

DOCTOR WHO

EQUILIBRIUM



SIMON A. FORWARD





'They breathed fire, drank blood and converted energy to their own strength. Earth's folk-lore fighting Gallifrey's legends.'

The Doctor and Liz visit a mysterious old mansion in the countryside during a freak storm. There they find an ancient tapestry depicting Greek gods fighting heavily-armoured wolf-like creatures, woven using impossibly fine threads.

The next morning, while investigating, they discover the house is more than meets the eye, with secret passages, leading to different times and eras. Exploring, Liz gets separated from the Doctor, and she is stranded in another age.

Can the Doctor defeat the evil forces that are unravelling the fabric of time before it's too late? Can he find Liz, lost somewhere in the past, before the creatures get her?

This adventure features the Third Doctor and Liz Shaw.

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Contents

Author's Notes

1 - The Chieftain

2 - The Doctor

3 - The Warrior

4 – Budapest

5 – Aphrodite

6 - The Major

7 – Melisandra

8 - The Queen

9 – Athena

10 - On-Ogur

11 – Arpad

12 – Equilibrium

13 - Liz Shaw

Author's Notes

'I really ought to have some sort of appropriate quote here to head up this section, to keep it in line with the other chapters, but blowed if I can think of anything.'

Me, just before embarking on this section.

Strange to think that *Equilibrium* was in fact my first *Doctor Who* novel, albeit that it remains unpublished. Originally submitted to Virgin, back in the days when they were producing their Missing Adventures and I can remember being at once encouraged and disappointed that their first book in the range, Paul Cornell's *Goth Opera*, was to feature *Doctor Who*'s very own Great Vampires. Encouraged, because it implied that Virgin were willing to explore elements of the series continuity in (I hoped) fresh and interesting ways; and disappointed, because I was worried that the fact that *Equilibrium* touched on the same area of background would count against it when it came to being considered for publication. Of course the very idea of an actual commission was a pie-in-the-sky pipedream at the time, but as I was driven by that same dream since a very early age, well, there was never any question that the book was going to be written, one way or another.

Now, looking back from the perspective of a published *Doctor Who* author, I'm at once better able to see where it might have been improved and perhaps just as mystified as to why they didn't go for it. But, after all, there's no accounting for taste! Well, as a matter of fact there is some at least, because I still have the response letter from Virgin, which praised my characterisation of the Doctor and Liz, along with the idea of the time-travelling house, while expressing that the idea of the temporal eclipse wasn't original or exciting enough, that the plot felt loose and unstructured and that it

would have been better if the story had been motivated by characters rather than a plot device such as a timeslip. All of which was (as might be expected!) at complete odds with my own take on the story and indeed how it was crafted, and only goes to prove the *Equilibrium*'s core message about opposite reactions.

Seriously, though, that initial rejection, my subsequent dusting off the proposal for submission to the BBC and my eventual preparation of the full MS for the website each inevitably led to a personal reappraisal of the story, and it was interesting to re-examine the work in the light of those initial comments as well as my own evolving views. In submitting *Equilibrium* to the BBC as a proposed Past Doctor Adventure, the aim was to produce a prequel to my EDA, *Emotional Chemistry*, but I left the synopsis unaltered for the most part and, presented to a different editor (Justin Richards), it met with different comments again – the key problem this time around being that the BBC range was undergoing a shift towards eschewing references to other books or past episodes. And while I would argue that a prequel could safely assume no prior knowledge of *Emotional Chemistry*, the bottom line was that this book was going to remain unpublished.

Never one to waste ideas, I also recognised that I wasn't going to be able to retell this particular adventure as a non-*Doctor Who* story – I think the fact that it was my first complete *Doctor Who* novel meant that it was always going to remain, at heart, a *Doctor Who* novel. (Virgin generally required a synopsis and a 15,000 word set of sample chapters, and so I had plenty of submissions for which I did that amount and no more, but *Equilibrium* was the only one that I just carried on writing to completion – between preparing all those numerous other *Doctor Who* proposals!) So I figured, why not put it where, at worst, it would only gather e-dust and, at best, where it might be enjoyed.

In working through it to prepare each chapter for posting on the web, it was tempting in some respects to perform a major overhaul, refine and polish it to the nth degree and eliminate all of its pesky flaws. But in the first place, I realised that wasn't practically possible, both because I couldn't afford

the time and because expecting it to be perfect was expecting too much; and in the second place, I thought that it would offer more worthwhile lessons, for myself and for other interested writers and/or readers out there, if it was posted – give or take the odd edit or rewritten section (on which, more in a moment) – in its original form.

It also means people can go easy on it because, like the author, it's a little rough around the edges!

So, other than the inevitable typos and the occasional compulsion, as I worked through it, to groom a sentence here and there, what was changed?

The most significant change was in one of the central characters. Although the synopsis had grown to accommodate Aphrodite and shape *Equilibrium* into a prequel, the original manuscript had been completed with a different character in mind. I won't say too much about her as, apart from a few *Doctor Who* trappings, I have plans to use that same character in another (non-*Doctor Who*) project, but suffice to say, in the context of the original *Equilibrium*, she was a Time Lady – albeit a unique and original one. So naturally, her scenes needed some extensive re-working, although I made efforts to keep the rewrites to a minimum. As such, for me, in this book, Aphrodite doesn't always read quite true, as it wasn't always easy to keep myself from visualising the original character in her place and, besides, some of the lines and actions were tailored to her replacement, rather than being born of Aphrodite herself. It's often a subtle distinction, but one I was acutely aware of and it will be interesting to see if anyone who has read both *Emotional Chemistry* and *Equilibrium* picks up on it.

By way of contrast, (Major) Bugayev proved an opposite case. He had always featured in *Equilibrium*, but in approaching his character I had anticipated there being some degree of rewriting in order to ensure that he came across as a convincing younger version of the character I painted in *Emotional Chemistry*. As luck would have it, I found the gap in maturity was already there, in terms of how I'd written the character, and I didn't really feel any need to tamper with that. So the fact that I had written him ten years earlier, for my

money, was what painted the prequel-portrait I was after.

Other than that there were a couple of name changes. In the first place, when I wrote *Emotional Chemistry*, Justin Richards pointed out that the name of Grushkin (Bugayev's original second in command) was perhaps too akin to Garudin on the page, so his name was changed to Zhelnin; hence, a corresponding change had to be made in *Equilibrium*. Then, in a similar fashion, I decided that with Aphrodite and Athena there were already too many A names involved, so I changed the name of Alisandra to Melisandra. Simple. And, I'm glad to say, totally insignificant in terms of any impact on the story!

So, what did I think of the story as I read it again?

Well, for one thing, I could see how it might be perceived as loose and unstructured. The fact is, in terms of how it was constructed, like everything else I write, it *is* structured – but the structure stems purely from character motivation. And characters are often (we hope!) unpredictable and take on lives of their own. For me, structuring a plot is like growing house plants: you can prune it here and there, you can turn it around so it'll grow towards the light, but at the end of the day it's going to find its own shape, by and large. Of course, I hope eventually I'll have more success with my plots than with houseplants, but the point remains the same.

The difference here, I think, is that two of the characters are powerful forces and the fact that they can manipulate time means they can manipulate events to such a degree that perhaps some of the characters' actions seem futile. The clash at the end is going to happen no matter what: that's what drives Athena and the Chieftain both, and although all the behaviour of all the other characters arises from a natural process of action and reaction, they're all at the same time being drawn along towards that point. Ultimately though, I do feel the Doctor makes the vital difference – as intended – in establishing the titular equilibrium (if I'm allowed to say that!).

There are a few indulgences along the way: the timeslip that enables the Doctor to hail a cab and shake off his OGRON escort, for instance, but I always felt it was worth it for the joke. And it's probably fair to say there's too much running

around, getting captured and escaping, but I think in writing it originally I saw that as part of the essence of a Pertwee adventure. In much the same way as, I suppose, being wrong on occasion is an essential part of the learning process! It's just a question of what works well on screen and what works well on the page, although I was satisfied with some of the action sequences in the book, so again it all pretty much balances out in the end.

The only question that remains, I guess, is what would I have done differently had the book been commissioned and I could have devoted a full six months on developing it properly as a published novel? Hm. Well, I say hm, but actually I have some very clear ideas of how I might have approached it differently.

It sort of goes without saying – but I'll say it anyway – that I would have taken a good long look at the structure and developed it anew, examining Aphrodite's role and subsequently writing her scenes from scratch.

In this compromise rewrite, there were all manner of things, like losing the original Time Lady's TARDIS, that would have and should have resulted in significant changes to the plot, and given what I know of the differences between the characters, I am sure Aphrodite's thread would have taken a different direction here and there – rather than her actions being grafted on in place of the previous character's. Aspects of her character do fit the events here, but I would have been much happier approaching her part in the story anew.

On top of which, I would have liked to have made this Aphrodite's introductory story, making this her first meeting with the Doctor, factoring in her trial at the hands of the Magellans at the end and introducing us to her homeworld, Paraiso, for the first time and so on. All of which would have required a greater word count, of course, but on the other hand it might have provided a good incentive to trim out some of the fat.

On the *other* hand, I would have also liked to have developed the Kagyrn more, expanded upon their culture and background etc. As the book stands, they serve well enough as monsters perhaps, but I had always had them in mind as

something more. They literally arose out of that notion (from *Dracula*) of vampires having wolves at their command, but as usual I did make some effort to develop them as a race in some detail, very little of which made it into *Equilibrium* as it is here. Likewise, word count permitting, it might have been matched with some measure of greater detail on the Magyar culture to which they were bound.

It's less easy to see what might have changed with regard to the other characters, mostly because their actions all ring true to me, but it's reasonable to assume that those key changes would have had some impact on the actions of others in the story.

In the case of Liz Shaw, though, I feel fairly sure I would have kept that ending. Back when I originally wrote *Equilibrium*, I'd had all sorts of ambitions to write that crucial departure scene for Liz: as one of my favourite *Doctor Who* companions, I really wanted to be the one to write that for her. But when it came to writing the story and arriving at the end, that question – of whether she would leave or continue travelling a while (via the house) with the Doctor – well, to leave it unanswered and hanging in the balance just seemed the right thing to do.

Quite possibly I am completely wrong on that score. But like I say, being wrong is all part of the learning process, and one thing this exercise – of revisiting *Equilibrium* here – has taught me is that I am definitely still learning.

SAF January 2005

To Jon Pertwee and Caroline John

A better chemistry than they realised.

Chapter One The Chieftain

*When Kagen's Eagle descended,
a million cowered and burned,
Ongra's Pack fell in Glory,
as Kagen's Evil shone, Spurned.
Then The Chieftain rose against her,
scarred from battles Ancient and Won,
Kagen's flame harmed Him nought,
and she fled from his fiery eyes alone.*

The Poems of the Dead, <<The Battle of Sinnaca>>,
Kagren Archive Translation.

Light drizzle played a pattering rhythm on the concertina-fold map, and was soon accompanied by the relaxed hum of some indeterminate ditty from behind the paper's broad expanse of creases. Liz Shaw tugged at the brim of her hat and pulled the short skirt of her coat further over her stockinged knees, then folded her arms with what she hoped was a supremely transparent display of patience. She observed the beaded raindrops as they slalomed down Bessie's gently vibrating windscreen.

'Ah!' a triumphal cry interrupted the incessant tune and Liz was halfway through abandoning her pose when a tut heralded the music's return. She could stand it no longer; she had to speak.

'Doctor, why won't you let me navigate?' She evinced the question as a child, eager to show her teacher precisely where he had gone wrong.

Her chauffeur peered around the water-stained map. He was a debonair gentleman, with flexibly handsome features declaring a seniority that Liz always found awe-inspiring; but

his authority was blended perfectly with a richly disarming compassion and the air of an affectionate old (*Oops – he wouldn't like that*, she thought) professor. His teeming curls of electric-white hair advanced his age further than his features should have allowed and he often combined comic sophisticate with dashing adventurer with brilliant scientist. It was, in some ways, that wonderful mind that had frequently reduced her to the level of laboratory technician and the reason she had already elected to return to Cambridge after serving her notice. She would miss her companion so much; she had grown to love him dearly.

Liz bit her lip tightly on that thought; she had yet to tell the Doctor. She watched his smile form, its growth the speed of a budding tulip.

‘My dear Liz,’ he said kindly, ‘you don’t even know where we’re going.’

She mirrored his warm smile and leaned towards him. ‘My dear Doctor, if you only *told* me, I could venture a brave attempt to get us there before we’re swept away in a torrential mudslide.’ She arched her eyebrows and jerked her head at the wet slope of field around which the road smoothly curved; on their left, the fields rolled away into a rain-greyed valley where they lost themselves in a huddle of trees. Straightening herself once more, she added, ‘I don’t object to being whisked off to the countryside – particularly the South West – I don’t mind at all. But the one doing the whisking ought to have *some* clue as to where his mystery tour leads, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Provoking the driver will get you nowhere,’ the Doctor rebuked, frustratedly stowing the map in the glove compartment. He laughed as Liz shuddered, water trickling from her glossy, shoulder-length hair onto her slender neck. She favoured him with a glare, her eyes alive with friendly fire.

‘That puts my taunts on a par with your path-finding,’ she said wryly. The Doctor would have doffed his *chapeau* at that, were he wearing one. Somehow, he had never taken to the things since the Brigadier made him return the hat he had ‘borrowed’ from a physician at the start of his unfair exile.

‘Alright, Liz. You win!’ He retrieved the map and opened it over Liz’s lap, sighing before launching into whatever explanation he had in store. He had to raise his voice a little to cover the approaching grumbles of widely differing air pressures. He was convinced that the idea of a storm would stretch Liz’s patience to breaking point.

He also released Bessie’s brake and guided her into a run. Under the threat of heavy showers, it was best to keep on the move.

The ship hovered over the storm-cowled planet, its crossbow-hull glinting even in the dim light of the alien sun. Its exterior armour boasted the geometric whorls and coils of its planetary emblem to the fellow vessels of its squadron. A honed steel shaft jutted from the dorsal tube of its main weapon and it waited, a sharp nail eager to skewer the body of a resting fly. Its name was *Halcyon Slayer*.

Its captain was a Lady – the Lady Melisandra. She wore the magnificent blue and white of the Elite Corps, faithful to the High President and dedicated to the successful conclusion of a war that had – only just – turned to their favour.

They had been saved by the invention of these ships, devised by the champion of their Scientific Corps, and had forced back the tide of all-consuming decay and Death. Melisandra’s own squadron had been assigned from the beginning, to combat the subject races of their Enemy: the Black Host, the Seven Million, the Kagyrn Packs. For, she knew, each of their Seven Chieftains had been blessed (*cursed!*) with the full powers of their soulless Masters. And each could only be slain in one way; one method alone prevented the transkinetic projection of their life’s minds into other beings; one way alone robbed them of their Immortality.

To the Chieftains, Immortality was no empty purse. To the Chieftains, it was a licence for Eternal Conquest. *Glory*, even.

Melisandra paced her bridge, calmly noting the trepidation on the aged faces of her junior officers. She was neither old nor afraid. Her age was two-hundred-and-fifty – youthful in a thousand-year life expectancy – and she was a golden-haired statuette, bronzed skin and supple muscular frame hidden

under the sapphire cloak of command. She was a trained killer of killers, a slayer of wolves, and her jewelled eyes revealed nothing of the emotional well beneath her perfect body. Perhaps, as even she thought sometimes, the well was dry.

She never feared Death, despite the vast number of occasions on which the ship and the War had brought her close. She could not fear Death, for she had no expectations of Life.

They had vanished with her love. They had vanished with the Sorcerer.

‘So what you’re saying,’ Liz gently coerced the Doctor, slapping a hand over her hat as Bessie hurtled, bumping, along the country road, ‘is *you* don’t know precisely where we’re headed, either. No wonder you have so much trouble getting that TARDIS off the ground.’

The Doctor was hurt. ‘Liz, the TARDIS doesn’t technically – well, er, never mind.’ He paused, affording the sky a wary glance. ‘You see, Liz, the call came through directly to the TARDIS console. It was a radioed invitation meant for my ears only. This rather enigmatic lady expressed an urgent desire to meet me – at her home.’

‘In tropical Somerset,’ Liz reminded the Time Lord about the storm, which galloped after them like the Chaos Hordes. In spite of the gathering gloom, Liz couldn’t help but laugh. She teased, ‘Sounds like a terribly bold chat-up line to me!’

‘Yes,’ simmered the Doctor slowly. ‘Well I don’t know that many lady-admirers would be able to send tight-beam tachyon transmissions into a dislodged TARDIS console, the location of which is a complete mystery to everyone outside of you, me, the Brigadier and UNIT’s tea-lady.’

‘It’s her!’ concluded Liz happily. ‘Oh, Doctor, do try to let her down gently.’

It was the Doctor’s turn to tighten his lips. ‘You know, I often think it’d be preferable if you resorted to sulking.’ He peered down at Liz in mock admonishment, suddenly replacing it with a tooth-wall grin. ‘Like I do! Now, tell me if it’s the next left or right.’

Liz studied the map intently, her eyes flicking occasionally

to the first of the approaching junctions. Mentally, she flipped a penny; it came up heads. 'I'd suggest the right. Then we'll stand a sporting chance of being *on* the map.'

'Must be one of my off-days,' remarked the Doctor glibly.

Melisandra came to an instant decision. 'I'm transmatting to the surface,' she informed her Second. 'I want a proper fix on that storm-centre.'

The Second Officer, a timid old fellow who approached his task with adolescent nervousness, frowned up at his beautiful commander. 'Is a landing entirely wise? With the entire squadron in orbit, we can obtain a triangulation on the target emissions in spite of the atmospheric disturbance.'

Melisandra sighed, her hair shimmering in the light of the instrument panels, as she bowed over the hunched shoulder of her Weapons Officer, inspecting the narrowing circle on his scope. She rarely faced her Second when addressing him and tried to find a number of other subjects to occupy her vision, for fear that her gaze intimidated him too greatly. She wondered, at times, why such a vulnerable specimen should have volunteered to combat the greatest evils in the Universe; she answered herself by contemplating the horrific slaughter of her people – the only ones to have stood against the Hosts.

'This is *the* Chieftain, remember, and I'll not take a chance on a flesh wound.' She turned to sweep her celestial visage over the concentrated faces of all her bridge crew. 'His heart, crewmen; the blackest heart that will ever exist. We may only count on ourselves and I will not sacrifice a nanodegree of accuracy.'

'Elastic beam?' the Second offered hopefully, afraid for his commander's life as if it were his own.

'Very well,' concurred Melisandra generously, 'but I want five full seconds before snap-back. Five.' She held her hand with digits splayed vertically, underlining her order so that no pangs of anxiety would deprive her of the proper reconnaissance. She did not really know, herself, why she was entertaining such a wild risk, but she was the rat-killer who had never seen a single vermin; she had eliminated from high in the gravity well, spearing her targets with a distant

equanimity that verged on the Divine. She had personally dealt with two of the Seven Chieftains, but this last Kagyrn was different. He – *It* – was as near to a god as aliens came.

She took her helmet from the console and strode to the transmat booth with a gait that was all purpose, but she felt the tension in her crew's faces solidifying and expanding like a gallon of ice inside her twin hearts. As she prepared herself in the alcove, she thought of the time she had waited and waited for news of her lover, knowing already that he was dead.

A verse of his rambled across the autumn fields of her soul:

*Pain's sweet avenger
Is Time's loving stranger
But as she grows wings
Must we shed our skin...*

A fundament of universal physics, as he had seen it, applicable to the emotional and psychological balance of an individual. It was why she had taken care to feel nothing since his death and it was why, as the booth activated, she assumed a blank neutrality with regard to her own fate when her boots soon touched the soil of the Kagyrn homeworld.

Bessie roared along the tree-rimmed lane as the rain lashed heavily, drops exploding and rebounding from the tarmac in fragmented bursts. The watery barrage chased the car's passage, and even her yellow had dulled under the oppressive bearing of the cloud.

The sky cracked and bellowed at the tiny car and its passengers cowered under the insubstantial black hood. Vengeful bolts of lightning were hurled, like burnished shafts of steel, at the swamping earth. Billowing chaos chased the yellow roadster, a legion of Black Knights racing to spear their routed foe. Satanic talons scratched hard down the heavenly blackboard.

Liz felt her nerves shredding. 'Can't you go any faster, Doctor? There's – something not – *right*, here – with the storm.' She had to raise her voice considerably above Bessie's

faithful engine and the cymbal-clash of thunder.

The Doctor smiled sympathetically, and seemed ready to assure her of how utterly ridiculous she was being; instead, he poked his head around, craning under the vehicle's canopy, staring intently through the sheening curtain of water. He gave up his mysterious search, but his deep eyes were slicked with apprehension. He worried Liz by surreptitiously accelerating the car.

An idea occurred to Liz. 'Do you think this is connected with those meteorological disturbances in Hungary? The ones they wanted you to check out?'

'Totally different, I should imagine,' the Doctor assured her with a loud voice and a shake of the head. 'No, those were sudden, freak changes – totally abnormal. We saw this one coming, remember?'

'Yes, I do.' Still, Liz was determined to score at least one point today, and she remembered only too clearly how the Doctor had steadfastly adhered to his programme of tinkering, rather than comply with the Brigadier's firm request for assistance. When it came to changing tune, Liz thought, the Doctor was a medley of his own favourites.

'Anyway,' she ventured, 'if they were so abnormal, how come you refused pointblank to go over and investigate? We could have had ourselves a pleasant trip overseas.'

'My dear Liz, it'd be a sorry day indeed if I had nothing more important to concern me than a few meteorological hiccoughs in Eastern Europe.'

It was Liz's turn to be hurt. 'I happen to find the weather a fascinating subject.'

'Yes, well, that'll be your English ancestry shining through.'

Liz started to smile, but was forced to shiver as another spine of electricity seemed to ignite the road ahead.

Bleak, mesmeric beauty surrounded Melisandra and she remained perfectly still as the panorama penetrated her defences; the valley below held her captivated for dangerously long, eating up her allotted time on the planet. She transmitted the signal that would postpone her snap-back matter dispersal,

drinking in the view as if it were a delicious poison.

Shades of grey abounded; from the slate and granite of the crags and escarpments, soaring at dizzying altitudes over banks and ridges combed with grasses of lilac grey, the valley spanned into a lead plain, ringed with charcoal hills of gale-scored rock; above the whole scene fumed a cinder and gunmetal sky. Melisandra adjusted her stance and splashed her left boot through a small pool; she was standing atop a high cliff of diced and fractured stone.

They materialised. Time and Space were torn in a barbaric separation of Siamese twins; Melisandra nearly toppled from her squall-swept ledge.

Masking the hills from sight, a vast army – an entire Pack – of flesh-hungry wolves, bipedal and bulky in their mish-mash of armour-plate, swarmed and writhed as a single body: *they* were a gathering storm-front. The Kagyrn warriors jostled shoulders, rending the air with the clatter of asymmetrical armour, their disorder savage in its intensity, but founded in a civilization older than Melisandra's own. From her vantage point, she could discern no details other than the red-giant glow of those hateful eyes; a faint haze of smoke rode the night above them. She was stunned with fear, even at her range; people talked of difficulty in visualising a million; she was actually *seeing* it.

At the head of their Army, came the Chieftain himself and it was his presence, she realised, that smote her courage and robbed her of her mettle.

A swollen mutation of his kind, he stood over ten metres high, a third as broad in his own battledress of mail and plate, cut in cruelly jagged edges and tinted with a burnished echo of the Kagren landscape. Fire-brand eyes of yellow-red shot thermal lances into the cold damp of the plain and his massive jaw hung open, its upper partner curling to reveal fangs that would tear a ship's hull into reedy strands. He was the Magi of Demons; his race were awesome, he was one of the Seven Chieftains that existed in any generation, they had become a subject-race of the Enemy, he had inherited their powers; then, he had become something more. Now, he towered above the mighty and superseded the merely deadly. He transcended

Evil itself, because there were none above who might judge.

Then she wondered, *With whom did this army expect to do battle?*

‘The house!’ shrilled Liz, excited and profoundly relieved.

The Doctor drove Bessie along the lightly wooded lane of tarmac until they faced a painted wooden gate, the name of the house stencilled on one bar in elegant white script: FERNHILL MANOR.

Without waiting to be asked, Liz leapt from her seat and darted for the gate, adding the shelter of her hands to the generous protection afforded by the hat. The thunder still shook the earth and there was an added *inner* chill that had induced uncharacteristic silence in both her and the Doctor during much of the remainder of their journey. Liz was never the superstitious type – heaven knows, the Brigadier had endless trouble trying to convince her of what turned out to be scientific (well, *solid*, at any rate) fact. Somehow, her moderate ability at programming a totally alien (TARDIS) console and her uncomfortably close encounters with extra-or sub-terrestrial menaces had left her hardy scepticism over ghosts and phantoms perfectly intact. As her boots skewed through the mud and the gate was opened, she scolded herself for this sudden weakness; but she still had to scan the lane behind as the Doctor rolled Bessie forward.

She shook her head, grinned unconvincingly at the Doctor and climbed aboard the car as it sailed into the yard. The Doctor parped the horn to announce their arrival.

There was no response from the soulless windows.

Liz remembered the gate. ‘Oh, I’ve left the gate open. I’d best –’ she faltered. Her fingers were trembling and her knees still shaking after the Doctor switched off the engine; her complexion had paled and her stomach had set with the cold. She felt foolish, a little girl lost in a foreign town; there was no escaping this fear’s suffocating grip. ‘Doctor, I – would you –?’

‘It’s alright, Liz. There’s nothing there,’ the Doctor’s tone soothed her some and he toyed with the trailing damp locks of her hair. She stared ahead at Bessie’s windscreen, quivering

and on the point of tears. The Doctor gave her a sidelong hug and slipped out of the car. 'Wait here; everything will be alright. I'll attend to the gate and have a little snoop around.'

'Doctor, be –' the words erupted from her, but she caged them quickly in, battling this unwarranted dread. She could never forgive herself for appearing an idiot in front of the Doctor; he admired her for her sparkling intelligence and this panic was unnatural. It wasn't her. The daunting, Gothic lines of the house added weight to her mounting fright. There was something – somewhere.

She heard the Doctor's feet splashing across the yard and the slow creak of the gate. The footsteps grew louder again almost immediately – he was returning already. Perhaps they might find a hotel somewhere; leave this lonely place. A tap on the shoulder turned her head.

It was a dead man.

She screamed and heaved herself away, into the driver's seat; the ghoul's face looked on, nonplussed. The Doctor shouted, 'Liz? Liz!'

The man struggled to speak, overcoming some shock of his own. His face and neck were a gaunt skeleton, a thin mask of rubber skin drawn over a haunting framework of bone. His eyes were tiny beads set deep beneath the lined brow and, as he parted his narrow lips, his teeth appeared as dull yellow tombstones.

'I offer my apologies, miss,' he simpered, 'I didn't mean to give you a scare. I heard the horn of your carriage.'

The Doctor trotted up to Liz's side and ducked his head beneath the canopy, taking in his companion's distress. He double-taked at the man on the other side of the car. 'Ah, how d' you do, sir? I think my friend is a little nervous. It's the storm.'

'Indeed, most regrettable it is, sir.' The man hovered, uncertain.

The Doctor was full of concern. 'Liz?'

Liz shrugged her shoulders, sitting up and scrabbling for what dignity she could find. 'I'm fine, Doctor, really.' Suddenly, her fear had passed and her body jogged to a suppressed tremor of laughter; all too soon, she was stifling

her mouth with a hand and leaning forward over the dash. 'I am so sorry; I really am. Oh dear.'

Suddenly, the storm held no more menace than a monstrous dowsing.

The butler, Perriman, led the way inside, after indicating to the Doctor the open stable doorway, where Bessie might find suitable shelter. As the Doctor parked the car neatly inside, Liz stepped gratefully into the dry of the house, finding herself discomfited by Perriman's seemingly deliberate quietude. She wasn't overly happy to be dripping water over the very expensive-looking Esfehan rug.

Perriman took her coat and left her to shake the loose ends of her hair over the already sopping mat; she didn't see where he disappeared with her hat, scarf and raincoat.

The Doctor swept in and closed the door, smiling, a solitary drip dangling from his proud beak of a nose. He began removing his huge, black cape, its scarlet lining engulfing Liz's attention immediately. 'Well,' he said, 'so much for English weather. Used to be a bit more temperate under Hadrian, as I recall.'

Liz leaned conspiratorially closer to the Doctor. 'That poor man – what must he have thought?' She paused, shame crystallising beneath her glassy eyes. 'I am sorry, Doctor.'

The Doctor was kind, as ever. 'Not a bit of it, Liz.' He gazed about the clammy hallway, scrutinising the cluster of portraits and landscapes, photographs and paintings. 'As a matter of fact, I'm still not happy now I'm inside.'

'Really?' Liz was shocked, and a little more relaxed, at the Doctor's admission. She looked about her.

Of the exterior, Liz only held a passing recollection, her impressions streaked with rain, but the hallway spoke of a distinguished history. Spacious and perfectly square, it was panelled with a finely polished dark wood which seemed to drink up much of the light, softening the illumination to a calming haze. A pair of doors stood like guards each side of the entrance, while a shrouded corridor cut through to the rear of the house, and possibly the kitchen. The ceiling soared high and the grand staircase climbed in stages to meet a landing

towards the front of the building, all the while bordered with an elegantly crafted mahogany banister.

‘There’s something about the house itself.’ He stopped, finger playing at his lower lip. Suddenly, it scratched at his nose, wiping away the offending raindrop; his expression became unduly nonchalant and Liz followed his glance to where Perriman stood at the kitchen entrance.

‘Hello there, Perriman.’

‘And a good evening to you, sir. If I might take your garments, sir, dinner will be served within the hour.’ He strode forward and relieved the Doctor of his cloak. ‘I was unsure as to how many I should expect.’

‘Oh?’ inquired the Doctor.

Perriman seemed temporarily unsettled; then he turned away with the cape, pausing at the kitchen door once more. He stared levelly at the Doctor. ‘The Lady informed me of your invitation, Doctor, sir, but she, herself, was uncertain as to whether or not you would come alone.’ He gave a slight bow. ‘It will be a small matter to set another place. Please, make yourselves comfortable in the lounge.’ His left hand indicated a pair of doors behind Liz’s slender figure.

Liz turned to the doors and twisted the handles; she addressed the Doctor with an inquisitive air. He was openly ponderous and he waved her before him. ‘You go on, Liz. I want to take a closer look at some of these pictures.’

‘Right – but don’t land us in any trouble, will you?’ She grinned and marched into the lounge, the Doctor’s voice trailing over her shoulder.

‘My dear girl, you do me a great injustice.’

Liz was smirking and she had seated herself in a gorgeous Georgian sofa before she found herself gaping at the sheer diverse splendour of the room she had entered.

There were framed photographs, landscapes and portraits in vibrant oils and temperate water colours; there were Chinese figurines, and porcelain cats curling at the feet of handdecorated Russian *matryoshka* dolls. Thai Buddhas squatted beside Indian totems, serenely contemplating forests of Venetian glass and ceramics from Meissen to Nabeshima. The cabinets, tables, chaise longues and chairs were gathered

amiably together over a Turkoman carpet, and Liz imagined them swapping whispered tales from around the globe. Even the potted plants fanned their leaves in a silent flaunt of their exotic origins.

There was something *odd* about the house.

The Doctor *ahemed* at the doorway, spooking Liz into a standing position. She glared her annoyance, tempering it with a curl of the mouth, and tucked a hand under each arm. 'Having fun, I see.'

'I'm sorry, Liz,' shushed the Doctor, striding over and dropping into the large sofa, lips puttering in imitation of a model motor-boat. 'You're quite right to be unnerved by all this, though.'

'Oh, how very reassuring,' she thanked him, keeping the sarcasm down to short measures. She sat beside the Doctor and eyed him curiously, trying to penetrate his mask of introspection; she tugged at the velvet sleeve of his jacket, unwilling to allow his absentmindedness much slack.

'Care to share a reason or two?'

'Hmm?' The Doctor awoke from a dream, eyes like dabs of grey paint. He studied Liz's furrowed brow. 'Yes, Liz, the house – either the Lady is a collector with a remarkable number of fingers in an astronomical number of pies; or she has a working TARDIS.'

Liz was stunned; she prompted her companion further. 'Perhaps you'd better try me with the main course.'

The Doctor rose, sniffing, and walked over to the porcelain vase dominating the polished timber coffee table; he examined it briefly before describing a circle around an elegant lounge chair, finishing at the central window. 'This Lady's antique collection is one of the most diverse and expansive I have ever had the pleasure of viewing.'

'The Lady is resourceful, indeed, sir.'

Liz was again startled by Perriman's silent motion, as she turned her head to the ghostly figure in the doorway.

The Doctor was affably unperturbed and seemed more than pleased to welcome the butler's unannounced arrival. 'Ah, Perriman, my good man – perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell us where the Lady of the House is presently?'

Perriman coughed and bowed, fully apologetic. 'I am afraid, sir, that she will be unable to join you for dinner and I am regrettably unaware of her expected time of return.' He relaxed under the Doctor's convincing charm. 'Lady Melisandra has been called away to attend one of her business interests, sir.'

'Ah, how very trying for her.' The Doctor rocked slightly on his heels. 'And dinner?'

'In ten minutes, sir. If you and the young lady would care to take your places in the dining room...' Perriman waved air past his flank and beckoned the two visitors to follow.

Liz and the Doctor converged en route for the door. Liz slipped an arm around the Doctor's elbow and inclined her face towards him. She hissed, 'She's a woman after your own hearts, obviously. Invites you to the English outback, then forgets to turn up.'

The Doctor grunted a chuckle and raised a warning finger to his lips. 'No sarcasm at the dinner table.'

Liz was bathed in perspiration as she escaped from the asphyxiating grime and rubble of the Manor House, as it sunk deeper and deeper into the liquid mud; she cried as she remembered the vision of the Doctor's ringed fingers flexing and scrabbling above the turgid surface, until they finally slid away, forever consumed by the filth-infested treacle of that graveyard-hill.

She sat up and felt the consoling weight of linen fall into her lap. She bunched the sheets up over her chest and rubbed one hand over her shoulder; her eyes scanned desperately around the fermented gloom.

The storm cackled and raked outside, blasting her bedroom window with fierce light and casting the silver-lined shadows of trees against the ceiling's pale screen. A twig squeaked and tapped on the glass pane, jarring her nerves and producing goose-pimples on her skin, despite the humid air.

That the storm had not passed, that the lightning still flashed over the manor and the surrounding farms and town; all of it insulted her love of science and her pursuit of the rational.

The lightning wasn't *real*.

She lay back, watching the shadow-play, remembering the principles of reflection and refraction; the science behind the spectre. Her lids fell over her deep eyes. They flicked back open.

She decided sleep was not for her tonight. She sat up, threw the covers aside and swung her long legs out over the carpet. She even had to steel herself (*ridiculous, Liz!*) before touching toes on the soft-wool pile.

'Stupid storm,' she muttered, then padded across the room to where her clothes were neatly folded on the back of a beautiful pink-rose armchair; her stockings were dried, shrivelled like tobacco-leaves over the radiator. Quickly, ignoring the shadowy talons of the trees, she dressed herself, alternately standing and perching on the tail end of the bed.

Zippering her boots and straightening her skirt, she paused to brush a few rebel tangles from her hair, then headed for the door. As she turned the handle, she silently promised herself she would not jump a mile if she saw Perriman lurking at the foot of the stairs.

The house seemed deserted and it fenced her in with blackness just as it had in her nightmare. There were no tremors or other signs of subsidence, however, and Liz felt more like her normal self as she set off along the landing, hand gliding over the balcony rail, and crept lightly down the stairs.

Idly, she pored over the fixed expressions of the portraits as she descended; she wondered what alien powers enabled the Doctor to sleep so soundly in this ominous abode or if he was lying awake in one of his brown trances.

She reached the hall without producing a single creak from the boards and could almost feel disappointed.

The kitchen door lay open, nestled behind the stairwell, and it invited her immediately in; she was eager to replace all the moisture lost through perspiration. For a moment, her fingers fumbled at the light switch, but the kitchen was showered in gratefully steady illumination.

In a ghost house, she theorised, the power would certainly have been out.

Shortly, she had fetched herself a glass of milk from a battered carton in the refrigerator; clearly the Lady Melisandra did not always stand on ceremony.

The kitchen fittings were singularly boring to Liz and the room was a cold, insensitive place. She wandered out to the hall, shutting the light off behind her, sipping at her milk. She stopped at the foot of the stairs, poking her tongue at her perfect front teeth, considering her destination.

Library, she concluded breezily. *Got to have a library.*

Liz swept her gaze around the hallway, playing eenie-meanie over the various doors; the lounge and dining room held no mysteries for her, but there were another three that Perriman had neglected to show them. Finally settled on the forward most door, to her left, she approached and tried the handle; it turned noiselessly.

As well-oiled as our butler, she mused, not bothering to suppress her smirk. The door swung inwards and she followed, marching into –

The library.

The room could not have been much else. The books lined two walls with their cared-for spines, with only a handful of dust-jackets dangling loose threads over the lip of a shelf; letters and titles leaped out in shimmers of gold or silver. A third wall housed a window overlooking the front courtyard, presently curtained, and the fourth was entirely shielded by a curtain of dark material, suspended on a brass track.

This, Liz decided, *was more like it.*

She clicked the door closed and tripped the light switch; the shaded bulb came on, yellowing the wood and the leather of the bound volumes. Liz gaped around at the collected works, marvelling at the filigree and the sheer numbers of foreign literary examples.

She moved softly over to the small bureau and deposited her glass on the surface, thoughtfully running a finger around its underside to check for clinging liquid; the glass gave a satisfying clunk on the desk. She brushed hands from her waist to her skirt, folded her arms; she was stumped over where to begin. She would be keen to uncover some rare scientific reference – even a Time Lord thesis; the Doctor had

hypothesised about this Melisandra possessing a TARDIS. (Doubtless, he would be after her for components to get his own contraption back together; she hoped he didn't leave UNIT before she did.)

The curtained wall. No secret passage; it backs onto another room, surely. Ah! Liz was suddenly proud of her powers of detection and she stepped smartly up to the right side of the curtain, where a gilded chord hung in full sight of the rest of the room. She expected to find the door of a police box or some other outrageous disguise as she reeled in the length of chord, sweeping the curtain aside.

What she found threatened to cast her irretrievably back into the realm of nightmares.

'Fascinating!' agreed the Doctor, his breath stolen by the spectacle of Liz's discovery. His companion stood nearby, calmly sipping more of her milk, still enthralled by the vision, but waiting patiently for the Doctor's conclusions.

Before them, suspended over the plain expanse of wall, a magnificent tapestry offered more than decoration. Everything around it was dimmed in the glow of its beauty; the woven illustration was impossibly elegant and it shone like a star in a crowd of nobodies. A classical battlescape, it was threaded with endless colours, sparkling like gems and precious metals even in close-up. Stitches were composed of hundreds of smaller strands, receding ever deeper into an eternity of decreasing size and expanding intricacy. It was a work that *demonstrated* perfection, wrapping mere spectators in an aura of its dazzling craftsmanship.

The scene's focal point was a woman, gloriously beautiful and clad in blue and cream uniform, bedecked with insignia or decorations; her face held the strength of an ocean, but she was ultimately vulnerable, wedged between the combatants. On the left there stood a Goddess; she was a woman of such divine countenance that her true charisma shone out from the tapestry; her hair was the gold of a solar flare and she wore moon-bright armour, embellished with the haunting relief of a Medusa's head. In her right hand, she lofted an aureate sceptre as a weapon; behind her an armoured host of perfect humans

ranged beyond the dark horizon. To the right was a monstrous Beast; he was a coal-furred Warrior, tall as the Goddess, with flamed eyes and massive wolverine head. His armour was jagged, completely asymmetrical, adorned with cruel symbols and a small arsenal of weaponry; there was a battle-axe slung from his waist, a short sword tucked into a jewelled scabbard, an energy rifle slung over his mighty shoulder and a needled mace clutched in a slashing prehensile tail. Milling behind him were a slaving pack of smaller warriors of his kind, hungering for the flesh of all those too-perfect humans, while their leader clashed his serrated broadsword with the staff of the Goddess. The impact of weapon on weapon sparked lightning-streaks which shattered the clouded sky and resonated an explosion that still echoed from the embroidered illustration.

‘Fascinating,’ repeated the Doctor, more subdued.

Liz prodded him. ‘I *know* that.’

‘Sorry, Liz – archaeology’s not one of your fortes, is it?’ The Doctor closed on the work of art and poked his nose up against the cloth, picking at the thread with his fingernail; it was much too fine to allow him a purchase. He arrested the inspection, before Liz unfairly accused him of being a vandal. ‘Never neglect the Arts, Liz.’

‘Well, it’s not a Monet...’ she brooded, stroking her chin.

The Doctor grinned; he found Liz’s sarcasm richly stimulating. ‘Yes, well, the artist has forgotten to add his or her moniker, but it’s the subject matter – as well as the microscopic detail – that really interests me. What do you think?’

Liz studied the picture, shook at the sight of the Beast; she helped another mouthful of milk down her throat. ‘Two sides of a person,’ she conjectured. ‘The woman has a similarly classical beauty to the Goddess, so maybe the artist is suggesting the age-old conflict – Good versus Evil. Drawn at half-time.’

The Doctor shook his professorial head and tapped a finger on the breast-plate of the Goddess. ‘Athena, Liz. Athena, from the old Greek mythology; sprouted from the head of Zeus; the Goddess of Wisdom in Warfare, among a

number of other minor patronages.’ His hand came across his chest to point at the fearsome Wolf-Beast. ‘And a Kagyrn Chieftain; a conquest-hungry creature from my own world’s mythology. They breathed fire, drank blood and converted energy to their own strength. Earth’s folk-lore fighting Gallifrey’s legends.’

Liz was suddenly grave; she rested her glass gently on the bureau, where a wet ring was now forming. ‘I didn’t know your people had a mythology – I thought they were too advanced.’

‘Huh!’ the Doctor grunted at the ceiling, then tapped the side of his nose and winked at Liz. ‘One of their most popular myths is their superior position in the galaxy’s hierarchy.’ He chuckled quietly. ‘No, none of our civilizations are too old for myths or fairy-tales. The trouble is, too often, they have a tendency to come true, one way or another.’

‘Terrific,’ moaned Liz, and her eyes fell on the Dantean figure of the Chieftain. The fiery beams of its eyes burned into her retina and she turned away to examine the bookshelves.

Chapter Two

The Doctor

'How's that song go? Wherever I steal a hat, that's my home.'

The Doctor to Liz Shaw, shortly after exile on Earth.

Breakfast was as dull as the thin wisps of morning light that seeped through the lace curtains covering the dining hall's windows; Perriman limited conversation to a few inquiries over the sufficiency of the toast and marmalade supply, and whether or not a refill of the pot would be required. The Doctor declined on both counts, but Liz countermanded the order, feeling the urge to improve her health after her shaky and largely sleepless night. The Doctor seemed unduly agitated and decidedly restless.

'What is it, Doctor?' asked Liz, chiming her cup on its bone china saucer.

'The TARDIS, Liz; you know about my homing instinct with her –' He halted, unable to find an explanation. He built a house with his fingers and began massaging one slope of roof against the other.

'Don't I just! You gave the Brigadier a right run-around when you first showed up.'

The Doctor was instantly cheered at the recollection, savouring his old friend's mounting frustration at dealing with the traumatic process of regeneration; it had been no less a trial for himself at the time, of course. 'That's right – I have a telepathic link with her; she's almost human – poor thing. Works even when I'm not a hundred percent; such a dependable old girl.'

'And when her insides have been thrown around on rubbish tips?' Liz conjectured, reminding the Doctor of more recent disasters. 'Surely, if you just fitted her console back...'

‘No, Liz,’ the Doctor was both adamant and down-trodden, ‘she should still be there, you know.’ His finger danced on his temple and he folded his arms before him, sliding forward, head down, over the breakfast table. The Doctor had crossed into the Doldrums.

Liz felt a pang of sympathy, but could do no more than pat his arm. ‘Doctor, why don’t you call the Brigadier – check up on her.’ She giggled. ‘Make sure she hasn’t latched onto some other handsome Time Lord in your absence.’

Even the Doctor could not maintain his sombre depression under the force of Liz’s irrepressible humour, and he rose from the table feigning admonishment. ‘I might just do that; there’s a phone in the lounge.’

‘Be careful with the truth,’ Liz warned him. ‘I mean he’s not going to think much of your swanning off to Somerset, particularly when he wanted to pack us off to Budapest.’

‘I keep telling you, Liz, the Hungarians can sort their own problems –’ The Doctor was at the door before he turned, grasping the door handle as his other hand shot to his brow. ‘Seven Chieftains! Of course!’

He made a split-second decision. ‘I’ll tell him to have our tickets ready the moment we get back.’

The Doctor disappeared from the dining room, leaving Liz to search for explanations in the dregs of her tea. She considered requesting more, but the thought of Perriman’s overbearing silence chilled her thirst into non-existence; she was happier with him in the kitchen. Instead, she stood and walked to the window, pulling aside the lace for a clearer view out from the rear of the house.

Beyond the wall of the garden, the hills rolled away and climbed again towards the horizon, where the sprawling woods were lashed by wind-blown drizzle. Even in the daylight, the trees cast an air of gloom and despondency over the land, rather than the natural refreshment she might have expected.

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth dropped fractionally open.

Behind her, the Doctor stormed in and sat at the breakfast table with a huff of fury. ‘Phone lines are all down – we’re cut

off, would you believe!’

Liz’s reply jammed under her tongue. ‘Ye – yes, I –’

There was a pause, until the Doctor came up behind her, leaned in past her to follow her entranced gaze over the ivy-laden garden wall. He was momentarily stilled.

‘Well, well, well. I’d never known how right I could be.’ He slid a consoling hand onto Liz’s shoulder and gently caressed her, before continuing. ‘We really are cut off,’ he confessed.

The curl of road that had brought them here was replaced by a pitted track of mud and stone, winding away into the woods, which had grown to encompass much of the hilly terrain behind and around the manor. Too many of the hedged fields had become open grassland and the horizon was wonderfully and terribly free of pylons or telegraph poles. From their vantage point, Liz and the Doctor could only imagine what might have happened to the nearby town, where the sun was slowly setting.

‘It appears you’re a time traveller at last, Liz,’ soothed the Doctor kindly.

The waters ran blacker than ever as they washed beneath the low bridge of stone and earth and Huba spurred his stallion across with an unusually vicious kick of his heels; sufficient, he hoped, to counter the animal’s understandable sense of trepidation. The Magyar himself viewed the dark palisade ahead with a distinct pride that added gravity to his already solid features. He had ordered his hundred-strong escort to wait near the bridge; they were hardly a necessity within the fortress. His mount’s hooves chopped eagerly along the path to the wall and the gate was swung back to admit the single rider.

Huba dismounted expertly and left his horse in the charge of an attendant slave, scarcely acknowledging the man’s humble courtesies. He powered himself briskly between the tents of animal hides to the stone hut, his cloak sweeping a broad trail in the dirt, encouraging the guards to stand aside.

He removed his spiked helmet and marched inside the torch-lit hall, favouring the six occupants with a curt bow

before he had properly seen them.

A pause was required to take in the majestic figure, king among kings, seated in the shadows, beyond the blazing pyre in the centre of the room. He was an imperious, powerful man, with chin and brow like rugged cliffs, surrounded by a regal beard and extensive tufts of hair. A granite ridge of nose separated two shimmering eyes of slate. Here was the binding force that cemented and governed their Magyar alliance. Here was Árpád.

The other faces, bathed in a flickering glow from the fire at Árpád's feet, regarded Huba with interest and an entirely cordial amusement. There were five of them: a sign of their Kavar allies' exclusion from whatever portentous affair lay at the root of Árpád's summons. Authority and leadership radiated from each man, and Huba acknowledged their respect with the mild deference of an old friend.

'My lords,' he apologized casually, 'I came on my fastest horse, the moment my tasks would allow. They were difficulties unsuited to delegation.'

Árpád laughed, his voice fanning the flames before him. 'Ah, Huba, if Death himself came upon you, he would find you too busy to grant him an audience!'

'Now, there is a matter I could happily entrust to a deputy,' smiled Huba grandly. The seven men roared in unison.

Árpád stayed their mirth with a raised hand and lifted his sturdy frame easily from the simple wooden throne. 'We meet here this night to reaffirm our pact, sealed on the Steppes, long before we were called to pluck the Moravian thorn from Arnulf's paw.'

He moved purposefully around the fire, studying the nodding heads of his six allies. He peeled the gauntlet from his right hand, drew a dagger from his belt. Solemnly, the others followed his example.

'We were promised conquest. We were shown the way. Moravians or no, that is why we came. Here in these fertile lands, we have found our destiny. This soil has been enriched by the blood of millions, and under us it will grow richer still.'

Balling his bare fist around the dagger's blade, he shifted

his great arm over the crackling fire and jerked the knife free of his iron grip. A trickle of red spilled after the blade and splashed, hissing, onto the flames. To Huba, it seemed the fire burned a deeper red.

‘Our guardian-spirits come,’ asserted Árpád. ‘Seven for Seven. To serve and to lead, to lead and to serve. From this night, we have no equal on Earth.’

One by one, the six allies approached and slit their palms over the pyre. Huba was the last to complete the ritual.

At Árpád’s signal, they gathered in a circle and seven clenched fists met over the centre of the climbing flames.

For an uncertain silence, Huba felt only the heat licking at the hairs on his outstretched arm. He was intoxicated, viewing his own masterful face in the black mirrors of his comrades’ eyes. He trained his swimming mind on the stickiness of the blood, congealing in his fist.

Gradually, he became aware of a second circle of eyes, shining and red, on the heads of silhouettes, standing ominously behind his fellow chieftains. There was a definite presence behind him, steamy breath wafting through the dense curtain of hair that guarded the base of his neck. Árpád’s eyes were agleam and Huba realized that no shadow haunted his shoulder.

‘Your guardian does not appear, Lord Árpád?’ He fought the words out, battling against the dry croak in his throat. He was a novice in the art of fear.

But Árpád grinned exultantly and spread his arms. ‘He is here, Huba! He is here!’

Huba and the other chieftains stole a wary step backwards to drink in the incredible sight. The fire leaped higher, moulded by an unseen hand, sculpted into the livid, pulsing image of a wolf’s head.

‘Have we lost it, yet?’

The question came as a demand, and Ludvika cared little for Boris’s tone; he may have been a friend, but he was still a subordinate. It was yet another sign of the decay that had taken hold of their company ever since the Magyars had stolen their lands. They had lost their homes, their families; then they had

lost fighting men by the score. Now they were losing the bonds of discipline and even friendship, which were the last vestiges of their pathetic strength.

Ludvika was too tired to argue, though, and he scanned the forest behind them, where several of the trees burned like torches against the curtain of night. Torn and charred corpses lay at the base of many of those trunks: some twenty of his own men between him and their frantically abandoned camp. The horror had strayed upon a ripe hunting ground when it had entered those vast woods. There was a yellow-white flash as he watched, and another conifer burst into flames near the forest's edge.

'There is your answer, Borisa!' he pointed with his sword, fully aware that the man had witnessed it as well as him. Something snapped inside, and he roared at the handful of stars in the sky. 'The heavens have eyes, and it is a poor hound that will lose a scent as sharp as ours! Our fear carries on the air for miles!'

'Ludvika, no!' pleaded the younger man, his eyes darting from his commander to the four others. Reading the crumbling spirits in every grime-coated face, he struggled to find any flimsy hope to hold them fast and firm.

'There is still the river,' he reminded his leader, insisting with enough volume for the rest of his small audience.

'Yes, the river, Borisa,' Ludvika recovered his failing thoughts, 'I know.' The hill ahead was a shallow climb and, beyond its crest, it plunged steeply down to meet the bank of the broad river. They would need to ditch much of their armour if they were to cross without drowning, but Ludvika knew there were a few settlements that could offer them shelter for a time. After that, they were finished as a fighting party, but at least they could cling to life.

He started up the incline at a trot. 'Come,' he ordered. 'I only pray the Devil cannot cross water.'

Liz followed the Doctor out into the hallway, where she found him furiously rattling the handle of the front door. As she came up beside him, he gave it a last concerted wrench, but the door remained stubbornly closed.

‘It almost seems magnetically sealed,’ muttered the Doctor, sizing up his inanimate opposition.

‘You mean, now the house has transported us back to the *Nth* century, it’s not going to let us out to have a look?’ Liz was conscious of her sense of relief at remaining within the safe confines of the building; her modest knowledge of history generally painted it as a singularly unpleasant place.

The Doctor scratched his head and stroked his chin in quick succession. ‘Yes, I’m afraid it does undermine the point of the whole exercise, rather.’

‘If you ask me,’ advised Liz weightily, leaning closer, ‘the butler did it.’

‘Well, we certainly won’t lose anything by asking, will we? Come on.’

The Doctor led her to the kitchen, easing the door gently open, but their quarry had deserted the room. The sink held the plates and cutlery already cleared from the breakfast table, while all else was stacked neatly in place, the refrigerator and worktops wet and shining from the attentions of a damp cloth.

The Doctor swapped a curious glance with his friend. A moment later, he was at the other door, testing whether the manservant had escaped via the back of the house. That, too, refused to give way to the Doctor’s coercing hand.

Liz allowed herself to be privately scared; she never had liked Perriman. ‘Why would he lock us in?’

‘You know, I don’t believe he has.’ The Doctor bunched his fists in against his waist, his brow furrowing. ‘You heard that front door yesterday, same as I did. Rather a solid affair, wouldn’t you say? Announces arrivals and departures with equal resonance.’

‘You’re right. And the kitchen door is even closer to the dining room. We would have heard *something*.’

Without a word, the Doctor strode past her back to the hall, and, though she hesitated only a moment before following, she saw his shoes hastily disappearing up the stairs.

‘You check down there!’ his brief instruction floated down from the landing.

Liz hovered at the foot of the stairs, resting one hand on the banister. She pursed her lips and surveyed the choice of

doors as she had done during the night. Finally, she headed for the lounge, taking care to open and close the door as quietly as possible, in her own reconstruction of Perriman's mysteriously covert movements. She concluded that any of the internal doors could be used without alerting anyone in the house, but nevertheless found the room devoid of life.

The remaining rooms on the ground floor were similarly still and empty. An exhaustive search of the library revealed no secret passages or priest-holes, and Liz returned to the hall in dismay.

Her keen eye caught the pencil-line crack in the flank of the stairwell.

She peered expectantly up at the landing, but the Doctor was nowhere in sight and the sudden scrape of moving furniture informed her that he was still engaged in his search. She murmured her lack of enthusiasm for her own benefit: 'Looks like *I* get to check the dark cellar, then.'

She approached with sensible caution, but was not going to be seen creeping towards the door. Her eyes swept around the outline of the entrance and she was surprised to find no handle, knob or button. She pushed experimentally at the surface of the panel, half-expecting it to snap permanently shut and remain hidden forever.

It sprang open at her touch, unveiling a cramped room in a chilling semi-darkness. The hazy light shone up from a square trap cut in the cupboard floor and the twin poles of a ladder could be seen, poking up from below.

'Doctor!' she called, with all the confidence she could muster.

This had evidently been Perriman's escape route, but there was absolutely no sense in her pursuing him alone.

Together, they ran, puffing the heat from their lungs and twisting their heads around frequently to view the receding border of trees. For his part, Ludvika could discern a flitting shape like a pall of black smoke, raging amidst the fires; but he kept his silence while he maintained his speed. The others seemed wearier and gratefully oblivious of that demonic hunter's continued pursuit.

Borisa's fist slammed into his leather-clad chest and the six men came to a halt with their leader.

'What in God's name can it be?' pressed the young soldier; again, a demand.

Ludvika only stared ahead at the building that had leaped up from the previously barren ridge of their hill. It was a house, taller and prouder than any he had seen, with a first floor protruding precariously over the ground at its front. He distrusted its peculiar lines and its foreign materials; he trembled under his armour at the impossibility of its sudden existence. It had to be some apparition of his own madness.

The hopeful, begging faces of his men dragged him to a resolution. 'Sanctuary. It is a keep,' he told them, his fingers seeking the cross which dangled impotently from his neck. 'We can defend ourselves from within those strange walls.'

They advanced on the house with renewed energy, Ludvika unconvinced that this was a genuine chance and not simply some phantasmal taunt.

The Doctor descended ahead of Liz, feeling the way down the ladder with his feet, then letting himself drop the last couple of rungs. Liz heard him land with a reassuring thud, then there was a pause.

'Alright, you can come down now, Liz.'

At the Doctor's signal, Liz manoeuvred herself over the trap and, gripping both struts of the ladder, slipped her left foot carefully down until her sole met the first rung. Happy with the steadiness of the ladder, she climbed the rest of the way down, contemplating that faint note of uncertainty apparent in the Doctor's voice. By the time her boots touched the floor, she had her answer to that one mystery at least.

