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'We've been colonising other planets for a thousand million years,' she said, turning to the camera and giving her trademark smile. *'All right, Mr Matheson – I'm ready for my close-up.'*

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This book is dedicated to the memory
of my dear friend, Lynne Thomas.

Godspeed, Lynne.

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PROLOGUE

'Hi. I'm Walter J. Matheson III.'

The man portrayed in the three-dimensional diorama in the centre of the room gave his familiar plastic smile – a smile as well known as his name. With his blue-silver hair and permatan he could have been anywhere between his late forties and early sixties, but to Joan, Cybil, Jacqueline, Victoria and Jane-Marie, age didn't matter. He was Walter J. Matheson III, richer than all of their husbands put together – and that was saying something. Actually, that was saying *everything*.

As Joan Bruderbakker sipped her mineral water (two ice cubes and a slice of lemon) and nibbled on a low-fat crispbread with low-fat spread and low-fat paste, Walter J. Matheson III was preparing to extol the virtues of yet another product that was undoubtedly going to make him even richer. Joan, Cybil, Jacqueline, Victoria and Jane-Marie watched intently. It wasn't as if they had anything else to do, was it? Five bored trophy wives, average age 35, average number of children zero, average number of stepchildren two (no children for them – pregnancy was a death sentence for a trophy wife), average number of bedrooms in their houses 31.

While their husbands, captains of industry all, toiled to make their billions, these five women's primary undertaking was to take it in turn to visit one another's mansions, sip mineral water and watch the television. Even the infomercials that filled the gaps between the morning soaps and the lunchtime chat shows were an intoxicating diversion from their lives of endless luxury.

The three-dimensional representation of Matheson – courtesy of another WJM product, *Living Vision*™ – continued. 'I'm joined today by my good friend, Dominique Delacroix. You may know Dominique from her roles in *Dreams of Tomorrow* and *Executive Desires*.'

Joan, Cybil, Jacqueline, Victoria and Jane-Marie did indeed know her. They knew her very well. Dominique was one of their icons, albeit a deliciously tarnished one. In the first four seasons

of the much-missed *Dreams of Tomorrow* (Republic Gold, cancelled due to falling ratings) she had been Celeste Wayne, the ignored and bored wife of a billionaire oil magnate; in *Executive Desires* (Republic One, about to be relaunched on KWJM3, 8 p.m., Wednesdays) she was the ruthless, manhungry boss of a powerful corporation – the much-married (and much divorced/widowed/delete as applicable) Majeste Parnell Partington Wilby Poindexter Raven.

They could all sympathise with the first role, but only dream about the second. In truth, dream was about all that they could do, apart from relish the fact that the oh-so-perfect Dominique Delacroix (born Mary Klinker three more years ago than her press releases cared to admit) was in truth far too fond of snorting her inflated salary up her nose (rumour had it that she was on her second reconstructed septum already), and her attention to her male teenage fans was legendary, well, legendary to them, courtesy of Joan, whom they all knew had been a successful soap star before her marriage to Charles Bruderbakker. Successful to a point, that was.

Joan had been a child star in *As the Worlds Turn*, a teenage siren in *Dreams of Tomorrow* and, in her twenties, a marriage wrecker in *Executive Desires* – both on set and off set.

Unfortunately, one of the marriages she had tried to wreck had been Dominique Delacroix's, something of a career-limiting move, given that Dominique had been the star of *Executive Desires* and her husband had been the producer. Joan's character had soon found herself thrown from grace (quite literally – out of the sixtieth floor of an office building) in one of the highest-rated storylines the soap had ever seen.

Thankfully Charles had been around to rescue her from the scrapheap of failed careers that was piled up behind the studio lot and had installed her as queen of the trophy wives. None of the others had ever dared ask Joan whether she thought it was a fair exchange, however. To be honest, Joan herself wasn't actually sure that she knew the answer to that one.

'Dominique's here to tell you about a revolutionary new process. And it's something that I really want to share with you,' Walter J. Matheson III was saying, his voice as silky as his manner, as the camera tracked across the studio. 'Once you've seen what it can do, your lives will never be the same again.'

And there was Dominique Delacroix, resplendent in a gorgeous lilac outfit – who was the designer? But none of them was prepared for the sight that presented itself: thanks to Joa they all knew that Dominique was in her early fifties. Yet ther were no tell-tale lines at the corners of her eyes, no turkey-ne no liver spots. Joan, Cybil, Jacqueline, Victoria and Jane-Marie craned forward to double-check the picture, five minds as on Had she had work done? She must have had! But there we none of the clues that indicated plastic surgery. So how could Dominique Delacroix, soap star, look so young?

'Hi, I'm Dominique Delacroix. Girls, you might be wondering how I manage to keep myself looking so good? It's all thanks to my friends at *Skin Deep*.' (The girls could almost hear the ™.)

Girls. A term that they hung on to. Because, despite the average age of 35, getting old was the one thing that they feared. Their husbands had chosen them for their youth, ar none of them (apart from maybe Victoria – she'd only just joined their little trophy wives' club), was naïve enough to thin that they wouldn't be replaced like their predecessors once t wrinkles and the bags under the eyes began to appear. Forge of their other problems, such as the logistics of organising dinner parties and charity balls – mortality was their biggest fear. S they were very attentive as Ian J. Matheson and Dominique Delacroix began to explain the 'revolutionary new process'.

And within a few minutes, the businessman and the soap star had Joan, Cybil, Jacqueline, Victoria and Jane-Marie on the edge of their (very expensively upholstered) seats.

Entranced.

CHAPTER ONE

'Hang on to your hat, Peri – we're in for a bumpy ride!' shouted the Doctor, his hands darting over the buttons and switches on the hexagonal control console.

Tell me something I don't know, she thought, as the floor bucked beneath her. She reached out to steady herself against the console, but a massive static charge threw her to the floor.

Lying there dazed, she tried to get a grip on what was happening. The day had started so well: a leisurely breakfast in the arboretum – waffles, maple syrup and eggs-over-easy, washed down with strong black coffee – followed by a few lengths of the TARDIS pool. Since the Doctor was still fiddling around with the Zeiton 7 they'd got on Varos – he'd spouted a load of technobabble at her before heading off to the Power Room like an excited little kid with a new model kit – she'd figured that she could have the day to herself.

And now the TARDIS was shaking itself apart.

Peri managed to sit up. 'What's going on?'

'A superheated plume from the substrate!' the Doctor roared over the twisted scream of the TARDIS engines. 'It's tearing us apart!'

'I get the picture!' she shouted, ducking as a couple of roundels exploded and span across the console room like mini frisbees. 'Can't you do something?'

'What do you think I'm trying to do?' His multicoloured frock coat trailing behind him, he leapt from panel to panel. 'The Time Vortex is falling apart before us!' He ran a hand through his mop of dark blond hair. 'Unless...'

Peri was knocked backwards as the TARDIS was hit by another wave of energy. She looked up to see the Doctor slamming his fist against a large blue button that she could have sworn hadn't been there before. 'Hold on, Peri – this is going to be rather nasty!'

And that's an understatement, Doctor! Lying on the floor, trying

to find something in the console room to hold on to, Peri felt like she was being dragged out of her body, her mind being taken *elsewhere*...

Then she *was* elsewhere.

Night had fallen. Not just the common night, the night that followed day, but the long night, the night that they had feared since the very beginning. They knew that they had always lived on borrowed time: now they knew that they had borrowed too much... and payment was due.

Since the dawn of the very first sunrise, they had known their purpose: to serve their queen. She was as old as the universe, and they were her children. They needed her, and she needed them. This world, this dark world with a distant red sun would never be enough for the Queen and her children: not when they could see the infinity of stars that surrounded them, the endless possibilities...

An aeon after being birthed, the plan was clear. They were the grandchildren of an ancient god, one of the Elder Race. Her people had held sway over the previous universe – they would hold sway over this one. And her grandchildren would swarm throughout the galaxies, their spores landing and colonising, spreading her majesty throughout the stars.

Peri could see the Queen from her vantage point: she seemed to shift back and forth across the borders of matter and energy, her shape impossible to hold. And Peri could hear her voice inside her head, her imperative: *Breed, my children. Breed.*

And they did. In abundance. All around her, Peri could see explosions of actinic light, as the children of the Queen launched themselves from their homeworld to become queens in their own right. Thousands, millions of them, protected in shining purple husks, shooting into the sky like a meteor shower in reverse. The night briefly became day as the Queen's brood came of age, with only one thought resonating across the gestalt mind: colonisation. *Everywhere.*

Peri was forced to close her eyes as the sky became bright and brighter, until finally even that wasn't enough. The light burnt through her eyelids, and instinctively she opened her eyes, expecting to see the hellish landscape. Instead, she saw roundels, and the concerned face of the Doctor looking into hers.

‘Are you all right?’ He held out his hand and hoisted her to her feet.

For a moment Peri considered telling the Doctor what she’d seen, but she ran the risk of seeming hysterical. Better to pass it off as a side effect of whatever had happened to the TARDIS and get on with things. Which meant finding out what the hell had just happened. ‘Explanation for the hard of thinking?’

The Doctor grinned at her. ‘Sarcasm in the face of adversity. Obviously not too badly hurt.’ He glanced at the nearest monitor. ‘Well, we broke free...’

Peri was still feeling slightly dizzy, and tried to surreptitiously steady herself against the console. ‘That’s your “but” voice, Doctor. What happened? And what went wrong?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Very well. You know what the Time Vortex is?’

‘Of course. It’s what the TARDIS travels through. like a Grand Central Station linking the universe together.’

‘Exactly. Peri – sometimes, you have the soul of a poet. Now, imagine it as an ocean. The TARDIS just ran into a plume of... well, superheated water.’

‘Like one of those underwater volcanoes? Smokers? Howard was always interested in them.’

The Doctor flicked a few switches. ‘Indeed. Something was forcing its way through the Time Vortex, and we got the rough end of the stick. Whatever it was, it was going from A to B and didn’t care what was in the way.’

Peri swallowed. Her stomach was threatening to show her what she’d eaten for breakfast. ‘Is the TARDIS okay?’ she managed to say.

The Doctor nodded. ‘She’ll be fine. I boosted the power... thanks to that extra Zeiton 7, we were able to shear off from the plume...’

Here we go. ‘There’s your ‘but” voice again.’

The Doctor shrugged. *But* we were dragged along with it, and ended up at the plume’s final destination. Wherever that is.’ He glanced at the console. ‘And the coordinates have been scrambled. How annoyingly inconvenient.’

‘Easy way to find out.’ Peri reached over and activated the scanner – she was getting quite familiar with some of the TARDIS’s more basic functions. The image on the scanner

changed to show a dimly lit street: familiar, somehow. Shiny w
pavements, cracked tarmac... and wasn't that a traffic bollar
And a street sign?

Surely not...

'Is that England? London?' she asked hesitantly. 'It is
London... isn't it?'

'I have to say, it does look very familiar.' The Doctor
grinned. 'Let's take a look, shall we?'

'But what if it isn't?' Something screamed out to Peri that
there was something simply *wrong* about the image on the
scanner, but she couldn't work out what it was. 'Doctor...'

He smiled at her. 'Where's your sense of adventure?'

'I left it in my room. I picked up "healthy scepticism" this
morning instead.' She glanced back at the scanner. It looked like
London... but her experiences with the Doctor meant that she
was always on the lookout for killer cyborgs or talking slugs.

'Peri...'

The Doctor's tone brooked no argument. He wanted to
explore, and she had no say in the matter. She sighed. This was a
battle she had never won, and never would, either. 'I'm popping
back to my room to pick up my jacket.' Then she grinned. 'And
just for you, I'll see if I can find my "sense of adventure".'

The Doctor laughed. 'That's the spirit!'

Peri wasn't convinced.

In Claudia Bruderbakker's experience, there were certain sour
that had an unerring ability to cut through anything. The cry of a
small child. The meow of a cat. The scream of a police car. Th
ringtone on her mobile phone. And her stepmother's incessan
moaning. Even over the thump and thrash from her mini-disc
player, she could hear the Word of Joan rising up from
downstairs. Never a good sign.

Groaning, Claudia paused the player, got up from her bed
and opened her bedroom door. 'Yes?'

The Word of Joan just about modulated into words.
Screechy self-obsessed words of: 'If you want lunch, you'll have to
make it yourself. I'm going out and it's Mrs Svenson's day off.'

Nothing in that sentence surprised Claudia. She was used to
looking after herself – she couldn't remember the last time that
Joan had ever lifted a finger in the kitchen apart from to wag it at
Mrs Svenson to tell her off – and she was used to being left o

her own: she'd had long enough, hadn't she? Her real moth had left the scene about ten years ago, when Claudia had been ten, instantly replaced by out-of-work actress Joan – the young model.

From day one, Joan had seen Claudia as a necessary ev her relationship with Claudia's father, something that had to b endured in exchange for a life after soap-stardom, a twent bedroom mansion, and her take on the Bruderbakker fortune.

Claudia simply saw Joan as evil.

Walking to the top of the stairs, Claudia looked down at Joan in the huge hallway. Her stepmother looked like she alwa did when she was liable to be seen by her adoring public: f coat, dark glasses, big hair. An archetypal trophy wife and an archetypal bad mother. No, not bad. That would suggest that s possessed even basic parenting skills. Joan's only skill w spending money. Other people's money. In particular, Claudia's father's money.

'Going anywhere nice?' Claudia asked indifferently. Sh could go to hell for all she cared.

Joan glanced up at her through wraparound sunglasses. 'I having a makeover,' she said smugly. 'An anniversary present your father.' An anniversary present that Claudia's father wou end up paying for, of course. 'Then I'm spending the rest of the afternoon with the girls.'

The girls. The term always made Claudia laugh – and not nice laugh, either. A vapid bunch of harpies who did nothing but spread their bile and spite around, whiling away the hours in concerted nastiness over the mineral water and canapés merely to detract from their own inadequacies. *Let me if I ever end up like that!* she begged in silent prayer.

'Ready, Mrs Bruderbakker?' The drawling tones belonged Brady, her father's chauffeur. He was standing behind Joan, in his charcoal grey uniform and peaked cap, looking as drop-dead gorgeous as ever. Claudia would have made a move on him long time ago, if she hadn't suspected that her stepmother ha got there before her. And Joan's cast-off men were about a appealing as Joan's cast-off clothes.

'That I am, Brady, that I am.' She shot Claudia a witherin look. 'And try to make yourself useful while I'm out.'

Claudia gave her the finger as she tottered through the fro

door towards the waiting limo. Useful indeed. As if Joan had ever been useful to anyone. As the front door slammed, Claud returned to her room. A makeover? It was a shame that the didn't do makeovers on personalities – that's what Joan really needed.

Despite her earlier cynicism, Peri had to admit that it did feel like London: cold and wet.

With its usual knack of selecting choice locales, the TARDIS had landed down a narrow side street of uneven pavement, cracked tarmac, flickering street lighting. And rain: a light but persistent drizzle that was already running off her grey jacket in shining little rivulets – and playing havoc with her hair.

She snatched the Doctor's horrible, gaudy umbrella out of his hand and put it up. It didn't seem to bother him: he was impervious to the rain. Shutting the TARDIS doors, he turned, looked up, and gave a tentative sniff. Then he licked a finger, held it up and stuck it in his mouth. 'Well, it tastes like London,' he pronounced, like some kind of galactic wine connoisseur. He must have read her mind, as he continued. 'The bouquet of the mid-Sixties: it's got that grubby feel to it. A touch of asphalt, a trace of tarmac.' His expression made it clear that he relished the grubbiness. He grinned at Peri. 'As you know, I'm rather familiar with – and fond of – that time period.'

'The Sixties?' Peri's heart sank. 'Oh, joy.' She knew enough history to know that Great Britain of the 1960s was the dictionary definition of drab: it lived in black and white, a country that still hadn't recovered from World War II. On the other side of the Atlantic, she probably hadn't even been born yet, but she knew that America of the Sixties had been a land of growth, of potential... Great Britain in the Sixties had simply run out of steam.

The Doctor grabbed the umbrella from her, hugged her close to him, and chose that moment to bring it all crashing down around her. 'The only problem is, this isn't London.'

Peri looked at him in confusion. 'What?'

He grimaced. 'Actually, it isn't even Earth.'

'You are kidding?' Marc leapt from the chair and leaned over the desk. 'You're firing me?'

David Kibble shrank back into his leather chair. ‘Not firing, Marc, no... it’s just that...’ He trailed off, drumming his fingers on the edge of his desk and refusing to meet Marc’s gaz Pathetic.

Marc slammed the script down on the desk. *Executive Desires: Season Opener* was typed in 12-point Courier on the first of the stack of pink pages. ‘You kill my character, David! Or have I misread this? Or were you planning to bring me back from the dead? Perhaps I’m just having a shower!’

‘It suits the needs of the plot, Marc. A dramatic subtext -’

‘You wouldn’t know a dramatic subtext if it hit you in that fat face of yours. This isn’t Shakespeare, David – this is primetime soap opera. It doesn’t have a dramatic subtext!’ Kibble really was a script editor who had lost the plot. Unfortunately, he was also the associate producer – one of t ones with the power to hire and fire. This time it was the latter.

Kibble shifted his sweaty bulk uncomfortably. He had neve been one for straight talking. Especially not when *Executive Desires* was concerned. ‘Marc – your death kicks off a very significant storyline. It gives Dominique a chance to emote.’

‘Emote?’ Suddenly it all became clear. Very clear. ‘It’s he isn’t it? The divine Ms Delacroix. She doesn’t want me in the relaunch!’

Kibble couldn’t even meet his gaze. ‘Marc: Dominique is the reason most people tune in to *Executive Desires*.’

‘And she also happens to be screwing Walter J. Matheson III – when you’re not in the way!’

The room went very quiet. Even Kibble’s laboured breathing seemed to stop. That was the point at which Marc realised that he had gone too far: Matheson was the owner of KWJM3, the new home of *Executive Desires*, and Kibble’s boss. And Kibble was so far up Matheson’s ass that he could see daylight throu his mouth.

Marc sighed and looked out of the window. Behind Kibble, the lot was being assaulted by an afternoon of heavy rain. H shifted his focus and saw his own reflection. Square-jawed; deep brown eyes; short, spiky brown hair; solid, gym-trained body Poster-boy for soap-studs everywhere and voted ‘sexiest man in soaps’ three years in a row.

His character in *Executive Desires* – Jon Chambers, the

handyman who was also the illegitimate son of Dominique Delacroix's character – had been amazingly popular. From his early appearances as an extra, audience appreciation figures soared, ensuring that he became a recurring character, then finally a regular, with his name enshrined in the title sequence.

Then, four years ago, Dominique Delacroix had made a pass at him. He had declined, and she had never forgiven him. Unfortunately for her, however, Marc's character – Jon Chambers, by now the corporate lawyer in the series – was too popular to be removed. For another year, she had been forced to act opposite him – and Marc had known with a vicarious enjoyment that she had hated every minute of it.

Okay, so Dominique had eventually had her husband (Clay Tyburn, the producer) alter the storyline so that he rarely appeared with her in the same scene, and she had also ensured that his character had two breakdowns, a drink and drugs problem and an incestuous affair with his sister, before finally being outed as gay. But at least Marc had had a job – and a very well-paid one at that.

It was fate that had dealt Dominique her winning hand.

When *Executive Desires* had been dropped by the Republic Network, Marc had found himself 'resting', in common with the majority of the actors from the series (apart from Dominique Delacroix, of course, who had retired back to her husband's mansion to live off her millions, publish a couple of ghost-written novels, and launch a perfume, which was a great success with women of a certain age).

But after six seasons of *Executive Desires*, Marc had been typecast as a mindless hunk... and there were younger mindless hunks out there, ready to move from waiting on tables to the sound stage, displacing people like him. True, he had succeeded in getting a few parts – an episode of *Dirty the Fearless Monster Killer* as the third vampire on the left; a frog-alien in *Space Journey: Traveller*; even three episodes of *The Secret Files* as a mutant that ate eyeballs – but it was nothing like the regular gig of *Executive Desires*. So when the call had come – a year after it had been dropped – that they were relaunching *Executive Desires* on KWJM3 and that they needed Jon Chambers, he had jumped at the chance and signed on the dotted line.

He just hadn't expected that his character would die in Act

One.

Kibble stood up. 'If you don't like it, Marc, look for work elsewhere. This is soap – we can always replace you.'

Final chance. 'I created Jon Chambers!' But the manicured talons of Dominique Delacroix were all over this. She knew that there would be an outcry if *Executive Desires* came back without him – but that hadn't stopped her getting rid of him as soon as possible: Act One, shot in the back by his illegitimate half-sister after she discovered that her lover was actually her own father. Maximum publicity and minimum screen time. Perfect for Dominique: she could milk his return and then kill him off as quickly as possible. And Mason, Kibble and Tyburn would roll over like obedient puppies at Delacroix's slightest whim.

'So?' Kibble was on the offensive. Marcus felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, as if the floor was about to give way underneath him. As Kibble started counting off the options on his fingers, the other shoe dropped: Marcus knew he had lost.

'Plastic surgery after a fire is always a good one. Or we could CGI your face onto another actor – that's quite popular at the moment. Or we could simply use a Synthespian – we have enough of them around, and they don't need trailers and expense accounts. So you see, you're easily replaceable. Especially for an act.'

Marc suddenly spotted an upper hand. He used it. 'Then go ahead. Replace me. I'm sure the press would be fascinated to hear about it.'

Kibble trumped him. 'If that's your attitude, you can expect to hear from our lawyers. You signed a contract, remember: no speaking to the press without going through the press office.'

My God – the man does have a backbone after all! They had him. He was screwed. TV networks were notoriously litigious – KWJM3 doubly so. If he made a fuss, their lawyers would crucify him. And after they'd finished with him, he wouldn't even be able to get a job as a downtown waiter, let alone as an actor.

'Damn you, Kibble!'

'I take it that's a "no", then, Marc?' Kibble said smugly. 'Just remember that the "no talking to the press" clause lasts for another three years.'

'Go screw yourself!' Feeble, but the best he could manage

He tried to slam the door, but it refused to comply and gently closed on Kibble's triumphant face.

Marc stomped down the corridor to the elevator, past the pictures of *Executive Desires* stars, past and present. He paused for a second in front of his own grinning image and read the legend: '*Marcus Brooks* as *Jonathan Chambers*'. How long before there was a space on the wall? Or another rising star caught in the studio machinery? He punched the picture, shattering the glass before the whole thing crashed to the plushly carpeted floor.

Back to Downtown. *Time to start flipping burgers again.*

'If this isn't London, where are we?'

Peri was confused. It looked like London. It felt like London. It *smelt* like London – God, she was beginning to sound like the Doctor! It was cold and wet and dirty and had that ambience that screamed 'London' at her: the mixture of pre-war and post-war buildings, the tarmac streets... Not something she knew from experience, but she'd seen enough British 1960s TV programmes on PBS to know what London had looked like back then.

They had reached the top of the side street, where it opened up onto a main road. An occasional car – more like a brick on wheels – sped past, but the streets were almost empty of people, save the odd drab figure, head bowed against the rain, too far away to even call out to.

'It's raining,' said the Doctor quietly. Knowingly. Infuriatingly.

'So? It does rain in London, you know.'

The Doctor gave one of his 'I'm very clever and you're not' smiles and directed a finger upwards, tipping the umbrella with the unfortunate side effect that the fine drizzle started raining down on her. 'I couldn't agree more, Peri! London isn't renowned for its clement climate – part of its subtle charm. But rain from a cloudless sky?'

Peri looked up and suddenly understood what he meant. It had been raining from the moment that they had walked out of the TARDIS, but there wasn't the faintest trace of cloud, only a perfectly clear night sky, a sky full of stars.

'And look over there.' The Doctor indicated a region of sky behind her. 'That confirms my suspicions.'

Peri turned to look – and immediately realised what he meant. A sky full of stars, but strange stars – Peri was pretty sure that it wasn't possible to see a blue-and-orange nebula shaped like an insect from anywhere in London. Anywhere on Earth, to be honest.

'This is a copy of London?' She suddenly let out a small shriek as a rivulet of water ran down her neck – the Doctor had closed his umbrella and was now stabbing the pavement with it.

'It would appear so, yes. And a very good one, right down to the slightest detail... fascinating.' He was now transfixed by the gutter, stirring up the rubbish that was being swept along in the rain with the ferrule of his umbrella.

'But why would anyone want to copy it?' she asked. 'This is 1960s London – it even looks black and white!'

'Everywhere is of historical significance, Peri,' said the Doctor, giving her a broad grin. 'Everywhere and everywhen to someone.' He gazed into the murk. 'Personally, I quite like it. In fact, I'd like to shake the designer by the hand and congratulate him. Or it. Assuming it has hands, of course.'

'Can we go back to the TARDIS? Please?' Peri was wet and cold. And somehow frightened. She had been through a lot on her travels with the Doctor, but this was different. It was... disturbing – like coming home and having the feeling that every bit of furniture had been shifted by half an inch. And because of that, she really didn't feel safe any more.

The Doctor threw his arm around her once more. 'Come along now, Peri. Aren't you even the teensiest bit curious as to why someone has built a duplicate of twentieth-century London on the rim of the galaxy?'

'The rim of the galaxy? How do you know that?' she asked.

The Doctor pointed at the orange-and-blue blur in the sky with his umbrella. 'That, Peri, is the Ant Nebula, otherwise known as Menzel 3, discovered by your people in the year 2000 by the Hubble Telescope.' A faraway look appeared in his eyes. Peri recognised it as 'lecture demon' and resigned herself to yet another lesson. 'We're seeing the death throes of a star not dissimilar to your own sun – the forces of nature have finally overwhelmed it, and the resulting explosion has thrown a shroud of polychromatic gases around it like a spectral winding sheet. Magnificent – cosmology, red in tooth and claw.'

Peri sighed. ‘Very poetic, Doctor. But how does that help you work out where we are?’

‘Sometimes, Peri, I think your heart lacks even the slightest smidgen of romance.’ The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘From the nebula’s relative position to the surrounding stars, that puts us about eight thousand light years from Earth, on the fringes of the Sagittarius Arm of the galaxy. Possibly near the Caledonian Reef or the Hepburn Discontinuity – I can’t quite remember which... always getting them confused. And some way into your future.’

Peri’s stomach sank a little bit further. ‘Go on – how far?’

‘Well...’ The Doctor stared at the nebula for a couple of seconds, chewing his bottom lip. Finally, he made his pronouncement. ‘There’s been considerable development of the nebula since the twentieth century – you can see that the gas cloud has spread somewhat. Take into account the relative distances and the rotation of the galaxy... About eight thousand years, give or take a century or two,’ he announced triumphantly.

‘Eight thousand years?’ Peri shook her head. She’d been further in the future, for sure... but not to an exact duplicate of 1960s London. ‘I’ve heard of nostalgia, but this is ridiculous!’

The Doctor tapped his umbrella against the streetlamp next to them, like a harlequin Gene Kelly. ‘Your race has an amazing capacity for reinventing itself along exactly the same lines, time after time after time. But usually there’s a good reason. Fancy finding out why?’

Peri shrugged. She didn’t really have any choice, did she? Okay, so she could go back to the TARDIS, but she knew that she wouldn’t be comfortable knowing that the Doctor was out and about, righting wrongs and undoubtedly getting himself into heaps of trouble. ‘Okay. But don’t blame me if we get our heads bitten off by bloodsucking aliens.’ She glanced around her. ‘Where are we heading?’

‘Actually, I think one clue is staring us right in the face.’ He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. ‘Behind you. If we turn round, of course.’

Peri turned round and saw what he meant. The main road they were on stretched unbroken towards an unappealing collection of grey tower blocks, windows flickering amber in the drizzle. Yet about three hundred yards behind them, everything simply stopped... it was as if the entire London just ran out

of steam. The road, the pavement, the shops, the houses... all came to an abrupt end, terminated by a sheet of blackness. Squinting, Peri realised that it was a high black wall that soared into the clear – but wet – night sky, with no vertical limit to be seen: and its blackness made it almost impossible to see unless pointed out.

'It's a wall,' she said pointlessly.

'Indeed,' said the Doctor, sighing broadly. 'And a rather impressively large one at that. Fancy finding out what's on the other side?'

Peri looked around. Rain. Grey. Drab. Surely anything had to better than this? 'Do I have a choice?'

'Oh, Peri... I had hoped that you'd found your sense of adventure! And besides – I have a suspicion that our arrival here wasn't an accident. Substrate plumes are usually a natural phenomenon... but that didn't feel natural. Not one bit.' With that chilling little prediction hanging in the damp air, the Doctor locked his arm around hers and began to walk – a jaunty walk in the rain on a creepy alien planet that thought it was Earth. *Great.*

Claudia slammed the door of her convertible and clicked the remote: the doors locked and the roof moved into position. A flash from the sidelights showed that the alarm was set. Another present from Daddy, more guilt assuaged with a black credit card. And she was her father's daughter – which was why she was here.

Three hours earlier...

Somehow, having her father's mansion to herself was rather depressing. The place was *vast*. Twenty bedrooms, but only five had ever been used since he had had the place built ten years ago – just after he had married Joan. And how could anyone need *three* pools? What had been wrong with their previous house? Five bedrooms, one pool, nice gardens? Oh of course, not ostentatious enough for Joan, was it?

She thought of all the numbers, and how her therapist had wondered why they seemed to be so important to her. But that was how it had always been: the number of zeros on her father's bank balance; the number of cars in the drive; the number of guests at every gala charity ball that Joan hosted. Numbers, numbers: that was how father measured success,

and how Joan measured her importance.

And how Claudia made up for a lack of attention. At least, that was what her therapist had reckoned. He should try living with Joan for a week and see how that got him. He'd be counting beans before the first day was out!

After two hours in the empty mansion (and almost at the bean-counting stage), Claudia had realised that she was too bored to stay there on her own. She had called a few friends, hoping they would come over, but everyone was busy doing their own thing that afternoon. She had tried to interest herself in the TV; but an endless diet of soap operas and infomercials wasn't really her thing – she left that to Joan with her faded memories of bit-part glory.

Finally, as Claudia reached the fuzzy boundaries of the bouncing-off-the-wall, bean-counting point, she decided to indulge in the one thing that would make her feel better and make reorganising her wardrobe even more difficult.

Retail therapy.

Which was why she was currently walking out of the parking lot of the mall, her credit card fully charged, ready to spend until even that bored her. By then, hopefully, Angelica would have finished her beauty treatment. Or Linda would have come back from the salon... Actually, why was *anyone* having a facial today? What was it? National Makeover Day?

Then she remembered that damned infomercial that was everywhere: Walter J. Matheson and his free trial makeover non-surgical. plastic surgery, he called it. Joan she could understand – anything would be an improvement, up to and beyond a bag over her head. But Angelica? At 19, she was only a year younger than Claudia. What did she need with a face-lift?

For a second, Claudia felt a shiver of fear – *should* she indeed a makeover? Some work? What if no one was telling her? She stepped into the mirrored box of the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. Was she a dog? Was that why she hadn't dated in over a year?

No. She studied her reflection in the mirrored wall. Five six, natural blonde hair, easy smile, blue eyes, good figure... what was she worried about? The reason she hadn't dated in a year was because she didn't want to. Or rather, because she didn't want Joan leering over yet another boy she brought home. With a st

of annoyance, she remembered her last boyfriend: Dane. Valedictorian, *summa cum laude*, six foot two of grade-A jock. Serious dating material – until Claudia had caught him and Joan in the hallway, enjoying a spot of find-the-tonsil. Screw that woman!

Retail therapy. Retail therapy. She reminded herself why she was in the mall. And how it was going to cheer her up.

After the first five thousand dollars, it almost began to work.

You can't miss the WJM Tower. That's the whole point of it.

Ninety stories of black glass and burnished chrome, the WJM Tower is a two-thousand-foot high cylinder that dominates the skyline, drawing the eye away from the archaic water towers on the older studio lots, the green and blue mountains on the horizon, even the neighbouring silver skyscrapers built in more architecturally forgiving times. The WJM Tower is the future.

Walter J. Matheson III's future, and it so large that no one can avoid it, whether they like it or not.

And everyone *does* like it.

The Tower is the climax of the universally renowned KWJM3 studio tour (six tours a day, booking always required). On the hour, thirty participants are ushered into electric buggies by the hyperactive and ever-friendly tour guides who have already whipped them up into an excited frenzy.

Over the next hour and a half, they get to see a working studio in action: the off-duty sound stages, where the sets of their favourite programmes sit in unused silence; the back lot, where an anachronistic collection of buildings from three centuries can be mixed and matched to represent virtually anywhere and anywhen on Earth; and, if they are really lucky, they can see actual programmes in progress – anything from the rehearsals of the new series of *Executive Desires* to filming of the seventh – and sadly final – season of *Space Journey: Traveller*.

Just when they think it can't get any better, it does. They are taken into the huge IMAX cinema at the centre of the lot. For another hour, they are treated to a roller-coaster collection of excerpts from KWJM3's output in vivid, thirty-foot high colour – clips that haven't even been on TV yet. Gasps and cries accompany what is in actuality nothing more than an hour-long trailer for the station's fall season. But the audience doesn't care.

visual effects dazzle, sound effects deafen, and spoilers for their favourite programmes flash past. Is that one of the regulars being abducted by aliens in *The Secret Files*? Does the *Starship Traveller* finally make it back to Earth? Surely that wasn't a Cyb attacking Professor X?

But the best is yet to come:- The WJM Tower beckons, and those in the know are well aware that the rest of the tour will simply fade into insignificance compared with the wonders waiting for them inside. Because the huge reception area is nothing short of a fanboy's wet dream.

Every programme the network produces is advertised there from *Dusty the Fearless Monster Killer* to *Professor X: The Next Generation*, not forgetting KWJM3's newest acquisition, *Executive Desires*.

Past episodes play in continuous loops on the banks of flatscreen TVs in glorious high definition, while hostesses in WJM corporate blue and gold hand out flyerspress packs and free DVDs. The fans accept them with soundless grace: this isn't what they came here for. They're more interested in the lifesize lifelike models of the network's stars (in full costume of course) standing against the walls, so lifelike that you expect them to sign autographs.

And then they do.

Synthespians™ technology in all its glory.

Captain Mulberry of the Starship *Traveller*, resplendent in her olive and black jumpsuit, flicks her auburn hair before lecturing entranced fans about the difficulties of being trapped in the Omega Sector, and whether they will finally get home.

Dusty – blonde, blue-eyed and quite pneumatic – explains her solemn duty to destroy the monsters that have erupted from the Hades Gate: fanboys drool, fangirls want to know if either of her demon lovers will be back for the new series.

The latest incarnation of the Professor – the Ninth (or was it the Tenth? Fans were still arguing over that.) in his high-collared black silk jacket, with curly blond hair and imperious gaze answers questions about old enemies such as the XTerminator the Snow Vikings and the Cybs: are they featured in the new season? Only time will tell, he avers enigmatically. He always does.

For over an hour, the fans are bewitched by these robots i

human form, exact copies with minds programmed with the experiences of the characters rather than the actors. Bewitch to the point where they don't worry about not having seen any real stars.

Finally, the tour is over. Thirsty satisfied fans emerge blinking into the sunshine with smiles on their faces, arms full of freebies, minds full of their favourite programmes and favourite stars. Brimming over with gratitude to KWJM3 and determined to tune in for the fall season.

Exactly as planned.

Anyone who has real business with KWJM3 – or any of the other subsidiaries of WJM Inc. – knows that there is another entrance. reached through a secure elevator from the underground parking lot. They find themselves in another reception – the *proper* reception – where the ever-smiling receptionists (ensconced behind a huge semicircular desk) issue the correct security passes with the correct level of access, before directing them to the elevator lobby at the rear of the reception, where the ever-smiling security guards are waiting for them.

Of the seven elevators in the lobby, six ensure that visitors can reach any of the 89 available floors within two minutes.

The seventh is a bit different.

Only a handful of the 4,025 people who work in the WJM Tower have the necessary clearance to even press the call button without the security guards taking notice. This elevator stops at only one floor – the ninetieth. The very top.

The office of Walter J. Matheson III.

Almost nobody actually gets to see Mr Matheson in person. the CEO and chairman of WJM Inc., a businessman of legendary acumen and mythical class skills, has higher things on his ever-active mind than basic public relations, and is cushioned from the minutiae of his business empire by a veritable army of assistants, security guards, and, of course, lawyers. If something is important, he will know about it. If it isn't, he simply doesn't care. He is at home with facts and figures, not the biased emotional overlays that *people* would bring to him.

But everyone knows *him*. Everyone recognises *his* face. Walter J. Matheson III's idiosyncratic approach to his work means that his face is a permanent fixture on TV screens and in magazi

advertisements everywhere, his shining personal endorseme
of his own products the stuff of every marketing course run in
the last twenty years. From razors to home entertainment, fro
cars to homes, from soap to soap operas, Walter J. Matheson
can be seen on a TV screen near you, telling you how much the
product means to him, and how much it will come to mean to
you and yours. And everyone believes him. Everyone trusts hi
It's just that no one knows anything about him.

His age, for example: he could be anywhere from forty to
seventy. His financial worth: some have him pegged as the
richest man in the Republic, while others claim that he is
mortgaged up to the hilt. His marital status: is he single, married,
divorced, widowed, gay? Is he having an affair with Dominiqu
Delacroix, who is seen on his arm at every black-tie event, or
she just a close friend? Who knows? Walter J. Matheson III
shrouded in mystery.

Just the way he wants it.

Today begins like any other day. Matheson arrives at his desk
at 8 a.m., where his half-full latte is already waiting for him,
courtesy of the ever-vigilant Miss Self, his long-standing (and
some would say long-suffering – unless they saw her annual
salary) PA. He spends the first two hours reviewing yesterday
reports – on paper, not e-mail – from every part of his huge
empire, from the established subsidiaries such as the property
holdings and the automotive industries, to the newer
acquisitions, such as his TV network and his range of beau
products. He scribbles notes in the margins, piling up the papers
one by one until the in-tray is empty, the out-tray full. Then he
calls Miss Self, who will diligently ensure that each memo
reaches the right person.

Ten till eleven a.m. is the first of his crisis windows. If
something needs his personal touch, now is the time for it.
Today is relatively crisis free, so he spends the hour channel-
surfing, quality-checking his network's mid-morning output
against that of his competitors. Today he is a little disappointe
by the chemistry between the two anchors on his mid-mornin
lifestyle show; he makes a verbal note into his dictaphone to
begin grooming their successors.

The rest of the day follows exactly the same format.
Windows of opportunity, each one inscribed in stone in

Matheson's meticulous diary, guarded by the indomitable Mi
Self like a vixen around her cubs. From 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., eve
minute of every hour sees Walter J. Matheson III exertin
complete control over his interests. Nothing is left to chance.
Random factors do not exist in Walter J. Matheson III's ordered
world. They simply aren't allowed to.

But today is going to be different. From today, every day i
going to be very different.

At 2:30 p.m. a call comes through on his secure line. Th
number is only known to a handful of people, each one vetted t
a level that would impress even the Republic's security servic
And the line is encrypted with algorithms that would have those
same security services tearing their hair out.

The call lasts all of ten seconds. As Matheson replaces t
receiver, his familiar penguin grin grows even broader.

The final part of his jigsaw has arrived.

'Interesting. Very interesting. Some might even say fascinatin
The Doctor's hands were stroking the wall, looking for anythin
that might suggest a way through. It stretched as far as th
could see in all three directions, bisecting everything that stood
in its way, including the tarmac road they were standing on.
There was a discernible curvature from left to right, as if the
were seeing part of a huge circle. From the outside.

Peri had only been to London a couple of times, but she ha
been horrified to see the results of post-World War II rebuilding.
For some reason, the architects had entered into a love affa
with rough, glittery concrete – and that was exactly what the wa
looked like. But eight thousand years in the future... there was
obviously more involved. It couldn't just be rough, glittery
concrete.

'It's rough, glittery concrete,' said the Doctor finally.
'Nothing more, nothing less. A big thick circular wall.'

'To keep us out – or to keep something in?' asked Peri, her
paranoid head obviously still placed firmly on her shoulders.

'Not all architecture is out to get us, you know,' said the
Doctor. 'Sometimes a wall is just a wall.' He stopped as a faint
vibration came from beneath them. 'Peri – get back!'

As they stepped back, a six-foot-wide, ten-foot-high section
of the wall descended into the ground with a deep grindin

noise. A bright red car – more 1980s than 1960s – was waiti
on the other side, its engine idling. The moment the wall ha
vanished into the tarmac, the car accelerated past them, a
blur heading down the street.

'Quickly Peri!' shouted the Doctor, trying to usher her
through the gap. She stopped on the other side and waited for
the Doctor – only to see the wall rising from the ground in front
of her. She tried to reach to reach the Doctor, but it was
already too late: the wall was already taller than her. In secon
the rough, glittery concrete wall slid seamlessly back in place,
cutting her off from him. Leaving her with him in a make-believe version
of an antiquated London, eight thousand years in the future on
the edge of the galaxy, and leaving her God knows where. S
turned around to see what nightmare she'd ended up in th
time, but there was only one word she could think of.

'Wow!'

The driving rain that had washed over the studio district had
finally spent itself as the daylight waned, leaving the back lot
KWJM3 with that crisp smell that suggested that the world ha
been washed clean. But not clean enough for Walter J. Mathes
III.

Matheson's night-black limo pulled up at the end of a long
narrow alleyway, a barbed-wire covered no-man's land between
one of Matheson's sister studios (an ailing animation company
– probably time to sell it) and that of a despised rival (althoug
Matheson's attorneys were working on that). The only lighting
came from the distant security spotlights on either side, sha
points of blue-white in the night.

Days in the studio districts stretched the statutory eight hours
that actors were permitted to work; then eight hours of nigh
before another working day dawned. Possibly an unusu
arrangement, but one guaranteed to extract the maximu
screen-time from the oh-so-precious actors.

Matheson had disposed of his chauffeur's services earlier
that day: there were some matters that required his perso
touch. He stepped out of the car and closed the door. Th
alleyway appeared empty apart from him, but Matheson kne
his employee far too well for that. He would be here – he shared
Matheson's respect for efficiency.

A shadow split away from the dark, resolving into the figure of a man. He was dressed in a functional blue flightsuit, tailored around a tall, solid body. His hands were gripping a plain black box. His face was expressionless.

Matheson took the box and clutched it to his chest, nodding to his employee, dismissing him back into the shadows. Alone once more, he took the liberty of lifting up the hinged lid and peered at his bounty. In response, the contents began to pulse with a purple-red glow, enough to light up the alleyway.

His face underlit in crimson, Matheson's trademark smile was more like a grimace. 'Good,' he announced. 'Excellent.' Then he laughed.

'I liked the product so much I bought the galaxy.'

CHAPTER TWO

The Doctor placed his hands on his hips and looked around. There was no evidence that there had ever been a breach in the wall: the concrete was a smooth, unbroken barrier once more. ‘It’s at times like this...’ he muttered in a brief, unfinished lament to his sonic screwdriver, before he considered his options.

Knowing Peri, she wouldn’t wait on the other side of the wall for another car to pass through – she’d be long gone, getting it into her head that he needed rescuing and looking for help, vanishing off into whatever lay on the other side, and that would leave both of them even more lost. At least he was on the side of the wall with the TARDIS in it! And besides – he felt strangely at home in this 1960s simulacrum.

In his many lives, he had visited countless planets in countless times, but none so often as Earth. True, he had been frustrated when the Time Lords had exiled him there, but that was more childish pettiness than genuine anger. Humans were so vibrant, so full of potential – and so very, very irritating! But Earth was a planet that he always enjoyed seeing; the TARDIS must have picked up on that over the centuries, because even when he had lacked precise control over the old girl, she had frequently contrived to end up there. And as for the 1960s... well, where had it all started?

So the Doctor wasn’t that concerned about his own whereabouts, but nor was he too concerned about Peri: despite the oddness that surrounded his place – and he had a bucketload of suspicions as to where he was – he didn’t think she was in any immediate danger, especially after the glimpse he’d been given of what lay on the other side of the wall. But he wanted to know more... so where was the best place to dig the dirt in a facsimile of twentieth-century London?

He rubbed his hands together. ‘I suppose I’d better find a pub,’ he announced gleefully. With that, he set off into the evening drizzle, putting up his umbrella and strolling down the

street.

Peri knew that there was a huge grin plastered over her face, but she couldn't help it. She was in a shopping mall! Not an alien c that looked like a shopping mall, but an honest to goodnes shopping mall!

Unlike that horrible artificial, plastic London with its scattering of drab little people, drab little houses and drab little cars, this vast semicircular plaza of pale blue marble was a bu of activity, hundreds of prosperous shoppers laden down with bags and boxes negotiating their way past the dancing fountains and huge statues and, naturally, each other.

And these people certainly weren't drab: designer clothe big hair, good teeth... They reminded Peri of the malls she had visited in Los Angeles – in her time. America in full consume mode, where money and possessions meant everything.

Peri had never been a spoilt child. Okay, so Howard had overcompensated when he married her mother, but that wa standard practice for stepfathers, and she wasn't going complain, was she? And her home life had been comfortable Ma with her high-profile job, Howard off on his archaeological trips... Peri had been happy to enjoy all the trappings of an affluent household, but money had never really meant anything to her. It was there, it was necessary, but she was only tru happy exploring the wonders of the plant world. Whether it wa the huge garden in their house in Pasadena, or her home town's annual Tournament of Flowers, or the botanical gardens in the grounds of the Berkeley campus.... nature fascinated her.

And human nature had soon repulsed her.

Her mother had forced her to go with Howard to the Canary Islands, to help him with yet another of his underwater adventures. She hadn't wanted to go – the thought of it had made her physically ill – but how could she tell her mother why How could she hurt her by telling her what Howard was reall like? So, like the good all-American daughter she was supposed to be, she had headed off to Lanzarote, never realising for one moment that that would be the start of an even bigger adventure.

Okay, so she had spent the last few years seeing sights t no one else had, experiencing environments that had once been

the province of science fiction and fantasy. And yes, she had been scared out of her wits on countless occasions terrified, tortured, transformed even – but she had also seen flowers that only bloomed once in a thousand years, smelt fragrances that could entrance or repulse, and sunbathed under green skies and purple suns.

At no point had she ever regretted stepping in that mysterious blue box with the enigmatic Doctor – even when he had changed into his current model, replacing innocent charm with abrasive arrogance, she could still recognise the quintessential 'Doctor-ness' of the man (despite his trying to strangle her soon afterwards). But this was the first time she had ever been anywhere which resembled *Earth*. No, more than resembled. Unless her memory was playing tricks, this was indistinguishable from the real thing: an exact duplicate of the newly built – in her time – Los Angeles Skyline mall!

For a moment, a wave of nostalgia hit her: the smells, the sounds, the sights of her own city, her own state, her own time. She had seen how the Doctor had been affected by the facsimile 1960s London, and from the odd comment he'd made from time to time, it was somewhere he was emotionally attached to – but only in the bleakest of senses. It wasn't like they'd landed on a duplicate Gallifrey, was it? But this? For Peri, this was a homecoming. Okay, so it was superficial, plastic and eight thousand years in her own future, but so what? *What gotta do what a girl's gotta do*, she decided. And that meant discovering what was going on, and trying to find a way back to both the Doctor and the TARDIS. And *that* meant finding a friendly face who could get her back through the wall.

She strained her neck to look up. The plaza was bordered by eight stories of marble and gold balustraded balconies fronting countless shops and restaurants, with transparent lifts and soaring escalators ferrying people from level to level. Peri's gaze carried on upwards: the sky was a perfect cloudless blue, with a hint of stars or alien nebulae. Artificial? A space station? This just got more weird by the second. But wasn't that the definition of life with the Doctor?

'On the other side of that wall it's a wet winter's evening in Sixties London. On this, midday at a shopping mall somewhere in North America, circa 1983,' she muttered. Peri had been

shopping all over the galaxy – and beyond – from the Garazon Bazaar to a Wal-Mart in the twenty-fifth century, but nothing in the. universe quite matched an American mall. Despite having no money (or whatever passed for money in the hundred-and-first century) it was time for some window-shopping. Knowing the Doctor, it was going to be some time before she saw him again: he'd be off trying to find a way to rescue her, and she was going to have to find a way of rescuing *him*. It was the way of the world. Of *all* the worlds they ended up on.

Regretting her wet hair and clothes – compared to everyone else in the mall, she felt like a tramp – she made her way to the elevator. In her experience, there was nothing like a bit of retail therapy – even if it was only window-shopping – to encourage female bonding.

As he meandered down the main road, occasionally hopping sideways to avoid being splashed by the blocky little cars running through puddles, the Doctor considered his options.

He was somewhere in the hundred-and-first century, that was certain. And the inhabitants of whatever this place was looked humanoid, if not downright human, from the couple he had passed on the street. But this period was a fractious one for the human race: although the decaying Union held sway as a political force across vast swathes of the galaxy, the human race had splintered as a result of the centuries-long civil war, leaving little outposts of humanity scattered hither and yon. And not all of them were friendly.

Spotting a cluster of hazy lights through the drizzle, the Doctor quickened his pace. It didn't take long for the lights to begin to resolve into a large sign on the corner of two roads. A building of familiar design.

The Doctor just hoped that at least one of the natives was friendly enough to buy him a drink.

The WJM Tower is never completely dark during the long nights. A number of employees work the 16-hour night shift: some monitoring the manufacturing output and investment portfolios of the corporation's business interests across the Republic, while others double-check the 24-hour feed from KWJM3's news channel for quality control.

Then there is the spadework that maintaining a building of the size and complexity of the WJM Tower requires: cleaners and technicians swarming from floor to floor, ensuring that Walter J. Matheson III's citadel remains as perfect as the day it opened.

But it is not just rare, but unheard of, for there to be any offices to be lit on the nineteenth floor. Even Miss Self is probably tucked up in bed, dreaming of spreadsheets.

Tonight is different. Tonight, a single window on the ninetieth floor is glowing dimly.

