

BBC

DOCTOR WHO



SHORT TRIPS

THE PAUL SPRAGG 'reCOLLECTIONS' ANTHOLOGY

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JAMES D. COOKE AND ANDREW HSIEH

A FLY IN THE WEB OF TIME

BY CHRIS TAYLOR

THE CRIMSON LION

BY TIM BRADLEY

THE PHOENIX

BY A F J KERNOW

THE SPACE

BY JAMES D. COOKE

NEGATIVE HELP

BY ANDREW HSIEH

THE POPIZ

BY TIM BRADLEY

STANDBY FOR DEPARTURES

BY ANDREW HSIEH

THE CAROL SINGER

BY A F J KERNOW

DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

PAUL SPRAGG R_eCOLLECTIONS

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**Special thanks to
Ian Atkins and Tony Jones**

First published in 2019 by
Divergent Wordsmiths
a Doctor Who writing community
at <http://divergent-wordsmiths.weebly.com/>

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Front cover and inserts by Phil Johnson

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“Purloined from the exquisite biomechanical computer systems of the Catchvane, the Wordsmiths have deciphered, transcribed and generally squabbled over the Doctor's vast gallimaufry of cosmic ventures. While many have been recorded by reliable sources, they are more curious of the accounts that have, as Tellurians would say in their idiosyncratic tongue: 'fallen through the cracks.' The Wordsmiths' efforts to document these lost exploits are furnished in the lathes below, left by a divergent scion and reappropriated for the Earth's admittedly primitive global computer network...”

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living, dead or in the process of regeneration, is purely coincidental.

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INTRODUCTION

“Paul Spragg ReCollections”

When Paul Spragg died on 8th May 2014, I lost a friend of 15 years. I'd been working at Big Finish doing a couple of days a week to help him out, for just five weeks at that point. In the months and years that followed, I always wondered if I'd have treated those weeks differently knowing how they ended. And you know what? I wouldn't. I had days full of laughter and fun, just as I had had when I first met Paul at *Visual Imagination*, or when we met up for our ongoing *Doctor Who* watch, or when he starred in my comedy videos, or when we went to recordings of BBC radio shows. He just enjoyed things, and you couldn't help but do so either when you were with him.

He also understood what it meant to be a fan. Not only of *Doctor Who* — that was just one of a bewildering number of shows, films and comics he followed and took pleasure (sometimes guilty) in watching and reading — but also institutions he'd admired when younger. For example, the magazines of *Visual Imagination*, such that his appointment of editor as *Cult Times* was a dream fulfilled. And as was working at Big Finish, which not only kept him close to the heart of classic *Doctor Who*, but also kept him in touch with those who loved the company's output as much as he did. In those five weeks I had with him, he'd often read out an enquiry email, explain the background to a baffled beginner (me) but then answer each one with the sensitivity and care and affection that he felt they deserved. Because, like him, they loved the same things he did.

A common email had the theme of wanting to write for Big Finish, or *Doctor Who*, or novels or films. This is a tricky area to answer — for copyright and legal reasons, we can't read unsolicited ideas, while a new writer can be raw and vulnerable, and every word in a response can be

pored over for either praise or offence in equal measure. But Paul regularly trod that fine line, because he knew completely what the fan mentality was like, and he treated people as he'd like to be treated himself. He encouraged. He highlighted the positives. He gave a person a reason to want to write again — which as a writer myself, I know is something disappointingly few editors do.

I'd suggested the *Paul Spragg Doctor Who Short Trip Memorial Opportunity* in 2016 because there are only so many door plaques you can put up, when it seemed there was a much more permanent — and appropriate — method to keep Paul in memories. It opened the floodgates, and that was when it was time to really remember Paul ourselves. Because the inboxes were full of people who'd put themselves out there, who'd worked hard, who'd put their writing hearts on their writing sleeves and then sent that work to a stranger. So you read everything and tried to make sure people knew that, at least. You tried to praise where you could. You tried to encourage, and you tried to ensure you'd hear from everyone again in a year's time. You gave people a chance to play within one of the modern world's most joyous toy boxes, and to have their words in a sentence ending, “said the Doctor”. Above all, hopefully every person involved had enjoyed at least some part of the process.

Because enjoyment was what Paul shared with all his family, his friends, his colleagues and even anyone who'd sent an email to Big Finish. And if that enjoyment's still there?

Then so's Paul Spragg.

— Ian Atkins
Former *Doctor Who: Short Trips* producer, Big Finish.

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A SIXTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

A FLY IN THE WEB OF TIME

BY CHRISTAYLOR

A FLY IN THE WEB OF TIME

By Chris Taylor

The hundred or more construction frames of the Drelaxi Orbital Shipyard formed an artificial ring around the unremarkably named Ice Moon of Drelaxis XV.

These and the dozen or so command stations spaced among their number were the centre points of an endless swarm of activity. Countless freighters hauled ore from up the pockmarked spheroid. Ancillary support vessels funnels supplies and personnel from one location to another. V-shaped defence fighters patrolled the enormous circle, their surfaces bristling with weapons. All of these active vessels, and every one of the freshly painted hulls on the more complete builds — ships of all sizes and classes — bore the livery of the Second Great And Bountiful Human Empire.

The exterior lights of every station amid ship, countless artificial stars amid the star strewn dark of space, blinked a merry pattern of red, green, and white.

One frame stood out from the rest, not just for its larger-than-average size. It was separated space, more than any other two on the circle were parted by. As well as twin chains of warning buoys, energy emission dampening arrays, and manned patrol craft. The skeletal ship growing within its womb was needle-sleek. This was Hermes Station. It stood at the forefront of the Empire's next wave of interstellar expansion.

Within this behemoth, a less-than-festive voice dictated a letter:

“I saw you adjusting your hair in a toaster's reflection before the party started. It was so cute, I couldn't help but talk to you. I figured we'd get a drink, and see where things would go. Maybe we'd fall in love and get married. It would be fabulous. Until we get pregnant. Children change

everything. We'd have to transfer to another station, maybe even a posting on-planet. No babies or kids around experimental technology, and all that. Lawsuit waiting to happen." A wry laugh escaped a female throat. "That's why I disappeared on you, when you went to get us more punch. Because I might want to see where things could go between you and I. Only, you see, Craig, I have an appointment with a big red button. And I can't let anything, or anyone, stop me from keeping it. Especially my own loneliness. Yours in obscurity, Amara Kelf."

She would never send the letter, of course. Or even write it down. She couldn't leave any clues that might have someone in Personnel deciding she wasn't mentally fit for service aboard Project Silverlight. The long, long vessel had yet to have its FTL engines mounted to the truncated pylons that stood one at the very back and four circling that at ninety-degree intervals. The interior of the ship was still largely empty. There was a long, long way to go before her big, red button would even be installed. Time enough to be transferred out for any of a hundred reasons that might suit an Empire with no time for whatever excuses she might provide. Time enough to miss her appointment.

Five hundred and fifty-five days. Three hours. Ten minutes.

She looked away from her chrono and back at to the nascent vessel. The hope of an Empire. Her damnation. She watched it floating before her for a good long while. One dark-skinned hand leaning against the transparaluminum window of Epsilon Arm's upper observation gallery. Staring past the reflection of her own hardening eyes towards the red, green, white of the *Starlight's* mooring lights.

"Merry Christmas, you son of a bitch."

She'd would have stood there feeling sorry for herself a good while longer — and had, on many occasions — were it not for the sound that shattered her reverie. A scratchy, mechanical gasp. Which while barely noticeable at first grew louder and unmistakable. It was the sound she'd been awaiting and despising for years.

"He's early! What the hell?" Amara tore out of the gallery's open doorway, the lines of her cocktail dress making waves with each bounding

step. Two-inch pumps cast staccato echoes along the bare metal walls. She stopped at every intersection, scouring the corridors for any sign of that awful blue box. Hissing to herself along the way, “Why *him*? Why *here*? Why *now*?”

“Hello there! I say *heeelllooo!*” His voice, a penetrating tenor, caught her like a punch in the gut. It was coming from the left side of a four-way intersect. A few more steps on her part, and they’d be facing one another. She was spared the decision of whether or not to take that left turn when he came tromping round the bend himself.

It was him alright. Those yellow curls and chubby cheeks. That long mouth that was just itching to spout something long-winded. Those ‘I know better than you’ eyes. Though he’d at least swapped out the technicolor tornado he’d been wearing on their last meeting for a (relatively) subdued blue number. Small mercy, that. The pin on his lapel was still feline, but no longer the cartoonish kitten of her lingering nightmares. Rather, a sleek, gold number. His grin was bright enough to be its match, and he was waving around a mad collection of spare parts with some lights attached. None of them yuletide hues.

“Good day to you, Madam. Or evening, as the case may be. Never easy to tell out here in space, is it?” The Doctor’s one-note laugh consisted of equal parts amusement and pretension. Both at her expense, no doubt. Was he really going to pretend he didn’t know her? Amara couldn’t bring herself to compose a response to the slight, so he provided his own. “You know, yours is the first face I’ve seen here. Strange to find such a capacious facility as this so bereft of occupants.” His voice lowered. “I dare say suspicious.”

“Everyone’s at the Christmas party,” she said without separating her teeth. Could he truly not see her (considerably sharper) cheeks trembling? She certainly could feel it.

”Splendid!” he grinned. “In that case, I shan’t be a tick.” Striding right on past her, he stated, “My ship picked up some rather squirrely energy readings from this location. They’re doing a mischief to my conveyance’s navigational systems. I just need to triangulate the precise foci of the

hyperspatial waveforms, and then I should be able to compensate for the interference.” Almost offhandedly, he added, “I’m the Doctor, by the way.” He followed the pinging of his device into a thin side-corridor. Headed towards the storage pods, of all things.

Amara leaned into the corner, oddly tired. “So this is how it starts? All this time waiting, and I never knew it would be now.” Some of the parts to be involved in the experimental, and very classified, FTL engine build were in fact biding their own time in the pods he was headed towards. “The fault must have been somewhere in the power core. It’ll get into the vortex turbines through the Z.P.E. interlocks.”

Another small relief: she worked with the team that had been charged with building the sublight engines. She’d acquired and carefully maintained a position as the third-highest ranking member. Experienced enough to be invaluable to the project, but not so highly placed as to draw ire from above for any major foul-ups.

“Vortex turbines?” The Doctor repeated, his eyes narrowing as turned back to her. They widened with realization. “*All this time?* No, no, no! Don’t tell me!” He started running towards her, with clear intentions to pass her by yet again. “I’ll come back later! Or perhaps sooner!”

The answer to his unfamiliar behaviour set Amara’s eyes ablaze. Two curt steps on her part cut off his escape. A flick of her wrist brought an emergency bulkhead slamming down, cutting them both off. “Why miss all the fun? Don’t you want to see what happens when the ‘squirrels’ get loose? Isn’t that why you’re here?” She could barely keep the fury inside constrained her voice.