They were standing on a carpet of soft blue, surrounded by walls of white plaster. There were polished timber doors along both sides and at either end of the corridor, while paintings filled the spaces between. A silver mirror hung at what Liz judged to be the midpoint of the corridor and a break in the wall faced it, where a stairwell descended to unseen lower levels. Electric bulbs glowed warmly from their ornamental mounts. Above her, the ladder jutted into the shadowy opening

of the trap-door, with all the enigma of a conventional attic.

‘I don’t understand. It looks like we’re on a landing.’

‘My thoughts exactly,’ the Doctor agreed as he sauntered along to examine the mirror and the stairs. He returned to address Liz, sparing thought for a passing inspection of the landscapes. ‘We’re in a completely different house. Probably not in England, either.’

Liz allowed her mouth to drop open. ‘Are you mad, Doctor?’ She was hissing, desperately struggling to grasp the situation. ‘I don’t think I can take much more of this – not on top of the time travel! Not without some sort of – *scientific* explanation. I can’t accept that it’s just *happened*.’

She sensed a nervous tremor beginning in her lip and barely arrested it. She saw that the Doctor had reached the head of the stairs again, to stare immeasurably into their hidden depths.

‘Doctor,’ ventured Liz, acutely aware she was probably interrupting some vital reverie, ‘how are we ever going to get *home*?’ She hesitated when the Doctor regarded her quizzically. ‘You *know* what I mean. What you’ve told me so far – it just isn’t enough!’

The Doctor took two seconds to recover from the gentle assault, recognizing it as an urgent plea for help. ‘Liz!’ he answered with some force. ‘I’ve gone as far as I can. Besides –’ he broke off, conscious of some whisper of motion on the floor below. Satisfied there was no immediate danger, he returned his attention to Liz. She was exactly the same girl who had assisted him against various threats to humanity, both alien and domestic; but, here, her own rationality was being severely tasked and the Doctor had to admit that, in many ways, her more highly-trained intellect would need more guidance from him, rather than less. He hastily sought the words he wanted.

‘You see, of all the people I could teach, you’re probably the best placed to understand, Liz. And I wish I could tell you more, I really do. But, to be perfectly honest, this is something outside even my experience.’

‘My trouble is, I *can* accept it, but then I forget. I start asking questions all over again, doubting, then I realize it’s

something I'll never understand.' She felt thoroughly dejected, separated from the crazy world in which she was hopelessly adrift. She tugged at a tooth with her thumbnail. 'You don't know a cure do you, Doctor?'

As she spoke, she watched the Doctor in contemplative mood, studying her and apparently at a loss to help. She knew he really wanted to be off, finding a way out of this new house, asking questions, panning the local river of gossip for some worthwhile nugget. It occurred to her then, as it occasionally did, how easily she always forgot that her companion was a Time Lord. Anatomically, she knew, he was an alien and his brilliant mind blazed with the light of another sun. Yet, here she was, cast back over an uncertain number of centuries into her past, feeling more totally lost than she had believed possible; and it was in this enigmatic, mysterious traveller that she sought her mental anchor. Somehow, he was the stability she needed right now, greeting history and the unknown with the calm assurance of the man who'd written many of the important scenes. Somehow, to her, he was very human.

He laughed gently. 'None at all, Liz. And you wouldn't want the medicine, anyway. That's your strength. One of many. You question, you want to know why all the time. It's why you'll have more trouble than most with this, but it's also the reason I'm particularly fond of you. So keep asking questions, alright?'

'Oh, you needn't worry on that score,' sighed Liz, the Doctor's words gradually lifting the weight from her shoulders. 'Remember, I'm not the veteran time traveller you are.'

The Doctor, too, seemed cheered at the return of his friend's resilience. 'Yes, well, what we have here is something more than a TARDIS. Something much less, in many ways.'

'I take it you mean more than simple aesthetics?'

'You're not wrong,' he admitted. 'Believe me, I'd really rather be conducting your first tour myself. It's really not very comforting to be arbitrarily hurled about the timelines with no sense of control.' He grunted softly, sharing some inner joke. 'See, Liz, that house in Somerset seems to slide back and forth

along linear Time, like a curtain-ring on a length of wire. It passes through exactly the same points in either direction.'

'And the TARDIS couldn't do that?' asked Liz, deliberately lowering her voice a notch for added emphasis.

'Certainly not, no,' the Doctor affirmed. 'No, the TARDIS would always meet itself coming back.' Liz's face was like the proverbial clean slate and the Doctor struggled for some sensible addition. 'Um, figuratively speaking.'

'Right. Well, assuming I can handle that concept,' said Liz, spreading her fingers to regard her nails, 'what about the change of interior?'

'Oh, I should imagine a number of curtain-rings on a number of wires, all linked together in some way,' answered the Doctor, evidently pleased with the tidiness of this rationale. A quick study of Liz's face informed him how little she had been impressed, so he switched tactics and favoured her with a pat on the hand.

'I'll get us back, I promise.'

Somehow, that was all Liz had wanted. But gratitude was brusquely detained as the Doctor clamped a hand across her mouth and lifted a finger to his lips. A nod of his head told her to expect trouble from downstairs.

The door opened inward without any objection, and Ludvika sidled into the hall, his features brimming with suspicion. The covering on the floor and the smooth paint on the walls seemed to conceal intangible threats. Unearthly flames, suspended from above and mounted on the walls, trapped in small globes, pained the eyes and provided no comfort. The pictures, watching from the walls, were too real to be decorative. Once they had his attention, he fought hard to peel it away.

In a humbled voice he beckoned his men, 'Quickly! Inside!'

Borisa, then the others, filed hurriedly past their leader, spreading out into the capacious hall. Their sweeping, awed expressions were those of men who had unwittingly defiled hallowed ground. Borisa fired an accusatory glare at his superior.

‘Into what have you brought us, now?’ The whisper hid none of his anger.

Ludvika seethed, then whirled to thrust his blade across Borisa’s palpitating throat; his left hand snatched a fistful of the man’s leather armour and pulled him close.

‘Safety, I tell you!’ Ludvika drove his message in with the authority of a cornered snake. ‘This is all I have left to give you, and if these walls appear strange, then it is because they were built to withstand the Beast!’

Borisa grit his teeth, but his chin still quivered. ‘How do you know it is not the Devil’s own house, Ludvika? Tell me! Tell us!’

Ludvika’s body was a whip, coiled in the clammy hand that clutched his heart. He felt the sword, willing its way through his old friend’s neck; the tiniest release would send that head bouncing over this alien hall. Ludvika bit deep into his own tongue and waited for the pressure to ease. His sigh brought tears to Borisa’s eyes and he let the man go with a single word.

‘Faith!’

The other men nodded, but Ludvika could see their empty hearts. He turned away and jammed the door shut more noisily than he should. He hoped the sound would reinforce his flagging command.

They were here to stay, one way or another.

‘Stay here!’ repeated the Doctor, before he sailed swiftly down the stairs and disappeared around the corner.

His shoes struck each step with the softest of thumps and Liz tried to mimic his stealth as she went after him; on matters of stubbornness, she could match the Scientific Adviser any day of the week – regardless of the century. She caught up with him on the next landing and found him pressed against one wall, listening attentively for noises filtering up from the hall below.

‘It’s nice to see none of UNIT’s military discipline has got to you yet,’ the Doctor observed quietly, without moving his head. He nudged himself an extra inch past the screening wall, straining to see whatever lay below. With only the Doctor’s

shoulders in front of her, Liz could contain her curiosity no more.

‘Well, who is it? Perriman?’ she inquired softly.

‘No, I don’t think so. Several mystery guests, I’d say,’ the Doctor surmised. ‘They’re shifting about, talking. Dressed more heavily than our friendly butler.’

‘Well, that settles it,’ Liz stifled a laugh. ‘You wouldn’t hear that man if he was wearing clogs.’

The Doctor straightened and brushed hands down his velvet jacket. ‘One thing’s certain, we can’t skulk around here all day.’

He stepped out and marched boldly down the stairs, catching Liz momentarily offguard. Throwing caution to the same wind, she rounded the same corner and found herself descending towards a hallway, brighter and more welcoming than that of Fernhill Manor, but currently occupied by a ragged group of leather-clad soldiers. Their features were heavy and strong, their hair matted like burnt straw; they appeared preoccupied with their surroundings or some private quarrel. She came abruptly to a halt behind the Doctor, wishing herself into one of the more placid landscapes to her right.

‘How d’ you do?’ chirped the Doctor in his most disarming fashion.

Six hostile faces zeroed in on them. Liz swallowed on a cold lump in her throat.

The Doctor beamed and waved an arm. ‘I’m the Doctor and this is –’

But the soldiers heard no more and terror broke into hatred. Two dived forward, longswords circling over their grizzled faces; the Doctor chose to duck right, flying from the stairs and leaving his left foot deliberately trailing. Liz watched with mounting anxiety.

The right-hand assailant was the first to fall; he had followed the Doctor’s motion, but was ignorant of the extended limb and went barrelling over it to meet a faceful of carpet. Meanwhile, the Doctor had grabbed the other man’s weapon arm and swung it down at his side, tugging the body after it; the man went into a forced somersault and landed

hard, his spine slamming into the wall.

A third fighter charged forward.

At the last moment, the Doctor cannoned into him side-on, wedging his right shoulder under the man's waist; the Doctor's left arm shot up around his back and clutched at the man's outstretched hand, flipping him over neatly onto the fellow he had tripped, who was only now staggering to his feet. Both formed an unruly heap, while the Doctor adjusted his stance in readiness for further conflict. Liz chuckled.

Then a fourth man gripped her wrist from over the handrail; he had run up to the left of the stairwell and launched himself at the banister. Liz gagged on a scream and sent one of her feet smartly between the broadly spaced balusters, driving her toes far into his stomach wall. His grip slackened and he tumbled backwards with an agonized grunt.

As the men stirred and hoisted themselves into action, the Doctor held a staying hand towards the bearded swordsman who hesitated by the main door. He held his blade lamely and regarded the mess of his felled troops in utter disbelief.

'Now, wait just a minute!' commanded the Doctor emphatically. 'I really can't say I care for these hasty introductions, and I'm sure your men would prefer a chance to get their breath back.'

The silence stretched into awkwardness. All the men were looking to their leader.

Finally, he waved off the soldiers, starving them of their planned revenges. 'Say your piece, stranger.'

'Thank you.' The Doctor abandoned the defensive posture and attended once more to his ruffled attire. He surveyed the wary assembly.

'I have no desire to harm any of you,' he informed them casually, then adopted a qualifying cautionary tone, 'but I'll gladly fight all six of you should you attempt to harm myself or my assistant, here. Understood?'

'You'll also have me to contend with,' added Liz with a conviction to ward off Goliath.

Eyes frozen over, the bearded commander sank to his knees and buried his chin near to his armoured chest. The younger man, who had led the brief attack, copied the motion,

but his leader's dignity was nowhere in evidence. Falteringly, the four others completed the tableau.

The Doctor was annoyed. 'Come on, get up, all of you! I don't want your obedience. Come on, man!' He clasped the leader's arm and urged him forcefully to his feet. 'You're supposed to be fighting-men, aren't you?'

'We were farmers!' spat the man contemptuously. 'I am Ludvika – the *Farmer*! That dog Árpád stole our lands and our homes, and so we *fought*. Now, you and that Beast rob us of our courage, what are we to do?' He practically screamed into the Doctor's face. 'What are we to *do*?!'

'Snap out of it, man!' The Doctor's voice exploded, shaking Ludvika back to cruel reality.

Liz moved off the steps to address one of the soldiers, granting Ludvika a chance to compose himself. 'What's this Beast he's talking about?'

'A wolf!' cried the more impulsive fighter, his thin face paling at the memory.

'Borisa!' Ludvika tried to cut him off, but his comrade would not be censored.

'A wolf that walks like a man,' simpered Borisa, trying to taunt Liz like a teller of ghost stories intimidated by his own creations. 'When he runs at you, though, you can see he truly wants to be an animal. He stoops forward, prowling, his great arms pawing at the ground. There's blood boiling in his eyes and fire shooting from his lance.' Liz retreated from his advancing leer. 'Would you like to feel that foul breath on your neck? Would you care to see it burn your friend? Or pin your brother to a tree with its sword? *Unh?*'

Suddenly, he lunged at Liz, fingers clamping around her biceps. 'I say we feed her to the Beast! This shameless harlot for our lives!'

'*I beg your pardon,*' his captive demanded, her pupils blazing.

The Doctor faced Borisa and spoke powerfully and evenly. 'Let her go, this instant. Let her go and I won't hurt any of you.'

'Do as he says!' roared Ludvika, his head fit to burst. 'Do as he says, now, or I will slay you myself! Do you think this

morsel will stave off that demon's hunger? Never! It finished twenty of our number and comes even now to this keep! We will live our last hours as Christians, Borisa, or we shall die now and leave the Beast hunt elsewhere!

'Let the girl go!'

As Ludvika hammered home his order, sword in both hands, the Doctor edged forward, palm stretched out towards the wild-eyed Borisa. Liz was tensed and preparing to spring free; the Doctor's subtle shake of the head told her to remain absolutely still, while the reflective flash of her captor's blade underlined the advice perfectly. Shored by their leader's firm words, two soldiers moved slowly in to outflank their comrade.

His spirit drained, Borisa shoved Liz away, into the Doctor's arms. She sagged with an honest sense of relief, while the soldier collapsed, pressing the hilt of his sword into his brow, while his face contorted in tears.

With an ear-shattering crack, the front door was punched open.

'Where is it, all this time?' wondered Huba impatiently, sieving the forest for any hint of movement, his only reward the dull orange beacons where trees had once flared into columns of light. He heard his captain's horse clump furtively up on his left.

Bidding farewell to his Magyar brothers, he had departed from Árpád's Csepel Island fortress, his demonic guardian marching some distance ahead of the column, yet sullen and menacing enough to unsettle all the horses and not a few of the men. They had travelled along the river for some distance, then arched northwest towards Huba's encampment, their route meandering lazily through the crawling woods. The men were unnaturally silent and they watched that lumbering vanguard with cagey suspicion. Huba would never find their loyalty wanting though, and they accepted the creature as being tethered to the soul of their leader. He had no doubt, however, that restive murmurs had begun when, midway through their journey, Huba drew the column to an abrupt stand. The animal had loped off into the forest, apparently

chasing a scent.

Does Huba truly control his demon, then? they were sure to be asking.

‘To serve and to lead,’ sniffed Huba sceptically. ‘And who is to do which?’

‘My lord,’ the captain ventured, wavering, ‘I do not care for this beast either.’

Huba rounded harshly on the soldier. ‘Vecellin, I do not care to hear of your likes or dislikes. It is a new warrior in our army and it obeys me as you might!’ Satisfied as to the captain’s acquiescence, Huba returned his watch to the broad stretch of forest between himself and the hidden river. ‘It is like our earthly wolves, that is all. Night lends precedence to the hunting instinct.’

‘Yes, lord Huba,’ conceded Vecellin gravely. ‘But what does it hunt?’

Huba settled in his saddle, fairly convinced of the answer. Instead, he shrugged and speculated, ‘Oh, some likely sport, I should say. Come morning, we may find its mood greatly improved.’

The Doctor herded Liz in a scrambling run up the stairs and she snatched only a glimpse of the ferocious chaos erupting in the arena below. An image blurred by motion, it still had the power to petrify.

One of the fighting-wolves from the tapestry, it careened into the hall, exploding into fearsome reality. The dripping jaws, the saw-tooth armour and the cruel weapons in each thrashing limb; the frames of action assaulted her nerves until the Doctor’s urgent voice fixed her attention on the landing above. The nightmare of sound continued behind them.

Ludvika, nearest the door, had staggered backwards and his sword was only half-raised when the creature’s axe bit a chunk from his side. Another went down to the swipe of a barbed sword. Two attempted a retreat to the back of the house, but the beast pounced forward, executing a cat-like twist in mid-air; they were each pounded in the head by the mace, gripped by a muscular tail. Borisa chipped his sword-blade on its breastplate and his last surviving comrade swung

higher, aiming for the monstrous skull. The barbed sword whistled through the air and severed the descending blade from its hilt, while the mace smashed Borisa's ribcage.

The axe chewed into the last man's flank and he crumpled like a paper doll.

Then the laser-beam eyes focused on the first-floor landing, where two more enemies had just disappeared.

'Doctor, we have to get to the attic!' begged Liz, but he locked her wrist in his own hand and yanked her back towards the door he had chosen. He dragged her unceremoniously inside, kicking the door closed after them.

'No time!' he insisted, and Liz was acutely aware of the sudden quiet downstairs.

'Those men – ?'

'They never stood a chance,' the Doctor shut her off, hurriedly shoving a dresser against the door, then panning around the large room.

There was a capacious bed, silk eiderdown draping to the floor; a teak wardrobe and a larger dresser, which would have been admirable barricades given more time; a bedside table and three bow-legged chairs. Curtains of heavy velvet hung either side of an impressive bay window.

'Oriel window,' remarked the Doctor, cantering over to peer into the night. 'Hangs over the porch; not a huge drop. Come on, Liz.'

Liz hurried to the bed and grabbed handfuls of the bedcover. The Doctor hefted the bedside table and smashed out a pane with the flat of its surface, hurling the table aside. He turned to Liz and relieved her of the cumbersome bunches of eiderdown.

'You won't need that,' he informed her. 'You're going to lower yourself with both hands, then drop.'

'Doctor, I am *not* James Bond.'

They were interrupted by an intense blast of heat from the doorway. The door and dresser crumbled into cinders and fire consumed the surrounding woodwork. A black figure was poised on the landing.

Liz leaped for the window sill, but the Doctor hollered '*Jump!*' and she didn't wait. She flung herself clumsily at the

ground, a beam of white fire eating the window-frame and melting the glass around where she had stood.

The Doctor steeled himself to face the snarling Kagyrn.

Chapter Three

The Warrior

*The howling of the wolves without grew louder and angrier...
...With such allies as these at his command, I could do nothing.*

<<Jonathan Harker's Journal>>, *Dracula*, Bram Stoker

The Doctor eyed the window, gauging the possibilities of a headlong dive, but the temperature was enough to produce a sweat, though he was a good two metres from the main blaze. In any case, his opponent read the intention and vaulted promptly over to bar that line of escape.

The Doctor responded by bouncing deftly away across the bed. He finished with a turn, balancing to dodge any sudden blow and warily facing that vicious sneer. The Kagyrn snorted, throwing a sulphurous cloud from its nostrils and half-open mouth. Slowly, it shouldered the metallic tube of its rifle, examining the Time Lord through lava-flow eyes. Claws played over the hilts of the sheathed melee weapons; the tail secured the mace in its proper mounting on the belt. An audacious lick of the tongue flicked saliva from the roof of its mouth onto the eiderdown.

The Warrior was effectively daring the Doctor to strike. *I am unarmed*, it taunted. *Fight me. Show me your worth.*

The Doctor was genuinely surprised. 'My dear chap, I really think you're not well.'

The Kagyrn Warrior gave a savage roar and lurched forwards. The Doctor was ready for the direct attack and rolled athletically to his left, away from the bed. The tail snaked out after him before his assailant had landed, the Doctor feeling its solid impact bruise his back. In desperation, he heaved at the handle on the wardrobe door, lifting himself

to his feet and pulling the cabinet away from the wall. With a lightning side-step, he was out of its path and it toppled satisfactorily onto the carelessly neglected tail.

The expected yelp of pain failed to materialise and the Doctor ducked from the room in disappointment. The Kagyrn gnashed its teeth in fury and angrily tossed the furniture against the remaining dresser.

Pointedly conscious of the crashing wood, the Doctor scurried along to the second flight of stairs.

He was gambling on having enough time for a jump from the second floor and, allowing that Liz had not moved, leading his companion far from the house while the Warrior rampaged through the interior. Naturally, that modified his plans for fulfilling his promise to get them 'home', but he was sure it would be a postponement at most. The Kagyrn would certainly return to its pack, he judged, by daylight; unfortunately, he had no way of telling precisely how far off morning might be, but it could be little more than a few hours. All of these thoughts flashed through his mind as he charged up the stairs and dashed past the silver mirror, steering for a room on his left.

Equally, all of them disintegrated as he opened the door.

Breaking up through the boards, like a submarine through ice, the black shape of the Kagyrn ripped at the wood and hauled his savage bulk into the chamber. Splinters fell from his armour, while more were enmeshed in his fur. Triumphant, he filled his great paws with axe and sword.

'Hm, I seem to have the wrong room.' The Doctor slammed the door and bit his lip hard, as he headed for his only available retreat.

The Warrior cracked through the door like an eggshell, just as the Doctor reached the ladder. If he had chosen the stairs, he would have had an agitated Kagyrn on top of him. Reaching with both hands, he leaped up and pulled his body the rest of the distance through the hatchway. He kicked the ladder down and batted the hatch shut and sagged against the wall.

He was in a cupboard under the stairs, in Somerset. 'Whatever you do, Liz,' he entreated his friend from afar,

‘don’t wander too far.’

The Kagyrn Warrior sniffed at the hatch with something approaching disdain. The distinctive scent had gone, as if borne away by a matter transmitter. He sheathed his weapons and struck the offending hatch with a fist, but the material was completely unlike the flooring, in spite of its deceptive appearance. Shooting a warning growl at his vanished enemy, he turned and retreated along the landing.

At the mirror, his nostrils twitched.

Eagerly, he gazed into its depths and spied precisely the very object he had scented all the way from the woods. He reached out and forced his claws past the watery surface, felt them close about the artefact, then steadily withdrew his arm.

Emerging from the mirror, came the sceptred head of a golden staff.

He hissed his agony and snatched away his smoking paw, fur falling from the charred flesh. The pain was soon forgotten, though, as he bared his fangs at the hated object. This was a delicious victory.

The sun broke apart in glittering shards on the surface of the lake. Like a billion other stars, instead of her own familiar one, dancing in the water.

Bailador’s hooves splashed tentatively in the shallows as his mistress hovered on the shores of indecision. Horse and rider, as one, sensed something momentous lying in wait out there for them, in the deeper waters of Espejo de Cielo. Beyond the mirror.

Like the passing of one moment into the next, it could not be avoided, would not be denied. It was all that even a goddess could do to postpone it. Sat high on her horse’s back, she scanned the scene one more time, embracing it all with her gaze. As though committing it all, sight and sensation, to memory. Finally, she breathed a sigh that seemed like it might travel the world and grow into one of the breezes that whispered their way across Paraiso, kissing the leaves in the trees and returning, ultimately, to caress the grasses on these same shores. At least then, even if she never returned, she

would leave something of herself here.

Reaching down to pat her stallion's proud neck, she found her resolve in the strength and power beneath his black-velvet hide. Sitting straight, she nudged his flanks with her ankles and kicked him on, into the lake.

Bailador relaxed into a trot, stirring the sparkling water into a gentle froth, and she rode him out and out and out until he plunged into a swim and she slid from his saddle, holding onto his reins. The trust between them was tangible, sure as the leather between her fingers and the palm of her hand.

Easily, firmly, gently, she coaxed him under and they descended together into the depths of the lake. Sinking into inescapable destiny.

Where the lake had wrapped her in tranquillity, and Bailador had taken to the water like Pegasus taking to the air, the peace in the forest, as they emerged into another world, cast a cloud over Aphrodite's sylvan temperament.

Undaunted by shadows, she set out on the path in serene confidence, making herself at home with the night. A riding cape – of almost a fairy-tale red – shielded her from the cold and the strangeness of the air. Enjoying the garment's pleasant rustle over twigs and leaves, she all but floated along, her gaze and fingers brushing the bark of an occasional tree. The chorus of a few owls, heralding her passage, brought a smile to her lips. Everything perfectly natural. But, gradually, she could see the shadows shifting from enticing darkness to crowding gloom, and Aphrodite picked her way more carefully, peering out from her cavernous hood.

Lights ahead hinted of danger.

Artfully, Aphrodite slipped from Bailador's saddle and dodged ahead between the trees, inching forwards and gathering up her cloak to avoid unfortunate snags. She crept with infinite patience until she reached a small copse, from the cover of which she had an ample view of the camp. Nearby, a pair of tethered horses acknowledged her presence by champing and nodding their black and chestnut heads. She blew them both a kiss, calming them instantly, before sneaking her first proper glimpse over the bushes.

A number of campfires were dotted around the broad clearing, illuminating the scattered shapes of sleeping men. Horses were tied at various points about the edge of a rough circle, while men sat in their vicinity, keeping a lazy watch over the camp. More fires burned in the background, implying other camps where the forest would allow. Aphrodite casually estimated a hundred men and took note of their leather and chain mail armour, covering – for the most part – fine tunics of silk brocade. Passing them over, she concentrated on the only two men standing, one of whom was an inexplicable draw.

‘Believe me, Vecellin, this delay is a greater sore to me than anyone. But I feel its importance in some way.’ The speaker balled his features into a frown and raised a gauntleted hand, searching for the proof of his words. It was apparently beyond his reach – and he gave up. ‘I cannot explain.’

To Aphrodite, the man’s admission seemed improbable. He behaved and looked as if everything was within his grasp.

That leather voice had the same coarseness as his granular complexion and a power that spoke just as audibly from his eyes. The swarthy face, under its black moustache and trailing hair, shared chilling similarities with that gloved fist.

The other man, Vecellin, broke in quietly and Aphrodite strained to hear. ‘Lord Huba, you must know of my loyalty. My *life* is yours. Yet I do not and never shall trust a fiend such as that.’ He indicated their humble theatre. ‘It has absented itself and we make camp to attend its leisure. Do you see, lord? I give you my service freely, but you – you are your *own* master. Or should be.’

Huba met his officer’s gaze. ‘I bow to Árpád.’

‘As friend and ally,’ Vecellin returned, voicing a truth the leader clearly knew.

The pause was brief and Huba’s decision appeared to be quickly made. But Aphrodite could tell a hundred thoughts had passed in that second behind those eyes. ‘You are right, Vecellin. I should listen to you more often. Pick four men who have rested and they will ride with us to search for the stray member of our pack. He will welcome our interest in his safety, I think.’

Vecellin laughed. 'Will you bring the hound to heel, lord?'

Huba moved his fist to his chin, rubbing thoughtfully. 'I think not, Vecellin. It has a wild heart and too much will of its own.'

He strode up to the paired horses, making for the black stallion that had earlier been favoured with an airy kiss. Aphrodite slunk back into the shadows, concealing her moonlit face in a quantity of her cloak and realising how Huba's last statement could easily have applied to her.

Liz had already decided it was not her day when she had hit the earth under the bedroom window: the ground proved a good deal harder than it had first appeared. Winded and bruised, she had rolled onto her back and lain perfectly still for some moments before guessing that the Doctor was not immediately able to follow her. In case the creature elected to leap after her, common sense begged action, and Liz chose to scramble into hiding at the side of the house. There, she had waited, a variety of sounds from inside telling her of the Doctor's continued survival.

It was against her best instincts to wait too long, but the Doctor had wanted her safely outside, even at the risk of a damaged ankle. Therefore, she reasoned, he would not be pleased to find her wandering directly back into danger, however much she might wish to help. Instead, she bit her lip, stealing glances around the corner, and assessed several hopeless plans in her head. There was no promise in any of them.

Her spell of luck dropped another notch when she heard movement from the front door of the house; craning her neck, she saw the stout figure of the Kagyrn Warrior. It carried something in a bundle of curtain.

As Liz watched, the head swivelled, sniffing her out.

Liz snapped back in horror, pressing her body deep into the wall. One side of the lupine face was horribly decayed, ragged flesh and fur sticking to an oddly phantasmal skull. An eye still bulged in the skeletal socket and Liz felt pinned by the memory of its stare. The silence transfixed her; she dared not look again.

Knees trembling, she geared herself for a run.

Then, the clink of armour reached her ears and she imagined its grotesque figure shambling down the hillside. She breathed slowly out, feeding her muscles some slack, leaning back against the house.

When she was ready, she straightened herself and padded around to the front of the house, keeping to the shelter of the overhanging first floor. The creature could still be discerned, loping slowly towards the line of trees where thin columns of white smoke sailed up to the sky. It showed no sign of turning back.

‘Well we won’t be inviting you back in a hurry,’ Liz told the departing form in no uncertain terms.

She sighed and faced the house, hoping for a glimpse of the Doctor at one of the windows. She fought down her concern and waited a while longer, massaging her arm and those ribs tenderised by the fall. She called out, ‘Doctor!’ There was no reply. She started anxiously towards the house.

Before she made the door, the entire building vanished.

Urgency tempered by a degree of caution, the Doctor dropped through the hatch, dispensing with the ladder altogether. He absorbed the impact with the skill of a gymnast.

The stillness was characteristic of an empty house. ‘I see the dog has been put out.’

Struck by the full significance of the fact, the Doctor hared along the landing and pelted down the stairs; Liz had the sense to conceal herself, he was sure, but a Kagyrn warrior was not easily fooled. Besides, the terrain outside had seemed far too open, with the trees distant enough to discourage her from hiding there. He was acutely aware of his inability to protect his companions all of the time, but Liz’s capable independence could be as much a liability as an asset. He found some encouragement in the fact that she had remained outside after leaping from the window; that much had worked as he’d intended. Even so, she had no idea of what she was dealing with, and that invariably spelled trouble.

He launched himself from the lowest of the stairs and landed near the door, ready to grab the handle. A sharp pull

told him it was locked. A repeated tug was equally futile.

He bent to examine the barrier, running a flat palm over the wood around the latch. He remembered the Warrior's forced entry. 'Self-repairing.'

Slipping a pen-shaped device from his jacket pocket, the Doctor thumbed a contact and described an arc over the lock. The sonic screwdriver whistled shrilly at its impassive target until the Doctor abandoned that line of approach.

He perched a finger on his upper lip, immersed in thought. Then his eyes skimmed over the empty hall and he was suddenly crouching to inspect the floor. Here and there, scorch marks showed faintly in the boards and the matting.

'Disintegration,' concluded the Time Lord unhappily.

He could almost see the victorious Kagyrn torching the bodies with the rifle, searing them away to nothingness. Then the house calmly healing its wounds as the fires died down. He expected the floor upstairs to be similarly knitting itself into shape and was tempted to go and confirm the theory; he was certain it would provide for a fascinating study.

His mind was changed by a sudden wave of giddiness as he stood. The sensation passed soon enough, but it was followed by a burst of automatic fire and the slam of bullets into the door.

Quick to accept the shock, the Doctor went straight to the side of the hall, every sense alert and the implications of his dizzy spell temporarily forgotten.

The firing was already over, replaced by shouts and the tramp of boots on stone. The Doctor listened intently without result, but could stand the suspense no more.

He climbed to his feet, tried the door and found it ready to open.

Before him, sprawling on a cobbled street, lay Perriman, his head towards the Doctor, but no less recognisable in death. The ugly bulk of an armoured personnel carrier squatted opposite the house, boasting its twentieth-century construction. Uniformed men regarded him from several directions, up and down the street. Most of them aimed rifles at his chest.

Helpfully, he raised both hands. 'It's alright, gentlemen. I

know the routine.'

Liz felt thoroughly wretched.

It was one thing for the Doctor to go losing himself in various dimensions, but she considered herself less well-adapted to such situations. Here, it seemed, she was the stranded one, rather than the more fortunate individual left to do all the pacing to and fro. The enormity of her position had not escaped her, either, and would have overwhelmed even her resolute nature but for the appearance of a more immediate danger.

Liz ducked the moment she sighted the group of horsemen approaching from the woods. Kneeling, she made herself a less obvious target for searching eyes.

They were another band of six, riding with the manner of landowners. Their armour comprised of several layered sections of leather over mail, crowned with a spiked helmet reminiscent of the Turkish style. The saddles and tack labelled them as sophisticated equestrians, but their military demeanour encouraged Liz to spread herself flat over the earth as their path brought them ever closer.

She stretched the sleeves of her sweater to cover her pale hands. She kept a tight rein on her breath.

The horses came to a halt some metres away.

Face to the ground, Liz could hear the riders turning in their saddles, scanning the horizon. There were the soft clinks and creaks of armour, the stamp of impatient hooves. There were also words exchanged, but the language was a stream of guttural, almost hacking, syllables that might have sounded more at home in the mouth of a wolf.

Whatever was under discussion, Liz felt lonelier than ever.

'The beast has slipped past us in the dark,' asserted Vecellin, unable to conceal a note of doubt. He studied his chief worriedly between each search of the hill's limits, observing a restlessness that seemed wholly unnatural.

'It could not. It must not have done!' Huba's expression was pained, but his commands had lost none of their force. 'We cannot allow it to roam free, Vecellin. It has something

precious, something *essential*, in its possession.'

Vecellin's concern was suddenly magnified. 'How do you know this, lord?'

'I know it!' Huba buckled under some invisible torture. Baring his teeth, he drew his sword and held it high. 'That foul thing has tested me too far, Vecellin. We will recover its prize, then I will relieve it of that burdensome head!'

Huba started his horse forward, skilfully turning the animal so he could face his troops. 'Don't expend any worries over your chief. The death of our monster will be my remedy!'

The stallion shifted again and a shape scuttled away from dangerous hooves.

Vecellin and the other men laughed, drawing their blades to match their leader. 'You have scared a rabbit from its hole, lord Huba!'

Huba turned his head with slow deliberation. He monitored the progress of the fugitive towards the inadequate sanctuary offered by the trees, seeing a pretty face glance back in fear. When the runner had achieved an appropriate distance, he snapped his reins. 'We'll have ourselves two famous hunts tonight! Follow me!'

The unsheathed sword had nearly sparked Liz's flight, but she had courageously held her ground for as long as she could, trying to filter the leader's shouts for some understanding. The clumping of hooves too close to her ears had sealed her fate. Forced to roll aside for safety, she had followed up with a blind, stumbling run. Only later did she bother to look to appraise the riders' reactions.

Initially, she thought they were shocked by her sudden appearance. Then she saw the cool hunger in the commander's observation. They were granting her a head-start.

Horried, Liz's boots ate up the span of ground between her and the forest, placing the site of the house and hope of the Doctor's help still further out of reach. As she ran, she cursed the impractical heels of her boots and several times sensed an ankle threatening to give way. Her heart beat so loudly in her skull that the noise of her pursuers took long seconds to reach her. When it came, she imagined the thundering horses

trampling her spine, but could find no more speed in her complaining legs. Her muscles ached and her head pounded and she could hear the eager calls of her hunters, howling like wolves.

She amazed herself by breaking into the undergrowth, wincing at the clawing branches. Pushing her head down, she rushed on.

She risked another glance back to the forest's edge and satisfied herself that the horsemen had been slowed at least. They urged their mounts this way and that, fighting for less direct paths where the way might be easier. Calls and much pointing showed they had yet to lose sight of her, but she stood to gain a little more ground if she could resist the temptation to collapse.

Her toe met something solid and she sailed forward, crying out before she crashed amongst the plant life.

Frantically, Liz wedged both hands under her and prepared to hoist herself up. The horses were crunching through the forest floor all about her, their masters homing in on her single, sorry yelp of surprise. She had no way of judging the visibility of her profile here in the shrubbery, but she could not guess very well which way to run. Indecision held her to the ground.

Then her mind was made up by a hand cupped over her mouth and an arm encircling her waist, pulling her backwards. Even the minimal light of night was shut out by a blanket or sheet enveloping Liz and her captor. There was strength in the restraint, but no violence – and Liz chose not to struggle. Suddenly, she felt perfectly safe.

The Doctor scratched an imaginary itch under his collar and pretended patience as he favoured the guard with a smile.

He sat on the rudimentary bench that passed for seating in the APC, the vehicle's ceiling low enough to compress both mood and illumination. This was where he had been roughly herded immediately on emerging from the house.

The commanding officer had apparently been too busy conferring with the medic over the dead Perriman to attend to his prisoner. The troops were clearly responsible for that

death, but their treatment of him was governed with suspicion, regardless. The guard, standing at the open hatch in the rear, made his personal distrust quite plain.

From the uniform and the fur-fronted *shapka* on his head, he was easily identified as a Russian. The rifle, with a distinctive curve to its magazine, was a cut-down variant of the infamous Kalashnikov, which was hardly conclusive; but the black epaulettes bore the Cyrillic 'CA' of the Soviet Army and the hammer-and-sickle shone proudly on each button. This guard's long coat looked a poor fit, but the Doctor could envy its protection against the icy edge of the local air.

'Look, I realise I don't have an appointment, old chap, but I really have been kept waiting indecently long.'

The guard's sixth sense was on a par with the Doctor's, because he stepped neatly aside without so much as a prompt and the stern figure of a Soviet Major appeared in the doorway. Tall, he stooped to enter the vehicle and sat opposite the Doctor, scrutinising his prisoner before leaning forward.

'I am relieved to hear you are impatient, my friend. Since you will not be leaving here until I obtain the truth, it promises a co-operative attitude.' He removed his hat and gloves, placing them on the bench beside him. 'I am Major Grigoriy Yevgenyevitch Bugayev. I would be delighted to hear any useful information you feel able to share.'

He had a face composed of many bold strokes: harsh black hair above a pronounced forehead of creases, straight nose pinched hard at the bridge, mouth squashed up by a pointed chin, deep-set eyes intensified by dense eyebrows which angled down to meet each other. His face was an effective warning, which the Doctor promptly ignored.

'Yes, now let me see. I happen to know where you might find a green-eyed yellow idol. Would that be of any help at all?'

Bugayev's lip curled in disdain and he looked at the guard as he spoke. 'I am not particularly fond of the flippant approach, myself. Given a choice, I prefer the prisoner who maintains a stubborn silence.' His eyes went to the Doctor. His words were delivered, encased in the heavy Russian accent, with the care and precision of a watchmaker. 'I find it less

irritating.'

'Perhaps the humour was a little subtle for your taste. I'd forgotten I was dealing with a military mind.'

Bugayev flared, but held himself from striking out.

'Your position is bad enough already, friend. You have a passport?' Here, the Doctor shook his head, but the Major already wore a knowing grin. 'I didn't think so. You English are always so quick to flash them at the first sign of trouble.' (The Doctor chose not to dispute him on the matter of nationality.) 'I could hand you straight to the Hungarian police and you can sweat it out with them until the British Embassy goes down on bended knee.'

'I'm in Hungary am I?' asked the Doctor for his own benefit. 'I rather thought I was when that fellow mentioned Árpád.'

'What *fellow* was that? Your tour operator? Or the customs official?' Bugayev wielded humour like a cold knife. He clasped his hands together and adopted a friendly grin. 'There's no guarantee you'll reach either the Embassy or the police in mint condition, of course. This isn't New York, but tourists still get beaten and robbed.'

The Doctor drew himself up and leaned in to meet the threat. 'My dear sir, don't go to any special bother on my account! Why don't you just shoot me like that poor chap, Perriman? Whatever's good enough for him is good enough for me!'

'Oh, you know him, do you? That's something. Perriman. He didn't have a passport either.'

'And since when did that carry a death sentence?'

Bugayev barked a laugh that was half anger. 'Damn you! Is that why you're being so difficult? You think I'm a murderer?' He stabbed out with a finger. 'Just answer my questions! What's your name?'

'Smith. Doctor John Smith.' It was a level response.

'I can see I am in for a challenging afternoon.' Bugayev sighed expressively. 'Look, I grant you the novel addition of the title, but I am familiar enough with your country to know the popularity of certain names. Particularly those aliases preferred for covert liaisons. In short, don't try me any further.'

I am not a patient man.'

'And you're not a murderer, either?' the Doctor continued his own interrogation.

'For the sake of productivity, I'll indulge you this once,' the Russian yielded thinly. 'The old man was killed by accident. Very unfortunate. My man was understandably on edge and, in any case, was firing at something else. Does that satisfy you?'

'Not really, no. It's a man's life we're talking about, you know. Not a broken window!'

Bugayev was finally incensed. He leaped up, bending over the Doctor. 'Well, friend, your approval doesn't concern me in the slightest. Hear?! Keep your damned accusations to yourself! I don't want your opinions and I especially don't require any preaching. I want plain facts!'

His eyes tried to pierce the Doctor's defiant stare, but the Doctor's temper was simmering nicely.

'On the planet Delphon,' he quipped, 'those eyebrows would earn you something of a reputation – as an oaf and a loudmouth!'

Bugayev bashed his fist into the vehicle's hull so close to the Doctor's head that even his nerves were forced to give a tiny jump. '*I have had enough!*'

His voice reverberated off the metal walls for some time and he let his rage die with its echo. Shortly, he proposed, 'I'll start with a few simple questions, shall I? We can work our way up to the important ones. What's your name?'

'I've told you already,' was the terse reply.

Bugayev's control succeeded with only the greatest effort. 'So you have. So you call yourself a doctor? Some aspiration of yours, perhaps? A delusion of grandeur?'

'Not at all, old chap.' The Doctor played his trump card in the shape of his UNIT identification.

Bugayev accepted the card and studied it with tightly narrowed eyes. He pocketed it.

'Why didn't you show this to me earlier?'

'I'm not altogether fond of bureaucracy,' the Doctor told him, 'and I'm still less partial to thugs.' Privately, the Doctor had to admit it had slipped his mind.

‘Perhaps you feared the forgery would be detected?’

‘Is it part of your professional training to be that obtuse? I’ve wasted enough time here already. If you’ll excuse me –’

Bugayev cut him off, seizing his small victory. ‘Yes, Doctor Smith, *you* have wasted enough time. I believe in taking the shortest route through an obstacle. Cut to the chase, as the Americans say. Whereas clearly you prefer to play your clever games.

‘Yet, I am convinced you may yet be persuaded to co-operate with us, after all. Maybe you will see I’m not as bad as you think and you may even take a few orders.’

The Doctor was openly dubious, but he disliked the Major’s note of triumph. Still, he was not about to change his attitude for the sake of a probable bluff. ‘Fancy ourselves as something of a creative genius, do we? Another Tolstoy, perhaps?’

Bugayev refused to be provoked. ‘Assuming your identification is not a forgery, you may be interested to see this,’ he said and held his hat out for the Doctor to study the badge on its front; all the guards had worn them, too. It showed a gold hammer-and-sickle against a black circle, a white border boldly off-setting the Cyrillic letters:

ОГРОН.

‘OGRON?’ read the Doctor.

‘*Operativnaya Gruppya Rasvedkoy Obyedinyonnihi Natsiy,*’ the Major explained, adding an unnecessary translation. ‘Task Force for Intelligence of the United Nations. It seems you are my ally, Doctor Smith.’

He thrust a hand at the Doctor, showing immaculate teeth.

The Doctor procrastinated, not caring to cement an alliance with the callous, ruthless man he had read in the Major. His choices were limited, however, and a more conciliatory approach could earn him some assistance in rescuing Liz. It was a thin chance, but he had succeeded with less than that in the past.

Overcoming his reluctance, he made the shake summarily brief.

‘Splendid acronym, anyway. I hope you never meet the genuine article.’

When the muffled noises of pursuit had died to nothing, Liz felt a pat from the hand across her back and she lifted herself to sit. The cover that fell away from her shoulders was a huge fold of red cloak. Kneeling beside her was a beautiful young woman who slid the garment's hood from her head to regard Liz with the gentle curiosity of a bird. Whether she was a dove or a carrion crow remained to be seen. But no, her exotic beauty seemed to intimate that she was a bird of paradise.

‘Are you alright? You didn’t sprain your ankle in the fall?’ Her voice had the featherlike singsong quality of a Spanish flute.

Liz needed a moment to reply. Not to assess the likelihood of a sprain, but simply to recover her senses. She studied her newfound companion, and couldn’t escape the impression that she was trying to make out whether the woman was real or imagined. Hair and skin varying shades of golden-brown, she could have hailed from the ancient Mediterranean. Liz could pin no definite age to her; there was such a timeless light in those eyes of sepia-tinted amber, set burning under fine cinder-coloured brows.

Whoever she was and whatever she was doing here, her quick wits had surely saved Liz from that barbaric chase. Whether she was to be trusted or not, Liz was at least able to recover her manners. ‘Um, no. I’m – fine. I tripped over something.’

The woman pressed a finger to her lips, reminding Liz that volume was still a dangerous luxury here. Reaching over, she dug into the undergrowth and hauled a magnificent golden sceptre free from a pile of fabric; it was as long as a spear and Liz recognised it instantly. ‘This was the something. You’ve seen it before.’

‘Yes, I – well, not exactly. I’ve seen an illustration. A tapestry,’ Liz stammered out the truth, struggling to convince herself. She remembered the Kagyrn Warrior, a parcel of curtain under its arm. ‘How did it get there?’

‘Someone – or something – dropped it, I should say.’ Unfurling her legs, the woman rested her back against the nearest trunk, closing her eyes for a moment. ‘I think I saw the thief. I’m not sure. We’ll be safe here for a while.’

Reclining there, she gave Liz the impression of a rare flower, thriving at the base of the tree.

‘Thank you, anyway,’ she ventured, ‘for your rescue effort. I should have said so before. You’ll forgive me if I’m a little muddled right now.’ Another important detail sprang to mind. ‘I’m Liz, by the way.’

‘Aphrodite,’ she smiled, offering a slender hand from beneath the cloak. ‘And don’t think your confusion makes you anything special around here. I am as much in the dark as you, I think, but at least we are in the dark together.’

Those words alone confirmed Aphrodite as a friend.

The Doctor accepted the idea of a stroll with the Major as an opportunity to think and to learn. As such, although the company was far from conducive, he welcomed the clearing of his head and the chance to temporarily put aside his anxieties. The cobbled streets and varied, even hybrid, architecture made for a perfect setting. The Major was a useful sounding-board who lapped up every scrap of data the Doctor could provide.

‘Tenth-century Slavs, you said?’ he inquired, surprisingly open-minded.

‘Yes, early tenth, I’d say. Their mention of Árpád helps tremendously, of course.’

‘It does?’ Bugayev was on unfamiliar territory. ‘Our Scientific Adviser was something of an historian also. She went missing in that house.’

‘And who might “she” be?’

‘A brilliant scientist,’ proclaimed Bugayev with a pride bordering on paternal.

‘Melisandra Sergeevna Kameneva.’ The Doctor was instantly alert. ‘Yes, I’ve heard the name before. Well, part of it anyway. She lives here in Hungary, does she?’

‘No, she has an extravagant *dacha* outside Moscow. Why do you ask?’

The Doctor affected as casual a manner as possible. ‘I have to wonder why a team of Russians would be conducting this investigation rather than a Hungarian group.’

The Major came to a stop, appraising the Doctor scrupulously.

‘They needed our expertise,’ he lied, resuming his stride.

‘You can tell me,’ encouraged the Time Lord, ‘I’m a Doctor.’

Major Bugayev shook his head. ‘That’s all you need to know.’

The Doctor decided not to press the point at this early stage. Their alliance’s cement needed far more time to dry.

Liz recounted the tale of her adventure in the house as if it were a dream from which she had only now awoken. Aphrodite listened calmly and with sympathy.

‘I realise I sound mad,’ finished Liz, feeling the need to qualify her story, ‘but that level of invention is outside my field.’

Aphrodite nodded. ‘I know. Not everything that’s horrible is madness, and not all that’s wonderful is sanity.’ She paused, drawing in the night air, then chuckled musically. ‘And I’m certainly ready to believe you came from another time and place. Your fashion sense is your biggest advocate.’

Liz appreciated the joke. ‘The Doctor never told me what to pack.’

They fell silent, Liz thinking about the Doctor and Aphrodite in her own reverie.

‘Aphrodite, who are you? I mean, why are you here?’ prodded Liz attentively, keen to discover more about her new companion while equally anxious not to intrude.

‘I came here to meet some friends of mine. I seem to have – missed them somehow.’

‘They’ve gone?’

‘No. I don’t think they’re here yet,’ the woman sighed and her eyes wandered airily for a moment. It sounded exactly like the sort of answer the Doctor might give.

She gasped and was suddenly on her knees. Liz followed her gaze and felt her own pulse jump.

Bathed in its own eerie light, the Kagyrn Warrior was advancing soundlessly through the undergrowth, its disfigurement more ghoulish than ever. A ghastly skull protruding from half a head of bloody fur and the withered, skeletal claw flexing from its housing of armourplate; the

creature was no less terrifying for its gross injuries. It staggered forward, snarling and panting, as saliva dribbled over its jaw of exposed bone.

Aphrodite's eyes were closed, her chest rose and fell sharply. She despaired, 'It's no use! It doesn't know any fear!'

Liz was ready to beg some explanation, but then she had her own idea. She reached over to the golden staff. 'Maybe it only wants this!'

The whoops of men interrupted her as she prepared to throw. The two women glanced about them until they finally spotted the shifting images of horsemen, circling them as well as the Warrior.

'Don't give him his bone!' someone shouted, and Liz realised it was a command meant for her. She restored the staff to its bundle and exchanged a nervous expression with Aphrodite.

A bear of a man charged his horse forward, helmet bowed to avoid the lower branches. 'Huba,' Aphrodite whispered.

Huba brought his stallion between the women and their would-be attacker. Other riders closed in around the arena. He called to them, 'Don't let him run!' and drew his sword. Then he was marching straight at the slaving beast as if it were a lamb to be slaughtered. The creature hissed its displeasure and held its ground.

'Here's an end to your night's revels, dog!' spat Huba, sword raised in both hands.

The Magyar swung the blade around at the level of the Warrior's neck, driving it clean through to chop at a tree on the other side. When he retrieved his weapon, the thing had vanished. He wiped the sticky blood from his sword.

'Did he kill it?' asked Liz in a hush.

'I don't know,' shrugged Aphrodite almost apologetically and, together, they stood. Aphrodite, Liz noticed, was a good half a head taller than her. Statuesque.

Huba was quick in coming back and, sword sheathed, he bore his satisfaction like a medal. He paraded before them, saying nothing, while Liz shied from the inspection of his men's eyes. Eventually, he stopped pacing and toyed with his moustache. A grin was forming and it put Liz off saying her

‘Thankyous’ altogether.

‘Who would have predicted,’ he said at length, ‘we would find so many prizes in such proximity?’

‘You are blessed indeed, lord Huba,’ praised Vecellin energetically.

‘Doubly so.’ Huba’s gloved hand shot out and locked around Liz’s face; she found herself shaking. ‘This one’s lost her skirts, but she’s comely enough.’

Aphrodite hummed a lilting tune, causing Huba to discard Liz and round on her.

‘This bird sings, Vecellin.’ Huba was vexed and he silenced Aphrodite with a hand on her neck, which he slowly moved back through her hair. ‘Look at me.’ She did. ‘What are you under those feathers? A scrawny hen or a nightingale?’

Unclasping her cloak, he threw it off behind her. She stood in the garb of a gypsy: lace-frilled blouse and embroidered floral skirt, flounces falling just above a pair of black suede ankle-boots. A sash at her waist accentuated her naturally alluring figure and completed a quintessentially romantic image. Huba was caught in predatory admiration, his eyes prowling far outside the borders of romance.

Aphrodite tensed visibly as he pressed closer.

‘I won’t break you, angel. I’ll treat you both with care,’ he assured them, and his fingers tugged at the laces of Aphrodite’s blouse.

Chapter Four

Budapest

To the memory of the heroes who have sacrificed their lives for the freedom of our people and national independence.

Inscription, <<Heroes Monument>>, Heroes' Square,
Budapest

The Doctor's concentration waded out from the decorative fortification of Fisherman's Bastion, across the Danube to the autumnal grandeur of Pest. His view spanned from the limestone cake of the Parliament Building, gilt-edged in the sunlight, to the more functional symmetry of Elizabeth Bridge. Sharing his vigil on this bank were the tree-furrowed brow of Gellért Hill, the imperious Royal Palace and – to his left – the undulating, home-speckled hills of Buda. Two widely differing cities held apart by nothing more than water.

To the Doctor, it was a scene evocative of the tapestry. 'Two armies poised to clash, wouldn't you say, Major?'

Bugayev stirred and joined him at the wall. 'You know, I always felt they were bowing to one another's interpretation of beauty.'

'You do surprise me,' expressed the Doctor, looking directly at the officer.

'Oh, the Suvarov academy didn't neglect my classical education, Doctor,' he boasted. 'I like to think my appreciation for art and culture is as well-developed as my marksmanship and grasp of tactics.'

'Yes, well, what we need is a plan of action, Grigoriy Yevgenyevich.'

'Major Bugayev,' corrected the Russian adamantly. 'We are officer and scientist, you and I. Not – comrades. What do you suggest? Melisandra Sergeyevna tracked the source of the

disturbances to that house in Tárnok útca.'

'I very much doubt if its the source, but go on – what kind of disturbances?'

'Okay.' The Major drew deeply on a cigarette and narrowed his eyes as if the taste offended him. 'Temporal, she claimed. Schisms in Time.'

The Doctor suddenly wanted to hear more and he applied a nudge or two. 'Temporal physics one of her fields, is it? Bit far-fetched, isn't it? She seems to have convinced you anyway, Major.'

'I am an inveterate sceptic, Doctor. But even an "oaf" like me must accept the testimony of his own senses.' Bugayev observed the Doctor closely. 'When that man, Perriman, was shot, he was being attacked by a thirteenth-century Mongol. My man, Chistyakov, opened fire on the Mongol, but the bullets went through like he was a mirage. I saw it.'

'What happened then?'

'The Mongol vanished and,' he shrugged, 'Perriman hit the ground. My men had orders to open fire on all such manifestations. The Mongol was not the first. We have come a long way from fluctuations in the weather patterns.'

'You do seem to have progressed,' the Doctor grimaced with the guilt of his late arrival. 'Do you have any data on these weather shifts?'

'Of course.' Bugayev addressed the waiting guard, a swarthy-skinned teenager. He snapped an order in Russian and the young private launched himself up the street. Bugayev commended him to the Doctor, 'He's a good man, Abdurasulov.'

'Only just,' complained the Time Lord.

'Another axe to grind, Doctor?' Bugayev was amused. 'All my men are efficient career soldiers. And experienced.' He let that trail significantly into silence, intimating another closed subject.

'I should be careful you don't reveal any state secrets, Major. You never know what'll end up on the *Voice of America*.'

Bugayev ignored the Doctor's sarcasm, instead watching the road. In a moment, Abdurasulov came trotting around the

corner and briskly mounted the steps. The Major took a wad of papers from him and wedged them into the Doctor's hands.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor to the boy, but his eyes were aimed at Bugayev. Leaving the Major to smoke, he flipped rapidly through the printouts, absorbing every key detail. Wind velocities, cloud formations, precipitation and temperature; all showed a series of random peaks and troughs, some representing frightening extremes. Wind direction altered dramatically at times, as well.

'Well, I shouldn't go making faces in Budapest for a while,' he cracked, subsequently serious. 'There's something else. The frequency of the shifts is increasing. Was that one of Melisandra Sergeevna's observations?'

'It was. But the weather is the less immediate problem now.'

'It most certainly is not,' the Doctor contested. 'It's as if Time itself were breaking apart.'

Aphrodite was trembling, but there was nothing to make her look vulnerable under Huba's lascivious attentions. Her eyes burned with defiance, so it was most likely – and understandably – a tremor of anger; but her breath quickened with every move of his hand, as though mirroring his anticipation. She was like a fire that wanted the man to put his hand in the flames. Unexpectedly, he withdrew his hand from her neck, snatching his fingers away as though Liz's impression had somehow been made real. Too hot to handle.

Pronounced concern on his face, Huba regarded Aphrodite as though afraid he had carelessly plucked at the petals of a fragile flower.

'I am sorry,' he breathed, earnestly penitent. 'I never intended to frighten you. Either of you.' He glanced at Liz. 'Please forgive me. I –' He broke off, trapped in some internal battle. Regaining his resolve like he was taking command of an unruly army, he stepped regally around behind the two women and bowed to retrieve Aphrodite's cloak. As king to a queen, he draped it carefully over her shoulders.

Liz was relieved, but ultimately bewildered. Aphrodite's – mood? – one could hardly have called it distress – was slowly

lifting.

‘Rest easy,’ Huba reassured them, ‘you will be safe with me.’

The mounted assembly grew restless and unsettled. Vecellin, as ever, voiced their thoughts. ‘Will you not take them, lord Huba?’ He laughed. ‘If your desire has faded, then may we share the prize?’

Huba’s face blackened and he stormed up to his captain. With a bellow of fury, he pulled Vecellin from the saddle; as the man hit the ground, his horse reared aside. Huba thrust a fist at Vecellin’s quivering features.

‘Lay a hand on either and I will tear you open!’ He stood back to command the other four. ‘Protect them or your lives are forfeit! They are my wards and you will guard them as you would me!’

Liz searched Aphrodite’s eyes for enlightenment. Aphrodite merely busied herself fastening her blouse and the cloak about her neck. The fire had turned cold in her eyes. Finally, though, she favoured Liz with a wink. *Trust me*, she was saying.

Liz could only think to answer with a nod.

‘Lord Huba!’ screamed one of the men, wrenching the chief from his passion.

Everyone turned to see the bestial shape of the Kagym Warrior, stalking towards the easy prey presented by the two women. Startled, Liz and Aphrodite backed away in unison. Vecellin and the others burst into action, dashing this way and that past the creature’s targets. Huba pounced in front of the women, shielding them with his own body. He dared the Warrior onto the tip of his sword.