Walter J. Matheson III sat behind his desk, his most recent acquisition sitting next to his inkpot. The final piece, the single item he had been waiting years for. And now it was here, in front of him. Everything was ready. Everything was set. Everything was perfect. In the solitude of his office, his public grin was replaced by a real, honest, smile of satisfaction.

He switched off the only illumination in the office – an anglepoise lamp – and plunged the room into darkness. But only momentarily. Reaching out, he lifted the lid and once more basked in the purple light that flooded from it.

It was calling him. It wanted to talk. Matheson reached out and placed his hands on the orb's surface and closed his eyes, concentrating, trying to hear the voice more clearly. *Talk. FOCUS!*

Two minutes later, Matheson was on the phone to one of his many divisions. Perhaps this wasn't the final piece of his plan after all.

The purple glow from the ninetieth floor continued to shine from the window until the sun came up.

Even after half an hour of looking at clothes and accessories that her mother's credit card would have baulked at back on Earth, Peri still couldn't get over the tackiness that had been put into this duplicate of LA. The people looked right (all power-dressing and big hair) the shops looked right (although the labels were all wrong) but she still couldn't get over the fact that the Doctor was stuck in a grim and gritty replica of 1960s London only a few hundred yards away.

She was currently looking through the store front of what she guessed was meant to be GAP: preppy jumpers aplen

shoulder pads galore. Peri sighed when she remembered how she had loved wearing stuff like that back home. But her time spent travelling with the Doctor had introduced her to all kinds of fashions, from seventeenth-century Paris to Ancient Egypt, taking in various eras, planets and realities en route. Now she wasn't sure whether she felt comfortable in anything, or uncomfortable in everything.

Lost in thought, she didn't see the attractive blonde woman, loaded down with bags and boxes, sauntering along the balcony. Peri turned from the window, just as the woman passed. They collided, with Peri managing to stay on her feet, but the other woman falling to the marble floor, the bags scattering. And what bags: Cabri, La Trente, Vorbux. Looking at the quality of the bags and the quality of the clothes now peeking out from them, she guessed that they were this planet's versions of Gucci, Prada and Versace.

'I am so sorry!' exclaimed the girl as she got to her feet, in what sounded to Peri to be an authentic American accent. An authentic *Californian* accent, as well.

'Hey – no need to apologise. I should have been looking where I was going. I'm afraid I was daydreaming.' She bent down and helped the girl to pick up her bags. 'Nice clothes,' she added, as way of an icebreaker.

The girl gave a warm smile in return. 'Thanks. I should have got one of the mall porters to carry them, but it always feels better if you carry them yourself. You can feel the money you've spent. My way of cheering myself up,' she laughed.

'Did it work?' Peri guessed that the girl was about her age – maybe a year or two younger – and obviously not short of a dollar or two, given her purchases. Blonde, good figure, lots of money... an archetypal valley girl. Except that the accent was slightly off – there was something else mixed in with the West Coast. Was it British?

The girl waved a hand at the bags. 'I've only just started. I was just about to have a break for lunch.' A look of realisation dawned on her face. 'I know. How about I treat you to lunch? Call it my way of saying sorry for being such a clumsy bitch.'

'You really don't have to,' Peri replied in mock protest, although a pleasant lunch with one of the natives might give her the information she needed. And besides – breakfast seem

ages ago. The TARDIS had a way of stopping jet lag the Doctor had once described it as 'one of the girl's little gifts' – but the transition between the gloomy 1960s and here was sending sorts of conflicting messages to her stomach she was starving!

'I won't take no for an answer,' said the woman. 'Anyway, having lunch on your own is so... sad. Everyone thinks you haven't got any friends!' She reached into her handbag a very stylish black leather number – and pulled out what Peri guessed was a mobile phone. (Peri hoped that, when the Doctor finally dropped her back on Earth, it would be far enough in the future for mobile phones to be really mobile, rather than the cumbersome backpacks of her own time.)

Pressing a fast-key, the girl spoke into the little silver device. 'Mario? It's Claudia. Can you make that two for lunch? About five minutes. Great! And put a bottle of my Chardonnay on ice. Thanks!' She hung up and replaced the phone in her bag.

Picking up on the name, Peri held out her hand. 'Claudia? I'm Perpugilliam. Peri for short.'

Claudia grasped her hand firmly. 'Good to meet you, Peri. Right – we're off to the Eyrie!'

'The Eyrie?'

Claudia grinned. 'Just you wait and see!'

With that, the two young women headed towards the nearest elevator. Neither noticed the unnaturally still figure watching them from the other side of the mall.

Well, it looked like a traditional corner pub: The Mitre, according to the gothic gold letters on both the main sign and the swinging board with its painting of a bishop's hat. The latticed windows were frosted and impenetrable, tempting the Doctor with shadows and light, while baskets of flowers hung from the upstairs windows, wilting in the heat. And he was sure that the bright red car parked outside was the same one that had opened the wall earlier. It was definitely out of place in this 1960s.

As he paused with his hand on the brass door handle, he remembered countless visits to London pubs over the centuries: Whitechapel in the nineteenth century, when his first incarnation had fought off whores and beggars to discern the truth behind the curious tale of the Pale Man; Soho in the 1960s, when carousing with the likes of Bacon, Freud and dear old Jeffrey,

had learnt enough to stop yet another of the Master's insidious schemes, as well as how to get stains out of crushed velvet; and carousing with Chaucer in The Tabard in Southwark in the fourteenth century over mugs of foaming ale.

But, whatever the century, one constant remained: the pub was the centre of the community, and the fount of all local knowledge. What was it that old Samuel Johnson had said to him? 'No, sir; there is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.'

And the best place to have his suspicions confirmed.

He snatched his hand away as the door pushed against it. The aroma of tobacco and stale beer wafted through the green double doors as they opened and closed to allow a very drunk-looking patron to fall out and stagger off into the night.

'Well, there's no time like the present,' he muttered, and strode into the pub with his most imperious expression on his face.

No one took the slightest bit of notice.

The pub was packed. All of the low tables, with their uncomfortable-looking wooden banquettes and three-legged stools, were occupied: people laughing and chatting and drinking, generating a good-natured air of hospitality. The Doctor couldn't help smiling: perhaps this version of the 1960s wasn't so drab after all.

Walking across the sawdust that covered the wooden floor, the Doctor made his way to the bar, pleased and yet intrigued if not a little disappointed – that no one was even giving him a second look. He wore his jacket to make a statement – a statement that appeared to be falling on deaf ears. And he wanted – needed – the attention.

Oh well. Onwards and upwards. He made his way through the throng, noticing the haphazard dress of the clientele: some were in authentic Sixties outfits, while others wore Seventies, Eighties, even Nineties clothing. But nothing later than *interesting*.

The queue at the bar was about three deep, but it didn't take the Doctor long to get to the front: one of his companions, Ben, had described it as having 'presence' – the ability to attract the landlord's attention. The landlord appeared to be the burly-looking man in shirtsleeves pulling a frothy pint, while a bust

barmaid with beehive hair and far too much make-up wa
making eyes at the customers and pouring someone a gin a
tonic. The landlord returned from the till and smiled at him.

'What can I get you?' he asked cheerily.

Ah – this is where the problems start, he thought. 'A glass o
tap water, please,' said the Doctor, trying to give a reassuring
smile. But the landlord didn't seem bothered at his
impecuniosity; he grabbed a glass from the shelf above the b
and picked up a large glass pitcher.

'You in the business as well?' A voice in his ear. The
Doctor looked round to see a young man in a long black leather
coat leaning unsteadily against the bar next to him, gripping a
half-empty glass of what looked like beer.

'Business? What business?'

'Our business,' slurred the man, gesturing wildly around th
pub. 'Show business.'

'Oh. Oh, yes. Didn't have time to change; the Doctor
replied, indicating his coat. 'I'm recording a commercial.'

'So if you're working, how come you're drinking water?
Surely you've got money?'

The Doctor hesitated for a moment. A drunken actor – and
he'd known more than a few in his time – might not be the idea
source of information; then again, he might very well be. Time t
chance his arm. 'Oh, I've only just started the job. Haven't been
paid yet. You know what these production companies are like.'

'I used to,' he said miserably. A false smile crossed his fa
'Then let me. I've still got a little bit left, and we actors need to look
out for one another, don't we?' He waved at the barman, who
was bringing over the glass of water. 'Hey, Charlie – forget that.
Bring this gentleman a pint of cooking lager, will you? And top
mine up while you're at it.'

The Doctor was having trouble placing the man's accent.
There was a distinct American twang to it – not as annoying a
Peri's, but still noticeable – but he could also detect traces
cockney. Very odd. Then the drinks arrived and the man hande
over a purple banknote. The Doctor took the pint of lager and
raised it to the man's. 'Cheers,' he said.

'Cheers!' The man pocketed the change and looked round.
'Hey – there's a free table over there. Want to sit down? I know I
do.'

They made their way to a circular table next to one of the windows, where a group of three women were just leaving.

As the women put on their coats, the Doctor extended his hand to the man. 'I'm the Doctor.'

'I'm Marcus. Marc. Good to meet you, Doctor.' He paused for a moment as they took their seats. 'Is that your stage name?'

'You could call it that. You don't seem a very happy man at the moment, Marc, if you don't mind my saying.'

Marc stared into his beer for a moment. 'You ever have one of those days where the whole universe seems out to get you?'

'Frequently,' said the Doctor. *Literally.*

'I'm having a day like that. Actually, I'm having a life like that.'

'Never mind. It'll all be better in the morning,' said the Doctor in what he knew was a patronising and insincere tone, not that Marc would have noticed in his present state.

'I haven't seen you in The Mitre before,' said Marc, wiping the foam from the beer off his upper lip. 'You just moved into the district?'

The Doctor thought carefully for a few seconds. He wasn't on Earth, but a duplicate. Did the inhabitants know that they were on a duplicate, or was this one of those situations where they actually thought they were on Earth? A situation where his presence as an 'alien' would at best be treated as a joke, and at worst... well, best not go there. But he wasn't going to find out anything by saying nothing, was he? *Here goes nothing.* 'I'm new here. Just finding my feet.'

'New?' *Uh-oh.* 'New to the Wannabe District or new to Reef Station One?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Reef Station One?'

Money. The place stank of the stuff. The States may have been a classless society in theory, but it was also based on the idea that anyone could become president. Social climbing was an art form, and she had seen enough of it growing up in Baltimore: her mother's little soirees, where the sharpest knives were reserved for the back of the person opposite rather than the entrée; the coffee mornings where venom flowed more freely than caffeine; and the charity balls where being charitable was the last thing on the agenda.

But looking around the Eyrie, Peri decided to put her scruples to one side and indulge herself. Subdued lighting, dark wood and lots of candles, with maitre d' who had met Claudia at the door with a wonderful mixture of Old World charm and enjoyable obsequiousness.

Peri and Claudia were courteously shown to a small table in one corner of the intimate room by one of the impossibly handsome waiters. The table offered a superb view of the central plaza through slightly darkened windows, distancing the world and giving the Eyrie a fairytale feel. They sat; the waiter adjusted their chairs and laid napkins on their laps.

It reminded Peri of her parents' favourite Italian restaurant in Baltimore. The first time she had been taken there – an excited eight-year-old – she felt so grown up. Her mum and dad had let her order her meal with the slightest amount of coaching – herself. Peri could clearly remember what she had ordered: clam chowder; steak, and ice cream. (Chocolate. With sprinkles.)

'I love this place,' said Claudia, spreading some black tapenade on a slice of thick Italian bread she had taken from the bread basket. 'I usually end up here after a hectic morning shopping – resting my feet and my credit cards.' She nodded towards one of the attendant waiters. 'Simon – there should be a bottle of my Chardonnay on ice?' She smiled. 'You'll love this!'

'Your favourite?'

'*My* Chardonnay,' she replied. Simon reappeared, holding a bottle of wine wrapped in a white cloth.

'Would you care to taste it, madam?'

Claudia shook her head. 'Just pour, Simon. I'm sure it'll be fine.' She turned back to Peri. 'Daddy bought me the vineyard as a birthday present a few years ago – it's out on Tranicula, on the edge of the Thomas Exultation. Something to do with the sunlight makes it perfect for the grape. The Eyrie's one of the few places that I allow it to be shipped to.'

'Nice present', said Peri, clinking glasses with Claudia before taking a sip of the wine. It tasted delicious: pineapple, a trace of lemon... if she hadn't known better, Peri would have sworn it was from the Napa Valley.

Claudia shrugged. 'More to do with the tax breaks. Daddy gets more back than the damned place costs to run. I visited it

once: boring as hell. All these shrivelled-up old men, spitting wine in buckets and talking crap. I'd rather drink the stuff than discuss it.' She picked up her menu. 'Have you been here before?'

'This place?'

'Not the Eyrie, no. Reef Station One. You're obviously offworld.'

Peri put her glass down on the table. 'It's a long story.'

'Then we'd better order first,' Claudia laughed. 'Want some recommendations?'

Joan Bruderbakker sank into the armchair, allowing the soft leather to remove all her aches and strains. Why hadn't she thought about doing this before? Endless days hosting coffee mornings, endless evenings being the perfect wife to Chuck's perfect business magnate... It all took its toll. And she hated it.

There was a little voice that reminded her that she had made her own bed and she was lying on it, but Joan silenced it. What else was she supposed to have done? That bitch had ruined her career, made sure that she was unemployable... and without a television career, she had been nothing, nobody! Chuck may not have been able to give her stardom, but he had given her a new career as one of the leading ladies in Reef Station One.

It just wasn't enough. Not any more.

She could still trade some of her past glories with the girls and with her coffee morning acquaintances, dropping the odd name here and there. But she knew that they all saw her as a faded star, and only tolerated her while she held the keys to all the major social events that the station had to offer – just as she knew that she was nothing more than a piece of jewellery for Chuck to show off at his various corporate dinners.

Of course, there were some benefits: the unlimited line of credit didn't hurt, did it? And since things in the bedroom department had dwindled – and not on her side of the Emperor sized bed – he had tacitly agreed to her finding satisfaction elsewhere, as long as she was discreet.

But Joan was still uneasy. She might have a life of sybaritic luxury now, but she could still remember her childhood, before the TV studios had beckoned and wrapped her up in a brand new world of pampering and yes men. And it hadn't been the

childhood that her press releases described to her adoring fans, nor the childhood that she laughingly discussed with the girls. That perfect, sugar-coated world in which she had grown up had been anything but. It had been a world of poverty and abuse, she'd been passed around the male members of the family like utility, their God-given right. For years she had endured the humiliation and degradation, until one day, just before the last embers of her self-respect were extinguished, she had somehow found the courage to run.

Run far and run fast – that had been her credo. Even as her family searched the colony for her, Joan was spending most of the money she had stolen from her father's meagre bank account on the first shuttle off-world – and she didn't care where it was going.

'Would madam care for some refreshment?' The beautician – a slip of a girl in her twenties – was standing next to Joan with a tray. 'Perhaps a glass of champagne or a Belgian chocolate to celebrate your new life?'

'New life?' Joan and beauty parlours were old friends, and she'd never thought of a facial and manicure as a life-changing event. But she still took the champagne flute and licked her lips at the chocolates.

'Oh yes, Mrs Bruderbakker. After *Skin Deep*, nothing will ever be the same again!' she said enthusiastically. 'Now, relax. Peregrine, the senior artist, will be here very shortly. Please help yourself to the Belgian chocolates.' With that, the girl walked out, leaving Joan in reflective silence once again.

Joan took a sip of the champagne – alcohol was only an occasional luxury for her, but that just made it all the more welcome – and stared at the antiseptic-white ceiling, remembering.

The shuttle had been heading from the colony world of New Regency (a misnomer if ever there'd been one) to the newly established planet NER-887 (so new that the colonists hadn't even chosen a name yet). Joan had found herself in a busy, hastily put together spaceport, with new colonists arriving from all over the Republic. But these weren't the same kind of people she knew from New Regency society. These people had money, they had class... and she soon realised that they had talent. Because NER-887 (later to become Bel Terra) was one of the first colonies

dedicated to the rediscovered – and unbelievably profitable – a of acting. And if there was something that Joan's experiences the hands of her family had taught her, it was how to act.

Within a couple of days, she had found herself an agent. Within a couple of weeks, she'd got her first part – a cutesy teenager in the low-budget but highly rated soap *Worlds Turn*. And within a couple of months, she was a star, with all of the trappings that came with it. But she never forgot where sh had come from. Not because she was proud of her past, no. Because she never wanted to return to it.

For 15 years, her career was a succession of triumphs and awards: three Platinum Globes, a clutch of Republics, and string of (usually younger) lovers. She was an irresistible force – until she met the immovable object. And the object was calle Dominique Delacroix.

Joan had become so used to getting what she wanted th she had forgotten that taking other people's property without permission was still a crime. And when that property belonged to an über-bitch like Dominique Delacroix, the punishment had been as severe as it was humiliating. Publicly sacked from her starring role in *Executive Desires*, Joan found herself at a crossroads in her life. Except the crossroads rapidly became a cul-de-sac when the offers of work evaporated, the endorsements dried up, and the once wideopen doors of th Studio District slammed shut in her face. Thanks to Dominique Delacroix, Joan was *persona non grata* at the age of 28.

The memory of that time forced her to gulp down more of the champagne. Despite years of star billing and star salaries, Joan had lived life to the full – and mortgaged herself to the hilt. With the loss of *Executive Desires*, Joan suddenly found herself facing her greatest foe. Poverty.

That time, Lady Luck had come to her rescue in the shape of Charles 'Chuck' Bruderbakker, CEO of Bruderbakker Communications Inc., and one of the richest men in the Republic. A chance meeting in a restaurant on Bel Terra had led to an invitation to stay at his mansion on the newly built Reef Station One – and that invitation became permanent with the (suitably expensive) wedding.

Okay, so he was considerably older than her, and on the attractiveness scale he hovered around the zero mark, but he was

her escape route from the degradation and limbo that had h
screaming in the night. Chuck was one of ‘the Nine’: the nine
most influential businessmen in the Republic, and one of th
driving forces behind the construction of Reef Station One.

But Joan knew that she was nothing more than a troph
wife, an ornament, a bauble that Chuck could flourish to his
friends, colleagues, and – most importantly – rivals. She cou
live with that – simply because she couldn’t live without it.

But being a trophy wife came with strings attached. Some of
the strings were fairly enjoyable: the charity dinners, the fun
raising, the endless cycle of black- and white-tie balls. But o
string was more like a steel hawser: the need to keep hers
looking like a trophy wife. Because the moment the breasts
sagged, the crow’s-feet appeared, the turkey neck began... t
the dream was over.

Joan knew that she wasn’t alone in that fear – all the other
girls felt exactly the same way. And it wasn’t related to ag
Victoria, 18, was as worried as 43-year-old Cybil, the only
difference being that Cybil had already embarked on her que
for eternal youth. But they all knew, with heart-sinking certainty,
that the quest was, ultimately, pointless. There was only so mu
that the surgeons’ knives and the beauticians’ creams could do
before the relentless passage of time claimed them.

Which was why Walter J. Matheson’s *Skin Deep* offered the
ultimate lifeline. The infomercial had only been the beginning;
Joan and the girls had delicately and diplomatically scoured their
address books, asking veiled questions as to whether the process
worked or not. Obviously, the majority of their friends and
acquaintances were reticent to admit that they themselves h
taken advantage of the revolutionary new process, but most of
them knew *someone* who had needed a bit of work. And the
overwhelming impression was that it worked.

Which had led all of the girls – including little Victoria – to
book appointments at the Walter J. Matheson *Skin Deep*™
Spa and Beauticiary in Retail Unit 1. Joan’s appointment was
first – the others were looking forward to the end result. And so
was Joan. It really was a matter of life or death.

The door opened and a handsome young man in a sma
grey suit entered. He had the most stunning eyes and perfect
skin – an ideal advertisement for *Skin Deep*.

‘Mrs Bruderbakker? I’m Mr Peregrine, your facial artist. I hope Alyssa has been treating you well?’

Joan smiled. ‘Champagne, chocolates, soft lights and soft music – what more could I ask for?’

Mr Peregrine leant forward, his mouth only inches away from her face. His breath was like perfume. ‘Oh, so much more, Mrs Bruderbakker. Much, much more.’ He clasped his hands together. ‘Here at *Skin Deep*, we can promise you eternity.’

‘That’s quite a promise.’

‘Trust me, Mrs Bruderbakker – we’ve been doing this for a very long time.’

Joan relaxed into the chair once again. If everything she had heard about *Skin Deep* was true, all her worries would soon be over.

Forever.

Walter J. Matheson III looked out of the window. A warm summer morning had been enforced upon Studio District 1, but he had no desire to join the other mindless sheep in enjoying it.

Despite reassurances, despite their constant monitoring, he was still uneasy about the presence of these two outsiders. He had been told not to worry: true, they were unexpected, but their abilities and motivations were also known, and could therefore be factored in to the business plan. But they weren’t under his control – and that made him nervous.

Matheson decided that he needed something to occupy him. Young boys pulled the wings off flies. Matheson had a more corporate way of doing things, and a good businessman knew that, even on the verge of the biggest deal of their career, it paid to keep an eye on all aspects of the business especially the annoying ones. He reached out to his desk and buzzed Miss Self.

‘Miss Self?’

‘Sir?’ Her thin reedy voice was even thinner and reedier through the intercom. Like him, she was always at her desk before the sun rose on Studio 1.

‘Could you check whether August DeValle is on the station? If he isn’t, could you page him? I urgently need to talk to him.’

There was a delay of a few seconds – Matheson could visualise his PA playing her workstation like a musical instrument, tapping into legal – and not so legal – information

sources across Reef Station One and beyond, tracking down one person amongst billions. Then again, August DeValle was hardly just one person: as chairman and majority stockholder of Republica Communications Inc., he was one of the Nine, the so-called movers and shakers of the New Earth Republic. Except that it was now time that the old August stopped moving and shaking. Matheson had wasted too much time pussyfooting around with the fossilised dinosaur; there was a Republica Communications Inc-shaped hole in WJM Inc., and Matheson fully intended to fill it, whether DeValle wanted it or not.

'Mr DeValle is on the station, Mr Matheson. He's currently touring his cell-phone manufacturing plant in Industrial District 5.'

'Good. Put a call in to him. Tell him that Walter would very much like the pleasure of his company... say, as soon as possible?' No point wasting time – Matheson had wasted enough with August DeValle and his precious company.

'Of course, Mr Matheson.'

He cracked his knuckles. Still wasn't happy about the random elements that had crept into his business plan, despite his partners' reassurances. But predictable little people like August DeValle were easy to persuade. With the right persuasion, of course.

'And Miss Self? I feel self-indulgent. Could you have some coffee sent in? A double espresso?'

Matheson relished the shocked silence from the other side of the office wall. Sometimes it was good to be unpredictable.

Reef Station One was, as the Doctor suspected, a space station. A very, very big space station. And he was currently in Wannabe District 1.

'Home of actors – working, resting – and everyone else who wants to make their name on TV,' Marc explained. 'Rents are cheap... careers are cheap. I had a career once.'

The Doctor recognised a tangent when he saw one. And in the current situation, it was probably best to follow. But he needed to keep Marc happy to squeeze more information out of him, so he decided to follow the tangent wherever it led, joining the dots as he went along. As he now knew that the locals weren't being duped into thinking this was the real thing: the

knew it was a copy and seemed quite happy with it. ‘What happened?’

Marc wiped some froth off his upper lip. ‘Got sacked. That bitch didn’t want me to be in it.’

Obviously the Doctor was not only going to have to join the dots, but find them as well. ‘In what?’

‘Get real! I was Jon Chambers in *Executive Desires*. Or haven’t you watched any TV over the last few years?’ He made that sound like blasphemy.

‘Of course – I thought I recognised you from somewhere. Jon Chambers.’

Marc gave a lopsided smile. ‘Thanks. At least someone still remembers. The network didn’t want me in the new series.’ He took a messy slurp of his pint. ‘Actually, that’s not quite true, She just wanted me back for one act – just so that I could die.’

The Doctor tried to empathise. ‘That sounds terribly unfair. I don’t think I’d stand for that either.’

Marc seemed not to hear. ‘All that bitch’s fault. So I chucked it in. I suppose it’s back to working in Wannabe 1. Burger bars, waiting on tables... I’m used to it.’ He fell into a brown study, peering into the bottom of his pint.

This was all very interesting, thought the Doctor, but there was something he really needed to know. ‘Just one question... what time is it?’

Marc looked puzzled. ‘The time?’ He just about managed to focus on his watch. ‘It’s about one o’clock.’

‘One o’clock? In the afternoon?’ He glanced out of the frosted window – it was still pitch black.

Marc nodded. ‘Why?’

‘My friend wandered through the wall earlier. And I could swear it was daylight. And yet it’s dusk here – and it feels like evening.’ His Time Lord senses were telling him that it was night-time, but Mark was telling him it was just after lunchtime. What was going on?

Mark laughed. ‘Oh, it’s almost eight o’clock! Jack. Every district has its own time zone. You obviously didn’t pick up your *Guide to Reef Station One* when you docked, Doc.’ He laughed. ‘Docked, Doc. That’s funny.’

The Doctor suppressed a groan. ‘Hilarious. Hysterical. Do go on.’

Marc looked a little put out at the Doctor’s abrupt dismissal

but continued. ‘Time’s really screwed on Reef Station One.’

The Doctor did a quick check, but couldn’t feel any temporal anomalies other than the usual. ‘In what way?’

‘Residential 1 follows Reef Standard Time. Everywhere else – well, it depends on how much money can be made. That’s the way everything works around here,’ Marc snorted. ‘The studios work on eight-hour shifts – eight on, eight off – and the Entertainment districts have one hour of daylight a day for cleaning. And here, in Wannabe 1, it’s 12 on, 12 off, just to be even more confusing.’

‘Sounds chaotic,’ said the Doctor. This was going to play havoc with his inbuilt sense of time, as well. Lunch, tea and supper, all at the same time – even a Time Lord could get confused.

‘Hey,’ said Marc. ‘Trust me, you get used to it as an actor on Reef Station One. Pills to wake up, pills to sleep. Beer to get drunk and pills to sober up. It’s the only way to keep sane around here.’

What a charming life these people led, thought the Doctor. He leant back into the banquette. And suddenly noticed something. Something anachronistic. A colour television. And not even a primitive cathode ray job – this was a widescreen plasma TV. From what he could see, it was showing...

No. It couldn’t be...

But it was. A Metropolitan Police Box in the centre of the screen.

Avocado with prawns for Peri, and French onion soup for Claudia. The waiter scuttled away with the ultimate in discreet decorum, leaving the women to their food, wine and – Peri hoped – useful gossip.

‘You were about to say what brought you to Reef Station One,’ said Claudia, topping up both their glasses. Peri took another appreciative sip: she found it ironic that it tasted like a New World Chardonnay, considering that worlds didn’t get much newer than artificial planetoids light years away from the nearest star.

‘Our... our spaceship had a bit of trouble. Navigation, that sort of thing. We stopped here to make repairs.’

‘We?’

‘The Doctor. He’s my... my travelling companion. It’s his ship.’ Peri hoped that she had coloured her answers with enough of the truth to appear convincing.

Claudia gave a lascivious grin. ‘A doctor, eh? Much older than you?’

Peri realised what Claudia was getting at. ‘Hey – nothing like that. He’s just a friend.’

‘Whatever.’ But she gave Peri a knowing look. ‘So, where is this Doctor?’

Peri shrugged. ‘We got separated. He’s stuck on the other side of that wall.’ She pointed out of the window towards the sheer face of concrete, although she immediately realised that it was actually a completely different concrete wall from the one she had entered through – totally the wrong direction. ‘Not that one – the one closest to the fountains. I guess he’s trying to find a way in.’

‘The other side? Wannabe City?’ Claudia laughed. ‘That’s the last place he wants to be if he’s looking for spares for your ship. Nothing but actors – mainly out-of-work actors – there. That’s what it’s there for. If he wants technical stuff, he needs one of the industrial districts, and the nearest one of those is two circles away.’ She paused to pull off a chunk of bread and spread it with tapenade. ‘And if you’re after space stuff... well, most of that is in Industrial 18, and that’s on the other side of the station.’

Peri was still lingering over Claudia’s earlier statement. ‘A whole district given over to actors?’ Peri knew that LA was awash with wannabes and has-beens and everything inbetween, but they were spread fairly evenly around the studios. Reef Station One sounded like it was organised into ghettoes.

‘Not just one -’ Claudia paused, her soup spoon in midair. ‘You really don’t know much about Reef Station One, do you?’

This was the make-or-break point in the conversation.

Should Peri tell Claudia – who seemed a genuine (well, what passed for genuine in this mock-up of the 1980s) person, far from the vacuous valley girl Peri had originally taken her for – about the TARDIS, or should she continue with the little masquerade? She took a hefty swig of the Chardonnay before replying. ‘Nothing at all, I’m afraid. The Doctor and I are from a long, long way away.’

Claudia’s eyes lit up. ‘From beyond the Republic? Wow

We're always being told that we're on our own. Outside the Republic? That is great!'

This wasn't the response that Peri had expected. She assumed that the Republic was yet another of these human federations or empires or alliances that she had encountered over the years, but why was it cut off? 'You don't have any contact with the rest of the galaxy?' A guess, but she hoped it was correct.

'None whatsoever – not for well over a century. You really have stumbled into this place, haven't you?'

'Walter.' August DeValle strode across the office, his hand already outstretched. 'How the devil are you?'

Matheson stood and grasped his fellow businessman's hand – that weak, sweaty handshake that reminded him of so many pointless meetings over the last twenty years. 'August. Not looking a day older.' A lie, of course, one of those lubricating lies that greased the wheels of polite conversation. Or, in Matheson's case, a dose of anaesthetic before the final incision.

The years of industrial captaincy had taken their toll on August DeValle: the vital, energetic young man who had single-handedly pulled the other eight business magnates who comprised the Nine together was now weak, old... the spark inside him that had made him Public businessman of the year for six years in a row almost completely extinguished.

Perfect.

'Have a seat, August. I want to discuss a proposal with you.' DeValle gratefully accepted the plush leather chair, but Matheson could see the fear glinting in his old friend's eyes, the slightest quiver around the corners of the mouth. Fear. *Oh, August, how low you've sunk.*

'If this is about your merger proposal, Walter... I'm afraid that the board was less than enthusiastic.'

'Really?' Matheson leant forward across the desk. 'I find that surprising – and not a little disappointing.' He felt a frisson of excitement as DeValle visibly shrank away into the soft leather. 'Republica Comms fits perfectly into the WJM Inc. roadmap.'

'Too perfectly.' An unexpected thread of steel had entered DeValle's voice – who'd have thought it? 'The Nine, Walter. The nine largest corporations in the Republic. The architects Of the

Republic's entire economic infrastructure. Together, we built a financial empire that sustains this entire region of the galaxy. We built Reef Station One, for God's sake!'

'Your point, Walter?'

'My point is that there isn't a "Nine" any more. Oh, it exists on paper – on the paper that the general public can see. But you and I know that there's a whole library of paperwork that the public knows nothing about: the labyrinthine business deals, those mergers and partnerships that you've bullied into existence.'

'Bullied?' Concerned smile, innocent tone... Under the desk, Matheson's fingers tickled a small indentation in the mahogany. 'Good business practice, surely? Something that the Nine are renowned for throughout the Republic.'

'But there isn't a "Nine"!' DeValle started counting down on his fingers. 'Garrison Polycerami. RBM. NovaCo. All now part of the glorious Matheson empire. And Chuck tells me you've been sniffing around his company as well!'

'As you pointed out, August, there's nothing on paper. Gentlemen's agreements, handshakes, mutual opportunities. Companies seeing the benefits of working together. This joint venture between WJM Inc. and Republica Communications is simply another example.'

'You're a predator, Matheson.' More steel. Impressive. Matheson would never have suspected that the old man had it in him. 'And you won't get your hands on my company while there's still breath left in my body.'

Matheson touched the indentation. 'My dear August. I really hope it won't come to that.' A door-sized section of panelling slid open. DeValle turned, obviously catching the movement out of the corner of his eye. For a second, he was silent.

'Or should I say, I really had hoped that it *wouldn't* come to that. But it has, sadly.'

DeValle rose from his chair, backing away from the figure that was walking out of the hidden doorway. 'What are you doing?' he gasped, before sinking to the floor, his hands clutching his head. 'What are you doing to *me*?'

'My business partners can be very persuasive, August. And I haven't got time for the subtleties of corporate etiquette. Now all of the paperwork is here. It simply needs your signature and

retina print.'

'No. No I won't do it...' groaned DeValle. 'I won't do it...'

Matheson watched as the man fell to pieces in front of him his mind under attack by an irresistible force. 'Try not to struggle, August. It can have such... terminal side effects.'

'No...'

Outside the office, Miss Self was engrossed in another of h wonderfully elegant spreadsheets when she heard the muffl scream from Matheson's office.

'Another successful meeting,' she muttered, before activati the intercom. 'Mr Matheson? Shall Mr DeValle's chauffeur not to wait?'

'*Dixon of Dock Green*,' said Marc. 'One of the classics.'

'*Dixon of*... Of course.' A closer look showed that the police box was a slightly different shape than the TARDIS – this wa an actual police box, not a block transfer computation that ha altered over the years as old age had set in to the outer plasm shell. But *Dixon of Dock Green* had been broadcast eight thousand years ago!

'Some people see it as an ironic commentary on twentieth century Earth.'

'And you?'

'A proto-soap opera with wobbly sets and so-so acting. I prefer *The Sweeney*, or the first 17 years of *The Bill*.' Marc gave a skewed smile. 'Reef Station One's never produced anything classy.'

Eight thousand years... and eight thousand light years. Of course! This Reef Station One was picking up television broadcasts from twentieth-century Earth! The Doctor glanced a the TV again and realised that something was very wrong. T quality of the picture was immaculate.

He knew that even early twenty-first-century Earth had ha the technology to restore scratched, degraded and disintegrating film prints to near-pristine condition, but that hadn't had to deal with the attenuation of electromagnetic radiation across eight thousand light years of spacetime, block-a-block with gravity sources, exotic particles and other cosmic bric-a-brac. As George Dixon gave a young reprobate a good telling-off, the Doctor continued to admire the quality of the reception. Every production glitch,

every boom shadow, every shaky – things that 405-line TV had mercifully covered up – were brutally exposed for all to se But the Doctor wasn't viewing the programme as a TV critic bu as a scientist – and his curiosity was well and truly piqued.

'Tell me, Marc... how do they achieve such good quality?'

Marc shrugged. 'Search me. Been doing it for the last te years. The Republic's been picking up signals from Ancie Earth for the last thirty, forty years – although at first the boffins thought it was nothing more than interference.' He stopped and frowned. 'How come you don't know? Standard history of broadcasting – we're all taught it as kids.'

'I had an interesting childhood. Do go on.'

'Okay.' For once, the Doctor was grateful for the fuzziness of drunks – any sober person would have heard alarm bells ringing by now. 'Then they realised what they were picking up, and stored the signals. The pictures were blurry, incomplete and then one of the Nine found a way to restore them to perfec condition. The idea caught on, and Reef Station One was built to capture as many programmes as possible and restore them.'

The Doctor was fascinated. Such a technique was possible, but the computing power necessary to interpolate the missin information would be astronomical. And he wanted to know more. But this simulacrum of a pub was hardly the place fo research – he needed to spread his net more widely. But how? And where?

'Another beer?' Marc was unsubtly shaking his empty glass.

'Not for me, thanks. And as you know, I can't return the favour. Actually, I think it's about time I got going.'

'Hey, it's only early.'

'Early?' Then he remembered the convoluted time-zone situation Marc had described. 'Of course. Well, where do yo suggest for my first night on Reef Station One?'

'Oh, you need an Entertainment district. The nearest one i Entertainment 12, but it's a bit, well, seedy. Entertainment 1's the best... but without a car it'll take you a couple of hours to g there. And you'll get some very funny looks if you're on foot.' Marc wiped his mouth. 'Hey – I'm through here. Half this lot are out of work, and watching them just reminds me of the dole queue.' He looked around the pub. 'Probably see most of them down the benefits office next week. No, I fancy something a bit

more exciting while I've still got a bit of money left. Want a lift to Entertainment 1?'

'A lift?' He looked down at the empty glasses. 'Are you sure that's wise?'

Marc laughed. 'Hey – I'm not driving. The car is. So – you coming or not?'

Picking up his umbrella, he stood and looked at his new companion.

'Marc – wouldn't miss it for the world!'

As the Doctor guided an unsteady Marcus Brooks towards the doors of The Mitre, neither of them noticed the strangely calm and silent man in the corner of the bar stand up and watch them depart.

On Claudia's recommendation, Peri had treated herself to the espresso crème brûlée, served with a single fig. Claudia had been studying her face as she took the first bite: the look of pure pleasure had sent the other woman into paroxysms of laughter.

'Told you it was good!'

It was the first thing Claudia had said that wasn't an interrogation. For the last hour, Peri had endured an endless series of questions: 'What's it like beyond the Great Barrier?' 'Is the Republic the last best hope for Mankind?' 'Do they have television?' 'What's the shopping like?' Peri had deflected each parry with a non-committal answer, but as the questions had continued, she had started to get more and more worried that Claudia would catch her out on some error of continuity, some minor foul-up that would show her up to be a liar – but the woman simply drank it all in.

Thankfully, it hadn't all been one way. Not completely, anyway. From the little that Peri had managed to learn from Claudia, Reef Station One was a space station deep within the New Earth Republic, an autonomous political union cut off from the rest of the galactic empire, or federation, or whatever human beings in groups called themselves in the hundred-and-first century. But Peri had also discovered three very important facts:

(a) Everyone was very, very rich. Well, *almost* everyone
(b) Everyone loved twentieth-century television and film
(c) Everyone was human.

Hence the nostalgia, and hence the obsession with Earth although this obsession seemed limited to the twentieth and ea twenty-first centuries. At first, as Claudia had wittered on abou how she would have loved to have been alive then (sh obviously hadn't heard of AIDS, Ethiopia or Ronald Reagan Peri had been puzzled: in her travels with the Doctor, she ha seen times when her home planet had left her feeling asham but she had also seen it as a shining jewel in space, where global peace and prosperity had made Earth a byword for paradise (although, to be fair, the Doctor had pointed out to her that this particular period in history had been extremely short-lived), but what was so special about the 1980s?

Then it had occurred to her. Eight thousand years... eight thousand light years. And the speed of light. This place wasn't based on historical records at all. It was based on what they'd seen on television! Deciding not to think about the situation too hard, she suddenly realised that Claudia was talking to her.

'Sorry – I was miles away.'

'Hey – not a problem. Sounds like you've had one hell of day. I was just saying: do you fancy an afternoon of full-o shopping, followed by a spot of clubbing?'

Peri almost did a double-take. Claudia was offering her a dose of reality! Shopping was a universal constant, but there were (literally) light years of difference between haggling with giant hamsters in an alien market and what Claudia was offerin For a moment, she thought about the Doctor – but very quickly decided that he was probably having as much fun as she was. And Reef Station One, despite its oddness and obsession actually sounded quite fun. There was only one problem.

'Claudia... I'd like nothing better. The Doctor's going to be hours before he sorts things out. But I haven't got any money.'

'Money? Money?' She laughed. 'What's the point of being a spoilt little rich girl if you can't take advantage of it?'

As the two women planned their assault on the field of reta warfare, with *haute couture* bags as weapons of mass destruction, Mario noted the (expectedly) generous tip Claudia was writing on the credit card slip as he headed towards the customer table 11. Except he wasn't there any more. Mario shook his head and returned to the front of house. Odd character anyway. Too quiet, too still. And he hadn't even touched the complementary

tapenade or the breadsticks.

Marc sat back in the plushly upholstered car seat, watching the scenery flash past at ninety miles an hour. And realised that he was going to miss all of it. The car wasn't his: the sporty red Ferrari lived somewhere in the fine print of his contract with KWJM3, and would undoubtedly be surreptitiously collected by Matheson's people sometime over the next couple of days. So he ought to make the most of it; very soon, he'd be dependent on the station's public transport, and, in the Wannabe districts, that meant hours queuing in the pouring rain as packed-to-capacity buses trundled by.

A plaintive cry of 'Are we there yet?' issued from the multicoloured heap in the passenger seat.

Marc had taken a couple of pills to clear away the alcohol and was now beginning to wonder how the hell he'd managed to hook up with this ridiculous stranger. He was looking forward to seeing the product that this Doctor was advertising: in a get-up like that, it wasn't anything tasteful, that was certain. But there was definitely something addictive about the Doctor – and at this moment, Marc really did need the company.

'Just going through Industrial 5.' Republica Communications' sprawling cell-phone plant lay on either side of the. two suppliers of phones to the masses. Marc idly wondered whether a job putting together little boxes of technology would be more satisfying than wearing a silly hat and smelling of hamburgers. But that wasn't the done thing for resting actors, was it?

'How many of these districts are there?'

Marc gave the Doctor a puzzled look. 'Hey – I know you're from off-station, but didn't you do any research before you came here?' Newly sobered-up suspicion started to creep into his brain. 'And why were you in Wannabe 1, anyway? The nearest district that does commercials is Studio 20 – the other side of the station.'

The Doctor held up his hands. 'You caught me bang to rights, Mr Brooks. I confess... I'm not an actor. Well, not in the traditional sense.'

Marc reached out to the stalk on the dashboard and activated the emergency stop. The car slowed from ninety to nothing in

seconds, grinding to a halt on the very edge of Industrial 5.

'Then what's this all about? Pretending to be an actor? What for God's sake? Why would you want to do that?'

The Doctor opened the car door and stepped into the twilight. Marc felt he had no alternative but to follow – he wanted to know what was going on.

The Doctor was standing with his back to the car, staring at the sun setting behind the factory blocks – it was always dusk in the Industrial districts. 'Marc – I have to ask you to trust me in this. You assumed that I was an actor – and, at the time, it seemed safest to assume that a particular role.' He put his hands on his lapels. 'Actually, it's one I feel quite at home with. I'm... well, consider me to be a kind of galactic policeman. Does that make you feel better?'

Policeman? The Doctor's multicoloured jacket and trousers weren't exactly the dark blue uniform that Marc was used to on Reef Station One – usually very late at night when he was less than *compos mentis*. But this Doctor had said galactic; hadn't he? Marc hadn't been off the station since he was a child – his last parents had moved here when he was young but he was well aware that the Republic had its own police force.

'The Republican Guard?' Were they supposed to be the supreme guardians of the glorious New Earth Republic? Then again, all Marc knew about them was from the long-running series *The Rep* – he'd had a small role in it a couple of years ago before it turned from a hard-hitting drama series to a wishy-washy soap. Reef Station One tended to look after its own affairs, and the Rep were infrequent visitors. But it was possible. 'How do I know you're telling the truth this time?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'You don't. Indeed, it may very well be in your best interests to get back into that ridiculous car and speed off into the night. I'm sure that my... my superiors would be fascinated to know why a right-thinking citizen of Reef Station One would deliberately leave a member of the august Republican Guard stranded in Industrial District 5.'

Marc thought about it for a second. If the Doctor was a Rep, then life was about to get exciting – and given the events of the last 24 hours, that was something Marc could do with. And if this was just another lie? Well, what else did Marc have to look forward to apart from a job at a burger bar?

‘Okay, okay – let’s assume you are a Rep. So what are y
doing here?’

The Doctor steepled his fingers. ‘Something is going on
Marc. I can’t be certain, but something is *definitely* going on. I was
brought...*sent* here for a reason. I admit that I’m not sure what at
the moment, but after another few hours of ferreting around, the
truth should hopefully be made manifest.’

‘I thought the Republican Guard was based on logic an
evidence?’ *Well, that’s what they always said in the TV series.*

‘Indeed it is – but sometimes that simply isn’t enough. That’s
when they call me in. Doctor John Smith – Special Executive.’
He flashed a shiny badge at Marc, rapidly pocketing it before
Marc could look more closely. ‘Undercover.’

‘Undercover? In that jacket?’

‘Undercover is a term that covers a multitude of sins, Mr
Brooks.’ He threw his arms wide. ‘How better to hide my true
intentions than to appear such a visible target?’

‘Target?’ Marc hastily looked around, but Industrial 5 wasn’t
exactly a hotbed of seditious activity – he couldn’t exactl
imagine murderous factory workers lurking around every corne
‘You’re expecting trouble?’

‘I *always* expect trouble. It has a habit of seeking me out.
Now – do you want to help me, or do you want to return to the
dismal humdrum existence that fate has recently dealt you?’

‘Well, when you put it like that...’ He gestured towards th
car. ‘Fancy a lift?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I thought you’d never ask!’

As the two men slammed their doors, Marc swallowed. What
the hell was he getting himself into? Pushing aside his fears,
pressed the ignition button, and sat back as the car accelera
towards Entertainment 1.

‘Do you think we’ve got enough, or should we go back for
more?’ laughed Claudia as they strode through the dusk of the
car park. Behind them, four immaculately liveried men from th
mall’s staff were laden down with bags, boxes and sundry other
containers.

‘Enough for at least one lifetime!’ said Peri. ’You’ve got
more there than my entire wardrobe!’

‘This? I’ll probably only wear most of it once, if that. That’s

the joy of shopping.'

Taken cold, that comment would have horrified Peri. Pure unadulterated consumerism. But last few hours had taught Peri a good few lessons about Reef Station One. And rule number one was that it was built around consumerism. Excessive consumerism. Claudia was spending like it was going out of fashion because that was her place in society. And from what s could gather, Claudia's father put a lot more back into th economy than even Claudia could spend.

Deciding that she could accept capitalism to the max mor than the killer robots, murderous cyborgs and deformed slugs that had been her more recent company, she stood back as the porters silently arranged the shopping in the trunk of Claudia's black Beemer. Finally, the lid was closed and the porters nodded respectfully.

'Are we supposed to tip them?' Peri whispered.

'Tip them? Of course not. They're Synthespians!'

'Synthespians?' Peri watched as they walked off in perfe formation. 'What do you mean?'

'Synthespians. Robots. We use them all over the station for menial tasks. They have the basic intelligence of dogs, and what you tell them. And they don't require wages, or food... a night, they simply stand in warehouses.'

Oh no. More killer robots. 'But they look... they look exactly like people!' At least the Cybermen looked like monsters, she thought.

'Of course they do. The early ones didn't – they were a lumpy, gave people the creeps. Then WJM Inc. developed the humanoid ones, and everyone loved them.' Claudia bleeped l key at the car. 'Get in.'

As Peri settled into the car, she couldn't help thinking about these Synthespians. 'So how do you tell them apart from people, then?'

Claudia pressed the ignition button and the car automatical reversed from its parking space – Peri gathered that cars on t station basically drove themselves. 'You don't. They're just the They even use them on TV.'

'As what?'

'Actors. That's where the name comes from. "Syntheti thespians." With all the TV series being made nowadays, the

studios couldn't get enough real actors – or couldn't afford them. So they started using Synthespians as extras, and eventually some of them got starring roles.'

Peri laughed. 'Starring roles? What in: silent movies?'

The car slowed as it reached another of the concrete walls. 'Oh, they can talk. The more advanced models, that is. They get programmed with the character that they're playing. The studios don't admit it, but they'd like to replace a lot of the actors with Synthespians – well, that's what an actor friend of mine told me. They don't command huge salaries or giant trailers; they never forget their lines, and – most importantly – they don't have monumental egos to support. But I don't think the Republic is ready for artificial actors. Artificial plots and plastic sets are about all they can stomach at the moment.'

'I remember the soap operas from home: *Dallas*, *Dynasty* –'

'Never watch them – living them is bad enough. Alexis has nothing on my wicked stepmother.'

'You've heard of...' Peri tailed off. If this place was based on 1980s TV, then of course she would have heard of them. And that definitely explained the shopping mall and the class society she appeared to have landed in. She changed tack slightly. 'What's wrong with your stepmother?'

'The sainted Joan, queen of the charity balls? My father married her, that's what's wrong with her. She spends money like it's going out of fashion –'

Peri coughed diplomatically, thinking of the trunk full of designer clothing. 'We haven't all of us too badly ourselves.' But she was surprised by the anger in Claudia's reply.

'That's different. I have a right to spend Dad's money. That's why he gives it to me – to make up for the millions that she spends.'

Peri was glad that the car was driving itself: in Claudia's present mood, they would have swerved off the road. She could empathise with Claudia's anger – her own experience of having a step-parent was hardly text-book stuff – but she decided it was time to steer the conversation into safer waters. She failed immediately. 'What happened to your real mother?'

'Traded in as soon as she started to get old – not young enough or beautiful enough to be seen with Dad any more. Set up for the rest of her life with a very generous alimony

settlement, on the condition that she never set foot on Ree Station One again. Haven't seen or heard from her in years.'

Peri was familiar with the idea of trophy wives – too many o her school friends had woken up one day with new mothers already installed in the family home. But that didn't mean tha Peri either understood it or liked it. Swapping partners simply because they weren't attractive enough...

'Anyway, you'll get to meet Joan in a minute – assumin she's back from the beautician's. We're almost there.' Peri w vaguely aware that they had passed through another couple concrete walls, and the view outside the window was as differe again as the mall had been from the factory district they had ju driven through. This artificial environment consisted of rolling hills covered in rich greenery, with huge mansions barely glimpsed through the foliage. *Sounds to reason – Beverley Hills.*

'Who lives here, then?'

'This is Residential 1,' said Claudia. 'Most expensive real estate on the station. Dad wouldn't live anywhere else.'

The car slowed to a halt in front of two huge metal gates.

'Nice,' said Peri, staring through the gates and along the long gravel driveway behind it.

'I'd say it's home, but it hasn't ever felt like that. We used t live somewhere a lot smaller – a lot less impersonal – but th wasn't good enough for Joan.' As she spoke, the gates opened and the car drove itself sedately towards the mansion.

'So why don't you get a place of your own? You can affor it, surely?' As the car followed a bend in the driveway, th mansion was suddenly revealed in all of its ostentatious glory – Peri was guessing at least twenty-five bedrooms, all of them undoubtedly designed to impress to death.