“Very well. I shall go the long way.” He winced before he turned to run the other way. That second’s delay was all Amara needed to box her nemesis in. Another flick, another bulkhead down, this one twenty meters ahead of her. He didn’t make the distance in time. He was trapped.

Trapped like she was. Had been. Would be.

There was a small window in the door from which the Doctor could see all the hallways he was not going to walk down. The face he turned back

to her was the very definition of diplomatic aplomb. Or perhaps feigned obsequiousness. It was genuinely hard to tell which. “I fear I may owe you an apology.” He placed the tool away within a pocket of his longcoat. “Alas, I fear I must also apologise for not knowing what it is I need to apologise *for*. You see, I am a—”

“A Time Lord? A traveler in the fourth dimension?” Amara had heard the words before, and more besides. So many words from this man! “You want to know what’s coming, do you?” She took a single step closer. Barely able to keep the rage from her stealing her voice.

The Doctor took a step back, bumping his back against the door. “No! Not even the slightest iota of it, if you please.”

“Four and a half years,” she said, taking another step. She could have given a more precise count of the days gone by, but on the occasions when she did count them all out, their weight kept her immobilized for hours. She needed to be hard now. Angry. She threw a hand to the porthole between them. From which the *Silverlight’s* mid-section could be seen. “That ship was little more than a hat stand when it started for me.”

“Please, I’m asking you, not another word. For your own good, if not mine.” The Doctor reached inside his coat, clearly hoping to hide the motion by keeping her eyes on his face. But wary Amara saw: From opposite the side he’d put his scanner into, he withdrew a small blue and red wand. She knew that device well. She leapt back to the control panel, and secured the doors before they could be thwarted. She’d had years now to master the proper codes. And she would be heard, dammit! “There I was — *here I was!* — another shinewrench looking to do my part for human-kind’s expansion. It started with the hands. Impossible hands — clawed, grasping things! — reaching through tears in the air. Reaching for me!”

But the Doctor was not listening. He was fiddling with that foul device. Whose screeching was enough to set teeth on edge. “Ooooooh, this one was supposed to work on deadlock seals! This is the very last time I’m ordering out of the Kerblam Catalogue, I promise you!”

Amara spoke louder. “The tears got bigger! These... *things* started coming through them! I got away, and fell into one of the holes! Damn near landed on the half-gutted corpse of someone I couldn’t hope to identify! I ran and I ran and I ran! The things were everywhere! The whole station was torn to pieces! I damn near trampled some stranger calling himself the Station Commander! He threw a staser into my hand and ordered me to get to my emergency station! A section of the *Starlight* I’d never even seen before! *Because it hadn’t been built yet!*”

With nowhere to go, the Time Lord continued his mewling. “Please. Madam, whoever you are, whoever you will be to me in my own future, I implore you cease this remonstrations. The consequences could be disastrous for the both of us! For everyone everywhere!”

But the four-year dam, once cracked, could only flood. “And what did I find when I got there? “*You!* I found you! Spouting orders like you were the one running the place! You took the staser out of my hand before I could put one of those monsters down—”

“Enough!” The cosmic aristocrat puffed up his chest, and set his fingers firmly against the back of the coat’s lapels. Gaining, somehow, a measure of height and a great deal of bearing in the process. Amara couldn’t help but back-pedal, herself. Now, she was the one set flat against a door.

Now Amara was the one looking into the face of anger. “Whatever else *my future self* may have done in your past, madam, I know full well that in light of our present encounter I will be compelled to take the time to warn you against enacting any temporal paradoxes! Such as the one you are in the process of creating with this overwrought and entirely superfluous demonstration!”

She refused to remain cowed. “How dare you talk to me like that! After all I’ve given up for you! Thrown away! Four years and more, gone!”

He refused to give any ground. “I dare because I must! Because I need to prevent you from further contaminating *both* of our timelines! With every word you utter, you are building your own causal prison! You are condemning me to condemn you!”

I'm already condemned, dammit!" Amara's words battered her own ears, bounced back from the uncaring metal. "Condemned to sit on my ass and watch my life pass me by! Condemned to wait and wait and wait! Wait until the moment I see... See her... See me." Amara's head was pounding. She slumped to the floor, no longer seeing the hated Doctor, but a memory burned into every corner of her mind:

The Doctor's last words to Amara chased her all the way from Impulse Control to Main Engineering. "You must vent the whole system! If even one time particle remains behind in those turbines, there will be no tomorrow for any of us!"

Using a dead man's access codes, and no small skill with a neutron spanner she worked her way through several deadlocked safety doors leading into the bowels of Main Deck Engineering.

Precious moments were lost when she was forced to duck into a service hatch to hide from one of the vile creatures that had infested the ship. Indigo-black, it was. From an eyeless lump of a 'torso' emerged four spider-like limbs/ Each one ended with a single, glowing claw long and deadly as a dagger. With furtive motions, a claw would slice through the air. Splitting it open to form another one of the inter-dimensional holes. Holes into a pit of color that her eyes did not want to process anything other than a warbling haze of reds and yellows. Into these holes it would fasten a claw, and pull itself forward. Slice by slice, the vile thing worked its way across the Engineering Bay corridor, never once touching its surfaces. She knew it was safe to go on when she could no longer see the strange lights reflecting off the thin rectangles of floor she could see from her hiding place.

Amara cried with joy to find the last door. Only to find it would not open: it had been welded shut from the other side, she could tell by the heat still radiating off the seam.

"Dammit!"

The very button she needed to press was visible to her, through the little transparaluminum window in the door. The glowing panel above named it, Emergency Vertiflux Vent. It was only a few dozen meters away. So close, so far. Undaunted, she had tried in vain to smash the small window open with the spanner. If only she could get an arm inside, maybe there was still a chance!

Whack! Whack! Whack!

“Let—me—in!”

Not so much as a scratch.

A figure came into view: female, encased in a standard-issue orange exosuit. She had been standing beside the door, and threw aside a fusion welder as she wandered around a small maze of consoles, railings, and flayed bodies. She had a hammer in her other hand. She used it to smash open the glass that shielded the vent button.

That was when the stranger turned to the window. To sneer at her dumbstruck witness with Amara’s own eyes.

“She looked at me with such... Hatred. Like, somehow, it was all my fault. My fault she had to be hiding in that decontamination room, waiting for me to come to her. But it wasn’t my fault! It was *yours!*” Hate was in her own eyes, now. And tears, too. Each one an indictment against her foolishness. “I trusted you. I listened to you. I did as you said. Even when you told me to keep it all to myself. And, idiot I was, I believed you when you said everything would work out in the end. But it never ended. Not for me.”

The silence between them was broken by a long sigh. His. “Perhaps it was my fault. Or, perhaps my hands were tied.” The big man deflated to his earlier proportions. His head hanging low, the Doctor conceded, “My future self will be bound to the memory of this moment. The knowledge that I shall be required to leave you to walk innocently into sorrow’s slow embrace. Lest our unhappy meeting in the here and now be undone, and our collective situation goes from ‘squirrely’ to something truly ‘abysmal’. All I can do now is tell you I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry? She hadn’t expected that

She looked up at him with shock behind her tears. “What?”

“I am sorry,” he repeated. There was a truthful tremble to his lips. “I have been where you are now. I know how it feels. Long ago, lifetimes ago, I lived in exile. For the first time in centuries, I was bound to one place. Cramped. Confined. Constrained! Not knowing when it would end,

or if it ever would. I never would have knowingly put anyone through that misery. But now, I must.”

She looked away. He spoke on:

“A future once observed is a future inviolate! I know that I shall be returning to this station one day. And I shall be forced to mislead an unfortunate woman about one or more aspects of a horrific situation. I shall do this knowing what a terrible impact it will have upon her even after I’m gone. And I shall feel a great despondency all the while. And I cannot not do it. As much as I might like to try. I am constrained again, to a path I cannot converge from.”

His voice softened considerably. “You carry a heavy load over a hard road, madam. Please believe me when I say that you do not walk it alone.”

Why was he saying this? Did he mean it? Of course, he did. There was no lie in his pained eyes. Wherever else she hated about what her life had become, she certainly couldn’t hate him for it any more. But when had that feeling started? When had The Doctor gone from being the face of hope to her definition of failure? She didn’t know. The moment had been lost somewhere in the long wait, and she’d missed it.

She couldn’t make herself stand, but she could fumble her hand about on the panel. A glimpse of her fingerprint was enough. The doors opened. “Go. Just go. Fly away. Leave me waiting to go the long way around.” A year and a half, give or take a few weeks. And that was assuming the chrono she’d taken off a dead man’s wrist hadn’t been malfunctioning. A year and a half and she’d be free. She could do it, couldn’t she?

She wasn’t sure. She buried her head, just as unsure if she could keep herself from stopping him again.

The Doctor did move forward. Not to leave, however, but to offer her a hand. “On further consideration, I could do more.”

She didn’t accept it. “Like what?”

“I could take you with me.” He offered.

“You would do that?” Amara did not add, ‘After what I just said about you?’

“We’d be fudging of the Laws of Time a trifle. But a well-aimed jaunt shouldn’t trouble them. We know where your future self is going to be. That cannot be changed, I remind you. But who’s to say that your future isn’t a couple minutes away? I could leave you when and where you need to be. Even give or take a few days to prepare your denouement. No more waiting.”

Hope rose inside a part of Amara that she’d forgotten about. It didn’t last long. “No. There’s something... You’re not there yet.” The man’s outfit was all wrong for one. Or, rather, this one he was wearing looked alright. But his hair was too short. And come to think of it, he’d made no mention of any other companions, much less that redheaded scream factory. He really was going to have to wait to play out his end of the disaster. “It would be a paradox.”

He was doing it again, dammit. Making her feel like she could do the unthinkable.

“It may well be. Are you sure you won’t take me up on the shortcut?” the Doctor asked.

She shook her head. Laughing at herself. *I am such an idiot.*

“Then you’re a stronger being than I. Back in the day, I’d have leapt at the chance and held on fast with both hands.” He went the distance of pantomiming the imagined struggle.

Was that pride swelling in Amara’s chest? It lifted her halfway onto her feet. The Doctor helped her the rest of the way. “Thank you, Doctor. For... something. I’m not sure what.”

“I shall look forward to learning your name some day,” he told her, handing over a handkerchief from yet another pocket. It was cornered in question marks.

She opened her mouth to resolve the mystery, but once more he raised a hand. This time, she respected the gesture.

“Please, spare me one lie,” he asked. “I have enough to tell. Given that we shall see each other again, someday, in some order or another, saying ‘goodbye’ seems rather inappropriate. So instead, I shall bid you good travels.” With that, he turned to leave.