The men bore down on their foe, swiping at it with swords from all angles, fear only apparent in their horses. Vecellin fought on his feet.

There was a scream and a whinny, the Warrior flaring with energy. A rider dispersed into blazing fragments, his horse kicking a retreat.

‘No! Keep your distance!’ warned Aphrodite, starting forward.

‘Stay!’ compelled Huba earnestly. ‘It will not pass me!’

Vecellin lunged again. Then the bedlam subsided as abruptly as it had come. The men hovered momentarily around where the Warrior and their fellow soldier had disappeared.

Huba relaxed and passed a gauntlet across his forehead. 'The blood of the thing was on my sword.' He whirled to meet Liz's frown. 'It was, I tell you.'

'We believe you,' averred Liz a little too hastily to be convincing.

Aphrodite fought down her emotions with an effort. 'I'm sorry – about your guard.'

Huba's gesture of dismissal was not made casually. His mind was wrapped in other concerns, though, and there was no release. 'That creature plagues us all. I should never have

- ' His face wrinkled in pain. 'He had – something valuable.' 'Are you alright?' It was Liz who spoke, but Aphrodite's concern matched hers. 'It's nothing! A curse!' He choked on a laugh. Rubbing his eyes, he sighted the staff

on its bed of curtain fabric. Stooping swiftly, he came up with the sceptre in his hand. 'Yes, this will be it. I must deliver this to Árpád.'

Liz decided there was an artificial quality to Huba's rapid recovery.

'Vecellin!' he beckoned and the captain hastened over. 'Send a messenger to the remainder of the escort. Tell them to continue on to the encampment. You and the others will accompany me back to Csepel.'

Vecellin was ready to question his chief's wisdom, but Huba quashed the thought with a look. 'Yes, lord.'

'And we will guide these ladies to the sanctuary of the fort.' Huba awarded Liz and Aphrodite a kingly smile. The weight of the staff rolled comfortably in his gloved hands. 'I trust that will suit?'

'Oh, admirably.' Aphrodite astounded Liz with her willingness, at least as quick with her answer as Huba had been with his recovery.

'We know the effect, Doctor. What's the cause?'

Bugayev's insistence was evident in his step as he kept pace with the Doctor. The two men marched swiftly across the

square, steering towards the corner of Tárnok street, the youthful guard in tow. It was the Doctor who infuriated the officer by bringing their procession to a rude halt.

The Doctor aimed a finger at the statue on the corner of a Baroque building. 'Pallas Athene!'

Although an alternative depiction to the one in the tapestry, the subject of the sculpture was unmistakable. Helmed and robed, the goddess watched over the square, armed with a spear and a shield bearing Buda's coat of arms. Hands at his waist, the Doctor stared up in quiet wonder.

An irate Major waved a palm across his line of sight. 'Doctor, she is a popular figure in mythology.' He added, 'It isn't even an original!'

'Oh. Are you sure about that?'

'If it's important, the original was an eighteenth-century sculpture. It used to stand somewhere near this spot.'

'Yes, it could be extremely important,' the Doctor scratched at his chin. 'Look, has the mystery house a library? I wasn't in the Hungarian one long enough to check.'

Bugayev was seconds from exploding, but calmed when he realised the Doctor had not swung off on a complete tangent. 'I believe so. Quite an extensive collection.'

'Excellent!' exclaimed the Doctor, just stopping short of a pat on the Major's shoulder. He resumed their walk. 'Have a few of your men root around in there, while we go for a ride, won't you?'

Bugayev and the private hastened to catch him up. 'A ride? Where? And what are they supposed to look for?'

They had to wait at the barricade, while a round-faced trooper hauled it aside. The Doctor waved an arm. 'Legends, myths. Local folk-tales, that kind of thing.'

Bugayev assessed the suggestion's potential and found he could actually see some sense in it, if not absolute logic. He passed the barrier after the Doctor, who was headed for the APC.

'Doctor!' he called, spinning the Time Lord around on his heel. 'In case you had overlooked the fact, the BMP is mine. Now, where would you care to go?'

'I'm terribly sorry, old chap. A little absent-minded

presumption, that's all.' The Doctor clearly relished the current puzzle as a distraction and his mood was perfect for a summer outing. 'I'd like to take in a few more statues, if it's all the same to you.'

Once the messenger had departed, Huba gave the order to mount up. Aphrodite and Liz were shown to the spare horse, recently brought under control by Vecellin.

Aphrodite went up with the grace of an experienced equestrienne. Patiently, she helped Liz to clamber aloft in front of her, reaching around her waist to keep hold of the reins. Liz held fast to Aphrodite and worked to find some steadier perch.

'You'll be fine,' Aphrodite's voice comforted.

'Can you see to drive?' Liz was sure the field of view was badly restricted.

'Have you ever known a horse to run into a tree?'

Huba rode up to ensure they were comfortable. Liz, loath to worry him, zipped her mouth into a polite smile. Aphrodite, too, nodded graciously, her gaze lingering momentarily on the golden staff, gripped like a spear in his right gauntlet.

'We will cross the hill and meet the river, then it will be only a matter of an hour's ride along the shore. Can you bear that?'

Aphrodite was almost buoyant. 'I'll enjoy it!'

She prodded the horse kindly into an easy canter, leaving Huba to take her lead. The Magyar chief gave a command and the riding party formed up in Aphrodite's wake. Huba closed the distance to ride close at the women's flank, where he could more easily assume the role of sentinel.

Liz squeezed Aphrodite's ribs to attract her attention. She whispered, 'Was that your escape plan?'

Aphrodite's face was a picture of innocence and whether it was real or a sham, Liz couldn't tell. 'What escape?' the goddess arched her elegant brow.

The grumbling motor of the BMP gnawed continuously at the Doctor's concentration like a mechanical dog and once again the Doctor was induced to envy the Russians some part of

their uniform; this time it was the hat, with flaps that folded down to cover the ears. The vibrations jarred his senses and interfered with his powers of concentration.

Such considerations were not legible on the faces of his fellow passengers and they rocked submissively to and fro on the benches on either side of the compartment. Ahead, Bugayev flaunted his upper half to the innocent passers-by, jammed up through the commander's hatch. The driver was hunched up in the chamfered muzzle of the machine forward of his superior. Sharing the Doctor's unpleasant experience in the rear were the six infantrymen who had been slow in volunteering for library duty: Chistyakov, Komarovskiy, Plankin, Saporov, Yaroslavskiy and Abdurasulov – courtesy of a business-like introduction from Bugayev. Their expressions varied from stern to placid and the Doctor's sympathy went out to them. Much of it also went to the passers-by.

After a long seven minutes, the vehicle trundled to a rest and the Doctor was first to emerge when the rear hatch opened. Breathing in gratefully and stretching his limbs, he let the troops file out around him and took in the scene.

The regimented paving of Heroes' Square spread out before him, bordered by traffic-heavy streets and a pair of column-fronted museums. Rising in the centre were the combined structures of the Millenary Monument, commemorating the thousandth anniversary of the great Magyar Conquest. The ensemble was much like an open-air rendition of a Greek temple, with its two-part colonnade as a backdrop, adorned with figures, and the central column rising thirty-six metres to support the Archangel Gabriel in flight. Huge statues of mounted warriors dominated the stone block at its base, while more statues stood proudly forth between each column on the background sections. Reliefs girdled the stonework, illustrating various scenes from the nation's past.

'Have you seen what you want?' The Major lifted himself from his hole and jumped down to join the Doctor.

'I'll just take a closer look. Won't be a minute.'

The Doctor started off towards the main column, Bugayev following as he had fully expected. They passed the simpler

Heroes' Monument, a comparatively humble block of stone and a poignant dedication to the dead of more recent history. The Doctor recognized its sentiment in a pause. Major Bugayev's inspection was unashamedly perfunctory.

The Doctor carried on to circumnavigate the base of the central column, affording a cursory glance at the fine sculptures and reserving his main attention for the names carved beneath them. Bugayev waited in one spot, hands clasped behind his very straight back. He was conscious of the few distant onlookers, whereas the Doctor was cheerfully oblivious as he scribbled in a little notebook. The Russian focused on the towering figures of the chieftains, resplendent in their armour and spiked helmets. The image of himself as a Cossack with a sabre twirling high over his head sprang, unbidden, into his mind.

The Doctor jotted down the last name and sauntered back, handing the notebook to Major Bugayev. 'Read those out for me, would you?'

Bugayev studied the names and formed the Hungarian pronunciations in his head. He read them aloud to the Doctor, who had turned away to view the foremost statue; the leader, whose name was spoken first. 'Árpád. Rond. Ond. Tétény. Elöd. Huba. Tas.'

The Doctor sniffed, then reeled off a second list of totally alien words. 'Argak. Rongra. Ongra. Tekeng. Erung. Kuba. Tyosk.'

Bugayev snapped the notebook shut and turned the Doctor about. 'What the hell language was that?'

'Kaguric. I'm a shade rusty myself.' The Time Lord kept his tone thoughtful, rather than aloof. 'The names of the Seven Kagyrn Chieftains.'

'Alright, so you can identify the Magyar chieftains with some other race,' concluded Bugayev intelligently. 'Does that place us any further forward?'

The Doctor slipped the notebook away from the Russian. Through a cagey expression, he declared, 'In the sense that our situation has taken a gigantic step backwards, I suppose my answer ought to be a resounding "Yes".'

Liz soon learned to appreciate the gifted competence of Aphrodite's horsemanship and, although she never fully relaxed, she settled into the rhythm of the journey. They located a wider path out of the forest, where the horses could gather pace, and presently they jogged onto the open ground climbing to the hill where Liz had first arrived. The horses leaned eagerly into the slope and Aphrodite eased their mare into a light gallop. Even Liz thrilled to the increase in speed.

All the while, of course, Huba clung to their side, a constant guardian whom Liz was sure they could live without. Aphrodite paid him no heed, but Liz had more occasion for study and she was certain she didn't want him around. She desperately hoped that Aphrodite had some plan to free them from his too-fierce protection.

As they crested the hill, her wish was granted.

In moments too scant for breath, Aphrodite had reached and deftly snatched the staff from Huba's grip, a blur had shifted across Liz's vision and the shunting beat of hooves had been replaced with a clatter like falling pebbles.

A flurry of new sensations assaulted Liz's sight, hearing and sense of smell in even measures. She still clutched Aphrodite's waist, but it was as if she could feel her own panic written in every taut muscle and each short breath. The horse clacked noisily over cobbles and threatened to rear dangerously as Aphrodite wheeled her round. Smoke welled in her nose and throat; dust descended all around them. A medley of buildings teetered on the brink of collapse. A piercing whistle swooped down from the sky.

Aphrodite's reflexes drove the mare under an arched gateway. Liz just noticed the recessed seating in the wall as the shell struck earth somewhere out in the street.

Nearly toppled from their horse, successive explosions beating at their eardrums, Liz found herself longing for Huba's dark aegis. She didn't need to open her eyes to know he had disappeared.

At the Doctor's behest the OGRON troops boarded the armoured vehicle once more and, for his own sake as well as to appease the Soviet Major, the Doctor popped his own frame

through the gunner's hatch. The two cupolas were close enough to permit a conversation, assuming a powerful pair of lungs for each man. The engine growled into life and the driver headed them into traffic.

'Well, Doctor, what am I up against?'

'It's too early to say,' began the Doctor, earning a further black mark in the Major's book. 'Our first clue lies in the weather data. There were sharp aberrations, but none of the variations were outside Hungary's normal pattern.'

'Right.'

The Doctor steadied himself as the light tank cornered with the agility – and the recklessness – of a rally car. For all its trappings of war, the BMP had its appealing qualities.

'So I'd say we were experiencing some localized phenomenon that began on a broad and general level – like the weather – and gradually worked down to specifics.'

'Like our Mongol raider,' Bugayev showed his understanding. 'And these Kagyrn of yours are pulling the strings.'

'Not that simple, I'm afraid. The Kagyrn these days are highly civilized. They keep themselves to themselves – generally want nothing to do with other worlds.' The Doctor rested his voice. 'The only thing that occurs –'

Major Bugayev was already there. 'Maybe it's not the Kagyrn of today.'

'You're very astute, Major Bugayev,' commended the Doctor, sincerely impressed. It might have taken him weeks to convey that concept to the Brigadier. He was not so lost in admiration, though, as to miss the transition; and he heard himself shouting before it had really ended.

'Major! Look out!'

He was pointing at a barrier formed by two wrecked cars, but the driver's natural instincts had already completed the swerve and they were burrowing down a side street. There was the clank of a small missile rebounding off the APC's ribbed glacis. Puddles of fire marked the main road where homemade incendiaries had spilled their payloads. Men and women tossed stones and debris from behind their crude battlements. The spectre of their opponents had a profound effect on

Grigoriy Bugayev.

‘Thanks!’ he gagged. ‘Did you see the tanks?’

The Doctor had only seen one of the lumbering hulks, devouring a lesser barricade under its steel tracks. Now, he heard the spit-and-crack of machine-gun fire as they hurtled away along this grimy avenue. A few screams and shouts reached him despite the burring motor, carrying them away from that theatre of bedlam.

‘What’s happening Doctor?!’ appealed Bugayev, trying to train his eyes in all directions at once.

‘You ought to know, Major,’ the Doctor answered coldly. ‘It’s as much a part of your history as theirs.’

Bugayev shook his head furiously, hammering out the syllables. ‘November 4th, 1956! It’s not possible!’

The Doctor watched the man’s back with concern, but his remarkably resilient mind soon regained control. Absorbing the impact of their predicament, he set about dealing with it, shouting orders into his radio.

‘Make for the Elizabeth Bridge and we’ll try an approach from the south! We must get back to the Castle District!’

Yes, thought the Doctor, *everything centres around there*.

They spun crazily into the next turn, forcing Bugayev and the Doctor to brace themselves with both arms. The kerbs and buildings pressed tighter here, limiting their room for manoeuvre. The Doctor scanned the windows and doorways, while Bugayev monitored the path ahead. The stuttering noise of a one-sided battle reverberated faintly through every alleyway.

Alarmed, the officer slapped hard on the vehicle canopy and the driver began to slow. The Doctor peered at the metal discs strewn over the tarmac until the truth dawned.

‘Drive on, man! They’re plates! Drive on!’

The strength of authority was the sort that Bugayev obeyed without question. He rapped again on the hull and they were speeding onwards, trampling the tin plates that had imitated mines so well – well enough to fool him in the heat of the action. Determining to thank the Doctor later, he waved him down and sunk back into his own hole, banging the hatch shut.

A volley of missiles, incendiary and otherwise, rained on the road after them, as the ambushers emerged from hiding the smallest fraction too late. They withdrew again, vowing to catch the next Soviet vehicle.

Huba brought up the reins and danced his horse in a tight circle.

The others rode back to join him, Vecellin bearing a mystified frown. He said, 'They were spirits, after all.'

'Spirits!' scoffed Huba, punching his stallion's neck. 'They were no imaginings. Not like that craven wolf!'

Vecellin came close to insubordination. 'You think the demon was a *dream*? I drew as much of its blood as was claimed by you, lord! And where is Asztrik, to speak of this nightmare we have shared?' Vecellin stopped there, remembering himself at last.

Huba glared. 'Well, Vecellin. You have more to say. *Don't guard your thoughts from me!*'

Vecellin hesitated, fear drying his tongue. 'Lord,' he said patiently, 'the beast can be whatever it will – part wolf and part man, we do not know. But those *spirits* did charm you and made good their escape into no more than the wind.'

The dawn light painted a soft glaze over Huba's eyes. He chewed over Vecellin's brave words, a rueful smile developing on his face.

'No, Vecellin. They had their magic, it is true. But no greater than many women.' He saw Vecellin about to protest. 'No! They have been abducted by another power and I *know* whence it came! You all saw it burning in the creature's head!' He pointed two fingers at his own eyes. 'Yes, the light of Death. And it still prowls the country, drooling over its prize like a miser!'

The Magyar's hatred was edged with pain.

'But lord, the – women – fled with the staff.'

Vecellin gripped his master's arm, but Huba cast his hand aside, saying, 'It must take much of your great courage to be such a fool, Vecellin. The staff is not the creature's treasure!' Huba's voice was hollow and bitter. 'It was yourself who spoke the truth not a minute ago. *Part wolf, part man.*

‘The one has robbed the other.’

Heel’s dug deep in the horse’s side and Huba lead his men on over the hill: to the river and to Árpád.

There was a respite in the bombardment and Aphrodite dismounted, Liz following suit, to creep to the head of the archway. Aphrodite kept one hand on the reins as she peeped out in either direction. The dusty street was temporarily silent.

‘Where are we?’ entreated Liz, starting to shiver in the frigid air.

‘See those sedilia?’ Aphrodite nodded at the seats in the wall. ‘That’s a very Gothic feature for a neo-classical building. We’re on the same long hill we were traversing before. Known as Castle Hill, Budapest.’ And that, thought Liz, was a very Doctorish thing to hear from the mouth of Aphrodite. The woman gave Liz some time to digest the news, using the pause to pass her gaze over the staff. ‘I hadn’t really expected this, but it does shed some light on our situation.’

Liz stared, openly incredulous. Badly in need of a rest, she sat in the stone recess with both arms folded. ‘And there was I wondering who’d snuffed out the candle!’

‘I’m sorry. I –’ Aphrodite arrested her apology, as boots stomped into the archway entrance and a panic-stricken shout snapped out.

‘*Hauptmann!*’

Quite apart from the harsh edge to his voice, the image of the man was enough to freeze the blood in Liz’s veins; from the angular cut of his grey topcoat to the helmet with its kinked rim, the nearly knee-high black boots and the various trappings slung from his belt, down to the flashes on his lapels; the *Schmeisser* submachine-gun only completed an icon of terror indelibly etched on human memory.

The fact that he appeared as frightened as Liz felt gave still more cause for alarm.

The implications were not lost on Aphrodite either.

Liz expected him to shout, ‘*Hände hoch!*’; but instead she heard, ‘Drop that! Raise your hands!’

Steadily, Aphrodite and Liz obeyed, not once taking their eyes from the German soldier. The staff clanged loudly on the

ground; incredibly, it suffered no damage and left no shining mark on the stone. Liz rose stiffly and cautiously to her feet. The German – his patches indicated a sergeant, or feldwebel – summoned his captain again, an increased urgency demonstrated in his tightening fingers as well as his voice. The beating of Liz's heart was painful in her chest.

The Hauptmann's arrival was no relief. A tall, lean figure with high cheekbones and slightly puffy eyes, he made his entrance in a talentless act of supreme confidence. Marching past the sergeant, he advanced on the women, curling his incision-like mouth into a poor facsimile of a smile. He was followed by eight troopers.

He stopped some feet away and laughed at Liz and Aphrodite as if they were twin barrels of a loaded gun. 'Pretty maidens in a row. How nice!'

He stalked gingerly up to Aphrodite and slipped into a conversational manner. 'So who are you? What are you doing in this fine city?'

'I am Spanish. My friend is Austrian. We've travelled up from Belgrade. We thought we might be safer here.' Aphrodite's response was marvellously free of hesitation, for which the German officer was ill-prepared.

After a moment, he revolved away from her, sending up both arms and bouncing highly theatrical laughs off the archway ceiling. Eminently pleased with his performance, he traced a wide arc that brought him face to face with Liz.

'Since you feel so safe,' he began, grasping one of Liz's wrists, 'you may as well dispense with these raised hands.' He forced her arm down to her side and quickly repeated the gesture with her right hand. Then he was over to Aphrodite, batting her fingertips to encourage both arms down.

He toed the staff. 'Looting, were we? True, it looks like no part of the Hungarian Crown Jewels, yet somehow I can't imagine it,' he sneered at the two women, 'to be part of your own luggage.'

Clearly, even Aphrodite could offer no explanation for the piece; she and Liz bit their tongues. The Hauptmann snapped his fingers and had one of the troopers pick up the artefact. His interest wandered again to his prisoners, immersing himself in

the fear they tried so hard to conceal. Liz could tell she was doing a lousy job of hiding it, and she knew Aphrodite was as scared as her: she could feel it. She watched as the Hauptmann's cold pleasure grew into an almost wistful trance.

'Pretty indeed. I shall never see the likes of you again,' he mourned. Head bowed, the Hauptmann turned and resignedly flapped an arm. He walked past his troops towards the street, hands behind him.

He sucked in a lungful of air and ordered, 'Search them. Then shoot them.'

As four of the soldiers rushed forward, Liz braced herself to endure the humiliation of a patting-down. There was only the duration of that search in which to think of something that might save their lives. Somehow Liz didn't think they could rely on the serendipity of another leap across the centuries.

Midway across the Elizabeth Bridge, the Soviet BMP jumped two decades into the future, earning a heartfelt sigh from the Doctor and the same from Bugayev, once he had fully oriented himself to the news that he was 'home'. Night had fallen and the lights of cars formed their escort over the river. There were no more discussions while the vehicle wended its way along picturesque streets and up to Castle Hill. The fact of their return was ultimately confirmed when the three other OGRON troopers moved the barrier eagerly aside, allowing the APC into Tárnok street.

The Doctor disembarked over the lip of his hatch. 'No time like the present, wouldn't you say, Major?'

Bugayev appreciated the joke and dropped nimbly down by the Doctor. He had no chance to speak his retort, however, as one of the three men came trotting to him from the barricade. It was the lieutenant – Zhelnin, if the Doctor remembered rightly – and he saluted so mechanically that an unsavoury revelation seemed imminent.

'Major Bugayev, there was an incident while we were in the house.'

'Report,' Bugayev demanded, looking quickly to the Doctor.

'Major, we were examining texts in the library as

instructed, when Sergeant Markov observed a change in the light outside.' The man paused, reluctant to admit a spell of insanity. 'For a time, we were unable to open the door to investigate. When we did, there were no buildings in the vicinity. I lead a brief reconnaissance and we were able to fix —'

'Your position as right here!' assisted Bugayev generously. 'You did absolutely right, Lieutenant. Did you see anything else?' The Doctor narrowed his eyes expectantly.

'There were a few settlements, Major, across the river — where Pest is now. And some sort of fortification down on the northern tip of Csepel.' His last detail went under some careful consideration. 'And, well, Private Narmanov was sure he spotted a figure at the uppermost window on our return to the house, but —'

'Didn't you search the house, Lieutenant?' the Doctor pressed him.

'Yes, Doctor, but we were unable to verify Comrade Narmanov's sighting. The house was empty.'

Bugayev rubbed his chin. 'Thank you, Sergey Mikhailovich.' He let the Lieutenant stand down. 'Well, Doctor?'

'If you ask me, figures at windows are too much the stuff of ghost stories to be ignored altogether.' The Doctor brooded over the Renaissance facade, but its secrets remained and it was time to act. 'Still, my own feeling is that we ought to use that house to get us back to the tenth century.'

'But I need to find Professor Kameneva,' came Bugayev's objection. 'You have earned some respect and gratitude, Doctor, but you are still here on sufferance.'

'Hardly that, Major. Your little outfit will need a Scientific Adviser until we find the one you mislaid.' As if that settled the argument, the Doctor started for the house; but he soon found he had more to say. 'That short jaunt of ours may have lifted some of the mystery, but it wouldn't be pure sensationalism to tell you that the danger has magnified tenfold! A hundredfold, even! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to investigate some means of accurately piloting our rogue house and I'm sure you can find a few games to pass the

time!’

‘*Doctor!*’ roared Bugayev, arresting the Doctor as he turned to go.

‘Oh, I’ve upset you, have I? Well, I’m terribly sorry but –’ the Doctor snapped, but was cut short as the OGRON troops unslung their weapons. He had mistaken Bugayev’s urgency for anger. Everyone was staring past him.

He whirled. A Kagyrn Warrior bared its fangs from the doorway.

Making a mental note to apologize to the Major later, the Doctor proceeded to plan his moves. ‘How d’ you do, sir? Haven’t we met before somewhere?’ His idle banter evoked a growl from the creature; it also clashed its two swords and flicked its tail to show the mace it carried. The Doctor tried a feint, then dodged aside in the opposite direction.

His ploy would have failed, but for the automatic fire that hailed into its breastplate. It staggered some, a few bullets grazing its head, while the Doctor broke clear and ran up the street.

‘Zhelnin! Take two men and go with the Doctor!’ Major Bugayev was shouting commands as he sprinted for the BMP, pistol drawn. The Warrior would not allow him the advantage, springing the width of the road to land on the vehicle’s deck. The Major swore and backed off, pumping nearly a dozen rounds at the beast. It howled defiantly after him. Clicking a new magazine into place, he reached his men and herded them past their barrier. He watched the Doctor – aided by Zhelnin and two others – do the same.

Only then did he notice the black liquid oozing from the thing’s eyes, and felt some reason for optimism. ‘It’s blinded! We can take it!’ He glanced about. ‘Narmanov! Plankin! Move up and get to the BMP.’

The two men complied, scurrying in around the barricade and heading for the vehicle. From the other end of the street, the Doctor stood forward, suddenly realizing what was happening. Zhelnin and Yaroslavskiy had to hold him back.

‘Major! No!’ he yelled, but the Warrior had pounced.

Swift, slashing motions cut Narmanov apart, shredding his heavy blanket-like coat like wet paper. Plankin hurled himself

back with desperate abandon, his square face screwed up and his finger glued hard down on his trigger. Bullets pummelled the armour-plating to no avail, but the man completed his escape.

The Warrior exulted over its defeated foe, then sniffed the air for others.

The Doctor waved Bugayev and his men away from the pathetic cover of the barrier. The Major nodded affirmation then detailed his troops to various positions around the corners. The Doctor led his own bodyguard out into the open ground of the square, seeking some form of refuge or recourse.

The high Gothic edifice of the Matthias Church offered temporary hope: its crypt presented a fair hiding-place; but the Kagym would level the building to reach its prey (and the Doctor considered it a rather fine piece of architecture). Similarly, the other buildings would provide a very flimsy shelter at best. With Zhelnin, Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy fidgeting restlessly behind him, it was a short age before he noticed the gift shop. When he did, he hared straight for it, the Soviets hard-pressed to keep pace.

A clear scent of many fixed in its nostrils, the Kagym sheathed both blades and drew its plasma rifle. It ploughed through the puny barrier at the end of the street and hungrily sought out Major Bugayev's scattered units.

At the gift shop, the Doctor hammered at the door until Zhelnin stopped him. 'Evacuated, Doctor,' he explained. 'What do you want?'

The Doctor moved to the main window, nicely latticed in a wooden frame, and pointed. 'Display bottle of perfume. And you'd best get your Major on the radio. Tell him, if it attacks, to lead it to us.'

Zhelnin was doubtful, but he radioed anyway; he jerked a thumb at the window as he talked.

The elven-faced Chistyakov looked bemused, then smashed the window open with the butt of his rifle. Courteously, he cleared the glass and some of the wood for the Doctor to reach in and steal the bottle. The container was the size of a compressed football and the Doctor weighed it carefully in both hands.

He offered it to Yaroslavskiy, a mild-faced ogre of a man. 'How far d' you think you can throw this?'

'You mean, like a grenade?' he asked, accepting the bottle but not the idea.

'That's right,' the Doctor assured him cheerfully. 'Eau de Molotov. Our friend really will be blinded then.'

Yaroslavskiy mulled it over and shrugged.

'Right, then. Come on.' The Doctor patted him on the arm and led his party across the square and up the steps onto the Fisherman's Bastion, there to skulk behind a low wall: if the Kagyrn retained even partial vision, their ambush might fail and the Doctor was not prepared to allow the risk. The troops settled down and waited. The Doctor peered between the sculpted balusters.

Their wait was short-lived.

The Major and his men filtered into the square, scooting ahead, then turning to fire. Their pursuer alternately lunged and paused to nose the air, sweeping its gun to and fro across its broad girth. Fortunately, it had yet to home in on a precise target, but three buildings had sustained serious damage. Bugayev ensured every man was keeping a respectful distance.

Seizing his moment, the Doctor mounted the wall and waved his arms at the Warrior. 'Over here! I challenge you to a duel! Single combat, then you can take your pick of the weaklings! Come on!'

Major Bugayev tapped his head and re-trained his pistol on the Kagyrn. In an instant, it had covered the ground to the Fisherman's Bastion. The Doctor barely had time to shout, 'Now!'

Yaroslavskiy propelled the full bottle for all his worth and the Warrior leaped through the air to meet it. Impacting on its armour, the glass exploded and sprayed expensive perfume in a huge cloud. The Doctor, Yaroslavskiy and the others fell hurriedly back as the Warrior landed on the wall, expecting it to fire madly with the gun. Instead, it thrashed furiously, screaming, as the offensive, overpowering smell tortured its sensitive nasal membranes. Soon, its balance was lost and it toppled noisily into the square, clawing at its own muzzle.

It was Major Bugayev who strolled up to it and emptied a whole magazine into its head. It needed that much to stop it moving.

Chapter Five

Aphrodite

‘Trap a butterfly in your hands, and she’ll beat her wings until they break; then her beauty will have passed the way of her freedom.’

Aphrodite, in a plea to her judges.

Aphrodite called out, ‘Wait!’ as the four searchers withdrew, projecting her voice specifically at the German officer. ‘Surely you have wounded? My friend and I are trained nurses!’

‘That’s right!’ Liz echoed, perhaps a touch too fast. Of course, her medical qualifications were exemplary and she could well imagine Aphrodite kindly administering to the sick and injured. Her friend had evidently pitched her claim at ‘nurses’ in the hope that Liz could reasonably feign a level of training she may not have had; as well as for the simple purpose of added credibility. In her eagerness, Liz worried that she may have spoiled their slim chance.

The Hauptmann turned rather sleepily. ‘What’s that? You want to mend our broken men?’ He seemed to find the proposal amusing, one hand beckoning them into the street. ‘Come out here, would you?’

Aphrodite and Liz edged slowly from the archway, passing the soldiers with some trepidation. The Hauptmann nodded encouragingly until, with the women beside him, he pointed briskly down the road to the right, then the left. The crumbling walls and holed roofs, the scattered piles of dusty masonry and splintered glass, the cratered surfaces of once-proud buildings; it was no more of a community than a graveyard.

‘What would be the point, hm?’ the Hauptmann asked them plainly. ‘The Russians will grind the rest of this to a fine

powder, which they will bottle and hand back to the Hungarians, saying "Here, piece it back together!" And they will try! Not for the first time. I mean, how many times can you do that? How many? I find it staggering, I do honestly.'

Liz lacked the confidence to supply an answer; she left it as a problem for Aphrodite to tackle.

'In the case of a city,' she conjectured, 'there is no real limit. While there are people with sufficient willpower and devotion to the ideal behind it, a city can always be rebuilt. So long as you accept it can never be the same.' Aphrodite assumed a fiery brazenness. 'Where lives are concerned, the chances may be more finite, but it's always worthwhile to try.'

'You're wrong. You're very wrong,' the Hauptmann frowned, ignoring Aphrodite's defiant air. 'There are limits. There is a point past which there is no worth in rebuilding, past which it is better to scrap it all and begin again. I think there are ways of *killing* a city.'

He was interrupted by a swarm of midge-like planes droning swiftly overhead; glancing up, he seemed infuriated at the distraction. 'Wasps to fend off hawks!' he spat up at them. Then he was back, groping again for the topic under discussion, but had lost his thread; meanwhile, in its stead he found many of his troops waiting anxiously on his command. 'Oh, take them to the hospital and make sure they're useful.'

As they moved off, he stopped the soldier in charge of the staff. 'Wait here with that.'

Aphrodite and Liz walked humbly, shepherded by the sergeant and six guards along the street. Liz felt the urgent need to murmur a few questions to Aphrodite, but the forbidding faces of their escort argued against the idea. Aphrodite, for her part, was stealing glances aft and Liz guessed her to be troubled about the staff. She risked a peek of her own.

The Hauptmann had just slipped an infamous Luger from its holster.

Aphrodite ignited like a forest fire: blazing past the barrier formed by their guards, she tore over the cobbles to the gateway. Her inflamed yells alerted the staff-bearer, but the Hauptmann's expression was placid as he raised the pistol and

ejected a sharp succession of shots into the archway. Liz heard the heavy thump when the horse fell and she saw Aphrodite fall to her knees as though the life had gone out of her as well. Liz moved to help, but powerful hands locked around her arms and anchored her in place. The sergeant jammed the sub-machine-gun in her side, while the four others tramped back and heaved Aphrodite onto her feet. She fought their restraint with a passion, until one soldier lost patience with the struggle and jammed the butt of his rifle into her stomach. She doubled up, her breath wheezing painfully.

Two soldiers moved in to lift her again, but she stood on her own – and by the time she was on her feet, although she was hugging her abdomen, her eyes were warning them off. Even the Hauptmann, as he strolled up, shied subtly from her direct gaze.

He gave his best attempt at a laugh. ‘You’ve messed up her face, look,’ he complained to the troopers. ‘There’s red around the eyes and the mouth is all twisted.’ He let his fake smile drop. ‘Take them to the hospital, and don’t let them give you any more trouble! An injured man likes a nurse to behave nicely. Come on, move!’

Liz, a lump in her throat, was turned to face the front and pushed into a hurried march. She heard Aphrodite dragging her steps. Suddenly, casting caution to the wind and worming her way around, Liz shifted to Aphrodite’s side and took much of her weight. There was a protest in her eyes, but Liz wasn’t about to take no for an answer. The troops, the Hauptmann included, offered no objections and seemed content as long as they were still moving along.

In fact, it was the Hauptmann who stopped their small procession and he scanned the skies.

At his barked command, the guards herded them along at a run; Aphrodite held fast to Liz’s hand and suddenly it was unclear who was offering support to whom. The roaring whine overhead announced the return of the planes and even Liz’s untrained eye could distinguish these from the ubiquitous Messerschmitts they had witnessed earlier. Although the shark-nosed fuselage was unfamiliar, the tail, emblazoned with the red star, was the only identification necessary. Diving

and swooping, the aircraft raked Castle Hill with shells and loosed bombs over buildings and defences.

Small arms fire and thudding flak pocked the sky, but scared off only one of the squadron, its wing trailing smoke.

The Hauptmann found another gateway in which to shelter and the troops ducked quickly inside, pulling their captives with them. One arm wrapped around the still silent Aphrodite, Liz peered down the street, gritting her teeth against the blasts that rocked the ground. Through the dust, the vision of the same house in which the Doctor had disappeared reached her stunned eyes. The house that had sat so alone on the hill – centuries before. Nestled in between the other buildings, she was sure it had to be a mirage.

As if to convince her otherwise, one of the Russian planes walked its bombs along that entire line of roofs – and blew that particular house into a cloud of dust and chippings.

‘Did you have to be quite so spiteful about it, Major?’ The question was a reproof, tempered by the Doctor’s gratitude for Bugayev having saved his life.

‘You’re damned right I did!’ the Soviet officer exploded predictably. He holstered his pistol. ‘Next time you come across one of those things –’ he gestured at the dead Kagyrn ‘– I’ll stand back and you can mollify it with pleasant conversation and Earl Grey tea! If you’ve any intentions of preaching humanity to me, then forget them right now, Doctor. You’re welcome to the moral highground, as long as you occupy it quietly and leave me to do my job. When I know the necessary action, I take it!’

The Doctor hopped down the steps to the level of the square, allowing Bugayev to cool. ‘Actually, I should think one of the more piquant Chinese varieties would be more to its taste.’

‘What?’ Bugayev was rarely nonplussed and disliked the sensation intensely.

‘Tea, Major. Tea!’ The Doctor crouched to examine the Warrior’s corpse, using the first seconds to remove the power source from its plasma rifle. Discarding the gun, he proceeded to fiddle with the belt and located a small pouch hanging

alongside the weapons. He plucked it from its tether and stood. By now the OGRON troops had gathered closer and he opened the pouch in plain view of several interested faces.

He tipped a tiny book into his palm. 'Well, well, well.'

Bugayev leaned in and fingered the miniature volume. 'What is it?'

'Poetry,' asserted the Doctor, riffling the pages to display leaf after leaf of pictograms. 'Ballads, to be more precise. The poetry is inherent in the patterns formed by the symbols. It's one of the few aspects of Kagyrn culture that relies on symmetry. Rather edifying, too.'

'You mean,' Bugayev piped, 'that *thing* read verse? And *you* understand it?'

'Well, in answer to your first question, yes. They're highly civilised, remember; the warriors used to craft their own armour and weapons.' The Doctor scratched his cheek. 'As to the second, only after a serious effort of translation. No, I meant it was enlightening that our friend here possessed this in the first place. These are the Poems of the Dead: ballads of great deeds and events from Ancient Kagyrn history.' He let the significance hang in the air in front of the Major, like a carrot.

'I see,' understood Bugayev. 'So this is a *modern* Kagyrn, after all.'

'I did wonder about the one I faced in the house. I thought it was a shade off-colour, so to speak.' The Doctor indicated the vanquished Warrior at his feet. 'Then, when this chap proved on the soft side, as well –'

'Now, wait a minute, Doctor!' Bugayev was furious at seeing his own victory belittled; some of the men were restless, too.

The Doctor was deadly serious. 'Listen to me! I'm not robbing you of your victory, and most of all I'm not making light of that man's death! These creatures are quite dangerous enough, I assure you.' He subsided into reflection. 'But their ancestors wouldn't have given us any quarter. None whatsoever. The old Kagyrn had a totally alien code of honour; one that centred on sheer quantity of kills and the understanding that they *never* gave an enemy an even chance.

They would see to it that their weapons' power packs were thoroughly exhausted before they even thought to wade in with their blades and battleaxes. They didn't hunt; they *massacred*.

'This one was baited into a duel, while the other sheathed its weapons when it saw I was unarmed. And now I think of it, the Kagyrn of old were reputed to breathe fire and all mine could manage was a puff of gas. They've lost some of their physical abilities as well as much of the fighting – or *killing* – instinct. They're simply emulating the great Warriors of yesteryear.' The Doctor deposited the book in a jacket pocket and looked thoughtfully down at the dead Kagyrn. 'Still, as I say, quite dangerous enough.'

Major Bugayev surveyed his men as he absorbed the various implications.

He noticed Zhelnin. 'Ah, Lieutenant. Have the Hungarian police attend to Narmanov. Take Yaroslavskiy and Chistyakov with you and meet us back at the house.' Watching the men go, he returned to the Doctor. 'See, I've decided to follow your suggestion. We will use the house.'

'Good. I'd better get to work on some form of control.'

'Yes, just one thing, Doctor. What would inspire your modern, *civilised* Kagyrn to start imitating their ancestors?'

'Well,' said the Doctor sardonically, 'I sincerely hope it's nothing more than a surge of nostalgia; but as hopes go, it's remarkably thin.' Leaving the Major to attend to the small detail of the dead Kagyrn, he made a beeline across the square, his mind now firmly focused on the time-travelling house in Tárnok Street.

The Hauptmann wasted no time in installing his prisoners in the makeshift auxiliary hospital that occupied one wing of the Royal Palace, thus ridding himself of a considerable burden. The various staff officers en route had given the man his way without a great deal of argument and, in less time than expected, Liz and Aphrodite were left to their own devices in the musty ward. The few medical staff present were too busy to offer guidance or query their sudden arrival; a state of affairs that was destined to continue as, when the Russian

aircraft had relented, the artillery had resumed its merciless barrage. Aphrodite had launched herself immediately into ministering to the wounded, while Liz busied herself with more menial chores, making time she urgently needed to collate her thoughts.

The hospital was not the best environment for introspection, however. Plaster chippings crunched underfoot wherever she moved and a biting draught whipped in where a broken window had been loosely covered with a section of tarpaulin. Mattresses lay on the floor between the beds and only narrow aisles remained between them, the patients coughing or groaning in response to anyone passing by; only the luckiest snored and the least fortunate cried in constant pain. Dust coiled in the air, belying the pretence of hygiene, and Liz's thoughts followed the same endless spirals.

She watched Aphrodite changing the dressing on a young girl's mangled arm. The girl was a tawny-complexioned Hungarian and one of the fortunate handful of civilians on the ward; proof that the Hauptmann was not the only class of German on the hill. The child's black hair was matted and her little face too pale, but she seemed happier for Aphrodite's attentions.

Liz approached doctor and patient carefully, crouching next to Aphrodite. Not quite sure how the language barrier now operated, she whispered to keep her words from the girl. 'You know, you shouldn't become emotionally involved.'

'I've no real choice,' lamented Aphrodite resignedly. She smoothed the child's hair back from her brow. 'It's the way I'm made.'

They rose and the girl slipped peacefully into sleep, smiling at dreams to come. Liz rested a hand on Aphrodite's arm. 'I don't know how you do it. You have a real gift.'

Aphrodite bowed her head and cast her gaze along the ward. 'It's a mixed blessing, Liz.'

'What is it? Have I said something wrong?'

'No, nothing wrong,' Aphrodite brightened with a friendly laugh. 'We have enough problems already, if you ask me.'

'I admire your power of understatement,' Liz complimented. 'You saw the wreck of that house. I'd thought

it was impossible to feel any more cut off until that happened. Now the Doctor has no way of reaching me.' The emphasis was to differentiate the new situation from whatever remote chance the Doctor had of reaching her previously.

'Liz. Set your mind at rest. It may be, from what you said about the house, that it will just skip by the moments where it doesn't properly exist, where its history is interrupted. Remember, it dropped you in the tenth century, even though it had no right to be there.' Aphrodite clicked her tongue meditatively. 'I'm afraid I'm a strict amateur in this field. I'm better at matters of the heart than temporal physics. And not always a mistress of the former.' She dismissed the recollection with a flick of her head. 'Anyway, stay with me and I promise I'll get you home.'

'Aphrodite...' Liz saw an earlier suspicion surfacing and decided to plunge in at the deep end. 'What would you say if I asked you how many hearts you had?'

Aphrodite smiled a curious smile and touched a hand to her chest. 'Only the one. It's the star I steer by.'

Árpád was livid at having to cut short a speech to his clan leaders. Huba's intrusion had disrupted their council more effectively than a winter's blizzard. For the sake of form, though, he controlled his temper all the while they filed from his hut, conscious that any signs of division among the Seven would carry to the rank-and-file.

As soon as they had gone, the gates opened under the full force of his anger.

'*How dare you!*' his voice boomed from the other side of the fire. 'Chieftain you are, friend you may still be, but even you, Huba, must accord me the proper *respect!*' He stepped closer to the flames, trying to perceive some hint that Huba was withering under his wrath; but the younger chieftain stood firm, bull-faced as ever. 'So there is something troubling you. Speak it!'

Huba waited, declaring a resolution to begin in his *own* time.

'Troubling me, you say?' he finally spat. 'Troubling *us*, Árpád! Tell me you don't feel the sickness that festers in us

all. No, you're colouring your skin with dyes to hide the pallor!' Huba advanced on the burning pyre. 'Listen to the way you speak about friends! Do we have need of such words any more? They ring false in my ears!'

Árpád paced around the fire to meet Huba on his side. 'Why false, Huba?'

'Why?!' Huba seethed and stammered: he had never considered the possibility of Árpád's ignorance. 'Because – because I am wondering what we are. There was a sense in me before that we roamed and conquered and raided as a *way of life*. It was all we knew. And now we have our *Magyaria*, there are other possibilities in our reach. But you – you want us to fulfil this pact! This compact with devils!' Huba played a fist over the fire. 'Conquest for its own sake! Árpád, can you really believe that to be *right*? You and your wolf-demons are transforming the tribes into nothing more than wild packs; and I'm forced to ask, are we still *men*?'

Árpád enjoyed a throaty laugh. 'Huba, I know what you ask yourself! You beg desperately to know if your "wolf-demon" has absconded with your soul. Fool, you never even had one.

'How easily your sword used to slip between the ribs of man or woman! How you cheered as you torched every hut and hovel! How readily you speared the slaves that failed to satisfy! How you drank to celebrate every slaughter! And now you choke on the blood you've spilled?' Árpád poisoned his laugh with scorn. 'Some woman has shed her soft light on your black heart and now you see *values* that were never there!'

'No!' Huba denied vigorously, before countering with a quieter vehemence. 'How you know of *her* is of no consequence; but she is not to blame. It is you, Árpád, who brought these creatures upon the Earth; you, who assigned each as a *guardian* to your allies; you, who gave me a demonic spy to watch over my shoulder.

'Well, now your precious spy wanders in some –' Huba groped for the phrase '-half-death, to which I am chained. There is no breaking the bond, maybe, but I will catch it when it is flesh and slay it like a sick dog. Then I will be free, while

you, Árpád, are still bound to your master. Yes, you, too, are a slave; but to something more terrible than any of us!’

‘Take care your intelligence does you no harm,’ Árpád warned.

Huba was immune to threats. ‘Until you rediscover your own sense, I relinquish my stake in our alliance. Send word of your improved health to the forest. I will be hunting there.’

‘Huba,’ Árpád’s call stopped the younger chieftain in the doorway. ‘Pass my greetings to Tétény when you see him in the forest. I dispatched him there with his guardian to scour for the staff and your woman. It would be unfortunate if your hunts were to cross.’

Huba was not deterred. ‘No, it would be propitious. I fancy Tétény’s dog will prove easier to kill than mine.’

With a grim smile, Huba departed and Árpád watched the door for a long time after he had gone.

Bugayev could never have any idea of the fact, but it was Tétény’s ‘dog’ that had presented him with such a headache when it came to the matter of disposal. In the end, he elected to strip it of its armour and burn the body. The smell of smoke lingered on his uniform as he strode into the Tárnok house.

The Doctor looked up from his work. ‘Ah, Major! Your men have been most useful, thank you.’

The Doctor sat on the hallway floor, his side propped against one wall as he pressed his ear to the plaster; in one hand he held a slim tubular device with a ring-shaped nodule on its tip. Every so often, he would thumb a contact, listen, then move the device to another spot on the wall. He ignored the general hubbub of soldiers moving through the house and particularly overlooked the possibility that Bugayev might want an explanation.

The Major, who detested mystery, perched himself on the stairs and broke in on the Doctor’s concentration. ‘That’s an intriguing little gadget, Doctor. What does it do?’

The Doctor sighed and reluctantly downed tools; he appreciated that Bugayev’s tolerance level would stretch nowhere near as far as the Brigadier’s. ‘At the moment, it’s firing minute sonic pulses into the wall space.’

Taking the Russian's silence as leave to continue, the Doctor set at the wall again, probing another position with the sonic screwdriver.

‘So you’re attempting to stun rats, are you?’

‘Firing sonic pulses into the wall,’ the Doctor replied, this time engrossed in his work, ‘will help me to map out the house’s control circuitry. I had your chaps go around thumping every surface until they found this. A spot of echo-location should fine-tune their discovery somewhat. So, if you’ll excuse me, Major, I’ll carry on with my very poor impersonation of a bat.’

‘You’re too self-critical, Doctor. It’s a very good impersonation of a lunatic,’ chaffed Bugayev.

‘*Lunatic*. Yes,’ grunted the Doctor. ‘Just another example of mankind’s perpetual fascination with the Moon. Connects rather well with her association with lycanthropy.’

‘Lycanthropy?’ Bugayev was unprepared for the change of subject.

‘Werewolves, Major. Or didn’t you think our friend was close enough to the classical image of a werewolf? An horrific merging of man and beast. *Homo Lupus*, whereas what we have here is more *Lupus Sapiens*.’ The Doctor tapped his chin with the screwdriver. ‘You know, werewolves often go hand-in-hand with vampires – or paw in claw, at any rate. That might be the explanation behind the blood-drinking myth.’

Pleased with himself, the Doctor bent his head to the wall again.

Bugayev ruminated a short while. Then the simplest of ideas dawned: ‘Werewolves, eh? Would silver bullets be of any help?’

‘Hmm,’ the Doctor gave the suggestion due consideration. He shook his head. ‘No. Only about as effective as any other bullets, I should imagine: they have to get through that armour. No, what you need is Depleted Uranium.’

‘Depleted Uranium bullets?’ Bugayev knew the concept was absurd.

‘Shells, Major,’ the Doctor elucidated. ‘Depleted Uranium *shells*.’

‘We really have to get out of here,’ whispered Liz, unnerved by the inescapable sadness that pervaded the ward.

‘Oh, I agree,’ Aphrodite murmured under her breath. She and Liz moved further down the line so as not to attract unwanted attention; most of the surgeons and doctors with any authority had rushed off to the surgery to deal with the new intake, but a few of the nurses regarded the two newcomers with distrust.

‘But we can’t leave without Zsusza. I can’t, anyway.’

Liz could understand Aphrodite’s qualifier, but she found it impossible to imagine them making any sort of getaway with an injured orphan under their wing. Of course, if the new batch of wounded included any officers, space would be needed and the pitiful collection of civilians would be relocated somewhere even less savoury than here. It was going to be an uphill battle to argue practicalities in the face of that harsh prospect; especially to Aphrodite. Still, Liz saw one possibility.

‘Listen, if we found out the exact date and time, couldn’t you come back and rescue her. I mean, before *anything* could happen to her. In the house. If we can figure out how to work it.’ Encouraged by a faint glimmer in Aphrodite’s eyes, Liz added, ‘I’ll help, I honestly will. But right now, we have to run out of here, probably being shot at. Later, we’ll be able to step out of a filing cabinet or a police box and step straight back in.’

‘Police box?’ quizzed Aphrodite, but her grin seemed to imply she was converted. ‘We also have to recover the staff, though.’

‘I was afraid you’d bring that up,’ Liz groaned, then presented a frost-coated smile for one of the suspicious nurses who hovered in earshot. The nurse bustled away to another bedside. ‘You do realise it’s the property of a goddess? Athena. She might want it back.’

‘Precisely, Liz. And think how upset she’ll be when she finds out it’s disappeared to some private vault in Berlin. If we suddenly skip back a thousand years, it could end up in South America before we locate it again.’

Liz followed Aphrodite along the aisle. ‘Alright, what if

we reported the Hauptmann?’

‘For keeping the staff? Yes, he probably has stowed it away – I’d say like a magpie, if I didn’t think they were such beautiful birds.’ Aphrodite paused at the head of Zsusza’s mattress. ‘It’s worth a try.’

‘Even if he hasn’t kept it, we can find out where it is. The rest we’ll have to improvise.’ Liz bit her lip. ‘Sounds incredibly risky, but I feel like we’re taking a risk every minute we stay here.’

‘Unfortunately,’ sighed Aphrodite as she knelt to kiss the child’s forehead, ‘so is everybody. At least we have the freedom of choice. Our presence here is an accident, but the history must be left intact. Luckily, there’s nothing to say we can’t make a small difference.’ She stood and, digging into a pocket in her skirt, she produced a small bottle of scent with a spray-cap. ‘And luckily, the guards didn’t search too thoroughly.’

‘I don’t think *Chanel* will cut any ice with the Hauptmann – or his superiors.’

‘Neither do I,’ Aphrodite promised Liz faithfully. ‘Come on.’

The Doctor stepped back and admired his handiwork; it was a rectangle rendered in blue chalk on the wall, its knife-straight boundaries indicative of a superlatively steady hand. The Doctor had acquired the chalk from the billiard room at the rear of the house. ‘Well, what do you think?’

‘Lieutenant Zhelnin! Fetch the cutting equipment from the APC!’ Bugayev was obviously reserving judgement till later. He followed Zhelnin’s brisk exit with his eyes.

‘Better tell him to hurry,’ advised the Doctor. ‘We could be in a different century by the time he comes back.’

‘Yes, the house does seem to drift of its own accord,’ mused Bugayev, although his expression advertised an attempt to fish for answers. ‘Like my APC occasionally.’

‘Similar effect, superficially, but not the same cause, I’ll warrant.’ The Doctor folded his arms and sat down once more, this time with his back to the wall. Thinking.

‘This house is part of a purpose-built apparatus for endless

transits back and forth through Time. I couldn't say why it drifts, exactly; perhaps because the owner isn't home.'

'Or perhaps because the owner wants it to.'

'That would be the more paranoid viewpoint, yes.' The Doctor rested his elbows on his knees. 'Now, our slip into 1956, on the other hand was —'

'Was part of the localised temporal effect! Yes, you were going to explain about that.' Bugayev settled on the stairs, an impatient audience.

Two soldiers traipsed by, lugging a pair of elongated boxes. Bugayev showed his annoyance briefly, then flashed a gratified smile as the men stacked the containers in the lounge.

'Heavy artillery?' the Doctor yawned. He found *déjà vu* extremely tiring.

'Don't evade the question,' Bugayev persisted, some of his earlier severity returning to the fore.

'Well, I only hope you can stomach the answer, Major,' cautioned the Doctor, still temporising to the last. 'You see, I believe we're experiencing a highly brittle temporal field. Think of local time as a pane of glass that's recently been struck by a stone. Time has been cracked somehow and the fabric is weakening. Are you with me so far?'

The Major affirmed strenuously. 'Of course. It's a fairly simple philosophical analogy. Can you spell out the connection — between that and the physical effects we've experienced?'

'Gladly. You've a box of matches, haven't you?' The Doctor held up his hands and caught the little box as the Major tossed it across. 'Thank you. Now, you'll need to understand that Time does a good deal more than merrily tick by.' He began laying out a string of matches on the floor beside him. 'Imagine each of these matches as an equal period of time; years, minutes, seconds, whichever you prefer. The exact interval doesn't matter.' His line was complete. 'Time, you see, is the governing force that maintains that straight line; connects the end of one moment to the beginning of the next and so on. In much the same way as gravity telling you which way is down.'

'Believe it or not, I'm with you,' said Bugayev, suddenly

craving a cigarette.

‘So if some catastrophe, some impact, say, on the temporal axis, struck with sufficient force to disrupt those connections in any specific region – your line begins to disintegrate.’ The Doctor shifted a few matches arbitrarily up and down the ordered row. ‘Just as the effects of a broken pane of glass are progressive – with the wind or the passage of a truck knocking more splinters free – so the same goes with our temporal fracture. The sequence is jumbled with increasing regularity, until’

‘Until?’ The Major was hooked.

Scooping up all the matches in both hands, the Doctor promptly scattered them in an untidy heap, traversing each other in all directions. ‘Until we’re ready for a cosmic game of Pick-Up-Sticks!’

Aphrodite and Liz passed smoothly from the ward without incident. Their heels tapped like leisurely castanets under the corridor’s high ceiling. In less than a minute, they stepped through the door that partitioned the hospital wing from the remainder of the Palace. A single guard barred their way, an assault rifle across his chest.

‘Go back in there!’ he commanded severely. ‘You are not permitted here!’

‘But we want to see the – Oberst,’ Liz pleaded, recalling the rank from a television serial. Whether she had referred to the CO or not, she thought an Oberst would adequately intimidate the Hauptmann.

‘I’ve even made myself up for him,’ joined in Aphrodite; and deftly sprayed a misty vapour over her extended wrist. She held the arm up to the guard. ‘Do you suppose he’ll like that? Do please take us to see him.’

As soon as the guard took one involuntary sniff, secretly amenable to the idea of two women flirting with him, he found he had no strength to refuse them anything. All the aggression simply flooded from his face and left him peaceably pliant.

‘That’s quite some tranquilliser,’ Liz commended Aphrodite.

‘Pacifier, I call it,’ Aphrodite confided, but placed a finger

over her lips.

‘Tranquilliser? Pacifier? What’s that?’ the guard was full of questions, worried by what he had heard but unable to feel angry about it.

‘Medical supplies,’ Aphrodite filled in hastily. ‘That’s what we wish to see the Oberst about. Will you take us? Please?’

‘Very well,’ the guard acquiesced. ‘This way.’ He shouldered his rifle and led them down a right fork in the corridor.

Presently, he knocked on a large door and ushered them into a well-furnished office, where both Liz and Aphrodite took careful note of the calendar and the clock on the wall. A young adjutant rose from his comfortable chair, behind the great walnut desk, ready to confront the soldier who had ushered them in here. Aphrodite and Liz immediately launched into their entirely different story concerning the Hauptmann’s private treasure hoard; a tale which caused the guard to wonder that the women had not told him as much, but which earned them a ten-minute audience with Oberst Schiller.

A pan-faced man with flecks of white in his dark eyebrows, he listened to their account with obdurate impartiality. At the end, he ordered the guard to fetch Hauptmann Gottlieb at once, and threw in a demand that the Hauptmann bring whatever treasure he had recovered with him. The wait passed in uncomfortable silence.

When the Hauptmann finally appeared, he marched smartly in with the staff in his hand. ‘You sent for me, Herr Oberst? I was just on my way over with this relic we recovered from looters today.’

Liz knew better than to interrupt, but Aphrodite had no such inhibition. ‘That’s a complete lie! Surely you can’t believe him, Oberst Schiller?’

Oberst Schiller was a while in restoring his composure. ‘I am well aware of the Hauptmann’s failings, thank you, *miss*.’ He directed his flat eyes at the Hauptmann. ‘Perhaps you had better tell me a less flimsy story, Hauptmann Gottlieb. Your record *needs* something with more substance. The ladies claim

it was their property, but that they were willing to hand it over in exchange for food and shelter.'