'Someone has to keep an eye on Dad. Without me aroun God knows what that harpy would get up to.' The car stopped in front of the ornate front doors, and Claudia stepped out. Peri followed, not sure of the reception she was about to get. What if this Joan was as bad as Claudia made out? What if she sta asking the wrong questions?

The doors to the mansion opened, to reveal a woman in he mid-thirties, dressed in a sober blue frock. It looked like she' just been to the hairdresser's – her light blonde hair was styled into a soft bob. Hadn't Claudia mentioned something about Joan

visiting the beautician's? But this harpy of legend was smiling warmly, stepping onto the drive to greet Claudia.

'Claudia, dear – you're just in time.' She kissed a speechless Claudia on both cheeks. 'I've baked some cookies. And you must introduce me to your lovely friend.'

Entertainment 1. The first and the best. Indeed, it could be argued that the district was the raison d'être of Reef Station One. What was the point of restoring old television programmes or making new films if they couldn't be showcased in the most lavish environment possible? There were other Entertainment districts across the station – and, of course, there were other cinemas and theatres across the entire Republic – but you knew a film was a must-see if it premiered at the Pantheon Theatre, Entertainment 1.

The Doctor stared up and down the main street that passed through the heart of Entertainment 1: according to Marc, it was inventively called Broadway. It was – as expected – night-time, which gave the cinemas, theatres and restaurants on either side that curious allure that he knew would be absent in daylight – the one hour of daylight that was permitted in this place. Neon could cover a multitude of sins without the cover of night, this would all undoubtedly look seedy and run down, but tonight it promised magic behind every door and window.

He turned to Marc. 'What did you have in mind?'

Marc scratched his chin. The Doctor noted that, while those little pills might very well have sobered him up, they had left him with a hangover. Hopefully, he'd now prefer something a little more sedate than the evening of racy nightclubs and offensive cocktails that he'd been talking about during the journey.

'Take in a movie, perhaps? There's enough to choose from.' He walked over to what appeared to be an information screen – a grey metal pillar with a built-in monitor, one of many dotted around the place – and tapped the touch-sensitive screen. 'See anything you fancy?'

The Doctor nudged Marc out of the way and scanned the list that had appeared: although he considered himself something of a film buff, this period of human history wasn't one of his regular haunts, so he didn't expect to see anything he recognised.

'*The Last Temptation of Lazarus*... mmmm, not really in the

mood for a religious epic, especially that one. Although I must say, I am curious as to who they got to play me... *Love for a Draconian* – I think not. Lust? Lust? Draconian courtship rituals last nearly ten years! Perhaps they should have called it *Will You Still Honour Me in the Morning*? What's this one... *The Time Machine*?' He tapped the entry to bring up more information, expecting to learn that it was a twenty-first century version of old Herbert's masterpiece, starring Silurian as the Traveller and spoken in haiku. Why couldn't people just leave well alone? As long as it wasn't the one with the Quarks and the Giant Wasps – that one hadn't even been bad enough to be good!

Then he saw the name of the director. *Surely not?* 'George Pal? George Pal?!'

'Found something you like?' asked Marc, peering over the Doctor's shoulder and breathing beery fumes into his face. '*The Time Machine?* Good choice. Only just been released.'

'Only just been released? This is over eight thousand years old!' Then he realised the stupidity of his comment; was this society based around the restoration of ancient TV signals and films? If they could make an episode of *Dixon of Dock Green* look like it was when it had first been broadcast, then surely a film from the 1950s wasn't beyond their technology? Except that the Doctor didn't believe that that sort of technology could exist in the here and now – this wasn't a question of restoring old tapes, but restoring electromagnetic signals that had travelled eight thousand light years!

'It's considered a classic by a lot of people,' said Marc. 'It won three Republics last year.'

'Despite its far-fetched premise?' said the Doctor naughtily. 'Still, it has a certain *je ne sais quoi* charm, I suppose...'

'So, that's settled then,' said Marc, obviously unwilling to get into a protracted debate about the merits of millennia-old science fiction while dealing with a fuzzy head. 'It's on at the Adelphi – that's just over there.' He pointed down the street, but which of the painted and overlaid façades he meant was unclear. 'The next show is in twenty minutes.'

'Excellent – enough time for you to get the popcorn as well.' He strode off into the neon night – and was sent reeling by a figure that had silently emerged from a small alleyway.

The Doctor realised that the stranger had come off worse

from the encounter – he was sprawled on the pavement clutching his head.

'Are you all right, old chap?' The Doctor helped him to his feet. His initial impression had been that the man was a street person, but his clothes belied that fact unless the local equivalent of Oxfam was in the habit of receiving the local equivalent of Armani suits. In fact, everything about him was expensive, from the shoes to the expertly cut grey hair. What had initially made the Doctor suspect something wrong wasn't physical: it was his eyes. They were darting from side to side, never resting, as he was looking for something – or something was looking for him. Quite frankly, he was terrified.

'Is everything all right? Perhaps you should sit down?'

'No. Can't stop. Can't stop anywhere.' Further clues presented themselves: a thin foam of spittle was forming around his mouth, and his shoes were badly scuffed, as if he'd been running for a long time.

'Can I help? Is someone after you?'

'You don't understand – no one understands. They can find you anywhere!'

By this time, Marc was standing next to the Doctor. 'Ignore him – he's just a tramp.'

'Such compassion, Mr Brooks. No – he's no tramp. And he's plainly scared out of his wits.' He turned back to the man and tried to place a calming hand on his shoulder, but it was shrugged off. 'Who can find you?'

'The ones with no souls! They're all around us, everywhere. We just don't notice them till it's too late – they're all around us!'

'Everything all right?' From the crisp blue uniform and polished buttons, the Doctor guessed this newcomer was a policeman. Especially since the uniform was an accurate replica of a mid-twentieth-century London policeman's garb.

'He seems to be in some distress, officer.' The distress became a thousand times worse when the man looked at the policeman.

'No!' he screamed, pointing at the man. 'Keep him away! He's one of them!' He tried to run backwards into the alley, but stopped and clutched his chest. A terrifying gurgle escaped his lips as he sank to the ground.

The Doctor was on his knees in seconds, feeling for a pulse.

‘Faint, but he’s still alive. I’m a doctor, and this man has just had a heart attack. Call for an ambulance, man!’ The policeman didn’t hesitate, speaking into his walkie-talkie. ‘Ambulance to Broadway, opposite the Plaza. Suspected cardiac arrest.’ He came over to the Doctor. ‘How’s he looking?’

‘Not good.’ The Doctor had already started CPR, breathing into the man’s mouth, then again, and checking for any response. The pulse was still there, but erratic, and definitely weaker than before. He began compressing the man’s chest. ‘Come on!’ he grunted under his breath. It wasn’t just his compassion for a fellow man that was driving him, although that was paramount – something had nearly scared this man to death, and he wanted to know what it was.

Two more breaths, more compression... but the Doctor seemed to be fighting a losing battle. It was as if the man had simply given up, rather than face whatever it was he was running from. People with no souls, he’d said. What did he mean? He checked the man’s pulse again. Nothing.

‘That ambulance had better hurry,’ he yelled at the policeman. ‘He’s stopped breathing.’ The Doctor carried on, two breaths, 15 chest compressions. ‘Breathe, damn you, breathe!’ He suddenly heard the universally characteristic siren of an emergency vehicle. ‘Not a moment too soon,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Tell them to hurry!’

The sleek white vehicle slammed to a halt, two paramedics sprinting over to the Doctor and the man. The Doctor quickly filled them in on the circumstances as they lifted the man’s prone body onto a stretcher and carried him into the ambulance. Moments later, it executed a sharp U-turn and sped off along the road.

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. ‘Poor fellow,’ he said. ‘I hope I was able to do some good.’

The policeman was leafing through a brown leather wallet. ‘If you have, you can expect a pretty hefty reward.’

‘I don’t want a reward!’

‘You might when you find out who he was. He dropped his wallet.’ The policeman held out a security pass. ‘That was August DeValle.’

‘Is that meant to mean something, officer?’

Marc shot the policeman an ‘oh, humour him’ look. ‘He’s not

from around here. August DeValle is one of the Nine, Doctor, he whispered. 'He's the second richest man on the station.'

'Was,' said the policeman, retrieving his walkie-talkie. 'I've just heard from the ambulance. I'm afraid he didn't make it.'

The Doctor sighed. The fragility of life – so easy to just snuff out like an unwanted candle flame. And yet there was mo to this. It had been a long time since the Doctor had seen suc unmitigated fear in someone's eyes.

The policeman was summing up, using that reassuring ton perfected throughout the galaxy by members of the constabulary. 'Well, there's nothing more any of us can do tonight. If you'd be good enough to come down to the station tomorrow, I'll take a statement. Formalities, you see.' He handed over a business card. 'Good evening, gentlemen.'

The Doctor and Marc stood in silence for a moment as the policeman walked off along Broadway.

'I thought you were supposed to be undercover?' Marc hissed, as soon as the policeman was out of range.

'What do you mean?'

'Not knowing who August DeValle is,' he said with disgust 'The Nine built Reef Station One, for God's sake.'

'I'm here on a specific mission, Marc. I'm not expected to know everything.' But the boy was right – any more slips lik that and his cover really would be blown: Marc might accept a undercover policeman, but an undercover Time Lord? And h now wanted to maintain his cover for as long as possible: one the most powerful businessmen in the Republic, drooling in terror in an alleyway before dying of fright? There might as well be another neon sign on Broadway flashing 'clue' at him! Then he spotted it. Perhaps there was...

'Still up for the movie, Doctor?'

'Hang on one moment. I need to tie my shoelace.' He knelt down. Seconds later he got to his feet. 'Why not?'

'Because someone's just died?'

The Doctor stared at him for a moment. Perhaps it did seem a bit crass to sit munching popcorn after DeValle's death, but there wasn't anything else they could do. Besides, the Doct knew that one of the best ways for him to process information was to take his mind off it and let his brain puzzle it out in peac and quiet.

But as they walked to the cinema, the Doctor was thinking less about Morlocks and Eloi and more about people with no souls.

Given the hours that he spent in his office, it would be reasonable to assume that Walter J. Matheson III's home was as Spartan as his workplace. Nothing could be further from the truth. His mansion was so exclusive that it wasn't even in one of the districts.

While all of the Nine had been as rich as Croesus when they had jointly founded Reef Station One, Matheson was in a league of his own. His fortune had been inherited from a dynasty of Mathesons, the earliest of whom had been a successful arms dealer in the galactic civil war. But Matheson had also inherited his forefathers' business acumen and had built up yet another fortune on top of his birthright: he could have built Reef Station One on his own, but it was far, far better to share the risk.

As the station was being built, Matheson had already decided to eschew the publicity that the others of the Nine entertained his money had bought him a topological anomaly on the station, acres of land that didn't show up on any map. Within the landscaped gardens, with their fountains, gazebos and follies, a mansion that would have been the envy of anyone in Resident 1 was completely hidden from prying eyes: even aerial photographs couldn't pick it out amongst the twisted zone boundaries at the very heart of the station.

The interior was as impressive as the exterior, although Matheson had never felt the need to impress anyone. He almost never entertained: this was his and his alone. Even his staff were exclusively Synthespians.

He was currently sitting in his library, where the shelves stretching from the polished wooden floor to the ornately decorated ceiling, were filled with volumes that would have every bibliophile in the Republic salivating with envy.

But they were his. And his alone.

And tonight, he was celebrating. A glass of two-hundred-year-old single malt from the now-owned distillery in the Hepburn Discontinuity sat next to him on the occasional table, a cube of ice slowly melting to crack the flavour open. He reached out from his leather armchair – its provenance dating it to the

Imperial Palace during the Ch'en Dynasty – and plucked a remote control from next to his whisky glass. He touched a button and a large circular dais – six feet across – rose seamle from the wooden floor. Seconds later, three-dimensional figures formed from the surface of the dais, extruding into existence as man and a woman behind a desk, a bank of flickering TV screens behind them.

'This is KWJM3 News, bringing you all the latest from Ree Station One.' Matheson saw that Marla and Boyce were on duty tonight: not the best team on the station, but always guaranteed to put in a workman-like performance.

As they adopted tones of hush shock at the lead story, Matheson had to smile. The death of August DeValle was a terrible waste and a loss to the business community. His widow was distraught, being comforted by their two grownup children. No one at Republica Comms could be contacted this evenin Of course they couldn't – they were all too busy having their careers transitioned or their skills rebalanced.

All the usual platitudes. Meaningless. Empty. No one woul miss August DeValle: he was ossified, a dinosaur. The bigg picture had always evaded his parochial mind. As for his wi and children: she was almost certainly in the arms of her lesbi lover, while the children had been excommunicated from the DeValle empire a decade ago – drugs and prostitution had become their abiding passions. As for Republica Comms...

Matheson picked up a sheet of paper from the table. Th smile became a grin as he picked up his glass and took a swig of the whisky. The underlying reason that no one could conta Republica Comms was because there no longer was a Republica Comms. It was now part of the glorious WJM empire. He pu the contract down and raised his glass.

'Here's to you, August. You did the right thing in the end.'

CHAPTER THREE

‘Another cookie, dear?’ Joan pushed the plate over the perfectly laid coffee table. Too perfectly laid, with doilies and napkins and a rotating cake stand that Peri had never seen outside of vintage British movies. ‘What about a muffin?’

‘I couldn’t possibly,’ said Peri politely. ‘I’m still full after our lunch.’

Joan smiled warmly. ‘Glad to see that my stepdaughter is showing some manners, Peri. Well, if you do feel peckish, they’re there for the taking. Now, Claudia, what sort of a day have you had?’

It was clear from Claudia’s hesitation that Peri wasn’t the only one confused by this woman who was apparently the bitch-queen from hell. Less Alexis, more Martha Stewart: even the dress was on the fluffy side, like one of those covers for toilet rolls in a certain type of house.

As Claudia composed herself and began to recount her experiences of the day, Joan listened appreciatively, only interrupting to ask an interested question every now and then. This gave Peri a chance to look around the living room: it was huge, but that came with the territory, as did the perfect decoration – all velvet, gold and marble. She could imagine it brimming with the rich and famously rich, liveried servants flitting around with trays of drinks and canapes while the true movers and shakers on Reef Station One took place.

It hadn’t taken Peri long after first entering the TARDIS to realise that trying to get alien civilisations – even human ones, come to that – to conform to her own limited experience was a bad thing. Mistakes and assumptions led to all kinds of trouble, and didn’t she know it! But Reef Station One was different. It had conformed itself to fit various eras of Earth history, and that appeared to include the social mores as well. Peri knew how easy it would be to pretend that this was 1980s California, and that Joan and Claudia were exactly who they appeared to be.

Except that they were sitting in a mansion built on a gian upturned mountain enclosed within a glass bubble, floating i space a very long way away from California.

She realised that Joan was talking to her. 'So, Peri dear, what are your plans until your shuttle is repaired? You're more than welcome to stay here – we're not short of space,' she laughed. Peri glanced over at Claudia, and suppressed a grin at t shocked expression. Clearly, lesbian lovers weren't common in the Bruderbakker household.

'Err... that would be great. Hopefully we should be on our way tomorrow.'

'Stay as long as you like,' said Joan. 'Now, if you'll bot excuse me I have to get to the kitchen. I'm preparing a spec dinner for your father, Claudia. He's been working so hard late he deserves a good home-cooked meal when he gets home. Especially since it's our wedding anniversary.' She elegan detached herself from her armchair and glided over to one of the many doors leading off the living room. She paused in th doorway. 'Now, you girls have a good evening: I won't wait up And then she was gone.

Both Claudia and Peri started speaking at the same time, b the gist of both girls' stuttered questions was the same: 'What the hell is going on?'

Claudia leaned back in her chair and shook her head. 'Tell me that wasn't my stepmother. Because if it was, I've entered parallel universe.'

Being well aware of parallel universes, it wasn't a suggestion Peri was going to dismiss out of hand. But it did seem unlikely. At first, she had thought that Claudia had exaggerated h stepmother's behaviour, but her reactions indicated otherwise.

'I have to admit, it was a bit...'

'Creepy?' Claudia answered. 'Definitely creeped me out.'

'Ever seen a film called *The Stepford Wives*?' Claudia shook her head. 'Don't worry – it would take too long to explain.'

'I know she was having a makeover, but this is ridiculous. I don't want to stay in this house a moment longer than I have to: a nice long soak in the Jacuzzi and then... do you fancy helping me play dress-up? We should wear what we bought at least on shouldn't we?'

'And then?'

She adopted a chillingly accurate impersonation of her new improved stepmother. ‘And then, dear, we hit the town.’

Even as he had bought the tickets, Marc just knew that this was a bad idea. The Doctor had been hypercritical over where they sat, changing his mind three times before finally settling on two seats that didn’t appear to be any better or worse than their previous choices; then he had hovered around the refreshment kiosk, demanding popcorn, and chocolates, and maybe a hot dog, and should they have nachos and dips? And don’t forget the super-size fizzy drink.

Suitably laden with sundry items of reconstituted pap (obviously, it was beneath the Doctor to carry anything), Marc made his way to the screen. The film was due to start in a few minutes, and the auditorium was almost packed; therefore the short journey to their seats was an uncomfortable voyage of bruised knees, crushed toes, and a continually muttered litany of excuse-mes and sorries.

Finally, they were seated (the Doctor taking ages to get comfortable), the food was (unevenly) distributed between them, and they could sit back and enjoy the film. If only life had been that simple.

The heavy red curtains closed, stayed like that for a second, and then grandly swept open. A black image appeared, before transforming into the standard Republic Board of Film Certification screen, announcing that *The Time Machine* was suitable for all ages, but that it did contain ‘mild peril, minor violence and scientific concepts not accepted by the Republic Science Commission’.

‘Mild peril?’ hissed the Doctor. ‘What’s mild peril?’

And that was only the start of it. Ignoring the (initially whispered, eventually shouted) objects from nearby (and not so nearby) movie-goers, the Doctor proceeded to dissect the film with the precision of a master surgeon. Nothing escaped his gimlet scrutiny, from the accuracy of the sets (‘That’s not authentic – the design’s all wrong. At least ten years too soon’) to the quality of the acting (‘Come on, man – that shop window dummy’s more lifelike than your actor!’), as well as a frankly mystifying diatribe on the eponymous machine’s journey through time (‘You’ll be telling us it’s static electricity and

mirrors next – preposterous, truly preposterous. And since when has brass been a suitable material for constructing time machines, eh?').

By the time the Traveller was thrusting lighted torches at the Morlocks, Marc simply wanted to crawl under his seat and make it all go away. As the closing credits rolled, he couldn't remember the last time he had felt so relieved. He virtually dragged the Doctor out of his pile of discarded food wrappings and towards the exit.

They reached the open air of Broadway, and Marc took a deep breath to calm himself. But before he could say anything the Doctor gave a stretch and smiled. 'Excellent. Absolutely excellent.'

'You liked it?' Marc asked in disbelief.

'The film? Well, they took it upon a few liberties with old Herbert's book, but that's only to be expected. No, I was referring to the restoration process. Magnificent. And so very, very disturbing.'

Marc reached into his pocket for his car keys, and pressed the summons button. 'Why disturbing?'

'Because there isn't a technology developed over the last eight thousand years capable of doing that. The original celluloid and any magnetically stored copy would have decayed millennia ago – so much was destroyed during Earth's primal wars before there was a chance to get it off-world.'

It was like talking to a child sometimes. 'I told you, Doctor Reef Station One intercepts television transmissions. What do you think the bloody great aerial is, sticking up through the dome?'

Marc's red sports car pulled up in front of them. 'That's as may be, but the quality of the signal, the degradation, the attenuation across the vastness of space... without an original to compare it to, there's no way anyone could reassemble it perfectly.' The Doctor eased himself into the passenger seat. 'It's like doing a jigsaw when half the pieces are missing and there's no picture on the lid. The computational power alone is staggering, but the degree of interpolation required would be unbelievable. Impossible!' He rubbed his chin. 'What did it say in the credits? "Restoration courtesy of *Redux*?" Who or what is *Redux*?'

Marc finished setting the auto-guidance computer and s
the car rolling before answering. 'Pedrix is a technique for
restoring TV and film. Been around for about three or four
years. Before that, even the best restoration made th
programme look like you were watching it through a
snowstorm.'

'That's a rather tautological answer, Mr Brooks. How does
work? Who developed it?'

'You're asking the wrong guy, Doc. I just act in films – I
don't make them. Anyway, where next? That's a point – have
you got anywhere to stay tonight? I'd offer, but I've only got a
tiny room – and Mrs Bussett, the landlady, isn't keen on guests

'That's fine, Marc. I have somewhere arranged in Wannab
1. If you could drop me off at the pub, that would be fine. But if
you're free tomorrow...'

'More investigating?'

'If you're up for it, yes.'

Marc grinned. 'Just as long as we don't have to see any mo
films. What's your phone number?'

'Phone number?'

'I assume you have got a phone, because you won't get
on the station without one of those, Doc.'

The Doctor reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a
small silver box. 'Of course I have a mobile phone – I did do
some research, you know!' he said with affronted anger. 'Let me
just check the number.'

The next couple of minutes were spent swapping phon
numbers – most of it the Doctor fumbling around trying to find
out his own number, until Marc took over.

'Right,' said Marc. 'My number and yours are on each other's
speed-dials. Give us a ring tomorrow if you need me.'

And, despite the embarrassment of the movie theatre an
the general unpleasantness of business magnates dropping dead
in front of him, Marc found himself hoping that the Doctor
would phone.

Peri had to admit that she was thoroughly enjoying herself.
Despite Joan's mysterious make, Claudia had soon lightened
up once they had started unpacking the bags, with each item
scrutinised for its suitability for an evening's partying.

Claudia had insisted that Peri try out a few of the outfits including a beautiful Vorbe dress, a slinky black number, slit to the thigh, and revealing a considerable amount of cleavage. Deeming it perfect, Claudia completed Peri's ensemble with the addition of a black pearl choker and perilously high stilettos.

Claudia chose a little white number for herself, coutured by the great Maxwell La Trente himself. After a brief dalliance with make-up and hair (which took Peri back to her highschool days), the two girls were dressed to the nines, and – for the first time in ages – Peri definitely felt ready to party.

'You look stunning,' she said to Claudia. Claudia's hair had been. carefully braided into an intricate French plait, and large diamond earrings glinted in the bedroom light.

'We're not finished yet.' Claudia walked over to the wardrobe – a walk-in number that took up an entire wall – and extracted a couple of fur wraps, white for her and black for Peri. She must have seen the expression on Peri's face; handing the black wrap over, she added, 'It's real, you know. I'm not that heartless.' Another rifle through the wardrobe.'And these.' Elbow length gloves.

As Peri put them on, she caught her reflection in the floorlength mirror. She had to admit, she looked a million dollars – almost unrecognisable as the botany student from Pasadena. There wasn't much call for evening dress on the Doctor's travels, and inevitably whatever she wore would end up ripped and dirty by the end of it, so it was nice to dress up and know you were simply going out for an evening of pure, hedonistic pleasure. For once, the Doctor could deal with the Cybermen, or the giant slugs, or whatever else was lurking on his side of the wall. She was going to have *fun*.

'Are we ready?' she asked.

'Just have a phone call to make.' While Peri had been admiring herself in the mirror, Claudia had been transferring all those essential bits and bobs from one bag to another – one which matched her outfit, of course. She took out her mobile phone. 'Hi – it's me. Up to anything tonight? Me and a friend we're heading off to Mandrake's for the evening. Fancy joining us? Yes, I know you're broke – I'll treat you. Don't I always? Okay – see you there in an hour. Ciao.'

'Boyfriend?'

Claudia laughed. ‘Good God, no. Old friend of mine. He needs a bit of cheering up. You'll love him – he’s a stud.’

Dancing, cocktails and some eye candy. Peri was lookin forward to the evening even more.

Back in Wannabe 1, the rain had stopped. The Doctor watched. Marc’s car swerve round the corner before he crossed the roa his umbrella tat-tat-tatting on the tarmac. With his inbuilt sens of timing – albeit fairly skewed by the strange time zones _ th Doctor reckoned that there were about three hours to go befor dawn, despite the fact that Marc was just gearing up for a nig out. Obviously the inhabitants with money felt that it gave them some sort of weird advantage over the lesser mortals in the relatively poorer districts.

He had already determined that he would spend a good fe hours researching this place and then – depending on his findings – give Marc a call. The Doctor was very grateful that th late August DeValle had not only dropped his wallet, but also his mobile phone, which the Doctor had pocketed while apparently tying his shoelaces. Marc hadn’t seen a thing.

Marc seemed a decent chap, and given this society preoccupation with all things theatrical, he made an excelle touchstone for the Doctor’s investigations. Especially given the complex web of social interactions that had been spun across Reef Station One; the Doctor had effortlessly slotted into societies across the universe, from the precise court etiquette the Draconians to the mannered threats and insults o eighteenth-century Paris, but those societies had evolve naturally over years, if not centuries. There was a natural logic behind their conduct, and the Doctor usually had no problems deducing that logic within moments of arriving.

But this place – and possibly the entire Republic – wa founded on a Proustian ideal of nostalgia. It wasn’t even remembrance of times past – it was second-, even third-han remembrance through the medium of television. Their ideas o twentieth-century life were seen through a glass darkly: th honestly believed that *Dixon of Dock Green* was an accurate representation of British policing, as demonstrated by the policeman earlier.

The Doctor recognised many of their cultural icons by virtue

of his association with twentieth-century Earth, but during his exile he hadn't exactly spent his time sitting in front of the TV, had he? So he had no idea which parts of which programmes had been co-opted into social referents, and without a knowledge of the twisted rules that underpinned Reef Station One, the Doctor was running a very big risk of making a monumental error of judgement – and that simply wouldn't do.

He reached the TARDIS, sitting patiently at the end of the alleyway, and inserted his key in the lock. For a moment, he thought about Peri, somewhere else on the station, doing goodness knows what. But the girl was resourceful: sometimes he didn't give her the credit she deserved. And besides, he'd make a concerted effort to find her tomorrow. Or today, depending on whatever time zone she was in.

Stepping into the TARDIS, he was oblivious to the silent figure in coat and scarf at the other end of the alley. Standing there. Watching. As the doors to the TARDIS closed, the figure jerked into life, and walked off into the night.

Chuck Bruderbakker dismissed his driver and waited for the front doors to open. They didn't. Puzzled by this lack of response from his household staff, he pushed open the doors and stepped into the hall. Joan was waiting for him with a drink in her hand.

'Where's Bosun?' Bosun, the major-domo, had been with Chuck's family for a generation, loyal, trustworthy and infinitely efficient. So why hadn't he opened the door?

Joan pre-empted him. 'I've given the staff the night off, darling. I thought we could spend a quiet evening in together.' She handed the drink over. 'Vodka martini, just as you like it.'

Chuck didn't know what to say. Joan was many things – hostess, organiser, courtesan, even – but a dutiful wife waiting for a husband with a drink? She entwined her arm around his and escorted him into the library.

'Now sit here and enjoy your drink. I have a few things to sort out in the kitchen.'

'The kitchen?'

'Oh yes, Chuck. I've cooked dinner for you. Your favourite: prawn cocktail, rare steak and fries, and gateau. I hope you like it.'

As Joan – dressed uncharacteristically in an understat dress that didn't reveal most of her décolletage – left the roor Chuck downed the martini in one and went over to the bar to fix himself another. What the hell was she up to? Surely she didn't want an increase in her allowance? She was virtually bankrupting him as it was. Sex? Well, Brady took care of that side of things.

He knew it was their anniversary, but usually the ever passed without comment: his PA, Helen, would buy a suitable (and obscenely expensive) present on Chuck's behalf, vulgar enough for her to crow to her friends about, and that would be the end of it.

He made himself another martini and sank into his chair. He really didn't need all this playing at tonight. He had business to attend to, and Joan in full-on wife mode, complete with home cooked meal (the very thought of it was giving him indigestion), wasn't going to help. He reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out the letter that had arrived by courier that afternoon. It was from Matheson – yet another of his veiled threats of a takeover. Chuck crumpled the sheet of paper and threw it on the open fire. Walter couldn't keep his wallet closed at the mome – acquisition after acquisition. It wouldn't surprise him if the old vulture wasn't already circling Quark and poor old August's carcass. Perhaps it was some kind of mid-life crisis? Well, he coul SWivel on it if he thOUght he was gOing to get his hands or Chuck's company.

Joan appeared in the doorway. 'Dinner's ready,' she simpered.

Suppressing a groan, Chuck followed her into the dinin room. He was beginning to wish he'd eaten in the office.

The Doctor didn't really like doing this. It felt like he was breaking the rules in some way. But with so little to go on, h needed an advantage. At the very least, he needed some more background information.

While the TARDIS gently teased its way into the station's datastreams, he sat in a hastily retrieved director's chair that he had found in one of the side rooms, his frock coat flung over the back, and tried to make sense of what he knew. The TARDI had been dragged here, that was certain. But whether that plume had targeted the TARDIS, or they'd just been along for the ride

was currently unknown. A prominent businessman, dying in terror. A restoration process that was frankly impOSSible. And his general feeling that something was terribly, terribly wrong on Reef Station One.

He'd always had that knack. Time out of joint, society out of phase, injustice, evil... all these things triggered alarms in his mind. Perhaps it was a Time Lord gift, but it wasn't one he could really discuss with the other cracks from Gallifrey, was it? Especially since they were usually the ones responsible. But the alarms had been ringing non-stop since his arrival on the station – and that didn't bode well.

There was a bleep from the console, and the Doctor rose from his chair. Unusually, he actually felt tired. He checked the local time, compared it with Public Standard Time, worked out how long he had before it was mid-morning... and headed out of the console room towards his own bedroom. Plenty of time for a nap – it wasn't as if he ever overslept, was it?

He stopped in the doorway. It wasn't as if he ever felt this *tired*, was it? Shaking his head to clear it of unwelcome cobwebs, he returned to the console. Maybe it felt as though he'd been running a marathon since he'd arrived on the station – and his subconscious was exhausted.

A mystery for another time. He needed to get his bearings on Reef Station One, to at least get a feel for this grotesque sOciety. And newspapers – or whatever passed for them here – were the best way of doing that. He pressed a button on the console, and then strode over to one of the walls. licking his rmger, he waved it around until it alighted on one of the roundels. Pulling the translucent panel open, he was presented with a stack of newspapers, reeking of fresh newsprint.

Right, he thought, settling himself back into his chair, his reading matter on the floor beside him. Let's see what passes for gossip around here. He picked up the paper from the top of the pile. 'Ah – the *Reef Station Enquirer*. Classy.'

Mandrake's was buzzing. Hundreds of beautiful young things of both sexes – although Peri noticed that there was a preponderance of men – were milling around below them, with alcohol, dancing and sex on their minds (and not necessarily that order).

Peri and Claudia were almost absorbed by the soft leather armchairs in the VIP lounge. Sipping their exotic cocktails Peri hadn't seen so many different types of fruit in one place since her visit to the Botanarium on Phyluxus – they were afforded a view of the dance floor, thanks to the wall-length window along one side of the bar.

'One of your regular haunts?' Peri asked Claudia.

'Err... sorry?'

'You okay?' Claudia had been distracted since they had arrived, and Peri was pretty sure she was still concerned about Joan. But people did change. Maybe not overnight, but sometimes it seemed that way. She couldn't help thinking of Howard.

At the beginning, she'd been understandably jealous. After her father's death, she and her mother, Janine, had grown closer than they ever had before. Perhaps that would have happened anyway: Peri was a teenager, after all, and Peri – were changing on a daily basis.

Janine had even started taking an interest in Peri's hobbies, paying for field trips and ensuring that she had an extensive library of text books at home (although it was nothing compared to the library in the TARDIS: who would have thought that there were some plants that grew in the photosphere of stars?).

And then Howard had arrived. Handsome, rich, attentive... Peri had hated him. He was an intruder in their lives, monopolising her mother's attention, creating a rift between them. Every night before she fell asleep, she had prayed to God that she only bothered when she really, really wanted something that Howard would be gone the next morning.

And one morning, he was. At least, that Howard was gone. A new Howard, unrecognisable from the old one, was breakfasting in the kitchen, full of excitement about a new botany exhibition. Did Peri want to see it? It meant a two-day excursion, and he'd be bringing his own kids along. But Peri had already decided that she liked this new version, even before the bribe/treat of the exhibition.

Perhaps that's what Claudia was experiencing? Finally seeing Joan in a new light, uncoloured by youthful perceptions of jealousy and loss? No. Peri instinctively knew that Claudia was right, and Joan was either possessed, a robot, or both. She took a

deep suck from the curly straw in her cocktail.

'You made it!' Claudia stood up to greet a good-looking man who had just entered the lounge. Some perfunctory airkissing took place before Claudia deigned to introduce the beefcake to Peri.

'Peri – this is an old friend of mine. We went to high school together. Marcus Brooks – meet Perpugilliam Brown.'

Chuck Bruderbakker finished off the last sliver of steak and growled contentedly. Mrs Svensen, their cook, was superb, but he couldn't remember a steak done quite as well as this one. And cooked by Joan... when had she started taking cooking lessons? The woman could burn water, for God's sake! But it had been a lovely meal: prawn cocktail, but with juicy prawns in a sauce that Joan swore was homemade; and steak, fries and onions done just as he liked them – the steak blue, the fries thick cut and the onions fried within an inch of their lives.

As for the wine: Chuck kept a well-stocked cellar, and had the knowledge of a sommelier, but the countless times that Joan had chosen a bottle of the 9971 – four thousand dollars a bottle – to go with sandwiches, and then followed it up with what was nothing more than the house wine he kept for the servants when he was entertaining his fellow captains of industry, were a constant infuriation. But she had chosen perfectly: the 9999 complemented a blue steak to perfection.

And then there was her attitude. He'd married her for her looks; initially, there had been sexual element to it all, but that had waned years ago. She found her favours elsewhere, and so did he (although his tastes were a little more... eclectic than hers). But it was how she looked to other people that counted: he was a member of the Nine – or should that be the Five, with poor old August's death, and the retirement of the others? – and appearance was all that counted. She was a money-grabbing, vile shrew at home, but by God could she throw a charity ball! And that was what mattered.

But the woman Sitting opposite him was anything but a shrew: she was affectionate, attentive. Suddenly she could even choose wine...

'Happy anniversary, darling.' Joan raised her glass and clinked it against his. 'Here's to many more years together.'

‘Happy anniversary; he muttered in reply. To be honest, he wasn’t sure how to deal with this – he couldn’t even recall the last anniversary they’d actually spent together. Then he remembered. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a long blue box and handed it over. ‘I didn’t forget.’ Well, actually, he had, but his PA hadn’t. Helen might not be quite up to Matheson’s legendary Miss Sellers standards, but she hit the spot. In more ways than one.

Joan extracted a sparking necklace from the box. ‘Darling it’s wonderful!’

‘Recognise what they are?’ Of course she did. Joan could smell the value of jewellery a light year away, and she had a cabinet full of the stuff to vouch for it. But Chuck knew she had nothing like the necklace she was currently placing around her neck: no one on the station did. Actually, he doubted that anyone in the Republic did, either.

‘Reef diamonds? They’re *Reef diamonds*!’ Chuck had never heard of them until Helen had suggested them, but now he knew that they were cut from the remains of a super-Jovian planet the Caledonian Reef that had exploded a million years ago and left little sparking things in its wake. Whatever that meant. But Helen had vouched for their rarity, and the receipt had proved their expense, so he bloody well hoped that she liked them.

As the hundreds of tiny jewels touched his wife’s flesh, they suddenly burst into flame. Each one became a tiny sun, the colours flickering from white to yellow to red to purple and then back again.

Joan clutched her hands to her chest. ‘Oh, Chuck! It’s beautiful!’

Chuck was momentarily speechless. Okay, so he could have bought a small planet for what the necklace had cost, and he had expected some sort of grudging appreciation from his wife, but this was ridiculous. ‘I’m glad you like it.’

Joan rose from the table and kissed him on the cheek. ‘I can’t wait to show the girls tomorrow. They’ll be so jealous –’ *Ah, much more like the old Joan.* ‘So jealous that I have such a wonderful husband. And now, I have a present for you.’

She vanished out of the dining room for a moment, before returning with a sheaf of papers in her hand. ‘Here you are, darling.’

Chuck stared at the topsheet with rising incredulity. He first noticed the letterhead: Walter J. Matheson III Industries Incorporated. After that he didn't need to read any more, but he did.

'Joan – is this some kind of joke?'

Standing behind him, her hand on his shoulder, her voice was innocence itself. 'I thought you'd be pleased.'

'Pleased? If I Sign this, I hand over my company to Matheson! Why on God's Earth would I want to do that, woman?'

'But Chuck,' she simpered. 'Think of what we could do with all of that spare time. We have the resort on Paxas – all that sand and sea – then there's the skiing on New Aspen, the zero-g chalet... If you retire, you'd never have to worry about anything ever again.'

He tried to shrug off her hand, but she wasn't budging. 'I built Bruderbakker Industries from the ground up, Joan. Twenty-hour days, never seeing Claudia from one week to the next. You weren't there – you're just reaping the benefits of a lifetime spent creating this company. And I'll be damned if I let a mercenary bastard like Matheson take it off me!'

Joan's voice was like a honey-dripped razor blade. 'Walter is offering well above the market capitalisation, Chuck.'

Market capitalisation? This was a woman who didn't care about the stock market so long as his company continued to fund her extravagant lifestyle. A horrible suspicion hit him. 'Walter? Since whell did you and Matheson get so friendly? What the hell's going on, Joan?'

'It's all for the best, Chuck. Honestly.' Any vestige of compassion had drained from her voice. This was no longer a matter of debate as far as she was concerned, Chuck could tell this was an ultimatum. He forced her hand off his shoulder and got to his feet, turning to face her.

'For God's sake, woman, I am not going to sign over my company to that slimeball, and that's the end of it!' The conflicting personalities of the Nine had created a form of mutually assured destruction: no single company could become too big, too powerful.

But if Matheson bought Chuck's company, the Nine would become the Four – and the other three companies wouldn

stand a chance. Cecil, Earl and Ladyjane would roll over with
seconds, leaving Matheson as not just the richest, but the mo
powerful man in the Republic. They might as well crown him
emperor and be done with it.

Joan just smiled sadly. 'I'm really sorry, Chuck. I truly, trul
am.'

It was late, but Mandrake's was still in full swing – if anything, it
had become even busier, with the dance floor packed to capac
Peri couldn't remember the last time that she had danced pure
for the sheer hell of it – and it felt good, especially since most
the music was actually from the early 1980s. Culture Clu
Prince, Michael Jackson... by the time Irene Cara started sing
'Flashdance', Peri was in seventh heaven, her mind firmly ba
on Earth.

She had spent the majority of her time dancing with
Claudia's friend Marc: she hadn't been surprised when sh
discovered that he was actually a soap star, although she did
sorry for him when he told her how he'd lost his job earlier that
day. He clearly didn't want to discuss it in detail, though, and w
obviously throwing himself into having a good time – and that
suited Peri. Thoughts of the Doctor, of her peripatetic life (bah
A pun! – more like peripathetic.) of wondering whether she
would ever really have a home again outside those whi
roundelled walls... all vanished into the excitement of the dance
floor.

As the night crawled well into dawn, the music ramped
down a touch. Early Eighties soul gave way to soft rock and
power ballads, and Peri found herself in Marc's arms, moving
slowly around the dance floor to the strains of 'Total Eclipse of
the Heart', her head buried in his shoulder. She knew that she
would have to find the Doctor tomorrow, and that the hectic,
unpredictable world that she had chosen all those years ago
would beckon her back in, but just for tonight, she wanted to
feel like the young, brash student she had once been.

The music stopped, and Marc led her off the dance floor an
up the spiral staircase to the VIP lounge, where Claudia w
nursing a multicoloured cocktail and staring off into the distance.

'Hey,' said Peri. 'Penny for them?'

'Sorry, Peri – miles away. Did you guys have fun?'

Peri looked up at Marc. In another world – her world that this place mimicked so well – perhaps the evening wouldn't have ended here. Perhaps they would have spent the night togeth and maybe another night. Maybe spent their lives together? W knew? But she was Perpugilliam Brown, the Doctor's sidekic and real lives happened to other people. Now the music ha stopped, reality was knocking, and Marc was never going to be part of that reality.

'I had a great time,' said Marc. 'Perfect end to one hell of a day.' He sat down on the banquette and indicated for Peri to s next to him. Within moments, a waiter appeared with a bottle of beer and a white wine spritzer. 'And getting fired was only th start of it.' He began to regale them with tales of dead businessmen and mysterious galactic policemen, but Peri wasn't really in the mood. The events of her own day were beginning catch up with her, and the thought of falling asleep in what wa undoubtedly a luxurious four-poster bed in Claudia's mansion was becoming more and more attractive.

Claudia must have seen Peri's first yawn. 'I think it's about time we called it a night. Marc – fancy coming back for a nightcap? We can pick your car up in the morning.'

Marc gave a cheeky grin. 'Anything's better than Mrs Bussett's – luxury it ain't.' He stood up and stretched out his hand. 'Peri – you coming?'

Peri shrugged. 'It's not like I have anything else to do.' Then she realised how terribly ungrateful that must have sounded. 'To be honest, I think I'm ready for a bit of peace and quiet.'

Three hours of reading through the scurrilous, the bizarre and the outright unbelievable had left the Doctor with a slightly better picture of the Republic and Reef Station One, but not a reassuring one.

As he had guessed, the Republic had become isolated from the rest of humanity some centuries ago; as civil war had rent t galaxy in two, a fleet of ark ships, fleeing the conflagration, had gone wildly off course and passed into a remote region of space. An unlucky combination of exotic particles and gravity wells meant that the fledgling New Human Republic was unable t communicate with the outside galaxy; and, left to their own devices, they had been forced to develop their own society.

And that's where it had all started to go a bit wrong. As was the way with ark ships, a ready-made ruling council was already in place: social engineering in humanity's far future was a highly polished art form, and a council born and bred through eugenics and education was poised to take the reigns of power and lead the New Earth Republic into a new golden age of enlightened reason.

Except no one wanted them to. As the robotic probes reported back from their new home, the newly thawed colonists discovered that their unexpected location was not just rich with minerals, it was positively embarrassed by them. And the minimalist lifestyle planned by the ruling council – a society carefully constructed on quasi-communist lines – no longer seemed very attractive. The hundred million colonists had chosen the arks to escape the crumbling empire, with its lack of resources and constant threat of invasion; here in the New Earth Republic, they could enjoy a level of luxury unknown by human beings for centuries.

Thankfully, it had been a bloodless coup. The old ruling council had probably welcomed the change in plans – in the Doctor's experience, most ruling councils were only in it for the perks, and what was the point of all that responsibility if everyone could have the same standard of living? And so one billion humans had overrun the five hundred inhabitable worlds of their new home, and terraformed or plundered the thousand that weren't habitable.

One hundred years after the ark ships had blundered into that region of space, life was good. Very good. Poverty was unheard of, all the citizens were educated to the highest standard, and a peace and prosperity that eluded the Empire, the Federation, the Second Empire and the Union reigned.

And so did boredom.

One of the universal truths about human beings was that they were never truly happy unless they had something to fight against. Not necessarily other people; in its finest moments, humanity had triumphed over injustice, tyranny and plain old evil. Boredom was a brand new enemy, and not one that mankind was particularly familiar with.

Victory came from a most unexpected source. Nine of the greatest businessmen in the public, spotting a potential

market, joined forces to see if they could communicate with th
rest of the galaxy. They were foresighted enough to realise th
boredom would lead the Republic down the old familiar paths o
dictatorship, civil war and even extinction; they were good
enough businessmen to realise that while armsdealing might be
profitable, in the Republic they had a unique opportunity to
actually create their own market. Thus was the original 'Nine'
born.

Truth be known, they had no idea. No business plan. They just
wanted to reach out through the Great Barrier that cut the
Republic off from its brethren, see what was going on in the rest
of the galaxy, and hope that their legendary gifts of
entrepreneurship would kick in and provide the answer.

Actually, it all happened in reverse.

The nature of the barrier meant that electromagnetic and
tachyonic radiation could pass into the Republic – after a fashion
– but nothing intelligible could get out. Still, it enabled the Nine
to discover what had been happening since the formation of the
Republic. Sadly, it wasn't reassuring. Emperor Chen's empire
had finally fallen, but casualties had been overwhelming and the
collateral damage terrifying. The triumphant Union was in no
position to celebrate – it was desperately trying to keep some
semblance of order, while brokering peace treaties and non-
intervention pacts (at best) or defending borders against
opportunistic invasion (at worst). The Republic was better off
behind its wall of silence.

It was a lowly engineer in Ward J. Matheson Senior's media
company who rediscovered the word 'serendipity'. The
broadcasts that made it through the barrier all suffered from the
same problem: interference. At first, all efforts were directed
towards cleaning up the primary signals, ensuring that the news
of the war and its aftermath could be viewed in all their gory
glory. But then this particular engineer – his deeds absorbed into
legend, his name into obscurity – did a little more investigation,
and realised that the 'interference' was actually of a far older
provenance: electromagnetic signals from twentieth-century
Earth. More precisely, what had once been called 'television'.

In his own time – old man Matheson would have sacked him
otherwise – this anonymous engineer found a way of restoring
the signals, using complex electronic guesswork to fill in the

missing pieces. Soon, he had a library of twentieth-century television programmes lost in the mists of mankind's tumultuous history. For months, the engineer had the solitary delight of such treats as *Dynasty*, *Baywatch*, *Professor X*...

Except that he became greedy. Some of the programmes were too badly degraded for his restoration techniques to work. Reaching the end of episode five of the *Professor X* story 'The Snow Vikings', he discovered that episode six – the rip-roaring climax – needed far more processing power than he could muster in his home lab. So he took the risk of taking it into work.

Bad mistake. COO Walter Matheson Junior was nothing if not meticulous about his father's assets, since they would, one day, be his: stealing processing power merited the same punishment as raiding the stationery cupboard or fiddling expenses. The engineer found himself (or possibly herself – the records were extremely vague) in front of both Mathesons where he had been forced to tell the whole story.

The rest was history. Literally. Given complete access to WJM Inc.'s processing power, the engineer developed more and more advanced forms of restoration. Meanwhile, other engineers, equally anonymous, developed more and more advanced methods of receiving the signals in the first place.

But what use were eight-thousand-year-old TV programmes if there was nothing to watch them on? WJM Inc. burst onto the consumer market with a revolutionary new household appliance: it was called the television. Backed with tens of thousands of hours of pure nostalgia, it was the biggest marketing campaign the Republic – possibly the galaxy – had ever seen. Within a year, market penetration was at 90 per cent. Every evening, bus workers would arrive home and sit in front of the new device and feed off the twentieth century.

The Doctor got to his feet and wandered out of the console room. So far, so good. An offshoot of humanity, fairly harmless, discovering its roots. He made himself a steaming mug of peppermint tea – with a generous spoonful of honey – and returned to his ruminations.

Of course, even the most junior socio-economist would have immediately spotted there was a serious problem. And Walter). Matheson III, now in charge of the company, and the

rest of the third generation of the Nine – all of whom were benefiting from the new invention – knew the market intimately.

The programmes were running out. Television had survived for hundreds of years on Earth, but the earliest colonies, but its transmission via electromagnetic radiation hadn't. And, given the Republic's distance from Earth and the time factor, there was only a century-long window of broadcasts for the Republic to enjoy – and after that, nothing. Unless...

The members of the Nine devised a two-pronged solution that would both benefit the Republic and, more importantly, benefit them. Firstly, they would reduce their reliance on Old Earth's legacy by making their own television programmes it couldn't be too difficult, surely? And secondly, they would ensure that every last second of Old Earth's output was stored and restored. That was the bit that was going to cost.

On the furthest edge of the Republic, Reef Station One came into being. A smoothed-off asteroid, two hundred miles across, enclosed in an energy-reinforced plexiglass dome, served both purposes. Modelled on twentieth-century film and TV studios, there was a Hollywood, a Bollywood, a Borehamwood... all surrounded by the social apparatus necessary to support it. There was also a damned big aerial.

The greatest scientific and engineering project ever undertaken by the fledgling Republic, Reef Station One had been precisely located to ensure that it could record every television broadcast from Earth from the very beginning. Meanwhile, a team of engineers from each of the Nine worked together to further the research into. reception, developing tedmologies that could repair the damage that eight thousand light years of to E-M radiation.

Unfortunately, no technological advance ever happens In isolation. Sow on even the most barren of lands and it will bear fruit. A society devoid of inspiration, bereft of imagination, had suddenly discovered a new world – a world of friendly policemen, giant shoulder pads and mysterious scientists fighting terrors from beyond. And while Matheson, Bruderbakker, DeValle and the others obsessed themselves with Reef Station One, the Republic obsessed itself with television.

As planets and asteroids were captured and terraformed, the whole of the growing Republic molded itself on what it saw in

the flickering box in the corner. 1960s London; 1980s Los Angeles; 1990s Australia; Middle-Earth; *Babylon 5*, the Crossroads Motel... Embryonic colonies, desperately seeking some sort of direction, found it in their past. Shops? Malls of the 1980s. A police force? Why not George Dixon? Big business? *Dallas* and *Dynasty* – and if the colony in question was really short of money, *Falcon Crest* – had that all sown up. By the time Reef Station One was finally open for business, the New Earth Republic was more than ready for it.

The Doctor put the empty mug on the floor and stared at the ceiling. This was a very unstable society, but he wasn't here to support it or topple it. He was here because something had brought him here. He was pretty sure that it wasn't the Time Lords – they tended to be a little more subtle than a substratum plume – but there was a, reason.

Once again, he made his way to the small kitchen area not far from the console room. It was time for breakfast! Eggs, bacon, sausage and a fried slice – the food of the gods! As he lit the gas on the cooker, his thoughts returned to *The Time Machine*.

