

The background features a man in a dark suit, seen from the chest up, holding a glowing light source in his hands. The light source is bright and creates a lens flare effect. The man's face is partially obscured by the light. The background is filled with various sizes of gears and intricate, glowing light trails that suggest a complex, mechanical or scientific theme. The overall color palette is dark with highlights from the light source and the glowing trails.

TIME

SHADOWS

SECOND NATURE
A Short-Story Anthology For Charity

Edited by Stephen Hatcher
Foreword by John Peel

Title Page

TIME SHADOWS

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A Short-Story Anthology For Charity

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PSEUDOSCOPE

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Colophon

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Contents

Title Page	
Colophon	
Foreword	
Introduction	
Epigraph	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment One	
The Case of the Missing Doctor	
The Unkindest Cup	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Two	
The Smallest War	
The Time Orphan	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Three	
Time-Crossed	
Dr. Who and the Mists of Prevalous	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Four	
The Crimean Centaur	
Ian Chesterton in an Exciting Adventure with the Martians	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Five	
Marginalia	
Plague Doctors	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Six	
In a State of Grace	
How to Kill God	
The Siege of Orléans	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Seven	
You Know the Drill	
Planet of the Doctor	
Custodian	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Eight	
My Name Is Susan	
Divergence	
The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Nine	
The Spinning Dancer	

[The Doctor's New Clothes](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Ten](#)

[Wouldn't Be Dead for Quids](#)

[Unexpected Item in Bagging Area](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Eleven](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Author Biographies](#)

[Artist Biographies](#)

Foreword

Another *Doctor Who* charity collection?

Why?

Well, there's the obvious reason, of course – to raise money for charity. And we all feel good about doing that, don't we? Instead of the profits going to a (perhaps well-deserving) author, or to some publisher, the money raised goes to help people in need. And that's always a good thing.

So, fine. But why *Doctor Who*?

Again, there's the obvious reason: there's a market for *Doctor Who*. People enjoy reading the adventures of the good Doctor(s). In fact, books based on or around the show have played a large part in the history of the series. I can clearly recall when I first found a copy of the Armada Book of *Doctor Who in an Exciting Adventure with the Daleks* – I was absolutely thrilled. Or getting *The Dalek Book* or the first annuals for Christmas – all priceless moments from my past. And a lot of people have felt the same way about the books associated with their discovery of the Doctor.

And, of course, there is a logical connection between *Doctor Who* and helping out charities, because the Doctor himself (and soon to be herself...) has always helped people in need. When we give to charity, we're walking a little in the footsteps of the Doctor.

So, there we go – perfectly fine and acceptable reasons to buy *Time Shadows* (one and two!) or other collections, like *Seasons of War*: you're helping people in need and also getting a *Doctor Who* fix. What's not to like?

But what about the other side of the issue? Why *write* stories for charity? Especially if (like me) you're a professional author and writing stories is how you make your living?

Again, there's a perfectly reasonable excuse – it's our way of giving to charity ourselves. By contributing stories, we're helping to raise funds for those in need. And that is certainly a good part of why we do it. But it's not the only reason.

I think a very strong motivation for both writing and reading this kind of a collection is that it's *fun*. We're all *Doctor Who* fans, even the professionals among us, and we just enjoy the writing (or reading). Quite often this kind of anthology has a theme that the authorized book series wouldn't touch, and – trust me! – you can't underestimate the impact of being asked if you'd like to write a story in which you can do whatever you wish with a favourite character. Perhaps to play with a Doctor that you really liked, or to add to a cherished companion's backstory – or to give them their own adventure. Or to let some beloved monster go on a rampage...

As a writer, I can assure you that there's nothing that's as much fun as being let loose to create... well, anything. It frees our imaginations and inspires us. So why not come along for the ride and see where that fun and freedom might lead?

John Peel

October 2017

Introduction

In January 2017, I emailed Matt Grady, editor and publisher of *Time Shadows*, to report on sales of the book at my local *Doctor Who* group. I ended the email with the question, “When do we start work on the next one?” The book that you hold in your hand today, nearly a year later, which I have edited with Matt as Managing Editor and guiding hand, is the result of that enthusiastic but innocent inquiry.

The submissions and commissioning process was tremendous fun but also hard work. We were humbled and delighted to receive over 120 story proposals: from experienced professional writers with credits for BBC Books and Big Finish; from old hands among the fan writing community; and from first-time writers, whose names were less familiar to us.

In truth, such was the excellence of the majority of submissions, we could probably have filled two volumes without diluting the quality of the final selection; but nonetheless after much discussion and debate, we finally arrived at a list of twenty-three stories, which we commissioned. As to that second volume, who knows? Watch this space.

The real fun then started as our selected writers’ stories started to come in – and one after another blew us away with their quality. No one let us down; I hope you will agree that without exception they are stories that are fascinating and fun, from horrific historicals to scintillating space operas, it’s all here; featuring all incarnations of the Doctor, including Peter Capaldi’s wonderful Twelfth Doctor, plus a whole host of companions, friend and foes, from all eras of the best TV programme in the world, ever.

Doctor Who fans have always got stories to tell – here are twenty-three of the best of them. No doubt there will be many more to come – for us, it’s *Second Nature*.

Stephen Hatcher
Mappleton, Derbyshire
November 2017

Epigraph

“Fear him not, immortal men. Time is but the shadow of the world upon the background of Eternity!”
—Jerome K. Jerome, “Clocks”

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation: we do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have these because we have acted rightly.”
—Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment One

by Nick Walters

THE SPACE WAR MUSEUM, NOW

“What’s the point,” said Bill, “in coming to a museum when we can travel through all of time and space?”

The Doctor ignored her. His face was dark as thunder. Thunder with eyebrows. Been that way ever since they’d landed.

“Well? We can go anywhere, see anything!

“I am well aware of that.”

They were walking through a vast circular hallway with a floor like a chessboard. Glass display cabinets were dotted here and there, and massive statues loomed against the pale stone walls. The ceiling was an immense, impressive window of green and blue stained glass which bathed everything in a cooling light. Humans and aliens were standing around admiring the displays, or drifting slowly from exhibit to exhibit.

“So why are we here?”

“Because of an email.” And then the Doctor was off, not quite breaking into his penguin-with-its-arse-on-fire run, but getting there. He barged rudely past a trio of dignified-looking lizard-people with high foreheads and long, glittering robes, who were studiously admiring a display case containing a massive jewelled sword, and headed towards one of the dozen or so corridors which led off from the central hallway.

Bill set off after him, apologizing to the lizard-folk, and caught up with him halfway along a stone corridor lined with portraits of stern, rather psychotic-looking moustachioed men in military garb.

“What email?” she called after him, but the Doctor ignored her again, haring along the corridor, taking another turn. He was like a hound on the scent. But the scent of what?

Bill turned a corner and ran along another corridor after the Doctor. She emerged into another vast hallway, this one full of exhibits of what appeared to be giant killer robots, inert and immobile beneath their enormous glass cases, yet still impressive, intimidating and... awesome. Bill was distracted by these for a bit so that she momentarily lost the Doctor, but soon found him again, in a small anteroom labelled the Relic Chamber. Inside, soft lighting fell on rows of glass domes containing bits and bobs and fragments and figments of this and that. There was no one else there besides Bill and the Doctor, who stood at the far end of the chamber in front of the last cabinet in the room. His head was bowed, chin sunk into his chest, and his hands were outstretched, lightly touching the glass.

Bill walked up to him. He gave no sign that he’d seen her. He just kept staring at the object in the cabinet, at the relic.

It looked nothing special. A chunk of burnt, charred metal, the size and shape of a rugby ball, with shining silver bits still visible through the damage, and clusters of thick black tubing poking out from either end.

“Ah, there you are, Bill,” the Doctor said at length, softly, and without removing his gaze from the relic, or his hands from the glass of the cabinet.

Bill pointed at the thing. “This what we’re here for? A lump of space junk?”

“No, it’s what *I’m* here for,” said the Doctor, a growly edge to his voice. There was a placard inside the cabinet, on the black velvet beneath the plinth which bore the relic. Black lettering on gold metal.

“*The Heart of Inomasp*,” read Bill. “Well, that makes everything clear.”

The Doctor turned to face her. “Stand back.” His hands on her shoulders, gentle but firm.

“Oookay... but why?”

The Doctor shoved her gently away. Then he turned back to the cabinet. “Dear Doctor, you are forever in ‘my’ heart,” he muttered. He took out his sonic screwdriver from an inside pocket. He aimed it at the glass cabinet. Adjusted a setting. A piercing, high-pitched whine rent the air.

“Doctor!” shouted Bill. “What are you doing?”

“Taking back what belongs to me!” cried the Doctor as the sound increased in pitch until it passed out of the range of human hearing – and the cabinet shattered into smithereens.

Next Segment

“BESHESHRA”, DURING THE REIGN

The Case of the Missing Doctor

by Ian Farrington

Vic Trussell slammed the door so hard the hinges asked for the afternoon off. He tilted his crushable fedora back on his head and slumped into his chair. The guy had wanted too much, cracked wise too much, and Vic couldn't waste time on time-wasters. He was in the middle of a class-A murder case, perhaps the biggest of his career. Everything else would have to wait until the sick perp was found. Booze, women, that joker who'd just left, everything.

He considered picking up the telephone and dialling his secretary, then thought about just hollering at her through the door – even though he knew doing that raised her hackles higher than the Golden Gate Bridge. But Vic resisted. He could predict with bookmaker-accuracy how the conversation would have played out: he'd call her through from the outer office; she'd saunter in with her legs that went all the way to the floor; they'd trade some dime-novel dialogue; and she'd say he was in over his head. She'd tell him to cut the Tremlett case loose, that it was best left to the SFPD homicide boys. But Vic couldn't do that. This one hurt.

He took out his smokes and was about to strike the match when a better idea struck his mind. Vic crept to the door, which had “llessurT ciV” printed on the glass – his name in reverse, handpainted in Copperplate script. He cracked it open, sloooow, and saw that the coast was clear. Maybe his secretary had gone to lunch or to powder her nose. He made a dash for it and was out of the building and onto the streets of sunny San Fran in moments. The traffic thundered past, but the air was cool and the breeze woke him up. His breakfast of eggs and Scotch had finally settled, and for the first time that morning he felt able to tackle the case. Vic strolled towards the Embarcadero, stopping on Hills Plaza to smoke a cigarette and watch the world go by for a few moments.

It wasn't easy being a gumshoe in the Bay area, especially now that Vic was no longer an ingénue off the bus from Bisbee, Arizona or wherever it was he came from. He couldn't remember anymore. He'd lived through too many murder cases, too many blackmail rackets, too many abusive-husband strong-arms, too many broads wanting to run away with him and too many heavies patting him down. The buzz had disappeared, and Vic had been surviving on adrenaline for longer than he could recall.

A few weeks ago, he'd realized that he was going through the motions and living his life like it was something to be tolerated until it was over. He voted for Harry S. Truman. He read about the new 49ers football team in the newspaper. He gave his secretary flowers on her birthday. But he craved excitement and something to keep him honest. Then Mrs. Tremlett walked into his life.

She was a classy lady. Older than Vic, but she still felt young at heart. He liked her straight off the bat, and couldn't figure why someone so poised and confident would need to employ a shamus. He was then shocked to his socks by what she told him. She sat down in his office and, without a quiver in her voice, explained that she was going to die. It was okay, she said. There was nothing to be done. She had accepted her fate. But Vic couldn't take it in – she seemed so vibrant and bright and eternal, like a movie star in the flesh. It took a lot of coaxing before Vic convinced her to lay out the details. She'd been reluctant to tell him everything, but Vic was as good a private dick as anyone in the city.

For several months, Mrs. Tremlett had been hounded by a man called Johnny Pacific. He was punishing her for something she'd done, and had made it clear that she'd soon be six feet under. She

knew that her time was nearly up and had accepted it, though she refused to take any blame. Vic argued with her – he stood up and raised his voice and threw things across the office and said that it didn't have to be this way. It's never too late, he told her. The movie isn't finished until the final title card. You can always fight back.

“Not always,” she'd said, tears welling up in her eyes for the first time. Vic had then noticed that she wasn't wearing any make-up. She was still as beautiful as the sunrise.

Mrs. Tremlett died a few days later.

That had been two months ago. When he found out, Vic had gone into a rage. Mrs. Tremlett had got under his skin; alcohol had got into his liver. Even his faithful secretary had been worried about his state of mind. It took several weeks for the world to come back into focus, but when it did he saw everything in Technicolor. He had to solve the case. That was the only way to battle through this feeling. He had to find out what had happened. He had to track down Johnny Pacific. He had to know what Mrs. Tremlett was supposed to have done – what she'd done to deserve death. And he had to get payback.

Other than Johnny, the only lead was something Mrs. Tremlett had said about “the doctor.” She'd said this doc had initially tried to help. He'd been a friend and been kind, but then one day he tipped her off that she wasn't going to make it. This piece of garbage had said to her outright that her days were numbered. Vic didn't have a name – Mrs. T had just said “the doctor” – but San Francisco only had so many sawbones. If he had to investigate every one in turn, he would do so.

Vic stamped out his cigarette and looked east. The sun was rising behind the Bay Bridge, glinting off the water. He decided there and then that both Johnny Pacific and his doctor friend would pay for what they'd done. Vic didn't like bullies.

He walked the city streets for hours, not caring for the shoe leather. He'd told everyone that his car was in the shop, but actually his 1940 Ford Opera coupe had been repossessed during the Bishop Brice case. He knew the city well, though, and was in good shape for a man of his indeterminate age. It took most of the day to cover everywhere north of Geary Boulevard. Vic scoped out doctors' offices and medical centres and pharmacies and veterinarians. He asked questions and flirted with receptionists and posed as a journalist writing a story on insurance fraud. But he came up bupkis. Nada. A significant amount short of zero.

His feet pulsing like they did in France in '44, Vic stopped off at a random coffee shop and grabbed a window seat. The waitress was cute but he didn't have the energy to yack with her. The cup wasn't clean, but he gulped its contents anyway. He realized he hadn't shaved in two days and felt embarrassed. Mrs. Tremlett wouldn't have liked that.

“Excuse me.”

Vic looked up to see a young man standing next to him.

“Is this seat taken?”

He wasn't very old and looked fresh-faced. He probably hadn't started shaving yet, thought Vic. His dark hair covered most of his head, and he was dressed in a yellowish tunic and baggy pants.

“Are you religious?” asked Vic. “Some kind of Buddhist?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Your outfit.”

“They're just my clothes. Can I sit down?”

Vic looked around. The coffee shop was busy, with nearly every seat taken. He pushed a stool out from under the table with his foot and the stranger took it. The waitress came over, notepad in hand, and asked for his order.

“What do you recommend?” the man asked Vic. “I’m hungry.”

“The chow’s all the same, my friend. I wouldn’t put too much thought into it.”

The man asked for the same drink and sandwich that Vic had been nursing. He smiled at Vic as the waitress walked away. Vic stared back.

“Can I help you?” he asked after a beat.

“Maybe.”

Then Vic noticed it. Everything fell into place in an instant and he couldn’t help laughing. The patrons at the next table looked over, disapprovingly, but he roared. He’d had many law-enforcement encounters during his career, but they’d all been on the level. Feds and local cops had never needed to play dirty before. They all knew the rules of the game.

“That disguise is not one-hundred-per-cent convincing,” he said. “Wouldn’t fool a blind redneck on a foggy night.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said the young man.

Vic pointed at the star-shaped, gold-and-blue badge on the stranger’s chest.

“What are you? Sheriff’s department? We don’t usually see you jokers this deep in the city. You know something? They call it undercover for a reason.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what you’re talking about. What are sheriffs?”

The waitress brought over a coffee and a ham-on-rye and placed them in front of the boy. He took a sip of his drink nervously.

Vic eyed his new friend and thought again. No, he was too young to be a cop – he looked no more than twenty. The badge was a decoy, a bum steer. He probably got it out of a cereal box. But there was something about him. Vic had been in this world for too long to believe in coincidences. Nothing was insignificant: on the day he’d set out to catch Johnny Pacific, a stranger starting a conversation in a coffee shop was a hydrogen-bomb-sized development. He knew he had to tread lightly.

“My name’s Adric,” said the newcomer, holding out a hand. Vic shook it.

“They call me Vic Trussell.”

“Vic? Really? What are you doing here, Vic?”

“I’m on a case if you must know.” Let’s spill some juice, he thought, and see if this guy clears it up. “A woman died. Do you know anything about that?”

“I might.”

Vic’s heartbeat hit a rimshot.

“Or at least,” Adric continued, “the Doctor might.”

The doctor. The doctor who threatened Mrs. Tremlett. The doctor who was in league with Johnny Pacific. Vic tried to hide the fact his hands were shaking with nerves.

“Who is this doctor? What’s his name?”

“I’m not sure, really.” Adric laughed. “I just know him as the Doctor.”

“And do you know where he is right now? Right this second?”

“Yes, I do. More or less.”

Vic grabbed his hat and coat and threw a couple of dollars down on the table.

“Let’s go.”

Vic headed out onto the sidewalk. It was getting dark now, the city settling down for its evening. Vic thought of all the things he would normally be doing on a night like this: staking out a suspect, or catching a jazz show, or shooting pool with the boys from the precinct. But now he had work to do.

Adric followed him out after a moment, sandwich in hand. Hit by the glow of the streetlights, he

seemed even younger. But Vic was a good judge of character and had made the decision to trust him. For now. His fingers had been burned so many times over the years – by duplicitous dames, by double-crossing crime bosses, by jumpy Joe Publics – that he was never going to go all-in with a stranger. But he had to admit that Adric seemed like the real deal. And how dangerous could someone with a Limey accent be?

“Where’s your doctor friend now?” asked Vic.

“This way. It’s not far.” Adric started walking east, back towards Vic’s office. This made Vic’s chest freeze for a moment. Had he veered too far from the action? Had he made a mistake in assuming the case was citywide? Of all the detectives in San Francisco, Mrs. Tremlett had come to him. Maybe she was more local than he’d assumed.

“The Doctor’s looking for someone,” said Adric.

“Another victim?”

“What do you mean by that?!”

“Nothing. Keep walking. Let’s get there quick.” Vic then realized he needed information – even if Mrs. Tremlett was gone, perhaps he could save some other poor sap. “Who’s he searching for?”

“A child, he said.” Adric looked across the street, waiting for the traffic to clear. “A young boy who’s gone missing. What about your case? Is that the right word? Case?”

Vic had to know if this doctor was Mrs. T’s doctor. So he dangled his feet in the water. He told Adric about Mrs. Tremlett coming to him and saying she was about to die. He told Adric about Johnny Pacific and the persecution. And he told Adric that he couldn’t save her.

“It had gone on for weeks,” he said. “Johnny bullied her and tormented her and threatened to take everything away from her. She was such a lovely lady, she didn’t deserve that kind of low-life treatment. No one does.”

“What did he do to her?” asked Adric as they turned a corner and found themselves on the shore of the Bay. “Did he hurt her?”

“He made her life a living hell. He was cruel and mean and vindictive.”

“But how?”

Vic wasn’t really listening.

“And the doctor made things worse,” he said. “He’s just as responsible for her death.”

Adric stopped walking.

“I can’t believe that,” he said. “The Doctor would have tried to help, I’m sure of it.”

Vic laughed.

“He started out nice, sure. She told me about the early days, when Johnny Pacific was first on the scene. She went to see this doctor and asked him what she should do. He said he’d help. He said she’d be all right if she just did what he told her to do. But she wasn’t. And he couldn’t stop Johnny. He didn’t even try after a while. He just let it happen. He just let her die.”

Adric sat down on a bench at the side of the road. Vic joined him and hunched over, his head in his hands.

“I need to find them, Adric. Your doctor is my only link to Johnny Pacific.”

“That’s a strange name, isn’t it?” said Adric.

Vic turned to face his new friend. What did the guy’s John Hancock have to do with anything?

“Johnny Pacific, I mean. Is that a common surname?”

Vic didn’t know how to respond, which was as rare as an honest lawyer. He usually had a head full of snappy comebacks and no one could out-think him. He had Academy Awards for his performances in front of assistant district attorneys, landlords who wanted their rent, and wives

engaged in cuckolding.

“I guess,” he said at last. “I’ve not come across it before, but then again I’ve met a lot of strange people. Mrs. Tremlett told me he’s also known as The Big Sea. Get it? Pacific, big sea? All those wise guys like having titles and aliases and handles. They think it makes them seem bigger somehow.”

“It can also signify a change in a person’s character,” boomed a new voice from behind Vic’s shoulder.

He turned to see a tall man in a long coat and even longer scarf. He had wild, unruly hair and a broad, dangerous grin.

“Names are very important, aren’t they?” he continued. “They can define us and limit us all at the same time. Think of a school teacher. They might be called Bob or Bernard or Sue or Riz, but the pupils have to say Mr. or Mrs. or Miss. That’s about respect. Or power, I suppose. It’s creating a divide between human beings, telling one group how to respond to the other.”

Vic stood up and pointed south. “The Salvation Army’s that way, pal.”

“Take my friend Adric here,” the man continued, “who’s been kind enough to bring you to me. Well done, by the way, Adric. You found him quicker than I did.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, take ‘Adric’. A nice, straightforward name. Five letters. Three consonants and two vowels. That’s a name that’s not trying to deceive you in any way, is it?”

So these two clowns knew each other. That was interesting. Again, Vic pondered the fact that there’s no such thing as a coincidence. This new man – he must be...

“This is the Doctor,” said Adric. “The Doctor I was telling you about.”

Vic’s hand reached into his coat and fingered his holster. His 1911 Colt pistol wasn’t there. In his rush to avoid his secretary’s disapproval, he must have left it in his desk drawer.

“The Doctor... I see. And what’s your name, then, Lord Fauntleroy?”

“Oh...” mused the Doctor. “Just the Doctor. That’s the beauty of someone’s name, isn’t it? As I say, it can define you and limit you. Unless you choose not to use one.” He smiled a smile wider than Route 66. “What’s yours?”

Vic didn’t reply, so Adric said, “This is Vic Trussell. He’s a detective.”

“Where do you work?” demanded Vic.

“Here and there,” replied the Doctor. “Everywhere, really, although it’s not really work.”

“I mean which hospital? Which doctor’s office?”

“I don’t work in a hospital. I’m here looking for a child who’s gone missing. A boy.” He sat down on the bench. “Let’s talk, shall we?”

“Let’s not. I’m on a case.”

Vic didn’t budge. Adric took the free seat next to his friend.

“Tell me about your case, then,” said the Doctor. “Perhaps I can help.”

Vic eyed him suspiciously. What did he want? Why was he doing this? If he was the doctor who condemned Mrs. Tremlett to death, Vic needed to know why. But if he wasn’t, this was a colossal waste of time, and Johnny Pacific was getting a step further away from justice.

So Vic laid it out again. Quickly. Just the highlights and headlines: Mrs. Tremlett and Johnny Pacific and the death threats and the doctor who wouldn’t lift a finger to stop it. He deliberately kept his focus on the Doctor, watching to see if he’d twitch at the mention of any of the names or accusations. Guilt can do a lot to a man, even one who doesn’t feel any. Vic had often caught out a liar by spotting an exhale or a furtive look when a key word was said.

But the Doctor was impassive – nothing but rapt attention. And when Vic had finished, he

smiled.

“I’m the Doctor,” he said. “But I’m not a hospital doctor or a family doctor. I’ve been both, but not now. I’m afraid I’m not the doctor you’re looking for, though the doctor you’re looking for did nothing wrong and was just trying to help. I’ve also never met Mrs. Tremlett. But from what people have told me, I’m sure she was a lovely woman.”

“She was.” Vic’s voice cracked.

“Is it time, Doctor?” asked Adric.

“Yes, I think it is.” He stood up, towering over Vic. “It’s time to put away childish things.”

Vic didn’t know what he meant. This crazy cat with the strange clothes and deep voice said he’d heard of Mrs. Tremlett – he must be connected to the case. Maybe he knew the doctor involved. Maybe he knew Johnny Pacific, aka the Big Sea.

“A death is always tragic,” said the Doctor. “Life exists throughout this universe and beyond. It’s spread to countless planets and moons and solar systems and astral plains. I’ve met carbon-based animals and sentient clouds, aeons-old trees and self-aware machines. Trillions upon trillions of lives across billions of years, and every single one of them is precious. The death of someone so important as Mrs. Tremlett must have hit you very hard.”

“No,” snapped Vic. “I hardly knew her. She was just some dame who wanted help.”

“Ah, well, that’s not true, is it? You knew her your entire life. A mother’s death is a lot for any son to take in – let alone a boy of your age.”

“What do you mean? I’m forty years old. I fought in the war. I smoke two packs a day and I carry a gun.”

“No,” said the Doctor. “You’re fifteen. You’re a schoolboy. And this has to stop. Your father is very worried about you.”

“I’m Vic Trussell, private eye.”

“No. You’re not.”

“Where do you get off—”

The Doctor pointed across the water to the huge bridge in the distance.

“What’s the name of that?” he asked.

Vic said, “The Golden Gate Bridge, opened 1937. Or maybe it’s the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, built 1933.”

“No, it’s the Dartford Crossing, opened 1991. This isn’t San Francisco. It’s Greenhithe. We’re not in California. We’re in Kent.” The Doctor squatted down, so they were eye to eye, and his voice turned soft and kind. “It’s not 1948. It’s 2018. And you’re not Vic Trussell. You’re Sean Tremlett.”

Vic – Sean – began to cry.

“I’m sorry,” said the Doctor. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

Adric put his hand on Sean’s shoulder.

“You see, Adric,” continued the Doctor, looking up at his colleague, “everyone reacts to grief differently. Young Sean here... well, he coped in his own way. He didn’t like how his life was going – who could blame him? – so I think he imagined a new version. You felt powerless, didn’t you, Sean? Lost. Alone. Scared. It was easier to exist in a fantasy world where you’re the famous detective Vic Trussell who always catches the bad guy and gets his revenge.”

“Famous?” asked Adric.

“In certain circles, yes,” said the Doctor, standing up and folding his deep-red scarf around his shoulder. “Vic Trussell is a grizzled private eye and war vet who solves crimes in 1940s San Francisco. He’s appeared in several novels and short stories. They’re very exciting, some of them,

and funny. There's a running gag where Vic's secretary is mentioned a lot but never actually appears – isn't that delightful? After a while, you start to think she's just a figment of Vic's imagination. My favourite story is the one about a woman who's having an affair with a mathematician."

"*Something About Her Doesn't Add Up*," said Sean.

"That's right. I saw a copy of it in your bedroom."

"Why were you in my bedroom?"

"Because I was helping your dad work out where you'd got to. He was the first person Adric and I met when we arrived this morning, and I've got to tell you he was in a right old state. Rushing around the town, looking for you. He's been terribly worried, Sean. He told us the two of you had a row this morning, is that right? You slammed the door on him and then stormed out of the house. You've been missing all day and we've been searching for you. I know you're going through an awful time, a really awful time, but this isn't fair on your father, is it? He's grieving too. And he loves you very much."

Sean rubbed his sleeve across his nose.

"I know," he said.

"I don't understand," said Adric. "Who's Johnny Pacific?"

"Ah, yes," said the Doctor. "Johnny Pacific. The Big Sea. He's the type of villain you often find in Vic Trussell stories – a ruthless gangster with a poetic name. But there's no such person. He doesn't exist. How did your mother die, Sean?"

Sean looked up through the tears. "Cancer."

"That's right. Sometimes called the Big C. Sean here needed someone to blame – someone to focus his anger on. But there wasn't anyone. There isn't with an illness like this. It just... happens. I wish it didn't, but it does. So it was only natural that Sean's imagination should conjure up someone he could blame. But it wasn't anyone's fault. It certainly wasn't your mother's doctor's fault, Sean. I'm sure he or she did everything they could to help."

"Yeah." Sean took a deep breath. He knew the pain wouldn't go away any time soon. This wasn't a story with a perfectly pat ending, where the bad guy is arrested and sent to Sing Sing, and the hero gets the girl on the final page. He could only take it one step at a time.

"Why don't we take you home?" asked the Doctor. "We can let your dad know you're safe."

"Yes, please," said Sean.

The Unkindest Cup

by Roger McCoy

The Doctor awoke in an unfamiliar bed, uncertain where he was. But wherever he was, he knew he didn't like it.

The Doctor rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, which was rare. He couldn't recall the last time he had been this deep in the arms of Morpheus, nor could he clearly recall what had led to him waking up in a small, uncomfortable single bed in this bland beige apartment bedroom. He pushed himself upwards, but was hampered by the sheets tucked in tightly around him. The Doctor absent-mindedly scratched where a pair of itchy, red woollen pyjamas irritated his skin. What precisely had happened? He vaguely recalled driving in circles over and over again with his two colleagues, Dr. Elizabeth Shaw and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart... but why? And how did he get here from there?

The Doctor eased himself out of bed, holding the metal bed frame with one hand as his bare feet struck the floor awkwardly. His knees shook, a sensation he wasn't accustomed to in his current body.

There was little to see in the room: a wall cupboard, a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, a small bureau under a round mirror and a coffee pot next to a rather large empty mug resting on a small metallic tray on the bureau.

"No," the Doctor said to no one but himself. "This is all wrong."

He wasn't going anywhere in these ridiculous pyjamas. He opened the wall cupboard to find a row of suits and dress shirts hanging inside. He shoved aside a series of tan, light blue, and navy suits until he found a plain black suit of a dull cotton blend. The dress shirts were neatly pressed, but limited to basic white. He removed his pyjamas with haste, forgetting his weakness and nearly falling to the floor. His hands fumbled as he fastened the shirt buttons as quickly as he could manage. He flicked through a sea of garish kipper ties, settling on a solid, bright red one. He folded the tie over itself with great precision, looped it around a few times, and knotted it with care into a makeshift bow tie. He grimaced at his image in the mirror, unaccustomed to looking so... plain.

He felt the warmth in the air from the coffee pot as he stood near the mirror. He lifted the tall metal pot and flicked the lid open. The smell of strong, fresh-brewed coffee wafted over him, invigorating his foggy mind. He released the lid and poured himself a mug. Maybe a cup would revitalize him enough to...

An odd, peppery odour brought him to a halt. He knew this smell. He had smelled this same blend before, not long ago. Sitting at a coffee house with Liz and the Brigadier. Fuming over the Brigadier's genocidal attack on the Silurians. But why were they having coffee together? It had been not long before he turned up here... He was sure of it. But what did it mean? He returned the pot to the tray, leaving the mug untouched.

The Doctor spoke to himself once more, "Where am I?"

He turned and traipsed towards the bedroom door, only then spotting a piece of paper that someone had slid under the door into his room. He picked it up and skimmed what appeared to be an assignment sheet:

Department: 4-F.

Task: Process reports. Route to the appropriate department. Create bullet-point summaries.

This couldn't possibly be for him. This bureaucratic nonsense was beneath him. He moved to crumple up the note, but stopped himself. Only out of a sense of order did he fold the paper in

quarters and place it in his jacket pocket before opening the door and exiting the beige room.

There he saw one of the most appalling sights he'd ever laid eyes on.

The square room was voluminous, perhaps one hundred metres long, and was filled with people and equipment operating with clock-like precision. Men in bland suits and women in plain skirts and blouses operated computers at plastic-topped wooden desks or scurried about handing papers back and forth to others who were stationed at standing or roll-top desks, most of which were already covered with their own piles of folders and paperwork.

The Doctor sneered. It was pure, unadulterated bureaucracy on a scale he'd never seen before.

Something struck him as off. Some of the equipment was just a little too advanced for this era. The wide monitors and light pens and even power strips were familiar from working with UNIT, but the monitors displayed colourful, detailed imagery. He observed people logging in by means of small, circular bioscanners. Light, compact displays were anchored to the ceiling every twenty metres or so, though none were active. A series of pipes ran the length of the ceiling, connecting cylindrical enclosures to the whirring ventilation system.

Had he ended up in the future? He had been tinkering with the TARDIS console as of late. The possibility that he had flung himself into Earth's future wasn't unreasonable. Though, from what he'd seen of humankind's future, the thick, clunky monitors and light pens would fade away within a few decades.

A human male in a light blue suit marched past the Doctor with a pile of papers in one hand and a mug in the other. The Doctor narrowly managed to tap him on the shoulder, causing him to jump and slosh his coffee to the floor.

"Pardon me," said the Doctor as the man checked his suit for spills. Seeing nothing, the man looked up, a grin forming under his pencil-thin moustache. "Can you tell me where..." The Doctor pulled the assignment sheet back out of his pocket and unfolded it. "Where department 4-F is?"

"Ah," the man said, friendly excitement in his voice. "Another recruit! Always happy to have another nose to add to the grindstone. May I?" The Doctor handed him the slip. He absent-mindedly scratched his short, curly hair as he skimmed the slip. "You aren't far off, I think. Please, come with me."

They strode through the office, weaving through people running around with papers, folders, and almost always a mug of coffee. The Doctor endeavoured not to slam into anyone as he tried to keep up.

The young man called out, "Alison!"

"Yes, Ray?" replied a bespectacled, long-haired young woman in a cable-knit jumper. She was rapidly sorting through papers, not even looking up in acknowledgement.

"You lose any of your recruits?" He shifted the hand holding the mug to indicate the Doctor. "Found this one wandering the halls."

"I certainly did!" she said, finally looking up, eager. "You must be John!" she said, extending a hand. "Alison Reed. I've been out of my mind worried about what happened to you! You're quite all right, I hope!"

The Doctor reluctantly granted a limp handshake.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose I am."

"Running late," she scolded, winking, "but I'll let it go since it's only your first day. Here, you'll be helping with the Troop Provision Supply reports because we've been absolutely swamped, and we don't have a moment to lose, and I do hope I can rely on our other new recruits to catch you up because I am just up to my ears!" She leaned around the standing desk. "Elizabeth!"

“Coming!” said a familiar voice.

“Elizabeth is another one of our new hires,” Alison explained, “though she can at least catch you up on the morning’s orientation. You missed the orientation, I take it?”

“It would appear so.”

Liz Shaw emerged from behind the desk. She smiled widely when she saw her colleague. “Doctor!”

“No,” corrected Alison, grimacing. “John.”

Liz tilted her head quizzically. “Doctor... John?”

“No, no,” Alison corrected again. “Just John... John Smith, as per the records.”

Liz extended her hand. The Doctor frowned, but took her hand warmly in both of his and held it with care. She was a rare human whom the Doctor regarded as a proper colleague worthy of him, but when he peered into those intelligent eyes, they felt empty.

She regarded him with confusion. “I’m sorry... John. I’ve been a bit out of it today.” She stepped back, gently removing her hand from his. “My head’s been in a bad place.”

“Tsk,” said Alison. “You probably haven’t had enough coffee.”

“I’m sure that’s all,” she said, seeming uncertain. She beamed at the Doctor. “But I’m having such a good time here! I’m so glad to have another familiar face.”

“Another?” asked the Doctor.

Alison wore a suggestive leer as she absent-mindedly twirled her long, blonde hair. “It would appear young Elizabeth,” she said, though Alison actually appeared younger than Ms. Shaw, “is previously acquainted with the new coffee boy.” The Doctor noticed Liz blushing at the insinuation.

“Coffee boy?” scoffed the Doctor.

“Yes!” cried another familiar voice. “Coming!”

The Doctor’s mouth hung agape as Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart scurried over carrying a large serving tray with a coffee pot and assorted creams and sugars.

Alison rolled her eyes but continued smiling. “Just as well. I’m in dire need of a refill.” She picked up an empty mug from her desk that read “Department’s Best Boss.” “Al, can you give me a fresh one? The day’s been dreadfully busy and if my energy dips, I may begin to lose my *joie de vivre*.”

“Not to worry; I’ll fix you up. Three creams, two sugars?”

“No, no. I need to watch my sugar. Just five creams, but make it snappy.”

“Yes, miss. Five creams, rapid.” The Brigadier balanced the tray in his left hand while he poured the coffee in one swift movement, leaving only just enough room for the cream, then slid the entire tray to his right hand. The cream emerged from the carafe in five short, measured bursts, then he released a concealed stir stick which plopped into the cup without even a splash.

The Doctor’s mouth continued to hang open as he looked back and forth at the Brigadier, Liz and the coffee tray. He still scorned Lethbridge-Stewart, but to see such a man reduced to pouring coffee...

The Doctor said nothing as he looked the Brigadier in the eyes. It was the same as Liz: his usual fierce determination was absent.

More memories returned: the Doctor could remember the Brigadier asking for help. UNIT was investigating a series of disappearances of young people in Chelsea. The two argued about the Silurians. The Doctor had been brokering peace with them before the Brigadier executed a pre-emptive strike. The Doctor wanted nothing more to do with UNIT, but he felt trapped as long as the TARDIS was non-functional. Then... driving in circles and... coffee? Something was still missing.

“Doctor?” said Lethbridge-Stewart, looking directly at him for the first time. “Is that you?”

“No, this is John,” corrected Alison, frowning.

“Doctor John,” corrected Liz. “What are you a doctor of, anyway?”

“I’m sorry, does this man look like a doctor to you two? Is there a stethoscope that I’m missing?” said Alison, exasperated. “Now, I’ve tried to be nice, but we don’t have time to mess around! I can’t think of any fate more ghastly than getting a bad report, can you?” Liz and the Brigadier didn’t seem quite as concerned, but they shook their heads in agreement. “Now, everyone back to work. John, please situate yourself at the nearest empty desk until Miss Shaw can begin your training.”

The Brigadier still appeared perplexed, but Liz smiled. “Yes, I’ll be just a couple more moments while I finish this up.” She returned to her typing, humming a happy song. The Brigadier joined in, whistling along as he took his tray around to neighbouring desks.

The Doctor couldn’t take it any longer. “What in blazes is going on here?”

Alison adjusted her spectacles disapprovingly, her patience wearing thin. “Settle down. I have been granted the immense privilege of running this department, and the last thing I need is a bad attitude, so you can either calm down and behave, or I don’t know what I’ll do. Do you understand?” The Doctor bit his tongue. “Miss Shaw, please begin training our Mr. Smith to create the Troop Provision Supply reports. They are absolutely critical to the war effort, so there isn’t a moment to lose.”

“War effort?” The Doctor shook his head in disbelief. “What war?”

“Come now. *The* war.”

The Doctor paced while he spoke. “Doesn’t matter. I’m not helping with anyone’s war; I don’t care who it is.” He turned rapidly. “No, wait, I take that back. I do care. Who is at war? And where are we?”

Alison took a deep breath, truly slowing down for the first time since the Doctor had met her. She closed her eyes as she held her coffee mug up near her mouth. She savoured the peppery odour of the beverage before finally taking a deliberate sip. “This is precisely why orientation is so important,” she muttered to herself.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I have far too much to do to catch you up on every little thing that goes on in this office. You’ll simply have to pick it up as we go along. I promise you I will file the forms to get you into the next orientation as soon as I have a moment to breathe, so can I trust you to be a dear and co-operate until then?”

“I will *not* co-operate until I know what is going on.”

Alison harrumphed. “John, I have to say I have never dealt with an employee as egregiously disagreeable as you.”

“Doctor,” he snapped.

“Oh, not you too.” She ran her hands across her face. “*Fine. Doctor* John. Now, either you can sit here and do your job and stop complaining, or I will have no choice but to write you up. And don’t think you’ll be able to get out of a write-up by transferring to some other department with a ‘nicer’ boss, because I guarantee to you that I am the most agreeable supervisor that you will ever meet, and if I don’t do it, somebody else will!”

“Go ahead and write me up! I’m not writing any blasted reports, and I’m not aiding in any foolish wars, and I’m not going to settle down until someone points me to wherever you’ve put my clothes!” He ran his hand down the white dress shirt uncomfortably. He took a deep breath. “And, more importantly, until someone tells me what’s going on. That’s important as well.” He turned towards Liz Shaw, who was poking her head out from behind a desk. “Liz, Brigadier! Come with

me!”

Papers rustled as Liz disappeared. The Brigadier was also out of eyeshot, likely across the office serving hot beverages at maximum efficiency.

“That’s it. I’ve had it!” Alison picked up a bulky desk phone. “Central office. Yes. Yes. No, troublemaker in 4-F. He needs a…” She looked askance at the Doctor. “A review. Possible disciplinary action. Yes, quite sure. Yes. Yes. Well, I have a department to supervise, and I can’t do it if I’m supervising someone’s tantrum. No, new recruit. Yes, I understand. Thank you.” She put the phone down. “Al!”

Lethbridge-Stewart appeared almost instantly, making the Doctor suspect he had ignored his previous call. Did he not respond to “Brigadier” anymore?

The Brigadier had a confused smile as he eyed Alison’s mug. “You can’t have finished already, I’m sure.”

“No, Al. Can I ask the biggest favour of you? It’s a bit outside your normal duties.”

“Yes, of course. What can I do for you?”

“Can you *please* walk our new recruit to the head office? The manager would like to meet him.”

The Brigadier’s brow knit. “The manager?”

“No, no, not to worry, Al! You’re doing marvellous. I just need someone to show him the way and make sure he gets there.”

“Yes, of course. Please come along, Doctor John. It appears you’re due to meet the chief.”

The Brigadier turned and began to march towards the far end of the large room before relaxing his stride to make certain the Doctor was following along.

The Doctor didn’t know what to think of this. Certainly, his first instinct was concern over the disconcerting effects on his colleagues… But he couldn’t help but feel a tinge of satisfaction. The Brigadier had become entirely too accustomed to ordering him around. Served him right to be pouring coffee for a while.

“Difficult first day, I take it,” said the Brigadier, filling the silence while they covered the length of the room.

“Indeed,” huffed the Doctor. “Tell me, Brig… Al. You recognized me. How much do you remember of our time together?”

The Brigadier tilted his head in thought, his pace slowing before coming to a dead stop. He turned to face the Doctor. “Well, I’m positive we’ve met before, but for the life of me I can’t say from where.” He looked the Doctor in the eye. “I must have seen you at the orientation, I’m sure.”

“No,” the Doctor said gloomily. “I wasn’t at any orientation.”

“Well, I can’t really help you then. I should think getting your training is a much bigger concern than reminiscing.” The Brigadier resumed his march.

“But you don’t remember our time working together?”

“Can’t say I do, but you know these types of jobs: one day blends into another.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Just started this morning.”

“Indeed. And you don’t recall where we’ve worked together before?”

“Well, one office is much the same as the next, wouldn’t you say?”

The Doctor harrumphed. “Some are less the same than others if you ask me.”

They reached a wooden door with a frosted glass window at the end of the room. “Well, here we are,” said the Brigadier. “I wouldn’t worry too much. You strike me as a man who knows how to adapt.” Without another word, he walked away and returned to topping up drinks.

The Doctor raised a hand to knock on the door, then stopped himself. He took a breath and barged in instead.

The creature waiting in the office stood between two large desks. The being had an amorphous, gelatinous body. Three crab-like legs protruded at 120-degree angles from each other, and three arms were at opposite angles from the legs. The creature wore a bizarre dress shirt and three ties, one facing each of its sides. A stalk from the top of its head was bent away from the Doctor towards a pile of papers on a far desk at the other end of the room.

A curious “Hmm?” came from the creature. The stalk flipped over its body to face the Doctor. A compound eye surrounded the rim of the stalk, and a mouth full of fangs all facing a central point spoke in irritation.

“Yes? Well, what do you want?”

The Doctor was not one to judge by appearances. “I’m looking for the manager.”

“Could have knocked.” The creature crossed two of its arms, and it skittered closer to the front desk. “So, I take it you’re the troublemaker I was expecting. Rare to have one so quickly on the first day. Not much of a coffee drinker, I take it?”

This wasn’t the question the Doctor was expecting, though he felt for some reason he should have. “Why do you ask?”

“Doesn’t matter.” The manager leaned its stalk down on an arm, which in turn leaned on the desk. “You have some sort of issue with your assignment? Should have mentioned it after orientation; you had the chance.”

“I was not at your ‘orientation.’”

“Really? What have you been doing all morning?”

“It would appear you’ve kept me unconscious while you’ve seized control of my associates.” The Doctor paused. “And, also, my clothes.”

“Unconscious? Well, that wasn’t the plan.” The manager picked up a device with one its rear-facing claws, then rotated around to hold the device over the Doctor. The creature’s stalk rolled to the side as it turned to continue to face him. “Huh. No wonder. You aren’t exactly... human, are you?” The manager sauntered around the desk. Its eyestalk was now mere centimetres from the Doctor’s face. “Tell me: you *did* drink the coffee, didn’t you?”

Coffee. The Doctor remembered struggling to find a pattern to the missing youths. He drove Liz around in circles for hours to see where she would gravitate; annoying the Brigadier was only a bonus. Liz convinced him at last to stop at a newly opened coffee bar.

The bar had been filled with youths. Several were invited to the back to try a special blend; the Doctor and his colleagues tagged along. There was a peppery scent. The Doctor felt queasy. A group of creatures resembling this manager with whom he was now speaking had emerged. He felt a pinprick. Then unconsciousness until he awoke in the room not long ago.

“Sorry, just struggling to remember,” the Doctor replied guardedly. “Yes, I did. I had a little coffee back in what I assume was your shop. Where are we?”

“Probably for the best you didn’t gulp it down. What precisely are you?”

“You first.”

An exasperated sigh emerged from the fanged mouth at the centre of the stalk. “Gusparkatarian Nilandrastolkang of the L’ngee Consortium. Pleasure to meet you. Just call me ‘Gus’; it’s easier.”

“Where am I?”

“Hang on: your turn.”

“I am the Doctor.”

“Of?”

“Gallifrey.”

“Really?” Gus again leaned its stalk on an arm, intrigued. “So, what’s a Gallifreyan doing in this backwater part of the galaxy?”

“Circumstances found me here. Why did you change my clothes?”

“Hey, I didn’t touch your clothes. But we have kind of a dress code here.”

“I don’t like this shirt.”

“We all have our burdens.” Gus crossed two arms. “But I take it that’s not why we’re talking right now.”

“Why are you taking these humans and making them…” The Doctor faltered. “What exactly *are* you making them do? Your paperwork?”

“Exactly that. I mean, wouldn’t you if you could? Have you ever tried filing and organizing this many reports? Hate it. Don’t know anyone who doesn’t. But *someone* has to do it, and these guys… Something just makes them suited for it – especially the younger ones.” The mouth distorted in an approximation of a smirk. “I mean, they’re not much good for anything else, but throw some mindless paperwork in front of them, give them a little pick-me-up… add in a little bonus to keep them docile, a little confused, and voila: we’ve got ourselves a bureaucratic army.” The mouth distorted further. “That way, we can focus on building up the more traditional armies.”

“Release them.”

“Afraid I can’t do that. Besides, where to?”

“Don’t be daft. Return them to the same place you took them from.”

“That would be a little inconvenient. We don’t have another transport coming from Earth until they finish the current round of scouting, which could be weeks. Still hoping we can find enough management material that I won’t have to wear one of these anymore,” Gus said, holding one of its ties up in disgust, though the Doctor wondered why the manager felt the need to wear them in the first place.

“Where are we now?”

“Earth orbit,” said Gus, its legs extending to give it some extra height. “But at the moment I’m more concerned as to what to do with you.” Gus paced in a small circle, its stalk rotating so as to keep pointed roughly to the middle of the circle while it talked to itself. “A Gallifreyan is useless as an office drone. The additives that keep the humans under control seem to have… unfortunate effects on you anyway, and we don’t want that. What can I do with someone who is absolutely useless in an office environment?” The L’ngee snapped a claw, then rotated to face the Doctor. “Guess there’s only one option.”

“Dare I ask?”

The L’ngee opened the cabinet and pulled out a mug that read “Department’s Best Boss.” “Congratulations! You’re our new supervisor.”

“Surely, you must be joking.”

“What would you do if you were me? I can’t send you back to Earth; this ship is only equipped for emergency landings. I don’t really want to throw you into space. Seems to me the only way we can keep you somewhere you can’t do much damage is by promoting you.”

The Doctor looked in revulsion at the mug being held out in front of him. “I won’t do it.”

“You *will* do it.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because,” said the L’ngee pointedly while it approached, “if you have spent any time with these

humans, you know they're far from harmless. Left on their own, they slaughter each other. Appallingly dangerous creatures. But" – it held a claw up in the air – "they *can* be docile and useful with just a little guidance. So we keep these poor, dumb creatures doing what they do second-best: paperwork."

The L'ngee again stared the Doctor down from mere centimetres away. He wished the creature would keep its distance. This was positively claustrophobic. It was hard to think to reply. Humans had no habit of merciless slaughter, but the Brigadier's recent actions still rankled. The Doctor remained silent.

The L'ngee continued: "Come on, I know you're going to help us. You don't seem the type to stay on a backwater planet like this just because. Crashed?"

The Doctor hesitated. "Exiled."

"Ha! Of course." Gus lay a claw on his shoulder. "We can change that. Just wait a week or two until the next transport shows up, and we'll get you back home. Or wherever you want to go." Gus stepped back. "You and me... We're above concerning ourselves with these lower life forms." Its voice dropped to a near-whisper: "Just between the two of us, I'm stuck managing these people. I wouldn't wish this on *anyone*. But I do what I have to do." Gus pointed at the Doctor. "That doesn't mean you need to be stuck with them forever. Now..." Gus stepped backwards and extended the mug out once more. "Do you want to discuss our compensation plans?"

The Doctor considered the build of the L'ngee. It was tempting to attempt Venusian aikido, but he wasn't convinced it would succeed against this gelatinous bulk.

"Well, I'm not helping with your war effort."

"Then you don't care about lives?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Transports. Supplies. Food. Medicine. I'll use you to get them where they need to go. Maybe help reinforce the troops so they don't get slaughtered." The Doctor was steely. "What is it you're doing on this planet that's so much holier than what we accomplish here?"

The Doctor hesitated. "I work with the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce."

Gus waited a long pause before speaking again. "You're kidding. You work with the military?" Gus sighed in disgust. "So, precisely how many lives are you saving with your work there? Seriously, Doctor, I can give you a chance to leave this forsaken ball of dust forever, or I can send you out of here the quickest way I know how. But you might want to put on a sweater; I hear the vacuum's a bit nippy today." The claw extended once more. "What say you?"

The Doctor swiped the mug out of the creature's claw.

Three days later, the Doctor felt as though he had accomplished nothing, but at least he had accomplished quite a lot of it.

Liz Shaw and the Brigadier had both been transferred to his department. He had suffered the indignity of filling out four forms in triplicate for each transfer, as well as additional forms for the individuals he was transferring out of the department, but it had been worth the indignity to have the two close at hand.

But he had another motivation for keeping them close: they had been too blasted efficient at their other jobs. Liz had been completing her reports and recommendations with remarkable productivity. Even the Brigadier had mapped out his route throughout the office with military precision. It was rare when an individual finished their cup before he was topping it off, unwittingly keeping the entire office drugged into servitude at maximum efficiency. The Doctor instead kept them occupied with

pointless activities: an extensive analysis of the effectiveness of the current system of status reports, including frequency, level of detail and ideal fonts.

In the meantime, the Doctor continued to try to get through to his colleagues. He tried mentioning UNIT or the Autons or the Silurians, but their fuzzy memories blurred these names into their time together in the office. He discouraged them from drinking more of the coffee, but they simply drank it behind his back.

The daily indoctrination video was playing on the displays mounted throughout the dimly lit complex. The Doctor contemplated the happy but empty smiles on his colleagues' faces as the video showcased smiling workers standing in the sunshine outside of a nondescript office building.

"...and remember that not only will your efforts here continue to save lives, but your standout performances will ensure your continued employment, and possibly keep you in line for promotion. Have a pleasant working day."

Applause rang out as the lighting returned to normal, then abruptly ended as everyone resumed their duties.

"Lethbridge-Stewart," the Doctor called out.

The Brigadier spun his chair to face the Doctor. "Sir?" There was something to be said for the Brigadier's unquestioning obedience, even if the commands themselves were dreary. No, even that was growing tiresome. Where was the fun in blind obedience? Where was the *banter*?

"In your filing, have you encountered any schematics for this ship?"

"Ship?"

It was difficult to break through the training videos' implication that they were on Earth. "This... office." Though the L'ngee encouraged the Doctor to supervise the humans, they hadn't given him much direct access to the systems. Keeping him where he couldn't do much damage, indeed.

"I can't say I have, but perhaps Miss Shaw has. Miss Shaw! Have you run into any floor plans for the office?"

"No, sorry. I think those are classified."

"Of course they are," muttered the Doctor. That would have been too easy. But maybe he was asking the wrong question. "What about other ships? I mean, offices?"

"Hmm." She cocked her head. "Maybe." She sat at a computer terminal, which recognized her biosigns and granted her access. She typed rapidly. "Department G-2 has a backlog of requests related to office efficiency analyses. Making sure their water, air and so forth isn't going to waste."

"Air?" the Brigadier scoffed. "They really do keep track of everything!"

The Doctor lunged over to her terminal. "Any with a floor plan similar to ours?"

"There!" said the Brigadier, pointing. Liz picked up the light pen attached to the thick display and tapped the plans on the screen.

"Let's see the life support systems." If the life support systems were damaged, it would force an emergency landing. "Where are the oxygen generators?"

"Distributed throughout the central office."

"The central office? That can't be right." The Doctor leaned against the desk. "They wouldn't leave life support so vulnerable." But the plans confirmed it: the cylinders spaced out throughout the complex weren't just a distribution system; they *were* the oxygen generators. "Something's missing here. What about the oxygen generators on the other decks? Those restricted to the L'ngee?"

"Funny you should ask," rang out a familiar voice. Gus had skittered out of its office for one of its occasional strolls. "Wonderful thing about being L'ngee: I don't need any oxygen. We provide it purely for your benefit, and at no small expense." Liz rolled her chair away from the desk abruptly as

Gus approached the computer. She and the Brigadier both appeared nervous. They were already accustomed to the alien's bizarre appearance from the infrequent walks around the office, but they were not in the habit of being so close to the manager's centre of attention. "Now, seriously, Doctor, I need you to focus on your job. If efficiency drops, we might have to cut back on certain... health benefits." It pointedly closed the schematics to the life support system.

The Doctor stood tall, staring the L'ngée in the eye as he replied, deadpan: "Just seeing how we can increase efficiency. Now, I would appreciate it if I weren't being micromanaged."

"Just stick to your own department, Doctor. If you think the humans are pliant now, you should see what happens when we cut their oxygen by twenty per cent." The skin around the compound eye bunched. "Or increase it, for that matter. Fragile things, aren't they?"

"We all are, in our ways," said the Doctor quietly. "If you want to me to be more productive, you'll return my wardrobe. I have difficulty focusing when I'm not wearing my own clothes." *Or at least other people's clothes that I've grown accustomed to, anyway.*

Gus laughed. "I appreciate a being with style, but even I'm not exempt from the dress code. Behave until the next ship comes, then we'll get your things back to you. Now, back to work." Gus scuttled off before the Doctor could reply to the threat.

Liz inched back to her desk. The Doctor collapsed into a chair. He rested his head in his hand.

"Doctor, are you all right?" asked the Brigadier. He kept his distance, but concern was apparent in his voice. "I... I don't think this is like you. Or I don't think it was, anyway."

He was not all right. Five minutes of this was too much, to say nothing of three days. He had a dozen ways he could have escaped in that time, but none of them would have guaranteed the safety of all of the human workers, much less their freedom. And without a working TARDIS, there was no way to come back to rescue them.

"Fine," the Doctor muttered to himself. "I'm fine."

Liz spoke up. "You only need to let us know how we can help, Doctor. Can I tell you a secret?" She grinned mischievously. "I'm not a fan of this bureaucratic nonsense either. But we all have jobs to do, and Al and I want to help you in any way we can."

"Really? Any way?"

The Brigadier chimed in. "Anything you need – within reason, of course."

The Doctor gazed into the eyes of the Brigadier, then Liz. Something was still there. These two were still his colleagues. Even after all that had been done to their minds, they were his greatest resources.

"Fine," he muttered. "They want me to manage, I'll manage." He turned to face his companions. "Lethbridge-Stewart, I am in great need of your skills from your previous job as a steward."

The Brigadier stood at attention. "Yes, of course. Glad to be of service."

"And, Miss Shaw, perhaps you can file a few forms for me. We're going to reroute some supplies. A few chemicals and such. Nothing too important. Dietary supplements." He paused. "A few personal belongings as well, if we can track them down."

"Gladly."

"And there's one more thing I must ask from both of you." He smiled. "I'm going to have to *insist* you two cut out the coffee."

The Doctor waited impatiently in his quarters for the nightly curfew to end. The Brigadier lay on the Doctor's small bed, restrained using the ties from the closet. Liz Shaw was similarly restrained on a

mattress the Doctor had dragged in from her nearby quarters. He had snuck them in there the previous day as soon as they had finished the forms he needed. He couldn't trust them to avoid the coffee, so physical restraint was the only option if he wanted them to stay away from the L'ngee narcotics.

Once the pair had finally lapsed into unconsciousness, he spent the night reassessing the risks of his plan. He could not put the humans in unnecessary danger, especially to save himself from boredom. But he could not let things stand as they were.

As happened every morning, an automated system pulled the tray into a cubbyhole in the wall and replaced the coffee pot. The Doctor lifted the carafe and flipped the lid open. The refreshing smell of hot coffee wafted over him, but there was no smell of pepper.

The Doctor was eager to wake and untie his colleagues, but there was one other thing he wanted to check before he woke them.

Hopeful, the Doctor opened his door and found a package waiting outside. Ripping open the box, he confirmed the contents. He grabbed his makeshift bow tie with both hands and tore it from around his neck.

"Brigadier, Liz!" he called, and they shifted groggily as he removed their restraints. "Grab a cup of coffee if you wish and return to your desks. I'll join you momentarily."

The Doctor's cape flowed behind him as he entered the office for what he hoped would be the last time. He held his sonic screwdriver near his ruffled shirt. Lethbridge-Stewart and Liz Shaw stumbled towards their desks.

"Doctor?" asked the Brigadier. "What's going on here? Where are we?"

"What do you remember?"

"It's hard to say. I feel like I've been run over by an FV101."

"You'd been drugged, kept docile. You are trapped on an alien ship."

Liz spoke up. "So, how do we get out of here?"

"Very simple," he said. "We manage."

The lights dimmed as the training video for the morning began. The familiar voice rang out: "Welcome to another morning at L'ngee, Inc., where satisfying work makes for a satisfying life."

The Doctor raised his sonic screwdriver, and the image on the monitors distorted.

"But you'll never get back to your real lives," the Doctor said, his voice echoing over the speakers. "That headache you're likely experiencing? That's the narcotics wearing off. Your managers have been controlling you: through hypnosis, through brainwashing and through your coffee."

Alison, a few desks over, spit her coffee out all over her desk. She rubbed her forehead wearily and slumped down, her right elbow shoving the damp papers until a few slid off the desk entirely.

"They have control of the life support systems. They don't need oxygen. Violence will only lead them to shut down your oxygen supply. But if you resist peacefully, they will weary."

"Yes," said Gus testily, approaching the Doctor. "I'm getting a little weary already." Gus's three arms circled its body and tapped each other impatiently. Liz reeled and the Brigadier's eyes widened, as if they were seeing the creature clearly for the first time. The displays shut down and the lights rose to normal. "What exactly are you hoping to accomplish with this?"

"Something. Anything. Slowing you down."

Its arms shook in disbelief. "You've accomplished nothing. We're not incompetent. My associates are going to have an alternative ready in minutes."

The Brigadier, now alert, faced the creature fearlessly. "We won't submit."

"Really? I don't see you have much of a choice."

"Don't we?"

"No," said Gus, testily. "You don't."

"Indeed." The Brigadier stepped up on his chair, and then onto his desk. "If you want to get out of here," he commanded the room, "you'll do as I do." He bent over and lifted his computer's monitor, but the cable snagged.

Gus edged closer a few steps. "What do you think you're doing?" it blustered.

The Brigadier finished unscrewing the monitor cable. "Making trouble." He stood up and hurled the monitor against one of the cylindrical oxygen generators in the ceiling. The monitor dented the metallic generator, but it barely budged a centimetre.

The Doctor was taken aback. "Brigadier," he said sternly, "I hope you realize what you're doing."

"I do," he said. "I'm 'taking my stand for freedom as in the olden time.'"

"Indeed," said the Doctor. "Well, do what you must."

"You're not accomplishing anything!" shouted Gus, but the Brigadier jumped off the desk and grabbed a pipe that connected to the oxygen generator. The pipe buckled under his weight, but it was still fixed to the ceiling. Liz Shaw hopped up on the desk and jumped for the same pipe. It ripped out of the fixtures on the ceiling, tearing apart the oxygen generator. The generator's whirring came to a halt.

The Brigadier stood upon the desk once more. His dominating voice carried easily across the room. "Listen! I know many of you are confused. All you need to know is this: as long as these creatures can threaten our ability to breathe, they control us. Now do you wish to live up here as slaves?" He slowly spun, still standing on the desk, making eye contact with the most attentive of the listeners. "Or do you wish to take a stand?"

Alison, suddenly lucid, shoved the papers from her desk and jumped on top. She shrieked as she lunged towards a pipe, then cried out in glee as she swung back and forth in her attempt to bring it down, her blonde hair whirling in front of her face as her glasses fell to the floor. She let out a yelp as the pipe, apparently less secure than the previous one, collapsed, her with it. She laughed painfully as she stood back up, nursing a bruised leg. Others scattered throughout the room imitated Alison and the Brigadier, while some simply smashed the computer systems at their desks.

"Everyone!" shouted Gus. "Calm down and get back to your quarters! You're only hurting yourselves!"

Four L'ngee emerged from a doorway carrying syringes. They wore suits much like the one Gus wore. They gasped, causing their round, fanged heads to appear larger and more threatening, though their body language and the whimpering sounds they made were far less intimidating. One inched towards a young woman, dancing back and forth as it attempted to approach her without attracting her attention. A scream startled the creature, and a moment later the woman bashed the creature's arm with her keyboard. It dropped the syringe and yelped, then skittered back again. The other L'ngee stayed near the wall, in no rush to approach.

Liz Shaw whispered something to the Brigadier. He nodded, and they quickly marched off to another corner of the office.

The Doctor smirked. "Docile, you said?" He stepped towards the L'ngee. "If there's one thing I've learnt about humans, it's that they are far from docile. What they lack in technology they make up for in spirit and independence, for better or for worse." The Brigadier and Liz returned with fresh

pots of coffee. They emptied the pots over the computers' power systems. Several sparked as they shorted out, then one burst into flames. The Brigadier tossed the empty pots onto the ground before returning to face the L'ngee, flames rising behind him. "With respect, sir, I suggest you cut your losses and return us home."

Gus surveyed the room in horror. "You're only going to burn your oxygen faster!"

Liz was deadpan. "Really? Hadn't occurred to us. I knew I should've paid more attention in those chemistry classes."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Humans can be savage creatures. You haven't begun to see what they're capable of. Especially this one," he said, inclining his head towards the Brigadier. "Wiped out an entire species just a few days ago." The Brigadier's posture weakened at the mention of his dreadful choice, but his face was resolute. "He'll destroy your ship without a second thought."

Gus's stalk was aimed at the Doctor. Disbelief echoed in its voice. "You knew this was going to happen, didn't you? You use these... humans to kill and destroy, and why? So you can keep your hands clean?" The Doctor fumed but said nothing. "No wonder you were exiled! You don't care about consequences. You'd rather destroy everything we've built than wait a few days for a ride home."

The Doctor's face was stony. "You're obviously under the misapprehension that you're speaking to a man who has a home." He stepped so close to the L'ngee that he exhaled directly into its eyestalk. "I have no desire to stay here forever. But I'm not leaving these people like this." He pointed to the chaos throughout the room. "You wanted a manager? I've managed them this far. I can manage to get them to stop as well. You wanted reports? I have a report for you: humans are unfit specimens. This programme of abduction must be terminated immediately, and this branch will be shut down at once. Now are you going to land this ship, or am I going to allow them to tear it apart piece by piece?"

The L'ngee faltered, then skittered over to one of the desks that was still relatively intact and picked up a phone. It rapidly operated the rotary dial. "This is Gus. Initiate emergency landing."

The Doctor busied himself adjusting the TARDIS console. He may have passed up one opportunity to leave Earth's solar system, but he did not intend to remain stranded forever.

The Brigadier strolled in uninvited.

"Doctor," he began, "we wanted to thank you for your assistance."

"We?" snapped the Doctor. "How many of you are there? I know there are at least three of me."

"Yes, well..." The Brigadier halted, confused by the comment, but he ultimately ignored it. "I thought you'd like to know we've confirmed that all of the missing persons have been returned. Most only have vague recollections of where they've been." His brow furrowed. "My memory's a bit spotty myself."

"For the best, I'm sure. Nothing happened that would be worth remembering."

The Brigadier stared at the floor near the console, hesitating. "Well, we appreciate that, despite any misgivings you may have about UNIT or... myself, you've continued to aid us when needed."

The Brigadier silently awaited a reply as the Doctor remained leaning over the console, adjusting various wires, but soon tired of waiting. "Thank you again, Doctor." He turned to exit.

The Doctor took his head in his hand. He could not shake the last thing Gus had told him before he left the ship.

"Congratulations. You managed to make these people do your dirty work for you," the manager said solemnly. "But that won't last forever. One of these days, you're going to leave your friends, or more likely they're going leave you. When that day comes," it said, holding a claw over

the Doctor's hearts, "you're going to find out who you really are." It placed the claw on the Doctor's shoulder. "Listen, I don't know if our operation was noble, but it was our last chance to survive war with the Sontarans. You've doomed us, Doctor. Hope your short-sightedness doesn't condemn your friends as well."

The Doctor glanced up at the departing Brigadier, though he remained hunched over the console.

"I have something for you."

"Pardon?"

"Something I obtained from the L'ngée ship. You might call it a gift, I suppose."

The Brigadier raised an eyebrow in bemusement as the Doctor retreated to a cabinet. The Doctor pulled out a coffee mug with the phrase "Department's Best Boss" emblazoned on it. He handed it to the Brigadier. "Don't read too much into that, of course. It's just... I have no use for it. Besides," he said, ducking under the TARDIS console, "I think I'll be sticking to tea for a bit."

The Brigadier turned to leave. From where the Doctor's head poked out from under the console, he could only see the edge of Lethbridge-Stewart's face as the man left the room, but he thought he saw the Brigadier's cheekbones rise in a smile as he strolled away.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Two

by Nick Walters

“BESHESHRA”, DURING THE REIGN

Once upon a time on the wondrous water planet of Besheshra, there lived a girl called Princess Inomasp. She lived all alone in her palace of coral and ruled her subjects with benevolence and great kindness. These subjects dwelt in the oceans of Besheshra and were, mainly, fish, plus a few crustaceans. Though she ruled sea creatures, Princess Inomasp was not of their ilk. She was human. Two long legs, two long arms, torso, head. She was almost, but not quite, beautiful: dark eyes rather too close together, a rather large nose, a rather small mouth and olive-hued skin with greenish undertones. But her hair fell around her head like rippling black flame, and when she smiled, which was not often, the universe did backflips. She wore, as befits the princess of an ocean world, a dress fashioned out of seaweed and a crown of seashells.

Several times a day, Princess Inomasp would descend the glittering staircase on the northern side of her palace of coral to stand on the tiny white beach and gaze over the wide blue ocean over which she ruled. She would ponder for a time, and at length she would speak.

“Creatures of the sea!” she would proclaim. “I hereby decree... that you wash your hands after each and every visit to the lavatory!” (Or some other such ruling that she thought fit for her subjects.)

Then she would give a gracious wave to the waves, smile a gracious smile at the surf, the universe would do a backflip, and she would regally ascend the coral staircase to her residence above.

One day, as usual, Princess Inomasp descended to the beach and stood staring at the gently rippling waves, listening to their endless surging swish, and composing her thoughts. What would she decree today to her myriad marine minions? But before she could think of something, a strange roaring, groaning, wheezing sound interrupted her thoughts. It was coming from behind her and so Princess Inomasp turned round in time to see a strange blue box appear out of thin air right at the foot of her coral staircase!

Princess Inomasp gasped.

She gasped again when the door of the strange blue box opened and a creature emerged – a creature just like her! Well, not exactly. It wasn't wearing a dress of seaweed or a crown of seashells, but a strange, close-fitting, brown, stripy garment.

The creature patted the side of the strange blue box. “Well done, old girl, that can't have been easy.”

The creature turned its attention to Princess Inomasp. Its hair was shiny and brown, and its eyes were also brown, and staring straight at her.

“Allo!” it said. “I'm the Doctor, who are you?”

Princess Inomasp had never seen a creature like this before, only fish, and the odd crustacean. He was beautiful! “I-I am Princess Inomasp, ruler of this world of Besheshra.”

“Bless you!” said the strange creature that called himself the Doctor. “*Princess* Inomasp, eh? *Ruler* of Besheshra. That figures.” He scratched his chin. “Do you remember me?”

Princess Inomasp was nonplussed. She had never met anyone before, so how could she remember him? “No, I do not.”

“Well, I looked a bit different last time we met. Leather jacket, bony face, shorter hair. And the time before that, I was a handsome fella in a frock coat. And the time before *that*, a little chap with a panama hat and a question-mark broly.”

“Your words are meaningless.”

“Personality and memory must have corrupted,” muttered the Doctor. His face looked sad.

“Your words are still meaningless.” Princess Inomasp could not help but stare at him. There was something about his eyes. They, and he, were just soooo beautiful! “Where have you come from, Doctor? What brings you to my world?”

“Oh, here and there.” The Doctor strolled towards her. “And I’m here to help you.”

Princess Inomasp bridled. “What makes you think that I, Princess Inomasp, require the help of anyone?” Even someone as beautiful as you, she almost – but not quite – said out loud.

“Oh you might not know it, Princess, but you need help.” He glanced around at the beach, up at the palace of coral that towered above them, and out to sea. “So... what do you get up to, Princess Inomasp of Besheshra?”

Princess Inomasp gestured with a wild sweep of a long arm, sending the sleeves of her seaweed dress swishing. “I rule here!”

The Doctor waved a hand in front of his nose. “Poo-er, you might think of giving that a rinse.” He glanced around at the empty beach and ocean. “Who exactly do you rule?”

“I rule the oceans! The creatures of the sea my loyal subjects be!” cried Princess Inomasp. “Thus.” So saying she turned to face the rippling waves. “Creatures of the sea!” she proclaimed. “I hereby decree... that you look both ways before crossing the road to make sure the way across is free!”

Silence, apart from the swish and swoosh of the waves.

Princess Inomasp pointed with a long finger at the wide blue ocean. “See?”

“See what? See sea? Yes, I see sea... I see.” The Doctor moved towards her. Close up he was even more beautiful, with his pale seashell skin, his dark eyes like the depths of the ocean.

Those eyes. As she gazed into them, the world seemed to tilt and wobble around her. Instead of standing on a beach, she was now in a big white dome, with sea creatures swimming impossibly above her head, and the Doctor had changed; though still handsome, his hair was longer, his eyes blue, and his clothes stranger.

Reality wobbled again and all was as before.

“Princess Inomasp,” said the Doctor, suddenly serious. “You do realize that the denizens of the ocean not only cannot hear your proclamations, but that even if they did, they would not make any sense? Roads? In the sea? I would go even further – your ‘loyal subjects’ are not even aware that you exist!”

Princess Inomasp swung away. How could someone so pretty be so cruel? “They hear! They understand! I exist!”

“Oh you exist all right, but what sort of life is this? How long have you been living here, giving your pointless instructions to the uncaring, unknowing waters of Besheshra?”

Princess Inomasp cast her mind back over her whole life. There was nothing, except what was now, had always been and would forever be. She turned back to face the Doctor. “I rule here, Doctor. I decree that you leave immediately!”

The Doctor’s eyes were full of sorrow. “Do you really want that?”

“Immediately!” cried Princess Inomasp.

The Doctor didn’t move. He pointed to his strange blue box. “See that blue box over there?”

That's my TARDIS. It brought me here."

"TARDIS?"

"Yep. Travels in time and space." He glanced around. "And... other places."

"Time... and space..." Princess Inomasp tried to grasp the meaning of these words, but failed.

"You mean, places... times... other than Besheshra?"

"Bless y— naaah, wasn't funny the first time," he said quickly. "Yeah. Come with me. Meet the universe. Live."

Princess Inomasp pouted. "All I need is here. And my subjects need me!"

"Subjects," said the Doctor. There was scorn in his voice. "Mere fish! There are worlds out there you could rule, Princess Inomasp, full of subjects worthy of you! Human beings, unicorns, giant badgers – people! You could offer them your wisdom, rule worlds untold!"

Doubt began to gnaw at Princess Inomasp. Doubt and temptation. Doubt and temptation and curiosity. But could she leave her piscine subjects? The Doctor had said her commands were pointless. Had said that her subjects did not even know she existed! Perhaps, after all, they *could* cope without her.

Princess Inomasp fell to her knees. Her fists grasped handfuls of warm sand. She let it fall between her fingers.

The Doctor stretched out his coral-pink hand, beckoning, beckoning. "Come with me."

Princess Inomasp howled in an agony of indecision and torment.

Next Segment
KRYAX, VOLCANO DAY

The Smallest War

by Violet Addison & David N. Smith

An alarm was ringing.

It was a pulsating electronic tone, which was echoing so loudly inside the TARDIS console room, that the noise was leaking out through the open door and into the office.

The Doctor stopped mid-sentence in his appraisal of Bill's essay, to glower at the open door, with the same contempt that Bill would have used on an alarm clock that had gone off accidentally on a Saturday morning.

"Aren't you gonna answer that?" she queried, glancing at the TARDIS. "It could be the end of the universe or somethin'."

The Doctor remained slumped in his chair, with his guitar resting in his lap. He gave a little shrug.

"Wrong bell," he replied.

Bill raised an eyebrow.

"The TARDIS has different ringtones?" She smiled. "Of course she does. Including one for the end of the universe, right? How's that sound? Just so I know."

"Surprisingly non-urgent, like a distant, doom-laden church bell."

Bill nodded.

"Right. So what does this one mean then?"

"That's the scanner," he replied. "It means she's detected a life form new to the area. I left it on, as an early warning system, in case anyone came looking..."

He left his sentence hanging, without any further explanation, but Bill was in no doubt he was alluding to the locked vault hidden in the cellar beneath the university. He remained reluctant to talk about it, even though after their trip to Mars, she was well aware of who was trapped within it.

"New life forms," Bill nodded encouragingly. "Shouldn't you be doing your spontaneous madcap dash then? So that I'm left sitting here looking at your empty, spinning chair?"

The Doctor strummed his guitar, while toying with the tuning pegs, an expression of dour disappointment sunk into the deep and crooked lines of his face.

"Never panic," he told her, his voice resuming the formal tone of a world-weary teacher. "Panic never achieves anything. Fear blunts the intellect. Why act on instinct, out of terror, when you have one of nature's most highly evolved minds at your disposal."

He tapped the side of his head.

"Yeah, it's massive."

"Yours is reasonably adequate too," the Doctor replied with a sour grin, as he turned his gaze towards the TARDIS. "Besides, we'll know in a moment if there is any cause for concern."

A large, colourful and bumbling shape suddenly crashed through the doors.

"Sir!" Nardole squeaked, his bald forehead creased with worry, as his agitated fingers pulled at his chequered waistcoat to make sure it was straight. "You'd better come and have a look at the scanner. I think we're under attack!"

Bill grinned at the Doctor's stern and resolutely calm face.

"That sounds like a possible cause for concern," she told him, rising hurriedly from her chair, anticipating that he would immediately spring into action.

The Doctor rolled his eyes.

“I do hate it when these things interrupt my lessons.” He sighed, as he reluctantly put down his guitar and clambered out of his chair. “I was probably in the middle of saying something important. I must have been. I was talking.”

The Doctor crossed the threshold of the TARDIS, giving Nardole a disparaging stare as he stalked past him, before glancing backwards at Bill with a mischievous smile, as she followed him across metal walkway towards the glowing console in the middle of room.

“How’s the new houseshare?” he asked.

“Sir!” Nardole exploded, shuffling into the TARDIS behind them. “There isn’t the time for small talk! The scanner!”

The Doctor shrugged.

“I have to ask now,” he replied. “I’m about to be very busy and I don’t want her thinking I don’t care.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Nardole huffed. “I’m sure you’ve got her fooled.”

The Doctor gave him a sideways glance.

“Oh, I see. No time for small talk, but plenty of time for banter.”

Bill sighed. It was like watching a married couple argue.

“The new house is fine,” she replied, cutting across their squabbling. “Ridiculously expensive of course.”

“I’ve never really understood your monetary system,” the Doctor countered. “It’s based on a completely flawed value system. A beautiful sunset is apparently worth nothing, while a well-cooked meal is disproportionately expensive.”

Bill shrugged. She needed money to live a normal life; discussing the merits of it with someone who did not need any, seemed pointless.

“And my room is ludicrously small,” she continued, now caught up in her list of complaints about the living conditions she was expected to tolerate.

“Well, space is dimensionally relative.” The Doctor shrugged, as he grabbed hold of the scanner screen and spun it around towards him. “The room isn’t too small: you’re too big for it.”

Bill ignored him, determined not to be put off by his odd and otherworldly comments.

“And I’ve just got a single bed in my room.”

“Why would you need more? There’s only one of you.”

“And there’s only one bathroom between the six of us!”

“Well, between you and me, it’s probably politer if you take turns, rather than all try to use it at once.”

Bill gave up.

“But, most importantly, at least this time there are no aliens bugs infesting the woodwork.”

“Well, nowhere’s perfect,” the Doctor shrugged, his voice suddenly devoid of emotion, as he focused his attention on the scanner screen, which had bathed his face in a shining red glare. Bill peered keenly around his elbow, to see a map of Bristol filling the screen, covered in thousands of overlapping, large red flashing circles.

“What are those?” she asked.

“Life forms,” the Doctor replied quietly.

On the far side of the console, Nardole gave a soft, knowing snort.

“I told you,” he muttered, eliciting a dark stare from the Doctor. “We’re under attack!”

The Doctor shook his head.

“It may have nothing to do with us.”

Bill frowned.

“But there’s, like, thousands of them!” she cried.

The Doctor nodded, tapping a finger against some indecipherable characters that occasionally flashed up on the display.

“Three thousand and forty-one,” he replied.

“Err, are you sure panicking isn’t helpful?” Bill asked in a nervous voice. “No offence, but however you look at it, that’s an invasion.”

The Doctor nodded.

“I do hope so. I’m excellent with invasions,” he said, clapping his hands and rubbing them together with gleeful excitement. “There’s a good chance they’ve detected the TARDIS. We’d best get ready to meet them! Grab whatever you need and meet me on the front lawn in five minutes!”

The Doctor bounded away, hurrying down a metal stairwell, deeper into the confines of the TARDIS, obviously intent on getting something that would help him deal with the invaders.

“Where’s he going?” Bill asked, turning to where Nardole had been, only to find that he had already dashed away up the nearest stairway and was now doing his distinctive shuffling run around the circumference of the upper balcony.

“I knew something like this would happen eventually!” he cried, as he hurriedly tore around the room, evidently engaged in a frantic search for something he needed.

Bill turned away.

She quietly stepped out of the TARDIS and back into the Doctor’s office. What could she possibly do about three thousand invaders? How could you prepare for that?

She glanced around the room, looking for anything that might be of use. There was a pot of sonic screwdrivers standing on the desk, but she had no idea how they worked, so they would be useless in her hands. There was also an old cricket bat, leaning by the hat stand, which she picked up and gave an experimental test swing. It seemed reassuringly heavy. It wasn’t much, but it at least gave her some capacity to defend herself. It felt absolutely absurd, that in the face of such an overwhelmingly large threat, she could think of nothing better than to pick up a big stick. She suddenly realized that she had never really put any thought into having a contingency plan for a world-shattering emergency; dealing with the minutiae of everyday life had just took up too much of her time

The Doctor flew out of the TARDIS, carrying a long and cylindrical package over one shoulder, with his manic penguin-with-its-arse-on-fire gait now fully engaged. He vanished through the office door, followed by a distinctive orange blur, as Nardole dashed after him, now dressed in his neatly buttoned-up duffle coat.

Wasting no more time, Bill hurried after them, with the ancient cricket bat clutched in one hand. She emerged out onto the front steps of the university building, to find the Doctor and Nardole standing in the centre of the lawn, looking up at an empty sky. Grey clouds were being driven swiftly overhead, dropping a cold drizzle of rain, which slanted on a hard and biting wind. Bill shivered; she had left her jacket upstairs and her brightly coloured, shoulderless top was entirely inappropriate for the weather.

Nardole glanced back at her.

“Why are you carrying a cricket bat?” he asked curiously.

Bill slapped the weathered willow club against the flat of her hand.

“I thought it might help.”

Nardole frowned, his forehead crinkling.

“You’re going to take on an army of three thousand aliens with a cricket bat?”

Bill glanced at Nardole’s empty hands, which he was anxiously rubbing together.

“Well, what did you bring?” she retorted.

“My coat,” Nardole replied, patting the orange duffle coat, as he grimaced at the sky. “I’ve never liked the rain. He said we were going outside, bring what you need. A coat seemed like an obvious choice. You must be freezing.”

Bill looked at the cricket bat in her hands, feeling suddenly foolish to be wielding it like a weapon. She glanced at the Doctor who, despite the grey and unfriendly weather, was now wearing his sunglasses. He shifted the weight of the brown-paper-covered tube, which was slung across his shoulder, as he scanned the empty tree line.

“What did you bring?” Bill asked, looking at the mysterious paper-clad package. “Some kind of sci-fi sonic space canon?”

The Doctor shot her a contemptuous stare.

“What is it with humans?” he asked. “You get new visitors to your world, technologically advanced enough to traverse massive interstellar distances, and the first thing you want to do is crack out your embarrassingly primitive weapons. Call in the army! Send in people with guns! Do you really think that’s going to end well? No! Why not try a more diplomatic approach?”

He dropped the package from his shoulder, tore off the brown paper and unfurled a length of red carpet, which he kicked out across the grass.

“Welcome to the Earth!” he cried, attracting a number of curious stares from passing students. “Sorry about the weather.”

His greeting was met by silence.

“That’s your entire plan?” Bill asked, looking at the frayed red carpet, a little incredulously.

“Yes.” The Doctor nodded. “Always assume the best until someone pulls out a weapon. Then, if all goes well, we can then challenge them to a game of cricket.”

Bill glanced at the cricket bat in her hand, then at the empty space at the end of the red carpet, from which the invading army of three thousand aliens was notably absent.

“Maybe I scared them off?” Bill suggested, pulling a face to clarify that she knew it was a ludicrous suggestion. “What were you expecting to find out here?”

The Doctor frowned, removing his sunglasses, which he waved in the air as he spoke.

“A battlecruiser. A mothership. Basically some kind of massive spaceship, large enough to bring three thousand aliens here.”

“Maybe it’s invisible,” Bill suggested.

“And the three thousand and forty-one aliens?” the Doctor shook his head, pushing the sunglasses into his pocket. “Where are they?”

“Maybe they’re invisible too.”

“That’s an awfully impractical way to run an invasion; people would just spend the whole time bumping into things. Generally, when invading, despots always like to show off their massive armies. It helps intimidate the local population into submission.”

“I thought we were *assuming the best*...” Bill retorted.

“Oh, I just said that to stop you panicking,” replied the Doctor, as he turned and glanced up at the window of his office. “They’re not here. Must have been a faulty scanner reading. I may have let the TARDIS maintenance slip at some point.”

Nardole frowned.

“Sir, it’s no mistake, we can’t just ignore those readings. The TARDIS doesn’t make those kinds

of errors. If they're not out here, they must be somewhere else..."

Nardole left the sentence hanging, in the same way the Doctor had in his office, obviously feeling uncomfortable talking about the vault in public.

"Go and check on it then."

The Doctor waved him away.

"On my own, sir?" A nervous tremor had entered Nardole's voice.

The Doctor nodded.

"You're the one worrying about it."

Nardole huffed, turned on his heel and shuffled hurriedly away, heading off around the corner of the building to where the entrance to the cellar was hidden.

"Panic over then?" Bill asked, resting the cricket bat against her shoulder.

"Not at all." The Doctor glanced at her with suddenly large, wild eyes. "I think I've just completely misjudged the scale of this crisis!"

He leapt off at speed, his long legs carrying him swiftly across the grass and back into the university building, abandoning the red carpet on the lawn.

The Doctor could run surprisingly fast.

Bill eventually caught up with him in the TARDIS console room, where she found him staring at the scanner screen with a look of concentration on his face. Having adjusted several dials and switches on the console, his face suddenly split apart in an excited grin.

Bill leaned the cricket bat against the railing and slumped herself down on one of the seats.

Over the recent weeks, she had begun to understand the Doctor's moods, and had realized that there were times you did not need to shoot wild questions at him, because the man just could not stop himself from talking. Instead, she stared at him with wide, expectant eyes.

With a firm hand, he spun the scanner screen around, with such perfect precision that it came to rest directly in front of her. She stared at the thousands of flashing red circles.

"You remember way back, long before all that business with the Monks, we met Tiny?" he asked. "The giant sea creature chained beneath the ice at the Frost Fair."

Bill nodded.

"Yeah. It's not the kind of thing I forget."

"The scanner recalibrated itself to account for the creature's massive size; look what happens when I reset it to the standard settings."

The Doctor turned a dial on the console, causing the map of Bristol to zoom in on just the university, and making the red circles shrink until they were just pinpoints clustered over one particular building.

"It's good to know even a Time Lord can have IT problems." Bill leaned forward and frowned. "So where exactly are these aliens then?"

"In my office," the Doctor replied, obviously believing his statement should somehow make sense to her.

"Um, you have three thousand aliens in your office?" she replied, shaking her head. "I think I would have noticed."

The Doctor advanced on her, pinching his thumb and forefinger together, until there was only the tiniest gap between them.

"Not if they were very, very small."

"Oh." Bill shook her head with disappointment, finally understanding. "Not more alien

minibeasts! Between Vardies and the Dryads, I've had my fill of them!"

"Smaller than that."

"Microscopic?"

The Doctor nodded.

"Come and see them!" he cried, turning and racing back along the walkway to the doors.

"They're just outside."

Bill bounced to her feet, perplexed by his excitement over a few thousand microbes. She found him on his hands and knees on his office floor, examining the rug she had bought him for Christmas, his sonic screwdriver buzzing in his hands. Beneath the blue glow, among the red weave of the rug, was a large fuzzy stain, which seemed to bristle with tiny white threads.

"If they're microscopic, should we even be able to see them?"

"That's not them. That's their city!"

Bill looked at him with skeptical eyes.

"Seriously?"

The Doctor nodded with enthusiastic excitement.

"They've pulled apart the rug at a molecular level, then used the component atoms to fashion this. In two thousand years, I've never seen anything like it! They're creatively reshaping their environment to meet their own needs! A city built out of wool!"

"I doubt it's real wool. It wasn't expensive." Bill shrugged. "I can probably get you a new one. Or you can just flip it over; I think it's the same on both sides."

The smile fell from his face.

"I'm saying they're intelligent." The Doctor frowned with disappointment, as he placed his screwdriver back in his jacket pocket. "Although so far, I've not been able to find a way to communicate with them. They don't seem to have been able to detect any of the sonic signals I sent to them."

Bill could not help but chuckle.

"And you're surprised? Doctor, they're microscopic! How could they possibly communicate with us? They're probably not even aware of our existence!"

The Doctor nodded in glum agreement.

"Still, there must be a way."

"If it's all the same to you, I might leave this one with you." She sighed, glancing at clock on the mantelpiece. "If our lesson is over, I have a house-warming party to get to."

The Doctor grimaced awkwardly.

"Oh, this is awkward, but I can't possibly go to that," he said, gesturing at the stain on the rug. "I'm going to be far too busy with this now."

"Yeah. That's okay," she replied, rolling her eyes, not even trying to hide the fact that he was most definitely not welcome. "I'd be surprised if you wanted to go, when there's something as exciting as that stain going on!"

"I'm glad you understand."

She stepped away from him and picked up her denim jacket from the back of her chair, shaking her head with disbelief as she left the room. It was at moments like that when he truly seemed like an old man, unable to understand her youthful concerns, as he became lost in his own ancient eccentricities.

She left him to his fascination with the blemish on the rug.

There was partying to be done.

Bill was woken by a shocked gasp.

She reluctantly opened one bleary eye.

Penny was standing by the window, evidently trying to find her jacket in the gloomy dawn light that was leaking through the thin curtains. Bill could not suppress a quick smile. The house-warming party had gone surprisingly well. For once the girl she liked had not fled from her, but had instead chosen to stay over, rather than make her way home late at night. She was feeling optimistic, and even though nothing had really happened between them, Bill momentarily dared to hope that her love life might actually be looking up for a change.

“No good morning kiss?” she teased, stretching.

Penny looked up at her and blinked.

“I didn’t mean to wake you…” The woman’s words stalled mid-sentence. “But what the hell happened to my jacket?”

It was a conversational turn that Bill had not been expecting.

Now, with her mind pulling itself free of the happy afterglow of a pleasant night’s sleep, Bill suddenly remembered the surprised gasp that had woken her.

She glanced downwards at the jacket on the floor, instantly noticing how it was covered in a thick green mould, sprouting wiry white threads. Bill immediately propped herself up on an elbow, suddenly fully alert, immediately aware of how similar it looked to the growth on the Doctor’s rug.

“I should have known,” she muttered.

Bill reached for the bedside lamp and turned it on.

Penny’s eyes widened. She screamed, a high and piercing note, filled with genuine horror and fear. Abandoning her jacket, she fled the room, still shrieking. A few seconds later the front door slammed.

Bill ran a hand through her afro.

“But I don’t get bed hair,” she muttered, trying to use her own humour to put herself at ease, as she slowly turned to see what had scared Penny so badly.

She almost screamed herself.

Her duvet was covered in a green, furry growth. She immediately flung it to one side, instinctively leaping out of the bed.

This was too much.

Once again the Doctor’s freaky world had impinged on her personal life, in a horrible and intrusive way, which she was not prepared to tolerate.

Still wearing most of her clothes from the previous day, but not daring to spend time getting changed, she hurriedly grabbed a coat and stormed out of the house.

She was going to make it quite clear to the man, that this was not acceptable; that she deserved to be able to have a normal life. He was going to have to sort out this mess straight away.

Bill entered the Doctor’s office without knocking.

He may be her tutor, and therefore officially have some kind of authority over her, but recent events had crossed so many personal boundaries, that she felt no compulsion to show any civility towards him.

“Hey, mister,” she cried, storming into the office. “You’re in big trouble!”

“He knows,” replied Nardole, who was standing just inside the TARDIS, surveying the devastated office with a look of absolute dismay plastered on his face. “Don’t step on anything.”

Bill immediately glanced down.

The wooden floor was covered in a thick carpet of furry mould, which had worked its way up the legs of the chairs and desk, and even up onto one of the bookshelves. Several books lay partly dissolved into the unpleasant mass of green.

The Doctor was sitting cross-legged on his desk, with his head in hands, and his grey hair in a state of wild disarray. Bill felt her anger momentarily diminish, feeling that overall she may have had a better night than him, even if it had ended badly.

The Doctor looked at her with wild, bulging eyes.

“The population is now thirteen thousand,” he muttered glumly. “I can’t find any way to communicate with them. They’re only contained in the office, because I’ve used the TARDIS to erect a low-level force field, with a microscopic filter, all around the room. If I lowered it, they’d probably consume the entire planet’s natural resources within decades. They’re almost as bad as humanity in that regard.”

Bill was momentarily taken aback.

He didn’t know.

He was completely unaware that they had already escaped the office.

“They’re in my house,” she stated matter-of-factly, crossing her arms and glaring at him, unable to conceal the anger sliding into her voice. He may not understand the personal catastrophe it had caused in her love life, but he evidently did understand a potential global apocalypse when he saw one.

The Doctor hung his head in defeat.

“You must have trekked them back there last night,” he sighed. “It would only take a handful on your clothes or shoes, then they would quickly start consuming material and self-replicating. If they’re not contained, this is going to escalate out of all control very quickly.”

“So,” Bill pushed, “what are you going to do about it, Doctor?”

“There’s only one thing I haven’t tried, but it’s fairly drastic, slash insanely dangerous.” He scratched at the back of his head, looking awkward and embarrassed. “I only found out by accident, quite a long time ago, that the TARDIS could even do it. It’s a design flaw, a technical fault; she’s not really supposed to be able to do it. I think it may even have been one of the reasons the Type 40s were retired.”

Nardole sighed.

“Just so you know, you’re having one of those moments, where nobody else in the room knows what you’re talking about.”

“So?” The Doctor shrugged, while waving a hand dismissively in the air. “That happens all the time. I’m used to it.”

Bill glowered at him.

“Well, it annoys the hell out of the rest of us.”

The Doctor nodded.

“The TARDIS is trans-dimensional. Size is relative.”

“On no.” A look of panic appeared on Nardole’s face.

“Still not with you,” Bill replied, throwing them both an angry-faced look.

“He’s saying he can shrink the TARDIS down!” Nardole cried.

The Doctor grinned excitedly.

“A face-to-whatever-they-have encounter with microbial life! It’s the only way they’ll ever be able to perceive us!”

Nardole’s forehead crinkled with worry lines.

“Can I just respectfully say, sir, that this is most definitely one of your daftest plans yet.” Nardole shook his head “And, trust me, it’s up against some pretty stiff competition.”

“Well, after two thousand years, can you imagine how dull sensible plans seem?”

The Doctor stood up on his desk, sized up the distance to the TARDIS door, then leapt forward, his long legs carrying him across the gap. Nardole stepped backwards out of the way, just in time to make space for the Doctor to land, in a half-sprawled crouch beside him.

“I would normally completely forbid this, obviously.” Nardole sighed, helping him back to his feet. “But I guess we don’t have much of a choice, do we?”

“Don’t worry, most of the time we’ll still be in the room. Besides, if you had forbidden it, I would have completely ignored you anyway.” The Doctor smiled. “Coming, Bill?”

She gave a brief nod, backed up a couple of paces, then charged at the TARDIS. At the edge of the office, she leapt upwards, easily clearing the distance to the doors. The Doctor caught her hand, to prevent her overbalancing backwards into the green carpet of mould.

“So, how exactly does this work?” asked Nardole, already stalking around the console with curious eyes, as the Doctor closed the doors.

“Essentially, you disengage all the safety systems, then open the doors during materialization.” The Doctor grinned.

“Ooh, I knew I wasn’t going to like it.” Nardole nodded, frowning. “But how exactly does that make us very small?”

“It triggers a catastrophic failure of the dimensional stabilizer, as the TARDIS has no stable coordinates to map itself onto.”

“Lovely.” Nardole swallowed nervously.

Bill nodded and shrugged.

“Yeah. So, technobabble aside, right, is it safe?”

“There’s no such thing as safe.” The Doctor replied, throwing the dematerialization handle and watching the upper sections of the central console begin to spin. “Walking in sunshine will give you skin cancer, breathing in traffic fumes will give you a host of respiratory illnesses, crossing the road you could be hit by a bus; yet you still walk about in Bristol city centre, don’t you? And that’s without even considering the dangers of asteroid strikes, terror attacks or nuclear war. Hang around long enough, and the AI systems will out-evolve you; you’ll be consumed by the machine. The universe is always trying to kill you. Existence is inherently dangerous. All you can do is *live*, while you have the chance.”

Nardole rolled his eyes.

“A simple *no* would have sufficed,” he muttered under his breath. “It’s not safe.”

“I need one of you over there,” the Doctor barked, gesturing towards the white wooden doors. “To pop the latch while we’re materializing. I need to stay at the controls, in case anything goes wrong.”

Nardole scratched his bald scalp.

“You’re deliberately crashing us; what can go possibly wrong?”

“Ask any pilot the difference between a controlled crash and uncontrolled one”

“Right.” Nardole nodded with understanding.

Bill hurried over to the doors, taking her position by the latch, ready for the Doctor’s command.

She swallowed nervously; she had not fully understood their conversation, but she did not need to understand the danger, to know that she should be terrified of it.

“Now!” the Doctor yelled, pulling back on the lever in his hand.

Bill twisted the old-fashioned silver latch, tentatively opening the doors and peering outside, curious to see what exactly lay beyond the doors while they were in flight. The unique sights outside managed to capture her attention, despite the sparks and flames which erupted from the console behind her. She could feel her lower jaw hanging open in awe.

For the briefest moment there was a shimmering tunnel of swirling silver fog, which was almost immediately replaced by the dark void of space, littered with stars, which seemed to streak past them as they thundered across impossible distances. The Earth shot towards her so fast, that she instinctively flinched away, fearing that they would hit it. A world of lava and volcanoes suddenly flashed past her vision, to be replaced by a lush jungle, as the sun rose and fell a thousand times. A city blossomed. The Doctor’s office reformed around them.

Like a scene from *Alice in Wonderland*, the furniture in the room suddenly began to grow, until the desk and chairs towered above her. As they shrunk, she spotted a forgotten silver bolt hidden under one of the tables, which expanded until it too towered above them.

A rolling green landscape of mould rose into view, its sponge-like floor dipping downwards into a narrow channel, topped by vast white tree-like structures, which occasionally swayed on sudden gusts of wind.

The TARDIS made a loud *thunking* noise, as it settled into place at the bottom of the high-walled gully.

“Woah!” said Bill, feeling the expression of shock succinctly summed up her attitude to the mind-boggling sights she had just witnessed. “Exactly how small are we?”

“I’m around half a millimetre tall,” the Doctor replied, using a fire extinguisher to blast out a fire raging beneath the console, before putting it down and moving over towards her and stepping out through the TARDIS doors. “You two are obviously a little shorter.”

Nardole shuffled outside behind him.

“It’s very green,” he said, prodding the wall of the channel with his finger, his eyes widening slightly with alarm as it sank into the material. He hurriedly pulled his finger out. “And not particularly pleasant to touch.”

Bill hesitantly stepped outside, finding the sponge-like terrain beneath her trainers oddly unsettling. It was like walking on a bouncy castle.

“So how do we find these aliens?” she asked, as she took a few tentative steps forward, her voice rising, as she found herself bounding around almost entirely out of control.

“You might want to familiarize yourself with gravity first,” the Doctor informed her, as he watched her tumble past, and land in a crumpled heap in the corner against the spongy wall of the gully. “Inertia works very differently at this scale.”

“Got it,” she mumbled, as she slowly unfolded herself from being a tangled heap.

“What fun!” yelled Nardole, suddenly bouncing up and down. He launched himself repeatedly upwards, to increasingly vast heights, until he was able to peer over the top of the gully. “Like a flea!”

The Doctor nodded.

“Yes, like a bald, orange, irritating flea.”

“Ooh, I think I can see the aliens!” replied Nardole, once again bouncing off the soft terrain and rocketing skywards. “Yep, there they are. Loads of ’em.”

The Doctor caught him as he crashed down again, using a firm grip to hold him in place.

“And, thanks to you, they now almost certainly know we’re here too.” The Doctor shook his head in dismay.

Nardole grimaced with embarrassment.

“Well, we are here to meet them.” He shrugged innocently, refusing to make eye contact with the Doctor’s angry stare. “Thank you, by the way; I couldn’t actually figure out how to stop bouncing once I’d started.”

“I hope you’re both ready,” the Doctor murmured, looking upwards, as a massive shadow fell across them.

Bill, having only just managed to pull herself upright, felt her knees weaken at the sight of the creature above them. It was slightly larger than her, with a blue, puffy body, segmented into five roughly equal parts; the rear four of which had a pair of chubby limbs, each of which ended in eight writhing tendril-like fingers. The foremost part was presumably a head, although it had no eyes or ears, just two antennae and a large, circular mouth approximately the same size as Bill’s head.