Hauptmann Gottlieb's agitation climbed sharply, as though the mention of his record had touched an open sore. 'Herr Oberst, these ladies are the looters! They almost fooled me with their oh-so-pretty faces.' A look from the Oberst cowed him slightly, but he continued, 'They have no papers and I would have shot them, but –'

'They say,' Oberst Schiller pointed out, 'you confiscated their papers on some pretext of your own; told them to collect them from your *personal* quarters.'

'Of course they say that!' the Hauptmann dismissed his superior outright. He walked behind Aphrodite and Liz, poked his head between their shoulders. 'Slandorous bitches!' He pushed his way through them to the front, both women shrinking from the brush of his uniform. 'Well, Herr Oberst, I am handing over this treasure, whomever you choose to believe. I hope my honest actions count for something.' He shrugged and waved the staff nervously. 'It's certain I have no use for this. If you ask me, none of us have. We'll be so much dust by the time the Russians have finished.'

'Hauptmann Gottlieb!' The Oberst stood, slamming his fist on the desk and knocking his chair over. His face was cherry-purple.

Aphrodite pranced forward and tore the staff from the Hauptmann's unthinking fingers. Grasping Liz's hand, she danced the staff before the German officers' eyes like some mystical wand and her face bore the mysterious smile of an especially exotic witch. Liz cringed reflexively, expecting at least the Hauptmann to whip out his pistol and gun them down. Instead, there was only a kind of blank stare on each of their faces and Aphrodite led her calmly through the door.

The tin box crashed deafeningly on the hallway floor, spilling a few of its contents.

'Careful!' the Doctor censured the young soldier who had carried it in. 'I hope there was nothing delicate in there.'

Major Bugayev laughed heartily. 'You are joking of course, Doctor? Those are *Russian* electronic components! We

build everything more robust in the Soviet Union.'

The Doctor began rooting about in the box, selecting any and every item that seemed remotely promising. 'Is that so?' he asked dryly. He made an additional inspection of the sophisticated nest of circuitry now exposed by the rectangular hole in the wall. Then he drew out a length of cable and stretched it between his hands.

'I tell you,' Bugayev pursued his line of humour, 'if a cosmonaut drops his camera from orbit, he can still have the pictures developed when he gets home.'

When the Doctor failed to respond, the Major's serious side resumed command and he wandered up to crouch at the holed wall. Puffing on a cigarette, he blew a funnel of smoke in among the circuitry. 'How long will it take?'

The Doctor shot needles at this unwelcome pest. 'A good deal longer if I have to fill out reports for you! Not to mention rewire this incredibly advanced system because of a few ruinous smoke particles.' He beat away another cloud. 'If you catch my drift.'

Bugayev grinned almost maliciously, debating whether to remain. Instead, he rose and headed for the lounge. 'Let me know when you're done.'

Aphrodite kept them to a swift pace as they retraced their steps to the auxiliary ward. Liz was bursting with questions, but sense and the occasional German guard commanded her patience to the fore. Sharp calls for them to halt, particularly in the longer corridors, would echo after them, but the shouts would chase them around corners, as though directed at their shadows. As though by the time the guards had heard them they had passed them by.

They were hurrying their pace, but Liz was fairly sure they hadn't broken the sound barrier.

They entered the ward, where even the least busy attendants failed to notice them. Aphrodite headed straight for Zsusza and asked Liz to gently lift her, stroking the girl's forehead all the while. The girl slept peacefully in her new cradle.

Then Aphrodite led them out of the hospital wing, and Liz

saw heads turning, as though at their entrance. When they were making their exit, and turning on a course for the main door, through which the Hauptmann had so roughly herded them earlier. A now distant shout arose from the direction of the hospital: 'Hey! What do you think you're doing with that girl?!'

'Taking her to safety,' Aphrodite trilled in reply, chiefly to herself. But their boots were crunching over the gravel, and they stepped smartly along a line of cars. Aphrodite ignored the sentries; near the vehicles or tucked inside rings of sandbags, they might have been statues for all their concern. One junior officer, waiting beside the rugged body of a Kubelwagen, appeared almost bored as he searched the sky. So Aphrodite relieved him of his keys as she passed. She slipped into the back seat of the car, carefully taking Zsusza from Liz in exchange for the keys. Thus assigned the role of driver, Liz jumped in and gunned the engine without delay. She reversed out and spun the wheel to steer them at the main gateway. The car bruised its square nose on the splintered barrier.

Belated shouts erupted in frantic succession behind them and were soon joined by still angrier bursts of gunfire. Bullets chipped furiously at the road in their wake, before they eventually dipped out of sight. They were whizzing along a half-demolished street.

'We ought to have picked up a street map,' Liz moaned as she powered the little car around the next bend.

'Don't worry, I know where to head for. Take a – left here and that will take us off Castle Hill,' Aphrodite's voice called out encouragingly.

'You know your way around,' remarked Liz as she followed the directions.

'I came to the area to visit friends. Straight down here now! Then away from the river!'

'And the Germans, I hope.' Liz concentrated on her driving, almost ready to ignore the occasional shot that rang out behind them. 'What did you do to them?'

'Tunnel vision,' Aphrodite explained distractedly, her eyes resting on Zsusza's waking smile. The staff rolled back and

forth at her feet; she tapped it with her toe. 'This fixed their senses a minute or so into the past. It seems to respond well to a woman's touch, wouldn't you say?'

Liz suspected the staff wouldn't respond to just any woman's touch – but she let that one go for the present. They were ripping away from the city at a rate of knots both frightening and reassuring. She drove them on, according to Aphrodite's intuitive navigation, and they were soon cutting between the extensive tracts of forest that spilled over the Buda Hills. The boom of artillery had resumed over the city and Liz suspected that the Germans had ceased to worry over the stolen field car. She only hoped they didn't run into any Russians, but Aphrodite soon advised her to take a track off the road, burrowing them safely under the cover of the woods.

After they had sustained a healthy collection of bruises from their bumpy ride, Aphrodite told her, 'Stop the car here, Liz.' Liz complied willingly, even though *here* was nowhere. The track had long since faded under a carpet of grass and broadened a little, although barely enough to be called a clearing. 'Wait a while. They'll find us.'

'Who – ?' began Liz, but Aphrodite was hugging Zsuzsa as close as her wounds allowed, brushing back her hair with a mother's touch. Liz watched as the child's spirits lifted with every caress, quite forgetting the cold of the Hungarian winter that hovered outside the car.

'I thought we were going to come back for her, at a later date. Well, the same date, but later.' Liz realised she was struggling. 'You're well-versed in time travel, you must know what I mean.'

'I do. And for a moment I was persuaded. You have a very practical mind.' She bent her head to plant a kiss on the girl's forehead. 'But I know I'm too easily swayed, too often. I have to listen very carefully to my own heart, to know my own course. The trouble is,' she added, flashing a glance that conveyed only deeper mystery, 'my heart isn't always my own.'

Liz sat quietly, studying her companion and trying to reason what that could possibly mean.

A tap at the windscreen stopped her heart. Only when it

beat again could she turn to look.

A swarthy-skinned man leaned in close to the driver's side, the lines on his face almost as deep and dark as his long, straggly hair. The muzzle of a rifle poked up above the level of his shoulder and a golden ring gleamed from the lobe of one ear. Liz saw others behind him, armed and standing amidst the surrounding trees.

Aphrodite patted Liz on the shoulder. 'Relax, Liz. They're friends.'

The man hooked a hand over the rim of the door, fingers as stark and gnarled as the forest's winter branches. His keen eyes had already assessed the driver and both passengers. He withdrew a step or two and invited the women out with a laugh and an outstretched arm. Liz opened the door and slid out, then turned to lend Aphrodite some assistance with the incredibly calm little girl. Liz retrieved the staff from the car while Aphrodite faced the man and his grizzly company.

'My name is Aphrodite Diamante. I am a friend of the gypsies.' The address, formal in structure, was laced with affection in its delivery. Liz marvelled again at her friend and then at the effect she produced in the man.

He strode up and leaned over Zsusza to kiss Aphrodite's cheek. He retreated and slightly bowed his head, removing the woollen hat that guarded his rough, dark hair. He sighed, gesturing mournfully at his ragged band of fighters. 'Ah, but we are gypsies no more. When there is nowhere safe to roam, we must become soldiers.'

Aphrodite's gentle face tilted, wounded with sadness. The words seemed to dry in her mouth.

The man hushed her, lifting a finger to his lips. 'This, I suppose, *is* the end. But you are a tale I remember happily.'

Aphrodite forced a smile and lifted her eyes. She cast a glance at Liz, then another at Zsusza and another at the man. 'Please, will you take her and care for her? Find her a safe home.'

'It will be our very next mission,' he replied without hesitation, nodding eagerly at both Aphrodite and Liz. 'István!' He beckoned one of the partisans forward and, after giving the girl a farewell kiss, Aphrodite eased Zsusza into the

young man's arms.

'We have to go,' Aphrodite stammered out an apology. She took Liz's hand and turned, guiding her away along the path and out through the solemn ring of men. She trained her face on the ground, never daring to gaze back. But Liz, peering anxiously around at her, could see and somehow feel the two shades of her grief: like the loss of a daughter and the death of a family.

The forest lost its wintry desolation somewhere along their path, and it only required a brief inspection of Aphrodite's rallying spirits to confirm that the trees now surrounding them presided over a quieter century.

'When did that happen?' Liz wondered.

And Aphrodite looked about her with an air of someone who – somehow – took the crossing of a few centuries in her stride. 'A few seconds ago, a few paces back.' Their progress was helped by the rather springy turf, Aphrodite filled her lungs as if emerging from a prolonged swim in foul waters. 'I was beginning to wonder when the Staff would allow us back.'

'Well, I have to envy you. You take it all very easily.'

'No, Liz. Far from it. The waters are running together. It's all very wrong.'

Around them, the forest was alive with the rustle of leaves and the trees stretched full limbs in the refreshing air. Under the cloudy light of day, she could see down the steeper slopes to the east and the blue-grey ribbon of water rippling between hills and plains. Occasionally, the roof of a house jutted up like a tiny arrowhead amongst the trees or from behind the brow of a hill. Thankfully, there were no signs of men in the immediate vicinity.

Aphrodite strolled along, a renewed vitality observable in her step. Liz fell comfortably in beside her. 'And I really thought you'd mastered the art.'

'I'm sorry,' Aphrodite admitted a shade guiltily. 'I thought I'd managed to wish us away from Huba; but I would never have chosen *that* for a destination. Trying to use the staff is all very well, but it's not mine – it does seem to have a will of its

own. Luckily, if it wants to play with us, the reverse is equally true.' Her thoughts drifted, riding the breeze. 'But I have a slight suspicion we weren't *allowed* to leave there until we'd met those partisans. Seems fanciful, I know, but...'

'No crazier than the rest of it,' commented Liz. Her eyes were on the woods around her, seeking movement or any disturbance of the foliage. 'Is it likely to be safe passing through here?'

'Relatively. They were out hunting the Kagyrn and us most of last night. They'll be resting most of today.'

Aphrodite spoke with such certitude that Liz was loath to contend the point.

'Besides, we won't be staying here for long. But before we go, I need to find someone.'

They strolled deeper into the forest and slipped some distance off the main path, working their way through the undergrowth. Stealth their watchword, despite Aphrodite's confidence, they satisfied themselves with a rather sedate pace, covering some miles into the verdant hills away from the Danube. Aphrodite gave the impression she was enjoying the scenery.

Only on reaching the glade did it occur to Liz to inquire who were supposed to be looking for. As it happened, it wasn't long before the answer came trotting into plain sight.

There was power in the beast, as if night had come to earth in the form of a horse. It made Liz stand back, feeling a little foolish but not quite able to fight down the nervousness. 'Bailador,' said Aphrodite, moving to greet the silk-black stallion, nose to muzzle, and taking his reins in hand.

Liz stepped up, her admiration overcoming her reticence in an instant. As fluid as their passage from one century to another. She patted his great neck, and he snorted and stamped a hoof as any ordinary horse might. But Liz appreciated all the same that he could never be mistaken for that. His black hide shimmered and there was an animal wisdom in his eyes that Liz had only imagined before in a big cat. Perhaps he was half-panther. 'He's magnificent,' she told Aphrodite.

Aphrodite nodded, mirroring Liz's smile measure for measure, then stepped back from the animal and began a

cursory examination of the ground. Apparently satisfied with the quality, she swept a boot across a bare patch of earth, finding it suitable for her purposes. Whatever they were. Humming a tune, she drove the base of the staff into the ground. All the while Liz watched, the woman's smile remained deliberately enigmatic as she seemed to will the artefact into concealment.

Liz goggled as the staff swam with an earthy texture and plunged into the ground like an iron bar into water, except for a complete absence of telltale ripples. She gaped at Aphrodite, then closed her mouth. She was sure an explanation would be forthcoming – *soon*.

Aphrodite turned and grabbed her horse's reins, mounting in one graceful motion. Before Liz knew it, she was offering her hand and hoisting Liz up behind her. With the lightest kick of her heels and a tug on the reins, she steered the horse into a gentle trot. They were headed for the river.

'Where are we going?' Liz asked reasonably, considering the simplest of the many questions on her mind for the moment.

'Another time,' Aphrodite told her. 'After a brief stop at my place.'

And she urged the stallion into a canter, then a gallop, revelling in the speed and the rhythm and the power beneath them. And there was no more time for questions or answers, so Liz just held on. And hoped.

Liz felt as though she'd been away in a dream. There had been a glittering expanse of lake, regal mountains across the water and a sprawling hacienda on the near shore. They had risen from the water like – well, like a couple of Venuses – and Aphrodite had called it home. She had also called it Paraiso, a name that summed it up perfectly.

Even after all that she'd been through recently, Liz could scarcely believe she was feeling the warmth of another sun on her face.

Another world, or merely a dream of one; more than anything else of late, it felt magical. Passing shuttered windows and sun-washed terraces, they had crossed a

courtyard, with a fountain and balconies spilling over with plants, through into an open, airy interior; stucco walls adorned with artistic flourishes and what might have been souvenirs from a dozen lives. A Mediterranean mansion.

‘Tell me we’re staying.’ Liz felt the sudden need of a holiday.

‘Not for long. Sorry. The Earth needs us.’ Aphrodite led the way into a lounge with a view out over the lake. ‘At least the Staff seemed to do the trick nicely.’

‘Trick?’ Liz’s eyes were everywhere, exploring every detail of the dream, but she knew she ought to stay focused on the matter at hand.

‘Yes, it’s omnitemporal – or monotemporal, depending on your viewpoint.’

Liz met Aphrodite’s gaze in an acceptable imitation of a spaniel. ‘Aphrodite, you’re not really helping.’

‘Sorry.’ Aphrodite paused, halfway to a cupboard set in the wall. ‘To that staff, all times are one. Or, it exists in every time at once, if you prefer.’

‘Until I know a bit more, I can’t really say I’m fussy,’ Liz told her earnestly. ‘Does this mean you have a better idea of what’s happening here now?’

‘After a fashion. Time’s normal influence is being severely disrupted in this area, that’s for certain.’ Aphrodite licked her lips, considering the best analogy. ‘Liz, as a girl, did you ever make daisy chains?’ With that auspicious start, Aphrodite commenced an explanation to closely rival the Doctor’s matchbox-lecture to Major Bugayev. In a relatively short span she had given Liz as clear a picture as she had herself, and rounded off by adding, ‘So I’m trusting that the staff, now that it’s secured in one place, will act as a kind of splint. Holding the timeline together.’

‘So that you could use your –’ she looked about the room, searching for an apposite term but finding none ‘– own peculiar method of time travel.’ She beamed, putting a brave face on what amounted to her best effort to rationalise the irrational. ‘I see. I think.’

‘Yes, it was that temporal disruption that landed me in the wrong time. Or the right time. And now,’ said Aphrodite,

reaching for the cupboard door, 'I should be able to take us to a better time. Somewhere to cheer ourselves up – and meet some friends of mine.'

Liz pulled at her skirt, testing the length. 'You don't happen to have some spare clothes tucked away in there I could borrow?' It didn't look the sort of place to fit a wardrobe, but there was surely no harm in asking. 'I ought to change, really. I've felt a bit conspicuous dashing about history like this.'

'No need,' Aphrodite favoured her with another of her enigmatic smiles. 'It's all part of the magic.'

She threw open the doors. And Liz gazed into a vista of stars. The whole universe arrayed before her, an infinite choice of destinations, stretching away into the miraculous, impossible heart of the villa.

Liz wasn't known for a delicate constitution, but she did wonder whether fainting in a dream simply meant she might wake up.

The return to Earth, passing through the waters of the lake like Alices through a liquid mirror, was as surreal an experience as any Liz had encountered so far. Swimming down, down, down until they found themselves stepping through onto solid ground and promenading together along a grassy avenue; Liz brightening less than she might have hoped in the forest's peaceful embrace.

Even here, she was persuaded, a shroud of menace encroached on the sidelines; a silent spectator to their progress that reminded Liz of the baldly staring eye of the mutilated Kagyrn. Whether a memory or an existent threat, the fear invaded the harmony intrinsic to any unspoiled woodland. She was grateful for Aphrodite's company and thrilled at the first sight of their objective.

Ahead, there were voices and flickering camp-fires; there were men and horses moving like shadow-puppets between trees; and there were the picturesque outlines of caravans.

'Gypsies,' enthused Liz. 'I should have guessed.'

At least the choice of outfit made sense: she was dressed similarly to Aphrodite, in an embroidered blouse and

waistcoat, a skirt a good few lengths more than her usual, all pleats and flounces, and a pair of what felt like riding boots. She'd learned well enough, at first hand, that history was anything but a costume party; but the fact that the lake had wrapped her in its waters to form the fabrics of these clothes lent a certain magic and an air of pageantry to it all.

'*Romá* men,' Aphrodite sang the phrase lightly, quietly celebrating some personal memory. 'Come and meet one of my families.'

Aphrodite led the way into the camp and Liz was both flattered and overwhelmed by the rapturous welcome they received; Aphrodite, of course, was greeted as a long-lost sibling with hearty hugs and energetic kisses; while Liz, her *gadzho* (non-gypsy) friend, was drawn eagerly into the fold with open affection. In no more than minutes, they were a part of the community: engaging in chatter around the camp; helping to prepare the Hungarian *gulyás*, ladled from a copper cauldron suspended over its own fire; and listening keenly to the tales of ghosts and ill-fortune infesting the woods.

This last was forgotten, however, at last as the rosy flush of sky faded to the black of night. Then they were singing and dancing, Liz clapping as Aphrodite whirled and skipped to the twists and flourishes of a music that was all fire and life.

And, as Liz's fears were dispelled at last, she thought, *This is my defence.*

Chapter Six

The Major

'Look at the self-willed stubborn head. A real Russian peasant's head with a few faintly Asiatic lines. That man will try to overturn mountains. Perhaps he will be crushed by them. But he will never yield.'

Rosa Luxemburg, speaking of her friend, Lenin

Human ingenuity came in many shapes and sizes, and it struck the Doctor that a good many of the nastiest forms were laid across the sofas and coffee-table in the lounge. Hand-held Rocket-Propelled Grenade launchers, machine-guns and automatic rifles were all represented by at least one example; not to mention two cases of grenades and the *pièce de résistance*, in the Major's view: a Surface-to-Air Missile.

Having jury-rigged a manual control panel for the house, the Doctor had dutifully headed for the lounge to report as ordered, assessing the scene as he entered. The men were definitely at-ease and grabbing what rest they could, seated around the walls since the furniture was occupied by this considerable arsenal. Major Bugayev, having obviously just completed a morale-boosting speech to his men, was conducting a full orchestra in a rousing march and the Doctor took a moment to locate the record-player in the corner. The Major looked up at the Doctor's cough, unabashed but thoroughly irritated by the interruption.

'The owner of this house has impeccable taste,' explained Bugayev, lifting the needle from the record and switching off the player. 'Tchaikovsky, *Symphony Number Five in E minor*.'

'I should have expected *Pathétique* was more your style,' the Doctor giped. 'When are you planning to use all this, exactly? Or is this an example of the Boy Scouts' motto?'

Bugayev extracted the record from the deck, handling it with exquisite care and slipping it back into its sleeve. 'Since we don't have a garage and are required to leave our BMP behind, I thought it prudent to pack a few support weapons. I hope you don't mind.'

'Boy Scouts' motto, just as I thought!' confirmed the Doctor. 'You know, it strikes me, Major, that the military mind operates on such similar wavelengths the whole world over. It's a wonder you fight each other at all! You should all get along famously!'

'Ah, but it's possible we are all so alike that we can only hate each other!' pronounced Bugayev victoriously. He was suddenly contemptuous. 'That's the trouble with you pacifists: you eventually argue yourselves out of existence. Now, if you've finished your work *and* your lecture, Doctor, can we please be going?'

'Certainly,' the Doctor bowed cordially, before exiting. 'I just wanted to make sure we had everything – *and* the kitchen sink!'

'Aphrodite! *Aphrodite!*' hissed Liz, rocking the woman's shoulder.

Aphrodite floated gradually up from sleep, fluttering her eyes open and rubbing them lightly with her fingers. 'Liz? What is it?'

Liz inclined her head closer, frightened to wake the whole camp. 'I *saw* it. I saw the ghost Kagyrn in the trees. It's like it's following us!'

'What? Here, now? Are you sure?' Aphrodite sat upright, casting her blanket aside. 'You're sure.'

They had slept, like many of the gypsies, under the open air, with the single blanket hardly a necessity on such a balmy night. Now, an eerie breeze was waving tassels of smoke across their vision from a deadened fire, causing them both to shiver. There was no proof anywhere of Liz's sighting, but Liz knew she hadn't been dreaming for the simple reason that she had not really slept.

'It was the Warrior from the house. The particularly ugly one that ran off with the staff.' Liz shuddered with disgust. 'I

don't think I'll ever forget that eye – that skull.'

Aphrodite was on her knees. She grabbed Liz by the shoulders. 'It'll be back!'

'You're smiling about that?'

'Listen,' insisted Aphrodite patiently, hands raised. 'Huba swore he'd killed it. He claimed there was blood on his sword. So our ghost is *real* some of the time.' She paused, following a few logical chains a few steps ahead. 'Now, what if the goddess Athena didn't care for grubby Kagyrn paws all over her staff?'

'Seems likely,' Liz conceded, the tapestry still fresh in her memory. 'You mean, she installed some defence mechanism against them?'

'Why not? Goddesses can manage that sort of thing, I should imagine.' Aphrodite was in full flow now. 'Say it bound him in some way to the staff. Then the Kagyrn becomes omnitemporal as well. Except, he can't, can he? There's only enough energy in him to occupy a single moment at a time – like any of us.'

'So he ends up spreading himself a good deal thinner – up and down the timeline.'

'Well, technically, physics does it for him. He's constantly flicking in and out of existence in every time there is, tethered to that staff –'

'Like a dog on a leash!' Liz finished adroitly. She frowned. 'How does that help us?'

Aphrodite clasped her hands in front of her. 'It's just occurred to me how I might adapt my Pacifier for use against the Kagyrn. They're warriors, so they wage war. With any luck, introduce them to docility and they'll all go home.'

Liz could follow that train of thought easily enough, but she reflected that she had somehow missed her connection. 'And?'

'Well,' Aphrodite stalled shyly, 'before we can put it into practice we need to do two things. And one of them is to obtain a blood sample.'

Liz laughed and coughed simultaneously.

Those with untrained eyes would have described the Doctor's

control panel as a ‘lash-up’, with its ungainly knobs and dials set in the tin box that had originally contained the various components. Wires ran from underneath to soldered connections on the more intricate array within the wall; a tangled mess of string left by a playful kitten.

The Doctor adjusted a knob and watched a dial. ‘Now, this probably used to function on some telepathic basis. So, if you can all picture Professor Kameneva in your heads, you might go some way to enhancing my navigation. I’ll think of Liz.’

Bugayev bent over the Doctor. ‘How will the house know where they are?’

‘Believe me, Major, there’s very little this house won’t know. Particularly with regard to its owner.’ The Doctor fixed his eyes on the readouts and left Bugayev to puzzle over that minor titbit.

Despite an obvious interest, Bugayev postponed the question of Melisandra Kameneva and revived another point. ‘Doctor, I’ve been considering this temporal fracture of yours. If Time is splintering and so on, why is it just us jumping about? The Mongol and the others we recorded turned out to be just images – phantoms; but we were really in the Fifties. Shouldn’t everyone be passing from one century to another, all mixing together?’

The Doctor finished at the controls. ‘That might very well happen at the height of the fracture, I don’t know. In our case, some other force must be filling in for us – governing our subjective timelines while Old Father Time catches forty winks!’

‘I don’t like the idea of anyone manipulating me,’ said Bugayev, his voice laced with threats for anyone that could be listening.

‘Oh, don’t worry, Major, we still have our own free will. Nothing is living our lives for us; just holding our future in sequence so we can achieve something useful, I imagine. I’m rather grateful, to tell you the truth.’

‘I’ll reserve judgement,’ Bugayev vowed. ‘What about objects, Doctor? Could they slip back through Time, like us? Maybe stay there?’

‘No reason why not.’ The Doctor could see there was

something more than Professor Kameneva on his mind. 'Why d' you ask?'

'It's nothing. Just a theory of the Professor's.' As an attempt at prevarication, it was poor, especially coming from Bugayev; but then, the Doctor realised, the Major didn't need to *lie* to keep him from the truth. He simply had to decide not to tell him.

The Doctor pretended not to care and stood up, brushing dust from his jacket and trousers. 'Anyway, we've arrived. Coming for a quick recce?'

'Yes, you may join us, Doctor,' permitted Bugayev acrimoniously. He turned to his troops. 'Alright, let's move! You know your assigned positions, so keep your eyes sharp and report *anything*. Don't fire until I give the order, *unless* it's one of those Kagyrn creatures, in which case go for its head and Chistyakov will finish it with the RPG. Clear?'

They all stamped to attention and hefted their weapons seriously. If any were afraid, none dared show it.

'Maybe it's not my place to say,' probed the Doctor in his best biting tone, 'but wouldn't two be more appropriate for one of your *reconnoitres*. A shade less ostentatious, perhaps?'

Bugayev tested the Doctor's presumption, inquiring, 'And which particular two would you *recommend*, Doctor?'

'Well, I'm more the outdoors type, myself,' alluded the Doctor breezily, 'and, of course, I'd certainly welcome the company of an experienced officer.' He had almost said 'Boy Scout', but deemed that one bite too many under the circumstances. He did want his own way, after all.

'Until we know the situation, anyway,' Bugayev condescended to approve. He raised his voice for the benefit of the squad. 'Alright, orders stand, but the Doctor and I will handle the preliminary scouting. Maintain a guard, permit no-one into the house and stay alert for our return.' He aimed meaningful eyes at the Doctor, but spoke for the crowd. 'That way, if I achieve nothing else, I may have appeased the English aristocracy.'

'My dear fellow, it couldn't be any better if I'd planned it myself,' the Doctor accorded the proposal his official stamp.

Bugayev grunted his satisfaction, then moved to the door,

batting the Doctor aside. Drawing his Makarov pistol, he tested the handle and opened the door of the house. He peered out on a roughly cobbled street, under cover of night.

‘Well, you haven’t piloted a house before, so I’ll go easy on you,’ Bugayev informed the Doctor caustically, ‘but this isn’t the tenth century.’

The Doctor scratched the base of his neck, avoiding the Major’s scrutiny and expressing his guilt with dignity. ‘I’d better have another go.’

Bugayev shut the door, but Corporal Grushkin, who had been the BMP-driver, marched forward, volunteering, ‘Major Bugayev, would it not be best to scout the area? If we were all thinking of Professor Kameneva, perhaps she is here, while the Doctor’s assistant is elsewhere.’

Bugayev regarded his junior NCO as if initiative was a bad habit he would have to curtail. Then his mood lightened, appreciating the sense of the suggestion. He patted Grushkin’s shoulder and faced the Doctor.

‘If Melisandra Sergeyevna is here you may help us find her.’ He opened the door once more.

The Doctor, despite his disappointment at having missed Liz, chirped, ‘Yes, I’ve been wanting to meet her for some time, as it happens.’

From the tip of what was to become Gellért Hill, Huba panned his eyes around in an unwavering arc over the surrounding wooded hills. Had he known that, a thousand years on, people would erect a fourteen-metre statue of a woman where his stallion now grazed, he would have balked at the idea of commemorating a struggle between foreign troops over his race’s soil; and he may have described the face with which they should invest her. For, as he searched, he wondered whether Árpád had spoken a germ of truth.

As far as he was concerned, there were two quarries out there in the forest: a demon and an angel? The thought of each seemed to burn as a tiny fire within him, but there was insufficient air for the both to survive. One fire would comfort, the other would eat him away, but his mind was blighted with a pitiful inability to distinguish one aspect from another. He

ignored the voice inside, beseeching him to stamp out the latter.

That would have been the old way, he realised. I tread the unknown –

‘Lord Huba,’ Vecellin reluctantly wrested Huba from his thoughts, leaving them unresolved, ‘shall I ride to retrieve your escort? They will not have made half the distance yet.’

Huba assimilated the view again, fixing his mind on a practicality. ‘Yes,’ he said, finally. ‘You, Vecellin, ride fast to the northwest, then cut north to intercept them on the plains. I will remain here with Torda and Koppány.’

‘That is good, lord,’ submitted his captain. ‘You will be able to watch any approach even when at rest.’

‘Rest will be scarce for us,’ Huba predicted gravely. ‘And for you. Remember, ride fast! Never stop for Tétény’s men! I spoke my mind to Árpád and he spoke his back with menaces. If he suspects I will have a company instead of a quartet, then he will act on those threats all the sooner.’

‘I understand, lord Huba.’ Vecellin set about streamlining his horse’s load, passing burdens to the other two men. ‘But there was a time when you could speak out to Prince Árpád and he would merely thump you on the shoulder.’

‘That is true, Vecellin,’ mourned Huba, ‘but that time is past. Go!’

Vecellin held the reins tight, leaned into the wind and charged off at a gallop that hinted to his master of desperation.

‘Listen,’ warned Aphrodite candidly, ‘I don’t want anyone helping with this unless they genuinely wish to. This is likely to – no, *will be* incredibly dangerous.’

The spruce young man, Péter, gave the impression of having been awake for hours. He flashed his eyes at Liz and Aphrodite in the darkness. ‘They’re all mounting up. What are you going to do?’ He waved an upheld palm at them and shook his head. ‘I won’t tell them to stay at home.’

Liz was faintly amused, but Aphrodite stipulated, ‘Well, at least not László. He’s too old.’

Although she lowered her voice purposefully for that last, Péter leaped forward and clamped a hand over Aphrodite’s mouth; then glanced furtively back to where the men and

women were preparing ropes and horses. One man, in particular, with drooping moustache and dishevelled grey hair, was making his enthusiasm for the venture known to everyone; he peppered his speech with occasional bursts of song, always ending in a laugh.

Péter whispered as if Aphrodite's life depended on his words. 'Do not let him hear you! His temper is far worse than his voice and maybe you can escape it, but it is more than we can bear!'

Such was his talent for melodrama that Aphrodite had to chuckle and push him away with a playful, 'Go on, then. You can play the hero, too.'

The man bounded off, celebrating. 'László! She gives us permission to join the hunt! But she says you must stay and tend the washing in the stream!'

László dismissed him with gruff good-humour, 'She said nothing of the sort. How are we to run our prey to ground with your mouth hailing our approach, eh?'

The entire camp seemed to enjoy the cheerful banter and Aphrodite cherished a brief chance to listen. Liz smiled appreciatively.

'They are a sort of family to you, aren't they?'

'Mm. I've joined this band so many times all the way from India, through Asia Minor, then up to the Balkans,' Aphrodite reminisced. 'Then to Hungary. So many miles, so many generations. No starship could rival a journey like that.'

'Don't they wonder who you are? The same woman turning up every other decade?' The longevity of Time Lords was a subject on which Liz generally preferred not to dwell, but the question

– and the question of Aphrodite's longevity – had piqued her curiosity.

'Not at all. That's their beauty. They don't question; they just accept me. Some call me their good luck charm.' The activity in the camp had almost subsided, indicating the readiness of their expedition. Aphrodite returned from her dreams and dug in the pocket of her skirt. 'Which reminds me, have some of this.'

She handed Liz a sprig of shrubbery; with dainty honeyed

flowers and miniature triangles for leaves. ‘*Calluna vulgaris*, although I’d say this was one case where the Latin does no justice at all.’ She watched Liz swivelling the plant between finger and thumb. ‘Heather, for luck.’

Liz was doubtful in the extreme. ‘I’m afraid I’m not the superstitious type.’

Aphrodite shrugged. ‘In that case, it won’t work. But it smells nice.’

Liz shrugged similarly, then tucked the plant in the brooch on her sweater.

Tárnok utca was a shambles.

Many of the houses differed in only minor details from their twentieth century aspects, but to the Major it seemed as if they had deteriorated over the centuries through which he had travelled back. The roofs were patchy and sometimes holed; the walls were pitted and flaking like pastry. Almost every house had the morose expression of dejection, bleary-eyed from all the rotting woodwork in their windows. The prevalent odours more than compensated for the absence of carbon monoxide, in the Major’s opinion, sticking in his nostrils like the mud between the cobbles.

‘Right then,’ meditated the Doctor, ‘when in a foreign town, head for the lights, and you’re sure to find a welcome.’

‘Actually, I was always taught the opposite,’ Bugayev griped testily. He peered suspiciously at the torches and the flickering squares of light in the buildings further north along Castle Hill. He scooted forward as far as the square, pistol in both hands and back pushed to the wall. He beckoned the Doctor to follow.

Bugayev showed his trim teeth to the night. ‘Look. Spot the difference.’

The Doctor sneaked to the corner, passing Bugayev and sweeping his eyes briskly over the scene. Down towards where the Bastion would be built, a sizeable portion of the square had been fenced off to form a corral, where horses milled and languished on crumpled straw. The various monuments and familiar houses were absent or profoundly unfamiliar. The key disparity, however, had to be in the

Matthias Church, the ice-crystal contours of its neck and shoulders disarranged and dressed in the apparel of a mosque.

A guard emerged from around the temple's eastern face; the Doctor ducked out of view, carelessly knocking Bugayev in his haste. 'Sorry, old chap.'

The Major neither accepted the apology nor raised a fuss. His attention was on the other end of the street, beyond their miraculous house. Torches bobbed and fluttered along the road towards them.

'In here!' Bugayev rattled a door handle and shoved open the door behind him. He waited for the Doctor to enter, then slipped inside after him. He eased the door closed. Then he was at the window, eyes piercing the slatted shutters.

The Doctor took a spot on the opposite side of the window, avoiding the wooden furniture in the darkened room; one scrape on the sanded stone floor and there would be more guests than the house could handle. He listened for the approach of the soldiers.

All too soon, the light of the flames was flitting over them. The guards were coffee-skinned with black beards; their heads were covered with fezzes or metal helmets, each with a puggree turban wrapped around the crown to form a brim; loose pantaloons billowed out from the base of their mail waistcoats and each man carried either a scimitar or a spear. Their single captive, fenced in on all sides, sparked a new light altogether in Bugayev's eyes and brought a glint of surprise to the Doctor's.

To the Doctor, she was the woman in the tapestry; the tiny figure in cream and blue sandwiched between the two deities. A statuesque figure now, she carried herself with the deportment of victor instead of vanquished, her noble features chiselled with the pride of a classical artist and glazed with a smooth bronze. Her polished golden hair was straight and shimmered in the torch-lit procession. She had the body of a gymnast, only marginally concealed by the plain dress of blue silk.

'Professor Kameneva,' intoned Bugayev, watching the group march by.

'Melisandra,' the Doctor copied the Major's tone.

There was a click from Bugayev's gun; the Doctor barely had time to stop him before he reached the door. He clapped a hand on the Major's arm.

'Don't be an idiot, man!'

'Those are Ottoman Turks, Doctor! Now, what do you think they'll do to a woman like that?' Bugayev patronised the Doctor from behind a murderous glare. 'I don't mean to teach you history, but they won't be putting her up in the Budapest Hilton.'

'Even so, this isn't the way! How far would you get with that little pop-gun of yours?'

The Major rolled his marble eyes. 'I'm going back to fetch the troops, Doctor. I might appear trigger-happy to you, but that doesn't make me a cowboy! Now, if you'll simply let go of my arm.'

'Wait a moment,' induced the Doctor, 'what say, if we just trailed them. Find out where she is taken, then you can call up your action men. Doesn't that make sense? I'd really rather you didn't shoot everyone in history.'

'Your idea has some merit,' Bugayev conceded. 'Come on.'

Together, they slunk out onto the street, quickly located the train of torches and their bearers, then pattered across the road and down an alleyway. Pacing themselves, they trotted down the next avenue in order to skirt the exposed square; they sheltered under the overhanging fronts of houses and paralleled the course of their quarry, stopping to listen for the clatter of boots to their right.

Bugayev drew them both up sharply, as the guards and their prisoner emerged from another alley ahead. The Turks steered Melisandra towards a solid stone building and the whole party disappeared inside.

'That's the Wax Works,' Bugayev assured the Doctor. 'Or it will be.'

'Does that help us?'

'Not exactly, no. The exhibitions were – will be – in underground caves. There's a system of galleries under the hill. Used for defence in the Middle Ages and, well, the Ottoman period – now.' The Major shook an exasperated

head; even when he accepted the fact of time-travel, the language remained elusive.

‘I don’t care for this in the slightest,’ grumbled the Doctor. ‘Such large chunks of Hungarian history are about warfare – battles.’

‘What do you expect? The country’s an old bone,’ Bugayev snorted. ‘Every dog there has fought over this one.’

‘Exactly, Major,’ concluded the Doctor unhappily. ‘What better battleground? Perfect for two immense forces who want to have a bash at each other, with that young lady in the middle for some reason.’ He tipped a hand towards the future Wax Works. ‘The Professor is not what she seems, and if she’s real I can think of two others that might be hovering in the wings, waiting for their cue.’

‘Two *forces*, hm?’ Bugayev digested the drops of information thoughtfully, swilling them around like mouthfuls of wine. ‘What are they? Are they coming here – to fight?’

The Doctor straightened himself. ‘Not here. The tenth century, is my educated guess. My earliest point of arrival and where I left Liz. My assistant.’

Bugayev nodded decisively. ‘Right. Let’s go and brief the men, grab Melisandra and make for the tenth century.’

‘Look, old man, I can mount less of a sledgehammer operation and meet you at the house with Melisandra.’ The Doctor spoke agreeably, but overdid the off-handed manner. ‘Don’t want to alert the entire garrison.’

‘Sanctimonious as ever,’ groaned the Major expressively. ‘But if things are as desperate as you claim, I haven’t any time to waste. So I’m not sitting at home, twiddling my thumbs while you ask nicely if we can have our scientist back.’

‘I don’t see why not. You can listen to your Tchaikovsky while you wait.’ The Doctor had dispensed with diplomacy. ‘You can’t go careering through the past with guns blazing! Not only will you get yourself killed, you stand to do some damage that will actually matter to the world at large!’

‘That’s enough!’ Bugayev shouted the Doctor down as if he were a bad pupil. He added an aimed gun to the power of volume. ‘We do it my way. And you can listen to music in the

privacy of your own room, with a guard outside. Move it.'

The Doctor made a show of despondency and started down the street, leading the way on the return to the house. Content with the Doctor's co-operative manner, Bugayev relaxed a level as he scurried along behind. He nearly thudded into the Time Lord's back as he halted in a doorway.

'Patrol!' cautioned the Doctor, waving Bugayev back from the corner. 'I think your ranting must have alerted them.'

'Inside, then! It worked before.' The Major growled at the Doctor's sloth.

The Doctor obliged, fiddling at the handle. The door swung open and Bugayev barged inside, scouting the shadows for danger. Impatiently, he signalled, 'All clear! Come on!'

The Doctor, treating himself to a grin, slammed the door shut and twisted the iron key that someone had negligently left in its lock. He heard the pounding of Bugayev's fists on the wood, even as he ran to rescue Melisandra.

Liz had credited Aphrodite with a strength at least equal to her beauty; and she had not been mistaken. The clamouring protests of a dozen hopelessly chivalrous gypsies could not shake Aphrodite from her chosen role of bait for the Kagyrn. She stood some distance down the track, Liz occasionally glimpsing the white of her blouse through the mesh of twigs and branches.

From her vantage point in the tree, Liz could see most of the components of their scheme arranged around the clearing that played host to Aphrodite's caravan. There was the ebullient László perched in the tree opposite; he held the blade that dangled from a length of rope like a sword of Damocles over the whole plan; secured to a high branch, it would swing towards her and she would catch it after it had cut through the ghost-Kagyrn. Embedded in the centre of the clearing was the copper handle from the cauldron, providing a conductor from the staff to the Warrior; this would feed him the energy he needed to grow more substantial and, hence, donate a healthier supply of blood on the sword. Off in the undergrowth, Péter (Aphrodite's loudest opponent on the matter of her role) and the others sat astride their horses, ropes in hand; they were

ready to charge forth, throwing lines between them to topple the Kagyrn. Then, Aphrodite would retrieve the staff and touch it to their foe and dispel the beast for good.

To Aphrodite, that last act was to be a merciful dispatch and she was the one to perform it because she would allow no-one else close to the deadly Kagyrn. Liz wondered if the creature would treat them with similar compassion.

She searched for Aphrodite again, but her faint figure had strayed behind a tree.

Out on the track, Aphrodite braced her weight against a stout trunk. Closing her eyes, she cast her fear out on the prowling darkness, a fishing line into black water. Her heart stuttered. There was a rustling in the lush forest floor.

The Kagyrn had come, straining to stay where the hunting was good.

Come on! thought Aphrodite as she retreated slowly onto the path. She aimed for the clearing and began a stroll, her eyes on the screening fence of trees and shadow. The underbrush bristled and snapped under the passage of something heavy, then shushed to no more than a breeze. Aphrodite moved to a gentle canter and gasped softly as the spectre projected its gory face on the air close to her left. Her heels scuffed the dry track, propelling her into a graceful run. After her through the trees, flashing madly from phantom to flesh, came the ravening ghost of the Kagyrn Warrior.

Sometimes she was chased by sounds alone; a rabid snarling, the crash of metal and clack of bones. Sometimes he was there; a staring half-skeleton with blood-smeared fur and melted armour. Its single eye burned for her.

Aphrodite ran full-pelt into the glade and angled directly for the protruding bar of copper. Pirouetting, she fanned her skirt wide to conceal the improvised conductor and met the Kagyrn's starved gaze with a wily smile. Undeterred, the creature bounded at her, claws and tail poised to rip her apart.

Aphrodite hopped aside with the confidence of a gazelle, but winced as her ankle bent under her and she foundered.

The stampeding bull of the Kagyrn curled around to pin her in his sight. Touching the staff indirectly, he felt the current of new life pulsing up from the ground. In an instant,

he was baring very real canines at his fallen victim, saliva dripping in glistening threads.

Aphrodite heaved herself up with difficulty, setting her foot down tentatively. She limped *towards* the Kagyrn, the slight pain in her ankle the only mar to her perfect composure.

The Warrior froze, bewildered and frustrated. An angry hiss blew a lock of Aphrodite's hair.

'*Aphrodite! No!*' Liz was as startled as the Kagyrn at first, but now she screamed as though waking from a nightmare. She clasped a hand to her mouth too late. She had woken the Kagyrn from its daze.

On hearing her name, Aphrodite had spun away. When Liz's 'No!' rang out, the Kagyrn swung its claw.

There was motion from the woods and Liz, already feeling awful, saw Lászlo pull the swordhilt from its loop of rope and swing down with the blade in hand. The branch supported his weight just long enough and he struck the ground between the Kagyrn and Aphrodite, slicing cleanly through one of its great arms. He pushed Aphrodite back further while the creature recovered from the surprise.

The riders plunged into the clearing, stringing their ropes as planned, but they were not going to arrive in time.

Lászlo discarded the all-important sword and threw himself over Aphrodite; the Kagyrn leaped forward and slashed him across the back with both claws. Liz nearly choked to see the ruddy gouges in the old man's torso.

Péter and another man rode hard, dragging the Kagyrn over with their line of rope at chestlevel. The creature crashed like a felled tree and immediately struggled to stand. The horses and men were no match for its power, but as it strained at the rope it began to pass through it. Away from the conductor, the Kagyrn was fading rapidly, much of its energy expended.

The Kagyrn rose and stalked from the clearing, a dissipating phantom.

Hurriedly, Liz dropped from her branch and ran over to Lászlo and Aphrodite. Péter and all the other riders dismounted and gathered round, rolling the old man's body carefully to one side and helping Aphrodite up. She fought off

the attendant hands, staying on her knees and cradling the gypsy's head in her hands.

His eyes were blank, but he wheezed and forced out a few words. 'Aphrodite,' he warmed faintly, 'you mustn't cry for old fools. I – should have – trusted you. You are – still our – Lady – Luck.'

The life left him and Aphrodite laid his head slowly to rest, her hands quivering and tears streaming down her cheeks. Liz felt her sorrow like it was her own.

One of Major Bugayev's failings, in accepting the abnormality around him, was that he continued to operate in accordance with normal procedures. Only after some kicking and banging on the door did he remember that radio silence was not a factor in this particular enemy territory. Reaching for the walkie-talkie he raised Zhelnin on the second call and issued clear directions to the building in which he was imprisoned. He had to admire the Lieutenant's reserve in only questioning the instructions once. Shutting the radio off and restoring it to his belt, he paced the floor with the air of an expectant father until the lock rattled and he was free.

He stormed outside where the troops collected in a semi-circle. 'Alright, what happened to the formation? Sort yourselves and post a watch on the corners.' He motioned Zhelnin into a conference. 'Sergey Mikhailovich, I confess it was the Doctor who tricked me. Now he has gone to get himself arrested by the Turks. But we have located – Professor Kameneva.' He had to pause over the name, reflecting on what the Doctor had said; he had not known the Professor long, and yet she was preceded by a truly magnificent reputation. (*Brilliant mind, handsome woman, cold as a Siberian winter*, he had thought on their initial meeting.) 'So we will mount a jailbreak!'

'Yes, Comrade Major!' snapped Zhelnin eagerly. 'Turks, you say, Major – what will be our approach?'

'Nothing fancy,' Bugayev dismissed the point as trivial. 'My guess is we're up against seventeenth-century Ottomans. They may have some muskets, but if you instruct the men to take them down first, I'm sure the spear-throwers still won't

have time to close.’ He smiled comfortably, reconsidering that Professor Kameneva was a Caribbean summer by comparison. ‘Remember, their cyclic rate-of-fire will be in the order of one a minute.’

Still, Lieutenant Zhelnin was troubled. As ever when there was a doubt, he dived in and prepared to accept the consequences. ‘Major, if we are in the seventeenth century, will we not have some detrimental effect on – our future?’

Bugayev laughed, ‘Go back to your farm, Sergey Mikhailovich!’ He looked on his Lieutenant to show it was a friendly joke. ‘Any time soon – maybe next year; hell, it might even be tomorrow there’s a massive Christian army going to storm into the city and wipe the Turks off the pavements. Now, you ask me if our little band is going to have a detrimental effect on that? What can it hurt if we kill a few before the Papist army gets here?’

‘You’ve seen that plaque commemorating the recapture of Buda, 1686? It lists them all – Swabian, Hessian, Württembergian, Bavarian, Austrian, Flemish, Walloon, Spanish, Italian and Hungarian!’ He listed the nationalities grandly, savouring a fine piece of military history. ‘What an army! And when I get back, Lieutenant Zhelnin, I’ll have you carve in “Russians” right at the end! Agreed?’ He spread both arms. ‘Though their part was small, they played it courageously!’

Lieutenant Zhelnin discreetly filed his concern in a small box. He idly inspected his gun, a cut-down Kalashnikov AKR. ‘What about the Doctor, Major?’

Bugayev tapped his own chest resolutely. ‘Oh, *I’ll* kill him.’

Had the Doctor known how little head-start he had, he would not have afforded the heavy vault door, barring his path to the stairs, such a patient examination. Once the lock was confirmed as screwdriverproof though, he only took a few seconds more to attain the solution.

Finding a small magnet in his pocket he delved again into the jacket and produced the Kagyrn’s energy-rifle power clip. Working the one against the other in easy strokes, he

magnetised the back-plate of the energy unit. In a mood of elevated self-satisfaction, he then clamped the device to the ironwork on the door and retired to a safe distance.

From out on the street, glancing left and right, he aimed the sonic screwdriver at the power clip and triggered a disruptive frequency pulse. The effects were suitably dramatic and wonderfully quiet.

The destroyed power unit released its energy in a blinding wave of superheat; the entire door, metal and wood alike, bloomed white and disintegrated, leaving a frame of red-hot stone. The Doctor ran through before it began to cool.

He descended a round stone staircase, heels clicking lightly on each step, keeping as near to the narrow-wedged side as he dared. Torches appeared at infrequent intervals, but the climb was not overly long. He soon came out into a natural cave, formed over millions of years, he inferred, by thermal springs. The flames provided plenty of illumination and a pleasant draught blew from elsewhere in the caverns. Powder barrels, crates and other supplies were stacked in every recess and a tunnel lead away opposite the stairwell.

There were also two guards, behind him as he entered.

Thankfully, they were as surprised as the Doctor and one of them could not help voicing it. The Doctor, dismayed expression at the ready, whisked around in a circle and grabbed the shaft of the nearest man's javelin. He brought it up like a quarterstaff to parry the attack from the second man. The first Turk shoulder-charged him and bowled him onto the hard floor.

Winded, the Doctor still managed a favourite move; foot raised high, he sent his attacker in a low-level flight over his head.

Raining curses, the second Turk thrust viciously forward with the javelin, intent on skewering the intruder like a grounded fish. The Doctor barrel-rolled and swept his own spear in a wide curve; the Turk spiked the ground and the Doctor knocked the weapon out from under him, leaving the man fall flat on his face. By the time he and his companion stood, the Doctor was up and ready for them both. Each flew at him; the Doctor tripped one and chopped a hand down on

the base of his neck; the other seized his arm, but the Doctor took him by the tunic and drove him headlong into the wall. The man's hat failed to save him from a nasty knock and he slumped unconscious.

The Doctor promised himself he would look around corners in future, then thanked the Time Lords for selecting this rather more able body over the previous one. He hid the prostrate defenders behind the highest batch of containers, then raced into the tunnel.

From far above, an alarm bell pealed frantically. He was halfway along the tunnel when the sound of more guards reached him and he was caught. It was too far to return without being spotted. He had to trust in their eagerness to respond to the alarm.

Squatting, back to the wall, he tore off his jacket and dumped it over his head, impersonating a dark limb of rock midway between two torches. A herd of feet rushed up on him – then passed by, bound for the stairwell.

The Doctor, no time for relief for fear they might send someone back on discovering the missing guards, clambered to his feet and donned his jacket on the move. He slowed as the tunnel widened into another cavern, searching the dim hollows and alcoves. Finding no likely opposition, he entered the gallery and ascertained that one half had been walled off to provide rooms. The barred windows on the doors were promising signs and he hastily tested each with a glance.

In the fourth he jumped at the close-up of a face; it backed away with a start.

It was Melisandra, and she buckled up with laughter. 'I'm sorry! I was looking out, trying to see what the commotion was!'

The Doctor saw the funny side, but he stamped a finger across his lips. Checking the entrances at either end of the cavern, he bent to try at the lock.

The satin voice from above said, 'Who are you? That is, if you don't mind me asking. It's interesting to know who's rescuing you.'

'The Doctor! How d' you do?' replied the Doctor amicably, without breaking from his task. The screwdriver

whistled truculently and the first screw loosened from the latch-plate. 'Have to get at this from the inside, I'm afraid.'

'I suppose you *know* who I am,' Melisandra speculated winsomely, 'otherwise you wouldn't be going to all this trouble.'

'Actually, with me it's compulsive,' professed the Doctor, enjoying the woman's effortless humour as a distraction from the task at hand; his operation on the lock was laborious, but not taxing enough to occupy much attention. He trained another ear on the bell, only to learn that it had stopped ringing.

Melisandra pressed her face to the bars. 'You wouldn't know what that bell was for, by any chance?'

'Unfortunately,' answered the Doctor, realising a possibility as he spoke, 'I can only think of one occurrence with the likelihood of causing that much alarm: another escape, I shouldn't wonder.'

When he saw the new group of Turkish soldiers hustling to join the action, Major Bugayev groaned at the additional delay they represented.

At the first encounter with a patrol, the engagement had ended succinctly and in their favour, the troops dealing with the threat with a competent display of martial arts; but replacement enemies had arrived with unnerving speed and his men had been forced to install themselves in various buildings along the street. Bugayev had a commanding bay window on the second floor and a computer-precise map of his men's positions in his head. No sooner had they dug-in than they were assailed from the other end of the street by a mob of Europeans in Turkish garb: the janissaries, the Major recalled as formidable ex-prisoners and slaves, were supposed to have been invincible in battle. To him, now, they were a disorderly rabble who had fled under a hail of gunfire.

Never knowing what hit them.

With the arrival of reinforcements from the north, he could expect the *janissaries* to rally for another go from the south. He advised Zhelnin of the probability over the radio.

'We've both flanks covered, Major,' the Lieutenant's

voice promised him faithfully. 'They're only wasting our time.'

'That is *it* in a nutshell,' Bugayev congratulated the junior officer. 'I am being too damn soft on them, and we're paying by the clock.' He perused the schematic in his mind. 'Look, Chistyakov is three windows on, first floor up across from you. Signal him to hit the north hard. Those with the elevation needn't conserve their grenades, either. Out.'

Zhelnin returned his acknowledgement, grimly loyal. Moments later, the expected onslaught came.

A volley of musket reports sounded from the south and Bugayev heard a ricochet off his window-frame. Then the war-cries blew through the street like a huge wind and the twin waves of soldiers surged towards the OGRON positions.

The Kalashnikovs replied to the muskets, each a quickfire thunderstorm. Calmly, Major Bugayev leaned on the window ledge and picked his mark in the milling mass of barbarians to the south; he wanted to bag a janissary. The heathens ploughed on over their dead comrades, but they were charging on in the face of death; for a moment the Major feared they might be overrun and he felt a twinge of admiration for their raw courage; even as he fired a single bullet at his target and saw the man fall. Yaroslavskiy's machine-gun added its blast of chorus to the defence of the north, then the plume of a rocket funnelled out from Chistyakov's window; the explosion splintered the entire corner of a house and showered the attackers with debris. One of the men to the south, probably Sergeant Markov, lobbed a fragmentation grenade into the fray. Both assaults were in an irredeemable mess.

The guns trailed into silence, the smoke spread a haze over the scene and Bugayev watched the tattered survivors retreat with wary eyes on every window.

He sat back and deposited his gun on the sill. Tired, he stretched, rubbed his eyes with both hands and massaged his neck. The Doctor, he knew too well, would have condemned that engagement as a bloody slaughter; but what the Doctor seemed to forget was the question of what the enemy would do to you if you downed guns. *Heads on spikes*, he would have told the Doctor, *and worse*. They had started off in good

order, fending off their opponents with a minimum of fuss, then the situation had literally exploded into that madness out there. *And once it gets to that stage, he would have added, there is no stopping until you're safe – because the enemy doesn't work like that.*

Pleased with having won an argument with the Doctor – in his head, at least – Major Bugayev settled back and waited for the streets to quieten sufficiently before he ordered his troops to continue the rescue operation.

Sparks shot up to dance with the stars. The fire consumed the painted wood of László's caravan with a ferocious joy that sent huge spouts of flame climbing over the roof to meet in the middle. Inside, Liz knew, were all his belongings and she could not shake the image of a man's entire spirit being engulfed in that blood-orange glare.

Aphrodite, Péter, the other men, the women and children all surrounded the pyre in humbled silence. Liz touched Aphrodite's arm.

'I'm so – sorry,' she managed a faltering whisper.

'I know,' Aphrodite consoled her through benign tears, 'and I know you're blaming yourself. Don't.' She squeezed Liz's hand affectionately. 'If anyone is at fault it's me – and László himself.' Aphrodite detected the susurrations of shock in Liz's eyes. 'Oh, he wouldn't object to my saying that. You know, he always feared a quiet death.'

'Are *you* alright?' Liz wondered sincerely.

Aphrodite nodded and turned to sprinkle her thoughts onto the roaring fire. 'The longer you live, the more friends you'll lose. And I miss every one of them so much.' She swallowed on a memory. 'But it's the *violence* that makes me shiver. That Kagyrn was energy with a killing instinct. That's all that was left. We *have* to put an end to it.'

Liz put in, 'I know. The Doctor would feel the same way.' Then she pondered how she might lift her friend from her current depression; her own mood had improved without her notice at the thought of the Doctor.

Péter held Aphrodite's hands and led her, uncomplaining, inside the circle of people. The faces were brightening and the

first few bars of a slow-quick tune trickled forth from a variety of instruments. Some danced while spectators clapped, and if the fire had enveloped the man's spirit, then this was a celebration of his life. It was not Liz's custom so she bowed out, but she saw in every movement of Aphrodite's a passion for life and energy.