Amara didn't let him get far before calling out, "Wait! How did you do it? How will you do it again? Get through the wait, I mean."

"I had friends," he said simply. "They helped more far more than I ever admitted to them." He considered that statement, then resolved, "Perhaps the time has come to amend that oversight. Maybe I'll go crash a few Christmas parties."

The unstated suggestion made her skin tighten. "I don't know if I can afford to make friends. Not real ones. Anything, anything at all could take me away from here. Someone might make me *want* to go."

The Doctor furiously waved the objection away as though it were some sort of biting insect. "And just as many things may bring you back! The web of time will sort itself out. It can abide the occasional..." He motioned with his fingers. "Tweak now and again. My advice to you is to *live a little*. Take some chances. Suck out all the marrow of life!" He threw his arms out wide enough to embrace a whole world. Again, he turned, and she didn't stop him this time. She followed behind, but only far enough to reach the doors of the observation gallery. Close enough to hear the TARDIS wheeze away.

She didn't stand still for long after that.

The ever-present hum of Hermes Station, loudest when the corridors were emptied, was swallowed by the tones of jingle bells being rocked and glasses being clinked. Restoration Hall Two still in full swing. Amara stopped at the double-doorway to peer inside. Aware, as always, of what a stranger she had become to many of the people inside.

Dozens of co-workers were still milling about, wearing a mix of civilian party clothes and duty jumpsuits. Craig didn't appear to be among their number. But many familiar faces from the impulse drive build team were still carousing under the hovering light-globes. As well as a charming young lady from Sensor Installation that she'd been putting off introducing herself to...

Live a little, she told herself. Just before stepping into the gathering, she straightened her dress and allowed herself to think back once more on the

younger side of a one-party meeting. The face of her doppelganger, not quite hidden behind an exosuit's face screen. Standing at a silver wall beside a big, red button framed in broken glass.

Looking her younger counterpart's way.

Amara's future self was smiling.

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A FIFTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

THE CRIMSON LION

BY TIM BRADLEY



THE CRIMSON LION

By Tim Bradley

Nyssa didn't know what to make of it.

There were animals of every type wherever she, the Doctor and Tegan went. Both Nyssa and Tegan saw an elephant they really liked. There were also giraffes, zebras, and monkeys. The monkeys, in particular, were always mischievous. They kept ruining the bonnet of any jeep they were jumping on!

It was the Doctor's idea of taking a day trip to reward his two friends after the adventures they'd been having. He decided to take Nyssa and Tegan to Longleat Safari Park. On a gloriously sunny day, they all agreed to go on a tour around in a jeep.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Tegan?" the Doctor asked.

"Too right I am, Doctor. I haven't had this much fun since I was a kid!"

"Well, that's good to hear. What about you, Nyssa? Are you enjoying yourself?"

Nyssa wasn't sure how to formulate her response. She then nodded and said, "It's er... very enlightening."

Tegan was appalled at Nyssa's lack of enthusiasm. "Nyssa! This is one of the best safari parks ever in Britain! It has every type of animal from zebras to long-necked giraffes. It matches the equivalent of Africa in terms of variety. And all you can say is... 'it's very enlightening?'"

"Well, it is," Nyssa replied. "I've never seen so many animals in one place. The animal life on Traken was nothing compared with what I've seen here today."

"You had wild animals on Traken, surely?"

"Not exactly 'wild' as you understand it, Tegan," Nyssa told her. "The animals on Traken were much tamer and gentler compared with what I've

seen here today. The Source burnt away all evil from the Union, including the crueller aspects of our wildlife. That... cat there, remind me what it's called."

"What? The tiger?" she asked.

"On Traken, it would have existed harmoniously with the giraffes and zebras, feeding only as a carrion animal. I could reach out and pet it without fear of injury for myself or others."

"Sounds nice, but..."

"Yes?"

Tegan shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know, Nyssa. Doesn't seem quite natural to me."

"They weren't harmed, Tegan, the taming was perfectly natural. No more invasive than the TARDIS's telepathic circuits, what you and I use to speak." She then smiled knowingly. "Mind you, I've seen plenty of genuinely wild animals in my time travelling with the Doctor. It's a shame they can't all be situated in one place... like this safari park."

The Doctor grinned. "I should take you to see Africa again, Nyssa. At our leisure, this time. You'd love it there. They've got safaris and game reserves teeming with animals—"

Suddenly, there was a loud scream which startled the trio.

"Cripes, where did that come from?" Tegan demanded. "Was that you, Doctor?"

"Me?" he looked affronted.

"There," Nyssa pointed ahead. "It came from that jeep ahead of us! Look!"

They all looked. They were horrified at what they saw, including the driver of their jeep.

"Yes. That jeep and the people inside are being attacked..." the Doctor declared, taking a deep breath. "By a wolf!"

It was true! A grey wolf was viciously attacking the exterior of a safari jeep with a father, mother and son inside.

What's worse, the vicious wolf was managing to break in!

The Doctor got out of the jeep in a jiffy. Their driver shouted at the Doctor to get back inside, calling him a lunatic. The Doctor didn't adhere. He wasn't one to stand idly by and let a family get mauled. Nyssa and Tegan followed, getting out of the jeep.

The driver was flabbergasted. "Where you lot going?"

"What's your name?" the Doctor called, jogging backwards.

"Miles."

"Miles, stay here! Call for any assistance if you can!"

Nyssa ran beside the Doctor on his right whilst Tegan ran beside him on his left. Tegan knew better than to argue with the Doctor. She knew he wouldn't back away from danger. Besides, she wanted to save that family in the jeep as much as he did. She couldn't believe how vicious the wolf was in trying to get at the family in the jeep.

Soon, they were close enough to scent the animal.

"Tegan, drop your gaze. Don't stare!" he urged.

She did as instructed. "Why?"

"Predators treat such a gesture as an attempt at intimidation."

"What do we do, Doc?" Tegan asked. "I'd like to hear the plan you have up your sleeve. Can you tame that thing?"

The Doctor couldn't help feel sheepish. "I'm somewhat out of practice, Tegan."

"What?" she stared at him, dumbstruck. "Oh, tremendous."

"Nice dog..." he cooed earnestly.

Desperate, Tegan joined him. "Good dog..."

Whilst the Doctor and Tegan tried to figure out how to tame the wolf, Nyssa stepped forward. It took a minute for them to realise what she was doing.

"Nyssa!" he cried, shocked. "Nyssa, get back from there!"

"Nyssa!" shouted Tegan, equally shocked. "What are you playing at? You'll get yourself killed!"

Nyssa didn't hear them. She was fixated on the wolf. It tightened its jaw, grounding its paws against the earth, its chest heaving with primal exertion. The windscreen crumpled beneath the shove of its shoulder.

The Doctor held Tegan back. "Doctor!"

"I know," he edged closer, pulling off his coat. "I think I can push it to the ground given enough room to manoeuvre. Nyssa? Nyssa, can you hear me?"

When she did hear, she answered, "It's alright..."

Holding the Doctor's coat, Tegan was baffled and demanded that he tell her what Nyssa was up to. The Trakenite meanwhile focused her thoughts on the wolf. It was just about to bite off the little boy's leg in the jeep.

Stop, she commanded gently. *They mean you no harm. Leave that family alone.*

At that attempt of telepathic contact, the wolf backed out of the jeep. It turned to face Nyssa, snarling at her and showing its teeth. Nyssa was shocked to see the wolf. It wasn't the teeth. It was the red glowing eyes it had.

Tegan and the Doctor saw them and were equally shocked.

Nyssa wasn't going to be intimidated. *Go away. Leave while you still can.*

The wolf didn't seem to adhere at first. It snarled at Nyssa rebelliously. But when she gave it a stern look, it was then that the wolf seemed to whimper. Very soon, it ran off. Nyssa watched the wolf go, surprised at how she had managed to send it away. The Doctor and Tegan were surprised too. The trio turned to look back at the family in the half-ravaged jeep. They were alright. They seemed safe now.

As Nyssa walked back to them, she rubbed her head as it was throbbing.

The Doctor checked on her, concerned. "Are you alright, Nyssa?"

"I think so," she replied. "My telepathic contact with the wolf has given me a headache."

"You were talking to the wolf telepathically?" asked Tegan, astounded.

"Not exactly talking," Nyssa answered, "I was giving him a straightforward command to leave that family alone."

"Well, it seemed to have worked," Tegan remarked.

"Doctor," Nyssa looked to him. "There's something very serious going on."

"I agree," he replied. "I wonder what's happening here."

Returning to their jeep, Miles rebuked the trio for attempting to tame the wolf like that. After apologising, the Doctor asked if this was the first time that something like this had happened. Miles laughed.

“Where have you three been? This is like the seventh time this has happened. And it’s not just with wolves. It’s lions and tigers too!”

“And bears?” Tegan added.

“No, thankfully,” he resumed. “They’ve attacked our jeeps. We’re supposed to be doing pretty well this summer.”

“Is there a regular pattern?” Nyssa asked. “Or do these animals just attack randomly?”

“Oh, definitely random,” Miles replied. “We don’t know whether our animals are coming or going.”

“Then why keep the park open?” Tegan asked. “Why risk tourists getting attacked when giving them jeep tours?”

“Look,” he said. “I don’t like what’s happening either, but I have a wife and kid to support. Last year, in 2014, the park suffered a financial loss from a lack of customers. I can’t go against the management!”

“Trying to cover it up, are they?” suggested Tegan.

“Trying to avoid a scandal, yes,” said Miles, “To prevent any of this getting in the press! They’ll have to listen now though. This is the first time a wild animal managed to break into a jeep.”

“The first time?” Nyssa said, astonished.

“Oh, yeah! The previous six times the animals were only scratching jeep doors. Now we’ve had one animal break into a jeep. It’s getting ridiculous.”

“Indeed it is,” the Doctor said thoughtfully. After a moment, “I wonder. Could you take us back to home base as soon as possible, Miles? I might be able to help out with the problem you’re having regarding the animals.”

“Sure,” Miles shrugged. “Safari’s cancelled today as far as I’m concerned. But I don’t see what you can do to help.”

“Oh,” the Doctor mused. “Just a theory I have. A theory I want to put into practice. I need to collect some items from my TARDIS first.”

As the Doctor was speaking to Miles, Tegan noticed that Nyssa was looking pale and became concerned for her.

“Nyssa,” Tegan laid a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Is there something wrong?”

A moment ensued before Nyssa answered. “Can’t you sense it?”

“Sense what?”

Another moment of silence, before Nyssa shook her head, disorientated. “I thought I could sense something nearby. A presence.”

“That Big Bad Wolf again?” joked Tegan.