“It’s quite big for a microscopic animal,” Bill muttered, subtly positioning herself behind the Doctor, in the belief that he would almost certainly be able to stop it before it reached her, even if only by being eaten. “I know, size is relative, but couldn’t you have made us a bit bigger than them?”

The Doctor nodded.

“That probably would have been a good idea.” He frowned, a look of suspicion and recognition sinking across his brow. “Is it me, or does it look vaguely familiar?”

Bill frowned, shooting him a sideways glance.

“No.”

“They’re a lovely shade of blue,” Nardole observed, a quiver of fear entering his voice as another of the creatures appeared above them. “It kind of reminds me of the TARDIS.”

“Oh,” said the Doctor, his eyes boggling wildly for a moment, as he slapped a hand over his own suddenly open mouth. “Oops.”

Bill frowned at him.

“That’s not good.” She folded her arms, setting herself in an angry posture, feeling increasingly sure that she was going to need it. “They *are* invading aliens, right?”

“Not exactly,” he replied.

“How not exactly?”

“Not at all.” He sighed, giving a small embarrassed shrug. “They’re tardigrades, or at least, the descendants of them. They’re a species native to the Earth, capable of surviving in even the most extreme environments. On Earth, they’ve been found in the deepest ocean trenches, in mud volcanoes and in Antarctica. They can survive temperatures and pressures that would kill almost any other species. They can endure without water for a decade. In a dehydrated state, they can even survive in the vacuum of space. They can actually repair the damage caused to their DNA by radiation. They’re an incredible species, which has survived every mass extinction event this planet has seen!”

Nardole frowned.

“Oh, a little bug-love. That’s nice, if a little weird. And just how might they fare on say the shell of a trans-dimensional space-time capsule?” he asked, with a tone of innocent curiosity, while giving the Doctor’s enthusiasm a wary stare. “Particularly one that’s been parked in a more-or-less static location for decades, leaking artron energy everywhere, due to thousands of years of poor maintenance.”

“They’d thrive!” the Doctor cried, looking at the growing crowd of creatures above them, as the

first one made its way down the side of the gully, using dozens of the fingers sprouting from its eight limbs to keep itself anchored to the surface. “It would have accelerated their life cycle and evolution to an incredible level. I’d say they’ve gone through an extraordinary evolutionary leap, giving them abilities other species can only dream of. I can only hope they’ve gained a reasoning intelligence at the same time.”

Bill shook her head.

“They’re microbes!” she protested. “Their brains literally aren’t big enough.”

“Trans-dimensional microbial life,” he countered. “Their brains could be bigger on the inside than the outside. They could have a hive intelligence. Anything is possible.”

He held out the palm of his hand to the nearest creature, which proceeded to examine it with both of its antennae. Bill took a step back towards the TARDIS, as numerous of its brethren began descending into the gully.

“Or they might just be mindless microbes that just want to eat us,” she stated, feeling a pair of antennae probing at her hair, momentarily getting caught in the curls.

The Doctor nodded.

“Well, yes, that’s also possible,” he conceded, laying his hand on the head of one of the animals. “They must be mildly telepathic. I can sense their minds. Unsophisticated, but with the potential to grow – not unlike you two.”

He looked back at Nardole and Bill and grinned.

Nardole rolled his eyes.

“Cut the banter and get on with it then,” he chided. “You are directly responsible for their very existence; you are essentially their god, so sort them out. Go on. Make one of your big, powerful and emotive speeches. Get them to stop eating the furniture.”

The Doctor nodded, rubbing his hands together with thoughtful glee.

“I have never wanted to be a god,” he muttered. “But what choice do I have? I can implant a telepathic message, broadcast it through the whole community, give them a commandment – a direction to an entire species. I can give them peace and harmony, enable them to co-exist with humanity.”

Nardole glanced nervously at Bill.

“Yes. I’m sure this will work out well,” he said, unable to conceal the sarcasm in his voice.

“Totally,” Bill agreed, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “What could possibly go wrong?”

The Doctor laid his hand back on the head of the creature, between its two antennae and closed his eyes.

“You are small, but you are not powerless. Look at your world. See the devastation you have wrought, utterly unintentionally in the pursuit of your mindless expansion. Your impact can be vast, compared to your scale. Imagine what you could achieve, if you worked together, with your own kind and others, towards shared goals and ambitions. Look beyond to your own small world, to the universe beyond. Reach for the stars. Know, that to build a utopia, all it requires is kindness.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” Nardole muttered. “Maybe they could all hold antennae too.”

The Doctor lifted his head and looked at him, with anger burning in his eyes, but did not say a word.

“Well, that’s what all your big speeches really boil down to, isn’t it?” Nardole shrugged. “Be nice to others, because you’re only really hurting yourself.”

The Doctor nodded.

“It’s so simple, yet so few understand it; instead they follow a path of fear and hate, which

ultimately leads to—”

“The Dark Side?” suggested Bill, unable to resist.

The Doctor scowled at her.

Around them the creatures suddenly moved, all simultaneously turning in a single direction, their antennae twitching as they shuffled away.

“Something has changed!” the Doctor cried, bouncing backwards excitedly on the heels of his shoes and launching himself at the TARDIS, seemingly able to function at ease in the unusual environment. “It shouldn’t take long to see what effect we’ve had on them!”

Bill gladly returned to the safety of the console room, keen to be away from the surreal nightmare outside. She felt her mood lift significantly once the doors were shut and they were once again in flight. For most of the journey, Nardole remained in the corner of the room, silently watching the Doctor with a look of disappointment stamped on his face, occasionally rolling his eyes and tutting with disapproval.

The moment they landed, all three of them dashed to the doorway, keen to see the office outside. Everything looked entirely unchanged, with a sea green mould still covering the floor and the legs of the desk and chairs.

“Give it a few minutes,” the Doctor cautioned, his eyes gleaming eagerly. “Societal change can take time. The message needs to spread.”

“Or they could just be dumb bugs,” Nardole muttered, shaking his head. “Not evil, but just not able to understand one of your lectures.”

An hour later, when nothing spectacular had happened, and Bill had grown weary of watching mould grow, she decided to head home.

Regardless of what happened in the Doctor’s office, she knew she was going to have to take care of the colony in her bedroom. She did quite enjoy sharing her personal space with one special person, but no matter what claims the Doctor made, she had absolutely no intention of sharing her living space with thousands of super-evolved, furniture-eating microbes.

Bill knew there was something wrong the moment she re-entered her bedroom.

Her mattress was gone, completely devoured, leaving only a mould covered wood bed frame which was on the point of collapse.

She now had nowhere to sleep.

Worse, there were a number of thin trails of mould, leading off in separate directions, ending in large, growing stains. She sighed; all the Doctor had done was manage to organize the creatures, which were now clearly spreading into new colonies.

One had eaten into her wardrobe, working through her clothes inside. Another was on the window, from which both a metal latch and panel of glass had vanished. Another had targeted the box of photographs of her mother, which had so mysteriously turned up one day, and begun to eat away at the impossibly valuable contents.

Bill felt her fists ball.

This was more than she could tolerate.

She was not going to lose another home to bugs.

This was her space.

The Doctor may be content to let their colonies grow, but they had crossed a line with her: they had invaded her personal space.

She trudged downstairs, collected a box of cleaning materials, then came back up to her room. She made quick work of cleaning the surfaces, then sprayed the worst areas with a chemical disinfectant. She bundled up any mould contaminated clothes, carried them outside and bundled them in one corner of the paved garden. She disassembled the remains of the wardrobe and bed and added them to pile. Finally, and with great sadness, she took any contaminated photographs and added to the base, where they would help serve as kindling.

She lit a match, threw it among the ruined clothes at the base of the heap, and watched the fire slowly blossom. The flames ate greedily through the wood, cloth and paper, blackening everything they touched, slowly burning it all out of existence.

Bill felt herself smile, satisfied with a job well done.

The smile vanished the moment she heard the scream.

It was a small voice, mewling like a cat or fox, wordless but in agony. Bill took a step towards the noise, coming from one side of the burning fire. There, writhing in the flames, were several small, blue creatures, all roughly around the size of an earwig. She watched them scuttle out of the charcoaling wood, seemingly unaffected by the flames.

A dozen more swarmed out of the pile, running across the paving stones towards her feet. She instinctively leapt back, then purposefully stamped on them. She did not want them getting back into the house.

How had they grown so fast?

What did it mean?

When she lifted her foot, she found three of them curled up in little balls, all of which immediately instinctively unfurled and resumed their scuttling towards the house.

She raised a foot again, intending to bring it down harder on the trail of tiny invaders.

Something large and blue leapt out of the fire at her.

She shrieked as the weight hit her shoulder and knocked her to ground. She hurriedly pushed it away. It was about the same size as a cat. It scuttled away on its eight stubby legs, before turning to face her, its antennae waving in the air.

“Oh, this really isn’t good,” she muttered, backing away from the creature, as it reared up on its six hind legs, revealing that the sixteen wiry fingers of its forelegs were covered in sharp silver claws, seemingly made of metal. It was threatening her. It was showing her that it had weapons, which it had chosen not to use; if it had, its surprise attack may well have been fatal.

Behind it, a new stream of dozens of insect-sized creatures erupted out of the fire, circling behind their larger companion and heading directly into the house.

The backdoor crumbled the moment they touched it, as they hungrily consumed it.

Her flatmates began screaming.

“There goes another houseshare,” Bill sighed, backing towards the alleyway that ran along the side of the building.

She took off at speed, running as fast as she could, feeling very conscious of the fact that she was suddenly doing her own version of penguin-with-its-arse-on-fire.

Bill arrived at the Doctor’s office, thoroughly out of breath and utterly unsure what to say. How could she possibly explain what had happened at the house? She was in little doubt that he would not react well.

She stepped into the room, taking advantage of some clear space that had appeared between the

Doctor's desk and the TARDIS, quietly closing the office door behind her. She always felt it was best if their bizarre conversations were not overheard by the other members of staff who had offices nearby.

The Doctor was sitting cross-legged on his desk, grinning like a five-year-old child with a new train set, as he studied the office around him. The mould, which had once covered everything, was now organized in neat straight lines and perfect hexagons; and it appeared to be avoiding the desk and chairs. The bookcase seemed to have magically repaired itself, although there was still a space where several books were missing. On one wall, the mould had formed into a perfect smiley-faced emoticon.

"I've done it," he cried. "Civilization! A perfect society, working in peace and harmony, acquiring knowledge, consuming a sustainable level of resources!"

She had never seen him look so happy.

"Little problem," she muttered.

He ignored her.

"Once they were organized, all they needed were a few telepathic nudges from me. Now they're away! I think there's some kind of telepathic hive mind at work," he gushed. "I wish all species were this easy! Frankly, they make you humans look needlessly difficult. No, correction, you humans *are* needlessly difficult."

After a brief, grinning pause, he spotted there was something wrong.

"What's wrong with your face?" he asked, in his usual brusque manner. "Why isn't there a smile on it?"

Where should she start? She didn't have a clue.

As ever, all she could do, was start talking and hope everything came out in a more-or-less acceptable way.

"So," she began cautiously. "You know the other set of bugs at my place, right?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I'm not an idiot. I've not forgotten. They're all telepathically linked, so they should now be behaving in a much more co-ordinated and civilized way."

"I kind of sprayed them with chemical disinfectant and set fire to them."

The Doctor stared at her.

"Why?"

It seemed like a fair question.

"They'd invaded my space."

"So you tried to annihilate them?"

"Unsuccessfully."

"You remember me telling you they were impervious to almost everything?"

"Yeah. I forgot. I was annoyed. It seemed so simple just to scrub them away—"

"And you thought you had that right?" he asked, his eyes wild with incredulity.

"Yes, Doctor! They're bugs!"

"So?" he raged angrily, gesturing at the smiley face on the wall. "Have you learnt absolutely nothing from the things I've shown you? So, they're small, does that make them insignificant?"

"No," she replied, glancing down at her shoes, feeling suitably chided, before finding her voice again. "But we have to find a way to stop them."

"Why?"

"They're getting bigger."

"So?" The Doctor frowned, making her feel even more like an idiot than she had at any point

during their time together. “They’re a terrestrial species, keen to live in peaceful co-existence; if you or any member of the human race picks a fight with them, that’s your problem. Given that I’m responsible for them, if I’m on anybody’s side, it’s theirs.”

Bill frowned.

“You can’t be serious!” she shouted.

“Deadly!” he shouted back.

There was a knock at the door.

The both looked at it, their furious argument instantly derailed by such a random act of politeness.

“Yes?” the Doctor queried, using an overtly light tone of feigned casualness.

“I can hear you’re, um, busy.” Nardole replied. “But can I come in?”

“No!” the Doctor and Bill shouted in unison.

The door handle turned and gently opened, as Nardole peered into the room, clearly comfortable ignoring both of their rejections.

“It’s just I think we’ve got a ‘little problem.’”

The Doctor glanced at each of them.

“Do you two rehearse this stuff?”

Nardole led the way, doing his distinctive shuffle-run, down the stairs and out into the grounds. Bill felt her stomach turn, as she realized where he was leading them.

As ever, the Doctor was one step ahead of her.

“They’re in the vault?”

Nardole nodded, his eyes bulging with fear.

“I must have carried them in, when I checked on it, the same way that Bill carried them to her house.”

“So there’s a colony in there?” Bill asked, with a deepening sense of dread. “With her?”

Nardole nodded again, this time adding an involuntarily high-pitch squeak.

She did not really know much about the mad woman they kept locked in the basement, but she had gauged enough to know that she should be scared of her. She had a way of looking at you, which implied that to her, you were just passing ephemera – that you lived, died and were forgotten in a blink of her eye.

“Well, I guess that probably explains why my lot weren’t as co-operative as yours,” Bill replied, turning to the Doctor, only to find that he had sprinted off ahead of them. He raced down the steps two at a time, through the door and plunged into the darkness of the basement.

She hurried after him, as quickly as she could, making her way down the steps just in time to see him pull open the large metal doors. Taking a breath to steady her nerves, she followed him into the white void beyond, aware that Nardole was shuffling in behind her, still making tiny, worried noises.

Missy was sitting her at her piano, her head half-turned, so that she could see them from the corner of her eye. There was a grin on her face, revealing her teeth, which reminded Bill of the Cheshire Cat. It seemed to scream: “Hello! Welcome to madness. I hope you’ve left your sanity at the door. It’s not welcome here.”

On the floor behind her was a perfect circle of mould, with eight small and glistening silver towers, rising from its green fur at regular intervals. Beside it, sat one of the blue creatures, roughly the size of a large dog. It reared up as they approached, threatening them with a miniature spear.

A look of fury crossed the Doctor's face, the age-worn lines of anger deepening into shadow, as his lips curled into a snarl.

"What have you done?" he barked.

Missy raised her eyebrows and blinked innocently.

"Nothing," she protested. "It isn't an escape attempt, or anything. I'm here of my own free will, remember? You really couldn't keep me locked up, if I didn't want to be here. Those doors are really there to keep other people out, aren't they? To keep temptation away. Unfortunately, our little friends here were so small they can come and go as they please."

The Doctor tried to take a step forward, but the blue creature stabbed at his shoe with its spear, forcing him to retreat a step.

"If you've hurt them," he growled, "I will not forgive it."

"Hurt them!" Missy shrieked with laughter. "No. I'll leave the genocide attempts to your little friend here. Is it true you burnt down an entire city, dear? That's what they say you did."

Bill shrugged, helplessly.

"Yes," she admitted.

"This one really shows such promise," Missy enthused gleefully. "You should keep it. I however, have kept my word. I have proven to be quite the benevolent ruler to my new people."

"Ruler?" the Doctor queried, quietly seething.

"Guardian, then." Missy shrugged, nodding upwards. "No different to you up there. I've just given them a little guidance, helping them grow. That's all."

Her fingers danced across piano, striking out a series of chords as she began to sing:

"There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, she didn't know what to do. She gave them some broth without any bread, then whipped them all soundly and put them to bed."

The Doctor raised his sonic screwdriver, which issued a soft pulsing hum, causing several twanging noises within the piano, as each and every string snapped.

"Oh," Missy muttered, with a look of glum disappointment sinking onto her face. She slowly lowered the piano lid. "That wasn't very nice, was it? It's not as if I've got many other distractions, is it? And I do get so bored in here."

She spun around on the stool, her eyes looking greedily at the tiny city beneath her.

"How have you been communicating with them?" the Doctor asked, his eyebrows arching with curiosity, which finally managed to override his anger.

Missy shrugged.

"Music. Telepathy. Trans-dimensional harmonics." She glanced at her nail polish, checking for imperfections, but evidently found none. "My abilities in all those areas were always superior to yours, remember?"

The Doctor nodded.

"And you taught them how to resize themselves?" he asked, looking at the little blue creature, that was standing as a sentry at the edge of its city.

"Yes." Missy nodded. "It made communication easier. In the past, my experiments have always focused on shrinking people. However, in this case, given the amount of latent dimensional energy they have, rather than doing something as reckless and stupid as shrinking myself, it was actually much easier just to get them to make themselves bigger."

The Doctor scowled.

"And what have you told them to do?"

“Nothing,” Missy protested again, this time clearly irritated by the accusation in his voice. “I’ve just given them the benefit of my wisdom. You were turning them into a bunch of happy-clappy morons up there, with the idealistic nonsense you were preaching. I’ve just taught them the importance of strength, of standing up for yourself, of being respected. They needed to know, that sometimes you need to fight back against your oppressors, to force them to see you as a true equal. I thought you’d approve. We do, after all, each need a little bit of badness in us, don’t we?”

Her eyes sparkled.

The Doctor shook his head sadly.

“You’ve no idea what you’ve done, have you?”

Missy frowned, looking thoughtful for a moment.

“No,” she admitted, bristling with curiosity. “What have I done?”

The room suddenly shook. The floor quivered and hummed. The metal door behind them rattled in its frame. Missy glanced upwards, with surprise etched onto her features.

The Doctor turned and hurried towards the doors.

“I think if we look outside, we’ll find we have a very *big* problem.”

“Oh, dear,” Nardole cried, as he shuffled after him, through the cellar, obviously understanding something Bill had not yet grasped.

The Doctor hurried up the steps and out into the grounds.

“Whatdya mean?” Bill cried, as she struggled to keep up.

The ground shook again, causing her to stumble and crash down onto the grass. When she looked up, she had her answer.

“I mean that!” the Doctor yelled, having somehow managed to stay on his feet through the Earth tremor. He gestured ahead of them. “They’ve upsized! They’ve realized it’s the only way you’ll ever take them seriously. The only way to make you stop burning down their cities. So they’ve combined all their dimensional energy and given you something to fear.”

Bill blinked, barely able to comprehend what she was seeing.

A huge blue creature, almost forty feet high was standing on the lawn in front of the university, on the end of the forgotten red carpet. It towered over the building, making the ground shake every time it took a step forward.

Students were fleeing in all directions.

She was suddenly reminded of the moment she had been standing over the little blue bugs, trying to crush them with her shoes, realizing their perspectives had suddenly been reversed.

“Even the smallest war can escalate beyond all control,” the Doctor growled. “Not a joke now, are they?”

“You’ve got to stop them,” Bill cried, as the beast looked around, with its vast antennae twitching.

The Doctor shook his head.

“You attacked them. This is a terrestrial species; this is your war. I’ve already told you, I won’t intervene. This is your problem, not mine. You have to fix it. You have to find the solution. I’ll help you, if I can, but I won’t do it for you.”

“But that woman in the vault, she—”

“She did nothing but talk to them.” The Doctor shrugged helplessly. “Which gives you some indication of just how dangerous she might be if she actually intervened. No, this isn’t her doing, it’s yours. This is your problem. Fix it.”

Bill gaped at him, feeling stunned that he would stand by while lives were in danger, but able to

see the resolute determination in his eyes. It was as if it was just another lesson to him: he wanted her to see that she was responsible for her actions, to acknowledge her fault.

“So I destroyed their city,” she conceded, “and they may retaliate in kind?”

The Doctor nodded.

“The fate of the whole of Bristol is in your hands.”

“I can’t let them destroy it, Doctor,” Bill cried, suddenly realizing just how many lives were at stake, feeling numb with horror. “It would be my fault. How do I stop it? What can I do? How do I destroy that thing?”

The Doctor winced, a look of pain, disgust and disappointment flaring on his features.

“I should expel you for that question alone.”

Nardole shook his head.

“You can’t anyway, they’re almost indestructible remember!”

“Then how do I reason with it!”

The Doctor shook his head.

“You can’t, you’ve no way to communicate with it, have you? Even if you could, why would they possibly listen to you? They can pulverize you and there’s absolutely nothing you can do to stop them! Frightening isn’t it, when the other side is bigger and scarier than you.”

Bill floundered, looking desperately from the Doctor to Nardole, hoping one of them would suggest something, but finding that both of them were simply staring at her expectantly.

Nardole’s eyes slowly slid sideways at the Doctor.

“I’m a bit worried you don’t actually have a plan.”

“Shush!” the Doctor chided.

Behind him, the vast creature trampled through a car park, kicking aside cars as if they were toys. Bill could hear screaming, faint and far away, but which left her in no doubt that people were panicking and fleeing before the giant monster.

“I respect it.” Bill nodded reluctantly, finally understanding. “It needs to respect me. I need to stand up to it.”

Nardole scowled at Bill.

“You sound a little like *her*.”

“Well, *she’s* a little bit right, isn’t she?” Bill replied. “We need to be on an equal footing. This is about *respect*.”

Nardole rolled his eyes.

“How can you possibly do that? Look at the size of it!”

Bill nodded.

“Eat me.”

“I beg your pardon?” Nardole frowned.

“*Alice in Wonderland!*” Bill replied. “She drinks the potion marked ‘Drink Me’ to make herself small, then she has the cake marked ‘Eat Me’ to grow up again.”

“What’s she babbling about?” Nardole queried, looking at the Doctor. “Has she lost it?”

The Doctor quietly smiled.

Bill rounded on him.

“If the TARDIS can make us tiny, can it also turn us into giants?”

Bill carefully opened the TARDIS door.

Outside, the space-time vortex spun in a myriad of shifting colours, which broke apart to reveal the Earth looming out of the darkness of space. Clouds raced by her, as tiny houses appeared below.

She could see the university campus racing up beneath her, with the house-sized blue creature still causing havoc in its grounds.

“And hand-break turn!” yelled the Doctor, suddenly throwing his weight forward on the dematerialization lever. The TARDIS engines screamed, the whole room shuddering, as the vessel came to a sudden halt, landing skyscraper-sized in the university grounds, with a colossal crash which shattered the tiny windows in the surrounding buildings.

Bill stepped backwards and picked up the cricket bat she had left by the railing.

“Really?” The Doctor looked at her with an arched eyebrow.

“It might help with negotiations,” she said, giving it a swift swing.

“And what do you do when it comes back with a spear? Get a gun?”

Bill nodded.

She quietly placed the cricket bat back by the railing and then stepped outside.

“Woah,” she said. “This is weird.”

She was more than twice the height of the main university building. The trees, which had once towered over her head, now only came up to her waist. She could see easily across both the roofs and the treetops into the city beyond.

“I don’t even want to think about how much weight I’ve just put on.”

“About nine tonnes,” the Doctor replied, dashing over to the door and glancing outside. “This is brilliant. I’ve not done anything like this for centuries, not since that time with Jonathan Swift in Lilliput. Come on!”

He dashed through the doors, vaulting over the university building in one easy bound, heading in the direction of the creature.

Nardole sighed, as he shuffled outside.

“I hate it when he saves the world and enjoys himself at the same time. It doesn’t seem right, not when there are lives in danger.”

“No.” Bill nodded in agreement, as she hurried around the side of the building. She watched students scatter beneath her feet, doing their best not to get trodden on or kicked aside. They barely even came up to her knees. “I thought he wasn’t even helping.”

Nardole shrugged.

“He’s prone to forgetting things like that.”

Nardole suddenly made a yelping noise as he hurriedly lifted a foot, narrowly avoiding stepping on a fleeing woman, by hurriedly grabbing hold of a chimney stack for balance. He watched in horror as the brick work crumbled beneath his fingers, the whole side of the building breaking off and clattering to the ground, flattening the flowerbed below.

“Oops.” He reddened with embarrassment, as he waved away clouds of dust and debris with his giant hand. “Best not to touch anything. Don’t know my own strength.”

Keeping his hands held high, to prevent further damage, he slowly made his way forward, treading with exaggerated care.

The creature, in pursuit of a handful of students, had bounded out of the grounds and into one of the city’s quiet side streets. The Doctor had hurried down an adjacent road, cutting off the creature’s only obvious escape route at the end of the road, penning it in.

“Go on,” he yelled, grinning madly at her. “She’s all yours!”

Bill looked at the creature ahead of her. It was slightly shorter than her, giving her a distinct

height advantage, unless it reared up onto its hind legs. It was prowling down the street away from her, its antennae focused on the ground, evidently trying to track the people who were hiding among the cars.

“Oi!” she yelled, trying to get its attention, as she advanced between the houses.

A man in a second-storey window screamed and drew his curtains.

For a moment Bill felt vaguely ridiculous, like an actor in an old *Godzilla* movie, stumbling around on a set made of miniature cardboard houses. Then the blue creature reared up and stamped down on a silver car, shattering its windows and flattening the chassis. The engine exploded beneath it, the resulting flames licking harmlessly at its impervious feet.

A young woman, who had been hiding beneath it, had only just managed to roll out in time. Burning debris from the explosion had been scattered along the street, threatening to start other fires. Bill knew it was only matter of time before someone died...

“I said, Oi!” she cried, scooping up a handful of wheelie bins and lobbing them at the creature. The tiny plastic missiles bounced off its hardened carapace, spilling their cargo of rubbish across it, causing it to rear up angrily and turn in her direction. “Glad I’ve got your attention!”

She took three quick steps forward, rapidly closing the distance between them, and grabbed hold of one of its antennae.

“You’re coming with me,” she yelled, aware that the creature was unlikely to be able to hear her, but feeling compelled to make her apology. “I’m sorry for burning down your city, but we can still sort this out, this doesn’t need to escalate any further!”

The creature may not be able to hear her, but the Doctor could; and she was keen for him to know that she fully accepted the responsibility for what was happening now. She did not want to disappoint him any further. She’d had so few people to look up to in her life, she always felt broken when she saw the resulting sadness in his eyes.

She gave the antenna a little tug, in a gentle attempt to guide it forward.

It came off in her hand.

“Ah, shi—”

The creature punched her in the face with one its stubby legs, its eight pale fingers wrapping themselves around her head, tightening in a deadly crush.

“I thought they were indestructible!” she cried, her voice muffled by the foot pressed against her face.

Out of the corner of her eye, Bill saw Nardole leap upwards, bringing his whole body weight down on the creature, while slamming his elbow into the back of its head. It instantly let go of her, as it crumpled beneath the weight.

With a grin of victory, Nardole spun himself into a sitting position on top of it, pinning it to the ground.

“Well, at least now we have control of the situation. Why don’t we do this more often?” he asked, an innocent expression on his face, as the creature squirmed helplessly beneath his vast bulk. “I could happily kick my way through fields full of Daleks right now.”

The Doctor nodded.

He stooped down beside the creature, placing a hand on its head, somehow managing to pacify it instantly.

“There’s the first problem: you get a little bit of power and suddenly you want to start a war with the most deadly race in the universe. The second problem, of course, is that the dimensional energies will be slowly unravelling your DNA. It’s fine for our blue friend here, he can repair his, but

we're all essentially slowly dying.”

Bill blinked.

“Say what?” she asked. “You let us do this, even though it's potentially lethal?”

The Doctor shrugged.

“We're all slowly dying from the moment we're born, a limited exposure won't kill you.” He waved away her complaint. “It had to be done, although not necessarily in such a ham-fisted way, obviously. They'll be prepared to listen now. You're prepared to listen now. So, we finally got there, but the sooner we can get back to the TARDIS, and open an official dialogue, the better...”

Bill stared at the Doctor.

He grinned reassuringly.

“I'm now in contact with the hive mind,” he said, his hand placed beside the creature's head, as it leaned against the console. “They're ready to negotiate. What's your offer?”

Bill frowned.

“Me?” she queried, pointing a thumb at herself in disbelief. “I can't negotiate on behalf of the whole human race.”

The Doctor matched her frown with one of his own.

“Why not? You're human. That makes you significantly more qualified than me.”

“But I'm just me!” she protested.

“What? Small and insignificant? Unimportant? Never underestimate a lone human: they can create religions, start wars, begin revolutions, burn entire cities to the ground, or negotiate peace deals.”

“No, but, seriously...”

“And, as President of Earth, I can fully empower your negotiations. What's your offer? Hurry up. They're getting antsy.”

Bill stared at the faceless blue creature, with its lone twitching antenna, looking for any marker that would give her any insight into its thoughts and feelings. There were none. It had the perfect poker face.

“Can't they just stay small?”

“No, they have an empire to build. They want to reach for the stars. They'll relocate, but they want somewhere on Earth, rich in natural resources...”

“Antarctica?”

“Perfect!” The Doctor grinned.

“I can't just give away Antarctica!”

“Why not, are you using it for something?”

“It's protected by countless human agreements!”

“They're not human.” The Doctor shrugged. “Antarctica is useless to you, but perfect for a race of extremophiles like them! They can thrive even at those cold temperatures.”

“I'm really not sure...”

The Doctor nodded, patting the blue creature on the head.

“Deal accepted.”

Bill shrugged.

“Maybe I should have given them the moon.”

The Doctor shook his head.

“Terrible idea,” he replied. “That's the egg of a giant Space Dragon.”

Bill frowned at him.

“Are you taking the mickey? Sometimes, I really can’t tell...”

Bill packed the last of her belongings back into a cardboard box. The building, which had been her home for just a single night, was now scheduled for demolition due to structural damage.

She had no choice but to return to her foster mother’s house.

As she carried her belongings away, she glanced upwards at the stars above her. Sometimes it felt as if the universe would never even let her get started on her life. All she wanted was a place of her own to live, to meet the right girl and to have a happy life. Was that so much to ask?

The stars twinkled silently back at her.

The Time Orphan

by David Gibbons

The planet of Vaanta Prime in the constellation of Mallacurio, a tiny world in a forgotten corner of one forgotten galaxy, agrarian and pacifist, had no way of detecting the Dalek Battle Fleet as it targeted the unstable upper atmosphere rich in fissile uranium gases, the same gases that made the whole sky beam silver-peach. On cloudless nights, the entire planet of the Vaantans, telepathic and devoted to each other, would intone stunning and complex motets, their crystalline chords healing the sick and the harmonies causing the azure grasses to glow and fruit. No other planet in the universe would shimmer like Vaanta during these nights of music. In all of time and space, this symbiosis was completely unique... and it would be lost forever, erased completely.

This world would be the first to fall under the Dalek reign of terror; it would be the first casualty of the endless war, Vaanta's potent uranium gases required to fuel the time experiments of a million Skaro scientists. All three billion inhabitants of this rural paradise would disappear from the timeline, forgotten by every soul of every species – all in an instant – no Vaantan ever even imagining that another race could even exist outside of their beautiful land of meadows.

The Dalek Fleet prepared to fire.

But then somewhere far away, roughly six hundred million light years away and 2.7 billion years in the future, on a planet that also knew war, the Time Orphan screamed his final scream and Vaanta Prime was saved. The orphan's demise cleansed the universe of the Dalek threat, and trillions of lives lived on in peace and harmony.

None of the devastation came to pass.

There was no Time War.

A child died and everything changed. One child sacrificed for a whole planet, a whole universe.

That's how it could have been...

BERLIN, MAY 1, 1945

The unmistakable rattle of a failing Panzer shook more dust from the growing pile of ruins that was now Berlin. There were shots, followed by a German scream, followed by a chilling silence that sent a shiver up the soldier's spine. The silence lingered for several moments, hanging in the air long enough so that Efreitor Artemi Onischenko could hear his own heartbeat.

Может быть, все конечно, может, это был последний. Нет, это никогда не закончится.

Maybe it's over. Maybe that was the last one. No, it shall never be over.

Soon enough, the assault began again, and firing once more filled the air, Onischenko's hopes for inevitable surrender fading with the vicious onslaught of bullets. He could barely remember a time when his world wasn't a flurry of sizzling violence. Explosions and bullets. That was Europe now. At least these days most of them were the Red Army's and not the Nazi's – not anymore. The Reich couldn't take much more of this merciless punishment from the Allies. Since the middle of April, they had laid waste to Germany's capital, and as May had turned the corner, the end must be in sight, Hitler's insane dreams of a thousand-year empire decaying rapidly, every passing day another nail in his coffin.

Berlin, like most of the country, had become a wasteland; the fighting had left the capital a rubble-strewn urban wilderness that burned incessantly with the ceaseless impact of the mortars, while its air smelled of death. Artemi shook his head as he looked at the devastation around him.

What a joke. Berlin is no longer a city; it is an asylum.

The city was now almost completely deserted except for the fading faction of Nazi holdouts. Most of the buildings had crumbled; schools were now ashes, churches obliterated, Berlin's riches of history long since stolen or incinerated. Even the blue sky seemed to be gone these days, the rich colours of the coming spring smothered by thick fumes of smoke and dust, the very air poisoning the sun's light.

Time was running out for Germany. Only yesterday the Reichstag, the last great *Deutscher* landmark and symbol of power, had been taken by the Russians. The building was of no strategic importance, but its value lay in crushing Hitler's flagship of his Empire. The Allied strangulation of the enemy was nearly complete.

Still the Nazis fought, the Volkssturm the last line of aggression: old men and boys happily marching to their deaths, armed with mothballed weapons and farm tools. One final chance for glory before the chants for Aryan supremacy were stomped out permanently.

But resisted they had. Six million of them mustered together just waiting to be needlessly slaughtered, less organized but just as zealous as the rest of the German military. Sixty thousand alone had fortified Berlin, most already dead. Over the last two days, Artemi had seen boys no older than thirteen fighting with rusting wrenches and wood-axes. And every one of them had fallen, shredded by machine guns. Their beardless faces and glassy eyes stared lifelessly up at their executioners as if abandoned like shattered dolls.

So much death.

Then there were the other stories. The ones that nobody wanted to talk about.

The rumours of the atrocities that had gone on in the city curdled the stomach. Carnal depravity, torture and even reports of cannibalism left every corner of Berlin sullied by the endless violence, turning simple family men into horrifying monsters. Germans and Russians alike.

He'd seen it, hadn't he? Only one short night ago. He'd seen what this war had done to some of his own, his comrades. Had he not stood by and watched as Kozlov committed that nefarious act just off Kurfürstendamm? When they'd found the young widow crying in the alleyway, face bloodied and bruised, desperate to simply cling onto the porch stoop, just wishing for the sound of the bombs to go away. The sounds of her German pleading had made Artemi wince in shame as he shut his eyes and struggled through a cigarette, his peer laughing like a jackal as he took her. Then he heard the pop of the bullet. Then her silence. And finally Kozlov's incessant chuckle, his decaying teeth grinning at Onischenko. Kozlov, once his best friend, delighting in the spoils of his victory and no better than a Nazi.

Please, not Evgeni Nikolaevich Kozlov!

He had so many times fished with Artemi on the banks of the Moskva near their home of Tuchkovo when they were young. And even he had degenerated into the soulless soldier, and it was a role that he seemed now to savour. The Evgeni Nikolaevich of the small village outside Moscow had long since been transformed into just another of the vicious killers born of this endless war. To see this bloodthirsty monster slowly emerge and finally consume the man he had come to love as a brother caused Artemi to weep.

But only on the inside. Moscow doesn't believe in tears.

Another tremor shook the ground beneath the soldiers' feet, and the sound of shattering glass

could be heard in the distance. That was the fourth quake of the day and no one had any explanation for it. Could it be some German military experiment beneath the soil? A series of gigantic bombs being dropped? If that was the case, the Russians certainly had no knowledge of it. Was God finally tiring of this war and shouting his distaste?

Ignore it and just do your duty.

Onischenko was a rather wiry man with a medium build and an elfish face, his strong jawline accented with a slender nose and beaming green eyes. Though he passed for youthful when clean-shaven, these days his real age was showing in the greying strands in his once completely blonde beard. He had been promoted to the rank of *efreitor* after pulling two men out of a stable near the Austrian border seconds before a mortar sent the ceiling crashing down, killing three others. It wasn't much, but for a non-commissioned private in the Soviet Army it was a gold stripe, a little extra respect and an immense show of pride. And although he had no subordinates, he didn't have to dig the latrine pits anymore, a job that every private in the army had come to loathe.

Several metres ahead of Artemi stood junior sergeant Evgeni Kozlov, not even panting for breath despite the smothering heat of another recent barrage leaving the *efreitor* a wheezing mass of sweat. Artemi struggling to keep up with his friend was not unusual. When Evgeni wished to get somewhere he didn't so much walk as he lumbered, leaving huge boot treads chiselled into the ground. He was known as *Bolshaya Medveditsa*, Great Bear, and he had become just as ferocious these days. He was a mammoth of a man: broad-shouldered, muscular and built like a steel barrel. Kozlov had the strength of two Artemis. He had wide cheeks that were constantly blotched red and surrounded by a shag of black hair. Then there were his remarkable brown eyes; Artemi had once thought Evgeni's eyes caressing, but they were just predatory now, hunting. His immense black moustache crept strongly down his lips and buried his once magnanimous smile. Kozlov had become fond of killing and he was good at it. With every confirmed kill, Evgeni would carve a little scar into his bicep to keep track and that list now enveloped most of his left arm. Kozlov recounted them obsessively as if afraid one notch might erase itself through the night, and his eyes had that glaze that suggested psychosis.

He and Artemi had enlisted at the same time, but Evgeni's suddenly inexhaustible appetite for Nazi-hunting, as well as the endless casualties within the 207th Rifle Division of the Third Shock Army, had meant that he was rising up the ranks quickly. Even the division was gone now. The bridge explosion had caught most of them, and opportunistic sniper fire had picked off all but the two of them.

The Two Boys of Tuchkovo, the last of the 207th.

They'd only made it out because another division had been following close behind, the sheer number of the Soviets overwhelming the fortification and terminating the hostiles.

With their division gone and the chaos delaying their transfer to the new one, Evgeni had seen an opportunity for a little unsanctioned reconnaissance. He had convinced Artemi to slip away with him after the 205th had secured the south bank of the Spree near the Tiergarten. The once glorious statues had all but been destroyed, the proud monuments toppled onto their sides; thousands of trees had been burned over the last few months in case the invasion was prolonged. Natural beauty is unnecessary when there is a demand for potatoes. Off the grassy shore, the waters of the river frothed with silty refuse, every bridge now destroyed except for the Russian-occupied Moltke.

Kozlov used the chaos to sneak away. He wasn't the only soldier to be acting out these days. The ongoing fighting had left many unstable, and Kozlov had been teetering on the edge for several months. It was during this sojourn that Kozlov had found the German woman and...

But that was several hours ago and Artemi's emotional numbness was only just dissipating. He didn't know what he was going to do. Kozlov had to be turned in, but to do so would mean betraying his brother – unthinkable for a Soviet. Kozlov would almost certainly be shot or, perhaps worse, the entire episode would be ignored. To the Soviets, the Germans were no longer even people. Little remained of guilty consciences when it came to dealing with the *Fashisty*. What was one German female when compared to the suffering of the valiant comrades of mother Russia? And should they not pay for their crimes?

She had committed no crime. She was just lost and alone.

“Every *Gans* had a role to play. They let it get this far... let the insanity pull the whole world into their conflict.” Artemi could still hear Kozlov's defence clearly: “How many of our comrades have died in this war? How many? We have suffered the most. Of all Allies, we have been slaughtered most badly. Think of Vyacheslav! Think of Ivan! Think of Andrei! All gone. All dead! We had to fight. In war there is no innocence. Only kill or be killed. Women are no different. A *Fashisty* harlot was all she was. She became filth and so I treated her as filth. You disappoint me, brother.”

That had been hours ago and by now the sun was creeping out through the clouds, and Kozlov was snoring calmly as he leaned against the remains of a small garden wall, his fingers interlocked and his *stalnoy* helmet raked over his eyes. Artemi had found a quarter bar of chocolate tangled among the rotting tendrils of twisting bushy weeds, and he was picking the grit out of his teeth, having eaten the bar, dirt and all, in one voracious bite.

There was a crash of thunder in the sky and the ground rumbled with another tiny quake, a strange smell of burning flesh wafting through the air. And then it subsided, leaving the surroundings buzzing for a moment and then finally returning to normal.

It was then that Onischenko heard a murmur coming from within a hedgerow of hawthorn five metres to his west. The sound wasn't loud exactly, but pierced the ear effortlessly. An animal? No, human. Definitely a child. Not exactly crying, but clearly distressed. The sounds were unintelligible, not even words – not words that Artemi had ever heard before.

Kozlov was on his feet instantly, suddenly very awake, as if never having been asleep – alert like a carnivore.

“*Halt! Wer schleicht daher?*” Kozlov demanded, his thick Russian accent obscuring the little German he knew. He pointed his gun at the hedge and asked the question again: “Who goes there?”

For a moment there was no response; the murmuring had stopped. There was another waft of charred flesh in the air and small aftershocks caused Artemi's feet to tingle. Soon enough the bushes began to rustle and a small blonde head peeked out from behind the dense foliage. It was a little boy, no older than six or seven, struggling to his feet and frightened.

Kozlov howled with unrestrained laughter. “Look at him, Artemi! A tiny, little, *rebenka* Fritz!”

The boy was dressed as a Hitler Youth, his full uniform immaculately pressed and bright, as if brand new. Even his shoes were perfectly polished. There wasn't a mark on them.

“They must be getting desperate now, Artemi! The last great soldiers of the Reich, one final ultimate weapon, ready to repel the efforts of the Russians!”

“Be quiet, Evgeni. What is your name, boy?”

The boy gawked back at both men.

“The man asked you what your name is, *mein klein Führer*.”

There was no sign of intelligence whatsoever in the boy's eyes. Kozlov was taking immense joy in this discovery and began to circle the boy, the bear sniffing its prey. The Orphan scrunched his face and winced, bringing one hand to his head and massaging gently. He then hunched over and began to

tilt his head back and forth oddly. His head drew level after a moment, face twisted and lips scrunched. It would have been funny in another situation, but Artemi's feet still buzzed and that smell of cooked meat had become potent.

Neither of them noticed the fleck of blood that dropped from the child's nose.

To Artemi, the child looked a little ill.

Kozlov interpreted the look differently: "Are you making faces at us, son? Are you trying to be smart? Hard to believe isn't it, Artemi? Nothing smart about this little fascist!"

"Stop it, Evgeni. He's just a boy. He's obviously simple-minded. Let's just leave him and get back to the camp. We've been gone long enough. They'll think we deserted them."

Kozlov turned ferociously. "Just a boy! Do you see what he's wearing?"

"They're just clothes, Nikolaevich. Half of the children in Germany are forced to wear these things now."

"I disagree. This is a formal uniform. That makes him one of them," Evgeni chortled hysterically. "He might be head of the SS by now, Artemi. We've certainly shaken up the chain of command quite a bit by now! Come here, *nemchatina*, I want you to lick my boots and then we're going to have ourselves a little court martial."

The boy twitched his hands and wrinkled his face, tapping his forehead furiously before staring back without expression.

"Get over here, or I will shoot you where you stand, little one!"

Kozlov began to squeeze his trigger.

"Stop it now, Evgeni!"

Artemi shocked himself by grabbing a fistful of Evgeni's collar and punching him in the jaw. The larger man stared back white with rage for a few seconds before shaking it off. Kozlov began to laugh and with nary an effort threw Artemi to the ground after a quick jab to the gut. The punch winded him and he fought back the urge to vomit. Furthermore, Artemi battered his elbow on a piece of jagged stone, and the pain seared up his arm and into his shoulder. The paralyzing pins and needles caused him to yelp.

Kozlov laughed again. "Silly, Artemi. That's assaulting a superior officer. You could be court-martialed for that behaviour. Looks like maybe we might have two trials this morning."

Artemi scoffed and began to bring himself to his feet. Kozlov gave Artemi a quick boot to the stomach and chortled as his fellow Russian crumpled back to the ground. "No, stay there. Stay there, brother. I'll deal with you next, soldier. I have some unfinished business..."

Kozlov ran his fingers down his thick beard and spat. "Get on your knees, little Hitler."

Nothing.

"Get down on your knees!"

The boy continued to stare blankly. He just didn't understand. Kozlov grabbed the boy by the shoulders and with a single motion, swept him onto the ground and onto his knees.

"Evgeni, ple—"

"That's sergeant, *efreitor*."

"Please, sergeant, don't do this. You don't have to do this."

"This is war, Artemi. We must do these things. After all of this time, I thought you could see that. I thought you would understand."

Kozlov drew his firearm and pressed it against the boy's temple.

Artemi forced his eyes shut and waited for the shots.

The shots never came.

Instead, all hell broke loose.

The whole world seemed to shake and a voluminous noise pierced the sky when the child finally responded. No words. Just a horrible scream that smashed the soldiers like an unstoppable wave.

You are not of this Earth. You are something else. Some abomination.

Artemi could do nothing but watch as Kozlov dropped his weapon, grabbed his eyes and wailed in agony. Artemi fell to the ground as the shrill cry began to crescendo, his bones quaking, feeling as though they would tear themselves from his skin.

The last thing the Russian soldier saw before he lost consciousness was his friend and comrade join in with the alien shriek as his eyes popped from their sockets.

The scream of a billion billion voices spiralled through Artemi's head. Confusion. Sorrow. Joy. Pain. So much pain. The voices screamed for freedom. The time was coming. Soon they would exist. Soon they would be.

Then the screaming ceased.

Then there was only blackness.

And memories...

Artemi prayed for his father the entire night that he died. Propped on his knees, hands clenched desperately, and staring into a cloudless sky, the young boy begged the callous moon and tyrant stars to wield some mercy. The winter air bit at Artemi through the open window, the young boy enduring the frosty penance in the hope that fate would see it as a fair exchange.

Fate drives a hard bargain.

The illness had come on so quickly. There had been the coughing. Then the fevers. Then the blood. So fast. Four tremulous weeks giving way to near-grief. Only one month earlier his father, Ilya, had taken him to the river to hunt for steelhead, the fish engorged and fat from a year of feasting. The cough was supposed to be just the freezing air. His father had promised it and that night they savoured the sweet flesh of a gigantic specimen. His father had lied. The cough didn't go away. But it would cease this night; Artemi decreed it.

And it did.

The young boy sobbed at his father's bed, refusing to let go as the sun began to rise over the snowy billows of the Tuchkovo hills. He dug into Ilya's cold hands and cried until he could take no more. He was completely alone now. First a mother he had never known, taken the night he was born. Now his father.

Artemi had gripped his father's hands for five hours before the weight of exhaustion emptied him of his tears and forced him to sleep. The newly anointed orphan dreamed of more sneering stars and vengeful moons; strange worlds of colour all around him. Desperate voices screamed for release. A billion billion beings begged for existence. A huge explosion of light consumed everything and Artemi heard the sounds of a child screaming. His own screaming. And finally he dreamed of nothing at all. These alien images exchanged for the blissful silence of darkness. Sleep's temporary void.

And then the blackness became a world of groggy light once again.

His dream-memory lingered for a moment and then faded into the background as he became more fully aware.

I'm alive. I'm still alive.

Artemi wasn't sure how long he'd been out, but the child was long since gone and the sun had

reached full morning. Kozlov lay crumpled several feet away, dead. Onischenko wept for his friend. He clutched and cradled the broken body until there were no tears left to pour. Despite the man's shocking change since the war diseased him, how could Artemi help but love him? The boy who had been there to greet him after his father had died. The boy who had taken Artemi into his heart and helped him grieve. Gone were the days of fields and of fishing. Artemi had seen endless death the past few years. Everyone had. But this was different. This death wounded Onischenko's soul in a way that could never be repeated. The pain was cosmic and eternal... and it would not go unpunished. Artemi's war with the Germans was over and another war had been waged.

You will be avenged, brother. You were right. We must do these things.

The child must die... No, not a child. A devil. The devil must be destroyed.

MAY 1, 1945

Artemi had spent much of that afternoon searching every nook of *Oberwallstrasse*, dozens of abandoned buildings and gutted vehicles haunting the empty streets. Each of these empty storefronts and homes had been thoroughly looted and burned from within, Soviets themselves cleansing the buildings in an attempt to force any opposition from possible hiding places or to salvage the last vestiges of food, jewellery – anything that could be valuable or keep one alive. Completely fruitless these days. These places had long since been stripped; only the rare forgotten family photo or rusted dining utensil remained intact. Would any of these families ever return to the comfort of their walls? How many would now face the world missing a mother, a father, or a sibling? Perhaps they were all dead, a whole street of Berlin left to bury the memories of an entire community.

After searching for any sign of the boy within the lonely homes, Artemi circled back a few blocks east and targeted the bank of the Spree, the water murky with concentrations of soot and debris. After an hour there and no sightings, he continued his search northwest near Friedrichstrasse and eventually targeted the ruins of the Opera House. A trail of dead birds seemed to point to the building like an omen and, like clockwork, a murder of crows fell from the sky in one giant heap, their bodies mangled and bone reduced to fine powder. As for the *Staatsoper* itself, most of the structure was still intact; the main entrance was still guarded by the six large Roman columns, though each were horrendously riddled with bullet holes and the four walls still stood proudly. Saying that, the Opera House was a wreck. Every window that circled the whole building had been blown out, both the smaller balcony windows and the large thin windows of the orchestra level looked scorched, proof that an explosion had rocked the inside. The roof itself looked as though it might give at any moment, and the whole Opera House had large chunks torn out of its sides. Jagged chunks of masonry lay strewn around the building, a barricade to prevent further vandalism to the structure.

Inside, the lobby was in tatters; the box office was folded in on itself, shards of wood jutting through its walls and splaying over the threshold, artwork stolen, and the intricate woodwork blown apart. The auditorium and orchestra had been nearly completely demolished, seats torn from their brackets and the upper opera boxes all but destroyed as well. The stage was veined with multiple cracks and a huge impact crater blotted the right side of the proscenium.

It was near the back of the hall that Artemi got a whiff of that horrible butcher's taste in his mouth and felt rather than heard a whirring in the air.

The vibrations began almost imperceptibly, barely a hum deep in Artemi's ears, but soon it morphed with an immense crescendo of violence and became a bombardment of sound. Onischenko

grabbed his face and clutched his head as a small stream of blood poured from his ears. That same sense of electricity that manifested the previous night buzzed through his eyes, and he grimaced as the pressure in his cheeks dizzied him. Every artery in his body seemed to swell and press against his flesh, as if ripping him from the inside out. He tried to get his bearings, but his brain felt as though it was popping, endless flecks of floating lights the only thing to focus on.

Around him, the ground shook and the salvageable parts of the Opera House still standing began to fracture, the very foundation underneath it beginning to deteriorate. Small piles of stone detritus erupted like little geysers, reduced to fine power and blowing away in a torrent of tornado-like gusts; seats launched themselves into the air and wooden joists crashed to the floor.

Artemi dove to his left as one of the chandeliers still suspended from the ceiling vaulted towards him at deadly speed, missing him by mere inches, microscopic particles of glass cutting his face and hands. And all around him he heard the child shriek, though he still could not locate him.

God, make him stop this!

And something else screamed at him as well, some kind of cacophony echoing through his very bones, trying to tear him apart. It was like hearing the entire spectrum of harmonics vibrate every cell in his body, a sonic blast both awesome and paralyzing. And what power this noise had. Without him even knowing it, the bombardment had cracked several of Artemi's ribs and had shattered three of his toes, every bone obliterated by this unnatural force.

For Artemi the world began to fade, the pressure punishing him to his very limits, the volume so immense that thought became almost an impossibility.

What is this hell? PLEASE STOP!

Artemi desperately pulled out his trusted Nagant M1895 and fired in every direction, emptying almost the entire chamber, screaming and just praying that his bullets hit something. Remarkably, the painful screaming stopped instantly and the soldier fell to his knees, his energy utterly leached away. Silence hung in the air as though nothing had happened. The ground was still and a gentle breeze blew through the auditorium.

As Onischenko regained some composure, brushing away bloody tears from his bulging eyes, he heard a small noise from behind the badly torn back curtain. He carefully peered over to discern its source, though its origin was unquestionable. Nothing else made strange noises like that: mumbling, chirping, high-pitched squeaking that rattled Artemi's nerves.

“Show yourself! Show yourself now!”

For several moments there was no movement and then inevitably the child crawled from behind the curtain, his uniform still perfectly pressed and his blonde hair shimmering. He emitted another one of his strange blasts of sound, loud enough to sting, but more contained than the last onslaught.

“Shut up! Just don't make a noise at all. I'll kill you. I swear I will!”

The boy's face drooped and he gazed back absently. Though he did remain silent.

Artemi moved towards the child carefully, never lowering his weapon. Every step pressed against shattered glass and crumbling stone like bones breaking.

“Tell me who you are. How are you doing these things? Are you a weapon?”

Dumb silence.

“Answer me, damn you!”

Artemi saw the boy's eyes roll into his head and the small torso convulse, sending another mini-quake through the wreckage of the opera house. Artemi managed to guard himself from another array of falling debris and steadied himself.

He looked back to take in the damage.

The orphan's eyes were glowing crimson, extreme heat radiating from within his very core in a corona of fire.

The child screamed.

The ground erupted and sent wood and stone through the ceiling and hurtling into the sky, accompanied with bursts of white fire. Onischenko dodged the blasts with a soldier's reflexes and rolled to a crouch, unaware that his boots had begun to melt, the laces singeing and soles bubbling. There was a sudden and immense crack and the stage dropped several feet, raked forward at a dangerous angle. The whole ground was baking beneath him; smoke crept up the remaining walls and the air had become suffocating. Another quake nearly toppled Artemi completely and the boy continued to shriek wildly, the strange glow in his eyes intensifying.

And the voices. They were everywhere.

Artemi could hear them. Screaming. Laughing. Crying. Rambling. Everything. The voices were everything. A chorus of phantoms calling out. The words though. They were still nonsense and they were everywhere.

And then they began to sing Artemi's name like a chorus of angels, washing his mind in a wave of warming light. The melody seemed to emanate from all around him. Within him. It could only be God... or he had finally lost his mind. The voices were cheering him, begging him to finish this. In his mind, he could see star systems sweep the sky, strange planets emerging from constellations of darkness. Countless worlds, once covered in shadows, suddenly found substance and shone magnificent alien colours unlike his human eyes had ever seen.

All this he saw in his mind. It was the future as it was meant to be, and although Artemi knew nothing of this strange new infinity, he could feel its imminence claw at his brain, pleading with him to face the boy.

Artemi looked into the child's eyes and what he saw in them was agony. The child was enduring terrible pain. Not even his powerful eyes could hide the desperate tears rolling down his cheeks. The Russian soldier had made his choice; he raised the gun and prepared to fire.

It was at that moment that Artemi felt a gentle touch on his shoulders. Surprised, he turned, pistol still raised, and gaped at the odd little man standing before him. The quaking stopped abruptly and the voices shut off instantly, the whole universe he had seen temporarily withdrawn.

The man was a diminutive figure and rather wiry. He propped himself up slightly with an umbrella and looked as if a strong gust of wind might blow him over. His slightly crumpled checked trousers were patterned with an odd mixture of blues, greys and browns, and though they contrasted sharply with his bright red waistcoat, a brown jacket softened the mismatch, giving the man a scholarly note. His hair was receding and showing the slight greying of old age, though it still stuck out defiantly from under his white panama hat. Artemi thought the man almost entirely unimposing – that is until he looked into his eyes. The man's eyes were icy blue and chilled the Russian to the core even though the heat of adrenaline was potent enough to stifle him. Right now, there was no warmth in those tired and ancient eyes; worse, the little man seemed to be scowling at Artemi, daring him to say something.

After an endless moment, the man decided to break the silence himself and the words caused Onischenko to shudder:

“Go ahead. What are you waiting for? Shoot him. I won't stop you. End his life.” A brief pause. “But ask yourself one question: has it all been worth it?”

Artemi forgot the boy for a moment and pressed his pistol into the older man's chest. The smaller figure pressed back, daring the soldier to fire, that cold stare stabbing back without fear.

“Put your hands up! Who are you? What are you doing here?”

The stranger seemed to mull these questions over for a moment, once again without a hint of emotion, although eventually the stranger grimaced though there was humour in the questions. Artemi was suddenly very afraid of this character. The war had driven fear from many men’s hearts, but such an utter lack of care for self-preservation disturbed him. He felt like he was the one with the gun being pointed at him, not the other way around.

Finally: “It doesn’t matter who I am... and I’m here for the same reason that you are. I’m here to win a war. You didn’t answer my question though. Has it been worth it?”

“What do you mean? Is what worth it? The war? All this death? Yes, yes it’s worth it. Worth it for Russia. Worth it for the whole world... though now it is a terrible world.”

The strange man gazed at the child and then turned his eyes to the ground, ashamed. “Do it then.” The boy grimaced at the man with the semblance of intelligence in his red alien eyes. His posture fell and he bowed his head resignedly. “Shoot him, Efreitor Artemi Onischenko – Comrade of Tuchkovo. Finish this for us all.”

“How do you know who I am? Are you a spy?!” Artemi drove the gun more aggressively into the little man’s body, the voices in his mind chanting his name once more. “Is this some kind of test?”

“No test, Artemi. Everyone in the universe knows of you, of your choice. It will be sung until the end of time as the man who prevented the war to end wars. Planets will take your name and entire civilizations will praise you for what you are about to do.”

“What you say makes no sense, old man! I order you to be silent!”

Artemi was now very afraid. Something frightening was going on here. Who was this stranger? His words were nonsense, obviously shell-shocked. These were delirious ravings, but then there were his eyes! Why were they so terrifying? What dark secrets lay embedded in them?

“Doesn’t it make sense, Artemi? Aren’t you a soldier? Haven’t you come here to die for your country? Didn’t you say it was worth it?”

“I have not come to die. I have come to protect my homeland, and if I die then at least I died like a Soviet citizen.”

“And what about him, what will he die for?”

The Orphan just stood silently and watched, a new trickle of blood-tears falling from his eyes.

“That boy is Nazi filth and... something else... he is not natural. He killed Evgeni Nikolaevich. I saw what he did to him. His eyes. They are the Devil’s. He is an abomination.”

“He is a child, Artemi. Just a child. There is no malice there. Simply fear.”

“He shakes the world around him. These Germans never surrender! They always have another weapon. Another trick. Looks at his eyes! Evil! Like in the rest of his people, I see only hatred there!”

“He’s not one of them, efreitor. Surely even you must see he’s not even human.”

“Not even human? What do you mean? Look at his clothes! Look at his face. He’s one of them. How many more of them must die before they finally surrender? How many more of my comrades need be sacrificed. He’s just another Nazi!”

“He’s just protecting himself, Artemi. He finds himself in a city full of war-struck children, alone, and he fits in. Silently. Trying not to be noticed. He isn’t human, Artemi.”

“You have lost your mind, stranger. You are just trying to confuse me.”

“Look again, Artemi. Really look...”

Artemi turned back towards the Orphan and did as he was told.

At first there was nothing, but then he saw. The boy’s outline began to glow a magnificent purple, his red eyes still burning strongly and then he started to change. The facade of the perfect Aryan child

began to melt away and what remained was unbelievable. Artemi gawked, barely able to breathe and unable to speak.

It was still a child, but unlike anything Artemi had ever seen. What struck the soldier first was how thin it was. The Orphan was completely emaciated, naked – a boy-sized heap of bones hidden by an almost transparent skin of blue. Artemi saw now that it was without gender, not even really a boy at all.

And another thing...

The Orphan looked ancient.

Impossible. How could something so old also be a child? Yet Artemi felt that was true. An ancient child. Tired. Perhaps nothing looked more tired. And sick. There was no devil in this creature. Simply alien. The eyes were huge bulging things and compared to the skinny leathery frame, they dominated the creature. The red hue that had terrified Artemi no longer seemed evil in the least. It looked unhealthy, as if death were near. The creature pressed its tiny lips forward as if to puff a ring of smoke and blurted out a stinging mix of consonants.

Both men winced.

“Невероятно! Unbelievable!”

Artemi circled the alien creature while trying to find some kind of bearing. Everything about this creature skewered his perception of reality.

The stranger just stood quietly and watched the Russian. The Orphan trembled in pain. Artemi was beginning to see the fatigue in the child’s red eyes and turned back to the little man:

“Tell me then, stranger, what is going on here? What is this crazy talk of wars and of the universe? Songs and planets! Nonsense. You’ve been at war for too long. Your mind is addled!”

The figure shrunk a little. “Yes, perhaps you are correct. I have been playing this long game for so many years. Perhaps I am finally ‘addled.’”

“That is not an answer to my question.”

The Orphan cried again and the ground quaked.

“Tell me the truth! What is going on?”

“There’s another war coming, Artemi... The worst one. At first only a small pocket of the universe will even feel it, but soon everything will burn. Whole worlds are going to suffer immense loss, and it is my belief that perhaps all that ever was is at stake. If you could stop that war from beginning, could stub it out before it got off the ground, is that not something you must consider?”

Artemi shrugged. These words meant nothing. The stranger tried again.

“If you could have stopped Hitler from taking power in Germany, would you have done it?”

“Absolutely.”

“What if you faced this tyrant when he was still a child? Could you do it then? Could you take his innocent life knowing that he would become a monster?”

A pause.

“...I don’t know. These words are meaningless. You speak of fancy and fairy tales.”

Artemi wasn’t sure though. There was something scarily earnest about this little man. His words were strange, but there was also truth.

And the voices, still pressing him forward, begging him to fire his gun.

All of a sudden the child convulsed; his spine twisted at an impossible angle with a horrible crunch; his head began to swell; the huge red eyes inflating and pulsing like two beating hearts.

And the noise was awful: almost insect-like, squeals and clicks, high-pitched and grating.

The Orphan began to levitate off the ground, the aura of a blazing inferno enveloping his tiny

naked frame.

“What is happening to him?!”

“Birth, Artemi. The birth of a whole galaxy. He’s a Time Orphan. The last of the Time Orphans. And he can stop the war.”

“Stop speaking in riddles! Tell me! Tell me everything!”

The stranger looked back at the writhing child and gave him a sad smile.

“Billions of years ago, long before the dawn of the Earth, there was an already ancient race known as the Orphans, children of eternity, separate entities from this causal universe, literally existing outside of fixed time. No one knows where they came from. Some think they’ve been here since the beginning of time itself, remnants of something even older, lost in the forgotten dusts of eternity, something that not even I can see. Some galaxies are born of clusters of stars coming together over billions of years; some galaxies are blown into existence through supermassive white holes that spew immense energy back into space; and some universes start from the tiniest of places and just grow, expanding to unimaginable size and scope. Isn’t the head of a child such a perfect place to expand? That is the curse of the Time Orphans. They father galaxies, Artemi. Their minds are born pregnant with the energy potential of whole star systems, infinite in size, and over eons this energy gestates until one day it is ready to be born. All it takes is a little more energy. Just the tiniest exothermic reaction...”

The stranger pointed his umbrella at Artemi’s pistol.

“And they’re begging for you to do it, Artemi. You can hear them singing your name. I hear them too. Just one bullet, Artemi, one bullet and we help this child father a whole new galaxy... one that will tear through space-time, one that will cause a cataclysmic explosion, an explosion that will consume the most dangerous galaxy in the universe.”

“Explain.”

“In that galaxy, a planet reigns with a race of creatures engineered by hate, obsessed with the annihilation of every other life form in the universe. Not contented until they are the very last, left to terrorize a universe of nothing. After the Orphan, this species will never have existed. These Orphans have one function: they give birth to whole galaxies that target pockets of space in which time distortion can be repaired. You see, time is sometimes fixed and sometimes fluid. There are places in the universe where those boundaries are stretched thin through temporal manipulation, damaging the very fabric of reality. This thinning acts as a power source to these Orphan galaxies, gives them existence. This planet, Skaro, has manipulated time for thousands of years and this temporal chaos has left a vast scar over that corner of space. This Orphan Galaxy will consume that world, healing the scar, feeding off its residue, and so end the Daleks. Their mark will be erased from time entirely and the war will never begin. Trillions will be saved. One bullet, Artemi... just one more bullet.”

“What happens to the Earth? What will happen to us?”

“It burns with the child. All of it. Its history. Its future. We will burn, Artemi. Everything... but you save trillions of lives. Your name will be sung throughout time as a god. A thousand worlds left for dead will now prosper. You will change everything.”

“And what if I do nothing? What if we just leave this place and do nothing?”

“The child dies, taking the Earth with it, the energy growing in his mind enough to destroy everything around it... but there is no birth and the war rages through time. You see? If you do nothing you doom the Earth regardless.”

“Can we do anything else?”

“Maybe... but no matter what, there will be consequences. I might be able to save the child, but

to do so would be at the cost of trillions. These are the choices we will have to live with. That I will have to live with.”

The soldier thought of his home; he thought of his father, seeing his soft face by the banks of the river beaming as they cast out the line together in the cool autumn air; he thought of Evgeni, singing in the fields, raving about *Karenina* and reciting stanzas of Pushkin; he thought about the war, the men and women who had gone bravely to their deaths for a higher purpose. Mostly he thought of himself and the night he begged the stars to save his father, knowing that it was hopeless, knowing that he would soon be alone. The pain in his heart something he had never felt before or since. The voices sang loudly, building to their glorious climax, praying of the future.

Artemi stared at the child, who was sobbing desperately in mid-air, writhing in a quivering mass, a corona of fire blazing around his head like a furious halo.

He pointed his gun at the child and closed his eyes.

“To save a universe...”

And then he dropped it.

“...I will not kill a child. Not even for your universe. Do it yourself...”

The stranger lifted his head and smiled at Artemi. “Thank you... for being human.”

The child began to spasm uncontrollably, his cries of agony piercing Artemi’s soul. The earth quaked furiously, knocking both the stranger and the soldier to the ground.

“Stop his suffering. Please. You said something might be done. I beg of you.”

“I’ll try but unless I can stop the reaction building in his mind, there’s going to be an incredible explosion! I need you to grab him, Artemi. I need you to hold him like you’ve never held anything in your life!”

Artemi dug in and grasped for the Orphan, the pressure behind his eyes nearly unbearable. He could feel particles of stone as the tornado of debris whirled around the ruins, but he couldn’t see anything but blinding colour, every capillary in his eyes swollen as the shrieking began to reach its fatal conclusion.

Onischenko felt the boy’s fragile body fall into his embrace. It was shocking how something so thin and so feeble could have such strength; even as Artemi used every muscle he had, he could feel them both begin to lift off the ground, stinging blasts of shrapnel gnawing at the flesh of his face.

The Doctor saw the bodies begin to rise and knew he had to act. He hurled himself forward to add his own weight to the turmoil. With one desperate reach he secured the boy’s head between his hands and clenched.

With a surprising gentle shush, he sent one tiny thought through the child’s mind.

Sleep. Just sleep.

The Time Lord thought cascaded like a wave through the child’s synapses, closing the connections forever, silencing the countless voices that would now never be. Worlds. Stars. Civilizations. They all faded back into oblivion. He saw other planets burn as the Time War erupted from the depths of the universe, infesting it like a cancer. The moment was now locked forever. Fate had been sealed.

The Doctor could see it all: the destruction, the carnage, the loss. Fury without reprieve.

And there was Death again, grinning maliciously, beckoning the Doctor to him.

Soon, Champion, we will meet again. Oh, so soon. And you shall be alone. I promise you that, Time Lord. You shall be alone.

Then he faded, leaving the Doctor to gaze into the future that he had helped forge.

At first it seemed as though the world would never stop shaking but then, little by little, the tremors began to subside, and the screams became gasps and then murmurs and finally silence.

The alien was asleep, the galaxy in his mind the first casualty of the many that would come.

Artemi held the boy and sobbed; sobbed as he hadn't sobbed since the night of his father's death. He sobbed for Evgeni; he sobbed for Russia; he sobbed for Europe; he sobbed for the universe.

And then he, too, slept...

The planet of Vaanta Prime in the constellation of Mallacurio, a tiny world in a forgotten corner of one forgotten galaxy, agrarian and pacifist, had no way of detecting the Dalek Battle Fleet as it targeted the unstable upper atmosphere rich in fissile uranium gases, the same gases that made the whole sky beam silver-peach. On cloudless nights, the entire planet of the Vaantans, telepathic and devoted to each other, would intone stunning and complex motets, their crystalline chords healing the sick and the harmonies causing the azure grasses to glow and fruit. No other planet in the universe would shimmer like Vaanta during these nights of music. In all of time and space, this symbiosis was completely unique... and it would be lost forever, erased completely.

The Fleet prepared to fire...

...And did.

The collective attack from the fleet caused the entire atmosphere to ignite, sending a huge explosion of nuclear energy to rain devastation upon the surface of the planet. Every Vaantan was incinerated instantly, leaving no sign that they had ever even inhabited the surface of this unique world.

It didn't matter.

It only took several seconds more before the molten core of Vaanta Prime erupted and tore the entire planet apart, leaving nothing but the newly enriched concentration of uranium to both power centuries of Dalek temporal science and haunt this now empty pocket of space forever.

The Time War raged on...

Artemi drove his pitchfork into the last mound of hay and lifted it to the stall with one final heave. His huge brown horse neighed contentedly and continued to feast while Artemi wiped the sweat from his eyes. The warm sun peered through the barn doors and a lonely bird crowed in the distance.

A good day's work, Onischenko. A good day's work.

Artemi grabbed his brown coat and headed towards his door of his home. As he stepped onto his small porch, he turned and stared at his fields. Crops nearly ready to pull and then prepare for another long Russian winter. Tuchkovo never looked better than it did in August and Artemi was glad to see it.

You made it, Artemi. We didn't all make it, but you made it. Another summer. Another winter. It has never been so beautiful. Perhaps there is time now to fish for steelhead once again.

"Evgeni, grab the rods next to the fireplace and bring them to me. I want to show you the river again. Perhaps we'll be lucky and grab a ten-pounder this time!"

The little boy's quiet steps pattered hurriedly to the fireplace and he grabbed the rods with glee. He met Artemi at the door and they stared at each other for a moment in silence, as though sharing a

deep secret. *Somewhere deep in the depths of space, a billion billion voices screamed.* Then they faded away like ghosts and there was silence again. The memory was gone, having never really existed at all. The boy just smiled.

“Yes, father.”

Alone in his wheezy old TARDIS, the Doctor watched from his monitor as the tiny world of Vaanta Prime was extinguished from history. He closed his eyes in sorrow and exhaustion. After only a short beat, he sighed and turned away from the screen, setting the co-ordinates for another place and time.

Gallifrey doesn't believe in tears either.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Three

by Nick Walters

KRYAX, VOLCANO DAY

“Admit it, Inomasp, you’re finished!”

Inomasp, Warrior Queen of the Kryax, howled in impotent rage. Directly behind the towering biomechanoid creature, a stream of molten lava flowed down the mountain, crackling and hissing and sending gouts of steam up into the purple sky. Directly in front of Inomasp stood the Doctor, scarf over his mouth to keep out the worst of the lava fumes, and the massed ranks of the Sixteenth Assault Squadron of the Second Spacefleet of the Earth Empire, comprising two hundred fully armed soldiers equipped with pulse rifles, lasers, masers, phasers, erasers, flensers and sonic cannon. They fanned out in a crescent shape around the alien dictator, cutting off her escape either up or down the mountain. Their white exo-suits shone pale orange in the glow of the lava.

“Never!” roared Inomasp, brandishing her fearsome pincers. “Inomasp will never surrender!”

Pulling his scarf aside, the Doctor sneered. “Oh come on, Inomasp, give it up. You’re completely surrounded.” He took a step closer to the alien warrior queen. Although the creature, at twelve feet high, easily dwarfed him, the Time Lord showed no fear. “And it’s time you paid for all the atrocities you have committed, all those millions of lives you have so brutally, senselessly taken.”

But Inomasp remained unrepentant. Her blue glowing compound eyes glared down at the Doctor. “Your morality means nothing to me! Nothing!” she hissed. “I am Inomasp, Warrior Queen of the Kryax!”

“Yes, I know who you are,” muttered the Doctor, almost absently, stepping back.

At his feet, before the front rank of the Sixteenth Assault Squadron of the Second Spacefleet of the Earth Empire, cowered a trio of insectoid figures. These were all that remained of the mighty Kryax army. Their leader, Vool, tugged at the Doctor’s trousers. Defeat had completely crushed the creature’s spirit. “Please spare our Goddess, Lord Doctor.”

The Doctor shook the creature off with distaste. “Don’t be a fool, Vool. Inomasp’s no goddess. She’s just a jumped-up biomechanoid with delusions of grandeur.”

Major Dupont stepped up to the Doctor’s side. “Your negotiations have failed, Doctor. Men! Take aim!”

The Doctor grabbed the arm of Dupont’s exo-suit. “No! Give me one more chance!”

Dupont’s moustachioed features regarded the Doctor impassively, then he gave a curt nod. “Very well. But be quick – it can’t be long before this whole mountain goes up.”

The Doctor turned back to the alien warrior queen, still towering above them in front of the bright orange flow of molten lava. “Inomasp, you’ve got one chance before these good men blast you into the middle of next week. Give up now, and live. Atone for your crimes.”

“That won’t bring back all the millions I have slaughtered!” hissed the biomechanoid beast, steam venting past her mandibles.

“No,” said the Doctor. “It won’t. But it would be a nice thing to do, wouldn’t it? Major Dupont, don’t you think it would be a nice thing to do?”

“Get on with it!” snarled the Major.

Vool stared up at the Doctor imploringly. “Spare our Goddess!”

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGHAAAAA!” roared Inomasp, looming over them all. The business ends of a couple of hundred weapons were trained on the creature’s chitinous carapace. “I have had – enough!” So saying, Inomasp swung away from the assembled soldiers, Time Lord and former Kryax soldiers, and dived headlong into the stream of molten lava.

There was an explosion of flame and oily smoke.

“No!” yelled the Doctor.

“Noooooooo!” cried Wool, all four pincers waving in the sulphurous air.

“Well, that’s sorted that out,” said Major Dupont matter-of-factly.

Later, when all the soldiers had flown away in their big silver ships, and the Time Lord and his magic blue temple had vanished into the ether, and the remains of the Kryax army had crawled back to the remains of their jungle villages, Wool slunk away and trekked back to the mountainside, where the molten lava still flowed, and the air was thick with the stench of its evil, sulphurous fumes. Wool was, once, a proud and brave warrior, but defeat, and the death of his Goddess, had broken him. He scuttled back and forth before the lava flow, lowing mournfully, feeling the deathly intensity of its heat on his carapace. He tried to summon the courage to plunge in after his Goddess, but, as soon as he got near enough for the heat to make his eyes sting, he scuttled back, hissing in pain. “Such as I dun deserve life, what mun I dooo?” he crooned, over and over again.

Then he saw it, lying in the ashes a few metres back from the bright orange river of death. A small object, about the size of a newborn’s head, a lump of blackened metal, with a few shiny bits showing through, and all tubes coming out of the top.

Wool chirruped in surprise and crawled closer, braving the heat. It was – it had to be!

Unlike the rest of his people, Inomasp had augmented her insectoid body with biomechanical parts, extending her life and power. Thus, came Inomasp to become Warrior Goddess of the Kryax. Could this object be – the biomechanical heart of Inomasp?

Bracing himself against the heat, Wool darted forward and scooped up the object in his foreclaw. He then scuttled back, twittering in pain, yet filled with a thrilling sense of awe and triumph.

The heart of Inomasp had survived!

Wool, and all his people, would worship it forever!

Next Segment
SIDIAN PALACE, PARTY TIME

Time-Crossed

by Daniel Tessier

Sara Kingdom cautiously stepped through the TARDIS doors. Even though she had checked the exterior via the scanner, she was prepared for the worst. No soldier could ever be too careful, particularly in an alien environment.

She looked around. The bright blue of the TARDIS was incongruous between the two metallic grey walls that rose on either side of it. She stepped gingerly forward, moving out from the alleyway in which the Ship had materialized. A forest of metal greeted her; spires rose in the distance, gleaming in the afternoon sun. She squinted, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the glare.

A sudden hoot startled her, and she stepped back quickly. A tomato-red hovercar skimmed towards her, travelling rapidly above the road that was criss-crossed with metallic gridlines. It barrelled past her, swiftly disappearing into the silver city.

Sara realized she had been holding her breath. She breathed out, and began to relax. The location was unknown to her, but the environment familiar. This was civilization; not her own world, but recognizable.

“Sara!” came the brusque voice of Steven Taylor, the man who had, during the astonishing events of the last few weeks, become her travelling companion. She turned back, returning into the alley.

“Sara, you should wait for the Doctor and me before you go outside. You’ve no idea where we are or what could be waiting for us.”

She should have been annoyed by Steven’s chiding, but there was something about the way that he looked out for her that she found quite likeable. He was a military man himself, of course, and had been living this strange lifestyle for far longer than she had. It was only natural that he should try to take charge, at least in some little way. Still, she wasn’t going to let him forget whom he was talking to.

“Steven, how many years have I been in the Space Security Service? How many potentially deadly environments did I visit before I even met you and the Doctor? I am perfectly capable of scouting out a new environment without supervision.” She thought for a moment. “Where is the Doctor, anyway?”

“I’m right here, young lady,” came a strident voice, its elderly owner stepping through the doors of TARDIS, firmly shutting them behind him. “The TARDIS is a complex mechanism, requiring precise and delicate operation, you know. I can’t simply barrel out of the doors the moment we’ve landed! There are checks to be made, measurements to be, ah, measured...”

The three of them walked out from between the buildings, the Doctor leaning heavily on his ornate cane. They took in the spectacle of the city in front of them, the blocks rising high into the sky, tenuous narrow structures of metal and glass. Hovercars of every colour scooted along the roads. The few pedestrians visible in the area walked with purpose, crossing from one roadside to the other by means of an elegantly sculpted steel bridge.

“Doctor,” said Steven, “where are we exactly? I mean, it’s obviously Earth, but it could be almost anywhere.”

“Is your eyesight so poor, my boy? If you look ahead of us there, you can see the statue of King Charles the First, and beyond, Nelson’s Column! This is the very centre of London!”

“Of course. You see, in my time,” continued Steven, referring to his native era, some centuries

before Sara's own, "almost the whole southern half of Great Britain is taken up by one enormous city that we call, well, the City."

"Yes, I see," responded the Doctor. "Well, the developments here are no doubt the beginnings of your great City. Although they'll have the Daleks to contend with first," he added, ominously. "Come along!"

The trio ambled along, the population becoming denser as they reached Trafalgar Square. The archaic structures of Nelson's Column, surrounded by the four iconic stone lions, and the associated statues of historical British figures, still stood. The expanse of the National Gallery crowned the Square. However, the fountains were dry, and the roads leading from the square were lined with impersonal, towering buildings of metal and glass.

The people moved quickly and paid each other little attention, each of them seemingly busy with their own lives, although several did spare a glance for the oddly dressed travellers who had wandered into their midst.

"Busy sorts, aren't they?" observed Steven.

"There's nothing wrong with that," said Sara. "It is good to have a purpose."

"And it is a Monday, my boy," pointed out the Doctor, gesturing towards the huge digitized date and time that was displayed on the side of one of the many metallic buildings. The bold red digits read: 12:59 – MONDAY – 23 MAY 2012. "These people are most likely taking what little time they have for their lunch break. This is a busy city centre, after all. Not everyone is lucky enough to lead the life of leisure we do."

Sara wasn't quite sure if he was joking or not. Before she could ask, a fanfare sounded, seemingly from all around them. Many of the people who were dashing about their day stopped, turning to the northwest corner of the square. In their midst, an image appeared, hovering above the empty Fourth Plinth. The face of a mature man, reasonably handsome but unthreatening, in sober clothing. His face flickered, broken up into thin horizontal lines, before stabilizing.

"A projection?" asked Steven.

"Indeed," said the Doctor. "If you look closely, you can see emitters on the corners of the plinth."

"Good afternoon," said the projection, in a cultured, English voice. "This is Calvin Bennett with *The Hourly Telepress* at one o'clock on Monday, the twenty-third of May. In today's headlines, plans for the weather control station have been given the go-ahead, and construction will begin on the moon within the next three weeks. This exciting new development promises more beautiful blue skies than ever before, and rain that will fall precisely on schedule."

The Doctor stood, gripping his lapels as he contentedly listened to Bennett rattle off his summary of the day's news. Sara felt her toes begin to itch. While she was used to long periods waiting for orders, the SSS were a division dedicated to action, and she didn't like standing around in the open in what was, after all, an unsecured area, however familiar it might feel. They were still technically on a mission, even if they had seen nothing of the Daleks for weeks.

"Doctor, isn't there something else we could be doing?" she asked.

"Shush, shush, shush!" chided the old man. "I thought you would understand the value of reconnaissance, young lady." He turned his attention back to the projection, a gentle smile upon his face. "In any case, I've long enjoyed the medium of television."

Steven gave Sara a look of resignation, and she smiled back to him. Inside, however, she couldn't shake her concern that they were always, potentially, at risk while on their travels.

"Finally," continued the projection of Bennett, "an unidentified mechanical object has been

discovered during the excavation for the site of the new Regent Street PowerTube station in the Westminster District. Services on the Fleet Line are subject to disruption. Construction has ceased awaiting investigation by the British Rocket Group. *The Hourly Telepress* shall return at two o'clock with an adventure with the Karkus." The projection blinked out.

"So, this is the City then," said Steven. "You don't get PowerTubes anywhere else." He pointed across the square, down the adjacent street. "Look, you can see a station over there."

"Strictly speaking, we're in Westminster," said the Doctor. "That is Trafalgar Square station. We can make our way along the line towards the construction site."

"You mean we're going to take a look at this 'unidentified object' they've found?" asked Sara.

"Of course!" said the Doctor, grinning. "We'd better hurry if we're going to get there before those busybodies from the Rocket Group make a mess of everything. Come along!"

Amy and Rory Williams – or, if you asked her, Amy and Rory Pond – wandered along happily through the crowd of tourists that filled Trafalgar Square, even on a Monday. Neither one of them had anywhere they needed to be. They were enjoying a long weekend away together, and had decided that they were going to do the tourist thing and see the sights.

Amy sat next to one of the four famous lion statues around Nelson's Column, eating a Solero. Rory stood next to her, slightly awkwardly, relaxation never having come quite as naturally to him as it had to his wife. A traditionalist, he had opted for a choc ice.

A man stood opposite them, peering occasionally over his newspaper, before hiding again. Even if they hadn't spotted his face during his sneaky glances, they would have easily recognized the turned-up trousers held up by braces.

"Come over here, Doctor," called Amy, with a resigned smile.

The Doctor beamed them a huge grin, and bounded over to them on his bandy legs.

"Ponds!" he exclaimed.

"How did you know we were here?" asked Rory, fixing the Doctor with a quizzical look.

"I searched every city in Britain until I found you."

"Okay, that's a bit weird," said Amy. An understatement, perhaps, but not much the Doctor did surprised her anymore.

"No, of course I didn't. I saw a receipt in your house in a few weeks' time from now. Fancied a trip to London, thought I'd pop in on a day I knew you'd be here. Twenty-third of May, 2012. An excellent choice."

"Slightly less weird," said Amy, "but still pretty freaky. Come here, you!"

She opened her arms wide and gave the Doctor a huge hug. After a moment of his standard awkwardness, Rory joined in.

"So, what's the plan, Ponds?" asked the Doctor. "British Museum? I accidentally reactivated a robot mummy there once. Or Hamleys! Love a toy shop."

"Tube station's over there," said Rory, nodding across to the Westminster station sign. "We could wander around Covent Garden and then up Regent Street."

"Excellent plan," said the Doctor, beaming. "I might get some Lego. This is still before it achieves sentience and declares itself an independent nation, isn't it?"

"I still can't tell when you're joking," said Amy, which was the truth.

“If the British Rocket Group is here,” explained the Doctor, “then there’s more to this ‘object’ than they’re saying on the *Telepress*.” He gestured wildly around the train carriage with his walking stick. “You know, I can tell when there’s something fascinating to be found nearby. It’s a sort of sensation.”

“Are you being serious, Doctor?” said Sara, who was beginning to realize that the Doctor’s claims should be taken with a pinch of salt, to use an ancient idiom.

“Indeed I am, Miss Kingdom! I have a nose for mystery!”

The train came to a halt, and after a moment, the Doctor, Sara and Steven, along with the other passengers exited onto the station. The Doctor took in the silvered map on the wall.

“Now, the new station is being constructed on Regent Street. We can walk there from here. I’m not unknown to the scientific community of this period, so I’m sure we won’t have too much difficulty making our way in.”

The Doctor wasn’t the fastest person on foot, and both Sara and Steven found themselves having to slow down their pace so as to avoid leaving him behind. It didn’t take them too long, however, to reach the throng of people gathered around the as-yet-unused entrance way for Regent Street station. Silver-uniformed guards stood in front of the entrance, preventing the various members of the press from gaining access. One side wielded holocameras, the other stun batons.

“What have they found down there?” shouted one of the journalists.

“What is the nature of the discovery?” called another, from a more high-brow publication.

“Is the object alien?” demanded another.

A guard held his arms out in a blocking gesture. “This matter is under official jurisdiction. A full report will be made to state reporters when the nature of the object has been fully explored.”

“State reporters? Come on, what about the real story?” cried one of the journalists, setting off a wave of vocal consternation.

The Doctor took the lead, moving past the ruckus in the hope of bypassing the guards altogether. While the majority of them were distracted by the growing commotion, one particularly large and burly specimen clapped a meaty hand onto the Doctor’s shoulder.

“May I ask where you think you’re going, sir?” asked the hirsute individual, politely aggressive.

“I’m – I’m needed urgently inside!” replied the Doctor, grasping his lapels with all the authority he could muster. “My expertise is required to identify this object! I am a noted expert in the field! You may have heard of me, my name is Doctor—”

The large man yelped, cutting the Doctor off, as Sara jabbed her knee into the small of his back. He fell to his knees, and she followed it up with a sharp chop to the lower neck, felling him completely.

“Sara, that was incredible!” said Steven. “Although he hadn’t actually done anything.”

“We need to get inside,” she replied, “and if we don’t go now while there’s a distraction, we never will. Come on!”

“My dear, I was just about to talk him round,” said the Doctor. “There’s no need to resort to such brute force tactics, you know. It’s all a matter of finesse.”

“Doctor, your finesse was getting us nowhere. Anyway, he’ll be fine in half an hour. Now, we’d better get moving before we’re noticed.”

They hurriedly made their way into the station, with the Doctor complaining all the way.

Amy, Rory and the Doctor bundled onto the train, happily chatting among themselves, with the Doctor and Rory comparing their respective tastes in boys’ toys.

“I don’t care what you say, Doctor, Micro Machines were and always shall be far superior to Matchbox.”

“Rory Pond, in the Acteon Group they use Miniscopes to time scoop cars and miniaturize them to make children’s toys, and Matchbox models are still better.”

Amy laughed at the boys’ little dispute, as they sat down clumsily on either side of her.

“There really is no telling some people,” said the Doctor.

Without warning, the train ground to a halt. The lights flickered, before going out. The jaded complaints of Londoners began, equal parts anger at yet another unexpected delay and satisfaction at having something to complain about. The stop was momentary, however, and the lights quickly came back on. In a few seconds, the train was running again.

The Doctor pulled his screwdriver from his pocket. The other passengers on the train had clearly noticed the eccentric man with his glowing, whirring gadget, because they were all studiously ignoring him.

“Doctor, it’s just a fault,” said Amy. “The Tube trains always have something wrong with them.”

“No, this is different,” said the Doctor. “Don’t ask me how I know, I can just feel it.”

The Doctor studied his screwdriver intently, and not for the first time, Amy wondered how he could actually read anything from the gizmo.

“We’re getting off,” he said suddenly, leaping to his feet.

“Doctor,” said Amy, “can we please wait until the train has stopped?”

“Fine,” he said, “but that means we’ll have to walk back down the tunnel.”

Sara led the way into an open chamber, which was clearly in the process of excavation. Rubble was still strewn about the ground. In the centre of the chamber sat an object: roughly egg-shaped, it was a pearlescent blue-white colour and perfectly smooth.

“Undoubtedly alien,” said the Doctor. “No wonder the scientists of the time are keen to get their hands on it. Completely beyond them, I’m sure, but one can’t fault them for trying.”

The three moved quickly down to the pod, the Doctor eager to investigate.

“Something’s stirring down here,” said the Doctor. “The sonic’s going crazy. Temporal energy readings are off the charts.”

“How worried should we about that?” said Rory. “Is this ‘run for your life’ or ‘poke with a stick?’”

“Amy, please tell your husband to calm down. Everything’s going to be perfectly fine.”

“Really though, Doctor,” said Amy, feeling her husband, as overly cautious as he could be, had a point, “what are we dealing with here?”

“Well, I don’t know. If I did, I’d know if doing this was a good idea.”

The Doctor held the screwdriver aloft in both hands and pressed three buttons simultaneously. A pulse of sound reverberated around the tunnel.

“Doctor,” sighed Rory, “what did you just do?”

“Whatever we’re dealing with here, I just gave it a little alarm call,” said the Time Lord, pocketing his screwdriver and straightening his bow tie.

On cue, a soft green glow appeared in front of them, dimly illuminating the tunnel walls, decades of dirt and lichen highlighted by the energy. The luminescence grew brighter and slowly, tenuously,

solidified.

In front of the trio stood a gently glowing green figure. Eight feet tall, broad and unmistakably masculine, its head was sunk into its shoulders and its arms reached down to its knees. It wore no clothes, but its body was almost featureless, its skin a smooth, almost carapace-like surface.

“Hello,” the Doctor said, in quiet tones. “So sorry to wake you like that, but it looked like you needed a little help. I’m the Doctor, these are my friends, Amy and Rory. Do you have a name?”

The being turned its stubby head to the trio. Slitted eyes stared out at them.

“Azarath,” came a deep voice, seemingly from all around. “My name is Azarath. How long have I slept?”

The pod glowed with its own faint internal light. It was just about large enough to hold a single person, although Sara knew now that external appearances could be very deceptive.

“I don’t recognize the configuration,” she said, realizing how unhelpful this was.

“There’s not really much to go on, is there,” pointed out Steven. “It’s pretty featureless.”

“Most definitely extraterrestrial,” said the Doctor, “and quite advanced, I’d say.” He knelt down beside the object. “Most certainly a craft of some kind. There are no controls that I can see, however... I can sense an interface of some kind.”

“Sense it?” asked Steven. “How so?”

The Doctor waved his hands irritably.

“Oh, how to explain... my people have a certain, mmm, affinity for time, I suppose you’d say. It’s part of how I fly the TARDIS, although there’s more to it than that. I have something of a special relationship with time. Evidently the pilot of this craft has something similar.”

Sara and Steven looked at each other. Anything that had to do with the Doctor’s piloting of the TARDIS was not a source of great confidence.

“Perhaps, if I just...” the Doctor muttered, leaning closer to the pod. Supporting himself with his stick, he reached his free hand out to the object. “Yes... yes, I can feel it!”

The pod began to glow brighter. A sharp line of white light appeared across its circumference. Slowly, it cracked open.

“Doctor, was that a good idea?” said Steven.

Sara felt herself instinctively reach for a weapon she did not have.

“There’s something coming out,” she observed.

The glow brightened further, coalescing in the centre of the pod. Rising upwards and outwards, the glow left the pod altogether. It stood in front of the three travellers, resolving into a humanoid form. The Doctor straightened up and backed away, standing firm in the face of an unknown entity. The white light finally took shape. In front of them stood a figure, perhaps six feet tall, with a slender build and an almost featureless body. Nonetheless, from the lines of its body and the structure of its alien face, it was undoubtedly feminine.

“What is this place?” she demanded, in a strident, powerful voice.

“It’s all right,” said the Doctor, hands raised placatingly. “I’m not sure how long you’ve been asleep, but we can find out. Maybe if you can tell me how you got here...?”

Azarath was silent for a time, seemingly deep in thought.

“I came here with my co-pilot,” he said, eventually. “We were passing through this plane on the way back to our own world. However, this world has experienced much temporal activity in this

space-time region. We encountered unexpected interference. Our craft was grounded. I was rendered insensible.” He paused again, almost as if he was listening for something. “This world has circled its star fifty times since then.”

“You can tell that?” asked Amy, fascinated. “When you’ve been down here all that time?”

“Of course!” exclaimed the Doctor. “You’re a Trizolian, aren’t you?” He swivelled on his feet and faced Amy and Rory, flapping his hands about with excited expressiveness. “The Trizolians are a four-dimensional species. Exceptionally sensitive to time. They make Time Lords look deaf and blind in comparison. They make us look like... well, you lot. Anyway, poor Azarath here is obviously a bit shaken up still; he’s only just got up after all, but once he’s back to a hundred per cent, he’ll have perfect co-ordination within all dimensions of space-time.”

“What happened to your co-pilot?” asked Rory.

Azarath’s head sank, and he became silent again.

“You’re on the planet Earth,” said Sara, stepping in front of the Doctor and Steven, instinctively putting herself into harm’s way ahead of them. “This is a city called London, in a nation called...” She searched her hazy memory of history lectures. “Merrie Olde England,” she said, finally. “We mean you no harm. How did you come to be here?”

“What is your name, my friend?” asked the Doctor, an approach that hadn’t occurred to Sara.

The being faced them with a piercing gaze.

“I am Coriu. My craft materialized here in error, grounded by the unusual temporal effects in this region. I have slept here for...” She fell silent for a moment, before continuing: “Fifty of your years. I can sense the passage of time, both since my arrival, and throughout your worldlines. The three of you originate from different times. Not one of you is native to this space-time.” She focused her narrow eyes on the Doctor. “You, in particular, are alien to this region.”

“As are you,” responded the Doctor, not unfairly. “Your craft is still intact, you can leave whenever you wish.”

“My craft is dead,” snapped Coriu. She reached out a hand, and drew the energy of the pod into herself in a stream of blue light. The craft faded from view completely. “I was injured in the materialization. I should not have slept so long.”

“Your craft must have materialized within the structure of the ground,” noted the Doctor. “You were unable to wake until these people began digging here. The disruption must have reactivated you and your ship, so to speak.”

“I travelled with a co-pilot,” she continued. “Yet he is not present. What have you done with him?”

“Nothing!” said Steven. “We’ve only been here a short time ourselves.”

“Azarath... I can sense him. He exists here, now, but in a separate veil of possibility.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sara.

“You’ve got me,” responded Steven.

“I think I understand,” said the Doctor. “You and your associate are separated by quantum probability? Both of you arrived in 1962, but were left, shall we say, out of sync with each other? While one sequence of events has led to this 2012, another sequence of events has led to another 2012 in which he now resides.”

“That is correct. We are lost to one another.” Coriu strode over to the Doctor and loomed over him. Her eyes blazed. “You must have a craft. You will take me through the veil, and we will be

reunited!”

“I can sense her, Doctor,” said Azarath. “She is close, yet so far. We are separated by the realm of probability, unable to meet even as we stand in the same space-time.”

“Two beings, separated by the dimension of quantum probability,” whispered the Doctor. “You poor old thing, Azarath. You must have been left slightly out of phase with one another when you crashed here.”

“We are linked,” continued the alien. “Neither of us can pilot our craft without the other. This is why I have woken now. She has recovered, and needs to find me. Doctor, I can sense that you too are a traveller in time. You have a craft, yes?”

“Azarath, I would love to help you, I really would, but you have to understand, I can’t just jump across worldlines like that. Unless...” The Doctor smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Oh, stupid Doctor, no, clever Doctor! If we go back to the exact point you crashed your ship in the first place, you can travel back up to now through the other timestream!”

“Doctor, what are you talking about?” said Amy.

“I second that,” added Rory.

“Imagine time as a pair of tights,” said the Doctor, miming stretching something with his hands. “Flexible, malleable, but with a definite structure. Now, if you wanted to move something from one leg to the other, you could poke a pencil through both legs and move it across that way.”

“But then you’d ladder your tights and ruin them,” said Amy.

“Exactly. Tights destroyed, big rips in space-time. But, if you go up one leg and then down the other, you can make the trip without any damage at all. I’ll just have to do something very clever at the crotch.”

“That is your worst analogy ever,” sighed Amy.

“Azarath, me old mate, I think we can do this. We just need to get to the TARDIS.”

“Your craft?” asked the alien. “I can sense it. I can take us there immediately.”

And with that, all four of them vanished.

“It isn’t as simple as that, Coriu,” protested the Doctor.

“Time traveller, you have a choice. You either take me to my mate with your craft, or I will break my way through the veil myself.”

“If you can do that, why don’t you?” asked Steven, reasonably.

“Steven, my boy,” said the Doctor, fixing him with a hard stare, “if she tears through the dimensions like that, she’ll take this whole city with her! Space and time will be ripped apart!”

“Then we have to help her,” pointed out Sara. “We don’t have a choice.”

“My dear, it really is not that simple. I would have to pilot the Ship back in time to the very point of divergence and correct for the phase variance there. And while my piloting skills are certainly up-to-scratch, I fear the TARDIS’s navigational system is not.”

“You have problems with your navigation?” hissed Coriu.

“I confess that my Ship has developed a small fault, so that I do not always know precisely where I am going to materialize.”

Sara and Steven looked at each other again, impressed by the understatement.

“I can sense your craft. I can pinpoint its exact location. I can move us from here to there in an

instant. Navigating the vessel will not pose a problem.”

There was a shout from the level above.

“There they are!”

Five armed, silver-suited guards piled in, followed by four soberly dressed individuals carrying various scientific instruments.

“Wait!” cried one of them. “They’ve made contact!”

“Don’t do anything!” said another. “The object’s gone!”

“This is the British Rocket Group. Please step away from the extraterrestrial immediately.

“Oh, that’s all we need,” muttered the Doctor.

“I will not be delayed further,” snarled Coriu. She lashed out with her right arm, sending a tendril of blue energy across the assembled humans. With a vicious crackle it contacted them, flooring all nine. They landed with a heavy thud, unconscious.

“That was unnecessary!” snapped the Doctor.

“The terrestrial creatures shall survive,” responded the alien. “Should we delay further, this city shall not.”

The Doctor sighed.

“Very well,” he said. “Steven, Sara, at my side. Take us to the TARDIS.

The four of them vanished.

“Blimey, Azarath, what’s your hurry?” asked the Doctor, a moment after he and his four companions appeared at the door of the TARDIS, parked behind the Leicester Square Odeon. “Come on then, this is my transport of delight. With your help, we can get to exactly the point we need to be.”

The Doctor opened the door, gesturing Amy and Rory inside before watching Azarath carefully as he entered. Finally, he stepped inside himself and locked the door behind him.

“An impressive vessel,” stated Azarath, casting his eye over the complex and cluttered control room.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” replied the Doctor, getting to work on the console. “Just a couple of adjustments I need to make.”

Azarath stood stoically as the Doctor worked.

“What was her name?” asked Amy, quietly.

The huge alien looked down at her, his glowing eyes meeting her own. From this close, she could feel the bristling energy that emanated from him. He could have destroyed her in a heartbeat.

“Her name is Coriu,” he said, and turned away.

“Don’t worry, big fella,” said the Doctor, “we’ll get you back to her. Tune yourself into the theta band. We’re about to go!”

“Doctor, I think I’ve had enough of being thrown across space,” said Steven, clutching his head as he fell back against the wall. They had appeared back in the alleyway, in front of the TARDIS.

“I don’t see the problem, my boy,” replied the Doctor. “That seems like quite an acceptable way to travel. However, this is something else entirely.”

He unveiled his key and opened the TARDIS door, holding out his hand and gesturing for Coriu to enter.

“After you, madam.”

Sara stepped up to the Doctor and spoke quietly into his ear.

“How do we know she’s not just going to take the TARDIS and leave us?”

“Because, for now at least, she has no idea how it functions,” replied the Doctor, “only that it moves through space-time. Without me, she cannot fly it; without her, I cannot land it precisely.”