There was scant time for pleasantries once the lock had been tripped, the Doctor managing to open the door one second before a trio of Ottoman guards clattered into the cave from the inner entrance, drawing scimitars. The Doctor jumped forward to meet them, forming a gentlemanly shield, which Melisandra promptly refused to hide behind.

Two went at the Doctor; the other ran into Melisandra's fist. The Doctor bent under the first blow, while another sliced dangerously close on his left. Melisandra caught her fallen opponent's sword, following with a fierce kick at the Doctor's left-hand assailant; the toe of her boot split the man's knee and he tumbled in agony. Meanwhile, the other guard's scimitar swished the length of the Doctor's jacket. The Doctor retreated, the Turk came after him, overreached; then the Doctor gripped his sword-arm and touched a finger to the back of the man's jaw. It was as if he had found the 'OFF' switch.

'Come on!' The Doctor sprinted ahead of Melisandra and they headed for the staircase, ascending it in long strides.

As they reached the top, a blade chinked loudly into the stone doorframe above the Doctor's head. Ducking, the Doctor rolled aside and came up to deliver a chop to another waiting guard. Melisandra leaped into his place at the doorway and swiftly parried a second strike, bringing her scimitar in a lightning swipe back across the fellow's midriff. Hands to his abdomen, dropping his sword, the Turk doubled up. Melisandra skipped over him to join the Doctor at the street entrance.

Streams of fireworks sounded from the south.

'Automatic fire! No prizes for guessing who that is!' remarked the Doctor irritably.

'We'd best not stay here, Doctor!' Melisandra's tone was insistent, but firm and free of panic.

Together, they dashed along the street, only covering a short distance before some twenty horsemen broke in from a side road. The riders, lances held vertically, hovered between joining the violent maelstrom of the main battle or to run down the lone pair of fugitives.

‘This is one time we’re not meant to cheer when the cavalry arrives. Come on!’ The Doctor guided Melisandra back along their course, tearing away from the horses without a single glance aft. Melisandra kept level with him all the way.

Multiple hooves angrily pummelled the stones on the road; half the lancers had plumped for the easier game. The Turks tilted their weapons forward, each shining tip seeking a contact.

‘Down here!’

Melisandra tugged the Doctor after her, into an alleyway. The cavalymen had to brake their mounts hard, turning the horses for the narrow opening; the breadth of which permitted only the lead two. The escape route ended too abruptly in a tiny avenue and the fortress wall. The alleyway vibrated to the flamenco-clap of hooves.

Instinctively, Melisandra swung them left and found the path blocked by a wagon. In a single breath, Melisandra vaulted onto the cargo-bed and lunged sidelong at the battlements, hauling herself onto the wall. The Doctor followed suit, perhaps lacking her avian grace, but nonetheless with a style of his own.

They threw themselves to the ground below, vaguely aware of the shouting horsemen jammed in the avenue behind them.

Both ended the fall with Olympic-class landings, although the Doctor mentally awarded the gold to his companion. Hurriedly, they left the shadow of the fortifications and hid themselves in the cover of the dingy streets and terraces. Continued shouting and the resonant stamp of feet, as well as hooves, encouraged them to continue their flight further. They finally stopped when they reached a badly damaged sector of the city, on the western outskirts.

‘This will do for now,’ supposed the Doctor. ‘It’s not that far back to the Castle, so we can keep an eye on the level of

activity.'

Melisandra agreed, her breathing deep but controlled. 'Yes, this corner of the city seems entirely deserted.' She scanned the scarred buildings with distaste. 'We'd better talk softly. Some of those houses are ready to fall down.'

'I'll be careful where I lean.' The Doctor appraised Melisandra now she was out in the open. 'I must say, you've kept yourself very fit in between weaving exquisite tapestries.'

Melisandra smiled, a word of thanks on her lips. Before she could speak, soldiers swarmed in on them from all sides. They wore breastplates and rounded helmets over leather uniforms, some with ruffed collars. This, their swords and their complexions told Melisandra and the Doctor that, whoever they were, they were certainly not Turks.

The Doctor could not immediately decide whether they were good news or bad.

Chapter Seven

Melisandra

‘Our love can be a bridge to span the Universe.’

Melisandra, on her parting with the Sorcerer

Melisandra resumed her role as captive with a bravura that annoyed and confounded their captors as surely as any resistance she might have offered. To judge from the funereal solemnity of the soldiers’ faces, the Doctor might have believed them to be the ones with their wrists bound behind them, on the march from the city limits. For his own part, he refused to be intimidated by what was for him an everyday occurrence.

The haughty soldier, rocking idly on horseback at their left, had taken charge of the procession, announcing that they (the Doctor and Melisandra) were now prisoners of ‘His Highness, Prince Eugene of Savoy’. A red sash was looped over his breastplate to support a fine scabbard, as well as advertise his importance, and slightly tarnished greaves protected his legs. Neat, blond hair was combed back from his pallid forehead, while a prominent mouth, like a crimped ridge of pastry, was defined even further by a bushy roll of a moustache and a triangular beard. He peered down from on high as if his prisoners were a source of great shame to his venerable personage.

He had spoken less than twenty words to his charges, a high self-regard implicit in his practised baritone.

The Doctor, though, had gleaned much from that brief volley of words and the subsequent silence had aided in sifting the implications. The rider was an Austrian baron, Mörtenhof of Krenowitz, and an officer in the great multinational force of the Habsburgs, commissioned to expel the Turks from Buda.

That placed the year at 1686 and the date nearing September 3rd. It placed him, Melisandra and their entire predicament in a worse state than ever: as liberators the Habsburgs were an uncivil lot.

Escape had not been an option though and he and Lady Melisandra were consigned to a long march, hemmed in by the Austrian musketeers and joined by others on their route out of the city. With this gradually swollen escort, they had been driven through a squalid collection of tents and mostly slumbering troops, after which Mörtenhof's adamant glare had herded them west, into the voracious darkness of the forest.

Melisandra remained undaunted by the gloom. She measured her steps with the same calm pride she had carried amongst the Turks, permitting herself infrequent glances at the Doctor, the Baron and the surrounding woods. Like the Doctor, there were probably a thousand thoughts playing behind her static features, largely illegible to all those around her.

Their path carried them a couple of winding miles along a tree-cluttered valley, before the commander signalled a turn northwards and they squeezed extra power from their legs, mounting a steep incline. The soldiers tramped loudly over leaves and twigs, sure of the territory's friendliness and apparently enjoying the persistent crunch under their feet. By then, the Doctor and Melisandra were the image of contented rambles despite the mild discomfort of their secured wrists. Mörtenhof rode mindfully past every tree, as if appraising its suitability as a scaffold.

When the rise had benevolently levelled, he called for a short spell of rest and was answered with grateful murmurs. He stood in his stirrups and viewed the undulating blackness of the woodlands behind them. He pulled his horse round for a better impression.

The Doctor, too, found his curiosity aroused by a lone fire, set in a distant hillside like the blinking orange eye of some fallen beast. No others burned nearby and, from the Austrian noble's affronted scowl, he could be sure it was not a Habsburg camp. In any case, the blaze seemed too tall and

unrestrained for a campfire.

‘Bah!’ the officer barked, dropping into his saddle and effectively rejecting the Doctor’s curiosity as well as his own. The site of the fire was too great a diversion and too small a concern.

Frustration now his spur, Mörtenhof immediately ordered the troops to proceed, now that they were ‘sufficiently rested’, and their group dipped down over the hill, the brow of foliage banishing the orange shard from sight.

The words ‘I can’t’ had all but spilled over Aphrodite’s lips when she abandoned the polite protest altogether. The gloss of the mare’s coat and the shining eyes was matched by the gleam in her own as the animal was led forward. There was an encouraging warmth in the smiles of Péter, who held the reins, and Liz, who stood beside her.

‘You know full well, if you had ever asked, Lászlo would have given her freely,’ the youthful gypsy reiterated, ‘and anyone can see how you’ve fallen in love with her already. Right?’ He looked for verbal confirmation from Liz.

‘Head over heels,’ Liz laughed gently, a hand on Aphrodite’s shoulder to nudge her forward.

‘Nivasi,’ Aphrodite tasted the name slowly, ‘She’ll make a good companion for Bailador. I’ll treasure her.’ The vow made, she stepped up to smooth the horse’s nose. Accepting the reins from Péter, she moved past him, her fingers gliding down the animal’s powerful neck. She kissed the young man and hugged him with her free arm. Then he helped her aloft, where she settled into the saddle and arranged her skirts while she waited for Liz.

‘I could walk beside you, if you like,’ Liz proposed, even as she wandered over and offered her hand to Péter.

Aphrodite evaluated the idea mischievously. ‘Ah, now I could use a trusty squire. No, it’s no good, my conscience won’t allow it. Come on, I promise a leisurely pace this time.’

She extended a hand down and assisted as Péter launched Liz up in front of her. Once again, Liz found herself rummaging for a more comfortable seat, but she soon relaxed and invested her trust in Aphrodite’s prowess as an

equestrienne. The two women smiled at the young man.

‘Take care of yourselves,’ he implored them earnestly.

‘Listen,’ Aphrodite replied with a kindly advisory note, ‘will you do something for me? When we’ve rid the forest of ghosts, try not to be such a serious old man.’

Péter laughed and raised both hands in apology, waving them on their way. The horse started into a trot and Liz followed the receding figure of the man with her eyes; he was heading back to the camp, where the round of fond farewells had been said, and where the final embers of the burning caravan were now a dull red glow.

The delays between offensives had steadily lengthened until Major Bugayev had chosen to evacuate his troopers from their defensive positions, hurrying in on the subterranean entrance and leaving the Turks wondering where their fearsome enemies had disappeared.

The plan had not unfolded as intended, but with adrenaline, the elixir of supermen, to bear him along, Bugayev held his team steadfastly on the new course and learned, to his delight, that the outcome was less disadvantageous than expected.

Shortly after the order had been issued, he had clumped both boots down on the cobbles, landing from the second-storey window and breaking into a run immediately. His troops had scuttled from a wide variety of holes all around him, rats erupting through the wainscoting. Sergeant Markov had chosen an exclusive rooftop escape, burrowing up from an attic window and eventually risking a daring lunge across onto the Castle battlements; Bugayev and the rest had ducked along at streetlevel.

From the temporary cover of a corner-house doorway, Bugayev had seen the first of the Turkish lancers gallop out from a small lane, a shaft drilling for Plankin’s unknowing heart. A warning yell grating the inside of his throat, Bugayev sprang forward, slamming an elbow into the mounted Turk and displacing the man from his horse. Clutching at the mane, he yanked himself astride the rearing animal’s back and turned his pistol on the astounded riders bursting from the lane in

single file. His gun issued forth a stream of satisfactory reports, at close range; then Plankin joined with the convincing addendum of the RPK automatic rifle. The Turks, with no room to flee, or to aim their lances, had discarded their cumbersome weapons and charged madly on, some managing to draw their scimitars before unseen impacts blew them backwards.

Handgun empty, Bugayev rode on, rising to the role of Cossack, leaving the remnants of the threat to the steel punch of the RPK, the ammunition drum clattering violently with each burst.

By then, shots had been cracking in his ears all around and more of their Ottoman friends had been tempted back. Zhelnin sailed up to him from an unseen quarter, declaring the subterranean entrance to be full of dead Turks; despite him having been the first to reach there. 'Now,' he had pointed out, 'the area's filling up with live ones.'

Certain of the Doctor's involvement, hopeful of the man's escape with Melisandra, Bugayev ordered a withdrawal from the area of the 'Wax Works'; a radio call from Sergeant Markov guided the withdrawal in the direction of the inland wall, away from the river.

Now, Bugayev rode into the narrow street that paralleled the wall, while Lieutenant Zhelnin stationed rearguards to cover every possible approach. Markov waited, low-light binoculars in hand, as his Major clambered from the horse to the battlements with the confidence, if not the expertise, of a circus performer. There was a body, its jaw smashed, barring Bugayev's path, so he levered it onto the road below with the firm pressure of a boot. Then he was next to his Sergeant.

'Well, Sergeant Markov, you did say *good* news,' he cautioned.

The senior NCO saluted and stated, 'Comrade Major, sir, I sighted what can only have been the Doctor and Professor Kameneva, captured by European troops.' He straightened an arm in the general direction.

Zhelnin appeared behind Markov, having climbed up from a nearby cart. Major Bugayev was busy digesting the glad tidings.

‘No casualties, Comrade Major, save a musket-graze for Private Saporov,’ the Lieutenant announced cheerfully.

‘Ammo status?’ the Major inquired, his mind divided between their various choices.

‘Half our ready supply, Comrade Major,’ came the response.

‘That, then,’ concluded Bugayev, ‘is our second piece of good news. It means we can chase after the Doctor and Melisandra Sergeyevna without ducking back to the house for the reserves.’

‘Can we be certain to find them?’ Zhelnin prompted worriedly. ‘They may have gone anywhere.’

‘They may indeed, but yes we can.’ In Bugayev’s mind, the job was already done. ‘Sergeant Markov’s hawk-eyes have the approximate area. We only have to track them from there.’

Lieutenant Zhelnin and Markov nodded in unison.

‘Meanwhile, Lieutenant Zhelnin, I suggest we play a special gambit of our own. You,’ he aimed a pistol-barrel finger, ‘can take Abdurasulov with you back to the house. The Doctor is convinced the tenth century is the start of this business, so slide the control back to zero – and, ah, think very hard about our key objective, hm? Memorise the current setting and send the house back for us if you can.’

Zhelnin was fascinated by the vulpine cunning etched by Bugayev’s facial lines. He was a short while in responding with the expected salute, then he stamped off, returning to the street and grabbing Abdurasulov en route.

In the present quiet, Bugayev summoned his other soldiers onto the wall as the quickest means of exit from the Castle, his fox-like eyes panning around the lightening horizon and at least half his mind trying to recall an English expression regarding wild geese.

The journey north developed into a trek, the undulating terrain beginning to exact demands on even the superior stamina of both Melisandra and the Time Lord. The swish of leaves overhead was eventually drowned out by the laboured respiration of the soldiers, who were conscious and jealous of the rhythm still maintained in their prisoners’ breaths. Baron

Mörtenhof was appreciative of the men's grumbles and flared his nostrils at the Doctor, particularly, for not having the decency to be quite so exhausted as his guards. During the final stage of the march, the Doctor obliged him with the first few beads of sweat on his forehead.

Here, the forest petered out over flatter ground and they approached a once-exalted fortress, constructed on two levels. Battered ramparts encircled the base of a hill like a pair of granite arms, breached in places and braced weakly by grey towers that reeled drunkenly. The keep backed onto the embankment, up which steps climbed to greet a war-scarred palace, lighted by the rising sun; a rival for Versailles erected within the bounds of Gormenghast. Its hidden face gazed dolefully into the River Danube, mourning the lost beauty manifest in its reflection.

'Visegrád,' Baron Mörtenhof informed his charges.

The Austrian noble guided his troops and prisoners through a miserably repaired gate, swung respectfully open by a handful of guards, into an imposing fortress ruined by hostile and negligent occupation. Wooden stockades, carts, limbers and guns were all gathered in the straw-covered courtyard as men bustled about them, making assorted preparations in a show of chaos peculiar to military organisation. Livestock and men crossed paths in this confused fashion, narrowly avoiding wheeled guns, wagons and hooves. Scarce were the eyes that looked on Melisandra or the Doctor, and all were as drab as the fortress walls.

The Baron paused only a minute to converse with the men in the grubby courtyard, spreading the news of his success; then they struck out for the keep, a path cleared for them in the mass of men, horses and materiel. After a while, the Doctor and Melisandra found themselves completely ignored.

At last, the noble dismounted and handed them unceremoniously into the custody of four guards inside the doorway. He parted their company without any signal of farewell and traipsed inside.

The guards hesitated, checked the prisoners' bindings, then grabbed their arms to lead them off at a right angle. The noble was nowhere in sight and the Doctor memorised their

course along the dingy corridors, right up to their being flung rudely into the wall of an open, straw-matted cell. Sturdy chains were the only decorations on the stone-block walls, a rickety wooden table and chair the only furniture; all the poor light strayed in from the corridor. The scene was uncomfortably familiar to the Doctor and he chanced a grimace in Melisandra's direction. She appeared equally unimpressed.

Taking care to watch them closely, one guard remained planted in the doorway, one fist over the hilt of his sword. While the Doctor's pockets were searched and emptied (with a deeply perplexed inspection of the sonic screwdriver), Melisandra was briskly manacled around the ankle; the Doctor followed suit, handled marginally more roughly. The length of chain was generously meant to reach the chair, but, for now, the two were shoved into sitting positions in the earth and straw. Then, to their collective surprise, a guard leaned behind each of them and, knife wielded cleanly, slit the ropes that bound their hands.

'You'll need them to eat,' he said.

'I was rather afraid we'd missed breakfast,' the Doctor addressed the man mordantly.

The guard dealt him a dose of regret for that, with a single, sharp swipe across his head, using the flat of the blade in his palm. By the time the Doctor looked up, the guards had crossed the floor, slammed the door shut and drawn the bolt with an ominously heavy clank.

Aphrodite was true to her word and the ride through the forest began as a surprisingly pleasant experience; if cross-examined, Liz would still have preferred a car, but at least she slowly lost her fear of falling and could watch the dawn light as it crept up its daily arc, unfurling a backdrop of silver to their path.

This bright screen of sky defined the silhouettes of danger just as well as those of beauty.

Aphrodite tugged the reins once and Zephyr halted faithfully, perfectly untroubled. Liz, too, felt a shielding calm even as Aphrodite leaned close and whispered in her ear, indicating the soldiers moving amid the undergrowth ahead.

‘We’ll have to skirt around them.’

‘Can a horse creep?’ Liz hissed back, positive she already knew the answer.

‘No, but she can move slowly.’

As Aphrodite skilfully steered the mare aside from the track, Liz wondered why she, herself, was not particularly scared, especially as the outlines of muskets, in the hands of the soldiers, came to her attention. There was such serenity in Aphrodite’s expression, when she glanced back, that Liz had to attribute the sensation to plain trust; it was a trust oddly in contrast with that she placed in the Doctor: he earned his very early on, with authority, warmth and confidence; the foundation for Aphrodite’s shone like a bronze halo.

They rode between the trees, picking their way by inches, it seemed. Behind them, the figures trod heavily through the brush, their own rustling steps concealing much of the horse’s sounds. They were still too distant to reveal any detail on their uniforms and they spoke in low voices, if at all, keeping any accent or identifying feature well below audibility. Liz watched the muskets, questioning which way they were pointed whenever their profiles shortened.

‘Flemish soldiers,’ murmured Aphrodite, obviously having heard and seen more, tingeing the explanation with sadness. ‘There’ll be a battle. We’ll have to get to get back to Paraiso before –’

The horse faltered, in time with Aphrodite’s voice. The soldiers spun at the movement and came loping at them, suspicions aroused.

Liz, suddenly uneasy, turned around. Aphrodite’s eyes bore a delicate varnish, but she swiftly recovered herself and clicked the reins. The horse, careless of its own noise, splashed rapidly through the undergrowth.

Aphrodite glanced into the trees, searching for the soldiers. A musket puffed angrily like a tiny dragon; something whined past their ears. Aphrodite leaned forward, and Liz held on to her as the horse’s hooves made solid, lively drumbeats over the earth. The soldiers were left standing, their aim spoiled by nature as Aphrodite’s promise of a sedate pace lay broken in their midst.

Liz had cause to wonder, with the threat of the soldiers fast disappearing behind them, why her sudden trepidation refused to fade.

Melisandra produced a handkerchief from inside her sleeve and sidled nearer the Doctor. Lacking any water, she wet the cloth with a small drop of spit and rubbed the moisture into the fabric. She gave the handkerchief to the Doctor, advising him to mop his brow where the knife's hilt had cut the skin.

'Not very hygienic, perhaps, but it's the best we have.'

'Thank you, anyway.' The Doctor obeyed, flinching only slightly.

Melisandra admonished him, 'You know, the Time Lords I know would have been decidedly more careful when to speak and what to say.'

'Yes,' the Doctor held the red-smudged cloth before him, 'well I was never much of a conformist in that respect,' he returned dryly, then indicated the spot to which he was attending. 'Or any other, for that matter. Of course, there's the occasional price to be paid for the privilege of free speech.' He paused, stuck for what to do with the lightly stained handkerchief; but Melisandra helped him out by snatching it away and tucking it back inside her sleeve. He noticed her anew. 'You say that as if you weren't a Time Lady. And I'd made up my mind that was all you could be.'

Melisandra drew her legs up and clasped her hands over her knees. She opened her mouth before the words had truly ordered themselves in her head. When she did speak, she selected a tone of consolation.

'You've not guessed badly, Doctor – you're really not very far out. But, for one reason and another, I'm afraid I only qualify for the title of Lady.'

'My dear Melisandra, that much should be apparent to anyone,' the Doctor grinned in a required display of gallantry.

'Thankyou, Doctor,' bowed Melisandra magnanimously, 'your charm does wonders for my deflated ego, in the current circumstances.' (The Doctor perceived her to be anything but deflated.) 'No, I am a Gallifreyan Lady, but I'm more a victim of time than her mistress.'

The Doctor shifted himself on the floor, as if anxious to gain a better view of his fellow prisoner; as if that would verify the incredible revelation that stirred the musty air into sudden activity. She didn't look as though she could be considered – least of all by herself – a victim of anything.

‘No, it's true,’ she testified gamely, ‘I was born some while before they started plastering Time all over their titles. I'm a genuine antique, and then some. There's an interesting story behind it might pass our time more favourably. Would you care to hear it?’

‘Shall we say I can recognise a rhetorical question when I hear one?’ the Doctor gave all the necessary answer with his eager eyes.

Melisandra tilted her neck back and raised her face to the grimy ceiling, seeking her starting point. As she did so, an unwelcome interruption from the rattling bolt at the door brought a flash of irritation to the Doctor's face; a flash that he hurriedly replaced with a smile on seeing the guard enter with their breakfast. Two tin plates, loaded with a pasty gruel and a dry crust of bread, and a metal jug were banged down on the table. The guard withdrew, joining another who had watched the entire delivery from the corridor.

The door thumped shut and the bolt was rammed home, leaving them alone once more.

‘I think, if you don't mind,’ ventured Melisandra with a sidelong look at the table, ‘I'll skip breakfast and carry on with my modest tale.’

The Doctor regarded the meagre offerings. ‘I think I'll skip breakfast and confine myself to listening to you.’

‘Well, now,’ Melisandra began, and she started with her appointment as commander of the *Halcyon Slayer*.

In the cool dawn, Major Bugayev and the OGRON troopers moved with practised efficiency, probing the way ahead with sight, hearing and a sixth sense that seemed to sniff the air from somewhere in the muzzles of their various firearms. Some way past the spot where Markov had witnessed the Doctor's and Melisandra's arrest, Bugayev had detected a humble military encampment.

This, the Russians fell upon with the deadly stealth of snakes.

Too late, drowsy men, half in armour, rushed to arm themselves. Commanded to restraint, the Soviets downed their first victims with well-directed thrusts from their rifle-butts and brutal stabs with bayonets. Men dashed to all corners of the camp, some emerging from the ragged tents, fearing Turks and discovering worse; while the defenders scattered, the attackers swarmed between them, shouting and striking everywhere. The clash of metal was eerily absent: whenever a blade swung in seventeenth-century hands, the Russian would dive aside and another would assail the swordsman from behind, burying a knife in the man's back or sliding it across his throat. Yaroslavskiy, equipped with a machete, stormed into his foes with the voracity of a madman and the precision of a surgeon. To the poor defenders, mayhem had been unleashed; to the attackers, the chaos was decidedly under their control.

Bugayev darted to and fro, rolled under an arcing sword and kicked out at the wielder, snapping a leg with his boot. He carried through onto his feet and stood face to face with a second enemy; a third was rushing up on his right. Fingers together, he dug a deep hollow in the first man's stomach, then whirled and chopped the other fellow, then arriving, across the jugular. Both dropped, one dead.

Around him, the fight had concluded and not a shot had been fired. The only traces of smoke came from the campfires, the faint crackle of which he had heard throughout.

Some of the OGRON troops gathered round; others roamed among the fallen with guns at the ready. But for their lying face down, the Austrians might have voluntarily returned to sleep.

Against the ensuing stillness, Bugayev knelt beside the first of his victims, laying a hand on the man's collar. The man grumbled and moaned something acceptably within the scope of Bugayev's German.

The Major attacked him straight away with, 'Two prisoners; strange clothes; white-haired man and a woman in a blue dress; have you seen them?'

‘I – yes – they – passed through here. I was –’ the man stammered on until Bugayev shook him.

‘Where? Which way?’

‘Visegrád.’ The man needlessly and feebly tried to point.

‘Looks like our luck is holding up admirably,’ Bugayev remarked contentedly.

‘She was a statue to magnificence, in many ways – like a Liberty or a Britannia, I suppose – except gloriously alive – but there was a disturbing quality to her that I never pinned down,’ Melisandra expounded with a light shiver, a rare and involuntary concession to frailty. ‘If the Chieftain and his Pack were the thunder, I suppose she, with her army, was the lightning; but burning perpetually at the other end of that valley. And she was as tall as the Chieftain, a great, golden light-sculpture.’ She broke off, saying, ‘I hope I did her justice in my tapestry.’

‘Even without having seen her, myself, I’d say you haven’t understated her. She must have made a lasting impression.’ The Doctor had found himself absorbed in the story, none too surprised to discover the real event behind the scene depicted in the tapestry.

‘Oh, she did that, alright,’ the Gallifreyan Lady assured him expressively. ‘There was I, on my ledge, about to witness a genuine clash of Titans and, I know, any sensible commander would have returned to her ship without delay. But I was gripped. My feet had taken root in the rock. But if there was one thing that snapped me back to reality, it was when they met. That first strike of weapon on weapon, sword upon staff, ripped the sky clean open.’

‘Ah yes, the rays of lightning,’ guessed the Doctor, recalling the image.

‘Well, *that* was essentially artistic licence. The only way I could represent it pictorially. It was like the impact of a stone in a pane of glass, but the cracks were spreading out in all directions. Even directions I couldn’t see; but I was – aware of them. I mean, memories were resurfacing before me and I saw the world of Kagren fragmenting, but it didn’t *happen*. I’m sorry; I lack the vocabulary.’

‘Past and future!’ breathed the Doctor, fingers coursing through his hair. ‘Those cracks spread in all *dimensions*, not just directions. Omnitemporal weaponry! When they clash, all Eternity feels the shock waves.’

Melisandra shrugged blithely, casting off the mantle of awe. ‘Well, that’s outside my field of expertise, Doctor. All I knew was, I was scared. And,’ she then chewed on something bitter, ‘I’d given up being scared for myself some while before that. So I knew there was much more at stake than me. Much more. And I did the only thing I could: I *commanded* them to stop.’

There was a note of supreme nobility in her whole manner, leaving the Doctor convinced of her success; her force of character hinted at the power to stay the hand of a god, or even two. The Doctor let her continue, without saying a word.

‘And they did. Both of them. The armies stopped advancing, they lowered their weapons. I had two million eyes on me and, to tell the absolute truth, I had exhausted all the speech I had. Stop! There wasn’t any more I could add after that. So I was sure they would just swat me aside and carry on with their battle.’

‘But no. For some reason, no. Athena’s eyes blazed the brightest of all. She just *stared* at me, all over me and through me. She did *not* appreciate the interruption! Then everything shifted and I thought I was floating in orbit, but – and this was no hallucination – it was as if Athena had wrapped herself around me. I was a defenceless chick under her wing and I honestly felt *protected*. She didn’t say anything and I just hovered there.’

‘Then I saw the Chieftain, floating like a mote in her eye. He was chasing after us – wherever we were. And the whole thing splintered again. I was left to fall, forever and a century. Not a pleasant sensation; worse than zero-gravity. Limbo. Take my word for it.’

‘Yes, I think I may have some idea on that score,’ interjected the Doctor, referring to a recent sideways fling through Time. ‘You’re saying Athena hurled you into the future.’

‘That’s right. To Gallifrey, as it emerged, a long time ago

now, subjectively speaking, but much, much closer to what you would call modern times. And, although she was gone, Athena was still with me. I was aware of those wings from then on; a cloak drawn around my mind.' She twirled a golden lock. 'Apologies for all these metaphors, by the way. Athena and the Chieftain generally appear to defy plain description.'

'Trust me, you're doing wonderfully,' encouraged the Doctor affably. 'You were thrown to your own world's future and Athena left a hint of herself with you for some reason. A souvenir, perhaps?'

'It's a theory I wish the Time Lords had settled for, certainly,' Melisandra rejoined. 'No, my world wasn't mine by then. The High Council – which was all new to me, of course – once I had told them my story, were sure I had been used as a decoy. They were extremely worried that the Chieftain was bound for their Gallifrey, after me.'

'Still, they weren't about to execute an ancient – because that is what I am and there's no point denying it – fellow Gallifreyan who had devoted and, according to history, lost her life to the defence of their world. At least, I'll never know how close they may have been to deciding to execute me – as the simplest option. But, as you can tell,' she flexed her arms as proof of life, 'they never did. So they had to come up with something else: exile.'

'For the Lords of Time, they can be very short-sighted,' reflected the Doctor moodily.

'What? You think they should have killed me?' Melisandra joked.

'Not in the least,' the Doctor smiled, 'but their solutions to various problems do tend to follow rather predictable patterns. I know from experience.'

'Well, I can't complain. They did their best for me. Built a very extensive prison complex here on Earth. Telepathically shielded to keep the Wolf at bay.'

The Doctor made a point of sitting up. 'The houses, of course. They granted you a good deal more freedom than me.'

'My sentence was protective custody. What was yours?' she engaged her cell-mate with a half-taunt, pleased to see she had guessed correctly about him. 'Don't worry, I won't pry.'

We're still on the subject of me, here. Although there's not much else to tell. I've been living in that network ever since, relocating to another wing whenever takes my fancy. I suppose you have it all figured out by now. Direct, transdimensional links between properties, each building lives up and down its allotted life span – from initial construction to final demolition, you know.'

'Yes, I don't mind admitting, I wasn't too far out on that front either,' the Doctor laughed softly. He added, 'But the system can't be functioning properly at the moment. The Tárnok house went back as far as the tenth century. That would make for some very interesting external effects.'

'Materialisation of the interface – the house exterior – for one,' remarked Melisandra. 'Not to mention *dematerialisation* when the interior shifted forward again. Now I don't know much about it, but that's not supposed to happen. The Time Lords are very particular about anachronisms.'

'No, the fracture must be disrupting the network, allowing individual buildings to stray outside their natural timespans.'

The Doctor folded his arms and sat forward, stroking his chin with a spare thumb. He was contemplating an impression of Liz, stranded on a dark hillside, watching helplessly as a lonely Renaissance house vanished before her eyes. The thought provoked a whispered exclamation from his own mouth: 'Poor Liz!'

'Poor Liz' was currently in her element, left to the luxury of a pristine and eminently equipped laboratory. It was a beautiful sight and one which distanced the memory of that disappearing house still further from her conscious mind.

Across the other side of the courtyard from the lounge and the navigational controls, the room relegated the cherished sophistication of her old laboratory at Cambridge to the proverbial Stone Age. There were, alongside the post-NASA devices mounted on the traditional benches, a large number of tributes to antiquity, of which, she was sure, the electron microscope was one. The benches, in contrast to most other laboratories, were devoid of clutter, with a vast collection of test-tubes, pipettes, petri dishes and other such common fare

all neatly stacked in glass-fronted cabinets, establishing the room's jurisdiction firmly in the worlds of chemistry and biology. The balance between all the sophistication and the idyllic surrounds of the villa was a surprisingly harmonious one. Perfectly in keeping with the mistress of the place.

The only modest disappointment was the absence of any makeshift gadgetry of the kind always being manufactured by the Doctor; proof against Aphrodite being a tinkerer in electronics. And even if she had been, Liz was reasonably sure she would have arranged all the circuits and wires more neatly than the Doctor could have managed.

Such passing thoughts kept her spirits and humour light as she occupied herself scraping Kagym's blood from the fateful sword.

She heard the door open behind her, but there was no need to glance up to know that Aphrodite had entered. There was her presence – a kind of aura that didn't even need to be seen; something that Liz didn't care to think about too much, for fear it would totally undermine her adherence to scientific principles and all things rational. And there was the graceful sound of her approach, her every step a precision beat leading in to a song you longed to hear.

'How are we getting on?'

Liz stood aside to show her the slide with its few dry specks of black, no more gruesome than coal-dust. 'I hope it's a pure enough sample.'

The lady of the house – of this world, even – had changed her rustic attire for a creamcoloured dress, drawn in at the waist by a belt of intricate gold chains. Not exactly a standard lab coat, but again it chimed perfectly with the setting. Somehow.

'I'm sure it will be.' Aphrodite's unquestioning confidence was exactly the sort of tone Liz scarcely ever heard in a lab. 'We'll simply slot that in the cellular analyser and give it the appropriate settings. Then it'll know what we're looking for.'

Liz hovered uncertainly, surveying the lab with care. 'Which is more than I do. Your cellular analyser must be a different model to the one I used back home.'

'Sorry,' Aphrodite slipped the sample from Liz's hand,

enjoying the sarcasm, ‘allow me.’

She sauntered over to the polished, box-shaped machine that straddled the end of the next bench. There, she activated a calculated sequence of switches, inserting the slide in a narrow slit in its right face. A visual display dappled her face with light and several diodes blinked into action. Aphrodite studied it all with the enraptured curiosity of a young pupil, all the time adjusting dials and triggering different functions of the analysis with measured applications of thumb and fingers.

Liz came up beside her to help decipher the results.

‘The Kagyrn antibodies are likely to be tough,’ Aphrodite hypothesised, ‘so we’ll need a sturdy protein to fight them off, or a crafty one to fool them.’

‘You’re aiming to convert your Pacifier into some sort of virus,’ Liz realised, her imagination already captured.

‘After a fashion. I don’t generally approve of biological warfare, you understand, but there’s a very good reason why I don’t think this counts.’

‘Small Pax?’ Liz volunteered tentatively, afterwards heartily sympathising with Aphrodite’s soft groan. Their collective suffering was relieved by an impatient, repetitive bleeping from the analyser. With a little guidance, Liz found she could interpret the displays competently enough; inwardly reassured to learn that future computer scientists *had* discovered user-friendliness.

‘Incredible! It’s not what I’d call blood, but the cells are still alive; positively thriving! There’s simply an outer shell of dead matter.’

‘Hm,’ Aphrodite was pensive, bending her face to the display, ‘it won’t live forever outside the body. Most of the Kagyrn’s matter was converted into energy, remember – that has to be what’s sustaining them. There’s even plenty of energy for multiplication, look.’

Liz met Aphrodite’s glance and voiced a shared thought, her enthusiasm for the project expanding with every moment. ‘If we had more, we could use the Kagyrn cells to host the virus.’

‘You’re absolutely right,’ Aphrodite’s gaze lit up mysteriously, ‘and we will have more.’

‘So my premonition about them selecting Budapest as their battleground doesn’t sound too farfetched?’ asked the Doctor, the lines on his face deepening to ravines. ‘And where could be more appropriate? An eternal battleground, if ever there was one. Two forces, two cities.’

‘I know it’s not much compensation for being right,’ Melisandra commiserated. ‘But that’s part of the impression Athena left on me. She has to destroy this evil, the Chieftain. No matter what the cost to us mortals.’

She spoke this last so resentfully that the Doctor was lifted from his own thoughts and turned to examine hers. This was her second lapse into bitterness and she endured it with shameless dignity, as if it comprised no taint to her grace. It was, though, a glaring chink in her armour of virtuous courage and aristocratic tenacity. Her eyes dwelt on the table, averted from the Doctor’s scrutiny.

‘You’ve paid your share already, I see,’ observed the Doctor gently. ‘The loss of freedom, or is it something more?’

‘Oh, I never mourned for freedom, Doctor,’ Melisandra champed sourly, ‘not once. If you consider yourself caged in a zoo, I could range all over my nature reserve. No,’ she confessed, a saltwater glaze coating her eyes. She fought to hold it in place. ‘It’s actually a chain I miss – an emotional one. Love.’

‘Someone you left behind?’

Melisandra nodded, gazing coldly at nothing. ‘In a way. He was killed – in the War. He was part of the scientific effort, engaged in a research mission to some world named Belogar. They found pieces of his ship embedded in the ice. Such a pointless, ordinary death for someone so – so – *unique*.’

One silver tear finally rolled down her golden cheek. Still she refused to shake with sobs. The Doctor laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. She patted it gratefully, controlling her breathing to gradually cheer her spirits.

‘He had your preference for a title over his real name, Doctor,’ now she remembered lovingly, picturing his features in the air before her. ‘The Sorcerer.’

‘An impressive name for a scientist,’ complimented the Doctor.

‘The *perfect* name for him,’ Melisandra pursued fondly. ‘He adored physics and mathematics. It was more than mere research, more than application. It was a real *mission*, with him. He wove spells, commanded the elements and he fashioned such wonderful poetry.’

‘Poetry?’ the Doctor was intrigued.

‘Hmm. It was his second greatest passion, you know. He always referred to the “Poetry of Physics”. He’d have talked for a century with you on that subject.’

‘Rhyme and reason,’ mused the Doctor. ‘Yes, I expect he would have. Assuming he could have strayed from your side that long, mm?’

At last, Melisandra managed to angle her face at the Doctor, an ornate smile illuminating her features with her more customary majesty. ‘You’re a gallant gentleman, Doctor.’

The Doctor’s response was trapped under his tongue by the clatter of the opening door, sending two guards barging in on them. They marched directly at Melisandra and hoisted her onto her feet, one hand under each of her arms. One drew his sword while his fellow bent to unlock the restraining manacle.

‘What’s going on?! Where are you taking her?!’ The Doctor’s sudden motion brought the guard’s sword dangerously close to the tip of his nose.

A face stepped up to the doorway. It was the haughty Mörtenhof who had accompanied them all the way from Budapest. He deigned to grant the Doctor an explanation. ‘She’s coming for questioning. I expect she’ll be brought back, so you won’t be alone for long.’

The Doctor glared back at the man, then sent a searching glance at Melisandra. Pinioned between two guards, she met that glance head-on, fighting the guards’ combined strength to earn her a pause.

‘Don’t worry, Doctor, it’s a far, far better thing,’ she parted on a brave jest.

But her humour rang hollowly under the low ceiling. She was dragged and shoved out of the cell and the Baron heaved the door to with a disdainful sneer. As the Doctor heard the bolt secured, he was thinking, ‘It was the worst of times, it

was the worst of times.’

Aphrodite was the only one qualified to operate the temporal accelerator and, while she supervised the machine in its efforts to speed the process of cell multiplication in the Kagyrn blood, Liz was pretty much her own boss in another sphere of the work: that of isolating or synthesising an enzyme which would catalyse the formation of RNA from the neurochemical compound that made up the Pacifier. The resultant virus would live happily in the Kagyrn blood cell, which would act as a host bacterium, attaching itself and transmitting the virus to other cells. All this would go on and the antibodies would leave well alone.

Liz was at home with the technicalities and now conversant with all the advanced equipment her work demanded. Aphrodite, appreciably sensitive to Liz’s nature, had devolved a large slice of responsibility to her. Their heads would occasionally come together for consultation and assistance and they would take pleasure in watching each other work. So understanding, Aphrodite gave Liz room to perform that the Doctor, in his unwitting genius, generally overrode.

Liz wasn’t altogether comfortable making those sorts of comparisons.

On the other hand, Aphrodite, despite her generosity, made Liz feel inadequate in other ways. Trying to reconcile her friend’s two sides and marvelling at the absence of any visible join, Liz saw a perfect mixture. Consequently, she found one side wanting in herself.

She folded her arms and leaned on the bench. ‘You know, I can’t help envying you.’

‘Why d’ you say that?’ queried Aphrodite, suspending her work.

‘You’re a very special blend, I suppose,’ considered Liz, thinking aloud. ‘Oh dear, now I’ve made you sound like a coffee. No, it’s your laboratory precision I can compete with – I’ll prove it in due course – but you’ve a – a *romance* about you that leaves me standing. Dance and music, together with medicine, biology and chemistry, and I’m afraid to guess what

else. My pitiful degrees probably don't come up to scratch. Even that wouldn't be so bad, but I just can't see where they clash. So tell me, what's your secret?

Aphrodite tested her warmly: 'Do you know what music is?'

'Well, yes, it's –' Liz had to reconsider.

'Music is the closest humans will come to imitating nature,' Aphrodite answered herself with what might have been a favourite maxim; pure and free of any lofty pretension, as though she was simply expressing a heartfelt belief. 'There's a definite science and an order to it, but it's still beautiful. And why shouldn't it be? The same that's true of birdsong is true of the bird that sings, trees, leaves, or anything else nature has to offer. Now, even if I *do* own up to a sound understanding of how all those things tick, that doesn't mean any of them lose their magic. Not to me. And the same is true of people.'

'You're saying there's a magic in me?' Liz tripped the question out with a laugh.

The wealth in Aphrodite's smile was surprisingly convincing evidence in itself. 'Oh, yes. Your *romance* is in your passion for science, and your zest for knowledge; the way you pursue your research with delight, the way your heart warms to every discovery or success.'

'I never thought of it like that.'

'That's my point. Don't think of it,' Aphrodite instructed her, 'just feel it, like I do.'

Liz was struck by Aphrodite's insight and was conveyed to another mystery that descended over her friend like a veil of lace.

'Yes, that's another thing – how do you manage to read people so well? And you manage to charm them too. Is that how you tackled Huba? I'm guessing it was more than psychology.'

'Now you've found me out,' Aphrodite shrugged reflectively. 'Among my – people, I'm a mutation – a freak.'

Liz objected inwardly at that; both words seemed too harsh to retain any possible connection with Aphrodite. 'You mean, you're an exile – like the Doctor? Is that why you live

here alone?’

‘Something like that.’ Aphrodite stopped what she was doing, a wistful melancholy transfixing her. One that Liz felt acutely, taking possession of her own features. ‘Emotions are my incurable weakness, see,’ Aphrodite explained with some effort. ‘And I’m as contagious as I am susceptible. People have to take great care if they want me around.’

‘They’re your strength,’ Liz argued, recollecting her own vacillating emotions during their travels. ‘I can vouch for that. I’m feeling it right now. Along with – I don’t know – so many other things.’

Aphrodite chuckled softly over a sob and dabbed her eyes with a silk handkerchief. ‘Now I’m sorry. There you are, no-one is safe. Your best chance is to keep making me laugh.’ She reached over and mopped the wet rings from under Liz’s eyes. So naturally maternal, or sisterly – or both. All possible things at once.

‘Dear me. What are we like?’ Liz was already laughing along with her friend.

Left to his own devices, the Doctor resolved to find some way of leaving his cell before he was overcome with boredom. His devices, however, were limited in their potential, but he viewed each artefact with as open a mind as possible. Breakfast, if there was any justice at all, had to provide more than tasteless nourishment.

He tested the manacle in both hands. It was an old band of metal and hung loosely around his ankle; removing his shoe, he could slip it down to touch his heel at the back. The setting for breakfast assumed a whole new meaning.

Standing, he hobbled over to the chair and picked up a platter, returning to sit on the floor, once he had used the bread to wipe off the mush; the stuff flopped into a more unappetising heap on the straw. Holding the tin platter behind him to muffle the sound, he began to scrape the rim back and forth against the stone of the wall, occasionally flipping it onto the reverse side; even less occasionally pausing to gauge his progress. In a fairly short space of time, he was satisfied to see a burnished and reasonably sharp edge in place of the

previously battered one.

There was still work to be done, of course, for the tin would never last long against the iron manacle, but by now he was ready to hum a quiet tune.

Back on his feet in an instant, he went to sit at the table, to all intents and purposes about to partake of Melisandra's uneaten meal. Instead, he chose a section of table and commenced cutting at the wood with his improvised, and wholly manual circular saw. Whenever he flicked a glance at the door, there was no sound to bother him, so he kept on sawing until a sizeable chunk of the wood splintered free. Actually, it proved too large, but he braced that on the table and chopped it down to an appropriate wedge.

Stooping, still seated on the chair, he used the flat of the plate to hammer this wedge in between the locking-plates of the manacle. This part of the procedure was noisy and hazardous to his shins. Still, he persevered.

Finished, he calmly retrieved the jug and spilled the water over his foot and waited. There was just enough give in the clamp and, with a moderate struggle and a minimal amount of pain, the Doctor slipped his foot free. He tossed the metal hoop aside and replaced his shoe.

'Next, the door,' he remarked under his breath, scooting up to the side of the portal. 'Guard! Guard! Here, guard!'

His best hopes were fulfilled, when the bolt was drawn and the door swung open. The guard was suitably lax and terribly surprised to find his prisoner absent from the chained position at the wall; he was more surprised at the impact of the Doctor's elbow in his unarmoured chest. The subsequent blow encountered his neck and he blacked out before his face met the straw and mud of the room's floor.

The Doctor was out. He ran down the corridor, trying to reason where they might have left his sonic screwdriver and various other possessions. The passages were deserted and he took full advantage of the fact. So careless was he that he nearly ploughed into Major Bugayev.

Bugayev prodded him with a fist. 'You didn't have to come out and meet me, Doctor. I would have shot you in your cell.'

The Doctor decided that this stale crust of humour was in need of a little butter. He said, 'I never thought I'd be pleased to see you, Major Bugayev. You did well to find me so quickly.' Serious again, he continued, 'Have you seen Melisandra? They took her away for interrogation. We should try to find her.'

'I'm aware of that, oddly enough,' snapped Bugayev, with a pained expression. He turned to address his troops who ran up behind him. 'Fan out and search around the keep. She can't be far.'

The Doctor watched the troops file past. 'You seem to have lost some men. Lieutenant Zhelnin and Abdurasulov. I'm sorry, Major.'

'Their lives weren't wasted,' Bugayev assured him grimly. 'We left a campful of Austrians drinking the morning dew. That's how we traced you.'

The Doctor thanked him rather mutely, preferring not to think about whatever actions the Major had sanctioned. Instead, he peered about him. 'Where are the Austrians, I wonder? Is the rest of the fortress this empty?'

'Skeleton staff, Doctor. My guess is they've gone to join the final assault. Today's the big day!'

'The recapture of Buda,' mulled the Doctor. 'You could be right.'

They waited in silence.

Bugayev's impatience won out and he shouted down the passage after his soldiers. 'Come on! Where are you? It's a long walk home!'

Sergeant Markov was first to return. He delivered his report solemnly, expecting some retribution from his CO. 'Comrade Major, sir, as far as we can ascertain, there is no sign of Professor Kameneva anywhere in the building.'

The Doctor thought of her parting words: an innocent joke. He knew too well how such things tended to rebound.

Chapter Eight

The Queen

*'Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty.'*

Lady Macbeth, <<Macbeth>> by William Shakespeare

The Doctor paced his thoughts around inside his head, all the time watching each of the Major's loyal soldiers return and deliver reports similar to Markov's. At the arrival of the last pair of boots, owned by the somewhat Elvish figure of Chistyakov, he had reached an unpalatable decision.

'We have to leave now, Major, without Melisandra – and without some very valuable possessions of mine.'

Bugayev cocked his head and peered doubtfully at the Doctor; the proclaimed element of sacrifice had not persuaded him in the slightest. 'We may well leave without your gadgets, or whatever else they've taken from you, but Professor Kameneva is my concern, and I'll be grateful if you'd allow me to give any orders relating to her. If you'd be so kind.'

The Doctor steamed impatiently, willing the temperature to cool as much as possible before he spoke.

'Of course,' he said, 'I never meant to undermine your authority. I realise how *responsible* you are. But, in the first place, I can tell you definitely that Professor Melisandra Sergeyevna Kameneva is simply the role an extremely special woman has been playing for your benefit.'

'I'd gathered that much,' Major Bugayev professed, between thin lips.

'Good, I'm pleased to hear you're with me so far. In the second place, I don't enjoy the idea of not having her with us,

either. She has an invaluable insight into the nature of the very forces we have to confront. Now that I've lost the Poems of the Dead, she could prove to be the nail we'll find wanting before too long.'

'So we'll find her first!' Bugayev threw an order at Markov. 'Find me a guard.'

'No, Major!' the Doctor upbraided him. 'Despite her singular importance, we don't have the time, you see! Those two forces I told you about; they could be ready to face each other any moment soon in our subjective future! And when they do, if their weapons meet just once, the shock waves will be enough to fracture Time in this entire region! And humanity will find to its cost that a temporal fissure is something you can't patch together with goodwill, grim determination or chewing gum! That's always assuming humanity is around to even give it a try!'

'I'll be here,' the Major swore calmly.

The Doctor could scarcely comprehend the enormity of the officer's arrogance. 'Maybe you will,' he humoured him for the present, 'but that's simply another reason for leaving right this minute. You'll be *here* – in the seventeenth century! If that house happens to be damaged or destroyed in the recapture of the city, we'll have no way to gain access to it. And since that house is our only link with other times, perhaps that much light will penetrate even your opaque skull!'

'You do have a point, Doctor,' Bugayev conceded at great length, abnormally content to pass over the insult. Still, he turned his face on the indecisive presence of Sergeant Markov. 'Sergeant, didn't I just ask you to fetch me something?'

There was such placid composure in Bugayev's tone, that Markov was quickly chilled to the core; that tone was the tip of a very nasty iceberg, with which all the troops, at one time or another, had been familiar. If it ever struck, each man knew the consequences for his career. Privately chastising himself for succumbing, albeit momentarily, to the strange Doctor's power of command, Sergeant Markov furnished the Major with the most polished salute of his lengthy service, then trotted up the passage in quest of a useful prisoner.

She sat impossibly tall and erect in the saddle, a woman with all the final majesty of an El Cid, save that her own ceramic mask of death was animated by a glaze of supernatural beauty. But this was only a hard shell, another assumed persona; a vessel for all the hatred pouring in from the cup of memory. The horse beneath her was the painful white of sunlight; the golden curves of her body were wrapped in glacial silk over beige leather trousers, shielded by silver breastplate, greaves and a skirt of chain. Her sword and pistol were trimmed with a gilt to compliment her hair. It was all part of the same armour.

She flexed the reins in one suede-gauntleted hand, sending the dazzling horse forward, its hooves daring the earth to mark its clean, trim legs. She rode past the dulled and battle-tarnished guns, ensnaring every man's attention, stopping at the crown of the hill.

From there, she could survey the army, ringed halfway around the walled city, as one devoted animal: officers on every side were the creature's brain, the infantry its claws, the cavalry its jaws and the cannon its fiery breath – *oh, how she loved the irony in that metaphor*. From there, she could master the beast; from there, she could temporarily drain that cup of all its bitter memories. Of Kagren. And before.

Major Bugayev had led them all outside, to wait near the door of the keep. The Doctor eventually unfolded his arms, as Sergeant Markov wrestled an argumentative guard – undoubtedly the fellow the Doctor had left on the floor of his cell – into the moody daylight. The Sergeant dutifully pushed the Austrian onto his knees at Bugayev's booted feet.

'Where is the woman prisoner, brought in with this one?' Bugayev demanded in German, expending no effort in either formalities or a civil reference to the Doctor.

The man stared with malicious awe at his interrogator and his circle of bewildering subordinates. Bugayev drew his pistol and spent a round on the sky.

'Major, you won't get your information that way!' the Doctor reprimanded him.

'Shut up!' Bugayev erupted ferociously, his blood rising like magma. He motioned for Yaroslavskiy to stand nearer the

Doctor, then aimed the pistol close to the Austrian's head and addressed him in restrained temper. 'You now know this for what it is – yes, it is a gun. Where is the woman? Where are all your soldiers? That's all I want to know.'

'The woman – I truly do not know! I beg you, believe me!' enjoined the already pitiable guard. 'The army is taken to sack Buda; all the forces are assembled. The Queen has promised victory over the heathen Turk.'

'Queen? What queen?' Bugayev's gun held as steady as his voice. (The Doctor was tensed to prevent him firing, Yaroslavskiy or no.)

'The Queen,' the Austrian repeated helplessly. 'She leads us into battle.'

The Major shrugged and holstered his pistol (permitting the Doctor to relax). The next minute, he was scratching his cheek in a casually pensive manner. 'Mean anything to you, Doctor?'

The Doctor studied the quivering guard sympathetically for a moment. He shook his head, 'No, nothing definite. It does make me wonder what happened to Prince Eugene of Savoy, though. He's not supposed to have been dislodged by a queen, you know.' Reading the patent dissatisfaction in the Major's face, the Doctor presently added, 'The name of Athena might enter into it somewhere.'

'Ah, yes,' Bugayev remembered, 'your obsession with statues. I guess we'll see soon enough. Come on, we're heading back to the city.'

'Without Melisandra?'

Major Bugayev was already marching across the dirt-caked courtyard, beckoning his troops after him. He turned and walked slowly back, saying, 'It's what you wanted, isn't it, Doctor? Honestly, some people can't even recognise when they've won their argument.'

The Doctor looked on with despair. The Russian troops were moving out, leaving the Austrian alone with his fears.

Patting the uncertain guard on the shoulder, by way of a farewell and a reassurance, the Doctor set off to follow the OGRON troops, but was met head-on by Bugayev, who had timed his return exactly.

‘Between you and me, Doctor, I would *never* commit murder without a very sound reason, but any time *you* want to quit this operation,’ he suggested with quiet menace, ‘you only need to question my authority during an interrogation one more time.’

The Doctor gave the Major a look of lazy exasperation, before patronising him with a reply.

‘My dear Major, there might very well come a time when I’m willing to let this planet fend for itself against any number of threats, extra-terrestrial or otherwise. But let me assure you, I would never, for one minute, consider leaving the fate of the world in hands such as yours.’

He strode purposefully by, fairly certain Bugayev would never sink so far as to shoot him in the back.

Aphrodite rubbed her eyes and stretched. The resultant yawn from Liz had nothing to do with Aphrodite’s mysterious emotional resonance; it was a perfectly natural case of infectious fatigue.

They had worked several hours without a break and now their researches waited on the crystallisation of the successfully tailored Pacifier virus in the temporal accelerator. Its success had been verified by a complex computer simulation, run by Aphrodite, which had mechanically predicted matching results in the real world at a probability in the very high nineties. Congratulations, Aphrodite and Liz had had to award themselves.

‘It should even work on humans, to a lesser extent,’ Aphrodite had pointed out. ‘The Kagyrn cells will last some time in the human bloodstream before the antibodies can fight back. Say, a matter of weeks.’

‘And we want it to work on humans?’ had been Liz’s hedging supposition.

‘Well, if it stops them fighting for a fortnight, then it can only be a good thing. By the time they recover their aggressive tendencies, they’ll be free of the Kagyrn influence, at least. They’ll only go back to killing for their own purposes, but —’ she had given a heartfelt sigh that reached Liz from halfway across the laboratory, ‘that’s something we can do nothing

about. Good or evil, history is sacred.'

Now, with time to spare, Aphrodite hauled herself from her stool and smiled an invitation. 'Care to idle away some time? A safe, leisurely stroll?'

'Yes,' Liz agreed readily, 'I don't mind if I do. I'm thinking of re-doing my living room back home, so I might pick up a few ideas.'

Aphrodite wasn't buying that for a minute. 'Come on, then,' she beckoned, eyes shining as she ushered Liz before her with the affectionate, guiding hand of an elder sister.

Liz felt that bond more closely than ever since the additional shoring provided by an easy working relationship. A tour of Aphrodite's home presented an opportunity, like the whirlwind tour of any friend's house, to gain an additional dimension of insight into her companion's enchanting character. The few rooms she viewed contained such an apparent richness and depth that, initially, she believed she might never know more than a minute segment of Aphrodite's true self. Realisation soon dawned, though, that the nature of those details was uniform throughout: just as the sunlight seemed to reach everywhere in the house, there were no dark corners to Aphrodite's personality. She was an honest portrait of herself. Such secrets as she had, were there for all to see, like the rainbow shine on a magpie's black feathers, or the enticing complexity of a snowflake. And there was the subtle, yet essential distinction between her and the Doctor: you trusted the Doctor in a few short instants, even though you would never completely know him; with Aphrodite, for all her mystery, you trusted her and *knew her* in that first magical eye contact.

Aphrodite's rooms, corridors and hallways were adorned with splashes of history, chiefly from Earth, with elements of unknown cultures. Her gardens were, as well as a magnificent library of plant life, several centuries of lovingly crafted sculpture. Birds dipped and wheeled over the lake, or flocked to the trees to fill the branches with colour and song. The horses roamed the lush grassland to the right of the house, not far from the shore.

'You're not afraid they'll run away?' Liz ventured,

although she didn't think so for a minute. 'I don't suppose the builders thought to include a stables?'

'They did. They're to the rear of the house – but they're rarely used.' They walked together along the lake shore, admiring the sun playing on the water, in its attempts to dazzle them. 'Bailador is part of the lake, this world. And Zephyr, I suspect, will not stray far from Bailador.'

'It's wonderful here,' Liz inhaled deeply, 'like a separate Universe.'