Restoration of ancient programmes was one thing, but the version of *The Time Machine* he'd seen was spectacular: the colours were even richer than when he'd seen it in 1960 – as a guest of George Pal himself, no less – and there was no way that a dim transmission from Earth a thousand years ago could look better than the original! He thought back a few incarnations and remembered a visit to the real Los Angeles with Ben and Polly: hadn't the Selyoids tried something similar then? But no. That had been an added glamour in a very different sense to this remastered *Time Machine*, and the Doctor was now far too long in the tooth to be taken in by such parlour tricks.

Ten minutes later, he was back in the console room, tucking into breakfast, laid on an occasional table next to him. The papers had been discarded; he was now checking out the TARDIS's video researches, specifically those that referred to film restoration. It didn't take long to find them. He poured himself a cup of Earl Grey tea and covered a slice of toast with strawberry jam as the scanner opened to reveal a television commercial that the TARDIS had dug from the archives.

'Hi. I'm Walter J. Matheson III.' The man simply

encapsulated the word 'orange', all perma-tan and capped teeth. 'I'm here to tell you about the most exciting developmen in television ever seen: *Redux*!' The picture changed to a grainy image that the Doctor recognised as an episode of *Professor X*. The Professor appeared to be running away from some strange reptiles that looked like a cheap version of the Ice Warriors.

'Until now, this was as good as it got,' said Matheson. 'But how do we know if the good Professor escapes? What happens next for our errant time traveller? The stories our forefather told us, lost forever... until now.

'*Redux* is the answer. With WJM Inc.'s revolutionary new restoration process, you can be guaranteed that the picture y see is as good as – no, better than – the one our ancesto watched, all those years ago!'

A montage of ancient television programmes then followed restored to perfect condition: *Z-Cars*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*... The Doctor finished off his breakfast with more Earl Grey and a healthy dose of nostalgia before switching off the scanner.

It was time to pay WJM Inc. a visit.

Claudia's car pulled up outside the mansion. Marc was asleep, and Peri was desperate to do the same – it had been a gr night, but tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

'Come on, kids,' said Claudia.

Marc blinked a couple of times before rejoining the main carriageway. 'We there yet?' he muttered.

'Indeed we are,' said Claudia, opening the passenger door of the Beemer and letting Marc and Peri out before sending the c off to be garaged with the press of a button.

'That's odd,'; she muttered as she opened the front door. 'All the lights are on. Joan's usually running around switching them all off. Wait here a second.' Leaving Peri and Marc in the huge hallway, Claudia sauntered off down the long carpeted corridor.

'I don't know about you,' said Peri, 'but I could do with getting my head down. It's been a long day.'

Marc gave a cheeky grin. 'Killjoy. The night is young, fai damsel. We should carouse until the break of dawn.'

'You can carouse,' laughed Peri. 'I'm going to sleep.'

A horrified scream echoed along the corridor. For a

moment, Marc and Peri froze, before running towards its origin.

It's funny how the human brain is more prepared to recognise the mundane and mediocre before seeing anything out of place. Peri noticed that the remains of dinner were still on the table, wine glasses half full, candles guttered to stubs. It was only after registering all of this that she saw Claudia cradling her father in her arms; her hands covered in the same blood that soaked his shirt and that was spread across the cream carpet. And, on the other side of the room, a woman sat quietly, a beatific smile on her face, dried blood on her dress. And a knife in her hands.

CHAPTER FOUR

Peri was immediately at Claudia's side, her arm round th shaking girl. It was obvious that there was nothing that could be done for her father: no Peri's age shouldn't be so familiar with death, but it was another legacy of her travels with the Doctor.

She glanced over at Joan, but the woman seemed complet oblivious to anything going on around her. Peri would have guessed that she was in shock, but there was an unnatu calmness about her that, quietly, gave Peri the willies.

'We should call the police,' said Marc, pulling out his mobil phone. Claudia nodded mutely as he dialled 999. Which was when Joan started screaming. 'Get her – try to calm her down!' he barked, before speaking into the phone. 'Police – this is the Bruderbakker residence. There's been... there's been an accid One fatality, one in shock, so we need an ambulance as well.'

As he continued to recite all the information that even the emergency services of the hundred-and-first century seemed need before they could move a muscle, Peri was attempting stop Joan from screaming. It was even a human scream, but something animalistic, as if all rational thought had departed. She had dropped the blood-stained knife on the floor, and seemed be directing her horror towards it, as if it wasn't the murder weapon but the murderer.

Marc pocketed his phone. 'Should be long. What the hell happened?'

Claudia began to babble about Joan being a murderer, b Marc soon put a stop to that. 'Claudia – this isn't doing any good. Just calm down.'

'Calm down? This is my dad!' she screamed, holding th body even tighter. 'And that bitch murdered him!'

'Claudia, we don't know that,' said Peri, although you didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work out the truth. Factor in Joan's apparently abnormal behaviour earlier in the day, and it did seem to be an open-and-shut case.

Claudia wiped the tears away from her eyes and gently laid her father's body back onto the carpet. Her white dress was soaked through with blood. 'I can't bear to be in the same room as that woman,' she snapped. 'I'll come down when the police arrive.'

As Claudia left the dining room, Peri finally located a section of wall that wasn't splattered in blood and leant heavily against it. Joan had calmed down again, and had returned to her uncanny smiling state – Peri wasn't sure which was worse.

'What do you think happened?' said Marc.

'I think that's pretty obvious, don't you?'

'I mean, why? I know Claudia can't stand Joan, but why would Joan do something like this? Chuck is – was – her meal ticket. And she's not going to inherit anything if she's murdered him, is she?'

'Look at her,' said Peri. 'That's not normal. Perhaps she just snapped – it does happen.' Virtually from day one with the Doctor, she had seen insanity in all of its shades – sadly, it took a lot to surprise her nowadays.

'Not to people like this,' said Marc. 'Joan had an army of therapists on 24-hour call. This just... well, weird.' He sighed. 'But it's not our problem. We've got to be here for Claudia. Let the police do their jobs and we'll do ours.'

Peri nodded, but her gut instinct told her otherwise.

Inside, she was screaming. Why couldn't she just have one normal day, like other people? Why did a night of drinking and dancing have to be capped with a murder rather than a mug of cocoa? She was still bemoaning this turn of fate as the sound of sirens began in the distance.

Matheson closed the lid on his precious metal box and sighed with contentment. With Bruderbakker off the board, he had a clear run. Nothing could stand in his way. He touched his intercom. 'Miss Self? Will you cancel all of my appointments for the rest of the day?'

Matheson waited for her to recover her composure before continuing – it had been about six years since he had cancelled an appointment. 'And have the car waiting – I'll be visiting the studio lot at some point this afternoon.'

Such wonderful imprecision – 'at some point', indeed. After

decades of matriculating his life to the minute and second, somehow seemed naughty to break his self-imposed rules. But he deserved it. And if it was send Miss Self in the direction of a nervous breakdown, then so at 12. She had a very generous health plan.

Sneaking a final glance at the glowing purple sphere, he stood up and looked out of the window. The first of his studio tours was just beginning, a herd of sad social inadequates who preferred fantasy to reality crammed into their buggies for an overdose of nostalgia. He always felt sorry for them, but today he felt doubly sorry. If only they'd waited another day, their petty desires would have been sated for free. And forever.

It was a crisp, dry morning – the sun was only just coming up in Wannabe 1 as the Doctor locked the doors of the TARDIS behind him and made his way to the bus stop. In the absence of a splendid remote-controlled bike like Marc's, he was dependent on public transport to get to his destination (he had considered using the TARDIS, but that might have drawn attention – and not the sort of attention he was after), he gathered that the headquarters of WJM Inc. were quite a tourist attraction, and buses ran to them from all over the station. Even better, they were free!

A long, bendy bus had arrived after only a couple of minutes; now, holding on to an overhead strap, the Doctor began to realise just how popular WJM Inc. – or rather, the studios behind it – was. Dozens of families replete with excitable and very fat children were chatting away in rather too loud voices about what they were most looking forward to. Was it the studio tour? The IMAX cinema? Seeing their favourite characters? After half an hour of this, the Doctor wasn't sure whether he was intrigued by the tour or already sick to death of it.

After another half hour of inane chatter – sometimes the Doctor wished that Time Lords had an audio bypass system to go with their respiratory bypass – he was relieved when the long single-decker bus finally pulled up outside an indecently tall glass and chrome building, the WJM logo carefully picked out in tasteful black above the arch of the main doors.

Peeling off from the rest of the passengers who were rushing

towards the water tower that marked the entrance to the stud
tour, the Doctor made his way to the side of the building.

When he had made this appointment, he had been surprised by how accommodating the person he had spoken to had bee She said that she would be *delighted* to answer any questions he had about *Redux*; that she would *love* to give him a demonstration of the process; and that she would be *more than happy* to take him to lunch afterwards as a *thank you* for showing such an interest in one of WJM Inc.'s flagship products.

All very fishy. The Doctor wasn't used to people welcoming him with open arms: open claws, open gunports or open spac time portals yes. But such sheer enthusiasm with lunch throw in? The voice on the phone had even given him detailed instructions as to how to find the business reception of WJM Inc., rather than the showy one that was actually part of the tou Of course, WJM Inc. would have been *more than happy* to lay on a car for Doctor Smith, should he need one, but the Doctor had learnt long ago that it was never wise to accept lifts from strange men, hence his bus journey.

As he wandered down into the underground car park where the secret entrance to the reception was located, he simply kn that something was wrong. No one ever trusted him this easily he hadn't even had to use his customary chemical *Welcome to my parlour, said the spider to the fly* came to mind: if his mysterious adversary – because there had to be a mysterious adversar was par for the course – wanted to get their hands on him, the inviting him into their headquarters saved all of that mess business of breaking in under cover of night. But how did they know who he was? The TARDIS had carefully tapped into th station's telephone network and made a magnificent impression of the Republic Hilton Plaza, Room 6, as well as quite literally doctoring the hotel's records to prove that he was staying in what was actually a vacant room.

Oh well, only one way to find out. He pressed the call button and waited a moment for the lift door to open. He stepped in, half-expecting nerve gas to pour through the vents, but nothing mo dramatic than the sensation of upwards movement happened. Moments later, the door slid open once more, and he was in th reception area, as overdesigned as the exterior. He walked over to the semicircular desk that dominated the vast chamber and

shot his most engaging smile at the doll-like receptionist.

'Good morning. I'm Doctor John Smith. I have an appointment with a Miss Glove?'

The receptionist dispassionately tapped into her keyboard, read her inset monitor.

'Please look at the camera.'

The Doctor stared into the little lens inset into the wall behind her, and waited for the flash. Seconds later, the receptionist handed over a pass with a little photograph of the Doctor on it. 'Quite flattering, don't you think?' he said jauntily.

The receptionist didn't react. 'Please wear your pass prominently at all times,' she droned. 'The lifts are behind you. Someone will meet you in the *Lux* reception. I hope you enjoy your visit to the headquarters of WJM Inc.' And that was the end of that.

As soon as the police arrived, Peri, Marc and an impassive Joan were ushered out of the dining room and escorted to the living room where Claudia was waiting.

While the scene of crime officers scoured the dining room (the paramedics had pronounced Chuck dead within moments of seeing him, which, given the surfeit of blood and the obvious lack of breath, didn't exactly require Einsteinian intelligence) Peri found herself being interviewed – although interrogated was probably a better word – by a young policeman dressed in what she could swear was a 1960s London police uniform. The questions were basic and easy to answer: or at least, they would have been, had Peri been a bona fide inhabitant of Reef Station One.

Yes, the three of them had been at Mandrake's all evening.

No, Mr Bruderbakker hadn't been home when Claudia and Peri left. Yes, Joan had – apparently – been acting oddly when they had seen her in the afternoon. No, Peri hadn't known either of them for very long. No, she wasn't a resident of Reef Station One. No, she couldn't name her home planet...

But the policeman could.

According to the PRC check, she was an inhabitant of New California. She and her companion, Dr John Smith, had arrived on Reef Station One at 11 a.m. RST the previous day, and the

ship – the *RSS Tardis* – was berthed in Docking District 5.

Peri almost threw up. This was worse than Cybermen, worse than the Valethske, worse than any of the alien horrors that she and the Doctor had faced over the last couple of years.

Someone knew they were there, someone with enough of an interest in them to falsify records and to create artificial identities for them. For a second, she entertained the idea that the Doctor might have done it, but that really wasn't his style: he was more blunder and bluster than methodical planning. No, someone was watching her – and she doubted that their efforts would prove to be of a beneficial nature.

Hoping that the cop hadn't seen that moment of sheer terror on her face, she carried on answering his questions as truthfully as she could, while attempting to steal a glance at the others. Claudia was still crying, Marc was being all levelheaded, and Joan was simply staring at the wall with that terrifying smile on her face. Peri just wanted the interview to end: she needed to find the Doctor, a.s.a.p. Even if he didn't have the answers, at least he would know the right questions.

Finally, the policeman closed his notebook. 'That'll be all for now, Miss Brown. I take it we can contact you here?'

Peri nodded. Her dreams of making a swift exit from Reef Station One were rapidly evaporating: if she was in this sort of trouble, God alone knew what was happening to the Doctor.

'Doctor Smith?' The woman was in her early thirties, with dark hair and a rather pinched expression, as if something was decomposing under her nose. 'Nancy Glove, PR director of Redux Technologies, a wholly-owned subsidiary of WJM Inc. I understand that you have a few questions about our revolutionary new technique.'

The Doctor sat down in the chair that Glove indicated and clapped his hands together. 'Indeed. Indeed. I was fortunate enough to see the restored version of *The Time Machine* recently, and I confess to being intrigued.'

Glove gave an icy smile. 'The *Time Machine* is one of my personal favourites, Dr Smith – and the best version of the film that we have in our archives. Our engineers deployed the very latest version of *Redux* to restore that film to all of its pristine glory. And, as you saw, the results are exemplary.'

‘That’s putting it mildly,’ said the Doctor. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was an improvement on the original.’

‘I wouldn’t like to comment, Dr Smith. And, of course, we have no way of knowing. *Redux* allows us to guess at the past, to re-imagine the past, but sadly not to genuinely see the past. So things are beyond even us.’

Some of us, perhaps. ‘And this technique can be applied to any recovered signal? How poor does the degradation have to be before the signal is unrecoverable?’

‘You must understand that the more technical aspects of *Redux* fall under the remit of our engineers,’ she said. ‘But I am led to believe that we have had considerable success even when only 20 per cent of the signal has survived.’

Remarkable. Also impossible, of course. There wasn’t a restoration technique in the universe that could recreate 80 per cent of a multi-millennia-old TV signal. And the Doctor got the feeling that she knew that as well as he did. This was a game. Unfortunately, he was completely ignorant as to the players or the rules.

‘That’s... astonishing.’

Another wintery smile. ‘Isn’t it just? Here at Redux Technologies, we are understandably proud of the contribution our restoration techniques have made to the cultural heritage of the Republic. Programmes thought lost forever are now available in all of their former glory, ready to be enjoyed by a new generation of viewers. Over the next few weeks, *EastEnders*, *The Tomorrow People*, even *Juliet Bravo*... they’ve all been restored and will be ready for market. I can arrange an advanced screening for you if you want.’

The woman sounded like a walking publicity brochure. ‘That’s all well and good, Miss Vega, but how does it work?’

The smile once again. ‘I can make you an appointment with our chief engineer. Unfortunately, he won’t be available until next week: everyone’s extremely busy with *Great Expectations* at the moment.’

‘The David Lean version?’ Before she could reply (and he doubted she knew anyway) he waved her answer away, leaving her gawping like a goldfish. ‘That won’t be necessary. I’m sure you can answer my more basic questions. For example, does your technique use recursive interpolation, or complex-plane

interrogation? Are the missing lines generated using interlacing or gradiation? How do you address the inevitable dirt and sparkle that cosmic radiation causes? What about the audio track? How do you filter out the interstellar static? Is it in Dolby or THX?' He continued in this vein for another couple of minutes, spewing out technobabble, allowing it to become more and more outrageous, noting that the poor woman was less goldfish now, more a deer in headlights.

She had no idea how the technology worked, and he doubted that any of her vaunted 'engineers' did either. The only way that *The Time Machine* could ever look as good as it had last night was if the celluloid itself had joined the dots – thinking film that knew what it should look like. But that was ridiculous... wasn't it? He knew he was missing something obvious – it was the same feeling he'd had since the TARDIS had first encountered the plume – but it escaped him. Damn this headache!

'If you could excuse me a minute?' The flustered Miss Glover made a sudden exit from the room, leaving the Doctor to admire the framed publicity posters that dotted the walls.

'Round one to me, I think,' he announced with enough smug charm to ensure that whoever was bugging the room heard. The only problem was, he knew that he had a losing hand, and the only option was to wait.

Whistling a happy tune, he put his hands behind his head and waited for round two.

The scene of crime officers had eventually finished their work and Chuck Bruderbakker's body had been discreetly ferried into an unmarked people carrier for the inevitable postmortem. Joan had been carefully led away – not that she appeared to notice – and Claudia, Peri and Marc were left in the drawing room, an untouched pot of coffee on the table in front of them.

'They want to sedate me,' said Claudia. 'Tranquillisers.'

'Perhaps that's a good idea,' said Peri. 'You could do with a good night's sleep.'

'Good night? Good night?! This is hardly a good night, Peri! My father's been murdered by my stepmother! And I don't want to forget a thing. I want that bitch to burn in hell for what she's done -' Her verbal assault ended as she started to sob once more.

'Mr Brooks?' One of the cops was standing over them.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m afraid you’re going to have to accompany me to the station, sir.’

Marc looked non-plussed. ‘Why? I’ve told you everything I know.’

‘It’s not that, sir... it’s about a different matter.’

‘What different matter?’

The policeman looked slightly embarrassed. ‘Maybe you’d prefer to discuss it down the station, sir. It might be in your best interests.’

Marc jumped up from the sofa. ‘No, officer – if I’m being charged with something, I want to know what the hell it is!’

‘Very well, sir. If that’s the way you want it. Marcus Brooks, I am arresting you on suspicion of persistent indecent exposure. You do not have to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and used in evidence against you.’

Peri had a stifle a laugh. There was a dead body lying outside, a psychopathic trophy wife, and the police were arresting Marc for being a flasher? She had no idea whether he was or he wasn’t – and to be honest, she didn’t really care at this precise moment – but the situation had just gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. The richest man on this body space station had just been murdered. In *her* LA, there’d be APBs, swarms of policemen, the FBI, the lot. Good God, the President would probably have been involved! Here, they sent a handful of sad saps from central casting, UK style, and seemed more interested in a mild pervert than murder.

‘You have to be kidding,’ said Marc. ‘A flasher? That’s ridiculous! Why would I want to do that?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but you have to come with us. We have a number of questions to ask you.’

‘Claudia!’ screamed Marc. ‘Do something!’

She looked up. ‘We’ll come down to the station as soon as we’re allowed to leave here. I promise.’

Marc paused for a second, pulling himself away from the policeman. He pointed at his mobile phone, sitting on the coffee table next to the neglected cups and saucers. ‘Ring the last number on the list. He’ll be able to help!’ Before he could say anything else, the policeman lunged – and uncomfortably, going by the grimace of pain on Marc’s face – restrained him and

dragged him out of the drawing room.

In the stunned silence that followed, Claudia picked up Marc's mobile and began pressing buttons. She paused for second before speaking.

'Why would he want us to call his doctor?'

'Dr Smith?' He hardly looked like great threat that Matheson had been warned about. Sitting there in his ridiculous jacket a trousers, his feet up on the table, looked more like a clown. But Matheson knew better than to more instructions from his partners.

There was a momentary flick of recognition in the Doctor's eyes before he jumped to his feet. 'Walter J. Matheson He held out his hand. 'I'm honoured!'

Matheson shook the Doctor's hand and smiled broadly 'You appear to have given my publicity director something of a headache, Doctor. A little technical, I gather.'

'Too much for her fluffy little head?' said the Doctor pointedly.

'Miss Glove holds degrees in mathematics and theoretic physics, as well as a PhD in communications technolog Insulting her intelligence is hardly befitting a man of your great reputation.'

'As far as I'm concerned, anyone who can spout such unmitigated drivel while totally failing to answer a single question has a fluffy little head, Mr Matheson. I came here to discover the truth about *Redux*; instead, all I got was a regurgitated publicity brochure!' A moment's pause. 'My reputation? I'm sorry, but you have me at a disadvantage.'

'Do I? Then I apologise. But when a man of such impressive credentials asks for an appointment, the least I would expect is a civil tongue.'

Matheson was pleased to see that even someone like t Doctor could be wrong-footed. Then again, it had always bee his business strategy: make sure you know more about them than they know about you.

'You appear to have developed a technique that has no basis in any accepted scientific discipline,' was the Doctor's best riposte.

'You were offered the chance to speak to one of my

engineers, Doctor. I gather you declined.'

'It would have been a waste of my time and theirs, Mr Matheson. If I want science fiction, I'll go and see one of your restored films.'

'Such as *The Time Machine*? I'm sure there was a lot in there for you to enjoy. See anything familiar?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Well, I have seen the film before, but... What do you mean, precisely?'

'I gather that time travel is a particular interest of yours, Doctor. *Redux* must offer a unique window on the past. Or maybe not that unique?'

Matheson knew that look: the Doctor was *wary*. This valiant galactic warrior, scourge of the time lines, was actually scared. Matheson had to admit that this sort of power-play was the only thing he was really going to miss after today. 'Is there a problem, Doctor? I do hope I haven't spoken out of turn.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about. I came here in all good faith – I simply wanted to know how *Redux* worked. Instead, I'm fobbed off with a load of corporate puff!'

Matheson made a point of looking at his watch. 'I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I have another appointment, Doctor. Perhaps we can reschedule? Lunch, maybe?'

'I think I'll probably have indigestion on that day,' he said with a distinct sulk in his voice. 'But thank you for your time, Mr Matheson.'

Matheson held his hand out, but the gesture was unreciprocated. 'The pleasure was all mine, Doctor.' He waited for the Doctor to reach the door before delivering his parting shot, a *mot juste* that his partners had permitted him to say.

'Oh, and Doctor... just think of *Redux* as 'thinking celluloid'. Does that help?'

The door slammed. 'Temper, temper, Doctor. As a nemesis you leave a lot to be desired.' Matheson rubbed his hands together. It was time to get to the studio. Rehearsals for the season opener of *Executive Desires* should be underway, and this was one performance that Matheson did not want to miss.

Distant but persistent security guards hovered at the ends of the corridor as the Doctor stormed out of the room and headed towards the lift. His face was a picture of anger, just as Matheson

had obviously wanted. Except that he was actually trying to suppress a laugh.

Matheson was too confident. Whatever game he was playing, his conviction that he had the Doctor on his back foot would be his undoing. The man had already revealed that he knew the Doctor was a Time Lord; obviously whoever he was in partnership with thought that such an august calling was beneath them. But that was an opinion that they would live to regret.

As he entered the lift, the Doctor knew that he was fighting an enemy every bit as arrogant as he was. 'Thinking cellulo indeed!' he growled at the microphones that were undoubtedly dotted around the mirrored interior of the lift. That was every bit as nonsensical as Miss Glove's pathetic explanations, but it wa warning shot across his bows: his enemy was confident enough to fire obvious clues at him; in a way, that was reassuring – t best enemies were those who took the time to explain their stratagems in boring detail. But there was another possibility: that they were confident because they actually held a winning hand.

The lift deposited him in the reception and he quickly made his way back to the underground car park. He wasn't entire sure what his next step was going to be. He wasn't too worried about watching his back, since his adversaries could cut him down at any point – the fact that they hadn't was proof that the were enjoying this cat-and-mouse game. And that gave hi sufficient breathing space to come up with some way o defeating them.

As he re-entered the warm maw of Studio 1, he felt a vibration in his pocket. Curious, he reached in and extracted the mobile phone that he had appropriated the previous night. It was telling him that he had a new voicemail.

The Doctor had never liked mobile phones: insidious little things that prevented people from ever being on their own. If life forms wanted that sort of hive mind, why didn't they develop telepathy and be done with it? But since only one pers knew his number (which was more than the Doctor did), and the Doctor was feeling in need of a friendly face, he negotiated his way around the overcomplicated user interface and retrieved t message.

The voice was unfamiliar, but with that strange

American/cockney twang that everyone – even Walter J
Matheson III – appeared to possess. She was a friend of Marc's,
he was in serious trouble, and could he come quickly
Thankfully, she gave an address: 27, Republic Boulevard,
Residential 1.

Public transport had been all well and good getting here, bu
this sounded like an emergency. Hoping that this Claudia
whoever she was – would be willing to stump up the fare, the
Doctor stood on the edge of the pavement and waved his han
'Taxi!'

Marc tried to look at his watch, but the handcuffs made it
impossible. Surely it didn't take this long to get to the precinc
house? He wasn't intimately familiar with Residential 1 – they
weren't exactly his type of people, or rather, he wasn't their type
of person – but he'd visited Claudia on a number of occasions,
and he found it hard to believe that captains of industry, TV
stars and the rest of the glitterati wouldn't have a precinct house
on their doorsteps.

'Where are we going?'

'Keep quiet. You'll find out when we get there.'

Marc stared at the policeman. 'I do have rights, you know.'

'People like you don't have any rights.'

'What about Joan Bruderbakker?' He'd just realised that th
police car with Claudia's mother in it was no longer following
'How come she's not behind us?'

The police of Reef Station One are renowned for being fai
just and non-violent. So Marc was rather surprised (for about
two seconds) when the policeman sitting next to him clubbe
him into unconsciousness.

Claudia replaced the receiver and sat back down. 'Peri... did th
seem anything odd about those policemen?'

'What do you mean?' said Peri, returning from the kitchen
with a pot of fresh coffee and some toast. Everything on Ree
Station One was beginning to seem odd now.

'I've just phoned the main precinct house in Residential 1
They've got no record of a call. They've got no record of the
paramedics, and no record of Marc. What the hell is going on?'

She took the proffered cup of coffee from Peri and drank

deeply. ‘Peri – this isn’t right. If the police and the paramedic
don’t have any record of coming here... who’s got my father’s
body? And where’s Joan?’

‘And where’s Marc, come to that? Did you phone that
number?’

Claudia nodded. ‘Left a message on voicemail and told th
wall authorities to allow him through. Haven’t heard anything
yet, though.’

There was a sudden buzz from the hall. ‘That’s the mai
gate,’ said Claudia. ‘Perhaps that’s Marc’s friend now.’ S
hurried off to answer it.

Peri sipped her coffee and gave one of the most heart-felt
sighs of her short but eventful life. Part of her wanted to say
‘look on the bright side, it can’t get any worse’ but she knew very
well that it could. This was a big game to someone – the forged
identities proved that – but people were getting hurt. Claudia
father was dead, her stepmother was loony tunes, and Marc – a
gorgeous soap star who’d actually fancied her! – was apparently a
pervert. The Doctor was missing, the police couldn’t be trusted,
and the coffee tasted like it had been recycled from the la
person who’d drunk it.

She never thought she’d miss running away from Cybermen

Claudia was in the doorway. ‘Peri – this is Marc’s friend. He
thinks he might be able to help.’

As the vision in red and yellow filled the doorway, Peri
almost dropped her coffee. ‘Doctor!’

‘You know one another?’ said Claudia.

Peri leapt over to the Doctor and engulfed him in a bear
hug. ‘Claudia – I think the cavalry just arrived!’ she yelled over
her shoulder.

The Doctor smiled. ‘Peri! I should have guessed you’d be
the centre of all this!’

Suddenly, Peri didn’t feel so scared.

Matheson’s limousine crawled through the KWJM3 lot, carefull
avoiding the latest studio tour whose happy participants had
decamped at a reproduction small-town 1950s America and
were merrily taking photographs of the depthless facades and
false perspectives that were the mainstay of so many of the T
movies and retro-soaps lapped across the Republic.

Inside the air-conditioned dark shell, Matheson compared the artificial town square to the lives of his camera happy customers. All front and no substance. The people of the Republic were weak, suckling on the teat of market forces that told them how to live every second of their pampered lives. You brushed your teeth with a WJM Inc. electric toothbrush, boiled your water for your morning coffee with a WJM Inc. kettle, toasted your bread with a WJM Inc. toaster. No aspect of your life was untouched by the guiding hand of WJM Inc., nurturing and supporting you from cradle to grave.

This hadn't been a deliberate strategy on Matheson's part, no more than it had been his great-great-grandfather's plan to supply 98 per cent of all hand-held and ship-mounted directed energy weapons to both sides during the civil war. There had been an opportunity, and something in the Matheson bloodline had responded automatically, instinctively.

But it simply wasn't enough for him any more. There was no danger of the market collapsing – the population was increasing at a healthy rate, and the gross planetary product had never been higher. On paper – and indeed in reality – WJM Inc., with its countless subsidiaries, was the bluest of blue chip companies with a market capitalisation that could buy whole star systems. But what could you do with another star system? Matheson already owned twenty of them.

Although legendary as a ruthless and calculating businessman, Walter Jeremiah Matheson thought of himself as a good man. Everything he had done, since selling his first set of the Encyclopaedia Republica at the age of 15 (his father's idea – start at the bottom and work your way up), had been for the benefit of his fellow man, from educating their minds to feeding their bodies. But what was the point?

On the other side of the Great Barrier, he knew that the war was long over. But the galaxy was still in chaos, with a weak Union desperately attempting to hold everything together in the face of economic and material poverty and internecine warfare. An excellent time to be a businessman! The survivors of the war were exactly that – survivors, a stream of humanity fighting for their very existence. Give them an electric toothbrush and they wouldn't know what to do with it; give them the blueprints for a food replicator and they could feed their family for decades

(terms and conditions apply). There, Matheson could live up to his birthright as an entrepreneur, a saviour. But here, in the bloated, lazy, obscene Republic, all he sold were products to make the inhabitants' easy lives even easier. If he could develop a product that could live their lives for them, they'd snap it up.

Which was exactly what he was planning to do.

The car came to a halt outside the back doors to the biggest studio on the lot. Only three weeks ago it had been the lavish world of Pyren in *Star Traveller: The Motion Picture*, but now it housed the sets that gave life to KWJM3's long-awaited relaunch of the classic *Executive Desires*.

Walking through the barn-sized doors, Matheson found himself in the opulent hall of the famous Partington Mansion, with its sweeping staircase leading to the much-used and abused bedrooms. Members of the film crew were scurrying around, setting up shots and furiously reading through their scripts, while the set dressers put the finishing touches to the flowers and ornaments that were dotted around the hall. Indeed, everyone was so busy that Matheson found himself in the rare position of being ignored, until a rich voice sang from the top of the staircase.

'Walter!'

He looked up to see Miss Jane Parnell Partington Wilby Poindexter Raven in all her magnificent glory, power-dressed to the nines in a black-and-white seersucker suit, her dark red hair only partially obscured by a wide-brimmed matching hat. With that well-known combination of catlike grace and tiger-like danger, she sashayed down the endless staircase.

'Darling! Mwah! Mwah!' Two air kisses, one for either cheek. 'What brings you to the coalface?'

'Dominique – you look stunning.' Which was hardly surprising, given her involvement with the *Star Deep* project: he couldn't have asked for a better advertisement. 'I thought I'd just pop along and see how things were going. Not long now.'

'You? Pop along? You never "pop along" anywhere! I bet Miss Self had a heart attack when you dared to deviate from your schedule!'

Matheson laughed. 'Let's just say she's developed one of her migraines.' He looked around the set. 'Looks perfect. Absolutely perfect.'

‘An exact replica. No one will know the difference. The Partington Mansion, recreated down to the last detail.’

‘How are the others doing?’

‘The newcomers are fine – word perfect on the first readthrough, but that’s hardly surprising. The new Jon Chambe is especially good. Some of the old hands are showing signs nerves, though – I caught Sean with a bottle of Scotch yesterday.’

Matheson laughed. Sean Bruce played patriarch Roger Partington, and was as hard-drinking in real life as his charac was on screen. Unfortunately, replacing him wasn’t an option: bringing back *Executive Desires* without Sean Bruce was as unthinkable as bringing it back without Dominique Delacroix. ‘As long as he’s propped against a wall and can remember lines, he can drink as much as he wants. It’s what people expe

Dominique laid a carefully manicured hand on Matheson’s arm, the nails like scarlet talons. ‘Have all the other arrangements been made?’

He nodded. ‘DeValle and Bruderbakker have both seen th error of their ways, and their companies are both being restructured as we speak. And Mrs Bruderbakker is taking t last delivery to the repro house later on this afternoon.’

‘Excellent,’ said Dominique with a smile. ‘And our two unwelcome guests?’

‘Tied up in scandal and intrigue, as always. The Doctor ha all the clues – it’s simply a matter of his vaunted intelligence figuring it out. But, as usual, we’re one, if not two steps ahead. should prove quite entertaining to watch him scrabble around like a rat in a maze.’

‘Ms Delacroix to the drawing room,’ came the call from somewhere behind the flats representing the walls of the hallwa

‘Walter – I have to dash, darling. Cat-fight with Jewe Partington. If the woman has stayed away from the nose candy, it should be quite fun. Still on for dinner this evening?’

‘Of course. My place, 9 p.m.?’

‘Sounds good to me. Right – time to teach that bitch who’s who!’ she whooped, before departing like a galleon in full sail.

Matheson laughed. It was always nice to see someo enjoying her job.

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor, taking the steaming mug of tea from Claudia. ‘Just what the Doctor ordered. Now, I think it’s time we laid out the facts. Your father was allegedly murdered by your stepmother, who allegedly underwent a significant personality change earlier today. Peri – what does that suggest to you?’

Claudia looked from the Doctor to Peri and back again, still in a state of some confusion. So this was Peri’s mysterious friend, up to his neck in this mystery already. Who was he? When Peri had first mentioned him over lunch, she had suspected that he was her older man, a secret lover. But that much was clearly wrong: the relationship was more that of bickering friends with a touch of father and daughter than anything else. What was more worrying was the calm way that the Doctor was accepting what had happened. No panic, no disbelief – just a straightforward analysis of the situation.

‘Mind control?’ said Peri.

‘Seems likely, doesn’t it? But we should look at all of the possibilities. Claudia – it couldn’t just have been an act? With malicious intent, perhaps, but an act, nevertheless?’

Claudia shook her head. ‘No. She was a completely different person. All sweetness and light, baking cookies, preparing meals... There’s no way she could have kept it up. She didn’t even flinch when I told her how much I’d spent shopping! Doctor, it just wasn’t her!’

‘Sweetness and light with a nasty blade,’ he muttered tactlessly. ‘I have to agree with Peri – some sort of mind control. I wonder...’ The Doctor broke off and rubbed his forehead.

‘Doctor?’ asked Peri.

‘Ever since we arrived on this station, I’ve had a headache.’

‘Do you want an aspirin?’

‘No thank you, Claudia – it’s not that type of headache. No, it’s as if some malevolent force is attempting to rummage around in my subconscious. My natural telepathic barriers are holding it at bay, but the strain is considerable. If that force applied its talents to a human being such as Joan...’

‘Doctor, I appreciate your help, but this is getting silly. There aren’t any telepaths in the Republic.’ The Doctor’s logic seemed to have flown away on a journey all its own.

‘No human telepaths, maybe. But other races?’

‘There aren’t any other races. The Republic is 100 per ce
human stock.’

The Doctor took a sip of his tea before replying. ‘As far as
anyone knows. A telepathic life-form this advanced could easily
hide itself from detection – even the TARDIS can’t see it.’ He
rubbed his chin. ‘It knows. It knows I know, and I know it
knows I know.’ He punched his fist into his palm. ‘We’re being
manipulated, that much is clear. Matheson knew far too muc
about me. And what are the odds of my path crossing not
one but two of the Republic’s legendary Nine within a day o
arriving, eh?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Claudia.

‘August DeValle dropped dead in front of Marc and myself
last night, and I saw Matheson himself this morning – I decide
to do a little bearding in the den, but it wasn’t quite as success
as I’d hoped.’

‘Three,’ Claudia murmured.

‘What?’

‘Your path’s crossed three of the Nine, indirectly at least. M
father is... was one of the Nine as well.’

The Doctor’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Really? Fascinating. D
you know of any link between your father, De Valle and
Matheson, besides being some of the richest people in th
Republic?’

‘I know that Matheson’s been hassling Dad. I’ve heard th
arguments on the phone. He wanted Dad to sell his company
him.’

Peri raised a finger in the air. ‘Hang on a minute. In the
dining room... there were papers on the table. I didn’t take too
much notice, but I could swear the letterhead said WJM. That’s
Matheson’s company, right?’

‘Well, there aren’t any papers there now.’ The Doctor ha
already examined the dining room with surgical precision.
‘Which means that our friendly policemen must have removed them.
Perhaps your stepmother was trying to persuade your father
accept Matheson’s offer?’

Claudia laughed. ‘Nothing could be further from the truth,
Doctor. Joan loathes Walter Matheson – he could have sav
her acting career when she was sacked, but didn’t. She’s ne
forgiven him. She’d rather end up back on skid row than le

Matheson have Dad's company.'

'Claudia – I know this is difficult, but who would have inherited your father's company? I presume that a man of h standing wouldn't have died intestate.'

Claudia hesitated for a moment. Her father was dead, h body missing along with her stepmother, and one of her best friends had been arrested for being a pervert. And here was t eccentric friend of Peri's – whom she hardly knew – barging i and taking control. But Claudia knew that she had to trus someone. She simply couldn't cope on her own.

'Joan inherits the lot. There's a generous trust fund for me but she gets control of the company and its assets, until I g married and have little Charles Bouderbakker Junior. Then he'll eventually get the company. Dad was a big one for dynasties.'

The Doctor stood up and started pacing the room. 'You know, I don't think she does. Not any more. Your father is murdered by your stepmother, but they both go missing. And there's no evidence to suggest that it ever took place – there is a single clue in the dining room. Your so-called scene-of-crim officers have scrubbed and disinfected that room... who's to say that Chuck and Joan didn't just decide to celebrate their wedding anniversary with a second honeymoon?'

'What are you saying?'

'Claudia – whoever we're facing is incredibly resourceful – and we know that Matheson is playing with a much better han than we have at the moment. As Peri told us, they've created complete history and itinerary for her, and doubtless one for me as well. Forging records of an off-world holiday would be child' play for Matheson and his associates.'

Claudia's heart sank. 'But that means... that means no o will ever believe me! My Dad's dead, but everyone will think I'm mad!'

The Doctor put his hand on her shoulder. 'We know you're telling the truth, and at the moment, we're the only two people you can trust.' He suddenly looked thoughtful. 'Does your fathe have a computer?'

Regaining consciousness was like being poked with a sharp stick. Marc let out an involuntary groan and opened his eyes, to s that he *was* being poked with a sharp stick – a policeman's baton.

'Out.'

Marc staggered from the police car and tried to focus on his surroundings. It definitely was a precinct house – it was dark, cold and below ground. If anything, it looked like an underground car park.

'Will somebody please tell me...' His plea fell on deaf ears as something cold pressed against his neck. It might have been a baton, it might have been a gun, but Marc wasn't taking any chances. He'd played the odd action hero in his time, leaping into the jaws of death with ripped T-shirt and a cheesy grin, but that was in front of the camera. At least four of his roles could have taken out these policemen without breaking a sweat: a little bit of bullet time, a fearless stunt double and some impressive pyrotechnics and three of them would have been out cold.

But Marcus Brooks, alone, unarmed and faced with three policemen who almost certainly weren't policemen and who were more than capable of ordering him a lot more than unconscious, didn't stand a chance. His only hope was that the girls had understood what he meant, and had phoned the Doctor. As a member of the Republican Guard, he'd know what to do.

Curiously, this didn't reassure Marc very much as his gaolers coerced him towards what appeared to be a blank concrete wall. What use was a man who didn't even know who the Nine were?

'Useless. Utterly, utterly useless!' The Doctor stared at the blank screen of the PC as if he could will it into life.

Claudia's father's den was in stark contrast to the rest of the mansion: untidy, disorganised and full of mobile phones. Photographs of her family, her mother and Joan hung on three of the walls, along with pictures of his favourite possessions: the football team, the baseball team, his stud of racehorses.

She remembered sitting under her father's big desk as a small girl, tapping away on a toy computer as he tapped away making money. She had felt special: her father's den was his sanctuary from the rest of the world. No one was allowed in, not even her mother or Joan. But all she had to do was knock on the door and call out, and the door would open, and he'd be sitting there at his desk, grinning as she ran to him and hugged him.

Its sanctuary status was reflected in the amount of security built into the ostensibly wooden door. Ordinary locks, voice print, palm print. But this hadn't deterred the Doctor: reaching into his pockets, he had pulled out a series of small tools and proceeded to make a mockery of her father's precautions. In moments, they were in.

An entire wall of the large room – it was big enough for an *en suite* bathroom and a full-sized pool table, as well as her dad's office area – was occupied by a glass case, containing dozens of phones of diminishing size, from the original bricks to the small silver devices that everyone now carried on Reef Station One.

'Mobile phones?' asked Peri.

'Dad's business. Bruderbakker Industries manufactures over 60 per cent of all the phones in the Republic, and runs over 80 per cent of the infrastructure. Dad's way of reminding himself where he came from. He designed the very first mobile phone, you know.'

'Ah.' The Doctor slid below the cluttered desk before returning to his feet. 'I suppose it does help if the thing is actually plugged in.'

Claudia couldn't help laughing. 'You mean you've been fiddling with that thing for the last twenty minutes, but you never thought to check whether it was plugged in?'

'I had assumed that your father had installed all manner of security features, given the globe,' the Doctor said without a trace of embarrassment, settling himself into the leather swivel chair in front of the desk. The monitor was now displaying a series of brightly coloured screens as it ran through its start-up procedures. 'But it would appear he considered the security of the mansion to be adequate for his needs.'

'What exactly are you looking for?' asked Claudia.

'Anything and everything,' the Doctor boomed. 'Specifically, anything and everything regarding the current or future ownership of Bruderbakker Industries.'

Silence followed as the Doctor's fingers flashed across the keyboard with superhuman speed – Claudia couldn't help but be impressed. Her typing skills never got the hunt-and-peck stage if she was lucky, but the Doctor played the keyboard like a virtuoso. Window after window popped up for his perusal before shutting a second later. Claudia caught glimpses of letters,

formal documents, photographs before the Doctor leant back into the chair with a squeak of leather. 'As I thought.'

'You've found something?'

'I'm afraid I have. As of 6 a.m. RST this morning, Bruderbakker Industries became a wholly owned subsidiary of WJM Inc.'

Claudia swallowed hard. She'd lost her father, and now she lost her birthright as well. And it was all part of someone else's plan – someone who was treating them all like pawns without regard to the personal consequences. Glancing at the Doctor, she could see he felt the same: his eyes had that glint in them righteous anger.

'That's not possible,' said Claudia suddenly.

'I'm sorry, but it is,' the Doctor replied. 'It's all there in black and white.'

'No, I mean it isn't *possible*. You said that Dad signed over the company at 6 a.m. this morning?'

'That's what the date-time stamp on the agreement says.'

'Dad had been dead for over an hour at 6 a.m. We got home just after six and... and his body was already cold.'

'Interesting,' said the Doctor. 'But not unexpected. Your father's murder was simply a method of removing a piece from the board.'

'This is my dad you're talking about!' Claudia shouted. 'This isn't some kind of game!'

The Doctor obviously realised he'd gone a little too far. His voice was calming when he continued. 'I'm sorry, Claudia, but Matheson, that's exactly what it is. A very deadly game, with extremely high stakes, but it's a game, all the same. And sadly, one that we're going to have to start playing as well.'

Nobody had said anything for at least five minutes. Marc had been ushered through a concealed door in the concrete wall, and then whisked off in an elevator that seemed to be going sideways as well as upwards. He stole a couple of glances at the three policemen, but their faces were emotionless. Unnaturally emotionless, like robots. No, not robots... something he knew far better than robots. He'd seen that fixed, blank expression countless times in countless films and television studios over the last couple of years.

They weren't people at all. They were Synthespians.

As the lift changed direction yet again, Marc swallowed down his panic and tried to think rationally. Synthespians were used all over the Republic, but the greatest concentration of them was on Reef Station One, where the needs of the inhabitants required a veritable army of little helpers in roles that even resting actors wouldn't consider.

But Synthespians didn't impersonate police officers. They didn't arrest people on jumped-up charges and abduct them. They were designed to be about as hostile as a coffee table, about as innocuous. They were machines, preprogrammed to obey orders.

But who gave the orders? As an actor – albeit an out-of-work one – he was well aware of the invasive nature of the Synthespians. When he had started in the business, the thought of an artificial life form having a role was not only unthinkable but impossible: the most advanced Synthespians looked like melted waxworks. But as more and more advanced versions had come onto the market, using them as extras had become a cost efficient way of padding out a scene, and in the last year, some of them had even got speaking roles – regular speaking roles, at that. But they were lumps of static with computers in their heads – they didn't do anything without being programmed.

So who was programming them? There was only one company that built Synthespians – WJM Inc. But what was Marc to Matheson? Okay, so Marc had undoubtedly pissed off KWJM3 by walking out of his role on *Executive Desires*, but did that merit programming a bunch of Synthespians to kidnap him? And what about Claudia's father and stepmother? What was going on there? Marc had to confess that he was completely in the dark. And scared out of his wits.

The elevator finally stopped and Marc was manhandled into a blindingly bright but windowless room. Looking around, he could see chemical equipment as well as electronic equipment with pipes of gurgling green sludge up-and-downing across the walls like an animated subway map. But what stood on the far side of the room ramped things up from sinister to terrifying. A whole row of what appeared to be metal coffins.

'Will somebody please tell me what the hell is going on!'

'Aww, Marc, please calm down.'

Marc knew the voice and couldn't help but feel a momentary relief. He turned to see a familiar figure walking through a side door.

'Mrs Bruderbakker! But how... what...'

She was holding a large metal box, and flanked by two of the prototype Synthespians, their lumpy bodies enclosed in dark blue flightsuits.

'You're part of all this, aren't you? Why did you murder Claudia's dad? What's going on?'

Joan placed the box on a small table next to one of the coffins. 'So many questions, Marcus.' She came up to him and stroked his cheek with her hand. 'You were always such a nice boy. I'd always hoped that Claudia would do the sensible thing and marry you. But children... what can you do with them?' She nodded at the policemen, who started to force Marc forward. Towards one of the coffins. His instinct was to struggle, but the Synthespians' grip made that useless. Inexorably, they dragged him towards whatever fate that coffin had in store for him.

Joan had returned to the box and was opening the lid. A light purple glow began to pulse from within, accompanied by a shrill burbling. Reaching in, she lifted out a faceted translucent sphere and placed it on a flat metal square, directly underneath an upturned pyramid. The pulsing increased in both intensity and frequency, while the burbling became a continuous whine.

Marc was turned round and forced against the back of the coffin. Thick metal straps were fastened around him by unfeeling hands.

'What are you doing to me?' he screamed.

'Marcus, dear – calm down,' said Joan, her voice creepily calm considering what was going on. 'There's nothing to worry about. In fact, you won't have to worry about anything ever again.'

The scream from the globe was now filling his head, drowning everything else out. He tried to concentrate, tried to focus on something, but he just couldn't fix on anything. The faces of the Synthespians and Joan began to blur and shimmer in front of him, merging into a purple mist that seeped into his mind, touching it, changing it...

CHAPTER FIVE

While the Doctor took over the pool table in her dad's den, covering it with papers and pointing, Claudia and Peri took the opportunity to get changed. Claudia was a little less withdrawn than earlier, but Peri was at something of a loss as to what to say. Somehow, she could empathise more with having a step-parent than the loss of a father: her dad's death had been an horrific accident, a combination of events which had left him to drown under a capsized boat. But Claudia's father's death was anything but an accident. Peri didn't think that she'd ever forget that look of emotionless calm on Joan's face as she had sat there, playing with the blood-stained knife.

Then again, a little voice at the back of her mind pointed out that she'd seen far, far worse during her time with the Doctor: carnage on a galactic scale, the application of pure evil, and she managed to live with that, didn't she? No, she argued – I manage to live *alongside* it. With Claudia, it was personal.

Showered and changed – Claudia in a purple spandex leotard with thick white leggings, Peri in a borrowed hooded sweatshirt and grey jogging bottoms – they joined the Doctor in the den.

'Feeling refreshed? Good. There's coffee and Danish over there – I persuaded Mrs Svenson to fix breakfast. We've all got to keep our strength up.'

As Peri poured coffee for herself and Claudia, the Doctor made a couple of last-minute arrangements to his mess of paperwork before standing back with a very pleased expression on his face. 'Ta-da!' he bellowed.

'I assume you're going to explain all of this?' All Peri could see was a higgledy-piggledy collection of papers.

'This, my dear Perpugilliam, is a financial map of the New Earth Republic. Marc was absolutely right when he described the Nine as the richest men in the Republic: between them, they control – controlled – legally, illegally and just downright dodgily – 99 per cent of all businesses in this peculiar little region of

space.' He stabbed a finger at a photograph of Claudia's father.

'Charles Bruderbakker was the founder and owner of Bruderbakker Industries, which is the largest manufacturer of mobile phones in the Republic. His company also controls 80 per cent of the infrastructure – the base stations, the satellites, the interstellar relays, et cetera. August DeValle was the founder and owner of Republica Comms, which is the *second* largest manufacturer of mobile phones in the Republic, and controls the remainder of the infrastructure.

'And, as of this morning, Mr Jeremiah Matheson III now controls the entire mobile-phone industry across thousands of worlds. Handsets *and* infrastructure.'

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a mobile phone. 'Believe it or not, this is August DeValle's mobile phone – I found it after his untimely death. From what I can gather, market penetration of mobile phones in the Republic is 100 per cent – everyone has one. At first glance, they look like the phones that Peri and I are used to...'

'Phones are phones, Doctor,' said Peri. 'What's so special about these?'

He switched to his clever voice. 'There's no traditional telephone network in the Republic. It isn't really practical to install copper wiring three thousand light years long between star systems. You can also rule out electromagnetic radiation – microwaves and so on – for the same reason. No point phoning someone to arrange lunch if the message is going to take a few centuries to arrive.'