They entered, along with Steven. Coriu stood in the gleaming white control room.

“This is acceptable,” she stated, without elaboration.

“Well, I am pleased you find it adequate,” huffed the Doctor. “If you’re ready, I am going to set the TARDIS temporal circuits to band theta. We can then begin.”

The TARDIS spun through the Vortex, the Doctor grabbing at the controls.

“Ooh, these precise hops are tricky,” he said, “but even so, there’s a lot of turbulence here.”

“Will we be able to materialize?” asked Azarath.

“Oh, don’t you worry, I’ll get us there in one piece.”

“Oh dear, this is most unusual,” complained the Doctor. “The TARDIS is pushing against some severe interference.”

“You had best not fail me,” warned Coriu.

“Fail? Never! We’ll be there in a jiffy!”

The TARDIS materialized.

The TARDIS materialized.

The Doctor stepped out, his cane clicking on the pavement.

The Doctor stepped out, whirring his screwdriver.

“Right, that’s as close as we can get without actually being in the ground.”

He saw his other self.

“Ah.”

Out of one TARDIS came Sara, Steven and Coriu; out of the other, Amy, Rory and Azarath. The eight time travellers all looked at each other, warily.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Sara’s Doctor.

“Oi, don’t blame me for this,” said Amy’s. “What are you doing here? I don’t remember this.”

“Coriu!” exclaimed Azarath, glowing brightly.

“Azarath, at last,” she replied.

They clasped their hands together, bold white and unearthly green shining together. They were more than just co-pilots, Amy saw. They needed each other.

“Aw,” said Amy, despite herself.

“Who are you people?” asked Sara.

Before anyone could answer, there was a violent shudder. The assembled humans almost fell to their feet.

“What was that?” questioned Rory, steadying Amy.

“Temporal feedback,” said the bow-tied Doctor. “We shouldn’t all be here at once. Two TARDISEs, two Doctors, two super-powerful transdimensional aliens. It’s all a bit much.”

There was another shudder, and a sudden, blinding flash. When it abated, all four humans were gone.

“What has happened?” demanded the stick-wielding Doctor.

“Oh dear,” said the bow-tied one. “It’s all gone a bit Pete Tong.”

Amy, Rory, Sara and Steven found themselves, flat on their backs, in the middle of a gleaming metallic walkway. People, hurriedly going about their lives, stopped, in some cases almost tripping over these strangers who had appeared in their midst. The four looked around, taking in the stone lions, the great column and the statues of noteworthy Englishmen.

“We’re back in the Square,” observed Steven.

“Yeah, but when,” said Rory.

“Where we started, I think,” said Sara, getting to her feet. “This is 2012.” She helped Steven up.

Rory, likewise helping Amy, shook his head.

“No, that doesn’t make sense. We’re from 2012. This is the future.”

“Right,” said Amy. “We don’t have metal gangways or, or hovering cars or – what the hell’s that?” She pointed at a hulking man in luminous tight-fitting coveralls, who was flexing his exaggerated muscles atop a plinth.

“I think that’s the Karkus,” said Steven. “Don’t worry, it’s just a hologram.”

“He looks like a superhero,” said Amy.

“I have seen every Marvel movie to date,” said Rory, “and I have never heard of ‘The Carcass.’ I mean, what kind of name is that anyway?”

“Wait a moment,” said Sara, butting in to avoid the conversation going off on a complete tangent, “the Doctor spoke of two different histories. One for Coriu, and one for her mate, each beginning in 1962.”

“So one is yours,” said Rory.

“And the other is ours,” finished Amy.

“And somehow, we’ve all ended up here,” said Steven.

“Without the Doctor, or the TARDIS,” observed Sara. “This poses a problem.”

The four of them stood silently for a moment, unsure of what to say.

“Fancy getting a coffee?” suggested Amy.

“Oh, this is most irregular,” complained the Doctor, pacing up and down, his cane making a racket on the pavement.

“Well, these things do happen occasionally,” said the other Doctor. “You might find you bump into yourself from time to time.”

“How can you be so glib, young man? We are breaching the Laws of Time!”

“Don’t you ‘young man’ me – I’m old enough to be your... well, your ancestor!”

“So which one are you then, hmm? How many have I gone through before I become this, this... whippersnapper?”

“Well, let’s just say it’s been a while since I looked as grumpy as you.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, this is a sorry state of affairs. Do I really change so much?”

“You don’t know the half of it, mate.”

Coriu and Azarath approached the Doctors.

“Explain this situation,” demanded the female.

“There is an overlap in your worldlines,” observed Azarath.

“Well, obviously,” said the younger-faced Doctor, running his hand through his hair. “That’s because we’re the same person. We obviously tried the same thing in different potential futures and, well, this is the result.”

“Never mind all that,” snapped the older-faced Doctor, “where are my young associates?”

“And why has no one noticed us standing here having this argument?” asked the other.

“We have projected a temporal envelope to prevent any of the natives of this space-time from interfering with us,” explained Coriu, quite haughtily. “Now that we are reunited, this is well within our abilities.”

“As for your associates,” said Azarath, “they appear to be downstream, in one of the worldlines from which you travelled. It is hard to tell which.”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” said the younger. “Two Trizolians are better than one, right? If anyone can find them and get them back, it’s you two.”

“Perhaps,” said Coriu, “but why would we? Their whereabouts are of no interest to us.”

“Coriu,” said Azarath, quietening his deep voice, “these creatures helped us become reunited. Is it not right that we do the same for them?”

“You always were too sentimental, Azarath.”

“It’s lucky you had some money in your pocket,” said Rory, sitting down at the transparent perspex table. “We never know if we’ve got the right cash on us when we’re travelling with the Doctor.”

“Or even when we’re just supposed to be out in town for a couple of days,” added Amy. “Why are they using pounds, shillings and pence? That stuff went out in the fifties or something.”

“1971,” said Rory.

“Which is after the two histories diverged,” noted Steven. “Luckily, we were in 1965 not that long ago.”

“This is all quite fascinating,” said Sara, cautiously sipping her coffee, which was quite unlike anything available in her own time, the coffee plant having become extinct some centuries previously. “You say you don’t have these holographic displays in your version of London?”

“That’s right,” said Amy, “but we do have Wi-Fi and a mobile network, which might make getting hold of the Doctor a bit easier.”

“If he’s even in this timezone,” pointed out Rory.

“He’s coming,” she stated, and left it at that.

“What we definitely don’t have,” said Rory, changing track, “is a Space Wheel. Seriously, the news here is amazing. And people just work up there?”

“Well, it’s very hard to get a placement on those things,” said Steven, “but are you really telling me you don’t have space stations in your time?”

“Well, we have the ISS,” offered Rory, “but it’s not quite the same.”

“And you’re from this time yourselves?” asked Amy.

“A little further ahead,” said Steven, not elaborating.

“I joined the Doctor and Steven in 4000, Common Era,” explained Sara, to be met with wide eyes from both Amy and Rory. “What?”

“You’re from the year 4000?” said Rory.

“A year 4000,” said a young voice. The four looked up. The Doctor stood there – Amy’s Doctor – with a broad smile on his face.

“Where’s our Doctor?” asked Sara.

“Yes, I think I might need that part explained to me again,” said Steven.

“Well, we’re both versions of the same person. We’re the same Doctor, only different. I’m a little further ahead – well, a lot further ahead – as you can tell from my superior sartorial taste.”

“So what happens now?” asked Rory. “Are we stuck in a parallel universe?”

“Not at all,” smiled the Doctor, clapping his hands together. “Together, Azarath and Coriu are far more powerful and more precise. They’re able to gently shunt us across to our own worldline, no harm done. Kind of like tying the ends of a pair of tights together, only not very much like that at all.”

“Thank you,” said Steven, “that’s all much clearer.”

“Look, it’s quite simple,” said the Doctor, pulling up a transparent chair. “At any point in time, there are many possible sequences of events that might play out. Technology might progress rapidly in one area, but not another. Someone comes to power in one history, his opponent in the other. Both versions of 2012 are equally possible from the point of view of someone in 1962, and both are equally valid, equally real – they’re just separate.”

He nodded at Amy and Rory.

“You two should never have been able to see this version of events. But it’s fine, you should slip back into your natural timestream with a little help from the Trizolians. Because you’re supposed to be there, it’ll make things a lot easier.”

He stood up.

“Now, you two drink up your coffee. We’d better be going. The TARDIS is waiting outside. We’d just best be careful to go into the right one.” He turned to the others. “Bye, Steven. Good seeing you again.” He grabbed his hand and gave it a firm shake.

He looked at Sara, and she was taken aback by the sadness in his eyes. Although he looked so much younger than the Doctor she knew, she could see the weight of years bearing down on him.

He put his hand on hers.

“Goodbye, Sara. Take care.”

The Doctor was waiting behind the café, standing by his TARDIS impatiently.

“Really now, what took you so long?” he chided.

“It was that other version of you,” said Steven. “He doesn’t half like to chat.”

“Yes, well,” sighed the Doctor, “I suppose I have all that to look forward to.”

The two Trizolians appeared in front of them.

“What are you going to do?” asked Sara. “Your ship was destroyed.”

Azarath and Coriu spoke together.

“We are our ship.”

They placed their hands together again, only this time, their glow grew ever brighter, green and white coalescing into one pearlescent mass of solid light. In time, there was only a pod left, glowing faintly, which then vanished with a flash.

“Well, then,” said the Doctor, “I suppose I shall have control of my Ship back.”

“Such as it is,” said Steven. “At least it looks like you’ll be able to fly it better one day, judging by your other self.”

The Doctor looked at him, dumbfounded.

“My other self? What are you talking about?”

The TARDIS materialized. Amy and Rory stepped out to a London filled with red double-deckers, Nando’s adverts and truly foul-looking pigeons.

“Good to be back,” said Rory.

“See?” said the Doctor. “Nothing to it. My earlier self will be forgetting about our little misadventure, everyone’s back in their right timestream, and our Trizolian chums should be happily on their way.”

“What now then?” said Amy. “Home?”

“We haven’t finished our little holiday yet,” said the Doctor, placing his arms round their shoulders. “Let me take you to lunch, and I’ll tell you a little about my friends Steven and Sara.”

Dr. Who and the Mists of Prevalous

by Jenny Shirt

The man stood in the circle of light in the middle of the darkened room, not daring to hope. The creatures in the shadows circled, giving him their full attention. He knew that he had been lucky to survive until now. Every second was a bonus – but it was also further torture. He had bought himself all of the time that he could. He had been fortunate to have something to tell them – and he told them everything. He told them about the living atmosphere and about the Crystal. He told them about how the old man had tricked him and his fellow pirates and about how they had all died. He told them about how he had run and escaped the planet with nothing but his life. What was that worth now? He had nothing more to tell and they knew it.

Silence! Nothing other than the sinister throbbing of their machinery. Perhaps they would be satisfied. Perhaps at least they might think he could be of further use to them. Then it came. Those terrible voices proclaimed the death sentence. The beams cut through him, disintegrating him, bringing the welcome release of oblivion.

Without warning, the TARDIS lurched sideways. Gillian, Dr. Who's young granddaughter, felt herself thrown violently against a wall and she slid down into a seated position. She glanced over to her brother John and to the funny little man in the scruffy coat and checked trousers, and saw that they too had been taken by surprise and were on the floor. Her grandfather's tall stovepipe hat had fallen over his eyes. With relief, she watched them pull themselves up and run over to the central console. Gillian joined them, just as a second lurch came. The three travellers clung onto the console, this time managing to remain on their feet. The Doctor was studying the instruments. Gillian had never attempted to understand how the Ship flew, but it was clear, even to her untrained eyes, that the flashing lights were a warning. She felt John move to her side and she grabbed his arm, holding him tightly for safety. Then a violent judder threw them forward against the console.

“What's happening, Grandfather?” Gillian shouted. This was like nothing she had experienced in the TARDIS before. One look at the Doctor's worried expression told her that things were seriously wrong.

“I have absolutely no idea, Gillian, but I believe we may be in for a bit of a bumpy ride.” He flicked a switch and the TARDIS seemed to settle for a moment, before beginning to shake alarmingly.

“Gillian, whatever you do – hold on!” urged John.

Still clinging to the console for dear life, Gillian felt John lose his grip and fall. She checked to see that he wasn't hurt. Sitting in a corner, he had grasped one of the many roundels that covered the walls, and was holding on as best as he could. She turned back to her grandfather, who in his concentration hadn't noticed what had happened to John.

“We have to get her back under control! I'm going to try to fly her manually.” He seemed to be pressing buttons and flicking switches almost at random. Not for the first time, Gillian wondered just to what extent this strange little man who was her grandfather knew what he was doing.

“There seems to be something out there. So why can't we see it?” He looked perplexed and annoyed, and seemed deeply uncertain about what to do next. By now, it felt as if the TARDIS was on some sort of enormous slalom course as it veered from side to side. “Ah-ha, there we have it.” The

Doctor pressed one more button and the sideways movement stopped. He smiled and chuckled to himself.

“For goodness’ sake, what happened?” asked Gillian.

“Well, I had a little help from the TARDIS. If I hadn’t, I rather think we might have hit whatever is out there.”

Gillian looked at the screen and then back at the Doctor. “But there’s nothing at all out there at all, absolutely nothing.”

“No, my dear, at least nothing that we can see.”

A red light started flashing alarmingly. The Doctor’s tone was composed and calm, but the note of unease was clear in his voice.

“John, Gillian, I believe that we may be under attack, and right now I really think...” The Doctor paused, his eyes drifting.

“Think what, Grandfather?” John shouted, still on the floor.

The Doctor snapped to. “What? Oh, yes, indeed, what. Well, between you and me, I think we may be about to crash! Something is drawing us down to that planet”

Gillian took a breath and felt her stomach leap as the TARDIS dropped suddenly downwards.

“It feels like we’re on a roller coaster. Are you sure we’re going to be okay?” she heard John ask. She turned to smile encouragingly at him. From nowhere, the floor around John seemed to be filled with a strange swirling mist. She saw him stare at it, moving his left hand through it while still gripping onto the roundel with his right. The mist swirled around his torso, and appeared to be scanning him. His head was now all that was visible.

The Doctor was still studying the flight controls. He had to shout to make himself heard over the whine of the protesting engines. “Well, that might explain part of it at least. We are entering the atmosphere of the planet Prevalous. It has a rather clever and very advanced security system based on a living atmosphere. The problem is... that it appears to have locked onto the TARDIS.”

Gillian frowned. “A living atmosphere?”

The Doctor simply nodded.

Any further questions were halted when John wretched violently. He was fighting vainly to keep his head above the cloud that had taken shape around his body. “Grandfather, I don’t know what’s going on, but this thing smells terrible! Can’t you do anything to stop it? I think it’s about to...” His last few words were muffled.

“John!” Gillian screamed as the swirling mist completely enveloped her brother and then began to head, slowly but purposefully, in their direction.

The Doctor stared at the approaching mist. “Oh, no! Gillian, I know precisely what’s happening. I am starting to remember now...”

Gillian waited for his explanation, but none came. “Well,” she prompted, “what is it?”

The Doctor looked slightly puzzled. “But this is different! This mist seems to have a mind of its own.”

John gasped in huge, lung-aching gulps of air, as the mist surrounding his body suddenly, and rapidly, dispersed, releasing its hold on him, and creating a cloud that loomed above the console. Gillian remembered the Doctor’s words about the atmosphere and the mist. It really seemed to know what it was doing.

Without warning, Gillian and the Doctor were hurled to the floor as if the TARDIS had collided with something rather large and then catapulted off it. The mist flew from where it was hovering, and surrounded them all, pinning them to the floor, as the TARDIS went down. Gillian felt the craft land

with a heavy crash, the doors were flung open, and she found herself thrown out as if tossed from a dice thrower's cup.

Gillian opened her eyes and shook her head, taking in the soft mossy vegetation that had cushioned her fall. Sitting up, she was relieved to find her grandfather, picking himself up beside her. He held out his hand to help her to her feet. Of John there was no sign. She could see the mysterious cloud, coming out of the TARDIS door and disappearing back into the atmosphere.

With astonishment, Gillian took in the scene. They appeared to be in a forest. The towering trees stretched towards a purple sky; streaks of sunlight emerged from behind white fluffy clouds to cut through the treetops.

With a sigh of relief, Gillian heard John's voice calling: "Grandfather, Gillian, I'm over here. It let me go. Come and have a look at this. There's a light." At that his tone changed. "No! Quick! Run Gillian! Grandfather, get out of there!"

With that, John's voice faded into complete silence.

The Doctor and Gillian looked at each other. She could see that he was as shocked as she was, but suddenly a loud noise, rumbling all around them forced them to cover their ears, banishing all immediate concerns for John. The noise was becoming more and more uncomfortable, and a searing pain shot through Gillian's head. They fell into unconsciousness.

Gillian awoke to find herself resting on the floor of a small clearing. Two tall, lean figures, both dressed in white with dark hair approached them from the left of the glade.

Gillian sat bolt upright. "Where are we?"

The Doctor smiled and offered his hand to the two strangers. "Hello, I'm Dr. Who and this is Gillian. Gillian, this is the planet Prevalous." He turned to the strangers. "That's right, isn't it?"

Ignoring them, the taller of the two figures began to light a fire. It was growing colder and night was drawing in. It was only once the fire had taken, that he spoke, "My name is Anto and this is my grandson Tres, and you are correct. This is Prevalous, the home of the Falaspi." He smiled, his eyes shining a bright sapphire blue.

Anto continued, "I remember your craft, your blue box. You came here once, many years ago, and helped us. You look different now, but it is you. My mind tells me so."

"What does he mean, Grandfather?" asked Gillian, confused.

"Well, Gillian, the Falaspi have a natural ability to transmit thoughts and memories of events past and present. They are able to join their minds and thoughts together. It's a sort of telepathy." The Doctor gave her a reassuring smile.

The Falaspi continued, "I am sorry if we hurt you; we had tried to lock onto your craft but could not communicate with you, for some reason. It was important that we brought you into the safety of the clearing, and this was the only way we could do it. We have seen blue lights that rise and melt into the darkness. They weaken us in ways that we do not understand."

Gillian watched the Doctor rest his head in his hand as if in thought, and then ruffle his already unkempt hair. "The mist we encountered earlier... this is your planet's security atmosphere, which prevents unwanted invaders from landing here. Is that right? It's being interfered with above your planet's atmosphere. Yes, that's it, isn't it? So, tell me. When did you first detect this?"

The younger Falaspi, Tres, got up and paced around a little. "A few days ago, something locked onto the machines in the caves below the surface. The machines hold vital information, records of our Knowledge Crystal. When you were last on our planet, you will recall that you created a secure

system, to prevent the whereabouts of the Crystal from falling into the wrong hands. We are relieved that you returned here, Dr. Who. We need your help. Whoever landed on our planet knows that too and forced you down onto the surface, for their own evil intentions. My grandfather and I joined minds to protect you, and using our thoughts we were able temporarily to prevent the planet's malfunctioning security system from attacking you, but we are weakened. Our thoughts are being blocked and our energy drained."

Gillian took a minute to gather her thoughts. "What happened to John? He vanished into the trees, just before we passed out!"

The Doctor took her hand. "John is resilient. Whatever has happened, he can take care of himself."

Tres sat down to join them by the campfire "We have recently observed bright lights in among the trees. Whatever it is out there may have been the cause of your friend's disappearance. Our family has generated a wall of protection, a barrier that we have created and positioned around this clearing. Nothing can go in or out of this area unless we allow it. Over the last few weeks, with our weakening powers, two of our own have vanished. They were far too headstrong and ventured out of the safety of the clearing to investigate where the interference was coming from. There aren't many of us left now."

Still confused, Gillian asked, "But what happened here, why did you need to create a barrier to protect yourselves?"

Anto replied, "Many years ago our race found a large crystal deep in the cave system beneath the planet's surface. This is how we acquired our powers of thought sharing. It provided us with an energy like no other. We believe that some machine is being used to create an interference, which stops us from using our mental powers."

Tres held Gillian's hand. "I will go and look for my missing brother and sister and for your brother John. Dr. Who, stay here and I will return with news of them as soon as I have any." Picking up a large stick he moved towards the edge of the clearing, where he paused for a moment and seemed to be focusing his mind. He waved to them and walked out into the forest, gradually disappearing beyond sight.

John awoke to find himself in the corner of some sort of control room, tied up with two others. He looked over towards the three creatures who had captured him. They were crowded around a monitor. The squat, metallic shapes with their domed tops were all too familiar: Daleks! But they had been defeated back when they had tried to build their exterminator weapon, to destroy the Earth, surely? As he was still assimilating the truth, they had taken him captive. He had to release himself and the others as soon as possible and inform his grandfather and Gillian, but he didn't know why he was being held there in the first place.

The first Dalek spoke in that familiar grating, metallic voice: "Communication with Skaro has been established."

The second Dalek responded, "Excellent. We need to determine the location of the Knowledge Crystal."

It turned its eyestalk towards John. "When your friends come for you, they will guide you to the Crystal."

The three Daleks turned to their prisoners. "We will return. If you attempt to escape, you will be exterminated."

John shouted over to them, “What crystal? What are you talking about? How did you even get here?”

Without answering, the Daleks left the room and disappeared into the darkness of the cave corridor.

John whispered to his two fellow prisoners, “What’s this crystal they’re talking about and who are you two?”

One of John’s fellow captives, a young man with a gentle face, took a deep breath before continuing in a whisper: “I heard them talking. They discovered that there was a crystal here that could give them the power to gain knowledge of the whole universe, and that the only way for them to control the Crystal’s power is to use us, to combine its strength with the power of our minds. Once they can do that, they will be like gods, and will use us to control future events. Without us, it is too powerful for them and would destroy them. We are able to absorb much more of its energy than they ever could.”

The young man looked at the third captive, a teenage girl. He looked back to face John. “My name is Vel and this is my sister Mib.” The young female looked frightened, but she clearly wasn’t going to admit to it.

Vel continued, “We Falaspi are a peaceful race. The three Daleks you saw, arrived among us a few days ago. We had seen lights in the trees and heard strange sounds, and Mib and I decided to go and investigate. My grandfather is not fast enough to outrun whatever dangers are out here, so he remained behind in the clearing with my other brother.”

Mib looked at Vel and piped up with enthusiasm, “As we wandered further into the trees towards the waterfall, we saw a blue light heading towards us and then we came face to face with these armoured aliens. We were very afraid and didn’t know what to do. We surrendered to their cries of extermination and remained still with our eyes closed, believing that this was the end of us both; but for some reason, they spared us.”

Vel took up the story once more: “These caves were created by the Falaspi thousands of years ago to mine the crystals and trade with neighbouring planets in exchange for food and provisions. Prevalous was once quite a beautiful place, with its rich vegetation and towering trees.” He paused, a thought occurring to him. Looking at John he continued, “I think you are a visitor to this world, too. Another traveller came here once. His name was Dr. Who and he helped an ancestor of mine to defeat a group of pirates, who had tried to steal our crystals for themselves.”

John felt himself react to the mention of his grandfather’s name, but decided not to let it show. He needed to hear more.

Mib interrupted her brother: “Dr. Who was clever, telling the pirates that he would lead them to the location of a precious crystal which would be worth far more than any other that they might find, but he would only do this if they left the planet and its people alone. He knew they were not to be trusted, and he was right. They agreed and followed him further into the cave system in search of the Crystal, but they took more and more of the caves’ smaller crystals with them in their greed.”

John looked fascinated. “So, what happened to these pirates? Did they get away with the crystals?”

Vel continued, “When they at last arrived at the cave where the Knowledge Crystal was located, they all fought one another and tried to take it for themselves. This was their downfall. As soon as their fingers touched the Crystal, their minds were overwhelmed and filled with information, far too much for a single brain to manage. They screamed in pain and died where they stood. They were all destroyed, all except for one lone pirate who had been too afraid to claim the Crystal.

“He saw what had happened and ran from the caves in his fear, and left the planet never to return. Perhaps he ran into the Daleks somewhere. Perhaps he tried to trade information with them, who knows, but they found out about our planet somehow. Our security system, built into our planet’s living atmosphere, has broken down and has turned into the mists you saw. For now, it is still doing its job, but its decisions are increasingly unpredictable. We believe it may be dying.”

John looked at them both. “This was that strange mist that enveloped me earlier?” He felt a chill at the memory.

Mib put her hand in his, calming him. She continued, “Dr. Who helped the Falaspi to store the Knowledge Crystal in a place where it would be safe”

John looked at her. “I just arrived on this planet with Dr. Who – he’s my grandfather.”

“Dr. Who has come back? We have to warn him about the Daleks.”

John laughed: “Oh, he already knows about them, believe me! Vel, perhaps we can send Mib for help? If we can find a way to free ourselves, she’s quite small and may be able to hide in the shadows and escape the cave system.”

Vel looked at Mib. She looked back at him and nodded. Before they could make more plans, the Daleks returned. As they did, a voice emerged from a several speakers set against the wall: “Incoming message from the Dalek Supreme.” The Daleks stopped in their tracks and raised their sucker arms, as if in salute. It was clear to John that they were listening intently. He did the same. He knew that if the Knowledge Crystal did happen to come into the Daleks’ grasp, they would use it to... Well, he didn’t truly know, but going by what he knew about them, they would probably try to conquer everything and everyone in the universe.

A deep, booming Dalek voice filled the chamber. This, John decided, must be the Daleks’ leader. “Dr. Who is on the planet’s surface. Locate him. Force him to lead us to the Crystal. Your ship will remain in orbit above the planet in readiness for your return to Skaro.”

The Dalek controlling communications answered, “We will complete our mission. We have produced an interference wave in order to decrease the power of the Falaspi mind. We will report back when we gain the power of the Crystal, then we will have dominion over the whole universe.”

The Daleks chanted in unison, “Daleks will have dominion. Daleks will have dominion.” Then one Dalek turned its dome towards another, which was clearly its subordinate. “Bring the girl into the caves. We will use her to access the Crystal.”

It was only then that John noticed that Mib had managed to free herself. Being careful not to alert the Daleks, he watched her escape through a crack in the rock wall. But it was only a moment until the Daleks noticed that the girl had gone.

“Alert, alert: the girl has escaped.”

“Go after the prisoner. Once the child is located, exterminate her. The other prisoner will serve our purposes just as well.”

Back in the clearing, Dr. Who was pacing up and down, agitatedly. He smiled at Gillian as she approached him. “Well, that’s it. There’s no sign of Tres – or of John. Gillian, listen to me, we need to see exactly what we are dealing with – and soon. I have a nasty feeling that this may have something to do with what happened last time I was on Prevalous. Gillian, you stay here, in case they come back. Anto and I will go and see what we can find out.”

Gillian nodded, and leaving her grandfather to his thoughts, she wandered curiously away into the trees, towards the nearby edge of the clearing. She had just reached the safety barrier when a

sudden flicker of light ran across the invisible wall, making her jump. She cried out.

“Grandfather, I think something is happening to the barrier.”

The barrier continued flickering and then gradually vanished as it lost its energy. The force field was dead. Gillian looked back towards the Doctor, who had stopped what he was doing. He called over to the Falaspi. “The barrier has completely gone. You must all find somewhere to hide.”

Gillian started as she noticed a movement in the distance. “Grandfather, I saw a figure over by that rock face.” She began moving in the direction she had indicated. The Doctor got up to follow her, but Gillian was already well ahead. Bolting forward, he caught her hand, quickly pulling her back. “Gillian, no! You mustn’t go any further without us!”

Tentatively, Gillian, Anto and the Doctor headed towards the rock face where she had seen the figure. As they arrived, Anto called out to the small figure, “Mib!” The girl emerged fully from behind the rock where she had been hiding and ran up to them.

The Doctor turned and crouched down to Mib’s level. He gently took her hands in his. “Where have you come from? Tell me, what have you seen? What happened? You can trust me. My name is Dr. Who.”

“Dr. Who?” She faced him with wide open eyes. “Daleks, they’re called Daleks. They captured us and your grandson John, too. We were taken into the caves. They wanted to use us to gain the Crystal’s powers!” A sound made her jolt. “Quickly, we have to hide. They’re not far behind me.”

The Doctor took no time in getting the group into the caves, where they found a small side room not far from the entrance. “Hide behind the rock wall and don’t make a sound,” he said in an urgent whisper.

It was pitch black in the side cave and the entrance was well hidden. Silently, they all held their breath for what seemed like an eternity.

Gillian risked looking around the rock. Three Daleks had arrived at the main cave opening. The first Dalek turned towards the others.

“Leave the girl, we will find Dr. Who. Then we will locate the Crystal.”

The second Dalek responded, “Dr. Who is close by.”

The Dalek turned its eyestalk slowly towards the direction of the side cave where the Doctor and the group were hiding. The group froze to the spot and could hardly breathe. After seconds that felt like eons, the Daleks finally continued on their way, back down into the caves.

The Doctor took Anto to one side. “We must get to the Crystal! Come on Anto, lead the way.”

“I am not as mobile as I once was. If the Daleks found us, I wouldn’t be able to get away from them quickly enough. The others also know the location of it, but you will need me to open the cave door and to apply my mind to take hold of the Crystal. I know that I am able to carry its energy in my own mind without it damaging me. As a young man, I found the Crystal and I have experienced its power. When it is used properly it can do amazing things, such as healing and bringing knowledge of the universe. In the wrong hands, it could be used to create extreme evil.” He looked bitter, and remorseful, imagining possible future events. “It would be better if it had never existed, for the trouble it could cause!”

The Doctor turned to the others. “We must separate into two groups. A rescue group and another group to deal with the Daleks and secure the Crystal.”

Mib held the Doctor’s arm. “There’s a path around the cave system if you’re small enough to crawl through the tunnels. It leads through to the Daleks’ control room. It’s the way that I escaped earlier.”

Anto nodded. “Dr. Who and I are too big to manage that, but Gillian and Mib could crawl

through. What do you think, Dr. Who?"

Crouching down, the Doctor placed his hands along the rock face in the area where they were hiding. He felt around the edge of the cave, until the rocks opened up into a tunnel about halfway off the floor.

"Gillian take Mib. There's a gap in the rock face, do you think that you can both get through it? It will bring you through to where John and Vel are being held. Here, take my pocketknife in case you need it. Once you get there, wait for your chance to rescue John and Vel, then get back out of the caves and into the forest as soon as you can. Anto and I will find the Daleks and lead them to the Crystal to try and persuade them that it's within their grasp." He turned to Anto. "Once I have the Crystal, I will put it somewhere else, somewhere safe where it can be used for the right purpose, so your planet can be safe from danger again."

Anto looked at him. "That's exactly what they want: they want you to take the Crystal, so they can destroy you. Not even you would be able to handle the Crystal and its power. The Falaspi mind works differently; I have many years of understanding how to direct and focus my thoughts. The Daleks know that if they can get you to touch the Crystal, it would be the perfect way to eliminate you."

The Doctor smiled grimly. "Well yes, you are quite right. As soon as I discovered that the Daleks were here, I realized that was why we were lured here. I think that the pirate who escaped must have tried to trade with these Daleks. That's how they found out about the Crystal and about my connection to your world."

The Doctor gave a decisive shake of the head. "We must be careful. The Daleks are extremely evil – worse than that, cunning, and will do anything to get what they want. But that very ambition can be used against them. The Knowledge Crystal is able to understand emotions; it can detect pure thoughts and can reach deep into the mind of whoever or whatever touches it. We have to find a way of persuading the Daleks to touch the Crystal."

Anto nodded and looked to where Gillian and Mib were waiting to set off on their journey. He hugged them both, and Gillian whispered to her grandfather in the darkness, "Ready when you are. I'll look after Mib," she assured Anto. "We'll come and find you once we are all together."

The Doctor held her hand. "No Gillian, you must get out of the caves as soon as it's safe to do so."

Gillian and Mib pulled themselves up into the tunnel and began crawling through to where John and Vel were being held. Arriving at the control room and finding it empty of Daleks, they climbed out of the gap in the rock face. They jumped down, and ran over to John and Vel. Using the pocketknife her grandfather had given her, Gillian cut the rope which bound them both together. Vel hugged Mib, and for a moment all was serene. Then hearing voices approaching, they ran and hid behind a large rocky wall.

The Doctor glanced at Anto and gave a nod. The pair stepped out into the corridor behind the Daleks. The Doctor called out. "Hello, Daleks! Hello, it's me, Dr. Who. I think you might just have heard about me."

All three Daleks swivelled around immediately and began chanting, "You are Dr. Who. You are the enemy of the Daleks! You will surrender."

“Yes, yes, I surrender. We both surrender.”

The Doctor raised his hands straight up in the air, stepped forward and smiled. “Good to make your acquaintance once again. I was only wondering yesterday, or was it next Tuesday, where you were up to with your plans to destroy happiness all around the galaxies. So, you’re plotting once more, but what is it this time? Why this planet? I am all ears, so please tell.”

The Dalek turned its eyestalk round to Anto and back to the Doctor. “You will help us locate the Crystal. Once we have it, we will have power over all existence. You will comply, you have no alternative. Show us its location.”

The Doctor and Anto led the Daleks down the cave corridor. Carefully avoiding the Dalek control room, where John, Gillian and the others were hiding.

Peering from behind a rock, Gillian watched her grandfather, Anto and the Daleks passing. She beckoned to John, Mib and Vel to follow her. She knew she was disobeying the Doctor, but he might need her. They followed behind, making sure to stay in the shadows.

With Anto leading the way and the Doctor just behind, they led the Daleks further along the corridor, taking a route that led left and up another side corridor, where they eventually arrived at a cave wall. Anto placed his hands on a pad, and the cave wall slid open.

They made their way along a wide ledge, overlooking a deep crevice below them. It was a vast cavern with a river flowing through it, and beyond this they could see the Crystal, sitting on a ledge just off the ground, glowing and pulsating with so much beauty and power.

The Doctor and Anto saw the figure who was standing in front of the Crystal in the same instant. Before the Doctor could stop him, Anto screamed his grandson’s name in anguish: “Tres!”

The Daleks turned towards the Doctor. “You thought your plans to destroy us had worked, Dr. Who, but we had already found the Crystal. Your friend is wired to it so we can acquire its power.”

The second Dalek turned towards Anto, who was beside himself at the sight of his grandson wired up to the Crystal. “The young humanoid did not employ his intelligence. He agreed to help the Daleks in exchange for your planet’s freedom. Instead of bringing freedom to your planet, you are now facing destruction. We forced him to wire himself to the Crystal. We know we cannot touch it. We will exterminate him when he is no longer useful to the Daleks.”

Tres shouted over to the group, “I can sense the Crystal. It’s so rich, so incredibly beautiful, but I am fighting to hold its power. Grandfather, I am frightened of what may happen if I lose control!”

The Daleks turned again to the Doctor. “We have communicated with the Dalek Supreme, who is waiting to transport us to our ship above the planet. We forced you to crash on Prevalous. Now, our plan is complete. You will take the Crystal and it will destroy you. We will reign supreme over the whole universe.”

The Doctor stared at the three Daleks. “You really don’t get it, do you? You don’t understand love or compassion of any form. Yes, you wired up Tres to the Crystal, but you failed to realize one thing: Tres is Anto’s grandson – he trained him in mind control.”

Anto broke free from the Doctor’s side and sprinted to Tres. The Daleks attacked. With cries of “Exterminate!” they fired their guns, the beams tearing through the old man’s frail body – and carrying on to the Knowledge Crystal. As Anto fell motionless to the ground, the Crystal was bathed in an almost blinding light.

Tres shielded his eyes with his hands, and the Crystal suddenly shattered. The Daleks emitted a horrible scream, as millions of tiny shards passed through the mesh of their casings. Disorientated, the Daleks began moving randomly back and forth and twirling around in circles, manically chanting “Out of control, out of control!”

Gillian, John, Mib and Vel emerged from the shadows from where they had seen everything and ran to help. The Dalek guns were firing randomly in all directions. One beam caused Vel to dive to one side, another nearly hit Gillian. The Doctor called to his friends, “Quickly, we must push them over the ledge. Cover their eye stalks with anything you can find. They have been pierced with the Crystal fragments and they cannot take the beauty and emotion they are now experiencing. The fragments still have power left inside them, and it’s destroying the Daleks’ minds and turning them mad.”

Devastated and angry at the loss of his grandfather, Tres, who had been thrown to one side and had avoided the Daleks’ beams, leapt to his feet and ran over to join Vel and Mib. Following the Doctor’s instructions they covered the Daleks’ eyestalks with items of their clothing, moss, anything they could find. The Doctor, Gillian and John helped and began pushing the Daleks from the rear. They were still firing the deadly beams and screaming “Exterminate!” and “Out of control!” manically as one by one the group succeeded in pushing them over the ledge. With one huge shove, each Dalek toppled off the cliff edge and plunged violently to the rocky floor below. They fell screeching, the impact shattering their outer casing, instantly destroying the angry creature inside.

All went quiet and the group sat on the floor completely exhausted and taken aback at what had just happened.

The Doctor sighed. “I am sorry for the loss of your grandfather. He was filled with so much love for you all and I didn’t expect him to do what he did. I thought he could control his emotions, and I knew that you would be fine, Tres. Your mind controlled those powerful thoughts with not a single bit of hate within.”

Gillian hugged the group. “Your grandfather was wonderful. You will remember him and those feelings will never leave you.”

Something occurred to John: “But what about the Dalek Supreme? He will know that something has gone wrong when this lot don’t report in. What do we do about that?”

“Come along then, everyone.” The Doctor motioned his friends to follow him and set off back to the Dalek control room, where he flicked a switch and turned a dial. The chamber was filled immediately with the throbbing sound of the Dalek Supreme’s control room on Skaro.

The Doctor smiled to himself, then spoke clearly into the machine, “Hello, Dalek Supreme, is that you? Can you hear me?”

The voice of the Dalek Supreme boomed out in reply, “Dr. Who?”

“Yes, quite right, it’s me, your enemy.”

The Doctor pressed another button and the ship above the planet revealed itself on a screen. “Oh hello. There you are then, bingo! I have located your Daleks’ ship. You’re wasting your time, you know. The atmospheric barrier is nearly back to full strength. You can’t get in, and there’s nothing for you here anyway. The Knowledge Crystal was destroyed along with your Daleks. You have no use for this planet now.”

The Dalek Supreme looked out of the screen. “You will never defeat the Daleks, Dr. Who. We will be back more powerful than ever and you will be destroyed.”

The Doctor replied, still smiling at the screen, “Well, perhaps, but not for now.”

“We will return! We will return!”

The Doctor sniffed, closing communications with Skaro as the Dalek Supreme's voice gradually faded. He typed a few instructions into the computer to the left of him. "That should do it. Your atmosphere was already resetting itself on its own and that should do the job now. There should be no more of those strange mists. I have reset its code, which should prevent it from going wrong again. The Daleks were able to intercept its coding this time, but I have altered it and I have made it impossible to change. You will be quite safe from now on. No, not quite safe – totally. Totally, totally safe."

Everything went quiet once more and the oppressive atmosphere had lifted. Gillian gave John a hug, and forgetting what he was doing, he reciprocated for a moment before pulling away from his young sister in embarrassment.

Mib held her brothers Tres and Vel's hands. "We will create a new world and learn to make this a planet where people will feel safe once again."

Dr. Who, Gillian and John said their goodbyes and walked into the TARDIS. The Doctor took the controls, and the TARDIS dematerialized, taking the travellers on their way. They knew this time they had succeeded in restoring serenity to this world. The Daleks had lost this battle, but it was an ongoing war which Dr. Who knew he might never win.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Four

by Nick Walters

SIDIAN PALACE, PARTY TIME

The Doctor loved a party. And this was a particularly good one. Or, at least, a particularly expensive one.

The ballroom was the size of a spaceport with a ceiling hung with elaborate chandeliers, which glittered and sparkled like cities made of stars. Floating platforms drifted through the scented air bearing musicians, dancers, magicians and prancers. Exotic food and drink from every corner of the galaxy was being served by gleaming golden robo-waiters. On one side, huge arched windows gave on to a view of a garden of illuminated fountains, which made the stars in the night sky above seem tawdry by comparison. Opposite these windows, an amphitheatre of stepped seating areas and private booths. People, dressed up to the nines, most of them human, filled the vast area, but it didn't seem crowded.

The Doctor took a glass of orange juice from a tray borne by a passing robo-waiter. "Whoever owns this lot must be worth a few quid," he muttered into his drink. He usually never noticed money, or wealth, but when it was this ostentatious? He could scarcely ignore it. And think dark thoughts about how it was acquired. Sometimes he hated the way his mind worked. "Oh, just enjoy yourself, you old fool, have fun and stop thinking the worst of every situation!" He wished Ace were here, to, in her words, help him "keep it real." But she'd gone a long time ago and he travelled alone now. Time for a change on that score, thought the Doctor as he moved through the crowd. Perhaps he would find a new friend among those gathered here?

As soon as he formed that thought, a gloved hand grasped his shoulder and a low, phlegmy, male voice muttered in his ear, "Lemme see yer ticket."

The Doctor sighed. Didn't look like he'd be making many friends today. He turned to gaze into small piggy eyes in a doughy face topped with close-cropped blonde hair. "I'm afraid I don't have one. I dropped it."

The guard – the Doctor decided to call him Guard A – grunted. "Not possible."

"It certainly is possible. Can you let go of my arm please?" The Doctor squirmed free and began to move away through the crowd of the shimmering rich only to run smack bang into another black-clad figure, this one thinner and with black hair.

"I'll call you Guard B," muttered the Doctor.

"What's that?" snapped Guard B, grabbing the Doctor by his shoulders.

Guard A joined them. "Trespasser. No ticket!"

"I said, I dropped it! In – in the fountains outside. Shall we go and look?"

Guard B sneered at him, and grabbed the Doctor's right hand. "You can't drop a handstamp, can you?"

With the help of Guard A, he began to drag the Doctor from the ballroom towards the exit.

"I must have rubbed it off accidentally!"

"You can't. It's designed to last for the duration of the party, and only fade the day after."

By now they had left the ballroom and the Doctor found himself being dragged down a corridor. As corridors went, it was a fine example of the species: expensive carpet, red and gold striped

wallpaper hung with what looked like original works of art. But it was still a corridor.

“How did you get in without a ticket?” demanded Guard B.

“Climbed in through a window,” replied the Doctor lamely.

Both guards laughed harshly. “Oh you’re for it, mate,” growled Guard A.

They came to a door. Guard B opened it, and Guard A thrust the Doctor inside. It was a small waiting room, with the same red and gold wallpaper, a sofa, a fireplace and a bookcase.

“You keep him here,” said Guard B, “whilst I go fetch the Lady Inomasp.”

“Yes sir,” grunted Guard A. He drew a small but deadly looking pistol from inside his tunic.

“Inomasp... Inomasp... rings a bell,” muttered the Doctor, waggling his lower lip with a forefinger. Then he remembered: “Oh no! Let me out of here!”

Guard A either didn’t hear him or pretended not to, and concentrated keeping his weapon trained on the Doctor.

Moments later, the door opened. The Doctor braced himself, raising his question-mark umbrella.

Guard B entered. “This is the intruder, my lady.”

The Doctor gripped the handle of his umbrella ever tighter, ready to fight – or run.

Guard B stood aside, and a tall, slim woman stepped through.

“Wait, wait a minute! You?” cried the Doctor, pointing his umbrella at the woman. “*You’re Inomasp?!?*”

The woman, who was tall and slim with olive-hued skin with greenish undertones, and who was wearing a long black dress and black court shoes, stepped closer to loom over him. “I might be. And who might you be, little man?”

Her voice was low and dangerous, with just a touch of amusement. “Me? Oh, I’m the Doctor. But why aren’t you a twelve-foot-tall biomechanical insectoid warrior queen hell bent on conquering the universe?”

The woman raised her eyebrows. She looked confused for a moment, and then she smiled as if remembering a private joke. Her face was thin, with a small mouth, a long, narrow nose, and dark eyes somewhat too close together. Her hair was long, straight and jet-black. She was almost, but not quite, beautiful. “I have been many things in my time, but never a twelve-foot-tall biomechanical insectoid warrior queen.” She walked slowly around the Doctor, her basilisk gaze assessing him. “But universal domination? Hmm. Maybe one day, but, frankly, dear Doctor, what with all my wealth and power, who needs it?”

“My memory’s rotten these days,” mumbled the Doctor. “I could have sworn you were a twelve-foot-tall biomechanical insectoid warrior queen hell bent on conquering the universe.”

The woman stopped pacing. “Well, I’m not. I am Proxistine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian, Lady Inomasp to you. And you” – she prodded him in the chest with a long, black-varnished fingernail – “need to tell me what you are doing in my palace!”

“I heard there was a party,” said the Doctor. His face and voice brightened like a light bulb being switched on. “And I do love a party! Is there cake?”

Lady Inomasp made as if to slap the Doctor, but controlled her rage and balled her fists. “This is a private party,” she said in a voice of black ice. “You have made a serious mistake in crashing it, Doctor. I have enemies.”

“Do you really? I’m sorry to hear that. Please don’t count me among their number.” With a flourish, he produced a posy of plastic flowers from his sleeve. “Can’t we be friends?”

“No.” Lady Inomasp raised a hand.

Guard A snatched the posy from the Doctor’s hand and tossed it in a gentle arc towards Guard B,

who shot it into flaming filaments, which floated gently to the floor.

“Oh,” said the Doctor sadly.

Lady Inomasp strode right up to him. “Enemies, Doctor. And I have to assume that you have been sent by one or more of them to spy on me.”

“Well, you know what assume makes...”

“I have survived on such assumptions all my life, Doctor.” Lady Inomasp smiled, but her eyes were dark stars. “Paranoia is sanity.”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes at her. “You’ve got something to hide.”

“Huh! Hasn’t everyone?”

Touché. “Secrets come in many sizes – and guises.” That sounded rather good, he thought; or, as Ace would have said, “well enigmatic.”

Lady Inomasp regarded him thoughtfully. Then she said, “Come, Doctor, let’s walk.”

It was a command, not a question, and the Doctor found his arms once again grabbed by Guards A and B. He was marched out of the room and along the corridor, in the wake of the slinky, sinister, black-clad form of Proxetine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian. They moved through a series of corridors to emerge finally into the night, into the Fountain Gardens of Sidian Palace. Coloured light and water combined to produce a spectacle that could best be likened to crystalline trees exploding underwater.

“My last incarnation would have loved this,” muttered the Doctor.

They walked through the splendourous if somewhat garish display. Looking back, the Doctor could see the immense pile of Sidian Palace, like an enormous and decadent cake, the arched windows of the ballroom reflecting the light of the fountains.

“Must have cost you a bit,” said the Doctor, watching Lady Inomasp carefully. “All this wealth – yet the people in the city...”

Lady Inomasp whirled round to face him. “Party’s over, Doctor. Who are you? Who sent you? What is your mission here?”

“I told you, I am the Doctor, nobody sent me, and I have no mission here.” He drew himself up to his full height. “Your paranoia is not sanity!”

Lady Inomasp turned away and clicked her fingers at Guard B. “Fetch a Mind Probe.”

Guard B grinned evilly and scampered off to do his mistress’s bidding.

No, not... that, thought the Doctor, outwardly remaining calm. “Won’t work,” he said casually. “My brain’s far too vast and powerful to be bothered by such gimmicky gadgets.”

Lady Inomasp laughed, and this time the humour did reach her eyes. “You little fool! Mind Probe is my favourite cocktail! Want one?”

“Er, no, thanks. I like to keep my vast and powerful brain unclouded by intoxicants.”

“Shame.” They had now reached the far end of the fountain gardens. A stone bench awaited them. Lady Inomasp sat, bidding the Doctor to do the same. He did so, while Guard A loitered ominously nearby. Presently Guard B returned, bearing a long, tall, dark purple drink on a silver tray. Lady Inomasp took it and sipped.

The Doctor shifted uneasily on the cool stone seat. Where was this going? What was this strange woman planning for him?

In front of them was a pond in which dozens of tiny silver fish darted hither and yon.

Lady Inomasp sighed. “I love my fish, Doctor. They remind me of my homeworld, Besheshra.”

“Ah, the world of water.”

“Have you been there, Doctor?”

“No, but I’d like to visit one day.”

“One day, I will return.” Lady Inomasp stared into the pond, at the darting silver fish. Her eyes shone in the light of the fountains. “And buy the biggest, most magnificent stonking boat the planet has ever seen.” She finished her drink and returned the empty glass to Guard A. “As for now, I have to decide whether to kill you, or let you go.”

“Oh.” The Doctor kept his gaze fixed on the fish, his mind furiously planning his escape. The pond was key. If he could somehow contrive to shove the guards, and Lady Inomasp, into the water, he could make his escape while they floundered and spluttered. Or, perhaps—

But Lady Inomasp was speaking again: “I’ve decided to let you go – if you let me have your ring.”

The Doctor looked down at his right hand, at the signet ring on the middle finger. “What, this?”

“Your ring, or your life.”

The Doctor’s hearts sank. He was quite attached to his ring. But it seemed he had no choice. He turned to regard Lady Inomasp’s narrow, predatory face. “So you’re a common thief. That’s how you’ve built all this up.”

Lady Inomasp smiled again, joyless and hard. “I am much more than a common thief, Doctor. Ring.”

Thank Rassilon’s silver toenail scissors he’d kept quiet about the TARDIS, parked safely in the trees several miles away. No doubt Lady Inomasp would have demanded that as payment for his life instead of his ring. Sighing deeply, the Doctor slid off the ring and placed it into Inomasp’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you.” Lady Inomasp turned to Guards A and B. “Now – chuck him out!”

The Doctor leapt to his feet. “I’ll find my own way out,” he snarled, putting as much gurning menace as he could into the words.

Lady Inomasp raised her hands. “I’m joking. Though, by all the drops of water in the oceans of Besheshra, I should have you skinned and fed to the fish, something about you fascinates me, Doctor.”

The Doctor felt flattered, but tried not to show it as he was escorted to the gates by Guards A and B.

“And at least I have your ring as a keepsake. Goodbye, Doctor.”

And that was it. The Doctor was shown to the gates and seen off the premises by Guards A and B, and the last he saw of Lady Proxitine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian was her dark, slinky form silhouetted against the luminescent extravaganza of her fountain gardens.

Next Segment
NOVATRON STATION,
ON JUST ANOTHER NORMAL WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

The Crimean Centaur

by Paul Williams

In the aftermath of slaughter at Balaclava and Inkerman, the men told stories of a horse that walked across the battlefield and devoured the dead. Tales designed to terrify the young soldiers who guarded alone at night. I thought nothing of them until I glimpsed the horse through the flash of an exploding shell. Thirty feet away, where the corpses lay, two blue eyes stared angrily back. As the light faded, I heard a sound louder than anything in battle and the horse charged at me. I spun the field gun round then froze, unable to fire.

The eyes were there on the night of the murder. Watching. Not intervening just as I had not intervened. The beast wanted to administer the punishment that man could not give. Praying for forgiveness, I awaited the fatal blow.

Another barrage of shells broke my trance, sending me sprawling across snow. Howling, the horse splashed away into the creek. Staggering up, I fired at the city. The Russians did not retaliate. Perhaps they targeted the horse, not me. Perhaps it ate them too.

Eventually the sun emerged, without melting snow. I waited, my eyes never leaving the six bodies by the water's edge. The dead were buried in the camp until an animal desecrated the graves and the weather made it hard to dig new ones. Lord Raglan ordered that corpses be temporarily stored outside the camp in sight of the gun.

Three hours or so after dawn, Wilkinson arrived to relieve me. "All quiet?" he joked, pointing at the remains of the shells. I nodded. Nobody would believe me and, in the calm of daylight, it was hard to believe myself. "The road's open," he said, "and Raglan wants to see you."

His Lordship walked among the men from time to time, always wearing an overcoat to hide his missing arm. He only spoke to the officers. A summons for a private could only mean a serious disciplinary matter. Such as murder.

I walked slowly to camp, trying not to show fear. A group, resembling wild beasts with their unshaven beards, passed me on their way to fetch supplies from Balaclava. Two weeks had passed since the great storm rendered the road impassable.

Lord Raglan stood outside his farmhouse, looking immaculate as always, but he slept indoors and could shave with his good hand. He lost his left arm years ago, but I never heard him talk about it. No surgeon could save the men who sacrificed limbs at Inkerman and Balaclava.

I saluted and waited. "Can I help you?" he asked at last.

"Private Chambers, sir. You sent for me?"

"Did I?" He frowned, then remembered. "You were on the gun last night, by the creek?"

"Yes sir."

"I want you to take the dead to Balaclava for burial. Safer than here with all the rumours going round."

I could not add to his displeasure by increasing the rumours or refusing an order. Resigning myself to another day without sleep or food, I took the last cart. They were built to Lord Raglan's design, when orders from London failed to arrive.

Wilkinson, surprised to see me back, hastily dropped a cigarette and stamped on it. I wheeled the cart to the dead of yesterday and the day before. Victims of starvation and fever, not enemy fire, and not affected by the bombardment. Four were in uniform and two in coarse underwear that the

fleas had long since abandoned.

I rolled the first body off the pile. His right arm and left ear were missing. Horrified, I looked at the others. Something had chewed them all, leaving large marks and holes in the clothing. A series of hoof prints crossed the vanishing snow towards the field gun, then abruptly turned and headed out to sea. Evidence that the nightmare was real. I put my boot inside one, estimating a gap of eight inches. Bigger than the surviving horses in our cavalry, and made by a two-footed creature.

A horse with the eyes of a man and the roar of a lion or bear. I loaded the bodies quickly onto the cart, jumping at every splash of the tide. Wilkinson must have thought me demented. Embarrassed I wheeled the cart past him and across the outskirts of the Turkish camp.

Two of their soldiers ran to help me, shoving rifles with long straps over their shoulders. I let them push, there was no need for three, then relieved one after a few paces. He ran ahead, kicking away obstacles to clear a path around the trenches and battlements. The cart still jolted over stones and slid on ice, as if the dead jumped free to find their missing parts in time for the resurrection. They last stumbled along this path as living men. Rushing to take a city that refused to surrender. Every day the church bells of Sebastopol rang defiantly, pretending that God was on the side of the defenders.

Debris from the first march or abandoned by the fleeing Russians littered the half-cleared road. We trudged past tent poles deposited by the hurricane and dozens of large hoof prints. The Turks said nothing, but I saw that one set led up the track to Mackenzie's Farm, named after a long-dead Jacobite who became commander of the Russian navy. Off that track was another farm. The murder site. The horror that disturbed me more than the carnage of battle.

Finally, we came over the hill and descended, holding the sides of the cart to stop the bodies falling out. At the bottom, my helpers left and others came, as if from nowhere, to take their place. With six trying to steer past pedestrians, I walked behind and saw how much Balaclava had changed since I clambered off the boat. Jewish, Greek and Turkish traders swarmed around, offering cigarettes, alcohol and all manner of other goods. Suddenly we pressed tight against a wall, allowing my countrymen to pass in the opposite direction with carts full of food, razors and tobacco. We exchanged pleasantries that must have sounded bizarre to the listening Turks.

Realizing that I did not know where to take the bodies, I allowed the Turks to navigate. They led me down the path to the jetty. A surly boatman and several traders waited. The Turks started to pull the corpses roughly off the cart. "Scutari," said the boatman.

"Is there no cemetery in Balaclava?" None of them understood, so I helped them move the bodies, pointing at the wounds. "Centaur," said one, without hesitation. "Centaur come."

The boatman dragged the bodies onto the boat. I took one then dropped it because the boat was already full. Lying in the cargo space were dozens of dead Turks, some identified only by the fragments of their uniforms, along with several other white men who were probably Greek, and a dozen or so civilians. The Turks threw the British soldiers on top, leaving room for a large sack of mail that was sent down before the hurricane. It contained Lord Raglan's letters to the mothers and wives of the dead, plus his complaints about the press.

Holding back an urge to vomit, I collected the cart and wheeled it in a less than straight line towards the hill. Then someone shouted and I turned to see five Turkish soldiers holding a white man prisoner. He wore a white suit that absurdly had a stick of celery protruding from the button hole. In the struggle, a hat had fallen from his head. I picked it up.

"Spy," said one of the Turks, making a cut-throat gesture. One of the others pointed at the ship, and I guessed that the man had tried to steal from one of the corpses.

"He doesn't look Russian," I objected. "More English."

“English?” The man frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“Capturing Sebastopol,” I told him. That was no secret.

“The Crime of Crimea,” he said. “The most pointless war of all, until the next one.”

I looked at his hands, undeniably those of a gentleman. A journalist asking questions could easily be mistaken for a spy. Despite their criticism of him, Lord Raglan did not want to execute journalists, merely to stop them spreading rumours. Looting was a capital offence, for soldiers at least, but this man did not resemble any of the thieves I knew in London.

There were stories of sightseers, British civilians who acquired boats to see the war for themselves. Aristocrats with binoculars on the hills of Inkerman. Binoculars that the short-sighted generals could have used. Stupidity was not a crime. Not like murder.

“Release him,” I said, looking at all the Turks, as it wasn’t clear which one had authority. None had stripes. They were my rank, common soldiers, without the authority to defy an ally. Reluctantly they let him go.

“Thank you,” he said. The Turks laughed and with a last look at the retreating boat left us. A couple of the traders remained. “I’m the Doctor,” said the man.

I returned his hat and apologized that my hands were stained with the dead. “So are mine,” he said, although they seemed clean. “Tell me about the Centaur.”

“Centaur?”

“The reason your allies are sending bodies away. A horse with the face of a man that roams the coast at night. Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, but he saw that it was a lie.

“Take me there,” he said.

“I can’t, sir.” No civilians were allowed on camp without permission. Officially this was to stop spies. Some of the men thought it was about stopping loose women who entered anyway. I didn’t want to be flogged, or worse, for breaking the rule.

“How do I get permission?” asked the Doctor.

“From the War Office.”

“Where’s that?”

“London.” A few miles from my birthplace, but inaccessible to those without a title or a patron.

The Doctor sighed. “Men might die if I don’t find the Centaur.”

“Men are dying, sir. They need a Doctor. Perhaps if you went to Scutari, Miss Nightingale could approach Lord Raglan for permission.”

“No time,” he protested. “Who’s Prime Minister now?”

I shrugged. “Aberdeen,” interrupted one of the traders. “Lord Aberdeen. Very good man.” I doubted that a peer of the realm would associate with a Turkish hawker, but felt embarrassed that he knew more than me. As his hand came out for money, I shook my head.

The Doctor looked out to sea, thinking deeply. “Too late for Lord John Russell,” he said. “Or is it?” He turned back to me, with renewed hope. “Suppose my mission was endorsed by someone more powerful than the War Office? Would you help me then?”

The traders suddenly scuttled off. I looked past them at the Turkish soldiers hurrying back and the brighter, smarter, uniform of their captain. “I will ask his Lordship,” I said. “Please follow me.”

I expected a quicker return journey with the empty cart. Progress was slow because the Doctor kept stopping to look for footprints, and examining them with a miniature glass kept in his pocket. I feared

he wanted to take the path to Mackenzie's farm, but he judged those prints too old.

As we approached the camps, he peered in the trenches, some of which contained a foot of water, and chatted with the men. Still conscious that he might be a spy, I watched his every move, but saw nothing that could be interpreted as a signal to the city.

"It's changed so much," he said.

"You've been here before?"

"Not in this millennium."

The thought that he was mad crossed my mind again. Perhaps he needed a doctor himself. I felt certain that I was doing the right thing. If he tried to cross our lines alone, someone would shoot him. The men we passed in the trenches, manning guns or bathing in the freezing sea, accepted him because of me. I couldn't have another death on my conscience.

Eventually we arrived at the tracks. The Doctor pulled out his glass and looked at them. "Definitely Centaur," he said, hopping on the rocks to confirm that the trail could not be followed. Night was falling as the artificial city lights blinked on. I hoped I was not on night duty again. It was a different man on the field gun now, watching us with his finger never straying from the trigger.

"Perhaps this creature has gone to the city," I said, wondering if it was a tame beast of the Russians, unleashed at night to cause mayhem and the shells despatched to call it back.

"The city has its own graveyards," replied the Doctor. "If the Centaur feeds here, it will have a closer lair."

We returned to camp, just as the last dregs of sunlight vanished and the biting nocturnal insects began their relentless onslaught. The mood was lighter as the men ate and drank, some for the first time in days. They called to me to join them, feigning disappointment when I declined.

The Doctor looked excited when he saw the farmhouse, then remarked that it was too modern. He informed the sentry that he wished to see Lord Raglan and gave him a small card from his voluminous pocket. We waited in the cold, listening to the merriment, until we were allowed in.

Lord Raglan was eating alone, delicious-smelling hot chicken and a glass of sherry. There was only one other chair. I stood but the Doctor made me sit down and he stayed upright.

"May I ask what it is about?" said his Lordship, fingering the card. I glanced at the name that the Doctor mentioned earlier. It meant nothing to me.

"Lord John sends his regards," said the Doctor.

"He writes to me almost weekly, but has never mentioned you."

"Secret missions are not discussed in mundane correspondence. There is a lost creature in the region. I need to take it to a place of safety."

Lord Raglan laughed. "Your discretion is admirable. Your attire less so. How can you root out spies while being so conspicuous?"

"In my experience, spies wish to examine the unexpected."

Lord Raglan laughed and called for more sherry. The Doctor insisted that I had a glass. They talked for a long time, seeming oblivious to my presence. It appeared that they had several mutual acquaintances in Parliament. I grew bored listening to fragments of their conversation, realizing that it was over a day since I had eaten a mouldy biscuit. The men outside were not singing now. The time had come to sleep, or perform the night watches that could end in death.

Lord Raglan spoke to me. I didn't hear him properly so mumbled an apology. He asked if I would volunteer for a special project, to help the Doctor. I felt nervous but couldn't refuse. Besides,

it meant that I avoided night duty. Lord Raglan stressed that the matter remained confidential and that I should not do anything to upset our allies, if encroaching in their camps.

They offered the Doctor a private tent and asked me to guard outside, in case any drunks came by. The Doctor told me to rest. I thanked him, then lay down, listening to explosions, rain and loud shouts.

I woke to find the Doctor by my side. I saluted. "I'm not in your army," he said. "The Centaur will want to feed again tonight. We need to find it."

"What is it?"

"Didn't they teach you mythology at school?"

"Not at the ragged school, sir," I told him, although it is possible that the teacher said something which I have long forgotten. I often wonder if he still lives and if he would be proud to know that at least one of his pupils avoided jail, the workhouse and the early grave. Pride lost if the truth of the farmhouse was revealed.

We ate an officer's breakfast with eggs and real bacon. None of the officers starved. Afterwards, with my question still unanswered, we walked to the shore. I saluted the soldier behind the gun, wondering if he had seen the horse. The Doctor stepped over five fresh and uneaten corpses, stored for someone else to take to Balaclava, and waded through the water. I stopped to splash some on my face.

"Mind the cholera," he said absently, as I was about to drink. I decided to wait.

"Are there any farmhouses nearby?" he asked. "Apart from Raglan's?"

"Dozens." We passed several residences on the long march. Visiting them all would take several days. Lord Raglan had forbidden further missions after reports of looting. He didn't want to offend the locals whose help might be required if the Russians charged down the paths.

The Doctor sighed. "Fresh chicken," he said. "Last night. Who supplied that?"

"The officers have a cook who sources food from the Turks."

"You don't normally eat chicken?"

"No sir," I said. "We have to make do with stolen hens." He frowned. I assured him that Lord Raglan gave approval, after he heard that the farmer was dead.

"How do you know he's dead?" asked the Doctor. I could not answer. Memories of the trip came flooding back. Starving, deprived of sleep, stumbling along the rough muddy path in heavy rain and leaving behind the bodies of fallen comrades. Following the French sergeant, with the jagged scar across his throat, and a colleague who claimed to know the way. The path to ruin.

Reluctantly, I led the Doctor back along the road to Balaclava then took the track to Mackenzie's farm. For two hours we walked, each step bringing back memories. Five survivors, from the nine who started, came down. It was the French. The laughing sergeant reached over the fence to grab a couple of squawking hens and passed them to us. We wrung their necks and bit into the raw flesh with gusto. It was the French who made a hole in the fence.

The hole was still there. I knew now that the eyes had peered through it. Praying that the horse was not in the house, I went through. Six surviving hens gathered around the exit, looking expectantly at us. Ripe for the slaughter, or perhaps they welcomed death as an alternative to their miserable existence. I felt hungry again but could not kill one in front of the Doctor. And I was temporarily on officer's rations. The other men needed the meat more. There were plenty of footprints to indicate previous visits, but none going to the house.

I asked the Doctor not to enter, realizing the danger I was in. We told our officers that the farmer died from natural causes. The French went inside, looking for alcohol. We heard two shots then both

men came out, indicating that we should not enter. Nobody wanted to. We were just grateful for the food.

The Doctor went inside. I stood by the fence, ignoring the noisy hens as they pecked in the snow for non-existent grain. A series of ropes were coiled around a hook on the fence. Like the rope used to end the lives of murderers and their accomplices. I should have reported the murder but did not want to be sent home, penniless. Now I faced prison and the gallows. I preferred to die in battle, if I was allowed a chance of redemption.

The Doctor stood in the doorway, shaking. "Come in," he said crossly. "Come in and see what you've done."

I entered, relieved not to have to bend my head. The house was built for tall people; the Russians I had seen were short. Apart from the books in Russian script, the interior resembled the house of an English aristocrat. Like the one I once served as footman in. I imagined Lord Raglan and the generals being comfortable in such a place, after the war. The soldiers would return to the slums.

Then I smelled a horrible fungoid smell. A creature lay dead on the floor of the back room. Rats had devoured most of it, taking bits of flesh back to their grotesque lairs and exposing the remainder to insects. I remembered kicking rats away from my father's corpse. Consequently, I could never eat the roasted rats on sticks that the Zouaves presented in camp.

The Doctor pulled the thick curtains, letting the limited sun illuminate the rotting pile of green flesh clinging to white bones. Lime green. Not human. But there were human clothes, the long winter coat and hat folded neatly over the back of a chair, and patches of black leather sticking to the chewed heels.

"Camouflage," said the Doctor. "The Remorian had to look human when it traded with them. Over two thousand years it has been here. Not hurting anyone. On the contrary, it protected the Centaur. And then you killed it."

The image of the noose grew larger. I visualized the Doctor fixing it to my neck with his delicate hands. "Not me," I protested. "It was the French."

"Why is it always someone else?" he grumbled.

I continued to protest, then saw something lying on the floor by the corpse. A pair of tweezers like those used by surgeons. I looked more closely at two bullets in the decaying flesh and visualized the tweezers pulling them out. "It didn't die immediately," I realized. "I could have saved it." Could have entered the house and removed the bullets. It might have lived, if I had been the surgeon. If I had not been greedy and scared.

I deserved to die.

"We have to find the Centaur," said the Doctor. Ignoring me, he turned and left the house. I chased after him, grabbing his arm before he went through the hole in the fence.

"Please," I said. "I'm sorry."

Instead of listening, he was studying the ropes. He pushed past, with a mumbled apology, to examine them more closely. "It was kept here," he said, pulling the ropes out. "Released at night to find the dead."

"Why?" I asked.

"Centaur's survive on the interstitial fluids that are found in human bodies," explained the Doctor. "There were five of them. The Greeks killed four. This one was rescued by a Remorian; they specialize in saving endangered species. A bit like me, but they are much better at it." He frowned and added, with a glance at the house, "Usually."

"Will it come back?"

“If you came home and found your only friend murdered, the only person who had spoken to you in a thousand years, would you consider it safe to stick around?”

“I found my father’s body,” I said quietly. “We had to stay.” Four days we waited, wondering if the undertaker would arrive before the midwife. It did not matter because neither my mother nor my brother survived the birth. Three more funerals paid for by charity that did not extend to the living. I now had money to survive, assuming the pay came, but had swapped the disease infested streets of the East End for the disease infested slopes of the Crimean Peninsula. Some nights I wanted to be back home. Others I was grateful to be here. The men were my new family and the camp my house.

The Doctor mumbled condolences. I was grateful but sensed his mind was elsewhere, contemplating the monster that fed on the dead.

“It will return to the shore,” I said. “We’ll kill it there.” The field gun had the capacity to bring it down, if I had the courage to fire.

“We’re not going to kill it,” said the Doctor.

“It eats people.”

“Only corpses. Like a rat or any other scavenger.”

“It’s sacrilege,” I protested.

“It’s survival.”

“Not for the souls that want to rise again.” I did learn something from the ragged schools and from the priests and preachers who roamed around, saving a few but powerless to help the many. Like me but, perhaps I could save others from the Centaur.

Silently, the Doctor rewound the ropes around the hook. “Why was it tied up?” I asked. “If it was harmless to the living, why not let it roam free?”

The Doctor’s face darkened. “Because you turned its habitat into a war zone,” he said. “The Centaur had to be protected.”

“There are soldiers dying here, Russians as well as allies. You’re a doctor. You could help more at Scutari by protecting them.”

“I wish I could,” he breathed. He stepped back from the ropes. “What happens when the fresh corpses run out?” he asked. “When they’re all buried six feet down in coffins that can’t be chewed through or cremation becomes the norm? How will the Centaur feed then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nor do I.” The Doctor found the gate and went out.

I was about to grab a hen when he poked his head through the hole. “You’re a soldier,” he said. I nodded. “And your commanding officer has asked you to help us.” Again, I nodded. “I can’t walk through the lines without an escort. I could ask Lord Raglan for someone else, but he picked you.”

I studied his sincere face carefully then lifted my rifle above my head. It was an opportunity to earn redemption. “I promise not to harm the Centaur,” I said. The words were not for the Doctor, but for the being that lay dead because of me.

I could not atone for the sins of the men who pulled the trigger, but I could earn eternal forgiveness for myself.

With a last look at the hens, I followed the Doctor, realizing belatedly what he had been hinting at. We ate the hens raw when there was no other food. If the Centaur could not find the dead, would he take the living? Already my promise seemed rash.

The Doctor explained that the Centaur would hide during the day as it was predominantly nocturnal.

We did not have dogs to sniff it out; any stray that ventured near the camp was roasted. Our only chance was to wait by the bodies.

“If the Russian shells didn’t scare it away,” I said.

“It should be able to dodge them,” he replied. “Close fire is more of a concern.”

We requested an audience with Lord Raglan and asked for the perimeter guards to be withdrawn. He smiled thinly. “We already have spies in the camp,” he said, an admission that his policies were failing. “Shall we just open ourselves up to the enemy? Is that your secret mission? Sent to sabotage us for the Russians, or for Lord Aberdeen whose parliament endorses the war he did not want?”

Distracted by the whisky on his breath, it took me a few seconds to realize that the head of Her Majesty’s forces in the Crimea, recently promoted to Field Marshall, had just suggested that the Prime Minister colluded with the enemy.

“One night,” said the Doctor desperately. “We need the men with guns away from the shore, in case it is scared by them or they start shooting.”

“One night,” mused Lord Raglan. “One night without manning the guns. Without returning enemy fire.” He cast his gaze upon me. “Chambers.”

I saluted. “Sir.”

“Footprints on the shore last night. Did you see the creature that made them?”

I couldn’t lie. “Yes sir.”

“And you chose not to shoot it?” He waved his hand before I could answer. “Don’t worry, you’re not the first. People think I’m out of touch, but I hear things. From the French and Turkish commanders as well as our own men and Russian folklore. Stories of a strange beast, half-man and half-horse that wandered across the battlefields and eats the dead.” His gaze left me and fell across the Doctor. “I hear things about you too, Doctor. From Miss Nightingale. She believes in you, Doctor. Do you believe in him, Chambers?”

“Yes sir,” I said, without hesitation.

“You can have your night,” said Raglan to the Doctor.

During dinner, an officer’s portion of chicken, the Doctor admitted that he had never met Miss Nightingale. “Lord Raglan must have confused you with another doctor,” I said.

“Plenty of them in a hospital,” he replied, pushing his uneaten meal across to me. I ate quickly, then we returned to the creek that was as black as the Black Sea that it circled into.

In the dim light of the moon, I saw the unattended field gun and prayed that I had not made another mistake. If the Doctor was a spy, the Russians now had access to our camp. We sat by the bodies and listened to the drunken calls of French soldiers, followed by an owl hooting and the calls of other birds. Occasionally the Russian guns thundered at the moon, without response. The longer we waited, the more likely it was that they would descend to investigate our unusual silence.

Then we heard the squelching of heavy hooves in the water. An enormous shadow approached. It had the torso of a naked man and the body of a horse, but walked upright with the front hooves dangling powerfully at its side. I glimpsed the face of a black, beardless man with bright green eyes, and rubbed my own beard. It carried a body, which it laid gently next to the others. The Doctor called in a soft voice, “Last of the Centaurs, I greet you.”

The Centaur looked up. The Doctor moved slowly towards it, arms outstretched. “I am the Doctor, a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey.” He exhaled deeply. “I am the reason you are here.” The Centaur remained still as he drew closer, still talking: “I had a different face then. The Remorian

asked me to lead you both to a safer planet, but I couldn't take you out of your time zone. I had to find somewhere where you could feed. I'm sorry."

The Centaur sniffed the air and spoke loudly: "Dead. They killed my friend." He pivoted in my direction, seeing the rifle. The loose hooves fell to the ground and it charged past the Doctor, straight at me.

This time, I knew it was not divine punishment and tried to duck. The foot smacked into my side and knocked me into the water. Spluttering, I looked for my dropped rifle then, not finding it, lay still and watched through blurred eyes as the Doctor jumped onto the Centaur's back. The Centaur spun round and round, trying to dislodge him. The Doctor spoke with calmness and authority: "This man was there but he did not kill. It was a different soldier. They are not the same. Please believe me."

I got up raising my hands. Seeing the gun and remembering my promise, I kicked it out of reach. The Centaur stopped moving. My vision returned. Intelligent eyes, old eyes, surveyed me. As they had done twice before.

"I saw," confirmed the Centaur, as the Doctor dropped to the ground. "Saw you and the others leave. You cannot understand my agony, unless you have been bereaved."

"I have," I said, then fell silent. This was not my conversation, not my place.

"Explain," ordered the Centaur. I swallowed and told him about my parents and the four siblings who had not survived infancy: James, Agnes, Catherine, Vincent. Names I will never forget. Lives snuffed out before they begun. The preachers said it was part of a plan. I never learned the rest.

"I too am the last of five," said the Centaur. Tears formed in both eyes. I wanted to ask questions about its loss but could not phrase them. I just stared at the ground in silent sympathy and prayed. Like I prayed with mother and over the bodies of fallen comrades.

"I trust," said the Centaur slowly. I looked up. Its head had turned towards the Doctor. "My keeper spoke often of you. The old humans had legends too. Will you take me from this place?"

"Yes," said the Doctor. "There are islands that will be isolated from this war and the next, but still supply you with food. You can hide there for a few hundred years and then I will be able to move you to one of the human graveyard planets in the Melixare system. Fresh bodies delivered daily."

The Centaur swung down and placed its hands on the ground. The Doctor climbed on its back. I realized they were leaving and pointed to my gun. "The Russians may attack."

"They fear me," said the Centaur. "Just as I fear them."

"And fear makes you both dangerous," said the Doctor. He patted the Centaur gently. There was a splash and it began moving, passing the spot where the corpses lay. I went over to them, relieved that they could now be buried. Then I looked at the latest, the one dropped by the Centaur. His head had been kicked in by something heavy, like a hoof. The scar across his throat was still visible and so were the stripes on the torn French uniform.

The Centaur had deliberately sought out and killed the French sergeant. It remained dangerous. It could come back and kill me. I wanted to trust the Doctor, but I had to protect myself. Lord Raglan would order me to kill it. He had already asked why I did not. I knew my duty. I picked up the gun and pointed, aiming for the leg to avoid harming the Doctor. A shot was fired, but not by me. The Centaur turned and saw me holding the gun. It made to return, then the Doctor slapped its back and it raced away. More shots sounded. Behind me, dozens of Russian soldiers were pouring down the cliff. I turned and sprinted towards the solid black shape of the field gun that lay between us.

Something hit me as I touched the field gun. Blood dripping from my arm, I turned the weapon round. With my spare hand, I fired in the direction of the Russians, ducking as bullets flew back. One struck my other arm. My grip lessened but I held on.

The shooting intensified. It came from behind me. British soldiers chasing the Russians back. Lord Raglan directed his army, splendid in his full uniform. He saluted me then I fell and, in the encroaching blackness, imagined two eyes marking me for death.

Letter from Lord Raglan to Lord John Russell,
19 December 1854

Dear John,

It is customary for me to write to the mothers or wives of those who die in the cause of their duty. Every night I am up past midnight, fulfilling this sad task. Occasionally there are men with no surviving relatives and, in such cases, there is nobody to receive my letters. That does not make the condolences any less sincere.

I am writing to you in the hope that you can pass this letter onto the agent under your command known only as the Doctor. He said that he follows the All-England-Eleven, and it may be that you will meet him at one of their games. I will not pry into your secrets, or his, but wish to acknowledge the recent success of his mission to the Crimea. The morale of those on night duty has improved significantly, and we have resumed local burials.

I am sorry to report that Private Gosforth Chambers of the 77th Regiment died yesterday at 20:05, local time. He sustained injuries in the line of duty fifteen days earlier and succumbed to fever in the Scutari hospital. He was the first line of defence against an enemy attack that was defeated without further allied casualties. He gave his life to save others, and I regret that we were unable to save him, despite the best efforts of Miss Nightingale and her team.

Before he was called home by God, Private Chambers asked Miss Nightingale if the Doctor would forgive him. I do not know the circumstances, but sincerely hope that this can be arranged.

*Yours sincerely,
Lord Raglan.*

Ian Chesterton in an Exciting Adventure with the Martians

by Greg Maughan

Fog set in around the car and I slowed to barely a crawl, straining my eyes to try and make out some sort of landmark through the thick grey mass of a genuine London pea souper. I'd not long come off the South Circular and had to be near my turning by now. Well, I thought, managing to get lost on my way home would really top things off! It had been the strangest day I could remember in quite some time. As the sprawl of the fog drew me away from the moment and over into my own thoughts, I cast my mind back to that fateful morning which seemed so long ago now, but had only been hours previously. It was such a short time ago, really. But the world seemed somehow much smaller then.

I sat nervously in the reception area of Donneby's, the big rocket component firm. It was new and modern looking, with big glass panels instead of exterior walls towering up to a ceiling at least twice my respectable six-foot-one. I shifted around on a low-backed settee that was just slightly too close to the ground to be sat on comfortably, my knees pushing up towards my chest and a copy of *The Times* held awkwardly aloft.

"Mr. Chesterton," called the young lady sitting at the reception desk.

Keen to be freed from the purgatory of the reception area, I leapt up and adjusted my jacket as I walked over to her desk. My second-best sports jacket, but it would have to do after that morning's sartorial disaster.

"Yes, that's me." I flashed her my best winning smile and got a sheepish grin in return. "I'm Mr. Chester – that is, *Ian* Chesterton."

This may have been a step too far, as the young girl's eyes darted down and she instructed me, "Director Krier will see you now."

I was taken aback and couldn't hide it. "*The* Donald Krier? What's he doing conducting interviews for a simple rocket technician post?"

"Mr. Krier is a very hands-on employer; he's involved in every level of the work we do here. Now if you're ready, please make your way along the corridor to the third door on the right."

And at that I made my way out of reception with a mental note to be a bit more careful about what I said. This could end up being my big break, I thought. As long as I can avoid putting my foot in it like that again!

Behind me, back in the reception area, the building buzzed with normal life. The telephone rang. The young woman I had just put my foot in it with answered, "I don't care if you are a doctor, they're not available to take a call." Other members of staff came and went, with good-mornings and how-do-you-do's as they passed each other. "Don't you 'my dear young thing' me," and the clunk of the reception phone being slammed.

But all this chatter faded into the background as I walked down the corridor I'd been directed to and noise was sucked from the air as if I'd entered a vacuum. Nervously, I reached out to the third door on the right and knocked.

A great, echoing voice called out "Enter." Steeling myself, I pushed forward on the door and did just that.

“You must be Chesterton, yes!” the same booming voice greeted me as I entered the room.

This time, I could see where it was coming from and what accounted for the echo: Donald Krier was a giant of a man in more ways than one. Almost as broad as he was tall, with shoulders like a silverback and a Churchillian stoop, he was squeezed into a pinstripe suit and squeezed behind a desk that he made look like dolls’ furniture. This was the man that had revolutionized rocket science in the UK. His company, seemingly from nowhere, had made leaps forward that the government’s Rocket Group still just dreamt of. The last six months had revolutionized the whole field, and I was standing in the shadow of the man responsible. Either side of him, he was flanked by lab-coated, clipboard-wielding underlings who scribbled away, no doubt recording every word of wisdom the great man imparted.

“I am indeed.” I played it cool. “And may I say, sir, what a pleasure it is to meet someone I’ve long since admired.” Flattery’ll get you everywhere, Chesterton, I thought to myself. Just be careful not to overdo it!

Before I could gauge his response, we were interrupted by another knock at the office door. “Enter,” Krier boomed and a bespectacled man, about my age, slightly shorter, stepped in. Rather more timidly than I had, I noted with a certain pride.

“Mackintosh, yes?”

“That’s right, sir,” my new companion mumbled.

“Good, good. One more and then we can begin.”

I hadn’t realized that this was to be some sort of group interview, but now it seemed I was going to be in direct competition alongside other candidates for the job. Despite myself, I felt my collar tighten as nerves started to mount, and the office door knocked for a third time.

The young man that stepped through next was shorter and more lightly built than either me or Mackintosh, but had a spring to his step suggesting confidence beyond his years.

“Uncle Donny!” he said, beaming. “I had no idea you’d be bothering with the interview yourself!”

My heart sank! Surely this was a done deal? But no, Krier looked blankly at the latest entrant, with the same steel glint in his eye that had greeted me.

“James Krier, yes?” he boomed in the same commanding tone he’d addressed myself and Mackintosh.

“Well, yes, of course it’s me...” the young man stammered. Who knows, maybe I’m in with a chance still, I thought to myself, stifling a chuckle as the colour washed from young James’s face.

“Good! Now that we’re all here, let us begin with a brief tour.” And at that, the back wall of the office opened out at a hairline crack in its centre. The two sections of wall swooshed out of view and the room opened up onto a whirring, clunking factory floor.

“We here at Donneby’s pride ourselves in being at the very forefront of rocket design, technology *and* production,” Director Krier boomed. He paced out at the front of the tour group, hands clasped behind his back. As he spoke, he faced forward. Not once did he glance back at us, confident that his cavernous voice would reach us over the rhythm of mechanization and that we would hang on his every word. “This factory represents the pinnacle of efficiency not just in the field of rocket science, but in *all manufacturing*. Every movement here is timed, analyzed and optimized. Not a single motion is wasted.”

As Krier spoke, I looked out across the factory floor. Anonymous workers in lab coats and safety goggles checked outputs, took readings, adjusted settings and moved items about. They moved seemingly without awareness of each other, consumed by their individual task, walking past one another without acknowledgement or greeting.

“Only the very best in their field are suitable for Donneby’s, gentlemen. And today we intend to determine if any of you three hits the mark!”

Among the continuous movement of cogs and limbs, two particular workers jumped out at me. One walked purposefully across the factory floor holding a box with a large neon hazard symbol plastered across it. The other had just jotted down output readings next to a hissing valve and turned to pace towards his next task. But, they were on a collision course for each other! Neither man slowed or deviated from their course, neither wavered from the straight line they paced out. Yet both men must have been able to see the other.

Despite myself, I yelled, “Look out, man!”

Neither worker acknowledged my cry. But with inches to spare, the man carrying the hazard box made a sharp ninety-degree turn and continued onwards without losing speed.

“As I said, Chesterton, not a single motion is wasted here,” chuckled Krier.

“I’m sorry, sir. I just thought...” As the sentence trailed away and I awkwardly rubbed at my neck, I felt my chances at the job once again receding into the distance.

If Krier had eyeballed me any longer, I may have melted on the spot. But thankfully his attention was diverted by a loud clank and thud. Unmistakably the sound of a man undergoing a sudden, violent realignment of the vertical and horizontal axis, as my old physics teacher would have put it!

As one, our group looked over to the source of the sound and saw another anonymous operative rubbing his shin, sitting on the factory floor next to what looked like a milk crate overflowing with sparking wires and flashing diodes. No wasted movement, I thought. Something flashed behind the bank of machines next to him. What was that? I shook the thought away. Everyone on that factory floor was wearing identical lab coats and goggles. But for a moment, I could have sworn I’d seen an Edwardian cape just ducking out of sight.

Director Krier was red-faced and exhaling like a bull ready to charge. He indicated to one of his clip-board carrying minions, “You! See to that, quickly.”

Turning back to the rest of the group, he addressed the three of us, “My apologies, gentlemen. But the tour will have to end there today. Let us move on now to more pressing matters.” Back in control of his breath, Krier allowed himself a tight smile. “We’ve devised a little test for you all.”

Back in Krier’s office, three podiums had been put in place, behind which we were directed to stand. On the top of the podium was a sort of television screen and upon it images of strangely shaped blocks slowly travelled from the top to the bottom of the screen, with a pixilated clunk marking each deliberate step in their descent. Poking at the television screen somehow made the block rotate, and after a little experimentation I discovered that if I were to drag my finger horizontally across the screen, the block would follow it! Why, I’d never in my life seen anything as fantastic or baffling. But, I had no time to stop and stare in awe. As the blocks descended, they began to fill the screen. But, if I was quick and cunning enough to rotate and drag them correctly, they would slot neatly alongside the previous blocks and, most fantastical of all, when I achieved a solid horizontal line it simply disappeared!

Gaining confidence in this ingenious test, I chanced a glance at my fellow interviewees.

Mackintosh stared intently at the screen, its display reflected in his thick spectacles. He clearly had a sharp, logical mind and had not broken a sweat. Krier's nephew, on the other hand, was flailing and poking at the television screen with both hands, seemingly without pattern or design.

I looked back down to my own television screen and noted that the blocks were increasing the speed of their descent! Don't worry, Chesterton, I thought to myself. Just keep a cool head and a systematic approach. But, try as I might, as the blocks sped up I would poke the screen once or twice too many times in my hurry to rotate it. And each mistake gave me less room in which to make my next move!

It was easy to tell why Krier had selected this devious test to sort the wheat from the chaff for Donneby's!

Finally, I could hold off the climbing tower of blocks no longer and as they reached the top of my screen, with an electronic gurgle, the image on the television screen cut out. Stepping back, I noted that Mackintosh experienced the same fate mere seconds after me. Whereas James Krier was already standing awkwardly behind his podium, beaten by the machine who knows how long since.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Krier intoned. "That has been most... informative. James Krier, your presence is no longer required."

Well, I was taken aback by the Director's, erm, directness. But my surprise was not a patch on young James's.

"WHAT?! Uncle Donny! Have you lost your senses?" I know the young man was taken aback, but, really, this was still no way to speak to an elder. "I shall have words with father about this!"

At that, Krier clicked his Cumberland sausage fingers and the remaining clipboard carrier grabbed James, dragging him from the room. It really was quite the scene.

"You haven't heard the last of this," James cried out as he was bundled from the room. Shooting nervous glances across to Mackintosh, I didn't know whether to be elated that I had met the mark and was through to the next round, or appalled at the rough treatment meted out. And to a family member, no less.

I knew it could count against me, but I really did feel slightly shaken by the way I had just seen young James treated. And so, before Director Krier could launch into the next part of this arduous interview, I cut in and asked, "Please sir, can I go to the toilet?"

Relieved and composed, I made my way along the corridor back towards the interview room. Remembering my days in National Service, I drummed out a marching pattern in my head and tried to embody as much confidence in my gait as possible. But the rhythm stammered when I spotted young James Krier walking towards me.

You've been in more awkward spots, I told myself. Just try to be polite; he'll feel worse than you.

I tried for my most conciliatory smile and looked James straight in the eye.

"Terribly sorry about what happened back in there, old chap. It really could have been any of us to get the boot."

James returned my look, but there was something missing in his eyes. They seemed to lack focus. And his face, well, the skin had an almost grey colour to it that definitely hadn't been there before. And it looked like rubber.

Slowly but deliberately, he raised his hands and held them out towards my throat as if to choke me. Startled, I stepped back, faltered and fell back onto one knee. James locked his cold, dry hands

around my throat and began to squeeze.

“What are you doing, man?” I choked out in panic. I tried to push back at him. But despite the young man’s slight frame, he was solid and unyielding. Black crept in at the corners of my eyes, then white blotches danced in front of me like a terminal Rorschach test as what I feared could be my last breath spluttered out of my lungs.

An electrical storm of noise rumbled around us. James’s hands loosened and I fell away from him, gulping deep, greedy breaths back into my starving lungs. As my vision regained focus, I saw my attacker stagger from side to side in time with the rhythmic white noise that had heralded my reprieve. But just as suddenly as it had begun, the noise pulsed and then cut out altogether. James stood and shook his head. I could only assume he was clearing the cobwebs before launching another attack.

Taking my chance, I barged past him. I heard a crash, but didn’t dare chance a look back to see how he had fallen. I barged back into the interview room and, slamming the door behind me, began to jabber excitedly: “Your nephew... attacked me. Something’s wrong. His face doesn’t look right. And there was this noise.”

Director Krier gave me a withering look and exhaled a deep sigh.

“It seems the time for subtlety has passed, I am afraid. Let us proceed directly to Stage Two.”

Krier’s lab-coated underling stepped towards me at a dash and whipped a great cosh, like a policeman’s truncheon, out from under his clipboard. With a dull thud, this time the black didn’t creep from the corners of my eyes, but raced.

I awoke to a dull throbbing at the base of my skull and instinctively went to raise my hand to rub at it, only to find myself unable to budge. Both my wrists had cold metal straps around them and a similar choker cut slightly into my neck, holding me tight and straight. A whimpering to my left-hand side caught my attention. Twisting my neck as far as the choker would allow and straining to see out of the corner of my eyes allowed me a narrow glimpse of Mackintosh. Trussed up in the same stainless-steel shackles as myself and strapped to a vertical metal board which, I could only assume, was identical to my own, Mackintosh made for a sorry sight. It was clearly all too much for him, and the poor fellow was sobbing away where he stood.

“Hold on, old chap,” I called out to him. “We’ll get out of this pickle. Who knows? This could just be the next step in the interview. A sort of role-play thing, maybe?”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, Mr. Chesterton. But the interview is over!” It was the unmistakable baritone of Director Krier. He stepped out of the shadows, a demonic grin spreading across his face. “In fact, I have positions available for all of you. But they require candidates that are adaptable, quick to learn new skills, and are willing to spend the rest of their natural lives preserved and stored in our transglobal biodata repository.”

“For pity’s sake, you don’t think we’re foolish enough to agree to something like that, do you?”

“Our legal team has informed us that your attendance at the interview today could be construed as implied consent, and that that line of defence would hold up in your courts. Not that that sort of thing should matter for too much longer, once we have all the judges preserved in the biodata repository alongside you. And the police. And politicians. And business leaders. Why it won’t be long until we’ve taken over altogether.”

“What are you talking about, Krier?” I couldn’t quite get my head around what the man was

saying, but was aghast at the seeming scale of the plot that I had wandered into.

“Why, we’re Martians, Mr. Chesterton.”

At that, I heard a clunk to my left and twisted my head to see that poor Mackintosh had given up the ghost and passed out. It was all just too much for the fellow.

“Seeing as we’re not likely to get much more from Mr. Mackintosh’s company right now, why don’t we begin with the deposit?” With this, Krier indicated a lab-coated assistant lurking in the shadows, who walked over to what for the life of me looked like a souped-up electric heat lamp. But when it was switched on, the glowing rings emitted a visible ray which pulsed in the direction of the bound, unconscious Mackintosh. There was nothing I could do but take in this terrible scene, knowing that whatever horrors they were inflicting, I would be next!

When the rings of the pulsing ray reached Mackintosh, they began to fade in and out of sight with each pulse. Mackintosh’s body became bright at the peak of the pulse and dull at the trough, then began pulsing in and out of sight along with the ray. And then, it stopped and he was gone.

“Good heavens,” I choked. My senses felt like they’d taken a Grade A battering, but there was more to come!

Out of the shadows behind Krier stepped forward Mackintosh.

Only, it wasn’t Mackintosh. Yes, physically he was the same. Identical to the man I had just watched fade away before my eyes. But there was something in his bearing that gave out a certain falseness, an ersatz quality just tickling the edge of my senses.

My eyes widened as the penny finally dropped. This wasn’t Mackintosh, the real Mackintosh had been beamed away to this global repository or some-such that Krier had been bragging about. And this wasn’t the famed Director Krier. Why, he must be a Martian replica too. The same for young James. If I wasn’t able somehow to free myself, the same would go for me. And soon, all of the leading lights of the British establishment!

“And now, Mr. Chesterton. I’d love to say that it’s been a pleasure, but—”

Krier’s final bon mot froze on his lips, as a familiar yet alien electric howl rang out around us.

Krier, Mackintosh and the lab-coated underlings that hung to the shadows behind them all began to bob and sway, just as young James had when I’d last heard that dizzying white noise. The volume increased and their swaying became more pronounced along with it. One lab coat fell to his knees, while another staggered and fell forward onto some sort of switchboard terminal. As he fell, there was a click and then behind me a clunk.

He must have fallen on some sort of control for my restraints, as I felt everything loosen and I was able to move again. Without stopping to think, I pulled myself forward and ran past the disoriented gaggle of replicas, hoping for freedom.

I ran down seemingly endless corridors as that noise rang out around me, juddered, and then cut out. Experience told me that it wouldn’t be long until those foul replicas would be back on their feet and after me, now the mysterious noise had stopped. I had to find a way out, and quickly.

I must have been running hard for a few minutes now, but had lost track of the twists and turns of the corridors. To my dismay, coming up in front of me at a clip were the ersatz Krier, Mackintosh, James and a crowd of anonymous assistants. I turned on my heels, almost overbalancing, and raced back in the direction I had just come.

Hot breath heaved in and out of my lungs. My feet pounded the linoleum corridor flooring through dress shoes designed for much sedater activities. My second-best sports jacket flayed out

behind me. And despite this, they gained on me. Despite everything that was at stake, my legs became heavier and I felt my pace slacken.

But as the enemy was on my heels, I heard Krier cry out.

“Forget Chesterton, the Trans-Temporal is the priority!”

At that, they barged passed me and through a door out onto the factory floor.

I was alone, relieved. My heart was slowing towards its normal pace. It was over.

All that was to be done now was to slowly and logically make my way back through these corridors, back out to the entrance foyer, past the receptionist with the nice smile, through the oversized, modern doorway and out into a dull November mizzle to bring me back to my senses and back down to earth. Then, I could put all this behind me and move on to the next job interview afresh. Why, a rocket engineer of my skill and standing wouldn't take long to secure a better post than the one I thought I'd been applying for this morning. Not these days, in an age of moon shoots and missions to Mars.

But, the Martians had beaten us to it in their mission to Earth. And they weren't playing fair.

With heavy heart, I made up my mind. I couldn't walk away from this adventure, not now. The world was so much bigger than I had ever imagined, and so too were the threats facing it. I would have to investigate further. So with great care, I stepped forward through the doors that Krier and the gang had barged through previously, out onto the factory floor to investigate.

The once immaculate factory now bore the marks of a workforce that had been disoriented by the mysterious noise in the same manner Director Krier had. The fallout would have filled an entire volume in a previously unopened accident book. Steam puffed from cracks and splits in pipework along the walls; sparks jumped from cables hanging down overhead; debris lay scattered and torn across the shop floor. And on the far side of the factory, a growing mob of factory workers and anonymous underlings, with Krier still at their head, closed in on an unusual figure in an Edwardian cape with a bow-legged run. From that distance, I couldn't make out any of their features. But surely, I thought, that must be the “Trans-Temporal” character Krier was shouting about.

I crept forward and noticed the milk crate contraption that had proved hazardous so much earlier on. Kneeling to inspect it, I was taken aback at the genius on display. It had clearly just been cobbled together with the sort of items that one would find in a junkyard, say. But, if I wasn't mistaken, I was looking at a highly sophisticated wave transmission blocking system. It was clearly a rush job, as the connections were barely thumb-tight, and the soldering was as sloppy as any you'd see in a Lower Sixth. But the mind behind the design was clear.

Reasoning it had cut out simply due to loose connections, I gave the crate a gentle shake and was thrilled as it wailed out again. The alien mob was stopped in its tracks and the mysterious figure ducked fully out of sight.

The wail buzzed and cut out, so I prodded the crate again and an intermittent noise rang around. If I had the time, I could have tightened up the connections, cut out the loose wires and neatened up the whole job. But time was not something I had, so I ventured on to try and find a more permanent solution to my predicament.

At the centre of the factory, something caught my eye and an idea began to grow from the back of my still aching head.

Standing there, towering above a central control panel was an industrial scale model of the heat lamp contraption that had done for poor old Mackintosh. Surely, if it can be used to make deposits, I reasoned, then this alien gizmo could be used to make withdrawals too.

I ran to the control panel and started poking around at it. But the wail of the wave blocker was becoming less frequent and weaker as its loose connections failed me, and a sore-headed Krier was staggering back towards me now.

“Chesterton, stop! We can make a deal,” he pleaded. “There’s an opening coming up in the organization that doesn’t involve lifetime imprisonment!”

“It’s no good, Krier. Some things are worth more than a job,” I cried back. At that, I plunged down a big lever on the control panel which I reasoned activated the damn thing. A giant wave pulsed out over Krier and his minions, and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding as they faded from sight.

It was over, I thought, as towards me staggered a disorientated, dishevelled Director Krier. Just to be on the safe side, I called out, “Excuse me, sir, but are you human or Martian?”

Brought back to his senses by my question, Director Krier fixed me with a stare that left me inches shorter. “What the devil are you talking about? I demand to know who you are and what you’re doing in my factory!”

It had taken some time to explain to Krier what had happened, and even longer to get him to believe it. After that, there were countless checks and audits that had to be carried out to make sure everyone had been returned correctly. I stuck around and did my bit, never one to walk away from a responsibility.

And then, after all of that, Krier went and gave the one opening available to his nephew!

There were so many unanswered questions as I made my way out into the evening fog on the road back to Paddington. Not least of which was the identity of the mysterious figure who planted the wave transmission blocker. But that was a question for another day, I thought to myself. If, that is, I were ever to find out at all!

As the fog thickened around me, I shook these thoughts from my head and focused in on the drive. The turn off for Barnes Common should be coming up. I didn’t want to miss that.

It was a late summer afternoon in a large suburban kitchen. The window above the sink was open, and the scent of freshly baked pineapple upside-down cake drifted out and down the road on warm, heavy air. The former Ms. Wright read the last few lines of the manuscript in front of her, while her husband Ian paced nervously behind. Finished, she laid the typed sheets of paper down in front of her and looked off across the room deep in thought as a gentle, affectionate smile danced across her lips.

Finally, Ian couldn’t wait any longer. “Well?”

“It’s good. Interesting, even.”

“But...”

“It’s just, meeting the Doctor, the adventures we had, it changed our life in so many ways. If you want to tell that story, I don’t understand why you can’t just start in that junkyard and then write about our wondrous trip back to the Neolithic.”

“About that... I was thinking of skipping over that one and starting on Skaro, actually.”

“What?”

“We get to be a bit more heroic in that one. And I think people will react better to how monstrous the Daleks were than they will to a story about trying to run away from some cave men!”

You get to be more heroic, Barbara thought, remembering her husband lecturing those gentle Thals. And of all their journeys, that trip to Skaro held the longest shadow. No, she didn't want to argue about this. Striking a conciliatory tone, she replied, “I enjoyed the story, you've clearly worked very hard on it.” Then, despite herself she continued, “But, oh Ian, why have you made yourself a rocket scientist?” she gently chided.

