about the Conservers?'

'I've changed a great deal, Doctor, but it hasn't affected my memory. The Conservers were human, once upon a time. They outlived every star in the galaxy, and preserved the history of its every intelligent race against the time when all could be resurrected.'

'The Conservers are descended from human beings,' the Doctor said. 'As a matter of fact, from a particular group of human beings.'

He looked at me expectantly, and I said, 'Either this is fate, or a monstrous coincidence.'

'Nothing is certain,' the Doctor said. 'If it was, the universe would run down in utterly predictable patterns like a clockwork toy. It's very much the better for harbouring fundamental indeterminacies. But in this case, I believe the Conservers altered the odds in their favour by reaching back into their own past.'

'They sent their avatars into the past, and the avatars snared Seraph and the ship, and us too.'

'They sent more than their avatars through the way they opened. A black hole is much larger on the inside than the outside –

It no longer hurt to smile. 'Like your TARDIS.'

'Not exactly, but I suppose it isn't a bad analogy. Anyway, there's something inside the black hole. Something that you and Tx must see before you decide what to do next.'

I returned to the hospice with Tx and the Doctor, and we lay down in three of its niches with our heads capped with squares of the mind-reading quantum monopole material. A moment later, we were standing on a flat plain that extended to infinity on all sides, under a white sky in

which black stars burned. ‘Steady,’ the Doctor said, as something approached from a direction at right angles to everything else. ‘Remember that none of this is real.’

Then the avatars stood before us.

It was as if space had been twisted to refract a vision of something that did not really exist, as lenses of shimmering air will conjure cool streams in a hot desert. They looked a little like people made of molten glass. How many there were it was impossible to say, because they were never still, and at any moment several of them were melting into a single form while another was pulling apart into many.

‘They’re so beautiful,’ Tx said.

They were, indescribably so. Have you ever met the gaze of a stranger, and fallen instantly in love? It was a little like that. I wanted to join their dance. I would have given anything to go wherever they went, do whatever they did.

The Doctor took my hand, and I realised that I had begun to move towards the avatars. He was holding Tx’s hand too; we were both straining towards the glorious vision like two hounds eager to be off the leash. ‘They are only approximations of the real thing,’ he said, ‘but they would burn you up in a second if you got too close. Remember what happened to Seraph. Remember that for the sake of everyone on the ship you must return safe and sound.’

The avatars began to recede, and we followed them into a volume of black space where I felt simultaneously no bigger than a dust mote, and so huge that I had to stoop to fit inside. Eight sharp points of light burned before us and within us.

‘Those are stars,’ Tx said. ‘Do they have planets?’

‘Each star has a planetary system, and each system contains at least one world where humans can live,’ the Doctor said.

‘We’re inside the black hole,’ I said.

‘Inside its event horizon,’ the Doctor said. ‘I can give you precise instructions about navigating the wormhole that links this place with the rest of the universe, but I should warn you that once you enter it, there’s no going back.’

‘Because not even light can escape a black hole,’ I said.

‘Exactly. You’ll be able to keep watch on the universe beyond the event horizon, but you won’t be able to return to it. Not until billions of years have passed on the outside, and the event horizon evaporates. What do you think, gentlemen? What will it be? Head on towards the original destination, or change the course of history?’

‘What if the ship is meant to resume its course?’ I said. ‘Who’s to say that the descendants of Tx’s people won’t become the Conservers unless they first find their Utopia?’

‘None but the Conservers themselves,’ the Doctor said. ‘Otherwise they wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble to snare us.’

‘What is meant to be, will be,’ Tx said. He was taking this more calmly than me, looking all around himself with solemn delight.

‘I think we should discuss this with Casimir and Captain Sha,’ I said.

‘With everyone on the ship.’ Tx said.

‘You’re their leaders, gentlemen,’ the Doctor said. ‘Talk to whoever you want, but in the end, the decision is in your hands.’

We live on a wild world of jungles and grasslands, on the single continent that sprawls across its equator. There are not many of us. Casimir and myself and our children, and the families of a few volunteers so loyal to Seraph that they preferred to drink my blood and be changed by the tyger-fever rather than join the Utopias that Tx and the rest of the ship’s officers and crew were building on the other worlds. There are three small moons in our night sky, and south of the equator we can see all seven of the stars that share the interior of the black hole with our own. Every ten years or so the steady light of the ship crosses our sky. Most of the time, each family keeps to its own hunting range, but when the ship enters orbit around our world we all come together and visit it for a few days of feasting and conversation with the passengers it has picked up on its endless round trip from star to star. We could choose to travel with it to the other worlds where the humans are making their homes, but there’s no need. We’re happy here, and at present the human worlds are at peace with each other.

Just before he left, the Doctor promised that I would see him again. ‘I came here a long time ago, in another incarnation. Before Tx’s people

become the Conservers, there will be a war between several of their worlds, and you'll need my help to settle it.'

I told him that it was best if I didn't know too much. 'You once told me that nothing about the future is fixed. There are fundamental indeterminacies. Perhaps it won't turn out as badly as you think.'

The Doctor looked at me with a wry, wistful smile. 'You've changed a lot in just a few days, Fyne, but you still have the foolish optimism that's so characteristic of you humans.'

'Quite the opposite,' I said. 'Who knows what terrible mistakes we might make, if we knew too much about our own future?'

'In any case,' he said, 'I don't remember very much about it. I'm sure you'll know what I mean when I say that I was someone else then.'

I think I do. Sometimes I dream of the woods of my father's estate. I'm following the scent of a deer when I spy a man and a small boy, talking happily to each other as they walk all unaware through the green shade beneath the grandfather oaks.

One day they'll need us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McAuley was born in England on St George's Day 1955. He has worked as a research biologist in various universities, including Oxford and UCLA, and for six years was a lecturer in botany at St Andrews University. The first short story he ever finished was accepted by the American magazine *Worlds of If*, but the magazine folded before publishing it and he took this as a hint to concentrate on an academic career instead. He started writing again during a period as a resident alien in Los Angeles, and is now a full-time writer.

His first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, won the Philip K Dick Memorial Award, and his fifth, *Fairyland*, won the 1995 Arthur C. Clarke and John W Campbell Awards. His other novels include *Of the Fall*, *Eternal Light*, *Red Dust*, *Pasquale's Angel*, the three books of Confluence – *Child of the River, Ancients of Days* and *Shrine of Stars – The Secret of Life, Whole Wide World*, and the forthcoming *White Devils*. He has also published two collections of short stories, *The King of the Hill* and *The Invisible Country*. A third short-story collection, *Little Machines*, will be published by PS Publishing in 2004. He lives in North London.