“No,” Nyssa replied, not registering the reply. “Not of Earth origin. Something not of this planet. It’s... extraordinary.”

As the Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan were driven back to home base, Miles’s jeep couldn’t avoid more encounters with wild animals. In the long savanna grass, they seemed to come out of nowhere. A hail of orange and black. Dishevelled and crazed. The tigers ran alongside the jeep, hyper-aggressive and lashing out with sharp claws. Like the wolf, they had red eyes too. The Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan were startled every time the tigers lashed out.

“Can you evade them?” the Doctor asked.

“You think it’s that easy?!” Miles said, clearly annoyed. “Have a go driving my jeep, mate!”

“Veer left! That gully might discourage them!”

The vehicle swerved down the dusty road. The Doctor turned to Nyssa. She knew what he was going to ask her before he even asked.

“I’ll do my best,” she said.

“Thank you.”

Without further ado, Nyssa got close to the jeep window where the tigers were running alongside. They tore off one of the doors from its hinges. Nyssa closed her eyes as she attempted to make contact with the tigers. She felt a searing pain as she did so. It was as if someone was banging a hammer on her head. She then sensed another presence. Someone was trying to stop her.

“*Nyssa!*” Tegan cried out.

The Doctor tried to reach out to her but Nyssa fended him off.

“No! I must sort him out before I attend to the tigers!”

“Him?” the Doctor became confused. “What are you talking about, Nyssa? Who’s *he* or *him*?”

Nyssa didn’t answer. She concentrated again, shutting her eyes. She could then see an image. It was blurry but she knew she saw him there.

A silhouette. He was almost red-like.

Stay out of this. I don’t want you here! Let the tigers eat you! Eat you, I say!

No, Nyssa responded. *You know it’s wrong! Call them off. Call them off this instant.*

Or what?

I’ll never leave. Never. I’ll always be here.

There was an angry, young moan at the other end. Nyssa could hear it. The image of him faded away. Nyssa managed to glimpse it. Eventually, she came out of her reverie as the Doctor and Tegan held her.

“Nyssa, are you alright?” Tegan asked.

She nodded her head, disorientated, “Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, Tegan.”

“Nyssa,” the Doctor asked. “Did you make contact with someone?”

She looked puzzled as if she’d forgotten momentarily.

“Yes! Yes, I did. I made contact with the person who is responsible for what’s happening.”

“Really?” the Doctor said, intrigued.

“And you managed to persuade him to call off the tigers,” Tegan pointed. “Look!”

Nyssa looked out of the jeep window. Tegan was right. The tigers had run off.

“Thank goodness!” Miles cheered, relieved. “I’ve still got a wife and kid to go back to.”

Nyssa became determined to tell the Doctor more. “Doctor, the person I made contact with...” She paused for breath. “He’s an alien crimson-coloured lion.”

“What?” the Doctor said, astonished.

“Biped certainly,” Nyssa continued, “but definitely a lion of alien origin.”

“An alien lion,” said Tegan before she joked. “Related to Aslan, is he?”

The Doctor mused to himself before he asked Nyssa, “Did you get his name and what planet he comes from?”

“And more importantly,” Tegan added, “why is he controlling the wild animals of Longleat Park and making them attack people?”

Nyssa struggled to think for a moment. “I don’t know,” she answered. “I was only able to get a brief glimpse in my contact with him. All I’ve told you is all I know, I’m afraid.”

The Doctor sighed. “Pity. No matter though. Once we get back to home base and return to the TARDIS, I’ll fetch the equipment I’ll need to track down who this alien lion is and stop this havoc he’s causing.”

Sometime later, the Doctor and his friends were back in the safari forest. Miles agreed to accompany them, under protest. He knew how important it was to keep his customers protected. Even though they weren’t on a safari anymore.

“Man deserves a promotion,” hummed the Doctor.

“From badly chewed to barely grazed?” Tegan suggested.

Miles cocked his gun. “I heard that.”

“We need to get moving,” urged Nyssa.

Forming a party of four, the Doctor used his tracker to scan the forest and try to find Nyssa’s alien lion. Tegan complained that he’d only brought his tracker. She had expected him to bring something else as well. Something more! The Doctor told Tegan his tracker was of essential importance.

The explanation had been fairly technical, but it had something to do with a stimulated emission of radiation. Not entirely unlike a laser or optical maser, but on electroencephalographic level.

She then asked why he hadn’t brought his tracker earlier as he would usually carry things like that in his transcendental coat pockets. The

Doctor reminded her that they were supposed to be enjoying themselves at Longleat, not investigating a strange mystery.

It was a good point the Doctor made, Tegan admitted privately.

But as they explored the jungle forest, she still couldn't help but ask another question.

“Why are we risking ourselves in the forest without any protection? The lions, tigers and wolves could come out at us again. Controlled by Nyssa's Crimson Lion!”

The Doctor sighed. He had to point out to her that his tracker had an inbuilt forcefield to protect them. Tegan was unconvinced about that, despite him insisting that it was true. She asked how reliable his tracker's in-built force-field was. The Doctor became sheepish again. After a moment's silence, he told her it was 89% reliable.

“Rabbits,” Tegan swore, annoyed.

“Brave heart, Tegan,” the Doctor reassured her. “We have Mr Miles to protect us with the tranquilliser darts in that gun of his.”

Miles was sullen during this exploration of the safari forest. He'd been looking forward to getting back to his wife for an early tea. His plans were ruined because he was out here with the Doctor and his friends.

The Doctor reminded Miles that he'd been given the choice not to come out with him, Nyssa and Tegan. But Miles reminded him of the responsibility he had to him and his friends and the code he went by. The Doctor was pleased that Miles had his priorities right. He reassured him that he and his friends would have this alien lion business sorted out as soon as possible and that it should be relatively straight-forward.

It was then that Tegan realised something was amiss.

“Where's Nyssa got to?” she asked.

The Doctor looked around. He realised Nyssa had gone. Both he and Tegan started to panic.

“She was here a second ago,” the Doctor insisted.

“Are you sure about that?” Tegan challenged him.

“Yes. I'm about... 78% sure.”

“Wandered off, has she?” suggested Miles.

The Doctor was clearly annoyed. “I told everyone to stay together! Not wander off. Why did Nyssa wander off?”

“Where do you think she’s gone to?” Tegan asked.

“To find that Crimson Lion herself, no doubt,” the Doctor answered. “And without protection!” He sighed, distressed. “Nyssa, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Nyssa had been distracted accompanying the Doctor and Tegan. She heard the Crimson Lion’s voice inside her head. She’d been getting closer to where it was coming from.

Before long, she realised she had lost her friends and was lost in the forest too. She berated herself for getting distracted. But she knew she had to find the Crimson Lion. To find out why he was on Earth!

Eventually, Nyssa came to a clearing where the voice of Leos—yes, that was the lion’s name! —was getting clearer and louder. She could hear him commanding the lions, tigers, wolves and other wild animals of the safari park to obey.

Nyssa began to call out to him telepathically and gently. *Leos! It’s me, Nyssa! I’m very close to you. Please don’t attack me. I’ve come to help.*

As soon as Nyssa called out to him, Leos’s voice stopped. The forest became silent. Even the birds twittering away in the background had gone quiet. Nyssa stepped closer into the clearing, feeling apprehensive.

Please answer me. I do want to help you. My people have latent telepathic abilities. I can hear your thoughts and feel your fears. Please, Leos. Let me hear and see you so that I can help you.

As Nyssa got into the centre of the clearing, she eventually saw the Crimson Lion crouched on the ground and sitting up against a tree. Relieved that she’d found him, she didn’t expect to be surrounded by two tigers, two lions and two wolves coming out at her. They surrounded her in a semicircle.

Nyssa became afraid. She knew Leos was controlling them telepathically. But she didn’t let the wild animals and Leos intimidate her. She stayed where she was, determined to maintain her contact with Leos.

They obey me! Nyssa heard Leos say. *You'd better not try to kill me!*

Nyssa sensed the growing fear of the young, perhaps adolescent lion.

Why would I want to kill you, Leos? I'm a peace-loving person. I don't believe in killing.

You cage animals and you shoot them! Leos retorted. *I've seen it happen. I know what goes on here.*

They don't kill them, Nyssa insisted. *Not here.*

I don't believe you!

If you can read my mind, you know it's true.

You're like them! You'd believe that to save your human skin!

Again, if you read my mind, you'll know I'm not human. This isn't my world.

A moment of silence ensued. Leos looked up at Nyssa. She could sense he was reading her mind, but it wasn't forceful.

After a short while, he looked down on the ground.

So you're not like them. That doesn't mean I have to trust you.

Leos maintained his control on the lions, tigers and wolves surrounding Nyssa in a semicircle. She slowly sat down on the ground opposite Leos as she attempted to reach out to him.

"Please tell me who you are, Leos," she said. "Where you come from. I'm using word-of-mouth instead of thought to talk to you. I won't pry into your thoughts as we talk."

Even as Nyssa tried to reason with him, Leos wouldn't submit. He smacked the ground with his paws, growling: *I won't reveal myself to anyone! I will protect myself!*

Leos, please!

No! he interrupted. *I won't tell! I won't!*

Leos let out an angry, ferocious roar. It echoed across the forest, scaring his minions, the lions, tigers and wolves. Nyssa wondered how this young Crimson Lion could have control over the safari park's wild animals and yet have so much anger in him.

She was reminded of something Kassia had once said to her in the grove, tending the weeds around Melkur. "*Emotion can be forged under pressure like any diamond, Nyssa. And wound just as likewise.*"

Leos approached Nyssa.

The Doctor, Tegan and Miles heard the loud roar too. They stood for a moment, wondering where it had come from. No one spoke.

Miles then broke the silence. “Could that roar belong to that lion-man friend of yours?”

“It wasn't a 'lion-man' Nyssa saw,” Tegan retorted. “It could be him though. What do you think, Doctor?”

As she turned to the Doctor, Tegan saw he had become thoughtful. When he spoke, he wasn't talking to her. “There was a voice inside that roar. I could hear it.”

“What?” a perplexed Tegan asked.

The Doctor turned to them. “Didn't you hear it, you two? The voice inside that roar? There was a sentient intelligence to it.”

Miles shrugged. “I only heard a loud roar from a wild animal. No voice to go with it.”

The Doctor looked hopefully to Tegan.

“Sorry, Doc,” she said. “I only heard the angry roar of an angry lion. Nyssa might be in trouble too! We should go help—”

“Of course!” the Doctor realised, interrupting her. “It wouldn't work for humans because you're not telepathically adept as me and Nyssa.”

“Come again?” Tegan enquired.

After thinking things through, the Doctor began to explain. “It's not your fault, Tegan. Due to this Crimson Lion having psychic abilities, the telepathic connections can only work with other telepaths. Nyssa can communicate with this alien lion because she has latent telepathic abilities—”

“Right.”