“It's a rocket technician, actually,” Ian corrected, straightening himself up as he spoke. “But, really, the amazing places we've been, all those spectacular sights. Who on Earth would believe that two ordinary school teachers could do all that?”

Barbara thought back, from the road to Cathay to sunrise over Vortis, they had had the most amazing life together and she wouldn't change a moment of it. No, she felt very strongly about this. Barbara rose to her feet, took her husband's hands in hers, looked him in the eye and told him simply and firmly, “Sometimes the most ordinary people can have the most amazing adventures.”

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Five

by Nick Walters

NOVATRON STATION,
ON JUST ANOTHER NORMAL WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Every Wednesday afternoon, Bence and Farbis met in Den's Coffee Den for coffee and a big moan about work. They both worked for Sphinx-Fordton UltraMeg, so there was a lot to gripe about. This particular Wednesday, the subject, as it often was, was IT.

"Four days to go," rumbled Farbis, as he eased himself into the plastic seat opposite his junior colleague.

"Trust you to sound the bell of doom," retorted Bence. "You're worrying about nothing."

"Am I? You really think this thing will work?"

Bence took a sip of coffee and regarded Farbis's face. It was old, bearded, with small, pale blue eyes that peeped out from under wiry grey brows with a permanent look of suspicion and distrust.

"Yes, I do, actually. And just because you're old school, there's no need to act the stereotype and distrust every new thing that comes along."

"I don't." Farbis held up his hand, displaying his shiny new wrist terminal. "Latest model."

Bet you don't know how to work it, thought Bence. He pointed with his spoon at Farbis's shiny new wrist terminal. "You do know that will be tied in to the new system, too?"

Farbis folded his arms, removing his shiny new wrist terminal from view. "Not if I have anything to do with it."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Around them, the Den was thronging with workers from Sphinx-Fordton and some of the other companies on Novatron Station. "It's not just us that'll suffer, it's the whole lot," muttered Farbis. "Putting all our eggs in one basket."

"Oh, and you think our current system is fit for purpose?"

"It works."

Farbis's complacency rankled. "It works, but only just! Communication is slow. Loading is very slow. Face-to-face networking only works one time out of ten. As for storage – do me a favour!"

"And this new system's going to fix all that."

"Yes! I believe it will."

Farbis snorted. "Fix all the problems on Novatron? Even sort out Den's dodgy till?"

"All systems. Even Den's dodgy till."

"By the iridescent wings of Zbi-Quickity it will."

"You'll see on Monday when INOMASP goes live."

Farbis snorted. "Stupid name, too. What's that meant to stand for? "INcompetent Officials Manufacture A Serious Problem?"

Bence folded his arms. Farbis could be so childish sometimes, despite his advanced age. "It actually stands for INtelligent Omniscient Mainframe Artificial Sentience Platform." He frowned.

"Or is it Program?"

"Sorry, did you say 'INOMASP'?"

The interloper was a skinny chap in a brown pinstripe suit, leaning over from the next table. Boyish face and hair like a salesman's. Farbis scowled at him.

“Yes, I did,” said Bence.

“INOMASP...” The stranger’s face went pale. “Oh, no no no!”

Farbis smirked. “Seems I’m not the only one thinks it’ll fail.”

The stranger grabbed Bence’s arm. The intensity in his wide brown eyes, the set of his sharp features, unnerved Bence. “And it goes live – when?”

“Next Monday,” said Farbis with a sly grin. “The day of doom.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” said the stranger.

Bence snatched his arm away. “Who the hell are you?”

The stranger stood up and put his hands in his pockets. “Industrial spy. Just passing through. Don’t tell anyone I was here. Now I must dash, I have an urgent appointment next Monday.”

And with that he was gone, running out of Den’s Coffee Den and disappearing into the crowds of Shopping Mall Three.

Bence watched him go. “Nutter.”

Farbis pursed his lips and whistled long and slow. “Maybe. Or maybe a harbinger of doom.”

Bence sighed and sipped his rapidly cooling coffee. “Roll on Monday, then you’ll see.”

Next Segment

SIDIAN VENTURER, PARTNERS IN CRIME

Marginalia

by Michael Gilroy-Sinclair

The fake monk was not happy. The school party was late and he had been reduced to simply staring out of the window. In the brightly lit education suite, he had neatly laid out a collection of fake parchment and quills in order to give the primary school children a taste of life as an eighth-century monk. It felt to him that he had been doing this, day in day out, for months and he was frankly bored.

He knew from the minimal research he had been required to do, that the real monks had used goatskin and octopus ink, but such extravagances were beyond most education department budgets.

Idly, he straightened a pile of A4 paper, which didn't need straightening, only to return to the window and glance across the car park for the fiftieth time that morning. The sky was the clearest blue with only wisps of white dancing in the heavens.

Surely, that blue portaloo hadn't been there this morning. How could he not have noticed it until now? Maybe the council were finally going to fix those potholes?

Only... Now that he could see it properly, there seemed to be a flashing light on the top and it clearly wasn't a portaloo at all.

Rose was not impressed with the Doctor. He had landed the TARDIS without any of the usual build-up about their destination and headed for the door. There had been no talk of strange creatures or stranger lands.

The Doctor's behaviour may have been out of the ordinary, but Rose reasoned that it must have had something to do with the sound.

Moments earlier, the extraordinary time and space ship had made an extraordinary racket that sounded almost exactly like it had a stone in its shoe. Rose knew fine and well that the TARDIS didn't have shoes to get stones into, so this was a worry.

She had come out of the kitchen and headed straight to the control room, where she saw the Doctor heading past the pale coral roof supports and out of the old wooden door and into the daylight beyond.

"Oi, hold on!"

"Hmm," replied the Doctor; he was distracted by his sonic screwdriver as it beeped and flashed in a way she had never seen it do before.

"Do you have any idea what we are looking for?" asked Rose in her most patient voice.

"Err... no.... but I will know it when I see it." He seemed very positive about this.

"And the beeping helps?"

"The beeping will tell me when we are close to the source."

Rose's patience was wearing thin, "The source of what?"

The Doctor stopped walking and looked directly at Rose as if she were a child. "The source of the temporal disturbance. Honestly, it's like I don't explain anything to you..."

"You don't. All I know is that the TARDIS started making a weird noise and then we stopped and you stormed off with that thing in your hand."

As if it were joining in the conversation, the bleep of the sonic screwdriver suddenly became slightly more frenetic, taking away the Doctor's concentration and causing him to walk off in a new

direction.

“Where are we anyway?” demanded Rose as she raced to catch up with the Doctor.

“You tell me, Rose Tyler.”

Rose looked around. “It’s cold. And it’s Earth... England.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because... unless we are in some pretty weird parallel universe, that’s a Ford Escort and that’s a Volvo.”

Rose was on a roll. She took a deep breath and smelled the air. “We’re near a river or close to the sea.”

“Correct on both counts,” the Doctor said, beaming. “Anything more specific?”

She looked over the Doctor’s shoulder and said, “We’re in Jarrow at a place called Bede’s World, near the river Tyne. Quite close to the tunnel, apparently.”

“Amazing! And how do you know that?”

“There’s a whopping great sign on the other side of the road,” said Rose smugly.

The Doctor beamed with delight. “Fantastic! Anything else?”

“It’s a World Heritage Site and it looks like the tea shop is open. Fancy a Hobnob?”

The Doctor flicked at the screwdriver until it stopped making a noise. “I don’t mind if I do. Grab your coat, you’re paying.”

Calder, son of Eric, had not always been the Viking warrior he was today.

He had been nothing more than a farmer with a sideline in jewellery making, when the Northern Lights had come down to the land to visit him and him alone.

It had been an ordinary afternoon in the fields when the storm had risen. It was a tempest unlike any he had seen before.

In a single heartbeat, the sky had ripped apart causing his flock to scatter and Calder to shelter under the nearest tree. From his refuge he could see the incredible colours swirl and pulse as the afternoon sun twisted and bent in the storm. Suddenly, a gash of darkest night filled the air above him.

Beyond the hole in the sky, the stars swooped and curved, with a single shooting star at its centre, resembling a pendant of the gods.

And then it was gone.

Like a vivid dream, it passed and seemed to leave nothing but a memory.

Calder shook his head as if to shake something loose, only finally to look up and see a small trail of smoke on the other side of the hill.

He ran, stumbling over loose rocks to see what was beyond the crest of the hill.

He arrived to find a short furrow in the ground, smoother than any plough could have made, with a small mound at one end. Calder could see something small and black embedded in the earth. He reached out and grabbed it. From that moment onwards, he was a changed man.

Now, all of these year later, he stood on the prow of the longboat and looked deeply at his left hand, examining the stone that had changed him so much. It was the shape of half an apple and blacker than a winter’s night. Across its surface a billion points of light.

The stone had taken him and his brethren on so many journeys. It had guided them from their homes in the West, across the seas to the fertile land again and again, only to have him return with a hold full of treasures and slaves and always an all-consuming feeling of loss.

Calder was their guide; he used the stone from the heavens, the obsidian map of the sky to point

the way, always listening to its silent whisper.

Until today – today there was no wind; there were no birds in the sky and only tiny ripples on the surface of the water beneath the hulking mass of the longboat.

Tentatively, Calder’s friend Tarben had suggested releasing the ravens in order to find the direction of the nearest land. Magic stones were one thing but the crew were realists.

Calder had told them to be patient; the stone would show the way. After all, it had never let them down before.

The tea shop was a small affair with a view over the river and beyond. Through the bay window, Rose could see the port with thousands of identical cars neatly lined up, ready for distribution around the world.

They had come in through the main entrance which also acted as a small gift shop, complete with pointless stationary and guidebooks. The woman behind the counter had a smile as wide as the Doctor’s and had welcomed them in like a seasoned pro.

“Welcome to Bede’s World, home of the Venerable Bede. As well as the Monastery and Visitors’ Centre, we have a special exhibition on at the moment with some of the finest examples of...”

“Is the coffee shop open?” interrupted Rose.

“Yes, it is. And we do a storming hot chocolate, pet.”

“Pet?” said the Doctor, worried that the TARDIS translation circuits might be on the blink.

“Aye, pet. The tea is nice too... I can bring it over if you like? Have you come far?”

Rose smiled to herself.

“Oh, about six parsecs as the crow flies,” said the Doctor absent-mindedly.

“Yeah you sound like you’ve come a long way. That accent... Somewhere in the South...? Manchester...?”

“South?!” sniggered Rose.

“Oh yes, pet lamb. Anything beyond Sunderland is the South as far as we’re concerned,” half joked the woman behind the counter.

The Doctor was clearly affronted and headed for the comfiest looking chair for solace.

“Your friend a bit touchy about his accent? Never mind. Now, what shall I get you?”

Rose ordered then joined the Doctor. “Did that woman really call me ‘pet lamb’?”

With a snort of derision, the Doctor busied himself with his screwdriver once again.

“I’ve ordered you a tea, if that’s all right...”

The Doctor didn’t answer.

“What’s up? Gone off in a huff because you aren’t quite northern enough?” She tittered.

“I’ll have you know I used to be Scottish. Is that northern enough?” he said, then stared out of the window. Whispering to himself, “And, for all I know, I might be again one day.”

Clearly she had touched a nerve. “You don’t half talk some rubbish... So... What’s all this about then?”

“I have my suspicions about what made the TARDIS...” The Doctor started to wave his hands about as if to explain something complex.

“...Make an appalling noise and put you in a bad mood?”

“Yeah! Only... it shouldn’t be possible. Not here, not now.”

The drinks arrived and broke the conversation. “One tea and one hot chocolate, both with complimentary biscuits. Enjoy your visit. Make sure you see the special exhibition and be careful of

that dig site. God only knows when they will be back.”

At the mention of a dig site the Doctor sprang to his feet, almost knocking over his tea. Looming over them was a fake monk.

Calder smiled. A smile that the crew knew of old. That magic stone of his was telling him something. The wind began to rise and they were on the move again.

The monk stood directly in front of the Doctor and Rose. His face was full of nervous energy, which Rose found more than a little appealing.

Suddenly the Doctor became tense. As Rose glanced in his direction, she could see that all of the usual warmth had evaporated from his face. He regarded the figure in front of them with the sort of suspicion he usually reserved for the galaxy’s most wanted criminals, rather than a man in a brown habit.

The two men faced each other in silence.

“Welcome to Bede’s World,” said the monk. “I am the Venerable Bede, born in 672 and died on the twenty-sixth of May, 735.” He paused for effect. “And I will be your guide today around my world. A world of knowledge and darkness and light and...” He paused.

“And inspiration!” shouted the woman from the counter. “Gary, the line is ‘and inspiration.’”

“You really know how to spoil the moment, Doreen... Anyway I thought the line was ‘and faith.’”

“They changed it at the last meeting, which you would know if you had been on time. You know, we never get this problem with Pete. Now *there* is someone who really inhabits the role.”

The truth dawned on the travellers. “Inhabits the habit,” joked the Doctor, his smile quickly returning.

Gary, the fake monk, was not happy with Doreen. “Look, it’s Pete’s day off and I am Bede today.”

Rose felt sorry for the man in brown. “Don’t worry... Gary, is it? I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it... Why don’t you tell us more about this place? Think of it as a practice run.”

Doreen was still unimpressed. “Shouldn’t you be with that school group?”

“They called and said they were running late. Engine trouble outside Middlesbrough, or something.”

“There you go,” said the Doctor. “Gary can tell us all about the place before the school gets here.”

“For a start, you can tell me who this Bede bloke actually was,” said Rose.

It felt like it had been raining for months. The land squelched underfoot. The sky, the river and the sea beyond were all the same dark murky grey.

Beyond the pond, where the trout waited until Fridays, lay the wooden fence which held the young goats, next to the tanning shed, where the living raw materials were turned into parchment and would form part of their greater purpose.

Beyond the rudimentary farm was the small, wooden jetty, the edge of which disappeared into the light fog over the river Tyne.

The mist spread its tendrils out across the land, and yet the sun was fighting through increasingly larger gaps in the gloom, allowing shafts of light to warm the land.

A small bell rang calling the monks to prayer, dragging them away from one form of devotion to another, their rough garments soaked from the constant drizzle.

The heavy air made everything sound so much closer than normal. The echoing ring of the bell was both muffled and yet piercing, and the constant bleating of the goats seemed more immediate than usual.

Most of the monks now stood in the chancel in silent contemplation while one, standing at a wooden lectern, was reading from the Scriptures.

As always, one of their number was not at prayer. Novice Randal had a considerably more earthly task to fulfil.

At the edge of the jetty, he sat listening to the sound of his brothers' devotions travelling gently on the breeze, while his eyes were firmly fixed on the horizon.

This was an important job reserved for the novices of the order, as the younger monks had better eyes and could see further.

It was Randal's job to keep a watch out for ships. Some would carry emissaries or pilgrims, while others brought those with darker motives.

It had been some time since the last Viking attack, but you never knew when an innocent looking trading ship would conceal different intentions. He did not know which would be worse: to die or to be sold into slavery. He had read the accounts of attacks on monasteries further up the coast. Such earthly horrors kept Randal awake at night.

For a fleeting moment, the sun fought the mist and won. At first Randal couldn't be sure. He blinked and strained his eyes. Yes, there it was, he was certain now. He could make out a black dot on the horizon and it seemed intent on heading their way.

As the Doctor, Rose and Gary (the fake Bede) walked away from the Visitors' Centre and down the small incline, the sounds of modern life went on around them. On the river, a gigantic tanker floated its way out to sea, while in the distance massive cranes were being dismantled. All around, the constant murmur of traffic impinged on this island of tranquility.

Gary explained as they walked, "In all honesty, I'm just an actor in between gigs... And a bit of 'theatre in education' always looks good on your CV."

"You were going to tell us about Bede," reminded Rose.

The Doctor interrupted, "Bede was a monk and a historian who wrote one of the first history books."

"I think she was asking me," said Gary, "but like he says, Bede was this priest who wrote... *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*..." He pronounced the Latin words with exaggerated care. "I knew I'd get that right."

"And what's that when it's at home?"

The Doctor couldn't help himself: "*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It's the first history book to use the AD system of dating. Without that book, you lot would know even less than you do."

Rose gave the Doctor a gentle punch in the arm. "Is it me or is it getting nippy?"

"Time displacement does that... Or it could just be the wind off the sea."

"I'm just glad I get to keep my thermals on underneath this habit."

“That’s hardly historically accurate,” joked Rose.

“And neither are his sandals.”

“I’ll have you know, if eighth-century monks had had access to Crocs as comfortable as these, they would have worn them.”

They were now getting closer to the actual monastery and could see it in more detail: a squat church made from heavy stone.

Gary continued with pride, “We’ve always got archaeologists of one type or another poking around. It’s not like when *Time Team* came...”

“*Time Team*?” asked the Doctor with interest.

“It’s a TV show. Now shush and let Gary tell us about the place,” said Rose.

Gary smiled. “Well, it was long before my time; they made a hell of a mess and they didn’t find anything much of interest, just a few pots and a lot of dead goats.”

“Dead goats?”

“Yeah, goat skin is what the monks made their special paper from,” explained Gary. “This lot are from the university; they only come a couple of times a week... The trench is just round this corner.”

The Doctors sonic screwdriver began to buzz once more.

Novice Randal ran for all he was worth. The mist had cleared enough for him to be sure that the oncoming ship was the Norsemen returning. They had reached the river mouth itself.

He had to raise the alarm. His feet pounded the soft earth, almost kicking a chicken as he ran haphazardly towards the church and his unsuspecting brothers.

The large wooden door felt as light as a feather as he pulled it open with all of his strength, the fear coursing through his body. Eyes turned to him and he shouted a single word: “Vikings.”

Every moment counted before an attack. Some of the older monks had sharp memories of times when the Norsemen had come and taken their friends and precious artefacts. Panic gripped them all.

Rose was not impressed; after all, if you have seen one hole, you have seen them all. “There’s not much to look at it, is there,” she said, stating the obvious.

The Doctor thought for a moment. “I don’t know, you can tell a lot from a hole.”

“You can?” asked Gary. “Like what?”

“Well, for a start, you can tell that there aren’t any archaeologists about.”

“I did say they only come a few days a week. In fact, I’m pretty sure they’re due tomorrow,” Gary explained.

Rose joined in: “Go on then Mr. Smarty-Pants, what else can you tell from this hole?”

“Well, the ground has been recently disturbed.”

“Yes, it’s a hole, someone dug a hole. They disturbed the ground. That’s how you make holes.”

The Doctor gave Rose the same sort of hard stare that Paddington Bear was famous for. “The earth at the bottom of the hole has been disturbed. There...” He pointed. “That line down the middle. The darker, dryer earth, it looks burnt.”

Now that the Doctor had mentioned it, it was obvious.

“I’m guessing it rained last night,” inquired the Doctor.

“Bucketed down,” said Gary. “Why do you ask?”

“Because whatever made that mark in the dirt happened after the rain and left a dry scorched line...” He peered into the ditch. “And as there are no muddy footprints, we know your students haven’t been anywhere near. I’m guessing whatever did it is still down there.”

“Ohhhh! Get you! The new Mr. Holmes,” Rose quipped.

“It’s a shame really,” said Gary.

“What is?” asked the Doctor.

“That we aren’t allowed down there to see what it is.”

“Tell that to Rose,” replied the Doctor as Rose jumped into the hole.

The monks had only moments to act but they had prepared. With a few swift swings of an axe, the jetty had collapsed into the river and now lay beneath the surface.

This would only delay the landing, but there was no point in making it easy for the invaders. The novice monks had very precise instructions: they were to go to the library and rescue as many of the books as they could carry.

Each one had been given a specific tome to protect. They were to run and hide in the woods, and only come back once it was safe to do so.

The older monks would defend the buildings for as long as they could.

Once Randal had reached the library, a small room off the cloister, he was pleased to see that most of the other books had already been rescued. Only one remained and it was in the hands of the old monk, Brother Bede.

The scholar was muttering to himself about the Norsemen and about how they would never take his life’s work.

In his hands he held his history book. Randal had yearned to read it for himself and hoped one day to do so. It had taken years to complete, and the old man was not going to let it go.

Quickly, the novice decided to do the only thing that was available to him: he would rescue the book and its author.

Together they would protect the book. The knowledge would not go up in flames like so much had done in the past. He was convinced that the Norsemen might burn the church, but they would not take these words.

By the time they left the small room, it was already too late – the Vikings had arrived, splashing and slashing their way on to the land.

Some of the warriors had split from the main force and were busy gathering up the animals, while the others burned the tannery. From the mists of the river they came, organized and strong. At their head was a single figure holding a sword in one hand and a small black rounded object in his other. The sword was already dripping with blood.

“We must go!” the young novice urged the older monk. Seconds later, the warrior was on them.

The jump into the hole was further than Rose had been expecting, but she had managed to avoid twisting her ankle. And, after all, any landing you can walk away from is a good one.

“Hold your horses, Rose, I’m coming down,” said the Doctor, as he jumped the short distance, much to the protestations of Gary.

“I only brought you here so that you could have a look.”

From his position in the hole, the Doctor looked up and smiled his goofiest of grins. “And that’s

exactly what we're going to do. We're going to have a look... and maybe a poke around. But mainly a look."

Gary gave in. "Hold on then, I'll come too... I suppose someone from the museum should be present."

"That's the spirit, come on down."

Gary slowly slid himself down the side of the hole, revealing the manufacturer of his underwear at least twice before arriving at the bottom.

"They're rather anachronistic, aren't they?" said the Doctor judgmentally.

"Do you mind!?" said Gary, as he straightened his robes.

"I'm only joking," said the Doctor.

"No, not you, her! I said, do you mind not poking about! Do you want to damage any priceless artefacts?"

"Since when is mud priceless? I just want to have a look."

Gary still seemed unimpressed: "You look with your eyes, not your hands."

Rose bent down. "I think there's something in there."

"Whatever it is, don't touch it. I want to take a reading," said the Doctor, pulling out his sonic screwdriver.

Gary moved forward, making a grab for Rose's shoulder. "I told you not to touch anything."

As he touched her, she must have made contact with the thing that had made the gash in the dirt. It was small and black, and looked as if it contained a million tiny dancing points of light in the night.

"I just want to have a..."

And then Rose and Gary were gone... leaving the Doctor alone in the trench.

Randal was terrified; his master held tightly onto his greatest possession, clutching it safely to his chest. They both knew they were about to die.

Randal knew that the Norsemen had no interest in the sacred words. Grimly, he realized that his last thoughts would be about the loss of the text, rather than concern for his own passing.

The old man suddenly seemed to be at peace, as if he knew his destiny and was willing to accept it without question. He pushed the novice to one side and urged the boy to run, forgetting the manuscript clutched in his hands.

The Viking was huge, at least two spans taller than the monk, and he had clearly seen battle. With a distant look in his eye, he raised his sword, ready to dispatch the old man. The monk simply held out a hand in friendship, his faith guiding his actions.

This caught the Viking off guard, and he froze with his sword ready to strike.

The monk touched the Viking's sword-less hand, breaking the moment. The sword came down and hit the book with so much force that it embedded itself into it. In the same movement, the old monk touched something smooth in the warrior's hand.

There was a flash like lightning... and both monk and Viking were gone.

Novice Randal stood in disbelief; had God taken his master and his attacker to heaven? Was this the Rapture?

Standing before him, where his master had once stood, there was now an angel with purest yellow hair and standing next to her, her herald, a monk in the cleanest habit he had ever seen.

If the Doctor had been surprised by the disappearance of Rose and Gary, he was even more surprised by the sudden appearance of the huge Viking and a more authentic-looking monk holding the tattered and smouldering remains of a book.

The angel remained still, in a crouching position, her hands held as if unexpectedly and suddenly empty of something that they had previously been holding. The look on her face told of her confusion, but then which of God's creatures would not be confused, after a fall from heaven?

The blinding flash had attracted the attention of all the Vikings. Randal watched their confusion as they struggled to understand the disappearance of their leader. For a moment, there was silence, then an uncertain muttering.

Randal knew enough of their strange tongue to pick out some of the words: "It's magic! Thor has taken Calder! What have we done to anger him? It's Freya! She's not taking me to Helheim."

As the young monk watched, panic set in and the Vikings ran, back towards their ship, abandoning their captured treasures and animals.

Randal felt a surge of pity for the Vikings, who seemed to have taken this angel for one of their own heathen gods, when clearly she had been sent from On High to save the monks from these savage invaders.

Rose gathered her thoughts. She was in almost exactly the same spot, only the ferry terminal, Visitors' Centre and car park were all gone.

The ancient church looked newer and there were more wooden buildings dotted around.

With astonishment, she noticed the group of people running towards the river – who seemed to be a group of Vikings. Admittedly they were Vikings without horns on their helmets, but nevertheless they were clearly the warriors of legend.

It also occurred to her that her sudden appearance may have grabbed their attention.

Not one to let an opportunity slip – the Doctor had taught her that – she stood up and looked directly at the young novice. "Hello, I'm Rose."

It was then she noticed Gary, the fake monk, lying at her feet, with an expression of utter disbelief on his face.

At the Viking's feet lay something the Doctor recognized. The Doctor smiled to himself in realization of what had happened.

Oblivious to his change in circumstances, the Viking raised his sword once more, taking the heavy book in which it was still lodged with it. He lifted the weapon high above his head and again prepared to dispatch the cowering monk.

"Oi, we'll have none of that!" shouted the Doctor as he brought his sonic screwdriver level with the new arrivals. The blue light on the end pulsed and the book on the sword blade burst into flames, showering the Viking's head in debris and breaking his concentration once and for all.

The Viking stood in silence, finally aware of his new surroundings. "What magic is this?" he spat.

"Now... I think one of you has something that doesn't belong to you," said the Doctor.

"Is this Valhalla? Or Helheim...?" continued the confused Viking.

“No, this is Jarrow. Just off the A19... Now, like I said... one of you has something that doesn't belong to them... Small black stone?”

Automatically the warrior raised his left hand. It was clear that he had no control over his actions: the stone was guiding him. With the Viking's palm open the Doctor could see the hemisphere reacting to his words, a million points of swirling light danced.

The Doctor spoke to the stone directly, “You are beautiful... and I think you're looking for your friend, aren't you?”

As if in answer, the pattern of stars shone in unison, and the stone slipped from the warrior's hand and into the Doctor's. The Viking's expression changed almost instantly, as if he had been released from a long captivity.

“Well, I think your friend is over here in the mud.” Carefully the Doctor took the Viking's stone over to the other, which remained embedded in the mud. Gently, he laid them together.

A white light glowed and then began to shine like a small sun as the two halves became a single ball of energy.

“I think we can leave those two to get reacquainted for a bit, don't you?” The Doctor turned his attention to the two confused humans.

“Now, did either of you see a girl in a white puffer jacket? She was probably with a very surprised-looking monk.”

The old monk ignored the Doctor's question; he was weeping at the smouldering remains of his life's work, now reduced to little more than a pile of ashes. He had used it to defend himself from the blow from the sword, but the stranger's wand had utterly destroyed it.

“Erm... Sorry about the book... Here, let me help you up.”

Once the Vikings had gone, things began to return to normal at the monastery. Even the novelty of having an angel among them had worn off after a few days.

Rose and Gary had settled in quite well. They had started by lending a hand where they could, and Gary had even suggested more than a few changes to the overall layout, using all he could remember from the scale model in the foyer of the Visitors' Centre.

He was experiencing life in the eighth century first-hand and was surprisingly adept at the general day-to-day tasks such as milking the goats. He had even taken to attending early morning prayers.

Rose was sure that Gary wouldn't have thrown himself into his new life quite so quickly, if she hadn't been able to calm him down and had assured him that the Doctor would be along to rescue them sooner or later; so they may as well make the best of things while they waited.

This news had cushioned the shock to his system, and being treated like a visiting angel wasn't something Rose was going to turn down.

She knew in her heart that the Doctor would arrive... sooner or later.

It was however the best part of a month before she heard the familiar tones of the materializing time machine in the cornfield that would one day be the visitors' car park.

With a familiar squeak, the wooden door opened and revealed the Doctor and a smiling elderly monk looming over the Doctor's shoulder.

“We just had to drop off a couple of friends before I picked you up. I hope you don't mind.”

Hiding her joy from her travelling companion, Rose said, “We've been here almost a month, Doctor. Honestly, for someone with a time machine, you really have no idea about time.”

“You haven’t been changing history behind my back, have you?” joked the Doctor. “I had this confused Viking to take home, but he seemed pleased enough to be back amongst his own people. And he did promise to give up on the pillaging and concentrate more on trade... so that’s okay then.”

“So who was this other person you had to drop off?” Rose asked.

Smugly, the Doctor explained, “Oh, that was just your standard sentient time- and space-travelling sphere.”

“Come again?”

The Doctor loved these moments: “That rock you touched... It was part of a couple who escaped the Time War.”

“A couple? It was a rock. Was it a ‘silicon life form’?” Rose grasped at a sci-fi reference in order to make sense of the Doctor’s words.

“No, don’t be silly, silicon life is incredibly rare. This was graphene life.”

Rose was catching up: “So it was a couple? There were two rocks?”

“Yes, a couple... You know... a mummy and daddy, pair bond, lovers... that sort of thing. And they were attacked... out there.” The Doctor pointed up, beyond the sky and towards the infinity of space. “They were split and they fell through time onto the Earth. One of them could influence time and the other, space. Together they’re quite formidable.”

The Doctor looked off into the distance. “You know, strictly speaking, they shouldn’t have been able come to Earth at all... Well, not after some bright spark time-locked this whole planet at the beginning of the War.”

Rose knew when he was remembering the dark times in his life, and touched his shoulder gently. “Doctor, sometimes I have no idea what you’re talking about. So are Mister and Missus Rock okay now?”

“Let’s just say a shiny rock found its friend and they have gone back home, amongst the stars... to start again.”

Novice Randal had heard the strange sound and came running from the other side of the buildings. He threw his arms around the old monk, before remembering his place and stood back, still contemplating the miracle of his master’s return.

“Thank you. You truly are an angel,” he whispered to Rose.

“Look Randal, we’ve talked about this... I’m no angel.”

“That’s true,” said the Doctor.

“It is good to see you again, Brother” said Randal to the old monk. “We thought we had lost you forever.”

The old monk smiled. “Don’t worry, my son, it takes more than an angry Viking and a few magic journeys to take me away from my work.”

“Do you still have the book, Brother?”

“Sadly, the book was destroyed... But we can still make another.”

“How?”

The old monk simply held up his hands as if in prayer. “The Lord will provide.” In the monk’s hands, Rose noticed a Penguin edition of Bede’s own famous history book.

“So how come me and Gary ended up here?” asked Rose.

“Well, the hemisphere in this time wanted to be with its partner in your time. It used your spare artron energy to shift itself through time... dragging you and Monkey Boy along in its wake.”

Gary had finally arrived, wheezing into view. “Rose tells me you can take me home in your magic box.”

“Magic box?!” The Doctor appeared to be affronted. “There is nothing magical about it. It’s simply a box that’s bigger on the inside that can go anywhere and anywhen... What is in any way magical about that?”

“So you can take me home again?”

“If that’s what you want, yes.”

“Hell yes! I’ve got a classroom full of kids, and I’ve got so much to tell them. Now that I’ve experienced life as a real eighth-century monk first-hand... I’m the ultimate in living history.”

“Well, let’s get you home then. Into the TARDIS with you both.”

Before the Doctor closed the door, he popped his head out for one last word: “Oh and Bede... One more thing... Try and check some of your facts will you?”

After saying his goodbyes, Gary headed out of the thing he had mistaken for a portaloos and headed across the car park, up towards the Visitors’ Centre. The genuine monk sandals made an odd scraping noise as he walked. Gary hoped that brother Randal would be happy with his Crocs and that the archaeologists wouldn’t get too upset if they found them in their ditch.

His head was full of new ideas about the things he wanted to teach the children – and according to the Doctor, the coach would be here in a few moments.

“You look awful,” said Doreen as Gary walked through the doors.

“This is one-hundred-per-cent authentic Dark Ages monk,” replied Gary as he headed to the teaching room, full of new-found confidence.

Outside the classroom, Gary paused to look at the new exhibition – Marginalia, the marks made by monks on manuscripts, beside the columns of text. He stopped to read an information panel, which explained how these doodles had revealed new and exciting facts about life long ago. The most mysterious of them all was from Bede’s history of the British people: a drawing of an angel with a Saxon inscription, “*Réðnes Heoruwearg.*” Underneath was the translation: “Bad Wolf.”

Before setting forth on that inevitable journey, none is wiser than the man who considers – before his soul departs hence – what good or evil he has done, and what judgement his soul will receive after its passing.

—*Bede’s Death Song*

Plague Doctors

by Dale Smith

The air was so thick with dirt and rain that you had to push it aside like a heavy curtain. The filth turned the cobbles into a riverbed, and every step forward was hard won. The cloud dipped low to wrap around the castle. Even if it hadn't, there would be nothing to see, except heavy doors, shut and bolted. No one ventured outdoors if they could afford to stay in. But even that wasn't enough to save them. People rich and poor were dying in their hundreds. Many more, they knew, would die yet.

The creature lurched out of an alleyway, its legs braced against the weather, its body bent double. Its thick leather hide glistened in the rain, but it mimicked – mocked – the shape of a man. It was as black as the night, barely visible as it trudged inexorably up the hill. On its head was a tricorne hat, at its side a leather bag. Its face was still and unmoving, a long hooked beak and two large shining eyes.

“Doctor!”

The creature's head jerked this way and that, until it caught sight of the bedraggled figure in the tattered military greatcoat. They waved for a moment from the alleyway, then ducked back away from the rain.

The creature started moving towards the voice.

The room was dark and smoke-filled, and the people filled every inch of it. Babes in arms, children who could barely walk, and the men and women who cared for them, with barely enough space to curl up and sleep in. Sometimes you would find generations of families crammed together in rooms such as this. Often, the inhabitants were related by nothing more than circumstances. Nobody paid it much mind: there were five more rooms just like it in the ramshackle little house, and a street full of houses just the same whichever way you turned.

The creature stood in the doorway for a moment, looking left then right. Nobody in the room looked. Nobody wanted its attention to fall on them. There was a fire guttering in one corner, and its light showed the hooked nose and round eyes to be a mask sewn from leather and glass. The leather hide was a long coat that went all the way down to the creature's feet. In front of it, the young man who had called in the street trembled uncertainly. Then he stood aside and gestured to a makeshift bed in the corner, standing aside to let the creature pass.

“You'll save her, won't you, doctor?” the young man said.

The creature said nothing. As it passed the fire, it pulled a blackened poker from its bag and dropped it into the embers to heat.

It hovered for a moment over the bed, as if gathering its strength. The only emptiness in that room was the dead space the inhabitants left around that bed. No one wanted to get too close, but no one could move too far. The mess of dirty wool moaned and turned. The woman was still young, although the disease had eaten away any vitality she had once had. Large painful lumps pushed at her arms and groin. The skin bubbled with blisters, blackened and swollen.

“God bless you,” said the doctor, his voice muffled behind the mask and herbs he used to keep away the deadly vapours.

He reached back into the fire for his poker, the end glowing red.

She screamed before the first blister was burst.
And was quiet again by the last.

The street looked barely any different in the morning. The rain was still hammering down, and the tenements stacked so high that barely any light fell on the crooked alley. The only difference now was that some of the inhabitants had left to find whatever work they could, but not all that many. Others spilled out onto the street, making the most of the greasy sunlight while they could.

Lizzie stood for a moment and took a breath. This was the house Doctor Paulitious had mentioned, on Fleshmarket Close, one of the alleys twisting off the Royal Mile. She didn't know the name of any of the families who lived on the close, which was a blessing. Each and every one of them knew who she was. Not by name, of course, but by the heavy shovel she carried over her shoulder and the white cross of Scotland sewn onto her tunic. Doors all around her slammed and bolted. Children and fishwives disappeared as if turned to smoke. It didn't matter: they were as safe as they could be for the time being. Today, it was just this one house.

The door slammed against her before she got within two paces of it. Lizzie took a moment to look up and down the close, but it was empty now. The inhabitants of the room didn't have any friends willing to stand between her and them. That was something, at least.

She swung the shovel from her shoulder and rapped against the door with it.

"There's nothing for you here," came a growl from within.

Lizzie braced herself, cautiously.

Nothing.

She rapped with the shovel again.

"She's dead," another voice, hoarse and raw, sobbed from within. "You can pass us by."

Lizzie hesitated.

"You know I can't," she said softly, mostly for her own benefit.

"We'll burn her," the first voice growled again.

"*We'll* burn her," Lizzie barked, and kicked the door through.

Lizzie let the blade of her shovel rest on the floor as she stepped into the room, knowing that otherwise it would scrape on the low ceiling. The room was emptier than it had probably ever been since it was pulled haphazardly out of the poisoned earth. Three men on their feet, two either side of her and the third between her and the bed. An ancient father and two grandmothers barely able to lift their heads to look at her, and a matronly woman, who had to have at least two strapping sons. There were no children in the room, not a one. On the bed lay the body, without even a sheet to cover it.

"Please," said the matron. "Just tell them we'd already gone."

"You know I can't," Lizzie said. "For your sakes. For your neighbours. You know this has to be done."

The man to her left lurched for her, hands grasping for her throat. Lizzie spun the shovel up and caught him hard under the chin, lifting him a few inches off the ground before he bounced off the wall. The one to her right grabbed the handle and pulled her backwards, off balance. She went with him, using her momentum to try to knock him from his feet, but he was a big lad. He clamped an arm around her neck and wrenched the shovel from her hands.

The man in front of her frowned and took a step forward.

“Now I wouldn’t do that,” drawled a gravelled voice from behind them. “If I were you.”

Both the men turned to see who had spoken. Lizzie took the opportunity to dig her fingers deep into the arm across her throat, and drop to her knees. The man behind her pivoted over her head and landed hard on the floor. Lizzie was already back on her feet, her shovel in her hand and swinging round to sweep out the legs of the last attacker. The matron made a noise, but a glare from Lizzie silenced her. The ringleader started to pick himself up, until Lizzie pressed the handle of the shovel deep into his belly.

“Well, I did warn you.”

Lizzie turned to see the man in the doorway. He was old; white spiked hair and a pointed beard made his head seem more egg-shaped than perhaps it was. The lines on his face said he had seen a lot of life, and his eyes said that he wasn’t happy about it.

Lizzie lay the shovel across her palms with implied meaning.

“D’you live here too?” she asked him.

Those sad eyes fixed on her. She fought to hide a shiver.

“Let’s assume for the moment I do,” he said.

“Right,” said Lizzie. “So where are the bairns?”

An hour later, and they were walking. The children had been rounded up relatively easily. The neighbours had made protective noises, of course, but all the same none of them had actually let the children into their homes. Everybody knew that the children were probably already infected. It was just that none of them wanted to be the one to say it. That was what Lizzie was there for. Most of the work of being a Foul Clenger was in being the one to blame. The rest of it was easy.

Two of the men carried the body, as carefully wrapped in dirty old blankets as they could manage. The third carried what meagre possessions they’d managed to scrape together. Lizzie would come back to the house afterwards and burn everything that was left. If she could, she would burn the whole tenement to ashes. But there would probably be another two families fighting to move in already, despite everything.

The matron carried the babe in arms, while the rest of them did their best to herd the children towards the gate and keep the old folk upright. The sad-eyed man kept pace with Lizzie, who was bringing up the rear to make sure nobody tried to dart away. She probably didn’t need to worry – the fight had gone out of them all now – but it was still her responsibility. He was looking at the other people out on the street that morning, braving the rain and the filth to scrape whatever living they could manage among all this death.

Lizzie looked at his leather coat, not as long as Doctor Paulitious’, nor as tightly buttoned. But perhaps cut from the same cloth.

“So are you a doctor?” Lizzie asked him.

For a moment, something flickered across his eyes. Then it was gone, and he gave her a sad half-smile instead.

“No,” he said. “No.”

He looked around at the people again. Not one of them looked back at him.

“Are they always this quiet?”

“They don’t want to attract my attention,” Lizzie told him, eyes on the road ahead. “They can’t keep the plague from their homes. But they like to think they can keep the likes of me.”

The sad-eyed man nodded as if he’d expected as much.

They walked down to the gate in silence.

The city gate was open for them when they arrived, and none of the watch got close. The sad procession had filed through in silence, only the dead woman's husband taking a last look behind him as he crossed the threshold. He'd probably lived all his life inside the city wall. Born, grown, met a woman who made a good enough match and settled down to start the cycle again. The idea that he might die anywhere other than the city probably never occurred to him. As wild a fantasy as being snatched away by the Faeries, or jumping up to the moon.

But the plague had ideas of its own, and so there they were.

The road sloped down to wind around the edge of the Nor Loch, the waters thick with whatever the people chose to throw down into it. Lizzie could see the two men eying the Loch hopefully: it wouldn't be the first body that had been committed to her watery embrace, nor the first still riddled with the plague. But Lizzie did the job properly. That was the only way to do it, or what was the point of it? The body would be burned when they got to flatter ground, all the danger gone to dust on the air.

"You don't know these people," Lizzie said to the sad-eyed man. "Do you?"

"Not personally," he admitted.

"Would've been better for you if you hadn't come through that door."

His eyes twinkled.

"Well," he said, "I could very well say the same to you, couldn't I?"

"It's my job," Lizzie answered firmly.

"Yes, but it doesn't have to be, does it? There are other... I'm sorry, what was it they call you?"

"Foul Clengers."

"Yes, there are others out there. You didn't have to do it. I can't imagine it makes you many friends in the city."

Lizzie could feel the bruises blistering up around her neck; the feel of the arm tightening there. The man who had tried to strangle her struggled on the uneven ground, trying to keep his wife's body from tumbling into the Loch. He looked back at her frequently, and the look in his eyes made it clear he would quiet happily finish the job given a moment's chance.

Lizzie's grip on her shovel tightened, and she kept walking.

"It has to be done," she said firmly. "The plague doesn't care for your compassion. It is the worst thing in God's creation. No conscience, no mercy, no pity. We can't let any trace of it remain."

"Yes," the old man agreed sadly. "But it's not just the plague you're banishing, is it? There's a cost. There's always a cost."

"Yes," Lizzie said softly. Just: "Yes."

Neither of them said anything more. Ahead of them, the two men stumbled and the body dipped close to the ground. Lizzie looked around. The ground was levelling out. The city walls loomed high up above them. The old man looked at her, but said nothing. This was far enough.

"Wait," she said.

The rain was easing off, just a light mist that hung in the air. It would soak them through before they got where they were going. Gently rob them of their warmth and life, drip by drip by drip. But the fire was warm and dry, for now. They all stood close to it, feeling it on their skin. None of them looked into it, except the husband. The widower.

“Come on,” Lizzie told them, hand on her shovel.
They started walking without another word.

They walked in silence, further away from the city, further from the walls. There was no path, but the fields had a track worn away by many feet trudging outwards, and fewer heading back. All the fight had gone out of them. The matron still glared at Lizzie when she could, but the men just trudged onwards. One of the children was crying. Lizzie thought she could make out the lumps rising in its neck.

She looked back to the thin trail of smoke rising into the sky behind them.

“You did what you had to do,” the old man said softly, so only she could hear. “What happened to the dead... in the end, it’s in the past. What happened, happened. Believe me that sometimes there’s no changing that. What matters is what happens next. What happens to the living. Sometimes... that’s harder to see. But if what you do prevents more innocent lives from being lost... I suppose that has to be all.”

“Don’t,” Lizzie snarled at him. “I know why I’m doing this. I know it has to be done. I don’t need you to tell me.”

The sad-eyed man looked at her, apologetically.

“I wasn’t telling you,” he said.

Lizzie stared into his eyes, deep into them.

“I can’t live with what I’ve done,” she told him. “What I’m doing.”

The old man nodded sadly.

“No,” he said. “I don’t suppose I will be able to either.”

He stopped, his hand going to his face to rub at his eyes. With a sigh, he crouched down to touch the damp earth. To feel it rubbing between his fingers, as if for the last time.

“But sometimes there isn’t any other way.”

He stood up again, looking over to the small knot of people stumbling away from the city. He looked to Lizzie, something nearly on his lips. But it didn’t come. Instead, he turned and walked away.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Lizzie had nothing to say, and the rest were too tired to speak. Eventually, they reached the hut. It was an old sheepfold that had barely been adapted for human inhabitants, with a roof barely draped across it. The ground around it had been worn to mud, and some cursory attempt at growing food had been attempted to one side. Whoever had planted the crops was long gone now: the hut was empty.

“That’s it,” Lizzie told them. “You stay here. I’ll be back again next month. You’re still here, I’ll bring you back. You come back before then, you’ll be hung, drawn and quartered in the town square.”

They didn’t look at her. Everyone knew that nobody ever came back.

“Lizzie!” shouted an excited voice from beside the hut.

He stepped out of a blue box that none of them had seen nestling close to the hut for protection, his arms stretched out wide. He had hair like an explosion and a tweed jacket which – combined with the accent – could probably get him killed back in the city. Lizzie would have sworn that she had never seen him before, not that that seemed to trouble him any.

“So glad I managed to find you. There was something I wanted to say to you when I saw you last.

But I couldn't. Well now I can!"

Lizzie caught herself looking into his eyes. His sad, old-man eyes.

"Sometimes there isn't any other way, Lizzie," he said, those sad eyes twinkling. "So that's when you have to make one."

He stepped aside from the blue box, and through its doors came a line of creatures, dressed like nuns but with faces like some kind of... cat? One of them held her hands out to the matron to take the wailing baby from her; after a moment's hesitation, the matron handed her over. Another cat took the matron's arm, touching her skin without fear or hesitation. Lizzie hadn't realized it had been so long since she had seen that done. Since before the plague. Longer, even.

"Don't be afraid," the young man was saying. "The Sisters are here to help. They'll fix you up, and then we can get going to your new home. The gravity needs a bit of work, but you get used to it. At least, that's what the others said."

"The others?" Lizzie echoed, confused.

The young man smiled.

"Everybody you ever brought out here, Lizzie. Everybody anybody ever brought out here. Everybody anybody ever will. I didn't have any choice, Lizzie: I made another way. I made it better."

Lizzie looked at him, this sad-eyed young man.

"So you are a doctor?"

And he smiled.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Six

by Nick Walters

SIDIAN VENTURER, PARTNERS IN CRIME

On the great river Ravuna, which wound in a glittering blue-gem ribbon through the centre of Mirabesh, Capital Island of the planet Besheshra, a magnificent vessel sailed slowly and majestically down the exact centre of the flow, dwarfing the pleasure and commerce boats, ferries, tugs and sailboats that plied their way along the mighty waterway.

Its hull was gleaming white in the noonday sun, almost painful to look at, and from pointed stern to shapely bow it defined the word sleek, and all those in the bars, bazaars, boozers, bistros and discos on the banks of the Ravuna who beheld it (with shaded eyes or from behind sunglasses) were consumed with teeth-grinding jealousy, heart-stabbing longing, and uncontrollable awe that such a beautiful artefact could exist.

As for those who sailed upon this object that it would be comically inadequate bordering on insulting to call a mere “boat,” who stood and posed on the wooden decking, who reclined in the sunloungers, who lounged in the sun bar, or who leaned the elbows of their expensive suits on the railings and gazed out at the riverbank either blissfully unaware or sneeringly all-too-aware of the psychologically crippling tsunami of envy hurtling in their direction – they were the greatest and best of all Besheshra, and a few other worlds besides.

This vessel was the Luxury Superyacht *Sidian Venturer*. It was the property of a lady.

This lady stood at the prow of the *Sidian Venturer*, before a small crowd of the most select of the greatest and the best aboard. All had partaken of the fancy food and drink available, and all, the lady hoped, were in a receptive mood – especially a pair of lizard-like aliens, who stood slightly apart from the main crowd, suspicious looks in their protruding eyes.

This lady wore a dazzling white dress which flowed around her like milk, secured at the waist by a belt of shimmering blue jewels. Her long black hair was tied back, and her long, almost-beautiful-but-not-quite face was shaded by a peaked sailor’s cap worn at a jaunty angle. On her feet she wore, for practical reasons only, white canvas deck shoes.

This lady was Proxetine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian. She raised her hands for silence and attention, and received both. Then she spoke:

“Ladies, gentlemen and aliens! I’m not a politician. I’m a businesswoman, with a sense of history. And I am also a native of this world, and today is a day of great historical significance for Besheshra. Our planet is not an island anymore. It is a leading galactic state, and I believe that this is the decade that Besheshra will become the galaxy’s capital, having cleared away the outdated. We’ve got mile after mile of acre after acre of land and ocean for our future prosperity. No other world in the galaxy has got, right at its centre, such an opportunity for profitable progress.”

Lady Inomasp paused. There was a smattering of applause and murmurings of approval.

She continued: “And I think it is important that the right people mastermind the new Besheshra. Proven people, with nerve, knowledge, and expertise. And that, ladies and gentlemen and aliens, is why you’re here today. All trusted friends. And why Chrrrl and Tynnn are here.” She nodded in the direction of the two lizard-like aliens. “Our Foamasi friends, to endorse the galactic nature of this venture. Let’s hear it, ladies, gentlemen and aliens. Hands across the galaxy!”

This time the applause was thunderous, the approval vocalized in shouts and cheers.

Lady Inomasp basked in it all, beaming in the blazing Besheshran sunshine.

It was all going so well!

But then...

“Oh bravo, bravo!” came a voice from the back of the crowd.

Lady Inomasp watched aghast as the greatest and best of the select of the select were shoved aside by... rather a handsome fellow. He wore a bottle-green velvet frock coat, cravat and waistcoat, despite the heat, and had a classically handsome face with piercing blue eyes and a magnificent head of slightly unkempt-looking brown hair.

Lady Inomasp raised her eyebrows. “And who might you be?”

“Oh, I might be anyone. But I’m really no one, no one special, unlike this lot.” He gestured vaguely at the crowd around him, who were regarding him with mixed hostility and amusement.

The man’s voice was casual, but persuasive; his mannerisms loose, his eyes mocking, but there was steel behind them.

Such insolence had to be seen, especially by the Foamasi, to be punished. “Lasers! Ginger!” Lady Inomasp clicked her fingers, and two burly henchmen stepped seamlessly and silently out of the crowd. One had a swarthy face badly scarred by laser pistol fire, the other sported a mane of wiry red hair. They each took one of the interloper’s arms.

He struggled against his captors, but they were too strong.

Lady Inomasp pointed imperiously at the glittering waters beyond the deck railing. “Chuck him overboard.” She turned towards Chrrrl and Tynnn, who were twittering agitatedly.

“No, no, wait! I have an invite! This time.”

“What do you mean, this time?” Lady Inomasp turned back to the stranger, who was now holding up his right hand. There, indeed, on the back below the knuckles, was the invite stamp for this gathering. The stranger was beaming up at her, idiotically. Then he frowned. “Well? Don’t you recognize me?”

“No.” She glanced at the Foamasi, who were being placated by a robo-waiter bearing a plate of cheese and pineapple on sticks. “Lasers, Ginger, chuck him overboard.”

The two henchmen began to heave the intruder through the crowd, who parted to let them through.

“Woah! Hang on! I’m the Doctor!” shouted the stranger.

Doctor. Lady Inomasp hesitated “Did you say – Doctor?”

“Yes!”

Lady Inomasp glanced in the direction of Chrrrl and Tynnn, who were happily munching on cheese and pineapple. They should be all right for a bit. “Lads, don’t throw him overboard. Instead, bring him into my cabin.”

Looks of disappointment passed across Lasers’ and Ginger’s rough, tough faces as and they dragged the Doctor away.

Lady Inomasp turned to face her guests. “Please excuse me whilst I deal with this matter. In the meantime, do help yourselves to more food and drink.”

Lady Inomasp’s cabin was amidships and spanned the entire width of the *Sidian Venturer*. A glass dome, beneath which holograms of sea creatures capered and frolicked, enclosed a suite of the most extreme luxury, furnished entirely in white. Lady Inomasp strode in, her deck shoes padding lightly on

the polished wooden floor.

She turned to face the Doctor and dismissed the henchmen, ordering them to wait outside for her command.

“So, Doctor. That invite is clearly a forgery. What are you doing here?”

The Doctor flopped down in a chair made from the bleached bones of a Besheshran killer whale. “Yeah, forgery.” He wagged his hand at her. “Good, though, isn’t it?”

“Stand up!” shouted Lady Inomasp. Despite herself, she was fascinated by this new Doctor – and attracted to him. He couldn’t be more different to the bumbling clown who’d crashed her party on Feleris all those years ago.

The Doctor stood, regarding her with a curious look. “You don’t seem surprised that I have changed my appearance?”

Lady Inomasp ignored the question. “What are you doing here? Why have you tracked me down after all this time?”

The Doctor smiled at her. “You know what I want.”

The penny dropped. Everything changed. *How long had it been?* Lady Inomasp stepped right up to the Doctor and gazed into his deep blue eyes. “Oh, Doctor... I can’t say I’m not flattered.”

A look of confusion passed over the Doctor’s face. “No! No no no... it’s my r—”

Lady Inomasp placed a hand over his lips. “Oh quit your babble, and kiss me,” she breathed. She closed her eyes.

“Why?”

“Why?!” Lady Inomasp opened her eyes. “Have you *seen* yourself?”

The Doctor placed his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her away. “Yes, yes. So superficial. I’m not human. Well, not entirely. I don’t have the same needs as you.”

Lady Inomasp just about resisted the urge to slap him. Her whole body shook with the rage and shame of rejection. “You passionless, milquetoast worm! How dare you toy with the heart of Inomasp! Typical Time Lord!”

“Oh, so you’ve been doing your homework on me?”

“Not that I discovered all that much. You are a Time Lord. You can change your appearance, and travel through time. You’re an inveterate and irreverent, irresponsible, incorrigible, incontinent fiddler and diddler in the affairs of others!”

“Well, I dunno about the incontinence...”

“I meant, you can’t help yourself! Can you?”

“Well, not where there’s injustice.”

“And is that why you’re here? You see injustice here?”

“I might.” He regarded her levelly. “You’re doing a deal with the Foamasi to carve up the development of this planet?”

“It will be good for everyone, Doctor. Good for the Foamasi, good for me, good for Besheshra. It will become a leading commercial power in this segment of the galaxy.”

“You’re biting off more than you can chew.”

“I know what I’m doing. I am and always have been a businesswoman, so what do you, feckless adventurer, know of the world of commerce?”

“Not a lot,” admitted the Doctor. “But I’ve seen enough to know I don’t like it, when taken to extremes. Ever heard of the Usurians?”

Lady Inomasp shook her head. “No. But, come now, Doctor, let’s put our differences aside. You might not appreciate my charms, but what think you of the *Sidian Venturer*? I said last time we met,

that one day I would come back to Besheshra and buy the biggest, most magnificent stonking boat the world has ever seen. Well, I have.”

The Doctor turned away. “It’s obscene.”

This was too much. A line had been crossed. “Don’t push your luck, Doctor!” spat Lady Inomasp. “Or I’ll keelhaul you.”

“I do believe that you will. Now I am seeing the true Lady Inomasp. You know, there’s something... *dodgy* about you, and all this wealth and power you possess.”

“Why – because I’m a woman?”

“No, because you’re a human. A typical, selfish, greedy human! Last time we met, you said your paranoia was sanity. That’s only true if there really are people out to get you. What was it you told me? You have enemies? Enemies and secrets. Well, why not be honest? Daleks are honest. You know where you are with them – they just want to destroy anything that isn’t like them. Cybermen, too – they just want to upgrade you. But people, humans like you? Power, money, fame, recognition – all for, what, your own pleasure? To pamper your own ego? Be honest, Lady Inomasp, and tell me all your secrets.”

Lady Inomasp stood in complete silence. Then she said four words, or rather hissed them, in a voice of coiling serpents, “You must be joking.”

“Very well. Your decision.” The Doctor pointed at her. “But I’ll check up on you one day. Other priorities at present, but I’ve got my eye on you. I’ll be watching you.”

“Oh, I’m soooo scared.” It was time she got back to her guests, in particular her Foamasi partners. She clicked her fingers. Lasers and Ginger entered the cabin. “Now you can chuck him overboard.”

Their smiles were terrible to see. The two henchmen grabbed the Doctor, and manhandled him out of the cabin onto the deck. Lady Inomasp followed. She folded her arms as her two henchmen lifted the Doctor high over the railing. He fell with a yell and landed with a satisfying, plunging splash.

Lady Inomasp smiled sweetly at her two henchmen. “Lovely work, lads, now go grab yourselves a drink.” Lasers and Ginger high-fived each other and lumbered off. Lady Inomasp leaned over the railing. There in the glittering blue water, the Doctor was swimming away from the *Sidian Venturer*, heading for the distant riverbank.

“Next time, Doctor, I shall not be so lenient!”

“Neither shall I!” came the distant, damp retort.

Lady Inomasp turned away, putting the meddling Time Lord out of her mind. Time to close the deal with her Foamasi friends.

Hands across the galaxy.

The Doctor swam to the riverbank, and was helped ashore by a pair of Besheshran coffee merchants. They were welcomingly solicitous, after his harsh treatment at the hands of Lasers and Ginger, and allowed the Doctor to bask on the first-floor balcony of their coffee shop to dry out, a pot of finest Besheshran blend on a table beside him, river water dripping from his clothes onto the dusty stone beneath him.

Thus refreshed, the Doctor thanked and generously tipped his hosts, then wandered slowly through the busy streets of Mirabesh until he found the small park where he had left the TARDIS. As always, she was a welcome sight, stationed unobtrusively in the shade of a tree next to the public

toilets.

Looking over his shoulder, half-expecting to see Lasers and Ginger thundering across the lawn towards him, the Doctor produced the TARDIS key from his trouser pocket and let himself in. He walked up to the console and flicked some switches, easing the time-ship gently into temporal orbit, his head full of Lady Inomasp. He couldn't quite decide if she was evil, or just an entrepreneur; and what right did he have to interfere, were she merely the latter?

The Doctor turned away from the console and headed towards the library – then it hit him.

“Oh no! My ring!”

The whole reason he'd tracked down Lady Inomasp had been to get his ring back – but she'd somehow distracted him from his quest, and his dip in the Ravuna had temporarily washed his mind of his objective.

The Doctor almost activated Fast Return, but decided against it. He didn't want to risk being keelhauled – would ruin his coat. He gazed down at his ring-less right hand, and sighed.

Never mind. There would be other times, other places.

Next Segment
NOVATRON STATION, ON A FAR FROM NORMAL
MONDAY MORNING

In a State of Grace

by Stephen Hatcher

Something was definitely “in the air.” In the three years that George Pemberton had worked in the Ministry, he had come to learn that there were days when not very much happened, other days when rather a lot happened and other days still when there was “something in the air”; and this day in the summer of 1896 was very definitely one of the latter days.

The signs were not difficult to read. The more fancifully inclined among George’s colleagues tended to speak of an almost electrical crackling in the air on these days, but as far as George was concerned that was nonsense. It was a much more straightforward matter than that. The level of coming and going was higher than usual. Serious-looking men in expensive suits moved purposefully backwards and forwards between offices, wearing an expression that said “something is up, and I am the man to deal with it.” Clerks scuttled, as only clerks can, from basement stores to conference rooms, carrying ever larger bundles of dusty, ribbon-bound files. Typists groaned under the weight of ever longer and ever more secret correspondence.

In the reception area, a procession of increasingly impressive members of the good and the great swept past George’s desk and up the stairs, presumably, if George had been inclined to speculate, towards the office of the Director. George, of course, was not inclined to speculate, beyond remarking to himself that something was very definitely in the air.

With luncheon appearing on the horizon, if not actually pulling up in a hansom cab outside the main doors, a sudden commotion caused George to cease contemplating his upcoming sausages, mashed potato and peas, and to witness the arrival of a visitor. In both size and dress, the man stood out from the crowd of faceless civil servants and politicians, who were the usual denizens of the Ministry building. George wondered for a moment if he knew him. The man was certainly familiar, if not at all run-of-the-mill. Of overlarge build and sporting a large beard, he wore a brightly coloured coat and a maroon and gold tie. He burst through the doors, turning as he did to address the cabbie in a booming voice, “Wait there, my good man. I won’t be long.” His whole bearing spoke of a general irritation and displeasure at finding himself here. As he strode towards George, he blustered loudly and angrily to himself and to anyone else who wanted to listen. George caught some of his words:

“The cheek of it... How dare they! Don’t they realize, I have better things to do than... I’ve told them, I want no more of this.” He stopped before the desk, addressing George before the astonished man could welcome the newcomer. “I want no more of it, I say!”

George couldn’t find the words to reply, so merely looked at the man and waited for his outburst to continue. There was a long pause before the man resumed.

“Well?”

George blinked, still lost for words.

“Well,” the man repeated, “is it not enough that I have come? I have obeyed your summons, now kindly have me announced.”

George recovered and smiled somewhat insincerely. “Good morning, sir. How may I help you?”

“I rather think it’s a matter of how I can help you, judging by the message I received. I was summoned, so here I am. Now kindly stop wasting my time further and have me announced to Sir Mortimer.”

The name of the Director brought George mentally to attention. “Certainly, sir. What name is it,

“sir?”

The man paused, pulled himself up to his full height and announced self-importantly, “I, sir, am the Doctor.”

The Doctor stepped out of the lift doors onto the fourth floor and followed the young man towards a large oak door. The man knocked and, in answer to the invitation from within, showed the Doctor into the room, closing the door behind him. The Doctor took in the scene: the large oak-panelled office was an impressive sight, as was the enormous mahogany desk; the man behind it, perhaps less so, but then so much of Sir Mortimer Charnley’s power came from the tendency of others to underestimate him. The Doctor knew that this was one of the most powerful men in England.

As Sir Mortimer rose to greet him, the Doctor’s attention was caught by another figure in the room, whom he hadn’t noticed before. Painfully thin, with untidy brown hair and wearing a badly fitting brown pinstriped suit, and what appeared to be some form of sports shoes, the man stood with his back to the window to the Doctor’s right. He reached into his top pocket and put on his spectacles, regarding the Doctor intently.

“Oh hello! Right, yes! Well of course, yes.”

Sir Mortimer turned to the man. “Doctor, allow me to introduce you to *the Doctor*. Doctor W.G. Grace.”

“Well yes, of course you are. I should say so.” The man bounded up to Doctor Grace and began shaking his hand vigorously. “Doctor Grace, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He paused for the briefest of moments, as if something had occurred to him. “Doctor Grace, I knew another Doctor Grace once. I suspect the name might be the only thing you have in common with her.”

Sir Mortimer continued, “Doctor Grace is one of my most dependable operatives, oh and he also happens to be England’s champion cricketer, the captain of the English Eleven.”

The thin man continued to pump Doctor Grace’s hand. “Of course, yes. That’ll come in handy. Couldn’t miss you, eh, W.G.? Can I call you W.G.? Or do you prefer William?” He didn’t pause for a reply. “W.G. it is then. W.G. Grace, perhaps the last of the great Victorians, the nation’s hero, an unmistakable icon of the nineteenth century... and with a great beard. Never could carry off a beard myself, sort of left that to ‘you know who’ really.” The words “you know who” were accompanied by the universal hand-sign for quotation marks and something of a wistful expression, neither of which left Grace any the wiser.

Seemingly without drawing breath, the Doctor continued, “Cricket, eh? Used to love that. Funny thing, I can’t remember why, come to think of it.”

Doctor Grace opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, he was distracted by a strange ringing sound. The thin man reached into a pocket and brought out some sort of device. To Grace’s astonishment, he began to speak into it. Even more surprisingly, Grace found that he could hear the faint sound of a woman’s shrill voice answering the man, although he couldn’t make out her words.

“Hello, Donna yes. Is everything okay?” The man looked momentarily concerned. “Oh, okay good... Shopping? Well, why not... Yes, I’m there now... Yes, you’ll never guess... W.G. Grace... Yes, the cricketer... I know... Anyway, I’ll see you later... Yes... Say hello to Professor Litefoot for me... Okay, bye.” He returned the device to his pocket. “Sorry about that. Now where were we? Oh yes... W.G. Grace! And they call you the Doctor. Well, that’ll be confusing. I’m the Doctor.”

Grace took the opportunity to speak at last, “The Doctor?”

“Yes, and before you ask, just the Doctor.”

“I see.” Grace gave the Doctor a long look of suspicion. He turned to Sir Mortimer, whom he found had returned to his desk and had been watching the two Doctors make each other’s acquaintance with an air of amusement. Grace awaited further explanation of who this Doctor was, but none came. “Sir Mortimer, can I ask why I have been brought here.”

“Doctor Grace, once again your country has need of your services.”

At the Director’s invitation, Doctor Grace took a seat and waited for Sir Mortimer to speak. The thin Doctor moved to stand behind the great cricketer, fidgeting excitedly, as if scarcely able to contain himself.

“Doctor Grace, Doctor, some information has come to my attention, which has a terrible bearing upon this nation’s security. It appears that certain forces, inimical to this country’s fortunes, have insinuated agents into the heart of society. As of yet, the specifics of their plans are not clear to us, but we do know that they intend to strike at the very existence of the Empire itself. Doctor Grace, it is vital that you discover their plans and that you thwart them.”

Grace stroked the impressive beard. “But Sir Mortimer, it is some years now since I last worked for the service, why have you found it necessary to call me out of my retirement?”

“Doctor Grace, as I said, these foreign agents are at the heart of society. What I have not told you is where we believe them to be operating. What makes you the only man who can investigate and thwart the plans of these foreign agents, is that it appears they have infiltrated the very Australian cricket team, against whom you will be leading the England Eleven, tomorrow at Lord’s Cricket Ground.”

Grace was dumbfounded. His first instinct was to rail against such a monstrous suggestion: “But Sir Mortimer, I can assure you that all of the members of the Australian team are personally known to me. They may be colonials, even the descendants of convicts, but I can assure you that they are all, to a man, gentlemen. Even the Players are Gentlemen.”

The thin Doctor observed this exchange, without comment.

Sir Mortimer continued, “I understand that, Doctor Grace, and I am sure that with regard to the majority of the colonials, both Gentlemen and Players, you are right. However, the information I have received is clear, the Australian team has been infiltrated. Whatever dastardly plan they hope to commit, is aimed at destabilizing the Empire itself, by striking at its very core. Now, am I able to count on you, Doctor Grace?”

Grace nodded. “Of course, Sir Mortimer.”

“And you, Doctor?” He turned to the thin man. “You have helped us before. Your arrival here at this time is most fortuitous. Can we count upon your help?”

The Doctor took a strange, buzzing, tube-shaped device from his jacket pocket and studied it intently. Sir Mortimer and Grace exchanged puzzled glances. The strange man spoke, his tone now serious, “Yes, of course. But judging by these readings, your problems are bigger than just a few foreign agents. Sir Mortimer, Doctor Grace, it may be that I’m the only person who can help you.”

William Gilbert Grace took guard, relaxed into that familiar batting stance and tapping the bat gently on the ground in anticipation, raised his gaze to take in the bowler. The man began his long run to the crease. Rhythmically building speed as he ran, a look which combined concentration and menace on his brow, feet pounding the compacted earth, he thundered in. He reached the stumps and with a whirl of arms and a great leap into his bowling stride, he released the ball... which bounced twice before

trickling along the ground towards the great batsman. Grace sighed to himself and clipped the ball off his feet into the netting on the leg side. In his head, Grace heard the familiar applause from the Members' Pavilion and cheering from the popular seats. If it had been a First Class match, the ball would have raced to the boundary and the champion would have added another four runs to his unequalled career total, but then a bowler quite this lacking in the requisite skill would hardly have been playing in a First Class match. It had been the tradition for many years on the morning of a Test Match to place a silver thruppence on top of the stumps in the practice nets and to allow club bowlers to test their skill, with the promise of the coin as their reward, should they bowl the great man out. Very, very occasionally a bowler of some ability would be unearthed. Today, Grace reflected, his money was safe. It was hardly worthwhile practice though, for the contest ahead.

Grace prepared to take guard again and the next bowler began his run-up. Just as the man released the ball, an insistent call came from the crowd behind the net, "Doctor Grace, hello there! I say! W.G....!" The ball happened to be more or less on a line and length; Grace's attention was momentarily distracted and it crashed into the off stump about halfway up. The bails were sent flying and the coin spun in the air before dropping to the floor. The crowd gasped silently. Grace retrieved the coin and handed it over to his conqueror, shaking the hand of the man, who would now have a story to tell his grandchildren. He beckoned to a teammate to take his place in the net and ended his practice session.

"Oops, sorry. Was that my fault?" The Doctor bounded over towards the great cricketer with an apologetic smile. Grace rolled his eyes in reply. The two men moved away from the crowd and found a corner in which to talk. The Doctor pulled the tube-like device from his pocket and flicked a switch. The device buzzed furiously. Doctor Grace looked on in puzzled interest. "I've been tracking this all night. Something, Doctor Grace, is definitely happening – and that something is something that should not be happening in England in 1896."

Grace felt as if something extraordinary was about to be revealed. It was a feeling that made him nervous, but he wasn't quite sure why. The revelation never came. The Doctor looked him in the eye and paused for a moment, before putting the strange device back into his pocket, switching it off as he did.

"No, I don't think so. Doctor Grace, I think you need to see what you can find out about Sir Mortimer's foreign agents. Leave this stuff to me. I'll see what I can find out and I'll see you later on, during the lunch interval."

Grace nodded. The Doctor turned with an encouraging wink and hurried off. As Grace watched him go, he wondered again who this strange man was and where he had come from. The very thought as to what the answers to these questions might be sent a shiver down his spine.

Just before ten to eleven, under bright sunshine, Grace went out to the middle with the Australian captain, the genial Harry Trott, and promptly lost the toss. Thus it was Grace's England Eleven that took the field first. The Australian opening batsmen Donnan and Darling were soon parted, and the early breakthrough soon turned into a rout as England's champion bowler Richardson ran riot. Three wickets were down before double figures were achieved and six before forty was scored. A little after the luncheon interval, the last Australian batsmen were trudging their way disconsolately back to the pavilion, fifty-three all out.

Ten minutes later, W.G. Grace and A.E. Stoddart took their places at the wicket to begin the England innings. Grace smiled encouragingly down the wicket to his partner. With the Australians

dismissed so cheaply, the match was theirs to win. Giffen bowled the first ball, which came cleanly off Grace's bat through the close fielders on the leg side for a single – off the mark. Grace settled to watch Giffen bowl the next to Stoddart, who also got smartly underway. No terrors here, the England captain thought to himself, before settling to receive the next ball. After a comfortable enough start, it was something of a surprise to see Stoddart go on seventeen, with the score on thirty-eight, but he was replaced by the diminutive form of the reliable Bobby Abel. Grace and Abel steadied the ship and saw off Giffen and Jones. Against Trumble and Trott, the pair began to prosper. With a perfectly timed clip off his legs to the boundary, Grace went to his fifty, raising his bat to the Members' Pavilion in recognition of the applause.

With the score on 143, and Grace on sixty-six, Trott surrendered to the inevitable and took himself off. Grace watched the Australian captain to see who he would choose to continue the attack and suppressed a chuckle when he saw him walk over to Cornforth. Grace and Cornforth were old friends and old sparring partners, with the key word being old. Grace thought back to that day at the Oval in 1878, when Cornforth had bowled faster than anyone had seen before; he was too good for the English batsmen that day, Grace included. Now however he was eighteen years older, the pace and fire had gone, and it was six years since he had last played in Australian colours. He had been following this team as a journalist and his selection for the Test Match had come as a huge surprise.

“Right ho, old man,” Grace muttered to himself. “Let's see how much of it you've still got.” He watched the old demon bowler with a mixture of curiosity and pity as he walked to the beginning of his run-up. Cornforth turned and stared at the England captain over his famous moustache and began running in. The old rhythm was still there as he ran, long dark hair flapping in the wind, but Grace knew that this was not the Cornforth of old. Cornforth bowled, or at least Grace presumed he did, because he saw nothing of the ball. He heard the thump as it hit the ground, felt the wind as it shot over his head and heard the gasps of the Australian wicketkeeper and slips as the ball continued over their heads to the boundary. The umpire signalled four byes and Cornforth returned to his mark.

The next ball pitched on a length and Grace got his bat on it, more by experience than by judgement. Cornforth followed through halfway down the pitch and stood glaring at the England captain. Grace returned the glare, unwilling to be intimidated. It was then that he noticed the peculiar stare of the Australian, expressionless, without recognition, without even a sign of hostility. This was a man whom Grace had known for eighteen years, but he did not know the man behind those eyes. It was a stare that Grace would have struggled to describe as human.

The third ball was a beamer, that most physically dangerous of accidental deliveries. It shot straight through Grace's beard, past the wicketkeeper, hitting the boundary boards on the full toss. Grace heard the astonished whistles of the Australian fielders and the concerned apology of Trott, “Sorry, Doctor, she must have slipped.” Cornforth said nothing.

Grace didn't see the ball that bowled him. He glanced ruefully at the shattered stumps, took off his gloves, tucked his bat under his arm and set off back to the dressing room. As he approached the pavilion, the crowd began to applaud in recognition of a good innings, albeit one brutally terminated. It was then that something occurred to W.G. When he was out, Trott the Australian captain had shaken his hand in commiseration and congratulation, but his old friend Cornforth had done no such thing and had just returned immediately to his mark, to await the arrival of his next victim. In many ways, that was even odder than his newly rediscovered ability to bowl like the demon of old. Something was not right.

As the two English batsmen led the teams off for the tea interval, they were observed from a balcony high up in the pavilion, where the English captain joined the Doctor. The two men spoke the same word simultaneously, "Cornforth!"

"Cornforth," repeated the Doctor. "So you noticed it too. There's something odd about that man."

Doctor Grace nodded. "Absolutely, he's not the man I've known for so many years. Somehow he's different."

"Look." The Doctor indicated the scene on the boundary, where the tall figure of Cornforth was in deep conversation with another, smaller man, also in cricket whites and sporting an Australian cap. "Who's he?"

"That's Carter, the Australian twelfth man."

"Mr. Cornforth and Mr. Carter appear to be as thick as thieves, wouldn't you say, Doctor Grace?"

"Hmm, quite so, Doctor. I rather think we should keep an eye on both of them."

"Good thinking. You take your friend Cornforth, and I'll see what Mr. Carter is up to. Just one thing, Doctor Grace: don't do anything to put yourself in danger. This may be beyond what you are used to."

Grace didn't reply, other than by giving the Doctor a meaningful look. "I must rejoin my teammates." He stood and began to leave. "I will see you at the close of play, Doctor."

The Doctor replied distractedly, still watching the two Australians intently, "Right, yes. See you later... One last thing, Doctor Grace..."

"Yes, Doctor?"

The Doctor flashed the great cricketer a broad smile. "Well played."

By the close of play, England had lost their remaining wickets. Cornforth had continued to bowl for a while. For an over or two, he had managed to keep up the terrific pace that had accounted for Grace's wicket and he had removed Bobby Abel too, but then the aggression seemed to disappear without warning. After an over of decidedly medium-paced and rather mediocre bowling, he was replaced by Giffen, who together with Trumbull wiped up the English tail. The Australian openers came out to begin their second innings 225 runs in arrears and despite the odd awkward moment against Richardson in particular, managed to see out the day without loss.

As the players left the field, Grace watched the Australian team come out on their balcony to applaud their batsmen in. He noticed the absence of Cornforth almost immediately. Where was he? Those keen eyes scoured the pavilion and found him. There he was, crossing the Long Room, behind the applauding Members. Grace left his teammates to get changed and took off after the demon bowler.

The concept of stealth was difficult for W.G. to pull off. Once seen, his immense stature and instantly recognizable beard were impossible to forget. Even without these distinguishing features, his achievements on the playing fields of England and Australia, where for more than thirty years he had achieved things with both bat and ball that no cricketer of previous generations had come close to, had made him instantly recognizable to all classes of society, in all parts of the Empire. It had been many years since he had passed anywhere unrecognized. The Lord's Long Room, during a Test Match against Australia, was very probably the last place on Earth in which the great cricketer might hope to pass incognito. He didn't waste time in entertaining the idea, instead taking the time to enjoy the adulation.

He was reaching an age when time was catching up with him. Almost all of his contemporaries had long ago retired, or worse. His thoughts passed for a moment to poor Fred, his late younger brother, perhaps the most talented cricketer of them all, who had gone so young. W.G. had been luckier, but his glorious career was reaching its end. He had already noticed that his eyesight and timing were beginning to diminish, and his faster ball was no longer the threat it once was. No, he would hang on a while longer, but retirement beckoned – and with it obscurity, as those who remembered his great feats grew old themselves and younger men found new idols. His records would be broken, he was sure, but whoever did so would have to be a true master. With a gracious smile, he made his way through the throng of Members, acknowledging each congratulation or kind word: “Well done, Doctor. Got ‘em on the run now. You’ll finish it off tomorrow. Good to get one up on the Aussies, eh?” With a glance to the far corner of the room, he noticed Cornforth, slipping anonymously through an unremarkable service door.

It took Grace a little while to cross the room. With a final wave to his public, he passed through the door. The contrast could not have been more marked. Leaving the crowds and the opulence of the Long Room, Grace had entered a dark corridor, which presumably led to the kitchens. In all these years coming to Lord’s, Grace had never been this way before. It was one of those areas used by stewards and waiters, where the cricketers and Members never had cause to enter. There was no sign of Cornforth, but there was only one direction that he could have gone, so Grace followed.

After a minute, he was faced with a choice as the passageway divided. To the right was a door to the kitchens, behind which Grace could hear the sounds of activity as the last remains of tea were being cleared away, prior to the preparation of the Members’ dinner. A small round window allowed Grace to peer through unseen. No sign of the Australian bowler. The other way then: a rough staircase leading downwards towards the basement.

Taking care to make no sound, Grace descended and found himself in another, darker corridor. He allowed his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness and took in what he could see. Four doors, all closed, all in darkness. But no, there! The farthest door, the third on the right – it was faint, but he could see a red light coming from around it. He approached the door and put his ear to it. He could make out a faint humming, like an electricity generator, but were there voices? No, he didn’t think so.

Carefully, he tried the handle. It turned. He opened the door just enough to see though. In the darkened room, he could make out some sort of medical or scientific instruments, although as a medical man himself, there was little here that he recognized. Some of the equipment was glowing gently, providing the red light he had noticed. There seemed to be no one here. Grace stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

It was a large room, probably an old wine cellar, he reflected. However, in spite of the cavernous space, it did not take him long to take in the strange equipment standing in banks around a central operating table – one of the very few things in the room that he did recognize. Along the far wall stood a row of what looked like large bell jars, each the size of a man. What caught his attention, however, was the figure on the table – Cornforth. He was completely still, eyes closed. Grace examined the figure. He wasn’t breathing, and there was no pulse. “Dead,” he whispered under his breath.

He heard a noise in the corridor. Someone was coming. Hurriedly, he took shelter behind one of the equipment banks and held his breath. Just in time, he managed to get out of sight as he heard someone come into the room. He risked a look and got away with it. It was Carter. Unseen, Grace observed the Australian twelfth man who had his back to him and was studying one of the pieces of

medical apparatus, occasionally twisting a dial or flicking a switch. After seeming to establish that things were working to his satisfaction, Carter went over to the inert body of Cornforth and began examining him, raising first one then the other eyelid and peering into the dead man's eyes. To Grace's relief, Carter then turned and left the room.

W.G. Grace paused a moment to be sure that the coast was definitely clear, then moved over to Cornforth. He re-examined the equipment that Carter had adjusted, but could learn nothing from the curious shapes and symbols that adorned it in the place of any legible numbers or letters. He moved over to the corpse. With a momentary pang of regret for his late former friend, W.G. again checked for a pulse. Nothing. He bent over the cadaver to confirm what he had already ascertained, that Cornforth was truly dead. He could hear no breathing.

In an instant, the matter was put beyond question. Cornforth's eyes shot open to reveal a dead stare of cold malevolence. Grace felt a hand grasp him by the throat and he began to choke. Cornforth sat upright and wordlessly tightened his grasp on the Doctor's windpipe. Grace struggled, but against such preternatural strength it was useless. He couldn't even call for help. He was beginning to black out when he became aware of a figure over his left shoulder. He felt the needle enter his arm. The grip on his throat was released, but by now whatever Carter had injected him with was taking effect. As he fell to the floor, he felt himself lose consciousness.

"Donna! Donnity, Don, Don, Donna!" the Doctor roared enthusiastically into his mobile phone. He winced and pulled the phone away from his ear, before continuing in a more subdued tone. "No, no, sorry! No, I won't do it again! Where are you...? Professor Litefoot's house...? Dinner...? Dinner, Donna. Dinnerdonna, Donnadinner. Ooh, I like that! No... Sorry!

"So, dinner, lovely... No, I'm not going to be able to. Things are happening here that I need to sort out. Yes, with W.G. Grace... Well, we've become quite good friends... Yes, I know... No, no... No! Please tell the Professor and Mr. Jago to enjoy their meal and leave it to me. There's nothing they could do here. No, that's right. There's definitely something going on of an extraterrestrial nature. Those signals we followed, yes. And the disturbances to the timestream too, yes! It's all connected and with the help of me old mucker W.G." – the Doctor chuckled to himself – "I'll get it all straightened out and I'll see you here tomorrow... Who's coming...? Oh right, you'll like him... One thing, if he thinks you are a boy, don't worry about it... No, Donna, I know you don't look anything like a boy, it's just his way... Okay then, see you tomorrow.

"Oh, and one last thing... Mind your table manners... Donna...? Donna...?" The Doctor smiled to himself and put the phone away.

Most of the Members had dispersed by the time the Doctor entered the Lord's Long Room, some to homes in the suburbs or to hotels of varying degrees of luxury; some to gentlemen's clubs in St. James; and some to the Lord's Dining Room, where they would eat before making their way to any of the above. The Doctor reached into his jacket pocket and took out the sonic screwdriver. He adjusted it, causing it to buzz insistently but quietly. He held it out in front of him and began sweeping it towards the wide glass windows, which gave the best view in the ground over the playing area. Immediately the tone of the buzzing lowered. The Doctor swept the screwdriver around the room, the tone remained persistently low, but then changed, increasing in pitch until it was positively whistling.

The Doctor smiled to himself as he opened the inconspicuous service door and entered the dingy

corridor beyond. He followed the buzz of the screwdriver along the corridor, down the stairs into the basement to the closed door. He tried the handle, found it unlocked and slipped into the room.

He saw the large inert body of Cornforth on the operating table immediately and took in the banks of equipment. "Hello, what do we have here then? Ooh, now that's interesting!" His examination was curtailed by what he saw next. At the back of the room, standing upright under a large dome made of some sort of plastic, was an ample figure that the Doctor would have recognized even if it was not wearing one of sporting history's most famous beards. The figure was wearing some sort of metallic headset, which flashed with red, green and yellow lights. "Well hello, Amazing Doctor Grace. What have they done to you?" The Doctor had little difficulty in lifting and removing the plastic cover. He waved the sonic screwdriver over the headset, which stopped flashing immediately, and removed it from Grace's head.

W.G. Grace opened his eyes and blinked wordlessly, bringing himself back to consciousness. He tried to step forward, almost fell, but caught himself and brought himself upright. "Doctor? What's going on...?"

Without saying a word, the Doctor indicated the next plastic bell jar. Grace looked at what the Doctor had seen: it contained another figure of around the same size and stature of Grace. Although rough and unfinished, it was quite clearly a replica of the great cricketer himself.

The Doctor moved to investigate further, but was interrupted by a shout from his companion. He turned to see Grace being attacked by Cornforth, newly resurrected from the operating table. He had Grace by the throat, pinned up against a vacant bell jar. In his youth, Grace would probably have been able to put up some sort of fight, but now approaching his forty-eighth birthday, he was no match for the giant Australian. The Doctor came to the rescue. Reaching behind Cornforth's right ear, he pressed gently and the attacker froze. Grace gently removed the fingers from around his throat and stepped away, leaving Cornforth standing where he was.

The Doctor allowed W.G. to get his breath back before checking on his health: "Are you okay, Doctor Grace?"

"I am fine, Doctor. But that's no man. What is that creature?"

"An android."

Grace repeated inquiringly, "Android?"

"Yes, an android, a mechanical man. At some point, your friend Cornforth has been replaced by this artificial creature, in order to carry out some plan or other. Now, I wonder what...? Yes, that would make sense. And if..."

"Doctor, Doctor please! Could you perhaps finish at least one of those sentences? What exactly is going on – how can a man be a machine and what does it have to do with the Test Match?" He indicated the unfinished android figure of himself under the bell jar. "And who or what is that?"

The Doctor began removing the cover from the replica of his friend. "Well W.G., this is you, or at least it was going to be, and if we don't do something about it, it still could be."

Grace stepped up and helped the Doctor to remove the cover.

The Doctor continued, "Whoever is behind this has replaced Cornforth, and perhaps others – and was going to replace you – almost certainly with the intention of committing some sort of outrage. Imagine the reaction in England if a member of the Australian cricket team were, for example, to assassinate Queen Victoria."

"But the Australians won't be going anywhere near Her Majesty."

"Well, not that then, but something, something big... As I'm sure you are aware Doctor Grace, cricket matters to you English. There will come a time when an English fast bowler, bowling leg-side

bouncers at the Australians, will almost bring down the Empire. Some sort of incident, here at Lord's could be catastrophic. It could alter history. Doctor Grace, I came here tracking a temporal anomaly. This is a point where the future of Earth is at stake. Someone is trying to change the future. The century that is about to start will see enormous developments in engineering, science and technology that will eventually lead humanity to the stars. Whoever is behind this is trying to stop that future from happening and to leave the Earth of the future vulnerable to its enemies."

Grace looked puzzled. "Enemies from outside the Earth itself? Martians, then?"

It was the Doctor's turn to look puzzled. "Eh, what? Martians? No... Well yes actually, maybe, but probably not. Suffice it to say, Doctor Grace, that this world has enemies."

"Indeed it does." Neither Grace nor the Doctor had noticed Carter come back into the room, until he spoke. They turned to find him pointing what was clearly some sort of weapon at them. "Now gentlemen, please move away from the android." They obeyed.

"Quite a good likeness, do you not agree? Or perhaps not just yet, but once we get you back into the machine and finish the process... And you will be only the first Doctor Grace. Your Time Lord friend here has got it right, or very nearly." Carter addressed the Doctor for the first time, "I have got that right, haven't I – you are a Time Lord?"

The Doctor nodded. "I'm the Doctor and yes, I am a Time Lord."

Carter smiled. "Imagine the scene, gentlemen. Tomorrow, at the conclusion of the Test Match, with the cream of society looking on, members of the England team, my androids, led by their heroic captain Doctor William Gilbert Grace, turn on their Australian opponents and with their bare hands, tear them apart. Then they turn to the assorted dignitaries present and kill them too."

Grace shook his head. "Monstrous, the diplomatic fallout would indeed be appalling."

Carter continued, "The Empire would fall and the Earth would be on a new course, leaving it open to my masters."

The Doctor looked up keenly. "Your masters? Now who would they be? I've heard someone talk like that before"

"I'm sure you can work that out, Doctor. Think about it while you are in the machine." Still covering them with the weapon, Carter reached over and flicked a switch on an instrument panel. Two of the bell jar covers began rising. Carter indicated that the pair should move underneath the covers. "Sadly, gentlemen, you will not be witnesses to the great events of tomorrow, you will..."

Carter's speech was interrupted as he was shoved violently against an instrument bank. The weapon fell to the floor and slid towards the Doctor, who picked it up deftly and pocketed it. The W.G. Grace android had come to life and was attacking Carter. The unfinished android briefly held the upper hand, but as Grace and the Doctor watched, Carter began to achieve dominance, forcing the Grace android to the floor, where he lay immobile, save for a gentle twitch. Seeing his chance while Carter recovered, the Doctor approached him unseen from behind, reached out and pressed behind his right ear. As Cornforth had earlier, Carter froze where he was.

"But he's..."

"Correctamundo, W.G. Mr. Carter here is another android, working in the service of one of the Earth's enemies. Luckily, your duplicate over there, Doctor Grace, had enough of the real you in it to allow it to help us out. Now, let's just make sure that all of these androids are completely and permanently deactivated..." The Doctor took out the sonic screwdriver and pointed it towards the two androids. The screwdriver emitted a high-pitched buzzing and the androids lay still."

"Doctor!" The Doctor could hear the urgency in the cricketer's voice. "It's Cornforth. He's gone!"

“Come on!”

The Doctor ran out, followed at some distance by W.G. Grace, but there was no sign of Cornforth. He turned to his companion. “Doctor Grace, go and talk to the people in charge upstairs, get the pavilion cleared. I’ve got a feeling that we might be in very great danger. I’ll find Cornforth.”

Such was his standing among the great and good of the MCC Committee, that W.G. Grace’s request that the Lord’s Pavilion be cleared was met with no resistance, other than a little good-humoured grumbling from some of the older Members. Grace left them to it and set off to find the Doctor.

Coming out onto the playing area and looking back at the now empty Pavilion, he saw him almost immediately on the home players’ balcony. Grace ran back into the Long Room, through the doors to the main stairs from which he had so often emerged on his way to compile yet another great innings, and raced up to the home dressing room. The Doctor stood with his back to him in the door to the balcony, looking down on the figure of Cornforth, who lay curled at his feet. The Doctor’s hand shot back in warning.

“Stay back, Doctor Grace, you need to get out. It’s damaged – I think it might explode.”

Grace ignored the instruction and came to stand behind the Doctor, who shot him an irritated look. “Can you humans never do as you are told?”

Grace became aware that Cornforth was trying to say something.

“Must... must... must...”

The Doctor began to raise the sonic screwdriver.

“No... no... Must... must... Must terminate.”

The Doctor lowered the screwdriver. He spoke gently. “Terminate. But Cornforth if you do that, you’ll take all of Lord’s Cricket Ground and quite possibly most of London with you.”

“Must terminate, now. Must terminate.”

“But you could have done that already. Yet, you haven’t, have you. What’s stopping you? I rather think something within you is holding you back. Something of the real Cornforth, perhaps?”

The android ignored him. “Must terminate... must terminate...” The android’s voice was growing louder and more insistent.

The Doctor gave a resigned look. Almost quicker than the eye could see, he had raised and used the sonic screwdriver. The Cornforth android fell silent and still.

W.G. Grace realized that he had been holding his breath. He allowed himself the luxury of exhalation. “Is it over?”

“It’s over.”

Lord’s Cricket Ground on a sunny afternoon was an idyllic sight. With the Australians all out in their second innings, the outsized Doctor Grace and little Bobby Abel were an incongruous pair, but they were getting the job done for England. In the stands, the Doctor and his friends looked on with varying degrees of interest and comprehension. They were an even more incongruous group, but the Doctor was a Member and they were all friends of Doctor Grace too, so no one queried their presence. Even the fact that one of the party was a woman was allowed to pass on this one occasion, given the special circumstances.

Henry Gordon Jago was studying the scorecard that he had been filling in as the runs were knocked off. He turned to his companion, an older man, who had been following play intently.

“Dashed shame, Professor, that poor cove Cornforth having to pull out of the game. Twisted ankle, apparently.”

“Quite so, Henry. It’s always nice to beat the Australians at full strength. Apparently their twelfth man is injured too.”

The Doctor suddenly realized that Donna had been talking to him for a while:

“So who was it then – go on, Doctor, you’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you?”

He shook his head as if to clear it and looked at her. “Who was what, Donna?”

“Have you not been listening to me?”

“Listening? Yes, yes, of course. Well no, actually. What? Who was what?”

“Who was behind these androids then?”

“Well, it could be one of many. Kraals... Kraals like androids, yes, maybe Kraals. Or the Master, but no, of course not. Chameleons then... but hang on, they weren’t androids. You know, Donna, the best androids I ever saw were on the planet Tara... absolutely extraordinary”

“So it was them, then.”

“Who?”

“Those Taranians, Tarasians – I don’t know, what do you call them?”

“No, no, not them.”

They were interrupted by a loud cheer that went around the ground, mixed with cries of “Well done, Doctor!” and “You’re the champion!” For a moment, the Doctor almost started to acknowledge the acclaim, before he realized it was aimed at his new friend, the great cricketer, who had stepped out and driven majestically to the long off boundary to reach his century.

The Doctor glanced at his friends. “The Earth is far from out of danger, Donna. We’ll have to see how things develop, but with good people like Doctor Grace, Mr. Jago and the Professor here on hand, at least there will be a defence.”

A loud cheer interrupted him as the crowd greeted another boundary. The Doctor jumped to his feet and joined in the applause. “Come on, Donna, there’ll be time to worry about that later. Just for today, let’s enjoy the cricket.”

How to Kill God

by Ian K. Cimm

HOW TO KILL (A) GOD: A GUIDE IN FOUR EASY STEPS

1. Believe. The key to all slaying of gods is belief. Without belief, the gods are as nothing: ephemeral jetsam that cannot be touched or even sighted. Belief makes them visible, tangible, provable, and therefore killable. Belief is key.
2. Polytheism. Think believing in one god is hard after a lifetime of avowed atheism? Try suddenly believing in multiple gods: and not just a dozen or so, but hundreds. The God of Bad Days, the God of Grief, the God of Literature, the God of Storms, the God of Procrastination. That's just a handful. Just as all experiences and facets of life have names, labels and protocols, so each has a representative god. Where crossover exists (the God of Hangovers and the God of Alcohol, for example), there are bound to be close ties and potentially fractious relationships abound. Use these: gain trust, sow seeds of malice, and then strike.
3. Power. A god does not become a god without some sort of power, in the same way a bumblebee cannot fly without wings, or a dancer dance without poise. Gods and their power come in a variety of strengths, potency and effects. Worse still, slaying one god of one discipline will merely leave that position vacant for the next occupant: think of it like the President standing down from Office. Elections follow, candidates snipe, and the majority vote in the successor. Gods or no, admin remains admin.
4. Research. So, you've decided to kill a god. Well done you: now go and do some heavy reading. Know their powers and work out a variety of counters (have an alphabet of alternative plans at your fingertips should Plans A through to P go awry). Believe completely in the presence of higher beings, but do not subscribe to their infallible nature. Train and practice, if possible with some lesser-powered deities first.

And most importantly? Have fun out there. It's not every day you get to do this sort of thing, so make the most of it.

*Liam Bright,
Operative Team Leader*

“Join the Operatives now and save your planet!” read Alice Haze aloud, her eyes tracing the lines of text above the propaganda. The letters floated eerily above an image of five perfectly uniformed employees, posing with hair gently floating in a breeze and eyes gazing straight ahead, blinking occasionally, as their chests contracted and inflated with steady breaths, and they all looked a bit uncomfortable. The trouble with this sort of image, of course, is that it works wonders as a still or poster, but with video making a comeback as the in-thing for advertisers, the poor people paid to pose here just looked increasingly fatigued. The video looped after roughly twelve seconds (Alice had counted, many times) and around eleven seconds in, you could see the guy at the front start to lower

his weapon, creating a poor join as the video started over.

Well-meaning but incredibly flawed. So is the poster, so is the job.

“Fitting,” muttered Alice, and drained her cup of coffee. The strip lights above her head flickered on and off, and she sighed. Maintenance were meant to have sorted this a while back, but as ever it had somehow fallen down the list of priorities, and now she was going to have to settle for gloom and an oncoming migraine.

Become an Operative and fight the good fight, they had said, and like a fool Alice had taken them at their word. As she paced up and down her office for what felt like the twentieth time that day alone, she contemplated life elsewhere. What would it be like on one of the outer moons, where the rivers flowed silver and kissing was illegal before dark. Would she still be working in some form of policing, or would it be a different calling which had grabbed her? She’d always fancied being an accountant, or maybe a gambler. She was good at cards.

Alice was about to carry on down this line of thought when her door burst open and Eoin walked in, a sheaf of papers in his hands and a bead of sweat rolling down his forehead.

“Eoin,” she sighed, already knowing this was bad news approaching her. “On a scale of one to ten, how much am I going to dislike you in a minute?”

“Gods,” he said simply, out of breath. “One of them is dead.”

“Oh.” This, she knew, was going to be a long day.

It took precisely seventy-five seconds to ascend from the depths of the planetoid to the surface. The engineers who first installed the elevating platform had toyed with making the journey quicker, but the nausea and resultant mess has put paid to that. The planetoid itself was nameless, so barren and lacking inspiration was its surface and atmosphere. Alice didn’t blame them; it really was a dive. The locals had started referring to it as Muck, which had annoyed the authorities who in turn tried to call it Hope. That hadn’t worked either, as no one can be bothered to even pretend, so in the end it had become merely Home. Home to dust, home to rain and home to gods, one fewer now if the report was to be believed.

Alice flicked through the report quickly, absorbing the key details on the ascension and probing Eoin for more. It was a tricky one, make no mistake about it. The god was found slain on the surface of Home that morning by a passing police patrol. They had quickly ascertained that this was no mere mortal and that there were scorch marks on its back; and had made contact with the Operatives to deal with it. The Operatives were essentially an outfit to deal with the weird, the unusual and all matters mysterious in this arm of the galaxy, (or rather the five planetoids and nearby satellites in their jurisdiction) and Alice had been working for them for just over a decade now.

Ten long, rainy years of more oddities than she cared to recall. It had seemed like an exciting gig when the job had gone up, and even more exciting when she’d got through to interview and they’d sold her a life of intrigue, problem-solving, reasoning and travel. Instead, it was mostly paperwork, trudging and the occasional head-scratcher. This right now, however, was less of a head-scratcher and more of a full-blown itch.

“God found killed, burn marks on back consistent with a short-range blaster. No indication of a struggle, suggesting either the god in question was unaware they were in danger, or arrogant enough to believe they could not be killed by their assailant,” rattled off Alice. “God in question was the deity of...” She squinted. “Small arms dealing? Really?” Eoin nodded. “All right. God is now expired, other gods unsure why or how this has happened, and no witnesses; and I swear to all that is sacred

Eoin, if you chew that gum any louder, I shall masticate you a new body.”

Eoin slowly removed his gum. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Try me,” muttered Alice and stepped forward into a shower of rain as the doors opened, and she breathed in the humidity of the surface.

The god in question was not too far away, arms outstretched and back badly bloodied, as the report had described. There were a few other Operatives nearby, dusting, taking photographs and mostly drinking coffee. Alice didn’t blame them. She pulled her coat tighter around her and frowned as she saw a single hair caught on the collar. Blonde: not one of hers, but the same shade as the office cleaner. Another strike for maintenance.

“Eeeesh, what a mess,” said Alice as she got up close. The smell of the fatal blow was a mixture of burnt meat and smouldering material. The hole in the god’s back was large, suggesting the weapon had been fired at relatively close range, and she could see the frayed and singed ends of fibres from its overcoat standing erect and black. If nothing else, it would have been quick as deaths go, and she suspected that even gods were grateful for this.

“I know you’re there,” Alice said, eyes still fixed on the god, “and I know it’s bad news. You only ever walk quietly when it’s bad news.” She turned around. “Hit me.”

Eoin popped another stick into his mouth, making sure to chew quietly, and approached her softly. “There was a witness,” he said, slowly. “A god of lateness: as in temporal lateness, not death.”

He was cold. His hair, thick and wiry and grey, was absorbing the rainfall like a fleece, with tiny tributaries of water pouring down his neck and making his skin shine brown, a mixture of complexion and whatever dust had managed to get caught in the atmosphere.

“Go on,” promoted Alice.

“They turned up after the event, but only by moments. Which is sort of their calling card,” he reasoned, then noticing her scowl he carried on. “We asked them what they saw, beyond a dead body. They said they saw the god’s assassin, hidden in the dark but visible enough.”

“And?”

“They reckon they saw the Warrior, Alice.” He shrugged apologetically. “It was the Nameless Warrior.”

“Oh.” Alice looked up into the rain. “Damn.” She sighed the sigh of someone already picturing the paperwork approaching her. “Of course it bloody was.”

Alice towel-dried her long, red hair and looked into a mirror. Her eyes looked tired, small bags beneath them and the usual blue shine of her irises dulled to seawater.