Aphrodite welcomed Zephyr with firm strokes of her palm. 'That's exactly where we are. Violence, horror; they're all shut out here.' She nodded ahead to where the horses were grazing. 'And I don't believe in shutting things in, if I can help it. It's ironic, really. I'm free here, I'm at home. But the truth is, this world is my prison.'

Liz stared at her friend in disbelief, and glanced around warily at the world, as though the fairy tale might come unravelled at any minute. It didn't. But then, the fairy tale was easier to believe than the idea that Aphrodite was any kind of prisoner.

The Queen unleashed her beast.

The army stirred into vengeful action and went at its victim with an incongruous sluggishness. Various divisions surged patiently forward from all directions, darkening the landscape like earthbound clouds, every yard of their advance breaking the formations despite the best will to maintain them. Blocks of musketeers and pike-bearers rolled steadily onward, trudging the grass mercilessly into the dirt, while massed rows of cavalry poised themselves and shuffled in anticipation of their charge. Already, mounted couriers belted across the field with orders and intelligence destined to be heeded, ignored or lost in transit. From her vantage point, atop the hill to the north, all signs of humanity were absent from the scene; as they were from her own features.

One of her adjutants observed privately, *Never was cruelty so visibly and disturbingly drawn than in the lines of such a beautiful face.*

She turned that beautiful visage on him, transforming the

thought, if not the adjutant, to stone.

Reading her gaze as an order, the man bowed and gratefully rode off to disseminate them as swiftly as his horse permitted. Others raced away to different corners of the battlefield, to the ranks of guns arrayed on several hills.

Shortly, the opening strains were expelled by the orchestral clamours of those same guns.

Everywhere, the cannons spewed fire and sound, crushing eardrums in the immediate vicinity or heralding its own contribution with a muted crash from far away; every mouth coughed up plumes of smoke to haze the air. Favourable winds carried much of the first volley to punch craters in the earth just below the walls of Buda; subsequent blasts shattered the stones, scattering dusty smoke and chippings, along with men, from the battlements. With each agonised hack, the guns trundled back and retched on their carriages, instantly rushed forward to have more crammed down its soot-smeared throat. The air was alive with screeching whistles and thunderclaps.

As the crude boxes of troops crossed an invisible line, the Turkish guns responded in kind, finding their marks on open ground and bludgeoning walls of flesh in payment for their stone. Some of the attackers fled in disarray; most were ploughed forward under the hail of Turkish grapeshot.

To Turkish eyes, the walls had betrayed them to their enemy, offering no more protection than wood, shaking at each impact, tossing more of their numbers into the streets, burying shrapnel in their sides. Still, the great shapes, charging up at the ramparts between pillars of smoke, were solid masses. The Turkish barrages had failed to thin them. Gates were opened and soldiers spilled out, driving to cut through the tightening noose; several columns competing for the nearest bridges, only to be pulverised by merciless barrages from along the riverbank.

She, the self-appointed conductor of this barbaric feast, spied one limb of the Turkish army flailing in her direction. Seizing her moment, she drew her blade and launched her own horde of cavalry off the crest of the hill, her features twisted in malevolent expectation.

The hillside disappeared under the swiftly stamping

hooves, weight of horse and rider digging a spreading mess of craters in a miniature cannonade of their own. The dry rattle of that frenzied rhythm pumped the adrenaline to fever-pitch, fuelling the killing instinct until the men felt starved. As this spearhead plunged into the flank of the Ottoman cavalry, flintlocks discharged, arms swiped everywhere with swords, legs kicked and horses reared, screaming as wildly as their masters. This savage melee of man and beast still sought to move, merged into a single organism and veering randomly over the mutilated turf. It finally stalled, seeming to keel over in imitation of the individual bodies, felled by slashing rapiers and scimitars, trampled to death under its own feet.

She, the Queen, revelled in it all, gladly staining her snow-white horse with splashes of red.

Bugayev, shoulder against one side of a tree, wiped his mouth with one hand and passed the binoculars around the trunk to the Doctor.

‘There you are, Doctor, what do you think of that?’ he asked plainly. ‘All sanctioned and financed by the Pope.’

The Doctor tightened his brow over the eyepiece, scanning the knotted clusters of violence with a sense of fading hope. Through the lenses, he could see the breached walls of Buda; men were piling through the gaps, scrabbling over the bodies of others and beating back the thin fences of resistance. Muskets chuffed and cracked timidly at this distance, but the Doctor heard a great many shots keenly. He handed back the binoculars.

‘Even the holiest of men are still men,’ he said dispiritedly. ‘The real question is, what do we do now?’

Bugayev stood simultaneously with the Doctor. ‘My own inclination is to go in anyway. Right now. Chances are, the house is okay at present. We may not want to leave it any longer. And in the midst of the confusion, we may pass unnoticed.’

‘Those bodies on the ground all passed unnoticed,’ the Doctor cautioned him.

Major Bugayev contemplated his men, resting peacefully under the shelter of a number of trees. They were genuinely

and understandably tired and would not last long in a protracted firefight. They could relax properly inside the house, but there was no guarantee they would reach the front door through that murderous shambles.

He arrived at his decision. 'We move in and wait a short while. Then we hijack a supply wagon and ride in with that.'

'Congratulations, Major, you've discovered stealth,' the Doctor offered his praises.

'I discovered it a long time ago,' scorned the Major, undaunted. 'I only stick to whatever works best.'

'Have you tired of idleness, yet?' Aphrodite's question floated across the veranda as Liz stepped outside to join her.

Liz, smoothing down her clothes, cast aside the temptation to sit right down and bask in the sunshine and favoured her hostess with an affirmative nod. Washed and refreshed, Liz's spirits were at their all-time high since her unhappy abandonment in the tenth century. 'You may not believe it, but I'm ready to face anything now.'

'Good.' Aphrodite twirled around and headed for the house. 'Let's pick up the Pacifier virus from the lab.'

Together, they passed along the villa's decorative corridors to the laboratory, where they extracted the crystallised virus from the accelerator cabinet. The crystal was roughly the size of a small football, glistening jet and presenting no more menace than a congealed lump of bath salts. *And why not?* thought Liz. It was designed to spread waves of passivity to its victims, and she could find no better comparison than the delicious perfume of a relaxing soak such as she had recently enjoyed. This image was further validated by Aphrodite's avowed method of delivery, revealed as her hostess carefully manoeuvred the crystal into an unassuming sack.

'I think the surest way would be to sprinkle it into their water supply – up the river from Csepel Island. It should dissolve perfectly; no visible traces and relatively quick dispersal. Gone in a matter of days to weeks. Also, I think, in the hot springs just under Gellért Hill, where the Magyars are supposed to bathe occasionally.'

Liz chuckled softly at the coincidence of the idea.

‘What?’ Aphrodite flashed her eyes inquisitively.

‘Oh, nothing,’ Liz collected herself. ‘I like the idea. The feeling we’re simply spreading a little happiness.’

‘One of my favourite pastimes.’

Aphrodite slipped the gloves from her hands and folded them before storing them in a cupboard on the wall. She tidied away the last few outstanding items remaining from their researches; although most had been disinfected and returned to their proper places as their purposes had been served. This predilection for neatness in her laboratory was another of Aphrodite’s subconscious expressions and mirrored much of the scrupulous cleanliness shown by her gypsy family. Her working method would surely have driven the Doctor spare.

With the laboratory restored to its prior spotless condition, Aphrodite hummed satisfactorily and escorted Liz outside to the lake shore. Liz was sorry to leave the villa and its surrounds and, standing at the water’s edge, it was hard to believe that they would soon be slipping through the surface, back to Earth. Stepping into her own world’s history had felt like trespass in an alien land, whereas here, on Paraíso, despite a compulsion to marvel at everything and her inclination to question her presence here, Liz had felt at home. But perhaps it was impossible to feel anything else when you were a guest in Aphrodite’s home.

Placing her hand in Aphrodite’s, and her trust along with it, she waded out with her friend into the welcoming waters of the lake. *Espejo de Cielo*. The name conjured all kinds of magic, none of which Liz had time to question, as they slipped under and into a realm that not only defied belief, but defeated it. Utterly.

Aphrodite had expanded only moderately on the subject of her imprisonment. As far as Liz understood it, this remarkable woman was an exile, somewhat like the Doctor. Through the interface of the lake, her prison allowed her some latitude. Much as the Doctor was anchored to Earth, but free to wander anywhere in the world. Or, as the rather more sober comparison occurred, just as the ghoulish Kagyrn creature was

bound to the Staff, like a dog chained to a post, a strict limit on how far it might roam. It was something that Liz had begun to understand only recently, and then only barely. Other factors deprived her of the freedom to wander time and space: how could she be expected to appreciate the extent to which Aphrodite or the Doctor had been deprived of their respective freedoms? But she did know that, no matter how inadequate her own grasp, Aphrodite and the Doctor, tidiness of laboratories aside, would understand each other perfectly.

Thoughts of the Doctor were displaced again by thoughts of the macabre spectre of the Kagyrn, as Liz realised they had stepped through into the woods that were the creature's hunting grounds. It didn't look to be quite the *same* clearing, where Aphrodite had planted the Staff, and she wondered whether that was because they had arrived in a different clearing or because they had arrived in a different century. Either was possible.

'We've certainly moved,' stated Liz, holding her arms apart to illustrate her meaning. 'In space or time, I can't quite tell which.'

'Time,' Aphrodite enlightened her. She laid the sack on the ground and moved across the clearing. Instinctively, she stopped some way short of the trees and crouched down to examine the ground. 'We're back in the tenth century.'

Liz, a little wary of leaving the precious sack lying around, picked it up and wandered over. 'Even though we left the staff in the —'

'That's right.' Aphrodite looked up in mild surprise. 'Omnitemporal, remember. It might not look it, but more often than not I know what I'm doing.' She laughed as she delved a hand into the ground. 'Of course, you can put it down to my rather freehand navigation if you prefer.'

'Oh, never! You forget, I know a skilled pilot myself. At least, he says he is.'

'Yes, your Doctor,' mused Aphrodite. Slowly, she eased the golden sceptre from its place of concealment in the earth, its muddy texture fading as more of the shaft revealed itself. Aphrodite's hand came away perfectly clean as she stood, staff in hand. 'I'm looking forward to seeing him.'

‘So am I,’ observed Liz wryly. ‘Still, first things first.’

‘Still ready to face anything?’ she quizzed finally, testing the regal weight of the staff.

‘Absolutely,’ Liz attested. ‘Let’s go now, before I change my mind.’

Capturing the wagon, as weary as the troops were, proved the simplest part of the operation. Their chosen cart had loitered at the rear of its group, a short distance from the concealing border of trees. The OGRON soldiers had taken full advantage.

Moulded into the base of the cargo bed, tarpaulins hauled over them, the OGRON troops were safely out of sight. The Doctor and Bugayev, heavy coats thrown over their normal attire, sat up at the front, doing their best to appear inconspicuous. The unconscious (the Doctor had insisted on a nonlethal approach) forms of the wagon’s previous masters were hidden beyond the tree line. Still, the group of wagons had not budged and both the Major and the Doctor were tired of waiting; plus the longer they remained stationary, the greater the chance of discovery. Feigning the receipt of orders from some invisible source, the Doctor flicked the reins and clicked his tongue, starting the vehicle into a creaking progress down the hillside.

They had travelled fifty yards or so past the foremost row, when a shout commanded them to halt immediately. Another few yards were to be gained in the pretence of deafness, then the insistence and volume grew too pronounced to be ignored. Since the command had been given in another tongue, with the language-barrier miraculously restored, Bugayev stood and hollered excuses back in German. They trundled on another few valuable yards. Then a single horseman, the indignant officer who had been doing the shouting, came galloping after them to clarify his message. The flush of his cheeks was visible from some way off. He rode promptly up, boiling mad at the necessity of reprimanding these stupid wagoners on the move. The obstinate or senile old fool, with the white hair, persisted in driving the wagon resolutely on down the hill.

‘Hey there! What the Devil do you think you’re doing?’ he

clacked furiously at them in Hungarian.

‘What’ll ’e be wantin’, d’ you suppose?’ the Doctor nudged Bugayev, adopting an appropriately colloquial accent; confusing even Major Bugayev for an instant with his amateur dramatics.

‘I’ll try to find out,’ Bugayev told the Doctor. He frowned at the Hungarian and favoured him with a deliberately querulous response, in German. ‘What is your problem? They want their supplies in the city, don’t they?’ He pointed at the city for effective demonstration.

The Hungarian pointed steadfastly back to the collection of more obedient wagons on the hill. ‘Get back to your station this minute! We’ve received no orders!’

‘E’ll do himself an injury, ’e will,’ opined the Doctor, immersed in the role of simple carter.

‘You’ll do yourself an injury,’ the Major passed the warning on in helpful German. He looked bemusedly back to where the Hungarian had pointed, welcoming the sight of the lengthening distance.

The Hungarian officer shook his fist at them, cursing the concept of multinational forces, and leaned out from his saddle to clutch Bugayev by the collar. The coat opened to reveal the OGRON uniform, minus its greatcoat. The Hungarian gaped; the Major glanced down. The Hungarian rotated in his saddle to yell an order. Bugayev jammed the words in the man’s mouth with a brisk punch.

The poor officer tumbled from his horse. Bugayev successively batted the Doctor’s shoulder and slapped the planks of the wagon. Heads arose from beneath the tarpaulin. ‘Stealth! Ha!’ the Major complained, then leaped into the saddle of the accompanying horse.

‘Heeyah!’ urged the Doctor, coaxing the pair of cart-horses into a more energetic run.

Cries had gone up from among the other wagons in sympathy with the assaulted officer’s fall and now other riders charged out and raced headlong after the fugitive wagon. A detachment of helmed infantrymen, ran forth and knelt to fire their muskets; the guns cracked off in a sharp sequence. At that range, with the wagon bouncing and wheeling all over,

only two musket balls pocked the cargo bed. The musketmen clambered to stand and continue the chase. Meanwhile, the horsemen had closed the gap on the wagon.

The jarring, rickety flight of the wagon was a severe hindrance to its Russian passengers, but a few maintained a kneeling position long enough to loose off a covering spray of automatic fire. Yaroslavskiy sensibly prostrated himself and braced the PK machine-gun on its bipod; his fire was no more accurate than the rest, but it came more consistently, throwing a number of their pursuers into hasty retreat as a chain of small explosions ripped up the turf. The Doctor sped the horses along in a mad dash for the city walls, trying to absorb the bruising impacts of every jump of the bucking wagon.

The first of the braver cavalymen sailed up beside Bugayev, blade scything the air. Bugayev produced his pistol and downed the man. A second rider cut in between him and the cart; he spun and squeezed the trigger, but the gun stuck uselessly. Although nearer the wagon, the cavalry officer sliced at the Major, but the long reach robbed the swing of its strength and Bugayev barely winced at a grazed arm.

Alerted to the Major's predicament, Plankin lunged out and clubbed the rider's back with his RPK. The rider, unaffected, faced Plankin, who had already collapsed backwards at a solid jolt from the cart; Bugayev had all the time he needed to steer his horse closer, releasing his own reins and gripping the enemy's sword-arm. Twisting the arm back, Bugayev pistol-whipped the man just under the exposed jaw. He toppled from the saddle and rolled dangerously close to the wagon's rear wheel.

Still more riders ranged up on either side, but the Russians stole what shots they could, infrequently finding their target and knocking him from the saddle to fall like a poor acrobat. As enough of their number had been picked off, to lie among the dead of battle, the riders drew back and slowed their horses, leaving the 'treacherous peasants' to their spoils. The scene around and within Buda spelled a victory for the Habsburg forces and the wagon-thieves, if not caught and hung, would escape with little of any practical worth.

Pleased to witness the steady dropping away of the

pursuers, Bugayev rode up alongside the wagon and shouted at the Doctor to slow, a request that was echoed loudly by most of the buffeted troops in the rear. The Doctor, unwilling to inflict further injury on his allies, eased back the reins and graded their flight down to a less urgent trot. The Major, for comfort's sake, remained on his borrowed horse. Their escape assured, they travelled up to one of the ragged holes in the wall.

The gap had cleared of fighting some time since, but they had to abandon their transport and negotiate their way on foot, stepping over the gruesome tangle of bodies and spreading cautiously out in the street beyond. The sounds of fighting had carried to another area of the city and their point of entry was strangely subdued. The smoky spines of the first fires were bristling above the rooftops.

Orienting himself hurriedly, the Doctor led the group off at a run, Bugayev trusting him enough to follow without questions, and they trotted down the tattered row of houses, ducked through filthy alleys and swerved aside at the earliest signs of trouble. Occasionally, as milling rabbles of troops appeared, they would seek refuge in a smashed hollow building, searching for an exit through the rear or finding some shattered window at the side. Eventually, without another shot fired, they had themselves positioned at the southern end of Tárnok Street, on Castle Hill. The assembled shouts stopped their progress, dead.

The Doctor filched a glimpse around the corner, snatched his head back in profound disbelief.

'What is it?' Bugayev demanded impatiently, but he would not wait for the Doctor to form an intelligible answer. He crept past the Doctor and poked his own eyes around the building. Their house stood proudly, suffering from remarkably minimal external damage, so he passed over that and fell on the mirage of white, silver and gold, climbing down from her snowdrift horse amid a furore of victorious Habsburg troops. Her face was one he knew only too well.

'It's Melisandra!' he exclaimed, his whisper more expressive than any shout.

'Isn't it,' seconded the Doctor, trying to figure the

consequences.

The Queen, or Melisandra, gloried in the adulation hurled upon her by the throng. Here, around her, was the only scene in Buda at present that resembled the established view of a celebration; elsewhere, the mood was equally jubilant, but it was being expressed with fire, looting and pillaging. The soldiers had fought hard for this success and they fought still harder for their enjoyment of the spoils. If humanity had been somehow forgotten in the confused machinations of the battle, now, in the enjoyment of their victory, humanity was to be openly scorned and abused. Queen Melisandra enjoyed that prospect as much as she enjoyed the praises of her officers.

She dismounted, retaining her stature in some inexplicable way.

‘Take the whole city, if you will,’ she permitted her retinue of officers. ‘But this house is mine.’

Mörtenhof, privileged to be counted in her honour guard, interposed. ‘But this building is very ordinary, Majesty, and has survived very poorly. Will you have no other, perhaps?’

Melisandra quelled her subject with a look far keener than any sword. She decided there and then that time had no further use for this man.

‘My task is, for the present, done. I will recall you when I need you.’ She used the last pronoun collectively, seeming to encompass more than the immediate gathering of officers and men. Her coldness still earned her several loud cheers.

Gratifying them and herself with a dignified bow of her elegant neck, she spun about and swept into the house, shutting out the crowd.

The crowd seemed to collect itself, with officers mounting up and men dispersing hurriedly along the street in either direction, eager to catch up on the looting and sacking of Buda. Feet and hooves tramped noisily past where the Doctor and his OGRON allies had been only moments before.

Mörtenhof was later killed by a stray musket ball.

They used the distraction provided by the Queen’s grand departure to slip around the front and secrete themselves in the

house which had afforded them cover. The emptying of the street had come as a surprise and the Doctor was in agreement with the Major that they should take the trouble of watching the house for a short period before attempting to move in. Most sensible people, when luck performs incredibly on their behalf, are unwilling to test its generosity further.

Melisandra, the Queen, failed to reappear. The street remained deserted, a remote island of stillness in a tormented city destined for ruin.

‘Alright, we’d better move now,’ the Doctor decided in a moment. ‘History dictates that this area isn’t to be left intact for too much longer.’

‘You make history sound decidedly undemocratic,’ remarked an acerbic Bugayev. He motioned his troops to the door, from where they exited professionally, two by two, scouting the road up and down as they stormed across to the other house.

The Doctor and the Major followed, with Chistyakov bringing up the rear. They slipped easily inside, suddenly feeling a good deal safer.

Bugayev had his troops fan out through the building and they whipped through it like probing termites. Meanwhile, the Doctor and Bugayev retired to the lounge, where the latter glanced over the supplies of ammunition and spare weaponry, privately satisfied to see certain items missing. Zhelnin and Abdurasulov had equipped themselves properly for their mission. The Doctor, though, was drawn to a selection of artefacts deposited on the turntable of the record player. He went over, lifted the cover and retrieved them.

‘What have you got there?’ Bugayev prodded suspiciously.

‘I’m not stealing the diamond stylus, if that’s what you think,’ retorted the Doctor amicably. ‘But I think you can call off your search for Melisandra. She’s probably gone out for a stroll – in another century. Look, she’s kindly returned my possessions.’

He exhibited the sonic screwdriver.

‘And the Kagyrn poems?’

‘Them too,’ the Doctor confirmed, waving the little book

before sliding that back into his pocket along with all the other bric-a-brac. ‘All of it, in fact.’

‘So what’s her game? This mystery woman, who pretends to be a Russian Scientific Adviser, then changes costume for a promising performance as a Warrior Queen, both of whom we must assume never really existed?!’ In agitation, Bugayev yanked his cigarettes and matches from his pocket, proceeding to light up. ‘I like chess, where the rules stay set, or war, where you make them yourself.’

‘I wasn’t aware that majors devised the rules of warfare,’ contended the Doctor, seating himself to think.

‘Well, no, but they interpret them freely, because they have to. In any case,’ Bugayev stared over the flaring cigarette, ‘I can cope with the fluctuations – the fortunes – of war. What I don’t like, is discovering somebody is not what they seem.’

‘Oh, there’s nothing wrong with an occasional helping of mystery,’ the Doctor was forced to disagree, fully conscious of his own ambiguous identity as far as the Major was concerned. ‘It’s altogether possible that Melisandra is using the benefits of this house to exact some revenge on the Universe in general. She would have reason enough to be bitter, but there’s no presentable target for her revenge – but that hasn’t stopped others throughout history. Of course, there is another more worrying possibility.’

‘Which is?’

‘Which is still a vague possibility,’ the Doctor procrastinated, reluctant to commit himself on the thinnest of hunches before someone like the Major. He stood. ‘However, I suggest you personally conduct a thorough search of the building, but this time ask the men to pay particular attention to secret passages, concealed entrances, that kind of thing. I’ll occupy myself with some library research.’

Bugayev stood to keep level with the Doctor. ‘Well, I’ll *tell* them, rather than ask them, Doctor. But why “personally”, specifically?’

‘Specifically,’ smiled the Doctor, wafting away some acrid smoke that trailed in his direction, ‘because of my highly developed sense of smell.’

Bugayev acquiesced, leaving the room with a rare bout of laughter.

The Doctor had passed some time, as promised, in the library, having initially set the house on a journey, he hoped, back to the tenth century and Liz. Dipping only briefly into books, undaunted by most languages, pausing only as long as necessary to digest the relevant details, he had not found the exact information he wanted, but had learned sufficient to warrant sharing with the Major, at the same time establishing how far the search had progressed.

He met Bugayev descending the stairs. 'Anything?'

Bugayev shook his head. 'Only an attic we can't open.'

'Ah, yes, I should have mentioned that. It's an access to another wing of the house entirely. It's not important right now.' The Doctor made this assertion so readily that the Major reacted as intended; he postponed it for later attention. The Doctor, by way of added distraction from a subject altogether too complicated, went on, 'Look, I've uncovered a few minor points of interest, so far.'

'Go ahead.' The Major rested one arm on the banister.

'It's not much yet, but my earlier speculation about a vampire connection might not have missed the mark totally, you know. Transylvania, for one reason or another, seems to have been treated separately by successive regimes throughout Hungarian history; generally more favourably than the rest of the country. Myths and legends.' He paused. 'Also, the Magyar people's origins are shrouded in mystery. That's the upshot of poor documentation, by and large, but there's some suggestion, to my mind, that the Chieftain had his paw in their destiny from a long time ago. The Carolingian Emperor, Arnulf, invited them into Hungary from the Don, to help assert his authority over a troublesome Moravian duke. But some unknown cause drove them from their original homeland in the first place, southward into the steppes.'

'The steppes?' Bugayev could hardly conceal his lively interest. 'Roughly where?'

'The lower Don, towards the end of the ninth century. Why?'

But Bugayev only nodded and deflected the Doctor with another question. 'The Chieftain? That would be the second of these forces,' he conjectured shrewdly, 'with Athena as the first.'

'I'm afraid so.'

A shout broke forth from the dining room. The Doctor raced Bugayev and won. They found Saporov and Sergeant Markov, the table moved and carpet tossed aside, shining torches down into a gaping, shadowy hatchway.

'The floor just vanished when I put my hand to it,' explained Markov dubiously.

Wasting no time, the Doctor and Bugayev sat at the rim of the rectangular hole and lowered themselves into the dimly illuminated space below. Their feet clapped down on stone after a short drop. Markov dropped after them with his torch. For a short while, the beam just rocked madly about, rebounding off the grey walls. Then it settled on the obtrusive bulk that dominated the centre of the chamber, identifying the room clearly as a crypt.

'Vampires, you said,' derided the Major.

A solid, stone sarcophagus, its surfaces riddled with ornate carvings, sat squarely on a low dais, a massive slab guarding its contents. As the torch bobbed closer, the Doctor had it circle the tomb with him to allow for a detailed inspection of the reliefs; they were too fine to have been fashioned by man-made tools. They depicted the Goddess, as shown in the tapestry, dominant in a number of scenes extracted from history: leading a rampaging Greek army of archers and spearcarriers across a broad plain to meet their cowering foes; driving a chariot, at the head of an unruly Celtic horde, into the terrified ranks of Romans; surrounded by armour-plated knights, bound to a stake and holding her head proudly above climbing fires; soaring into the night sky, borne on eagle's wings, as the flagship in a formation of gun-infested spacecraft.

'Athena, Boudicca, Joan of Arc and – ' he stopped himself briefly ' – something after our time.'

'All the same woman?' Bugayev closed in.

'Perhaps. Either that, or representative of her influence.

Female warriors up and down history, and not confined to Earth, either, by the looks of things. I wonder if we can remove this lid?’

‘Wonder no longer,’ Bugayev instructed him, then walked back under the hatchway to summon a number of strong men. The helpers were a very short time in coming, clumping one by one down onto the stone floor. They traipsed smartly over, Yaroslavskiy fortuitously among them.

They stood in deferential silence, only desecrated by the Major’s order .

Together with the Doctor, they all heaved and levered the massive slab, grating ominously over the walls of the sarcophagus. They rotated it by inches, leaving it rest perpendicular to the length of the coffin. The troops, in spite of temptation, stood back to allow the Doctor and the Major to advance for an inspection of the contents. The two of them leaned in, while Markov held his torch behind their heads. A few of the men reached for the guns they had left in the rooms above.

The Doctor and Bugayev exchanged a transitory glance.

‘Old bones,’ declared Bugayev disappointedly. Then, more thoughtfully, ‘A woman.’

The Soviet commander was right, but the Doctor felt a twinge of something far more acute than mere disappointment. The pitiful wicker framework before him had supported a remarkable life, the mocking skull had been layered with the finest noble features, the cavernous sockets had been home to a sparkling pair of eyes. The Doctor reached in and ran his reverent fingers over the skull to make sure of himself, his eyes roving intently over the skeleton.

Gallifreyan bones, the Doctor thought and kept it to himself. He waited, before sharing his conclusion aloud. ‘I think we’ve managed to find the real Melisandra, at last.’

Chapter Nine

Athena

Minerva – Latin, from the same root as mens, meaning Mind.

Origin of the name of the Roman goddess, identified with
Athena

Liz and Aphrodite might have found the peaceful surroundings idyllic, but their walk through the forest was otherwise clouded with the same contaminant gloom that had affected Aphrodite's sensibilities on her first arrival here and imprisoned Liz's better judgement until her heart-warming welcome into the gypsy camp. Now, the feelings of both were more overcast than ever, with the rustling canopy of leaves invoking in Liz a discordant echo of those irrational fears sparked by the storm in Somerset. She was, on this occasion, grateful for Aphrodite's company, since she managed to cloak her own spirits with a resilient cheer, her inner warmth taking the edge off the threatening chill for the two of them.

Liz's own failing nerve had been elevated, over the first couple of miles, to the point where she could almost attribute the mounting darkness solely to the gradual slide of the sun from the sky. Still, she must have been reasonably tensed, for she clutched her chest against a fugitive heart when a sudden shadow flapped loudly above them, parting the leaves and branches.

Aphrodite's hand gripped her wrist urgently.

Eagle or angel, Liz could not tell; but the creature floated down as though from the heavens, striking the earth like a belated shaft of sunlight. The brightness glared without hurting, ebbing and flowing over the feathered face, melting it all away to unveil a sublimely beautiful woman. The feathers stripped themselves down to quills, which then narrowed to

the finest hairs of pure gold. The wings fanned out behind her, sporting an array of colours to humble a peacock. The woman's smile, in consort with her eyes, formed a brilliant constellation on a backdrop of forest.

The pattern was astoundingly familiar to Liz, who only then spotted the Medusa's head, emblazoned on her breastplate. The face, with a raw physical power on the brink of masculinity, was that of the Goddess – *or was it of the woman who had stood between Athena and the Chieftain?* Liz could no longer differentiate the two in her memory: they had been similar already to her mind.

Whose face it was held no more import; it was a *maternal* image, to be obeyed.

'You're not a bad likeness for a friend of mine,' Aphrodite aired her own appraisal, caution flowering into fragile defiance, 'but her beauty and courage beat from two hearts.'

Clearly having guessed something of the creature's nature, and therefore her identity, Aphrodite pushed the staff into Liz's compliant hand. The weight of it managed to revive Liz's senses to some degree; she lowered the sack to the ground and grasped the staff in both hands as if her life depended on not dropping it. Aphrodite was edging forward through the glade, resembling a fragile moth fascinated by the glow of the Goddess.

Athena spoke, her voice chiming like a bell lined with silk.

'I knew your friend well, Aphrodite.' Her tone was of someone offering her condolences, in the wake of a friend's passing. 'Give the Staff to me.'

Liz felt her mouth trembling and was unable to produce a sound. Aphrodite approached a foot short of the shimmering corona. The comment about her friend had evoked a single tear, but Liz guessed there were a thousand more inside. She was sure she could even feel them. Aphrodite, though, was mastering herself with that strength which Liz had so far only glimpsed.

'We had intended,' she said, without a trace of timidity, 'to return the staff to its rightful owner.'

'Your honesty is creditable, Aphrodite. The staff is mine. It is the Staff of Minerva. Athena. Pallas Athene. My names

outnumber the galaxies. Give the staff to me, Elizabeth Shaw.'

Liz raised the staff aloft, her face alive with wonder, although she hardly knew what her features or any of her muscles were doing. She advanced slowly.

'But,' interrupted Aphrodite, again resurrecting Liz's consciousness, 'I did say we *had* intended, you see.' She clasped her hands regretfully and curtsied deferentially to Athena. When she arose, her face was a perfect vision of earnest apology. 'Unfortunately, now I've finally met you, Athena, I'm no longer sure you can be trusted with the Staff. How do you wish to use it?'

Athena levitated a metre off the ground, ruffling her wings as if in indignation. She took an age to settle once more. 'Your courage is also worthy, Aphrodite. It will serve me far better than it serves you. The same is true of both your intellects. Yes. Although it is an entertaining thought, you will abandon this notion of infecting my enemies with peaceful dispositions. There must *be* a battle. You will not avert that, though you may serve in other ways.'

Liz bowed, the staff held vertically.

'I refuse,' determined Aphrodite fairly promptly.

'Oh, but my dear, dear *sister*, you have no choice. Your own emotions will enslave you,' Athena fixed her motherly gaze on Aphrodite's upturned face. She watched the inevitable transformation take place, wiping away Aphrodite's defiance with the passage of a gentle eraser. Athena was delightfully surprised by the placid mask of devotion she had sculpted in its place.

The Goddess gave a trickle of laughter, a melodious peal of the bells, at the enveloping joy of servitude with which she had managed to fill the suddenly vulnerable Aphrodite.

Aphrodite's eyes shone in worshipful homage to the light of the Goddess. She expressed her pleasure in the most natural way, commencing with a patiently formed pose, curled arms and balanced toes. From there, she presented herself as a gift to the rhythm of the surrounding forest and Athena's quivering delectation. Slipping into easily measured motions, Aphrodite glided from foot to foot, dancing to each delicately plucked note of the gypsy tune playing in her senses, handed from

partner to partner in her elegant passage between the trees. The tempo gathered pace, a wind fanning her fiery passions ever higher; then she was spinning, weaving, stooping and leaping in a captivating flurry of swirling skirts and butterfly limbs. In a state of constant change, she emulated nature from second to enthralling second; first, arching her back like a cat, then soaring like a bird, then twirling down to the grass like a sycamore seed. And wherever the dance carried her, her eyes would meet the enraptured attention of the Goddess.

Liz, who had missed most of the display, found herself freed from Athena's spell. She, too, was almost immediately drawn into Aphrodite's magical dance, but she forced herself away, desperately figuring some means of releasing Aphrodite from the same power. Stuck for options, she adopted the blunt approach: she hurled the Staff of Minerva at its unsuspecting owner.

Incredibly, Athena seemed to reel with the blow, the momentum of the staff pushing her uncontrollably backwards.

Aphrodite recovered in no time, snapping reflexively out of her dance, running over to scoop up the sack and grab Liz's arm. Aphrodite towed her friend into a hasty run.

'Come on, we won't have much time!' she urged.

'You were in pretty deep there!' Liz pointed out, on the move.

'Me? You mean Athena!' Aphrodite smirked proudly. 'I out-enchanted her! That was quick thinking with the staff, by the way. To be honest, I wasn't sure what to do next.'

They raced on, not daring to glance behind. Liz thanked whatever forces had delivered her into Aphrodite's hands and expressed another observation out loud. 'Yes, well I wasn't sure whether goddesses were subject to conservation of momentum!'

'What kind,' panted Aphrodite with breathless humour, 'of second-rate school did you go to, anyway?'

Athena charged after them, a burning fireball with no hope of losing their trail.

The Doctor and the Major, deciding there was little more to be gained by staring into the depths of the tomb, retired to the

lounge, both made thoughtful by the miserable occupant of that hidden grave. The Doctor spread several tomes before him on the coffee table and buried most of his concentration in those; including the tiny volume of the Kagyrn Poems of the Dead. Bugayev had no such diversions for the present, but for once he refrained from intruding with questions, convinced that answers would eventually appear of their own volition.

To pass the time, Bugayev had Saporov, the team's medic, attend to his graze.

'Here's something,' announced the Doctor finally, developing a theory marginally ahead of the spoken words. 'The *Turul* Eagle. It's a Hungarian folk-tale concerning a magical eagle supposed to have given birth to the father of Árpád.'

Bugayev sat forward, enthusiastic to hear anything. 'Where does that lead?'

'Ultimately, parthenogenesis, I think,' the Doctor hinted enigmatically. He drummed his fingers over the open page of the Kagyrn Poems. 'It's all a matter of interpretation, correlation of myths.'

'Oh, that's Saporov's field,' growled Bugayev sarcastically. Poor Saporov was preoccupied with swabbing the Major's arm with disinfectant; he looked up in terror of what else might be asked of him. 'Relax, Saporov. Get on with it.'

The Doctor realised that this last was meant for him, rather than the medic. 'Well,' he pursued obediently, 'there's a section in the Kagyrn work that refers to Kagená's Eagle, and I happen to know Athena was originally beheld as a Bird Goddess – in addition to a Serpent Goddess, incidentally. Now, if we can reasonably suppose "Kagená" to be the Kagyrn word for Athena, we can equate Athena with the *Turul*.'

'On what basis?' Bugayev upset his attendant with a jerk of the shoulders.

'On the basis of everything that's happening here,' the Doctor quashed the Major's ready arsenal of objections before they were fully deployed. 'This segment of the Poems of the Dead, "The Battle of Sinnaca", states in one line that Athena

consumed all of Ongra's Pack in a ball of fire. That's one million Kagyrn, including their tribal chieftain. The very next line refers to the Chieftain rising against Athena and scaring her away.'

'That could be wishful propaganda, Doctor,' advised Bugayev cynically. He settled back in his seat, interfering with Saporov's work once more. 'History might dictate what happens, but how it's written down is generally up to individuals.'

'Very good, but it hardly matters,' the Doctor congratulated him cordially. 'We're not concerned with whether Athena was frightened off or not. Only that the Chieftain rose directly out of the flames with which she annihilated Pack Ongra. My own guess is that Ongra himself wasn't destroyed.'

Bugayev shrugged, eliciting a frustrated glare – hurriedly concealed – from Saporov. 'A phoenix?'

'It's a fair comparison. Now, bear in mind that the seven Kagyrn Chieftains were reputed to be capable of transmuting all energy to their own advantage.' He reiterated, digging at the table with a forefinger, 'They could convert energy directed against them to increase their own power. So what happens when you fire a pseudo-magical energy at something like that – an energy, to all intents and purposes, verging on the divine?'

It was meant as a rhetorical question but, again, the Major proved his sharp intelligence. 'You create another magical being. A god.'

'The Chieftain. Exactly. Parthenogenesis.' The Doctor rubbed his hands together in front of his weary eyes. 'Now, how's your genealogy, Major?'

'Family trees?' Bugayev quizzed, then neatly followed the skip in sequence. 'The Chieftain is Árpád's father?'

'Metaphorically speaking, yes.'

'Metaphorically speaking,' deduced Bugayev, 'you are full of pleasant surprises, Doctor.'

A flickering, blazing spear of fire shot through the forest, its tip seeking the fleeing forms of the two women. A vengeful,

headless snake of pure flame, it licked angrily at the air and slithered faster and faster along the emotion-scented track. Its body writhed with the energy of the chase and the sheer torment of being fooled, *ensnared* by a mortal. It would scorch the layers slowly away from Elizabeth Shaw's bones. Something else would have to be imagined for the hateful empathy.

There they fly!

The crackling rush of fire on the air forced Liz to look behind her. She screamed at the column of flame resolving itself into the Angel of Death, homing in on their backs. Athena was upon them and they were both going to be killed.

A primeval snarl competed with the roaring flames; Athena, assuming her classical image, with plate-shielded breast and Greek helmet, veered aside to face the ghoulish outline of the ravaged Kagyrn Warrior. Its killing lust was excited into blind fever, a murderous appetite grotesquely reflected in Athena's celestial visage.

'*Come on!*' Aphrodite injected a new dose of vigour into Liz's run. The two women were bound away, darting between the trees like startled birds.

Behind them, Athena drew back the Staff, inviting the Warrior onward, although the beast needed no enticement. A slaverling, rabid hatred instilled the creature with that supreme vision of this mighty Kagenia reduced to bloody shards and tatters in his own claws and fangs. It was the last picture in his mind, as he bound forward. The dream was flushed out by a tidal wave of energy that swept him and his body away, dashed his decaying form apart on some rocky shore and sucked him into the infinite depths of the Staff of Minerva. Ashes cast upon a limitless sea.

Athena smoothed the shaft of the weapon with a mother's loving hand. A descendant of her ancient foes was adequate recompense for the loss of two mortal females. She elected to let them live.

For the immediate future.

'So,' said Bugayev in a calculated tone, probing the insides of his dismembered pistol on the table, most of his mind on the

larger issue, 'Athena took the real Melisandra's place in this house. May have killed her, even. Doesn't strike me as an honest, trustworthy sort of lady.'

'Yes, well, her striking appearance means little in terms of morality,' the Doctor told him ruefully. He had risen from the sofa and strode over to peer out between the curtains. The hill outside was dark and barren, as he had first found it when persuading Liz to leap from the oriel window upstairs. They were in the tenth century and, somehow, he had quite abandoned the hope of finding Liz waiting meekly outside. 'I should have thought you'd have known that it's not always the heroes that wear white.'

'We do have winter fatigues,' Bugayev delivered a jest in the midst of concentration on his task.

The Doctor had to grunt his amusement at that, before resuming undiluted seriousness. 'No, we're facing two very opposite forces, but nothing so simple as Good versus Evil. Two wrongs, Major – and I trust you know what they won't make.'

'Well,' the Major seemed unduly relaxed, holding up a component of his gun, 'I would prefer to look at it mathematically: the sum of any number and its complement is a big fat zero.'

The Doctor turned slowly from the window, regarding the Major for some minutes. He watched while the Soviet officer tended to the insides of his gun with the considerate delicacy of a surgeon. He was fiddling patiently with the hammer and the sear lever, the care taken over his weapon a source of mystification to the Doctor; demonstrative of both his hardened militarism and his more refined points that deserved a level of regard, much as his comment had done.

'You know, Major,' he said unequivocally, 'statements like that must be the very reason I've not completely fallen out with you yet. Despite your shameless preference for solving everything with violence and the fact that you're still concealing some important truth from me, you do sometimes appear to have quite a brain in your head.'

'And,' deflected Bugayev, glancing up for the first time, 'you have quite a tongue in yours, Doctor.'

Still, as the Major began to reassemble the mended weapon, he treated the world in general to a tempered smile. ‘You know, Doctor, it’s occurred to me that we can take your genealogical theory one stage further.’ He flicked a tiny screwdriver into his fingers, starting to fasten the gun’s casing. ‘If you equate this Chieftain to Árpád’s father, then Athena emerges as something like the great grandmother of Hungary. And, although patriotic pride should prevent my saying so, I gather Hungary’s population has one of the highest proportions of genius in the world. Something in that, do you think?’

‘Perhaps,’ the Doctor nodded, one finger tapping an unheard rhythm on his chin. ‘It depends how far you intend to scatter her over the landscape, wouldn’t you say?’

The Major, despite friendly amusement, remained non-committal with the obstinacy of a veteran politician.

Some time ago, Lieutenant Zhelnin and Abdurasulov had stood just beyond the window out of which the Doctor had peered. They had met the sight of the vanishing house with an alacrity that Liz would have secretly, or even openly, envied.

‘That must be one of those American mobile homes,’ Zhelnin had laughed, heading them on their way to the most obvious first point of reference for their search.

Having kitted themselves with several extras from the store of equipment in the house – such as a supply of Czech *plastique*, detonators and timers, SVD sniper rifle, and a number of grenades – Zhelnin conducted Abdurasulov on a circuitous route through the denser area of forest away from the river, to provide for better cover. They were troubled here by a few searching Magyar horsemen, but successfully avoided an encounter, flattening themselves under a clump of shrubbery at the base of a grand old tree; Zhelnin highlighted the necessity of saving both ammunition and themselves for later. Abdurasulov watched the passing cavalry through the masking screen of leaves, conscious of the bulging pack on his back. After the cavalry drifted by, the Lieutenant nudged the young Abdurasulov onto his feet and the two soldiers stole towards the river, where the trees petered out to a light

sprinkling of vegetation. Daylight was seeping away and the two Russians worked their way up the river, staying with the shoreline. Now they hunkered down and aimed binoculars over the surface at the island fortress that was their target.

Under streaked clouds, Csepel Island seemed to float on the blackened, gently corrugated river; a half-submerged chunk of coal, its visible portion fashioned into a crude, lumpy knife that parted the river. At the tip, directed towards the Russians, the upper surface had been levelled and cleared a short way from the banks, then nailed deep with a square of sturdy trunks; the heads of the nails having then been honed to vicious points. The structure showed as a collection of flame-lighted edges, like the silver scratches in an etching-plate. Zhelnin and Abdurasulov accorded their observation plenty of time, reserving special attention for the single spar of stone bridge that traversed the western branch of the river.

The water lapped daintily at their boots.

Abdurasulov had a question: 'Comrade Lieutenant, does this seem a likely place after all?'

'Well, we'll have to make certain anyway. There is no other obvious choice, and at the very least we may learn where to look next. My own instincts tell me we're close.' The Lieutenant raised the binoculars once more, sweeping systematically over the scene. 'See, the bridge shows signs of recent strengthening. Heavy stonework, surplus to requirement for the standard horses and carts. This is the place.'

Abdurasulov fell silent. There was nothing more to be said. He admired and respected Zhelnin, maintaining faith in his seniority and judgement without the fear necessarily inspired by Major Bugayev. Lieutenant Zhelnin was a highly personable officer in addition to his capabilities. The plan of attack would already be forming in that officer's mind.

'The bridge is too exposed and we'll never climb that palisade,' Zhelnin asseverated. 'We'll take the bridge and worry about the next step later.'

At first, Abdurasulov was worried that his trust may have been sorely misplaced these few years of his service, but then he caught the joke in Zhelnin's tone. Clearly, as with all Zhelnin's humour, there was an element of dry truth in it, so

he rose and prepared for a sneaking advance on the bridge. Lieutenant Zhelnin moved off just in the lead and they shortened the distance between themselves and the crossing. At an appropriate point, hidden by a kink in the shore, Zhelnin unshouldered his gun and began removing his coat. Not waiting for an order, Abdurasulov followed the example soundlessly. They bundled their coats and dumped them in the mud at the riverbank, then spent a few more moments loading their pockets with gear from the pack, wrapping vital items in plastic sheets or bags.

With gun-muzzles thus clad in plastic, they waded gradually out into the cold water. The surface climbed around them like twin hoops of icy steel, merging into one tightening ring as it reached their abdomens.

When the level had reached their waists, they turned to walk towards their objective, eyes alive to the presence of danger and to the acute vulnerability of their own position. Since neither Russian believed in such abstracts as *luck*, slackness on the enemy's part, rather than good fortune, kept the attention of the handful of troops on the bridge well away from them. The guards at the gateway seemed wholly interested in the activities and movements of their fellows. Shortly, silently, the two Russians had closed in under one side of the bridge, out of sight from all the known enemy vantage points. Now, their only potential traitor was sound.

They waded further out, the noose of water travelling up over their chests. The guns, notoriously robust, were held slackly, gripped with a finger around the trigger guard, while the free hand touched the cool stone of the crude, but firmly constructed bridge. The water sloshed sedately between their bodies and the construction, dribbling off the stones. Abdurasulov heard each sound echoing in his ears, his mind estimating the probable volume at various distances from their current position. There was one point where he could not tell the voices above from the whispering air between the bridge's supports.

Zhelnin pushed a hand at the private's chest, braking his passage through the water. They had stopped, a little under halfway.

‘It’s time for a few preventive measures, Abdurasulov,’ laughed Zhelnin as grimly as he did quietly. He handed his AKR to the young private, keeping the SVD slung over his shoulder. Then he was busy extracting one yellow block after another from his upper breast pockets. Gently, these were slotted into available crevasses between the stones, plugged with wires piercing the plastic sheet and tamped in with pebbles previously scooped from the riverbank. Zhelnin worked on, ignoring the chill fingers of water that clamped so tightly around the younger man’s ribs. Abdurasulov wished he had something to engage his mind and distract his senses. Sooner than expected, though, Zhelnin was finished, taping a timer switch to the support and setting it with a final deft motion.

‘It’s all I’ve got,’ Zhelnin offered his hushed apology. ‘If we’re not out in thirty minutes’ time, I suggest we swim out in thirty-one.’

Abdurasulov managed a boyish grin in spite of his dampening mood. He handed Zhelnin the AKR, eager to be on the move again.

They swam off again, the water rising and lifting them off their feet, though guiding hands were kept on the stones to their right. From above there occasionally came the trudge of boots or the exchange of voices, relaxed and inattentive; all unaware of the two pairs of alligator-eyes that skimmed towards the island above the rippling surface. The guards evidently expected no trouble.

They emerged stealthily from the water onto the island shore, the wet dripping from their drenched uniforms, pressing their boots down flat to prevent them from sliding in the mud. Zhelnin and Abdurasulov clambered up as far as the grass, training their eyes on the gateway and the figures dotted across the bridge. Abdurasulov stripped the plastic from his assault rifle and he crawled the expanse of clumped grass and reeds to meet the base of the palisade, Zhelnin having moved on ahead. Nestled in against this, they worked their way along, walking on their elbows until they had drawn nearer the gateway.

‘Now comes the tricky part. We’ll be using the front door,’ warned Zhelnin as the private came level. He licked his finger

and held it aloft, testing the breeze, laying the still-wrapped AKR at his side. 'Should last long enough for us. Move up ahead of me; throw a smoke when you hear the shot.'

'Comrade Lieutenant,' acknowledged Abdurasulov plainly, continuing his crawl towards the gateway.

Zhelnin knelt, back pressed to the palisade, bracing the stock of the SVD solidly against his shoulder and closing his eye around the lip of the sight. The crosshairs focused on a lone Magyar guard, about halfway across the river; Zhelnin steered them onto the man's arm. The Magyar remained helpfully still.

He squeezed the shot off; barely had time to see the man snatch at his upper arm and fall back onto the bridge, before he was on the move.

The young private breathed in, tossed a grenade out in the mouth of the gateway and heard the muted crump of the detonation. Smoke pumped out and sent a cloud billowing away over the water. Confused guards were already running through the gathering pall to assist their mysteriously afflicted comrade. Zhelnin, SVD shouldered on the run, came up past Abdurasulov, then they were both charging forwards into the smoke and turning in through the gateway.

There was still one guard on his post at the gate.

Abdurasulov lashed upwards with his rifle, thumping into the man's chin before his hand had closed on the sword's hilt. Zhelnin and the young private sped on inside the fortress and ducked down behind some tents sited near the walls. Vaulting the pegged ropes, they hurtled through the shadows, alert to dangers and hunting out the object of their expedition.

One region of the fortress was devoted to ten covered hulks, each with the appearance of a square marquee, arranged in a tidy row out past the well-stocked corrals. So far unopposed, their run soon carried them to the nearest of these.

Certain of his find, Zhelnin swept down one flank of the large tarpaulin, rushing to hack at the ropes and kick the pegs loose from the soil. Abdurasulov trailed behind, heaving great flaps of the material up onto the roof of the vehicle.

Once the door of the cab was revealed, Zhelnin urged Abdurasulov aboard and hovered outside, scanning the

immediate vicinity with the intensity of a hungry watchdog.

The first shout went up as soon as the engine growled alive.

Heads poked out from nearby tents, but Zhelnin ushered them back inside with a few controlled bursts from his Kalashnikov, the first one rupturing the plastic still shrouding its barrel. Agitated figures were running in from all directions now and Zhelnin spun, firing bursts at random positions to slow them. Swords were drawn, shouts issued forth from everywhere. Abdurasulov called out from inside the cab.

Zhelnin tossed one grenade after another in a very approximate circle; some smoke, some fragmentation. Explosions, angry curses and the whinny of frightened horses shook the entire fortress awake. Mixed in with this, the engine gave a deep, zealous purr, thrilling to the start of its run. Confused shadows moved in from the thickening bank of white fog; they were trying to slash the curtain with their blades. Hands and magazine emptied, Zhelnin pulled himself up into the cab and slapped the dashboard to signal Abdurasulov it was time they left.

The truck thundered out from under its canopy, half-dragging the covering with it, churning the earth and flinging as many men as sprays of mud to either side of its stampeding wheels.

Aphrodite negotiated her way down the embankment, extending one foot before her and an arm behind to steady herself. She finished with a delicate jump, landing on the track that ran parallel to the riverbank. Liz came down next to her, managing to slip part of the way because she had her eyes on the dark square of the fortress across the water.

Aphrodite glanced up and down the Danube, one palm resting lightly on her chest while the other held the sack. Liz puffed from the exertions of their journey and she brushed herself clean of most of the vegetable matter that had somehow hitched a ride on her clothes.

‘We’re some way upriver from the springs, but there’s Csepel Island, anyway,’ Aphrodite informed her companion with the breezy acquaintance of an experienced tour guide.

She had made no reference to her friend, and Liz was sensitive enough not to probe. Aphrodite's reserves had only postponed the eclipse. For now, and perhaps for Liz's benefit, she wore a bright corona. ['See what I mean about freehand navigation.']

'No need to worry on my account,' Liz assured her. 'I enjoy a leisurely evening stroll, and the scenery's magnificent.'

'Oh, we'll have to do it again some –' A crisp, sharp crack severed the tail of Aphrodite's words. It was followed rapidly by others, exciting the air above the fortress.

Aphrodite tensed and crouched, cat's eyes wide as the moon. Liz hunched down beside her, following the searching, anxious gaze out to the fortress. The dull crump of explosives, then the traces of smoke soon after, were the subsequent clues to meet their senses. The sound of many men shouting rode up with the smoke. Then some other noise, distinct and Herculean in the tenth-century night: a grumbling diesel motor. Headlamps arcing like great lances, the vehicle responsible broke out from the gateway and powered across the barely adequate bridge.

A squat and chunky shoe-box, mounted on six great wheels like squashed black balloons, with a cruelly flattened, broad wedge for a nose; which the truck's belly sloped upwards to meet, hinting vaguely at the prow of a poorly streamlined boat. The roof seemed compressed flat under some unseen weight and its body was finished in an uncomplimentary drab-green livery. Three windows were set in a backward slope behind the nose. A red star was picked out with a white outline on the vehicle's exposed flank, as it crossed the bridge like a ferocious, hornless rhinoceros.

It looked to Liz like a launcher vehicle of some kind.

Aphrodite and Liz gasped together. Men dived from the bridge in panic. The vehicle roared past, veering around a hazardous bend and ploughing along the track, following the river downstream. Liz gasped a second time.

Aphrodite stood slowly and drew Liz back with her from the side of the track. The vehicle rumbled slowly up to a stop, rocking and creaking on wheels almost as tall as Liz. Aphrodite glanced at Liz in a daze, but Liz only answered in

kind.

The door swung open and a mature, friendly face looked down from inside the cab. He was dressed in a military uniform, with an angular cut Liz associated with Eastern Europe and which went well with the Slavic features. He smiled briskly and beckoned them up insistently.

‘Come on! Hurry!’ He leaned out and lowered a hand towards Aphrodite. As he did so, he addressed Liz. ‘One of you is the Doctor’s assistant, yes? I’m Lieutenant Zhelnin. We’ll take you to him!’

Magyar cavalry was streaming from the gateway of the fortress.

‘Good enough for me,’ enthused Liz at the mention of her Time Lord friend.

‘And for me,’ approved Aphrodite, placing her foot on the first rung of the metal ladder. Zhelnin, raised as a gentleman, helped Aphrodite into the cab with one arm wrapped around her waist, easing her past to sit between himself and Abdurasulov. Quickly, he leaned out again and favoured Liz with the same chivalrous treatment, slotting her in next to Aphrodite; the cab was capacious enough, with seats arrayed behind the three windows and a panel of sophisticated electronics. He slammed the door closed with a clang, shutting them in with the vibrating engine.

Abdurasulov was a moment greeting the two female passengers with his youthfully attractive smile. Aphrodite, particularly, returned the expression.

Lieutenant Zhelnin reminded his driver of the urgency of their situation with a glare of grim impatience. Abdurasulov rushed a salute and released the brake, gripping the oversized wheel. The cheerful teenager accelerated them away along the bumpy track. The swarm of cavalry were just visible in the stalk-mounted mirror outside his windscreen.

Liz wondered about their cargo, shielded under the armoured hull behind them.

Chapter Ten

On-Ogur

The federation of the Seven Magyar and three Kavar tribes was known as the “Ten Arrows”, or On-Ogur, from the Slavic pronunciation of which the word “Hungarian” derives.

Summation of source material, <<History of Hungary>>,
Encyclopaedia Britannica

The cavalry galloped madly after the vehicle, but their dash along the riverbank was arrested by the volcanic blast that sheared the bridge and threw jagged fragments of stone across the water. The sound died with the final few splashes of falling stone, while a dusty cloud drifted languidly down over the bent and splintered palisade at the gateway. The riders gathered round in consternation, sharing their attentions between the receding giant wagon and the cloud over the ragged spine of bridge.

The leaders eventually herded their men back to assist with repairs.

Meanwhile, the mammoth vehicle rumbled on, steered with energy by Abdurasulov, heading off the track and assaulting one face of the rise destined to become Castle Hill. The tyres bit hard into the dirt with their rubber teeth, mashing the grass to pulp as the truck hauled itself determinedly up the hillside. As the ground levelled, they could see the lonely, conspicuous house and Liz failed to restrain her yelp of excitement.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered earnestly, gripping Zhelnin’s arm, ‘thank you so much.’

‘It was only a lift, Miss Shaw. It was nothing, really.’ Lieutenant Zhelnin slid her hand considerably from his uniform’s sleeve, a touch embarrassed; friendly introductions

had been traded moments earlier. Gradually, Liz managed to compose herself, as the truck closed steadily on the building she had never expected to see again.

‘I’d like to thank you, as well, Lieutenant Zhelnin,’ Aphrodite put in quietly, ‘for not leaving us at the mercy of those Magyars. And you too,’ she turned to speak to their driver, ‘Private Abdurasulov.’ Aphrodite seemed to handle the very proper addresses a little clumsily, as though such formal modes of address went against her personal grain.

Abdurasulov noticed her difficulty: ‘Ah, you’re welcome to call me Kolya, Aphrodite.’

He wheeled the lumbering truck around to park it in front of the house. They waited for the suspension to stop swaying and Zhelnin censured Abdurasulov’s unsoldierly fraternisation by use of a discreet glare. Then the Lieutenant jumped down and turned to assist the ladies safely to the ground. Troopers were emerging from the front door of the house, most pausing to admire the hulking amphibious truck before passing on to appreciation of the two lovely women being ushered from the crew compartment.