Peri racked her brains to come up with a suitably clever response. 'What about tachyons? We've been to places where they use tachyon transmissions.'

'On the ball, Peri,' said the Doctor with that annoying patronising attitude that indicated that he'd already dismissed that one out of hand. 'Except that the exotic particles that comprise the Great Barrier actually saturate the Republic to a lesser degree. A tachyon emission would disperse within two, maybe three light years of the source.'

That told me, thought Peri.

The Doctor turned to Claudia. 'Thankfully, Claudia's ancestors found a solution. Your grandfather, I believe.'

'Ishmael Bruderbakker?'

‘The very same. If you’re trying to forge a new empire communications become paramount. Old Ishmael becam obsessed with the problem, and did some digging through th libraries on the ark ships that brought humanity to this benighted stretch of space. He discovered ancient technology that had been discarded as being ineffective in the fortieth century, and realised that it was the perfect answer.’

Peri had to ask. ‘Where did you learn all of this?’

The Doctor tapped his nose. ‘Research has always been hobby of mine, Peri – you should know that. I found some very interesting books in the... in our ship.’

‘Sub-etheric beam transmissions,’ said Claudia. ‘But I don understand what’s so important about mobile phones.’

‘Nor do I,’ said the Doctor, ‘but to Matheson, they’re obviously very important. Within the space of a day, he’s mad sure that he now controls the entire network. But why? And there are other acquisitions as well. Garrison Polyceramics. RBM. NovaCo... There isn’t a Nine any more, there’s a Four. O rather, a One with three very little Ones swimming around – three companies obviously not important enough to form part of his little empire.’

‘Doctor... is this actually getting us any closer to figuring out what the hell is going on?’ snapped Claudia. ‘Matheson had my father murdered and Marc’s been kidnapped. And you’re standing here playing around with pieces of paper and giving a history lesson!’

‘Claudia, I understand that you feel the need to do something, but if we go blundering in without any background knowledge, we’re going to be at even more of a disadvanta than we have been up till now. This isn’t simply a case o corporate raiding – Matheson’s been gobbling up the other members of the Nine for perfectly his own reasons all his own. But he doesn’t need the money – he doesn’t need the power! WJM In is a commercial colossus!’

‘I understand the mobile phone bit of it, but what about those other three companies he bought? What did he get out that?’ asked Peri.

‘Good point, good point. It would appear that he bought each of the companies for a single product line, and discard everything else. Not really the best business strategy in the wo

– worlds – is it? From Polyceramics, he took *Redux*. From RBM, he took something called *Living Vision*, which is some kind of advanced three-dimensional television. And from NovaCo, some sort of beauty product -'

'*Skin Deep*,' said Claudia. 'It's all the rage at the moment. All my friends have been having it done.'

'What is it?' asked Peri.

'Matheson claims it's a non-surgical form of plastic surgery. Joan went in for a session this afternoon...' She trailed off. 'Oh my God...'

'Now that *is* interesting,' said the Doctor. 'Beyond interesting – vital!' He strode around the pool table, rubbing his hands together. 'Joan has plastic surgery and – quite literally – comes back a new woman. Excellent. Absolutely excellent.'

'Doctor!' yelled Peri. 'It's far from excellent.'

'Once again, I'm sorry,' said the Doctor, even managing to inject the barest trace of apology into his tone. 'But there are serious matters afoot here, and Claudia's stepmother's whereabouts yesterday afternoon may prove vital.'

'Doctor – I understand.' Claudia picked up her mug of coffee and sipped it. 'I want to nail Matheson, Peri. I can do all the grieving daughter stuff when he's paid for what he's done.'

She's stronger than I was, thought Peri. Much stronger.

'Right. I think we now have two fronts on which to attack Mr Matheson. *Skin Deep* and *Redux*. A personality-changing makeover and a restoration technique that can't possibly work. Of course, we're still playing his game, but I'll wager I can throw a few curve balls – that's the right term, isn't it, Peri? – to keep him occupied.' He eased himself into one of the armchairs dotted around the den.

'Claudia, can you find out where Joan went to have her makeover?'

Claudia nodded. 'Brady – our chauffeur – took her. I'll ask him. And there are some brochures on *Skin Deep* in Joan's room. I'll go and get them.'

'Excellent. Meanwhile...' He gave Peri that look which meant 'I'm about to put you in the most terrible danger, but you don't mind, do you?' 'As for you, Peri... fancy a spot of acting?'

INT. PARTINGTON MANSION. DINING ROOM. MAJESTE AND JEWEL ARE STANDING IN FRONT OF THE PORTRAIT OF ROGER PARTINGTON THAT MAJESTE PAINTED FOR HIS BIRTHDAY

MAJESTE
I THINK I CAPTURED HIS ESSENCE, DON'T YOU?

JEWEL
THAT'S ABOUT ALL OF MY HUSBAND YOU'LL EVER CAPTURE, MAJESTE. ROGER ONLY AGREED TO THE PAINTING TO SHUT YOU UP.

MAJESTE
JEWEL, DARLING. WHY SUCH ANIMOSITY? WE'RE ALL ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY, SURELY?

JEWEL
WE ARE, YES. ROGER, ME AND THE CHILDREN. YOU'RE NO PART OF THIS, MAJESTE. WHEN WILL YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?

MAJESTE
AH YES... THE CHILDREN. MY CHILDREN. (SHE TURNS AND WAVES A HAND AT THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF SEBASTIAN, EVE AND CAIN.) SUCH A PITY THAT YOU'RE BARREN, JEWEL. SUCH A LOSS FOR A WOMAN. I MEAN, HOW CAN A WOMAN FEEL LIKE A WOMAN WHEN SHE CAN'T GIVE HER HUSBAND WHAT HE NEEDS?

JEWEL
YOU BITCH! THAT'S LOW, EVEN FOR A SNAKE LIKE YOU, MAJESTE. ROGER DOESN'T CARE THAT WE CAN'T HAVE CHILDREN.

MAJESTE
DOESN'T HE? WHEN HE AND I WERE STRANDED ON THAT DESERT ISLAND, HE CARED THEN. HE CARED ABOUT HIS CHILDREN, AND HE CARED ABOUT ME.

DO YOU KNOW... I DON'T THINK YOUR NAME EVEN CROPPED UP. THAT'S HOW MUCH HE CARES ABOUT YOU.

JEWEL
I'M WARNING YOU, MAJESTE. YOU'RE HERE ON SUFFERANCE. I INVITED YOU TO ROGER'S BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR THE CHILDREN'S SAKE. DON'T MAKE ME THROW YOU OUT. A BIT UNDIGNIFIED FOR THE CEO OF WILBYCO THROWN OUT OF THE HOUSE LIKE A PIECE OF TRASH. BUT THEN YOU WERE, AND YOU ARE. THROWN OUT AND A PIECE OF TRASH!

MAJESTE
WHY YOU...! (MAJESTE SLAPS JEWEL AROUND THE FACE) HOW DARE YOU TALK TO ME LIKE THAT? AT LEAST I WAS BORN TO ALL OF THIS – I WASN'T JUST A SECRETARY WHO SLEPT WITH HER BOSS. AND GIVEN YOUR PROBLEMS DOWN BELOW, SLEEPING'S ABOUT ALL YOU CAN DO!

JEWEL PUNCHES MAJESTE IN THE FACE. MAJESTE FALLS BACK AND KNOCKS OVER A TABLE. SHE GRABS A FALLING MING VASE AND THROWS IT AT JEWEL'S HEAD. IT MISSES AND SMASHES AGAINST THE WALL.

JEWEL
YOU BITCH! YOU'RE POISON, MAJESTE. PURE POISON. I DON'T WANT YOU ANYWHERE NEAR MY FAMILY GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!

MAJESTE GETS TO HER FEET.

MAJESTE
YOUR HOUSE? YOUR HOUSE? OH, JEWEL, YOU REALLY HAVE BEEN SO NAIVE. REMEMBER THE PIPELINE EXTENSION THAT ROGER WAS SO DESPERATE TO BUILD? THE MONEY HAD TO COME

FROM SOMEWHERE. I BACKED THE LOAN, WITH THIS HOUSE AS COLLATERAL. AND DEAR ROGER HAS FAILED TO KEEP UP THE REPAYMENTS. AS OF TODAY, I OWN THE PARTINGTON MANSION. ALL OF IT! THAT WAS MY BIRTHDAY PRESENT TO ROGER – TO SEE HIM ON THE STREETS, THE SAME WAY HE SAW ME ON THE STREETS. SO PACK YOUR BAGS, JEWEL. YOU'RE OUT OF HERE!

'And... cut.' Maynard Treeves, veteran director of soap operas from *ReefEnders* to *Liberation Street*, clapped his hands. 'Well done, ladies. Excellent. Just what the viewers ordered.'

Dominique Delacroix and Paris Forbes walked off the set into the welcoming arms of their dressers, not sparing one another a second glance. Treeves knew that the animosity between Majeste and Jewel was scripted in real life, and his job was as much referee as director. But the hatred shone through on screen, and that was what really mattered.

He looked at his rehearsal schedule, glancing up to make sure that the prop boys were replacing the vase and the table he did so. Next was the scene in the hall, with Majeste hurling Roger and Jewel's belongings down the stairs. He called over one of the runners – he needed to know whether Sean Bruce was in horizontal or vertical position at the moment. Dealing with alcoholic actors was all part of the game, but this episode was going out live – if Sean couldn't manage the dress rehearsal, how was he going to manage the live broadcast?

He looked around the sound stage at the silent, motionless figures of the Synthespians, all in costume. They made good extras, and minor speaking roles. Was Treeves going to be forced to be the first director in Republic history to use one as the leading man? He sincerely hoped not. Replacing Jo Chambers had been bad enough.

The relaunch of *Executive Desires* was the high point of Treeves' career: it had a guaranteed audience of over a trillion people. If he could pull this off, producers would be begging for him!

He just hoped that he could manage two leading ladies that loathed one another, a drunkard for a leading man, and all the other character flaws that made up a behind-the-scenes soap

opera every bit as engrossing as *Executive Desires*.

'Young executive or what?' said Peri, entering the den. This time the dressing up hadn't been quite so much fun as before – the stakes were a bit higher than a night out clubbing – but Peri was still pleased with the result. Claudia had raided her stepmother's wardrobe, and pulled out a charcoal-grey trouser suit, a white blouse with a black frilly cravat and a black pillbox hat. Frankly, Peri thought that she looked ridiculous, but Claudia had been adamant that it was what all the bestdressed young female executives were wearing this season. She even had the Joan Collins shoulder pads.

'Very nice,' said the Doctor, not even looking up from his paperwork, which appeared to have multiplied tenfold in the last hour. 'Just the ticket.'

'But I'll be recognised,' said Peri. The Doctor's plan – for Peri to arrive at the WJM Tower as a legal representative of Claudia Bruderbakkerveg, get the guards of the most secure facility on the station the slip, and have a nose around – was improbable at best, suicidal at worst – but the Doctor seemed convinced that it would work.

'Of course you will. It's all part of Matheson's game. He's expecting me to make another mental attack. But forearmed is forewarned... and that goes for both sides. Now, listen carefully...'

Meanwhile, Claudia was in the kitchen sharing a cup of coffee with Sean Brady. The chauffeur was in his grey uniform, carrying on as normal despite the fact that both his employers had seemingly vanished. He was fair game for the picking, now but after his fumblings with Joan, he was damaged goods as far as Claudia was concerned.

'Did they tell you when they'd be back?' she asked.

Brady shrugged. 'Honestly, Claudia, I didn't even know they were going away on holiday. But your stepmother seemed very excited about the trip – it was a surprise for your father.'

'Joan went for a makeover yesterday, didn't she?'

'That's right. She's always been a fine-looking woman, but (*yes, Brady, you would say that*) 'but that makeover did her the world of good. She was so happy when she came out of the clinic

and she looked a million dollars.'

Dismissing the words green and crinkly from her mind Claudia had to admit that Joan had looked years young yesterday afternoon – she pressed him further. 'It was this *Miss Deep* thing, wasn't it? The one that's in all the infomercials?'

Brady nodded. 'That's the one. I think the station seems to be going for it at the moment. Not sure if they do men, though.'

Charm on. 'Sean. You don't need any work. You're gorgeous as you are.'

'That's kind of you to say, Miss Claudia.' – *very formal. She'd got him on the hook.*

'But I was thinking of taking a visit – just for a look around. Can you take me to the clinic?'

'You, Miss Claudia? You don't need anything.'

'Oh, you'd be surprised what I need,' she replied, stroking his hand. 'And it won't do any harm to see what's on offer, will it?' Her choice of *very* low-cut dress was clearly the right one: Brady's eyes were so down her cleavage that she could feel th boring into her navel. 'Can you?' She pouted, smiled, did everything short of taking her clothes off. 'Can you take m there?'

Brady was clearly flustered. 'Er... er... of course, Mis Claudia. When did you want to go?'

'How about now?' She stood up, making sure that she thru her breasts into his face. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

'I'll have the car out front immediately.'

Claudia smiled and left the room, noting that Brady hadn't stood up yet. *I've still got it*, she thought with a smile. Who needs makeovers?

Marc opened his eyes. It was dark, but he could just about ma out the four walls, and he could feel that he was lying on a be What the hell had happened?

He got to his feet. The last thing he remembered was th sound and the light beating into his head, but he felt completely awake now – not even a headache. He reached out to the mu wall and felt for a light switch, his hands spidering along until h found one. He blinked as he looked around his surroundings, surprised at what he saw – he'd expected a cell, but this wa hotel room, and a pretty decent one at that. Bed, bedside table,

ensuite bathroom... even a *Living Vision* set. As prison went, this wasn't too bad. But it was still a prison.

Except that the door opened when he turned the handle. He peered out to see a corridor stretching forever in both directions, and an endless series of doors on either side. But no guards. What was going on? An ashtray sat on the bedside table. Matheson pulled out a book of matches. 'The Imperial Hotel?' Imperial was a chain with hotels in all of the Entertainment districts. Perhaps it was time to look around and see how far he could get.

However, he was dressed in a pair of nondescript pyjamas – not exactly the outfit for roaming around. He went back into his room, and locked the door. A quick search revealed a wardrobe full of clothes. With one eye on the door, he quickly got dressed in the darkest clothes he could find (black jeans and a black roll-neck) picked up the few meagre belongings whoever it was had left him – his wallet and the wall opener – and then slipped out of the room.

He found the elevator almost immediately. Desperately pressing the call button, he watched as the numbers crept higher and higher, while still checking the corridor. By the time the elevator had arrived, he was almost hyperventilating. Jumping in, he pressed for the ground floor and grasped the broken table leg he had liberated from his room even tighter.

Claudia and the Doctor waved Peri off as the cab drove down the drive.

'Will she be okay?' asked Claudia. She might have only known her for a day or so, but she'd immediately bonded with Peri. And, at the moment, she needed all the friends she could get.

'Peri will be superb,' the Doctor replied. 'She's used to this sort of thing. And while Matheson's occupied with her, we can snoop about his beauty parlour, can't we?'

'You're very sure about this, aren't you? Doesn't it bother you that you're putting her life at risk?'

'Claudia... I know exactly what I'm doing. Well, almost. Matheson isn't going to do anything to any of us. If he wanted us dead, he would have done it by now – you've seen the sad and sorry consequences of his ruthlessness. He's enjoying this, and we need to play his game, to outwit him.'

‘And you’re sure we can trust him?’ Claudia wasn’t convinced that a multicoloured dwarf like the Doctor could even outwit a traffic light, let alone the richest man in the Republic.

‘Actually, I’m not. But I’m not about to let a little problem like that get in the way. Ah – that your car? Big, isn’t it?’

The limo pulled up in front of them, Brady smiling lasciviously at Claudia through the window. She suppressed a shiver – acting as a *femme fatale* didn’t exactly come naturally. Brady was out of the car in seconds and opening the door for them; the Doctor gracefully ushered her in before taking his seat and closing the door.

‘This is almost certainly a stupid question, but why do you need a chauffeur when your cars can drive themselves?’

It was the same question she had once asked her father, and she gave the same reply that he had. ‘Because we can.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor, settling back into his leather-upholstered seat. ‘Like that, is it?’

Peri stared out of the window as the taxi sped from district to district. She didn’t think that she’d ever get used to what was nothing more than a highly localised form of segregation. As they left the Californian sunlight of Residential 1, they were plunged into the premature dusk of what appeared to be one big business park, with factories and offices on either side of the road.

According to Claudia, access to the various districts was dictated by a person’s place in the social structure. People such as Claudia, the daughter of a billionaire, had carte blanche to travel anywhere, whereas Marc – a lowly actor – was limited to the Wannabe districts, the Retail districts (for work, rather than shopping, of course) and a handful of other places on the station where he wouldn’t offend the delicate sensibilities of the residents. Whether this extended to the whole of this New Earth Republic, Peri neither knew nor cared. Any trace of enjoyment she had felt the previous day had been replaced by a combination of fear and anger.

After all these years of travelling, she thought that she’d become inured to her current lifestyle, never staying in one place long enough to put down roots – ironic for a botanist! But it also meant never staying in one place long enough to make friends –

although she always seemed to stay just long enough to ma
enemies of the biggest and baddest kind.

Claudia was the closest that Peri had come to making
friend in a very long time, and what had happened: within hours
of meeting Peri, Claudia's entire life had been ruined. Perhaps it
was Peri. Perhaps she deserved all of this. Hadn't Howard cal
her a bad girl, an evil girl?

No. None of this is your fault. She let out an angry sigh. She had
a lot to learn and a lot to remember before she arrived at th
WJM Tower, and dwelling in the past was hardly conducive, was
it?

She returned to her sheaf of notes as the car slipped throug
another concrete wall into yet another district.

The elevator reached the ground floor. Marc peered out of the
door, but, once again, there was no one about: the reception
desk was unmanned, there were no bellboys hovering arou
nobody. Why go to all the trouble of kidnapping him, only to le
him escape so easily?

Deciding not to try his luck, he sprinted over to the huge
revolving door and pushed his way out into the open air.
Somehow he had to get back to Claudia and the Doctor and
warn them what was going on. Not that he knew what was goi
on, but something was, and that was enough for him.

Claudia checked that the glass partition between Brady and t
passenger seats was closed before she said anything.
'Something's wrong.'

'In what way?' asked the Doctor.

'I don't know where we're going,' she hissed.

The car was now well beyond Residential 1, but this wasn
the way to any of the nearby Retail districts that Claudia kne
and she knew all of them. Brady had driven through the eastern
exit from Residential 1, which meant that they were now in
Financial 1 – home of all the money. Claudia only knew it from
few visits to her father's offices, which occupied a large
proportion of the district, but what was Brady doing taking them
this way?

The Doctor simply smiled. 'I know.'

'You know?' Claudia didn't like this: the Doctor had said it

was a game, but didn't she have a right to know at least some
the rules?

'Well, let's just say that I was expecting this. We can't even
blink without Matheson knowing what we're doing – which
suggests that he's been keeping a very close eye on you and
family. And how much closer than your so-called trusted staff?'

'Brady?'

'Possibly – probably. Now, be ready for when we stop.
We've got to get out of the car and run for it. Somehow, we have
to vanish off Matheson's radar – that way we might get th
advantage for once.'

'You knew this was going to happen? Do you always jus
walk straight into danger?'

'Usually. Saves time in the long run.' He reached out an
tapped the glass. 'Mr Brady?'

No reply. The car was now leaving the financial district an
entering Warehouse 1, a run-down district that was nothin
more than what the name indicated: a collection of warehouses
that, to the best of Claudia's knowledge, was complete
automated. Robot trucks drove the goods in and out, an
Synthespians did all the dirty work.

'Brady!' the Doctor shouted, but the chauffeur's eyes staye
on the road. 'Right,' he said to Claudia. 'Hang on!' He reached
into his jacket and pulled out a claw hammer, before proceeding
to smash it against the glass. Once, twice... it took a third atta
to break the toughened glass. The Doctor put his hands through
and grabbed the back of Brady's neck, shaking him like a r
doll. The chauffeur took his hands off the wheel to pull the
Doctor off, causing the car to swerve off the road. Claudia
grabbed onto her seatbelt: it would take at least five seconds for
the station's road network to register 'driver failure' and tak
over.

They didn't have five seconds. The limo hit the side of a
warehouse with a jolt. Claudia's seatbelt just about kept her in
place, but the Doctor was thrown forward and cracked his head
on the broken glass of the partition. As for Brady... his head was
through the windscreen. Trying not to look, Claudia undid her
seatbelt, opened the door and helped herself and the Doctor out
of the crumpled wreckage of the limo.

'You okay?'

The Doctor rubbed his head, and pulled his fingers away smeared with blood. ‘Only a graz, nothing serious. How about you?’

‘A bit shaken. What about Brady?’

Things you wished you’d never asked. The driver’s door creaked open and the Bruderbakker chauffeur stepped out.

Half his head was missing.

Claudia pointed desperately, but the Doctor had already been alerted by the sound. ‘Run!’ he shouted at her, but Claudia was rooted to the spot, unable to take her eyes off Brady. There was no blood: it was as if he’d been made of plastic and a chunk had been torn off. But the remaining eye was fixed on her and the Doctor.

Brady – what was left of him – made no move to intercept them. All he did was raise his arm, his fingers pointing at them. Then half his hand fell away.

‘RUN!’ The Doctor grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away, as a bolt of energy sizzled through the air where she had been standing. A plume of orange smoke erupted from the ground as the Doctor dragged her down a narrow alleyway between two of the warehouses.

‘What the hell is it?’ she stuttered.

‘Our worst nightmare. These Synthespians. They’re nothing of the kind. They’re called Auts. And they never give up.’

CHAPTER SIX

The thing that wasn't Brady appeared at the end of the alleyway as the Doctor and Claudia ran down it hell for leather. Another energy bolt whizzed past them, sending splinters of concrete at them.

'But that's Brady,' she cried, still not sure what was going on.

'No, Claudia, it isn't. It's nothing more than a lethal lump of plastic in human form – a living weapon animated by a powerful psychic force.' He did a sharp left, taking them out into a small plaza bordered on all four sides by more of the featureless warehouses. A strange look entered the Doctor's eyes. 'Of course! I should have realised! The Nestene Consciousness!' Choosing not to explain further, he pointed towards the nearest warehouse. 'Inside there. It might give us a fighting chance.'

There was a smaller door set into the huge cargo doors; the Doctor kicked it open and ushered Claudia inside. The warehouse was a labyrinth of wooden crates, piled twenty, thirty feet high. The Doctor chose a zig-zag route through any gap he could find, while Claudia simply tried to keep up. Finally, he stopped.

'This should give us a bit of a breather. But not for long. Not only do they never give up, but they have the tracking instincts of a bloodhound.'

'Are you saying that Brady is a Synthespian?' *Joan Brady was their chauffeur. Joan was sleeping with him. Unless...* 'Claudia. You have to understand this. Reef Star One – indeed, the entire Republic – is in terrible danger. What you and your compatriots call Synthespians are nothing more than tools of a calculating alien intelligence called the Nestene Consciousness. It's a creature of pure psionic energy, which exists solely to colonise other worlds. But being rather ethereal, it needs a practical power base – and that's where the Autons come in. Hands and guns in one package – literally.'

'But how can he – it – track us down?'

‘The Auton will be attuned to your brain patterns. And they never tire and never give up unless ordered to.’

‘But you said Matheson wouldn’t kill us.’

‘I know. Perhaps an assumption too far. I get the feeling that his plans – or the plans of his Nestene paymasters – are nearing completion. Maybe Peri and I were nothing more than a sweet distraction for a day or two. What the endgame is here...’

There was a light footstep only yards away. The Doctor placed a warning finger to his lips, but what was the point of keeping quiet when the thing could sense brainwaves?

There was a loud thump as the crates surrounding them started to fly apart. Claudia looked for another exit, but the Doctor seemed to have chosen a dead end to wait out their final moments.

Suddenly, he tapped her on the shoulder and pointed upwards. She noticed that the crates formed a kind of staircase leading towards a skylight. Following the Doctor’s lead, she began to clamber up them, glancing backwards to see what the Auton was doing. It had finally smashed through the last of the crates, and was now about 15 feet below them, its single eye staring directly at her. The hand came up again, and she ducked to one side as another energy bolt detonated the crate she had just stepped off.

The tower of crates was now getting more and more unsteady – an unsteadiness increased by the presence of the Auton, now making its slow but inexorable ascent after them.

‘Through the skylight. Quickly!’

Claudia pulled herself out of the warehouse and onto the featureless flat roof. Great. Now what? Nowhere to hide, nowhere to run to, unless the Doctor had a two-person flying machine hidden away in that ridiculous coat of his.

But the Doctor wasn’t doing anything. He was standing at the threshold of the skylight, waiting. What was he planning? To kick the thing in what was left of its head?

That was exactly what he had planned to do. His spatted shoe booted the Auton in the eye, but the Auton reached out and grabbed his foot in what was – going by the agonised expression on the Doctor’s face – a vicelike grip.

‘The Ride of the Valkeries’ sounded out across the roof. With a ridiculous incongruity, someone had chosen that moment

to ring Claudia on her mobile phone. Almost instinctively, she pulled it out of her pocket and answered it, but events at the skylight meant that she never found out who had phoned her.

The Auton let go of the Doctor, and from the clunk-clunk-clunk that followed, she guessed that it had fallen down the tower of crates.

The Doctor swallowed. 'That was close. Too close. If Matheson is sending killer Autons after us, he must want us out of the way... which means that he's worried about us.' He froze. 'Peri...'

'What about her?'

'When I sent her to see Matheson, I assumed that we were dealing with corrupt big business, not an alien invasion. Especially not a Nestene colonisation. We have to get to the WJM Tower as soon as possible. How far are we from the nearest inhabited district?'

Claudia shrugged. 'Wannabe is about an hour's walk away.'

'Too long, too long.' The Doctor peered over the edge of the skylight. 'By the way, you appear to have killed the Auton. It's not moving.'

'How can you kill a lump of plastic?'

The Doctor clapped his hands together. 'I'll explain on the way.' He led her over to the edge of the roof and craned his neck to look down. 'There's a fire ladder – let's get to street level and review our options.'

Marc hurried out of the Imperial Hotel into the dark deserted streets. Very dark, very deserted. Too dark, too deserted. A hotel meant an Entertainment district, and they were 24/7 – they didn't just close down!

He trudged down the street, looking for a bus, or a taxi, or anything. Whoever had abducted him had taken his phone. And without that, he had no way of contacting Claudia or the Doctor. Once, when he'd been very young, there had been public telephone boxes on every corner, but mobile phones had put paid to them. And, of course, that was one thing he didn't have at the moment.

His only option was to find a bus stop, and try to make his way to Claudia's house. Difficult enough at the best of times, but (a) he had no idea where he was and (b) getting into Residential

without any identification was virtually – no, strike that, *totally* – impossible. Deciding to cross all those bridges when he got to them, he started to look for a bus stop.

'What are you doing?' asked Claudia, holding the Doctor's jacket in her arms while he fiddled about under the hood of one of the robot delivery trucks, a huge articulated vehicle about thirty feet long.

'We need transport, since your limousine is a write-off, so I am attempting to get this belligerent behemoth to work,' he bellowed from the depths of the engine. 'I would imagine it's waiting here for further instructions – I'm trying to give them to it.'

Claudia had to admit that it was their best option. It was too far to walk, and if one Synthespian, or Auton, or whatever they were called, could turn homicidal, what about the others that worked in this district?

After a few more minutes of watching the shirt-sleeved Doctor wrestling with the complexities of the engine – minutes during which she was constantly looking around her for Synthespians – she was more than pleased when he stood back, closed the hood, and clapped his hands together.

'There – that should do it.' The truck shuddered into life. 'Hop in!'

Claudia hoisted herself into the passenger seat. Although the trucks were automated, the Resistance had never felt entirely happy leaving everything to machines and Synthespians hence the option of manual override. Indeed, a number of companies still insisted on human truck drivers, just for the nostalgia kick.

'It's been years since I drove a truck,' said the Doctor gleefully, crunching the gears with a sickening sound of metal on metal. 'Arizona to Texas, I don't a care in the world!'

I'm not going to have a care in the world if he carries on driving like this, thought Claudia, as the Doctor scraped the wall of the nearest warehouse. 'Look, now you've demonstrated your skills as a mechanic, will you please tell me what's going on?'

'Potted history for the hard of thinking – but hopefully not the hard of believing,' said the Doctor. 'At the dawn of time – and by that, I mean the beginning of the universe – a creature known only as Shub-Niggurath emerged into our universe. She

was gifted with unimaginable powers – godlike, you might say.'

'Are you winding me up? This sounds like the sort of crap those greasy nerds who hang around Retail 20 are always talking about. You know the sort. Them -' she held up one hand 'Personal hygiene -' she held up the other and moved them away from one another. 'Light years apart.'

The Doctor grinned at her. 'I have met people like that, yes. But there's more than a grain of truth in all of that sword-and-sorcery, dwarves and elves, evil from the dawn of time stuff. Call it a universal race memory, if you will.'

'Okay...' A day ago, Claudia would have discarded the Doctor as a grade-A lunatic. But she knew that he and Peri came from beyond the Great Barrier, and she had also seen her chauffeur turn from affable sex-object to homicidal plastic robot. It was probably best to believe him – it might save her life.

'Shub-Niggurath was dying – unlike the other Great Old Ones, she had been pregnant when she made the transition. Hang on!' The truck swerved round a corner, scattering a group of Synthespians – the blank-faced, dumpy ones – as they were unloading crates. Claudia checked the rear-view mirror to see if they were about to fire on them, but they ignored the interruption and resumed their work.

'She manifested herself on an asteroid trillions of light years from here, and gave birth before the end. But what she gave birth to was an abomination.'

'Doctor, you have to understand... I've never seen another type of life. I know they're out there – our history books talk of the Sontarans, and the Martians, the Earth Reptiles... and hundreds more of them. But we're the only people in the Republic. Human beings. Knowing about aliens and having them trying to kill you are two different things.'

'I understand, Claudia, but it's very important that you accept what I'm saying. Our lives, Peri's life, Marc's life – they depend on it.'

A phrase she never expected to utter came out. 'What about Joan?'

'I'm afraid I strongly suspect that she's an Auton. What they did with the real Joan... well, I don't know. Anyway, let me get on with my story!'

‘Okay.’

‘This abomination grew into a creature of pure psionic energy. A mind that saturated its birthplace, absorbing the li essence of everything that lived there. Plants, animals, microb even! Have you ever heard of the concept of Gaia?’

Claudia wracked her brains. ‘Gaia? Isn’t that the whol biosphere thing?’

‘Indeed it is, Miss Bruderbakker. Glad to see that education hasn’t been entirely neglected on Reef Station One. Gaia posits that all material on a world – both organic and inorganic – bot co-exists and inter-depends. Think of it as a form of “meta-life”. This creature – the Nestene Consciousness – took the conce of Gaia to its ultimate extreme. The entire planet of Polymo *became* the Consciousness. All living tissue was co-opted into it psychic matrix -’

The Doctor groaned and slumped forwards onto the steering wheel. The truck began to veer off the road, headi straight towards what appeared to be an electrical substation.

Very quickly.

Claudia had never driven a truck. True, she had known a fe truck drivers in her time (but probably not as many as Joan, she reminded herself in an attempt to regain – or at least rent – th moral high ground), but they’d always been a bit too busy t show her how that side of things actually worked. For a moment, all she could do was look at the substation as it gre closer and closer, before sheer panic and some sort of instinct took over.

She grasped the handbrake and pulled hard. The truck screeched to a halt, skidding across so that it was now heading towards a warehouse.

Two car crashes in one day. What are the chances of that?

Claudia braced herself as the truck slid towards the wall. An stopped, about a foot from the brick edifice. Realising she’d been holding her breath for the last minute, she let out a sigh relief and turned to the Doctor. He appeared to be unconsciou his breathing shallow.

Had he had a heart attack? He was on the large side, a even in the Republic, such things weren’t unheard of. And wh knew what constituted healthy living beyond the Great Barrie She reached over and checked for a pulse. And checked ag

And then checked a third time to convince herself. *Self. heartbeats?* Very slow, but there was definitely a double pulse. But he was from outside the Reich. Perhaps that passed for normal out there?

'Doctor? Doctor! Wake up. Please wake up!' She random glanced at the rear-view mirror and froze. Four crate-shiftin Synthespians were suddenly paying the truck an awful lot of attention. Such as coming towards them.

She didn't have much choice. Somehow, with a lot of struggling, pushing, clambering and general manhandling, she managed to move the Doctor out of the driver's seat and int the passenger seat, taking his place at the same time. She loo at the controls. The engine was still running, so she had manoeuvre the truck back onto the main road. *But how?* Then she remembered: she'd seen it on television...

The Synthespians – or Autons, or Nestenes, or whatev they were – were getting closer. The lead one raised its hand, which dropped away.

Try to remember. The Italian Job. Bullett. *Come on!* Claudia let off the handbrake, threw the truck into reverse and slammed h foot on the accelerator. The truck jerked backwards about twenty feet, hitting the Synthespians and sending them flying. Looking back, Claudia could see one of them had been cut in two, but both parts were still moving, the legs stumbling around while the right arm of the top half was firing wildly into the sky.

Turning the steering wheel, she changed gears a accelerated away, hoping that she was heading in the right direction. Although anywhere away from the Synthespians w the right direction as far as Claudia was concerned.

Peri had no illusions as to her role in all of this. A stalking hors a Judas goat. Nothing more than something to keep Mathes occupied while the Doctor and Claudia did whatever the Docto and Claudia were up to. Part of her was jealous – that was h job! And they were probably in the thick of it, while Peri had been politely escorted to a (very comfortable, she had to admit) waiting room.

Okay, so there were hot and cold running teas and coffees, a table laden with Danish pastries, and a library full of magazines, but it couldn't hide the fact that she had been sitting there fo

over an hour, waiting for someone to deign to see her. She sighed, and picked up another magazine – *Satellite Homes and Gardens* – and idly flicked through an article on zero-G bonsai.

'Miss Brown?' She looked up to see a neat and tidy woman in her early thirties standing in the doorway, out-power-dressing Peri by miles. 'I'm Miss Glove, head of PR. I'm so sorry to keep you waiting.'

'That's okay,' said Peri, holding out her hand. Miss Glove looked at it as if she were offering her a dead fish, but graciously took it with the slightest of grips.

'We're extraordinarily busy at the moment, as you can probably imagine.'

Peri remembered that she was supposed to be part of Claudia's legal team, inquiring into the acquisition of her father's company, so she nodded sagely. 'So many acquisitions, so little time,' she quipped.

'Indeed,' was the frosty reply. 'But growth is progress.'

'That is what I'm here to talk about -'

'I'm afraid I cannot discuss any aspect of WJM Inc. legal policy without proper representation, Miss Brown. As an attorney, you must understand.' She gave a cold smile. 'But Mr Matheson will be more than happy to spare you a few minutes of his time to discuss any of the more general queries you might have.'

And as a time-travelling botanist, one-time warlord and the lust object of a million and one alien monsters, Peri understood perfectly: the wonderfully efficient Miss Glove was leading her meekly into a trap, her only hope being that the Doctor could get his act together and rescue her in the nick of time. He'd succeeded hundreds of times, as Peri knew only too well, she only had to be unlucky once.

Fingers crossed that this wasn't that occasion.

After an hour at the bus stop, Mark was beginning to realise that he wasn't going to have much luck. Public transport, while commonplace on the station, was a fairly and squarely at the hoi polloi, and they weren't supposed to travel at night – that was when decent people, people with cars, were out and about. When night fell at its various times across the districts, the buses went back to wherever it was that buses went, and the stree

were silent apart from the cars of the rich and famous.

But there was one exception to that rule. The Entertainment districts. Apart from one hour for routine maintenance tasks best carried out in daylight, it was always night. Because Entertainment districts were always busy.

Except that there weren't any cars. There weren't any people. There wasn't a sound. And there certainly wasn't any public transport. As his head slowly cleared, Marc realised that this didn't look like any Entertainment district he'd ever seen, and he was pretty sure he'd been to all of them in his short but hedonistic life.

No buses, no cars. And no idea of the time. Marc took a deep breath and started walking. Hopefully, if he walked far enough, he'd find a wall into the next district. It wasn't as if he had much choice, was it?

Claudia was quite proud of her driving skills. Okay, so she'd knocked over five Synthespians, but that was through design, not accident. And she had stalled the truck twice. But she seemed to be getting the hang of it, and, truth be told, she was actually enjoying it. This was proper driving, not just sitting there and letting the car and the station take you from place to place. Just a shame that the circumstances weren't a bit different.

She glanced over at the Doctor. He was still unconscious, but why? Perhaps it was a delayed reaction to the bang to the head when the limo had crashed, but that looked like nothing more than a graze, so she doubted it. What was it the Doctor had said back at the mansion? Some kind of telepathic attack. And these Synthespians, the Autons... somehow they were linked to some telepathic entity that the Doctor had obviously met before. Perhaps it had stepped up its attacks on him. He had been about to explain more about the Autons...

There was nothing she could do for him in a warehouse district. Keeping her foot down, she set the truck on a direct course to what she hoped was the nearest wall.

The Doctor slept. It was a deeper sleep than most life forms could accomplish – a gift from his Time Lord physiognomy. Breathing, heartbeat, brain activity, all reduced to an absolute minimum – but it gave him a chance to analyse and assess

without the outside universe interfering.

And that meant telepathic attacks from the Nestene Consciousness.

All the clues had been there from the very beginning: the super-heated plume from the substrate, Matheson's offhand 'thinking celluloid' comment, a slave caste made of plastic... but the Nestene Consciousness had been deliberately clouding his mind, making him fight a battle on too many fronts without knowing what was going on. He'd visited countless civilisations in his many lives: why had acclimatising himself to this one proved so troublesome? Well, now he knew the answer.

Matheson had played the Doctor like an out-of-tune violin, and he had been too befuddled to do anything but string along, as it were. But that stopped. And it stopped now.

Deep within his subconscious, the Doctor was shoring up his psychic defences. The Nestene Consciousness, child of Shub Niggurath, wielded telepathic powers beyond almost any other creature in the universe, and even then Doctor wouldn't be able to defend himself against a concerted attack. But if he could defend against the befuddlement, he might be able to formulate a plan. Especially since he and Claudia's experience on the roof had demonstrated one huge, gaping weakness in the Nestene Consciousness's plans.

Hoping that Claudia had learnt how to drive and that his physical body wasn't a bloody mess tangled in wreckage, he continued to plan his assault. No, not assault. Revenge. No one made a fool of the Doctor and got away with it.

'It's all going a little bit awry, Walter. Not quite the smooth takeover you imagined.' Dominique Delacroix sipped her cocktail – a Margarita, as always – and gave a beguiling smile.

'Everything is under control, Dominique. Don't panic.' Panic was a forbidden word in the WJM Tower, but Matheson had to admit that he was feeling the slightest twinges of uncertainty. An unfamiliar and particularly pleasant feeling.

Here in his office, enveloped in his huge black-and-silver citadel that overlooked Reef Station One, Walter J. Matheson was king. And soon he would be king of the world. King of all the worlds. All the worlds *outside* the Republic. Nothing was going to go wrong.

‘But you’ve lost the Doctor. Your little rogue element that you kept to add spice to the game, that our partners allowed y to keep because of what he could offer us. And now he’s out your control.’

‘Not at all. I know exactly where he is.’ Well, I did, Matheson thought ruefully. After escaping from the killer Auton, the Doctor had engaged another squad in Warehouse 1, but according to the globe – his mind pattern had suddenly vanished. Was he dead? The globe couldn’t be certain.

Okay, so Walter J. Matheson was beginning to panic.

‘You and I both know that isn’t true, Walter.’ She tapped the cocktail glass with a scarlet fingernail, dislodging salt from th rim. ‘But we do know that he is heading here – you have a hostage, haven’t you?’

‘She’s on her way now. Lamb to the slaughter. Far too easy, if you ask me.’

Dominique raised a sculpted eyebrow. ‘That’s what worrie me, Walter. That’s what worries me.’ She finished the cockta and got to her feet. ‘I have to get back to the set. We’r rehearsing the scene where I get to bed Roger Partington af his amnesia. I just hope he doesn’t smell of whisky too much!’ she laughed, before swishing through the office door.

Matheson put his head in his hands. Less than a day to g and a plan that had been years in the making was fraying at the edges. And it wasn’t even his fault! They’d wanted the Docto involved – something to do with revenge. Matheson could understand that, but he had no time for protracted schemes: he simply tore people’s lives apart. But they’d wanted him to to with the Doctor – an entertainment for them.

Obviously they’d changed their minds – or mind, given that the Consciousness was apparently a gestalt entity – since they’d ordered him to send a killer Auton to replace the Bruderbakker chauffeur and kill the Doctor and the Bruderbakker girl. But that had been the start of the whole thing falling apart!

‘Miss Self?’ he yelled. ‘Miss Self!’

The door opened and his PA walked in. Razor thin, a fac like a funeral mask, but the best PA he’d ever had. ‘Is everythi all right, Mr Matheson?’

‘Can you get me an aspirin? I have a bit of a headache.’

She smiled – if you could call it that – and nodded. ‘Of

course, Mr Matheson, of course.'

'And keep Miss Brown waiting for another half an hour, if you would. I have some paperwork to attend to.'

'What was I saying?'

Claudia jumped. After an hour of complete silence – no need for CD players in robot trucks, unfortunately – the Doctor's words came as a bit of a surprise.

'Are you okay?'

'Never better, Claudia, never better. Now, where are we?'

'Just coming up to the edge of the district.'

'We need to get to the WJM Tower as soon as possible.'

'The next district should be their Retail or a Residential – we can get a cab. I don't think we'll get away with driving a truck up to Matheson's gates, do you?'

'True. But a cab isn't the best idea. I think a bus might be better – less conspicuous.' He clasped his hands together. 'We've sent Peri into a trap, and we're following her. But we're now a little better informed than we were.'

'You mean the mobile phones?'

'What?' The Doctor suddenly looked crestfallen, as if his sweets had been taken away. 'I was going to tell you that!'

'My phone went off, and the Synth... the Auton collapsed. Obviously the phone had some effect.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Indeed. The Nestene Consciousness communicates with its Autons on the astral plane -'

'What's the astral plane?'

'Something for flying to astral countries in! Oh come on, you must have heard of the astral plane! Telepathy? Psychic powers?' The Doctor shook head. 'The astral plane is a region of the space-time vortex... never mind. I'm not in the mood for technobabble.'

Claudia was grateful for that – she'd watched too many episodes of *Space Journey: Traveller* to be fobbed off with 'particles' and 'beams' and the headaches that usually resulted. 'Please put it simply, Doctor.'

'I'll try. Your mobile phones use sub-etheric beams – it's the only communications medium that can penetrate the ambient exotic radiation that permeates the Republic.'

'That's still "beams" and "particles", but I'm just about with

you.'

'Good. Sub-etheric beams intersect the same... the sam *dimension* that telepathy uses. When your phone rang, the sub etheric beam must have cut the telepathic link.'

'That's it? Mobile phones? Hardly the most thrilling alien invasion, is it? The critics would have a field day!'

'This isn't a laughing matter, Claudia. From what you've sai the Synthespians – the *Autons* – are everywhere throughout the Republic. Invisible. What happens when they're ordered to k everyone, eh?'

Claudia swallowed. 'You're serious, aren't you?'

'Deadly. I've seen Nestene colonisation before, but never this extensive. It's usually a world at a time. This is invasion on a grand scale, even for the Nestenes.' He pointed forwards. 'Wat that wall!'

Claudia tried to remember how to brake properly, remembered just in time, and brought the truck to a halt jus before the concrete wall. 'End of the line,' she announced.

'But we still have to get through the wall.'

'No problem.' Claudia reached down in her jacket pocket and pulled out a small black cylinder. 'The key.'

'Marvellous,' said the Doctor. 'Absolutely marvellous.' He peered into the rear-view mirror. 'No Autons around. Good. Right... hand over your mobile phone.'

Claudia pulled it from her pocket and gave it to him. The Doctor turned it around and around in his hands, before holdin it up to his face and staring at it.

'I don't understand. Mobile phones are ubiquitous throughout the Republic, aren't they?'

'Pretty much. It's the main – no, the only communications system.'

'Range?'

'Unlimited. Well, unlimited within the Republic. Even subetheric transmissions won't pass through the Great Barrier.'

'So everyone is walking around on Reef Station One usin mobile phones...'

Claudia realised what the Doctor was getting at. 'But th Synthespians still work! They'd all be collapsing if your theor was correct!' Just as she'd thought: 'beams' and 'particles' aga

The Doctor smiled smugly. 'Indeed.' He looked at the phone

again. ‘Your father’s company made this, I presume.’

‘Of course.’

‘Is it under warranty?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s just that... well, it’s broken.’

Marc was taking a breather. Sitting on a bench in a small b artistically laid-out park, he looked down the hill and realised how far he’d walked. He had little sense of time, but it must have been hours since he’d escaped from the hotel.

And no sign of a wall. No district was big! He stared up at the sky. The constellations were still in place: the Antennae, the Screen, the multicoloured blob of the Ant, so he was definitely still on the station. But where on the station was there a huge – and deserted – district containing only him?

Nothing made any sense, though, nothing had made much sense since he’d met the Doctor the previous day. DeValle a Bruderbakker’s deaths, Claudia’s mother turning into a homicidal maniac... and what the hell had they done to him in that coffin He tapped his pockets, but he didn’t have any cigarettes, nor any money to buy any. Then again, there wasn’t anyone to buy the from around here anyway!

Taking a deep breath, he got to his feet and continued walking. With any luck, it would be daylight soon. Perhaps then he’d have some company.

Matheson’s headache had almost subsided. It wasn’t the stress of the takeover operation – acquisitions and mergers were h lifeblood, his reason for being. No, he’d spent too much time in communion with the globe, which was a bit like having a conversation with someone with a loudhailer. But inside your own head.

The Doctor would probably be here in less than half an hour, rushing in like a foolish white knight to save his belove companion and win the day. By then, Matheson would have ha enough time to put Peri’s life in danger; he could then blackmail the Doctor into surrendering, tell him the Nestene Consciousness’s plans, and have him disposed of. All very efficient, but Matheson hadn’t achieved all that he had achieved throughout the Republic without being efficient.

Unfortunately, that was when the phone rang. The subsequent conversations subsided developed into extremely large spanners that were then hurled into Matheson's extreme complex works.

'Can you show me where the ladies' room is, please?' Such innocent request, and then pinch-faced old bag guarding Matheson's office had been only too happy to oblige. And now Peri was completely lost in the WJM Tower. Which was exactly what she wanted.

Assuming an air of superiority, she strode through the corridors as if she owned the place, which she had learnt through quite painful experience was the best way to blend in. None of the few people she passed batted an eyelid at the confident, smartly dressed executive, despite the fact that her stomach was doing summersaults.

The Doctor had wanted a distraction? Well, she was going to give him a distraction. And if she could find out more about what Matheson was doing into the bargain, then so much the better.

What she was looking for was something marked 'Top Secret' or 'Do Not Enter'. Breaking in would undoubtedly set off all sorts of alarm bells, but that was what she wanted: to draw as much attention to herself as possible without getting caught. She reckoned that she probably had about another two minutes before the receptionist noticed her absence, which meant she had to get off this floor – which was positively alive with CCTV cameras – and get somewhere a little less visible. Although she suspected that Matheson probably even had the washrooms bugged.

A chance came when she turned a corner and saw an elevator door opening to allow someone – he looked like a maintenance guy – to get out. Quickening her pace, she reached it just before the doors closed.

The WJM Tower had ninety floors. At random, she pressed the button for the twenty-seventh. It was probably the typing pool or something equally as useless, but it was a start.

'What do you mean, it's broken?'

The Doctor waved the phone in her face. 'Just what I said –

it's broken. Have you dropped it recently?'

Claudia strained to remember. Phones were phones – especially in the household of the man whose company made the majority of them. She'd only had this one a couple of weeks, but hadn't she dropped it into the pool the other day? Yes, she remembered. She'd been sunbathing, Britney had phoned, Claudia had sat on the edge of the pool and the phone had slipped out of her hands. But it had worked okay afterwards, so she hadn't given it a second thought.

'Dropped it into a swimming pool, yes.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor with that annoying smile of someone who's very clever and thinks you're not. 'I thought as much. You've shorted out one of the shielding coils.'

'Again with the "beams and plates", Doc! Simple language for simple people, okay?'

He laughed. 'Very well. Prolonged exposure to sub-etheric radiation can be very, very painful. All human beings possess the mental wiring for telepathy, even if it's never used. Sub-etheric radiation can have a deleterious effect on that part of the brain, leading to blood clots and tumours and unpleasant stuff like that.'

'There was a big scare about five years ago.' Claudia could still see her father ranting and raving about those lunatics and their pet scare of the week, but he'd still had to pull the latest generation of his phones off the market because they didn't meet whatever standard the authorities had set. 'It wasn't as though people were dropping dead in the street, nothing like that, but Dad's phones all had to be replaced.'

'And the next generation had superior shielding. A perfect solution unless you drop it into a swimming pool. This phone is designed to receive and broadcast sub-etheric radiation in coherent form, focused with pinpoint accuracy. Without the shielding coils, it starts to attenuate.' He must have seen her confused look. 'To disperse.'

'And that's what affected the Auton back there?' She was forcing herself to think of them as Autons. Synthespians were useful members of society, not homicidal plastic robots.

'Exactly. The dispersal isn't just in normal space. It enters the astral plane -'

'Which flies to astral countries.'

The Doctor simply raised an eyebrow. 'And disrupts any

telepathic communication in the vicinity. The Nestene Consciousness uses telepathy and telekinesis to animate and control the Autons; cut that link and they're exactly what they look like – lumps of plastic.'

'So all we need are a load of broken mobile phones and we're home and dry?' asked Claudia, knowing full well that the answer was going to be no.

'No. You'd have to saturate the entire Republic with sub-etheric radiation.'

'Can we do that?'

'Not with a single mobile phone, no.'