“And I can hear the alien lion's thoughts due to my telepathic abilities as a Time Lord,” the Doctor continued. “Though my thought processes are stronger than Nyssa's to ensure a full telepathic conference.”

“And I suppose we humans can't hear the alien lion's thoughts because we're not geared for that sort of telepathy, right?” Tegan retorted.

“Afraid not,” the Doctor confirmed. “Sorry, Tegan. As I said, it's not you or Miles' fault.”

“Yeah well, it doesn't bother me in the slightest,” she said. “I can't hear this lion's thoughts since it is all growls and roars to me.”

“Don't you think it's fascinating, though, Tegan? Your species struggles to process the necessary requirements to ensure full telepathy. Though I can recall a few specialised events that trigger latent psi-capabilities—”

“And quite frankly, I don't care!” Tegan grabbed him by the arm. “All I care about right now is finding Nyssa so that we can save her from this alien lion of hers. Provided she hasn't been eaten up already! Hadn't that occurred to you, Doctor?”

“Quite right,” Miles said, supporting Tegan. “We should get a move on? My tourists's safety is my prime concern in this ridiculous endeavour! And that goes for your young friend who's lost herself in the forest too.”

The Doctor looked squarely at Tegan and Miles, before seeing that they had a point.

“Very well,” he said. “Come on. Let's go and find where that roar's coming from. This way, I think!”

The Doctor headed off in one direction before Tegan and Miles followed. Just then, another loud roar echoed in the forest. Once that happened, he headed off back the other way. Tegan and Miles still followed him.

“I knew it was this way all the time,” the Doctor insisted.

Nyssa saw Leos sob away. He crouched by the tree he lay against. She gradually moved closer to Leos. He must've known she was getting closer to him since he could telepathically mind-link with her. For a brief moment, Nyssa saw an image of Leos with other Crimson Lions. Nyssa stopped approaching Leos as she tried to figure out what it was about that image that felt so familiar.

Eventually, she worked it out.

“You miss your family don't you, Leos?” she said, sympathetically.

Leos didn't answer at first. He grunted as if a big secret had been revealed.

You said you wouldn't try to read my mind, he reminded her.

"I didn't," Nyssa insisted. "I saw the image in your mind briefly. You let yourself slip."

I didn't, Leos denied.

"I'm afraid you did," Nyssa told him. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

A moment's silence ensued.

"Please, Leos," pleaded Nyssa. "Tell me about your family. I would like to help. You would like to get off this planet, wouldn't you? To return to your family?"

Nyssa realised that she had won him over now. He didn't argue or bite back. He started to come out of his crouched position as he looked up at her. He saw the genuine compassion she had in her eyes.

After what seemed like minutes but really seconds...

I come from the jungles of Zofaso on the planet Savar, he began. *All the—you would call us lions, of Zafaso are crimson-coloured and telepathic. Crimson for the wildfire of our five stars and a single voice to unite us all. Speaking and spoken. Listened and listening. All as one.*

Nyssa took a moment to process the fascinating information Leos was giving her. "How did you come to be on Earth, Leos?"

Leos struggled to answer for a moment. *I was with my family pride. We were travelling the stars, heading back to Savar. We Jungle Emperors of Zafaso can share each other's thoughts within a pride. We can control the minds of our prey during a hunt. We can travel through space from planet-to-planet.*

"That's amazing! But... you got lost on the journey back home. Is that right?"

Leos looked embarrassed for a moment before he answered, sounding sad. *There was a meteorite storm. One of the meteorites hit me as we traversed through it. I got separated from my family. I ended up on this miserable planet with no-one to talk to. No one to share my thoughts with. These human predators... They're so violent in mind and lonely in soul. They flinch at each other's touch, yet seek comfort in one another's beliefs.*

“I know,” Nyssa nodded simply.

I tried contacting the lions here but they can't speak to me. They don't have higher brain functions as I have. He paused for a moment. I'm lost. I've lost my family. I don't know where they are.

Nyssa shed a tear for Leos. She understood what it was like to lose a family and loved ones. She'd been through it. She had lost her mother and father, as well as her home planet. She had lost loved ones like Adric and Billy. But the reason she kept going was that she was convinced there was still hope. She was convinced the principle applied to Leos' predicament too.

“Leos, I know it's tough. But we can solve this. We can reestablish contact with your pride.”

Leos looked eagerly her. *But I'm doing exactly that!*

She was confused. “What do you mean, Leos?”

Well isn't it obvious? I telepathically link with the animals of this place to defend myself against the creatures that cage and gun them down! I've tried to send a telepathic signal to my pride to call them back and rescue me. But my signal isn't strong enough. With a strong telepathic link with the wild animals of this place, I can make myself heard even louder. I can summon back my pride!

Nyssa shook her head disapprovingly. “No, Leos.”

Why?

“Your telepathy drives the animals into a frenzy. You'll be killing more innocent people if you do this. If you maintain your contact with the wild animals of the safari park like this...”

They're not innocent! Leos interrupted her angrily. *They keep their animals for amusement. The animals are wild! They should be free! Not caged!*

“But how could you know that?”

I do!

“The people of this park mean no harm to the wild animals,” Nyssa told him. “They look after them. They try to keep them safe in this place...”

No! Leos growled. *I don't care what you say!*

“Please!” Nyssa pleaded.

No! Leos roared again. I won't stop my link with the wild animals of this place! I will protect myself! I will make myself heard for my pride to come and collect me! It'll be worth the sacrifice if some come to be entertained by the wild animals of this place, only to be killed in the end!

It was fortunate that the Doctor, Tegan and Miles had heard the roars clearly and now they had found Nyssa in the clearing where Leos was. She turned to see them approach, then got up to reunite with them.

“Nyssa, are you alright?” the Doctor asked.

“I’m fine,” she reassured him. “Please help me, Doctor. Leos won’t listen...”

But their arrival caused Leos to get off the ground and be on the defensive. He growled at the Doctor, Tegan and Miles. Nyssa stood between him and them.

“No, Leos!” Nyssa said to him, seeing the fierce look on his face. “They mean you no harm. They’re my friends! They want to help you!”

I don't need any help from anyone! Leave me alone! I want my pride back! I want them to come and collect me! I can't stand the silence, I can't stand how loud my own voice can be! Don't you know what it's like?

As Nyssa tried to negotiate with Leos, Tegan nudged the Doctor and whispered: “What's happening?”

Before the Doctor could answer Tegan's question, Miles trained his gun on Leos.

“Miles!” he snapped with a whisper.

“Young miss,” Miles addressed Nyssa. “Stand back away from that fierce-looking lion-man—”

“Boy,” she corrected.

“Boy, whatever. For all we know, he can jump on you and eat you at any time he chooses with the way he’s growling and roaring right now.”

“No, Miles!” Nyssa protested. “He's just a child, Leos doesn’t mean any harm. I can hear what he’s saying—”

“Miles, think about it. We've no idea what the effects of the tranquilliser will be on his alien physiology,” the Doctor warned. “It could kill him.”

But Miles didn't listen. He turned his attention to the Crimson Lion, saying to it, "Now listen here you... whatever you are. You just leave the little lady alone. I don't want to have to shoot you, but—"

It was then that everyone, except Leos failed to notice that the lions, tigers and wolves that had surrounded Nyssa earlier had returned. Leos smirked with relief. He had regained control of the wild animals.

Nyssa realised this and shouted, "No, Leos! Don't hurt him. I told you these people mean you no harm. They're just as scared as you are!"

"Too right." It was then that Tegan snatched the Doctor's tracker from his hand and stepped forward. She held it out for Leos and the wild animals to see.

"Tegan, what are you doing?" the Doctor called, astonished.

Tegan put on a threatening tone as she addressed Leos, holding the tracker up in her right hand. "Now, listen here, Cowardly Lion," she said. "Call your friends off or else... I'll shoot lasers from this thing. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Tegan!" Nyssa said. "We don't need to threaten him. We need to—"

But it was then that Nyssa realised that Leos had run away. So had the lions, tigers and wolves following after him. Nyssa was astonished. So was Tegan and the Doctor. And Miles, who they careened past without fear or favour. They didn't expect it to be so easy.

Miles raised his gun to fire, but the Doctor snatched the weapon away by its the barrel. "Don't even contemplate it, young man."

"Well, that worked didn't it...?" said Tegan, pleased with herself. "The scanning does work on lasers, right?"

"Tegan! That was a very dangerous thing to do," the Doctor reprimanded her. "And laser beams? Seriously? Out of my tracking device!"

"It was the only thing I could think of," she retorted. "And how about a 'thank you very much, Tegan, for saving our lives!'"

"Thank you very much, Tegan, for saving our lives," he said, snatching back the tracker.

"Better."

“We need to find Leos again,” Nyssa insisted. “We have to help him!” The Doctor tapped Nyssa gently on the shoulder.

“It’s alright, Nyssa,” he said reassuringly. “We’ll find a way, don’t worry.”

“Well, speaking for myself,” Miles began, addressing Tegan. “I’m very grateful to you, miss. I was afraid those wild animals were going to maul me there and then. My wife wouldn’t be happy if she saw me in a terrible state.”

“Glad to have helped,” she lowered her voice. “Though, truthfully, I might just have made things worse...”

“You don’t understand,” Nyssa protested. “Leos has lost his family. We need to get him back to his pride of Crimson Lions from the planet Savar. We have to strengthen his telepathic signal to call for them to collect him.”

“We have one Crimson Lion to worry about,” Tegan objected. “We don’t want a whole pride of them to deal with.”

“Nyssa, did you say that the creature was a juvenile?” asked the Doctor. “That’s right.”

“It’s for the best, Tegan,” he said. “We have to help this young Leos in every way possible. He’s a frightened child looking for his parents. The longer he stays on this planet, the more trouble he’ll cause to every visitor at Longleat Safari Park.”

“So, how are we going to do it?” Miles asked. “How are we going to return this lion-person back to his family pride in wherever he comes from?”

“They have a strong telepathic link with the family members in each pride,” Nyssa told everyone. “We have to find a way to increase the connection between Leos and his pride before they come and pick him up.”

“You have something in mind then, Nyssa,” the Doctor said. “I’d very much like to hear it.”

“I’ll need your help on this idea I have in mind, Doctor,” Nyssa said.

“Ah,” he replied. “I think I know what it is you’re going to ask me.”

“Yes,” she said. “Do you think it’ll work?”

The Doctor thought for a moment. Then he answered. “It’s never been done before, I admit.” He paused for a moment. “But in this case, I don’t see why we shouldn’t give it a try.”

Tegan felt left out. “Would you two care to share what it is you have in mind?”

The Doctor beamed, slinging the rifle over his shoulder. “Home field advantage, Tegan.”