Major Bugayev marched through his troops to meet Zhelnin. Aphrodite gazed up at the house, only half aware of the Major’s approach. The Doctor, at first stunned with disbelief at the arrival of the wheeled monster, temporarily shelved all other thoughts on seeing Liz alive and well. The OGRON troops parted courteously, allowing Liz to trot up to the Doctor and lock him in a heartfelt embrace. Her eyes smarted with tears of joy.

‘Liz, it’s good to find you safe and sound,’ the Doctor held her at arm’s length for an improved study. ‘I promise you I never meant to desert you like that. The Kagyrn detained me a little longer than I’d have preferred.’

‘There’s always something more important on your agenda,’ she accused him, with a familiar soft chuckle in her throat.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor boxed her tenderly, then nodded at the vehicle, ‘like right now, for instance.’ He strode by, guiding her to follow, heading for the Major who had recently completed a thorough examination of this side of the truck. As

the Doctor and Liz came up, however, they found Bugayev engrossed in a heated verbal battle with Aphrodite and Lieutenant Zhelnin.

‘Believe it or not,’ blazed Aphrodite defiantly, ‘vile as your machine is, I do not have the faintest desire to spread news of its existence around the globe! I *would* like to know what it’s doing here in the tenth century, but assuming we *can* destroy it or return it to its proper time, I can assure you I won’t be stopping long enough in the twentieth century to say more than a few goodbyes! In short, your secrets are safe with me. On the other hand, if I can’t persuade you I’m *not* a spy, your best course would be to shoot me right now!’

Bugayev tapped his holster as if seriously contemplating this suggestion. ‘Don’t tempt me with ideas like that, *Miss*. Because that would be the easiest and safest option, whether I can trust your silence or not. And don’t *ever* castigate me again for disciplining one of *my* men’ – he nailed Zhelnin with a finger – ‘for admitting civilians on board a *classified* weapon that has yet to enter full service!’

‘Comrade Major,’ Zhelnin made a tentative effort to smooth the situation, ‘the women were in immediate danger of being overrun by cavalry, giving chase as a direct result of our provocation.’

‘Provocation!’ Bugayev barked into his subordinate’s face. ‘Lieutenant Zhelnin, the *fact* that you succeeded in recovering *one* item of the Soviet Union’s property is *barely* enough to let you off with a verbal warning for the fact that you then chose to *advertise* that property to citizens of a foreign power! Is that all perfectly clear to you, Lieutenant?!’

‘One?!’ Aphrodite stormed upon the Major as he was turning away. ‘How many are we talking about, exactly? If there are weapons of mass murder here in the tenth century, you can’t just try to hide them like a guilty schoolboy who’s misplaced his homework!’

That was sufficient to tip Bugayev’s tolerance firmly into the red; he rounded on Aphrodite, his arm cutting back ready for a swipe.

The Doctor, by then, was close by and prepared. He trapped Bugayev’s arm before the hand could slap Aphrodite’s

face. She stared boldly into the Major's eyes, ignoring the flat palm hovering a few inches from her cheek; the violent emotions behind her face and Bugayev's act of physical aggression were separated by the breadth of a universe.

The Doctor released Bugayev's arm. He postponed his own anger in favour of greeting Aphrodite. She smiled with her customary well of affection and the Doctor shook her proffered hand with a similar warmth. Liz performed the introductions, studying them both with that tension normally attached to the initial meeting of two dear friends. As it was, she needn't have worried: the glimmers in their respective gazes were a strong indication that they already knew one another. Liz was less surprised than she thought she should have been. Bugayev, meanwhile, busied himself directing Zhelnin and Abdurasulov to drive the TEL to another spot, further north along the ridge of the hill, so as not to obstruct the approach to the house.

'Aphrodite's the reason I'm safe and sound,' Liz volunteered.

'In that case, I'm especially grateful as well as very pleased to see you here,' declared the Doctor sincerely, as the three of them ambled to the house together.

Aphrodite accepted the Doctor's compliments graciously and opened her mouth to say more, but before any words escaped, Bugayev chose to intrude, heading the trio off at the threshold. He sneered, 'This is so touching, it hurts, but we do still have a number of problems demanding our attention.' He jabbed a finger at the Doctor before marching inside. 'And you needn't think I've forgiven your interference, Doctor.'

'I'm not the sort of chap to jump to any such rash conclusions, Major,' replied the Doctor frostily. He led his little troupe after Bugayev. 'Aphrodite is absolutely right, you know. We need to know the precise nature of those vehicles your two "dead men" recovered, and how many. I can make my own sound guess on the first point, so you needn't be too specific.'

Bugayev appraised them thoroughly with his eyes. He was several long seconds coming to his decision.

'The Magyars have nine others,' he revealed grudgingly.

‘They are *Tochka* class TELs that’s Transporter-Erector-Launcher vehicles. The West will probably designate them SS-21 if they haven’t done so already. I have no idea what ridiculous name they will dub it. These test missiles have a one-kiloton warhead; the operational payload is and will remain a state secret. They went missing from their test ground in the southern steppes, and *that* is as far as I go.’

He concluded with a vehemence that closed the subject with an audible slam.

‘Hence, the Russian involvement,’ the Doctor realised, shaking his head. ‘Ten nuclear missiles. The Ten Arrows of the *On-Ogur*.’

‘What?’ frowned Liz.

‘More myths and legends, really; or Hungarian history. I’ll explain later,’ the Doctor deferred the point. His anger had been reined tightly in for far too long. ‘Major, the only criticism I might level against Aphrodite is that she let you off far too lightly. You’ve guarded this information childishly all along and now I find the entire situation is immeasurably worse than I ever had reason to suspect!’

‘Worse?! How can it be worse than you predicted?’ Bugayev threw his arms up in disgust. ‘Space and Time shattered! The end of civilisation, blah-blah! And a few nuclear warheads are going to make a massive difference to that?!’

‘A difference likely to be discernible to even the most obtuse minds!’ The Doctor’s temper was fully fired. ‘For your information, I was in the midst of formulating a plan to extricate this planet from the impending threat posed by two supremely dangerous forces; one that may *just* have worked. What I don’t have, though, is an answer to a misappropriated nuclear arsenal which could have dire consequences for history if so much as one of them is ever detonated! It should be obvious that one of those forces – our enigmatic friend, the Chieftain – has intentions to use those missiles to weigh the battle in his favour somehow.

‘I should thank you, Major, for managing to spring an added difficulty on us in what was already a near-impossible situation! Are you sure you haven’t a few more problems you

could dig up for us?!'

Bugayev filled the hallway with his countering outburst. 'Oh, yes! That's all very fine, Doctor! I've *upset* people with my secretive nature! But what have you done? Formulated a *plan*? Well, that's decidedly strange, because I haven't heard a whisper out of you until now!'

Liz watched the mounting argument with a corresponding sinking feeling. She feared her diplomatic skills were not up to separating the two factions. She searched hopefully around for Aphrodite, confident in *her* ability to restore a more productive calm. It was then that she first noticed the woman's absence.

Aphrodite must have slipped away unseen, some moments ago.

This house had been Melisandra's home and it didn't take Liz's mathematics degree to put two and two together; maybe Aphrodite wanted some time alone.

Perhaps it's just as well, Liz tried to console herself. Despite her evident tendency to touch others with her own emotions, there was an outside possibility that Aphrodite's pacific stance may have antagonised the Major still further.

Huba kicked his black stallion and rode forward to confront, rather than greet, his old friend Tétény. He would rely on his own forceful persona to deter any hostile action, although the presence of his fully reassembled escort, visible through the trees, would provide a supplementary deterrent. Tétény, on a point of pride, was obliged to wave his own men back and they reversed their horses a few reluctant steps down the path. Huba brought his sleek stallion's head to cross with the neck of Tétény's stately dun.

Words were a luxury for which both men were prepared to wait.

Tétény was older than Huba, the white strands of his beard a commanding contrast to the swarthy, taut skin stretched over his narrow face. The grooves around his eyes and mouth and his weather-beaten complexion presented him as a wise old tree, with a thin but rugged trunk. It was down to him to break their silence.

‘You should have journeyed as far as possible, Huba,’ he counselled, sitting high in his saddle to underline his seniority. ‘Prince Árpád will ask me to scratch the source of his irritation, I’m sure. And then I will do it. With regret, but I *will* do it.’

‘Hah! Are you ill, Tétény, that you forget how impervious to threats I am? Perhaps your memory is failing.’ Huba sat up, craning around to view the surrounding forest. The night held no unnatural shadows. ‘Where is your dog? Has the faithful hound deserted you? To hunt, perhaps? They are apt to do that.’

The elder Magyar drew a reed of air over his teeth. ‘Árpád was equally convinced of your ailing condition, and now I can see it for myself. True, you have a willpower to resist a god’s wrath, but that used to have a companion in respect.’ He bunched the reins in his fist, but his fury subsided into reticent sobriety. ‘It is my own sense that my Warrior is slain. I do not know how.’ He shrugged off the burden imposed by the recollection. ‘It is of no matter now. Its death must mean I no longer have need of its guardianship.’

‘Did you ever?’ scoffed Huba. He was envious of something in Tétény’s ease of manner. ‘But it appears to have left you intact, I see.’ Huba was unable to stop a twitch of his facial muscles. ‘It was not so with me. I – I – *know* the beast is slain. But there is something still missing inside.’ He clasped his breast under the chain shirt; Huba felt his control faltering under the pressure of unendurable loss. ‘Take care to – count your possessions, Tétény; for revenge must be delayed, when the thief has absconded to another world.’

For the first time, the elder chief appeared concerned for his ally. ‘Huba, you *do* suffer from some affliction. Return to Csepel with us, that we might determine its nature and seek a remedy; I beseech you. Huba!’

Tétény’s appeals were cast off with one wave of Huba’s strong arm.

‘There is no remedy in Csepel!’ the younger Magyar snarled, his resolution returning. ‘I know where to seek it. And I know how to cure my misguided allies of their ills! You return to Csepel, you say. Well, you may tell Árpád that if

Huba sees only the snout of one of his black dogs, he will cleave it in pieces and feed it to the fire! Then we may build our Magyaria, instead of an animal lust for blood!’

‘You are no longer a *Magyar*! I wonder that I don’t kill you now, Huba,’ Tétény’s agitation was emphasised in the clumping hooves of his fidgeting horse, ‘to end your misery as well as my own. You are a sorry sight to behold.

‘Yes, I return to Csepel. As do we all. I have encountered Rond, who has already lead his tribe to the fortress. There has been an attack and it is time for our forces to gather. You have lost all chance to be a part of that.’

Tétény whipped his reins emphatically, driving his horse past Huba and signalling for his men to follow. The riders tried to avert their eyes from Huba’s piercing review.

Huba shouted after Tétény before he lost sight of him, ‘I have lost far more than that! Of it all, I mourn for that the least!’

Liz eventually decided to depart the lounge and track down Aphrodite; the room being fully occupied by the Doctor and Major Bugayev, at loggerheads once more over the optimum course of action. There had so far been one short-lived spell of calm and that was due to the temporary absence of the Major, who had departed the house to issue orders for its defence. Bugayev’s efficiency brought him back from that task sooner than either he or the Doctor might have preferred, and Liz had felt the need to escape only minutes later.

She loitered in the hall for a while, listening to the sounds of the men outside, digging themselves a few foxholes and constructing crude ramparts. She wondered whether the Major had favoured that line of defence as a matter of tactical doctrine or because of the Doctor’s warnings about possible permanent damage to the building in the event of heavy fighting inside.

After looking left and right, Liz moseyed towards the kitchen, nearly colliding with Aphrodite as she came out, a loaded tea-tray in her hands.

‘I should mind where you’re pointing that thing,’ Liz cautioned her whimsically. ‘Where have you been? We could

have done with your help earlier, maybe. Probably still need it now.'

As Liz fell quiet, they could both hear the raised voices emanating from the living room. Partially dampened by the staircase, it could equally have been a television left on at a high volume, playing out some domestic drama.

'Oh, I took some refreshments out to the soldiers,' Aphrodite explained with a dismissive flick of her hair. She winced slightly and nodded at the closed lounge door. 'I thought we could do with some lubrication in here, as well. I'm sure that nice Major would react well to a civil cup of tea.'

Fairly certain that Aphrodite was not the sort of woman to content herself with making the tea, Liz indulged in a little benevolent scepticism. 'Since when have you wanted to play waitress?'

'Oh, I'll admit it was some way down my list of ambitions. But I'm not above playing the hostess when the occasion demands.'

Liz sniggered, then gave Aphrodite a conspiratorial nudge, with proper regard for the tray. 'Well, a dose of sweeteners certainly couldn't do the Major any harm.'

Aphrodite chuckled softly and they entered the living room together, stifling girlish smiles before any eyes had turned on them. Aphrodite laid the tray on the coffee table and stepped back with a curtsy. 'Shall I pour?'

Bugayev sniffed at the cups from where he stood, as if convinced they were coated with poison. 'Well, at least one person doesn't see the situation in the same urgent light as us, Doctor.'

The Doctor, standing in the corner, drumming his lips with the sonic screwdriver, escaped his reverie and defended Aphrodite's kind hospitality. 'On the contrary, Major; it strikes me that Aphrodite has only recognised the important contribution to the cognitive process that can always be made by a strong cup of tea.'

'Precisely!' agreed Aphrodite, clapping her hands. 'I can feel several ideas brewing already.'

'You've come to provide the floor show, have you?' grated an intensely snide Bugayev, although Liz detected a

hint of fascination in the man's gaze whenever it passed in Aphrodite's direction. He chose to ignore her presence for now though and fired an ultimatum at the Doctor. 'The way I see it, we either need an idea from you now, or we don't need any at all. If you haven't anything better very soon, Doctor, I'm going ahead with my plan.'

'What's that, exactly?' inquired Liz dubiously; this was news to her.

'Since we are now obliged to operate in a spirit of complete openness,' said Bugayev with forged charm, 'or, if you prefer, Miss Shaw, a don't-need-to-know basis, I won't mind sharing that information. I am considering conducting a raid, similar to that mounted so admirably by Lieutenant Zhelnin, to recover the remaining missiles.'

'That will involve a great deal of bloodshed,' simmered Aphrodite, a gentle tremor to her lip like the presage of an impending earthquake.

'Huh, not on my side, I hope,' Bugayev snorted. He tried a half-hearted moderation, saying, 'An acceptable level, in relation to the severity of the situation.'

'*Acceptable to whom?!*' roared Aphrodite, her fine-grained voice breaking like rapids. She shivered at some unknown cold. 'There's always an alternative! You only have to think a little harder.'

'Precisely what I've been telling him,' seconded the Doctor, placating Aphrodite with the promise of a staunch advocate.

'Oh, wonderful! Another of your kind, Doctor,' Bugayev was exasperated. He rose and walked over to Aphrodite, inspecting her like one of his soldiers, poorly turned out for parade. 'Only, she's worse than you. We have a real dove this time. And tell me, what is the honest use of a dove? Shoot one of its young, and it'll fly to you with an olive branch and ask you very sweetly not to do it again! Whereas an eagle will peck your damn finger off so you'll never pull another trigger!'

Liz was not prepared to see her friend bullied. 'Major, I should pick your opponents with more care, if I were you.'

Bugayev spared her an insidious smile. 'She's not an

opponent. We're all in this together, so to speak. It's just that some of us aren't particularly useful. Now, if either of you can use a gun –' He permitted the offer to hang.

'You'd best not hand me one at the moment,' glowered Liz.

There was no genuine sentiment in Liz's realistically menacing tone, and Aphrodite readily welcomed the humour. Although she had relaxed, her temper still maintained an underlying, lively crackle. 'Aside from my personal objections, Major, how can you expect to achieve surprise, when you behave with such predictability? I think I've read you pretty well during our short acquaintance, so it's fairly certain the Chieftain will anticipate a direct attack. Your raid would achieve nothing but bloodshed.

'As it happens, I also doubt the efficacy of an olive branch on this occasion. However, that doesn't rule out some suitable alternative.'

The Doctor applauded her speech, satisfied to see the Major's self-proclaimed 'eagle' being challenged by the woman he had cynically labelled a 'dove'.

'What? You're suggesting we should negotiate with this Chieftain – and Athena?!' Bugayev mocked her incredulously.

'Well, it's only what I was about to propose, myself,' the Doctor put in, scratching idly at the base of his neck.

Bugayev gaped from Aphrodite to the Doctor. He looked at Liz as if she were their keeper. 'They are both insane. It's down to us.'

'Personally, Major, I don't think you want to hear my opinion,' Liz registered her vote firmly with the Doctor and Aphrodite, although mindfully saving the Major from any increased irritation. Bugayev threw himself back into the sofa with some sense of despondency, actually finding solace in pouring himself a cup of tea.

The Doctor proceeded, 'Of course, I'm going to need your help, Aphrodite.'

'You can take that as a given.' Aphrodite smiled and Liz fancied she could see the Doctor's reflection in the gleam of her eyes. 'What is it you want me to do?'

'Well, it's more what you can do for Earth, of course,'

replied the Doctor amiably, ‘but I’ve been considering what to do about this temporal fracture. If we can contain that, I’ll be negotiating with some measure of bargaining power behind me.’

‘How’s that?’ requested Liz.

‘Well,’ the Doctor responded slowly, ‘Athena seems to be flitting freely about the timelines, but the source of the fracture has to remain fairly static. And since one of our players has yet to show his hand, my guess is that the Chieftain has been sitting still, biding his time at the root of it – if he isn’t the cause himself.’ The Doctor returned to briefing Aphrodite. ‘So, if you could arrange some small countermeasure, while I pay a call on the Chieftain –’

‘Name it,’ Aphrodite instructed him.

‘I want you to try to extend the force field of the house along the temporal axis – in either direction. If you reel it in like a net, you should eventually meet the limits of the fracture and –’

‘And,’ Aphrodite finished enthusiastically, ‘haul those limits back in with it. Like healing a wound by binding the skin together! I was drawn here, to this century, so we must be very near the origin of the fracture; therefore, I should be able to compress it to almost nothing. Especially as you’ll be distracting the Chieftain. I like that, Doctor. I like it a lot.’ She flashed a roguish grin at Liz: it was an expression that was pure Doctor. ‘With any luck, that will banish most of the Chieftain’s and Athena’s tampering to a genuine never-never land.’

‘But can you do it?’ Liz wanted to know for sure.

‘With my eyes closed,’ Aphrodite guaranteed. To Liz, that sounded unfortunately like one of the Doctor’s infamous reassurances. The ones that tended to go wrong. What worried her most, though, was the fleeting nod of approval with which Major Bugayev greeted the plan.

The Csepel fortress had completed licking its wounds, with more stones dumped into the river to plug the jagged lesion in the bridge. Now, the men were amassed in their tribes and clans, kneeling before their great Prince Árpád. Many a torch

floated on that dark sea of people and Árpád surveyed them as if he were on a soaring promontory instead of a towering, midnight horse.

The horse was nearly as resplendent as its rider, decked in the trappings of war. Árpád rode down an aisle formed by two blocks of loyal warriors, trailing three Magyar chieftains and their Kagyrn warriors in his wake. When he returned to the high centre of the fortress, lining his entourage outside the stone hut, he thrust a sword into the sky.

‘Magyar warriors! Though, this night, the On-Ogur has been defiled, still they may be the Ten once more; or, if not, we will exact our payment in the blood of Humanity and our Enemy shall know that Nine Arrows may strike with the force of Ten! I, Prince Árpád, consecrate those Nine with the Flame! I, Prince Árpád, charge their servants to attend them and bind them to their targets for tomorrow’s Battle!’

On command, the nine covered shapes erupted into flames, the tarpaulins consumed in whirlwind cones of fire. The army bowed its innumerable heads with heightened reverence; it chanted the name of Árpád. Men sallied forth from each clan and surged towards the row of burning covers, forming a ring around each conflagration. The tarpaulins melted away, the fires dying as suddenly as they had come.

The servants closed their circles and leaped upon the exposed Launcher vehicles.

Two men boarded each cab and worked competently and ardently at the intricate board of electronic switches and indicators; others danced on the roof. Engines fired, stabilisers protruded from the vehicles’ flanks, double doors opened in each armoured canopy at the rear, throwing off the dancers. The men reformed their circles.

Tétény and the two other chieftains, Elöd and Tas, drew their bright swords in unison. Blades started up in every hand.

‘I give you the Almighty Power of the On-Ogur!’ exalted Prince Árpád, his voice thundering over the fortress. ‘I give you the Eternal Glory of the Magyar race!’

Steadily, as if in response to the fervid incantations of the soldiers, the nine missiles arced back into their vertical positions; a fearsome magnification of all those thousands of

swords, piercing the night sky in expectation of triumph.

Liz hugged the corner of the house and waited for the street to go away again. It did, in the space of thirty seconds, and several men bumped back into their foxholes from the cobbles that had appeared from nowhere. The breaks in Time were still very much in evidence, but the shift had at least had the decency not to cut the soldiers in half with the sudden materialisation of several feet of soil and stones. Liz couldn't bear the thought, let alone the possibility.

The Doctor took her by the arm and she opened her eyes. 'It's typical, isn't it? My first hop through Time and the thing can't keep still.' Under the circumstances, she couldn't stop thinking of Time with a large capital T.

'Hm, well, we'll be trying to bring it back into line shortly,' said the Doctor, almost apologising on Time's behalf. 'That was a decidedly small fragment; means the fracture is spreading, although it's been slower to develop than I expected, thankfully.'

'You can thank Aphrodite for that. She braced it all together with a stick, would you believe?' Liz knew the Doctor's appreciation for irony. 'Admittedly a large golden stick, but still.'

'The Staff of Minerva. Yes, a very smart young lady, she is too.' Praising Aphrodite in her absence, there was nevertheless a distinctive light in the Doctor's gaze that might well have been some part of her. 'Of course, her temporal theory could use a little work and, what with the Time Lords' tampering with my knowledge on the subject, we were rather longer over the directional field calculations than I would have preferred. Deployment of a force field along the temporal axis is a very tricky operation, you know.'

'Goes without saying,' agreed Liz. She hesitated. 'Doctor, you're not really set on facing both those creatures alone? I mean, take it from me, Athena is not the most gracious hostess; and from his portrait alone I'd say the Chieftain wasn't exactly the sort to fetch your newspaper and slippers.'

'I'll only be in serious trouble if he wags his tail,' commented the Doctor, remembering the preferred position of

a Kagyrn's mace. 'Besides, we may have got him all wrong. Appearances can be deceit –'

There was no warning: the attack fell on the Doctor's words and silenced him in a split second. The shots of the defenders, out on the perimeter, splintering the stillness like the first bite of an axe into dry wood, alerted them to the approach of a Magyar offensive. The troops nearby, their greatcoats replaced by flak jackets, readied their weapons and trained barrels on the brow of the hill.

Bugayev dashed out from the house, Aphrodite a second or so behind him. The Doctor held on to Liz and scanned around for the first visible signs of the enemy.

'No, Major!' Aphrodite cried frantically. 'Don't fight! *Please!* I can –'

'*Shut up!*' the Major silenced her and shoved her away, jumping into a hole of his own and pressing a radio to his mouth. 'Markov! How many; over?' – there was a fuzzed reply, but Bugayev must have caught it – 'Get yourself out of there, around the base of the hill; link up with Zhelnin and Abdurasulov at the missile; out!'

The shots from the forward post had fizzled away; Markov was either on the move or dead. Aphrodite was tensed, quivering with dread. Liz wanted to go to her and the Doctor released his hold, ducking down next to the Major.

'If there are too many, we'll need some other way,' he urged the Russian officer.

Bugayev scowled and hollered over to Yaroslavskiy in the pit directly in front of him. The burly soldier, his PK machine-gun mounted on its tripod, leaned around and chucked the Major his assault rifle. It fell past the Major with a dull clatter, but he swiftly retrieved it and released the safety.

'This is madness! What do you hope to –' But the Doctor couldn't complete the objection, because the Major drowned him out with his, 'Too late, Doctor!'

Like the hammering of a thousand hearts, the hooves ascended the hill and brought a hundred horses stampeding towards their positions. The riders were yelping and whooping like moon-crazy wolves, blades and spiked helmets glinting with the same wild light as in their eyes. Leading them, came a

bear of a man, swollen by fur cloak and a mass of brown hair over a jutting chin: a Magyar chieftain, on a chestnut steed.

None of the OGRON troops had to wait for orders; Bugayev had already made that clear. Guns juddered and cracked, straining to jump from the soldiers' hands, spewing bullets and coughing up brass. Red gouges opened in horses and men; but the Magyars still charged onward. Chistyakov, on the right flank, found their centre and fired the RPG, its whooshing tail of flame so like Athena's fiery serpent. The blast rattled the windows and a ball of dirt, smoke and blood punched a crater in the galloping herd of cavalry; but still the Magyars charged onward. Zhelnin, over with Chistyakov, and Saporov, to the left, held off firing to lob grenades, inflicting wounds to compare with the RPG round; but still the Magyars charged onward.

'Doctor!' Liz was panic-stricken. Aphrodite's breath was trapped in her lungs and as she had stumbled, steadying herself against Liz. Her eyes focused on air, denying the chaos around them. As the Doctor looked over, Liz was struggling to keep her steady. Aphrodite muttered something, like a rapid mantra, but the words – if that was what they were – escaped her soundlessly.

The Doctor launched himself out of the hole and darted to join Liz. Taking hold of Aphrodite's arm, cradling her head, he hurried an examination; pulse, heartbeat, respiration, eyes. *'It's almost a regenerative coma,'* he whispered. The fight gnashed and screamed from behind him, reminding him of Liz's description of her friend and clicking a diagnosis into place. *'I think I know what the problem is, but it hasn't a hold of her yet. She's fighting it. Hurry!'* he pressed Liz fervently. *'Get her into the house! It's telepathically shielded!'*

Together, with the battle raging, Liz and the Doctor helped Aphrodite and the Doctor, to speed things along, lifted her and carried her in through the doorway of the house. The Doctor kicked the door closed and bore Aphrodite's slender weight into the lounge, laying her head gently on one arm of the sofa. Aphrodite's eyes came alive and she tried to sit, but the Doctor eased her back to lie still. *'I'm all right,'* she insisted.

The shots still echoed from outside, mingled now with

other terrifying noises. Aphrodite seemed more tranquil, less perturbed by the sounds alone. Liz knelt beside her and the Doctor headed for the door.

‘You’re not going back out there?’ Liz demanded, bordering the question on an order.

‘I have to, Liz! I think the Major’s overlooked something. Stay with Aphrodite.’

With that emphatic command, the Doctor was gone. Liz recognised all of her anxiety mirrored with crystal clarity in Aphrodite. She gripped Aphrodite’s hand to comfort herself as much as her patient.

Outside the house, the Doctor was shocked to see the reduced numbers of the Magyar cavalry, but there was still a cluttered mob overrunning the Soviets’ defences. Horses bounded over the foxholes or galloped between them; Magyars pounced from their horses to brawl with the Russians, clashing swords against hastily swung rifles. The ground around that end of the house was awash with bodies, rearing horses and fighting men. He spied the Major, a face of stone, emptying his pistol at selected targets, punching or kicking grounded Magyars, pulling riders from their mounts. There was Yaroslavskiy, wielding his PK like a ten-kilogram cudgel; there was Plankin, slicing and stabbing with his bayonet. They were the only recognisable faces the Doctor saw, until he ran around to the left and found Saporov, unmolested in his hole, picking off his enemies with single, clear shots. The situation looked near to hopeless for everyone but Saporov.

The Doctor hurtled on past, stealing a sword from a dead Magyar’s fist, and continued out towards the TEL truck, squatting along the hilltop like a beetle on a rock. The beetle carried two figures on its carapace. One of them was Lieutenant Zhelnin; the other was precisely what he had feared.

The Doctor raced there with all his energy. Lieutenant Zhelnin, as with Yaroslavskiy, held his gun like a club. The Russian was edging way from the Kagyrn Warrior, running out of room. The Kagyrn brandished twin axes and drooled, poised to cut his prey in two. Zhelnin, to the Doctor’s

amazement, was toying with the Kagyrn, delaying him with something like the opening courtesies of a martial arts tournament; these modern Kagyrn were susceptible to such points of honour.

Still, the Doctor knew the Kagyrn would not hold from the kill for long. Braking his run hard, he spun the sword in both arms and hurled it with his utmost strength at the Warrior. The Kagyrn swatted it aside; but the creature's attention was diverted. '*Galfek!*' he salivated, nostrils piqued by some scent and knocked Zhelnin off the TEL with a poor swipe that missed its mark. Then the Warrior covered the full distance to the Doctor in a single vault.

The Kagyrn sheathed its axes and spread his claws out to either side, puffing vapour and dribbling long strings of saliva. The Doctor was unfortunately short of solutions.

'Doctor! Get out of there!' It was Sergeant Markov, a short way beyond the vehicle, a cumbersome tube on his shoulder and most of his face obscured by sights. The Kagyrn steered its head around to view this new 'threat'.

The Doctor used the distraction to dodge backwards, the Kagyrn only partially noting the movement. It could deal with the Galfek later. Keen to match weapon for weapon, the Kagyrn whipped the plasma rifle from his shoulder, but before it was properly in both claws, Sergeant Markov triggered the SA-7 man-portable SAM; its infra-red seeker had homed in nicely on all that hot gas from the creature's throat.

The missile jetted forward on a screeching wind, describing its path with an expanding plume of smoke. The Kagyrn was a fraction faster; cutting to one side and melting the SAM from the air with a beam of plasma.

The Kagyrn aimed at the attacker, but Markov had disappeared behind the TEL. The Doctor could almost see the temptation building in the creature's flame-charged eyes. Finally, it roared with savage frustration and fixed once more on the Doctor.

The Russians had only had the one anti-aircraft missile. So the Doctor glanced about him for some sort of weapon. It was hopeless, of course, and, anyway, there were none available. The Kagyrn stomped purposefully up to him, sliding the

plasma rifle neatly away and replacing it with the axes. The Warrior was now intent on the kill, free of its finer points; much more like his ancestors.

Snarling, the Kagyrn thrashed his tail and flipped the Doctor over.

The Doctor was winded and he stared up at the certain knowledge of defeat. His muscles still tensed to react, but an axe would catch him whichever way he rolled. The moment stretched; the Doctor's senses were deadened.

The thud of hooves, the Kagyrn spinning, a shout, some gruesome, splitting crunch. The Doctor rolled automatically, seeing the wolf-like head fly from the armoured shoulders and the great body crash over the spot where he had been lying. A Magyar chieftain, with features like a clenched leather gauntlet, mounted on a glossy black stallion, reined his horse around to trample the corpse.

Huba's sword was stained black; there was a vicious red gash in his side. 'It will trouble this earth no more,' he vowed, accepting the Doctor's nod of gratitude.

Then he galloped off, with other Magyar horsemen following, headed for the house, where steel now clashed against steel. Although the Doctor had no answer as to why these Magyars had come to their aid, the battle now seemed considerably less hopeless. The Doctor picked himself off the ground and set off at a trot to witness the battle's end.

Into the mix of Russians and Magyars, more Magyars had poured, relieving the Soviets of a weight that had just begun to crush. By the time Huba arrived, it was nearly over, but it was only on seeing him that the other grizzly of a chief screamed at his men to retreat. Huba fought his way through to drive him off. 'Fly to Csepel, Rond! Tell Árpád I have slain another of the beasts!'

Rond bellowed in response, as he extricated his own horse from the melee, 'I only go to save myself from your sickness, Huba!'

'Fool! I've saved you!' Huba mocked Rond's receding form over the dying clamour of battle. He glanced around him, dropped his sword to the dirt. 'Enough!' he ordered. 'Enough!' The noise filtered out and the last few of Rond's

men beat their retreat. Everyone moved slowly, adjusting themselves to the sudden calm; the only exception being Saporov, who hastened to the fallen, moaning figure of Private Komarovskiy.

Bugayev rubbed sweat and blood from his forehead and saluted Huba. 'I'm grateful to you, whoever you are. Let my man tend to your wound.'

'It is nothing,' Huba claimed, but he clamped a gauntlet over his eyes. When he brought it away, his face was clearly pained. 'Where is she?'

Bugayev frowned, searching the surroundings. The Doctor had appeared at the corner of the house. Liz was following Aphrodite out through the front door. Huba's eyes rested on the women, shimmering hopefully.

The Magyar chieftain slid down from the saddle and walked his horse through the silent aftermath. Liz shied back, drawing Aphrodite away with her, but Huba only knelt at Aphrodite's feet. His hand and face went up imploringly and his voice croaked weakly, 'Please, my soul was lost to the beast. I *need* your light to make me whole.'

Aphrodite seemed greatly affected by his plea. She slipped from Liz's arm and knelt before Huba, taking his huge, rough hand in both of hers. She inhaled deeply and said, 'You've lost nothing, Huba. I only meant for you to protect us. I must have delved too deep and now you're unearthing your sense of humanity.'

'But there is such *remorse* in me,' Huba trembled, his grief like a slowly crashing wave. 'All the blood I've spilled, all the lives I've taken. If you could feel the pain in things I've done, I —' Huba broke off, biting down on a bitter string of images; as though he could see only pain mirrored in the beautiful face before him. 'I *need* — I beg your forgiveness,' he begged finally, the leather voice cracking with the strain.

A tear rolled down Aphrodite's cheek, but she ignored it as though it wasn't her own. Liz laid a consoling hand on her shoulder anyway.

Aphrodite told him, 'Huba, I can't be the one to grant you that. It isn't me that you've hurt.' She swallowed a mouthful of sorrow and held Huba close. 'Listen to me; I could never

create what isn't there. Is it enough that I don't *hate* you?'

One of Huba's strong arms pressed Aphrodite to his breast. He embraced her there for a long, peaceful minute. Then a firmer voice thanked her: 'Yes. It is all my spirit needs.' He commended her to Liz, in all earnestness. 'If love were a living creature, it would be she. This creature here.'

Huba rose steadily. Meeting Aphrodite's gaze steadfastly now, he bowed to her, then to Liz, before mounting the stallion that had waited faithfully behind him. The horse performed a small jig. Huba showed a palm in salute, then guided the stallion into a run.

'Come, Vecellin, let us heal ourselves at camp!'

The Magyar horsemen assembled and followed Huba in a gathering stream. Vecellin rode past Aphrodite and gave her a curt nod, perhaps of thanks. The swelling river of horses and men flowed down the hillside into the forest.

Liz lifted Aphrodite to her feet and the Doctor strolled up to meet them.

'I'm fine, thanks,' Aphrodite reassured him and Liz together.

But their exchanged smiles were soon to be tainted: Sergeant Markov and Lieutenant Zhelnin trudged towards the house, the limp shape of Abdurasulov carried between them. Heads bowed, they laid the soldier out on the ground before the Major. Even Bugayev swallowed and his eyes flinched as he stared at the mutilated torso, where an axe had hacked through the young man's flak jacket.

The OGRON troops clustered around in muted regret.

Aphrodite went to the body and fell to her knees at its side, but this time there were no tears. As though grief too had died. Despite that outward absence, it was like Lászlo's death, all over again: there was more here than sorrow for Abdurasulov, and Liz felt a welling of emotion inside that threatened to overwhelm. He might have been a stranger, but he was a young boy, and that was reason enough for tears, but there were other forces at work here and Liz knew their source. And just as Aphrodite had said, understanding a force of nature deprived it of none of its power. Controlling her own tears with a massive effort, she rushed to Aphrodite's side.

Eventually, she was able to tease her friend away and she escorted her in silence back to the house.

Behind them, the men's eyes remained fixed on their fallen comrade.

Liz sat with Aphrodite on the sofa, and they rested there, both physically drained. Aphrodite assured her, 'I'll be alright in a while, I promise.' She glanced up as the Doctor entered, before her gaze swam back to Liz. 'Time *is* a healer, but ultimately the energy has to come from yourself. Whatever else I am, I'm blessed with a tremendous resilience. That's the key to my survival. It's my greatest strength.'

Liz patted her hand and withdrew from the sofa, leaving her friend to meditate on the torrent of feeling she could still feel passing through her.

'It's just as well she is resilient,' remarked Liz sympathetically, under her breath. 'How could anyone bear the horrors in a life as long as hers? She's so *sensitive* to all of it.'

'Yes, she has a very special nature, Liz,' the Doctor reflected, studying Aphrodite's recumbent figure from the doorway. 'Time Lords are innately telepathic, you know; but Aphrodite is a different story. She's unique, Liz, and her empathy is a unique part of who she is – and part of her prison too. Empathy: manipulation of emotions in others and an acute receptivity to the feelings around her. A blessing and a curse.'

'That's what she said,' Liz remembered clearly.

'Even with an entire world to herself, she would have been so trapped if I hadn't intervened on her behalf,' the Doctor estimated, telling what Liz felt sure was a fraction of the story. 'The emotional chaos of a battle is harmful enough – her feelings out there could so easily have turned to violence. But a solitary existence on Paraiso – well, she would have felt something like a caged bird. She would have had to leave or eventually die. She did nothing wrong, she was merely someone who was born outside the rules of her society. I persuaded her people to be merciful in her case. They're powerful beings, but not too powerful for compassion.'

'So they gave her her lake. Espejo de Cielo,' Liz spoke the name just to enjoy the sound. 'You did that for her.'

The Doctor nodded. 'They had to give her that much

freedom.'

'Is that a note of envy, Doctor?' Liz queried affectionately.

'No, Liz,' the Doctor testified, his gaze roving over Aphrodite's still figure, steadily, gradually returning to some sort of peace. 'I don't think I could ever be jealous of her.'

Chapter Eleven

Arpad

i – ‘And these Magyars are a Turkish race and their leader rides out with 20,000 horsemen...’

ii – ‘The Magyars are fire-worshippers; they dwell in tents and pavilions...’

iii – ‘It is said that the great king of the Turks cannot show himself, and that if he did, no one could support the sight of him.’

Early Arabic accounts of the Magyars and their Kavar allies

Aphrodite had disappeared in the first misty light of morning, bound for her world and the gathering of a few items of equipment she would need for the task the Doctor had set her. Liz had watched her strike out, down the hillside where disturbed earth had thankfully hidden most of the night's death. Happy to see Aphrodite's more buoyant spirits renewed, Liz had declined an offer to accompany her, choosing instead to remain and go with the Doctor to Csepel. So it was not without some irritation that she heard the Doctor's firm request that she stayed safely behind at the house.

‘You expect me to hang around here and do nothing?’ Liz protested strongly. ‘I could have gone with Aphrodite, after all.’

‘Actually, I'd have preferred it if you did, but it'll be too late to catch up with her now,’ the Doctor replied, searching the line of trees as if he might spot Aphrodite over the distance she had covered in the last hour. In all probability, she was home by now – on another world entirely. ‘You'll be perfectly alright here, Liz, and you can keep an eye on the Major for

me. It's not what I expect you to do, of course, but it's what I *want* you to do.' He squeezed her arms firmly.

'Very well, Doctor,' Liz finally conceded defeat.

'She'll be fine here with us,' the Major promised, approaching from the house, an AK-74 rifle perched in the crook of his arm. He scanned the hill for signs of trouble, plucked the cigarette from his lips and stamped it underfoot.

'She had better be.' The Doctor followed the movement of the Major's boot with some distaste. 'You know, Major, aside from everything else, you must have strewn the centuries with countless cigarette ends and spent cartridges.'

'You're saying I ought to develop a more responsible attitude to time travel?' Bugayev grunted philosophically. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. It's not really for me. Still, it should please you to know I have every intention of settling down in the twentieth century when we've corrected this mess. I can hardly say fairer than that, can I?'

'However, for now, I hope you'll be satisfied with my small measure of improvement; namely, that I'm assigning you an escort. Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy. I wouldn't like to lose another Scientific Adviser and I absolutely *insist* on being informed.'

'There's really no need, Major,' the Doctor argued politely. 'The less people directly in danger, the better my chances of success.'

Bugayev would hear none of it. He gave a purposeful smile. 'Doctor, this is no mean contribution I'm making. With Abdurasulov dead, Komarovskiy badly wounded; I have barely enough men left standing.'

'Enough for what?' probed the Doctor suspiciously.

'To guard the house, of course. Our transport home. Good luck, Doctor,' Bugayev effectively ended the conversation. He motioned the two troopers up from the porch and they stood either side of the Doctor. The Doctor glanced from one to the other.

'Feeling as safe as this, I shouldn't think luck will enter into it,' he quipped for Liz's benefit.

Liz watched him go with the two men in tow. She had conveyed all her good-luck wishes wordlessly. Now, she

added a quiet, 'Take care, Doctor.'

She stood there for an indeterminate time, after the Doctor had vanished, barely conscious that Bugayev had left her alone with her thoughts. It occurred to her that Bugayev might possibly have acted from consideration after all, so she turned to smile at him in case he could still be seen. He could; but her smile was wiped clean away.

The Major was over at the launcher vehicle, directing his remaining troopers.

Telling herself they were engaged in entirely routine systems checks, or *something*, Liz still felt nervous about being kept in the dark. Besides, there was nothing of interest to her in the house; only the sleeping Komarovskiy and that room where they had laid the poor Abdurasulov, and she didn't want to share a building with that memory. Forcing a sigh, she jogged in as leisurely a manner as possible over to the Soviet truck.

Bugayev intercepted her, grabbing her arm.

'What are you up to?' she glared.

'Don't worry your pretty head,' Bugayev warned severely. He beckoned Saporov with a shout and a sweep of the rifle. The medic trotted up, bearing the questionable gift of a crumpled rubber suit. The men at the truck were donning similar gear; hooded one-piece garments, complete with gloves and masks. 'Put this on,' the Major commanded.

'No,' smouldered Liz plainly.

'Put it on,' Bugayev persisted, under an impatient breath, 'or I'll shoot you and zip you in it myself.'

Liz reconsidered for as long as she dared, then relieved Saporov of his bundle. 'Well, I hope you've managed to get my size right, Major.'

'You'll fit,' Bugayev predicted, releasing her arm but maintaining a careful watch, while Liz unfolded the suit. 'I had hoped you'd be going with one of your friends. Still, at least the most objectionable ones are out of my hair.' He paused, his attention dwelling impassively on Liz's slender legs as she slipped each of them into the suit; Liz ignored him with grim stoicism.

'At least your Doctor has some degree of respect for me,

some sense of proper conduct,' Bugayev went on, his audience truly captive as she tugged the suit up over her everyday clothes. 'That Aphrodite – you saw the way she reacted to the fighting – and Abdurasulov's death! She didn't even know him. It was unseemly.'

'Unlike most of us, she doesn't measure acquaintances in terms of time,' Liz retorted, fed up with the Major's concept of small talk. She shoved her arms into the sleeves and sealed the cumbersome NBC suit over her chest. Then she pulled the hood up over her head and tucked her hair in underneath, feeling angry and ridiculous. 'Didn't you wonder why she took such an instant dislike to you?'

'People's opinions rarely concern me, Miss Shaw.' Bugayev showed he was equally weary of Liz. 'However, if Aphrodite responds to death with tears, I respond with something far more effective. She'll no doubt cry her delicate heart out when she sees the mushroom cloud over Csepel Island. We'll be rid of the Chieftain, Athena, the whole pantheon!' The Major grinned, satisfied with either his humour or the shocked expression frozen on Liz's face. 'And, in case you have any complaints of your own, I'm going to ask that you put your mask on ahead of time.'

He kindly held the gas-mask out for her. Liz snatched it and turned her back on him, ablaze with contempt.

'Zip me!' she snapped. It was a wholly unnecessary request, but as a euphemism for 'Shut up!' it served extremely well.

The Doctor exchanged scant words with his enforced escort, only occasionally welcoming their continued presence with a thin smile or a curt nod. He led them in a relatively casual riverside stroll, making his point in an unmistakable admiration for the scenery. Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy spared little time for such niceties and quietly asked themselves why the Doctor was taking it out on them.

The river's surface was laced with sunlight and the whole countryside was possessed with an immeasurable calm; striking the Doctor like the receding waters prior to a tidal wave. As he anticipated, the environment shifted. And for a

change, this time, it was most opportune.

The two Russians were alarmed by the bronchial whine of a motorbike. Together, they flung themselves off the road and rolled onto the pavement, under a row of four-storey tenements. They were in the tawny streets of modern Buda, their nostrils sniffing at the fumes of the evening traffic.

Chistyakov was first on his feet. Yaroslavskiy brushed his greatcoat before standing. 'I'll never get used to that.'

'No, only the Doctor seems to take it in his...' Chistyakov heard his words trickle to nothing. He twisted his neck this way and that, stood on his toes to see over the repetitive tops of the cars, burring past and honking their annoyance at competing drivers.

A good many were tooting horns at the taxi-driver who had pulled sharply up fifty yards down the road to grab a fare from a well-dressed gentleman with a mane of white hair. The Doctor, in respect to the other drivers, boarded the cramped taxi in a hurry and sat back, requesting a speedy passage to Csepel Island. The driver, a rotund fellow with dark brown skin and clipped black moustache, cheerily accelerated his vehicle away from the curb, excited that the end of his tiresome day was about to be rewarded with a generous tip.

The Doctor peered out through the rear window, disappointed to note that his escort had caught sight of him. Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy were in pursuit, on foot.

The driver barged his way between the streams of traffic where he could, showing off his proud little car to the full. The two Russians disappeared from view soon enough and the Doctor relaxed to the best extent, troubled by the probable effects of inertia in the event of another temporal shift. His theoretical anxieties were not tested in practice, however, and he stopped the taxi on demand just opposite the industrial clutter of Csepel Island.

He stepped out onto the pavement and walked up to the driver's window, digging in his pockets and enduring the driver's hopeful face with cordial civility. The absence of any forints in his pockets was not exactly a surprise for the Doctor, but his flicker of apprehension caused a similar change in the driver's expression.

‘Ah, well, you see – I –’

The Doctor was sure he would remember that driver’s face for a long time, after the twentieth-century cityscape had faded. His reputation was irreparably dented in Budapest, he was certain. He might have to postpone any return visits until he had a different face.

There was no opportunity to reflect further on that, though, as the scuff of hooves announced the arrival of a group of Magyars, riding down on him from the direction of the tenth-century fortress. The Doctor raised his hands as he turned to face them, narrowing his eyes at the Kagyrn Warrior, loping towards him at the head of the riders. The beast halted a disconcerting metre from the Doctor, clacking its teeth.

‘Rather a lot of you chaps about, aren’t there? I trust you’re familiar with the sign of surrender.’

‘*Galfek!*’ snorted the Kagyrn, in imitation of Rond’s Warrior the night before.

‘Yes, I take it you mean Gallifreyan,’ the Doctor interrogated the Kagyrn cautiously. ‘Even though I don’t suppose you’ve ever met one.’

‘The smell lives forever in our race memory, *Galfek!*’ the Kagyrn formed its answer through gnarling fangs and a dripping tongue. ‘You will be a precious kill.’

‘There’s no need for that, old boy,’ the Doctor appeased the Warrior awkwardly. ‘I want you to take me to Árpád.’

The Kagyrn bobbed his head in deliberation. ‘That is where you are expected.’

Illuminated from underneath, the face of Árpád was contorted into a tragic mask of coruscating flesh and writhing shadows. Inhumanly regal, enveloped in the darkest majesty, the Magyar leader speared the Doctor with his prolonged scrutiny from across the tattered curtain of flame.

‘Leave us!’ he ordered the Kagyrn who had offered the Doctor up for sacrifice. The Warrior ducked obediently out, not even pausing to pay the respectful acknowledgement that would have been expected from a human subordinate.

The Doctor was alone in Árpád’s shadow.

‘Doctor!’ the kingly voice boomed, blowing the fires into

a renewed fury. 'Is your life so worthless that you must throw it so readily at my feet?'

'I was told you expected me,' quested the Doctor, his head tilted to on side. 'That's unusual foresight for a Magyar king. Still, not quite so unusual if my suspicions about your lineage are anything like close to the truth.'

'I am willing to believe they are,' Árpád hinted at an answer. He moved around the pyre and seated himself on the throne, all with a grand sense of purpose. 'You have struck me as an intelligent man, Doctor. There is always some compunction partnered with the destruction of intelligence.'

'Of course, I speak from a biased viewpoint, but surely you'd be better off following your conscience?' The Doctor chanced a modest smile.

'As you have already deduced, I follow a force far higher than conscience.' Árpád spread his arms over the arms of the throne, balling his hands into fists. Each gauntlet was like a small club. 'Doctor, you know whose spirit has guided my Magyars; you know whose eyes burn behind mine. You know who plucked the On-Ogur from future lands and who instilled us with the knowledge to use them.'

'Yes I do, Prince Árpád,' said the Doctor, hurrying into the gap in Árpád's speech, openly antagonistic, 'but I'm hoping that you don't have the *will* to use them! You are a Prince, the High Chieftain of the Magyars! You don't need another Chieftain above you!'

Árpád rocked his head back with laughter, unclenching his fists and gripping his fingers tightly over the arms of his great chair. His mirth lingered many seconds in the confines of the stone building after his mouth had fallen closed.

'Doctor,' the Prince spoke at last, 'I was chosen as the figurehead for the largest army the Universe has ever known. It will be an army to rival the Seven Packs of the Ancient Kagyrn; an army the size of a galaxy! There can be no honour to compare with that!' Árpád fumed quietly, apparently trapped in his own dreams. His nostrils flared. 'That has been the Chieftain's intention right from the beginning, when his victory was robbed from him at the Battle of Kagren. It will be I, Árpád, who leads forth his next army; and with that army I,

Árpád, shall dig graves to the core of every world, Doctor, and plough in the dead!’

There was a regal energy in Árpád’s words that banished all hope that they might be mere rhetoric. The Doctor steeled himself to pursue the matter, dredging the shadows for facts and tentatively seeking realisation of his worst fears.

‘When does this crusade begin, Prince Árpád? When?’

‘When *Kagena*,’ the cavernous voice screamed the name, ‘is met and her *evil* is erased from Eternity! When Athena is smashed to *nothing*! Today, with the conclusion of the Battle and the summit of Time’s eclipse!’ Árpád’s rage declined with the languor of a thunderstorm. ‘Unless you now promise your impartiality, Doctor, it will not be your privilege to live until then.’

The Doctor knew then that his life was suspended on the passage of a single thought through the mind behind Árpád’s mask.

A muffled cry issued from the doorway, followed quickly by the thunk of a slumping body. Hopping in over the felled guard, rushed Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy, respectively wielding an assault rifle and a PK machine-gun. They slid in between the Doctor and the crackling fire, levelling the weapons on the Magyar Prince and bringing Árpád rocketing to his feet.

‘No! Get back to your Major!’ the Doctor berated them immediately.

‘Was *this* the reason for your delaying tactics, Doctor? Surely, you must have known more than *that*!’ Árpád’s eyes were livid with scorn. ‘Such mistakes must honour their forfeits in *pain*! I will have my Magyars kill you, Doctor; dragged by horses over the plains!’

‘In your dreams,’ Chistyakov denied him stiffly.

The Doctor called out, ‘*No!*’

Chistyakov’s finger squeezed the trigger home, Yaroslavskiy’s tightened a second later. The stone hut was alive with the rattling, grating blast of both guns, spraying bullets through the flimsy wall of fire. Árpád sailed back against his throne, jerking violently as the rounds pitted his armoured body and sprinkled blood all around. The guns

emptied as the Doctor looked on in horror, surrounded by an impossible stillness. Árpád's corpse sagged uselessly onto its knees and tipped forward, the dead face crashing into the fire.

'There, Doctor, there's one problem sorted for you,' Chistyakov indicated the body with satisfaction. Yaroslavskiy nodded grimly.

'Really, Chistyakov, you know I think you stand a very good chance of making major one day,' the Doctor responded with a harsh bite. 'Look!'

The face in the fire was that of a giant wolf. With rapidly increasing momentum, the flames licked all over Árpád's corpse, swelling his limbs and torso, enlarging his head and extending his features as they glared up from the dying embers. The fire was flowing from its appointed place, infusing the body of the Magyar Prince with its divine force. Still engulfed in flame, the body staggered to its feet, mutating in the fierce orange glow. Sprouting claws, a lashing tail, a massive lupine head; cladding itself with jagged plates of armour; the fire and the body had given life to the fearful image in the tapestry.

The empty shell of Árpád had become the Chieftain.

Chapter Twelve

Equilibrium

For every force, there is an equal and opposite force.

In essence, Newton's Third Law of Motion

Bound at the wrists with a short length of rope and effectively gagged by the gas mask, Liz was limited to the role of anxious spectator as Major Bugayev, now also dehumanised by the NBC suit, supervised his men in the exacting preparations for the missile launch. *NBC*, thought Liz. *Nuclear Biological Chemical; a suit designed to protect against three of the dirtiest forms of warfare.* Meanwhile, it suffocated her spirits and trapped a deepening depression inside with her. She was very much alone, shoved out on the wing, as skull-masked OGRON troops attended to their tasks.

The double doors had opened in the vehicle's roof, while the four stabilising jacks were jutting from its lower hull to plant metal feet firmly into the ground. It was Plankin and Saporov who walked down either side of the missile housing, crouching to remove a few restraints and checking the hydraulics that would hoist the missile into launch position. Sergeant Markov busied himself at the computer console, revealed where a panel opened in the truck's flank, not far from where the NBC suits had been stowed; he occasionally co-ordinated his meticulous systems checks – guidance, ignition, warhead activation, tracking – with the two on the roof, by the industrious use of shouts and hand-signals. Lieutenant Zhelnin unpacked and began to set up a small radar dish for the assimilation of meteorological data, running a cable into a socket in the computer panel. Corporal Grushkin, with the privileged assignment of guidance officer, was currently occupied with trajectory calculations, using tripod-

mounted theodolites nearer the house, where he had a splendid view of the designated target.

The Major, like most supervisors in a capable team, had precious little to do. He turned on Liz and raised his mask, affecting to appear moderately more human. 'You're being very quiet, Miss Shaw. Very co-operative of you.'

Liz mumbled a scathing insult. Bugayev obliged her by lifting her mask over her brow. She presented a sweet smile as her face was unmasked.

'You'll find it easier to be understood without having to shout,' he explained.

'Thank you. I would hate to get a sore throat at this stage. Actually, I was just offering my assistance,' claimed Liz, adopting a marked innocence and hoping it was not overacted. She had secretly originated a scheme for derailing the Major's insane plan, as a means of lending herself some trace of hope. She nodded in Zhelnin's direction, guessing his identity from his stature. 'I assume the Lieutenant's feeding in the meteorological data. That's one of my strongest fields.'

Bugayev looked idly back to where Zhelnin was engaged. 'Smart reasoning for a civilian. But then, you must glean something of military matters at UNIT.' He wore a pained expression. 'I'm sorry, Miss Shaw. I think I'd rather rely on Lieutenant Zhelnin's modest store of knowledge than your questionable motives. It's nothing personal.'

'You're going to kill your own men, you realise?' Liz's innocence had been crumpled up and thrown away, no longer of any use. 'That's nothing personal either, I suppose?'

'Well, no. But there's not really much choice, you see. I can easily target the missile on Csepel; and hitting an island isn't a huge problem with a CEP of less than a hundred metres.' Bugayev stopped himself, conscious of having leaked a significant detail of the weapon's specification; the Circular Error Probability being a measure of accuracy: the general radius within which the missile is likely to fall. He decided that Liz's anger would effectively divert her from this particular. He hastened to say, 'It's a matter of timing, though. I need to know when the Chieftain and Athena show their faces, so I can be certain to catch them in the warhead's

footprint. I mean, I'd like to bag them both, but you only need to kill one to prevent the Battle. So I'm striking the minute we have *one* in our sights. I can't afford to waste an asset like this.'

'If your plan goes really well, you may even kill *us*,' Liz flared. 'Has anyone figured that into all your calculations? I'm no military consultant, but we can't be very far outside the burst radius of a one-kiloton detonation!'

'Four kilometres clear!' Bugayev shouted her down. He gulped down his ire as if it were stomach-acid, then proceeded more sympathetically, 'For our own safety margin, I'm targeting an area the other side of Csepel from our position.' He surveyed the trees and the slovenly clouds. At the truck, Lieutenant Zhelnin had achieved his object with the radar dish and now entered data at the computer keyboard alongside the other operator, Markov.

The Major noted this as well and said, 'Fallout is our only potential problem, but the winds are favourable.'

Liz gagged; he could have been discussing an afternoon's sailing trip. She felt a chill perspiration creeping over her skin. It was impossible to find a rational answer. 'You're no better than a murderer.'

'No!' Bugayev objected immovably. '*Murder* is always unnecessary. Believe me, Miss Shaw, I will be sorry to see the Doctor pay his fraction of the price for saving the world. I respect him a great deal. But he is only paying one share. Abdurasulov and Narmonov have paid theirs to get us this far.' The Major studied the effects of his remembrance on Liz's bowed head. 'The Doctor will be keeping the Chieftain suitably distracted. We all have our parts to play, no matter what it costs us personally.'

He grinned almost kindly, a hand hesitating to caress her shoulder. 'All you have to do is stand there and look pretty.'

'It's alright,' Liz blazed, lifting her head, 'you can touch me; I think I'm adequately protected.'