Claudia laughed. 'I had sort of guessed that, Doctor.'

'You'd need a massive emitter and an awful lot of power. But the casualties would be catastrophic.'

'Auton casualties?'

'Yes, but also human casualties. To permanently sever the link, the intensity of the sub-etheric broadcast would trigger aneurysms, strokes, brain haemorrhages and the like throughout the Republic. It's an option, but not a very pleasant one. Think of your phone as a hand-held power. It gives us an advantage, but only a slight one.'

'Slighter than you think, Doctor.' Claudia looked at the display as she handed it back to him. 'Battery's almost dead.'

Matheson was angry. Angry was bad. Angry was very bad. He was never angry.

That Brown woman had gone missing, on the pretext of relieving herself. He couldn't blame Miss Self, since forbidding visitors to use the amenities was exactly in her job description. And it wasn't exactly unexpected, since all the concerned parties knew that it was a trap. But with the second piece of information he'd just received, rounding her up became an unnecessary inconvenience.

As business plans go, Matheson's had been relatively simple. Place Autons right across the Republic, and send the activation signal. So far, so good. Autons in all possible guises were now ubiquitous, thanks to WJM Inc.'s magnificent marketing. And with complete control of 100 per cent of the Republic's communications network, interference from sub-etheric radiation wouldn't be a problem.

Sending the signal was also just a matter of acquiring th right technology: an engineering company here, an electronics company there... Working together – although none of them knew it – they had developed the most powerful transmitter receiver ever seen in the Republic.

Except that now Matheson was being told that it wouldn't work.

Less than one day until activation, and his tame lab rats were suddenly claiming that they couldn't handle that amount o bandwidth. Various widgets and gizmos would fail, things would explode, death and destruction, yadda yadda yadda. wasn't paying them to bring everything crashing down around them – well, in one sense he was, but that wasn't what he mea – but to give him a solution. And now they were claiming that they couldn't deliver on time and within budget. For one very simple reason.

All the equipment that they had requisitioned to enable th transmitter-receiver to work to specifications had been mysteriously destroyed in some kind of accident in one of the warehouse districts. And Matheson knew exactly which distric and what kind of accident. That damned Auton, in its single minded hunt for the Doctor, had succeeded in smashing the very crates that Matheson's people needed! The coincidence would laughable if it wasn't so catastrophic.

Time to give himself another headache. He reached over and grabbed the black metal box.

According to Claudia, they were in Residential 2 – not quite as upmarket as Residential 1, but still pretty spectacular, with avenues of palm trees towering over very expensive cars as their chauffeured owners went wherever it was that rich people went.

'Over here.' She beckoned him towards here, and pointed upwards. 'This'll take us rapidly to the WJM Tower. Unfortunately it's a tour bus.'

'Meaning?'

'Well, apart from the fact that I have to pay for it, it means we'll have to listen to the tour guide pointing out the homes o the rich and famous.'

'Fascinating,' said the Doctor. 'All my birthdays have com at once.'

‘And here’s the bus now.’ A single-decker red-and-gold bus was heading in their direction. ‘I haven’t done one of these tours in years,’ she said with a trace of delight in her voice. The bus pulled up in front of them.

‘How have you managed?’ said the Doctor dryly, as he followed her onto the bus.

Artificial dawn was finally breaking over the district, and the pale sunlight was enough to wake Marc up from his short but unintended sleep on another park bench. A stretch and a yawn later, he looked around: there still wasn’t anyone about. This had now stopped being puzzling and started to become creepy, reminding him of restored films he’d seen, such as *Day of the Triffids* and *28 Days Later*.

Had there been some sort of disaster that he was unaware of? A plague? A mass evacuation? Even an invasion? But who would invade Reef Station One? Why? Who would be interested? Alien TV-lovers? And both a plague and an evacuation would leave evidence: wrecked or abandoned cars, dead bodies... Not this.

Peering into the now visible distance, Marc looked for any sign of something tall, black and circular, but all he had was an uninterrupted view of street after street, with the occasional green blob of parkland or sports field. From experience, that made this district at least ten times the size of any other Entertainment district on the station – of any other district, come to that. Which was impossible because he knew that a place like this simply didn’t exist.

He made another vain attempt to reach for a cigarette, growled, and then tried to decide what to do. He was still trying to decide when he saw a person in the distance.

At last, he thought, before setting off at a fast trot towards them.

The twenty-seventh floor had been a bit of a non-event, as far as Peri was concerned. Bland offices, even blander water coolers and completely bland people. Nothing that screamed ‘break into me!’ at her. The same was true of the thirtieth floor, the sixth and now the fiftieth. The biggest entertainment corporation in space, and its head offices were B.O.R.I.N.G. Then again, she doubted that the corporate HQ of Disney was crawling with

Mickey Mouses and Donald Ducks.

Heading back towards the lift, she had a revelation. Th building was hollow. Not literally hollow, of course. But every floor had had the same layout – as if she had been walkin around a quadrangle. All of the offices had been facing the outside of the building: the inner wall, plain dark wood with the occasional painting hanging upon it, didn't appear to lead anywhere.

But there had to be a way in. It was entirely possible well, t be honest, virtually probable – that any entrance was heavily guarded and on a completely different floor, but it wouldn't hurt to take a look, would it? She'd been so wrapped up in looking at the offices that she hadn't even thought to examine the seemingly blank walls to her right.

Retracing her steps – with the prepared excuse that she w lost, if anyone asked – she looked from wooden panel to wooden panel, searching for hinges or secret handles. Perhaps she could claim that she was a wall inspector: all she needed was a clipboard and her disguise would have be perfect.

Peri almost missed it. To quote *Sesame Street*, one of these panels was not like the others: in that there was an infinitesimally wider gap between it and the adjacent ones. Checking the corridor, s started to feel the panel, checking for concealed button pressure points. Then she pushed a bit too hard and the ent panel simply sank back into the wall. Another hurried glance around, and she stepped through one of the gaps that had be created, before pushing the door from the other side. It obediently closed.

She'd been right about the building being hollow. She appeared to be on some sort of observation platform – looking up and down she could see similar platforms on every floor o the building on each of the four sides, as well as larger outcrops with walkways linking them to the sole occupant of the centre o the building. And wow, what an occupant.

Peri had to admit, she was impressed. They say th diamonds are a girl's best friend, she thought: this one must have a lot of girls interested in it. At the heart of the WJM Tower was a cylinder of crystal, stretching fifty floors. Multiple spotlights shone onto its faceted surface – the effect was spectacular. Peri was almost mesmerised by the diamond; sparkling awa

Mesmerised, but none the wiser. For all she knew, it could have been Walter J. Matheson's retirement fund or the core component of some super-weapon.

She looked around the observation platform, and noticed that there was another door to her left. This one was more traditional, with a good old-fashioned handle. 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained,' she muttered, going over to it and pulling the handle.

Now this was more like it. A proper control room, with computers, flashing lights, machines that went bleep -

And three blank-faced figures in blue overalls, staring at her with empty eyes.

Peri moved backwards, but the door was now closed. All she could do was press herself against it and watch as the three creatures raised their arms, both hands dropping away as they did so to reveal guns.

Peri had wanted to attract attention. But not quite like this.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Withdraw.' Walter J. Matheson stepped into the room from a door opposite Peri: she recognised him from the infomercial that Claudia had shown her while preparing for her 'role', but even that hadn't prepared her for the sheer charisma that dripped from him. He could have marketed doggie dirt and people would have flocked to buy it.

The three blank-faced things closed their hands, dropped their arms and sunk their heads. It almost looked as if they were sulking.

'Ah, the redoubtable Peri Brown. How good to meet you at last.' Matheson held out his hand, and Peri was amazed to find herself shaking it, and equally amazed that it didn't split in two. 'My, but haven't you given us quite the run-around?'

'Sorry to have inconvenienced you.'

'Not a problem. I usually scurry around the infrastructure of my own building in the afternoon.' He sighed. 'Now, what are we going to do with you, then?'

'Close your eyes and count to a hundred?'

'The time for games is over, Miss Brown. My business interests are reaching a critical juncture, and I really don't have time for all this at the moment.' He thought for a second. 'I wonder...' He smiled his legendary smile. 'I know, Miss Brown – have you ever wanted to be on television?'

'And on the left, the pink mansion was once owned by Letitia Mannheim, who you will all remember as matriarch Cissie Vible in *Dreams of Tomorrow*. Everything in the mansion is pink: the floors, the walls, the furnishings. When Miss Mannheim died she left provision in her will that the house was to be maintained in perpetuity, although no one apart from the maintenance staff is allowed to enter. Such a pity. Next we see the Art Deco-style bungalow currently occupied by heart-throb Victor Ploog...' And so on and so on. And so on.

Boredom came easily to the Doctor, so this endless pointless drivel about fading, fade downright dead actors on television stations he'd never heard of was positive torture.

The bus was crawling through the main thoroughfare of the district, slowing even further whenever the tour guide glimpsed the minutest smidgeon of architecture that he could splatter with his verbal diarrhoea. Every second counted with Peri in danger – why couldn't they have got a taxi?

Because it had been his decision. Taxis were driven by Synthespians. And Synthespians were Autons. He'd been in the back of far too many cars with Autons at the wheel for his liking.

Claudia seemed transfixed by the inane commentary. Apparently, the yellow-and-black construction to their right – not that there was anything wrong with yellow and black, but in the right proportions, the right proportions! – was the former home of the infamous ftlm magnate Godfrey Lettice, who ran his entire empire over the phone. And was so special about that? The Doctor knew of galactic empires run in a similar manner and quite efficiently as well.

He was well aaware that his pervy criticality stemmed from anger. Anger at Matheson and the Nestene Consciousness obviously. But a large proportion of that anger was directed at himself. *How could he have been so stupid?* Headaches, feeling tired, missing even the most obvious clues – he could imagine the Master or the Rani now, giggling away at him for his idiocy!

The tour guide was bleating again. 'We're approaching the climax of our tour – the WJM Tower itself. Those of you who have tickets for the WJM Studio Tour, please proceed directly to the embarkation point to your left. For those of you who wish to visit one of the other attractions in Studio 1, such as the Republic Studio Tour,' (the tour guide couldn't have sounded more disgusted if he'd tried; as the Republic tour was about as exciting as a trip round a rubbish dump), 'you will find buses at the embarkation stand somewhere down the street.

'Thank you for taking part in the KWJM3 Tour of the rich and famous. Have a nice day.'

As the Doctor and Claudia got off the bus in the middle of a throng of Hawaiian shirts and sandals, he whispered to her: 'We should have got a taxi. Might have saved a bit of time.'

'What do you mean?'

‘KWJM3? This is Matheson TV studio, remember? Look over there.’ He pointed towards the entrance to the WJM studi Six black-clad security guards were watching them intently. One of them was speaking into a mobile phone.

‘It was going to happen sooner or later, Doctor. As you said he’s been on to us since the beginning.’

What a wondetfully pragmatic young lady. ‘Oh, I suppose he has. Very well, time to face the music. Up for it?’

‘What choice do we have?’

‘None, really. Come on.’ Linking arms with Claudia, he strode over to the security guards.

‘I’m the Doctor. I believe you’ve been expecting me?’

When Marc had been Jon Chambers, physical fitness had been a major part of the role. Hardly an episode of *Executive Desires* had gone by without some tenuous excuse for the dashing young lawyer to take his shirt off, so bulging pecs and a six-pack had been a requirement. Since then, since cancellation, he hadn’t exactly neglected his body; more like turned a blind eye to some of its excesses, such as beer and cigarettes. And pizza. And burgers. And the occasional recreational drug. Okay, so *he* had neglected it.

Marc was definitely feeling that neglect now, as he ran up the hill towards the figure he had seen earlier. Sweating, out of breath... but he still kept the man in his sights. He appeared to be heading back towards the main drag of the district – even if the man couldn’t help, or at least shed some light on what was happening, there was always the chance that somewhere might actually be open by now.

So long as Marc didn’t keel over with a heart attack before he caught up.

Peri had never been on the set of a TV series before. It was just a pity that the circumstances couldn’t have been different. Beyond her understandable fear, the faceless creatures had been replaced by more user friendly, but no less threatening Autons (at least, that’s what Matheson had called them; she assumed they were simply another version of the Synthespians), which were keeping a close eye on her – part of her was fascinated.

On television, this would look like the interior of a real mansion, home of the rich and famous, somewhere you could believe that Blake Carrington or J.R. Ewing would live. But close up, without the magic sparkle of the camera lens, it was nothing more than painted plywood, tinsel, artificial flowers, and cheap ornaments painted to look like expensive vases.

And artificial people. It was easy to spot a Synthespian – no body language whatsoever. At least the two that were 'accompanying' her were moving around the set, actors in full costume simply stood there, like Armani-clad store mannequins, ready for the order to become their character. Women with shoulder pads, men in sharp suits, major-domos and cooks... and a perfect replica of Marc, standing near her impassively. She gulped.

'Clever little technique, isn't it, Miss Brown?' Matheson was standing behind her, his approach as silent as the Synthespian. 'The Synthespian over there is a perfect copy of Marcus Brooks. Or rather, a perfect copy of Jon Chambers, his character on *Executive Desires*. Far less troublesome than an actor – they're so demanding!'

'What have you done with the real Marc?'

Matheson looked affronted. 'Done? I haven't done anything with him. As far as I know, he's hale and hearty and around here somewhere. I had to keep him off the streets for a while – he might have caused some negative publicity, and with the live episode of *Executive Desires* being broadcast across the Republic in just a few hours I can't really have that sort of disruption.'

'The Doctor will stop you,' she blurted out, realising the pointlessness of that statement before she'd even spoken the words.

Matheson stroked her chin. 'Oh, Miss Brown, My business partners credited you with some intelligence.'

'They don't even know me!'

'Don't they? Perpugilliam Brown, daughter of Janke and Paul Brown. Born on Ancient Earth in the twentieth century. Your father died when you were 13, and your mother remarried Howard Foster, a renowned marine archaeologist. At first you were unsure of him, then you accepted him, doing all you could to gain his approval. You tried to turn yourself into a scientist so that he would love you. But he did love you, didn't he, Peri?'

'You *bastard*!' She leapt at Matheson, but her Synthespian

escorts grabbed her arms, leaving her flailing. 'How dare you!'

'Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.' An elegant woman stood to her right, dressed entirely in red, from stiletto to pill-box hat. 'You're a born victim, Peri. Get used to it.'

'You bitch!' Peri struggled against the Synthespians, but it was pointless. 'What do you know about my life? What do you know about what I've been through?'

'I know *everything*. Every last pathetic little fact of your pathetic little life.'

'But... but how?' Peri stammered. And then she realised.

Peri could see the Queen from her vantage point: she seemed to shift back and forth across the borders of matter and energy, her shape impossible to define. And Peri could hear her voice inside her head, her imperative: Breed, my children. Breed.

Whoever Matheson was working for, whoever was responsible for the murders, for Marc's abduction, for the Synthespians... they had touched her mind in the TARDIS. They had violated her, trampled through her memories, her thoughts, her deepest secrets. While she had been looking into the abyss the abyss had been rummaging through her soul.

'Understand now?' said the woman. She laughed, a callous unfeeling laugh. 'As I said – pathetic.'

Peri tried to suppress hot tears. 'You don't know anything about me!' she yelled. 'I'm not the same person.' The thought of the Doctor burned, a totem in her mind. She wasn't going to let this smug bitch laugh in her face. 'Whatever you saw in my mind, it doesn't matter. Travelling with the Doctor... it's changed me.'

'This is the same Doctor that tried to strangle you?' asked the woman innocently.

'That was different! He'd only just regenerated. He wasn't thinking straight.'

Matheson leered at her. 'Everywhere you've been with the Doctor, people, creatures – they've all seen you as nothing more than a victim. Sil, Sharaz Jek, Tabilibik...'

'They were the weak ones,' said Peri. 'Not me. I've commanded armies...' She calmed herself down. They were trying to rattle her, to get her off guard. And she'd seen too much, been through too much, to be upset by a bit of name calling. 'You're not going to break me, Matheson. The Doctor

will be here soon -'

'Still dependent on the good old Doctor. How touching.'

'He's on to you!'

'I know he is,' said Matheson. 'I'm counting on it. You see, you're not the only one who needs him. He has a very importa part to play in this drama that Dominique and I have arranged.'

'Drama?'

Dominique smiled. 'Darling. Do you really think that we would broadcast live without a dress rehearsal?' She nodded at the Synthespians. 'Take her to make-up. Despite her age, I f sure that she'll feel the benefits of *Skin Deep*.'

The ™ hung in the air.

'Isn't this jolly?' said the Doctor as the buggy trundled throug the studio lot.

'We've been kidnapped! How can that be that jolly?'

'Claudia, Claudia... try to look on the bright side. We're getting the KWJM3 studio tour, and we're not having to pay fo it!' He pointed towards the reproduction nineteenth-century township. 'Looks like Tombstone. I visited there once. Not nice.' He returned his attention to Claudia's mobile phone, poking i with a tiny screwdriver.

Claudia sighed. Matheson's armed gorillas had carefully ushered them towards one of the tour buggies – hastily requisitioned, much to the annoyance of the tour staff and the Hawaiian-shirted guests – and she and the Doctor were no heading deep into the lot. Tombstone gave way to a 195 avenue, complete with picket fences.

'Is this Nestene guy really that dangerous?' she whispered.

'Dangerous? Dangerous?' The Doctor laughed. And not humorously. 'That's like asking if fire is hot or if ice is cold. Of course *she's* dangerous. She lives to colonise – and getting her hands on me is probably the ultimate prize.'

'Why's that? Can't be the dress sense.'

The Doctor arched his eyebrow. 'Somehow, I don't think that sartorial elegance comes close to the top of the list wh you're discussing a creature made of pure psionic energy. Bu suspect she's after the TARDIS.'

'Your ship?'

'My, you are a well-informed young lady! Peri's obviously

been telling tales out of school.'

'Peri said it had broken down.'

'Peri would. No, it hasn't broken down. And nor is it just a spaceship. The TARDIS is capable of travelling through th myriad dimensions of time and space. And Peri and I were brought here by the Nestene Consciousness.'

'I'll take your word for it – enough odd stuff's happened today.' Picket fences suddenly gave way to smooth green lawns, topiaried hedges and ornamental pools. Claudia recognised it immediately. 'Do you realise what this is?'

'I have no idea.' Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle with the mobile.

'These are the gardens of the Partington Mansion!'

The Doctor shrugged. 'And that's supposed to mean something to me, is it?'

'*Executive Desires*, Doctor!'

He shrugged again. 'And that's supposed to mean something to me, is it?'

Claudia decided to take pity on the infuriating, eccentric time traveller with no dress sense. '*Executive Desires* is the most popular soap opera of all time!'

'Another relic of Ancient Earth?'

'Not exactly – it was the first ever soap opera created by th Republic. It was our first original programme!'

'How wonderful for you,' said the Doctor offhandedly. 'Ah!' he said triumphantly, pocketing the mobile. 'Right – listen carefully. When we get to where we're going – probably th villain's secret base, full of diabolical future equipment – leave all the talking to me.'

'I doubt I could get a word in edgeways.'

The Doctor's. voice grew serious. 'You have to know this - Matheson isn't human.'

'He's not my favourite person, but that's a bit harsh, isn't it?'

'I mean it, Claudia. If my suspicions are correct, the rea Walter J. Matheson died some time ago. This one is a highly advanced Auton with all of Matheson's memories and knowledge. But with a large amount of the Nestene Consciousness as well. He – it is in touch with all of the Autons on Reef Station One. That's how he's known our ever move. Every Auton on the station is an extra pair of eyes fo Matheson.'

Claudia gulped. ‘He’s an alien?’ This was Walter J. Mathes III they were talking about – the most successful businessman in history. There wasn’t a household in the Republic that couldn’t claim to have a WJM product somewhere, from electric toothbrushes to vacuum cleaners, to *Living Vision* 3DTV sets and. those odd little brush things that no one knew what to do with after they’d bought them.

But an alien? ‘How?’

‘The Nestene Consciousness exists to colonise. She spreads her seeds across the known universe. As each swarm of seeds approaches a planet, it uses its telepathy to search out a sympathetic mind. It persuades that person to help, to build it a body – a plastic body – that it can inhabit.’

Claudia screwed up her face. ‘Ewww.’

Smiling, the Doctor continued. ‘Indeed. Sometimes, the body is an entirely new person, but occasionally, it duplicates the person it has contacted and then replaces them. I’m pretty sure that what you – and everyone else – think is Walter J. Mathes III is nothing more than a man-shaped lump of thinking plastic. It would have made far more sense to replace him, given his importance in the scheme of things around here.’

Claudia shuddered.’And you think you can defeat him... it?’

Defiance coloured the Doctor’s voice. ‘*I know* I can. I’ve defeated the Nestene before, and I will do again. And I think the final battle is about to commence.’

The buggy was drawing to a halt outside one of the sound stages. Claudia’s eyes widened as she saw what was inside.

The final battle was going to take place on the set of *Executive Desires*?

The man had vanished. He’d turned a corner, down one of those little side streets that in Entertainment districts usually suggested X-rated clubs. Not that Marc knew about things like that, of course.

Marc followed, breathlessly reaching the corner. And was presented with an empty street. He slumped against the wall of a strip joint. All he wanted now was a cigarette, a drink, and then a warm bed.

But what he saw as he glanced up was just as good.

A wall. A *wall*.

Finding energy from somewhere, he ran towards it, reaching into his pocket for the little sonic device that would get him out of this nightmare. Of course, there was always the chance that his wall key would no longer work. *Access all areas* was a right and a privilege for some actors, but not for unemployed actors. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the button and aimed the key -

And the wall gently slid into the floor, brilliant sunlight flooding through. Like a thirsty man in the desert, Marc ran towards this oasis, desperate to escape -

And collapsed unconscious as someone slammed something very hard into the back of his neck.

'You should feel privileged, my dear.' This woman, Dominique Delacroix, apparently (Matheson had told Peri that she was a famous soap star), was standing in front of her with a self-satisfied smirk on her face. 'The *Skin Deep* process is extremely expensive, and usually reserved for vain prom queens and fading trophy wives.'

Peri didn't try to struggle against the straps that were holding her in the huge chair. 'I'm flattered. But the last time I checked, I was happy with the way I looked.'

Dominique drew closer to her. 'The way you look is irrelevant. It's the way you think that we're more interested in.' She nodded towards Matheson. 'Time for your sales pitch, Walter.'

'Of course. Always ready to sell my own products.' He tested the straps. 'Good. All nice and tight. Right, Miss Brown. Time for you to learn about *Skin Deep*. *Skin Deep* is a revolutionary new process that allows you to shed the years, roll back time. Then again, when you have a TARDIS, what's time?'

'How do you -' Peri stopped herself. There wasn't really any point, was there? Matheson obviously knew about the TARDIS – he seemed to know about everything else.

'How do I know about the TARDIS? We've been inside your mind, remember. Time and Relative Dimensions in Space. A dimensionally transcendental vessel engineered exclusively by the Time Lords of Gallifrey – a very valuable acquisition. And yours is currently sitting in an alleyway in Wannabe 1.'

'It won't do you any good. The Doctor's the only one who

can operate it.'

'Oh, we're well aware of that. But after we've finished with you, the Doctor will be only too pleased to help,' said Dominique.

'I've been tortured by experts!' Peri yelled. 'You two don't come close.'

'Really? Well, let's see how you feel after *Skin Deep*.' Matheson nodded at one of the Synthespians standing over a control panel; one of the lumpy ones, rather than the human ones. Peri wasn't sure which was the most creepy.

A white plastic mask began to descend from the ceiling, with holes for the eyes and the mouth.

'The Doctor has met our business partners before, Miss Brown,' said Matheson. 'The Nestene Consciousness. Older and more powerful than you can possibly imagine.'

Peri was trying to sound defiant even with the plastic mask now clamped to her face. 'I doubt that. We've faced off against the Cybermen!'

Matheson laughed. 'The Cybermen? My, my, but aren't we a little behind the times, Miss Brown? They haven't been called that in centuries. They're nothing more than a bunch of pacifists now. Then again, to give them some credit, they did see the benefits of plastic.' He turned to the Synthespian at the console. 'Begin stage one.'

A raucous buzzing began; at the same time, the mask seemed to clamp itself to her face.

'Our usual customers get champagne and chocolates before we start the process,' said Dominique. 'Sadly, we can't offer you the same.'

'What are you doing to me?' shouted Peri. There wasn't any pain, just the feeling of hundreds of little pinpricks across her face and skull.

She could still see both of them through the eyeholes. 'The Nestene Consciousness has a unique affinity with plastic, Miss Brown,' said Matheson. 'The polymer chains of both thermosetting and thermoplastic resonate along its psychic wavelength. What we do with *Skin Deep* is to inject tiny particles of plastic under the skin. Thinking plastic. It orders the human tissue to obey it – both on a microscopic and a macroscopic level. It tugs, pulls and tightens, removes liver spots, crow's feet

and turkey necks... but it also takes full control of the brain.

'In a few minutes, the procedure will be complete. You will look better than you have ever looked before. And that's a promise,' said Matheson, a beaming smile on his face.

Dominique clapped her hands together. 'And then you will belong to us,' she said with obvious relish.

That was when the pain began.

'Ah, Doctor. And Miss Bruckbakker. How good to see you again.' Walter J. Matheson was waiting to greet the Doctor and Claudia in the doorway of the sound stage.

'I wish I could say the same,' said the Doctor, escorted from the buggy by the security guards – who definitely weren't flesh and blood. 'Come on, make your threats. All bluster. Typical Nestene nonsense.'

'Oh no, Doctor. Things are a little different this time. As much as it pains me to admit it, *I need* you.'

'Need me? Need me? Since when has the vaunted Nestene Consciousness needed anyone?' The Doctor pulled himself away from the Autons' grip and stood face to face with Matheson. 'Losing your touch, are you?'

'Not at all. I'm looking to expand my business interests, and you have a couple of very interesting assets that I would like to acquire.' He looked at the blank-faced Autons. 'Take them inside.'

'You can't just take what you want, you know!' shouted the Doctor as he was carried away by the Autons.

Matheson's face was a picture of delighted incomprehension. 'Of course I can, Doctor. I'm Walter J. Matheson.'

Marc woke up and tried to move his head, but to no avail: it felt like some kind of neck brace. He was tied to what appeared to be a dentist's chair, metal straps keeping him in place. All he could see was a lighting rig far above him – was he in a studio?

'Ah, Mr Brooks. Back in the land of the living.'

Although Marc couldn't see who was speaking, he recognised the voice. Who wouldn't? Walter J. Matheson III. 'Matheson,' he hissed.

'That's Mr Matheson to you, Marcus. Please remember your place.' Matheson's face suddenly hovered over him. 'I doubt you ever expected to see this place again – not after those incautious

words you said to David Kibble. But I'm not a vengeful man, Marcus. Welcome back to KW]M3.'

'The last time I was here, torture chambers weren't part of the set-dressing.'

'Torture? Oh, Marc, what do you take me for?' He held up a finger. 'Don't answer that – I know exactly what you take me for. A fool.'

He heard his own voice being played back to him, part of his dialogue with David Kibble. *And she also happens to be screwing Walter J Matheson III – when you're not in the way!*'

His voice grew very hard, very cold. 'No one ever takes me for a fool, Marcus. You saw what happened to poor old August DeValle.'

'You were responsible? I should have guessed. What did you do to him? He died of fright, Mathe*Mr* Matheson.' Marc could still see that look of terror in DeValle's eyes.

'August wasn't willing to see the error of his ways. He couldn't understand that strength comes through unity.'

'Very 1984,' snapped Marc. 'Although I prefer the Peter Cushing version to the John Hurt one.'

'Audience figures tend to agree with you, Marc. Perhaps you could have become a film critic. But sadly, your job opportunities have now become rather limited.' He clicked his fingers. 'You've let yourself go, Marc. You look a little rough around the edges. No wonder the parts have been drying up. Did you really think that we wanted Jon Chambers as a series regular? You're more trouble than you're worth – especially since we have a fully functional Jon Chambers Synthespian waiting in the wings – quite literally.'

Matheson's face was replaced by Marc's own. Or rather, a perfect version of Marc's own. That slight shaving rash was gone, the bags under the eyes were no more. The hint of male pattern baldness had given way to a full head of hair, and the tiny scar on his cheek was gone. It wasn't Marcus Brooks – it was Jon Chambers.

'Hi Marc. How are you doing?' His own voice, overlaid with the Southern twang Marc had adopted in the role.

'So you see, we never needed you,' Matheson continued. 'But the public needed you. But who can tell the difference between a Synthespian and its human counterpart? As far as the

citizens of the Republic are concerned, the cast of *Executive Desires* is one big happy family.'

'Yeah, right,' countered Marc. 'Your beloved Dominique Delacroix hates everyone else, your male lead is an alcoholic, Paris Forbes has a serious coke habit, and two of the female stars have had secret abortions. A very happy family.'

'A family that I am granting you the chance to join, one final time.'

'What?'

'We're about to do a dress rehearsal, Marc. A dress rehearsal of the opening act. Rather than waste the abilities of our Synthespian friend here, I thought you might want to take part.' Marc couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Act One? The one where I die?'

'So you did read the script? I'm glad. It will make the... the re-orientation a lot easier.'

Marc really didn't like the sound of that word. 'Re-orientation?'

'I want the dress rehearsal to be as realistic as possible. And that includes your unfortunate – and extremely career-limiting – accident with a handgun. It'll make a marvellous addition to the DVD Special Edition.'

'So you're going to kill me?'

'Me? No. My dear Marc – you're going to kill yourself.' He clapped his hands as if to start the process.'

A white mask began to descend from the ceiling.

'Where's Peri?'

'Your young friend is having a makeover,' said the woman. Apparently she was Dominique Delacroix, acclaimed soap star. Mutton dressed as lamb, as far as the Doctor was concerned. 'When she returns, she'll be a new woman.'

'A new woman?' The Doctor felt his hackles rising. 'What are you doing to her?' He struggled against his Auton captors but he couldn't move.

'Doctor – please take a seat.' Matheson was back on the set.

He indicated a director's chair. 'And then I'll explain everything.'

Reluctantly, the Doctor sat down, the two Autons standing guard behind him. 'Go on, explain your plan to me. It's about

that time, isn't it? Gloating hour?'

Matheson ignored the quip, which was a pity. The Doctor wanted to get him riled. 'At this moment, Marcus Brooks, Perpugilliam Brown and Claudia Barbakker are receiving an introductory offer to WJM Inc's revolutionary new process, *Skin Deep*™. Plastic surgery without surgery.'

He gestured to two of the killer robutons. They brought over a flat disc that the Doctor recognised as a *Living Vision* 3DTV. Matheson placed it on a small table he had removed from the s and clicked a remote control. Figures formed from the substanc of the base: Peri, Marc and Claudia in dentist's chairs, whi masks being clamped to their faces.

'But *with* plastic, no doubt,' said the Doctor. 'What are you doing to them? I wasn't aware that the Nestene Consciousne needed any mechanical assistance to take over lesser minds.'

'It doesn't, Doctor,' said Matheson. 'But it's currently very busy. Moving house is supposed to be one of the most stressful things in a person's life, isn't it?'

'Moving house?'

'The Nestene Homeworld is dying, Doctor. The Queen and her children need a new habitat... and the Republic is a perfect piece of real estate.'

'Polymos? Dying? How?' The Doctor had never visited the planet – it was hardly what you would call a holiday destination but it didn't seem likely that the planet would be in any danger. Small but stable sun, little tectonic activity, far, far away from any of the active wars in its galaxy...

'Perhaps this will explain.' He clicked the remote control, and a planetscape appeared on the 3DTV.

The Doctor immediately recognised Polymos: a grey, barre world with a distant red sun. There was no visible life – that had all been absorbed aeons ago. But the surface seethed with ju visible energies – the granddaughter of Shub-Niggurath. And suddenly there was a brilliant concentration of light – and the Nestene Consciousness, mother of this psychic fog.

The image flared for a moment: a swarm of energy units wa launching itself from the surface, translucent purple globe propelled by pure psychic energy. Once, many years ago – both linear and his personal time – a similar swarm had landed on Earth, just as the TARDIS had materialised. Then it had bee

drawn through a funnel of super-heated air; this time, a funnel of super-heated Vortex.

He watched as the swarm ascended.

All at once, every single globe exploded.

'What happened?' said the Doctor, watching the resultant cloud of energy dissipate.

Matheson's voice was low, angry. 'An enemy attack.'

'Enemy? Enemy? Who would attack the Nestene Consciousness? It's not exactly at the top of everyone's Christmas card list, I'll admit. But the only planet that has lived to tell the tale is Earth, and even in its current circumstances, it hardly has the energy or the resources to mount any sort of attack on a planet in a different galaxy!'

Matheson pulled up another chair and sat opposite the Doctor. 'Ever thought of being an actor, Doctor?'

'Frequently. Why?'

'Because this innocent act you're portraying is Republic-winning material.'

'What are you talking about, Matheson? I don't know anything about this.'

Matheson raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

The image changed. Now they were looking at Polymos from further away, watching the swarms burning through the thin atmosphere. And then something else hove into view. Stubby grey boxes with stubby grey arms protruding from their bases.

'No!' shouted the Doctor, trying to stand. And failing, as the Autons held him down. 'That isn't possible!'

'Oh, but it is, Doctor. It is.'

Bolts of energy seared out of the weapons ports of the boxes, again and again and again. Each one hit home: the energy units exploded in a flare of red light.

'They... they...' The Doctor simply couldn't believe it. They couldn't have!

He still couldn't believe it when the boxes dematerialised with a strange wheezing and groaning noise.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Do you understand now, Doctor?’

The Doctor spoke through gritted teeth. ‘That had *nothing* to do with me. Nothing.’

‘But you do recognise the assailants?’

No point in lying. It could have been a clever fake, but something told him that he’d just stepped into a messy pile of his own people’s doings.

‘They were Type 70 War-TARDISes. *Military* TARDISes.’

‘Indeed.’ The Delacroix woman had reappeared at Matheson’s side. ‘Our partners did nothing to your people Doctor. Nothing. Yet you shot them out of the sky!’

‘*Your partners* have been spreading themselves across the universe for aeons, Ms Delacroix. Stealing whole worlds, whole systems. You wail about them. The Time Lords attacking Polymos? Who was there to wail when Arcadar was colonised? Or Plovak 6? The Reverent Pentarch of Looom had no one to cry out to when your energy units landed, did they? If my people attacked Polymos, then they had a very good reason!’ He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms. It was a shame that he looked more righteous than he felt.

‘Actually,’ said Matheson, ‘I don’t really care. I just want your knowledge. And your TARDIS, of course.’

‘Over my dead body!’ Not the greatest of retorts, but the Doctor was still in shock over the image of his own people systematically wiping out the Next Consciousness. Surely they wouldn’t action something like that?

But Gallifrey wasn’t Gallifrey any more, was it? There was something rotten in the state of the Capitol, and – as usual – he was here at the sharp end, taking the blame. Then it occurred to him: the Time Lords had sent him to Earth in 1986 to prevent the Cybermen from disrupting the web of time – was this another of their seedy, unscrupulous little ploys? Was he destined to be the one who always carried out their dirty work?

The High Council? He should have sacked the lot of them when he had had the chance!

'Your dead body? I don't think so,' said Dominique Delacroix. 'But these dead bodies...'

Peri, Marc and Claudia walked onto the set. They were all dressed in what appeared to be 1980s clothing – bright and tasteless – and wearing what appeared to be 1980s smiles – wide and vacuous.

'What have you done to them?' The Doctor could see at a glance that they weren't themselves, neither physically nor mentally. Physically, they all looked perfect. Too perfect – that slight scar on Peri's forehead, incurred during their experience on Dorsill, was gone. But the blank unthinking smiles – were these Auton replicas?

'Oh, they're not Autons, Doctor, if that's what you were thinking,' said Matheson. 'They're still the same people physically. But *Skin Deep* works by injecting small beads of Autonised plastic into their head. It removes all blemishes and imperfections, but it also allows a small part of the Nestene Consciousness to control their minds.'

'You really are a despicable human being, aren't you, Matheson? What have these people ever done to you?'

The Doctor felt a heavy blow on the back of his neck. Like the state of his three friends, this wasn't a physical act: it was a mental sideswipe from the Nestene Consciousness. She must be getting desperate to resort to childish displays of anger!

He was winded, but refused to allow it to show in his voice. 'Go on, Matheson, play your little game. Amuse yourself.'

'I intend to amuse all of us, Doctor.' He waved his hand around the set. 'We're about to mount the dress rehearsal for the opening act of the relaunch of *Executive Desires*, which will be broadcast live to the entire Republic in a few hours. The opening scene will be a recap of the final cliffhanger from the last episode.'

'As I said to Claudia earlier, is that supposed to mean something to me? I'm not an avid follower of soap operas, I'm afraid. Not much time for that when you're crusading around the universe, righting wrongs and fighting evil.'

'No matter,' said Matheson. 'It'll all become very clear.' He hurled a wad of pink paper at the Doctor. 'Just read Act One.'

The Doctor didn't really have much choice in the matter.

Surrounded by Autons and with Peri and her friends under Nestene control, his only option was to play along and hope for a lucky break.

He started flicking through the script. He wasn't impressed.

It appeared to embody the absolute worst of twentieth-century drama: convoluted plots, contrived relationships, overblown dialogue and a cast of grotesques. It even gave *Grand Guignol* a bad name!

He hurled the script to the floor. 'Dreadful. Truly dreadful. Who do you get to write this bilge? Worse than a nineteenth-century potboiler, Matheson!'

'But it brings in the viewers, Doctor. That's what counts. I need the season opener of *Executive Desires* to reach the maximum possible audience. For three years, the great unwashed have been waiting for this moment, and I intend to deliver.'

'If this is what passes for entertainment in the New Earth Republic, I really do fear for the human race.'

'Doctor: Shakespeare or soaps, it's all the same to them. And it's all the same to me, as well. Every home in the Republic has a television set, and 99 per cent of them were manufactured in one of my factories. The public see it as a window on the universe, but they're wrong. Each one is another pair of eyes for me. And my partners.'

Realisation hit the Doctor like a thunderbolt, despite his splitting headache. 'You are joking? Auton television sets? I thought daffodils were bad enough!' But his flippancy concealed a serious worry. Matheson had just admitted that the tentacles of the Nestene Consciousness extended throughout this offshoot of humanity. That reliable flickering box in the corner was nothing more than a plastic killing machine. The panic when Matheson activated his little pets would be unimaginable. But that was the Nestenes' way, wasn't it? Panic the populace, destroy the infrastructure, and spread like a virus.

Matheson laughed. 'Face it, Doctor. You arrived just a little bit too late. My plans are far too advanced for you to be anything more than a minor irritant.'

The Doctor hated smug villains. They couldn't resist a good old gloat, kicking a man when he was down. But the Doctor wasn't beaten yet. It was a case of emergencies: he had to get Peri, Claudia and Marc in the clear, and then he could act.

‘But you might be able to help.’

‘Help? Help you? Don’t be so ridiculous!’

‘Very well, Doctor. Perhaps it’s time for the dress rehearsa to begin.’ He nodded at the assembled cast of Synthespians, which jerked into life.

‘I intend to see Act One through until the very end. Might I suggest that you check out pages six, seven and ten?’ Matheson gestured at his other three captives. ‘And, for your information, Miss Perpugilliam Brown stars as feisty Caitlin Munroe, illegitimate daughter of Major Bartington. Marcus Brooks will, of course, be reprising his role as broken corporate lawyer J Chambers, while Miss Claudia Berbakker will reinterpret the role of downtrodden kitchen maid Adlette Sinclair, who has just discovered that her father, faithful retainer Julian Sinclair, is actually her brother’s temporal duplicate.

‘And if you read the pages I pointed out, it will all become very, very clear.’

The Doctor speed-read the pages. Which was when h realised what Matheson meant.

‘They all die. Murder, suicide, poisoning...’

‘Exactly, Doctor. And whereas, normally, the safety of my actors would be paramount, in this case I feel a little realism is called for.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘And... action!’

A majestic trumpet melody soared triumphantly above the driving strings. Poignant in its solemnity, it was a gesture of courage that was drowning in a sea of sentimentality, overlaid with the saintlike voices of harps and harpsichords. The Docto felt like being sick.

‘Call that theme music?’ snapped the Doctor. ‘I’ve heard better on the prom at Brighton. Overblown nonsense.’

‘Mock away, Doctor,’ said Dominique Delacroix. ‘It won’t detract from the finality and futility of the situation.’

‘Agree to help me and your young friends will survive,’ chimed in Matheson. ‘Or simply sit back and watch the deadliest soap opera of all time unfold.’

The Doctor couldn’t help laughing. ‘You two should be on the set, not Peri and Claudia.’

One or the other of these two was the embodiment of the swarm leader that had made first contact with Reef Station One. Or maybe both. There was little point in trying to appeal to thei

better nature because they simply didn't have one; basically, had five pages of dialogue to kill up a better plan before their melodramatic culling began.

'Oh well.' He waved a hand dismissively. 'Let the revels begin!' he broadcast. 'See if I care.'

'Very well, Doctor. Act One, Scene One...'

INT. PARTINGTON MANSION. THE KITCHEN. ALLEITE IS SITTING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, SOBBING. MRS KAPALSKI, THE COOK, WALKS IN.

MRS KAPALSKI
WHATEVER THE DEVIL IS WRONG, ALLETTE?

ALLETTE
OH, MRS KAPALSKI – I KNOW I KNOW!

MRS KAPALSKI
WHAT DO YOU KNOW, CHILD? COME ALONG, IT CAN'T BE ALL THAT BAD. I'LL FIX YOU A MILKY DRINK – EVERYTHING WILL SEEM SO MUCH BETTER AFTERWARDS.

ALLETTE
(CRIES) BUT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. IT'S MY FATHER I KNOWWHO HE IS. I KNOWWHO HE IS, MRS KAPALSKI.

DOMINIQUE DELACROIX ENTERS THE KITCHEN.

DOMINIQUE
GO ON THEN, GIRL. TELL US. TELL US YOUR PRECIOUS SECRET – WE'RE ALL DYING TO KNOW.

ALLETTE
YOU KNOW, DON'T YOU? HOW LONG HAVE YOU KNOWN?

DOMINIQUE
I'VE KNOWN FROM THE VERY BEGINNING! WHO DO

YOU THINK GAVE YOUR BROTHER THE TIME TRANSMITTER IN THE FIRST PLACE?

ALLETTE
YOU MEAN-

DOMINIQUE
THAT'S RIGHT. I ARRANGED FOR YOUR BROTHER TO GO BACK IN TIME. THEN I ARRANGED FOR HIM TO SEDUCE YOUR MOTHER – AND SHE GAVE BIRTH TO YOU!

YOUR BROTHER IS YOUR FATHER, ALLETTE. YOU'RE A BASTARD – A BASTARD OF TIME!

'Total and absolute gibberish,' said the Doctor, taking advanta of the scene change to add his comments. 'I've heard grandfather paradoxes, but this's ridiculous. It can't possibly work in reality – there's no way to seed the causal nexus!' H skipped a page forward in the script. 'Oh, and this one's a real corker! How many scriptwriters did it take to come up with this Matheson? Or was it a room full of monkeys and typewriters?'

No response. Annoying. Usually when super-villains made mistakes when they were needed. Oh well, on with the motley! He sat back in the chair as what passed for drama continued.

INT. PARTINGTON MANSION, THE LIBRARY. ROGER PARTINGTON IS STANDING BY THE FIREPLACE (LIT) WITH A TUMBLER OF WHISKY IN HIS HAND. HIS NEWLY DISCOVERED DAUGHTER, CAITLIN, STANDS BEFORE HIM.

ROGER
I KNOW THIS IS DIFFICULT TO TAKE IN, BUT IT'S TRUE.

CAITLIN
IT ISN'T TRUE. NONE OF THIS IS TRUE. THIS IS JUST ANOTHER GAME THAT YOU AND THAT BITCH DOMINIQUE ARE PLAYING. I'M NOT YOUR

DAUGHTER!

ROGER
BUT YOU ARE, CAITLIN. THE DNA TESTS PROVE IT. YOU'RE MY DAUGHTER. AND THAT MEANS YOU'RE A MEMBER OF THE PARTINGTON FAMILY (HE WAVES A HAND AROUND THE LIBRARY). AND All OF THIS IS YOUR BIRTHRIGHT.

CAITLIN
BIRTHRIGHT? BIRTHRIGHT? WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I NEEDED A BIRTHRIGHT? WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I WAS STARVING, WHEN I HAD NO SHOES ON MY FEET, WHEN I LIVED WITH THE RATS AND THE ROACHES AND A MOTHER WHO WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A TEN-DOLLAR WHORE? WHERE WERE YOU THEN?

ROGER MOVES OVER TO COMFORT HER, BUT SHE SHRUGS HIS ARM OFF.

CAITLIN
YOU CAN'T MAKE IT UP TO ME, MR PARTINGTON. TOO MUCH HAS HAPPENED. I ACCEPT THAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW. BUT THAT BITCH KNEW, DIDN'T SHE? SHE KNEW ALL THE TIME. SHE GAVE BIRTH TO ME AND THEN DUMPED ME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

ROGER
SHE IS STILL YOUR MOTHER.

CAITLIN
REALLY? REALLY? MOTHERS DON'T DO THAT, <u>DAD</u> (SAID IRONICALLY). AND I INTEND TO MAKE SURE THAT SHE PAYS FOR WHAT SHE'S DONE!

CAITUN STORMS OUT OF THE LIBRARY. ROGER MAKES TO FOLLOW, BUT CLUTCHES HIS CHEST. WE ZOOM IN ON THE CRASHING TUMBLER AS IT HITS THE FLOOR.

‘A slight improvement,’ said the Doctor, flinching at the noise. ‘But not by much.’

INT. PARTINGTON MANSION. THE KITCHEN. ALLETTE IS STILL IN DISTRESS. DOMINIQUE HAS FIXED HERSELF A COCKTAIL.

DOMINIQUE
SO YOU SEE, I’VE KNOWN ALL ALONG.

ALLETTE
BUT WHY? WHY?

DOMINIQUE
ISN’T IT OBVIOUS? EVERYONE THINKS THAT YOUR FATHER IS THE TRUE HEIR TO THE PARTINGTON ESTATE. BUT SINCE HE IS NOTHING MORE THAN A TEMPORAL DUPLICATE, THAT CLAIM IS VOID. ACCORDING TO REPUBLIC LAW, VIOLATIONS OF THE LAWS OF TIME ARE VIOLATIONS OF THE LAW – THE MANSION IS MINE!

‘Violations of temporal law? Balderdash! Poppycock! You writers wouldn’t understand a violation of temporal law if it went back in time and blew up their first typewriter! That’s assuming that they use typewriters, and not crayon?’

THERE IS A SCREAM FROM THE NEXT FLOOR. EVERYONE REACTS. DOMINIQUE AND ALLETTE RUSH OUT OF THE KITCHEN.

INT. PARTINGTON MANSION. THE LIBRARY. ROGER IS LYING ON THE FLOOR. DOMINIQUE RUSHES OVER TO HIM. JEWEL ENTERS.

JEWEL
GET AWAY FROM HIM! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

DOMINIQUE.
I’VE JUST FOUND HIM – HE’S COLLAPSED.

JEWEL
WHAT DID YOU DO – LOOK AT HIM?

JEWEL STRIDES OVER TO DOMINIQUE AND SLAPS HER.

JEWEL
GET AWAY FROM MY HUSBAND, YOU BITCH!

JEWEL KNEELS.

JEWEL
HE'S STILL BREATHING. SOMEONE CALL THE PARAMEDICS. QUICKLY!

CAITLIN
NO.

CAITLIN PICKS UP THE PHONE AND SMASHES IT TO THE FLOOR.

CAITLIN
LET HIM DIE. AND YOU,YOU BITCH!

CAITLIN PULLS OUT A GUN AND AIMS IT AT DOMINIQUE.

CAITLIN
I WAS YOUR DAUGHTER AND YOU LEFT ME TO ROT IN A STINKING HELL-HOLE. WHILE YOU HAD ALL OF THIS, I HAD NOTHING. AND NOW YOU'RE BOTH GOING TO PAY!

ALLETTE
DON'T DO IT, CAITLIN. DO N'T! THEY AREN'T WORTH IT. THEY RUIN PEOPLE'S LIVES FOR A LIVING. THEY'VE RUINED MINE AND THEY'VE RUINED YOURS. BUT WE HAVE TO BE BETTER THAN THEM.

JEWEL

CAITLIN – YOU'RE LIKE A DAUGHTER TO ROGER AND ME! WE WERE GOING TO ADOPT YOU!

DOMINIQUE
ADOPT MY DAUGHTER? OVER MY DEAD BODY!

JEWEL
THAT CAN BE ARRANGED, DOMINIQUE. YOU'RE NOTHING MORE THAN A CANCER, A QUEEN OF SPITE AND BILE. THE WORLD WILL BE BETTER OFF WITHOUT YOU!

JEWEL GRABS THE GUN FROM CAITLIN. JON CHAMBERS WALKS IN.

JON
HEY – WHAT'S UP!

CAITLIN
STAY OUT OF THIS, JON. IT DOESN'T CONCERN YOU.

JON
EVERYTHING IN THIS FAMILY CONCERNS ME, CAITLIN. I'M THE FAMILY ATTORNEY AND DOMINIQUE'S SON, REMEMBER!

ALLETTE
HOW COULD WE FORGET? THE PRODIGAL SON? YOU'VE BEEN WELCOMED INTO THIS FAMILY, WHILE I WAS EXPECTED TO WORK BELOW STAIRS – NOTHING MORE THAN A SERVANT! YOU USED THE LAW TO RECLAIM YOUR BIRTHRIGHT, JON! (BEAT) BUT SOME THINGS ARE ABOVE THE LAW.

ALLETTE SLAPS JEWEL AROUND THE FACE AND GRABS THE GUN FROM HER.