Leos ran wild in the safari plains. He hadn’t felt so free. He ran with his fellow wild animals. Even though he couldn’t speak to them telepathically, he could connect with them on instinct. They ran the safari park, on the lookout for those who would threaten their existence.

After running for what seemed a long time, Leos came to a stop. The other wild animals stopped too. The sun had started to go down.

Was it coming to the end of the day already? Leos thought.

He missed the long days in the Zofaso jungles. He wished he was back there.

Leos soon realised that he and his friends weren’t alone. They were on the defensive as they looked around to see. He saw a jeep approaching. He recognised the driver. He also saw the strange cream-clothed man as well as the loud one and the one who had tried to befriend him.

The one who had tried to help him... She should know better! Trying to befriend a wild Crimson Lion!

“Leos!” Nyssa called out to him. Yes! That was her name! Nyssa!

The jeep halted. After a few seconds, Nyssa and the cream-clothed man came out to meet him and his pack. Leos commanded the lions, tigers and wolves telepathically to advance towards them.

They obeyed.

The loud one called to warn them. A sentry! Someone to watch over the pack, that was logical. The cream-clothed man and Nyssa stopped in their tracks. They held up their hands as the wild animals advanced.

“Leos, please!” the cream-clothed man called. “Watch!”

He slung something off his shoulder and held it up. The gun! He was— The strange animal flung it into a nearby watering hole and dusted off his hands. To the consternation of the man in the jeep. He acted against his own pride, what a bizarre gesture.

“We only want to help you,” the Doctor insisted.

“Yes, Leos!” pleaded Nyssa. “Please listen to the Doctor.”

No one can help me! Leos replied defiantly. *No one can help a wild Crimson Lion like me. You don't understand the link I have with my pride. It's precious to me. They're so far away! I can't make my signal heard by them. I need these wild animals to enhance my signal. To defend me at all times!*

“But we can enhance your telepathic signal to your family on Savar for you,” the Doctor told him. “You don't need to have Longleat's animals attacking innocent people to enhance the signal for you.”

At that, Leos listened. His control of the wild animals faltered. They stopped advancing towards the Doctor and Nyssa. Leos regained his control on them to stop advancing and prevent them from slaughtering the Doctor and Nyssa too soon.

Help me? Leos was confused. *How can you do that?*

“The Doctor has a ship,” Nyssa answered. “It's called the TARDIS. The ship can travel anywhere in time and space.”

“The TARDIS has telepathic circuits, Leos,” the Doctor added. “If we link you to those circuits via your thought patterns, the signal can be enhanced and your pride can come from Savar to pick you up. You can return home to your family.”

“See, Leos,” Nyssa said. “You have no need to attack anyone else to make yourself heard. Let the Doctor help you and we can take you to where the TARDIS is.”

Leos shook his head. The offer was too good to be true, he thought.

It's a trick! It's a trap! I don't trust you!

“It's no trick,” the Doctor insisted. “It's genuine! We want to help you! I'm a Time Lord from Gallifrey and Nyssa is from the planet Traken. We can sense your telepathic abilities. Humans don't have that advantage. You can trust us! Listen to us!”

Why? Leos retorted. *Why should I trust you and listen to you?*

“Because you're harming your pride!” Nyssa protested.

A moment of silence ensued.

What...?

“A door can swing both ways, Leos,” said the Doctor. “All that fear, that mistrust, those emotions come from you, but are also those of the creatures you've enslaved. They don't understand what's going on. They're afraid. Afraid enough to kill.”

Nyssa eventually said, gently, “Do you want to kill people, Leos? Not the pack, not the pride, *you*. Are you really that kind of a lion? You don't want to be remembered as a murderer on your home planet, do you? A murderer who killed innocent lives on another alien world? Believe me, Leos. Murder isn't the answer to getting you back to your home planet.”

“Nyssa is right, Leos,” the Doctor told him. “Do you really want to kill to return home?”

Leos wanted to say yes. He wanted to defy these people. He wanted to defy them as they seemed... genuinely eager to help him... to help him get him off this planet... to get off so that he could return home and not hurt anyone else.

Was he that kind of a lion? Nyssa had asked him. *Was he really a murderer?*

He couldn't believe he was being swayed by those not like him. By aliens!

No, he grudgingly answered. *No, I don't.*

“If you can read my thoughts and the Doctor's,” Nyssa began, “And I'm sure you can... You know what we say is true.”

Leos didn't answer immediately. He still wasn't sure whether to trust them.

Then he heard a voice. Nyssa's voice. *Come with us. Back to the TARDIS.*

She was communicating to him telepathically, so was the Doctor. *You have nothing to fear. We won't harm you.*

In that moment of telepathic contact, Leos began to understand. He had been reckless and immature about his predicament from the start. It was time for him to grow up.

What must I do?

It was agreed that Tegan and Miles wouldn't enter the TARDIS while the Doctor and Nyssa were with Leos. They were happy to wait outside.

The Doctor showed Leos the telepathic circuits on the console unit as he and Nyssa led him into the console room. Leos looked around in awe and wonder. He thought the blue box was small on the outside. How come a huge spaceship fitted inside a small space like this?

“Here we are, Leos,” the Doctor said. “Place your hand on these two sensors. Then you can start making contact with your family.”

Leos looked up at the Doctor. He wasn't sure what to make of these sensors on the console. Had he been right to trust them or was this all some elaborate trap?

“It's no trap, Leos,” he said. “I can assure you of that.”

Oops, Leos thought. He must have let those thoughts slip out for the Doctor to hear.

“Yes, you did, I'm afraid,” Nyssa teased him. “I heard them too. But don't worry. We understand how you feel. It's a big thing for you to trust us like this.”

“Go on, Leos,” he said encouragingly. “Place your hands on the sensors. Your family's waiting for you to make the call. Let them know where you are.”

At first, Leo wasn't sure if this was going to work. Would these TARDIS telepathic circuits allow him to strengthen his telepathic signal and contact his family as the Doctor had said?

Nevertheless, Leos placed his hands on the two sensors as the Doctor had told him to do. He began to contact his family, focusing his thoughts on sending the signal and making the call.

At first, it seemed to take forever. Nothing was happening. Leos started to get impatient. Even as he was still in the process of focusing his thoughts into making contact with his family, he was beginning to lose faith in the Doctor's reassurances.

Nyssa was getting anxious and having doubts, but the Doctor told her not to lose faith.

Eventually, and by a miracle, Leos felt a jolt of joy in his heart. Wildfire hearts. Speaking and spoken. Listened and listening. The Doctor and Nyssa saw Leos's reaction as his eyes were shut with making the contact via the telepathic circuits and his smile grew broader by the minute.

"Has it worked?" Nyssa asked the Doctor. "Have they responded to his signal?"

"You know something, Nyssa?" he said to her. "I believe that it has worked."

It's them! I can hear them! They're immediately flying out from Savar and coming to collect me. They're coming to Earth and they're going to take me back home! Oh, how wonderful that my nightmare has ended!

Whilst Leos's eyes were still shut and he was still connected to the TARDIS telepathic circuits, the Doctor turned to Nyssa and said satisfied, "See, Nyssa, what did I tell you? It all worked out in the end, didn't it?"

Very soon, Leos was off back to his home planet with his pride of Crimson Lions. He thanked the Doctor and Nyssa before he left.

Nyssa, the Doctor, Tegan and Miles watched as they saw the streak of red that was Leos's pride heading off out of Earth's sky and into space. They were back at home base where the safari park's entrance/exit was. They also noticed that things had resumed to normal. Everyone was coming in to enjoy the safari park. In fact, news travelled quickly about Longleat Safari Park being safe again that more tourists were present. The Doctor wondered how that had happened. How did news travel so quickly and how were more people coming to the safari park?

Miles turned to the Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan before he departed. "Well, thank you, you three. I don't know what you did with that red lion, but thank goodness you sent him on his way back to his family so that he could hurt no more people. I wonder what my wife will say when I tell her about this. She probably won't believe me, you know."

“Thank you, Miles,” the Doctor said, affably. “Your assistance to us today has been very much appreciated.”

Taking the hint, Miles said his goodbyes to the three travellers before heading off to finish for the day and return to his home, wife and family.

The Doctor and Nyssa started to head off in one direction before Tegan stopped them.

“Hey, Doc! Nyssa! Where are we going?”

“Well, the TARDIS of course,” the Doctor replied. “After that episode with Leos the Crimson Lion, I thought Longleat Safari Park would have put you off, Tegan.”

“You’re joking, right?” she retorted. “I don’t want the fun to end. I’ve been enjoying myself so much at Longleat, I don’t want it to stop.”

“Really?” he said, surprised. “I never expected you to say that, Tegan.”

“Though let’s not do the safari drive this time,” Tegan suggested. “Let’s take a look at the house and grounds. We haven’t seen those yet. I’m sure Nyssa would like to see their gardens.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Nyssa said. “Let’s go and visit. I agree. It’ll be much safer.”

The Doctor seemed to grimace at that. But then he relented and said, “Alright then. Very good suggestion, Tegan! I’ll buy you and Nyssa some coffee and cake after we’ve walked the house and grounds.”

“There’s no need to get so grouchy about it,” Tegan told him.

“I wasn’t,” the Doctor denied.

Nyssa interrupted the flow of argument that was starting between her two friends. “Do you think Leos will be alright?” she asked the Doctor. “Do you think he and his pride will return to Savar safely?”

The Doctor thought for a moment. “Who can say?” he replied. “I’m sure they will. Leos will have a lot to tell his family about what he’s been doing on Earth.”

“Yes,” Nyssa agreed. “I’m sure he will.” She paused for a moment. “I wonder what he’ll tell his family pride about me. Was I a friend to him in the end?”

“Little friends may prove great friends. Did I ever tell you of Androcles and the Lion...?” The Doctor smiled and lead his friends, an arm over each shoulder off the savanna.

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A SIXTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

THE PHEONIX

BY A F J KERNOW

THE PHOENIX

By A.F.J. Kernow

Prelude

“I’m here.”

The Doctor nervously entered a side ward where a middle-aged woman lay peacefully in bed. Head wounds were always difficult. They created as much smoke as they did fire in their Grand Guignol of grotesquery. They had cleaned her injuries well, one of the nurses may even have combed her hair.

Only the constant beeping of monitors disturbed the stillness.

“Oh, what a mess,” he murmured as he sat down. “Why do I always let humans get caught in the middle of my battles?”

He looked at her round face, framed with greying black hair. Below her tafelshrew nose, her small mouth, usually firing verbal barbs in strident tones, was silent. Her doctors told him that she was in a coma following the accident. They suggested a familiar voice might help bring her back from the indifferent arms of Morpheus.