The Major clutched the mask and tugged it back down over Liz's face. Liz was shut away and neglected once more, a lonely observer to all the troopers' diligent preparations, labouring steadily towards the certain destruction of the

Doctor.

The Doctor and the two Russians flew back as the Chieftain erupted over the centre of the fortress with the force of a meteor impact, climbing like the blackest dust cloud from the crater. The Kagyrn deity, his mountainous frame adorned with weaponry, smashed up and out through the stone building, scattering pieces all over the camp like so much brittle eggshell. A hurricane roar accompanied every exaggerated motion.

The same tearing wind brushed the rubble from the bodies at the Chieftain's feet and cast the stones out over the fortress walls, hissing into the waters of the Danube. Magyars bolted from their tents and huts, arming themselves or taking up torches against the premature fall of night. The Chieftain, at the core of the sudden darkness, spread limbs like armour-plated tree-trunks and commanded the whole of Csepel to unholy silence. The nine missiles formed bizarre totems. The sandstorm subsided and the Magyars were kneeling in homage to the Beast who had shot down the sun, the entire army suspended in stasis. Their alien Chieftain tipped his boulder of a head over to peer down at the dusty shapes in the bare ruins of the building at his feet.

The Doctor was the first to stir. He gazed up at the demonic face seeming to soar just under the clouds. Shielding his eyes with one hand, his perspective adjusted soon enough, but the Chieftain was still a daunting ten metres. The Doctor sat up to take in the battered forms of Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy; he was aware of the Chieftain's head shifting to follow his glance.

The Doctor looked up, against the vengeful glare of those eyes. 'I beg you, please spare their lives. Their actions had nothing to do with anything I might have been doing. Yes, I was trying to delay you, but only until I had an argument that would stop you from fighting your Battle! As reckless as these men were, they've done you no harm and you knew they never could! What do you gain by killing them?'

'Nothing,' the Chieftain admitted hollowly, prolonging his sonic-boom voice and apparently savouring the noise. The

Doctor had yet to dissuade him.

‘You used to be Ongra, chieftain of the ancient Kagyrn pack of that name,’ the Doctor entreated, rising to his knees and trying not to sound hurried. ‘Surely, you have to be something more than that now! Of course, a Kagyrn chieftain would take the kill without question; and I wouldn’t even be here talking. And I certainly wouldn’t be naive enough to ask for their lives. But now, you no longer need to live by that primitive code.’

‘There is nothing I *need* do or must not do,’ the Chieftain growled a threatening reminder. ‘However, they shall be spared.’ He enjoyed the Doctor’s relief and surprise for a moment, his tongue coating his fangs with oily saliva. ‘I am Ongra in spirit, but the mind requires more. Reborn as a god, I have learned the clemency of a god. There must, indeed, be more aspects to a being such as I, in order to accommodate this new wealth of energy.’

‘Thank you,’ the Doctor expressed sincerely. He scrambled to stand and absently brushed down his jacket. ‘Perhaps we might continue our talk?’

‘There is time. Though, the Battle *will* be fought.’

‘Then, perhaps you won’t mind telling me what you intend to do here,’ braved the Doctor. ‘I know you’re the cause of the temporal fracture.’

The Chieftain sniffed the air as if truth could be discerned by smell.

‘Very well.’ One huge arm gestured, indicating the still fortress. ‘The Magyars are the key, Doctor. My people as much as the Kagyrn.’ He chose a direction and moved with incredible poise in each expansive stride, armour-clawed boots sending up showers of earth; his tail lashing like an agitated python. The thousands of Magyars remained paralysed in worship. The fluttering torchflames and the nervous horses in their corrals were the only other sources of motion.

The Doctor was unavoidably impressed as he followed the Chieftain between these motionless ranks.

‘You see, I am Ongra in spirit and to fight and conquer are my sole pleasures. To rule a territory, no matter its extent, is to bury yourself in the earth. Subtract from me the will to fight

and I will lose the will to survive. There: I have instructed you on how you might destroy me, though it is an impossibility.'

'I rather thought it would be,' the Doctor acknowledged the Chieftain's humour.

'Good, you do not argue with the inevitable. That is as good a promise of your impartiality as I may expect.' The Chieftain snorted satisfactorily, smoke spouting from his nostrils. 'The Magyars, Doctor! They compare so admirably with my Kagyrn Horde of old. These feeble specimens I enlisted from Kagren are worthless imitations; they strive to emulate the savagery that to their ancient brethren was inborn! But the Magyars! Yes; they *have* the killing spirit; they *have* my lust for conquest, Doctor. Here, on Earth, I have found the source of my new Pack. A Pack that will shrink the ancient Horde to a litter!'

'How can that be?' the Doctor pried. 'There can't be many more than ten thousand Magyars here.'

'Your words are truth as far as they comprehend,' the Chieftain grunted, half-mocking the Doctor's apparent ignorance and delighting in the *Galfek's* narrowing eyes. 'Under my guidance, they will flourish far beyond the bounds permitted by history. When this land is sealed in its fractured Time, they will never be trampled under all the intruding armies of other nations that Time brought to bear; they will never burden themselves with spoils so as to invite easy attack on their return. I will cultivate them and they will be plagued by none of this human error and *waste*!'

The Chieftain's hiss nearly blasted the Doctor over. The Time Lord retreated a step or two and probed the burning eyes in that mass of fur. He sensed he was on the edge of a dizzying revelation. 'There's something else, isn't there? The nations of the world together would still be a match for the Magyars, whenever you decided to mend the fracture.'

'Oh, very much so, Doctor. I am not apt to overlook these considerations.' His immense body quaked under a clatter of armour. 'The fracture will splinter Time to the smallest degrees and it will be my hand that rearranges the pieces.' He clenched his rock-sized paw around imaginary sand. 'The grains of all those lives will be unleashed simultaneously,

Doctor. They will all share the same present. How many minutes tick by even in the life of a mortal man? Less than in yours, Doctor, but still not too few to be labelled countless. Fifteen hundred different lives in every man's day! Or shall I count a human's life in *seconds*? And these will live until death in battle because they will be mine! Not all the *stars* could defeat an army of those numbers!'

The Doctor was stunned. There was no argument to give.

Amid the remains of the stone hut, Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy stayed low, hearing and seeing the Chieftain with a fear as omnipotent as the spell of stasis over the surrounding army. An image of the Major was enough to shake Chistyakov to life though, and he drew his radio from the belt at his waist. At a sign from his comrade, Yaroslavskiy obediently crawled forward to bar the Chieftain's view.

Chistyakov inhaled deeply before clicking the transmit button. He was expected to word his report clearly and concisely.

The glint of metal between the blades of grass offered Liz the light of hope. She inched sideways towards it, cursing the gas mask for inhibiting her field of vision and preventing her from noticing it sooner. She stared out through the goggles, constantly monitoring the activity around the launcher and praying that no eyes turned on her. Eventually, she reached the object and identified it as a sword.

With a special glance at the Major's back, relieved to see him engrossed in some radiocommunication, she flopped down and sat cross-legged on the grass, the sword behind her. Gently looping the bindings under the blade, she slid her wrists back and forth, conscious of the proximity of the sharp edge to some fairly major veins, but hopeful that the heavy suit would afford ample protection from fatal injury.

She tensed and froze. The Major had pocketed his radio and looked her way. Liz was certain he must have spotted her moving arms. He shook his head, then returned his attention to his troops at the vehicle, where the preparations seemed to be largely finished. Liz breathed out heavily and carried on slicing the rope against the sword.

Meanwhile, Saporov and Plankin jumped down from the TEL and withdrew along with most of the others, picking up their weapons from the grass. Corporal Grushkin installed himself in the cab. The roof of the truck disgorged its rather stubby missile, until it resembled a tilted spire. Major Bugayev marched up to the door and issued a few instructions, finally replacing the mask over his face and confidently slapping the truck's hull. *Either they're pulling back to avoid the rocket exhaust, Liz fretted, or the Major expects a serious accident.*

To Liz's dismay, the troopers were gravitating towards her spot, for want of any other landmark. None of them were attentive to what she was doing, but she knew the Major would be tagging along any minute now. She rushed her last several furious strokes and her body sighed as the rope snapped free. She assumed a nonchalant expression before she remembered her face was hidden. For now, she stood, with hands clasped behind her to hide the trailing ends of rope and planted her feet over the sword to conceal its presence as comprehensively as possible.

Bugayev slammed the cab door on Grushkin and retreated at a trot to where the others had assembled, the AK over his shoulder. His zombie mask dwelt temporarily on Liz and she knew there was an expression of the deepest suspicion behind it.

Liz angled her head skyward and rocked on her heels to illustrate apathy, but Bugayev was already absorbed in the arrangement of his men in a tidy row, standing at ease; with eyes front.

Liz's time had run its course. This was her best and last chance; she dared not see it slip by. Expelling all thought for the consequences, Liz dived headlong into a run, motoring straight for the TEL vehicle. She could scarcely miss it, but she oriented herself once to home in directly on the stillopen computer panel.

Behind her, the Major whirled and emitted a muted bark. Unslinging the assault rifle, he pressed the butt to his shoulder and swiftly centred the muzzle on Liz's spine. His finger hooked around the trigger; his thumb tripped the safety; he tracked her running form with the barrel, making sure of the

kill.

Lieutenant Zhelnin flapped an arm, obscuring the Major's aim. He nodded vehemently at his superior. 'Comrade Major! I'll tackle her!'

There was a second's decision. 'Then do it!' Major Bugayev lowered the AK and watched Zhelnin's powerful run in pursuit of the Doctor's troublesome assistant. He swore as he noticed that Liz's slender legs had carried her almost to the vehicle, in spite of the encumbering NBC gear.

'Move it, Zhelnin!'

Liz could hear the beat of chasing footsteps, but she focused harder on attaining her object. She practically rammed into the side of the vehicle and scanned the computer console before her with rapid sweeps of her eyes. The Cyrillic alphabet was going to be as severe an impediment as the chubby fingers of her gloves, but she quickly recognised the meteorological data packed into one small screen, its own set of keys beneath; she didn't attempt to decipher the statistics blinking on the other screen, but guessed they were related to the missile itself. Fighting down a panic, battling the thump-thump of approaching boots, she punched in a series of entries on the compact screen, beginning with wind direction and speed. Her sabotage progressed no further than that.

Lieutenant Zhelnin seized her around the arms and wrestled her away from the machine. She wriggled in protest, but Zhelnin held her fast, flipping her onto the ground and restraining her there. He forced a shout into her hooded ear. 'Give it up, Miss Shaw! He will kill you!'

Liz searched the eyes behind the gas mask. She submitted.

Lieutenant Zhelnin helped her to her feet, holding her arms secure. He yanked her back to the panel and inspected the alterations she had completed. Pretending to shake her roughly, he pushed his mouthpiece close to her ear once more. 'It was a foolish risk —'

The cab door opened and Grushkin poked his shrouded head out, his whole posture a question. Lieutenant Zhelnin retained his grasp on Liz as he rounded angrily on him. 'There's nothing to see; no harm done! Proceed with the launch!'

He escorted Liz back to the others and had to report that Miss Shaw had managed to achieve only what would amount to a minor course deviation; insufficient to warrant an abort for reprogramming. Major Bugayev stared at Liz, the reflected missile screening his eyes in their visored sockets. He growled. 'Lieutenant Zhelnin, kindly place her in storage somewhere. Out of my sight and out of harm's way.' He waved her aside and turned to observe the launch. Zhelnin eased Liz away into a march, his hands gripping her shoulders.

The rocket ignited. Steam jetted down, floating the rear of the truck on a churning bed of filthy vapour. The tail drove a blinding stake of flame into the ground, vibrating and straining on its invisible leash. On the sound of a constantly crashing wave, this fat javelin screamed aloft in a funnel of smoke and fire.

Liz wept and trembled with the realisation of her own failure, but only Zhelnin knew anything of her distress. And he carried on shepherding her towards the house.

Aphrodite folded her arms and stamped a boot in a display of benevolent impatience. The Doctor had exposed the house's force field systems and the controls he had rigged were nothing short of a mess, a mess that, despite her best efforts, she had compounded with her own modifications. So no doubt the signals were having trouble navigating their way along the tangled spaghetti of wires. People or machines, they all took their time to respond, but the difference with people was that Aphrodite generally knew their responses before they voiced them. Machines, if there was any delay at all in their operation, kept her guessing.

Well, there certainly wasn't any time to tidy up the wiring.

Deciding not to wait any more, she reasoned a few more adjustments ought to make a more visible difference. She set about operating the force field controls with her mannered, delicate touches, even her easy concentration totally at odds with the situation's pressures.

After making sure she had correctly tapped in the Doctor's figures, in which she had every faith, she checked the chronometer she had built into the panel. Everything certainly

looked to be functioning perfectly; according to the dials, she had successfully redirected the field up and down the temporal axis.

‘Now for the challenging part,’ she jested for her own benefit. She licked her lip.

Sliding twin controls, now synchronised, she trawled in the limits of the force field towards her current temporal coordinates: centred on the house’s position in time. The Doctor’s theory was sound and she had every reason to believe the practice would generate the same result. She was surprised, even so, when her hands met actual physical resistance from the controls. The field had met the first point of opposition.

‘Ah! Well, our fish is too big to slip through the net, that’s certain,’ she murmured lightly, pursing her lips tightly in contemplation, ‘but can it tear it apart?’

She heaved with all her strength on the controls and edged them back several notches further. She breathed a sigh and waited. Then she tentatively removed her fingers from the slider. At least the controls had yet to bounce back to their original position. The span of the fracture had narrowed some hopeful centuries already.

Struck by another idea, she opened the plate above the slider and lit up the intricate circuitry with one of her rings. She commenced rerouting power to the slider mechanism itself, to assist in her subsequent attempts. After some minutes, she replaced the plate to hide away even more untidy wiring, rubbed her palms and tugged at the slider again.

It shifted more freely now, Aphrodite almost ready to rejoice as she drew the control closer to home. But the panel whined and sent up a cautionary wisp of smoke; and the slider jammed once more. Aphrodite huffed her exasperation and stood away, hands on hips. ‘Hmm.’

She shook her head, then shrugged. ‘Well, I’m sorry, Doctor. What we really need is something to remove the Chieftain; *then* we can have our never-never land.’

Something flashed bright in the living room window and Aphrodite heard the roar of a rocket engine outside. Hurrying into the room, Aphrodite looked up and out at the object now

arcing through the sky on a supporting trail of smoke. The Major had launched the *Tochka* missile.

Aphrodite's lip curled ever so slightly at the corner of her mouth.

There was nothing more she could do about that now. Let the Major play with his toys. She went back to the controls to see if she could make more of a difference there.

The Chieftain snuffed the air again and seemed to puncture a hole in the clouds with his massive bellow. His armoured chest inflated with the fury or exultation – it was impossible to tell which – then the noise filtered away to a low gargle between his crag-like teeth.

The Doctor forced himself into a patient wait for the Chieftain to reveal the cause of his outburst.

‘Ah, Doctor! I am attacked on all fronts. But your Russian allies have betrayed you, offered you up for sacrifice! These human loyalties are so fragile.’

‘Something I’m constantly made aware of,’ the Doctor pointed out, perfectly alert to the fact that Aphrodite must have embarked on her dangerous struggle against the fracture and his own need to divert its creator, ‘but what have they done? I don’t know quite what you mean.’

‘There is a *nuclear* missile, speeding to annihilate this very fortress! None of us is to survive!’ The Chieftain found untold pleasure in the prospect, but far more in the figures of Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy, who had escaped as far as the gate.

The Doctor adopted a forceful tone, attempting to break the Chieftain free of this jarring elation. ‘Surely, nuclear weapons are no threat to you! Can’t you do something; prevent the detonation?’

‘It is already done!’ the Chieftain declared in that instant. ‘We are spared!’

‘*What* have you done?’ demanded the Doctor, brusquely doubtful.

‘Grant me my due respect, Doctor, and I will grant you yours!’ the Chieftain commanded a penitent bow from the Doctor. Placated, he enlightened his audience with the news

that, ‘Such a miserable weapon, it has been swatted away. It will strike its target at some other random time.’

‘But that’s terrible!’ The Doctor was mummified with horror. ‘That simply plants the same problem on another century! There’ll be a nuclear detonation somewhere in Hungary’s past or future! You must prevent it!’

‘No! I must not. And I do not wish it. If it is the Major’s pleasure to explode a nuclear device in his own world’s past, then why should I deny him? Here, I have saved the lives of my army of Magyars, two of the Major’s *warriors* and yourself. There is room for gratitude I trust, Doctor?’

‘The Major is an irresponsible idiot! And –’ The Doctor clamped his own mouth shut, wary of straying outside the bounds of diplomacy.

‘A single *thought*, remember!’ The warning reminded the Doctor of an earlier sensation: that his existence would hang on nothing more material than an idea in attempting to face these creatures. Either Athena or the Chieftain could *wish* him dead. He had to maintain his distraction so that the Chieftain couldn’t deal with Aphrodite’s attack in a similar fashion.

As it was, in that moment, his task was done for him. A falling star, brightening the sky to twilight, swivelled the Chieftain’s head to the west of the fortress. ‘*Kagena!*’ he announced her entrance in hateful ecstasy.

The Doctor raced to the palisade and hopped up a rickety ladder to stand on the planking, set below the cruel tips of the wall.

Over the west bank, Kagena’s Eagle, borne on feathers of golden light, descended with diamond claws reaching for the earth. She landed with destructive grace, throwing out ripples of energy to consume the trees and clear a circular plain; the glowing rings sinking to the ground and moulding into soldiers, horses, and cannon. The Eagle’s wings folded around the body, then blossomed to their full shimmering span, disclosing the classical statue of Athena, the Staff of Minerva in her marble hand. She was crowned in a Greek helmet, the mask raised on its hinge to unveil all the serene belligerence of her face.

The concentric bands of her army were the multinational

Habsburg force, stolen from the seventeenth century. The Doctor was appalled.

The fortress burst into chaotic life. The Magyars washed over the ground, freeing their horses from the enclosures and mounting up to a chorus of wolfish howls. Torches and swords were thrust aloft as the clans formed up, gathering around their leaders and the Kagyrn warriors. The Chieftain himself unsheathed an asymmetrical sword, with a viciously barbed edge, from hilt to tip the length of one of his arms. The blade swam with a curious sheen.

‘An omnitemporal sword,’ the Doctor whispered from his vantage point. It was easy to envisage exactly how Time was to shatter into so much sand. Diverting the Chieftain was achieving nothing: the effects were already being felt, but the break had yet to occur!

‘My Timeblade!’ boasted the Chieftain, exhibiting a Kagyrn’s pride in his own craftsmanship. ‘To cleave Infinity!’

‘Why fight at all?! Hers is the greater army! She has eight centuries of technological development in her favour!’ The Doctor waved an arm at the assembled guns on the plain.

‘The On-Ogur will boil her army from the surface of the planet! Enough! Our talk is done, Doctor! The Battle is joined!’ The Chieftain’s rallying cry invoked a further tide of yelps and cheers from the incensed Magyars. Then the Chieftain released them from the fortress.

Many flooded out through the gateway, but others ranged behind the Chieftain, whose flamethrower breath disintegrated entire sections of the palisade, opening gaps through which the cavalry could pour. The Doctor’s segment of wall was jostled, but remained intact; the Doctor having to wedge an arm over the space between two posts to stay on the catwalk. He hauled himself upright in time to see the Chieftain marching outside onto the island.

There the army paused, facing its enemy across the water. The antagonists greeted each other with poisoned scowls. The Doctor drank in the scene, in real danger of intoxication. He was sure, now, of how Melisandra – the real Melisandra – must have felt all those millennia in the past, overlooking that valley on Kagren, crammed with the forces of these two

demigods.

Boil her army...? The Doctor tore his gaze away and panned it around the empty fortress. It was not *quite* empty, of course.

Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy had been over by the gateway when the Chieftain had delivered the news of the missile's launch and subsequent deflection. True to their professional training, they had not remained very long in that position once attentions had turned away from them.

Chistyakov, the smarter of the duo, had learned the error of the Major's plan; in short, that the beings they faced were invulnerable to nuclear missiles. He had witnessed Athena's descent with the same faltering courage that had accompanied the Chieftain's materialisation. He had already reasoned that the Chieftain was determined to use 'his' nine missiles against Athena – possibly by way of a feint. Then, while he and Yaroslavskiy were flitting between the tents, avoiding the crush of Magyars, he had inferred, from the Chieftain's words, that the warheads were to be detonated over Athena's army. Since this constituted no direct attack on Athena herself, Chistyakov carried the point further, she may well fail to fend off all nine; therefore, *they* were in danger of dying.

Besides, the Major wanted the other nine missiles recovered.

As all this clicked into place, Chistyakov had resolved the only course open to himself and Yaroslavskiy. Now, they were committed to that course in full.

Jogging swiftly, they forged a path towards the row of TEL vehicles, taking care to duck out of sight until they were sure the Chieftain had departed the fortress. Once Chistyakov saw him exit, he urged the burly Yaroslavskiy into a faster pace, mindful of their available time diminishing rapidly with the approach of battle. Soon, though, they darted up to the first of the trucks and Yaroslavskiy pounced on the ladder, wrenching the cab door rudely open.

The Magyar, seated at the launch console, gaped blankly at the instruments, one bat-like gauntlet hovering over the buttons that would key the ignition. Undeterred, Yaroslavskiy

punched the man across the face. The Magyar crewman collapsed, allowing the stocky trooper to haul him out and dump him on the ground.

Chistyakov stood guard as Yaroslavskiy climbed in and operated the electronics to disarm the missile and the hydraulics to lower it safely into its armoured housing.

‘You go,’ he advised Chistyakov. ‘It’s the work of one man.’

‘One your size,’ his comrade quibbled, but hastened on to the next truck.

It was then that the Doctor spied the elf-like soldier and his colleague, immediately guessing the nature of their actions. He observed them avidly, tracing each man’s hopscotch progress from one TEL to another; neutralising the weapon’s operator, boarding the vehicle, working furiously at the controls, leaving his fellow hurtle past and proceed along the line of trucks. The Doctor frequently transferred his attention outside, where he found the Chieftain’s army still forming up on the stone bridge and the island shore.

This time, when he looked, the Chieftain’s eyes drilled right at him.

‘You and your infernal allies learn *nothing!*’ the Kagymn raged.

‘The weapons are no good to you,’ the Doctor pleaded, buying every moment possible for the men behind him, ‘so why avenge their loss? They would have vaporised both armies equally. They don’t discriminate!’

‘They do when I command it! I was prepared; Athena was not!’ The Chieftain becalmed his army once more, venting brimstone clouds at the fortress. ‘This time you shall see which forces are mine to command!’

‘No!’ was on the Doctor’s tongue, but intuition turned his head. Yaroslavskiy dropped from the last truck, but his boots never touched the ground. He and Chistyakov were drowned in a violent flare, their flesh and uniforms swimming together, the molten surface broken by protracted screams. Then the flare intensified, the liquid evaporating into misty figures, dispersed by the natural breeze.

The Doctor rounded on the Chieftain; only to be ignored.

The Danube ran with a viscous fluid, solidifying into blue glass. Mirrored in the surface, under the imposed twilight, the Magyars galloped over, the animals' hooves finding an adequate grip. The Magyar chieftains, the Kagyrn warriors, the clan leaders and the hordes of riders swamped the smooth screen like a thick coat of oil, then flowed up the bank to regroup on the other side. The Chieftain waded through his own men to take their lead.

Scattered trees were blasted from existence, cleaning an expanse of plain all the way to meet Athena's patient multitude. Then they faced each other, just as in the tapestry. There, before him, was the scene hinted at by the two cities of Buda and Pest, suspended on the brink of a disastrous war, and the Doctor, from his viewpoint on the battlements, could believe himself the only factor keeping the forces apart.

Events had run ahead of him, all sense of control slipping inexorably through his fingers.

Then he recollected what Athena, in playing the part of Melisandra had said, and that the Chieftain had heard even his whisper. When anyone really wanted their message to be heard, all they had to do was shout.

'You compare yourselves to gods and yet you're as blind to obvious facts as any common-orgarden human general! Wars always have their level of futility, but these Battles of yours are absolutely pointless!' The deaths of the Russians had robbed the Doctor of his caution for the present, and he delivered his lecture with reckless zeal.

Athena and the Chieftain paused, their conflict suspended on a thread of Melisandra's tapestry. While their respective armies froze, forming a monumental tableau on the dusky landscape, the two faces compelled the Doctor to finish his speech.

'Athena brought us here to engineer an advantage for herself against you, the Chieftain. All we've managed is to cancel the advantage of the missiles on your side!' The Doctor drove the main force of his argument at the Chieftain, his instincts presupposing a better chance of success there, if only because he was more sure of the entity's nature. 'Destiny itself

has enforced the balance! There will never be a victor without an ultimate sacrifice!’

The Greek goddess and the Kagyrn hero prepared to disregard the Time Lord and resumed their stances for battle. The opposed armies stirred restlessly. The weapons lingered in tantalising proximity, compressing infinity between them.

‘But don’t you realise, you’re a perfect match!’ persisted the Doctor, straining the desperate tone from his voice. ‘Neither one of you can ever win the victory you want! Don’t you see? Athena created *you* her equal.’ The Doctor pointed across the distance to the Chieftain; he was on the wings of a stage and his voice carried to the centre because at least one of these entities wished to hear him. ‘You’ll each need to commit every last erg of yourselves to cancel out the other. Destroy yourself in order to destroy your enemy! The victory belongs to the one who *chooses* to make that sacrifice!’

There was a strenuous pause. Once again, the scales wavered, then steadied.

‘Ah, Doctor, you are clever, I’ll grant you,’ trilled Athena, intimating that she believed precisely the opposite. Her voice swept over the Doctor with the passing clouds. ‘But you will not *talk* us both out of existence. No. We each desire to win, but it matters little whether I achieve my goal this time or the next. I will persevere forever and the dictates of chance will grant me my opportunity; whereupon I will seize it. There is no hurry, you see.’

The Doctor applied a liberal coat of sarcasm. ‘Spoken with true irony, madam.’

‘She toys with you, Doctor,’ opined the Chieftain. ‘She is given to frivolity.’

‘She is frivolous – and *wrong*,’ the Doctor amended him. ‘She intends to go on forever flipping a coin that’s destined to land on its edge every time.’

‘You speak the truth in vivid colours, Doctor,’ the Chieftain belied a rumbling note of admiration for the mediator.

Athena sneered at the Chieftain, the expression ruinous even to her sublime beauty. ‘So you grow conversational with this *Galfek* now? Why don’t you kill him so we might

commence this battle and I may prove him wrong? Come, or can you be contemplating his proposal of suicide?’

‘My sword hungers for your kiss, Kagena,’ simmered the Chieftain in return, ‘but *I* know that the Doctor speaks truth. My Timeblade will never destroy you and this I have known for the span of my existence.’ He aimed his diabolic head at the puny figure of the Doctor. ‘This harpy created me with her own destructive energies; on that you are not mistaken. The transformation was total. I was a being apart from my own race – unique, since my nature was still my own. No longer did I depend on the life force of others. To feed me with energy would now be to spill a vial of scent into an Earthly ocean. You would gain nothing. Where, then, was my existence?’

‘There was but a single cause. Kagena. My only worthy opponent. To slay her was my sole desire. Yet, if I were to pursue that goal, what would become of me when it was attained? I am ended. There is nothing left. I die. So I reasoned it all as you have done and made my conclusions: that only self-destruction wins her destruction.

‘My old spirit lives within me and it breathes too deep to allow me that choice, so I must be satisfied with the *pleasure* of our bouts and the fulfilment of conquest. These alone can fill my eternity. And if any Battle affords more than pleasure, then I may fill my eternity all the more.

‘Your intelligence does you credit, Doctor, and I will spare you.’

‘Well, I suppose I should be grateful,’ gruded the Doctor, ‘but I must say I find your admission deplorable. You’re talking of battles, wars even, as entertainment! Both of you are equally guilty in that respect, of course. I’ve seen the evidence on Melisandra’s tomb.’

‘I didn’t kill her,’ Athena insisted, with a very human note of defiance and almost as if sensitive to the Doctor’s judgement. Then, too, there may have been a sliver of regret. ‘She was a mortal and she died of natural age.’

‘That’s rather beside the point!’ the Doctor objected fiercely. ‘Not even Man fights his battles for reasons as flimsy as *amusement*. Oh, he’ll fight for territory, glorification, over

some point of honour or belief – pretty much anything you care to mention! But never simply to *pass the time!*’

Athena displayed a lofty smile. ‘Gladiators,’ she stated. ‘You’re argument fails, Doctor. They killed and others had them kill for the amusement of spectators. Today, you may be *our* audience. For, if I attack, the Chieftain has no choice but to defend, and so begins the Battle.’

Her muscular arms raised the magnificent Staff of Minerva in a challenge to the Chieftain. Her enemy bared his fangs and touched his Timeblade to the clouds. The armies behind each tremendous being fomented in anticipation of battle. Death or glory? was a question caught in every mouth.

The two weapons swung apart. When they clashed, Time fell asunder.

Chapter Thirteen

Liz Shaw

'I suppose you must think of me as a very junior apprentice. Well, I may be some distance behind you, Doctor, but at least I know where I'm going.'

Liz Shaw to the Doctor, during joint research work

'Wait!'

It was probably the most important demand the Doctor had made in his life.

Incredibly, it had the desired effect. First Athena, then the Chieftain, turned attention on the Doctor and slowly lowered each mighty weapon. In the silence that ensued, even the huge armies that ranged across either side of the plain fell as still as glaciers. The broken skies above, so like a shattered pane of dark glass, were melding together once more; Aphrodite's efforts were containing the effects of the gods' weapons. For the time being. There was death in Athena's beautiful eyes, disbelief in the fiery glare of the Chieftain.

The two deities – and the fate of the Earth – hung on the Doctor's words.

'I cannot allow you to do this. Either of you.' The Doctor delivered his simple proscription with accomplished equanimity, folding his arms to await the reaction.

Athena spread her wings, bridling visibly. She fired an enraged appeal at her opponent. 'Hear him! The Time Lord issues decrees to you! Will you spare him even now? Brush him away and let us begin.'

The Doctor fancied there was some amusement in the curl of the Chieftain's oily lips. If there was, then there was also some measure of promise. Skilfully concealing his apprehension, he confronted the Goddess head-on. 'Now, wait

a minute. Why don't you do your own dirty work, Athena? Why don't you kill me yourself?'

Athena was nearly apoplectic. 'I do not like your tone! Remember, you address a Goddess!'

Now, the Doctor's confidence flourished and he slipped into a decidedly informal patter. 'Do I now? You know I can't help wondering if you're as all-powerful as you're cracked up to be. Perhaps I've been mistaken. Maybe you're not the equal of the great Chieftain here. Maybe he has one-up on his creator.'

'We are exactly matched!' Athena boiled. 'Chance will give me my victory!'

'Perhaps you'll entertain me in a little harmless speculation, then. A small delay can hardly matter to you, can it? Of course, a great deal depends on how much truth you let slip when you were posing as poor Melisandra.' The Doctor had obviously struck a chord. He pressed on, confidence gathering pace steadily. 'Yes, I see it all now. Let's trace your history shall we?'

The Chieftain sheathed his sword, snarling with glee. He clearly sensed the Doctor's assured manner and delighted in any ruffling of Athena's feathers. 'More of your *entertainment*? Why not?'

'Play your games, then,' Athena acceded pompously.

'Of course, I have seen the *real* Melisandra. I expect she rendered a decent self-portrait in her tapestry. That was her work, I'm sure, and my companion, Liz, actually remarked on the similarity between her and the Goddess in the picture.' The Doctor could readily visualise the tapestry in his mind's eye; it was a work which would probably stay with him for the rest of his lives. 'Well, now I've seen both genuine articles, so to speak, I'm inclined to heartily endorse my friend's opinion.'

Athena affected boredom. 'What of this?'

'Athena – sprouted from the head of Zeus!' proclaimed the Doctor theatrically, always fond of drama where appropriate. He clutched his chin, feigning puzzlement. 'What does that sound like to me? It can't literally mean what it says. No, poor Zeus would have had a dreadful migraine! No, it sounds rather like an *idea*, I'd say. And who could Zeus be? Father of the

ancient gods! Well, who was the father of the ancient gods, but mortal Man? He was dreaming up deities all over the place – a god for this, a goddess for that. Mount Olympus was positively overcrowded.’

‘I was created by no human, Doctor,’ Athena hissed her contempt.

‘No, I never said you were.’ The Doctor was committed to a bold offensive now. ‘No, I think this *Zeus* was a Gallifreyan. That’s right, a *Galfek*. I think the fellow was a remarkable young man who discovered some way to transpose his imagination into a living reality of energy and matter – cast spells, if you will. I think he envisaged a beautiful weapon to combat the threat of the Kagyrn Chieftains, with little understanding of their powers for transmutation. And, most of all, I believe he modelled this *saviour* in the image of the woman he loved!’

The Chieftain’s giant frame rocked gently underneath his armour; he was laughing through his fangs.

Athena laughed silkily. ‘Oh, you tell a fanciful story, Doctor!’

‘You’re unusually transparent, madam,’ the Doctor accused her, no longer looking up at her in anything but a physical sense. ‘I *know* it’s the truth. A truth you refuse to see, but truth is the one constant with which you cannot play. You were created a goddess, a self-willed entity with extraordinary power, but with one primary purpose to fulfil before you earned your freedom. Destroy the Kagyrn Chieftains! Destroy the enemies of Gallifrey!’

‘Only in that first battle on Sinnaca, you learned how you were destined to fail. In your very first attempt, you created an equal out of the mighty Ongra. You fled in desperation and uncertainty. What was to be your next course of action? Stop me wherever I go completely off the rails, won’t you, madam!’

‘You raised an army of humanoids to face the Kagyrn. Dedicated yourself to the destruction of the fiend you’d brought into existence. You came to that battle on Kagen to try your luck. But you hardly expected to see the Lady Melisandra there, did you? Your own face on a mere mortal! That must have been a grave wound! You couldn’t kill her,

because your Gallifreyan creator had given you that limitation at least. So what did you do?

‘You overlaid her with a shell of your own persona – your aura, if you will – to decoy the Chieftain. Then you cast her through Time so he might destroy her for you.

‘Now, tell me where my equation doesn’t add up!’

Athena’s natural glow intensified and the Doctor could feel the anger, the frustration, the desire to kill him welling up inside her; he could feel the breath of destruction dammed up behind that beautiful face. There was nothing she could do.

The Chieftain was quietly elated, his mirth a gentle quake on his tongue and in his eyes. The iron was hot and it was left to the Doctor to strike the final few blows.

‘You are the greater evil, Athena!’ he condemned her ardently. ‘The Chieftain fights his endless battles because war is instinctive to Kagyrn. You were devised for good, but you threw all that into the nearest star! You *chose* your path of war, siding with any cause that took your fancy; any history, any world – but why should it matter to you? As long as you were the people’s champion, as long as you were the heroine!

‘You’re as dispassionate in your killing as the Chieftain, but at least he has the honesty to do his own! And the honesty to admit what he is! What did you do to your creator, Athena? How did you engineer the man’s end for creating such a failure? You must have despised him for all that humiliation!

‘But if you are the greater evil, then you are very much the minor deity. The Chieftain was created by a goddess, after all. Whereas you began as nothing more than a young man’s romantic dream! You are the end result of wishful thinking. In short, madam, you are a *bad idea*!’

The Chieftain’s volcanic mouth swung open and he exploded into mocking laughter. Behind him, an echo rippled through the assembled ranks of his Magyar army. The Kagyrn Warriors snorted fitfully in their master’s shadow. Athena, the awesome Kagenia, was a joke.

‘You are my inferior, after all!’ the Chieftain bellowed ecstatically.

Athena, snake-venom on her lips, exulted: ‘Then my victory is all the richer!’

She lunged at the Chieftain in a wash of brightest flame, her wings and armour melting away to pure energy. White fire enveloped the black mass of the Chieftain, consuming him body and soul until he was no more than a darker fire burning inside the crowning conflagration of the Goddess. Magnesium flames expanded out and out, then collapsed inwards, fading to nothing. Lingering in that void, the Doctor was sure he saw the outline of Athena's celestial features, her heavenly mouth curled in a triumphant smile.

The waters ran blacker than ever as they washed beneath the low bridge of stone and earth and Huba spurred his stallion across with an unusually vicious kick of his heels; sufficient, he hoped, to counter the animal's understandable sense of trepidation. The Magyar, himself, viewed the dark palisade ahead with a distinct pride, tinged with the gravity of the moment. His hundred-strong escort clattered over the bridge a respectful distance behind him; they were hardly a necessity within the fortress, but would be Huba's contribution to the honour guard. His mount's hooves chopped along the path to the wall and the gate was swung back to admit the rider and his entourage.

Huba dismounted expertly and left his horse in the charge of an attendant slave, scarcely acknowledging the man's humble courtesies. He powered himself briskly between the tents to the stone hut, his cloak sweeping a broad trail in the dirt, encouraging the guards and lines of people to stand aside. His escort waited on their mounts, silently greeting the horsemen of the other tribes.

Huba removed his spiked helmet and marched inside the torch-lit hall, favouring the occupants with a curt bow before he had properly digested the scene.

A pause was required to take in the majestic figure, king among kings, lying on a stone slab in the shadows, beyond the blazing pyre in the middle of the room. He was an imperious, powerful man, with chin and brow like rugged cliffs, surrounded by a regal beard and extensive tufts of hair. A granite ridge of nose separated two eyes of slate. Here was the binding force that cemented and governed their Magyar

alliance. Here was Árpád.

The other faces, bathed in a flickering glow from the fire at Árpád's feet, regarded Huba with interest and a mute cordiality. There were five of them: a sign of their Kavar allies' exclusion from this sombre affair. Authority and leadership radiated from each man, and Huba acknowledged their respect with a grave deference in keeping with the occasion.

'My lords,' he apologised profoundly, 'I came on my fastest horse, the moment my tasks would allow. They were difficulties unsuited to delegation.'

Árpád jested weakly, his voice husky with the effort of speech. 'Ah, Huba, when Death comes upon *you*, he will find you too busy to grant him an audience!'

'Now, there is a matter I could happily entrust to a deputy,' smiled Huba humbly. The seven men shared a soft chorus of laughter.

But the moment of humour was short-lived.

Rond, Ond, Tétény, Elöd, Tas, Huba; each of the six chieftains knelt and paid their respects at the altar as the breath seeped from their leader's body. As Huba stepped forward, he felt a cut, like a blade slicing across his gaze. A jump, a flinch, some fleeting sensation he could not grasp. He mistook it for one of the rebellious tears he would not permit himself.

And when it was gone, nothing had changed. Not even the mask setting on his leader's face.

Huba sent a guard to fetch Árpád's Kavar wife and his boy, Zoltan, from outside; then he took his chieftain's hand and kissed it, whispering, 'Names will be our only epitaph. Yours will be this country: the nation of Magyaria.'

As Huba stood away, Árpád died.

The flare receded as unexpectedly as it had come, leaving behind only a bizarre calm on the plain near Csepel Island and a painful afterimage on Liz's eyes, despite the barest glimpse to which she had been exposed. Squirming past Zhelnin in the doorway, she barged her way out to the front of the house and the gathered soldiers. She blinked and looked again in the direction of the fortress.

She knew the Doctor could not have lived.

The fact that the TEL vehicle had vanished was a minor detail to her and the ensuing frenzy of voices and activity made no impression until the Major brought it to an unexpected end.

‘Stand at attention! There’s no cause for alarm! The Temporal disruption is over! We have won!’ There was no cheering though. Only a stunned silence.

‘How, Major?’ Lieutenant Zhelnin came up, asking on the men’s behalf.

‘I don’t know! The missile, I expect. Did it detonate after all?’ demanded Bugayev furiously, words muffled but discernible. ‘Where’s the damned cloud?’

Turning a glare on Bugayev, Liz whipped off her gas mask and yanked the hood down around her neck. She brushed a sleeve across her sweating brow. ‘Is that really all you care about? Where’s the mushroom cloud? Did the weapon function properly?’ She arched her lip in obvious distaste. ‘If you ask me, the Doctor went to deal with the wrong monster!’

‘What’s the counter read, Corporal Grushkin?’ Bugayev urged the trooper, but the slight figure shook his head and there was scarcely a crackle from the device in his hand. The Major tossed his mask aside and regarded Liz sympathetically. ‘Miss Shaw, you’re clearly distraught and, believe me, I understand. But the Doctor died a hero, and you’ve every reason to be proud.’ He cuffed her chin surprisingly gently.

‘Don’t touch me!’ she exhorted, shying away.

There was an undulating clump of hooves as a horse trotted gracefully up the hillside towards them. Liz turned and was cheered to see Aphrodite, emerging from the house to welcome Bailador.

‘Oh, no,’ groaned Bugayev. ‘The *dove of peace* has arrived. She will certainly peck me to death over this.’

But the fact that Aphrodite had summoned her mount implied to Liz that her friend was preparing to depart, her job done. Aphrodite guided the stallion to a halt before her. ‘Hello, Major,’ she chimed softly, immediately patting the horse’s neck and approaching to greet Liz. ‘Liz, how are you? Did they force you into that?’

‘It’s hardly the Paris spring collection, I know.’ Liz admitted, pulling at the hips of the NBC suit and staring down at herself. She suddenly remembered the brilliant flare. ‘Oh, Aphrodite! You don’t know what’s happened. The Doctor –’

Aphrodite buttoned Liz’s mouth with her fingers. ‘He’ll be fine, Liz, honestly. He’s got a fair walk, that’s all.’ She read Liz’s fears in an instant. ‘Trust me. *Trust* me.’

‘You’ve been in contact with him, then?’ inquired Bugayev.

‘No, I’m a gypsy fortune-teller,’ testified Aphrodite, with the convincing innocence of a lamb. ‘And for the Doctor, I’d predict a long life with plenty of travel and new friends wherever he goes. At least, that’s my hope for him.’

‘Oh, shut up!’ Bugayev swatted her away impatiently, then signalled the rest of his men to remove their NBC gear. Running fingers back through his hair, he told the two women, ‘Neither of you know the whole story, so stay off my back.’

‘Yes, but she was right on one score, at least!’ called the Doctor, appearing from nowhere and trudging up the steep flank of the hill from the riverside. In his hands he carried Athena’s Staff and a frighteningly large sword. He looked like an off-duty monarch who didn’t quite know what to do with his symbols of state.

‘Oh, Doctor!’ Liz skipped over to meet the familiar figure and practically flung herself at him, wrapping both arms around his neck. Smiling, the Doctor surrendered to her embrace, taking care to hold the two artefacts apart behind her back.

‘Yes, I’m perfectly well, Liz. Just a few minor bruises around the neck and ribcage now, that’s all.’ His eyes shone tenderly as she released her hold.

‘The explosion was your handiwork, I take it?’ guessed Liz.

‘Yes, I think you could say I played my part. All it took was a subtle tip of the scales on one side. Of course, they sprang promptly back in the other direction and there you are! Equilibrium.’ The Doctor held the sword and staff up at equal but opposite angles.

Liz walked with him to join the main group. ‘You do

realise the Major gave you a hero's death a while ago?"

'Yes, quite. I'm very much afraid that might be said of Chistyakov and Yaroslavskiy – but not me. Hello, Aphrodite,' he gave the young lady a warm-hearted nod, before handing her the artefacts, asking her to take care of them for a moment and rounding abruptly on the Major. 'Of all the ignorant, stupid, pig-headed things you could have tried, that, sir, does more than take the biscuit! That demolishes an entire packet! I won't waste my breath on what could have happened, since my opinions evidently don't feature too highly on your list of priorities. But the Chieftain brushed your insignificant spear aside in Time and now I have neither any idea when it might detonate, nor if it'll be possible to prevent a massive disaster!'

'Doctor –' interposed Aphrodite, but her quiet voice was no match for the Doctor's temper.

'I've not quite finished yet, Aphrodite.' He jabbed a finger at Bugayev's chest. 'Do you have any idea of what you've done, Major? A nuclear explosion over Budapest at any time in its past or future! We could be talking about millions of lives, all down to this irresponsible madness you call "necessary action"! You, sir, are the most callous, dangerous maniac I have ever seen leading anything smaller than a country!'

'Doctor – !' Aphrodite persisted, a tremor of anger rising in tune with the Doctor's.

'Shut up!' Bugayev yelled at her. 'The Doctor has made his point with his usual eloquence; and his usual supply of half the facts!' He slapped the Doctor's arm aside and aimed his own finger at the Time Lord. 'In the past, I have taken all the *necessary actions* you can think of in the interests of security – national and global! I have done it all, and you don't have the first clue! Believe me, it is enough to make your fine head of hair whiter still!

'And through it all, I measure my success in terms of one question: have I done my job to the best of my ability? The answer is always yes – always! And not once have I ever had cause for regret. Not once have I had to think back and wonder if I had done the right thing. But it's not enough, because *you* –' he fired a gun-barrel finger at first the Doctor, then

Aphrodite ‘ – and *you* want everything done with handshakes and kisses! And that, my friends, is not living in the real world!

‘And did it never occur to either of you, with all your superior intellects, to stop, just once, and consider the outside possibility that, perhaps, this outrageous solution was going a little too far even for the hard-hearted Major!’

‘You’re claiming you were *controlled* to launch the missile?’ The Doctor’s scepticism was wholly unrestrained. ‘You know, Major, you never struck me as an easy target for telepathic manipulation. Far too strong-willed.’

‘And your emotions are firmly in the passenger seat,’ added Aphrodite, offended by the verbal tirade and appearing flustered at having to go unheard.

‘I’m claiming nothing,’ Bugayev snarled. ‘I merely put it forward as a possibility, something to make you think before you assault me with your high-minded accusations. But let me make something very clear, Doctor. I don’t *care* enough to lie. But those were *god-like* beings we were dealing with, and the thing you have to ask yourself is, would Major Bugayev have knowingly sacrificed his men and you, Doctor, to save the Earth?’

He smiled thinly, his voice perfectly calm. ‘And the beauty is, you will never *truly* know.’ He tapped the side of his forehead. ‘Because the answer stays locked in here.’

For once, the Doctor had no words, matching Bugayev’s impenetrable stare.

Gratefully, Aphrodite intervened. ‘I’m sorry to take the wind out of your sails, Major, but the issue is rather moot, anyway.’ She smiled faintly to herself. ‘You see, I’d already disabled the nuclear warhead and equipped the missile with a container of my Pacifier virus. Liz would tell you about it, but the exact specifications are top secret.’ She shared a roguish grin with Liz, then sighed listlessly. ‘Wouldn’t have hurt anyone, the fight would have been cancelled and they could have all gone home. Such a shame it was a wasted effort.’

‘That’s right,’ seconded Liz helpfully. ‘Even the belligerent deities might have lost their aggressive instincts. We should have saved some for you, Major.’

The Doctor chortled softly, a weight lifting from his mind. Major Bugayev digested the news far less appreciatively, his eyes darting around the small assembly.

‘How dare you tamper with Soviet military equipment!’ he shook a fist at Aphrodite, all the more annoyed when her eyelids failed to flicker. ‘Why didn’t you enclose a bouquet of flowers while you were at it?’

‘I didn’t have the time,’ lamented Aphrodite. ‘But it would have been a lovely touch.’

Fuming, Bugayev seemed to search around for something to strike; the soldiers respectfully avoided him. He steadily recovered his senses.

‘Just a minute, my little *gorlitsa*, how could you disable the warhead? Such a frail creature would have needed some assistance. Who were the other saboteurs?! Who helped you?!’

Aphrodite, unintimidated, coolly delivered her reply. ‘It was Abdurasulov. Only him.’ Behind Bugayev, Liz noticed Zhelnin incline his head and shift his stance. After a moment, Aphrodite added, ‘And I’m not your little dove.’

‘Have it your own way!’ relented Bugayev, seeing no advantage to arguing. ‘I’m sure I would only have a mutiny on my hands if I arrested *you*.’ He barked a number of orders at the troopers who moved off in the direction of the house, Zhelnin keeping his eyes resolutely away from Aphrodite but of course Aphrodite would know the extent of his gratitude: she would feel it, Liz was sure. Bugayev treated them to a haughty smirk. ‘Fortunately, I have a few more pressing matters awaiting me in Moscow.’

‘Ten of them in Budapest,’ the Doctor refreshed his memory. ‘The Magyars brought those missile-trucks from the Steppes. Ten Arrows! There won’t have been any spatial transition on the return journey, you know.’

Bugayev was appalled, his beady eyes swelling dangerously. Lacking any solid target, he punched his own open palm. ‘One on Castle Hill and nine on Csepel! The Hungarian police will be swarming over them!’ With pristine humility, he issued a curt salute to the trio, insinuating good will. ‘Goodbye. Thank you so much for all your help. If we must meet again, please make sure it’s on my home territory.’

He carried himself in a masterful pace all the way to the house, entering the doorway without turning back. In seconds, the building had blinked out of existence.

‘Will he send it back, do you suppose?’ asked Liz, a short while later. ‘For us?’

She gave a start as the house reappeared.

The Doctor patted her arm sympathetically. ‘Yes, it does rather creep up on you. Not like a TARDIS at all.’

‘If you say so, Doctor,’ murmured Liz, lacking the energy to disagree.

‘No materialisation or anything of the kind. Remarkable piece of temporal engineering.’ The Doctor was in full professorial mode. ‘Of course, the damage will have to be rectified. Can’t have these buildings slipping outside their allotted time-span just as they feel.’

‘Is that what you’re going to do?’ Aphrodite was studying the Doctor keenly. ‘Put the house in order? Maybe the entire network’s impaired. Quite a job. Could be very time-consuming.’

She was teasing the Doctor for the truth, Liz could tell, but he attempted a deflection anyway. ‘Someone has to do it, you know.’

Liz glanced between the two of them. The Doctor and Aphrodite. Two mysteries with an unspoken understanding of one another.

‘There’s an alternative, of course,’ posited Aphrodite, looking whimsically askance at the air, her fiery eyes alive with some plot. ‘I mean, if you wanted a proper break from your exile, there are rooms available in a humble villa I know. I don’t generally have many guests, it’s true, but it wouldn’t be the first time. And you know it would be no imposition.’ The Doctor nodded, more unspoken mystery passing between their gazes, until the Doctor glanced away and Aphrodite was left studying his profile. ‘Three’s not a crowd in paradise, and I know what it would mean to you, Doctor.’

Liz saw how the Doctor was moved by her generous candour. Here was a glowing opportunity to decamp and thumb his nose at the sentence of exile. He glanced at her, as if

figuring her own desire to see other worlds into the equation. In his expression, Liz fancied there was an apology, telling her it simply wasn't a factor.

'Yes, you do know what it would mean, Aphrodite – and I'm honestly touched by your offer,' he smiled, with both hearts. 'You know that too, but I may as well say it too. But it's not an offer I can possibly accept. Sooner, rather than later, the Time Lords would realise and I'd be straight back here. Worse than that, I'm afraid they wouldn't thank you for having helped me escape. They're terrible sticklers for their rules, you know, and they'd most likely see you pay with your freedom.'

'And I know what that would mean to *you*.'

Aphrodite smiled ruefully, accepting an answer she had already known deep down. She strode forward and enfolded Liz in a sisterly hug. A hold that didn't want to let go. 'Take care,' she instructed her. Then, she breathed, 'Remember, science has a poetry all its own.' She pulled away, her hands lingering on Liz's shoulders for a moment longer before passing to the Doctor.

The Doctor bowed and kissed her hand. 'It's been a pleasure.'

'We got there in the beginning, didn't we?' she joked slyly. Drawing back into a curtsy, she approached Bailador and glided up into the saddle. The sword and staff were strapped, held fast in place behind the saddle. 'I'll see to it these are buried deep.'

'Yes, we cut things a little more finely than I would have liked.' The Doctor laid a hand around Liz. 'Time is going to need some bracing if she's going to heal over this wound.'

'You mean – ?' started Liz.

The Doctor flexed his features slightly awkwardly, clearly not proud. 'Yes, I'm afraid so. It's not a serious break, nothing a couple of omnitemporal splints can't help mend. But don't worry.' He favoured Liz with an encouraging squeeze. 'History has been held together by flimsier threads than that before.'

'A wing and a prayer, Doctor,' said Aphrodite. She grabbed Bailador's reins, ready to ride off. 'Goodbye. Both of

you.'

'Oh, Aphrodite!' the Doctor called, striding up. 'By the way, you do realise, your Pacifier missile might not have been such a wasted effort. It's a guess, but it could have detonated in the middle of the thirteenth century, don't you think? It's quite possible it took more than the death of a Khan to turn back the Golden Horde.'

Aphrodite rolled the idea around on her tongue. 'The Mongols, you mean?' She laughed. 'Well, like the Major's mystery, we'll never truly know the answer. But I like your version. It's wonderfully neat.' She smoothed the horse's neck.

'Of course, when you are out in the Universe again, Doctor, you'll be sure and look me up, won't you?' Gathering the reins again, she prepared to depart. 'By the way, Liz, after I've buried these somewhere, I'll wait down by the river for an hour or two. Goodbye.'

A flick of the reins sent the stallion into a healthy canter, bearing her mistress, Aphrodite, homeward.

'And to think, I never used to believe in magic.' Liz watched horse and rider recede only for a moment. 'Doctor, what on earth did she mean?'

The Doctor shuffled from one foot to the other, his gaze passing gradually out over the Danube. 'I'd say it was her way of inviting you to go with her – or offering you an alternative route to UNIT HQ –' he reasoned, admiring the view. 'A more – *direct* route.'

'Direct?' Liz cursed the sluggishness in her brain, but as her own gaze fell on the lonely Renaissance house she could almost hear the click – of the light going on in her head.

'Oh, I see,' she smouldered, tucking one arm under the other and resting her weight squarely on one hip. 'Your *maintenance work* is going to take you all round the world, back and forth in your precious curtain rings, is it?'

The Doctor faced her with hands in pockets. 'Well, it's not likely to be for long, Liz. Most probably, the Time Lords will want to close it all down once they learn of Melisandra's death.' His expression was a plea in itself. 'There can't be any harm in exploring the other houses, anyway – in the meantime.'

And since I'll not have left Earth, the Time Lords can hardly lodge any serious complaints.'

'When were you going to let me in on this, exactly? When we stepped through the wardrobe into Narnia?' Liz sensed an agitation surfacing in her and she knew the Doctor had noticed it already. *Why did he have to mention UNIT?* she thought.

'If you don't want to come, Liz, I'll understand. You can go back to UNIT and wait for me there.' There was a paternal quality in his manner that Liz knew was meant to charm her. He finished, 'I'm sure you'll straighten everything out with the Brigadier for me.'

Liz bit her lip and searched the stretch of the Danube for any defence against the threat of tears. 'Oh, Doctor, if I go back to UNIT I'll only be serving out my notice, and how long do you suppose that will take?'

'Yes,' the Doctor bowed his head soberly, 'I rather thought you might be leaving.'

Liz spilled over with frustration. 'There you go again! You wouldn't even let me spring that much surprise on you!' She turned away and the house was in her field of view again. 'I haven't a clue what I'm meant to do now.'

There was an awkward pause, filled by the distant chatter of birds.

'What did Aphrodite say to you?' Liz heard the Doctor's note of idle interest; he had detected the whisper, but the words had been meant for her alone. She ran over them in her mind.

'She was telling me I should be happy with who I am,' divulged Liz hesitantly.

The Doctor said, 'And?'

It was the question of a lifetime, of course, because he was really asking, 'Are you coming or aren't you?' It wasn't a choice she wanted to make, but there was no escape clause. Naturally, it wasn't a matter of swaying her from her resignation; on that she was committed. It was the uncomplicated issue of how she was going to spend her last days prior to that, and simplicity suddenly seemed a foreign word. The Doctor had effectively opened a jam-packed cupboard, causing all manner of bric-a-brac to tumble over

Liz's mind. She stood helplessly in the midst of it, wondering where to begin.

On the one side, there was the mundaneness of serving out a month's notice in the UNIT laboratory, drumming her fingers on the bench and watching the rain outside; and never mind if there was an alien invasion in the interim. There would be the clipped conversations with the Brigadier, liberally seasoned with inquiries after the Doctor's whereabouts – *as if Liz would know!* Then there would be her departure, with every probability of no farewell from the Doctor because of his continued absence; a distinctly grey end to this chapter of her career. Against all that was set the unknowns of an expedition through a machine that defied reality and would send international air fares crashing if widely publicised. Where would the Doctor take her? She'd have no trouble adapting to anywhere around the globe, but there was the extra dimension of when. History had never fired her imagination fantastically in the classroom, much as Aphrodite had neglected her temporal physics; up close, the snatches she had seen ranged from hospitable to horrific; and though there was something to be said for the spice of danger, she was sure the Doctor would find more trouble-spots than leisure centres. The future held more promise, but even there Liz was forced to weigh whether she was meant to go there at her own pace, watching it unfold through telescopes and microscopes; making her own special contribution.

When she turned again, the question was still etched on the Doctor's face.

Liz knew her answer would be just the one word, but it seemed to her an awful long time in coming.

THE END