ALLETTE
ALL OF YOU KNEW! YOU ALL KNEW MY BROTHER WAS MY FATHER. AND I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU

PAY FOR THAT!

ALLETTE WAVES THE GUN AROUND. WHO WILL SHE CHOOSE?

The Doctor looked down at the script and realised that they ha reached page 6. Allette tr to shoot Dominique, but Caitlin fights her for the gun. There's a struggle, and Caitlin is mortally wounded...

No. He may have run out of options, but this had to stop now. Just as Allette/Claudia a that Dominique, as Caitlin/Peri lunged at her -

'Stop!' bellowed the Doctor, jumping from the chair. 'Stop this travesty. I'll help you. Just release my friends.'

Matheson gave a slow handclap. 'Bravo, Doctor, bravo. Yo held out longer than I thought you would.' He snapped his fingers, and all of the actors, humans and Synthespians alike, sank into lethargy. All apart from Dominique Delacroix, who joined Matheson and linked her arm with his.

'A real ratings winner, Doctor, don't you agree?' The Docto snorted.

'A trillion people will watch this evening's episode, Doctor. One trillion people.'

'Very impressive...' Then he realised. It was so obvious! 'This is the activation signal, isn't it? This broadcast will activate all of those Auton television sets across the Republic!'

'Not just television sets, Doctor. Everything that WJM Inc. has manufactured over the last few years contains the essence of the Nestene Consciousness.' He threw back his head a laughed. 'Toothbrushes, razors, televisions, microwave ovens – all of them! Even those little rubber car deodorisers – imagin the chaos!'

'I don't want to know, Matheson. Just let them go.'

'Very well. I'll keep my side of the bargain, as long as yo keep yours.'

'And what's mine?'

'I need your help with the final phase of activation. And I also need the key to your TARDIS.'

'Won't work. It's isomorphic. My TARDIS, my key. And I'm not prepared to sacrifice the TARDIS for anyone.' He glance

over at Peri. ‘You’ve seen what the Time Lords can do. If the
detect my TARDIS doing anything they consider even remote
dodgy, they’ll shoot it out of the Time Vortex.’ An hour ago, he
would have dismissed that idea. But having seen the recordin
what was going on with the High Council?

‘Really?’ asked Dominique Delacroix. ‘But you’re their Lord
President. Would they really do that?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘They’ve tried before. I’ll help you,
Matheson, but you can’t have the TARDIS. I think that’s what
you people call negotiation?’

Matheson chewed on his bottom lip for a moment.
Obviously the help that he needed was vitally important to th
Nestene colonisation of the Republic. The TARDIS was nothing
more than a fringe benefit, to put it in Matheson’s terms. And
the Doctor would detonate the Eye of Harmony before letting
these psychic vampires get their tentacles and claws on t
console.

‘Very well.’ Matheson closed his eyes. Seconds later, beads
what looked like thick sweat dribbled from Peri, Claudia and
Marc’s faces. ‘As you can see, the effects of Skin Deep can
reversed – although I’m sure that all three of them will be very
grateful that the physical effects remain. We’ve taken years o
them, Doctor!’

Dominique Delacroix smiled. ‘It is an introductory offer.
Do you fancy trying it out? Might do wonders for you.’

‘No thank you. My body has a way of looking after itself.’

A sudden anger flared in Dominique’s voice. ‘Yes. All your
clever Time Lord regenerative techniques. There will be a
reckoning, Doctor. You can count on that!’

‘I look forward to it.’ He ignored the Autons and strode over
to Peri, who was leaning against one of the flats. ‘Are you a
right?’

‘Oh, Doctor – I was there, but I wasn’t. They were making
me do all of those things.’ She turned to Dominique. ‘You bitch
Got your kicks, did you? Enjoyed that, did you? You -’

‘Peri – calm down. We’re not in the best position at the
moment, I’m afraid.’

‘No last minute plans?’

‘No.’

‘No tricks up your sleeve?’

‘Sadly not. But I have bargained for your release. All three of you.’ He looked at Claudia and Marc. Both looked exhausted, but human rather than plastic. You could see it in their eyes: the spark of life that even the most advanced Auton replica save the swarm leader – failed to achieve.

‘They will, of course, be kept in protective custody until you’ve fulfilled your part of the bargain,’ called out Matheson. ‘For their own safety, of course.’

The Doctor shoved his hands in his pockets. ‘Of course.’ His voice dropped to a low whisper. ‘Get ready,’ he hissed. His fingers grasped Claudia’s mobile phone and sought out the one button. *There!*

The results were immediate. The Autons standing around on guard simply fell backwards, toppling like ninepins. The Doctor spared a quick glance at Matheson and Delacroix: they seemed unaffected, but that was only to be expected if either of them was the swarm leader. The sub-etheric pulse that Claudia’s fault mobile was generating was sufficient to cut the telepathic link between the Nestene Consciousness and the killer Autons, but the complexity of the link between the higher forms of Nestene life was more difficult to break.

‘All of you – run!’ He pointed towards a gap in the flats.

‘Claudia – catch!’ He threw the mobile phone towards her. The battery was low, but it would give the two girls enough breathing space to escape. He had other plans.

‘Use it sparingly, but it’ll disable the Synthespians. Just get somewhere safe and wait for me to get in touch.’ He waited a moment to make sure they’d got off the set.

‘Marc – you’re with me. Come on!’ He virtually had to drag Marc off the set. ‘We need to shut this down at the source and I suspect that’s the WJM Tower!’

‘Actually, it is, Doctor,’ said Marc calmly, stopping in his tracks. ‘But there’s no need to run. That’s where we’re going.’ He raised his hand, which dropped away to reveal a gun.

The Doctor put his hand to his head. ‘An Auton,’ he groaned. ‘How could I be so stupid?’

CHAPTER NINE

Claudia checked the battery level on her mobile. It wasn reassuring. She hurriedly looked around for any Synthespia but all she could see was a tour buggy filled with Hawaiian shir Surely even Matheson wouldn't be stupid enough to kill tw women in front of a load of tourists? But Matheson was the mastermind behind an alien invasion of the Republic – Claudia doubted that there was anything he wouldn't dare do.

'Where to now?' asked Peri as they took refuge behind stack of unused flats outside another sound stage. 'If we go back to the mansion he'll know immediately.'

'If we go *anywhere*, he'll know immediately. Every Synthespian is a pair of eyes for Matheson, remember.'

'I don't see we have much choice,' whispered Peri. 'Where else can we go?'

It hit Claudia like a revelation. 'Of course! Peri – the mansion is the best place on the station to go!'

'Why?'

Claudia grinned. 'Because there we have the best chance of fighting back – and rescuing the Doctor.'

The Doctor was led away from the sound stage by two of th facsimile Autons. Marc, Dominique and Matheson followed behind. Marc had closed his mouth, but the Doctor was well aware that he was surrounded by at least three killing machines that wouldn't hesitate to strike him down, whatever his so-calle importance to Matheson's plans. And who would bat an eyelid The tourists? They were on this tour to expect magic an spectacle: the sight of a man in a brightly coloured frock coat vanishing in a plume of orange smoke would engender applau not panic!

'Oh, and Doctor?' said Matheson. 'Don't try another stunt like that. The girls may have escaped – for now – but we st have Marc. The real Marc, so to speak.'

Of course – the brainwave imprimatur. The Nestene Consciousness, for all of its unite d powers, was spread pretty thinly across the universe. A typical swarm of energy units numbered about fifty: sufficient telepathic energy to animat enough killers and facsimiles to enslave and colonise most planets. But unlike the swarm leader, which was powerful enough to duplicate the mental patterns of the person it was enslaving – or create one from scratch – and hold that psychic matrix indefinitely, the normal facsimiles needed the originals to be alive, if comatose, to constantly refresh the personality.

This Marc replica was far more advanced than any Auton th Doctor had met before, save swarm leaders such as Channing – he had to be able to withstand the sub-etheric pulse from th mobile phone – but he was still a copy. Which meant Marc wa still alive. Which raised an interesting possibility...

'Get into the car, Doctor.' A huge black stretch limo was waiting for them.

'Nice to see we're travelling in style, Matheson.'

'Nothing less for the saviour of the Nestene Consciousness said Dominique Delacroix. And the Doctor realised that she wa talking about him.

'Saviour? Saviour? Saviour?! You have to be joking, madam. The Nestene Consciousness is the antithesis of everything stand for. A rapacious predator -'

He stopped as a searing bolt of psychic energy hit him righ between the eyes. The psionic equivalent of a laser beam bored through his natural defences and exploded in the centre of his mind. The tentacles of the Nestene Consciousness reach out, rifling through his memories, peering into his thoughts, purloining his knowledge.

For a Time Lord, there was only one option.

The Doctor switched off his mind.

'How are we going to get to the mansion?' asked Peri. 'It's not exactly walking distance.'

She still felt soiled by her experiences as Caitlin: she h shared her mind with someone else, seen their thoughts, th memories. Okay, so it had happened before, but this time had been different: Peri knew that the memories she had seen, had experienced, hadn't been real. To 'Caitlin', they had been re

the rapes, the abortions, the abductions, the whole lot. Peri knew that those memories were nothing more than the wildest fantasies of scriptwriters, but she still had all the emotional responses of the character screaming at her, making her skin crawl.

Damn Matheson, and damn Dominique Delacroix, and damn this whole stinking spaceship. Was this what humanity had become? A race of galactic couch potatoes, not bothering with a future, just leeching off the past?

She shook her head to try to calm down, realising that Claudia was talking to her.

'We need a car. And quickly.'

'Can't we get a cab?'

'No way – they're all driven by Synthespians. We have to make our own way – and we have to disable the automatic guidance systems. There's no telling what Matheson can monitor or control. I don't fancy becoming roadkill at the touch of a button.'

Claudia looked around the lot. There had been a definite increase in the number security guards, and their hiding place wasn't going to shield them forever. 'Unless...' She looked at the mobile phone. 'Let's get a cab,' she said.

The Doctor opened his eyes. Then he closed them to protect his eyeballs from the light. Wincing at the pain, he did a quick mental itinerary, and was satisfied to see that everything was still in place. That was the worst assault from the Nestene Consciousness so far: if his mind hadn't automatically closed itself down, it would have seared his memories and fried his mind. And one more attack would very probably do just that.

'Ah, Doctor – back in the land of the living, I see.' Matheson was standing over him, fixed grimly in place. 'I hope you don't have too much of a headache?'

'I always credited the Nestene Consciousness with a certain degree of subtlety, but these mental attacks are a little blatant, aren't they?'

The Doctor sat up. He was on a couch in a medium-sized room full of control panels and suchlike – perfect as the master criminal's lair: Matheson couldn't have done better if he'd hollowed out a volcano. One of the walls was glass; through it,

the Doctor could see what appeared to be a vast crystal colum illuminated by spotlights. Quartz, maybe? Or even diamond? But what would Matheson want with a cylinder of pure crystal?

'I assume we're in your admittedly triumphant tower, Walter?'

'Indeed, Doctor. This is the primary observation gallery. Getting to his feet, the Doctor strode over to the window. He stared down at the base of the column, which must have bee about twenty stories below. A faint purple glow was visible at the base.

'That is very impressive, Walter. Some sort of substitute for your shortcomings, is it?'

'Actually, Doctor, it's the largest receiver-transmitter in the Republic. The crystal matrix of the spire -'

The Doctor waved a hand. 'The science doesn't reall interest me. I presume this is what you're going to use to transmit your hellish soap opera across the Republic?'

'Oh, so very much more than that. I know you've done your research, Doctor. Reef Station One was specifically designed receive even the faintest electro-magnetic signals from de space. Behind the scenes, I manipulated the other members of the Nine to create exactly what my business partners wanted conduit.'

Conduit? 'Conduit for what? You seem to have a complete Nestene swarm down there – but that's enough? What are you...' He sighed. 'You meant it, didn't you? What you sai earlier. You're planning to download the entire Nestene Consciousness!'

Matheson sat down in a chair and beckoned the Doctor t do the same. Dominique Delacroix was already coiled up in chair on the other side of the room like a viper.

'Care for a drink? I have a good single malt here.'

'No thank you.'

'Your loss.' Matheson poured himself and Dominique drinks. He handed one of the tumblers to her and then took his seat. 'Let's look at this logically, Doctor. Your people are hunting down the Nestene Consciousness and destroying it. The Ne Earth Republic is their only sanctuary.'

'Sanctuary? You're predators! That's like giving house room to a tiger!'

‘Me?’ Matheson even sounded affronted. ‘The Nestenes a
nothing more than business partners, Doctor. Nothing more,
and nothing less. They offered me a business opportunity, and
have exploited it, Mutually beneficial to both sides.’

‘You mean you’re not an Auton?’ This changed everything.

‘Good God, no! I’m as human as the next man – well, no
you, obviously,’ he laughed. ‘No, I’m doing this for the good o
humanity.’

Marc opened his eyes. He couldn’t remember much – being h
on the back of the head, falling to the ground, then something
about... something about *Executive Desires*. It was the season
finale – ‘the one where everyone died’ as the papers had called
But there was something wrong with his memory. Annette and
Caitlin had been recast – recast as Claudia and Peri! And t
Doctor had been watching it all happen from a director’s chair,
with Matheson standing behind him with his Synthespians.

Where was he now? It was so difficult to concentrate, as
two people were living in his head. He tried to focus, but the
effort was too much. Darkness fell.

And then he found himself entering the observation gallery.

Claudia and Peri had finally reached the water tower at the ga
of the studio lot. Thankfully, the security guards hadn’t spotte
them – Claudia’s phone was almost exhausted, and they needed
what battery power was left in it to get away. That was assuming
that all of the guards were Synthespians – against human bein
Claudia doubted that they’d stand a chance.

‘There!’ She pointed over the road. A black car with a tax
sign was idling next to the pavement. ‘Quickly!’

Dodging the traffic and taking the risk of being arrested for
jaywalking, they reached the other side of the road. Claudia
knocked on the cab’s window.

An Auton slowly turned its head towards her. Blank-faced
emotionless, it raised its arm. Claudia pulled out the mobile
phone and pressed the call button. *Please, just enough for this!*

Nothing happened. The display died. The phone died. And
their chances of escape died, too, as the Auton’s hand dropped
away to reveal the concealed gun.

‘Ah, Marcus,’ said Matheson. His little Auton toy was proving far more useful than his real self – far less trouble. ‘Keep an eye on the Doctor – I’m sure he’ll be more cooperative towards a friendly face than one of your less... photogenic brethren.’

‘I’ve told you that you can’t have the TARDIS, and that is nonnegotiable. If needs be, I’ll use a telepathic signal and destroy it.’

‘And kill everyone on Reef Station One? I don’t think so, Doctor. Besides, attempt to use your minimal telepathy, and you’ll leave yourself wide open – my partners would see that a very strategic opportunity. But let’s leave the TARDIS aside for a moment. If I was able to convince you of what I’m doing, and why I’m doing it, would you be more amenable?’

‘Hmmm. That depends on what you’re planning to tell me.’

Matheson stood up. ‘Then let’s go somewhere a little more comfortable, and I’ll explain.’ He turned to Dominique. ‘I’m sure you can handle the rest of the dress rehearsal, my dear?’

From the early twentieth century, mankind had been drawing attention to itself. Radio signals gave way to television, electromagnetic radiation beamed into deep space. Nuclear explosions frequently rocked the planet, their unique signature obvious to any alien intelligence watching from afar. Humanity even had the bravado to send probes into the void: the Voyagers, the Pioneers, all broadcasting mankind’s existence.

Probably not the best move. Many scientists clung to the idea that any civilisation capable of interstellar travel would also be peaceful; their reasoning was that they couldn’t have achieved that sort of technology by being warlike: to create a faster-than-light drive required cooperation, a planet living in harmony.

How wrong could you be? Then again, they hadn’t heard of the Daleks, or the Cybermen, or the Sontarans. They had spectacularly managed to miss the ancient civilisation of the Martians, despite their many probes and landings. They hadn’t even looked under the surface of their own world and discovered the proud and glorious Earth Reptiles in hibernation.

Humanity needed conflict to survive. And so did other life forms. What was the point of exploration if everything you needed was handed to you on a plate? call it exploration, call it empire-building, call it colonisation. It had been happening

throughout the universe since the very beginning of time. From beings such as the Eternals who saw other life forms as nothing more than playthings, to the Daemons, who saw them as laboratory experiments. From the Daleks, who saw all other life forms as either a threat or else slaves to do their bidding, to the Cybermen, who simply needed to survive. It was a fundamental drive. And once mankind started advertising, they were fair game.

No one had ever catalogued all the alien incursions that Earth endured – many had simply not been noticed. The earliest was possibly the Jagoroth, but that was arguable: in 5720, in the aftermath of World War Six, deep-core archaeologists had discovered the crushed and fossilised remains of what might very well have been a ship. But they never discovered who might have been responsible. Hardly surprising, since the race – the sublime and mysterious Khorlthochloi – had been extinct for over a billion years.

Visitations were fairly sporadic until the twentieth century, although the civil engineers excavating for a new runway at Heathrow had quite a surprise when they discovered three-hundred-year-old metallic artefacts that defied analysis – and that was before they discovered Coca-Cola Golf Victor-Foxtrot! But then it was open season on the human race. You name it, it came for a good look around. Arms, eyes, tentacles, plungers – they all had a good old probe.

To be honest, the Doctor had no real idea why Earth was so fascinating to these would-be conquerors. Human beings were creatures of infinite resourcefulness and unlimited drive, and they were definitely not the type of people to make enemies of. Yes, he had helped outwit the human race on many, many occasions, but he knew that they would have succeeded eventually, even without his help.

Like everyone else on this cosmic chessboard, they had a will to survive, to prosper. Just like the Nestene Consciousness. She was older than the human race. Older than virtually everything in this universe! Didn't she have a right to survive? Didn't she have a right to prosper?

Not at the cost of others.

But it was *always* at the cost of others! That was evolution, natural selection. The strong survive. That was the way that the

universe worked. Had he been wrong, all these centuries
Allowing petty little insects like the Zarbi and the Menoptra to
triumph over an august being like the Animus? What about the
Great Intelligence? It only wanted to live, and its knowledge wa
greater than the entire human race! Consider the Daleks – th
sought to impose order on the universe. Yes, it was order,
but planets and stars and galaxies would have run like clockwo
under their steely gaze. And yet he had always fought the
always defeated them.

Then there were the Cybermen. They were human beings!
Cast out into the depths of space, forced to live their lives
underground, they had survived in the only way they knew how
the ultimate synthesis of man and machine.

Who were the Time Lords – who was the Doctor – to choose
who should fail and who should succeed? What right did he have
to influence the natural order of things?

He was the Doctor. And that gave him the right.

As they walked through the bland corridors of the WJM
Tower, he looked round at Mellon. 'I'm looking forward to
your sales pitch.'

Claudia pulled the battery out of the mobile phone and slammed
it back in before switching the phone on again. This time, the
effect was immediate – the Auton (she couldn't think of them a
Synthespians any more) slumped forward onto the steerin
wheel, setting off the horn.

'Quickly – drag it out of the car. We'll just have to hope
there aren't any cops watching.'

They manhandled the inert lump of plastic out of the
driver's seat and dumped it on the pavement, before climbin
into the front seats.

'What happened?' asked Peri.

'Old trick. Sometimes taking the battery out and putting it
back in gives it a bit of a boost. Don't worry – we can recharg
the phone when we get back to the mansion.'

'Assuming the place isn't surrounded by Autons,' said Peri.

'If we can get to my dad's den, they won't be a problem.' Sh
started the car. 'I have a plan. It isn't much of one, but it's a
start...'

‘Please make yourself comfortable, Doctor. I so rarely hav guests – only appointments.’ Matheson had shown the Doctor into his office. ‘Marc – you and the others can stand guar outside. We can’t be too careful, can we?’

As the Autons left the room, Matheson locked the door behind them.

‘That won’t offer much resistance to a killer Auton, Matheson,’ said the Doctor, sinking into one of the leathe armchairs.

‘Actually, it will. The door is triple-bonded duranium, interlaced with matricite. All of the walls, the floor and ceiling as well.’

‘Matricite. Interesting. That’s a rather rare and unusual mineral, isn’t it?’

‘Quite common out here, Doctor. Scientists speculate that the stars and planets of the Reef were formed from the remai of some very strange Population 0 stars – lots of rare elements and even rarer radiation.’

‘And matricite blocks telepathy, of course.’

‘Of course. I may be many things, Doctor, but I’m far from stupid.’ He poured two glasses of his prized single malt and handed one to the Doctor. ‘You can never be too trusting.’

‘So, are you going to explain your little scheme to me?’ Th Doctor took the glass and gave an appreciative sniff. ‘Sing malt... Sweet, with a touch of peat, a touch of smoke...’ He smiled. ‘A Glen Garioch, from the Old Meldrum distilleries... this whisky is over five thousand years old!’

‘The simple pleasures of life, Doctor. I’m glad to find a fellow connoisseur.’

‘I’ve learnt to appreciate beauty in all of its multifarious forms. But there’s nothing beautiful about the Nestene Consciousness. You must see that!’

Matheson sighed. ‘Mankind – this branch of mankind, out here in the Reef – is weak. An evolutionary cul-de-sac. Surrounded by riches, there’s no ambition, no drive. The hundreds of billions of people here are content to sit in front of their television sets all day and, contributing nothing to the grand scheme of things.’

‘Isn’t that their right?’ Even as he said it, he realised tha Matheson was doing nothing more than reiterating his own

earlier thoughts. Boredom – mankind's ultimate enemy.

Matheson gave a bitter laugh. 'Eight thousand light years from here, Ancient Earth is a scorched ruin, a ball of poison and radioactivity. The civil war may be over, but the people are stronger for it. They are struggling to survive – evolving!'

'Are you telling me that this... this *partnership* with the Nestene Consciousness is some grand plan to create a war in the New Earth Republic? With Walter Matheson as some social architect?'

'And what's wrong with that? I've been working on this for years. I know I'm right, I know it's for the betterment of mankind. Who are you – some high-and-mighty Time Lord – to lecture me about morality?'

'Do you have *any* idea what you're talking with here? We're not talking about your run-of-the-mill alien invasion! The Nestene Consciousness is almost as old as the universe!' The Doctor slammed the tumbler down on the table next to him. 'It feeds on biological life – on mankind's energy. Give it a foothold in the Republic and you'll be waving a pretty quick goodbye to the rest of the human race!'

'News of the colonisation will reach the Union, Doctor – my transmitter will see to that. And it will be a plea for help that the humans on the other side of the Great Barrier will be unable to refuse. The downturn in the Union economy will be reversed as the planets gear themselves up for war – conflict is always a marvellous catalyst for business.'

'And meanwhile, billions of people in the Republic will be slaughtered. That's barbaric!'

'They don't deserve to live!'

'They don't deserve to die!' The Doctor turned his back to Matheson. 'I've fought some people in my time, Matheson, but you really take the biscuit. Inviting one of the deadliest creatures into the universe, into your backyard, just to promote economic growth? The plan doesn't even hold water – by the time the scientists of the Union have worked out how to pass through the Great Barrier, the tentacles of the Nestene Consciousness will be so firmly embedded into this little enclave of humanity that there won't be anything they can do!'

He span round. 'And, of course, it's worse than just a simple Nestene colonisation, isn't it? You're planning to invite the entire

kit and caboodle here! This *galaxy* won't stand a chance!'

'You underestimate me, Doctor.'

'I don't think so, Matheson. I think you underestimate your so-called business partners. Don't you think that the Nestene have read your mind? You've seen what they can do to me, how can a simple human withstand it?'

'Don't insult me in my own building, Doctor, and don't presume to judge me. Why do you think I bought all of the phone operators in the Republic?'

'Oh, I worked that one out a long time ago. Or did you miss my little trick with Claudia's phone earlier? Sub-etheric radiation. But there's no way that you can come to the rescue at the fin moment, broadcasting your brains across the Republic. The human casualties would be tremendous, and the Nestenes wo stop you the moment that they detected the thought in you mind.' He paused for a moment. 'I'm surprised they haven't stopped you already, to be honest.'

Matheson held his tumbler up to the light. 'I know you've done your research, Doctor, but there have been som development projects on this station that even your TARDIS couldn't find. Such as WJM Inc.'s acquisition of a tiny little company that specialised in surgical operations.' He smiled. 'A of my other acquisitions have been for my business partners. But this one... this one was for me...'

Walter J Matheson looked up from his monitor and rubbed his eyes. It was late, but late nights were nothing to him. Usually. But tonight felt different. It wasn't that he wanted to sleep – it was a pressing need to get out of the office, to go for a walk.

It's 1 a. m! But the need was growing stronger and stronger. It had been there as a whisper a couple of days ago. By yesterday, it had begun to nag at him like a toothache. And today it was like an unfulfilled addiction, a craving that overrode everything else.

He stood up and grabbed his overcoat; even in his preoccupied state he hadn't forgotten that Reef Station One weather control had ordered snow and sub-zero temperatures for Industrial 1 this evening.

The night was magnificently crisp, the air almost crystallised with cold. Matheson pulled his coat further around him, and smiled in remembrance. It reminded him of his childhood on New Alaska, the remote homestead, with the nearest neighbours, the Swifts, forty miles away. Absolute solitude.

Absolute peace. No people to get in the way, to make irrational decisions, to question his decisions.

He summoned his limousine, got in, and deactivated the grid. He didn't know where he was going, but he'd know when he got there.

Twenty minutes later, he was in Reclamation 1, a grim vista of water tanks, waste recyclers and low smog. Not exactly the location you'd expect to find one of the Nine, but this was where he'd been told to go. He got out of the car and waited. He didn't have to wait for long.

Up in the sky, through the thin smog and through the dome that covered the station, he could see the stars, the rich tapestry of the New Human Republic.

Some of the stars were moving. A lot of the stars were moving.

A cluster of stars, thirty, forty, maybe fifty of them, were moving towards the plexiglass dome. Meteorites? But the station defences would have vaporised them by now. What the hell were they?

They weren't stars, obviously. And he could see shapes in the brilliant luminescence, he could see... he could see a formation to them! And they were heading straight towards the dome -

He instinctively covered his head with his hands as the flight of meteorites hit the dome – and looked up a moment later to see that they had passed through the indestructible plastic that protected Reef Station One and were now landing all around him, a cacophony of explosions like a machine gun. He could see plumes of dust rising everywhere as the meteorites made planetfall.

But no meteorite could simply pass through the station's protective dome. And no meteorite could summon him to one of the least-visited districts on the station. He took a deep breath, and listened. Not with his ears, though: with his mind, trying to hear that faint voice that had compelled him to be here.

Where are you?

We are here.

An hour later, Walter J. Matheson's limousine arrived at his newly built mansion in Residential 0, with a trunk full of wonder.

'And they let you live?' said the Doctor. 'Hardly the Nestene way. Normally, they'd have got you to build a host body for the swarm leader and then enslave or kill you. At the very least, they would have enthralled you with their psychic powers. You were very lucky.' He thought of poor old Hibbert, during the Nestenes' first Earth invasion. The man had eventually bee

driven quite mad by the mind control enforced upon him.

'Call it serendipity, Doctor. Chuck Bruderbakker's company had the market lead in mobile phones, but they were far from perfect. They leaked sub-etheric radiation, which, as you very well know, is rather unpleasant for my business partners. I discovered this accidentally, but soon put it to good use. It gave me a strategic advantage, and we came to an agreement. They would allow me to remain human and free of mind control, and I wouldn't decorticate them.'

'Outwitting the Nestenes. I am impressed.' But if the stakes were as high as the Doctor had been led to believe – and he still found those images of WAR-DISes around Polymos suspicious at best – and the entire Consciousness was fleeing its ancestral home, then perhaps it had been willing to make such a deal with a mere human.

'I'm always in control, Doctor. You should have realised that by now. If anything happens to me, a coherent sub-etheric pulse will be fired at both of the Nestene swarms on the station. Without a spearhead, the Nestene Consciousness will be trapped on its homeworld, waiting for the end. I offer it hope. I offer it survival.'

'So very noble.'

'Business is about sacrifice, Doctor. If part of your organisation isn't working, you cut it off like a diseased limb. Don't you understand?'

'We're not talking about an arm or a leg, Matheson. We're talking about a thriving colony of human beings!' He slammed his fist against the wood-panelled wall. 'These billions of people aren't a sacrificial lamb for you to use and discard!'

'But they are! They're weak, pointless. Once the forces of the Union break through the Greatbear and defeat the Nestene Consciousness, the survivors will rejoin mainstream humanity. I will be a hero, the greatest businessman of them all.'

'I think you assume just a little too much.'

'I'm taking a risk, Doctor. That's what all good businessmen do. I'm risking everything for the chance to succeed where no one has ever succeeded before. But if you don't help me, my plan simply won't work. As you said, billions of people will die – but the Nestene Consciousness will win. Weigh up the consequences.'

The Doctor simply stared at him.

The journey to the Bruderbakker mansion didn't take very long. Claudia's driving, while erratic, eccentric and often downright dangerous, served its purpose: getting from A to B as quickly as possible.

Peri was effectively riding shotgun, although she would have preferred a real-life gun rather than a mobile phone with a run-down battery. Thankfully, the journey had been relatively Auton-free so far, but Peri doubted that Matheson would make his move where bystanders might see.

'Is there a back way into the mansion?' she asked, as Claudia overtook a huge truck and then narrowly swerved to avoid an oncoming car.

'A back way? Why?'

'If Brady was an Auton, there's a good chance that the rest of the staff are under Matheson's control. We need to get to your father's den without anyone noticing.'

'I see what you mean. But they'll know we're coming when I open the main gates.' The car continued to career along the highway.

'I still don't understand how you've managed to keep all of this secret from the Nestene Consciousness,' said the Doctor, back in the armchair and still trying to comprehend the enormity of Matheson's plan.

The response was brief and blunt. 'I bought a company that specialised in microsurgery. Then I had them operate on my brain.'

'You don't do things by halves, do you? Let me make an educated stab in the dark – a circular neuronic web, woven into your temporal lobe? Clever. Very clever.'

'I like to think so. In the early days, when there was only one swarm on the station, the Nestene Consciousness lacked the telepathic strength to read my mind, so I was able to undergo the procedure without its knowing.'

'And now, even with two swarms on the planet, your surgically enhanced brain protects you from the odd mind probe without alarming the Nestenes. You really have been a busy boy, Matheson.'

‘I didn’t get to be the richest man in the Republic by taking unnecessary risks, or by leaving a single base uncovered. So you see, there is a method to all of this. Now – will you help me? Now you know how high the stakes are?’

The Doctor sighed. He’d been outmanoeuvred – that much was clear.

But where there’s a will, there’s a way...

‘Very well. But under duress, mind. And my TARDIS isn’t part of this deal, understand?’

Matheson nodded. ‘My business partners won’t be happy, but I’m sure I’ll be able to persuade them.’ He stood up. ‘Right – we’ve been in here for long enough. Don’t want them getting suspicious, do we? I’ll show you what needs to be done.’ He checked his watch. ‘And then I must get back to the studio. We have a season launch to prepare for.’

The huge wrought-iron gates of the Bruderbakker mansion swept open, allowing the pursuit taxi to proceed up the gravelled drive. Nothing obstructed it: Claudia’s security clearance saw to that.

It pulled to a stop at the front of the mansion, just as the main doors of the mansion opened. Bosun, the major-domo, and Mrs Svenson, the cook, stepped out of the house to greet them.

A second later, the car was nothing more than a twisted wreck of metal, flames and black smoke rising into the sky.

Bosun and Mrs Svenson’s hands clicked back into place as they went back into the mansion and closed the door behind them.

CHAPTER TEN

The woomph of the explosion echoed around the gardens of th mansion. Claudia looked at Peri. ‘You were right.’

Peri shrugged. ‘Doesn’t give me any pleasure, though. The are Autons in the house. But using the driving grid was a good idea.’ Claudia had re-engaged the cab’s link to the grid as th reached the gates, allowing them to get out before the car dro into the grounds, and find their way to the rear of the mansion.

‘Well, it worked – that’s the important thing. Now we have to get into the mansion before they detect us. How’s the mobil phone?’

Peri checked the battery level. ‘Almost dead. And I’m no sure how much it needs to knock out these Autons.’

‘We don’t have a lot of choice. The only other way in is the kitchen. And we’re certain to run into Mrs Svenson.’

Peri knew that they had run out of options. They had to get into the den, whatever the risks. She sighed. ‘What are w waiting for?’ Brandishing the mobile phone like a talisman, she followed Claudia around the back of the mansion, glancing behind her across the vast grassland desperately hoping that there wasn’t a gardener with a surprise up his sleeve.

Matheson led the Doctor from his office, past the redoubtable Miss Self. The two Synthespians had, of course, met Marc – the Doctor was still having trouble believing he could have been fooled so easily followed them.

‘Is she one of your plastic pals?’ asked the Doctor as the entered the cor ridor.

‘Miss Self? Good God, no. I’m not sure she’s human, but she’s definitely not plastic. Granite, possibly.’

‘Now I know you’re human. No Auton would make a joke like that.’

Matheson simply gave him a withering glance.

They continued in silence for a minute or so, until they

reached the lift. The doors opened and Matheson ushered th
Doctor inside.

'Bit of a tight squeeze,' muttered the Doctor, as the othe
four got in.

'Only a short ride, Doctor.' Matheson pulled a small key
from his pocket and inserted it into the panel. The lift began t
descend.

'Ooh – another secret facility. Were you scared by James
Bond films as a boy?' quipped the Doctor.

'Actually, the entire James Bond canon was one of the firs
successes of my *Redux* process, Doctor. And now a whole new
generation is discovering a cultural icon.'

'How nice for them. I hope you mean the twentieth-century
run? I'd hate to think of all those poor children having their
minds contaminated by those twenty-fourth-century travesties.'

The Doctor paused for a second. He'd just said somethin
very important. He could still feel the pressure of the Nesten
Consciousness boring into him, and was still suffering the afte
effects of the previous psychic attacks, so he wasn't exactly firi
on all cylinders. But there had been a sudden twitch at the si
of Matheson's mouth, as if the Doctor had touched a raw nerve

Of course.

'*Redux* is part of your plan, isn't it?'

'A conversation for later, Doctor. We're running out of time
and you need to get started.' The door slid open, leading into
a small vestibule. The only interesting feature was a door, which
Matheson opened with his palm print.

The room was about the size of a tennis court. The walls t
the left and right were plain, adorned metal; but the furthest
wall was a holographic representation of the crystal aerial at the
heart of the WJM Tower. A large central bank of controls stood
in the centre of the room.

'Very impressive,' said the Doctor. 'I see you've gone for th
minimalist approach, and I don't blame you. Too many
supervillains have a tendency to gild the lily where their secret
bases are concerned.'

'It does what it says on the box,' Matheson replied.

'Which is?' The Doctor idled over to the bank of controls
and gave them the cursory once-over. 'Don't tell me, let m
guess. This controls the available bandwidth of the aerial. You

have to send the activation signal across the Republic at the sa
time that you try to download the entire Nestene Consciousness,
so you're going to need an awful lot of bandwidth...' Tapping a
few keys the Doctor examined the results on one of the inse
monitors.

'Oh... I see your problem. You have to download the
Consciousness first, to ensure it can spread itself across the
Republic. But you can't do both at once. You've left it a bit late,
haven't you?'

Matheson seemed a little taken aback. 'My people were supposed
to integrate Republica Communications' equipment into the
transmitter-receiver array, but there was a technical glitch.'

'So that's why you killed Delta-Eva – to get his technology?
What was wrong with a hostile takeover?'

'Oh, it was fairly hostile, Doctor, trust me. But, this, as you
can see, is my problem – and I think I add, a direct cause of *your*
interference!'

'Me? I'm honoured to have had such an effect, but what am
I supposed to have done?'

Matheson was now on the borders of getting really angry.
'Your futile little chase through Warehouse 2, Doctor. The killer
Auton managed to cause a considerable amount of collateral
damage during its pursuit – including the majority of the
equipment needed to increase the bandwidth.'

'Oh, I'm so terribly sorry. But as a successful businessman,
surely you should know the importance of choosing the right
employee for the job?'

Matheson hit him round the face. Hard.

'Within a couple of hours, I will need at least ten times the
available bandwidth to achieve my aims. And you will provide it.'
Matheson snapped his fingers, and the Autons aimed their guns
straight at the Doctor.

'I don't really have much choice, do I?'

'Not really, no.'

'And what if I decide to throw another spanner in the works
instead?'

'I still have Autons all across the station. And two Nestene
swarms. All of this can be rebuilt. It will take time, of course, but
I will do it. Although the bloodshed will be far greater, since the
time to roll-out will be less. And the consequences to you won't

be pleasant.'

'Oh good, a threat. What do you think you can threaten me With, Matheson? Death? I don't think so. I've faced it before and I'll face it again.'

'Your TARDIS.'

'Oh, not that one again. I told you. No, no, no! I'll destroy it before I let your "business partners" get their tentacles on it And I think an explosion of Artron energy that big would attract the attention of the Time Lords, don't you?'

'You're assuming you'll get the chance. The Nestenes have drawn back from a full-scale attack on your mind, Doctor, because – believe this or not – they think you might be useful. But if you betray them – if you betray us – then such considerations simply evaporate.

'They will rape your mind Doctor. Every last scrap of information, every vital piece of knowledge. Everything. You'll be left a drooling imbecile, and the Nestene Consciousness will have time travel.'

'What's to stop that happening anyway?'

'My word is my bond.'

'Really?'

'Really.' Matheson actually looked affronted that someone could possibly doubt him.

The Doctor was too tired to argue. 'Scylla and Charybdis, rock and a hard place, needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few... Take your pick. That's the only reason I'm helping you. You want bandwidth, I'll give you bandwidth.'

'Thank you, Doctor. I felt sure you'd see the error of your ways. I'll leave Marc to guard me. He can help you,' he said silkily. 'And there'll be two Synthespians outside the door, should you need anything else.'

Like an energy bolt through the chest. 'That'll be fine. I'm quite a dab hand at engineering and telephony. I mean, I do travel around in a telephone box.'

As the quip sailed over Matheson's head, he nodded at Marc, who moved to stand by the Doctor.

'You're with me!' he snapped at the Autons. 'I have a rehearsal to attend.'

As the metal door closed, the Doctor turned to the artificial Marcus Brooks. 'And you're here to help me, eh?'

Marc nodded. ‘In any way I can, Doc.’

The Doctor hated shapeshifters, duplicates, replicas, facsimiles, call them what you will. It was always so disturbing: familiar speech patterns coming out of familiar mouths in familiar faces, driven by completely unfamiliar minds. This wasn’t the Marc that he had met in The Mitre only a day ago, unless Matheson’s plans were even more complex than the Doctor imagined. But Matheson had had no way of knowing that the Doctor and Marc would meet up – unless he had been tracked from the moment he and Peri had landed on the station, and thinking like that would make his headache even worse. Still, he had to find out.

‘Is there a real Marcus Brooks?’ he asked. ‘Or has it been you all the time?’

‘Oh, there is a Marc,’ the Auton said casually. ‘He’s in a metabolic coma. This body needs to regularly touch base with the original’s mind to ensure the integrity of the brain print. He had to be utterly convincing. *Skin Deep* breaks down after a few hours.’

‘Does the real Marc know what’s happening?’ This was fascinating – a proper conversation with an Auton. Wonders would never cease. Next week, cream tea with a Dalek.

‘You’ve got to get started on this, Doctor,’ said the Marc Auton. ‘Time is pressing.’

The Doctor held both his hands up. ‘I know, I know. But just indulge me, will you?’

‘Marc is here. His mind is animating me as much as the Nestene Consciousness, except that he’s in a dream state. He’s seeing analogues and analogies of all of this. I’m probably the most advanced type of Auton apart from the swarm leader – even more advanced than a facsimile had to be to fool you.’

‘How fascinating,’ said the Doctor. *So there was a swarm leader.* ‘And flattering. Well, better get started. Can you get me a tool kit?’

Mrs Svenson was standing over the marble top of one of her work surfaces, rolling out some dough. The smell of baking filled the kitchen as Claudia and Peri entered.

‘Miss Claudia – I didn’t expect to see you.’ Claudia felt a moment of doubt – surely this was the real Mrs Svenson, the

one who baked cookies for her, the one who had made her special recipe milky drink for young Claudia when she couldn't sleep after her mother had left home?

'We... we didn't want to make a fuss, Mrs Svenson.'

'A fuss, you? Oh never, Miss Claudia. I'm baking. If you and your friend want to go into the living room, I'll bring you some freshly baked cookies and a nice pot of hot coffee.'

'That would be great, Mrs Svenson,' said Claudia, as Mrs Svenson bent down to retrieve something from the oven.

'Do you like cookies, Peri?' the cook called over her shoulder.

It hit Claudia in an instant. How the hell did she know who Peri was? 'Now, Peri!'

Peri pressed the call button on the phone. Mrs Svenson was just turning round, her hand now a gun. Claudia braced herself, but the phone appeared to have had one last shot in it: the beloved family cook collapsed to the floor, her features blurring until she was nothing more than a lumpy Auton, lifeless on the stone flagging. Green ooze was streaming from the eyes and nose.

'Quickly,' said Peri, dragging Claudia away from the horrific sight. 'Which way to the den?'

Claudia pointed left as they exited the kitchen, and the two of them ran hell for leather down the corridor.

'The battery's completely dead, Claudia. That was our last shot.'

'Not if we can reach the den!'

Bosun appeared at the end of the corridor. He stood with his hand stretched out.

'Oh shit!' shouted Claudia. 'Duck!' The two girls ran to opposite sides of the corridor as an energy bolt seared past them, shattering a Ming vase and incinerating two floral arrangements en route.

Claudia gestured for Peri to follow her, turning left, then right then left again, deep into the heart of the mansion. But Bosun's footsteps were getting quicker and closer. 'Here!' Claudia pushed on the den door. And nothing happened. It was locked: hardly surprising, given how her father considered it to be his inner sanctum. And unlike the Doctor earlier, she didn't have any handy gadgets in her pockets to spring the lock.

Bosun must have been right around the corner. Almos
upon them. There had to be something. Anything!.

She remembered. She remembered scuttling up to the doo
toy computer in her hands, ready to spend the morning typin
away while her Dad worked...

'Daddy – it's me!' she screamed. There was a click of bol
and a whir of gears as the door creaked open. Claudia pulled P
through after her and slammed the door shut. Seconds lat
there was a repeated thumping from the other side.

'That's not going to hold it for long,' said Peri. 'One energy
bolt and it'll be through.'

'Don't underestimate my dad,' Claudia replied. 'I remembe
he added that security feature when I was really little, so I cou
come in and sit with him without making him get up and oper
the door. But the door and the walls – they're reinforced. Da
reckoned they could stand up to a directed energy weapon.'

'Then we're safe for a while. Right – time to put your plan
into action.' She and Claudia began opening the display cabinets
and removing the mobile phones.

The set was a scene of frantic activity. With only an hour or s
to go until the live broadcast, set dressers were fussing arou
like camp insects, while the director was trying to ward off hi
nervous breakdown with a few swigs of vodka, which he hoped
had gone urmoticed. Sadly not. Treeve's dreams of fame a
glory were going to be as limited as the lifespan of his liver.
Matheson's eyes were everywhere.

'You have a problem, Walter,' said Dominique, as the two of
them shared a not so cosy tete-a-tete behind the set of th
kitchen. 'I gather the girls have not only reached the mansio
but have managed to barricade themselves inside one of the
rooms.'

Matheson sighed. He loved Dominique Delacroix a great
deal. She was his consort at all public events, and, in priva
much, much more that. She was the only person he had allowed
to get close to him – Miss Scarlet would be horrified if she ever
suspected that there was someone else on the station who knew
more about him than she did. But Dominique did have an
armoying habit of stating the damned obvious!

'So I've heard.'

‘And you plan to do what about this, exactly?’

‘I’ve been to the Bruderbakker mansion – I have a little inside information. I think I know a very cost-effective way to deal with the girls once and for all.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Ninety minutes till the broadcast. I think it’s time for a wave of suspicious deaths across Station One, don’t you?’

Dominique Delacroix pursed her lips. ‘Sounds divine, darling. Absolutely divine. I trust you’ll get onto it right away?’

‘Of course. Consider it done.’

The Doctor had removed a panel from the side of the control bank and was poking around with a Laserson probe. Naturally he could see exactly what the problem was: Matheson’s technicians had assumed that the download rate would be constant – and who could blame them? He’d hardly explained what he was planning to download, had he? But a psionic feed of the magnitude that Matheson was expecting would arrive as a modulated signal. At irregular intervals, the download would require all of the bandwidth, effectively cutting off the activation signal.

That wasn’t too much of a problem; complications arose when the upload was actually the Nestene Consciousness as well, spreading out across the Republic. That signal couldn’t be disrupted – it would cause the Consciousness considerable pain and all manner of horrible feedback effects. And then there were the interference patterns to consider. Two psionic signals in the same datastream with identical frequencies would play havoc with each other unless there was some kind of buffer signal between them, which meant yet another drain on the available bandwidth. And then there was Matheson’s heartfelt plea to the Union for help to be considered.

But the solution was obvious, if you were a Time Lord with experience of engineering that spanned galaxies and millennia. He could fix it in about ten minutes, but where would the fun be in that?

‘I’ve found the problem,’ he told Auton Marc. ‘Should take me about an hour to make the necessary adjustment, then it’s systems go.’

‘That’s cutting it pretty fine, Doctor. We go live in just over an hour.’

‘Don’t you need to get back to the set? *Executive Desires* wouldn’t be *Executive Desires* without Jon Chambers, surely?’

‘But I’m not Jon Chambers.’ He – it – *he* – was easier – sounded puzzled. ‘Jon Chambers is already there.’

Fascinating. Did Jon Chambers’ facsimile believe it was Jon Chambers, or Jon Chambers as played by Marcus Brooks? Or part of the Nestene Consciousness? Or all three?

Deciding that one headache was enough, he replaced the panel and got to his feet, dusting his hands on his jacket. ‘Right – I’ll need the following equipment. Another two Laserson probes, a microwave hammer, a proton wand...’ He carried on listing more equipment that he had no intention of using. ‘Did you get all of that?’ he said at the end.

‘No problem.’

‘Can I ask you another question?’

The Auton shrugged. ‘Depends what it is.’

‘Do you remember playing Jon Chambers?’

The Auton frowned. The Doctor knew that, below a few millimetres of extremely flexible plastic, lay the lumpen form of a killer Auton, but the Nestene’s facsimile technology was outstanding: he could really believe that this was the real Marc. He just hoped that the Auton felt the same way.

‘Do I remember? Of course I remember! Best role in the world. I was named best soap star by *Republic Times* magazine three years in a row.’

‘That must have been a great honour.’

‘You can’t imagine what it was like. Penthouse apartment, fast cars, women, drugs... I had a lot. All of it. Then it was snatched away by that bitch, Dominique. Thrown onto the scrapheap, having to live off the parts that no one else would touch. Frog monsters. Aliens with bumpy foreheads. Men in rubber suits.’

The Doctor couldn’t help thinking of his exile to Earth. Hadn’t that been something similar? ‘You must have been so angry, Marc.’

‘Angry? Angry?! This is my life you’re talking about! Everything I held dear to me, it all vanished overnight!’

‘And this was all due to Dominique Delacroix?’

‘Her and her army of lackeys. Matheson, Kibble, Tyburn. All of them.’

The Doctor adopted his most understanding tone. ‘What if I told you that there was a way to get your own back?’

Marc smiled. It wasn’t a very nice smile. ‘I’m listening.’

Peri hefted the mobile phone in her hand. ‘Not exactly a design classic, is it?’

‘Actually, it was. My dad’s company won an award for it.’

Oh well, thought Peri. It takes all sorts. ‘But how are we going to use these things? The batteries must be dead by now.’

‘Hence these.’ Claudia produced a bunch of cables. ‘We recharge them.’

‘All of them?’

‘All of them – we can’t be too careful. Some of them have been in here for years, so I’m not sure how long the batteries can hold their charge for.’ She started unplugging the cables into various power points around the den. Each time, she called for Peri to throw over a different mobile, until ten of them were set. Sitting happily on the floor, little recharging lights flashing contentedly.

‘How long’s this going to take?’ The sizzling noise from the other side of the door had stopped, but she didn’t believe the Autons would give up that easily.

Neither of them noticed the *Living Vision* set come to life in the far corner of the den.

Marc had gone to collect the Doctor’s tool kit, and his new guard was one of the less advanced Synthespians – a basic killer Auton. Nowhere near as catty and with dreadful dress sense.

There was a part of him that sympathised with Matheson. Imagine being the latest in a dynasty of successful businessmen, working at the very frontiers of commerce, only to find yourself in the most consumer-friendly place in the galaxy? Invent it, market it and people would buy it. Where was the fun in that? Matheson craved the excitement, the adventure, and the Doctor could understand that.

But his solution was too drastic, too dangerous. There were too many points of failure, there was too much risk to everyone and everything involved. Mankind might be indomitable under normal circumstances, but these circumstances were far fro

normal. By the time Matheson had rallied his new troops through the Great Barrier, the entire Nestene Consciousness would have swarmed over hundreds of thousands of worlds. The humans would be facing an Auton army billions-strong, with all the possibilities of infiltration that went along with that.

The Doctor couldn't allow it. He couldn't allow any part of it. How easy it would be to just set the transmitter to explode, but what would that achieve? He'd be dead soon after, so would Peri, Marc, Claudia... but the Nestene Consciousness – at least part of it – would still be here.

In a way, Matheson was right: his plan would minimise the number of casualties. But Matheson's definition of minimal was considerably higher than the Doctor's.

The console bleeped at him, and one of the monitors burst into life.

'Ah, Doctor.'

'Matheson,' the Doctor replied without enthusiasm. 'Checking up on me, are you?'

'Not at all. That's what the Autons are for. No, I thought I'd warn you that I'm about to bring the transmitter online. And no, I'm not going to tell you why.'

'How am I expected to work with these interruptions?' he snapped. 'Inadequate tools, lack of resources...'

'Your tools will be with you soon. The Marcus Auton is currently collecting them.'