Despite protesting that a family member would work better, the Doctor had discovered that her husband was away on business, whilst her children lived abroad. He was the only one. A veritable Don Quixote. A stranger.

Keeping such unworthy thoughts to himself, he addressed her like a jolly uncle who is trying to liven up the post-Christmas dinner torpor with another tall tale. “It seems I’m your best hope for recovery. A familiar voice... a familiar tale? Yes, I think we’ll start there...”

Settling back in his chair, he took in a deep breath and began.

I: The Formidable Lady

The TARDIS had landed in a village in Oxfordshire. There was the usual mix of schools, church, pub, village hall and post office... so typically English. Everything in its place. Nothing allowed to disturb the status quo.

I knew I was in trouble as soon as I stepped out of the TARDIS. Across the beautifully manicured lawn, I spotted a tall businesslike lady march out of conservatory doors towards me. A crisp middle-class voice cut through the cool morning air. “What is this grubby box doing in my garden? Explain yourself!”

“Well, I'm sorry, but—”

“You can jolly well put it back on your lorry,” she declared.

“I don't have a lorry,” I replied.

“Rubbish.”

“Do you see—”

“Take it away. This instant.”

I finally got a word in and explained that I was a government scientist investigating reports of unusual biological activity. A white lie couched in a former truth. Her ice-blue eyes surveyed me rather like a hawk watching its prey.

“I am not falling for that one,” she shook her head. “Good grief, man, what are you wearing? Is that what passes for a lab coat these days? Honestly, standards are sliding downwards everywhere.”

“It's a coat specifically designed for sociocultural litmus testing,” I looked down at the red, “I see that it's working.”

“We've moved on from mood rings to mood gowns, have we? What's your field? Can't be biology, you'd have shown more care to the traveller's joy.”

“Practically everything.”

“Modest...”

“One tries.” I tried to placate her with my most winning smile. “I assure you, madam, I am a scientific adviser for the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce.”

“Why, then is the United Nations operating in my garden?”

“An unintended casualty, I assure you.”

“What’s in there? Inside your shed.” She tried forcing her way around me.

I blocked her way. “Complex scientific paraphernalia. Shall we discuss it? Perhaps over a cup of tea?”

“Too complex for me? Listen, young man, I’ve had enough of this... I will phone the police and you can tell *them*.”

I watched her cross, indignant figure stride back to her house. I was not staying for another police interrogation. Nipping back into the welcoming shelter of my TARDIS, I tried to leave, hoping to land in more congenial surroundings. The familiar shrieking rumble of the engines began, increasing in volume before shuddering to a halt.

“Come on, old girl,” I protested.

I tried again with the same outcome. The TARDIS is a remarkable machine. I use the word ‘machine’ in the same way that you or I would refer to ourselves as such. My people barely understood the nature of their intelligence when I first departed home. She can think, reason, based on stimuli I myself am otherwise unaware of. Sometimes, she just decides where I am most needed. My only recourse is to thump the console with a frustrated sigh. I have no choice but to go back outside to meet my latest nemesis.

I trudged up the gravel driveway leading to a detached house. Wisteria crept up one of the walls while standing guard either side of the dark blue front door were two bay trees in wooden pots. I rang the doorbell. My new *favourite* lady opened the door. She seemed rather flustered.

“Oh, it’s you again. Have you moved your shed yet?” she asked.

“It will take some time,” I replied.

“Don’t be obtuse, man.” She regarded me like a piece of dirt under her shoe. “Either you have removed that grubby object from my property, or you have not.”

I paused before replying, examining her face. How I wished the TARDIS had just dematerialised. I should be exploring an interesting planet with an orbit like a tango or fishing with Izaak Walton. Instead, I was being verbally assailed by an irate middle-aged lady.

“I'm terribly sorry, but at present, it will take some time for them to remove the blue box,” I told her apologetically.

“Some time? It's quite simple. If your people can't get it out, just hire a lorry from down the road. Just... Just get it out of *my* garden,” she said closing the front door again, due to the insistent ring of a telephone.

I found a bench on the patio and sat waiting for my impatient adversary to return. It was a glorious spring day. The daffodils positively glowed in the warm sunshine. The birds were noisily flying about their business. After a while, I started wondering if I should try leaving in the TARDIS again.

The lady returned, her angry face told me I was due for another verbal tirade.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Why do we bother paying our taxes?” she fumed. “They called me back. Eighty pounds the council wanted to remove your box.”

“And the police?”

“Are too busy with the carnival to send anyone round.”

“We appear to be at a bit of an impasse,” I said standing up.

I neglected to mention my role at this juncture, but I feel as though such expounding would not run amiss now. A previous engagement had left me within calling distance of a local UNIT monitoring station. They had a favour to ask of me and I had the time.

An unusual degree of alien sightings had been recorded in Oxfordshire that fortnight and they'd asked if I could perhaps remain on as, well, a porter. The TARDIS would be given free reign to sniff out any unusual activity in the region and I would wander in and explore, as was my wont.

I'd just finished what I considered a reasonable tour of duty for an old acquaintance, but one must take time to smell the roses. Particularly when one's own method of conveyance has stubbornly chosen to tower over them in indomitable blue.

“I was just admiring your garden,” I said. “Did you design it yourself?”

Her demeanour visibly relaxed. “Thank you. I have a gardener who comes and does all the boring jobs like mowing the lawn and trimming the shrubs. My husband won’t.”

“Boring jobs?”

“The maintenance. It leaves me no time to cultivate the flowers. I have been working on this garden for years. No poppy left behind, but it’s been getting harder and harder to keep them alive. It’s not fair, you know. Not fair on the flowers. I put them there.”

I extended my hand. “I’m the Doctor. What’s your name?”

“Doctor? That’s your title, not your name,” she gripped my hand and shook it firmly. “I am Mrs Fieldhouse, former headmistress of the village school. Who are you, really? No evasiveness this time, please.”

An ex-teacher, that explained the harsh manner. No pupil would have dared challenge this formidable educator! I smiled and told her my usual *nom de plume* of Doctor John Smith. However, she was obviously not convinced I was telling her the truth.

“Well, Doctor Smith, if that is your name, you had better tell me more about this work of yours. Why did you feel the need to place your equipment in my garden without asking?” Mrs Fieldhouse asked.

I could see this terrier in human form was not going to give up questioning me until she got at the truth. I wondered what her reaction would be if I did tell her the truth. “Madam, I am, in your terms, an alien lifeform. A Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey. I travel in time and space and my spaceship is a blue box that is, to you, a dimensional impossibility.”

If I told her these facts, she would probably dismiss my candour as the ravings of a delusional madman. The sound of frenzied banging was coming from the front of the house. We ran around the side. Thumping furiously on the front door was a dishevelled young man.

“Get in... Have to... Have to get in... Have...”

“Steady, old chap,” I said.

“Have to... have to... have to...” his movements became distorted, he began scrabbling at the paintwork, nails scraping as he moaned like a wounded animal.

“Will you stop that at once!” Mrs Fieldhouse shouted. Her booming teacher's voice stopped the man from attacking the door immediately.

“I understand you're frightened,” I said softly. “But there are better ways than shouting.”

She was shaking too much to reply. Likewise, the man was clearly in some distress.

“What is the matter?” I asked.

His eyes darted about nervously and he struggled to get any words out. He pointed wildly away from the house. Then, he started to shake again, violently.

“Can you help me get him inside? He needs to gather his wits before he can tell us anything,” I said urgently.

“He is not coming in my house,” Mrs Fieldhouse looked visibly repelled by the young man. “He's one of those travellers from that dreadful site. The council gave them somewhere to park their caravans and they've made such a mess. They are not proper Romany Gypsies I'm sure of it.”

“Help me get him to the bench so he can sit down,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I am not touching him. He looks like he hasn't seen a shower for days.”

I managed to get the poor man to the bench. Mrs Fieldhouse watched me impassively, her arms folded. I told her to fetch some water for the man. Reluctantly, she went into the house via the conservatory door with its shattered glass panes. She returned with a plastic beaker of water. I was able to help the man take in a few gulps. He started talking about what he had seen.

“In the woods,” he began hesitantly. “In the woods, something weird... B-Burns my head, in my head it talks, can't see anyone, just this thing talking, in my head.” He mumbled something else and lapsed into silence.

“What a perfect day,” Mrs Fieldhouse said acidly. “First you, and that eyesore of a box, and now an incoherent drunk.”

“*Mrs Fieldhouse!* Surely it is obvious, even to you, that this man, whatever his outside appearance, has witnessed something frightening! Did compassion go out with chalk slates and the cane?”

The shock on her features was like a thundercrack. “What did you say? I have *never* used the cane. Not once.”

The man groaned, fainted and would have fallen if I hadn't caught him. He was now slumped unconscious on the bench. I moved him into a more comfortable position. I told Mrs Fieldhouse to fetch a blanket and to call an ambulance.

She did so with great urgency.

The ambulance arrived quickly, to my great relief, as his breathing was shallow and his pulse weak. The man was taken to the hospital. I was left to wonder what could have shocked such a vital and fit young man. He had been absolutely terrified by his discovery.

II: A Difference of Opinion

“You cannot judge people purely on their appearance, Mrs Fieldhouse,” I stated confidently.

“Why not? You can tell a great deal about a person from their appearance. Whether a person chooses to dress appropriately or not, gives you insight into their values. A scruffy appearance usually equates to laziness and shoddy work,” she replied.

“On that analysis, a punk is condemned to be forever labelled untrustworthy, just because they don't conform to your narrow expectations.”

“Well, they won't get a job working in a bank or a school,” said Mrs Fieldhouse smugly.

“Perhaps not, but shouldn't they? Our punk might be more honest than those bankers in their suits, whose negligence and greed caused the recent financial meltdown.”

“Now your just being facetious. Our friends, the Marshall-Joneses work for a multinational bank. They are certainly not unscrupulous.”

“You trust them because of their consistent good character that you see regularly and that their employers recognise too. A person should be judged on their actions, not solely their outward appearance,” I concluded.

“While that maybe true. It is social conventions such as smart dress and the correct etiquette are what keeps us civilised. I used to help those pupils in my care so that they had the correct uniform and were proud of their school.”

“So why did my offer of tea and good company prompt you to call the police?” I resisted the urge to hum a few bars from *My Fair Lady*. She always wanted to dance, dear Audrey.

As I sat in Mrs Fieldhouse’s pristine conservatory, I wondered how Mr Fieldhouse managed this granite lady, whose opinions were set in stone. Trying to stay positive, I did appreciate that she did make a splendid cup of Earl Grey.

Our conversation turned to what the man had seen in Crayfield Woods. Mrs Fieldhouse surprised me when I announced my intention to go and investigate.

“I’m coming with you. Someone needs to keep an eye on you, Doctor Smith,” she said.