The Nameless Warrior. He’d been sighted a few times now, always in the shadows, always waiting, and always walking away from trouble. A couple of explosions here, stolen materials there, and a couple of deaths. Never anything as big as this before, though. That felt small fry in comparison. If the Nameless Warrior (an affectation the local media had run with despite pressure from above not to glamorize vandalism and murder) really was upping his game to take in gods, then Alice had no idea what was to come next.

This felt unfair. This was meant to be a quiet day. She was meant to go home early today to claw back some of her time owed in lieu, paint her nails and go for a meal with that Tom guy who seemed to be keen on her. She wasn’t meant to be stressing about the seemingly impossible death of a god at the hands of a seemingly anonymous pest.

Alice inspected her nails beneath the faulty strip lights. They weren’t too long right now, but a

bit bare. Maybe she'd have time for one coat before dashing to the restaurant Tom had booked. Or maybe she'd call him and cancel. Did she really want to go on a date after the day she was having? She wouldn't be good company. Then again, if he turned out to be a colossal bore, then at least she would put him off and nip this adoration in the bud.

"Alice?" Eoin spoke as he knocked on the door. Alice lowered her hand and shook her head free of tonight, focussing instead on today. "The first god is here."

"Good good," she said, taking a seat behind her desk. "Send them in."

Eoin left the room briefly and returned shortly after with a strikingly tall, pretty girl with long, dark brown hair and deer-like eyes. It was only when she passed in front of the door that Alice fully took in that the girl in front of her had faintly transparent skin, like a ghost.

"Alice Haze, Senior Operative," said Alice, standing up as she introduced herself, uncertain whether to offer a hand to be shaken.

"God of Serenity, God." She nodded and settled down on the chair opposite Alice's, neatly crossing her legs beneath a flowing skirt and placing her hands atop a knee, one stacked upon the other. She never broke eye contact once.

"Eoin Charmers, Operative," said Eoin, closing the door and staggering over to a seat against a wall. "I'll be taking notes. If... if that's okay?"

"Of course." The God of Serenity beamed a smile so pleasant even Alice felt warm and fuzzy inside. Eoin, meanwhile, looked smitten.

This was always a problem with gods: no amount of training could prepare you for the effect they had on your sexual desires. It was why Liam Bright, an Operative from years ago now, had become an expert in the field of gods and their disposal: he was as asexual as the day is long, so able to approach them with no chinks in his armour.

Killing gods was a messy business, but Liam had done it and written the book on it (literally). There were times in the career of certain Operatives when disposal of antagonists was, if not desired, then practical at least, deities or other, and Liam's guide had proven itself to be invaluable. Not that Alice wished to divulge this information now to the God of Serenity. Knowing Alice had read a chunky guide to killing her ilk as bedtime reading when she'd first started working as an Operative was the sort of thing liable to make an interviewee frosty.

"Interview commences," said Alice. "The God of Small Arms was found dead this morning, slain from behind with only the God of Lateness as a partial witness."

"On account of their tardiness," pointed out the God of Serenity.

"Quite," noted Alice. "They observed a figure known colloquially as the Nameless Warrior observing the situation and putting away a weapon. The description of this weapon is patchy, but appears to be consistent with the blast damage found upon the deceased."

"Correct." The God of Serenity smiled, and Alice found she had the taste of soothing tea upon her tongue as she did so.

"Correct," echoed Alice. "The trouble is, such weaponry is not known to have an effect, lethal or otherwise, upon a god, irrespective of devout belief or wavering faith. To kill a god requires weaponry of a more... specific and complex sort."

"This is true."

"Then how did he do it?" Alice leaned back in her chair. "A magic ray gun?"

"You do not believe in magic?" A raised eyebrow.

"I prefer fact over fiction," countered Alice, squinting as the strip lights flickered again.

"Many years ago," replied the God of Serenity slowly, "people did not believe ray guns could

exist. They were as fairy tales. For many years also, gods were thought fable and nothing more, too. Both have now been proven fact and not fictitious.”

“Many years ago, gods wanted faith over fact. Now you want both, to have your cake and eat it, in order to talk to us mere mortals.”

“You wish to get into a debate on doctrine and faith with a god?”

Alice looked the God of Serenity straight in the eye and finally said, “No. I’ve got better things to do with my time.” She sat upright. “Like this murder. How can a normal gun kill a god?”

“It would take a miracle,” started the God of Serenity, then stopped and smiled, adding, “if you will pardon the expression.” She thought about it. “The murderer would have to be skilled, in possession of cunning and duplicity; wield power in deployment, thought and action, and be motivated single-mindedly. Why, they would be godlike themselves.”

“So the Nameless Warrior is a god?”

“The Nameless Warrior is a murdering guttersnipe,” spat the God of Serenity, her mask slipping. “One of our own rank would not slay another with their back turned unless they were a coward, or a cold-hearted murderer.”

“Or busy,” offered Eoin. Both women turned to look at him. “I mean, if this Nameless Warrior guy is on the clock, maybe he’s just killing people and gods now as quick as he can, hang the dignity?”

The God of Serenity chewed this over, then nodded. “A reasonable possibility, Mr. Charmers.”

The rest of the interview after that was brief and functional. She left soon after, pausing only to sign some paperwork at the end. (This was a relief. Some of the older gods were hesitant to do this, citing a signature as concrete proof of existence in a way that good old intangible faith and apparitions as a consequence were not. Alice could see their point, but it made the admin a headache.)

Next in was the God of Luminosity, who took one look at the faulty strip lighting and spent the rest of the interview distracted and irritable. A few minor deities followed, but irrespective of rank they all told the same tale: they did not know how a god could be killed by gun alone, but supposition that the Nameless Warrior was therefore a god was blasphemous at worst, silly at best.

Last in was the God of Disparity. Kitted out in little more than tight-fitting golden armour and thigh-high boots, with skin as dark and shining as his bottomless eyes, he cut a powerful figure, and both Alice and Eoin had to stop themselves getting down on one knee and proposing there and then.

“Slain by mortal or god, it makes no difference. Dead the god is, and dead they shall remain,” declared the God of Disparity before he had even sat down, his voice deep and reverberating as if it housed its own echo, and proceeded to answer almost all questions with shrugs from thereon in.

As he left, and Eoin wiped a strand of drool from the corner of his mouth, Alice groaned and massaged her temples. “When the God of Disparity is saying it makes no difference what happened, just that it was bad, you know you’re in trouble.”

“I’m not sure we’ve learnt anything,” sighed Eoin, flicking through his notes.

“You’re not sure?” Alice frowned. “I’m certain of it.”

“This Nameless Warrior is a pain,” he sympathized.

“If it *was* him,” said Alice. “I’m sure even gods can be fallible, no matter what the churches say. It doesn’t really fit in with his M.O. though, does it? We know he’s blown up key military installations and stolen some engine parts, but god killing?”

“He did murder those two men,” pointed out Eoin.

“Men, not gods,” said Alice, “both of them knee-deep in gunrunning. Though I suppose a god of

arms isn't too far removed in that respect." She groaned with exhaustion and stood up. "Guess it's time to see what Team Kettle know."

"Oh." Eoin didn't look thrilled. "Really?"

"Come on, it won't take long." They walked out the room, neither of them noticing as the strip light sparked out for the final time, leaving the place silent.

Alice wasn't keen on visiting Team Kettle any more than Eoin was, but she knew when she was beaten. There wasn't anything specifically *wrong* with the team; they were just a bit sinister by the very nature of their job.

Team Kettle was led by a bespectacled man named John Randals, who jokingly referred to his co-workers as the "tidy team," which was a good description really. They were the clean-up arm of the Operatives. Their job was to visit the sites of bad situations and "kettle in" the mess. They would literally mop up the messes left behind and figuratively do the same to witnesses, giving them strong doses of retcon and other memory-altering substances to make them forget what they had seen, and in some cases even engineer time itself. It was that aspect which put most people off seeing them. Team Kettle would often use temporal engines and chronological technology to isolate incidents, wind back the clock, and stop them from ever having occurred in known history, arresting the perpetrators before they killed or committed a crime.

Where it got eerie was that you would often visit them and they'd be in a bad mood with you for your behaviour at the last triple-homicide scene you frequented together... only they had erased this from time now and no such homicide had taken place; so you couldn't remember it ever happening because you were not holding onto the temporal bubble tech when operated. They *always* held onto the temporal bubble tech, as it allowed them to claim for expenses.

Alice wondered how out of pocket she must be by now and entered the main workshop of Team Kettle. John was peering into a tiny, intricately pieced-together clockwork dial and held up a hand to shush them before they could speak. He carefully extracted a thin rod from the dial with a pair of tweezers and placed it on the bench in front of him, then sighed. "It's safe now, come in."

"Operative Randals." Eoin nodded.

"Eoin," said John, less formal. He smirked. "The things you've seen but can't recall." He tutted. "You never even knew her name, did you?"

"That's enough of that, John," said Alice, ignoring the haunted look in Eoin's eyes. "The slain god. What do you know?"

"God of Small Arms, shot in the back, standard weaponry that shouldn't harm a deity but has done this time. Supposedly executed by this Nameless Warrior," rattled off John.

"You've visited the site of the incident?" asked Alice.

"Naturally," said John.

"And?"

John frowned. He actually looked frustrated, realized Alice. This was new.

"What happened?" asked Alice.

"Nothing," admitted John at last. "We tried to do a time sweep and reversal, but it wouldn't work. Our machinery just gave up." He indicated the dial with a nod of his head. "That thing is meant to control the turn of time itself in a radial area of isolation, but the moment we set up a circle and tried to reverse time within it, it started smoking."

"So, what? You need new parts?" Alice inspected the dial, noticing small burn marks on the side

of its metallic casing now.

“So something happened which has fixed time in an unobtainable way.” John shook his head. “Very dangerous stuff, to create a fixed point in history and fence it off from the curious.”

“Wish I could bloody do it,” muttered Eoin.

“Ah, but Eoin, then we’d never have had that night on the moon with its silver rivers, with... oh, you know, that girl you keep forgetting. Now what *was* her name?” John teased.

“John.” Alice shot him a warning glance.

“All right, all right.” John held his hands up in mock-surrender. “It’s been a long day. I’m letting off steam.”

“Is that what you call it?” Alice walked around the workshop, taking in the shelves of metallic gears and tightly bound bundles of loose wiring. She peered curiously at the back of the workshop. “What on Earth is that?”

John turned to follow her gaze and sighed. “Another mystery. Turned up a few months ago now and we can’t touch it.”

Alice walked down the workshop and finally reached the object of mystery. It was a large, blue box, slightly dirtied with mud and scorch marks. There was writing on the top denoting it was a “Police Public Call Box” and the thing emitted a faint hum, which she only now realized had been echoing around the room since she’d come in. It was like how the air conditioning in her office would be on all day, but she’d only notice it when it cut off and stopped making a noise.

“It vibrates, too,” said John, inviting Alice to see for herself. She touched it, then took an involuntary step back. “Told you so.”

“What is it?” she asked, wonderstruck.

“No idea. Bit like the crime scene on the surface: we can’t touch it. Doesn’t like any of our time technology or skeleton keys. Not keen on brute force either.” He waved at the scorch marks. “We gave it our best shot.”

Alice was about to say something more when she received a message on her wrist. She gazed as writing scrolled across the tiny display: “CAN’T WAIT TO SEE YOU SOON XX”

Tom. Urgh. There was keen and there was borderline obsession.

“I’d better go,” said Alice. “Things of actual interest to be getting on with. No offense.”

“None taken,” said John.

“Pity, it was intended.” Alice smiled sweetly. “Good luck with the mystery box and the crime scene.”

“If I make any advances with our investigations, I’ll let you both know,” said John, smiling. “Especially Eoin.”

Eoin hurried out of the workshop behind Alice, who was looking at her wrist again. “Dammit,” she cursed. “I’m already late.”

“Just claim it as overtime,” suggested Eoin.

“No,” said Alice, trying to shrug on a coat as she walked and finding another one of the cleaner’s blonde hairs instead. “I mean, yes, I will, but I was meant to be home before heading out.” She looked at her naked nails. “Never mind. Eoin, get those notes you made earlier summarized and on my desk by tomorrow morning.”

Eoin mentally prepared himself for an all-nighter, as the best Operative he’d ever known walked ahead with one arm flapping helplessly as she failed to put on her coat while running down the

corridor.

He never even noticed as the hum from the workshop died away, and he barely registered the sound of groaning engines and wind that followed, paying it as little attention as he did to any sound coming from that workshop. A wheeze and a groan were no different to a bang and a clap in his book, so he never turned around, he never looked away from his destination, and so he never saw the body of John Randals slumped over his desk, the shelves behind him bare and his precious dial gone.

Alice ran through excuses in her mind as she raced to the restaurant. Excuses about why she was late (work, traffic, sloppiness), and more pressingly excuses about why this was the first and last time she would be meeting Tom Skiff. A more in-depth glance at her wrist had thrown up a further three messages from that day alone, adding to the dozen across the past week. It wasn't "keen" – it was creepy.

The restaurant loomed into view, and she dashed across the rainy surface of the planetoid to reach it, cursing with every splash of puddle and pinch of icy water on bare skin. Above her in the sky, there was the thrum of engines as traffic flowed by and a low rumble: thunder, or the gods? It was hard to tell sometimes, and harder still to know whether the latter did not cause the former, but Alice was no theologian (such types were understandably wary of the planetoid), and just wanted out of the rain.

A few lights flickered to dazzle purple and green in the darkness, but it didn't so much brighten up the place as only go to highlight the drab nature of what they were orbiting.

Home is where the heart is, reasoned Alice, then felt like crying at the very notion.

She shook herself down, a miniature shower of raindrops coming off her coat, as she reached the entrance to the restaurant and spent a moment looking into the glass windows, absently adjusting her hair, before walking in. She walked straight up to a welcome plinth, where a bored-looking young man waited, not even pretending to be enthused.

"Hello," he said in monotone, "and welcome. Have you a reservation? We're busy tonight." He glanced behind at an ocean of empty tables and corrected himself. "We will be busy later," he whispered conspiratorially as he leaned forward, "because of the reservations."

"I'm Alice Haze," said Alice. "I'm expected."

The boy looked down a list. "Ah. Come with me."

They walked through the empty restaurant, a pianist sounding as bored as the boy elsewhere in the room, until she found Tom sitting at a table, absently looking through a list of alcohols. The boy winced slightly as he took Alice's damp coat and trundled off with it at arm's length.

"Sorry I'm a bit late," said Alice, then held his gaze and sighed. Best to get it out of the way now and get on with the meal without false expectation. "Look, I just want to say..."

But Alice did not get to say anything, because at that moment Tom grabbed her face and kissed her. Not a small, friendly kiss; not a peck on the cheek. A full kiss. She could taste and smell the brandy on his tongue and breath as he kissed her, her skin flushing with surprise and embarrassment. He wasn't a bad kisser *per se*, just an extremely unwelcome one.

"Hey!" Alice backed up and pushed him away. "What?"

"What?" Tom looked confused and a bit angry. "I don't see you for three weeks. I think I'm entitled to a kiss!"

"You're entitled to nothing, you littl— wait, three weeks? What?" Alice stopped in her tracks. Frowned. Went to speak, then frowned again. "What?"

“What?”

“What do you mean three weeks?”

“Well, okay, nineteen days.” Tom did some mental calculations. “No, twenty. Close enough.”

“I know that twenty days is close enough to three weeks, you idiot. I meant what do you mean by the whole sentence? It’s been three weeks? Three weeks since what?”

“Three weeks since what?” Tom looked surprised. He paused. “Is this a joke? Right? Is this, like, a game?”

Alice cocked her head. “A game? No.”

Tom looked annoyed now. “Seriously? Like, how many other men have you seen in-between?”

“What?” Alice’s turn to be annoyed now.

“Alice, this isn’t funny.”

“Tom, I am not laughing. Three weeks since what?”

“Since we last met,” he said, levelly. “Since you last stayed over and we... spent the night alone.”

Alice looked at him. She took in his face, deadly serious. “Right.” She nodded. “Always get the weird ones. Bye.” She turned around to find the boy, get her coat and leave, when she felt one of Tom’s hands grab her shoulder and spin her round.

“Alice!” cried Tom. He was sounding a bit panicked now. “What’s going on? I... I’m sorry for implying you’ve seen other people.” He was rushing his words. “I know you’ve been busy at work, so I’ve probably been over the top with the messages, but I... I thought we were doing well? I thought this was going somewhere?” He took one of her hands. “Alice, I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

That was the moment Alice knew that he was completely sincere. She could see his eyes watering. He was telling the truth, and she had no idea whatsoever about how to respond.

“I think we need to talk,” she said simply, and slowly led him back to the table. She took a small breath to compose herself.

Think about this methodically, she told herself. Treat this like a job at work.

A beat. A short breath. And then: “Tom. This is going to sound strange, I know, but tell me: when did we last meet?”

Tom looked unsure, but answered anyway: “Twenty days ago, I told you so. You stayed the night and we...”

“Right, sure, okay,” said Alice, shaking her head, “but what did we do beforehand? What did we do that day?”

“That day?”

“Yes!” Alice snapped. “That day. Did we go on a date? Did we eat something funny? Where did we go?”

“Alice, we were at work together all day,” said Tom, exasperated now. “The Day of the Immortal Schism!” His breathing was quick now, anxiety-coated. “Oh come on, Alice, don’t give me that look!”

“Tom, what was the Immortal Schism?” Alice leaned forward. “For serious, Tom. You need to tell me. I need to know.”

And so he told her.

The Immortal Schism took two forms: physical and spiritual.

Physically, it was tiny: a mere pinprick through which a thin red line, like a laser, emerged. The

line of light carried across the air, barely perceptible from some angles, until it reached a black rock, wet and glistening and sitting amid other rocks of other varying hues. It was a deadly beam or a blinding light. It didn't radiate heat or burn the eyes if you dared look into it. It was just a light: thin, red, a bit pathetic.

Spiritually, the Immortal Schism was the great divide between gods into those who fought back and those who backed off. The fighters merged into one, a mass of deity with no individual face or rank or ability. They reverted to generic shadow and hazy form, as if seen through a mist, and slowly edged forward towards the three figures watching.

"I can't make them out," frowned Tom, one of the trio, squinting.

"It's because I know them," came the explanation. "It's because I know they are not gods." A scoff. "They are creatures, nothing more. Psychic golems. I deny them their story. Without faith, they are nothing."

Alice, the final watcher, brushed a strand of red hair out of her eyes and looked at her companion. "Gods that are only pretending to be gods?"

"Is there any other sort?"

Alice sucked breath in between her teeth. "I'm fairly sure continents have fallen for lesser blasphemies."

"I'm fairly sure I watched them fall." The man stood forward and then bellowed, "Be still. All of you." The gods stopped their progression and closed ranks. "You know who I am, of course?"

"Warrior..." said the gods as one, a sonorous voice with amazing clarity despite the multiple layers of contributing vocals. "But more than that. A name shrouded."

"I have no name," said the man simply.

"You do," said the gods, almost with a smug ring. "But you hide it behind a title. A title hidden behind even this one now, Warrior."

"A nameless warrior?" asked Tom, stepping forward to be beside Alice, who shushed him impatiently.

"You know who I am," said the Nameless Warrior again, "and you know what I am here to do." He indicated the red light. "That light should not exist here. It comes from deep in the vaults of my own planet. It has come through a pinprick, but one which you have exploited. It has been stretched and the vaults ransacked." The Nameless Warrior indicated all around him. "It has allowed for time technology to be used by police, and weaponry to be traded by false gods. You've placed this world in danger."

"Surely the gods know all this already?" whispered Tom to Alice. "Why the speech? Does he just like exposition?"

"He's not saying it for them, you dolt," hissed back Alice venomously. "He's saying it for us."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" Alice nodded towards the gods. "They're harming Home."

"I call on you to close the hole," continued the Nameless Warrior. "Already your actions have drawn attention to fighters in the Time War. Already this planetoid is harmed by time; my ship takes with it culture from other worlds, and I see those planets here in speech and action and aesthetic."

"Your ship is soaked in Earth," said the gods.

"And now this world is, too. Already it is too late to stop that. Already this planetoid is known because of it. I ask you now to close the hole."

The gods laughed – an actual villainous, pantomime-cliché laugh. Alice thought about it, then reasoned that beings throwing around thunderbolts willy-nilly were fairly pantomime anyway, so just

went with it.

“You *ask* us?” shuddered the gods with potent rage. “The Warrior asks us?”

The Nameless Warrior blinked and then, to everyone’s surprise, smiled. “No.” He shook his head. “You know me. I do not ask, not anymore. That was not a chance I gave you. It was a warning to the others listening.” He took out a thin, silver tube from the inside pocket of his battered brown jacket and held it aloft. “I do not believe in gods.”

The gods recoiled slightly, perceivably afraid, as the man pressed a button on the tube and it emitted a high-pitched scream. Every light and piece of glass nearby shattered into tiny fragments, and the hole grew wider. The Nameless Warrior reached into it and retrieved a large weapon, orange and sturdy, which he quickly aimed at the gods. One of the pack split and tried to escape, but the Warrior took aim and fired, enveloping them in a jet of steam. There came a cry and the steam dissipated, the enveloped deity vanishing along with their voice.

“Alice!” The command came from the man, and she ran forward. He tossed her the weapon and she started firing, too, hitting creature after creature with no pause for remorse. She had heard enough. She had become an Operative to defend her world. Today, right now, this was her job and her duty.

The man took an identical looking weapon from the hole and helped Alice as she slew the gods. They tried to wriggle and fly free, but the combination of steam, fatigue, fear and the continual whine from the silver tube disorientating all made it a one-sided fight.

In silence they killed. In silence, they heard the screams of genuine pain and terror. In silence, Alice felt her entire consciousness distance itself from her body right now, because it knew that the moment it set foot back into flesh it would never forgive itself.

“Alice! What are you doing?” shouted Tom above the chaos. “Stop!”

“Alice. Remember what I told you,” said the Nameless Warrior, and Alice’s jaw tightened. She would deal with Tom, and that cleaner hussy he’d been sleeping with behind her back, later. She shut her ears to him now.

She killed the gods of Home, one by one.

Tom whitened as the woman he loved, when he could remember to and wasn’t listening to his lust, finished the carnage and the tube was silenced by the Nameless Warrior. He swore he would never remove the high-pitched wail from his hearing. The tube was adjusted slightly and a lower, more bubbling whirble came from it as the Nameless Warrior pointed a bulbous lump on one end of the tube at the red light. The light thinned, the hole in which it came from shrunk, and finally it vanished from sight.

“You won’t see the light again,” said the Nameless Warrior. “It’s gone for good now.”

She shuddered and collapsed to the floor, her eyes wide and her breath short as anxiety took hold. “Oh... oh... oh! What have I done?”

“Alice!” Tom ran to her.

“Shut up!” she screamed at him and backed away, pacing, arms and hands flapping in the air to try and cool down. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“Her work is done,” said the Nameless Warrior simply and walked to Tom. “It’s your turn.” He pointed to a pile of time technology which they’d taken with them from the Team Kettle vaults. “This is stolen technology from my world. Destroy it. I do not advise its use unless you want attention.” He paused, as if searching for something to say. “War is not for the fight-less. I will stay and finish what must be finished. I advise you to leave. Alice has her own fight to win.” He looked at Tom. “Without

you.”

“You used her,” said Tom, small and impotent.

“Yes,” said the Nameless Warrior. He’d used her aim, he’d used her loyalty; Tom knew that he had used her heart and Tom’s infidelity. A good soldier uses the things around them to get the job done.

Tom stood and watched Alice fall to the ground and curl up, tears streaming, screams from her very chest, hands looking for a weapon to end it all. He turned and saw the Nameless Warrior vanish into the horizon, and swore he could hear him whistling to himself, oblivious.

Tom looked down at the time technology. He couldn’t, and shouldn’t resurrect the gods, and he shouldn’t and didn’t deserve to resurrect her love. But that didn’t stop him.

Tom was crying. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have, she meant nothing to me. Only you do, Alice, only you.”

“What did you do to me?” Alice looked ready to vomit.

“I used the machinery, to help you. To make you forget what you did.” He sniffed, messy and full of tears. “You’d remember... *him*,” he spat out, “killing them, but nothing you did, nothing he said. Nothing he said to you about...” He started a fresh set of tears. “I got it wrong. I changed your memories, but you forgot it all. You forgot me.” He laughed. “You took my jacket and walked away as I watched. But I thought you’d remember me.”

Alice thought about her coat. That explained the blonde hair at least. For once, she was lost for words.

“Tom,” she said, “what have you done?” She went to add more, when the room started to shake. She stared upwards and saw the light fittings vibrate wildly, heard the crash of glass elsewhere, saw the boy who had taken her coat run, felt a terrible pang of recognition, buried deep in a hidden thought as the gods (the false gods) screamed. Then she felt a hand grab her and turned to see Tom as the room shook...

...No, not Tom, and the room was not shaking anymore.

And the room was not the room.

Alice staggered back. Her mouth tasted of acid. The restaurant was gone. She was in a large, grey building. Concrete and cold, hard and empty, the faint smell of oil and sweat like an old garage. The person who had grabbed her arm stood still as she took it all in.

The Nameless Warrior, of course.

“I don’t think you’ll be getting dessert,” he said, awkwardly, like he’d seen a pun written down once and thought he’d give it a go.

“Where...” started Alice, then stopped. *Where am I?* was one cliché she was going to avoid. “What...” *What happened?* No better. “How?” Better: precise, to the point, inquisitive. The sort of question a decent Operative may ask.

“Elsewhere,” he replied, simply. “The gods are gone. We’ve done our job.”

“Our... our job?” Alice’s head hurt. This was a lot of confusion for one night.

“I came to your world to rid it of a parasite,” he explained. “Gods who are not gods. They were psychic beings, nothing more, but dangerous ones. They took weapons and powers from my planet, and showed that they could wield them in a way armies would beg to have.” He shook his head. “It could not be allowed. There is too much at stake for the enemy to get them...” He paused. “And too much risk for my race to have them. They could turn.”

“They?”

“Either party,” said the Nameless Warrior, grimly. “So they had to go.”

“Where did you put them?” Alice asked, her voice small and naïve, but already knowing the answer.

“They are gone,” said the man. “Dead. Tom used the time technology again.” He smiled. “I knew he would. It weakened things enough to let me tie the final knot and tidy the mess.” A good soldier *always* used his resources. “Your Team Kettle would have been proud. I took what was left and needed from them and a couple of minor ‘gods’ and gunrunners, then finished the job.”

“Tom?” Alice whispered. “Eoin?” Even John bloody Randals. “Dead?”

“Gone.” The man said it with no real indication of whether this made him feel anything at all. “Never happened.”

“But... but me?” Alice could feel the first tear in her eye.

“You helped me.” The man looked at her, the first trace of confusion upon his brow. “You helped me get the weapons. You helped me defeat the enemy. You helped me stop the War escalating into a world I don’t want to imagine. I used a vortex manipulator to take us here.” He actually smiled. “I used to be good at rescuing and saving people. It’s nice to see I remember how to do it.”

“What?” Alice rushed forward. “Saved me? You haven’t saved me! My home, my friends, my... my *boyfriend*! They’re all dead!”

“You’re alive!” The Nameless Warrior looked genuinely baffled. “Do you know how many soldiers get to say that? You’re safe! Today, I did a good thing.” He smiled and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Thank... thank you?” Alice looked at her hands, trembling, everything rushing into her mind at once. Dead world, dead lover, dead friends, dead gods. Her, a murderer who couldn’t recall her crime. She looked up and saw the Nameless Warrior almost gone. “No! No! Come back! Take me back! Take me back now! I don’t want to be here! I don’t want... I don’t want to live like this! I don’t want to live!”

But the man was gone, hidden in a familiar-looking blue box placed in the corner of the room. It emitted a sound as thunderous and groaning as the gods themselves used to do, and disappeared from view.

Alice stopped in her tracks, tears aplenty, breath short, arms shaking. Alone.

She stared dumbly at the spot where the box had disappeared and with it the Nameless Warrior, and all she could think was a question: what terrible thing must happen to someone for them to get mercy and kindness so very, very wrong...?

The Siege of Orléans

by Stuart S. Roth

Sir Robert drew his sword and spoke challenges as chivalry demanded. The opposing knight was unarmed. No sword or belt hung from his polished iron suit. “Where is your weapon? You face a nobleman, not brutes.”

The knight marched forward. Orléans sent this mountain of a champion out each morn to harass the English and Burgundian lines.

The metal joins of his armour did not grind or clang as he walked. Despite his size, the man was as silent as a ghost. Usually a good smith would fashion some ornamentation onto the faceplate. This warrior had none; in fact, there wasn't even a nose bridge. All that could be seen was a smooth, dull silver metal sheet covering the face. Two round eyeholes with teardrop enlargements looked out above a blank slit for a mouth. It was an impassive, lifeless face. Sir Robert raised his sword.

The rest of the armour was of an equally bizarre craftsmanship. Two jug-handle protrusions connected from the top of the helmet to where the man's ears should be. Similar tubing extended up and down the legs and into the chest.

The chest was a heavy breastplate of odd fashion. A torch light flickered inside its grill and Sir Robert imagined he saw the movement of a bellows-like contraption. “What manner of creature are you?”

A small indentation atop the helmet flashed. Sir Robert barely had time to notice it before he was struck by fire. His body burned from the inside and he fell to the ground. The knight lurched forward and looked down at him. It raised its three-fingered hand to its breastplate. The devil's light atop the helmet flashed again and Sir Robert's last thought was that Satan had come to aid the enemy.

Palace guards surrounded the strange blue box. No one had seen it appear in the corridor. A serving maid had been on her way to the great hall when she found her way blocked.

Baron Augustin Tollendal, who was responsible for the King's safety during his stay in Chinon, was summoned.

“Wooded frame, my lord, but no axe can dent it,” one of the soldiers said. “And strange words written there. English? But I don't know their meaning.”

Tollendal sounded them out, “Police Public Call Box.”

There was a creaking sound and a door opened on the side of the box facing the wall. Guards raised their pikes, but allowed a small, somewhat shabbily dressed man to extricate himself from the tight space. “Oh, good gracious, we seem to have made a mistake again, old girl.”

“Doctor, what kind of place have you taken us to now?” A younger, burly man stuck his face out from the box and wedged a shoulder into the narrow space.

“Perhaps I should go first,” a girl's voice called from inside the box. “You're going to get stuck.”

The small man turned to his companion. “Jamie, let me give you a hand.”

“The space is too small.” The man named Jamie was good and stuck. “I cannae move.”

Tollendal could see the third visitor, a diminutive girl, shoving with all her weight from the other side. “Guards, free him. We have no more time for mummers.”

Finally, all three were standing before the baron. Tollendal looked them over. The scruffy little man spoke up. "If you would be good enough to tell us where we might be, then I would be happy to..." The man held his gaze and looked him up and down. "Do we know each other?"

"Such a short memory for a man who speaks many tongues." Tollendal couldn't believe his eyes. Twenty years must have passed, yet the stranger looked no older. He turned to the boy and girl. "The lad and the slip of a girl, are they children of the Lady Polly?"

A light went on in the Doctor's eyes. "Of course, Baron Tollendal, of the King's Vanguard." He clasped his hands and smiled to his companions. "Jamie, Zoe, this is an old acquaintance of mine." Turning to Tollendal. "Polly no longer travels with me."

"Then you are in the habit of picking up stray wards, I see." He waved to the guards. "Put down your weapons. I shall vouch for them. You arrive at a bewitched time. Come, Doctor. You saved my life once; I shall return the favour with good hospitality. Your companions, however... The Scot is welcome. Often we have relied on the support of the clans against our common foe. The girl, though – are these garments small clothes of a sort?"

"Small clothes?" Zoe asked indignantly.

"No matter. My niece is of your age. I will have you suited with proper attire."

Jamie laughed. "They don't know how to dress lasses in her century." The Doctor kicked him in the shin, prompting Jamie to add, "I mean in her land."

As Tollendal led his guests to his private wing, the Doctor asked how it was he could accept their arrival so calmly.

"Perhaps I have grown accustomed to miraculous visitors," he answered with a bit too much irritation. "The King is in one of his moods. He is bewitched by evil men concerned only for their purses and influence. Chinon is a long way from Paris. It will be even farther away if Orléans should fall."

The Doctor nodded. "The Court at Chinon, Orléans under siege – that narrows it down. You mentioned visitors, who else has arrived?"

"*La Pucelle*. The maiden. This peasant girl being examined by the ladies of the court. They say she was chosen by God. More like than not she was chosen from a pig sty and raised by shrewd minds to beguile the King."

"Are you talking about Joan of Arc?" Zoe asked.

Tollendal went white. "Jeanne d'Arc? You know of her?"

"Only stories."

"Aye," Jamie piped up. "Everyone has heard of Joan."

The Doctor grew red. "Everyone has not heard of Joan of Arc. My dear Tollendal, we simply have special knowledge of these things."

"No, let them say what they will. She has cast her tale far and wide in her journey here."

"I would like to meet her," Zoe said smartly.

"That wouldn't be a good idea," the Doctor added.

"Of course it would," Jamie added. "Doctor, this is *the* Joan of Arc. We cannae miss a chance to see the lass."

Tollendal put his arms around Jamie and the Doctor. "It seems your wards have spoken."

Before Tollendal could feast them, a herald announced that the King had called an audience of his court. The Doctor and Jamie were led to the chamber. Zoe joined them a short time later wearing a

dress and head covering more suitable for a lady of moderate status.

She was complaining about the frilly sleeves and impractical bodice when the Doctor shushed her. "Oh, Zoe, this isn't good. I've completely forgotten until now," he whispered, "I've met Joan before. I didn't know it was her, of course, but when I realized..."

"You couldn't resist talking to her," Zoe said knowingly.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. She was only thirteen at the time. Her voices were speaking to her and she was afraid."

"As I'd be too," Jamie said, "if God were speaking to me."

"Not exactly God, some of his saints, if I remember correctly."

Zoe pursed her upper lip and gave him a skeptical look. "You don't really believe she spoke with angels?"

"And you cannae say it didn't happen," Jamie added.

The Doctor huffed. "If enough people want or need something to happen..." He trailed off as the crowd stirred and the herald announced the arrival of the King. A tall, nervous-looking man appeared at the end of the hall. "Charles the Seventh, called the Dauphin," the Doctor pointed out. "He has laid out his claim to the throne of France; unfortunately, his mother, Isabella, let a little indiscretion on her part become public. Well, to be brief, Henry the Sixth of England also claims title to the throne. Henry is supported by the Burgundians and France is divided. Charles, it seems, needs a miracle to reunite the country."

The Doctor suddenly snapped his fingers, making his companions jump. "Of course! I didn't meet Joan as I am now. That was the old me. She won't recognize me."

Tollendal returned to his side. "The ladies of the court have reached a decision on the peasant girl. She is the maid she claims to be. More importantly, the King's own doubts have been dissuaded. He decided to test this girl himself. He summoned her to a gathering of his inner court. There, he hid among them, dressed as a noble, while having a squire masquerade the part of king. Jeanne, who has never beheld the King, is said to have gone not for the throne and its obvious head, but picked His Grace out of the crowd and pronounced her loyalty to him. On this foolery, he plans to trust her with all of France."

The Dauphin took the throne and spoke in a loud, but wavering voice, "My court, the examination is complete and I have satisfied my doubts regarding our visitor." Murmurs and argumentation rose from the assembly. The King silenced them with his hands. "Be at ease. Though I am not yet prepared to call her the saviour of France, I am willing to accept that she was sent to us as a test of our resolve and our right to claim the throne." He motioned to the door.

Jeanne d'Arc was led into the room. She wore a peasant dress and her hair shorn short like a boy's. Her walk was firm, but with the wide step of a commoner. Her round face was neither beautiful nor ugly. It was a face like countless other faces, but her eyes were bright and sharp. It was known that she could not read, but the eyes were those of a scholar of her fellow men and women.

The Doctor pulled Jamie and Zoe close. "Joan is rumoured to have whispered the King's deepest fear back to him. It was a secret fear that he had divulged to no one."

Zoe was perplexed. "Someone must have told her. Doctor, really, you travel in time and space."

Jamie was even more enthralled by the peasant girl. "A lass from a cow pasture can't simply walk up to a King. This is truly Joan of Arc."

"She must have been helped by people at court."

The Doctor separated his two friends as the Dauphin motioned Joan forward.

"You wish to lead an army to lift the Siege of Orléans, do you not?"

“I do, Your Grace,” the girl spoke with an accent that betrayed her common origins. Some in the court sniggered.

“Then I shall give it to you. Commander De Vignolles, come forward.” A barrel-chested man answered his master’s call. He knelt before the King. “Raise your force. You shall supervise my army.”

The man, who was known as La Hire, looked up at the King and then to Joan.

Joan seemed uncertain. “I have been called to lead the army, Your Majesty.”

“You shall bear the standard as Commander of the Army. De Vignolles is an experienced leader; you will abide his council and heed his advice.”

She turned to the soldier. “I shall heed the words of God and the voices of his angels. I am certain they would not have placed you into my service to counsel me poorly, Lord Knight.”

La Hire reddened like a brazed boar, but held his tongue.

Charles laughed and bade his man to rise. “With God’s wisdom and De Vignolles’ skill at arms, we shall indeed see miracles performed.” He rose and adjourned the court.

La Hire immediately sought out Tollendal and gave orders for the provisioning of the levy. When he had swept on to join his commanders, the baron turned to the Doctor. “It is several days’ march to the city.”

“Not for us, old friend. I fear we must be on our way.”

Tollendal took a step towards Zoe. “It would serve my needs if you could attend us, Sir Doctor.” The baron took Zoe by the arm. “Three strangers arrive in a box scrawled with English script, just as the King announces a major campaign. Some would call you spies.”

The Doctor could see that this peasant girl had shaken Tollendal’s beliefs.

Jamie had his ire up now, but the Doctor interceded. “A good march in the countryside might do us all some good. On one condition: my blue box, I want it to come along.”

“I suspect this box of yours to be an engine of tricks, Sir Doctor. It shall join us, but under guard.” He considered Zoe again. “An army has only two types of women. You are neither a camp follower nor a divine messenger.”

“Zoe comes too,” Jamie insisted.

“Of course I’m coming along.” Zoe stood on her toes to look Tollendal in the eyes. The Doctor shrugged apologetically.

Three days saw the raising of a force of men. Joan was transformed from a peasant girl to a knight, at least in outward appearance. She attended drills and ate her meals with the officers and led the troops to Mass. La Hire and her other commanders were often seen arguing points with her in an animated way. As they gestured and reddened around the neck, she would stand calmly and make her responses in brief, unflinching terms.

Zoe could not say how many of these arguments Joan won. As a lady and a mere girl, she was kept well clear of the soldiers. But she did often find Joan alone pacing a courtyard, or striding uncomfortably in her boiled leathers and chainmail.

On one of those occasions, Zoe stood aside as Joan walked past in the rain. She was muttering something about curses. “The man would serve God while his tongue mutters the words of the gutter. Surely you would not allow La Hire to continue with blasphemous talk.” She paused, turning to look at Zoe.

Zoe was dumbstruck. She had imagined a hundred questions she would love to put to the so-

called saint, but now found her tongue tied.

“Forgive me,” Joan said. “I often must seek my own council when my voices are not of the mind to answer me.”

“The... the men, they will not listen to you?”

Joan smiled. “It isn’t necessary for them to listen to me, only for them to follow God’s plan. But it is the cursing. La Hire uses the Lord’s name in vain. He calls forth all manner of foul words to season his language. In this, I will have none. You shall see, my lady. An army for a righteous cause must act in a fitting manner. I will see no visitation of the horrors I know have followed other armies.

Zoe smiled back weakly. At just that moment, she wanted to sign up for Joan’s army herself. But the mood passed. Joan begged her leave and continued her muttering patrol of the grounds.

Angry with herself for not saying something more, she sought out Jamie in their apartments. “And how can you be so certain she is divine?”

Jamie shrugged. “I dinnae expect to find proof. You always need to know everything from start to finish. Well, some things you just can’t know. That’s the way of it. No travel to other worlds is gonnae change that for me.”

“Zoe, my dear,” the Doctor said, “the universe is full of many mysteries that are even beyond the knowledge of my people. History says that a figure named Joan of Arc did what no other woman, let alone a girl, had done in her day and age. Something could be said to be a miracle because it is divine, as Jamie believes, or because its mystery is unexplainable. I find the universe to be full of miracles.”

He called her over and put a soothing hand on her shoulder. “Miracles and mysteries go hand and hand with each other. You are right when you say that Joan did not make it all the way to the King without human aid. Watch the people who mill about her. Even you, James McCrimmon, should watch and keep an eye on these quiet mutterings and sidelong conversations.” He took them both in with his gaze. “I fear we are in great danger from my friend, Tollendal. He is not inclined to see Joan as a divine messenger. He believes her to be a witch.”

“That’s ridiculous, everyone knows witches have pointy hats and ride on brooms.” Jamie jabbed Zoe in the ribs to show he was having a jest.

“You won’t be laughing if he comes to the same conclusion about us,” the Doctor snapped.

The army moved out to rousing cheers. Secrecy was unimportant; everyone from the kitchen maids to the Englishman Bedford in command of the siege knew they were coming. The war had dragged on an eternity.

A siege implied that the city was surrounded. In truth, the English and Burgundians had only managed to secure three of the four approaches to Orléans. The siege army was bivouacked in small groups to make better use of foraged lands. The occupied approaches were as leaky as a sieve. Bedford viewed the stalemate with nearly as much despair as those “trapped” within the city walls.

Zoe was eager for this first direct discussion between the Doctor and Joan. “Will you ask her about the voices?” Zoe asked as they strode with Tollendal towards the captain’s bivouac. “You should ask her about the angels.”

“I agree,” Tollendal added. “Put her to the test.”

“Oh, would you now.” Jamie had lost all patience with their French captor. “A big strong fellow

like you. Why don't you make her talk?"

Tollendal reached for his sword and Jamie for his dirk. The Doctor barked at them both, "Shall we go to our meeting and perhaps maintain as pleasant a facade as possible. Jamie? Lord Tollendal?"

Joan was warming herself by the fire when they arrived. She was surrounded by her captains, who made room for the newcomers.

The newcomers squeezed into the tight circle. No one spoke. Jamie looked into the fire. "A cold night," he finally said to break the silence.

"That it is," Joan said. She studied the three of them. Her eyes reflected warmly the light of the fire. "Is it not strange that we are companions in this venture, yet when we sit about the fire, all camaraderie dies?"

"Men don't feel like talking," La Hire grumbled. "We're not made with wagging tongues like womenfolk, pardon me for saying."

She laughed. "I am only grateful you have given in to my womanly request that you not blaspheme when you speak." Joan looked to the three travellers. "Tomorrow we arrive and most likely will enter battle immediately. I've asked you here to count the measure of your courage, Sir Doctor, Sir Jamie."

"And Lady Zoe," Zoe muttered in whisper. Joan returned her remark with a friendly smile.

"I perform this test every night with my commanders and with the men of the camp. A leader must be seen and must know the men they command.

"Aye, a clan chieftain does the same," Jamie agreed.

Joan stood up and moved closer to the fire, warming her hands. "The saints have not spoken to me in some time. The last thing they did say to me was that I must have faith."

"In God, I suppose?" Zoe said.

"In myself." She paused. "I thought it strange advice. Surely I need faith in the powers of heaven, but then I looked about me at my commanders. I understood. Each of them knows the power of God. He also knows that he must earn God's grace by serving the cause with fortitude and strength of will. Why should it be any different for me, merely because of my sex?"

Zoe considered her for a moment and looked hesitantly at the Doctor. "You made it all this way on your own – didn't you?"

"I sense a test in your words, Lady Zoe." Joan looked at La Hire, who chose that moment to spit a bit of food to his side. "You sense the truth. When I was very young, the headman of our village led me to speak with the magistrate for our region. Then, much later, Lord Baudricourt aided me in gaining an audience with his master. On and on, like a ladder, I was helped in my journey to Chinon. Intrigues of this sort are not new to me. So, when at court I was approached by yet more allies, I did not question it. Some, I fear, have paid to get me this far so as to embarrass the Dauphin. Others hope to use me for their own gain. I lead the army in Charles' name, yet it is La Hire to whom the men turn for their day-to-day commands."

"Then you are being manipulated?"

Joan looked curiously at Zoe from across the fire. "I know not your word. If your meaning is that others have eased my journey, then you are correct."

Zoe looked sidelong to Jamie. He was staring at Joan with his head cocked and a look of hurt in his eyes. Zoe felt a sinking feeling in her heart for him.

"On this journey," Joan continued, "I heard what others whispered in the shadows. They said, 'Look at the girl from the cow pasture who hears voices in her head.' Sir Jamie, have you ever heard voices in your head? I mean voices not of your own mind." She didn't wait for his answer. "Do you

follow men who claim to hear such voices? Speak truthful.”

“No. I would not, my lady. ‘Tis bad to listen to voices.”

She raised her hands and shrugged. “Even those who are mad have moments in which they see the world clearly. I doubted myself.” She looked to Tollendal. “I feared I was bewitched.”

La Hire cleared his throat. “An army on the eve of battle should not speak of such things.”

Joan turned and stood before him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Fear not. There is no talk of defeat in my speech tonight.” Turning now to Zoe. “My strength was returned to me. It was a rainy night as I was being led to Chinon. We passed the abbey of St. Denis. Legend held that a sword, which has been missing for one hundred years, was to be found somewhere on the grounds. Many have tried to discover it. Many have failed. After a moment’s thought, I told my companions to seek it in the little cemetery behind the church. In my mind, I could see it beneath a tall oak. They searched for some time.”

“And did they find this sword?” Zoe asked.

Joan turned and drew a folded cloth from her spot by the fire. She unfolded it and the tarnished edge of a sword could be seen dancing with the glow of the fire. “It is not the sword I shall take to the battle, Sir Jamie, for it was a symbol and a message to me. Have faith. The day will be won.” Then, louder, she addressed the entire group, “Have faith, for the day will be won.”

Joan looked over her men in turn. “Have I not succeeded in getting La Hire to cleanse his tongue?” The others laughed. “And what of you De Metz and you Poulengy? Have I not won the day and saved your souls by urging you to seek confession? All those who aid me, whether they think they act for the King or they think they act for themselves, are truly working to a divine plan. My part is simple. I must have faith in myself, for God is guiding me.”

Joan circled the fire and stood before the Doctor. “My voices know you, sir. Saint Michael has spoken of you.”

The Doctor held her gaze. His eyes were warm with the firelight, but also with humour. “Good things, I trust.”

“He reminded me that you and I met many years ago in the fields near Domrémy. I was troubled and remember receiving advice from a man. This man did not wear your face. He was an old man with white hair and a sharp tongue. I was such a small child then. Still, there are not many strangers in a place like Domrémy. Say the truth of it, Sir Doctor. Were you ever in the village of Domrémy?”

He fidgeted a bit. “Domrémy? Well, I do travel extensively. Difficult to say...”

She raised a hand. “Saint Michael said you may deny it, and he said that I was not to press you to speak. How you could be that same man, I cannot say, but Doctor I know it is you.” She bowed her head a bit and the Doctor smiled back.

The force arrived on the morning of April 29. The Governor, De Bunois, rode out to greet them. It was the joke of the siege that the officials of the city routinely left the confines of their walls to take the country. But the siege was deadly and was entrenched. When he met the host that was to liberate them, he was far from impressed. “This is your force? So, where is *la Pucelle* of Domrémy?” He looked past La Hire to a boy with shaved head and fragile body.

“I have come at God’s request,” the “boy” answered.

“God would do better to show himself,” De Bunois scoffed. “That is the truth, no matter what penance I must say for using His name. None the less, let us continue this mummery. I have a white mare, clean and groomed, the best we have. You will ride beside me, carrying the banner of your

force.” He turned to her captains. “Sirs, I suggest you deploy your army here where the approach is well suited.”

Joan stepped between them. “I command and will not leave my army.”

La Hire sensed an unpleasant scene and stepped between her and the Governor. “God has instructed you to ride into Orléans, has he not?”

“But it was to be at the head of an army?” she protested. “No, my lords, the army must follow.”

De Bunois stepped away and waited for La Hire to put the boot to this girl. To his surprise, the veteran knight took a deferential role. “The Governor has already told the people that you are here. He only asks that you ride on and show them. An army’s first battle is to raise the morale of the people.”

“When do we put the sword to the enemy?” she answered. “The lands are ravaged; the people need more than morale.”

The Doctor, who was observing quietly off to the side, stepped forward. “There are other ways to do battle, Joan.”

Tears streaked her face. They had all learned that Joan was two people, depending upon her mood. There was Joan the commander and leader, but there was also Joan the wilful child. “Very well. I’ll suffer your parade, but Doctor, you and your companions must accompany me.”

The English siege had not cut the eastern approaches to Orléans. Joan, decked out in full armour, carrying the banner of Charles’s army, rode her white horse into the city gates. Beside her was De Bunois, his men-at-arms and three time travellers. Zoe was forced to wear a heavy cloak.

Joan smiled up at the sky as the people cheered her.

The Doctor, too, seemed to enjoy the parade. His good cheer was short-lived. As he scanned the assembled knights along the route, his hearts skipped a beat as his eyes focused on a solitary figure. He reached to Jamie riding on the horse beside him. He yanked furiously on the Scotsman’s sleeve, but the boy was too busy returning the fond wishes of the people.

“Jamie McCrimmon!” the Doctor growled. “Look to your right. Now! That silver knight there.”

Jamie was so surprised, he jerked back on the reins, causing the stallion to buck. “Och, how can that be? Doctor, it’s one o’ those beastie metal men.”

“I’m afraid it is, Jamie – a Cyberman.”

“I can’t do that, Sir Doctor. He has been a hero of the people.” Joan knelt in the small chapel. The Doctor paced back and forth behind her.

“You don’t understand. This Silver Knight is evil. He isn’t what you think he is.”

Joan folded her hands and began to pray, but the Doctor would not be still and she was forced to break her concentration. “The ranks of my army are filled with the unrighteous.”

The Doctor knelt beside her. “I know no better way to explain than to try and tell you the truth. The universe is a much bigger place than you can imagine. Within that universe are places that give rise to the most terrible things. The Silver Knight is not a man at all; or rather not much of him is, in any case. Oh, how to make it clear to you. He is an engine, like the trebuchets that hurl rocks great distances.”

She laughed. “You jest with me, sir. Are you saying that the man was fashioned by a sword maker or a smith?”

“Not a ‘man,’ Joan, it is a Cyberman.” He grew frustrated. “It is a machine. There is no heart, no mind, no blood – no soul.”

“No fear of God? Even Satan fears God.”

“There is no emotion at all.” The clownish man knelt beside her and Joan could see the deadly earnest in his eyes. A cold shutter went up her spine.

Jamie and Zoe watched as Tollendal’s men laboured to bring the TARDIS into the walls of the city. “I am beginning to dislike that man,” Zoe said of Tollendal.

“Aye,” Jamie agreed. “He has no right to call himself the Doctor’s friend. Do you notice how afraid he becomes when anyone mentions Joan to him?”

“I’ve noticed that too. He is becoming pathological. He is truly frightened?”

Tollendal himself appeared in the courtyard below them. As they watched, a hooded figure with a longbow strung over his shoulder approached him and the two began to talk. “An archer,” Jamie said with disdain. “Only cowards use arrows in battle.”

The archer nodded as Tollendal gave his instructions. “Aye, my lord. If she isn’t fool enough to get herself killed in battle, then I am to finish the job.”

Tollendal handed him a purse of money. “Half of your fee now, the rest when she is dead. I care not whether it be by English hands or your arrow.”

Joan decided she must give the Silver Knight a chance to answer the Doctor’s charges. So she decided to confront him. The Doctor followed in tow.

The tower door creaked open after her touch. She peered inside. “Lord Knight?” A candle on a table inside provided the only illumination. The Doctor put a finger to his lips and drew a small metal box from the voluminous pocket of his trousers.

“Electromagnetic field detector,” he explained. “It is inside. We must be cautious.” He cleared his throat loudly. “Lord Knight, we are here for an audience.”

A harsh, metallic voice responded, “You will enter.”

They passed over the threshold. The candle glow caught a faint glint of metal reflecting back from a corner. The Silver Knight emerged from the shadows. Joan stared into its polished face and blank eyes. The thing did look unholy.

“We would speak with you,” she said.

“I have expected your arrival, Joan of Arc.” It was an eight-foot giant and towered over her and the diminutive Doctor.

“Your defence of this city is legend,” she complimented.

“I was wondering about that myself,” the Doctor agreed. “How do you come to be here?” He stepped forward, letting the knight see him clearly.

It gave no sign that it recognized him. “I come from a distant land. My mission is to collect data and to observe.”

“What orders do you have about enemies?”

“Enemies will be destroyed.”

“Do you owe allegiance to Charles?” Joan asked.

“Allegiance. A pact made to a cultural leader for the purpose of military cohesion. It is expedient to seek the alliance of units defending this urban centre.”

Joan was flummoxed. “Do you answer me yes or no?”

“I defend this place,” it answered neutrally.

“What if we were to ask you to leave?” the Doctor fiddled with his bow tie.

The Cyberman considered its response in silence, then it turned and raised a three-fingered hand to its chest unit. A flash of light emanated from its helmet and lit the wall hangings on fire. Despite herself, Joan shrieked in fright. She was slow to pull herself together. “Do you fear anything, Sir... Knight?”

“Fear is inefficient. Fear has been replaced.”

“When does your spacecraft return for you?” the Doctor asked offhandedly. To Joan’s surprise, the Cyberman leapt forward in an almost emotional response. “Oh my giddy aunt. I think I’ve upset the apple cart.”

“Your words are not consistent with the technological development of this planet. You know of the Cyber-race. You are an enemy.” It reached a hydraulic arm towards the Doctor. “You will be destroyed.”

“No, stop.” Joan stepped between them. “He is my ally. If you harm the Doctor, I shall summon my army to strike you down.”

The Cyberman stood frozen. It neither advanced nor retreated. Joan was dwarfed by it, but she too did not move. The Doctor peered around her. “We should go.”

“Sir Knight,” Joan craned her neck to see the silver face. “We prepare to lift the siege. Will you help us?”

It stepped back. “Yes. A test of combat skills by native forces is part of my program.”

“Then you are welcome. You will be rewarded by the Dauphin.”

The Doctor whispered in her ear, “There is nothing that Charles could offer that a Cyberman would want.” He began to pull her towards the door.

“There will be a Mass in the chapel on the morn,” Joan said. “I expect the presence of all my captains. You will be among them, my lord.”

The Cyberman remained silent.

The Doctor pulled her out the door. “Don’t expect it to show for services.”

Bolder now, she answered to the room, “If you do not show, sir, I may need to heed the council of the Doctor. Come, Sir Doctor, I have other duties to attend to.”

The Doctor, Jamie and Zoe watched from the back of the church as Joan, La Hire and the captains of her army gathered for Mass.

“It is a scout,” the Doctor continued his updating of the Cyberman situation in a hushed whisper. “We must find a way of deactivating its weapon; otherwise, both armies combined wouldn’t be able to stop it.”

Zoe snapped her fingers. Jamie waved her to be quiet as the priest at the altar looked back at them. She nodded. “The TARDIS has a pulse generator. We could short out the Cyberman’s power cells.”

“We need to get past Tollendal first,” Jamie grumbled. “Can’t you talk to the man, Doctor?”

“I’ve tried. He is determined that we remain here and away from the TARDIS.”

The heavy doors of the church creaked open. Standing in the entrance was the Silver Knight. The crowd of soldiers rose and turned to look at him. Joan looked back at the Doctor and smiled triumphantly.

Joan faced the bracing wind on a bridge overlooking the enemy. She carried a white flag, but a dozen archers guarded her back. "Brave English foes," she called out to the morning mist. "I wish to speak with your commander."

"Who speaks?" a soldier called back.

"I am Jeanne d'Arc, the captain of Charles's army."

Laughter sounded from the fog. "You sound more like a cowgirl."

"I call on you to retreat with honour, for you face the banner of God."

"Come to the far side of the bridge, cowgirl, and we'll show you our honour." They began pelting stones and garbage towards the bridge. Their missiles fell short of their target, but the archers on the wall behind Joan soon put their laughter to silence.

"You have been warned." Joan's voice cracked as she called back. "Let the blood that comes be on your hands." She turned away from them as Noah must have done when the masses came to him in the flood. Her conscience would be clear.

The Doctor held out the box. "Fortunately, I had something in my pocket that will suit our needs. Sometimes I must admit that I am rather clever. This, Jamie, is an electromagnetic detector, or rather it *was* a detector."

"What is it now?"

"I've rigged it to emit all of its battery power in one single burst of energy. Bang. That will put paid to the Cyberman's gun."

"That wee box is gonna do that?"

The Doctor frowned. "The problem is that we will need to get very close to it for this to work." He touched the box to Jamie's arm. "Very close indeed. The Cyberman's weapon is separate from its body mechanisms. Still, I do wish we could shut down the whole Cyberman."

"Aye, those arms o' his can squeeze the life out of you."

"I have considered that. Where is Zoe?"

"She's talking to Joan. She's meddling again, I'm sure of it Doctor."

The Doctor was looking at a wire he had left out of the machine. "I hope I haven't forgotten anything."

"Doctor, did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, of course, let her be, she has sense."

"She has computer-teaching sense," Jamie corrected. "No more sense sometimes than that wee box in your hands."

The two girls walked between the pews of the chapel. Joan was deep in thought. "My force is preparing to attack the fort at Tourelles. If we take it, the Loire crossing will be ours. The siege will be lifted."

"I must admit, I'm impressed with all that you have achieved." Zoe strode beside her. "Though I'm not so sure about your voices being from heaven."

Joan looked the girl over. "One battle at a time, Lady Zoe. Perhaps I could ask you a question. You have a confidence and a forwardness that I have not seen in a lady of our land. You speak your

mind and partake in adventures as though you were a man. How did you achieve these things?"

"Where I come from, women don't have to be subservient to men."

"And do women command armies?"

"We've done away with war, at least on... on our lands."

"Then perhaps my voices have spoken with others, for I cannot imagine a time when man does not war against man. So you see, Lady Zoe, all of creation moves with or without our consent, for it is the realm of He who made it."

When Zoe did not answer, Joan looked into her face and saw sadness. Zoe turned away. "Joan, we have met the Cybermen before. They cannot be trusted. They will destroy you, your King Charles and anyone they deem to be of no use to them. Please, don't trust it."

"You prophesy the future. Do not give in to it, for it will bewitch and weaken you."

"You prophesy victory, what is the difference?"

"My voices tell me what is to come. That is not prophesy. For example, they have given me a pain in my shoulder and have told me that tomorrow I shall be wounded by an arrow loosed at the moment of victory. I know this to be true because the saints have told me, not because I am bewitched. Fear not, Lady Zoe."

Six hundred Englishmen guarded the keep at Tourelles. The fort was built on a small island in the middle of the River Loire.

Three thousand men marched to the shores opposite the fort. The Doctor and his companions rode beside Joan. Zoe was back in her heavy cloak. The drawbridge was pulled up against them, but the bridge to the opposite shore was down. The fort could receive reinforcements from the far shore.

The Cyberman strode out to join the army.

"Lord Knights," Joan greeted her captains and lieutenants, "we must wade to the island and launch an attack with archers."

The Cyberman stepped forward. "You must cut off escape and prevent reinforcements. The bridge to the opposite side must be destroyed."

"We can spare you no men," the Governor said. "A frontal attack will be costly."

"Irrelevant. I shall destroy the bridge. Your archers must provide cover."

The Doctor felt the edges of his improvised pulse emitter in his pocket. He needed to wait for the right moment before using it.

Joan turned to him with a knowing look on her face. "Matters will reach their climax today."

All day the two forces clashed. Those English who stood on the near shore were vanquished, but the river crossing was difficult and the soldiers were bombarded with rocks, oil and arrows along the way. By nightfall, De Bunois was bloodied and streaked with sweat as he rode back to report: "We can not overcome their fire."

Joan herself had taken a glancing blow upon her back. The pain of it still troubled her. "Just a little longer. The Silver Knight has started his crossing." She pointed to the river where the knight was submerged nearly to the top of his helmet.

The Doctor and his companions watched from the vantage of a hill. They could see the Cyberman rise

from the water on the opposite side of the island. Its advance was inevitable and machine-like. The defenders were mystified and their confusion made them prey to La Hire's archers. Finally, the Cyberman reached the shore of the tiny island and circled the fortress. He was out of view.

English reinforcements massed on the opposite side of the bridge. They paused as the silver giant blocked their path. A blue light flared behind the keep in a series of bright flashes. Hellfire ignited the bridge. The seasoned wood burst into flames. A few of the Englishmen close to its edge similarly were engulfed in fire.

"For Charles! For the King of France!" Joan cried out as she led the attack on the fort. One by one the last of the English archers were felled. With the destruction of their only escape route, the defenders fell into disarray. They were trapped and the door was in flames. French soldiers, shielded by interlocking *pavois*, marched beneath the walls and began to assault the door.

Joan stormed unafraid into the fight. De Bunois held her back. "No, child. You are too valuable to risk now that the day is ours."

French troops poured through the open gate. Flames had spread throughout the tower. Boiling oil had been prepared by the defenders, but the fire had swept up so swiftly that it caught them in an inferno.

The Doctor sighed sadly as he watched the carnage. Zoe turned away, unable to look on the death and destruction. Even Jamie, who had seen battle in the Highlands, was left gaping.

The troops began to rise in cheer and shout in celebration. They released the fort's surviving drawbridge and it crashed to the ground. The opposite bridge was still burning, and the English massed on the shore could only watch helplessly.

The French began to return across the bridge. Standing head and shoulder above them was the Cyberman.

"Why has it become involved?" Zoe asked. "You said it was here to observe."

"Observation, scouting the Earth for weaknesses. What better way to judge humanity than to participate in its test of arms." The Doctor paced about in a tight circle. "It is imperative that we disable that gun. Come along, we have to speak with Joan."

Tollendal and his archer chose an isolated spot on the parapet overlooking the city gate. Tollendal had watched the victory. It was proof to him that Joan had called forth the fires of hell to beguile his countrymen.

"I cannot perform what you ask, my lord," the archer said.

"You've been paid. You'll do as you're told."

The man threw back the purse of silver. "It isn't worth my soul. What the maid has done was a miracle."

"Come back here, you fool. Did you not see the Silver Knight? The Devil's own light came from its head."

"I saw not, my lord. I saw only the girl, barely grown, lead a victory. I will not challenge God's will."

The archer fled, throwing down his bow and quiver. Tollendal picked them up.

“A victory, as clear as the night sky itself.” La Hire was already drunk on the cheers of his men. “And to think, I was prepared to call retreat.”

Joan stood beside him and allowed the troops to wade past. Every one of them wanted to touch her helmet.

The Doctor and his friends made their way up to her. She caught sight of them and waved them over. “La Hire led the fight. I was but their banner. They waved me as though I were silken glory.”

La Hire waved a gauntleted hand in disgust. “Wilful child, do you wish to steal victory with talk like that?”

“The day is won, but the battle isn’t over. I have vowed to see Charles crowned as King.”

“And so you shall,” De Bunois answered. “Given this day, the men will follow you.”

“I am not a banner to be held and managed when called to fly.” She turned away from the men filing past and grasped the Doctor’s arm. She led him away. “I fear that my voices’ words have not yet been fulfilled. I was to suffer a near mortal wound.” Her face wore a mask of concern. “My wound earlier was nothing, but it has made me afraid, not for my soul, but for my body.” She laughed nervously. “I await the pain that is to come, and the wait is pain itself.”

“Joan, I need to talk to you again about the Silver Knight. Did you see how it set the bridge afire?”

“The bridge was alight. That I saw, but not how he accomplished it. He was hidden behind the castle.”

“Here comes the beastie.” Jamie pointed.

Joan patted the Doctor’s arm affectionately. “Come, we will greet our champion.”

The men cheered the Cyberman, but they did not rush to touch it as they did with Joan. The creature strode forward to meet the girl. “Your enemy has been defeated.”

Joan reached out and boldly touched the knight’s forearm. “You have done great service for us today. But there is still one who doubts your loyalty. Doctor, come forward. Let us have peace between you and my silver champion.”

The Doctor shambled hesitantly closer, Jamie and Zoe close on his heels. “I must admit, you were impressive. Perhaps you would show Joan how you set the bridge on fire.” He reached into his coat pocket and felt for the pulse generator.

The Cyberman assessed him. “The cultural development of this planet is not advanced enough to comprehend the technology.”

Jamie nudged the Doctor. He clearly wanted him to act. The Doctor shoved him off. What would it do if it was attacked? What if it lashed out and killed Joan?

“Will you join us at feast tonight?” Joan asked. “I shall see your face, and you and Lord Doctor will be praising each other before the night is out.”

The Cyberman did not answer. It seemed to be staring over her shoulder at the Doctor. There was no emotion in its stance, but Joan turned towards the Doctor as if knowing there was some animosity there.

“Shall we go?” she said and led them back towards the city.

A procession was arranged back to Orléans. Joan was on her white horse. A guard of five hundred men, including the Silver Knight and the Doctor and his companions, followed.

As they approached the city gate, the Doctor worked his way up in line beside the Cyberman. “So, what is your take on today’s events? Is there any part of you that was stirred by the carnage?”

“Emotion is inefficient.”

“I didn’t ask if emotion was efficient. I asked if there was a reaction in your organic remnants from what happened today. Surely you can understand that there is logic to understanding your own reactions?”

Zoe had slipped up beside the Doctor and, with the impetuosity of youth, blurted out, “He wants to know if you are all machine, or is there any humanity left inside you?”

It stopped and turned on her. A three-fingered hand reached down and seized her neck. Jamie, who was watching with a defender’s eye, leapt in, but he could do nothing to move the creature’s arm. Zoe struggled in its grasp as the Cyberman responded, “The application of sufficient pressure is enough to snap the spinal column and terminate life. The purpose of my mission is to understand human weaknesses and to observe the combat abilities of this planet. Your questions and your companions’ reaction to my aggressive behaviour have been noted for study.” It turned to the Doctor. “My program does not benefit by answering your questions.”

All around them the procession stopped to observe. Joan was looking back on them.

The Cyberman lifted Zoe so that she was forced to stand on her toes. Jamie had removed his dirk and was stabbing ineffectively at the Silver Knight. The creature swatted him away.

The Doctor clenched his hands at his sides. “Please don’t harm her.”

“It is your reaction to her death that I wish to observe, Doctor.”

“Release her, Sir Knight!” Joan called back. “Release the maid at once.” She stood tall in her saddle and was nearly at eye level with the Cyberman. “I will not have this battle between you in my camp. Release her, or I will order you killed despite your bravery today.”

Zoe watched in terror from the monster’s grasp. Suddenly, the fingers released and she was free.

“There shall be no more of this war. Do you understand me?” Joan scolded. She turned her horse and ordered the march to continue.

An arrow whirred down from the parapet above the gate. It struck Joan’s shoulder and she fell from the horse. The men directly behind her caught her as she screamed in pain.

The Cyberman reacted immediately. He turned to the source of the attack and raised his fingers to his chest plate. The weapon on his helmet fired. Tollendal stood frozen on the wall, his body engulfed in hellfire. Already dead, he fell from the battlement and landed in a broken heap on the drawbridge. Men screamed in panic and fled from the Silver Knight.

The Doctor was shocked himself. Recovering, he drew the pulse generator from his pocket and pushed his way through the fleeing men-at-arms. He activated it just as the device touched the Cyberman’s chest unit. The little box discharged its entire energy output in an anticlimactic pop. The Cyberman whirled around and brushed the Doctor away. It reached its fingers to the gun control, but nothing happened.

“You’ve done it,” Jamie said as he rushed in to pull the Doctor away. The Cyberman marched forward, but they wove out of its lumbering way. Joan’s army had recovered from its panic. Men rushed forward, swarming around the Cyberman and forming a cordon between it and the Doctor.

Words like “Hellfire” and “Limb of the Fiend” were mumbled. Others asked God to strike down the Devil’s creature.

The Doctor explained to Zoe and Jamie, “The only ones who had seen how the Cyberman set the fort on fire were the defenders, and they are all dead.” He assessed the angry mass of men around them. “Even with these odds it will be a bloodbath. Joan, where is she?” He led them around the circle of men to where Joan lay on the ground in agony. The arrow was still in her shoulder. Her captains had applied bandages, but would need a doctor before daring to remove the shaft.

“Joan, speak your judgment,” La Hire said. “Shall we strike down the fiend? What is God’s will?”

“Doctor, bring me Sir Doctor.”

He was allowed to approach. “Joan, the Cyberman is still very dangerous.” Behind him there was a shout and the circle of men rushed in on the creature. They could hear the clink of armour, the thrashing of the giant’s arm and the crushing of men’s bodies. “You must order it to stop. There will be many, many deaths before you bring it down.”

“Stop!” she cried out. “Stop. Leave him be. He has brought us victory, but I will not consort with the Devil.”

La Hire ordered the clash to end. The circle reformed around the Cyberman. Pikes held it in the centre, while broken men groaned around them.

“Go, Sir Knight!” Joan called out with her last strength. “There is nothing I can do to protect you. Return to your master.” With that, she passed out.

The circle of men parted to allow La Hire to address the creature. He repeated Joan’s order. The Cyberman remained motionless for a time, then suddenly turned and strode away.

Jamie watched it recede into the distance. “We cannae just let it escape. Doctor.”

Zoe was tending to Joan’s wound. As she pressed a bandage tight to the shoulder, Joan opened her eyes. “It is as my voices warned me: I would be struck in the shoulder upon the celebration of our victory. You see, Lady Zoe...”

“This strange blue box of yours, Sir Doctor,” Joan said. Her shoulder was bandaged and she had recovered some of her strength. “It has been carried all this way in our baggage. What is it for? Why were Tollendal’s men keeping you from it?”

“The TARDIS and I are quite inseparable,” he answered without answering. “Aren’t we, girl?”

Zoe popped her head out of the box. “We can’t find the Cyberman on the scanners?”

Joan laughed. “Does the Lady Zoe expect the Silver Knight to be hiding in your cabinet? No, it has left the country as mercenaries are apt to do. If he turns foe, I am sure we will know it soon enough.”

“More likely his power cells are dying. It may have returned to its spacecraft to recharge.” The Doctor saw the way Joan looked at him. “Forgive me, I speak in the tongue of my country. But it is as you say, he is gone elsewhere for other profits.”

“We can’t just let him wander around,” Zoe insisted.

The Doctor looked from her to Joan. “I think we too must be off.” He reached out and clasped the girl’s hands. “Goodbye, my dear. Goodbye.”

“Tell me truthful. Even though I know it cannot be so, are you the grey-haired grandfather who I met as a child in Domrémy?”

“Well, I am sure you have answered your own question, my dear. Hmm?” There was a twinkle in his eye.

She released him and nodded. “As you say, I have answered my own question. Farewell.”

“Farewell, my lady.” Jamie came out to kiss her hand. He was still a bit in awe. Zoe hugged her. The Doctor watched nervously, afraid his precocious companion would say something more, but she did not and disappeared back into the TARDIS.

The Doctor said one final goodbye and then entered the time ship.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Seven

by Nick Walters

NOVATRON STATION,
ON A FAR FROM NORMAL MONDAY MORNING

In Conference Room Two of Sphinx-Fordton UltraMeg's offices on Novatron Station, all employees were gathering for a special event.

Farbis squashed into the seat next to Bence, who shuddered as his colleague's bulk encroached upon his slender frame. "Lordy, mate, you need to lay off the pies."

Farbis ignored the insult. "Well, this is it. The Day of Doom."

"Or the dawn of a brand-new era of IT that, gasp, actually works," said Bence.

"Huh."

As Conference Room Two began to fill with all 348 employees of Sphinx-Fordton UltraMeg, the noise of conversation got louder and the temperature warmer.

Beads of sweat began to break out on Farbis's forehead. "Bloody air conditioning," he muttered, mopping his brow with a grimy hanky. "On the blink again!"

"Don't worry, when INOMASP comes online, she'll sort out the air conditioning."

Farbis glanced sharply at his work colleague. "She? What makes you think this thing's female? Or has any sort of gender at all?"

Bence shrugged. "Dunno. Just seems it. Women are good at multi-tasking, keeping things in order, and all that. So it fits."

"Well I hope it's not as moody and temperamental as a real woman," grumbled Farbis.

"Watch it, old fella, or they'll send you to the Reminder Room for diversity training."

Farbis shuddered. "Don't 'remind' me of that place."

Conference Room Two was now completely full, to the point where some employees were forced to stand at the back.

On the stage was a table draped in blue cloth bearing the company logo: a Sphinx's head with coins for its eyes. Three places had been set at this table: three chairs, three blotters and three glasses of water. An expectant hush fell over the assembled employees as three esteemed corporate personages mounted the stage and took their seats. In the centre seat sat Desdemona Fordton, current CEO, grey-haired, stringy and severe. To her right, Human Resources Director Alexis Quernchagg, a blandly handsome chap in his fifties with shiny black hair. And to her left, the company's IT Director, Dr. Nathan O'Ghoosk. In striking contrast to his more formal colleagues, O'Ghoosk wore green corduroy trousers, big shiny silver magnetic astronaut boots (which made it difficult to walk, but it was the fashion), and a red T-Shirt bearing a slogan in big black letters which, somewhere, somewhen, must have meant something to someone: "COAL NOT DOLE". He sported profuse purple dreadlocks, a matching goatee and little round yellow-tinted glasses he didn't really need to wear. He was brandishing a silver control wand.

Desdemona Fordton stood up and raised her hand for silence, which duly fell.

"Today is a great day for us, and for all of Novatron Station. Thanks to Dr. O'Ghoosk here, we are about to roll out INOMASP – the INtelligent Omniscient Mainframe Artificial Sentience Platform."

“I was right, it *was* platform!” whispered Bence.

Desdemona Fordton continued, “INOMASP is an operating system that will not only provide a platform for delivery of all our services, but will take over the running of every system on the station.”

“Doom,” muttered Farbis.

“Fool!” hissed Bence.

Dr. O’Ghoosk stood up. “Mark this day as the dawn of a new era.” His voice was a nasal monotone. He stroked a touch-sensitive pad on the control wand and the lights dimmed. Behind the stage, a screen lit up. A kaleidoscope of tessellating triangles whizzed around the screen, and a deep, female voice intoned:

“At the centre of the system sits the Heart of INOMASP, a unique Central Processing Unit possessing greater and faster processing power than anything yet invented.”

It went on for a while in similar vein.

Bence nudged Farbis’s flabby arm. “Told you it was a woman.”

Farbis snorted.

The presentation ended with a bombastic fanfare and the lights went back up.

“Once I stroke this touch-sensitive pad,” O’Ghoosk declared, “INOMASP will take over, sending all our troubles and worries into yesterday!”

Farbis muttered something, presumably derogatory, but it was drowned out by thunderous applause, which Bence joined in enthusiastically.

“No! Stop!”

A figure leapt up onto the stage and grabbed the control wand, trying to wrest it from O’Ghoosk’s grasp.

There was a general murmur of alarm from the crowd.

“It’s that nutter from the café from last week!” cried Bence.

It was indeed the thin eavesdropper in brown pinstripe. He was now engaged in a bizarre waltz with O’Ghoosk as they struggled for possession of the control wand. Desdemona Fordton and Alexis Quernchagg had abandoned their chairs and looked on, aghast.

“Don’t do it! You’ve no idea what you’re unleashing!” cried the stranger.

“No! I must activate INOMASP!” shrieked O’Ghoosk.

The shrill ululations of the building’s security alarms kicked in.

Bence and Farbis, now standing up like everyone else, watched the events on stage unfold as if in slow motion.

The stranger and O’Ghoosk locked in their struggle.

CEO Desdemona Fordton gesticulating and shouting, her words drowned out by the clamour of the alarms.

HR Director Alexis Quernchagg, his face a mask of rage, leaping headlong into the fray and wrestling the interloper away from O’Ghoosk.

O’Ghoosk, panting heavily, his glasses dislodged and face sheened with sweat, holding the control wand aloft in triumph.

Bence felt a chill in his guts. “You were right. He’s right!” he yelled, pointing at the stranger, who was struggling and failing to release himself from Quernchagg’s bear hug. “INOMASP is evil! It should be stopped!”

But it was too late.

His purple-goateed face alight with triumph, Dr. Nathan O’Ghoosk lightly brushed his thumb

over the touch-sensitive pad on the control wand that, when touched, would activate INOMASP.

And INOMASP was activated.

And all the lights went out.

Three-hundred-and-fifty-odd people screamed.

The gravity went off.

“Zbi-Quickity save us!” wailed Farbis as, with Bence clinging on to him, he began to rise into the air.

And then the air supply cut out.

Bence, Farbis, their work colleagues, Desdemona Fordton, Alexis Quernchagg, Nathan O’Ghoosk, and all the thousands of beings who dwelled upon Novatron Station, began, slowly, to die.

Next Segment

SIDIAN TOWER, END OF THE LINE

You Know the Drill

by Anthony Wilson

It came as a surprise to no one, least of all myself, that I spent the first few weeks of my exile ignoring practically everything but my drive to escape. It was not that I wished to be somewhere else specific, and, in other circumstances, I would have quite happily stayed for some time. It was being told that I *couldn't* leave that made me so very determined to do so.

I tried every trick that I knew. I rigged and de-rigged and re-rigged the ship, but nothing could compel it to work. I tried self-hypnosis, shock therapy, an alleged, and, it transpired, fraudulent telepath – anything I could do to get my mind to function properly again. I even sent distress signals in the direction of benevolent friends or ex-enemies, but somehow they never heard my call. Oh yes, my captors had my exile sewn up as tightly as could be imagined; they knew exactly what they were doing and exactly what I would try. No friends came, no sign of anyone who might have helped me.

All of which is not to suggest that the planet on which I found myself was utterly isolated from the universe at large. Indeed, the opposite was almost true. For whatever reasons, the tribunal at my trial had coincided the time and place of my exile with a sudden and inexplicable increase in attempted invasions. I think they felt that they knew what they were doing, that they knew how I would act. And, of course, they were correct.

Within days of my arrival, the first of these had begun. I could scarcely help becoming involved. I flatter myself that, in my travelling days, I had done some good. There were and are, of course, corners of the universe which breed the most terrible things. And I believe that evil, wherever it is, and however it manifests itself, must be fought. You know the drill.

So, as the meteorites fell, bringing the first of a series of alien intelligences to this tragic, blue-green planet on which I found myself, there really was nothing I could do but to offer and provide my aid.

The challenges that these invasions posed were not difficult to overcome. Dangerous, certainly – and being attached to a quasi-military operation was always useful in that respect – but there was nothing difficult, nothing intellectually challenging about what had to be achieved. The alien menace came from beyond the stars, or beneath the ground, or from a parallel world, and it was defeated. There would be an inevitable and highly regrettable loss of life, and then the case would be closed and, amidst trying – with increasing desperation and despair – to rescind my exile by my own hand, we would move on to the next attempt to destroy us.

It was some time, I think, before I finally decided that escape was not going to be possible. I feel that one has to accept the nature of the universe sometimes, otherwise one runs the risk of insanity. I felt myself drawing closer to such a state in my frustration, and, logically, there was only one decision to take. I do not recall exactly what I felt the day I closed the door on my ship for the last time. It may have been regret, but it equally may have been release. That is strange, now I come to think of it; I am normally so perfect in my recall of events. I wonder why that particular feeling eludes my memory.

Exile is as much a state of mind as it is a state of existence. Having finally decided to accept it, I began to refer, in my mind, to the planet on which I abided as “home.” It was not an easy mindset to adopt in the circumstances, but I am nothing if not fiercely willed, and very little diverts me from my decided course when I put my mind to it. Perhaps I was just a little stauncher in this planet’s defense, now it was my home and not my prison. Perhaps I put myself on the line that little bit more, was

prepared to risk just a little more daringly, or dangerously – to go that little bit further – than before. But that is what you are supposed to do for your home, your friends, your adoptive family: you know the drill.

Through it all, with alarming regularity, the hordes continued to come. Sometimes they came promising gifts, sometimes they returned after thousands of years away, sometimes they tried to manipulate time for their own ends. All of them were defeated, turned back, destroyed. They were getting cleverer, though; that I have to allow them. The early attacks often involved hypnotized agents, a fifth column of unwilling volunteers, trapped into doing their masters' biddings, but easy to locate and neutralize. As time went on, the invaders seemed to realize this, and so they chose their agents more carefully. Instead of heavy-handed mind-control techniques, they chose the far more obvious course of tapping into that most basic of instincts: greed. Now, the aiding and abetting of the alien would-be conquerors was done by men and women who had no need of control, because they had relinquished their own self-control years before. These – I cannot call them “people” – *creatures* enjoyed their betrayal, and would often profit handsomely from it.

There was a dispiritingly high number of them. And they deserved their fate. I do not regret what happened to them.

I remember my thought processes very clearly at this point, like crystal. I had adopted this planet as my home. Albeit unwillingly at first, I had come to love it dearly, to see in its hills and valleys, towns and cities, something that I would long for if I left. And, by contrast, there were those who were born here who seemed not to see its inherent beauty, who had no love for their land or its people. To protect the good and the obedient, it became necessary to stop the bad and discontented. To tell these two groups apart, I needed information. And thus the inception of the Finders.

It seemed like poetic justice. I took those who had betrayed their world and I electronically improved their brains. I am proud of the system that I developed. The traitors were returned as productive members of society, watching, listening, filtering the relevant information and returning it to me. They forgot nothing that they heard or saw. Neither did they forgive.

There were only a few – seven or eight – at first, but even with that small number, I was able to find several thousand potential traitors within a month. I did nothing but continue to monitor their activities, waiting until one or the other of them was contacted by an invading race. None were, but this did not seem to stop them committing crimes. Most were petty, but some were astonishing in their extravagance and violence. My Finders were preventing fraud and larceny, rape and murder. The world – my world – was a safer place.

Not everyone was happy. There were those who believed that the continuing conversion of criminals into Finders impinged upon the rights of those individuals. I, respectfully, disagreed. They had no rights, I argued: they had voluntarily rescinded their citizenship of their race by their actions, and were worthy of nothing but contempt. Certainly not rehabilitation or second chances. You go through life but once, and if you get it wrong, there is no opportunity for forgiveness. You know the drill.

I found the reaction of those in authority unhelpful, insidious and traitorous. When I had begun to assist in the defense of my new home, I garnered unquestioning assistance, infinite resources. Now, this was being removed from me. Authority figures, formerly so helpful, became obstructive, less willing or able to listen to reason. Equipment, once easily available, became the subject of questions about its necessity and efficaciousness. It was never a direct challenge to what I was doing, because the public, the people I had sworn to myself to protect, were happy with the results of my efforts, but this creeping sabotage of my work was becoming evident. I could not, in all conscience, allow it to

continue.

Ironically, as my Finders' activities were increasing, the alien desire to invade seemed to be wilting away. This had been my success: I had been here for nearly ten years and had protected my world from without. Was I now going to have it destroyed from within by the pig-headedness and high-mindedness of those who claimed to have principles? Naturally, I would not. It was certainly not difficult to send my Finders to those in governance who disputed that I had the right to do what I wished. There was always something to find, some way to remove them from their undeserved positions of power. And if there genuinely was nothing there, then people could be made to say whatever it was that I wanted them to say. No one really has as high a pain threshold as they would like or believe. Electricity, heat, invasive surgery, or, as you know, the drill.

By the time I was finally invested as ruler of my adoptive home, there was a Finder on every street corner, planet-wide. The world was safe, and the people – the good, law-abiding citizens for whom I had given everything – were happy. Or, at the very least, given what I saw through the eyes of my Finders, they were smiling. The traitors, the criminals, those who could not contribute to society, were, slowly but surely, being expunged. No invaders whatsoever came here anymore; maybe there was less here now to interest them, maybe I had destroyed them all. I do not know, and nor is it important.

It had taken years and cost me so very much, but I had, at last, succeeded. My world, my home, was finally fully under my protection.

It was in the seventh year of my rule that the five hundred millionth criminal was recycled as a Finder, and returned to productive life. And it was the day after that milestone passed that the Doctor came.

I knew nothing of him before he arrived. I know only a little more now, although I gather from some things he said, that he, too – and more than once – had been trapped for a time on a planet that was not his own. I would have liked to have been able to explain to the Doctor the decisions that I had made, but I was not afforded that chance. I genuinely believe that he would have understood.

It took the Doctor precisely twelve minutes to utterly dismantle my empire. To this day, I have no idea how it was achieved. Suffice it to say that, upon his arrival, there was a sound as of the universe being torn asunder and, only moments later, it seemed, the same thing happened to the safe, protected world that I had built.

Much of the time, he seemed barely to know what he was doing, as if his mind had been scattered to the nine winds. Or as if he had spent too much time in the company of my Finders. At times, it seemed, his friends were his nursemaids – the soft girl, the jagged man – and sometimes he even appeared to forget who they were.

But he did not forget his purpose, his drive, his... reason to be what he was, where he was, when he was. This ludicrous avenging angel, this champion of so-called justice. He knew nothing of me, nothing of what I have given, sacrificed, become to protect that which I love, and lacking that understanding, he destroyed me nonetheless.

I loathe him. I hate him with a passion deeper than anything anyone could possibly imagine. I would have him torn apart with an atom-thin blade, molecule by agonizing molecule. I will burn into his brain every feeling of pain, hunger, love, despair, frailty so that he knows only suffering until the end of time.

I do not fully understand why there is a part of my mind which envies him. So very much.

I remember our only conversation. I replay it, on an endless loop, inside my mind, over and over, even though it was but moments long. I know every nuance of his voice, every minute tilt of his

head. This broken vessel of a man stood before me, held out his hand, and offered me forgiveness. I told him that I had done nothing which required it, and then he took my world apart.

I do not need to bore you with the details; you have seen the like on countless occasions, numberless worlds. The order comes to rejoice, for the tyrant is no more, and no one notices the irony. Weapons are beaten into ploughshares, castles and fortresses are razed to the ground, and emperors and empires are locked, deep, deep below, in dark and fetid rooms where scarcely any come. And there is joy throughout the land.

It matters less to me now. My jailors – the new order – have serviced me well by hiding me here, for it is easier to bear the shame and stigma of defeat away from the prying eyes of the winning side. This is, perhaps, their error, but it is not the only one that they have made. Nor shall it be the last.

I hear rumour still, you understand. Those spectres, electrical impulses still misfiring in their minds, who on occasion seek my company, tell me that the new regime is changing. Inch by inch, link by link, the chain that starts with the fight for freedom is already being forged. The new order is already seeing enemies at the gate, and are just beginning to institute changes for the protection of the public good. Cameras, recording devices, things which... find things, are appearing in the streets and the houses, in the blocks of flats and the beautiful, darkened parks. And that which is heard must, of necessity, be reported back and thus – of necessity of course – there must be a personage in authority to whom this reporting is addressed. And if that person does not like what he hears, well then, ways must be found to ensure that different things are said thereafter. You know the drill.

And if they continue down this road, then I can see into the future.

I sit here, in the darkness, and wait for the Doctor to return.

Planet of the Doctor

by Paul Driscoll

Sonny “Survivor” Sanders had no idea just long he’d been living on the notorious prison moon of Delta4. He was pretty confident however, that he’d broken the nineteen-week record set by notorious bandit Frank Foulds before he’d fallen victim to the moon’s deadliest species – the beautiful yet terrifying Scarf-dragons. Only a week before Sonny had been framed for murder and banished without trial, he’d watched Foulds’ gruesome death on the reality show *Hellborn*, boasting that he’d be able to survive far longer than even the most hardened of convicts.

The programme had become so popular that the moon had been officially renamed after it. Sonny suspected it was his outspoken comments about the reality show that had led to his incarceration. He used to complain about how the exiles had given up before they’d even started. The way he saw it, they had played into the government’s hands by believing its propaganda and the heavily doctored scenes so prevalent when the broadcast started twenty years ago.

Sonny was determined to see *Hellborn* as a home and not a freak show to titillate the holier-than-thou majority on Delta4. That didn’t stop him playing up to the cameras – a bewildering array of powerful and intrusive lenses operated from a fully automated network of satellites.

Sonny waved at his unseen audience as he worked on finishing yet another shelter. He’d been building the makeshift homes using materials that for centuries the government of Delta4 had been dumping off-world. The introduction of prisoners was treated like an extension of the moon’s waste disposal function. This was the planet of the unwanted.

“There he goes again, the arrogant sod.”

Del Myers, acting head of St. Branson’s school, despised Sonny’s habit of waving at the cameras.

“Oh come on Del, this is TV gold. No one, nothing comes close,” said her deputy, Mike Crompton, mesmerized by the screen.

“Stop making him out to be a hero,” retorted Myers. “He’d better die before Friday; we need another deterrent to show the kids in assembly, what with that school inspector on the prowl.”

She sauntered up to the window and looked down at the school field. The inspector, surrounded by a bunch of disinterested pupils, was running around with his trouser legs rolled up above his knees and his jacket tied to his waist.

“What does he think he’s doing?” she said.

“I believe it’s a quaint team sport from Earth’s golden age,” replied Crompton as a football collided into the window. “Probably using it to lure the kids into giving him information. At least he hasn’t noticed that we’re late for the next classes.”

“A sport? Good luck to him if he thinks he can get that shower to work together. Still, I suppose it explains one thing.”

Crompton frowned.

“That funny little bow around his collar. It might not be a spying device after all – it could be part of an authentic kit. Come on everyone, back to work.”

“What happened to the new teaching assistant?” said Crompton as they filed out.

“She didn’t even make it to the first lesson. Lightweight.”

The irritatingly pretty, elfin-like girl, with a round face and gorgeously dark eyebrows, had been introduced to them earlier in the day by the school inspector, who claimed to have found her loitering in the reception.

The strangest thing was that nobody had been expecting the girl, and yet she had all the paperwork to confirm that she was due to start her induction. With the headmaster off that day with stress, it was impossible to verify.

“So where on Delta4 is she?” said Crompton suspiciously.

“Locked inside some kind of walk-in closet, that’s where,” said Clara into her mobile, more than a little embarrassed at having to call upon the Doctor for help. She was sure he was pretending not to hear, just so that she would have to sound like a total klutz once again.

“So are you coming to get me, or not?” she added.

All she could hear in response was a shrill whistle and a scream of delight, pain, or both. It was impossible to tell with the Doctor.

“Doctor!” she shouted again.

Some teaching experience this was turning out to be; no doubt she’d be sacked before the day was out. The Doctor had taken her to Delta4 to build up her CV, yet it didn’t seem to have occurred to him that Coal Hill would be unable to verify her employment history or obtain references from the future. When she’d suggested borrowing the psychic paper to fast-track her way into the Shoreditch teaching job, he’d infuriatingly suggested that this was an inappropriate use of the technology. Apparently, under no circumstances should it be used as a shortcut. As if, she thought.

Clara wasn’t quite sure what the Doctor wanted from her anymore. He’d solved the puzzle of the Impossible Girl, so perhaps setting her up with a job was his way of getting rid of her. It was okay for him – he could probably move on and forget, but her life would forever be defined by their relationship, and their adventures had made a lasting difference. Among other things, she had become an expert computer hacker, an effective counsellor and an army leader. The Doctor should have picked an escapologist or a lock picker as a companion, because right now none of her newfound skills were of any use.

Two hours earlier, Clara had been waiting to be taken to her assigned classroom, but when Myers didn’t show up, she decided to find it the long way round via a tour of the campus.

Outside, Clara was amused to find what looked like a row of bike sheds in one corner of the playground. This might be an Earth colony two thousand years into the future, but it still reminded Clara of her Blackpool comprehensive and of days when, instead of smoking and kissing behind the huts, she would assume the role of teacher while carrying out her prefect duties. Yes, she thought to herself, she was a control freak even back then.

Clara walked to the back of the sheds, half expecting to bump into some of those notoriously wayward students the Doctor was so eager for her to meet, but instead she was astonished to find a space shuttle docked on a raised circular platform.

“Bike sheds, tick. Smell of urine, tick. Climbing frame shaped like a space rocket? Not quite,” she said to herself. Spotting that the hatch was open, Clara climbed on board.

She hadn’t even got to see the engine room or the flight deck, when she’d somehow managed to

lock herself in the storage room.

“Clara Oswald, I specifically told you not to go wandering off,” shouted the Doctor into his bow tie, as he mis-kicked the football.

“What in the stars are you doing, Doctor? And why so breathless?” Considering Clara’s current predicament, her tone of mild amusement was another example of that reckless streak that so irritated the Doctor.

He adjusted a TARDIS-blue earpiece.

“Football. I play football now. Getting down with the kids, using a few moves I picked up from an old friend. They’ve never even heard of it, and that’s... well that’s just not cricket.”

“Okay, Doctor, I’m glad you’re having fun, but *hello?* A little bit of help needed here.”

“Hang on a minute,” replied the Doctor, conscious of potential eavesdroppers.

He picked up the ball and, with a flick of his sonic screwdriver, sent it soaring off to the other end of the field.

“First to the round thing and back gets to go home before lunch!” he shouted excitedly.

The teenagers sat down, making their intentions clear. The very idea of walking a mile to fetch a ball was clearly as unpalatable to them as his earlier suggestion that they should always kiss their mothers goodbye in the mornings.

“Okay, you’ve made your point,” said the Doctor in resignation. “You wait here. I’ll fetch the ball. And don’t think I won’t be telling your parents. You mark my words, you ungrateful... meteorites, there’ll be no custard on your fish fingers tonight.”

Looking every bit like a sulky child, he headed across the field.

“Clara, I thought teenagers were supposed to talk incessantly. Can’t get a word out of them. Any ideas, Teach?”

“Doctor!” said Clara, assuming her sternest teacher’s voice. “The air inside this place, it...”

The Doctor pulled out his earpiece and scanned it with the sonic.

“...smells like the inside of an Ice Warrior’s suit.”

“How can you...”

“The wonders of Time Lord engineering. I’m using the TARDIS phone remotely, remember. She doesn’t just pick up sounds, no siree. She can detect the dimensions of the room you’re standing in, the atmospheric conditions, even your emotions. How cool is that?”

“Cooler than I’m feeling right now, Doctor. And no – that’s not an invitation for you to go routing around inside my head.”

It really wasn’t the time to worry about having her private space violated, but for Clara such a degree of vulnerability was a more disturbing prospect than coming face to face with another Ice Warrior. She was absolutely certain that even if he left it until the last minute, the Doctor would get her out of there.

“So, come on, Doctor. How do I save myself from the Ice Warrior this time? There’s some kind of ventilation unit in the ceiling, but it’s been filled in. Apart from that, I’ve got nothing.”

“Oh the smell’s too intense for your bog-standard Ice Lord, and there’s a hint of liquorice that can mean only one thing.”

“He had a sweet tooth?”

“Ice-Sheet. A recreational drug made from Ice-Weed spores, quite unique to Delta4. At the very worst, the fumes will enhance your sense of superiority. Not that you’d need it.”

“Oh great, so I’m about to get stoned on my first day in the job. No sign of any drugs here.”

“Smoked over a long period of time in such an enclosed space, Ice-Sheet will have permeated the walls. Just keep breathing. Deep and heavy. Into the phone.”

“Oi, Mister I’ve-got-a-snogging-booth. Enough of that.”

“All I have to do is reverse the polarity and whoosh, fresh air on demand.”

Clara held the phone close to her mouth like a gas mask, taking several welcome breaths.

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

“I owe you several hundred more, Impossible Girl.”

“Doctor, let’s not go there, eh? I don’t want you to feel like you’re forever in my debt. Just you taking me to the stars – that’s reward enough.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet, Miss Oswald. So many places to go, all those weird and wonderful creatures. The levitating ducks of…”

“Just promise me one thing.”

“I would, but you probably ought to know, I’m not that great at keeping them. Just ask Amy, Sarah or Susan.”

“This one’s a doddle, even for you. How about *you* ring *me* for once, on that TARDIS phone of yours. One day, when you find yourself in trouble, instead of trying to sort it out yourself, just call me, yeah?”

“Clara, I’ve taken the earpiece out again; the air quality between my ears isn’t the greatest. Keep breathing through the phone. I’ll be five minutes.”

Clara sighed; she had no idea whether or not he’d heard her heartfelt request.

The unexpected sound of approaching footsteps nearly made her drop the phone. Quite a racket for one pair of shoes, but then again, the Doctor wasn’t one for subtle entrances.

“I thought you said five minutes?” laughed Clara, wondering if her sense of time had been affected by the drug.

Excitedly, she stood up and straightened her dishevelled hair, practising her teacher look in the reflective surface of the door.

“Miss Oswald to you. *The Anatomy of a Levitating Duck*. I want a three-thousand-word essay on my desk by 9 a.m. tomorrow, and if it’s not there, well… you’ll wish you were in hell. Now, off you pop.”

Surrounded by four of his peers, Bobby Clarke hovered his fingers excitedly over the controls of the school mini-shuttle. So far this was proving to be the easiest joyride ever, what with the hatch having been left open.

“This is more like it,” he said. “Who wants to be kicking balls when this little beauty’s begging for a spin, eh Dazza?”

“Sssh, I’m almost done,” replied Dazza, tinkering with a faulty light fitting.

“You and that solder of yours, I’ve a good mind to stick it up your—”

Girlfriends Javinder and Sadie sniggered as if they were half their age.

“So where you taking us this time?” Dazza asked, mimicking their sing-song voices.

“Just enough fuel to get to the Snowcap Dam,” Bobby replied.

“Not again!” said the girls in unison. Suddenly, it wasn’t quite so exciting after all.

“If I could, I’d take you to Hellborn and back, but there’s only enough fuel for a local outing,” said Bobby.

“He’s lying girls.”

The fifth member of the gang, Wendy Martin, spoke in her usual disinterested, clipped tone. She was cold, cynical and the antithesis of the swooning Javinder and Sadie.

“Who asked you to come along anyway?” said Dazza.

Everyone looked at him, shocked by his forwardness.

He immediately regretted it.

Slowly, Wendy walked up to him and gave him the stare.

They all knew what was coming next... one almighty, sickening crack.

The force of the headbutt knocked Dazza to the ground.

“If anyone’s going to leave, it’ll be you. In mid-flight,” snarled Wendy. “What do you say, Bobby? Dare you to take us to Hellborn.”

Javinder and Sadie looked positively unsure.

“I think he’s scared,” teased Sadie, attempting to mask her own fear. “How about you?” she added, nudging Javinder.

“I’m not scared,” said Javinder unconvincingly, before she realized what Sadie meant. “But he is.”

“Can’t we just get on with it; at this rate, we’ll be caught before we’ve even started up the engines,” said Dazza impatiently.

“Don’t know what you’re moaning about. You’re already seeing stars,” said Wendy with rare humour.

“I’m not scared, all right?” said Bobby finally. “But I might have exaggerated how good a pilot I am.”

“Oh, give it here,” said Wendy, taking the controls.

She started up the ship like it was second nature.

“Dad’s an interstellar long-distance truck driver. I learnt to fly those things when I was seven; this is a piece of cake in comparison.”

The Doctor, still on route to the sheds, watched in horror as the mini-shuttle soared over the school playground, before shifting to a vertical axis and flying straight up into the clouds.

“Clara,” he shouted frantically into the bow tie. “Clara, can you still hear me?”

Back in the drug-infused closet, Clara was lying unconscious, knocked out by the force of the take-off. Her phone lay in pieces beside her.

Predictably, a crowd of students and teachers had congregated outside the school.

Myers approached the Doctor.

“Rest assured, inspector, the pupils responsible will be duly punished... their parents and the police notified,” she said.

“Pupils. That thing’s being flown by pupils?”

“With respect, sir, it’s hardly going to be a teacher.”

“Where are they going? There’s plenty of Ice-Weeds locally.”

“Joyriders. I know it looks bad, but the problem isn’t unique to us.”