'Well, that's a start. Although given the antiquated junk you've given me to work with, I'd probably have more luck with a hammer and chisel.'

'Just get it done, Doctor, just get it done.' His image faded.

What was he using the transmitter for? Somehow, the Doctor had to interrogate this dinosaur of a computer without alerting the Auton behind him or giving the game away.

'I'm just going to run a diagnostic – is that all right?' he said in the voice he usually reserved for babies and small children. The Auton simply stared at him through those empty eyes. 'People without souls,' muttered the Doctor. 'That's what DeValle meant.'

'Come on, come on,' screamed Claudia at the row of mobile phones – the old mobile phones, the ones withdrawn because

they leaked sub-etheric radiation. She just hoped that they leak enough of it; without the Doctor, they couldn't modify them.

Quantity, not quality – story of my life.

'Another few minutes,' she said to Peri. 'And then we break out and deal with Bosun.'

'Are you sure this is going to work?'

'These old phones leaked so much radiation they were a health hazard. But no, I'm not sure. All we can do is make sur they're completely charged, and then go for it.' A sudden noise made her turn. The 3DTV was on.

'Did you switch that on?' she asked Peri.

'No. I wouldn't know how.' Peri peered at the tiny figures parading across the raised dais.

God knows what the programme was, but it appeared to be a platoon of soldiers fighting in one of those wars on Ancient Earth that seemed to fascinate young boys. Ordered rows of men, marching across a muddy landscape, then marching off the platform of the 3DTV set onto the floor of the den -

'Peri!' she screamed as a small but perfectly formed energy bolt shattered a photograph on the wall above her head. 'Autons!'

Peri glanced down at the ever-increasing horde of three-inch-high Autons as they marched towards them. Another bolt shot out, then another.

'Into the bathroom!' She and Peri dodged another barrage and threw themselves into Chub Bruderbakker's private john, slamming the door behind them.

'What are they?' said Peri.

'3DTVs work by extruding plastic to create 3D versions of a TV programme. They must be Autons!' Claudia couldn't believe she said the next phrase. 'Baby Autons!'

The door rattled under the onslaught of bolt after bolt slamming into it.

'I'm pretty sure this door isn't reinforced. It won't take them long to break in. And then we're done for.'

'Claudia?' Peri's voice was eager. 'These 3DTV sets – are they quite popular?'

'Popular? Ninety-nine per cent of the Republic's population have one...' She trailed off as she realised the significance of words. 'Oh my God.'

The hammering on the door intensified.

The Doctor's fears had been justified. The tiny, tiny beam of light power that Matheson had installed was pinpointing a mansion in Residential 1. Three guesses which one, he thought. It was logical that Claudia and Peri would seek sanctuary there, but it was also logical that Matheson would have foreseen that and have put contingencies in place: more Autons.

'Hang on a minute,' he muttered. 'That's odd...' He realised what he was looking at: a television signal. He turned to the Auton behind him. 'Could you pass me that ion bonder?'

The Auton turned sharply to the tool bin behind it, extracted a small grey tube, and handed it to the Doctor. 'Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Thank you very much. You're a great help.'

Now... let's see what this does.

Tiny holes were appearing in the bathroom door. Not big enough for the baby Autons to clamper through, but enough to weaken the strength of the door. What if a troop of them was already opening the main door to the den, allowing Bosun in to deliver the final killing blow?

Claudia looked around the bathroom for something to use as a weapon. If it had been Joan's boudoir, it wouldn't have been a problem – the woman bought nail-varnish remover in industrial sized barrels. But antiperspirant, aftershave and an electric toothbrush were hardly weapons of war, were they?

Peri screamed as the electric toothbrush attacked her, bristles whizzing round at a rate that Claudia felt sure the Republic Dental Association wouldn't approve of.

'Get it off me!' she shrieked as it tried to bore into her throat. Claudia tried to pull it away only to find that she too was the subject of attack: her father's electric razor was trying to shave her to death.

She fell backwards, narrowly missing banging her head on the porcelain base of the shower, while the razor tried to give her the best shave a girl could get. She pulled at it, but the blades were embedded in her leg – the pain was excruciating as she tugged at it. She glanced at her dad's bathroom cabinet, and was horrified to see the ordinary toothbrushes rattling menacingly in their glass, while the shower curtain was rustling in an extreme

murderous manner.

And the door was almost shot through. Another few moments and the bathroom would be swarming with baby Autons and their baby guns – but deadly. A sudden clatter as an electric toothbrush hit the floor, but that didn't stop it: it stood there on the tiled floor, bristles akimbo, preparing to strike once more. Meanwhile, Claudia's electric shaver was trying to shave her thighbone.

Silence.

No baby Autons or killer toothbrushes, no murderous razors or sinister shower curtains. Just silence. Toothbrushes and razors lay prone on the tiled floor.

'Hello? Can you hear me?' Both of them recognised the muffled voice from the other side of the door.

'What if it's a trap?' said Claudia. 'We open the door and those little bastards are waiting for us?'

'I think they could have killed us in here.' She gestured at the now lifeless bathroom paraphernalia.

Claudia tentatively opened the door. 'Hello?'

The floor was strewn with melted bits of plastic; nothing was moving. Apart from the foot-high simulacrum of the Doctor on the dais of the 3DTV.

'Doctor?' asked Peri.

'I hope you can hear me, because I can't hear or see you. Strictly one-way traffic, I'm afraid. There's been a lot of Nestene activity in your vicinity, but I think I've managed to stop it for a short time – but not for long. Now get out of there. Peri – take Claudia to the TARDIS and wait for me. It's probably guarded, so use that mobile phone – and the other ones in Matheson's den. But get there, and get there quick -'

The signal cut off.

'I hope he's all right,' said Peri. 'He's in trouble – I just know he is.'

'Then again, when isn't he?'

'At least we're on the right track with the mobiles.'

'They're fully charged,' said Peri, looking at the phones. 'But we need something to carry them in.'

Claudia rummaged through a large wooden trunk. 'Will this do?' she said, holding up a rucksack.

'Looks perfect.' Peri started unplugging the phones and handing them to Claudia, who placed each one into one of the

compartments in the rucksack. ‘That’s it. And one each for us
She handed over the blockiest and hopefully most effective –
phone to Claudia.

Armed to the teeth with telephones, Peri turned to Claudia.
‘Time to save the day and rescue the Doctor, I suppose.’

Claudia grinned. ‘And make like Lara Croft!’

Peri was non-plussed. ‘Who?’

Claudia carefully opened the door an inch. Together, the
aimed their phones, pressed the buttons, and fired.

‘That’s quite enough, Doctor.’ Matheson nodded at the Auton,
which knocked the Doctor away from the console and left him
sprawled in the corner. Matheson went over and switched o
the Doctor’s comms channel. ‘Ingenious. I wish I’d had a man
like you at my side in the early days. I wouldn’t have needed t
rest of the Nine.’

‘I won’t let you kill Peri and Claudia,’ gasped the Doctor.
‘They’re of no use to you. Let them go!’

Matheson rubbed his chin. ‘That’s the funny thing about
business, Doctor. You never know when something will be
useful. Every acquisition serves a purpose. Peri and Claudia
make superb bargaining tools. Help me or I kill them.’

The Doctor got to his feet. ‘I trust their resourcefulness.’

‘You mean those old mobile phones that Chuck
Bruderbakker keeps in his pockets, the ones that leak? Oh,
that might stop a few of my Autons, but let’s see how they cope
with this.’

Matheson tapped into one of the keyboards. As he did so
the left and right walls slid upwards to reveal 50 Nestene ener
units, 25 on each side, pulsing away with their malignant purple
glow.

‘I don’t need Reef Station One. In less than an hour, chaos
will reign over the New Earth Republic, but, just like
Dominique, I always like to have a dress rehearsal.’ His fing
pressed one final key.

‘Activate!’

All across Reef Station One, things came to life. All sorts o
things.

In Residential 5, Mrs Sable-Au-Corage was strangled by her

fake-pearl necklace – the consequences of trying to pass yours off as someone you're not.

In Wannabe 11, Matilda Hartley wished she'd looked after her teeth when her new, pearly white dentures expanded and suffocated her. Perhaps she should have flossed.

In Studio 3, Billy Latimer, director of the long-awaited sexflick, *Confessions of a Monoid*, was speechless when his megaphone bonded itself to his mouth. Sadly, no one would miss him.

And in the WJM Tower, Walter J. Matheson gave a superior grin as the Nestene Consciousness rose from its slumber and reached out across Reef Station One. He looked over at the Doctor.

'Act One, Scene One, Doctor. How does it feel to finally lose?'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Marc looked around nervously. He'd finally escaped, finally found a way out of that district that never ended. He didn't know who'd knocked him out, and he'd had some pretty weird dreams, but he was fairly sure he was back in the real world now.

Unfortunately, it wasn't quite the bit of the real world that he wanted to be in. He'd woken up in a studio lot, asleep under a set of bleachers from some long-time potboiler. Who had dumped him there? And why?

He ran his fingers through his hair to achieve at least a modicum of respectability, smoothed down his clothing, and peered out onto the lot.

People! There were people here. Okay, so they were tourists, but they were *real people*. And he could see the walls as well. This was Studio 1... and this was the KWJM3 lot.

Not good.

But he didn't have a lot of choice, did he? Trying to act as nonchalantly as possible – *remember that part in* The Rep *when you were a suspected serial killer and had to bluff your way out? Think like that!* – Marc sauntered towards the main gates of the lot. Something told him that the answers to all of his questions were buried under the WJM Tower. Literally.

Peri and Claudia cautiously opened the door, but Bosun was nothing more than a dead Auton, covered in green goo, slumped next to the grandfather clock. The women looked at one another.

'Two down... how many other staff are there in the mansion?' asked Peri, glancing nervously around them.

Claudia began counting them off. 'There's Shirley the senior housemaid, Mr Svenson the gardener, the two kitchen maids, the chambermaids...'

'In other words, a lot,' said Peri. 'Great.' She held up her mobile phone. 'I just hope this idea of yours works.' A mobile

phone against an army of pit robots? How ludicrous was that?

'Got a better one?' snapped Claudia. 'I'm sorry. Still a bit shaken. Anyway, where is this TARDIS of yours?'

Peri could understand Claudia's reaction. Household appliances weren't supposed to attack you, any more than faithful family retainers were. TARDIS? Who said anything about the TARDIS?' she said.

'But the Doctor said -'

'The Doctor says a lot of things. Not all of them very sensible. Do you really want to hide away while Marc and the Doctor need our help?' Stay in the TARDIS, indeed! Peri was actually quite insulted by the Doctor's imperious command. Did he think she couldn't look after herself? After all they'd been through together?

A broad smile dawned on Claudia's face. 'You mean...?'

'Got your phone? Good. Lock and load!'

The women made their way through the mansion, leaving the suppurating mess that had once been a major-domo behind them.

All across Reef Station One, the familiar became the unfamiliar.

A couple celebrating their first wedding anniversary stepped out of the most exclusive restaurant in Entertainment 3, staring at each other with doe eyes. The cab was waiting for them, ready to whisk them away from the restaurant to an evening of champagne and dancing. Five minutes later, the cab was a crumpled, burning wreck. And so were they. The Synthespian cab driver simply walked away, shooting the odd passer-by as he did so.

In the living room of the Wallace family, Mum, Dad and little Billy were sat around their *Living Vision* set, watching *This Evening with Phil and Bev*. They'd all been looking forward to this – an exclusive interview with singer and icon Jared Morrell. What they hadn't been looking forward to was Phil shooting Mum through the head, Bev blowing Dad's heart out of his chest, and little Billy having his eyes clawed out by a three-inch-high Jared Morrell in tight leather trousers.

Emma Dance looked at her new figure in the full-length mirror. The people at *Vein Deep* had said that they could perform

miracles, but her new cleavage was more than a miracle – it w
a lifesaver. Cover this body in a slinky dress, and no one wou
be able to say no. At that point, her breasts exploded.

The story was the same across Reef Station One. Every W.
Inc. branded product was no longer a friendly member of the
family but a hostile intruder. People who managed to survive the
shock of vacuum cleaners coming to life, microwave ovens
attempting to irradiate them, toothbrushes trying to choke
them, barricaded themselves in rooms, only to discover quite
how pervasive Walter J. Matheson's marketing campaigns h
been. Duvets, pillows, light fittings...

Synthespians suddenly stopped being wallpaper an
background noise: taxi drivers, barmen, waiters – all of them
were now ruthless killing machines. And those were just the
obvious Synthespians. Many, many more so-called 'people'
across the station were nothing of the sort: policemen, husband
wives – either Synthespians, or recipients of WJM Inc.'s
miraculous *Skin Deep* process – turned on their loved ones,
slaughtering everyone in sight. And what was the point of
locking the doors when every home had a *Living Vision* set?

There was some resistance: a group of construction workers
building yet another palatial mansion in Residential 1 reacted
immediately when one of their number turned from 'good old
Tom' into 'psychopathic murderer Tom': they attacked him with
welding torches and liquefied him. But such acts were few and
far between. Too many of the inhabitants of Reef Station One
had recently seen a film or a TV programme lovingly restored by
Redux. Which meant that subtle telepathic messages had been
beamed into their heads by the images on celluloid and videotape that
Matheson's process employed. They simply didn't have the w
to defend themselves.

The Doctor looked away from the *Living Vision* set that
Matheson had kindly activated and said, 'You seriously expect me to
help you after this... this *carnage*?'

'Call it a loss leader. Give me full bandwidth, Doctor.'

The Doctor stood his ground. 'Not while this is happening. I
will not countenance mass murder!'

'Mass murder?' Matheson even had the effrontery to loo

offended. ‘These people are sheep. Their deaths are no loss the human race. They’re nothing!’

‘Every speck of life is *something*, Matheson. The universe is more than atoms and molecules, and a damned sight more th marketing and profit margins!’

‘All *energy* is a form of life, Doctor! So doesn’t that give the Nestene Consciousness a right to exist? A being almost as old time itself. She is the queen of the universe!’

‘Queen of the universe? Pretentious! You’ve been watching too many of your own soaps, Matheson,’ the Doctor spat. ‘Th Nestene Consciousness has *no* place in this universe. It’s the child of a revenant from another universe! An invader!’

‘The Time Lord cant of your masters, Doctor. The ones who have forced the Nestenes hand in this matter. You talk o marketing? The Time Lords have done a pretty good job of that over the millennia, haven’t they?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The wise and all-powerful guardians of the timelines watching but never acting? How does that square with genocide, eh, Doctor? Your people are annihilating the Nestene homeworld, and you stand there like some old-fashione preacher. Fire and brimstone for everyone who doesn’t agr with you!’ Matheson turned to the bank of screens, wher wholesale slaughter reigned unabated.

‘I’m not doing anything your masters haven’t already started. And if you want those girls to live, I suggest you complete you work immediately. We go on air in less than an hour!’

The Doctor turned to the bank of controls. Two Autons were watching his every move, the baleful purple glare of the second swarm was flooding from both sides of the room.

‘I don’t appear to have much choice, do I?’ he said with a grimace.

‘Not really, no. Now, I have to get back to the set. I’ll be back before transmission. Just make sure you’ve done it, Doctor.’

‘Marcus – the Auton Marcus – hasn’t returned yet with the tools I need.’

‘Do it – otherwise I’ll make sure you watch Peri and the Bruderbakker girl scream in agony before I have my Autons tear them to pieces. Understood?’

‘Perfectly.’ Matheson was getting rattled. Then again, so w
the Doctor.

Peri and Claudia had been spoilt for choice when they reached
the mansion’s garage: about twenty vehicles, from sporty litt
numbers to off-roaders to SUVs, filled the parking bays.

‘The four-by-four,’ said Peri, pointing at a decent copy of a
Cherokee. ‘God knows what we’re going to run into.’

‘Literally,’ said Claudia. ‘The problem with these Autons is
that they don’t stay down when you knock them over.’

Autons had been the least of their worries while escaping
from the mansion. None of the other staff had shown their
(false) faces, but the rest of the house had made its presen
clear. Anything with plastic in it had either thrown itself at them,
fired at them, or exploded. The first two mobile phones were
nearly exhausted, and they only reached the garage!

‘If it’s like this here – what the hell’s it going to be like when
we get out?’ said Claudia, echoing Peri’s thoughts. She pointed at
a flat-screen TV hanging on the garage wall. She’d turned to
news channel, which was showing Matheson’s handiwork acro
the station. ‘It looks like Matheson’s made his move.’

Peri shuddered. ‘I’ll let you drive.’

‘Going so soon? I’m disappointed.’ The women span round
at the sound of the voice. Behind them, leaning seductively
against a yellow sports car, was Joan. Dressed in a red leat
catsuit, she had a broad grin on her face. ‘You’re going to miss
all the fun!’

‘Fun?’ said Peri. ‘People are dying!’

Joan laughed. ‘They’re only people. No one will miss them.’

‘You always were a selfish bitch,’ snapped Claudia. ‘Yo
killed my father, and now you’re standing there laughing?’ She
grabbed her mobile phone and fired it at her stepmother.
Nothing happened.

‘Sorry dear – that doesn’t work on me. I’m real.’

Claudia walked up to her and slapped her round the fac
‘Real? You were never real. Not a real mother, not a real pers
You’re nothing more than a leech, a parasite. And I’m going t
put an end to it right now.’

Peri gasped as Claudia punched Joan in the face, knocking
her to the concrete floor.

‘You’re wasting your time,’ said Joan, wiping a trickle o blood from her mouth. ‘Walter’s won, and there’s nothing you can do. I’ve got what I wanted: the mansion, money – I’m eve getting my career back. And I don’t ever have to worry abou you or that bore of a father of yours again.’

‘Why you -’ A foot kicked out, but Joan grabbed it, throwing Claudia off balance and sending her flying into the car.

‘Face it, Claudia. I’ve got it all now. And you’ve got nothing.’ Claudia smiled. ‘No, Joan. I have one thing you’ll never have. Real friends.’

Peri smashed the wrench down on Joan’s head, leaving t woman unconscious on the floor.

‘I wish I’d done that,’ muttered Claudia.

Peri put her arm around her. ‘That’s what friends are for Now come on – we’ve got a Doctor to rescue.’

Neither of them gave Joan a second glance. Which, sadly, w the true story of her life.

Marc found the concealed entrance he’d been looking for – th faintest trace of the faintest outline in the concrete wall of th underground car park. He placed his hand on it and wa surprised when it slid open. Surely it couldn’t be this easy? H stepped into the elevator, and tried to remember which button the Auton cops had pressed. Relying on instinct, he tapped a brief staccato on the elevator pad, and waited as the door clos and the elevator began its erratic journey.

Matheson decided to walk the short distance to the *Executive Desires* sound stage. All around him, Hawaiian shirts and fa children were being shot down in cold blood, but that meant very little to him. They weren’t *real* people. The real people were on the other side of the Great Bear, ready and waiting to claim what was rightfully theirs.

The Doctor switched off the Laserson probe and closed th cover. He had done what Matheson asked. The transmitte receiver was now configured to send *Executive Desires* – and the Auton activation signal – across the Republic, while allowing the download of the entire Nestene Consciousness. With a little bit of bandwidth left for Matheson’s heartfelt plea to the old

country.

He was used to cutting it fine, but this was ridiculous. Matheson he could deal with, but the entire Nestene Consciousness? The Great Old Ones gave him the creeps w were they so fascinated by tentacles and slime? Why could they choose something fluffy and comforting? Perhaps that's why the Great Intelligence used Yeti – some sort of transference.

He turned to the Autons. 'Tell your boss that I've done what he asked. He can start the download whenever he wants.'

But download to where? Where was Matheson planning to house the entire Nestene Consciousness?

Claudia had never realised how evil Walter J. Matheson's claws dug into Reef Station One. She knew that anything with his name on it was now an offensive weapon, but she'd never known how much he was part of the station's everyday life. O both sides of the highway, she could see people being strangled by garden hoses, decapitated by chainsaws, and blown up by cigarette lighters. Nothing was safe any more.

As the four-by-four went well over the speed limit through district after district, Claudia felt guilty. She was enjoying herse Her father was lying dead somewhere, and she was having fun!

But she was going to nail Matheson – and she knew her da would approve: Claudia Bruderbakker was Chuck Bruderbakker's daughter, and she was going to prove it. Th fight with Joan had given her some degree of closure, but sh wanted more. She glanced at Peri. 'Hang on!'

Pedal to the metal.

Dominique Delacroix clapped her hands. 'People! A word please.' Both the human actors and the Synthespians turned to listen to her.

'In twenty minutes, the first new episode of *Executive Desires* in over three years will go out, live, to our billions of loyal viewers across the entire New Earth Republic.' She ran manicured hand through her dark red hair. 'I don't want any fluffs, any corpsing. We are all professionals, and I expect us all to behave that way.'

She raised an eyebrow at the young actress playing Anne 'You weren't at all convincing in the first scene with Mrs

Kapalski, dear. You've just discovered that your father is your brother – the way you reacted, it looked like you'd mislaid your car keys. Put some emotion into it! And Marcia, dear – Caitlin is supposed to scream when she's shot, not look pleasantly surprised.'

'Err... Miss Delacroix...' The hesitant voice came from one of the extras. 'I was wondering about my motivation in Act Three, Scene Two.'

'You're an extra, dear. No one will notice.' She smiled the smile of a caged lioness. 'Any other questions?' There was a mutter from around her. 'Then get to your positions.'

'Impressive.' Walter J. Matheson was standing behind her. 'You should moonlight as a motivational speaker.'

'We should have replaced all of them with Synthespians, Walter,' she said, lighting the cigarette in her unreasonably long cigarette holder.

'My factories have been working overtime to produce the ones that are most necessary. I'm sure that your human actors will live up to the task. Not that it's that important, Dominique.'

'Not important? This is *Executive Desires*, darling! Of course it's important.'

As long as he lived, Matheson knew he'd never understand the divine Dominique Delacroix. But that was part of her allure, wasn't it? 'What's more important is what the backroom boys are up to. You need to get to the WJM Tower within the next ten minutes.'

'Walter – don't fuss so.' She snapped her fingers. A slinky female figure appeared from behind one of the flats. Not only was she dressed identically to Dominique Delacroix, she was Dominique Delacroix. Or rather, she was Majeste Parnell Partington Wilby Poindexter Ravel. 'Majeste here can take over from now on. Ready?'

She linked arms with Matheson and led him off the sound stage. 'This is going to be the greatest performance of my life!'

The group of Autons appeared to have been working in one of the hotels in Entertainment 1. Dressed in blue-and-gold frock coats, their faces still wore expressions of docile servility, even as they gunned down any passers-by unlucky enough not to have sought cover – however fleeting that cover may have been, given

what horrors lay indoors.

The four-by-four scattered the Auton concierges like ninepins. A stray energy bolt knocked off the nearside wingmirror, but the car was well away before the Autons could scramble to their feet.

'How long till we get there?' asked Peri.

'Shouldn't be more than another ten minutes,' Claudia replied. Thankfully, one of Bradley's jobs had been to ensure that all of the cars in the garage always had full tanks – Claudia did fancy breaking down around here.

Just glancing from left to right, she could see the sheer panic that had descended on the station: crowds of people running in terror, being herded by one group of Autons into another lying in wait. It didn't help that these were Synthespians, rather than the basic lumpy models: the man who had loaded your shopping that morning was now shooting at you.

And if it was like this in the open... what about at home? She swerved to avoid a huge plastic model of RBC's famous Pert Penguin, which had suddenly decided to flipper people to death. Their experiences with bathroom fittings had been bad enough – but multiply that across the station. The death-toll must be astronomical!

Peri was checking the mobile phones again. 'One of them isn't holding its charge,' she groaned. 'That leaves us with nine, and two of those are nearly dead.'

'Even one's not going to be much good if we don't know where we're going,' said Claudia, voicing an unspoken fear. 'We're assuming that the Doctor is somewhere in the WJM Tower, but it's ninety stories high, Peri. And you yourself said that there were hidden entrances all over the place. How are we going to find the Doctor?' She threw the car into reverse to get away from a six-foot-wide hamburger on legs that was shooting energy bolts from its all-beef pattie.

Peri smiled. 'Don't worry. I think the Doctor will find us. It usually works out like that.'

The Doctor glanced at the Nestene swarm pinned behind the glass like some ghoulish museum display. The pink-purple glow was dim – the Doctor guessed that the majority of its mental energies were being directed outwards to Reef Station One

animating the bloodshed that continued to rage across the station.

Could he have stopped it? Could he have minimised the loss of life? But it was too late for regrets – agonised postmortems could come later, assuming that there was a later. He just hoped that his propensity for thinking on his feet would stand him in good stead in what was turning out to be the final battle.

'Ah, Doctor. Everything shipshape and Bristol fashion?' Matheson had entered the room with Dominique Delacroix.

'You have your bardwidth, Matheson. I've also threaded buffer signals into the upload and the download to prevent interference between the various datastreams.'

'Marvellous, Doctor. And my Autons have been following you every step of the way – according to my business partner your circuitry is a work of sheer elegance.'

'We aim to please,' said the Doctor without the slightest trace of pleasure.

Matheson rubbed his hands together. 'Begin the download, Doctor. The coordinates have been set – it's just a matter of pressing a button. And I believe that you should have the honour.'

The Doctor sneered at him, but the sight of one of the Autons with it's gun-hand aimed at him was persuasion enough. Pursing his lips, he reached out and touched the button.

Marc recognised the place immediately. The row of coffins, the suffused purple glow. This was where they had changed him somehow, put thoughts that weren't his into his head. And this was where he was going to get his own back. He looked around the cavernous room, looking for another door. The Doctor had said there would be another door... Of course – where had Jo emerged from? He ran over to the furthest corner of the room and found what he was looking for.

A metal door. Locked. Bolted. Impenetrable. How was Marcus Brooks, failed soap star, supposed to open that?

Except that he wasn't Marcus Brooks, was he? He was far far more than that. He aimed his hand at the door. With a high-pitched buzz, the hand fell away. He began firing.

The noise in the transmitter-receiver control room was

overpowering. A deep thrum that vibrated through everything, setting the Doctor's teeth on edge.

'The location signal has been sent to the Nestene Homeworld. Interesting hybrid of tachyonics and warp-lattice technology, Matheson. You should be proud of yourself.'

'Oh, but I am, Doctor. Immensely proud. As should you be. I could have done it without you, but it wouldn't have been half as much fun.' Matheson gestured at the console. 'May I?'

'Oh, be my guest,' said the Doctor, standing aside.

'It should take a few minutes for the Nestene Homeworld to respond to the signal. Then the download will begin. Ten minutes after that, *Executive Desires* will return to the screen after a long absence, bringing joy – and so very much more to every home across the Republic.'

The Doctor thought about spilling the beans then and there – telling the Autons, and through them the portion of the Nestene Consciousness on Reef Station One, all about Matheson's plan. But what would that achieve? He and Matheson would die, the signal to the Union would never be sent, and, in a few short years, an all-powerful Nestene Consciousness would burst out of the Republic and slaughter the rest of the galaxy. He bit his tongue.

'I have a question, Matheson.'

'Fire away, Doctor. I'm all ears.'

'The Nestene Consciousness has no physical form. It's a creature of pure psionic energy. At the moment, it inhabits the entire planet Polymos, from crust to core. How are you going to contain all of that on Reef Station One? There's nothing here to suggest that you have an alternate planet waiting in the wings.'

'Ah, that's where I come in,' said Dominique Delacroix. She wafted across the room and stood at Matheson's side.

'You? I suspected that you were a facsimile, but -'

'A facsimile?' The woman gave him a look of poisonous disdain. 'You insult me, Doctor. I'm far more than a facsimile. I'm the most advanced Auton construct ever created! My polymer neural nets are more complex than you could possibly imagine – thought processes on the quantum level. I can embody the entire Nestene Consciousness. I will *be* the entire Nestene Consciousness.'

Matheson grinned. 'Doctor – allow me to introduce you to

Dominique Delacroix... the Nestene Queen.'

For once, the Doctor was speechless.

Auton energy bolts are a refined form of telekinesis, rippin matter apart at the sub-atomic level. At their lowest intensity rarely needed, so rarely used – they simply caus unconsciousness, but when focused and backed by the f telepathic might of the Nestene Consciousness, they can te into anything.

The metal door didn't stand a chance.

Marc pushed his invulnerable body through the molten remains of the door, ignoring the smell of burning fabric as his suit caught fire. It was irrelevant. What lay on the other side was the important thing.

A cemetery for the living.

Thousands upon thousands of people, all in comas, all lined up in little metal boxes. Every single Synthespian on the station had a template – either a real person, or a computergenerated personality, such as the actors on *Executive Desires*. And each of the real people was stored here, their bodies maintained, their minds still active – just. Every now and then, the Synthespian would need to reinforce its personality, just like a mobile phone handshaking its base-station. Some of them were still alive, from hall porters to actors to trophy wives.

Marc knew that he was here as well. He walked through th maze of sarcophagi, using his Auton instincts to home in on single brain pattern. His own. Within minutes, he found it.

He stared at the naked body floating in a tank of oxygenated nutrient fluid. It was *him*. Or rather, *he* was him. This was the real Marcus Brooks, not some plastic facsimile who pretended to be him, who thought that he was him.

Part of him wanted to open the coffin, wanted to meet the real Marc. And part of him felt ashamed. But that wasn't what he was there for. With a twinge of regret, he turned from his duplicate and continued down the narrow corridor.

The wall that divided Entertainment 1 from Studio 1 was fas approaching. It didn't help that they were now driving on three tyres, the fourth a casualty of a surprise attack by a twenty-foo tall billboard poster of Dominique Delacroix.

‘The wall, Claudia,’ said Peri with terrified calm.

‘I know.’

‘It’s getting closer.’

‘I *know*.’ Claudia was desperately pressing her sonic key, b nothing was happening. The four-by-four was a hardy vehicl but the walls were solid concrete. There was no way that ev this reinforced cage with bull-bars was going to be able to sma its way through.

‘The wall – perhaps it isn’t just concrete – there’s plastic in there! There must be!’ screamed Peri. She held up two of t mobile phones and pressed the call buttons.

‘I’ve got to brake!’

‘You can’t! There are at least thirty Autons behind us.’

‘I don’t have any choice!’

The wall began to descend.

‘We’re going to make it!’ Claudia yelled. ‘We’re going to make it!’

The four-by-four *thumped* over the remains of the wall and entered Studio 1. It was brilliant daylight, a clear blue cloudless sky.

Claudia braked and stared through the windscreen. If you looked towards the horizon, you could see the impressive aerial that was the centrepiece and *raison d’être* of Reef Station One only a few miles in the distance. But there was something very, very wrong about it.

Clasped around the aerial, an enormous creature writhed and undulated. It must have been tens of miles across, a greeny-yellow cross between a spider, a crab and an octopus, its sin baleful eye looking through the plexiglass dome at the million of terrified inhabitants. All the while, it flickered in and out of existence, its tentacles and claws and tendrils grasping and feeling.

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘Magnificent, isn’t she?’ Matheson looked at the materialising form of the Nestene Consciousness on the *Living Vision* set, but his thoughts were with her final form.

‘Malignant, more like.’ The Doctor was a beaten man – that much was obvious. His compassion for his friends had been his downfall, forcing his hand to serve the glorious Nestene cause.

But the Nestenes were only a short-term acquisition; once they had served their purpose, Matheson would walk onto the galactic stage as the saviour of humanity. He turned to Dominique Delacroix. ‘Manifestation at 10 per cent, my dear. Are you ready?’

‘Ready? Ready? I *was* ready!’ she exclaimed, making her way into an alcove set into the rear wall of the room.

‘You seriously expect that the entire Nestene Consciousness can inhabit a single Auton?’ asked the Doctor. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘The Nestene Consciousness believes it can, and that’s all that counts. The Nestene Queen will direct her forces across the Republic – and she has promised that collateral damage will be minimal.’

‘How magnanimous of her.’ The Doctor paused. ‘What about the real Dominique Delacroix? I assume that there is one somewhere?’

‘Ah... poor Dominique. A brilliant actress – if you like that sort of thing. I always admired her from afar.’ His voice took on a wistful tone. ‘Such a shame that she was a complete bitch in real life.’.

‘So you turned her into an Auton? That’s a little drastic, even for you.’

‘She will be my consort, Doctor. As the war unfolds, Dominique Delacroix will be at my side, supporting me, guiding me... It will be glorious.’ He looked down at the console. ‘Download at 30 per cent. It’s time, Dominique.’

‘You don’t have to do this!’ the Doctor protested.

The perfectly dressed, perfectly coiffured woman in the alcove threw up her hands in delight. 'We're the Nestene darling,' she said, turning to an imaginary camera and giving her trademark smile. 'We've been colonising other planets for a thousand million years. You see, it's in my life! It always will be! Nothing else! Just us, the cameras, and those wonderful peo out there in the dark.

'All right, Mr Matheson – I'm ready for my close-up.'

Studio 1 was no calmer than the other districts Peri and Claud had driven through – if anything, the aftermath looked worse. Buses and cars were overturned, bodies covered the paveme Peri couldn't see any Autons around, but that didn't mean anything: they could be hiding, they could be disguised as anything with plastic in it. Trying to ignore the bulk of that *thing* that blotted out a large proportion of the sky, she tried to locate the WJM Tower.

'It's over there!' she shouted.

'I do know, Peri,' said Claudia. 'I have been here before.' She negotiated around a pile of dead people, trying not to think about it, and headed down the main boulevard towards the Tower. 'Everything set?'

'Phones ready. But I don't think we're going to need them.'

'Why?'

'Because Matheson knows we're coming. If he'd wanted to kill us, he would have done so by now. So I bet there will be reception committee waiting for us when we reach the Tower.'

'We seem to have spent the last couple of days walking in traps. Doesn't that bother you?'

Peri laughed, but deep down she realised that Claudia w telling her a truth she had known for a long time. 'Actually, it does. But I've been travelling with the Doctor for years, Claudia. I've been to the past, the future – I've been all across th universe. And yes, it's always the same. The Doctor comes up with a clever plan, I'm used as bait, he pulls a rabbit from a h and in one single bound I'm free and everything is *okay*.'

The four-by-four was approaching the turn-off for the Tower. 'Is he going to win?'

'The Doctor? Probably – he usually does.' But this time, Per wasn't so certain.

‘Then stay.’

‘What?’

‘When all of this is over, stay here. We can get a place together. I know Marc’s quite sweet on you, and it’s not as you’d be completely out of your depth – you are from the 1980 – the *real* 1980s.’

Peri didn’t know what to say. In all her travels, she’d neve really felt like staying once the Doctor had done whatever it was he had to do. Even when they had landed in her own time, she had merrily entered the TARDIS afterwards to be whisked awa to who knows where.

But Reef Station One? A new home? A real life?

Such considerations were abruptly cut short when the car reached the entrance to the Tower. At least thirty security guar – of the non-human variety – were waiting for them, gun-hands trained in their direction.

‘I think that’s our reception committee,’ said Claudia, turning off the engine. ‘I just hope you’re right, Peri.’

Marc stumbled. Part of him, the part of him that wasn’t Marc, seemed to be fighting for control, but Marc refused to allow it a foothold. He owed it to the Doctor, and he owed it to himself, to see this through. He might only be a duplicate, a replica, a *facsimile*, but he fully intended to make his real self proud. Pushing away the alien invader in his head, he staggered down the corridor.

‘I couldn’t have done this without you,’ said Matheson. An Auton had just entered the room with a bottle of champagne and three flutes. ‘Care for a glass?’

‘I don’t think so, Matheson.’ The Doctor looked over to the alcove, where Dominique Delacroix was wearing a look o complete rapture as the Nestene Consciousness downloaded of itself into her apparently compliant neural net. ‘I don’t exactly feel like celebrating.’

‘Why not? In less than ten minutes, the upload will begin and the signal will be sent to the Union.’

‘Aren’t you worried about your business partners listening in?’

‘Oh, I think they’re a little busy at the moment.’ He popped

open the champagne. ‘Are you sure I can’t tempt you?’

‘You love Dominique Delacroix, don’t you?’

‘I love this Dominique Delacroix, yes. The Nestenes allowed me some say in the personality engrams.’

‘Can’t find a woman so you make one. There are names for people like you. Sad. Pathetic. Want me to go on?’

‘Fire away, Doctor. You’ve lost. It would be nice if you could accept that with good grace and assist me in the last stages of my little takeover, but it’s not really that important. You can take your friend and leave whenever you want now. I won’t stop you, the Nestene Consciousness won’t stop you – take your TARDIS from Wannabe 1 and head off into infinity.’ He sipped his champagne. ‘And see how long it takes your Time Lord masters to track you down for your part in this.’

There was a groan of what appeared to be ecstasy from the alcove – Dominique Delacroix was writhing in pleasure, her eyes alight with the eldritch fires of the Consciousness as it filled her, consumed her, became her.

Matheson walked over to his so-called consort. ‘The Nestene Queen will be triumphant, Doctor. She will rule the New Earth Republic, the most divine sovereign in millennia.’

‘Am I missing something here?’ The Doctor had already worked out that Matheson was intoxicated with success, let alone champagne, but this simply didn’t make sense. ‘I thought the whole point of this was to *defeat* the Nestene Consciousness? Or are you hoping for a quickie divorce?’

‘A true businessman never shows all of his cards until the very end. I will bargain with the Union for a new home for the Nestene Consciousness – from businessman to peacemaker. My name will echo throughout history.’

‘As a traitor. A quisling. You’re selling out your own people for a footnote in the history books and a plastic concubine? You disgust me!’ The Doctor checked the console. There were only scant minutes left before the upload began. *Where was Peri?*

‘Mock away. I have everything I could ever want. My partnership with the Nestene Consciousness was the wisest investment in my entire career, Doctor. And an errant Time Lord can’t bring me down.’

The door opened behind him. Peri and Claudia were almost thrown into the room by a couple of Autons.

‘Ah... back so soon, ladies.’ Matheson hoisted the champagne bottle. ‘Care to partake?’

‘Rot in hell, Matheson,’ snapped Claudia.

‘It’s a good vintage, my dear.’

Peri ran over to the Doctor. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I should be asking you that,’ he replied. ‘Is it as bad out there as it seems?’

Peri nodded. ‘Worse.’

The Doctor hugged her, squeezing her tightly. ‘Mobile phone. Now!’ he whispered in her ear.

‘Download at 90 per cent... 95 per cent...’ Matheson was positively crowing now. ‘Go on, Dominique, go on... just a fraction more!’

The woman writhed and twisted in the alcove, her face almost beatific. The entire Nestene Consciousness, child of Shub-Niggurath, grandchild of the previous universe, was filling every quantum pathway in this oh-so-clever facsimile. All of it. In one time and one place.

Peri handed over the phone, and the Doctor urgently tapped a number into it. Before Matheson could hear the series of little bleeps and react, the Doctor shouted into the mouthpiece.

‘Marc! It’s Dominique!’

In the bowels of the WJM Tower, Marc had just found what he was looking for when the mobile phone rang and delivered the message he’d been expecting.

There she was: the real Dominique Delacroix, floating in a tank of nutrients. He was having trouble concentrating – the Nestene part of his mind was fighting back, and his life as Marc was beginning to disintegrate. He could feel the effects on his body as well: his face was dissolving back into the blank template of a killer Auton. With the last vestiges of Marcus Brooks, he smashed the glass.

Thrown backwards by the rush of fluid, an inactive killer Auton slumped against another of the coffins. Of Marcus Brooks, there was no sign.

The real Dominique Delacroix opened her eyes.

Dominique Delacroix screamed. It started as a human scream, but soon sounded like no living being. It became a shriek. The

sensuous writhing became agonized convulsions as the basic template that the most advanced Auton facsimile depended upon to keep its form severed the link.

'What have you done!' screamed Matheson. He turned to the Autons. 'Kill them. Kill all of them!'

But the Autons were in no position to respond. As one, they collapsed to the floor. Dead. As if they had never been alive.

Matheson was cradling the prone form of Dominique Delacroix in his arms. 'You have to help her! You have to!'

'It's over, Matheson,' said the Doctor. 'It's all over. The entire Nestene Consciousness is now trapped inside that plastic body. Unreachable. Unable to cause any more damage, any more pain. If you want to enter the history books, I suggest you look for a better route than selling out your own people.' Checking that the download was complete, the Doctor shut down the console. 'There we go. All over.'

'You bastard. I won't let you do this!' Matheson produced a stubby little gun from his jacket. 'Save her!'

'Never. Best place for it. Never should have been in this universe to begin with.'

Matheson's gun was kicked from his hand by Claudia.

'I knew those martial-arts lessons would come in useful,' she said to Matheson. 'And this is for my dad.' She kicked him in a rather private place, leaving him gasping for breath on the floor.

'Is it over? Really?' asked Peri.

'I think so,' said the Doctor, ensuring that the console was shut down permanently with a quick burst from the ion bonder. 'Without the real Dominique Delacroix to support its personality matrix, this clever copy is nothing more than a shop-window dummy.'

They looked over at the prone form of Dominique Delacroix. She was mouthing words, saying them in a whisper. 'I'll kill you, Roger. You can't take away my children. The mansion is mine. I'll kill you, Jewel. You bitch, Jewel. Don't take away my children.' Nothing but a stream of snippets from *Executive Desires*... the long-awaited soap that was now sadly cancelled. Permanently.

The Doctor glanced at the walls of energy units, but they were lifeless. He looked over at the holographic display of the crystal transmitter, but there was no purple glow there, either

The universe was finally free of the Nestene Consciousness.

'I won't allow this, Doctor. I want your TARDIS. I want you to show me how to fly it. We're going to change history. We're going to make it work this time. *Now*, Doctor!'

Matheson had managed to recover both his wits and his gun and was now standing there waving the gun around. 'You can't escape, you know.'

'Oh, Walter, don't be so melodramatic.'

Dominique Delacroix was standing in the doorway. Dripping wet, and wearing Automarc's jacket, but definitely the *real* Dominique Delacroix.

'You never were very good with threats, were you?' she said, striding into the room. 'Hiding behind your lawyers was always your way.'

Matheson's jaw dropped. 'Dominique?' he gasped.

'The one and only.' She glanced over at the prone puppet in the corner. 'Unless you've been making even more copies of me, you pathetic little man.'

'But... but I love you.'

'Love me? Love me?' She threw back her head and laughed. 'And your definition of love is to make a Synthespian of me and reprogram it to adore you, is it? I could never love you, Walter, not in a million years.' Even in borrowed clothes, her hair a mess, the real Dominique Delacroix simply radiated star quality. 'I like backbone in a man. Something you lack. You knew you'd never have me so you created the perfect wife. Well, Walter, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not that perfect wife. I'm Dominique Delacroix, and I intend to stay that way.

'So take your company, take your studio, and ram it where the sun don't shine, *darling*, because I have had more than enough of *you*.'

Turning on her heels, she left. The equally bedraggled Marc – the real Marc – standing in the doorway – he seemed to have found some clothes along the way. 'Hi, everybody,' he said feebly.

'Well done, Marc,' said the Doctor, holding out his hand. 'Well done.'

'Thank the other bloke,' said Marc. 'He did all the hard work.'

'It was your personality, Marc,' said the Doctor. 'It shone

of sugar into his own mug. 'If you do want to stay, I'll fully understand. You've made friends here. You understand their society. Reef Station One could be the making of you.'

Peri looked over at Claudia and Marc. A ready-made best friend and boyfriend. A ready-made home. A ready-made lifestyle.

'Do all your companions leave to get married?' she asked. The Doctor smiled. 'Not all of them, no. Some of them even get to go home again – think of that. Though. I could take you home, you know.'

Peri put her hand on the Doctor's. 'The TARDIS is my home, Doctor.' And she meant it. A universe of possibilities.

'And I'd miss having you around.' He drained his coffee mug. 'When I first met you, I thought you were brash, egotistical -'

'Me?' said Peri.

'Exactly. My previous self was a defender of waifs and strays, but as you know, *I'm* not. But thankfully, you're neither. You're almost my best friend.'

'Almost? So who is?'

'She's big and she's blue and she's waiting for us in Wannabe 1. Coming along for the ride, Miss Brown?'

'I'd be delighted, Doctor Smith.'

Leaving Claudia and Marc behind, Peri was almost certain that she'd made the right decision. *Almost*. But in a universe of possibilities, *almost* was *almost* good enough.

It took them over three hours to reach Wannabe 1. No buses, no cabs, nothing. The Doctor had somehow purloined a sonic key from somewhere, so the walls were not a problem. It was just the sterile emptiness of Reef Station One. It was nothing more than a pale reflection of twentieth-century Earth, and the real thing hadn't been that good to begin with.

'There's the old girl,' said the Doctor. They were back in the alleyway, and Peri was seeing Wannabe 1 in daylight for the first time. It wasn't much better. Grim and grimy and still looking black and white. They walked towards the TARDIS, both well aware of the silence that had descended on Reef Station One.

The Doctor put his key into the door and ushered Peri inside. She stopped for a moment on the threshold.

EPILOGUE 1

In the aftermath of the Auton incursion, the new owners of WJM Inc. – Bruderbakker-Brooks Enterprises Inc. – opened a new attraction to the famous studio tour. *Executive Desires* might not have gained a new series, but the *Executive Desires* Experience was a crowd puller.

Every hour, on the hour, actors would re-enact the final scene from the final episode. Tourists came from far and wide to watch Majeste Parnell Partington, Wilby Poindexter Raven, Roger Partington and the rest of the Partington-Wilby clan spouting out their bile and vengeance amongst the rich trappings of their magnificent lifestyle, and no one left the attraction feeling disappointed.

A few people asked how Dominique Delacroix could work such a punishing schedule; given all of her other commitments, she must be a superwoman!

As always, the real Dominique Delacroix refused to comment.

Reef Station One survived. The New Earth Republic survived.

Eventually, after the Union became the Concordance, the Confederation and finally the Junta in a relatively brief succession, mankind – a most unpleasant, totalitarian form of mankind by now, led by a despotic psychopath who claimed lineage from Mavic Chen – decided to seek out all of the lost colonies. And found a fiercely independent outpost deep within the Great Barrier.

The New Earth Republic's obsession with television had been a short-lived fad – within a hundred years of the Auton incursion, the New Earth Republic was a very different place. It had even started its own colonisation programme, with manned probes to the Magellanic Clouds, and sleeper ships off to the Wolf-Lundmark-Melotte galaxy and Andromeda.

And when the first battle cruisers from the Junta finally

EPILOGUE 2

The Junior Monitor on duty had to double-check the information before he dared to pass it on.

'My... my Lord,' he stuttered.

Coordinator Vansell, head of the Celestial Intervention Agency and second in power – although that was debatable – to the Lord President of Gallifrey himself, turned, a quizzical look on his face. 'You have something to say? Well, spit it out, man!'

The Junior Monitor, a young Time Lord called Caspin, took a deep breath. 'The Nestene Consciousness has managed to escape from Polymos, my Lord.'

Vansell frowned. The phalanx of War-TARDISes had been in permanent orbit around that benighted planet for months; even their substrate plume had been spotted and stopped. There was no way that a Nestene swarm could have escaped their time torpedoes! 'Explain!'

'I... I can't, my Lord. The entire Consciousness somehow managed to transmit itself along a sub-etheric beam through the Vortex.'

Vansell strode over to Caspin, a rustle of robes and peered over his shoulder. 'Somewhere in Mutter's Spiral, I see. Can you be more precise?'

Caspin nervously tapped his display, honing in on the exact location.

'A human colony in the one-hundred-and-first century, Hunianian Era. Somewhere called the New Earth Republic.'

At the sound of the word 'Earth', Vansell's suspicions were aroused. 'Check for any temporal activity.'

'My Lord?'

'Do it!' he commanded. But he already knew the answer. It was involved. *He* was *always* involved!

'Time traces indicate the presence of a Type 40 TT capsule, my Lord.'

That settled it. It had been a long time coming, and for Time

ACKNOWLEDGEME

Well, where do I start?

This book has a strange origin. Back in Los Angeles at th*Gallifrey 2001* convention, a group of us were in a hotel room with a few bottles of wine, having a general chit-chat abou nothing at all – as you do in the wee small hours at convention The TV was on in the background, and suddenly there was a infomercial featuring Linda Evans – Krystle from *Dynasty* – talking about this new, non-surgical form of plastic surgery. They placed a white plastic mask – with eyeholes and a slit for h mouth – on her face and the wheels started turning in my brain. Apparently, I suddenly got a very odd look on my face...

Up until that point, my next submission to BBC Books had been *Thy Kingdom Come*, which was a sequel to my first novel, *Crystal Bucephalus*. But I suddenly knew that I had a different book to write. I dragged Ed Funnell out of the room to the outside of the hotel for a cigar, and the entire book came into existence in one go: an EDA called *Plastic Surgery*. I pitched it to Justin Richards over breakfast the next morning, and now eventually – this is it. Different Doctor, different setting, but exactly the same plot dreamed up in Los Angeles in 2001. I hope you like it – and this time I've been sparing with the continuity (well, apart from Autons, of course!).

Who do I thank? First of all, my dear friend Lynne Thomas. Imagine a cross between Edina from *AbFab* and Servalan – that was Lynne. She died at the ridiculously young age of 42, just a was completing this, and I dedicate this book – and so very, very much more – to one of my dearest friends. I think she would have loved it. No, I *know* she would have loved it. Ciao, sweetie.

So, in no particular order, here we go: Mike Ramsay, Edd Thornley, Andrew Hair, Justin Richards, Peter Anghelides, m Mum, Ed Funnell, James Gent, Russell Stone, Gary Russell, Andrew Beech, Shaun Lyon, the Outpost Gallifrey community, Trey Korte, Richard Callaghan, Dave Whittam, Brian and Holly

ABOUT THE AUTHO

Craig Hinton was born in London in 1964. He's been a mainframe programmer, a technical writer, manager of an IT testing facility and has edited a number of IT magazines. He had an unfortunate brush with marriage in 2003, but he's now fully recovered. In his spare time, he collects American comics, and eats and drinks far more than he should do.

Synthespians™ is his ninth novel, and his fifth foray into the written universe of *Doctor Who*.