It was clear that the teachers were completely out of control as the pupils cheered the miscreants on.

The Doctor, brow furrowed, chewed his lip before going on the attack.

“When you say joyride, I’m thinking, you know – a little trip to the local chippy and back. Or a couple of circuits around the school field. Not an interstellar hyper-speed jump!”

“I know. The youths of today, sir.”

“Personally, I blame it on the parents,” chipped in Crompton.

“And I blame it on you. All of you. What were you thinking leaving a ship with such capabilities unlocked?”

“Unlocked, sir? It most definitely wasn’t. The auto-locking mechanism will have been triggered on touchdown. When docked, the shuttle can only be opened from the inside,” said Myers.

The Doctor started to pace up and down, clearly agitated. There was nothing childish about his demeanour now.

“So how do you account for my assistant being able to walk casually on board?” he said.

“Miss Oswald is working for you? I knew it!” said Crompton.

Myers was more than happy to start taking the moral high ground. It all made sense now: for once this had nothing to do with the errant children.

“It’s a setup, isn’t it?” she said. “How much did Wesley High pay you this time? Trust me, I’ll be reporting your unorthodox methods to the education commissioner. I suggest you call your assistant back at once, or the next thing you’ll be inspecting will be your own excrement.”

“And there’s me thinking that all this place needed was a new teaching assistant to turn it around. I couldn’t have been more wrong. The problem here isn’t a failing school, it’s a lost planet. Another planet of the dullards,” railed the Doctor. “You actually enjoy watching your children fail, don’t you? Does it make you feel better about your own pathetic lives? No wonder they’re rebelling.”

“I think you’ll find they are more than willing to obey orders.”

Myers called over some particularly thuggish-looking senior students.

“Dunstan, lock him up in the Student Union until the police get here,” she said. “And you have my permission to do whatever comes into that twisted mind of yours. Use any means necessary to get him to talk and return our ship.”

Dunstan and his lackeys dragged the Doctor inside, just as another teacher came rushing out.

“It’s Hellborn, Mrs. Myers, you are not going to believe it,” he spluttered.

Hellborn was hardly a tourist destination, but nevertheless the moon attracted its fair share of daredevils, overzealous fans of the show and, as in the case of wheeler and dealer Max Stone, fortune seekers.

Most scavengers were from the lower echelons of Delta4, desperate to source recyclable waste materials, but Max was a self-made millionaire, dealing in high-end products from across the galaxy. His mission to Hellborn was quite specific. He was hunting the rarest of prizes: a Scarf-dragon egg. Since nobody had ever managed to smuggle one off-world, the trade value would be astronomical and, more importantly, Max would gain the adulation he so desperately craved.

Slightly built, clumsy and scatterbrained, the bespectacled treasure hunter was hardly cut out for fieldwork. Usually he relied on hired hands, but despite the generous wage offer, all the usual suspects had turned him down this time. Instead he’d come armed with an array of weapons and the high-tech Insurve tracking discs. Used by conservationists and hunters alike, the artificially intelligent

Insurves had been specifically built to bore through the hardest of skins.

After a couple of near misses from creatures far less threatening than the Scarf-dragons, Max had decided to find a new recruit from among the convicts. Surely the promise of escaping from Hellborn in his shuttle would seal the deal? Apparently not; so far everyone he'd asked seemed to prefer to hide in caves than risk their lives on such a foolhardy quest. He was considering abandoning the quest, when he'd spotted Sonny brazenly building a shelter on the hillside.

Max had been tracking Sonny with his PDA for a few days now, waiting for the right moment to approach him. He couldn't be too careful, especially after he'd almost become breakfast for one hungry prisoner, a hulk of a man who looked anything but malnourished. He'd only just got over that near miss when he'd lost all his weapons to another convict. The sleek and alluring woman claimed she didn't want to leave Hellborn. Instead, she proposed an exchange. One dragon egg for all Max's weapons. On closer inspection, it turned out to have been a dummy, the kind used to distract attacking Scarf-dragons, who were quite prepared to sacrifice a meal in order to take an orphaned egg back to their nest.

As he contemplated knocking on Sonny's door, Max twirled the egg on the flattened slab of rock that he'd been using as a viewpoint to the hut below.

"Oh, bother and damnation," he shouted, as one final, over-enthusiastic spin sent the egg tumbling down the rock face.

It bounced all the way down, careering into Sonny's hut. Max hid behind the slab as Sonny stepped out, picked up the egg and scanned the area. Shrugging, the convict returned inside.

Wendy had been showing off her skills by weaving in and out of the satellite network above Hellborn.

It was all too much for Dazza, whose head was hurting. At least he had the perfect source of pain relief on board the mini-shuttle.

Skulking away from the others, he made his way to the drug den.

The door slid open and he stepped inside, inhaling deeply.

It was only then that he noticed the broken mobile on the floor.

Puzzled, he bent down to pick it up.

Catwoman-like, Clara leapt down from the ceiling and landed in front of Dazza.

"I think you'll find that belongs to me," she said.

"It's a bit of an antique, but with the right tool..." replied Dazza producing his pocket solder. "Put in a good word for me with Myers, and I'll get it up and running again."

"If you value your life, you'll fix it for me anyway."

The Student Union was decked out like a torture chamber.

Two of the boys were strapping the Doctor to a tall-backed metal chair. Fitted with an array of wires and cutting implements, it looked like a gruesome cross between a barber's chair and an electric chair.

"Don't really want to hurt you. Not after you put Smelly-Delly in her place," said Dunstan, watching on. "That was classic."

"You deserve better than this," said the Doctor.

"This is as good as it gets for us, mate," replied Dunstan. "Knock him about a bit, just enough to show a few bruises."

They were about to lay into him, looking far from willing to hold back, when the wall terminal alerted them to an incoming video message.

It was Myers.

“Release him at once. The inspector’s story checks out,” she urged.

“Has the shuttle come back?” said Dunstan with keen interest.

“Not exactly. I suggest you tune into *Hellborn*.”

“*Hellborn*? What’s *Hellborn*?” said the Doctor, as Dunstan changed the channel.

The mini-shuttle was performing a series of stunts over Hellborn.

There was something eerily familiar about the planetary body, but the Doctor couldn’t quite place it. At first he thought they were watching a newscast, but just before cutting to an ad break, a series of tacky captions overlaying clips from the day’s events so far told him all he needed to know.

“So this is what passes for entertainment here. Why am I not surprised?” said the Doctor making for the door.

“Bobby, you idiot,” said Dunstan to the screen. “How am I supposed to get my next fix now?”

“You don’t need to get high on Ice-Sheet and you certainly don’t need these torture toys. Here...” said the Doctor, rummaging in a pocket.

Dunstan puzzled over the unfamiliar object the inspector had just launched at him.

“It’s a Rubik’s Cube, an ancient stress-management device,” explained the Doctor. “Legend says that the real treasure lies within, but that it will only open once you’ve matched all the colours. A word of advice: cheat and the whole thing goes up in smoke. Should keep you out of mischief for hours.”

And with that, he hurried away.

Inside the flight deck, Bobby’s grudging admiration for Wendy had given way to sheer panic.

“Come on, Wendy,” he said. “Playing chicken with the satellites is one thing but chasing after a Scarf-dragon? You’re out of your mind.”

“Or off her face on Ice-Sheet,” said Clara, striding in purposefully with a sheepish Dazza in her trail. “I’m from the agency. Miss Oswald to you. When your school said they needed a supply, I don’t think this is quite what they had in mind. Now come away from the controls at once. It’s my turn to drive.”

“Like I’m going anywhere. Dazza, sort her out,” said Wendy.

Dazza looked at Clara, but all it took was one raised eyebrow and he was putty in her hands. He nugged Wendy so hard that her head hit the control panel, knocking her unconscious.

“Yea, a little bit overenthusiastic, but you’ll do,” said Clara. “Now what about you three?”

Bobby and the girls obediently pulled Wendy away from the controls, and Clara took her position at the helm.

“Don’t think for a moment that this gets you all off the hook,” she said.

“But it’s like I told you, miss, she made us do it,” complained Dazza as he got to work on repairing Clara’s phone.

But Clara wasn’t listening, she was dithering over the controls, wondering why on Earth she’d thought she could fly the thing. She pulled a lever, assuming it to be the steering mechanism.

The ship accelerated towards the Scarf-dragon, clipping its tail.

As Clara pushed the lever back, the shuttle slowly came to a grinding halt.

In horror, the students looked through the cockpit as the angered Scarf-dragon twisted its body

180 degrees to face them.

“It’s beautiful, the Doctor would so love this,” said Clara, marvelling at the creature’s mane of multicoloured stripes. “I see why you call it a Scarf-dragon.”

“I’m not so sure you do, miss,” said Bobby, quickly coming to her aid with the flight controls.

The ship was in mid loop when the Scarf-dragon began to extend its body, wrapping itself around the stricken vessel and pulling it violently towards the moon’s surface.

Cracks began to form along the ship’s hull as the Dragon tightened its grip.

The Doctor had returned to the TARDIS, armed with enough information for him to track the mini-shuttle. But his mood had certainly not improved.

“I get it, missy. You don’t like her. What is it? Trying to get rid of me at last? Jealous that she’s saved me more times than you have? I don’t really care, but if I find out that you’re the one responsible for getting Clara onto that ship then... I’ll fill your fluid links with liquid Ice-Sheet.”

“Jump!” Clara ordered as Dazza hesitated over the hole that had opened up at the bottom of the mini-shuttle. He looked down at the others who were already jet-chuting to Hellborn.

“Here,” said Dazza, handing the mobile back to Clara. “Please don’t tell.”

“Sometimes all you kids need is a little push,” said Clara, repeating a well-remembered saying from her favourite teacher. Dazza had no time to protest as she bundled him out. Her plan was then to tie herself to the unconscious Wendy and leap out together. But the Dragon had other ideas, blocking the hole as it performed another loop around the shuttle.

Reluctantly, Clara switched on the repaired mobile. If truth be told, she’d been getting quite a kick from going it alone.

On Hellborn’s fully automated prime-satellite, the unauthorized jet-chuters had been detected. A pilotless maintenance ship was immediately dispatched to their location.

The Doctor danced with delight as the call came through on his earpiece.

But at that very moment, the TARDIS cloister bell began to toll.

“No, no, no...”

There was no way he’d be able to hear Clara now.

He’d been placed in an impossible position. The cloister bell was probably another sign of the TARDIS’s disapproval of Clara, but with the old girl clearly not in any present danger, it was possible that via the phone link, she was reacting to a situation inside the mini-shuttle.

Travelling to the ship could be suicidal, but that wasn’t going to deter him.

“Let me do the impossible thing for once,” said the Doctor.

“Geronimo!” he cried, like a man possessed, as the TARDIS dematerialized.

Max had watched with interest as the passengers bailed out onto a nearby hill. He couldn’t believe his luck when the Scarf-dragon headed towards him. If he could track the creature to its nesting

grounds, he might finally be able to locate his prize. Using a handmade catapult, he fired his one remaining Insurve disc at the dragon.

“Damn it,” he said, cursing his rubbish aim. He was about to recover the tracker and try again, when at the foot of the hill, Sonny emerged from his shelter with the dummy dragon egg in hand.

More concerned about losing a means of escaping Hellborn than the fate of the mini-shuttle’s remaining occupants, Sonny ran towards the Scarf-dragon, waving frantically.

“Hello my lovely,” he said. “I’ve brought you a present.”

He threw the egg into the Scarf-dragon’s eye line.

The dragon stopped in mid-flight, as if contemplating its next move. Then without warning, it released the mini-shuttle and nosedived towards the egg, sweeping it up in one clean movement.

“As dumb as she is beautiful,” Sonny muttered as the dragon flew off.

To Sonny’s relief, the ship was still intact, but worryingly it was now in freefall.

“Come on,” he said, hoping that the pilot was still on board and conscious. “Pull it up, pull it up. Easy now... easy.”

Once the Scarf-dragon had released its grip, Clara had a choice: she could jump through the re-exposed hole or try and save the ship.

“Jumping is for cowards,” she declared.

Struggling to get the ship back under control, she cursed as her mobile flew off the side of the control panel. She’d left it on, despite the din of the cloister bell, in the hope that it might help the Doctor to find her.

“Okay, Doctor. This is where you’re supposed to come in. Last minute... and this really is the last minute,” she said.

Miraculously, she managed to steady the ship.

“On second thoughts, you know what? Don’t bother. I can do this. Just need to figure out how to land the thing.”

Thinking on her feet, Clara dragged Wendy’s body into the drug-infused closet.

“If it worked for me...” she said.

Within seconds Wendy came to.

“Miss?”

“I’m not too proud to admit that I made a mistake. The best teachers let their students learn in action,” said Clara. “So I’m putting you back on piloting duties. Oh, and just to make the test that little bit harder... we appear to be crash-landing.”

Sonny’s initial relief as the mini-shuttle’s pilot appeared to have regained control turned to panic. It wasn’t going to slow down in time. He ran back into the hut, but seconds later the ship careered straight through it.

Max flinched as the mini-shuttle collided into the hill, but quickly returned to the task in hand: recovering the Insurve.

He located the tracker using his PDA and was about to pick it up, when a gust of wind pulled him back.

Sheltering behind a rock, he watched in utter disbelief as the TARDIS materialized.

The Doctor stepped out purposely, and frowned.

“You’ve done it again, haven’t you? This isn’t the mini-shuttle. You’re supposed to be taking me to Clara.” he complained.

“Wait!” shouted Max as the Doctor marched angrily back into the TARDIS, slamming the door behind him.

Tentatively, Max knocked on the door, but after receiving no answer he walked around the TARDIS, scanning the object with his PDA to assess its value.

“A painted wooden box. Worthless,” he said, puzzled.

He tried pushing the TARDIS off the Insurve, but the door opened causing him to fall at the Doctor’s feet.

“Well that’s new, but really there’s no need. I’m not the Lord of this manor,” said the Doctor.

He crouched down in front of Max, his face full of urgency, which given the delay in responding seemed bizarre to the treasure hunter.

“So, weight? Oh I don’t know, fifty kilograms give or take a Jammie Dodger or two. It’s not really something we’ve ever discussed,” said the Doctor, pulling Max up. “Have you seen her?”

“If she was on the mini-shuttle, then you’re too late,” replied Max, pointing to the crash site.

The Doctor immediately ran towards the smouldering wreckage.

Max hurried after him.

“You didn’t let me finish. It’s okay... the crew bailed out. Unless like me they’ve got jamming software fitted into their PDAs, they’ll have been picked up by a maintenance craft. Those things don’t hang about,” he said breathlessly.

The Doctor stopped in his tracks and turned to face Max.

“You wouldn’t mind moving your teleporting box, it’s just...?” said Max, provoking a stern and unsettling stare.

He tried a different tact.

“Is this Clara your daughter?”

The Doctor’s stare turned to puzzlement, but he seemed more interested in the view behind Max.

“I mean, to come in person to Hellborn to bring her home. That takes a special kind of commitment.”

Max was now beginning to lose patience with the silent visitor.

“Look, she’ll be on the prime-satellite with the other kids. So do us both a favour and take your box there.”

The Doctor, continuing to ignore Max, knelt down to pick up a fallen leaf. He licked it and grimaced, before scanning the ground with his sonic device.

Max reasoned that this must be the device that had given the wooden box its powers of teleportation. It would no doubt be a poor substitute for a Scarf-dragon egg, but it could still be worth a small fortune.

“Kids. You said they were all kids,” said the Doctor, suddenly rising to his feet.

“As far as I could tell,” replied Max.

But the Doctor was already on his way again.

“I’m guessing it’s a weapon too?” said Max, catching up with the Doctor at the crash site. “It would need to be effective against Scarf-dragons.”

Spotting a trapped, dust-covered body face down in the wreckage, the Doctor frantically moved the debris, splitting apart the bigger obstructions with the sonic.

“This is for fixing lives, not killing them,” he said angrily as he turned over the body.

“It’s one of the students.”

“Can you bring her back?”

“The sonic can do practically anything. Apart from raise the dead,” said the Doctor. “For example, it’s great for soothing a ravenous beast.”

Max turned around nervously. A Scarf-dragon had glided down behind him.

But this was no ordinary dragon. Bigger and fiercer than any he’d seen, this had to be a queen. Suddenly, it dawned on Max that he was already in the heart of the nesting grounds.

After pulling Clara out from the wreckage, Sonny had taken her through a tiny opening in the hill against which he had built his hut. It was how he’d survived every Scarf-dragon attack. He promised Clara that the next day she’d be extracted from the moon like the others, but that with nightfall approaching, they’d be safer underground. Surprised by her ignorance about the moon, he’d been filling her in as they walked deeper into the cave network.

Clara carefully wriggled her way through the fluorescent green weeds that lit the caves.

“Don’t worry, they’re safe to touch. Alien in origin, like most of the organic life forms here. But completely harmless,” said Sonny.

“Alien?” said Clara, not expecting a local to make such a distinction. From her perspective, the whole place was alien.

“Dumped here like the waste from Delta4, just to add colour to the entertainment. No one knows how the producers got them here, but they’re all victims of this sick game show. Even the Scarf-dragons.”

“I don’t get it. If you wanted to stay hidden, why build a conservatory and a front door? It’s a bit of a giveaway,” asked Clara.

“Why should I live in fear and shame? This world should belong to us, not the mindless audience and certainly not the TV executives. Anyway, they don’t like us being underground... Terrible for the viewing figures. They have a nasty habit of dropping vampire badgers into the caves to route us out. Nowhere is safe on Hellborn, but all the while I’m building huts, they haven’t got a clue that my base of operations is down here. My huts are quite literally a front.”

Eventually the path opened out onto a vast chamber.

“You get some rest and I’ll keep watch,” said Sonny. “It’ll be hard, but try to sleep. There’s nothing you could have done to save her.”

It was small comfort, thought Clara. Ridiculously, she could save a Time Lord, over and over again, but a child who should have been in her care?

The Doctor tried various settings on the sonic to tame the Scarf-dragon, none of which were having any noticeable effect. His Venusian lullaby was even less helpful, agitating the creature further.

Fearlessly, the Doctor went nose to snout with the dragon.

“Haven’t we met before somewhere?” he said. “It’s just... you seem familiar, if a little out of

place.”

The creature wrapped itself around Max, forming a snake-like grip and stretching to impossible proportions.

The very specific method of attack triggered long-buried memories in the Doctor, as the penny finally dropped.

“Oh... Ohhhh. You’re not a Scarf-dragon. You’re a Dimension Twister!”

“Help me, for God’s sake man,” squealed Max.

The Doctor was still holding out his sonic, but in truth he didn’t have a plan.

The dragon sneezed, loosening its grip enough for Max to break free.

“Of course – dust,” said the Doctor, frantically searching through the debris and sniffing for the familiar smell of an Ice Warrior.

With a cry of triumph, he waved his arms about wildly, drawing the dragon’s attention away from Max.

“Oi, Puff the Magic Dragon. Over here. Come and get a sniff of this,” said the Doctor, exploding another wall with the sonic, and showering the dragon with a layer of thick dust.

The dragon appeared to smile as it spread its wings and flew straight up.

“I’ve never seen a Scarf-dragon reach such heights before; is it a unique gift of the queen?” said Max in relief, as the dragon disappeared into the sky.

“She’s high as a kite. It was just a confidence issue,” replied the Doctor, picking up the remains of Clara’s phone as the dragon swooped back down. “Confidence: the double-edged sword that can save your life or place you in the greatest danger. So, which was it for you, Clara?”

“The owner of this joint’s missing too, Doctor. But I think I know where they’ve gone,” said Max, sticking his head through the hillside opening.

“You get some rest,” he said.

Was there anything more pointless than a chivalrous man? thought Clara, as she watched Sonny dozing.

Restlessly, she walked around the cave, wondering whether or not to just leave him there and return to the surface. But there was a mystery to solve, and this cave of treasures seemed as good a place as any to start. If the prison freak show had only been going for twenty years, then why were some of the alien life forms already so virulent? As if to confirm her suspicions, she spotted what appeared to be the fossilized remains of a baby Scarf-dragon in the rock face. It just didn’t add up.

“Sonny, you’re a Womble,” said Clara to herself as she rooted through the various odds and ends he’d gathered from the dumping grounds. She had no idea what she was looking for, and most of it seemed predictably useless, until she found a trinket box decorated by a series of Gallifreyan symbols. She recognized the language from the history books in the TARDIS.

“Okay, I *so* wasn’t expecting that,” she said, wondering now if Sonny was another Time Lord. Banished for interfering in the affairs of state? If he was a Time Lord, then he was a renegade like the Doctor. Perhaps it was the unavoidable destiny of all rebel Gallifreyans, to become the archetypal outsider. No, it was a stupid idea. A Time Lord like the Doctor wouldn’t be trying to make this world his own, he’d be finding a way to get off it.

The box contained a notepad, its pages brittle and dusty. She was used to the TARDIS translating alien languages, so initially the fact that she could read its contents gave her hope that the Doctor had followed her here. But it became apparent from the spelling mistakes that the notes were originally in

English. There was only one Time Lord who would prefer modern English over ancient Gallifreyan.

“Clara, don’t hate me.”

She barely jumped at the Doctor’s entrance.

“How did you know where to find me?” she replied with her back to him. “Oh don’t tell me, you’ve been pulling all the strings from the start. This was never about my CV, was it?”

“Clara, I had nothing to do with getting you here; those strings belong to another. A person died today, do you really think... You of all people should know me better.”

Suddenly Clara turned around and threw the notepad at the Doctor, its pages flying out.

“But I didn’t know about this place,” she said. “I thought that turning a moon into a freak show was bad enough, but what you’ve done...”

“Can one of you tell me what on Delta4 you’re talking about? Who is this man, Clara?” said Sonny, woken by the fierce exchange.

“Yeah. I’d like to know that too,” said Max, quickly introducing himself to Sonny. “Max Stone by the way. Treasure hunter and all-round entrepreneur. I’m a big fan of yours.”

“So you’re the one who’s been stalking me? Well if you’re such a fan, then how about you get me off this godforsaken rock?”

“I barely know him,” said Clara, storming out of the cave.

The Doctor chased after her.

“Planet of the Doctor?” said Max, reading the discarded front cover of the notepad. “Sounds like the title of some corny sci-fi show.”

Sonny gathered up the other pages.

“It’s a catalogue of some kind. Listing various species, their place of origin and date of extraction.”

“Clara. Stop. It was a pet project of mine, but in my defence I was young and idealistic,” said the Doctor.

“‘Pet’ being the operative word. How could you have been so stupid? Why, Doctor? Did it make you feel like a god?”

“I was saving them, Clara.”

“Stealing them more like.”

“Every single species was on the verge of extinction. I gave them a new home.”

“And then what, you abandoned them? How can you forget a whole planet like that?”

“They weren’t monsters when I brought them here. Take the Dimension Twisters,” replied the Doctor as the queen dragon flew past. “Peaceful creatures, harmless unless threatened. They should have grown in intelligence, spread their wings like butterflies, not devolved into giant hungry caterpillars. How was I to know that humans would come along and ruin it all?”

“Blaming humans again. You’re good at that.”

“It must be the contamination from the waste they’ve been dumping here.”

“You said the strings belong to somebody else, what did you mean? Isn’t this just about you and me?”

“The TARDIS used you,” said the Doctor pointing out the familiar blue box on the hill. “She played us both. Boy, she’s good.”

“Nope, still not getting it.”

“She brought you here and made sure I couldn’t stop you.”

“So why didn’t she just drop us off on Hellborn in the first place? Or write you a memo? ‘Hey, Doctor remember that planet of yours?’ ...”

“The TARDIS moves in mysterious ways, Clara. You’ll get used to it. All that matters now is putting an end to this.”

Clara wasn’t having any of it.

“If the TARDIS took advantage of those children, then she’s responsible for Wendy’s death. I’d rather stay here than put my life in her hands again.”

“No, that’s not how it works. With or without us, those kids were always going to try out a stunt like that. And if you hadn’t been there, it wouldn’t have just been poor Wendy coming home in a body bag. We can save the school, save this planet and...”

“Listen to yourself, Doctor. You’re at it again, playing god. Enough already.”

The Doctor gave Clara the TARDIS key.

“What’s that for?”

“If you think she’s that bad an influence then throw it away. Otherwise, go and talk to her, make your peace. And while you’re busy doing that, I’ve got a TV show to cancel.”

“Doctor, stop. Don’t you dare walk off when I’m talking to you...”

The Doctor grinned as he walked back for Max and Sonny.

“One hundred per cent teacher, of course she is,” he muttered.

“This moon... we could be sitting on a small fortune,” said Max. “What else has this Doctor fella been breeding here?”

“And just how old is this place?” added Sonny.

“Your people have made it worthless,” said the Doctor joining them in the cave. “But it’s time I reclaimed my property. If you’re both hoping to make it out of here alive, then you might want to come with me.”

“What are you planning to do?” asked Sonny.

“Why, hitch a ride of course. Do keep up.”

Back outside the cave, the Doctor waved his sonic screwdriver at the queen Scarf-dragon who, still high on Ice-Sheet, was whizzing around manically.

Assuming the sonic was the source of her fix, the queen approached him to be fed. He leapt on her back and aimed the sonic at the prime-satellite, causing the installation to light up.

Sonny and Max watched on agog.

“Hop on, you two,” said the Doctor gleefully.

Back in St. Branson’s staffroom, Myers and the other staff were beside themselves, when the unprecedented happened.

The show which had been broadcast continuously for twenty years had lost the feed.

It had all started with the incredible sight of three people riding a queen Scarf-dragon.

At first there was only the strangest bit of interference – dark lines bouncing across the screen and splitting the images, but within minutes the whole picture had gone black.

The Scarf-dragon had wrapped itself around the prime-satellite.

“What are we supposed to do for lunch, now?” said Crompton, considering the unthinkable and switching channels.

“Stop... there’s another picture forming,” said Myers.

It was the Doctor, flanked either side by Sonny and Max, sitting in the control room of the prime-satellite. Behind them, the staff could just about make out four of their runaway pupils, including Dazza who was destroying Hellborn’s master recordings with his solderer.

The Doctor addressed the camera. “People of Delta4, this is your Doctor speaking. Hellborn is closed for business. I repeat, closed for business. You need to return the remaining prisoners to your world where I expect you to treat them humanely. Pardon the pardonable, mend the broken and rehabilitate the offender. And for goodness’ sake, stop dumping your waste on somebody else’s backyard...”

Clara missed the Doctor’s dragon-riding exploits, but she had watched in awe as, soon after, hordes of Scarf-dragons inspired by – or perhaps called by – their queen turned the skies above Hellborn into an array of colours, before worming their way around every single satellite installation.

She hesitated outside the TARDIS, unsure of whether or not she’d be welcomed, but instead of using the key, she decided to put her to the test.

Clara clicked her fingers.

“No. Thought not...”

As soon as she turned away, the doors opened.

“And he calls *me* his Impossible Girl!”

Inside the TARDIS, the transmission from the prime-satellite was playing on the monitor.

The Doctor was still in full flow:

“Why should we, I hear you ask? The Scarf-dragons are having a ball crushing the waste you dumped here. But turn their generosity into an act of slavery, and they won’t hesitate to take it back to where it came from.”

“Go, Doctor,” said Clara. “Give ’em hell. But come on, seal the deal. Use the psychic paper.”

The Doctor flinched and adjusted his earpiece.

The broadest of grins filled his face as he pushed the psychic paper against the camera lens.

“My credentials. As you can see, this is my planet and you have no right being here. Teacher’s orders.”

The Doctor turned off the signal. His worried expression was in marked contrast to his triumphalist camera face.

“What’s wrong, Doctor?” said Max.

“Don’t tell the kids, but we haven’t got long; it’s only a matter of minutes before the Scarf-dragon squeezes the life out of this installation. I’m beginning to fear I’ve made a grave miscalculation.”

“Can’t we all ride the dragon back to the surface? She’s big enough,” Max asked, panicking now.

“She won’t leave until this whole satellite is destroyed. I lured her here under the false pretence of the abandoned young. Now the drug’s worn off, she’s not happy to find out that it’s her lunch and not her children waiting for her here.”

“If we are to die, I’m ready, Doctor,” said Sonny. “At least ours will be the first meaningful

deaths on Hellborn.”

“Meaningful death? That’s a contradiction in terms, Sonny,” replied the Doctor. “I was banking on my best friends burying the hatchet.”

They all dived for cover as the Scarf-dragon violently pulled the satellite towards the moon’s surface.

The TARDIS materialized over the Doctor and the others, a split second before the Scarf-dragon dropped the broken satellite, sending it crashing to Hellborn.

“Did you have to leave it until the last minute?” said the Doctor.

“Now he knows how I feel,” joked Clara.

Dazza smiled.

“Thank you, miss, that’s twice you’ve saved our lives today. We all thought you and Wendy were goners.”

Clara glared at the Doctor for leaving her to break the news.

“How about a tour of the Doctor’s ship? It’s bigger than you think,” she said, ushering the pupils out of the console room. There was no way she was going to tell them in the presence of the Doctor, not with his lack of tact.

“You’re not kidding,” laughed Bobby.

“Great idea, Clara,” said the Doctor with misplaced cheer. “Be sure to check out the football pitch. But Dazza – no soldering, eh?”

“We’ll talk along the way,” Clara added sombrely as she left.

“Time to take you all home,” said the Doctor.

“I already am, Doctor,” replied Sonny. “I’d like to stay here... Manage your gaff while you’re away.”

“If you’re sure you can handle an angry dragon queen,” said the Doctor. “And you Maxtible? Or is it Maximillian?”

“Just drop me off near my ship,” said Max shiftily. “Can’t afford to leave her behind: she’s a top-of-the-range model.”

The TARDIS materialized as far away from Max’s shuttle as was possible.

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Maxine?” said the Doctor as the treasure hunter followed Sonny out.

The Doctor held out his hand.

“Er...”

“It wouldn’t do to go pressing the wrong button. You might just find your precious shuttle gets reduced to the size of a pea.”

“It was worth a try,” replied Max handing the sonic back to the Doctor.

“And no more egg poaching, eh? I prefer mine scrambled anyway. Just like your tracking disc...”

Max tried to look all innocent.

“...crushed by the full weight of the TARDIS.”

The TARDIS materialized outside Coal Hill School.

The Doctor spotted Clara walking purposefully towards the front gate, ready to start her first

day.

“Clara,” he shouted. “Give ’em hell!”

Clara rushed over.

“I don’t know if I’m ready, Doctor,” she said.

“The best people never are.”

“We did good on Delta4, didn’t we? I mean the psychic paper, genius eh?”

“You were almost brilliant.”

“Only almost?”

“They saw through the paper. If it wasn’t for Sonny and Max…”

“And there’s me thinking we were the odd couple.”

“Come on, Clara,” the Doctor urged. “The best workers always arrive last minute. I’ve got something to show you.”

“Better make it quick,” said Clara, following him inside.

The Doctor swivelled round the monitor.

“Delta4 thirty years on from our arrival. The Sonny and Max natural history show – *Life on Hellborn*. It will be the most watched programme since Hellborn at its peak.”

“And the school?”

“Still struggling. But on the plus side, instead of worrying about kids hijacking mini-shuttles, they’re busy banning the latest craze. All that clicking, terrible for concentration. They call it the Dunstan’s Cube. He made a small fortune from designing the toy and donated seventy per cent to the Wendy Memorial Centre.”

“Don’t tell me, it’s some kind of drug rehab centre?”

“Whatever gave you that idea? No, the Dunstan’s Cube has practically wiped out the market for Ice-Sheet. The centre is a teacher training facility, with a very specific remit as laid out by the original trustees, led by Bobby, Dazza and Co. Experienced-based learning, right up your street. Now run, you clever girl, and go and be a teacher.”

Custodian

by Simon Blake

Our ancestors had a word for this;

The songs we sing in death.

MgGreet tried to push the twisted rigging from off his chest. It was no good. He was a powerful man, but the hull must have already magnetized against the rigours of re-entry. Notwithstanding, the freighter was now the only object to persist in this void. Its gravity was absolute. MgGreet was pinioned to the outside of his own ship, providing the freighter with its own splintered figurehead. Soon this hulk would drop out of warp drive and re-enter normal space. The time-winds had eased, but with nothing but a blister-thin skein of air between him and the void, MgGreet lay back defeated. He was trying to ignore the rattling of the inspection hatch next to him, and ready himself for the inevitable.

Death teaches us again the tongue of the ancients.

Old words with which to sing new songs.

Ahead of him now, the realities of space-time began to reassert themselves. After travelling so long through the labyrinth of hyperspace, a bauble of N-Space was exploding softly above him: the crash of stars and purple nebulae. He began to settle his mind, to concentrate on the techniques his people had taught him. Now was not the time to worry about broken comms links, corrupted navigation systems or the now violently clattering inspection hatch. Ancient tradition called for a moment of tranquillity, unbroken by any hatch-banging, no matter how persistent. Soon the void would be filled. Time and matter would disperse around him, and the raw fire of the star field would burn him to ashes.

There is no longer sky, there is only open-passage;

There is no void, only ship-blind night;

The return to N-Space shall be the great in-rush;

...And that inspection hatch will be the death of me!

At that very moment, the hatch sprang open to reveal a man with a mop of blond curls. “Ah! Hello.”

A second head followed directly. “Hi.” A female: elfin, nervous, framed by a bob of dark hair.

Impossible! “How many more?” MgGreet swung his gun, covering them both. “You – the one in carnival dress. Tell me how you got on board – and make it quick. I’d hate to die with an unsatisfied curiosity.”

“Carnival...? Do you mean *me*?!”

“MgGreet, it’s us,” interrupted the girl. “I... I don’t know if you’ll remember us this time, but you have to listen...”

“Hush, Peri,” waved the man. “Don’t use his name. If he hasn’t met us yet, it’ll only antagonize him.” Then turning back: “Let’s not worry about that now, shall we, Mr. MgGreet? We’re here to help you.”

Just at that moment, MgGreet fired and the entire universe exploded.

Inside, the hull smelled of ozone. Dank and metallic. The light atop the TARDIS swept a widening arc

along the dark, rusted corridor. Slowly, the battered old Police Box pulled itself into existence.

Immediately, the Doctor stepped out. “No, I don’t think so.” He was brandishing a small, compact device that beeped alarmingly.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.” Peri followed behind, none too impressed.

“You were going to accuse me of getting the co-ordinates wrong again.”

“Well, haven’t you?”

“Hmm? What?” By now the Doctor was fully absorbed in his surroundings, but then suddenly rounded on her. “I just told you. Do *try* to keep up.”

“Well, this certainly doesn’t look like Blackpool to me.”

“There was a universal distress call, Peri. The TARDIS is programmed to automatically reroute... unless I specifically intervene.”

“And I don’t suppose that, just this once...” She was immediately silenced by a look from her companion. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it. Of course, if there are people in danger...”

“Exactly!” The Doctor’s voice rang out in heavy, metallic echoes. “There’s something very wrong here, Peri. The signal the TARDIS intercepted was intermittent in nature.”

“Maybe it’s just from a weak source?”

“No, different sort of intermittent. Sometimes it was there and sometimes it wasn’t.”

“Isn’t that generally what intermittent means?”

The Doctor sighed. “I was speaking temporally. Sometimes the signal exists – has existed – and then at other times... poof! It’s like it was never there at all. It doesn’t even leave an echo in the TARDIS log. It’s as if whatever caused it simply falls out of existence.”

Peri was genuinely curious. “But how can that be?”

“I don’t know.” The Doctor held out the small beeping object and pressed a switch on its base. “But I think we’d better find out, don’t you?”

“With that?” She gestured to the contraption.

“Hmm? What? No, this is just a torch.”

“Then why is it making that beeping noise?”

“Oh.” The Doctor regarded the device as if fully noticing it for the first time. He gave it a good shake. Immediately the beeping stopped and it shone a powerful light. “Batteries must be running low. Come on, I sense a distinct need for knight-errantry.”

Peri tried not to laugh. The image of the Doctor as an intergalactic Don Quixote was all too compelling. She followed the beam of his torch. “Just look at this place.”

Rough veins of corrosion snaked the walls, blistered, red and rusted. Various pieces of machinery lay piled high and pallid with neglect.

“Clearly some kind of spacecraft,” muttered the Doctor.

“You know, for once, the TARDIS doesn’t look out of place.”

The Doctor merely gave an imperious *humph!* before brandishing his torch further along the corridor. “This way, I think.”

Peri ruefully kicked along behind. What was the use? The Doctor was never more happy than when off, tilting at windmills.

A maze of corridors, a ship echoing and empty. The Doctor was now down on one knee before another in a long line of doors.

“What are you doing?” quizzed Peri.

“Well, I’m fairly certain this is the last bulkhead leading to the bridge. The controls are dead, so I’m trying to short the hydraulic raise.”

There was a sudden hiss, and the pair shot back. The door had sped into the ceiling, unleashing a blast of klaxons. Amber warning lights flashed, and a gun was now trained directly upon them.

“I told you before, Doctor: if you tried to stop me again, I’d blow your head off.” The figure was big. Long, dark hair, matted down with sweat, streaked his face. He was unshaven and greying, dressed all in black in what looked like furs and leathers. A powerful man. Amidst the confusion, he was trying to rise, but the chair in which he sat held him fast. It seemed he could only swing encumbered, before a bank of screens and displays. Something desperate in his aspect, he reminded Peri of a Viking lashed to his own helm. Most troubling of all, however, was his recognition of the Doctor.

Immediately, the Time Lord raised his hands, encouraging Peri to do the likewise. “I’m afraid you have us at something of a disadvantage, Mister—”

“Leave now, Doctor,” the stranger bellowed over klaxons and the growing whine of engines. “Know this: whatever alliance we’ve shared is now over. No interference. No delays. I won’t let you distract me again.”

At once, a computerized voice began intoning:

“Warp descent induction... Drives initiated... Vector plotters engaged...”

Immediately, the stranger swung back to his bank of displays, adjusting controls with well-practiced actions.

“I’m afraid time has run out on us, Doctor. You’re too late – and you’re no longer my problem. Computer...!”

“Yes, *MgGreet?*” answered the infuriatingly calm voice.

“Depressurize all non-essential drive compartments.”

“Yes, *MgGreet.*”

“And secure the bridge!” The pilot turned momentarily from his helm. “Goodbye, Peri. You, at least, I shall miss.”

The door then slashed down, cutting off further conversation.

Gone were the klaxons and warning lights, sealed into the bridge. Nevertheless, Peri still had to support herself against the jolting ship. “Who was that? And how did he know our names?”

“Evidently he’s called *MgGreet* – according to his computer, but never mind that now.” Sprinting to the other end of the corridor, the Doctor knelt beside an open bulkhead door. “We suddenly have two rather pressing problems.”

“We do?”

“Mr. *MgGreet* is about to fall out of warp drive.”

“And that’s bad?”

“A controlled descent, no, but judging by the sound of that engine cut-out, he’s not going to descend so much as plummet.”

“Okay, that’s sounding worse.” Peri immediately regretted her choice of words.

“Worse? *Worse?!* We’re about to hit conterminous-time without retro-stabilizers. We’ll be smashed on the shores of an event horizon. We’ll be lucky if we don’t tear through a couple of stars before we eventually run aground.”

“Okay, okay, so what’s the second problem?”

The Doctor considered. “We may mercifully suffocate before that happens.”

“What? You mean we’re running out of oxygen?” She was suddenly aware of a loud hissing.

“You heard our friend back there: depressurize all none-essential drive compartments. He’s trying to expectorate us from his ship.”

“Well, shouldn’t we get back to the TARDIS?”

“There isn’t time. But if we can close the surrounding bulkhead doors, we can create a little breathing space.”

Peri leaned forward to watch where the Doctor had disengaged a length of tube to jump-start the hydraulics. Immediately, the door sliced down, jamming into the floor. “All right, now you take the doors on the left and I’ll take the right.”

“Sure.” Peri tried to sound confident, but it was already getting difficult to breathe. She ran to the next entry, and the door swung open before her. “Hey, this one’s not like the rest.”

“Leave it,” called the Doctor. “I’ll check it next.”

“All right,” she gasped, stumbling to the next entry. “It’s the one marked Navigation Suite.” She was starting to feel dizzy now; the atmosphere was thinning. “Doctor, I... I don’t know... if I can make it.”

“Just hold on.” The Doctor slammed home another door. “I can manage the rest, just...” Suddenly, he interrupted himself. “Did you say Navigation Suite?” The Doctor ran to check the engraving on the door. “That’s it, Peri. We’re safe.”

“Doc... Doctor!” Peri had collapsed to her knees, gasping for the next breath.

“Peri!” Without waiting for a response, the Doctor hoisted her up and carried her through the door, slamming it shut behind them.

There was a reassuring thump as the door hermetically sealed.

Half starved, Peri breathed in all she could. “The vibrating... it’s stopped.” She was coming back to her senses. “Are we... safe here?”

“Certainly safer than out there. Navigation Suites count as essential drive compartments.” Rather too casually for Peri’s liking, the Doctor took a tour of the room. It was large and apparently empty. A railed walkway described the edges, while steps led down to an open area below.

“Hey, it looks like someone drained the pool.”

“Hmm?” The Doctor had found a desk of switches, and was now happily meddling. “You’re right. It is a little sparse in here. Let’s see if we can’t liven things up.” With something of a flourish, he activated a series of switches and the room darkened. Then out of nowhere, a series of bright ethereal planets erupted out of the pool before them. Spinning out in beautiful displays of complexity, they lit the chamber and delighted the Doctor.

“Navigation Suite... Of course! Look Peri, it’s an Astral Map room.”

Peri was awed by the spectacle. “What are they – holograms?”

“Of course.” He held her shoulders and pointed. “See? Iterations of orbits and alignment, distant shifting systems, constellations described to their very perihelion.” The Doctor descended the steps. “*The untold want, by life and land ne’er granted...*” He spread his arms wide. “*Now, Voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find.*”

“Walt Whitman,” Peri approved.

He turned to her, impressed. “Very good.”

“No need to patronize me, Doctor. We studied him at school.”

“But just look at the ingenuity, Peri.” The Doctor raised a hand into the air and swept an entire planetary system around his head. There was a faint fluting cadence as the corresponding constellations shifted into alignment. “See? It even compensates for any heliocentric parallax.” The Doctor seemed genuinely awestruck. “An absolute must for any serious navigator – I must get one of these for the TARDIS.” He swept another moon, an entire constellation, probing through the catalogue of maps, seeking a possible trajectory for the ship. “Extremely intuitive.” He was clearly delighted.

Again, the fluting cadences rang out with every gesture.

“What are those sounds?” Peri was staring about her, equally caught by the wonder.

“They indicate the gravitational byways – the rapids around the rocks, if you like.”

“The music of the spheres?”

“That’s right... Figuratively and literally. Watch.” And with that, he raised both hands and began to orchestrate the entire maelstrom. It whirled about him in a dizzying display of light and colour. The notes rang out and then arranged themselves into something of a tune. It took Peri a moment to recognize it: Rodgers and Hammerstein!

“Oh very appropriate.” She laughed. “Carousel.”

The Doctor grinned, and then all of a sudden, everything went dark. “Oh! I was enjoying that.”

“What happened?” No sooner had Peri spoken than another hologram materialized to fill the space. It grew out of the darkness as if approaching from a far-off perspective. Then at a certain distance, it stopped and began its approach again.

“It must be this ship.”

“What a piece of junk,” commented Peri.

“It’s a *Hulk* – freighter class. Can’t quite make out the name. It must have got stuck on re-entry from hyperspace.” The Doctor then noticed something disturbing. “Wait a moment...” Raising both hands to make a frame, he teased apart the hologram to increase the magnification.

“Hey, it’s us.” Peri was right. There, dwarfed by the hulking freighter, was the TARDIS. Spinning, insignificant, it looked as though the tiny Police Box was rebounding from a collision.

“Is that what happened?” asked Peri. “Did we hit this thing?”

“What? No, we couldn’t have. We would have noticed a collision on that scale. It’s more likely something drew us off course.”

“The distress signal?”

“Possibly...” Something was clearly on the Doctor’s mind, but he obviously had no intention of sharing it just yet. “But interference on that scale could only have come from... Eureka, Peri, I’ve got it! Look – see where the trajectory repeats itself?”

“Yeah, and then we appear and bounce off it.”

“Ah, but we don’t. This map is from the ship’s point of view. We don’t just appear; we were there already. We must have materialized a split second before the freighter attempted to leave warp drive and re-enter N-Space. Then, as the two crafts couldn’t occupy the same space at the exact same time, it knocked the freighter back into hyperspace.”

Peri waved her hand through the hologram. The myriad of fractals jumped and fizzed at her interference. “So, is this like an action replay?”

The Doctor stared at the hologram, “This is no replay, Peri. We must have triggered a warp ellipse...”

“A what?”

“A fixed orbit in time and space. We’ve interrupted MgGreet at the crucial moment of navigation, and now he’s simply repeating his last programmed trajectory again and again.”

Peri was lost. “But I don’t understand. I mean, if the TARDIS has landed now, why is he still going through the motions like that?”

The Doctor suddenly appeared gravely concerned. “Of course, how stupid of me! The earlier aspect of us is still out there.” He pointed into the depths of the hologram. “That’s us just before we materialized on board. We responded to the distress signal, only we arrived too early and became the very hazard that caused the original collision in the first place.” The Doctor was only just beginning

to realize the full implications. “We’re caught in the causal nexus. MgGreet – this entire ship – is now circling around that same original event. He’s trapped in the void. No wonder he wanted to kill us. I’ve shipwrecked him in eternity.”

“That’s horrible. Can’t we help him?”

“Right now, we’ll be lucky if we can help ourselves. Although...”

“Although what?”

“Well...” The Doctor pulled nervously on a stray curl. He looked as if he was about to say something, thought better of it, and then thought again. “I can’t escape the feeling that this is all partially my fault.”

Peri laughed out loud. “Oh, you think so? You’ll be lucky if you get to keep your licence after your driving.” She moved to view the hologram from another angle. “Doctor, how does MgGreet know who we are?”

The Doctor was now shoulders-deep in the innards of a service panel, connecting together handfuls of radiating filaments. “That’s a very good question. He obviously seemed to think he recognized us.”

“Oh, come on. He called us by our names.”

“Yes,” the Doctor sounded worried again, “I’ve been trying to ignore that.”

“Why?”

“Because the possibilities are too disastrous to think about.”

Suddenly a screen in front of them exploded into life, scrolling through screeds of apparent nonsense. In accompaniment, a computer began intoning:

“Warp descent induction... Drives initiated... Vector plotters engaged...”

Peri was startled. “Why does she keep saying that?”

“The systems keep resetting,” replied the Doctor. “I was right. This ship, the computer and all its instruments are trapped in a temporal loop, circling perpetually around the same set of pre-established events.”

“You mean this ship can time travel?”

“In a manner of speaking, or rather it travels without time.”

“In hyperspace?”

“Precisely.”

“Doctor, what is hyperspace?”

“The void? A nothingness – between the here and now.” He reactivated the fractal pool. Instantaneously, the freighter appeared before them. “We are currently sailing through oblivion. Without friction, force or time, a freighter of even this size can traverse immense distances without its occupants dying of old age.”

“And if we can’t leave?”

He didn’t answer her immediately. *“Life and land ne’er granted?”*

Sickened, Peri had to look away. “Let’s not start all that again.”

“I quite agree.” Immediately, the pair swung round at the intrusion. Another hologram had taken the freighter’s place. A huge three-dimensional rendering of a face: MgGreet was staring directly at them.

“You saved your breath, and this is how you choose to waste it?”

“You again!” announced the Doctor.

“Doctor, you’ve rerouted my computer. This is mutiny.”

“I’ve had just about enough of this.” The Doctor strode right up to the railings, directing a

threatening finger at the disembodied face. “Who exactly are you? And more to the point – how do you know me?”

“I think you and I are a little long in the tooth for introductions, Doctor,” rejoined the hologram.

“Long in the tooth? *Long in the...!* How dare you, I’m in my prime of my lives.”

“Release the control-node,” insisted MgGreet. “I need those navigation calculations. If I attempt re-entry without proper data, we’re all as good as dead.”

Peri instinctively clung to the Doctor’s arm, but the Time Lord stood resolute.

“Well, judging by your navigation computers, I would say your entire point was moot. You can’t simply drop out of warp drive like this.”

“Very well. Desperate times, Doctor.” Instantly, MgGreet’s face dispersed into the fractal pool, and with it, Peri too began to fade.

The Doctor could only watch helplessly as she vanished. “Peri... No!”

Back on the bridge, MgGreet remained lashed to the helm. Activating controls, checking readings, he paid little attention to the girl materializing before him.

“Why did you come back, Peri?”

“I’m sorry, what?” Peri was now doubled over, trying to alleviate a deep cramping.

“Did the transfer hurt you?”

“I feel a little sick.”

“It’ll pass. The teleport wasn’t designed for your species. Now find something to hold onto, I’m starting the countdown.”

She could feel the engines build, and a sudden surge of panic reminded her of the danger.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m really not sure who you are, but the Doctor said—”

“The Doctor says a lot of things.”

Despite her rising panic, Peri offered a smile. “Oh, so you really have met him before?”

“How could anyone forget *him*.” He suddenly turned to her. “Why does he dress like a fool?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

“Oh, I think we’ll hear from him soon enough.”

He was right. The Doctor would find some way of bargaining for her safety. It was just a matter of time.

“But tell me, Peri. Why have you stayed with him all these years?”

Years? It hadn’t even been so many months, had it? But then time in the TARDIS seemed to have its own sense of passing, quite outside the relative dimensions espoused by the Doctor. How long had it really been?

“Ask me another,” she replied, defiantly.

“All right, answer me this: why is he is trying to kill us all?”

Back in the Navigation Suite, the Doctor was incensed. He punched open a comms channel. “MgGreet, or whoever you are, this is the Doctor. Answer me.”

Instantly, MgGreet’s head once again appeared in the fractal pool. “I know who you are, Doctor.”

“Release Peri, immediately.”

“Right now, Peri’s safer than you are. I warned you not to come back. You’re lucky I don’t

evacuate you from the ship right now. No interference, this time. We do things my way.”

The Doctor felt the thrum of the engines change. “Don’t be a fool, MgGreet. You can’t leave warp drive like this.” He ran down into the fractal pool, clinging to the railings as the ship took a drastic lunge. With quick, deft movements, he began swiping through a myriad of star systems. Calling up data sweeps, he then sent suns, planets, whole galaxies through the numbers.

The engines took a different tone, and amidst the growing confusion, MgGreet’s furious expression appeared.

“Doctor, what the hell are you doing?”

The Doctor continued working. “You know, the trouble with you, MgGreet, is that you’re just a thick-skulled old pirate who couldn’t even steer a pedalo, let alone a space freighter.”

As if in response, the vessel lunged like a ship at sea. Engines screeched their intolerance.

“Enough of this,” bellowed MgGreet. “I must have concentration.”

Immediately, a new set of computer commands broke over the engines’ roar:

“Safeties disengaged... Hull breach imminent... Voiding fractal pool... Five... Four...”

The screeching intensified. The music of the spheres rang out in wild counterpoint. Simultaneously, the floor beneath the Doctor’s feet began to give way.

“Three... Two...”

The last words then belonged to MgGreet: “Goodbye, Time Lord.”

There was now nothing to hold on to. The void had opened up beneath the Doctor, and so he fell.

*We all fall to the void – sooner or later,
Ending the myth of the divided self,
And I don’t care what our ancestors sing
...He earned his death.*

The Doctor fell into nothing. Time, space and direction had failed him. Planets ruptured, galaxies fractured – the remnants of the navigational holograms. Flashing starbursts, raining shards of colour – he was caught in their helpless descent. The freighter had disappeared from view, and now gravity too deserted him. Together they went, spinning out into infinity. Then, contrary to the laws of most of the known universe, the Doctor somehow managed to completely disappear.

On the bridge, all was still. The engines had returned to a gentle lull and the lights were all but extinguished. Only the screens remained, where Peri had watched the Doctor’s expulsion from the ship. Simultaneously, something had happened to MgGreet there in the darkness, but she didn’t care. She had lost her best friend.

How long had it been? She thought again of MgGreet’s questions. In all the time she had known the Doctor, she had asked herself many times why she stayed? Moreover, she asked how she could ever leave? Where would she go? She could never return to her studies. The Doctor had shown her species both exotic and exquisite. Her knowledge of alien botany now far outstripped any Earth-bound conservatory, but that was hardly the reason. She thought of him in the Navigation Suite, lost and enthralled amidst his own astral compositions. He had been where he belonged – and so had she.

At that moment, all lights returned to full flood, and something incredible happened. The Doctor materialized before her very eyes, cross-legged and grinning.

“Doctor!”

He immediately sprang to his feet, evidently possessed by his own cleverness.

“Good, eh?” he said, beaming.

The poor girl was lost for an explanation; tears of relief ran down her face. “I don’t understand. How did you...?”

“Lombard Street to a China orange,” declared the Doctor, blithely.

“What?” stammered Peri. “What does that even mean?”

He tapped her on the nose. “I’ll explain later.”

“You always say that.” But the Doctor’s attention was already taken by MgGreet.

The pilot had now swung round to face them, something odd in his countenance.

“Now, Mr. MgGreet,” demanded the Doctor, “just what do you think you’re doing, throwing innocent people overboard?”

MgGreet gawked at the Time Lord, utterly shocked. “How the hell did you two get aboard my ship?”

For a moment the Doctor could only stare blankly at the pilot. “I’m sorry?”

“Can’t he remember us?” Peri whispered, amazed.

“You got my signal?” MgGreet looked searchingly from Peri to the Doctor. “You’re part of the rescue party?”

The Doctor opened his mouth, dumbfounded, and then scratched his head. “Ah... Yes, well... if you like.” He glanced uneasily at Peri. “We’re the rescue party... How can we help?”

“I’ve had no warning of approaching crafts,” muttered MgGreet suspiciously.

“Be that as it may, we were passing and—”

“Who are you?”

“Merely humble mariners, such as yourself. This is Peri, and I am generally known as the Doctor.”

“We’re hardly at sea, Doctor,” muttered Peri.

The Doctor turned to her in a huff. “It may surprise you to know, Perpugilliam, that for the rest of the universe, *mariner* is as ubiquitous as *ship*. It’s only humans who insist on ridiculous terms like *astronaut*.” Then, raising his eyebrows at the pilot: “Look, the point is, we answered your distress call.”

“Then you’re very prompt, Doctor. I’ve only just...” For a moment, MgGreet fell silent.

“Only just what?” urged the Doctor.

“I’ve only just sent it... Why did I do that?”

“I’m afraid you’ve had a collision, Mr. MgGreet.”

The pilot suddenly regarded him with deep suspicion. “How do you know my name?”

The Doctor instantly realized his mistake. “That hardly matters now. The point is you collided with... something at the precise moment your freighter tried to drop out of hyperspace. That collision then bounced you back an hour in your flight-time.” The Doctor gravely shook his head. “You’ve been spiralling, MgGreet, going round in circles.”

“You’re lying.” The pilot swung back to his controls. “No, you’re wrong. There was a collision, yes: a blue box – space debris – but there is no evidence of a warp ellipse.”

“Your systems are resetting with every pass. You must believe me,” insisted the Doctor. “Course projection! Look for yourself. The star systems you’re aiming for, your own home – try and find them.”

Doing as he was bid, the pilot shook his head in horror. “They’re all moving out of alignment.”

“No,” maintained the Doctor. “We are. That’s the normal passage of time outside this portion of

hyperspace.”

“Then why isn’t it registering on my systems?” Infuriated, MgGreet smashed a fist on the console.

The Doctor shrugged apologetically. “At a guess, your instruments are only receptive to local time. As soon as you restart your trajectory, your computer, your guidance systems, even your alarm clocks all reset an hour. They’re not archiving any new data.”

There was a long silence. MgGreet was staring ahead, breathing heavily. Then turning back violently to the Doctor: “How long?”

“Look around you,” the Doctor said, gesturing sadly. “You’re in a dwarf-star galley. It’s designed to protect you from the rigours of warp-drive, but it’s badly shielded. The rust still gets in.” The Doctor looked pained on his behalf. “And some of the memories, I think?”

“I asked you how long?”

“It could be years.”

In that moment, MgGreet looked entirely lost. “Have I been here before?” He raised his hand to the Doctor, fingers spread wide. “Is this new, Doctor? Is this moment new to me?” He looked from Peri to the Doctor. “And you – both of you. Have I met you before? Have I imagined you...?”

Reluctant to remind him, the Doctor quickly broke in: “Let us help you, MgGreet – or else we’ll all be here for an eternity.”

“How?”

“We can realign the drive systems.”

“What would be the point,” snarled MgGreet. “They would only reset within the hour.”

The Doctor shook his head. “Only the computer. We can bypass the digital telemetry if we only effect physical changes.”

MgGreet thought it through. “Is that possible?”

The Doctor shrugged. “I don’t see why not. We have substantial freedom within the time field; the drive mechanisms should also.”

MgGreet still appeared uncertain, but the Doctor continued, “Everything else may reset, but we are organic, MgGreet. We’re the only agents of change on this entire ship. We must at least try.” Then turning, he made for the door. Peri recognized that old, familiar air of command. “Now, I’ll need your help, Mr. MgGreet. Stay here and I’ll tell you which components need manual release. Peri, you come with me.”

“Wait, Doctor.” MgGreet had activated a console. Then, reading aloud, “Systems report a tall blue box on C-deck.” He turned pointedly to the Time Lord. “Space debris?”

The Doctor blew out his cheeks and gave a nonchalant shrug. “Couldn’t say. Back in a jiffy!”

“Hey, what happened back there? Why did he just forget us like that?” Peri hurried to keep pace with the Doctor.

“The human spatio-temporal cortex is relatively feeble compared to that of a Time Lord – and completely unsuited to the rigours of unprotected warp travel. MgGreet’s got the time equivalent of mal de mer. He should have an orange.”

“That’s for scurvy.”

“Is it? Well, besides which, he’s been stuck here for countless years with no means of measuring time – no birdsong, no sunrise. Not only that, but his instruments constantly reassert that he’s only been here for an hour.” The Doctor appeared deeply saddened by MgGreet’s predicament.

“You mean it’s like he’s got some form of sensory deprivation?”

“Precisely. Sometimes he forgets, sometimes he remembers. He’s set adrift, Peri.”

“It’s horrible. Can we help him?”

“We can try. Right now, MgGreet is running and re-running the same procedures. He responds to the same situation his systems keep feeding him. He thinks he’s piloting the ship, but in reality the ship is piloting him. He’s simply the custodian of a skeleton crew.”

“Okay, so we change what the systems are telling him, right?”

“Exactly!”

“And then will he recover?”

“I don’t know. What did he say to you when you were alone together on the bridge?”

Peri suddenly felt uneasy. “Does it matter?”

The Doctor stopped before a bulkhead door. This time it activated with ease. “Any clue could be vital.”

“Well, if you must know, he wanted to know about your coat.”

“Oh.” The Doctor seemed surprised. “He has an interest in haute couture, has he?”

Peri sighed. “It’s a good thing he didn’t ask me about the question marks.”

The Doctor seemed confused. “What question marks?”

Peri gave him a wide look. “The ones you always insist on wearing – on your shirt lapels.”

“Oh... so that’s how you see them, is it?” It was as if the Doctor had suddenly gleaned some deeper understanding of the workings of the universe. “The TARDIS telepathic circuits must be struggling to find a translation.”

“What does that mean?”

The Doctor neatly closed the bulkhead door behind them. “I don’t wear question marks, Peri. These shirts happen to be monogrammed. Come on.”

Another identical corridor, and Peri was getting anxious. “So come on, tell me. How did you do that trick back on the bridge. You always say you’ll explain later, and never do.”

“Do I?”

“Yes, and this time I really want to know.”

The Doctor beamed. “Clever, eh? I knew that at any minute the freighter would circle back on itself. I just needed to be outside of its warp field.”

“But how did you survive out there?”

“I... suspended my temporality...” The Doctor looked uneasy, as if he was admitting to some misdemeanour.

“I don’t understand.”

“I... took myself out of time – but only for a few milliseconds; just enough to catch the freighter on its return.”

Peri was amazed. “How?”

“With great concentration – and believe you me, they don’t teach that at the Academy.” He could see that she was none the wiser, so added, “Essentially, I held my breath.”

“And then you just coincidentally happened to land back on the bridge?”

The Doctor shrugged with perhaps a little false modesty. “Well, I admit the calculations did take even me a little while, but that Navigation Suite really is a marvel, not unlike myself.” Another door opened before them. “Ah! There she is: the auxiliary-drive housing.”

Next to the reassuring sight of the TARDIS, Peri observed the unceremonious pile of junk the Doctor was indicating. Then something quite unexpected happened.

As the pair watched, another battered old Police Box, identical to the TARDIS, began materializing beside the original. For a moment, it appeared almost fully corporeal. Then, as its light scanned the surrounding deck, it quickly faded again to nothing.

Apparently furious, the Doctor stamped his foot. “Well, that shouldn’t happen.”

The Doctor strode into the gleaming white console room, quickly followed by Peri.

“What was that? More Time Lords?”

“No,” fumed the Doctor. “That was me – although what I think I’m up to...!” He was now underneath the TARDIS’s central control console, struggling to open an inspection panel.

“Can I help?”

“Doubt it,” replied the Doctor glibly. “There’s a problem here, Peri: how can we have responded to a distress signal which we ourselves caused?”

Peri was confused. “Well, like you said, we must have travelled back in time.”

Doctor was instantly dismissive. “No, doesn’t work like that. In the TARDIS, we can only be affected by events relative to our own timestream.”

“Then, I give up.”

“Well, it seems I was right about there being an outside influence at work. We’ve somehow been locked into a temporal envelope. Nothing gets in or out.”

“Not even the TARDIS?”

“Not any of us,” emphasized the Doctor. “Else we threaten the whole causal nexus.”

Until now, Peri hadn’t realized the severity of their situation. “But who could trap the TARDIS like that?”

The Doctor stopped for conjecture. “I don’t know. Not even the Time Lords would abandon me like this.”

Peri looked into the deeper workings of the console, where the Doctor was attempting to release a golden sphere from its circuitry. “So what are you doing now?”

The Doctor pointed to the mottled object. “This is the real-world interface of the TARDIS log. It represents the metaphysical record of all the TARDIS’s journeys – past, and in some cases, future... I’m trying to remove it.”

“Why? Have you forgotten where you’ve been?” Peri offered him a smile.

“In actual fact, it’s crucial for making sure that the TARDIS never arrives at the exact same iota of space-time as any of its other journeys. I had to install it the very first time I started travelling with aliens.” He gave Peri a broad look. “A nice young couple.”

Peri indicated the sphere. “So what will removing that do?”

“That second TARDIS we saw out there was us. Only we weren’t able to land because we’re already here, you see?”

“Kind off. So it bounced off?”

“*Bounced off?*” the Doctor wrinkled his nose. “Oh, if you like. Well, I’m now removing the safety, so we can cross our own timestream.”

“Is that safe?”

“Well, put it this way: it’s not encouraged; but if we can dip in and out of the freighter’s repeated hour, we can effect greater change.”

Peri sensed the Doctor didn’t hold much confidence in his plan. “And will that really help?”

“It might,” he considered. “We’re working within the compressed dimensions of a warp

ellipse.”

A brief shower of sparks, and the Doctor triumphantly produced the golden sphere. “Ah! There it is.” Then a thought suddenly stuck him. “That’s odd.”

“What is?”

“An alarm should have sounded. I half-expected the Time Lords to intervene... I wonder why they haven’t.” Momentarily troubled, the Doctor then sprang to his feet. “Well, that at least makes everything a lot easier.”

On the bridge, it was night. MgGreet glanced out blindly at his own reflection. Beyond the backlit screens lay infinity. Only the methodical glimmer of his controls gave any light. The monitors were now his eyes and ears. He would soon drop this derelict out of warp drive, and re-enter N-Space. His instruments told him he was almost home.

The void is nothing but a well draughted sleep.

...Almost time to wake, old man.

After all this time... What dreams had come in the fever of isolation. He had even fancied he had seen people – a pair of absurdly dressed carnival characters. They had seemed to need his help. And wasn’t there something he had to remember?

Immediately, he sprang to his feet and went to check the storage vault. Placing his palm against the access plate, it clicked at his print and opened. Inside, the row of transparent tubes bubbled eerily, with an iridescent green. They were sealed, but the magma could still be heard to gulp within. MgGreet tapped the glass, and then instinctively snatched away his hand. The globular substance belched evilly, erupting in bubbles of gold, but it was the way the light had hit his skin. He had been assured that the contagion could not spread beyond the confines of its protective container, but still it made his skin itch. It was hard to believe the worth of this neutrino substrate: more than the entire arsenal in the cargo holds below.

MgGreet hastily checked the remainder of the vault. Cartridges, explosives, canisters and detonators. If there really were aliens on board, let them have the hold. He could defend the bridge indefinitely.

Satisfied, MgGreet closed the storage vault, relieved to be out of the glow of the substrate. The last word in bioweaponry, if only they could find anyone fool enough to take the one-way mission needed for solar pollination.

A persistent bleeping then brought his focus back to his instruments: a warning flash, an incongruous reading. Something told him it should be attended to. Systems had identified a tall blue box on C-deck. Perhaps an intermittent fault; it appeared as if it had sometimes always been there... and occasionally never.

The TARDIS had arrived in what looked like the engine room of an old steamship.

“Talk about a bumpy landing.” By the time Peri had stumbled out, the Doctor was already in his shirtsleeves, hard at work.

“Be thankful we were able to land at all.” He was attempting to turn an ancient release wheel. “I just tried to make a direct transfer, but we slipped back in time along the orbit, and bounced right off. We’ve just become the second TARDIS we saw.”

“So where are we now?”

“Forward drive compartment, lower deck. Here, help me with this.” The Doctor laced his coat through the rungs of the wheel, and both he and Peri struggled to turn it. “This is the manual-release valve for this entire section.” It was rusted with age, and movement was slow. “After this, we’ll use the TARDIS to access all the remaining drive systems more-or-less simultaneously. Even a slight deviation in the freighter’s trajectory might break us free of the ellipse.”

“But is the TARDIS that accurate?” worried Peri. “How do you know we won’t just bounce off again?”

“In theory, we should, but I’m using the Presidential Override codes. They work with any TARDIS – only I shouldn’t still have access to them. Mine were cancelled after the last time I absconded from Gallifrey.”

Finally, the release wheel gave, and the Doctor retrieved his coat. “Come on. We’ve a lot more to do.”

The TARDIS materialized with its familiar wheezing, groaning sound, and Peri exited carrying the torch. “So where are we now?”

The Doctor followed, pointing. “Aft compartment, oscillator stacks. We’re going to set up a *systolic warp array*. That should allow us to keep track of our orbit, and hopefully give us some precise calculations to work with.”

Peri shone the torch along the darkened passage, and then gave a startled cry. A huge figure stood before them, blocking their way.

“MgGreet!” declared the Doctor. “What are you doing down here?”

The old pilot looked more than a little confused. He offered up a palm-top screen. “You told me you needed the results of the systolic warp array to release the ship.”

“I did?” The Doctor stared blankly at him for a few seconds. “Yes... yes, of course. And you have them there, I see? Jolly good... top marks.” He took the palm-top from MgGreet and immediately made for the TARDIS, leaving Peri and MgGreet staring at each other in utter confusion. Instantly, the light on top of the old Police Box began to flash, and the Doctor’s voice boomed from within. “Come on, Peri!”

“Well... catch you later.” She offered the pilot a weak smile and ran back into the TARDIS.

The hulking freighter moved on. Time processed around it, regrouped and repeated; while inside, systems reset and the rust continued to grow.

The Doctor shone his torch up the rungs of the ladder, to the pressurized hatch above. “Now, I wonder where that leads.”

“It’s cold.” Peri hugged her arms.

“Some of the more basic systems are finally beginning to shut down.”

“Where are we now?”

“It’s more a question of when.” The Doctor shook the palm-top display. “According to the warp array, it’s seven months since we were last here – that’s external time, of course. In practical terms, we’re still in the same repeated hour. Now, I just need a moment to download the local telemetry, and...” In confusion, the Doctor then shook the palm-top again. “These readings... It can’t be.”

Peri, sensing danger, moved a little closer to his side. “What is it?”

The Time Lord was now looking profoundly disturbed. “Peri, if I didn’t know better, I’d say this

was almost certainly a causal paradox.”

“A what?”

“Putting it simply, a trap – devised by my own people, I’m ashamed to say; engineered so that the prisoner becomes the reason for her own confinement. Once she becomes part of the causal nexus, she can never escape.” The Doctor read Peri’s look. “Oh, my people are quite ingenious when it comes to methods of dispatch.”

“*She?*”

“I’m sorry?”

Peri frowned. “You said *she*.”

“Did I?” The Doctor considered. “Well, indeed. The ancient Gallifreyans developed it to confine a very particular prisoner.”

“Another Time Lord?”

“A war criminal. No one knows for sure who she was, but the name Enarete even found its way into Earth mythology.

“*Enarete?*”

The Doctor nodded. “The mother of Sisyphus. According to the myths of your planet, it was her husband who gave Odysseus a bag of all the Earth’s winds, except for that which would carry his ship home.”

He stopped short as if struck by something troubling. “It’s strange how the legend got passed on.”

“So what did this Enarete do that was so terrible?”

“The mother of the sun-plagues. She’s said to have spread contagion throughout countless galaxies.”

“And for that the Time Lords trapped her forever?”

The Doctor shrugged. “They felt they had to. The myth tells of the harrowing of a thousand stars, suns composed of boiling bones.”

Peri was horrified. “And you think the Time Lords have trapped us in the same way?”

“No, they couldn’t have. I simply can’t see why they would.” Nevertheless, the Doctor appeared gravely concerned.

“Well, could we have fallen into one of these traps by accident?”

The Doctor frowned. “I’m afraid that’s equally unlikely.”

A warning light then flashed above their heads.

Airlock Security Override.

“Now, what do you suppose activated that?” mused the Doctor.

“I did.”

At the interruption, they both spun round.

“MgGreet,” gasped Peri. “You scared me half to death.”

“You still remember my name?” He looked incredulous. “You abandoned me.” The man was distraught. “I don’t even know how long it’s been.”

The Doctor made to interject, but suddenly the pilot’s gun was trained upon them.

“I thought I’d dreamt you,” he hissed. “Every hour waiting, I rethought you again, questioned my sanity. It was you that showed me the course projection, how everyone I knew was now long-since dead. After all this time... I thought I was mad.” His gun was beginning to shake.

The Doctor raised his hands in placation, but MgGreet instantly refocused.

“Stay back, Doctor. I know what you’re planning to do, and I won’t allow it.”

Much to the confusion of Peri and the Doctor, MgGreet then placed himself between them and the inspection ladder. "I'm taking my chances with the warp cut-out, and damn the universe. If we die, let the ship tear through as many stars as she needs to finally run aground."

The Doctor made a sudden lunge for the gun, but the pilot's reflexes were impeccable. He swiped the weapon hard across the Time Lord's face before quickly readjusting his aim.

"Now I warn you, if you interfere again, I'll throw you to the void."

"Oh, will you, indeed?" The Doctor rubbed his jaw, incensed. "You seem to forget, you tried that once before – and it didn't get you very far..." He then stopped abruptly, caught by a sudden notion.

Peri pulled at his sleeve. "Are you all right?"

"Of course." He snapped his fingers. "We can do it, Peri."

Even MgGreet appeared stunned.

"If I can control my descent, then so can the ship. All we have to do is reduce the load on the space-time event." The Doctor slapped his forehead as if he had been unutterably stupid. "We'll simply drift out of orbit. Peri, bring the torch." And without a further word for the poor, beleaguered pilot, the pair then departed for the TARDIS.

On the turning of the hour, the bright lights of the bridge turned themselves on one by one. MgGreet rose from his command chair at the elephantine chorus of the TARDIS. Fully materialized, the Doctor and Peri emerged.

"You two took your time."

Momentarily flummoxed, the Doctor nodded genially and then immediately got down to business.

"Mr. MgGreet, we need to lighten the freighter. The load applied to the space-time event is what's keeping us in orbit. Now, I've made a quick scan of the ship. You only have one escape pod. It may not be warp-proof, but it is of a similar dwarf-star alloy to the rest of the ship. Release the pod, you lighten the load, and the orbit will decay." The Doctor spread his arms wide. "We can all go home." Then, unbidden, he took MgGreet's command position. "I just need to find the remote release for the escape pod."

MgGreet made no move to stop him. "Home..." He muttered it to himself almost sacredly.

The Doctor then slammed the controls in frustration. "Stupid system isn't working."

The pilot shook his head. "No, we tried all this before. Don't you remember, Doctor? The ship's preparing for warp cut-out. It won't release the pod."

"Of course, I should have realized... Oh well, that's health and safety for you."

"But we can release it manually."

"How?"

The pilot activated a panel, and a storage vault opened to a flickering green glow. "I've had a long time to think this over. Explosive charges, Doctor. We can blow the release clamp."

The Doctor frowned. "Outside the ship? Do you have pressure suits?"

"No, but I can generate a maintenance screen. It should be enough to work by."

The Doctor appeared doubtful. "That's only a thin pocket of air. We'll have to work quickly or we'll disintegrate on re-entry." The Time Lord rose to his feet, but MgGreet pushed him back into the command chair.

"No, Doctor. We'll need new co-ordinates as soon as we're clear of the ellipse. I'll need your

calculations.”

The Doctor looked as though he meant to protest. He was staring intently into the vault that MgGreet had just opened, but then quickly nodded his assent. “Be as quick as you can. You won’t have long once the pod is released.”

MgGreet reached into the iridescent green of the vault, retrieved a number of charges and a detonator, before rapidly resealing the panel. Then turning back to Peri and the Doctor, he gave something of a bow before hastening from the bridge.

Immediately, the Doctor jumped to his feet and ran over to the vault.

“What are you doing?” Peri was startled by his suddenness.

“I need to see inside.” The Doctor was now pulling at the seal with his fingertips.

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“That glow. I thought I saw something that really has no business being aboard this ship.”

“You mean the explosives?”

The Doctor stopped, as if struck by the sudden realization. “Neutrino plasma?” His fingers then grazed the engraving. It was a name set into the command panel itself. Instantly, the Doctor’s face fell. “*She...*” he muttered.

“What?” Peri was alarmed by the sudden change in him.

“It’s not just people... ships are also *she*.”

“Doctor, you’re not making any sense.”

He turned to her, distraught. “I am making perfect sense, Peri. I need to think.”

Instinctively, Peri pulled at his sleeve. “Look, I get it, I really do,” she lied, “but is it really more important than what’s going on here right now?”

For the longest time, the Doctor seemed to stare directly ahead of him, his face grave. Then suddenly turning to her: “You’re absolutely right. We still have to lighten the ship.”

Immediately, he swung himself back into the command chair and activated the controls. Relieved, Peri stepped up to observe the monitor screens. They were now fixed on the outside of the ship.

“I don’t get it,” she declared. “You’re saying that if we’re lighter, we won’t travel at the same speed, so we won’t hit the TARDIS?”

“Exactly – well, more or less. The drive systems will be applying the same force to a lighter load. It’ll throw us right out of orbit.” He was now fervently typing out new codes and co-ordinates for their ongoing trip. The screens before them danced in complex equations.

Peri watched, enthralled, then her attention was caught by a secondary screen showing the outside of the ship. Here she could just make out the hulking form of MgGreet as he exited the airlock. In his furs and skins, the figure reminded Peri of a bear, lumbering from hibernation.

With a cautiousness that was painful to watch, MgGreet began to lay the explosive charges around the release clamp. Lit only by the hull’s external sensors, he cut an impossible figure against the unreal blackness of the void.

Then something happened. A shadow fell, and Peri gasped. “Doctor!”

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“I don’t really know, he’s trapped.” She pointed to the secondary screen. MgGreet had been working in and out of the shade of a communications rig, when it had suddenly collapsed. It had now fallen across his frame, pinning him to the outside of the ship.

“MgGreet, can you hear me?” The Doctor bellowed into the comms link. “MgGreet! It’s no good, he’s dropped the detonator.” The Doctor’s face was grave. “It’s the break-up. After years of

stress, even the introduction of oxygen is taking its toll.”

“What happens if he can’t get free?”

“He must.” The Doctor checked the readings. “We’re about to attempt another re-entry. The air skein won’t protect him. He’ll be torn apart out there.”

“Can’t we help him?”

“Possibly. I’ve programmed a short time-delay into the drive systems. If we can disengage the pod, then it should stop the computers resetting. Then they’ll follow my co-ordinates instead.” The Doctor did a quick mental calculation and then sprang to his feet. “We should have just enough time to get him back undercover before we make the final jump.”

MgGreet tried to push the twisted rigging off his chest. It was no good. The hull must have already magnetized against the rigours of re-entry. He had set the explosive charges all around the base of the escape pod’s release clamp. Then he had dropped the detonator. Stupid – a senseless death. He lay back, defeated.

Death teaches us again the tongue of the ancients.

Old words with which to sing new songs.

The time-winds had whipped up a squall, but now they eased a little. He stared up above him, beyond the blind-dazzle of the ship’s hull, into the void. In comparison to the freighter, his lungs were tiny and weak. Only a blister-thin pocket of air held life in place. At any moment the freighter would drop out of warp drive, and he would be burnt to a shadow. A sobering thought – and yet MgGreet couldn’t rid himself of a nagging feeling that he had just forgotten something important.

At that moment the airlock clattered open.

“*Carnival...? Do you mean me?!?*”

Peri winced. “MgGreet, it’s us,” she said, trying to defuse the situation. “I... I don’t know if you’ll remember us this time, but you have to listen.”

“Hush, Peri,” waved the Doctor. “Don’t use his name. If he hasn’t met us yet, it’ll only antagonize him.” Then turning back to the pilot: “Let’s not worry about that now, shall we, Mr. MgGreet? We’re here to help you.” The Doctor was desperately scanning the surface of the hull for MgGreet’s misplaced detonator.

The pilot then swung the weapon again, and Peri flinched. His face told of a wealth of confusion. The injury he had sustained, the time-winds whistling in the rigging. Even the countless years he had learned to trust them, forgotten how, and then learned all over again. Peri could see it all rushing in on him; this bear of a man, pinioned like a figurehead on his own ship. She wanted to speak up, say something – tell him it would all end soon. He just needed to trust them a little longer, but at that moment, MgGreet fired.

There is no longer sky, there is only open-passage;

Lost to the thrall of eternity...

And if I ever meet the Doctor again,

I swear I’ll be the death of him!

The ship pulled gracefully away, bleeding time and space. A heat haze of nebulae swarmed before it.

The purples and the white of starlight, distant navigational markers, buoyed into existence. Finally, the freighter was heading home. She pulled up against an inrush of the infinite.

Pulling back a little further, and she was encapsulated entirely within the gleaming white frame of a monitor screen.

“She’s found her course.” The Doctor adjusted a control, and the TARDIS scanner then followed the ship a little further. “She’s turning.”

Peri joined him at his side. “Do you think he even remembered us in the end?”

The Time Lord didn’t answer. He was staring at the screen.

“Well, that was one hell of a shot, anyway...”

“He wasn’t aiming at the explosive charges.” The Doctor’s face was grave. “He was aiming at me.”

Peri squeezed his arm. “Hey, don’t take it personally. He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“He was a war criminal and a gunrunner.”

“What?” Peri was astonished.

“Running contraband weaponry from Gallifrey.” For a moment, the Doctor remained silent. Then raising his voice in abject fury, he suddenly thundered to the heavens: “Why didn’t you tell me? I could have found another way!”

It was a custom Peri had slowly grown to understand. It meant that he suspected his own people, the Time Lords, were watching on. Bravely, she put her arm through his. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I should have realized sooner. How else could we have both remembered the myth?”

“What myth? Doctor, I don’t understand.”

“It was the vault.” He was clearly stricken. “I just needed more time.”

A sudden sinking feeling overtook Peri. “Doctor... what did you see in there?”

“Neutrino plasma... the perfect substrate to breed the contagion.”

He suddenly turned on her, “It was me, Peri. I broke the causal paradox and made myself an accessory.” She could sense his profound apprehension. “I’m responsible for the harrowing of a thousand stars.”

Peri slowly backed away. “I don’t understand.”

Without further word, the Doctor adjusted the scanner. Instantly, the retreating freighter swam back into view. They both then watched in silence, as the *Enarete* sailed out of timeless oblivion.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Eight

by Nick Walters

SIDIAN TOWER, END OF THE LINE

“Admit it, Inomasp, you’re finished!”

Lady Proxistine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian yawned, leaned back in her chair and swung her legs up to rest her booted feet on her expensive ebony desk. “I admit nothing.”

Directly in front of her desk stood the Doctor, flanked by squad of a dozen Judoon. “Drop the act, you’re impressing no one.”

“You’ve changed again, Doctor. So the handsome Byronic adventurer is now a big thug in a leather jacket? Shame.”

“Tough. Can I have my ring back, please?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have it on me.”

“Care to tell me where it is?”

Lady Inomasp grinned. An expression the Doctor had not seen for centuries. It was a snake’s smile. “Somewhere safe.”

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand. “Whatever. Let’s get to the point. I’m here with my Judoon mates to take you in! I’ve found out enough to put you away forever.”

Lady Inomasp yawned again. “Oh. Out of interest, how did you get in here? You can’t all have climbed in the window, we’re on the ninety-third floor. All my guards seem to be unconscious. And my security system didn’t detect you, and it’s state of the art.”

“I’d take it back to the shop if I were you.”

Lady Inomasp folded her arms. “I’m not telling you anything until you say how you got in.”

Sod telling her about the TARDIS, thought the Doctor. “Long-range teleport.”

“That somehow managed to get past my teleport disruptor field,” said Lady Inomasp drily.

“Yeah, well, you’re not the only one with state-of-the-art tech.” The Doctor clutched the lapels of his leather jacket. “Now then, *Proxistine*, since our last meeting, I finally got round to checking up on you. That name of yours, Inomasp – it’s not your own, is it? It’s the name of the Warrior Goddess of the Kryax, defeated centuries ago, by – well, defeated centuries ago.”

Lady Inomasp leapt to her feet. “Yes! One of the greatest leaders in history! I borrowed her name to inspire fear and respect!”

“You can’t have had much confidence.”

“No. You’re right. I was young, I needed all the kudos I could get, and the legend of Inomasp helped. Now, though, as you can see, I’ve built up an entire empire—”

“An empire that ends tonight.” The Doctor gestured to the Judoon, who all raised their weapons and aimed them at the woman behind the desk. “Are you going to come quietly?”

Lady Inomasp sat back down in her chair, and put her feet back on her desk. She was wearing high-heeled leather boots, the Doctor noticed. Was that power dressing?

She folded her arms. “No. You have nothing on me.”

“Proxistine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian,” began the Doctor. “Grew up on the water world of

Besheshra to a good family, but fell into bad company, and drifted into a life of crime, beginning with the smuggling of weapons to insurgents. Then drug dealing. Then people-trafficking. Left Besheshra to set up base here on Feleris. Went back there to sell out your homeworld to the Foamasi.” The Doctor smiled sarcastically. “Which is where we last met.”

“The Foamasi? Huh! They backed out. I did the deal with the Raxacoricofallapatorians instead.”

“That’s worse!”

“Besheshra is now a galactic hub for commerce, and doing very well. My people have much to thank me for.”

“Oh, do they?” The Doctor gave his anger full rein, his voice thick with passion. “What about the people of Mardus, where you set up a dirty little deal supplying the Valetske with weapons in their war against the Earth Empire? Or Hanley’s World, which you basically sold for pocket money? Or Phimrallax Alpha, now a barren desert thanks to you selling nuclear weapons to *both* sides in their civil war? They can’t thank you or curse you, because they’re dead. Dead!” The Doctor paused, and strode over to Lady Inomasp’s desk, putting his hands on the cool black surface, staring into Lady Inomasp’s dark eyes. “Want me to go on? There’s worse. Much worse. Supplying arms and tech to the Sycorax, Sontarans – even Daleks! Your empire is built on the pain and suffering of millions of innocent lives.” The Doctor stood back, disgusted. “You’re as evil as the thing whose name you borrowed. Do you deny any of this?”

Lady Inomasp shook her head. “Nope.”

Her unusual calm unnerved the Doctor. “Well... are you going to come quietly, or...” the Doctor indicated the twelve Judoon.

“I’m not going to come at all. You see, Doctor, I foresaw that one day, someone might catch up with me. I never thought it would be you. Do you know what this is?” She held up a small device, a thin silver pad with a green button at one end.

The Doctor looked at it, and realization began to dawn. “It’s a biotranscendence activator.”

That snake smile again. “Quite correct, Doctor. Goodbye!”

The Doctor leapt forward, but it was too late. She had pressed the button.

Lady Inomasp’s whole body was suffused in a blue-silver glow, and she began to pixelate like a TV picture breaking up. The pixels began to collapse into each other, and, within seconds, Lady Proxistine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian had completely disappeared.

The biotranscendence activator clattered to the desk.

“Blo fo kro lo mo ko dro!” The Judoon glared around the office in confusion, but the Doctor had already turned away.

“Come on lads, we’ll never find her now. She’s uploaded herself.”

With that he left the office, scattering confused Judoon in his wake, and made his way back to the TARDIS.

Next Segment

NOVATRON STATION, AFTER IT ALL WENT PEAR-SHAPED

My Name Is Susan

by Joshua Wanisko

One week ago, David and I exchanged gifts to celebrate the one-month anniversary of our relationship. Well, to be completely honest, David presented me with a small gift and I presented him with nothing, because I hadn't been aware of the custom at the time. He gave me flowers, which apparently are traditional, but as he had grown to adulthood as a pragmatic resistance fighter, he also gave me the practical gift of a voice-activated recorder, so that I could record my thoughts as I got used to our new life together.

That has proven difficult, because I don't like where my thoughts are going.

Where are they going?

To start with, I'm beginning to have some serious doubts. I gave up absolutely everything I have ever known to settle on an alien world with a man I barely know. I love David, but I don't even know if I *like* him, and he's away from home so frequently in his efforts to rebuild the world that I don't know if I'll ever have the chance to find out.

DAY 1

No one knows what year this is, so the dating system in the diary is somewhat arbitrary. We can all agree that the meteors started dropping in 2157, but soon afterwards, the Earth was occupied by a hostile alien race and the last thing on anyone's mind was marking off days on a calendar.

So rather than try to puzzle out exactly what the date is, I'm just going to number the days sequentially. If we can ever figure out exactly when it is, I'll go back and correct the date.

I am a time traveller who has no idea what time it is. I am not unaware of the irony.

None of that is important. It's just a way to delay talking about what's really bothering me.

In addition to David's frequent absences, there is another problem. I'm reluctant to say it out loud, even to this recorder. It feels like that giving voice to it will make it real; by naming it, I bring it into being. But it is something that is happening to me and ignoring it will not change that.

So here it goes, dear diary.

I am sick, and there is no name for my disease in any language on Earth.

My people possess some sensitivity to psychic phenomena, and I am sensitive to an unusual degree. At least I was, until last week.

There exist numerous technical terms to describe my condition back home. Its study is, in point of fact, a venerable and well-respected field. But I mean Gallifrey when I say "home," and that isn't true anymore. Gallifrey hasn't been my home for quite some time. Earth is my home now. On Earth, with David.

Earth is my home, but they would understand my condition on Gallifrey. There are doctors and specialists who could treat it.

It's hard to be sick. It's hard to be alone. It's very hard to be both at once.

And I don't mean to be melodramatic. This isn't like me. But when you're stuck inside your own head, you forget who you are.

DAY 2

I greeted David when he returned home after a long day of conferences. We sat down to eat. I had cooked the meal myself, with vegetables from the garden.

As we ate, we discussed our day. I am not strong, and while I am very clever, it is that particular kind of clever that is not good for anything practical. I could expound at length about the nuances of Sensorite social hierarchy or the myths and traditions of the Aztecs, but at the end of the day, neither of those will get the crops watered.

So that's why I spent my days learning from a local girl named Sarah instead of toiling in the fields. Also, I just don't think the people around here like me very much. They were civil enough when David was around, but conversations stopped when I approached on my own.

David was the Regional Council's representative here in Newcastle. There were tensions between his group and the local government. A month after the end of the occupation and people were already jockeying for position. He stopped talking after a short while, but seemed to have more to say, so I urged him on.

"Susan, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that Carl has asked to represent our region in a larger convocation. The bad news is that if I accept, I'll be away for a week and quite possibly longer."

My hearts fell, but I forced a cheery tone into my voice and said, "David, you have to accept." I hoped I sounded more sincere than I felt.

He flashed the smile that I fell in love with then asked, "Do you think you can meet with the local council in town tomorrow?"

"I'd like to tell Sarah before I go, but it shouldn't be a problem. Why?"

"There will be a ceremony on Friday evening to honour the delegation. You'll be sitting with me and you might be called upon to say a few words."

I pulled away. "Are you ashamed of me?"

It was an appalling overreaction. I regretted it as soon as the words left my mouth.

David looked stricken. "No! Of course not, darling! Never! I only thought this would be a new situation for you, and I just wanted to make sure you were prepared."

I relaxed. Of course. That was it. I was so uncertain of myself these days.

DAY 3

I became aware of the dream gradually, but awoke from it suddenly. It was not, as one might expect, a nightmare of Daleks and Robomen, but something more personal... I couldn't remember any details other than the impression that I had been buried alive a thousand miles beneath the surface of the Earth. The sensation was vivid, and it took my hearts several minutes to fall back into their normal rhythm.

The dream was a metaphor. If I had *actually* been buried that far below, I would have been surrounded by magma, not the black earth that filled my mouth every time I tried to scream. It was probably a message from my subconscious that my problems were burying me. Which was not inaccurate, but a little too on the nose for my tastes. Thanks, subconscious! I had already worked out that much for myself.

Several cups of tea later, I walked down to the garage to talk to Sarah. I was very fond of her. She was buoyed by a constant enthusiasm for the wonders of everyday life, and in that she reminded me of Jenny, who was now stationed in London with Carl Tyler.

Sarah was dark-haired and her eyes were as green as a sunset on Quinnis, burning bright and brittle within her beautiful face. She always bore a smear of grease decorating one cheek, directly above the dimple that blossomed when she smiled. I think she put the grease there deliberately. It appeared in that spot with too much consistency to be a coincidence.

She sat on a workbench and listened to me vent my frustrations. I'm afraid my tone of voice crept perilously close to a whine while airing these grievances. Sarah listened patiently, as she always did. After nearly forty-five minutes, I finally got around to my reason for being there.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah, but I can't help out this week. David wants me to meet with the council in town, so they can show me how to act."

She shrugged. "Better you than me. Watch out for the mean girls."

DAY 4

The dwindling of my psychic sensitivity wasn't like becoming blind or deaf. It was closer to losing one's colour vision or sense of smell. I know there is a larger world out there and my soul aches that I cannot reach it.

Yikes. Did I really just say "My soul aches"? Get a hold of yourself, Susan. I would delete that line if I knew how, but I don't have the knack of operating this recorder yet. This machine is so primitive. There is no mind-machine interface. I have to operate it manually. It uses *batteries*. For most of my life, Gallifrey was all I had ever known. The Tribe of Gum painted murals of the great totemic beast of the mammoth using paintbrushes made of twigs and hair, and paints ground out of seashells. From my perspective, the technology to build this recorder was closer to the tools they used to scrawl their caveman scribbles than it was to the dizzying quantum poetry of the artificers of Gallifrey.

Of course, if the recorder had come from Gallifrey, it would be needlessly complex, semi-psychic and would break down at the worst possible times.

It's funny. I don't think I had ever heard "recorder" in the context of a mechanical device used to make audio records. To me, "recorder" had always referred to a musical instrument. Grandfather once told me that he had been quite the virtuoso in his youth, and has hinted that he may yet take it up again in another lifetime.

I sighed. Grandfather. If Grandfather were here, he would certainly know what to do.

I knew what I needed to do as I stood at the entrance to the Cathedral Church of St. Nicholas. What I needed to do was go inside it and meet the people who had agreed to train me. The trick was convincing myself to actually *do* it. I had the terrible feeling that they would take one look at me and know that I didn't belong here.

Still, the church itself was beautiful. At least I had a nice view while I dithered. The structure of the building was much like the population it served, battered but defiant. Some of the stained glass was even intact, which in itself seemed somewhat miraculous.

If the Daleks had understood what it would come to represent, they would have destroyed it in the initial bombardment. It was fast becoming a symbol of the resurrection of human civilization.

I took a deep breath and entered, and then stopped to gawk after several steps. Like the TARDIS,

it was even more beautiful on the inside. I heard someone shout, "Make a hole!" and while I was pondering what a strange phrase that was, I was nearly flattened by a messenger pushing a pile of papers on a mail cart.

I stepped aside to avoid it and knocked over an entire shelf of records. Even as a temporally displaced traveller from an alien civilization, I knew this was a cliché.

At least I didn't twist my ankle again.

Conversation stopped. Everyone in the church looked at me.

A fearsome woman with hair the exact colour of tombstones fixed me with a withering stare.

"Can we help you, young lady?"

I stammered out a reply, "I'm Susan Foreman. David Campbell sent me here."

Her lip curled. "Right. Because we're a finishing school now. But the Regional Council gets what it wants. I don't have time for this. Penny!" A pretty blonde in a tight blue dress stepped forward. "Show Miss Foreman how to hold her teacup! And don't dawdle. I want you back as soon as you're done playing Pygmalion."

The girl, Penny I presumed, nodded her head, then walked over to me. She smiled sympathetically and knelt down to help me pick up the papers. When the older woman was out of earshot she said, "Don't mind Mrs. Sterling. She's under a lot of pressure to have everything ready."

I nodded. We worked together for several minutes, and I couldn't help but admire her poise. She was really pretty. It wasn't a contest or anything, and it's sort of terrible to compare your friends in this way, but I think she was prettier than Sarah. Her hair was perfectly coiffed and I certainly couldn't kneel down like that in such a dress. I'd fall right over. She was certainly the right person to teach me some social graces. When we had finished picking up, she asked, "Now what can I do for you?"

DAY 5

I think I had the dream again, but I couldn't remember the details, just the overwhelming sense of claustrophobic dread. It was all but forgotten by the time I returned to the church.

I liked Penny. She was so nice to me. I was a little worried about the way she talked about people who weren't around. It made her come across as a bit two-faced. I might bring that up when this was over.

In between instructions on who is addressed with which honorific and which fork to use at which time, we talked about the paths that had led us here. Penny had been widowed in the war and didn't want to talk about her past, but she was passionately interested in mine. She already knew the basics from community gossip, of how I had arrived with Barbara and Ian and the person they knew as the Doctor, and whom I called Grandfather. I expanded on that, and I told her that we had adventures and we helped the people we met on our travels through time and space.

I'm not certain that she entirely believed the last part, but she, like everyone else on Earth, had survived an invasion that would have seemed impossible to their younger selves, so she was at least willing to entertain the possibility. But it's true. We go up and down and to and fro in the universe and help the people who need it most. That's what we do.

That's what we did, at least. I don't know what I do now.

You see, Grandfather left Earth without me, so I could have a life with David.

So I could have roots of my own.

So I could belong somewhere.

It was now clear that events were not unfolding in quite the manner he had intended.

Penny was comforting and welcoming. “Don’t worry. Just remember what I taught you, and when we’re finished, everyone will know who you are.”

DAY 6

That same dream again, only this time I was trapped inside a coffin in addition to being buried deep within the Earth. Not sure if that was an improvement or not, frankly.

Not even a dream like that could ruin my day. Things went swimmingly with Penny! She taught me so much and I was going to dazzle the crowd tonight.

DAY 7

Sarah took her now customary seat on the workbench and listened to me vent. I was still burning from the embarrassment of last night. The entire community had been celebrating, and the gala they organized was the fanciest they could manage. Truth be told, it was a simple gathering by pre-war standards, but everyone pulled together and the whole affair had the aura of a historical event about it.

I had been at the top table with David, and I could feel the gaze of all those eyes upon me. David gave his speech and after the applause had died down, he asked me to say a few words. I swallowed and I was acutely aware of how dry my throat was, Gallifreyan physiology being identical to human in that respect. I mumbled a few platitudes, in which I’m sure Grandfather would have been disappointed, and then I suggested we all start on our meals. In the process, I referred to a utensil by the wrong name. When he figured out that I wasn’t making a joke, David leaned over and whispered, “That’s not called a dinglehopper, darling. I think someone on the council was just having a little fun with you.”

I flushed to my ears, reliving the humiliation. “It wasn’t ‘fun.’ It was mortifying and just another reminder that I don’t belong here.” I wanted to die on the spot and regenerate into someone less self-conscious. “I’m not *stupid*, Sarah! I know what a fork is! Penny told me that it was a specific term that applied to a specialized kind of fork.” She also told me that it was customary to kiss envoys on the lips, but fortunately David was watching and intervened before I could embarrass myself any further.

Sarah shrugged. She never seemed bothered by anything. “Don’t let them get to you. It took months for the boys to warm to me and I grew up around here. It wasn’t until the invasion that they accepted me.”

“Penelope Bowman! What’s her *problem*?” I demanded. Also, I had been wrong about Penny. Sarah was much prettier.

“She lost her husband to the Daleks.”

I flinched. “I knew that he had died, but I didn’t know the circumstances.”

“It was probably his own fault. Right from the start, there were rumours that he was a collaborator. We’re a small town now and everybody knows everybody, and I’m pretty sure that’s more or less what was going on. He worked out some kind of agreement with the Daleks. Nobody knows the specifics, but it was probably a deal where he’d provide workers for the camp and they’d

leave his family alone. Mostly, he settled scores or gave them the types of people he considered 'undesirable,' until one day they decided he had outlived his usefulness and dragged him away instead. I can't drum up too much sympathy."

I swallowed. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the invasion was how the Daleks turned humans into monsters as great as they.

She shrugged. "Penny has decided that the best defence is a good offence. She thinks that if she gets the mob worked up about other people, they won't turn those torches and pitchforks on her."

That was the flash-fire moment when I knew for certain that something was very wrong. I don't read minds or anything so *gauche*, but I am sensitive to certain mental impressions. The power has been waning, but it was still *there*. I could usually tell what someone meant when they said something, some kind of psychic subtext. It's the difference between someone speaking to you and you reading the words off a sheet of paper. There are nuances present in the former that are absent in the latter. My power was waning. I already knew that. I couldn't read the crowd last night. I didn't know if they were laughing with me or at me. But I thought that was because I was flustered. Now I saw that the problem went deeper than that, and the difficulties I had been suffering were not something temporary that would get better on its own.

Sarah was blank to me now. I didn't know if that shrug meant that she thought I shouldn't let it bother me or if she didn't care enough to let it bother her.

I had always liked talking with Sarah. She didn't understand me. She couldn't help me. But she wanted to, and that was comforting in its own way. But now I felt cut off, alienated.

Like the alien I am.

DAY 8

I awoke late that morning. No dreams overnight. Small blessings. I ate a quick breakfast, then hurried to the garage as fast as I could manage. I was in no mood to speak to any passers-by.

The front door was locked. Sarah usually had it wide open. There was a note with my name pinned to the door. I removed it and opened it. Printed, in Sarah's almost obsessively precise hand was:

Susan, called to London. Back soon. So sorry. S.

Sarah had been the only one left. No one was calling me to London unless there was an urgent need for someone who tripped a lot and screamed all the time. I couldn't take it. I sat down on the stoop and started bawling.

I was vaguely aware that people were staring, but I didn't care. I cried some more. I was a mess. I cried myself dry, but my nose was still running. I was wearing David's jacket. I wiped my nose on its sleeve. I hoped he never found out about this. I felt absolutely worthless.

A shadow fell across my face. I looked up and saw that it belonged to Penny. That was all I needed.

She laughed to her gaggle of debutantes. "Come on, ladies. It's almost time for supper. Get your dinglehoppers ready! We've got some Fruit of the Loom on the menu!"

I didn't look up. I was too numb to feel anything from what she said. I wondered vaguely if she hated me, or if I simply represented a target of opportunity, but even that thought was abstract, like I

was reading about an injustice that had perpetrated upon someone else a long time ago.

Penny continued with her jeering: “Did you know that you can kill two birds with one *scone*?”

It was bizarre. It was surreal. She was trying to ruin me with malapropisms. And the killer was that I was in such a low place that it was *working*. Every one of her barbs found a home.

I rose and gathered David’s coat and what little dignity I could muster and wrapped myself in each.

I took a step forward and they stepped back. For a moment, I thought Penny was going to hit me, but no. That’s not how she hurts people. I kept moving forward and they parted before me. They shouted insults as I left, and I want to say that I didn’t hear them, but that’s not true. I heard every one of them. I wanted to keep a measured stride as I departed, but I broke into a run before I had taken ten steps. The last thing I heard was the tinkling of their laughter, ringing like tiny silver bells.

I paused to catch my breath in an alley, and I could hear the thoughts of the townsfolk. They were echoing what Penny had said, that I was a failure, stupid, an outsider, a fraud. But in an epiphany that was at once euphoric and heartbreaking, I realized that I wasn’t picking up the thoughts of those around me. I had already internalized what Penny was saying. Those thoughts were my own.

I wasn’t merely engaged in a popularity contest with a small-town mean girl, I was *losing* a popularity contest with a small-town mean girl. It would hardly be an optimal solution to my problems, but I suppose I could just wait a couple of decades and outlive her.

Which reminded me, the fact that I am a long-lived alien was probably a conversation I needed to have with David eventually.

I leaned against the wall of the building.

Speaking of David, what would he do in my place?

I laughed bitterly. David wouldn’t be caught in this situation.

What would Grandfather do?

Grandfather would take one look at Penelope with his iceberg eyes and pronounce a single incisive quip that would chill her to the core, whereupon she would fall to the ground and shatter into a million pieces.

My mind scrabbled for someone to imitate, to show me how to act, but there was no one there. I was on my own.

DAY 9

I cried all day.

DAY 10

I slept all day.

DAY 11

There are exercises one may engage in to strengthen a weakened talent, certain esoteric disciplines one may employ. I had not gone down such paths since I had been as young as David, but I returned to

them today. I spent the entire day reciting the mantra we knew as “Contemplation of the Eye of Harmony,” foregoing food entirely and stopping only to sleep in the evening.

It didn't help one bit.

DAY 12

I can't continue lurching back and forth between despondency and gallows humour. The stress is going to destroy me, like a piece of metal bent back and forth until it breaks. And I know that I don't have to hold out forever, just until David returns, but that's not really true either. His presence won't fix things; it will only remove the source of the trouble, and I know that unless I make the necessary adjustments within my own mind, I'm just going to fall apart in the exact same way the next time these circumstances arise.

I didn't experience my days – I endured them. I waited for them to be over and then I woke up and started waiting again. I felt numb. Worn out. Used up. I asked myself what David would do in my place, but I had no answer.

The isolation was killing me.

DAY 13

That same dream. I was trapped underground, observing myself from outside my metal sarcophagus. It seemed to last forever, much longer than the period I would have been asleep. As I writhed within it, I heard the din of a single word ringing like the echoes of a gong, over and over again: *Eight. Eight. Eight.*

What could that mean? I think that eight was considered a lucky number in some parts of the Earth, but that's hardly what seemed to be implied in the dream. Did I fear that it would be eight years before Grandfather returned, or that he would be in his eighth incarnation when he did? What a dreadful thought. I pushed it from my mind.

I went through the rest of the day like a Roboman, scarcely aware of my actions. The only event that seemed to exist in my universe was the weekend, which would bring with it David's return.

He called today. Ordinarily, I don't like speaking on the telephone because my sensitivity does not apply at great distances, but David's voice was like the first song of spring. I couldn't feel his presence with my gift, but I'm not certain I could were he near.

“It's not going well. Who would have thought that saving the world would be the easy part?”

My hearts sank. I didn't need to be psychic to predict what was coming. A delay. Two more weeks at least.

DAY 14

The loss of my talent was all in my head. Almost by definition. But that didn't make it any less real. There was occasionally the flicker of a phantom pain in the part of my mind where it had dwelled.

My talent wasn't dead. It was sleeping. However, the only difference was one of potential, and if the circumstances that would lead to its awakening never arose and that potential remained forever

unrealized, then the distinction between dead and sleeping was meaningless.

I didn't realize until it was gone, but my talent was how I defined myself. I was Susan, who saw into a world that others did not. That was it. That was my identity. That was what I was, who I was, when everything else had been stripped away.

And who am I, now that it was gone?

DAY 15

The dream again. It seemed to be waiting to pounce on me as soon as I closed my eyes. *Eight. Eight. Eight.* Inchoate visions of smothering shadows and crippling fear. *Eight. Eight. Eight.*

I clawed my way back to consciousness like a drowning sailor. The loss of my talent, David's absence, the shunning, this dream. I could weather any of these troubles alone. But they compounded the toll when taken together, and the pressure was simply overwhelming. I knew this tail-swallowing cycle of regret and rumination wasn't helping, but I was alone. Grandfather, Barbara, Ian, David, Jenny. Sarah now. There was no one to anchor me. I was lost.

I awoke from the dream to diamond-sharp clarity. Psychic gifts are most powerful in the twilight realm between sleep and the waking world. So too is the propensity to mistake a psychic-sending for a dream or a delusion, which is why I had taken so long to realize what was happening. I was not dreaming. Someone was calling to me.

END OF DAYS

I pulled on a pair of boots and tucked my trousers into them. I found a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses and David's jacket and dressed in those. I located a canteen and filled it, placed it in a rucksack. The house was still and silent.

It felt like the long morning before a funeral in the afternoon, where the act of dressing has the feel of a ritual. I wondered vaguely if that funeral would be my own.

I left the house and locked the front door behind me, setting forth with the freedom hopelessness brings. I was not certain of the choices I was making, but they were mine to make. Everything that had led up to this point had been a consequence of someone else's decision, and it was time I made my own. Grandfather's parting words had been the wish that I go forward in my own beliefs. So be it.

Eight. Eight. Eight. It echoed like a drumbeat in my mind. Semantic satiation is the name for the phenomenon where a word loses meaning if it's repeated too often in too short a period of time. I walked in time with the words.

Eight. Eight. Eight.

Ate. Ate. Ate.

Eight. Ate. Eight.

Eight must have been very hungry.

I giggled. I was cracking up.

The signal/sensation/sending from the trapped presence was strongest to the north, and I followed it. There was no sense of identity, but a growing sense of presence.

I sent memories to let him know I was coming. I wasn't sure which pronoun applied. Him? Her? Probably not it. I didn't know anything about the identity of the presence. He could be man or woman,

young or old. The only thing I knew for certain was that the presence was trapped and afraid.

I sent images of happier times, of quiet Sunday breakfasts with Grandfather. Of love. My quickened pulse when I first met David. Comfort. The small schoolroom in Coal Hill and the two teachers who cared enough to follow me home.

My boots crunched on the gravel. There was a faint glow to the hills in the distance. The land there was probably irradiated. I'm more resistant to radiation than humans are, but I suddenly wished that I'd had the foresight to pack Grandfather's anti-radiation gloves.

Eight... Ate... In... In... In-ate...

That was new. What did that mean? There were few human psychics, but they did exist. I had assumed that the power awakened in the presence had been the result of a mutation borne of the weapons employed in the war, or the consequence of a vile experiment by the Daleks. Was he telling me his power was inborn, innate? Or was it something else? The message was fragmentary, and I felt like I was missing something important.

...Ate... Ate... Inate... Inate...

Inborn or otherwise, he had reached out to my mind with his, and I would not abandon him. I sent forth more memories. The Hidden Palace of Emperor Xanagrin nested like a viper within the poison clouds of Jupiter. How the tempest of the Great Red Spot lashed and raged outside, and how small that eternal storm seemed compared to the echoing vastness of Xanagrin's fury when he realized that he had been outwitted by Grandfather.

There. That cave on top of the hill.

Ate... Innate... Innate... Innate.

The cave had probably been a coal mine a century ago, but whatever access roads had led to it had long been reclaimed by the wilderness. First, I had to find my way up the cliff face. It wouldn't do to break my leg at this late hour. Find a grip for hand, a solid surface to place my foot. Begin climbing.

The voice in my head rang clearer.

Sturm... Sturm...

Sturm? That was a new one.

What did it mean? I paused in my ascent to see if a "Drang" would follow, but none was forthcoming.

...Innate...

...Innate...

...Sturm...

...Sturm...

I felt an urgency from the presence. I sent it the most calming thoughts I could picture. Cherry blossoms. All that I had ever seen. Cherry blossoms outside the Imperial Palace, the satin blanket of the petals covering the ground like freshly fallen snow and the fragrance wafting like a perfume. Cherry blossoms in Sakura Park in the ruins of Manhattan in the thirty-second century, the grove still vibrant and alive. Grandfather taking a clipping out from under the watchful eyes of the gendarmes in the *Parc de Sceaux*, intending to grow it someday in the TARDIS gardens, but never quite getting around to it.

And then I thought of Penny, unbidden, and how she was a victim as much as anyone, betrayed by a man who performed unspeakable acts in her name. Did she love him? Did she hate him? Or was it something in-between, all mixed up between love and hate? Even today, prisoners were still being found in Dalek labour camps. Was she like the Penelope of myth, holding out hope that her husband

would be returned to her after his odyssey? My hearts swelled with pity and with awareness of our common humanity. The seed of nameless night slumbers within us all. Sometimes it takes root, as within Penelope's husband. Sometimes something better happens, and we recognize the cruelty and pettiness within ourselves, and we understand that it is not denying those urges that allows us to transcend them, but rather it is the act of acknowledging and overcoming them.

...*Innate*... ...*Innate*...
...*Sturm*... ...*Innate*...
...*Sturm*... ...*Sturm*...
...*Innate*... ...*Sturm*...

I had to concentrate on my climb. I could not afford to let my mind wander. Hand over hand. Up and over. I overreached once and nearly fell into the open air. I twisted my shoulder badly in catching myself. But I would do this. I hoped the presence in the cave felt my determination and was buoyed by it.

My universe shrank to the need to climb and the crescendo building in my mind: *Innate*... *Innate*... *Innate*... *Sturm*... *Sturm*...

I did it! I didn't know how, but I was there. I stood at the top of the cliff, near the mouth of the cave, hunched over, panting, with the palms of my hands on top of my thighs. I had ripped the jacket and lost one of David's gloves in the climb.

I had the sudden thought that the presence was trapped, pinned under something too heavy to move and that all my efforts were in vain. But I dismissed it. I was here. I had done it. I was Susan. I had reclaimed my name. And nothing was impossible for me anymore. I knew who I was, and I knew my place in this world. I gathered my powers to speak with the presence. He would be frightened. The thoughts reached with a new urgency as I ventured within.

...*Sturm*...
...*Innate*...
...*Ex*...
...*Ex*... *Sturm*... *Innate*...

Oh. Oh no. I had misjudged this catastrophically. I rounded the corner and finally laid eyes upon the presence. It spoke aloud at last, and the lights atop its dome illuminated the cave walls as they flashed in time with the completed word.

"*Exterminate*," said the Dalek.

It was battered, beaten, broken. The dome was dented from the rockfall and half the globes across its body were shattered. The plunger hung limply and the eye at the end of the stalk had a crack running right through the centre. Only the gun-stick seemed functional, but that was the only part it needed. A nimbus of blue light like St. Elmo's fire played about its edges.

It was dying. It perhaps only had minutes to live. It had clung so desperately to life so it could live long enough to kill me. Then it would die, content.

What would David do? The question flashed through my mind. What would Grandfather do?

No.

That was the wrong question.

What would *Susan* do?

But the only question before me was, "How would I die?"

All right. I would die as I had wished to live. I was called by another name on Gallifrey, but I

am Susan Foreman and soon I will be Susan Campbell. Your name is the story you tell the world. And my last act would be to tell the Dalek the story of Susan.

It is a terrible thing to die alone. I would not wish that upon anyone, even to this Dalek. When I entered this cave, I thought I would find a frightened lost soul, and I had prepared a psychic-sending to reassure that victim that I was here to help. With what would be my final act upon this earth, I delivered that message to the Dalek. I sent it a message of love and hate. Of joy and sorrow. Life and death. I sent it the knowledge that the juxtaposition of opposing concepts was simply a rhetorical device, but that they mask a deeper truth. I sent visions of every beautiful sight I had ever witnessed.

The silver seas of Venus lapping gently against the prismatic sands of the shore. A public house in Argentina, where the rain whispered softly against the window glass and the ceiling fans sluiced lazily through cigarette smoke, and men laughed and cried throughout the long night. The kaleidoscopic beauty of the garden moon of the Stacycul, where synaesthesia reigned, and the flowers sang to you the mysteries of the universe. My visit to Olympus, and the electric tang of the nectar on my tongue.

Visions of Arcadia, Gallifrey's Second City, all invincible glass and lofty spires tapering off into an infinite night. Ethereal, eternal, perfection calculated to the thousandth decimal place. One of the Seven Hundred Wonders of the Universe. Torn from the heart of a shackled black hole, among the grandest achievements of a people who had bent the natural world to their will, it would last beyond time.

Then I thought of Arcadia on Earth. Pastoral, imperfect, impermanent. Precious because it was these things, not in spite of them. Gone already, industrialized centuries ago, and then razed in the invasion. Yet it lived on in the hearts and minds of the people of Earth.

I held nothing back. Everything I had ever seen or done or known. Every joy, every secret shame. Everything that made me Susan. I would die. Only my murderer was here to witness my awakening, and he would follow me into oblivion as soon as he killed me. But I knew who I was and not even death could erase that.

I rose and stared into the eye. The gun-stick moved to track me. I was going to die in a cave far from civilization, in a coat too big for me, and my body would never be found. I remembered my Shakespeare, and Claudio's words in *Measure for Measure*: "If I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride, and hug it in mine arms." I spread my own arms wide. Brave Susan. Courage enough at long last to look Death in the eye.

I felt a movement within its mind, like a great throng of crows taking wing all at once. It seemed to be trying to say something.

The lights atop the dome flashed, once, twice, but no words accompanied them.

A rattling shudder passed through it.

The gun sagged and the Dalek was still.

The Dalek was dead.

Had its injuries caught up to it at last? Or had I touched it in those final moments?

I looked at it. There had been a living creature within that casing, twisted and malign, but still a living being. Now it was just a body, a thing.

I felt like I should say something, but I had no words. It had helped me in a way. I knew who I was, and I knew I could make it in this world. I had a home. I had reached the Dalek and I could reach Penelope.

I picked up the rucksack. I didn't know what awaited me, or the people of this world. It could take decades to rebuild. This victory was a tiny thing in the scheme of things. But as I left the cave, I

knew, for the first time since I had come to Earth, that I would finally be going home.

Divergence

by Kate Coleman

“Where to now, then, Clara?” the Doctor asked. “How about a trip to the crystal caves of Kasteel Three?” He took a pace sideways and spun a monitor protruding from the console towards her. “The dual pulsars Geminga and BO-three-five-five are generating particularly spectacular particle clouds right now. Look.” He pointed at two small, bright spheres. Streams of violet, blue and pink light poured from each, bursting outwards into space. At the point where the streams converged, an explosion of colours swirled across the screen.

He took her hand and guided her finger to the middle of the colours. “We could materialize right here and watch from the doors.”

Clara pondered. She really *should* get back to school before her hair grew much longer. There were a few awkward questions from other members of staff last time. But another adventure was hard to resist.

“I’m pretty tired, but I could shower and crash in the TARDIS. It will still be here tomorrow, right?”

“I’ve got a time machine. Of course it will still be here tomorrow.”

She grinned, and tugged playfully on his hand. She wanted this to go on forever, spinning through time and space – skipping more and more of her dull, regular life – because *nothing* compared to travelling with the Doctor.

He grinned that owlish grin of his. “All right, I’ll—”

Without warning, the TARDIS pitched hard to the right. Clara staggered across the room, grabbing at the railing around the central dais. Then the Ship plunged down with a sickening lurch. Books toppled from the shelves. The central column laboured out a grinding rasp.

“What’s going on?” Clara yelled.

“I don’t...” The Doctor stopped and then darted to the other side of the console. “Something’s stuck on the outer shell.” He flicked on an external scanner. “No, no, no, not one of those!”

Clara stumbled across the shaking TARDIS. “What is it?”

“It’s a divergence cannon.” The Doctor slammed his fist into the console. “Left over from the Time War.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Clara said.

“It isn’t. They’re unpredictable and dangerous. We need to get out of the vortex and find a safe place to power down.”

The Doctor began punching a series of buttons. The juddering and grinding was almost unbearable. Clara’s eyes watered as wisps of blue smoke from the overwrought console gathered in the air.

She looked at the co-ordinates he’d punched in. Her flat. He was taking the screaming, roaring, out-of-control TARDIS *to her flat*. “Wait!” she yelled. “Not—”

The landing brakes groaned and the TARDIS slammed to a halt, throwing Clara to the floor.

The Doctor dashed out of the doors and returned a few seconds later with his red jacket smouldering. “I’ve got it off the shell. Quick, we need to power down.” He flicked a few buttons and then darted over to offer Clara his hand.

As she struggled to her feet, she glimpsed blue flames through the TARDIS door. “Doctor, what

did you do with that cannon?"

"I threw it away from the TARDIS, of course. We need to get out while she shuts her systems down to cut the cannon off from its power source. Hurry."

Clara ran through the doors and into her darkened flat. She jolted to a halt and stared open-mouthed. Something resembling a large space gun, with a broken barrel and half the trigger mechanism missing, lay against the back cushions on her sofa. The TARDIS doors slammed shut behind her. At the same time, the blue glow around the cannon faded. The flames consuming Clara's furniture, however, did not.

Clara dashed into the kitchen and yanked her fire blanket from its place on the wall by the cooker, and ran back to the lounge. Thrusting the blanket into the Doctor's hands with a silent scowl, she bolted back into the kitchen for a bucket.

Running water into the bucket, she had several seconds to decide just how much hell he deserved for this. Getting her tied up, locked in alien prisons, even covered in alien gloop was one thing. Burning her sofa took recklessness to a whole new level.

Clara and the Doctor sat on the floor, legs outstretched, with their backs resting against the side of the TARDIS. As cold air blew in through the open window, flapping the sofa's loose fabric to reveal the exposed springs, Clara turned the full force of her scowl on the Doctor.

"I can't believe you did that," she said. "There's not a scratch on the TARDIS, but my sofa is..." She searched for an appropriate word, but couldn't find one rated PG, so she just waved her hand at the soaked, blackened fabric of what used to be her couch. "I only just finished paying for it."

"Clara, I really am very sorry. This was the first place I thought of." He stopped fiddling with the cannon and put it down on his lap.

"If you could get in the TARDIS, I'd tell you to bugger off," she said. "I suppose I'm stuck with you now until the power's back?"

He offered a sheepish grin.

Clara really couldn't stay cross with him for long. They'd been in much worse scrapes than this. "Is that thing safe now?" she asked, pointing at the cannon's cracked, blackened shell.

"Quite safe, as long as there's no time-sensitive objects around."

"What did it do? In the Time War, I mean."

"It splinters space-time, extrapolating all possible futures into separate divergence bubbles." He rubbed his temples wearily. Clara knew thinking of the Time War still pained him. "Whoever's in charge of the cannon dismisses the futures they don't want – and selects the future they do want. That version of reality is then forced into existence."

"That's a terrible weapon." Clara shuddered at the thought of someone coldly selecting this future or that, stealing the days to come by their choices.

"Yes, it is," the Doctor said. His tone darkened. "I thought I dealt with them all years ago. I'll dismantle it. By the time the TARDIS powers up, it won't be a threat to anyone."

"Look, I need to get cleaned up and sleep. You make yourself at home, okay?" She paused. "Um, you don't need to sleep, do you?"

He shook his head quickly. "No, no, a quick nap will see me fine."

"Good. We'll get rid of this" – she kicked at the carcass of her poor sofa – "in the morning." Goodness only knew how she would explain *that* to her family.

Clara woke blearily to the sound of ringing and the sight of the Doctor hovering near her bed.

“Your phone won’t stop making this terrible noise. It’s very distracting,” he said, handing it to her.

She groaned. It was her stepmum. “Linda, I’m not even up, it’s 7 a.m.”

“She called four times,” the Doctor added as he backed out of her bedroom.

“Is that a man’s voice? Are you alone?” Linda asked.

“Linda, I’m twenty-nine-years old. If I’ve got a man here, it’s none of your damn business,”

Clara snapped.

“Well! You can introduce me, then. I’m on my way up the stairs. Your lift is broken *again*.”

“What?” Clara sat bolt upright. “No! I mean, I’m alone. There’s no one here...”

Linda had already hung up.

Clara leapt out of bed. “Doctor!” She bolted to the lounge. To her relief, the TARDIS door was open again and he’d dismantled the divergence cannon.

“We need to get that out of here,” she said, pointing at the heap of gun parts on her carpet. Then she added, “And my sofa. And you. Now!”

“We do?” The Doctor looked up in mild surprise.

“Yes, we do. I’m not in the mood for the Spanish Inquisition from Linda. Can you get that lot in the TARDIS?”

“Not the cannon. It might be inert now, but if we take any part of it inside a time machine, it will light up like a Venflaxian Festival tree.”

Clara grabbed the barrel and a handful of the circuits and dashed back into her room. “We’ll hide it under my bed. Bring the rest,” she called over her shoulder.

When they’d cleared the floor of space debris, Clara grabbed the end of the sofa. “Let’s get this in the TARDIS, and you can buzz off and dump it somewhere, yeah?” She started to drag it single-handedly towards the TARDIS.

The Doctor shot her a quizzical look. “Okay... but what’s the rush? Linda’s met me before. I thought—”

Clara flushed. She remembered *that* meeting only too well. Linda hadn’t let her forget it. “Yes, well, I’m fed up with her constant criticism. My flat isn’t tidy enough. I’m not head of department yet. I’m twenty-nine and single. Which, apparently, gives her licence to set me up with Matthew Flint, the deputy bank manager.” Clara screwed her face up at the thought.

“I’m sure *Matthew Flint* is a perfect bore. He sounds terrible,” the Doctor agreed.

Between them, they hefted the remains of the charred sofa towards the TARDIS. As Clara stepped backwards into the Ship, the couch wedged itself part way through.

Clara grunted, and shoved at the sofa. It wouldn’t move. “Turn it on its side,” she commanded.

The Doctor grinned. “Yes, boss.” Then he let go of his end of the sofa and waved his hand towards the hall. “You should stand up to *her* like that.”

Clara twitched her nose. “It’s her passive aggressive rubbish I can’t deal with. She drags Dad into it. Sometimes, it’s better to just go along with her.” Clara tugged hard at the sofa. Linda would be here any moment after huffing her way up seven flights of stairs, and she didn’t have the energy or the patience to explain the Doctor to her today.

They manoeuvred the sofa onto its arm, tipped it over the threshold and let it crash into the console room.

At that moment the doorbell rang.

“Good, now you can...” Clara waved her arm at the dematerialization controls.

A blue flash sparked up from behind a sofa cushion, lighting the whole base in a blue glow.

“Oh, no, no, no!” the Doctor said, diving at the furniture. He flipped it over and ripped off the charred cushions.

The doorbell chimed three times.

The TARDIS doors slammed shut. A small, blue blur zipped up between the cushions. The Doctor lunged for it. Spinning away, almost gleefully, it dodged him and hovered over the console, where it spun in the air and buzzed.

Clara stared at it, almost mesmerized. It reminded her of the Golden Snitch, only much, much bluer, and no Harry Potter on his Nimbus 2000 to catch it.

Leaping towards the console, the Doctor yelled, “No, you *don't*.”

The blue blur darted away.

“What is it? What’s happening?” Clara yelled. The central column started to rise and fall. The ball of trouble bounced off a bookcase, sending a shower of blue sparks across the console room.

“It’s part of the divergence cannon. I think it’s...”

They both ducked as it catapulted itself across the room. The air in its wake glinted and flickered, like an angry blue comet orbiting the TARDIS console.

The Doctor groaned. “It’s the cannon’s CPU. I thought that part was lost in the vortex...”

Clara took cover under the console. “What’s it doing?” she called to the Doctor.

“It’s set us in motion. We’re in the vortex. But don’t worry, I have a plan.” He flicked coordinates into the console, and then disappeared up the steps into the heart of the TARDIS.

The blue ball of trouble buzzed over Clara’s head, and then pinged up towards the ceiling, before starting off on dizzying circuits of the room. After a few frenetic laps, the orb came to a halt, hovering just above the console, spinning faster and faster. Clara flung her hands over her eyes. Arcs of blue light streaked from the Snitch to the panel. Acrid blue-grey smoke hung in the air.

“Oh, no you don’t!” The Doctor stood at the top of the steps with a cricket bat against his shoulder. “Clara, get ready to open the door.” He pounced down the stairs, wielding the bat in front of him like a sword.

Clara closed her eyes for a second. *Okay, it’s fine. If he can beat Robin Hood with a spoon, he’s good for six with a cricket bat.* She opened one eye as he stalked the CPU across the console room. The device dodged and wove its way around, as if avoiding his inept lunges.

He swiped, missed and staggered forward. “Okay, I got this. That was just practice,” he said, regaining his balance and some of his dignity. He straightened his back. “Get ready to open the door.”

The CPU whizzed past Clara’s head and crashed into another bookcase. Pages exploded into the air and then fluttered to the floor around her. She jumped up, dived forward and poised her finger over the door-release button.

“Ready?” she yelled to the Doctor.

He grinned. As the CPU darted past him, he swung. “Now!” he bellowed, smashing it with the bat. With a high-pitched whine, it sparked over Clara’s head and out of the TARDIS. They both rushed to the door to see where it landed.

Outside, a dense jungle of tangled trees was briefly illuminated by a blue flare, and then all evidence of the CPU faded as it fell somewhere in the undergrowth.

The Doctor leaned against the door, grinning, with the cricket bat over his shoulder.

Clara shot him a coy smile. “Not bad.” She tapped the bat, just above a burn mark the size of a satsuma where he’d smacked the CPU. “Not bad at all.” Then she turned sharply. “Is the TARDIS

going to switch off again?”

“No. When everything rebooted... while you were sleeping... I recalibrated the phase dynamics on the outer shell. It should be shielded from the CPU now.”

“Should be?”

“Well, it’s not an *exact* science. There might be some residual power,” he mumbled.

Clara surveyed the jungle. A canopy of green trees towered above them, reaching into a cloudless, orange sky enveloping the forest in a warm, golden glow. “Where do you think it landed?”

The Doctor made a click with the corner of his mouth, and then pulled a small transceiver from his pocket. “It’s not so much where,” he said, “as when. We have to find the CPU before it can latch onto anyone.”

“Okay... so someone else finding it would be bad? How bad?”

He turned to her. “Remember that book with the small hairy-footed creatures? One of them found a ring and it poisoned his mind?”

“You mean Gollum?”

The Doctor nodded. “Yes. I think it’s fair to say anyone holding the divergence cannon’s CPU over a period of time would find it... *seductive*.”

“What would happen?”

“I don’t know for sure. But, it’s possible they could manipulate reality.”

“That sounds bad. We better...”

The Doctor grabbed her arm as she started off into the bush. “Clara, I admire your get up and go, but” – he nodded at her clothes – “you’re still in your pyjamas. You might want to get dressed.”

Clara blushed furiously. “Right. Okay. Just a minute.” She dashed halfway across the console room, and paused. “Don’t go leaving the Shire without—”

“Without what?”

“Without me.”

“While you were dressing,” the Doctor said when Clara returned, “I found out a few things about this planet. It’s a human colony, a few hundred years in your future. There are a number of good-sized cities on the planet, but we’re in a remote spot. Nearest city’s a few miles in that direction.” He pointed beyond the clearing they had landed in and towards a barely visible pathway through the trees.

“Come on then.” Clara stepped onto a layer of damp leaves. The steamy rainforest air was laced with a sweet, floral note that reminded her of summer evenings in her gran’s garden. The warmth had her rolling up her sleeves before she had taken a few paces outside of the TARDIS.

The Doctor laid a hand on her shoulder. “Look. Don’t... Just, let’s take care. There’s no telling what trouble that CPU might cook up.”

“We better hurry up and find it then,” she said, shooting him a sideways look. This was so much more fun than dealing with Linda.

He sighed, almost inaudibly, and then nodded. He released her shoulder and followed her.

Clara felt a bounce in her step as she traversed the leaf-covered clearing. The sun, dappled by the high canopy of fleshy leaves, painted patterns on the forest floor. She could be anywhere, on one of a million, billion worlds. Her heart fluttered at the thought of stepping where no twenty-first-century human had gone before. She grinned back at the Doctor, and she could see – by the boyish grin playing on his lips – that the excitement had grabbed him, too.

“What’s this planet called?” she asked.

He quickened his pace to catch her up. “Arawath Prime. There’s a huge trading centre on the southern continent, but this area’s mainly agriculture.”

“Good, perhaps aren’t too many people around to find it.”

Clara grabbed his arm and pointed at a shimmering blue light sparkling through the trees. They pushed on through the tangle of shrub blocking their path and, as they closed in, Clara heard a faint crackling. The Doctor stamped down some undergrowth, clearing a path for them to step out of the jungle and onto a shallow beach. A wide expanse of an inland lake spread before them.

Clara gasped. A sprinkling of tiny blue lights clustered in the air a couple of metres above the high-tide mark, shimmering like fairy lights on a Christmas tree. As the Doctor and Clara watched, each light stretched into a crack the length of her finger.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

He strode towards the lights, peering through his sonic sunglasses. Then he turned towards her and shook his head. “Divergence,” he said. “We’re too late. It’s feeding from the residual energy it took on while it was in the TARDIS. Clara, take my hand. We mustn’t get separated. The divergence map is formulating, and we’re standing right in the middle of it!”

Clara ran to his side and grasped his hand. Just once, she thought, it would be nice if she *didn’t* get carted off anywhere.

The noise on the lakeside whipped up as the cracks continued to expand. When one touched the lake’s surface, the water fizzed and popped, sending steam rising in clouds.

“Are they hot?”

Although he was right beside her, the Doctor had to shout so she could hear him over the roar. “For the time being. It’s when they’ve cooled down we need to worry.” He waved his free hand at the cracks all around them. “After this expansion phase, they’ll achieve interstice. After that…”

A nearby crack speared the beach, spraying sand and a shower of glassy pebbles into the air. The Doctor pulled Clara sharply around, shielding her from the worst of the debris with his back.

When Clara opened her eyes, his red jacket was speckled with black where the hot stones had peppered him.

She flicked ash and fragments of stone from his shoulders. “What happens now?” she asked. Ten separate cracks, heat radiating from each, surrounded them.

“The controller, whoever it was that found the CPU, discards the realities they don’t want, and makes their choice,” the Doctor said.

“Changes the future?”

“Distorts reality. Same thing.”

“What do we do?” Clara gasped.

“We need to scan the map,” he said. “Stay close.” He approached the closest fissure.

A blurry, grainy image resolved through the crack. Beyond, a bearded man, in a tailored grey suit, sat at a long dining table in an elegant room. A photograph of a tall glass-fronted tower block hung on the wall over his shoulder. Another man, who reminded Clara of an old-fashioned butler, brought a meal on a tray and set it on the table. The man barely glanced up from the touchscreen data pad on the table in front of him.

“Who’s that?” Clara asked the Doctor.

“I don’t know for sure, but probably—” The Doctor paused, as half a dozen blue fairy-light cracks winked into existence around the seated man. The man looked up, examined each in turn and then, with a flick of his finger, swiped them away, until only one remained. He smiled, and poked his

finger deep into that glinting light.

As he did, his surroundings shifted. The table seemed a little larger. What Clara had taken to be a photograph of a tower building now seemed to be an oil painting of the same view, and beside *that* was an even bigger painting: a portrait of the man who was still seated at his table. Through the window, Clara saw an elegantly styled garden, with an expanse of trimmed lawn.

“Uh oh,” the Doctor said. “We’ve found the focal point. But this is his future.”

“What just happened?”

“He collapsed the divergence bubble,” the Doctor said.

Clara squinted at him; that answer didn’t make a jot of sense.

He rolled his eyes, before explaining, “He swipes away the realities he doesn’t want, and then selects the one he does want. He changes the future.” The Doctor pulled on Clara’s hand. “We need to find the first time he interacts with the CPU.”

They moved through the growing storm towards another fissure. The orange sky darkened, and grey clouds rolled in with the wind.

Through the tear, Clara saw the same man; perhaps a few years older, seated in what looked like a boardroom. A picture identical to the one they’d seen earlier in the house, hung on one wall. Behind him was a logo, *SadTech Industries*, in huge gold lettering.

Clara took a step closer, but the Doctor held her back.

“I want to see the name under that portrait,” she said.

The Doctor retrieved a pair of binoculars from his pocket, glanced through them quickly, and then handed them to her. Through them she could easily see the name on the gold plaque beneath the portrait: *Harrison Sadler, CEO SadTech*.

Harrison Sadler spoke animatedly to the men and women seated around the table. Not one of them met his eyes. He jumped to his feet as a scattering of blue lights appeared, waving several away with irritated swipes. Clara watched the people around the table react to his erratic arm-waving. The woman closest to him exchanged glances with her neighbour and stood up as if to speak, but Harrison didn’t seem to notice. The room quickly cleared, leaving Harrison Sadler alone, waving his arms at the blue lights buzzing around his head.

“Can other people see those cracks?” Clara asked the Doctor.

“No, just him. He’s the focal point. We can see them because we’re time-sensitive.”

“They must think he’s hallucinating,” Clara said.

“The constant divergence and selection process will overwhelm him. The only way he can get the lights to stop is to choose.”

The air became colder, and Clara shivered. The orange sky had darkened with grey clouds, and a cool wind sent ripples across the lake.

“We need to find the earliest...” the Doctor began.

From the corner of her eye, Clara saw another scar-like tear forming. It quickly widened. She tried to pull the Doctor aside, but his foot clipped the edge of the tear and he stumbled.

“Woah!” Clara exclaimed, as she clung to his hand. It was as if an invisible rope had wrapped itself around his leg and was dragging him towards the tear. “Look out!” she yelled above the wind.

The Doctor turned his head to the rift. In that moment, she thought she saw a hundred calculations running through his mind. He looked back at her. “Let go!” he said.

“What? No!” She scrambled for a foothold on the beach, but found none. They were both being dragged towards the pulsing tear in the fabric of reality. On the other side, Harrison Sadler stood entwined in a blue vortex of swirling light. He was a shouting, ragged man now; his grey suit worn

thin, his straggly hair down to his shoulders, his beard matted. His eyes horrified Clara most, though – wild, darting around desperately – they were the eyes of a man who knew no peace. And the Doctor was being dragged towards *that*. “Hold on!” she cried, digging her free hand into the sand.

The Doctor shook his head. “Take these,” he thrust the sunglasses at her. “Find point zero, where Harrison made first contact with the CPU. *You* have to stop him finding it in the first place.”

“I won’t let you go!” She thrust her heels hard into the sand in one last desperate attempt to stop his relentless progress into the frenzy.

The Doctor was in the tear up to his waist now. “Clara! We can’t fix this if we’re both in there,” he said firmly. His voice exuded reason, calming her somehow. “Let me go.”

Clara looked at the sunglasses.

“Clara Oswald, you make an excellent Doctor. You can do this,” he said.

He trusted her. He trusted her with his life. Clara nodded once. “I’ll save you,” she said, squeezing his hand tightly for a moment. Then she let go.

The Doctor watched Clara vanish. The roaring wind transformed into the buzz of confined static, and the beach shifted and became the room in which he and Clara had watched Harrison eat his breakfast. But the fine table was now cracked down the middle, and instead of the golden morning light pouring in through the windows, a blue, fizzing storm raged inside the four walls. The curtains were in tatters and the broken windows looked out, not onto fine lawns, but onto a thick mass of shrubs. Harrison Sadler paced among the ruins.

His eyes darted around, tracking the swarm of lights. “Not you,” he muttered, and swiped away a light. “Nor you. Go.” He swiped four lights away in turn, but dozens remained. “I’ll find it. Then I’ll be done. No more!”

The Doctor stepped towards Harrison. “I’m the Doctor. Let me help you,” he said. This was *his* fault. He’d smashed the divergence cannon out of the TARDIS and into this man’s life.

Harrison looked up at him wildly. “I’m not mad,” he said. “They’re here. I have to choose. I have to choose.”

The Doctor stepped closer. “What do you have to choose?”

“The right one. The last one.” Harrison swept away another batch of lights with jerky, shaking hands. “Where, where, where?” he muttered, and set off around the room at a frantic pace.

“Maybe I can help you find it?” the Doctor offered.

“No. Yes. I’m done,” Harrison snapped. He turned on the Doctor with a sudden burst of speed and grabbed him by the lapels. Up close, the Doctor saw what he had taken for old age was in fact neglect. Harrison’s hair and beard were tangled and matted, but his skin – under a layer of grime – had very few wrinkles.

This man’s life had been consumed by the endless barrage of choices.

The Doctor raised his palms in a gesture of surrender. “I know how this works. You see different realities through these cracks. One has pudding for dessert, the other has an apple. It’s easy to choose. Who wants an apple for afters?”

Harrison stared at the Doctor. “How do you know that?”

“It always starts small. How long was it before they appeared again?”

“A whole year,” Harrison said, in a moment of clarity. “I thought I imagined the whole thing. Only, the next time there were three choices. So I thought, why not choose the reality where I score top in the test?”

Suddenly, Harrison shoved the Doctor backwards and took off in a loping run. “Choose, choose, choose,” he called, swiping away the fragments of blue light as he passed.

The Doctor regained his balance and followed Harrison careering across the room. “So it went on. Reality splitting and reforming around the choices you made.” Harrison wasn’t listening. The Doctor knew how it must have gone: each choice just a little harder than the last. Then the space between the choosing getting shorter.

“I can help, if you let me,” the Doctor called.

“If you want to help, start looking... for the final choice.”

A jolt ran through the Doctor. “And what’s that?” he said carefully. “What’s the final choice?”

“Peace,” Harrison said. “No lights. No choices.”

“And how will I know when I see it?” the Doctor asked.

“Flames,” Harrison whispered. “All the world in flames.”

On the beach, the wind tore at Clara’s clothes and the grey sky cast a pallid, murky light. Cracks in reality surrounded her, with more appearing each moment. How on Earth was she supposed to find point zero among all these?

Clara put on the sunglasses and turned her whole body around. She felt as if a tone was vibrating inside her mind. It changed as she swept past each crack, becoming higher in pitch, until it was a terrible, irritating, whine, and then dipped again. So, assuming the highest tone was closest to point zero – her best guess – that narrowed things down. A set of three cracks, two at the water’s edge and one disappearing under the lake, gave off the highest tone.

Through the first crack, she saw a child’s bedroom. A dark-haired boy in pyjamas held the CPU. It glowed steadily now; the angry crackle and fizz were gone. It looked like it had found a home. The boy looked up sharply and then tucked it under his pillow. Clara guessed, although she could hear nothing, a command had come to brush his teeth. He scurried off out of the bedroom. So that was early – probably soon after he found the CPU – but still not point zero.

The wind buffeted Clara, and she struggled against it with unsteady legs. From the cloud-blackened sky above, blue lightning arced to the surface of the lake. The water transformed into a brilliant blue and then faded back to murky grey. The air smelled of ozone. Instinct urged her back, but the next tear was closer to the lake, so she pushed forward. She had to save the Doctor.

Through the next crack, she saw the boy again, a teen now – no beard, but recognizably Harrison Sadler. Three or four tiny lights floated around his head as he lay on his bed. He watched them for a while, and then he playfully swiped three away, and tapped a finger on the remaining one. With a contented smile, he rolled over and closed his eyes.

Cold water lapped at Clara’s feet, soaking through her shoes, as the wind whipped the lake. She shivered against the biting cold. She turned the glasses to the third tear, which disappeared under the lake. The high-pitched beep pierced the storm.

Point zero.

On the other side of the tear, the sun shone over a calm, turquoise lake, and a boy floated on his back in the water. He flipped over and then pointed excitedly at something glowing blue on the lakebed. The boy waved animatedly shorewards and then dived under the water.

A minute later, he resurfaced, took several breaths and then plunged under again. Clara’s heart sank. Young Harrison Sadler was diving for the CPU as if it were lost treasure or a precious pearl.

Clara tore off her jacket and kicked her feet out of her shoes. Then she took a deep breath. If she

wanted to get the Doctor back and stop young Harrison's life going to hell, she would have to dive into the lake's icy, dark waters, and get that CPU before he did.

Harrison Sadler dashed feverishly across the room, batting away unwanted bubbles until only a dozen remained. How did he choose each time, the Doctor wondered, as he examined the closest tear. At just a couple of centimetres across, each window to the future was very small. But if he closed one eye and focused, it was like looking through a pinhole camera.

As he trained his brain to see through the rips in reality, diverging, fragmented futures appeared all around him. Some were images of Harrison in varying forms: smartly dressed or in rags, and many states in between. Within the myriad of choices, there were people the Doctor didn't know. He saw many faces: happy at this choice or anguished at another. The Doctor saw planes crash into the ocean and earthquakes swallow cities. He recoiled. Were *these* the choices Harrison had been faced with, day in, day out? Choosing who lives and who dies? No wonder it had driven him mad.

Harrison stumbled around the room. "Flames. Only flames now," he said, in a sing-song voice. "We all sleep. It's the only way."

The Doctor began to realize, with cold horror, what Harrison's peace really *was*. "You're looking for a future that ends in fire for everyone?"

Harrison offered a sad smile. "Soon be time for bed," he said. Then he fixed his gaze on a tear at the far side of the room. He raised a finger. "That one."

The Doctor squinted at the tiny blue tear. An inferno raged inside – a planet consumed in flames. Harrison set to work swiping the other blue lights away. The Doctor leapt at him, ready to pin his arms, but the ragged man dodged out of his grasp.

"Clara, be quick," the Doctor muttered.

If Clara didn't find point zero before Harrison made his final choice, every man, woman and child on Arawath Prime would burn.

Clara strode into the freezing water up to her waist. She didn't stop to think about the cold. She took two good breaths and then plunged towards the lake floor. The light was better near the base of the tear, for the day beyond – a window into the past – was a bright summer afternoon. She forced her eyes open, even though they stung, and looked through the tear in reality.

Harrison Sadler, in bright red swimming trunks, scabbled between two rocks on the bottom of the lake. A blue light radiated from the crevice. The rocks were right on the junction between Clara's reality and Harrison's.

Marking the spot well in her memory, Clara zipped back to the surface. In just a few strokes, she gulped in fresh air. The wind whipped her hair and the sky roiled with angry black clouds. Lightning crashed into the beach and sent a shockwave through the lake. Clara took two breaths and then plunged back down again.

Harrison was still trying to get his fingers around the CPU. With two powerful strokes, Clara placed herself opposite him. She reached out a hand and shoved him away from the rocks. He floated backwards, eyes wide in surprise, and then turned and kicked his little legs furiously, propelling himself to the surface.

Good, Clara thought, go make a sand castle and leave me to deal with this. She wiggled her hand between the stones. Her fingers touched the surface of the CPU, still a tantalizing blue, glowing

magically in the water. No wonder Harrison wanted it.

She jammed her arm further in to get her fingers around the sphere. She heard a muffled crack, and the whole lakebed shuddered. The rocks shifted and clenched around her forearm. She grasped the sphere and tried to yank her arm out.

Her arm wouldn't move.

Okay, don't panic. She pulled again.

Nothing. She looked up, to see Harrison again, floating in the clear blue waters, staring at her curiously. Then he peered between the rocks at the blue shimmering orb.

She shook her head frantically, panic tightening her chest, unable to communicate with him except through the desperation in her eyes. She tried to bend her knee up into the rock to get more leverage and yank her arm free. Fear tore through her like a hurricane.

Harrison backed out of sight, and Clara heaved her arm, ignoring her skin scraping on the rock's rough surface. Her lungs felt ready to explode. The cold water's deadly embrace pressed around her. She closed her eyes. One word echoed in her mind: *Doctor*.

The Doctor wrestled Harrison to the floor. "We can fix this. You have to give my friend time," he yelled.

Harrison laughed, the howling laugh of a man so far over the edge he'd lost sight of reason. "Time? No time. She's drowning."

Harrison pointed at the two remaining lights sparkling above their heads. In one, fire raged, a planetwide conflagration. In the other, Clara was struggling, submerged in murky water, eyes wide with terror.

Harrison traced his finger back and forth in the air under the two splits in reality. "Choices," he said. "Bad choices. Still have to choose."

The Doctor roared in fury. "Not Clara! Not in any reality!"

Harrison laughed. "This is a good one. Let your friend die, or the planet burn. Which do you choose?" he gibbered, shaking with laughter.

The Doctor's hearts clenched. He would not let Clara die. He lunged at Harrison and they both tumbled to the floor. Harrison brought his knee sharply up into the Doctor's stomach. With a grunt, the Doctor pulled himself and Harrison upright. He forced the man's hand towards the crack and wiped away the inferno.

"One left," Harrison said. He let his hands flop down to his side. "It doesn't matter what you do. It starts all over again," he whispered. "Get it right next time. Everything ends." He looked up at the Doctor. "Sorry about your friend."

The Doctor gripped Harrison's hand. "There's one thing you haven't taken into account," he said, as he poked their joined fingers to select the last reality bubble. "I'm the Doctor, and I save people."

Reality folded around him, and suddenly the Doctor stood at the lakeside again in a blizzard of sand.

He flung his coat to the ground, kicked off his shoes and dove into the water.

One of Clara's arms floated upwards, and her hair billowed out like a crown. He grasped her hand and pulled himself towards her. Her face had reddened with the strain of holding her breath. In seconds, reflex would compel her to breathe out and the icy waters would flood her lungs.

He anchored himself with one arm around her waist, pinched her nose, and covered her mouth with his. She let her breath go, and then he breathed out steadily, careful not to overfill her lungs, for he knew his capacity was much greater than hers.

That would buy him two minutes, no more. He met her eyes for a moment and then examined the rocks trapping her arm. She was wedged in tight. He pushed the rocks. One was far too big to contemplate moving, but the other, about the size of a dustbin, might budge. He shoved it as hard as he could.

It didn't shift. He adjusted his position and tried again. It just wouldn't move.

The Doctor squeezed Clara's hand, thrust himself up to the surface to suck in more air, and then back to her side. He repeated the kiss of life, and moved to the other side of the rock to try and manoeuvre it from there. It would not budge. He smashed it with his fist. He wouldn't let Clara die. Not here, not today, not on his watch!

He became aware of two more figures in the water: a small, dark-haired boy, pulling the hand of an older man, perhaps his father, and pointing at Clara. The man nodded. He tapped the boy's chest and pointed to the surface.

The Doctor wedged his feet against the large rock and shoved. The man dug his feet in the sand and pulled. Clara struggled furiously, but although the rock moved a fraction, she couldn't break free.

Then the little boy reappeared. He wedged his feet against the small rock and took Clara's arm. The Doctor and the man pulled and heaved.

At last, it moved a fraction. In a blur, Clara and the boy were swirling upwards in a cloud of bubbles, and just before the Doctor grabbed the glowing CPU, he saw Harrison's little feet kicking for all they were worth, propelling himself and Clara towards the surface.

Harrison Sadler's mother pressed a large plaster over the graze on Clara's arm. "Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor? We could drive you to the hospital."

Harrison's father agreed. "It would be no trouble."

Clara glanced at the Doctor, who was sitting on a picnic blanket next to Harrison. The boy watched, fascinated, as the Doctor disassembled the CPU into its component parts.

"Thanks, but no, I'm good," Clara said. "You've got one brave little boy there."

Harrison's mother smiled warmly, and looked proudly at her son. "He's usually so shy, but he seems to like your friend."

The Doctor passed Harrison a small, bright blue stone that he'd taken from the CPU.

"What is it?" Harrison said.

"It's quite safe," the Doctor replied, glancing at Clara. "It's just to remind you of the day you were a hero." The little boy beamed and grasped the stone in his hand.

The sun had almost dried Clara's clothes when she noticed the Doctor hovering over her.

"We should go. Get you back to face Linda," he said.

Clara groaned. Really, what was the point of having a time machine if you couldn't put off things like *that*.

Before they left, Clara squatted down in front of Harrison. "You saved my life today. I'll never forget it." She folded him into a hug.

He grinned. "I won't forget you, either."

Back in the TARDIS, Clara glanced at the Doctor as he set the co-ordinates. Harrison Sadler wasn't

the only one who had saved her life today.

“Um, I appreciated the oxygen,” she said.

The Doctor, busy at the console, didn't look up. “Least I could do, after you dived down there to fix my mistake.”

He didn't seem inclined to add anything further, so after a moment she asked, “Could we go back to my flat an hour earlier, so I can get a shower and change my clothes?” Then she strode towards him, tapping her fingers along the console as she moved. “Better yet, how about I get changed here, and then we pop off for cocktails on the moon instead?”

He glanced up with a half-smile. “We can't go back an hour earlier. Your flat would be rather crowded. He tapped the console. “Very delicate calculations. We have to arrive seconds after we left, or we'll throw the whole timeline out. Anyway, you have to explain to Linda that she needs to tell Matthew Flint to...”

Clara raised an eyebrow. “To what?”

“Well, tell him you're busy. Washing your hair,” he said, waving his hand at her bedraggled locks.

Clara sighed. That was true enough. But, what with the sofa fire, chasing the CPU around the TARDIS and almost drowning, she'd had enough drama for one day. She didn't much feel like having to deal with Linda.

After the TARDIS landed, Clara peeked out. “You've parked in my bedroom?” she exclaimed.

“I didn't want to risk...”

“Oh, never mind.” The doorbell rang insistently. Clara tapped the Doctor's chest and squinted at him. “You, stay in here.”

Clara opened her front door. “Goodness, Clara. What on earth were you up to?” Linda said as she breezed in.

Clara stepped aside. “Come in,” she muttered to Linda's back. Then she forced a smile. “I'm really busy right now. I need to...”

“Get in the shower and tidy the place up. Yes, I can see that,” Linda said. She barged into the lounge, and stood staring at the spot where the sofa should be. Then she sniffed theatrically. “Have you started *smoking*?”

“Of course not. Look...”

“Well, you just sort yourself out,” Linda said breezily. “I'm off to the market to pick up fresh veg, but I want you at Dad's twelve sharp. Mr. and Mrs. Flint, and *Matthew*, are coming for lunch. Your father agrees with me. It will do you good.”

Clara pulled her fingers through her tangled hair. Her trousers were still crisp from where they'd dried in the sun. She sighed. If she agreed to lunch, perhaps Linda would leave her alone.

“Well, I suppose...”

Clara's bedroom door burst open. Linda stared at the Doctor, and the Doctor stared at Linda.

Linda blinked several times, opened her mouth, closed it again, and then turned expectantly to Clara.

“Um, Linda, this is...” Clara took a deep breath. She'd faced down Daleks, outwitted an Ice Warrior, and roundly trounced the Sheriff of Nottingham. The Doctor was right: it was high time she stopped letting Linda walk all over her. She cleared her throat. “Linda, this is the Doctor. He's the same man you met Christmas before last, in a different body. We travel through time and space

together, and today we saved a whole planet. He's not my boyfriend..."

"I never thought he was—" Linda exclaimed.

"...but he's the only man I want in my life right now. Stop trying to fix me up. I'm perfectly happy with how things are!"

"Really, Clara." Linda sniffed and tossed her hair. "In what reality do you expect me to believe that nonsense?"

"Reality is subjective at the best of times," the Doctor said. He nodded towards the bedroom door. "Would you like to see my time machine?"

Linda blanched. "I can see you're busy. Far be it for me to intrude. I'll see myself out." She flounced towards the door.

"Oh, Doctor, you've done it now." Clara couldn't stop laughing.

The Doctor grinned. "How about cocktails on the moon?"

He didn't need to ask twice. Clara headed straight back to the TARDIS.

"Not any old moon though," the Doctor went on. "The third moon of Fistealia has a cocktail bar looking over the fire mountains, and drinks that glow every colour of the rainbow. How does that sound?"

"That," Clara said, "sounds amazing."

With the whole of time and space to explore, real life could wait. After all, who wouldn't choose that?

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Nine

by Nick Walters

NOVATRON STATION, AFTER IT ALL WENT PEAR-SHAPED

The Doctor took advantage of HR Director Quernchagg's surprise to wrest himself free of the man and launch himself across the stage, now in complete darkness, in the general direction of O'Ghoosk. He collided with something soft and beardy, and got a mouthful of floating dreadlocks into the bargain. He grabbed the IT Director's arms.

"O'Ghoosk!" he shouted into the man's ear as they both began to float into the air. "You're wearing magnetic boots. Switch them on!"

With a muttered exclamation of surprise, O'Ghoosk kicked the activation nodule on the heel of his left boot with the right toe of the other. There was a jolting clunk as the magnetic soles attached themselves to the stage; below the carpet of which was, like everywhere on the station, metal flooring.

Still holding on to O'Ghoosk, the Doctor whipped out his sonic and flicked the torch setting. The illumination revealed a grotesque tableau of floating bodies, arms and legs akimbo, spinning and bumping into each other. Their screams blended with the incessant blare of the alarms to create a hellish crescendo.

"O'Ghoosk, you fool!" cried the Doctor. "What have you done?"

"Can't – can't breathe!" gasped the IT Director, hands clawing at his throat.

Things were worse than the Doctor had thought. "Can you walk? Head for the exit, the one on the left!"

O'Ghoosk began to stomp like a Cyberman, in his astronaut boots, towards the door the Doctor had indicated, and the Doctor rode him on piggyback, using the sonic to light the way. Flailing, screaming bodies bounced off them and ricocheted away. Eventually, with O'Ghoosk gasping for breath, they emerged into the corridor, where the TARDIS awaited. The Doctor sonic-ed the door open and shoved O'Ghoosk inside. He closed the door behind him, enjoying for a second the quiet hum of the console room.

Then he rounded on O'Ghoosk, who was on his knees, gasping in great lungfuls of air. "Hey! It's bigger on the inside!" he said, looking around himself. "Cool!"

"O'Ghoosk!" snarled the Doctor. "Tell me where you found this INOMASP program!"

O'Ghoosk blinked up at the Doctor. "Look, man, like, who are you? And what is this place, and, well, let me out of here? I'm in the middle of rolling out a pretty fab piece of kit here, man!"

The Doctor dragged O'Ghoosk to his feet. The man had clearly been brainwashed, influenced somehow. "You're in the middle of getting everyone on Novatron Station killed! Your new 'fab piece of kit' is corrupted. It's shutting everything down as a failsafe measure."

O'Ghoosk seemed to come to his senses. "I dunno, man, it just... I was doorstepped. Usual sales spiel, yadda yadda yawn. But when I looked into it, I could see how mega brillo ace this INOMASP program was and, well, I was hooked!"

"Hypnotized, more like! Listen, INOMASP was once a person. A master criminal who escaped justice by uploading herself! Now, she's trying to come back – and something's gone wrong!"

O'Ghoosk gazed at the Doctor, mouth agape. "Eh? Like... Eh?"

Ignoring him, the Doctor turned to the console. “There’s only one thing for it. I’m going to have to go in.”

“In where?” came O’Ghoosk’s confused voice from behind him.

The Doctor stared into the central column. “Into the INOMASP program itself.” He patted the TARDIS console. “Don’t worry, old girl... I think we can make it!

Next Segment

“BESHESHRA”, AFTER THE REIGN, AND BEYOND

The Spinning Dancer

by Simon A. Brett

The late-evening sky cried as the wind cracked at the rooftops, lifting gutters and shuffling slate as it circulated the streets. Gentry Roman exited his favourite tavern, where he had spent the last of his goodwill credit draining one of the landlord's less popular and possibly more evolved ale kegs. Stumbling out onto the cobbles and into the chaos, sobriety wrestled to take control of his bloated frame with surprising urgency, as a particularly aggressive bolt of freezing air blasted past. His hands clambered to grip the wooden doorframe for balance.

"Lumpy wind," he proclaimed to everyone and no one, "I hates it! More than I hates this flaming town! Better a consistency of charge than an element that takes thee by surprise." And sensing a lull in the air pressure, he moved a hand from keeping his hat in place, instead thumbing the brim upwards to get a good look at the heavens. The rain took full advantage of the momentary break in gale and proceeded to empty a minor cumulonimbus directly into his face. For a man such as Roman, this only served to strengthen his resolve that the world was, indeed, out to get him – and that for all the logic the city's scientists repeatedly used to polish fate's faeces, while simultaneously trying to disprove the existence of all manner of specific gods, he was still unconvinced of nature's innocence in the face of life's struggle. At least keeping an open mind about a convenient deity presented the option that there was always *someone* to blame.

The wood and stone buildings that lined both sides of each claustrophobic street in Greater Schuw heaved forward towards each other at roof level. Foundations were rarely prioritized by the city's builders, as it was generally assumed that sooner or later, if a house needed any kind of support, it would be provided by its neighbouring property... eventually.

On any number of bad days, Roman had sworn to himself that he would eventually seek out the singular brick that would bring the whole place crashing down. Until then, blotting out the bleakness of his existence as a small-time religious bookseller via the imbibing of alcohol seemed the most productive policy.

He shook a clenched fist at the sky above, threatening Vocal Mary (a thunderous god detailed in the books that he attempted to sell to unwitting customers) with inferred queries of her parenthood. He removed a surplus pocket edition from his coat and launched it enthusiastically towards the sky. The book flew in a surprisingly efficient manner upwards, with no immediate sign of losing altitude. For a moment, Roman thought that it might indeed reach the clouds above where Vocal Mary supposedly gave her raucous opinions of the mortals below; its pages fanning out into makeshift wings that would carry it further upwards, towards the beings detailed within its leaves. Then with a sodden crunch, it froze in the air, wedged between the guttering of two opposing houses.

A further curse oozed through his teeth, reforming behind his lips and readying itself for audible release, when a sound beyond Roman's experience thundered above, causing the windows, the doors and finally the brickwork of the surrounding houses to rattle enthusiastically. Looking past the lodged book, he noticed the sky changing colour from its usual disgruntled blue to an uncharacteristic, almost enthusiastic simmering orange, growing brighter by the second. For a moment, directly above his head, he saw the burning tail of something plummeting towards a nearby forest. As it disappeared behind the trees, the light show diminished, returning the sky to a reluctant indigo.

Seconds passed in silence with Roman rooted to the spot, until a low sonic boom shuddered through the streets, once again jostling the city. In a surprising turnaround of priorities, the alcohol-to-

adrenaline ratio of his blood did a small tango. His legs forgot their age and past misuse, tricked into thinking that now was a good time to get somewhere familiar. It could have been argued that this wasn't necessarily the safest of destinations, as his house was the second to last in a long stretch of ageing buildings, with only the end terrace in a position to break its slow-motion fall. But for the time being, falling objects were a threat way in advance of the barbed comfort his house provided.

Roman's book, now slightly pulped by the heavy torrent of wind and rain, slipped from between the guttering and flapped to the cobbles where he had been standing seconds before. The sodden and suddenly sober bookseller was already halfway down the street and uncharacteristically eager to get home.

An immense peel of thunder rumbled through the heavens as Roman reached his front door. The end terrace house to its right looked as unhappy as ever, teetering somewhere between sculpture and rubble. He imagined for a moment that the large family hidden inside must all be huddled in a corner somewhere. But just at this moment, that wasn't his problem – he would leave that to Handy Grimth, the spirit of balanced bricks. He was relieved to find that his door unlocked and opened in its customary complaining but forgiving way; and as he closed it again, he took a moment to check a protractor-like design, drawn in charcoal to the side of the doorframe, with a dangling metal weight hung by string at its side. No noticeable shift in angle. Not since breakfast, anyway.

He smacked his lips, loudly, and turned his attention to his belly now that his brain appeared satisfied with a workable level of normality. He slumped into his favourite chair, closed his eyes and concentrated on losing the knowledge that an unidentified object had crashed in a nearby woodland, while retrieving the memory of what edible items might exist under his roof.

Summoning up the adrenaline to rise from the chair, he approached the larder with renewed vigour. There was indeed a small piece of Gross Bessa's green cheese remaining, which temporarily lifted his spirits. Its clagging properties were perfect for lining a stomach, but with the antisocial effect of congealing in the throat – often giving the diner a voice similar to a duck with anaphylactic shock. However, finding an empty bread bin was an unexpected result. He definitely remembered purchasing a loaf that morning from the bakers opposite his house.

His was the one and only key to the front door. The local rodents hadn't, to his knowledge, developed the means by which to open cupboards and lift heavy ceramic lids from bread boxes. His eyes scanned both walls adjoining adjacent properties for signs of recently loosened brickwork, but every crack and loosened area of plaster was exactly as he remembered it. Not even one of the small children from next door could have eased their way through a gap without some evidence of movement.

There was a scuffle noise from upstairs, and dust dropped from a far corner of the ceiling. Somewhat shaken, he took a sharp intake of breath. He stilled his lungs again. No sound.

Roman slowly made his way to the stairwell. He had decades of familiarity with them, and in particular the dodgy fourth step remained in place, shuffled back into one piece for makeshift security. All steps were intact and untouched. Either the intruder had entered via the top window, was light enough to leave the steps in one piece, or had an unspecified psychic link with staircases of wooden origin to detect booby traps. Again, the most likely culprit would be a small animal – but again, that same animal would not have been able to gain access to the bread.

He really didn't like this. This was too much trouble. He was wet, still technically drunk and most importantly hungry – wasn't that enough? He desperately started to try and think of an

appropriate deity to insult, settling upon rubbing his right elbow and asking Bilius Eric, the god of reluctant heroism, for strength.

Elsewhere, an outwardly human male of quite possibly late-middle age was carefully navigating a path through woodland towards a very definite goal. Light of step and low to the ground, he walked an almost dance-like zigzag through the undergrowth, cautious for a moment, then scampering between vegetation of varying levels of irritation. His dark flurry of hair rising up and down into a perfect mop as he rose and fell in small skips. Every now and again, he held back particularly unhelpful branches with a black umbrella that he held in the opposing hand to a battery-operated torch. He could also be heard uttering one-sided conversation with the forest's greenery, and generally seemed delighted to be making its acquaintance for the first time.

Eventually he came to a clearing, freshly carved into a tunnel-like passage down the centre of a usually impenetrable matrix of thick, interwoven trees. A smouldering crater of burnt vegetation, bushes and molten rock fizzed at its end, bordering a smoking bullet-shaped object, half-buried in the ground. A steady sizzle punctuated the air as light rain hit the heated stone.

"Oh! Ahhhh... hmm," he said. "Well, this is all very... *something*, isn't it?"

The lichen said nothing. The shrubs gave no opinion.

"Yes, that's exactly what I thought," said the stranger, dark, generous eyebrows lowering and suddenly very serious.

Roman always knew there was a reason why he'd kept his mother's floor mop. Standing astride the doom-laden fourth step of his house's staircase, he thrust the pole upwards once more, then waved it back and forth much like a flag bearer. Quite what this was supposed to achieve in the face of some undefined threat he wasn't sure, but there was always the possibility that the mop might appear both bigger and hairier than the bread thief. Besides, the mop was expendable. All of a sudden, he felt like a minor tactician and manipulated it through the air in a manner he felt was befitting an intelligent and respectable life form.

With aching arms and a waning enthusiasm for tactical puppetry, he took a firm grip of the handle with one hand, a candle in the other, and began steadily to climb the stairs, avoiding any that might audibly give his progress away. As he stepped up onto the floorboards, he lit a nearby candlestick and placed his own candle on a shelf nearby.

"Hello?" he called into the darkness. Why in Schuw he was being so polite he wasn't sure, but he ventured that it might be best to head into danger on a pleasant foot. It may well put him in good stead should power shift to the invader at a later stage.

There was a shuffle and then the sudden bang of an undefined object hitting the floor from the other end of the room.

"I'm going downstairs again, now!" he said in swift reply, an octave or so higher than previously, while instantly turning and striding back down the stairs, two steps at a time. He stumbled as his foot split the fourth step permanently in two.

Clumsily hitting the ground floor, he called "I'm downstairs now!" up the staircase, followed swiftly by "I won't be coming up again! I didn't see you!" then taking a breath and pondering. "You can leave the same way you came in as soon as you like. You can keep the bread! I didn't like it anyway!"

Roman winced at quite how instantly fearful he was in the face of the unknown intruder. Any sense of outrage had been replaced with intense dread and wanting the whole thing to go away. At this point, no amount of elbow rubbing would get him back up those stairs, let alone curiosity or even bread products.

The candles now offered a flickering orange glow in the room above. For a moment, the light faltered, and Roman surmised that whoever was resident upstairs had moved across their influence. He listened again, waiting – almost willing the appropriate noises associated with leaving to appear. There was nothing aside from the whistle of the wind outside. The storm had, at least for the moment, calmed.

An hour passed, and as the light from the candles flickered and faded, so did Roman's hope for a noisy exit from the thief. The weather had abated, yet still his unwanted guest was finding his modest abode preferable to outside, and he assumed was settling down for the night. Roman would take his chances with the unknown at least until daylight. He shifted his favourite leather chair towards the centre of the room and settled as best he could, facing the staircase with the mop perched towards danger like a jousting invalid. Despite best intentions, he was asleep within half an hour.

Sunlight broke through the blankets hung at the windows and between the less confident brickwork of Roman's house. Consciousness returned to him in multiple stages of varying colour and lucidity. It was only at the moment he realized there was a floor mop wedged down the side of the chair's arm piece that he remembered his current situation. He forced all concentration into opening his eyes wide enough to take in the detail that the morning light revealed.

The sound of breaking crockery drew his attention to the larder from which his bread had disappeared the night before. The receding darkness invigorated his resolve to retake ownership of his home, and he rose from the chair, pulling the makeshift weapon from between the cushioning.

He edged towards the larder, slowly easing the door open with the head of the mop. Standing, hunched and awkward, was a young girl. Skin, pale as marble with a mess of pearl-white hair, and naked as her day of birth. She ravenously scraped at the pots and boxes that populated the shelves, pulling away cobwebs, then tipping contents directly into her mouth with no concern for hygiene or, indeed, how long the ingredients had been there. With insider knowledge, he retched at the prospect.

She suddenly became aware of his presence and turned to flee, but found him blocking her escape. For a moment their sight met, both instantly trying to measure the other's intent. Her eyes were wide, watery and blue as the sea in picture books. Somewhat disarmed by the memory and detecting a fear equal – if not superior – to his own, he slowly placed the mop onto the floor and held his hands outwards and open. Her eyes moved down to study his hands, seemingly fascinated.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he asked. “By the Goddess Axia, where are your *clothes*, girl?”

He reached for a large, thick blanket that hung over a pole above a nearby window. She was a thief, but only by the grace of the gods had he not yet fallen to that level himself. He afforded her some dignity.

As he pulled the blanket down, he was unaware that he had just revealed something hidden, something altogether stranger than the female standing in his larder. The girl screamed words in an unknown language and lunged forward, pulling the blanket from his hands and pushing past him towards the front door. Roman fell to the floor, grabbing at the air to regain possession of the mop. As he turned towards the girl, who now sat hunched at the foot of the locked exit, a glint of reflected

sunlight drew his attention away from her and back to where the blanket had been.

Silhouetted in the window, haloed by the emerging daylight, stood, to Roman's eyes, a metal man. The figure stood still and upright, almost to attention, but with its head drooped slightly forward. Lifeless and statuesque, the creature was clad in shining metal platelets, sculpted to approximate the landscape of a muscular and toned human male body, with ridges and angles that reminded Roman of the armour adorning the city's royal guard. This was where any kind of comparison to human form ended. On the chest was a boxlike construction, grated wire in an aperture down its centre. For a moment, he fancied that the three, cavernous dark areas to the front of its head emulated the visage of a skull; yet the shape of the head, with supposed handles at either side, also reminded him of his favourite tankard.

He decided to focus on the familiar. He prodded lightly at the leg with the mop handle. A hollow toll rang out, vibrating upwards into the chest cavity.

"Just a statue, I fathom," he said to the girl, whose eyes were transfixed on the figure. "I fancied for a moment that it might be alive – a gift from the gods maybe. Anything to do with you?"

The girl was now on her feet, but showed no sign of reaction to Roman's questioning. Besides, she appeared mesmerized by the metal figure and began to step tentatively towards it.

She stopped for a moment, head cocked, studying it from head to toe. Roman almost detected an element of recognition in her face. Almost a smile. Now that she stood, modesty covered in the blanket, he afforded himself a moment to appreciate her striking appearance. Her blue eyes sparkled, her sun-honeyed hair glistened, and the pores of her perfect skin contrasted into defined relief in the sunlight. In fact, he noticed that her skin was *stunningly* perfect. Not a blemish. Not a scar. Just pale as if having never seen a day of sun.

"Step... away from it, dear," ventured Roman.

The girl didn't react, instead walking confidently towards the monster. She was now close enough for it to easily grab her, snapping her neck in one movement – had it, of course, been anything other than an empty shell. And yet, with air at its core, it still exuded menace in its silence.

She ducked beneath the drooping head and looked up. At first, Roman thought that she was studying the minimal features of the creature. Joining her in her bravery he noted two round holes, like the coins placed upon the eyes of the moneyed dead, with a secondary hole at each outward corner, almost signifying a tear, and a thin, rectangular slot where its mouth should have been. She stayed there for a moment, swaying slightly. There really wasn't much detail to take in, to be fair, he thought. Then he realized that she was looking at something else entirely: her reflection. Distorted and elongated – but hers alone, nonetheless.

She placed a hand gently onto the chest plate.

A low, broken rasp emitted from the box on the front of the creature. The girl stepped back. The sound appeared to be slowly increasing in repetition and pitch, then stopped as quickly as it had begun. Roman lunged forward, grasping the girl's hand and pulling her towards the door.

"No good will be coming from hovering round this beastly decoration," said Roman. "I shall be selling this fairground curiosity as soon as I reckon its purpose and how it gotten itself here. This be needing some thoughts, and I daresay that thinking could be expedited by a stiff drink!"

Mrs. Googun from the bakery opposite looked down upon the couple as they disappeared around a corner. Unimpressed, she emptied a bedpan onto the street below. She jumped as a sudden loud thump emitted from Roman's house, coupled with a cloud of dust puffing from its windows. Nothing more

happened for a moment. Thinking nothing more of it, she began to close the window shutters. Just then, she noticed her husband make his way across the street to Roman's house, having been disturbed from his bread-making routine. She watched as he tried the door, finding it apparently unlocked by the hastily absent owner, then slowly stepping inside, an oven paddle held aloft in preparation for battle. She bustled with pride, somewhat taken aback by her husband's vigour. There was a pause and then another cloud of dust exploded from the window frame. A fine mist of flour settled onto the cobbles, forming cloudy pools of white punctuated with clots of deep red between the stones. She fainted.

An early morning tour of the city afforded the advantage of being able to wander at one's will through the grounds of private properties. Not only did this give the option to proceed in a virtually direct line to a destination, but it also led to easy pickings of clothes lines along the way. A trail of clothes lay like breadcrumbs across a multitude of back gardens and yards; and at its head, the girl had settled with a long, woollen smock of pale orange, and velvet three-quarter-length leggings brought to a full stop by a large pair of black-stained leather farm-worker's boots, left outside and caked in mud after the previous night's storm. Roman couldn't help but be amused by the girl's enthusiasm at stomping through the streets, scattering dried clods of earth about the cobbles.

The girl turned to Roman, smiled for the first time, then delicately uttered words that in content meant nothing to him. However, in their shape, he was reassured and warmed that they sounded like something good and probably thankful.

"Don't mention it," he replied, smiling back – then checked himself, remembering the state of his teeth.

They finally ducked between an archway created by two opposing small cottages, both lost in time to the sprawling hotchpotch of crooked houses. It opened out into a large town square, filled with the early stages of a street market. A multitude of smells permeated the air, from the fragrance of freshly cut flowers, to the beginnings of hot stews reheating from the previous day. The girl sniffed, almost mesmerized by the taunting scent of food. As she lunged towards a fruit stall, Roman grabbed the back of her smock and held her back. He shook his head, holding an open palm to her face. Placing one hand on her shoulder, he wafted the other downwards to try and relax her enthusiasm. Reluctantly, she nodded.

Five minutes later, they crouched in a small alcove beneath a ramshackle bridge, gnawing at fruit and vegetables, expertly snatched by Roman.

"Used to have a bookstall stall here, meself," he said, sadly, "till they raised the taxes up higher than Slack Dorca's hemline."

The girl looked at him then smiled, detecting his melancholy tone. She placed a hand on his and offered him some of her fruit. He placed his other hand on top of hers and shook his head, smiling a flat smile.

The market had become busier. Shoppers and stallholders communicated through various levels of aggression and laughter as they traded. The girl listened intently, every now and again showing hints of a grin or a frown, as emotions cascaded through the street. Then something lifted above the cacophony, taking the whole of her attention. She leapt to her feet, banging her head on the underside of the alcove. She put her hand to her head, confused, then inspected her palm. She studied a small amount of blood for a moment, then shaking her head, wiped it dismissively on her leg before setting off into the thick of the crowd. Roman jumped up, stumbling at first, calling after her to slow down. He swiftly stuffed what was left of his meal into the breast pocket of his jacket, licking his fingers

then, following her example, wiping them on his trousers.

He pushed his way forward through the crowd, ignoring rudeness and comments about lineage as he did so. Face upon face upon face greeted him as he forced on, each with their own hurtful, gurning facade. Instead, he decided to listen and seek out what might have enticed the girl away from him. As he moved on, something became more defined amidst the throng: music.

Eventually, he found himself towards the centre of the square and, with one big push between some particularly stubborn and stocky Schuwan women, he fell forward out of the crowd and into a space left, almost politely, around a street entertainer. He quickly gathered composure and stood upright to take in what was happening.

At the centre of an almost perfect circle left by the surrounding crowd, stood a small group of musicians, swaying in unison. A rhythmic, shuddering folk tune was being coaxed out of their various tools: an almost machine-like sequence of fluttering notes blown from two opposing wind pieces; a swaying wall of thin chords squeezed from two paddles joined by inflated animal skin; a woman of traveller descent blowing bass notes from a long tube of lovingly carved wood; the whole piece punctuated by the thud of a large skinned drum, gradually increasing in frequency.

Orbiting the performance, skipping, leaping, marching, striding, ducking, turning, reversing, shuffling then spinning in a revelry of pure barefoot joy, danced the girl.

At first, Roman attempted to grab her as she passed, but she was too fast. She was caught up in a trance-like ecstasy, losing herself in the moment. Mesmerized by the drug of glorious expression, she increased with speed as the music did the same. Resigned to standing patiently until the end of the tune, Roman began to notice that it wasn't necessarily the musicians that the crowd were responding to. All eyes were on the girl; all hands clapping along in time with the music, as much to encourage her efforts as enjoy the music. As the melody and tempo lifted, bringing the tune to a crescendo, coins began to rain towards a box to the front of the band. For a moment there was silence, then a loud and enthusiastic cheer erupted; currency continued to be thrown.

Before Roman had a chance to rescue the girl, a new musician appeared with a very different-looking instrument, to take his place among the minstrels. He placed part of the device under one arm and began to squeeze, methodically. Gradually, the strangest of drones began to emit from what looked like a petrified animal. Frozen legs protruded from a round, swollen belly, regularly compressed by a full-figured young man with dark hair, a flared white shirt and what Roman could only perceive as being red-patterned female legwear. Still, as time moved on, the dissonant sound gradually reached a tangent of its upward curve. The player began to draw out fragmented notes from the cry of the animal – rhythmic and flighty, much like the previous tune. The drummer began to pick out the geometry of the piece and began to thump along in time. Before long, the crowd had begun to clap along, once again.

Fearing that things would start again, Roman ran to grab the girl's hand. As he did so, she turned to him, smiling – then as he refused to let go, her expression turned darker.

“Let me go – I *need* this!” she shouted.

Roman immediately let her go, taken aback at her sudden ability to speak in perfect blessed-tongue. Then, as he regained his senses and reached out once again to halt her in her tracks, a hand swiftly clasped his wrist.

“Now, now, now. Let the children have their fun,” said a warm and calm voice in his ear. Roman turned to see the profile of a strong, plummeting nose protruding from under a dark cloak, underpinned with a pouty, full mouth, currently grinning broadly with a cascade of white teeth. “She is somewhat interesting though, isn't she?”

The man turned to Roman, allowing him a first look at the face in full. Two disarming and kind hazel eyes met his, each squinted with amusement – possibly slightly awash with tears. It had been so long since Roman had found himself caught up in an emotional moment like this, and to find himself in the company of one equally moved left him flailing for reaction.

Instead, words fell from his mouth. The relief was exquisite.

“She’s beautiful,” he said. “A Gift from the Gods, is as good as any explanation. I is still trying to fathom which of them upstairs would think me worthy to have her appear in my home. All I is usually having delivered is final demands of the tax.”

“Ah, so she *appeared*, you say? Last night, was it? During the storm?”

Roman’s disposition changed somewhat, and he suddenly felt the need to be a little more guarded. This was all sounding decidedly more official. People with questions were rarely a welcome intrusion.

“Who the Daevil *are* you?” he demanded.

“So sorry, Mister, er...” the man replied, removing the hood from his head. “I’m the Doctor – and that piper over there is my friend, Jamie. Has your friend got a name?”

“I’ve no idea, sir,” said Roman, responding subserviently to the titled stranger. “She’s only just started talking in me native tongue, to be fair.”

“Ah, yes. Well I’m probably to blame for that. Still, it makes things that much easier, eh? And let me tell you, I don’t think anything about this is going to be easy.”

Roman’s heart sank. Was this stranger going to make this all complicated and take his new friend away so soon? He looked across to where the girl was currently pirouetting around Jamie as he danced a small jig, momentarily losing his place in the music as the girl passed him with a smile.

“Don’t tell me. She’s an escaped pris’ner. A thief. A demian sent by Gaseous Jum... just my flamin’ luck.”

“No, none of those things to my knowledge,” said the Doctor. “But to be fair, I’m not really sure myself.”

“I’m not really thinking anything be makin’ sense, Doctor,” said Roman, shaking his head. “Firstly, I’m thinkin’ the sky is falling in, I see a comet crashes in the woods, then I come home to a breadless larder,” he elaborated. “Then I’m finding an angel in my bedroom, a metal man in me lounge and...”

“A what?” interjected the Doctor.

“An angel in me bedroom...”

“No, the bit after that.”

A scream interrupted the conversation. The Doctor, Roman, Jamie and the girl all turned round, trying to get a pinpoint on the direction of trouble, but the chaos that erupted from the crowds only served to muddy their hearing. Jamie went to help the girl to safety, but she immediately made her way to Roman’s side and began to pull at his arm to get them away from the area.

The crowd thinned as people ran in all directions for safety. There was a loud crash behind them. They turned to see a large fruit stall tip towards them, scattering fruit across the cobbles. Some small children quickly gathered to collect up the spilt food. Jamie shouted at them to get to safety, scooping up one small girl whose legs were obviously way too small to offer any chance of speed. Facing the upturned stall, he turned to run, but not before he saw a shape – somewhat familiar – stepping robotically towards him.

“A Cyberman! Doctor! It’s a Cyberman!”

“Run, Jamie!” shouted the Doctor. “Don’t think, just run – everyone!”

Roman, the girl and finally Jamie ran towards a nearby alley. The Doctor momentarily stood with a look displaying concern, fear and fascination. He wrung his hands in a circular motion, muttering to himself. While the metal man's progress was somewhat slow and laborious, its feet hit the ground with a solid shunt – left, right, left, right; its focus dead ahead and relentlessly aiming for the group fleeing down the alleyway. Its stability seemed unsure as it stepped onto the uneven cobbles. Servos and motors whined, compensating for the lack of flat ground, but with each step, its efficiency appeared to improve.

The Doctor pulled at a nearby abandoned handcart. He swung it into the path of the Cyberman. It strode straight on ahead, the cart spinning off as if lighter than air. Only then did the Doctor react, appearing momentarily to dance on the spot, then stepping backwards, turning to change gear into a full-blown sprint, chasing after his colleagues.

The Doctor turned a corner to find himself looking straight into the face of a large furry creature that reared its head, making a noise not dissimilar to a bear. He looked past to see that the beast was hitched up to a large wooden wagon, the reins held by Jamie who stood, somewhat gladiatorial, behind the animal's head; Roman and the girl sat behind, beckoning for the Doctor to climb aboard.

“He's some weird lookin' beastie, Doctor, but I'm told he's quick!” said Jamie, almost smiling, “I'm thinking we'd best get a move on before that Cyberman gets here!”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea, Jamie,” replied the Doctor, grabbing the Scot's hand and allowing himself to be pulled aboard.

As the Cyberman turned the corner, the wagon was already weaving somewhat recklessly down the alley and banking onto two wheels as it headed up a linking lane. The Cyberman paused for a moment, then re-engaged its pursuit with renewed velocity.

“We need to get back to that capsule, Jamie,” called out the Doctor. “I think we'll get some more answers now that it's cooled down.”

“Cooled down?” ventured Roman. “Are you talking about that comet that hit the forest last night?”

“That was no comet,” said the Doctor, now smiling, eyebrows raised. “That was an escape craft. A *Cyber* escape ship!”

“Ships can't fly, you damn fool,” said Roman, scoffing.

“He's right,” said the girl, quietly, head hung and visibly shaking. “That thing came from another world.”

Roman's immediate thoughts were to equate the information to the actions of the gods – but this girl was offering up evidence of life from above the cloud cover. Quite how this was possible was another thing – but here were these people, talking of things way beyond his comprehension. So *not* Schuwan in any shape nor form. The gods of which he sold books, detailing their varied behaviours and powers that kept the world turning, did just that – this world was their focus. Anything outside of that defied description. Defied categorization. Defied *nature*.

“Jamie and I followed the ship here in my TARDIS,” said the Doctor.

“Yes, the Doctor managed to fly the TARDIS in a straight line for once, too!” said Jamie, somewhat amused.

“Well... following the energy trail of the capsule did make things somewhat easier, I *will* admit.

But I have to say, I've rather impressed myself. It's not often you find a crippled Cyber-cruiser, firing off escape pods. It's all still a bit of a learning process, you see. You know what they say about the first few hundred years."

As they entered the nearby forest, it became impossible for the vehicle to progress. They entered into a denser area on foot, eventually finding the channel created by the crashed ship.

As they made their way towards the crash site, Roman took the opportunity to ask the girl some questions, especially as she now seemed to be able to converse in almost perfect Schuwan.

"You arrived in a... *sky* ship? With that *thing*?" he ventured.

She nodded. "Yes. It wants me. It's trying to get me back."

"You were a prisoner then, lassie?" said Jamie, listening in. She nodded. He continued, "But I don't understand, Doctor. How did the girl and the Cyberman get into this man's house? The ship crashed!"

"I can only guess that it was some form of ejector seat, Jamie."

Jamie and Roman looked at each other and shrugged.

"Short-range matter transference?" he tried again. Two mouths hung slightly open.

"Before the ship crashed, the on-board computer used a special energy beam to place the occupant in a place of safety, rather than risk damage on impact. Possibly a place where it can get right on with continuing to propagate the Cyber-race."

"Turn the people into more Cybermen?" asked Jamie. "But that doesn't make any sense, Doctor. That Cyberman is only interested in the girl – its prisoner. It doesn't seem interested in anyone else."

"Yes," said the Doctor. "Yes, that had occurred to me too. The Cybermen don't keep prisoners – not for long, anyway." He turned around to see the girl, hanging back slightly from the group.

They arrived at the crash site. The top half of a small, silver capsule showed above the collected earth. Through the mist of steam and smoke that had gathered around the ship, the Doctor made his way to what looked like an opening in its hull. He pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and held it to his mouth, disappearing into the fog.

Out of breath and desperately trying to make sense of the situation, Roman eased himself down onto a nearby, levelled tree trunk. He looked at the forest floor, wide-eyed and breathing deeply. Then he turned to the girl.

"As I is thinking it, woman, that metal monster is wanting you for something. What are you? A criminal? A deserter? A traitor?" he said, high-pitched and breathless. "That's a machine of battle, make no mistake."

Not making eye contact, she looked to the ground and replied, "All of those things. And worse."

"A Cyberman's a beastie of nothing but *evil*," interjected Jamie. "And what I've seen of them makes me think that they're not in the habit of keeping prisoners. Just like the Doctor said, you must be something pretty special if they're keeping hold of you in one piece. Who are you? What did you *do*?"

A lone tear fell from the girl's eye. Taken aback, she lifted a hand to her cheek, feeling the moisture against her skin.

"I did what I had to do. I wanted to help. For the good of everyone," she said. "That's what you do when you want things to get better, isn't it? When there's a war on?"

"Well, yes, lassie," replied Jamie, "I wouldnae have picked up a sword if I wasnae gonna do good wi' it."

"Exactly," she said, recognizing a commonality between the two. "When you can't stand to see your family suffer, your world to be destroyed at the hands of others."

“I would have done anything for my sisters,” said Roman, staring straight ahead, “even making a deal with the Daevil...” He turned to the girl. “Is that what you did, er...?”

“Kastrid,” said the girl, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, smiling a broad grin and laughing politely. “My name is Kastrid. And yes, I did what I did because I thought that it was the right thing to do. I thought I could protect them. Protect everyone. I signed up for the war effort. Left my family. Said goodbye.”

“You fought in the war?” asked Jamie.

“I... I believe so,” she replied, holding her head. “It’s all so hazy.”

Out of nowhere, the Doctor appeared from the white of the smoke.

“Battle not with monsters lest ye become a monster,” he said, theatrically. He walked to Kastrid and took a hold of her shoulders, gently, and smiled briefly. “I think you should come with me. This won’t be easy, I’m afraid. Not quite looking into the abyss – I can’t recommend that – but it’s a close second.”

The Doctor led Kastrid through the mist to a dark hole in the shell of the capsule. She half-expected to see an empty cockpit in the darkness, but as she approached, she caught sight of an all-too-familiar glint of silver among a mess of wires and dull, torn metal.

There, in the cockpit was what remained of a Cyberman; distorted by impact and heat – but a Cyberman nonetheless, in better days identical in design to the machine that had pursued them earlier.

“This can’t be the ship I arrived in,” she said, somewhat confused. “This is a single-occupant capsule. This can’t be right... How did I get here? There must have been more than one ship?”

She stared down at the helmet looking up at her. Once again, she saw the blurred, pink shape of her face, reflected in its mask. She looked into each hollow, seemingly endless eye – drawn into the black where all emotion seemed lost and meaningless. She felt what little joy she had managed to experience and stored away in the last few hours begin to drain away; warmth and connection with the world replaced with cold function and a predictable, pointless existence.

She realized that she had stopped breathing. She took in a sharp and deep breath; intense morning-cold mist mixed with the caustic, metallic smoke still bleeding from the capsule. Then as blood rushed, complaining around her veins and into her ears, the swell of her heart pumping became almost overwhelming. Her focus pulled away from the eye and onto the second, smaller tear-like hole to the side of the aperture. She once again felt at her cheek, still moist with emotion. Suddenly the face of the Cyberman seemed wrought with sadness and she joined it in its sorrow.

Noticing a jutting crack to the side of the helmet, she reached down, grasping the sheared metal and pulled. The Doctor reached a hand out to her arm, concerned that she might burn herself on the still-hot metal, but her determination overcame any sensitivity to danger, and a large section of the mask came away in her hand, immediately dropping to the ground.

Kastrid stood completely still, mesmerized by what she saw. Cold, dead, familiar eyes looked straight back at her. The scarring and heat damage to surrounding skin did nothing to diminish the recognition of the once-living face within – a face that she had known since before she could remember. The face was her own.

“You see that nasty electrical storm last night must have played havoc with these Cyber-systems,” said the Doctor, almost talking to himself in a reassuring and practical manner. “When the transmat systems tried to get the passenger to safety, I think it got a little confused about, well, flesh and metal, and rather cleverly reconstructed them both in full – didn’t even have the energy to

properly deconstruct our friend, here. It's all rather fascinating, really! Matter transportation has always had issues with living, sentient beings – never a problem with standard matter in general. Tricky for cyborgs: two different algorithms intertwined and... Well, here you are! A perfect reconstruction of Kastrid the Mondasian, safe and well!"

"Fascinating. Safe and well," she said, coldly.

She turned to the Doctor, suddenly calm and measured: "But of course, I'm only half of the problem, Doctor."

"I can assure you, my dear, that you're no problem at all, and that transporter created you back in an almost perfectly recreated whole piece," said the Doctor, teeth bared in a wide and thrilled smile. "You are a little miracle."

"I left anything 'miraculous' about my existence at the door of my family home, Doctor. That dead creature in the ship is Kastrid – I'm just a ghost of her. But I can't pretend that all of the blame for the horrors that she perpetrated aren't part of me. Equally, I can't lay all of the blame for that on the machines the scientists created."

"Kastrid," said the Doctor, "all questionable acts, even those we might call evil, are created from the perspective of a righteous cause. It's what we do with the knowledge of the repercussions that matters. So many have committed unspeakable atrocities with the justification of being 'right.' You have a second chance. You can see both sides now. That is a privilege that I would hope you would not dismiss easily."

Kastrid smiled and turned. "We became the very thing we feared, Doctor. In running from death, we became death itself. Walking corpses with only the illusion of life to set us apart from robots, coupled with the illusion of a righteous cause wrapped up in a subroutine. The arrogance of the Mondasian race, believing itself to be superior in the face of difference, proclaiming, 'You will become like us!'"

"But you're free from all of that now, Kastrid!" said the Doctor, breathing fast and visibly emotional. "You're no longer part of the Cyber-race!"

"But it's still part of me," she said.

There was a moment of silence. Then they turned as a shriek erupted from within the fog. A flying body appeared out of nowhere, momentarily creating a hole in the mist, and landed at their feet, broken. Kastrid looked down to see the lifeless face of Roman looking up at her.

"No!" she shouted and made for the direction in which the body had travelled.

"No, Kastrid, wait!" called the Doctor, flustered. He thought for a moment, then ran after her, shouting, "JAMIE!"

They quickly made their way through the blanket of mist, back to where they had left the wagon. As they broke at the smoke's edge, they saw Jamie, cowering as the Cyberman bore down upon him. Its movements seeming far more fluid than before, as Jamie scuffled backwards on all fours to hide himself underneath what was left of the wagon, which itself was rotating wildly as the attached beast of burden bucked and struggled to free itself of its bonds. The Cyberman brought a large metallic hand down onto the wood; the beast simultaneously pulled backwards and fell sideways on top of Jamie. He struggled underneath as the animal writhed, attempting to regain purchase on the ground.

Jamie looked up, seeing the Cyberman reach out with both hands towards his head.

"You want me, don't you!" cried out Kastrid, silhouetted at the edge of the smoke. The Cyberman froze, then straightened up, adjusting its position to focus purely on the girl.

"You don't just want me, do you, monster?" she continued, taunting the creature. "You *need* me. Otherwise you're just a shell. A parasite with no meaning! A gun with no trigger finger!"

Kastrid stood for a moment, considering the creature once again, now suddenly calm and accepting. She cocked her head to one side slightly, considering the sight before her.

The Cyberman cocked its head also, mirroring her movements. They both lifted their heads up straight. Then the creature raised an arm, firing a small projectile at the girl.

The dart hit Kastrid in the chest. She shook for a moment, her body movements suddenly disconnecting from her own control. The Cyberman walked decisively towards her.

By this time, Jamie had managed to extricate himself from beneath the animal. He picked up a wooden shard from a split side to the wagon and moved to intercept the Cyberman's movements. Immediately the Doctor appeared, halting Jamie in his progress.

"No, Jamie, wait – this is Kastrid's battle," said the Doctor.

"It's gonna kill her, Doctor! We must do something!" cried Jamie, angry and smarting with the pain in his legs.

"We and Roman already have, Jamie – we bought her a little... perspective."

The Cyberman froze in front of the girl. As it raised its arms slightly upwards, she did the same. But then the machine began to tremble. Slowly, Kastrid stepped back from the machine. Then, a moment later, the Cyberman did the same. She turned round towards the smoke surrounding the capsule. Her counterpart too.

Before long, the girl and the creature were making their way towards the cockpit of the capsule. The Doctor and Jamie followed from a short distance. The Cyberman juddered as it struggled to regain control of its movements. As it did so, Kastrid winced, crying out, but gritting her teeth and swearing in a language that the Doctor could only imagine was ancient Mondasian.

The metal man stopped at the cockpit and reached down towards a control panel. Kastrid, to its side, mimed the same. The Cyberman placed a hand onto the control panel, transferring energy from itself into the device. Deep within, an electronic whirring sprang into life.

"Kastrid, I think I know what you're doing... Don't!" called out the Doctor. "We'll find another way!"

"What's she doing, Doctor?" asked Jamie, who had reached Roman's body and was looking for signs of life.

"She's winning is what she's doing, Jamie," he said, "but unfortunately, I think there might be a price to pay."

A sparkling glow appeared around both Kastrid and Cyberman. As it did so, she turned to the Doctor and Jamie, giving them a short moment of recognition. Then, in a flash, both glowing bodies disintegrated into pixels of colour... and were gone.

The blurred but familiar ceiling rafters of Roman's house eased into view as he regained consciousness. No one was more surprised at his survival than he himself. His head and muscles ached. He was bruised in places never before reached in even the nastiest of confrontations with drunken atheists. He wiggled his fingers, then his toes, relieved at some tenuous movement at his extremities, though his arms would not move. He turned to his side to see the Doctor sitting in his favourite leather chair, casually flicking through one of a pile of books, while playing sporadically on a small wind instrument.

"That Vocal Mary needs to pipe down a little," said the Doctor, smiling. "Shouting and throwing things around causes all manner of problems, don't you think?"

"I'm alive," said Roman, attempting to put his hand to his head.

“Oh yes, isn’t it *marvellous?*” said the Doctor. “I *do* hope you’re not going to squander the possibilities of that. Kastrid certainly wouldn’t want you to.”

“Kastrid... Is she...?”

“Gone, I’m afraid,” he replied. “It’s all very, very sad. But... she redressed things and, well, you and your people are still very much alive, mostly.”

Roman shook his head, trying to place the information in some kind of order. Then he looked to the other side of the room, which looked... different. It now opened widely through to a front room very similar to his own, except this was populated by a large family of a broad range of ages. His neighbours at the terrace end. A small boy ran towards him on seeing him awake and handed him a small cup of steaming tea.

Jamie sat to the side of the gap between the houses, his own legs bandaged and obviously causing him discomfort, but hammering at an arrangement of wooden supports that now held the two houses together in one piece.

“I do hope you like your extension, Mr. Roman,” said the Doctor. “We figured that you probably needed some looking after – and that lovely family next door were running out of room. You know, a bit of leaning on each other from time to time is no bad thing, and little Brydo here *loves* your books.”

Roman winced, unable to move his arms, now densely wrapped in bandages.

“Both your arms are broken,” said the little boy, “but I’ve been praying for you. Would you like me to rub your elbow for you, Mr. Roman?”

The Doctor's New Clothes

by Mark McManus

Peri pulled the TARDIS door closed behind her and stepped into the warm morning air. Ahead of her stood the Doctor, tall and straight-backed, his gaze sweeping around a quiet town centre as a mild breeze gently ruffled his blond curls and the tails of his colourful coat. The TARDIS stood shaded by a tall tree, in a spacious square surrounded by pleasant-looking shops and cafés. Hovercars and bikes were parked along the curbs, in contrast to the more rustic buildings.

As Peri took in her surroundings and enjoyed the fresh air after the sterile interior of the Ship, the lamp atop the TARDIS's Police Box shell flared a final time and then was still.

"So, where are we this time, Doctor?" she inquired brightly.

"Colony Twenty-Six," replied the Doctor without turning around, "a human outpost far in your future."

He thrust his hands into his pockets and started strolling away. He seemed to be looking for something.

Peri had already sensed that they weren't on Earth, despite the architecture being of a vaguely Mediterranean style, not unlike that she had seen in Lanzarote. The buildings were whitewashed and many were adorned with elaborate mosaics.

It was the time of morning when a town is just stirring to life. As Peri looked more closely at the people busily opening the shutters of the shops around them, she noticed something that astonished her.

"Doctor!" she exclaimed. "They're all dressed like you!"

The population of Colony Twenty-Six were indeed attired in the same multicoloured patchwork style as the Doctor's coat. Trousers, dresses, shirts and aprons all clashed with themselves and each other in a bewildering visual cacophony.

The Doctor spun around to face Peri, beaming. "That's why we're here, Peri. We're going shopping... on the most stylish planet in the universe!"

The Doctor and Peri were strolling down a wide main street, off the square where they had landed. Peri was still curious about the colony.

"So, what happened to these poor people?" asked Peri. "Are they having some kind of 'The Doctor' convention?"

"The very idea!" the Doctor scoffed.

"Well... Did you once save this planet, and now they dress like you as an homage?"

"No." The Doctor paused thoughtfully for a moment, before adding, "Although now you mention it, it is surprising that doesn't happen."

Peri gave her friend a sidelong glance, but said nothing. As they ambled along, the Doctor scanned the shopfronts.

"There's no great mystery, Peri. They simply have a very stylish dress sense on this world. The last time I was here, I saw this rather dapper ensemble I wear in a shop window. When one has the opportunity to purchase such sartorial finery, one doesn't hesitate."

"You actually paid for that?" Peri teased.

It was the Doctor's turn to deliver a sidelong look. "Money well spent," he said sagely, then stopped abruptly outside a tailor's shop. The sign above the entrance told them the business was called Godfrey's.

"We're here to buy clothes?" asked Peri, who might have been excited by the prospect on virtually any other planet.

"Well you don't imagine I only have one change of clothes, do you, with all the scrapes that we keep getting into?" He glanced at Peri's outfit, which consisted of matching blue leotard and shorts. "We might find something for you too."

The Doctor nodded towards the shop window display. There was a mannequin wearing a version of the Doctor's clothing in the form of a dress.

"I wouldn't be seen dead in that," she said, laughing.

The Doctor pushed the door open and led the way into the cool interior. Inside, Peri saw racks and rails covered in samples, all made up in the same assortment of ill-advised colours that the Doctor sported. When she left Earth in the 1980s, colourful clothes had been in fashion, but they looked tame compared to the dress sense on this planet.

A tailor looked up from where he was working on a lurid waistcoat. He did a double-take, and then downed his work to come over and welcome the two time travellers. He was a slight, nervous-looking man with a lugubrious face. This must be Mr. Godfrey, thought Peri.

"Good morning, madam. We must find you some new clothes immediately!" said Godfrey, by way of greeting. He looked out of the shop window nervously, then tried to usher Peri further into the store.

The Doctor, looking a little affronted, spoke up, "Excuse me, I'm the customer." He put his arm around the smaller man and guided him firmly towards the men's garments.

"But the young lady..." protested the clothier anxiously.

"Never you mind her," replied the Doctor severely. He looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes at Peri. They had both become used to the male attention Peri seemed to attract on their adventures.

"She's..."

The Doctor simply talked over further protestations, his deep, powerful voice brooking no argument. "Now, I've been thinking about something similar" – he gestured to his outfit – "but in blue."

Defeated, the tailor produced a tape measure from his pocket. Peri wandered over to the section of the shop containing women's clothing. It was all terrible. She looked around without interest. Across the shop floor, she heard Godfrey ask, "Does sir dress to the left, or the right?"

Peri pushed her fingers in her ears and hummed to block the conversation out. She realized she was hungry, and came to a decision.

"I'm going to find some breakfast, Doctor!" she said loudly, over her own humming. She pulled the door open and stepped back out onto the street.

Outside, Peri looked around for somewhere to eat. The town was busier now, and she realized that she was attracting a good deal of attention from people walking past. They seemed to be looking at what she was wearing, and being the only one not in multicoloured clothes was making her strangely self-conscious. This is how the Doctor ought to feel all the time, she thought.

A few doors along the dusty street, there was a tavern, from which some delicious cooking

smells emanated. As she began to make her way there, a young waitress looked up from where she was setting a table and saw her. Peri smiled, but the waitress's expression quickly turned to shock, and she rushed towards Peri.

Suddenly Peri was aware of movement right behind her. She heard the waitress scream. Peri spun around as a shadow fell over her, and saw a tall whirlwind of dust. Tiny red sparks, like flashes of lightning, briefly raced through it. The cloud enveloped her and, just before everything went dark, she heard the Doctor's voice crying out her name.

The Doctor skidded to a halt. He watched helplessly as Peri, and the vortex he had seen absorb her, vanished. He had spotted the attack through the shop window as he was being measured up, and rushed out to help his friend. The locals on the street had all congregated and were talking fearfully over each other.

"What was that?" the Doctor asked. Nobody answered him.

Over his past few lifetimes, the Doctor had been used to his clothing helping to make him the centre of attention, but here he was literally one of the crowd, his clothes as outrageous as everyone else's. Fortunately, he was still possessed of a resonant voice that he could project magnificently.

"Excuse me!" he boomed. "Calm down, everyone." The crowd looked at him expectantly. "Now, can anyone tell me what just happened to my friend?"

The residents all started talking to him at once, gesticulating wildly. Exasperated, the Doctor spotted that Mr. Godfrey the tailor had followed him to join the throng on the street. The Doctor spotted him and strode over. The man tried to turn away, but the tall Time Lord clasped his shoulder. "What was that?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid the Chimera has your friend," Godfrey replied, shaking his head sadly. "I did try to tell you."

"The Chimera?" the Doctor asked. "And what, pray tell, is that when it's at home? And where has it taken Peri?"

Godfrey bowed his head apologetically, cowed once again by the Doctor's truculence. "We... don't exactly know what it is. But surely you know about the Chimera? Didn't they tell you at the spaceport? I assumed that's why you're dressed like us."

The Doctor was confused. "What do you mean?" he said. "I dress like this because I very much like the style of clothing on this planet. Congratulations by the way, it's among the finest in the universe. And believe me, I should know."

Godfrey looked both surprised and skeptical. "Um, okay." He cleared his throat and continued, "Well, generations ago, when our ancestors settled here, something began stalking the colonists. They called this creature the Chimera, but no one knows what it really is. Eventually they realized that the creature only took people who wore too much of one colour. The belief is that the Chimera has very basic vision, and can only see movement if it's a solid block of colour."

The Doctor looked appalled as he took this information in. "You mean to say this isn't haute couture, but... safety wear?!"

The tailor nodded sadly.

"Safety wear?... SAFETY WEAR!?"

"For years I have dreamed of bringing my own designs to life, but all we can wear is this tasteless stuff." The tailor gestured around bitterly. "I mean, I do my best... the cut of a suit, the flow of a dress, my little signature flourishes. But there's no pleasure in making, or buying, clothes here."

The Doctor was aghast. "The last time I was here, I simply thought it was the charming local dress. No one mentioned anything about a Chimera. And I wasn't attacked when I arrived," he added

thoughtfully.

“What were you wearing?” asked Godfrey.

“Let me see. I would have had my long multicoloured scarf... Ah,” said the Doctor. “Well, you might have told me that Peri was in danger when we first arrived!” the Doctor snapped.

Before the other man could protest that he had tried to do exactly that, the Doctor had stomped over to the point where Peri had vanished. He crouched down and started examining the ground. Scooping some dust and stones from the road, he sniffed, then licked it.

“Energy residue,” he muttered.

Godfrey, who had followed, wasn't sure if the Doctor was addressing him, or talking to himself, and piped up, “What does that mean?”

“Teleportation,” the Doctor announced decisively, standing back up. “Whatever your Chimera is, it's no simple animal. Tell me, did this planet ever have a sentient indigenous population?”

“Nothing when we arrived, and no evidence has been found that there ever was.”

“Hmm.” The Doctor thought for a moment and then seemed to come to a decision. “Back to the shop,” he announced, leaving Godfrey little choice but to scurry after him.

Peri awoke groggily to find herself lying in what she immediately knew was a cell. She'd spent enough time incarcerated by various aliens since she began travelling with the Doctor to recognize immediately the sense of captivity. This particular example was not very comfortable or well-kept.

Peri remembered being engulfed by a cloud, but something solid inside it had efficiently and tightly grabbed her. She got to her feet a little unsteadily and walked over to the bars. It looked like the prison was inside a cave; she could see a row of similar cells carved into the living rock opposite her.

It was dark. It looked like most of the electric lights were no longer working, and the few pools of light available did not reveal anything. Peri's eyes had not yet adjusted, but peering into the cell opposite hers, she thought she could make out a figure hunched against the far wall.

“Hello?” she called out tentatively. “Is anyone there?”

A clang rang out in the gloom from deeper in the cave and made her start. Gripping the bars more tightly, she forced her voice not to betray her fear. “Hello?” she said again, this time addressing the darkness. “Why are you keeping me here? I haven't done anything.”

Coming slowly towards her was a nightmarish figure, made more unsettling for its face being hidden in shadow. It was humanoid, wrapped in decaying material that may once have been for camouflage, like khaki. It didn't move easily, seeming to almost limp along. But it was heading straight for Peri. Halfway to her cell, it stopped by a rusty, old machine which Peri had taken to be scrap metal. After a moment, the machinery came – protesting noisily – to life. It dispensed a metal container, which the being picked up before continuing towards her.

Peri retreated a couple of involuntary steps away from the bars, and the canister was pushed through a horizontal slit, to land on a shelf. Under the rough hood, Peri caught a glimpse of a smooth, featureless face.

“Hello,” she said, trying to sound friendly and unthreatening. “I'm Peri. Why... why did you bring me here?”

Her captor showed no sign that it had heard her, and turned to shuffle back into the darkness.

This must be food, Peri realized. The device it had come from reminded her a little of the food machines aboard the TARDIS. Despite her unease, she remembered that she still hadn't eaten

breakfast and was feeling quite hungry. She picked up the steel box and removed the lid. There was nothing on the plate within but rust, and a large beaker of dirty, muddy water.

Back in his shop, Godfrey watched helplessly as the Doctor removed one of his mannequins from the window display and started stripping the clothing from it.

“Do you have any normal clothes?” the Doctor asked. “Like Peri was wearing?”

“No. There’s never been any point,” replied Godfrey. He thought for a moment. “But I have fabric; I could knock something up in no time.”

“Well, get on with it,” the Doctor said with a nod, spurring the tailor into action.

Godfrey pulled a roll of pink cotton from a drawer in his worktable and began marking out where he would cut it. Despite the Doctor’s abrasive manner, he was keen to help rescue this chap’s attractive friend if he could.

There had been no further movement in the cave, and Peri had been unable to attract the attention of the figure she thought she could see huddled in the cell opposite hers. Rather than wait, she had used the stale, brown water from her otherwise empty dinner tray to wet, and then dig away at the wall. The whole prison seemed ancient and in disrepair. She was making good progress, digging through to what she hoped was a way out. Whatever the material was, it seemed like it had once been tightly packed and impenetrable; but age had loosened it to the state where, with a lot of effort, she could break chunks off with her hands.

Godfrey finished stitching the simple outfit he had made at the Doctor’s behest, and started dressing the androgynous mannequin in it. He still couldn’t believe that his strange new customer was wearing his garments by choice, and said so.

“Well, I apologize for the cultural appropriation, but I’ve always had a keen eye for a natty outfit,” the Doctor said distractedly, as he fiddled with the controls of a small boxlike device he had produced from his pockets.

Godfrey laughed. “I’m not concerned about that, Doctor. You’re very welcome to it in fact.” He paused, and asked more seriously, “Do you really think you can find your friend? No one the Chimera has taken has ever come back.”

Godfrey took some scraps of material and started to fill out the top he had made, trying to recreate the way the Doctor’s friend had looked.

The Doctor looked up. “I hope so, if I can find out where she was taken. I’m hoping we can use your dummy here as bait, then I can use this,” – he waved his gadget – “get an energy reading and track the beast to its lair.”

He examined Godfrey’s handiwork. “That’s probably enough now,” he said as Godfrey continued to pad out the mannequin’s brassiere.

“We’ve had hunters from off-world here over the years,” Godfrey said as he worked, “but they never managed to find the Chimera.” He took another handful of cloth to insert into the effigy’s décolletage.

“That’s enough, man!” The Doctor dashed the fabric from Godfrey’s hand, and frowned at the tailor reproachfully as he placed a long black wig on the dummy’s head. He hefted the creation and

carried it from the shop.

Eventually, Peri had managed to create a wide enough hole in her cell wall for her to climb through. She crept back over to the bars and listened for any sounds of movement. All was silent and still.

Peri crawled over to the hole she'd created and, as quietly as she could, wriggled through it, face first.

Immediately she could tell she was in another cell. Like the one she had seen opposite her own, it seemed to contain another prisoner, slumped against the far wall.

"Psst!" said Peri urgently. "Hey," she whispered when there was no movement in response.

With dread certainty, she crawled the last few feet and shook the prone figure. It fell sideways, out of the shadows. A skull rolled out from under some brown coveralls. Even though she had been expecting a corpse, Peri had to stifle a cry.

Where was the Doctor?

Godfrey was standing in the sunshine, holding the shop-window dummy. The Doctor had outlined his plan, which was that the Doctor would watch for the Chimera and scan using his handheld gadget, while Godfrey walked and talked with the mannequin, to simulate a potential victim for the Chimera. The Doctor had simply brushed aside his objections, explaining that he had superior eyesight and knew how to operate the energy scanner.

The Doctor was now sitting in the shade at a table outside the nearby tavern, enjoying an ice-cold homemade lemonade and studying his energy scanner. The tailor himself felt incredibly self-conscious as he awkwardly shuffled the ersatz woman along, to the stares and muttering of his neighbours. Worse, in his quest for verisimilitude, he had made the effigy too heavy at the front, so it constantly pitched forward if he didn't hold it upright.

"Good morning, Mr. Godfrey," said the baker as the unlikely pair went past her patisserie. "Have you made a new friend?" The woman chuckled and Godfrey forced a smile, his face red.

Godfrey caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye. His embarrassment forgotten, he cast around, trying to see what it was. He saw another quick, darting motion. Whatever it was seemed impossibly fast and appeared to be circling him. He held the dummy-Peri at arm's length, and swung round with it like a shield as he turned one way then the other, trying to catch a glimpse of the thing that stalked him.

Out of nowhere, the same whirlwind which he had seen take the Doctor's friend earlier sprang up before him. Godfrey shrieked, flung the mannequin into the maelstrom and ran down the street.

He didn't get far before the Doctor intercepted him, arresting his panicked flight and taking him firmly by the shoulders.

"It's all right, Godfrey! It's gone."

Panting, Godfrey looked back. The street was empty.

"Sorry, Doctor," he said, awkwardly.

"Oh don't worry, I got the energy reading I needed. It looks familiar, but I'll need to get back to the TARDIS to analyze it. Come along, Godfrey," he called as he strode away.

Peri was back in her own cell, sitting on the floor, hugging her knees. She looked up when the gloomy

silence was broken by a rising whooshing sound, and saw the same strange cyclone which had whisked her here. Materializing outside her cell, the strange, blank-faced captor she had seen earlier was holding a body.

Without paying her any attention, the gaoler seemed to press a control high up on the wall outside Peri's cell. She heard the door next to hers clang open. Peri held her breath, desperately hoping the hole she made between the two cells wouldn't be noticed.

After what seemed like an age, she heard a thud, which she guessed was the new prisoner being thrown into the neighbouring cell. A moment later, their captor reached up to press the unseen control again and the door closed.

Once the coast was clear, Peri quietly crawled over to the gap in the wall. Pausing to listen for sounds from the wider cave, she climbed through once again.

The second figure in the adjacent cell was just as still as the first, lying on its side, facing away from Peri. She silently moved over to the new prisoner and gently rolled the prone body onto its back.

Peri gasped. It was a dummy, like one you'd see in a shop window. But this one was wearing some crudely made pink shorts and T-shirt. She looked at it for a moment in confusion, then quickly stood up and backed away from the figure. She remembered the Doctor once telling her over dinner about his friend Jo Grant, and how they had battled deadly mannequins when they first met. She thought of the smooth, featureless face of her abductor. Was it this old enemy of the Doctor who had taken her?

The Doctor always enjoyed the incredulous reaction of new passengers in the TARDIS, but Godfrey's incredulity was directed elsewhere, much to the Doctor's irritation.

"You can go anywhere in time and space?" the tailor was asking, "And you wear clothes from Colony Twenty-Six?!"

"Apparel oft proclaims the man," the Doctor intoned, as he busied himself at the TARDIS controls. He stopped to study one of the screens set into the console. It began filling up with information incomprehensible to Godfrey. "Aha!" the Doctor cried triumphantly. "Found it." But his face fell as some red text scrolled up. "Oh dear."

"What is it, Doctor?" asked Godfrey.

"I know what the Chimera is," replied the Time Lord. "And it's one of the deadliest things in the universe."

Peri studied the dummy from the far wall of the cell. It didn't move. And the more she looked, she realized that its head looked kind of loose. Summoning all her courage, she walked back over and, with a quick wrench, pulled the head from the body.

It seemed like an ordinary mannequin. What on Earth was going on with this crazy planet? she wondered. The people all dress like the Doctor, and they lock up tourists and shop-window dummies.

Peri had an idea. She grabbed one of the arms and, with little effort, was able to prise it off too. She made her way to the bars, and began reaching up with the plastic arm to roughly the spot where she had seen her captor operate a control to open and close the cell doors.

After a few minutes of scraping the dummy's fingers against bare rock, she hit what felt like metal. Clumsily tracing the outline of a metal box set in the cave wall between cells, she then jabbed as hard as she could into the middle of it. A couple of attempts later, she felt a button depress and the door swung open.

The TARDIS had materialized on a rough path halfway up a mountain. The Doctor and Godfrey stepped out and took in their surroundings. The two gaudily dressed men stood out vividly against the green backdrop. Several miles away, towards the coast, Godfrey could see the distinctive white buildings of the colony gleaming in the sun.

“There’s nothing out here, Doctor,” the tailor said.

“I detected a cave further up this escarpment,” replied the Doctor. “If what I think is waiting for us inside is really there, we need to tread very carefully.”

The Doctor led the way upwards, feet crunching on the scree. Presently, they could see a large cave mouth in a sheer cliff face.

When they reached the entrance, both men stood to one side, trying not to be seen. The Doctor poked his head quickly into the cave and then withdrew. “Too dark to see anything,” he said quietly.

Before Godfrey could protest, the Doctor slipped into the darkness. Godfrey took a last lingering look at the town where he lived, off in the distance, and followed.

They sidled along the wall, trying to remain unseen. After a narrow, dark tunnel, the cave opened out into a larger cavern. There were cells set into the walls, and some artificial lights picked out their bars.

Suddenly the Doctor barged into Godfrey, knocking him to the ground. A second later, a resounding clang echoed around the large space. Godfrey looked up and saw a long metal spear protruding from the wall where he had just been standing. The Doctor dragged him to his feet and they ran, crouching as more projectiles were hurled in their direction.

They took cover behind a large rock formation, just as Godfrey spotted what was firing at them. A tall, lean figure wrapped in tattered shreds of dark clothing robotically pointed its arms in their direction.

“Doctor!”

Both men looked over at the sound of Peri’s plaintive cry. She ran full pelt across the open space and into one of two open cells. Their assailant’s head jerkily followed her progress, and turned to follow her. It fired one of its deadly spears into the room they had just seen Peri enter. It seemed to run out of ammunition at this point, and raised its arms as if to strangle her as it entered the cell.

The Doctor and Godfrey followed. As they got closer, Godfrey saw a female figure impaled by a spike, pinned to the back wall of the cell as the Chimera advanced upon it.

“Peri...” the Doctor said forlornly, as the monster jerkily raised its right arm and chopped down, crushing its victim’s head.

The Doctor and Godfrey looked away, horrified.

“We’re too late,” the Doctor whispered. He sounded utterly bereft.

Godfrey didn’t know what to say.

“Doctor!”

Godfrey whirled round to see Peri running out of the adjacent cell. Confused, Godfrey looked back at the Chimera and realized it was actually attacking his old shop-window dummy.

“I need a leg up!” she called and pointed at a box set into the wall about nine feet high, outside the cell.

The Doctor immediately knew what she meant, and cupped his hands together. He launched Peri up and she slammed her hand against the button on the box. The cell door closed.

“There’s a hole in the wall through to the next cell,” Peri told the Doctor. “That’s how I got out.”

The two friends quickly did the same with the next lock button along. The Chimera was trapped.

The Doctor gave Peri a mock-reprimanding look. "I thought it had got you," he admonished with a smile.

"No, there was a dummy in there. I stood it up to look like I was still in the cell."

"I see," replied the Doctor. He turned to Godfrey. "I'm afraid it's in no fit state to go back in your window."

They watched as the Chimera strained against the bars of the cell.

"What is that thing?" asked Godfrey.

"A Raston Guerrilla Robot," replied the Doctor. "It must have been here for centuries. It's an early model; the later ones move like lightning. Still, we're very fortunate it's not still running at full power. The Rastons originally came from this part of the galaxy. This chap must be all that's left of some long-forgotten war. He'd have been programmed to take prisoners wearing a particular uniform, or maybe a race with a certain coloured carapace."

"That's why the people here wear so many different colours," Peri realized.

"Yes – and because it's very stylish," replied the Doctor. "You know, I always thought you were a fashion victim, Peri. Today, that was almost literally true."

Peri gave a wry smile.

Godfrey considered what this meant. "So, we can wear what we want now?" he asked, thinking about the fashions he could create.

"Well, you could I suppose," said the Doctor dubiously. "But remember, style never goes out of fashion."

The Raston robot had started chopping against the bars of its prison, and was starting to make some impact on widening them.

"Um, Doctor..." said Peri.

"Oh yes, better do something about our friend here." Tentatively the Doctor made his way to the cell, and produced the device Godfrey had seen him use to scan the Chimera earlier. With a darting motion, he held the gadget against the robot's head, and it emitted a keening sound. The Raston froze, then, stiff as a board, fell backwards and hit the ground.

A short time later, the TARDIS was back in the square where they had first arrived. Word had spread quickly of their return, and already Godfrey was being inundated with orders for "normal" clothes. Some of the colonists had started dumping their awful patchwork coats in the street to make a bonfire.

"I'll need to take on some apprentices at this rate," he said, beaming. "Bigger premises..."

Peri grinned back at him. "Best of luck," she said, shaking the tailor by the hand. She looked around for the Doctor. He appeared, walking towards the TARDIS with an armful of coats, trousers and waistcoats.

"I'm really overwhelmed by your generosity, Godfrey," he said. "But I'm worried I'm not leaving you with much stock!"

Godfrey replied, "Don't worry, Doctor, it's the least I can do..." The Doctor shrugged modestly. "Anyway, I won't be making any more of this stuff."

"Oh?" The Doctor seemed to finally notice that a huge pyre of colourful coats was being constructed in the middle of the square. "Oh."

Muttering under his breath, the Doctor shouldered the TARDIS doors open, carrying his haul of new clothes with him.

“Goodbye,” said Peri as she followed the Doctor into the TARDIS, feeling she had to be polite for both of them.

Godfrey watched as the blue box disappeared with a creaking, rasping sound. He turned and hurried back to his shop, his mind reeling with ideas for new designs.

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Ten

by Nick Walters

“BESHESHRA”, AFTER THE REIGN, AND BEYOND

Princess Inomasp opened her eyes and rose to her feet. The Doctor was still standing there, still beautiful, still looking at her with those imploring brown eyes.

He was talking, his words weaving an intoxicating web around Princess Inomasp.

“Come with me to the world of Florana. It’s like this, only prettier. See the snows fall on the city of Shurr on the planet Ribos. Watch the sun set over the Eye of Orion. Go Aggedor hunting with the Peladon Royal Family. Quaff wine with Prince Reynart of Tara. And – know that you can, you will, you must, rule over them all!”

As she gazed into those eyes, the world seemed to tilt and wobble around her. Instead of standing on a beach, she was now in a big white dome, with sea creatures swimming impossibly above her head, and the Doctor had changed; though still handsome, his hair was longer, his eyes blue, and his clothes stranger.

Reality wobbled again and all was as before.

Something happened deep within Princess Inomasp. Something long dead sputtered to life. Something once dried up became irrigated. Something very deep rose to the surface. “Very well, Doctor. You have won the heart of Princess Inomasp.” She held out a hand.

The Doctor took her hand, and guided her towards the blue box, his TARDIS.

“One last thing,” she said, turning back to the oceans. “Creatures of the sea! I do decree... that you get on with your lives – without me!”

That said, she turned back to the Doctor, and smiled. The Doctor smiled back. The universe did backflips and breakdanced.

The Doctor and Princess Inomasp entered the TARDIS, which then, with its customary roaring and groaning, faded out of existence, leaving only the palace of coral, the empty beach, and the wide blue ocean.

And after a few moments, all that faded away, leaving only darkness and silence, forever.

The Doctor closed the TARDIS door and watched as Princess Inomasp wandered slowly around the console room. “It is like an undersea palace!” she said. Then she came across Dr. Nathan O’Ghoosk, who was slumped gasping on one of the chairs near the console. She pointed at him with a long finger. “Another strange creature! Who is this?”

“Never mind him,” said the Doctor through gritted teeth. He walked up to Princess Inomasp and grabbed her hands. “Listen to me. You’re not really Princess Inomasp, you’re an avatar, the virtual representation of someone called Proxitine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian, a human being who uploaded herself and became information. Do you remember?”

Princess Inomasp frowned and shook herself free of the Doctor’s grip. “These words are alien! Take me to these new worlds! To my new subjects!”

“I lied,” said the Doctor. “There are no new worlds, no subjects for you. There can’t be. There is nothing for you.”

“What! But you promised!” wailed Princess Inomasp.

“Hey, man, quit harshing her buzz,” droned O’Ghoosk.

The Doctor ignored him. “I said what you wanted to hear just to get you in here. You – or rather the real Inomasp – obviously had some plan, which involved Dr. O’Ghoosk here, but it’s gone wrong. Your personality is corrupted. The former Inomasp no longer exists, just this jumble of mixed-up memories in a fantasy realm. And as a result, people are dying!”

Princess Inomasp turned away. “Leave me alone!”

“Yeah, man, leave her alone.” O’Ghoosk had risen to his feet. Princess Inomasp ran to him and he embraced her.

They kissed.

“Look, O’Ghoosk, this isn’t a chat room! People are dying! Your friends and colleagues!”

But O’Ghoosk wasn’t listening. He was gazing into Princess Inomasp’s eyes.

“She’s not real,” said the Doctor coldly. “She’s just a corrupt collection of algorithms, a muddled memory of a real person. She’s only still here because of the TARDIS’s state of temporal grace.” The Doctor moved to the console, flicked some levers, twisted some dials. The TARDIS landed in Sphinx-Fordton UltraMeg’s Conference Room Two on Novatron Station. The Doctor activated the scanner screen. Emergency lighting had activated, and many of the floating bodies appeared to be dead, or at least unconscious.

The Doctor glanced at the IT Director and the avatar, locked in embrace.

“Sorry, but this can’t go on.”

He opened the TARDIS doors.

The avatar Princess Inomasp, all that remained of the woman called Proxitine Inomasp Beshesh-delta-Sidian, simply vanished, as if she had been switched off. As, indeed, she had been.

Dr. Nathan O’Ghoosk found himself hugging air. “Eh? Where’s she gone?”

The Doctor kept his eyes fixed on the screen. “Nowhere. She was never here.”

“Harsh.”

On the screen, the Doctor saw that lighting and gravity had returned to normal, and people were beginning to pick themselves up, having fallen suddenly back to the floor. To the Doctor’s relief, the only injuries appeared to be broken bones. “Get out.”

“Huh?”

“Get out, O’Ghoosk, and go and help your colleagues.”

The Doctor didn’t even look as Dr. Nathan O’Ghoosk exited the TARDIS. He dematerialized his ship and sent it into temporal orbit. Saved the day again, he thought. You hero.

But at what cost? The Doctor looked down at his right hand. “I’ll never get my ring back now,” he muttered.

Farbis and Bence picked themselves up off the floor. Bence had fallen across the back of a chair, and there was a massive pain in his left side. “I think I’ve broken a rib. Or two,” he gasped.

Farbis’s head was covered in blood from a deep cut on his forehead. The skin Bence could see was horribly papery white.

“I was right. It was the day of doom!”

“Don’t be such a drama queen! Still alive, aren’t we?”

Bence helped his colleague up, and they limped away from the scene. Thankfully the alarms had stopped. People were picking themselves up and walking, hobbling, or in some cases crawling away

from the scene of disaster.

On the stage, Desdemona Fordton made an announcement, “Normal service has been resumed.” Her usual calm, collected voice was shaky. “A full investigation will be launched into what went wrong.” There was a pause. “Take the rest of the day off, valued colleagues. Or the week, if you need it.” There was a click as she switched her lapel mike off.

Bence and Farbis bumped into a figure in green cords and a red T-Shirt. O’Ghoosk! He looked more spaced-out than usual.

“This is all your fault, you know!” snarled Farbis. “Bloody mess you’ve made of it.”

Such gross insubordination was usually punishable by secondment to the algae farms, but in the circumstances, Farbis got away with it.

O’Ghoosk regarded Bence with imploring eyes. Bence felt sorry for the man. It wasn’t his fault the system had crashed. One thing above all was bothering Bence: “Who the heck was that skinny bloke in the brown suit?”

O’Ghoosk shrugged. “I dunno, man, don’t ask me! I think I’m having some sort of flashback.”

Bence exchanged a puzzled glance with Farbis, and the two colleagues shuffled away.

O’Ghoosk stared around open-mouthed at the scene of carnage. “Oh noes,” he groaned. “Looks like the end of my career!” Then he remembered. During his research into a new operating system for the company, hadn’t he come across another solution, a back-up in case INOMASP had failed? Well, INOMASP *had* failed – but the Board were just going to *love* BOSS!

Next Segment
THE SPACE WAR MUSEUM, NOW, AGAIN

Wouldn't Be Dead for Quids

by Paul Sutton

Tegan stepped out of the TARDIS and immediately felt the vastness of the room. “Six hundred and forty square metres,” the Doctor had told them definitively, reading from the console instruments with satisfaction. “Give or take,” he’d added after a considered pause. “Seventeen-point-four metres to its highest point. Sizable.” “That’s about the same as in yards, right?” Tegan had asked, giving up on her mental arithmetic. The Doctor’s answer had been a tight-lipped look of forbearance. “Don’t blame me,” she’d retaliated, “blame the Commonwealth.”

The TARDIS had landed in a corner, hard up against dark, panelled walls. Above a height of about ten feet, the surface gave way to a milky glass-like substance, which then rose on all sides like a perfectly smooth geological formation, arcing seamlessly into a dome. Whether sunlight was filtering through it or it was itself an unfeasibly large lamp, Tegan had no way of knowing, but that was where the illumination was coming from. As far as she could see, which was right to the other side of this shadowless space, the only other thing in here with them, out towards the centre across an immaculate expanse of herringbone parquet, was a small glass case resting on a tapering, jet-black pedestal.

“Have you said hello yet?”

Tegan didn’t jump; she’d noticed Turlough out of the corner of her eye leave the TARDIS, sneaking up behind her. He always seemed to be sneaking somewhere, on his sneakered tiptoes, in his public-school uniform worn aerodynamically tight.

“Who to?”

The Sneaker gestured to the pedestal. “To whomever. This is obviously a reception area of some kind.”

“Really? I thought it was more like a museum.”

“A museum with one exhibit,” Turlough scoffed, circling her. “I think I can say, with my more comprehensive experience of alien cultures, that this, Tegan, is a reception area.” He looked about them and added as though from deeper consideration, “Perhaps a boarding zone for a transportation hub.”

“Big-note yourself much there, Space Boy?”

Turlough turned to face her. “There was an Australian boy in my year at Brendon, you know,” he said, his tone full of the awkward superciliousness she was used to from him. He was cocky yet unsure of himself in a way that Tegan found mildly endearing. “I barely understood a word he said either.”

Tegan pulled a face to convey insouciance at this. “It means you’re full of yourself,” she informed him, “as you well know. And if you think—”

The air was suddenly filled with the punching trill of an alarm system.

Tegan started; Turlough, wild-eyed, wringing his hands, took a step back towards the TARDIS... just as the Doctor emerged urgently from it.

“Tegan,” he said in exasperation. “What did you touch?”

“And you needn’t start either!” she told him, raising her voice above the din.

It wasn’t anything personal, his continually assuming everything was her fault. Not really. The Doctor treated all humans that way. Well, similarly at any rate. And Tegan had always been the only

human in the TARDIS, so maybe it just seemed exaggerated. Maybe the next person to come on board would be from Earth. Tegan smiled. *Two humans! The Doctor would probably implode!* Maybe this was Earth. Quite a bit after her time if it was though, judging by the ceiling. And that alarm was like nothing she'd ever heard before.

As abruptly as it had started, the alarm cut off.

“Doctor?” Turlough inquired. Tegan could hear the concern in his voice.

“I don't think that was us,” the Doctor reassured them, avoiding Tegan's eye, she noted. “That was someone turning off an alarm system.”

“Thieves?”

“Turning off rather than disabling.”

“Someone's starting work, you mean,” said Tegan. “Like in a museum?”

“Or reception area,” Turlough interjected combatively.

“Hmm,” intoned the Doctor ambivalently. Then: “Oh, not just *a* museum, Tegan.” Tegan shot a look at Turlough, who, in concession, replied by pulling the same face she had treated him to moments before.

“The British one?” she hazarded, on a roll.

His back to her, hands in trouser pockets, craning his neck back to better take in the ceiling, the Doctor said, “I'm afraid not. Not unless it's undergone a fairly extensive refurbishment, and has been transported several thousand light years in a roughly south-southwesterly direction. Although come to think of it, that kind of thing isn't exactly unheard of. No.” He spun round, smiling intently, leaning in. “This place is something on a far grander scale.”

“More than just the one artefact on offer then, I take it,” Turlough said dryly.

“Oh, this isn't the half of it. Actually, this isn't the approximately twenty-seven thousandth of it.”

“You're serious?” Tegan asked. “We're in one of twenty-seven thousand rooms all like this one?” The Doctor's eyes and smile widened in affirmation.

“Approximately.”

Tegan looked around them more carefully. Midway along the panelling of each wall, she now saw were large, heavy looking double-doors.

“This is—”

But the Doctor was cut off as the nearest doors opened outwards.

Three people entered, two women and a man. The woman at their head, noticing the new arrivals, made straight for them. The other two followed at her heels.

“They told us you would be arriving tomorrow by shuttle,” the woman said officiously. “I told them, why would they put themselves through all that when they can transmat?” She glanced at the TARDIS. “Is that your orbital transmat? Interesting design. Personalized, of course. Isn't it a bit big for just the three of you?”

“We like the leg room,” said the Doctor, not missing a beat.

“Yes, well, I suppose there's never any guarantee that good taste necessarily comes with the kind of money you people make, is there.”

Ruffled, Tegan said, ““You people'? What's that supposed to mean?””

“Tegan,” said the Doctor in warning. Tegan bridled. To the woman the Doctor said, “Forgive her, she was looking forward to a shuttle ride.”

Tegan laughed sarcastically. “You mean this isn't Disneyland?”

“I'm the Doctor, by the way. These are my... associates Tegan and Turlough.”

The woman's manner left no doubt that she considered introductions to be beneath her and her

own associates, although the man at least seemed to have the decency to look embarrassed by this. Tegan caught his eye and he immediately looked at his shoes. She had the idea that he must be some kind of trainee whatever-they-were, although he was dressed just the same as the two women, in a soft-looking, thin grey suit, the jacket zipped up to the chin.

When it became clear the boss-woman wasn't going to say anything, the Doctor explained to Tegan and Turlough, "These are the Head Curators. They're responsible for countless items here from cultures throughout several galaxies and across hundreds of millennia. Here at the Walker-McCutcheon Repository for Other-world Antiquities and Curios." He added pointedly, "Which of course as you know is where we are."

"Catchy name," Tegan observed wryly, provoking a brief pursing of the Doctor's lips. Addressing the curators, the Doctor said, "Remind me, how have you organized it? By solar system?"

"No. We have established a fixed timeline."

"Fascinating. So a visitor can compare any given moment in one galaxy with that of another."

Turlough said, "Isn't that a bit impractical? I mean the exhibits could turn out to be miles apart."

Loftily, as though it explained everything, the woman said, "Intra-transmat." To the Doctor, whom she seemed to be warming to, she said, "Of course there are many unidentifiable items that cannot be placed, either chronologically or spatially, yet we nevertheless seek to provide suppositious narratives for these wherever possible – unlike other, lax establishments I could mention."

"Ah yes. You're thinking of course of the Braxiatel Collection." Tegan thought she could hear a touch of mischievousness in the Doctor's voice, and sure enough the woman's nose wrinkled in disdain.

"Irving Braxiatel cannot hope to compete with us on so many levels."

"I didn't know that the study and preservation of history was a competition."

"Everything is a competition, Doctor."

"I see."

Boss-lady frowned. "If you don't mind my saying so, I find that attitude a strange one coming from a cleaner."

"A cleaner?" Tegan exclaimed. "Is that what you think we are?"

"What my friend means," the Doctor interjected preventatively, "is that no one should be limited by definition to their profession. Isn't that what they say?"

"You can start whenever you're ready. I would recommend immediately. We haven't been able to trace the source of the... disturbance."

"Well, no, you wouldn't be expected to. You sound quite worried, if I may say."

"You have the equipment?"

"Of course. It's in the TAR— It's in our transmat. You know, your feedback could be extremely useful to us. We rely on people like you, you know, in our... line of work. So if you could just tell us what you think it is we're dealing with here..."

"Just what we communicated to your organization: a disturbance."

"Yes you said. What kind of a disturbance?"

"That is for you to ascertain. Are you sure you're professionals?"

"If you could just..." The Doctor raised his eyebrows encouragingly. "It would be a great help."

The man looked up from his feet. "Emissions," he said nervously. "We've registered emissions somewhere in the museum."

Teasingly, Tegan chipped in with, "One of your unidentified bits of history is leaking, you mean,"

earning her a glare from the Doctor.

“But you don’t know from where exactly,” he went on, addressing the man.

The woman said, with unrestrained impatience directed at Tegan, “Obviously.”

To himself, quietly and by way of summation, the Doctor said, “And we’re the cleaners, come to clean up the mess.”

Turlough muttered, “Nothing to worry about, eh, Doctor? Just a containment breach in one unidentified object among millions that could either be next door or fifty miles away.”

Turning on him an admonishing look, the Doctor said, “Probably nothing. Why don’t you pop back into our transmat there and scan for the usual radiation bands.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Turlough said, grudgingly playing the part.

“Oh, and Turlough.” The boy stopped with his hand on the TARDIS door and turned back. The Doctor took a step towards him and lowered his voice, but Tegan was still close enough to hear. “Be particularly on the lookout for artron energy, yes? We don’t want a sarcophagus in a distant hall turning out to be the Master’s TARDIS without forewarning, do we. Good!”

“No, Doctor,” said Turlough, in that weary way he had that made it sound like he was always humouring you, and he disappeared into the interior of the time-and-space machine.

To the curators, the Doctor said, “Now then. Perhaps we could use this intra-transmat of yours to get to a central monitoring hub of some kind, help me get my bearings.”

“Hang on a minute,” Tegan chipped in. “What am I going to do?”

“Tegan. Yes.” The Doctor paused. Tegan knew what was coming. “Stay here and don’t touch anything.”

She watched as the four of them headed out into the room and towards a cubicle-type-thing against the opposite wall – a little smaller than the TARDIS, resembling an upright pellet, opaque like the ceiling – the Doctor visibly energized, all the while asking questions, the male curator giving him inaudible to Tegan but apparently informative answers.

Tegan felt neither use nor ornament. What was the point if she couldn’t help? She had a sudden realization that she just wasn’t enjoying herself. In fact, when had she last enjoyed herself?

She felt a dull twinge of pain behind her eyes as though just thinking about it was giving her a headache.

She could help Turlough, she supposed. But he’d just be sulky and silent, probably just slouch off and let her get on with staring at whatever monitors needed to be stared at. Well stuff that, she’d explore on her own! Don’t touch anything indeed! As if she would in a museum – she wasn’t a child.

Tegan turned to the doors in the wall behind the TARDIS – the closest, and in a direction satisfyingly opposite to that taken by the Doctor – intending to stomp off through them, but just then her head began to throb again and she stopped. The doors in the right-hand wall were... a better choice, weren’t they? She should go that way instead, shouldn’t she? Yes. Of course. What had she been thinking...?

A warm sensation of calm flushed slowly though Tegan. And as she made her way at a measured pace across the parquet, the pain in her head subsided, settled into a rhythmic pulse that was barely perceptible, and in any case not entirely unpleasant.

In the TARDIS, Turlough glanced up at the scanner just in time to see the image of Tegan – that ridiculous leather miniskirt, the “pop star” Jackson Pollock top – disappear through the doors.

“She’s off again then,” he said to himself archly. He returned his attention to the instruments on

the console panel he was working at.

It was so much easier to set up this kind of wide-sweeping, catch-all detection net since the Doctor had reconfigured the controls in here – it seemed that from anywhere now, at any minute, a keyboard bristling with functions might sprout and make itself useful – and so Turlough had already completed the task the Doctor had set him. Or almost. One hand hovered for a moment over the execute key – then fell instead upon a series of switches and recessed pads to one side. “And not forgetting,” he said, as though he hadn’t actually until the last minute, “the artron energy.”

He brought the program online, and felt suddenly bored. Looking at the scanner again, he saw that Tegan hadn’t closed the doors behind her.

“Born in a barn,” he commented. “Well I’m not coming to find you when you get lost.”

Turlough looked around and began to wonder what to do with himself.

Not all the rooms contained just a single exhibit. Their decor, lighting and size were all the same – precisely so, it seemed – but each successive space Tegan had passed through had been home to anything from one treasure or relic or remnant, or whatever they were, to dozens. Sometimes even, in crossing to the next pair of double doors, Tegan had had to navigate low, maze-like corridors formed by the close arrangement of maybe a hundred of the pedestals. She’d seen crown jewels, pottery fragments, scraps of inked animal hide; technological devices whose purposes she could only guess at; shards and lumps of half-destroyed or decayed stone or metal, or horribly organic-looking things that she doubted anyone could enlighten her about. But she hadn’t lingered over any, much less inspected for signs of anything acting up; she didn’t have time, she had to... What did she have to do?

Tegan felt a faint tickle at the back of her mind. Did she have to be somewhere?

Unbidden, just behind the tickle, Auntie Vanessa’s voice said then, “He wants to be your young man. You can always tell by the way they sweat.” “I haven’t got time for all that now, not with the new job.” “Have we got any clean wine glasses?” “On the draining board, behind you.” “Well he’s keen. And he only lives upstairs. He could just nip down whenever you felt... you know.” “Auntie!” “I’m just saying, you take happiness when and where you can in this life, girl. If it happens to be attached to a man so much the better.”

Tegan kept moving.

She’d been walking for more than an hour by the time she came to the final doors. She knew they were the final doors – the final ones she needed to pass through – because, as she turned the two crystal, diamond-shaped knobs, it felt like opening an airlock in her mind: an inrush of excitement, of achievement; a thrill of being welcomed – of being expected.

Tegan pushed open the doors and stepped forward.

As she moved inside, the curious light from the domed ceiling began to dim. The doors clicked gently closed behind her, cutting off all illumination from the previous room. About twenty yards ahead and to her left, a greenish glow appeared beneath a single pedestal, picking it out from among the many. The welcoming feeling changed then, became more... insistent; as though she had gone from being an honoured guest to someone who, while still held in high regard, was respectfully required to fulfil a duty here – one which could under no circumstances be deferred. The understanding chilled her, yet at the same time, Tegan found herself wondering why on Earth she would ever choose to defer it.

“You know, if he just happened to decide to pop downstairs this evening to wish you luck,” said Auntie Vanessa’s voice in her head, “I’m just saying it wouldn’t be such a bad thing. He could bring some chips with him if we’re lucky. Or ‘crisps.’ Bloody stupid word, if you ask me.” “There are more things to life than boys, Auntie.” “Name me three and keep a straight face while you’re doing it! Now, pour us another of them cheeky Chardonnays, and I’ll explain to you about the birds and the bees. No disrespect to y’ mother but, when we were growing up, she thought the only thing a boy kept in his trousers was gum and a pot of Brylcreem.”

The green light stayed low to the floor, but was radiating strongly out across the parquet. As it spread, it picked out the bases of the other pedestals around her more than well enough for Tegan to avoid bumping into them in her now otherwise pitch-black surroundings.

When she reached the source of the light, she realized it had been contracting, drawing back in, in step with her progress, until now it was no more than a circle in which she stood. In the next moment, it began to project slowly upwards, to form a column surrounding her. With nervous elation, Tegan looked down... and laid eyes upon the item she’d sought out – which had sought her out.

It was a lozenge shape, no more than two feet by one and perhaps six inches high, black with rounded ends. Still liquid – also black, or perhaps just clear water – covered its uppermost face, reaching precisely to the edges and no farther. It almost seemed to be a lidless container, like a narrow cake tin, collapsed in on itself with no surface at all.

It called to her.

Tegan touched it.

“He offered you a lift?”

Tegan blinked rapidly, frowned, screwed up her eyes in confusion and forced concentration. Auntie Vanessa? The voice sounded different now somehow, as though it was outside her head. Tegan’s mind felt muzzy, her thoughts jumbled, like she’d just come to, having nodded off in the chair for an instant. Chair? Hadn’t she been standing? How come she was sitting down? She opened her eyes, looking down at her lap. Some funny kind of green light or glow or something played on the backs of her legs. She must be tired. Flaking out. Can’t keep up with Auntie Vanessa... She should go to bed. Where was her bed? Where was she? Wasn’t this a... she wanted to say museum. Why would she think she was in a museum? She was so obviously in a kitchen. The vagueness behind her eyes began to clear. Yes, she was in a kitchen. Her kitchen. Sitting at the table. And there was no crazy green light under her chair.

“You know what that means. If he wants to take you tomorrow, he’s got ulterior motives, girl. You’re in there!”

Sitting at the kitchen table with Auntie Vanessa.

The tiredness, or whatever it was, lifted entirely and the real world came back into sharp focus.

“There’s a time and a place for ulterior motives, Auntie.”

“And the front seat of a car first thing in the morning’s as good as any in my experience.”

“Auntie...”

“All right, all right. But cancel the taxi, I’ll take you in the Mini.”

“Fine. But that means we’re not opening a second bottle, right? I’ve still got to be up in the morning before God.”

“So have I now!”

“Yeah, but you’re just the chauffeur.” She smirked mischievously, then stood and walked over to

the kettle. “You can come straight back here and go back to bed. I’ve got to do a full day’s work!”

“Cooing at all the dishy pilots, my heart bleeds.”

Tegan turned and pulled a face; Auntie Vanessa mimicked it exaggeratedly.

“Actually,” Tegan told her in a gently informing, affectedly self-important tone, “air stewardesses have always performed a vital role in the world of passenger aviation.”

“Strewth, hold onto your hand luggage, here comes the in-flight commercial,” her aunt informed the room.

“And modern stewardesses,” Tegan went on pointedly, ferrying the kettle to the sink, “are key not only to the physical comfort of the people in their charge, but are also called upon to continually monitor the mood of a flight’s complement so as to identify any instances of passengers experiencing heightened anxiety levels, and are trained in a number of techniques designed to give reassurance in such circumstances.”

“Yeah, like slapping them round the mush and telling them to get a grip.”

“The modern stewardess is also fully trained in emergency procedures, which time after time have been proven to save lives in extreme situations.”

Auntie Vanessa raised her empty glass in salute. “In other words, stick your head between your legs...” she began. Tegan grinned, raising the kettle. “...and kiss your ass-sumptions of survival goodbye!” they finished together, laughing loudly. Tegan threw a dishcloth at her aunt’s head.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Auntie Vanessa announced, catching it, “I give you my talented young niece: the world’s only cross between a trick-cyclist and Skippy the bloody Bush Kangaroo, guaranteed to put you right, and get y’out of schtuck at the same time. *What’s that you say, Skip? The businessman in seat twelve has had too much to drink and is acting like a dick? Well, then let’s go box his ears for him, shall we?!*”

Let’s go box his ears... The expression resonated strongly with Tegan.

She’d been seven when the family had moved out of Brisbane up to Caloundra. When Auntie Vanessa had come to stay for Christmas, Tegan had been in her new school for a good couple of months – still feeling alone, still on the bullies’ radar. Auntie Vanessa’s arrival had been proof that her old life, her real life, still existed and she’d hugged her a little too hard in hello.

“They call me Goat,” Tegan told her, not allowing herself to cry. “Why the bloody hell do they do that?” “Cuz daddy’s born in Yug’slav’ya. They say that’s where goats come from.” Auntie Vanessa had grasped her firmly by both wrists, looked her dead in the eye. “You know their names?” Tegan nodded. “You know where the biggest one lives?” Nod, nod. “Right then. You get yourself over there, girl, and box his ears!”

Tegan hadn’t done it, of course, but the next time Shaun Winters had yelled, “Billy Goat Gruff!” at her, she’d grabbed him by both wrists, looked him dead in the eye and told him he smelled like a gerbil, and that in Yugoslavia her grandparents had fed their goats on rats and gerbils. The poor boy had been called Gerbil for ages after that and had never come near her again. Since that Christmas, Auntie Vanessa’s solution to anything that upset Tegan – the high school dance, college entrance exams, her father’s death – had been that she find someone’s ears to box. It had always helped.

Tegan put down the kettle, stepped quickly to the table, hunkered down, threw her arms around her aunt’s neck.

“What’s all this about then? Eh?”

“I’ve got it all, Auntie,” Tegan said, releasing her. “Nice place to live, new job. You.” Shaun Winter hadn’t made her cry, but she was crying now.

Auntie Vanessa put a hand to Tegan’s face. “Hey! It’s okay. Okay. You all right?”

Tegan laughed. “Christ, Auntie,” she said. ““All right?” I wouldn’t be dead for quids!”

“Good on ya, girl! You deserve it!”

Tegan sat down, dried her eyes.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said, having composed herself. “I’ve loved having you here these past couple of weeks, Auntie Vanessa. What do you say you give up your place, move in here with me permanently?”

Auntie Vanessa’s eyes glistened, her mouth turned down and: nod, nod. And Tegan felt she was looking at her own seven-year-old self, that the circle had completed its turn. Her hand flew to her mouth as the emotion burst forth again.

Through elated sobs, Auntie Vanessa said, “What are we like?” and she made to say more, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. As Tegan wiped her eyes, she saw the guilty look already forming on her aunt’s face.

“Auntie Vanessa,” she said warily, “what have you done?”

Her aunt shrugged quickly, sniffed. “What? Don’t look at me, I’m not expecting anyone.” The expression of innocence she was attempting to assume, however, gave Tegan more than enough cause to doubt that.

“Well, seeing as it’s someone in the house knocking on the flat door, and not out on the step ringing the front-door bell, I’d say the possibilities are pretty limited, wouldn’t you?”

Auntie Vanessa held up her hands. “Like I say...”

“Come on out with it, what did you tell him?”

“Nothing!”

“Aunt-ie...”

“Okay, okay. I just told him you were starting with the airline tomorrow.”

“Well I’ve told him that. I told him that when I got the letter. Why do you think he’s been offering to take me?”

“Yes, but...” Auntie Vanessa winced. “He might have somehow got the idea that for your first tour, they’ve rota-ed you on the Caribbean routes, and that you’ll be island hopping out there for a month.”

“Auntie, I’m doing the Dublin shuttle!”

“Yes, girl,” she said with some insistence. “But if I’d told him you’d be back tomorrow evening, he wouldn’t be here now to declare his undying heaven-only-knows-what before you disappear, would he!”

“No, you’re right, he wouldn’t! Stone the crows, Auntie Vanessa, I don’t need anyone deciding for me when I need a man!”

“Your problem is you’re a victim of your time, girl, you know that? You and your generation have made up your minds that all men are fundamentally rotters, when the truth is you just don’t understand them.”

“I understand men very well, as it goes. I happen to be very much in touch with my animus.”

“Whatever that is. Sounds to me like you might be talking out your animus.” Tegan scowled at her. “Look, you like the boy, don’t you?”

“Sort of. I guess. Yes. Oh, I don’t know!”

The knock came again.

“Why not open the door, dear, and see if we can’t figure out which it is?”

With a parting glare for her interfering, Tegan got up, walked through the living room and answered the door.

And there, of course, was Terry. He seemed smarter than usual somehow. Had he ironed that shirt? His hair appeared less free-range than it usually did. He held both hands behind his back like a headmaster.

“Hi,” he said, “I... just thought I’d come down and wish you *bon voyage*.”

From the kitchen in tones of innocence came, “Who is it, love?”

Over her shoulder, Tegan called, “It’s a nice man wondering whether we’d like to subscribe to *The Watchtower*, Auntie. I’m putting your name down for a lifetime’s worth. Which might not actually turn out to be too long!”

She turned back to Terry...

...and saw that he was outlined by a green glow, like sunshine haloing a supple leaf. Something familiar stirred in her mind, began to hurt deep inside. Tegan screwed up her eyes, shook her head. But the pain didn’t clear. It intensified, radiated out; compressed her eyeballs, caused a vacuum in her ears; it pulled at the muscles in her neck and it shouted at her whole body to stop – stop existing! stop resisting! *come back!*

Tegan opened her eyes. A column of green light was lowering around her like liquid. Someone was shouting at her. Someone was holding her.

“Tegan!”

The face was at first unfamiliar and it scared her a little. But in the next moment, the sickly pale skin, the thick mop of red hair, the thin throttling tie all came together to form a memory.

“Turlough?”

“It’s okay, I’ve got you out of there.” He had one arm around her waist; the other grasped her forearm, keeping her steady.

“I was back with Auntie Vanessa.” She glanced at the smooth lozenge device on the pedestal. Its perfect liquid-surface rippled. “This thing’s some kind of a mind-reading machine: it showed me images of my last night with Auntie Vanessa. But it was so intense. Like I was really there...”

“I don’t think they were just pictures from your past, Tegan,” said Turlough. “The TARDIS registered faint levels of artron energy coming from this room. I think you actually time travelled. Not physically, but somehow in your mind. Come on.”

“How’s that possible?” Tegan realized he was trying to lead her away from the pedestal. She didn’t want to go. She wanted to stay here, by the device. She pushed herself fully upright, wriggled out of Turlough’s arms.

“I don’t know,” Turlough admitted. “But I watched it all.” In answer to her frown, he went on, “You were standing inside a... a tube of green light. The outside of it was like a screen. All the way around it showed a kind of hologramatic image of your memory.”

“Sounds like this thing is more like a hypnotic TV than a time machine. It’s a glorified entertainment centre, that’s all!”

“Using artron energy? No. I don’t know what this device is for, but it could be dangerous. Now think: did you change anything in your past? Did anything happen differently?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I remember what happened. I was just talking to Auntie Vanessa and Terry the night before...”

The memory blurred. She looked down at the device again. She had to touch it; there was something she had to finish – something she wanted to finish...

“The night before what, Tegan? If you can’t remember, then that might mean something.”

“The night before... I went to the doctor’s? Something about the doctor’s. Was I ill? I had a doctor’s appointment?”

“The Doctor? Was this the night before you met the Doctor?”

The Doctor! Saying the name seemed to diminish the presence of the device in her head slightly, lessen its importance to her. And as though it had loosened its grip, Tegan found she could look away from it.

“The Doctor... Right!” she told Turlough, feeling it was little short of a revelation, but one that had still to fully convince her. She couldn’t quite see this Doctor’s face; he was young and blond, wasn’t he? Or... brown curls?... Then the mugginess was shot through with a clear image of hard, blue, wooden lines. “The TARDIS! We broke down! I met the Doctor in the TARDIS because we broke down!”

Turlough grabbed her tightly by the upper arms, roughly jerked her whole body round to face him. A panic seemed to have overtaken him.

“Tegan, this is important. Who was driving? Who was driving, Tegan?”

“Who was... what?”

“Changing a timeline is based on making different decisions, taking a different path. The only decision I saw you make on that screen was accepting your aunt’s offer of a lift to the airport. Was that the way it was supposed to happen, Tegan? Tegan?!”

“The Mini broke down...”

“Your aunt’s Mini!” His excited tone seemed to imply he had deduced something. “If you still remember the Doctor, then I’m guessing the correct timeline is the one where your aunt gives you a lift and you break down.” He let go of her arms, sighing with relief. “I think it’s okay, Tegan. I don’t think you changed anything.”

Change...

In the lay-by, grit on her hands from the tire, three wheels on the Mini...

Auntie Vanessa, small, rigid, like a doll...

Auntie Vanessa grinning and crying in the kitchen... She was going to move in...

Terry had offered to give her a lift...

The Mini broke down...

The kitchen...

Crying...

Happy...

... “‘All right?’ Auntie, I wouldn’t be dead for quids!”

The tear-choked words pulsed and repeated and echoed in her head.

Tegan violently pushed Turlough away, turned and threw herself upon the alien device that she now knew was offering her so much...

...when she looked again, it was just Terry standing before her, no green glow, lit only by the orange

electric light of the street lamps, coming through the transom window of the front door.

Why had she been expecting a green light?

Terry had pulled his arms from behind his back, presenting her with a ribbon-wrapped bottle of wine.

“For you. Congratulations again on the job.”

“Thanks,” said Tegan, taking the gift. “Doesn’t come with any Monster Munch by any chance?”

“I could shoot down to the corner shop for you,” he said, indicating keenly down the hall with his thumb.

“Never mind,” said Tegan with a smile. “Come on in.”

She led him back to the kitchen.

“Terry!” said Auntie Vanessa. “What a surprise! How nice of you to just drop in like this.” And thinking Tegan wasn’t watching, shot him a theatrically executed wink. Give me strength, thought Tegan. “Oh, wine! We were just about to open another bottle. Or I was – Tegan’s complaining about having to go to bed early.”

“Very sensible,” said Terry. Did he sound disappointed? “First day. Can’t have a stewardess sozzled on the job.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t either, really,” conceded Auntie Vanessa. “I’ve got to drive Madam here to the airport at the crack of unearthly.”

To Tegan, Terry said, “Really? I thought you were getting a taxi.”

“Change of plan.”

With concern he said, “Are you sure you’ll get there?”

Auntie Vanessa took umbrage at this. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry, it’s just—”

“A bit fried out she may be, sure, but my old Mini’ll get you where you’re going every time, no bother!”

“Sorry. It’s just that... It doesn’t always start, does it.”

“Doesn’t mean it’ll bloody stop.”

“No. But... Well, I work from home, don’t I,” Terry went on valiantly. “So I could drive you, like I said. I don’t mind. I’d like to.” A blush reddened his cheeks. “And I’d get to spend a bit more time with you before you go away for a couple of weeks.”

“Ah, yes, Terry,” said Auntie Vanessa guiltily. “About that...”

Pushing his case, Terry said, “I think you might stand a better chance of getting there.”

Tegan paused.

“Would you mind, Auntie?”

“No, you young ones go on ahead. I’ll stay in bed.” Then genuinely brightening added, “I think I will have another glass of wine then!”

She reached for the bottle Terry had brought.

To Terry, Tegan said, “Looks like you’re on then!”

A queasiness bubbled up in her stomach; a dizziness bloomed behind her eyes. For a second, it seemed to Tegan as though she would collapse. But in the next moment both sensations subsided, faded and were replaced by a curious feeling of calm and well-being. She smiled at Terry. Terry smiled back.

From upstairs came the faint but familiar sound of the front-door bell ringing in Terry’s flat.

Tegan said, “Expecting someone?”

Terry frowned. “No. I’d, um, better just go and... Sorry, back in a sec.”

As he left, Auntie Vanessa turned to Tegan, clasping a hand to her chest in the tradition of melodrama, and said, “My God, was that Tegan Keirsten Jovanka accepting the possibility she may actually have a use for a man? I never thought I’d see the day!”

Tegan giggled.

Auntie Vanessa picked up the unopened bottle of wine and waved it suggestively at her.

Overcome by a sudden celebratory urge, Tegan moved lightly to the draining board and retrieved the corkscrew.

As she brought it back, a crash and a cry came from out in the hallway.

“What was that?”

The front door opened to reveal Terry. He looked taller than he had on the device’s surround-screen.

“Yes?” he said.

Turlough clasped his hands together in front of him, taking a deep breath.

“Hello, Terry,” he began. “Look, you don’t know me, but I’ve got something very important to say to you.”

“How do you know my name? Hey, you’re not selling *The Watchtower*, are you?”

“What? No. Look. What it is, is... You’ve won a prize draw in our magazine’s monthly... competition thing... and we need you to be at home tomorrow morning to receive your... prize.”

It was the best Turlough could come up with, although to be fair, he had had more pressing concerns since noticing the image of his travelling companion on the scanner, standing like a zombie inside some sort of weirdly glowing movie projection of her own life, wrists-deep in what looked impossibly like a block of obsidian. Hacking into the call-send circuit of the museum’s intra-transmat network had been simple; projecting a cone of frequency-matched artron energy from the TARDIS had taken rather more of his attention however, and only when he plunged his hands in on top of Tegan’s had he stopped to think what the hell he was going to say.

It had all been a damn sight easier than coming up with a ruse to convince this Terry guy that he shouldn’t take Tegan to the airport tomorrow. And it wasn’t such a bad ploy, was it? Turlough’s time on Earth had taught him that if humans on this side of the planet were susceptible to anything, it was the offer of getting expensive consumer items cheaply or, for preference, free.

Terry said, “*Reader’s Digest*? Sorry, mate, I don’t think so.” He began to close the door, not unkindly, in Turlough’s face.

Turlough leapt forward. “No, you don’t understand!”

What happened next was more the result of Terry’s hesitancy than Turlough’s physical strength – Turlough knew it the moment he felt the lack of resistance behind the door. The front door flew sharply inwards as Turlough landed against it, hit Terry on the side of the head, and sent him crashing against the wallpapered wall, bringing down a large mirror that hung immediately inside the hallway.

Turlough’s own momentum had him stumbling into the house, stepping awkwardly over the now prone Terry before just about regaining his balance. Terry lay grimacing amid orange-ly twinkling shards of mirror. Blood seeped through the arm of his shirt.

“Terry!”

Turlough looked round to see Tegan and her aunt rushing from their flat.

Instinctively, he turned away: he couldn’t let Tegan see him. Assuming he could still somehow ensure Tegan’s aunt took her to the airport the next morning – *how?* – there was no point doing it only

to set up a paradox at the same time: meeting Tegan before they were supposed to, when she and the Doctor had turned up at Brendon and the Black Guardian had—

His hesitation, he realized then, had given Vanessa enough time to move between him and the front door.

“Oh no you don’t, you dirty little whatname, you’re not going anywhere.” With one hand pointing menacingly in Turlough’s face, she slammed the door shut with the other. “Tegan, call the police!”

He heard Tegan say, “Terry! Are you all right? What happened?”

Glowering at Turlough but addressing Tegan, Vanessa said, “You work some of that air stewardess first-aid magic of yours, love. Then I’ll drive him to Accident and Emergency.”

“No!” Turlough blurted out.

By his side now, right at his shoulder, Tegan said, “What do you mean ‘No’?” Turlough raised a hand to hide his face from her.

If the Mini made an extra journey this evening, it would break down tomorrow for sure. And then Tegan would be lost.

What was he to *do*? He’d managed to get himself here, why couldn’t the rest of it just... sort itself out? Why did the responsibility have to be all *his*?

From the corner of his eye, he saw Tegan kneel to help Terry up, and while she was thus distracted, he risked a quick look askance at her.

He saw a person almost unrecognizable. Her manner, the way she held herself – he sensed it instantly. It was a lightness. An innocence? The absence of a reflection of all the death he knew she’d seen with the Doctor? And it occurred to Turlough in that moment – as Tegan held firmly onto this man she liked and who liked her; as he felt the strong dynamic she and her aunt shared – that perhaps she was better off here; that he should just walk away and leave her to this life...

“I’m sorry, Tegan,” he said loudly, clenching his hands, almost shouting. “I don’t know what to do!”

Then Tegan gave a yelp of pain, doubled over.

The front-door bell rang.

Tegan again felt the queasiness in her stomach. Terry had a steadying arm about her.

“Are you okay?” he was saying. “Tegan?”

The stranger was staring straight at her, but his features were deep in a darkness cast by an intense, green glow that outlined his entire body. He was saying something, apologizing. For attacking Terry, presumably. The more she tried to make out his features, concentrate on his words, the worse the sensation in her stomach seemed to become.

Then she was all but blinded as the same green light flooded the hallway from the direction of the street: the front door was opening. The stranger exclaimed something, loudly and in relief – one word, a name? Tegan squinted into the light. She made out the back of her aunt’s head; over her shoulder, the silhouette of another man. Somehow she knew that both he and Terry’s attacker were not merely standing in the light, they were the source of it.

And coming off this newcomer in waves along with it – as unmistakable as it was inexplicable, conveyed by the way his outlined frame was standing: expectantly, hands in trouser pockets, shoulders back – was a sense of irritation tempered by concern.

The figure entered the house, its features still hidden by light, and addressed Terry.

“Ah, Mr. Bannister.” He spoke hurriedly, giving the impression that he’d brook no delay in the

other's understanding of what he had to say. "I'm... Well, for our purposes, perhaps you should just think of me as the Neighbourhood Watch. I'm afraid I have to inform you that your car has been stolen. Terribly sorry."

The sick feeling rose to Tegan's throat. She felt her body go suddenly heavy, felt hands grabbing her. Then the green was swallowed by black.

Tegan opened her eyes.

She was lying on her bed, in her room in the TARDIS. The Doctor and Turlough were standing over her. The Doctor smiled.

"Tegan. How are you feeling?"

He meant well. He always meant well. She knew that: he was kind. But his smile in that moment hurt her, because it told her that nothing had changed. And she had had the chance to change so much. She wanted to be back there, back in the hallway.

"It was real," she said to Turlough. "All of it. I was there."

Turlough said softly, "We know."

"You were there too," she said, realizing, accusing. "Both of you. It was you!"

Sheepishly, Turlough said, "I saw you were in trouble, so I followed you in. The Doctor rescued us both."

"You attacked Terry!"

"It was an accident."

"And you," she said to the Doctor, "how did you know which was Terry's car?"

"Tegan, the TARDIS is capable of navigating the violent vagaries of the time vortex. The DVLA is hardly what you'd call a closed book to her."

"Don't get all flippant with me!"

"No," the Doctor said, uncomfortably contrite, "you're right. I'm sorry." His tone changed then, became clinical, business-like. "How much do you remember?"

"Why? Afraid I might have changed something?" She sat up to better confront him. "Everything. I remember everything." But uncertainty clouded her thoughts. "I think. How do I know?!"

"Quite. I'm sure it wasn't a pleasant experience for you. But rest assured you've done some good. The device that trapped you, it wasn't the artefact the curators were looking for. We tracked that one down eventually, by the way – cracked outer casing of an interesting little device which..." He stopped, perhaps sensing Tegan's rising frustration with this irrelevance. "Anyway, even though Turlough was scanning for artron energy, your device's output was so low through its shielding that it didn't register. The TARDIS didn't detect anything until Turlough aimed the scan directly at it. If it hadn't reached out for you, found you were susceptible to what it was offering then... Well, if not for you, it would have stayed hidden and active, and who's to tell what it might have got up to?"

"What was it?"

"A nasty little piece of technology. From what he saw, Turlough thinks it was designed to lure people in with memories of when they were last happiest and change their timestream from that point – give them the choice to, as it saw it, be happy again. We don't know its origin, but it was probably used as a combination of therapy and entertainment, hence the hologram."

"That's sick."

"Quite. Cruel certainly. But, in your case, no damage done."

"No damage done? Doctor, I could have stayed there with Auntie Vanessa. She could still be

alive today. Right now.”

“Yes, I’m afraid that is true. And who knows, you and Terry might be married with a mortgage and goodness knows what else.”

“Don’t mock me, Doctor!”

“I’m really not trying to, Tegan. I’m merely saying that the past happened the way it had to. This device was offering you nothing. It was using your life as a spectacle, that’s all. And you’re worth so much more than that, Tegan. You’ve travelled so much in the TARDIS, helped to affect so many changes on so many worlds. Who knows how many lives would have been lost if I’d never met you?”

Tegan pushed herself off her bed.

“So Auntie Vanessa had to die so that... so that Logopolis could survive? So that London could burn to the ground? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Tegan,” the Doctor said gently, but not without impatience.

“Maybe Adric would still be alive if I’d stayed on Earth, had you thought of that?”

“Tegan—”

“Leave me alone!”

She pushed past him and Turlough, out of her room. In the corridor, she paused just long enough to recall which direction the console room was in, then set off the opposite way.

She knew he was right, that everything had to happen the way it had to happen – that Auntie Vanessa was dead, that Adric was dead.

But that night, in the kitchen – with the wine, the laughter, the memories.

I wouldn’t be dead for quids, Auntie Vanessa.

Crying hard, Tegan ran to lose herself in the depths of the Doctor’s time-and-space machine.

Unexpected Item in Bagging Area

by Grace Haddon

“PLEASE SCAN YOUR ITEMS.”

“I’m doing it,” Ace muttered, waving a tin of beans at the self-service machine for the third time. “See? Barcode!”

Finally it beeped. “PLEASE PLACE YOUR ITEM IN THE BAGGING AREA.”

She sighed and stuffed it into the carrier bag. A normal shop, she’d told the Doctor. No supermarket planets, or shady kiosks where you paid with memories, just a nice, normal shop so she could buy toothpaste and stuff. But the TARDIS was being its usual self, and after landing in the twelfth century and then the fifty-first, they’d overshot the eighties by a few decades. Not even far enough in the future to be *interesting*.

“UNEXPECTED ITEM IN BAGGING AREA.”

“Oh, shut up.” She pressed “Pay” and searched her pockets. She’d filled three bags; you never knew when you’d next see a shop. The other week, she’d asked the Doctor if the TARDIS had a sanitary towel dispenser, and his eyebrows had nearly fallen off in puzzlement. Never again. There wasn’t even a vending machine in there, yet there were at least three swimming pools. Time Lords had weird priorities.

Chocolate milkshake powder, pasta, bubble bath... Why, in the future, did things have stupid names like “Diamond Shine” and “Choccy Nut Crunch”? And everything came in a dozen different flavours. Even the bubble bath was “Peppermint Peony Tropical Soak.”

“UNEXPECTED ITEM IN BAGGING AREA,” the machine barked again.

“Just let me pay, will you?” Ace snapped, her face warming as she glanced at the growing queue behind her. Where was the Doctor when you needed him?

The screen flashed red. “PLEASE WAIT FOR ASSISTANCE.”

So she had to stand and wait until a cashier took pity on her. “They’re a bit temperamental,” said the girl, about her age, as her manicured nails clicked over the screen. Her black hair was poker-straight, just like her winged eyeliner, which seemed almost too glamorous for work. “There you go.”

“Thanks.” Ace suddenly felt scruffy in her puffy jacket and skirt. She hoped she hadn’t noticed the twenty cans of men’s deodorant she’d bought. But she couldn’t make Nitro-9 that smelled of citrus burst. No one would take her seriously again.

She fed the machine the plastic notes the Doctor had given her, and it spat out some change. Pound coins had been pretty new back home. She studied the shiny silver and gold coins. Different again. She’d better go and find the Doctor before he found some aliens plotting world domination. Sentient milk bottles, maybe?

They’d parked in the pet aisle. Her first step into the twenty-first century had been onto a squeaky rubber chicken, and she’d nearly broken her neck. Ace stepped around a corner – and collided with someone running the other way. She stumbled against a shelf and fell, triggering an avalanche of cereal boxes. Her bags of shopping spilled over the floor.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?” she groaned, sitting up and clutching her elbow.

A giant man in armour glared down at her. “You dare strike me, girl?” He rose to his feet and towered above her. His chainmail was flecked with rust, but the sword at his hip gleamed.

Ace snatched up her shopping and stood, watching him bend down to gather up boxes of cereal.

“Nutter,” she said under her breath.

The knight drew his sword and brandished it at her. “Do not tempt the wrath of the brave Sir Bartholomew,” he breathed, and a bit of cereal fell from his beard. Then he threw down the boxes and marched towards a spotty teen who was stocking shelves. “Vendor! Fetch me more of your Rainbow Honey Flakes!”

Ace hurried away before someone could blame her for the mess. Maybe re-enactment was popular in this century, but something about him seemed a little too... convincing. She should find the Doctor.

But the TARDIS door was locked, and when she knocked there was no reply.

Right on cue, the supermarket tannoy crackled into life:

“Could Ace please come to the entrance? Your... uncle is waiting for you to collect him.”

“Great,” she muttered.

At the entrance, the Doctor stood sheepishly beside a security guard who probably wasn’t paid enough.

“You’re Ace, then?” He lowered his voice: “He was counting the vegetables.”

“Fruit, actually,” the Doctor corrected.

Ace grabbed his arm. “Nice to be out of the hospital for the day, isn’t it?” she said loudly, leading them away.

The Doctor frowned at her. “Why are you covered in cereals?”

She shook her head. “Long story. What were you doing messing with the veg, Professor?”

He smiled mysteriously and leaned in close. “Avocados, Ace,” he murmured, tapping her nose with a finger. “Avocados.”

Someone shouted behind them. Ace turned and saw the security guard standing in the open doors. His eyes were wide and his lips formed words, but no sound came out. There was a crack like a gunshot, then he disappeared in a flash of blue light.

Travelling with the Doctor had shown her amazing things, and she wouldn’t trade a single second of it. But the fun ended when someone got hurt. Nowhere was truly safe. Blood roared in her ears and her mouth went dry. Even after so much time with the Doctor, death always came as a shock to Ace.

“What was that?” She stared through the open doors, now sliding closed. “Daleks?” The blue light reminded her of their death rays. The car park beyond was clear, but the air rippled slightly as if in a heatwave.

The Doctor’s face was grave. “No, worse. Back to the TARDIS, now.”

They hurried back, weaving between groups of shoppers. “Why aren’t they panicking?” she asked quietly. “Surely they heard it?”

“We’re time travellers, Ace, we see things differently.” His umbrella clicked against the floor with every second step.

Ace tried not to think about the security guard’s terrified face. After all the Fenric stuff, she’d wanted some time to reflect. Why couldn’t they just have a quiet day for once? She took a deep breath – which smelled a lot like laundry detergent – then they rounded the corner to the pet aisle.

The TARDIS rippled behind a wall of blue light.

“A force field?” Ace backed away.

“Look.” He pointed with his umbrella. Tins of cat food and bottles of flea spray crowded every inch, but beyond the blue wall the shelves were empty.

She swallowed. “Disintegrated?”

“Time energy.” The Doctor reached out as if to touch the light, then snatched his hand away. “Which is why the others can’t see it.”

“So there are aliens? Here?” She looked back. “Bet it’s the self-service machines.”

“This is serious, Ace.”

“Right.” She bit her lip. “I saw someone earlier. A knight in armour. He was very... realistic.”

“That’s even more concerning.” They stared at the TARDIS, only a metre beyond the wall. “Don’t go near the light. In fact...” From his pocket, he produced a roll of tape. “Cordon it off. We need to know where its edges are.”

She took it. “But who did this?”

“I think perhaps... the TARDIS. Keep everyone away from it. Don’t let them go outside. I’m going to warn everyone.”

Confused, Ace watched him march away. A time field, in a supermarket? She pulled off a strip of tape and stuck it between two shelves, cordoning off the TARDIS. Then she wandered around the shop in search of blue light. It stretched across the aisles, blocking off one end of the building, and everywhere it touched the shelves were empty. She taped them all off. Unfortunately, the self-service machines were unaffected for now.

There was a commotion at the entrance: the knight was standing in a shopping trolley by the groceries. “You cowardly knaves! Will none fight me in a duel? What say you, peasant?”

A balding man with tattoos merely pushed the trolley a few inches to the left and reached for a punnet of grapes.

Ace crept past them and taped across the entrance, then searched her pockets for some paper. Among sweet wrappers and deodorant lids, she found a very crumpled bus ticket. She scribbled “DANGER” as large as she could and stuck it beside the doors for good measure.

Keeping people in wasn’t easy. She negotiated with bossy mums, bafflegabbed suspicious teenagers and threatened a persistent elderly woman.

Just as an angry man with a name badge and tie came striding up to her, the Doctor’s voice echoed through the shop: “*Hello everyone!*” he said chirpily. “*I need to speak to all staff and shoppers, so can you all come to the freezer aisle? Something very serious has happened that could endanger your very existence.*” Click.

“Could have toned it down a bit,” Ace muttered as everyone looked about in alarm. Even the man in the tie reluctantly nodded to her and turned away. She followed the flow of people to the freezer aisle.

The Doctor stood on a stool used by staff for stocking shelves, somehow managing to look authoritative and politely expectant at the same time. Already a small crowd had gathered: families, couples, elderly people and a handful of nervous-looking cashiers. “Right, is everyone here?”

The man in the shirt and tie pushed to the front. “What’s going on? You’re not staff. If you’re here to fix the lighting, you should have talked to—”

“I’m here to warn you that anyone who tries to leave will be vapourized.”

A few worried looks.

Ace rolled her eyes. Before he could go on about the fabric of space-time, she called out, “Something’s wrong with the electricity, so you need to stay in here until we sort it out.”

“So you *are* here to fix the lighting?”

“Yes, if you like.” The Doctor stepped down. “But under *no circumstances* is anyone to step past the tape lines, or touch the outer walls of the building. Is that understood?”

A young woman put her hand up. “My parking runs out in half an hour. Will this take long?”

“Mummy told me to come straight back,” said a little boy clutching a newspaper and a bag of sweets.

Others chimed in with excuses until the Doctor couldn't even shout over the noise. Ace dug an ice cream out of the freezer and lobbed it down the aisle. Blue light flashed, and with a bang it was gone before it touched the floor.

“Point proven?” she snapped. “Do what he says and then we can go home.”

She was met with terrified stares and silence except the hum of the freezers. Maybe she'd overdone it a bit.

The Doctor clapped his hands. “Now then, I have work for you all.” He pointed at the man in the tie. “Dog food.”

He frowned. “I'm sorry?”

“I need a tin of dog food. Any kind will do, though I've always been rather partial to the beef.”

The frown became a scowl. “I'm the *manager*.”

“Even better, you'll know where it is. Now let's see...”

“This is a prank, isn't it? Stick it on YouTube, get lots of views?” He rounded on Ace. “Well?”

She shrugged. “What's YouTube?”

A cashier stepped forward. It was the girl with winged eyeliner from earlier; her name badge read “Dhanya.” “I'll get it.”

“Thank you. And after that, I need you to count the number of avocados you have in that box by the entrance. Three times. Any more volunteers? I also need washing-up liquid, cling film, teaspoons, a calculator, coat hangers...”

The crowd slowly trickled away to fetch things, a few throwing fearful glances back at them.

Ace struggled to hide a smile. “You're not just making them get your shopping, are you?”

“It keeps them busy.” The Doctor wandered out of the aisle and over to the front window. The glass was shimmering gently.

“But we don't have a dog! And what's your obsession with avocados all of a sudden?”

“I counted them earlier. Each time the number was different.” His reflection warped and flickered in the window.

“Doctor, the energy bubble...”

“Has got smaller, yes.” Earlier it had been barely visible through the doors, now it was in front of the glass. “We need to act quickly.”

One by one the shoppers returned, grumbling as they handed in their items.

“I hope you're paying for all this,” said the manager.

“Oh, I'm sure of it,” said the Doctor distractedly. He took the TARDIS key from his pocket and began untwisting the wire coat hangers.

Someone nudged Ace. “Is he always like this?” Dhanya asked.

She smiled. “Oh, all the time.” They watched him pour washing-up liquid over the coat hangers and wrap them in cling film. “But he knows what he's doing.”

“If you say so.” Dhanya pulled out a pocket-sized screen and began tapping at it.

“That's a phone!” Ace exclaimed before she could stop herself.

She laughed. “Yeah, and I'm not even on break. Such a rebel, I know.” She started typing out a message. “Guess I'll be late home; I was supposed to finish half an hour ago.” She frowned. “Weird. There's no signal here.”

“Right, everyone!” The Doctor straightened up, brandishing his coat-hangers-and-string contraption. “Ace and I are going to investigate. In the meantime, wait by the entrance, but stay away

from any blue light. We won't be long."

Ace's stomach churned as they walked back to the pet aisle – or what was left of it. The shelves were empty, pixelating like an arcade game. The TARDIS was only ten metres away, but its outline was barely visible, blue blurring into blue. The Doctor knelt down and resumed taping things to the coat hanger.

"How is that thing going to get the TARDIS back?" She folded her arms. No reply. "Can Daleks time travel? Or could it be something to do with Fenric...?"

"It isn't Fenric," he said quietly, not looking up.

"All right, so who did this – the knight?"

"Our friend Sir Bartholomew? He wouldn't recognize a time field if it challenged him to a duel." He picked up the teaspoons, tapped out a brief rhythm, then attached them to the contraption. "When we left World War Two, we may have hit a... bump, chronologically speaking. It created a 'hole' in one of the systems. That's why the TARDIS has been unreliable lately..."

"More than usual, you mean?" She stuck her tongue out as he glanced up, offended.

"...and when we landed here it... sprung a leak."

"So *we* did this?"

"Indirectly, yes."

Ace chewed her lip. Pure time energy, in a bubble around the building. And it was getting smaller. "So what do we do?"

"Well, we have all the tools we need. I just need to get back inside the TARDIS, then I can fix this."

She huffed. "You make it sound so simple."

"Just be grateful we didn't land in the thirteenth century. Try fixing a TARDIS with cabbages and sheep droppings."

Ace leaned against a shelf, listening to the distant hum of fridges. Then she realized she couldn't hear any voices. "Professor..."

She stepped forward and nearly walked into a rippling wall of blue light. Beyond it, the shop was empty.

"I told them to wait near the entrance," the Doctor murmured, already beside her with a hand on her elbow. "The bubble is accelerating. It's closing in fast."

"All those people..." Her throat closed up. "We were only gone five minutes. There was a kid there..."

"Standing here won't help them. I might be able to reverse this, but only if we act quickly."

Why had they come here? She'd seen the world gripped in wars past and future, and they would always give her nightmares. But here there were no monsters, no armies, no one to blame. Just an accident with terrible consequences.

"Come on, Ace, I need you with me." The hand on her elbow tightened.

She wiped her eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"Put this right." He handed her the coat hanger, slippery with washing-up liquid. "I'm going to anchor myself to the present, then it should be safe to walk out of the bubble."

She swallowed. "How?"

"Through you." He put down his umbrella and rolled up his sleeves, then took the coat hanger back. "Hold onto this and don't let go." The hanger was tied to a ball of string, which he pressed into her hand. "I'm going to try to get inside the TARDIS. It's the only way we'll be able to leave."

Ace looked down at the string, pulling taut as the Doctor stepped away. "What if you're erased

too?"

For a fleeting moment he looked old again: all those centuries of life. All of it could be gone in an instant. Then he smiled sadly. "I'll be fine, Ace. Watch my back."

So many adventures she'd never have had without him. If the bubble took him, she'd be back on Iceworld, waitressing for the rest of her life. Or would she even exist, if she hadn't helped Kathleen escape the Haemovores and saved her mum in the first place? It made her head hurt. She couldn't lose her best friend, who had taught her not to be afraid of fear, to be proud of the drop-out teenager she was and the fighter she'd become. If all of it was undone... all of the worlds he'd saved would be too. And all because of a stupid leak.

The Doctor took one step, then another. The air rippled and shook around him, but behind the wall of light he was still there. Ace gripped the little ball of string tight enough to hurt, and *hoped*.

"We meet again," boomed a voice behind her. Sir Bartholomew stepped out from behind a shelf, but he seemed calmer than usual. "Your bravery is admirable," he told her. "Worthy of any knight."

"How come you didn't get erased?" Ace glanced over his shoulder, but he was alone. "I thought knights were supposed to save people."

"They were but cattle. I saw to it that the magic wall took them first, but it matters not..."

"*You* did it? You *made* them walk out of the bubble?" she thundered. "You maniac!"

"Doctor!" he bellowed. "I wish to duel!"

"I'm a bit busy at the moment!" The Doctor's voice sounded far away. Ace could barely see him now, his outline wobbling as if from the bottom of a swimming pool. "Can it wait?"

"I shall duel you for Ace's hand!"

"You what?" She laughed hollowly. "You want to marry me?"

"Your father must face me in combat, for I sense he dislikes me." He looked down at the string in her hand. "Ah, the magic is revealed!" He bent down and pulled on the string. The Doctor's echoing steps faltered.

"Oi, pea brain!" Ace snatched up the Doctor's umbrella and wielded it by the handle. "If you want to duel, duel me."

He didn't turn around. "Pah! I would not fight a fair maiden."

She whacked him over the head with it. "I'll show you how fair I am." Her hand was slippery with washing-up liquid. She wiped it on her skirt. "Come on tin can, if you're brave enough!"

Sir Bartholomew dropped the string and drew his sword with a whine of steel.

"Don't let go of the string, Ace!" the Doctor called, his voice distorted. "It's all we have!"

She wound it around her fingers and clenched her fist tighter. She would not let go. With the same hand, she reached for the canister in her inside pocket, cold as it pressed against her ribs. After she'd done her shopping earlier, she'd made a detour to the ladies'. She twisted the nozzle. Forty seconds.

"Will you surrender, Lady Ace?" he murmured, the blade shining under the electric lights.

The string yanked as she backed away, so she let out a little more and held her ground, even as her heart thudded in her throat.

Thirty seconds.

"I don't surrender to bullies," she said.

The sword came down. Ace dodged and it whistled past her ear.

"How much longer, Doctor?" she shouted, letting out more string. Everywhere she looked was the edge of the bubble, shrinking so quickly that she could see the blue light creeping across the floor.

A feint from the left, slashing to her right. She held up the umbrella to catch the blow, the impact

unbalancing her and sending spikes of pain down her elbow.

Twenty seconds... ish.

She staggered backwards, the string unravelling until she held only the very end. It had to be enough.

“You have such fight in you.” The knight laughed, not even out of breath. “I admire your spirit.”

She dropped the umbrella and pulled out the canister of Nitro-9. “Sorry, face ache, the answer’s still no.” And she hurled it past him.

It was supposed to be a distraction. An explosion not close enough to harm, but enough to buy them time. But Ace’s arm still ached from the blow, and she fumbled it. The canister landed at his feet, bounced and kept rolling.

At the edge of the bubble, it exploded.

Blue fire roared up, blasting open the fire exit and sending lights crashing down. Ace dived to the floor, trying not to breathe in the fumes.

“SORCERY!” bellowed the knight over the shriek of the fire alarm. And he stumbled into the shrinking bubble and disappeared from existence.

Ace raised her head and saw that the bubble was now barely five metres wide. The flames were soon smothered, the smoke swallowed. Blue light filled her vision, creeping closer. Keep hold of the string. That was all that mattered.

What did it feel like to be erased? Would it hurt? She curled into a ball and shut her eyes tightly. After all the amazing places she’d been, the last thing she was going to see was the half-price sale on flea spray. It wasn’t fair.

There was something important she had to do. Something about... apples? Watermelons? Counting string perhaps.

A great whooshing sound enveloped her, reverberating through her bones until she could barely hear her own thoughts. The string was still there – no, it was gone! She clenched her fist but her hand was empty. Everything was gone...

Then the noise faded, replaced by a gentle hum. She felt warmer, lighter.

Ace opened her eyes and saw a pair of spats. “Nice of you to join me,” said a familiar Scottish lilt.

She breathed out shakily as her memory returned. “Thought we weren’t going to make it.”

“We almost didn’t.”

She tried to stand up and smacked her head on the underside of the TARDIS console. “Stupid knight nearly ruined everything.” Bruises throbbed everywhere. Right now she’d even settle for a Peppermint Peony Tropical Soak.

The Doctor smiled. His face was smudged with dirt, and string tangled around his arms, but he was as alive as he’d always been. She hadn’t lost a single second of him.

Ace threw her arms around him. “Next time we’re shopping in the eighties.”

He laughed. “I promise.”

She rested her chin on his shoulder. “You smell of dog food.”

“Well, I made do with what we had.”

She glanced up. String spiderwebbed the console, and an open tin of Beefy Bites was secured against it with rubber bands.

“I’m not even going to ask.” She pulled away to look at the scanner screen. “So what happens now? Have you fixed it?”

He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the hatstand before pressing some buttons. “It’s a little

basic, but I'll make some proper repairs once I have the parts." The TARDIS hummed, the time rotor flashed, and then they landed. "A short trip, to reset the leak."

The scanner screen opened to display a bustling supermarket on a Saturday morning. Ace spotted the security guard, sneakily checking his phone, and Dhanya helping an old lady at the self-service machine. "Everyone's back!"

"The time leak never happened. Sir Bartholomew is back in the twelfth century where he belongs, and everything is as it should be." He pointed at a pile of carrier bags on the console room floor. "But I saved your shopping before the realities snapped back into place."

Ace grinned. "You're the best."

"Well, after all that excitement, it must be time for lunch." The Doctor cracked his knuckles then hovered his hands over the controls. "Where to?"

Ace crouched down to rummage in the bags. "Somewhere quiet. No knights, no monsters – and no self-service machines."

His face lit up. "A picnic! Yes, why not?" And then he was off, pulling levers and pressing buttons. "I know of a lovely afternoon in 1922..."

"Sounds great." Ace straightened up and held out a small green fruit. "Avocado, Professor?"

The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Eleven

by Nick Walters

THE SPACE WAR MUSEUM, NOW, AGAIN

The Doctor grabbed the relic from the smashed cabinet, shoved it inside his coat, turned to Bill and yelled – over the piercing blare of the alarm – “Run!”

“Won’t we get caught?”

The Doctor held up his sonic screwdriver and pressed a button. The sound of the alarm was joined by the distant wails of dozens of others. “I’ve just set off every alarm in every room of the museum,” yelled the Doctor over the racket. “They won’t know where to look!”

And so Bill and the Doctor legged it back to the TARDIS, avoiding the security guards with ease in all the confusion.

Once inside, the Doctor leaned against the closed doors, and burst out laughing.

Bill folded her arms. “Having fun, are we?”

The Doctor produced the relic – the Heart of Inomasp – from his inside pocket and tossed it from hand to hand. “Yes, aren’t you?”

“Not right at this moment. What exactly is that thing?”

The Doctor strode over the console, still holding the relic, and with his free hand flicked some switches. The TARDIS took off. “It’s the biomechanical heart of an alien warrior queen I defeated, oh, many, many years ago.” He held up the heart in both hands, aloft above his head. “Worshipped for centuries by its people, it ended up here. And now I have it.” He struck a classic Shakespearean pose. “Alas, poor Inomasp.”

“So why did you steal it? What’s it to you, all these years later?”

“Remember the email,” said the Doctor.

“How could I forget!”

“It was when I was clearing out my inbox the other day. That’s when I found it.” The Doctor flicked another switch and a message appeared on the console screen:

DEAR DOCTOR

YOU ARE FOREVER IN “MY” HEART

REGARDS

PROXITINE INOMASP BESHESH-DELTA-SIDIAN

“Look at the quotation marks! So obvious!”

“Is it? Give us a clue, Doctor.”

In reply, the Doctor prised open the Heart of Inomasp as if it was an Easter egg. Inside, nestled in black velvet, was a golden signet ring with a blue jewel. “Ha!” cried the Doctor, tossing the remains of the Heart aside. “At long last! She must have hidden it whilst she was still corporeal, and sent the message after she uploaded.”

Bill was completely lost. “Doctor, you’re not making any sense!”

“I’m making perfect sense.” The Doctor held the ring up close to his eyes and frowned. “But why hide it in the first place? And why leave such an obvious clue? She knew I’d never be able to

resist it.” His eyes widened. “A trap! Or – no...” He peered into the blue crystal. “Hmm. Aha! Secondary back-up.” He produced his sonic screwdriver, aimed it at the ring and pressed a button. There was a high-pitched whine. “There! Deleted. That’s the end of Inomasp – forever.”

“Doctor!” shouted Bill, practically jumping up and down with frustration. “Are you deliberately trying to wind me up? Could you please tell me what the hell is going on?”

The Doctor shot Bill a penetrating look. “It’s a long story. You’d better sit down.”

Bill sat down, on one of the seats near the console. “So that’s what these seats are for. Explanations.”

“Right!” the Doctor grinned and sat beside her. “Now where the hell shall I start? At the beginning? Or the middle? Or the end. But which end?”

“Just start with who this Inomasp is, or was, and why she hid your ring inside her – or rather ‘her’ – heart.”

“Okay.” The Doctor took a deep breath. “Inomasp, the original Inomasp as I’ve said, was an alien warrior queen, but Lady Proxetine Inomasp... Hang on.” He was still holding the ring. As Bill watched, he slid it onto the middle finger of his right hand.

It hung there like a hula hoop around the waist of gymnast.

“Blast!” roared the Doctor, his face, once again, dark as thunder. With eyebrows. “It doesn’t fit anymore!”

Acknowledgements

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Stephen Hatcher

November 2017

Author Biographies

Violet Addison & David N. Smith are a team of UK-based writers, who have had over a dozen short stories published in various anthologies, including three volumes of Big Finish's *Short Trips* range. David has recently been writing and producing an officially licensed audio drama series, based on the classic *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook series. The first title, inspired by the "The Warlock of Firetop Mountain", is available now.

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Simon Blake is a writer and actor, retuning for his second outing with *Time Shadows*. He is a winner of the Faber Academy's *QuickFic* competition and the Mere Literary Festival's Certificate of Merit. His stage adaptation of Dickens' "The Signal-Man", for London's VAULT Festival, earned him critical acclaim from the Dickensian Fellowship, and his original fiction is available on Amazon. As an actor, he is a winner of the BBC's Carleton Hobbs' Radio Drama group commendation, and has appeared in the *Doctor Who* audio range from Big Finish.

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Ian K. Cimm has been a fan of *Doctor Who* for longer than is healthy, and spent more money on it than his therapist recommends he recall. Aside from this story, he is the author of *Professor Howe and the Viciousal Vloggers*, which is due to be published by Long Scarf Publications in 2017/18, with all proceeds going to charity. He thinks Mel is sorely underrated and will engage you in fisticuffs should you disagree.

Kate Coleman (Twitter: @KateCol17) lives in Suffolk, England, and works for the NHS as a trainer. She has loved *Doctor Who* since she was a wee girl in the 1970s, and fondly remembers Saturday nights peeking out from behind the sofa! With her own kids and long-suffering husband, she enjoys the show just as much today. After an operation on her spine left her with chronic pain, she needed a new hobby. She has written fan fiction for *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, and plans to write a sci-fi action novel someday. Her short story featuring the Ninth Doctor and Rose will appear in *Temporal Logbook II*. www.facebook.com/KateCol17

Paul Driscoll's earliest *Doctor Who* memory is of being scared witless by Daleks and Clawantulars in the stage play *The Seven Keys to Doomsday*. Writing credits include *The Black Archive #10: The God Complex* (Obverse), *Seasons of War* (Chinbeard), *A Clockwork Iris* (Obverse), *Nine Lives* (Red Ted), *A Time Lord for Change* (Chinbeard) and forthcoming anthologies *Whoblique Strategies*, *Master Pieces* and *Relics*. He is currently editing *Army of Ghosts* (Watching Books) and working on

a full-length *Seasons of War* novel – *Gallifrey* (with Kara Dennison), a *Black Archive* volume on the TV Movie (1996), and a *Silver Archive* volume on *Stranger Things*.

Ian Farrington (Twitter: @ianfarrington) has written over 15 short stories and edited numerous fiction and factual books – including five *Doctor Who* short-story anthologies. He’s produced audio dramas, written for several non-fiction books and magazines, and has worked as a sub-editor for the last decade or so. Recently, he’s also contributed two stories to Big Finish’s range of *Dark Shadows* talking books. His website, where he reviews films, TV shows and albums for fun and gives them scores out of 10, is www.ianfarrington.wordpress.com

When **David Gibbons** isn’t indulging in literature, arguing about trivial things, or annoying his wife, most of the time he can be found singing onstage as an operatic tenor (a pursuit that requires far more effort than seems sane). He has several other writing projects on the go and currently lives in Canada. He keeps a low online profile to avoid getting into trouble.

Michael Gilroy-Sinclair is the author of *Whostronomy*, a *Doctor Who*/comedy/astrology book. His new novel, *Geek Myths: Tales from the Counter Culture* (a story of life, love, fandom and the pursuit of plastic sonic screwdrivers) is out very soon. He is currently working on its sequel *My Big Fat Geek Wedding* and on an alternate-reality series called *Jane of the Air*. When Michael isn’t writing, he is the host of the Tin-Dog Podcast www.tin-dog.co.uk @TinDogPodcast

Grace Haddon has been watching *Doctor Who* since 2008, and learned her craft through writing fan fiction (her first novel featured the Fifth Doctor, Turlough and dinosaurs – and a character suspiciously similar to her!). In 2015, she won Malorie Blackman’s *Project Remix* competition, and she was on the judging panel of the 2017 *Leicester Writes* short-story competition. She holds a BA in creative writing from the University of Nottingham, where she edited the class anthology, *Vices and Virtues*. Grace is currently writing a comedy-fantasy novel, where Sir Bartholomew lives on as a secondary character. www.gracehaddon.com

Stephen Hatcher, a semi-retired teacher of Modern Languages, is co-ordinator of the Whoovers, one of Britain’s biggest *Doctor Who* local groups and director of the *Whooverville* convention. Steve has contributed to a number of fanzines and is a regular writer for *Celestial Toyroom*. He contributed to five volumes of Big Finish’s *Short Trips*, as well as stories for *Myth Makers* and *Time Shadows*, and articles for several volumes from Watching Books. He is a co-presenter of the *Flashing Blade* podcast and is editing a volume of critical essays on *Doctor Who* from Watching Books entitled *Stitches in Time*.

Roger McCoy is living in a compressed region of space-time roundabouts Dracut, Massachusetts. In addition to a few articles for IBM *developerWorks*, he’s previously written for *Time Shadows* and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds 2016*, and if he’s not very, very careful, he may add this writing thing to his already too-long list of unfortunate habits, which includes public speaking, private reading and protected computer programming.

Mark McManus lives in Cumbria with his wife, and has been a *Doctor Who* fan since watching “The Happiness Patrol” in 1988. He hosts the *Trap One* podcast, where he is joined by a different

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Greg Maughan has previously been published by Obverse Books, writing stories for Iris Wildthyme and Brenda & Effie. He has upcoming work in a big, secret project that he’s not sure he’s allowed to mention. Greg lives and works in Whitby, North Yorkshire, and thinks it’s hard enough to find time to write as it is without being on that Twitter, so doesn’t have any social media platforms to plug.

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Jenny Shirt (Twitter: @bluebox99) has been watching *Doctor Who* since the early seventies. When she isn’t fixed to a computer screen, she spends time writing, going to the theatre, listening to film soundtracks and musicals, and enjoys drinking oodles of coffee. She is very pleased to be involved with *Time Shadows: Second Nature*.

Dale Smith could travel in time, yes. They weren’t wrong about that. But what they never were clear about was his range: twenty seconds in either direction, no more no less. When the car mounted the pavement, of course he tried going forward, but he found no forward there. So instead, he went back – again and again. If he could just get enough time, he would think of something. And he had all the time he could need: it was amazing how soon twenty seconds could turn into twenty years, if you went back often enough. Again and again. www.dalesmithonline.com/about

Paul Sutton is the author of a number of Big Finish *Doctor Who* audios, including *Arrangements for War* and *No More Lies*, and also the Bernice Summerfield novella “The Purpura Pawn”, part of the *A Life in Pieces* collection. He is currently living in Budapest and divides his time between writing stories and songs, and being at the general beck and call of his cats.

Daniel Tessier is a terrible geek who writes too much about old television and superhero movies. He runs his own blog, *Immaterial*, and has written reviews and articles for *Television Heaven*, *Whotopia* magazine and *The History of the Doctor*. He has written for *The Doctor Who Project* and had stories included in *Shelf Life*, *Myth Makers Presents: Golden Years* and *Iris Wildthyme of Mars*. His favourite Doctor is Patrick Troughton, his favourite dinosaur is *Carnotaurus* and his favourite star is Fomalhaut. He lives in Brighton, Sussex, and it’s very nice there, thank you.

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Nick Walters is the author several *Doctor Who* novels including the *DWM* award-winning *Reckless Engineering*. He is currently writing for Candy Jar Books’ series of *Lethbridge-Stewart* novels. *Mutually Assured Domination* was published in 2015, and early 2018 sees the publication of *The Man from Yesterday*, in which the Brigadier meets his long-lost father, missing since the end of World

War Two. Nick lives in Bristol with his cat Tammy and his two racing bikes Bellinda and Barbara.

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Paul Williams (Twitter: @PaulECWilliams) grew up in Birmingham, wanting to be script editor of *Doctor Who*. He now lives in Australia. “The Crimean Centaur” is his fifty-third published story. He has also written two non-fiction books, the first based on his PhD thesis about the wolf in folklore, and several articles. His third book is a biography of Britain’s most convicted man who was in the Marines at the time of the Crimean War, and he is seeking a publisher for an epic study of all the Jack the Ripper suspects. www.paulecwilliams.org

Anthony Wilson has written on *Doctor Who*, science fiction in general and other topics, including essays in the *Time Unincorporated* series and the *Outside In* series. Next year, with co-author Robert Smith? and from ATB Publishing, his first book, *Bookwurm*, will be released. It’s a detailed and fun-filled analysis of Virgin’s *Doctor Who: The New Adventures* series. www.atbpublishing.com

Artist Biographies

Paul Cowan has over twenty years’ experience as a professional artist and forty-five as a dedicated and happily obsessed *Doctor Who* fan. He has drawn sketchcards and illustrations for several years, on such properties as *The Hobbit* films, *Doctor Who and the Daleks*, Hammer Horror and *Terminator 2* among others. www.paulcowansketchcards.co.uk

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Iain Robertson is a professional graphic designer living in Portsmouth, UK. He has produced numerous covers for Telos Publishing, Big Finish, Fantom Films, as well as many charity projects. He can be contacted at vendetta_uk@yahoo.com for business or private commissions.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Colophon](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment One](#)

[The Case of the Missing Doctor](#)

[The Unkindest Cup](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Two](#)

[The Smallest War](#)

[The Time Orphan](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Three](#)

[Time-Crossed](#)

[Dr. Who and the Mists of Prevalous](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Four](#)

[The Crimean Centaur](#)

[Ian Chesterton in an Exciting Adventure with the Martians](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Five](#)

[Marginalia](#)

[Plague Doctors](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Six](#)

[In a State of Grace](#)

[How to Kill God](#)

[The Siege of Orléans](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Seven](#)

[You Know the Drill](#)

[Planet of the Doctor](#)

[Custodian](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Eight](#)

[My Name Is Susan](#)

[Divergence](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Nine](#)

[The Spinning Dancer](#)

[The Doctor's New Clothes](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Ten](#)

[Wouldn't Be Dead for Quids](#)

[Unexpected Item in Bagging Area](#)

[The Heart of Inomasp: Segment Eleven](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Author Biographies](#)

[Artist Biographies](#)