“You don’t know what you are getting involved in. Things could get dangerous and you would get in my way.”

“You have no idea what that man saw either. The danger is just as real for you as it is for me. Unless, of course, this unpleasant thing in the woods is something to do with you.”

“If it was something to do with me, I wouldn’t be taking tea with someone with such obvious perspicacity. You would have found me out ages ago.” I said, already knowing her inevitable response.

“Flattery will not help you if you are trying to placate me, Doctor Smith.”

“Mollify, I think is the word,” I muttered under my breath. “Like one does with horses.”

She got up and left the conservatory. I felt like a naughty schoolboy awaiting my fate in the headteacher’s office. Unfortunately, I seem to

attract humans that are tiresome and obstinate. It was like debating with a brick wall. There seemed to be no willingness to understand a different point of view.

“Are you ready then?” the owner of the distinctive voice that could cut through steel was back.

She had dressed appropriately, wearing a blue raincoat, green wellies and a waxed green trilby style hat with a light green feather in it.

“Eminently suitable for an expedition into the unknown,” I said warmly.

“Indeed, more suitable than that ghastly monstrosity you seem to favour. Anyone up to no good would see you coming a mile off and escape,” she said, locking up the conservatory doors. “Or worse, charge you like a bull.”

I straightened my coat. “I’ll be careful.”

“You better had.”

We went into the house, which was uncluttered and decorated in neutral colours. Mrs Fieldhouse picked up a small black handbag. The locking up of her home took longer than one would typically expect. She checked all the doors, all the windows, twice. I didn’t comment at the time, but I did take note. Eventually, with the key hidden away for her husband, we left the house and walked down the country road into the woods.

Clouds, the whiff of freshly scattered rain, a brisk gale. Lovely. At home in this familiar element, I attempted to discover more about my new colleague.

“So, why did you become a teacher, Mrs Fieldhouse?”

“I have always placed great value in education, Doctor Smith. It is vital to give young minds the tools they need to become successful adults,” she obviously enjoyed the opportunity to talk about one of her passions.

“What made you retire from the job you so obviously loved?” I asked.

“It was a number of things. I was an analogue signal in the digital world. I questioned all this reliance on computers and calculators. They are useful tools but can make you lazy.”

“You found it harder to embrace change as you gained more experience? If it isn't broken, why change it?” I asked innocently, unprepared for her furious response.

“How dare you accuse me of being some sort of dinosaur,” she snapped, furiously. I had inadvertently prodded a wasp nest. She continued talking at me, loudly. “I listened to the new research from Professor Wragg at Exeter University, where I trained. I subscribed to the *Times Educational Supplement* to inform my teaching. What I did not tolerate was unnecessary change. Those ignorant politicians started to interfere when they had no idea, no clue what good education is all about. They created a National Curriculum that was completely unwieldy. The money they wasted on constant changes because things weren't working. They lost sight of the children...”

She was clearly upset by the bad memories of what to her, had clearly been a calling, not just a mere job.

I chose my next words carefully. “I understand. I too have been frustrated by mindless bureaucracy and petty, unimaginative politicians. You obviously thrive on challenge, I expect you fought hard for the good of your pupils. I'm sorry, if I made an incorrect assumption,” I hoped my words sounded sufficiently contrite.

“Some of my more spirited pupils used to call me Mrs Fieldmouse,” she remembered, smiling.

Her smile was like the sun appearing after a storm. I kept the thought in my head that this was a totally ridiculous nickname for someone so combative and strident. Perhaps, the village students had a sense of irony.

“I see my former charges around the village from time to time. Many tell me of their latest news. Some families I got to know very well. ‘Did you really teach me Dad?’ they would ask shyly,” she smiled at more pleasant memories. “Some even tell me I should ‘get out more’, little monkeys.”

“Why don't you?”

A spark of fear chilled her eyes. “If I leave the house, they'll come again.”

“Who will?”

“Young thugs with more heat in their blood than sense, I suspect.”

She looked to me for some kind of reply, permission to speak, but I merely nodded and listened attentively.

“They broke in, tore up the place and left,” she continued. “I don’t think they were interested in stealing anything.”

“You never saw them.”

“No... No, merely heard them. Screaming and shouting like animals. I locked the bedroom door, they were coming up the stairs. Gave it a few kicks before they decided to go elsewhere. One of the old neighbours must have called the police. I never shouted, never showed my face. I just hid underneath the sheets until they left. Like a child.”

“Where was your husband?”

Any further discussion was halted by the strange object in the clearing in front of us. The object was about eight-feet-tall, dark purple and egg-shaped.

Mrs Fieldhouse looked nervously at me. “What is it, Doctor Smith? It looks like a giant bird's egg.”

“No earthly bird laid that egg. Not this century.”

“Whatever it is, it shouldn't be here. We need to call the authorities. It could be an unexploded bomb. Look, the surface is iridescent. It changes colour as I move around it,” Mrs Fieldhouse sounded fascinated by the object.

Unfortunately, her curiosity got the better of her. Before I could even shout a warning, she touched the surface of the egg. She recoiled quickly clutching her head. I knew why.

A deep voice was forcing its way into our minds. Unlike the poor man earlier, the presence of the TARDIS helped us, by translating the alien voice. It did not sound friendly.

— YOU WILL ANSWER MY QUESTIONS. WHERE HAS THE POD LANDED? WHAT SPECIES ARE YOU? ANSWER. ANSWER. ANSWER.

III: The Mysterious Pod

An incessant, unrelenting interrogation began.

Whatever this was, it started demanding immediate answers to its questions. The voice was invading my mind and presumably Mrs Fieldhouse's mind too. It felt like being struck repeatedly on the head with a blunt instrument.

Mrs Fieldhouse looked close to passing out when I shouted to the pod, “You are too powerful, you will destroy our minds! Reduce your telepathic field!”

The pain reduced and the powerful voice reduced to a loud but more tolerable level. As the pod or its occupant was still insisting on answers to its questions, I attempted to provide some information.

You have landed on Sol 3, otherwise known as Earth or Terra. I am a Time Lord of Gallifrey and my colleague is a native of this planet, a Tellurian or human.

“What did you tell it?” she asked.

“Sorry, I should have spoken my reply. I forget some humans have no telepathic abilities. I merely told it where it was and who we are.” I looked at her confused face. I realised what I had said too late to retract it.

“Are you mad? What's going on? Is this some sort of trick?” she asked, shaking.

The pod resumed broadcasting its message into our minds — WE ARE THE PHOENIX. THIS IS A WARNING. WE HAVE BEEN TASKED WITH POPULATING THIS PLANET. OUR SCANS INDICATE THE ENVIRONMENT IS CONDUCIVE TO PHOENIX SURVIVAL. GERMINATION CYCLE HAS BEEN AUTOMATICALLY INSTIGATED.

“This planet already has inhabitants.”

— IRRELEVANT.

“You cannot settle here. I have a ship, I can find you are a more suitable planet to live on,” I protested.

— YOUR INFORMATION IS IRRELEVANT. THIS IS A WARNING. THE PHOENIX WILL BE REBORN. THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE. EVACUATE.

“It’s glowing...” Mrs Fieldhouse observed.

“It sounds desperate,” I turned back to the pod and stated firmly. “I can’t allow you to invade this planet. There is a pre-existing species here and they’ve no mass space flight capabilities. You will have to go elsewhere.”

— ARE YOU A THREAT TO THE PHOENIX? THE PHOENIX ARE ARMED AND READY TO DEFEND OURSELVES.

“I am no threat to the Phoenix but I will find a way to stop you if you attempt to eradicate the human race.”

I then attempted to send the pod into hibernation telepathically. I closed my eyes as I tried to negotiate the pod's telepathic defence system. The pod's defences were surprisingly easy to breakthrough. The Phoenix probably weren't expecting to encounter any telepathic beings.

“What are you doing?” Mrs Fieldhouse asked.

“Trying to—”

What happened next was over so quickly I had no time to react. An electric-blue flash struck out in my direction. Mrs Fieldhouse instinctively put herself in between me and the pod. A second flash hit her and she fell to the ground, striking her head on a tree trunk.

My concentration had been broken by the first flash. It had felt like a mild electric shock. How it had affected Mrs Fieldhouse I didn't know. It must have had a more powerful effect on her.

“She was no threat to you!” I said angrily.

— YOU WERE ATTEMPTING TO BREACH OUR TELEPATHIC SHIELDING.

“Only as a last resort. You cannot colonise this planet, it is occupied by intelligent life,” I said.

— DEFINE INTELLIGENT.

“Like these, you stupid machine,” I leant down. “Like these...”

I checked Mrs Fieldhouse. She was out cold and had a nasty gash at the back of her head where she had struck the tree trunk. Fortunately, she was still alive, I detected a strong pulse. I allowed myself a wry smile. In this case, strong character equalled a strong constitution.

I reached into Mrs Fieldhouse's black handbag and found her mobile phone. There was no time to phone for an ambulance as the pod had changed colour to a bright yellow. I straightened up and tried once more to force the pod into a hibernation state.

“You know I can easily take you to an uninhabited planet where your species can be reborn,” I said, attempting to distract the pod. “*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves—*”

“*Jabberwocky?*” Mrs Fieldhouse groaned in confusion before losing consciousness again.

I nodded, unaware my reply was unheard, “*Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.*”

The voice was increasing in volume — WE MUST BE REBORN. THE PHOENIX CLAIM THIS PLANET AS THEIR OWN.

I clamped my hands to my head. In my mind, I could see the files of the artificial intelligence controlling the pod. I was running out of time. Very soon, I too would succumb to the pod's powerful telepathic field.

There. A black file marked Hibernation Protocol. Quick start. Now for protocol operation—

I awoke groggily and struggled to my feet. My head was pounding, but I had more important things to worry about. The pod had disappeared. What had happened? I remembered. I'd been interrupted by another blast of the electric blue flash. Mrs Fieldhouse was still unconscious on the ground. How much time had passed? I quickly checked her pulse and breathing. A large lump now accompanied the nasty gash on the back of her head. She was stable but she needed medical attention fast.

I retrieved Mrs Fieldhouse's mobile phone from one of my capacious pockets. I phoned for an ambulance and put my coat over her to keep her warm. After what seemed a lifetime, the phone rang again. It was the

ambulance crew requesting further directions to the casualty's location. They found us quickly with assistance from my desperate shouting.

I accompanied Mrs Fieldhouse to the hospital. While in the ambulance I looked through the contents of her handbag. You can tell a lot about a lady from her handbag, as Evelyn was fond of telling me.

In Mrs Fieldhouse's handbag, there was a powder compact and a lipstick. More useful was her little address book and her purse. From these items, I finally learned her first name, Margaret.

Hopefully, by this point in my tale, you've recognised more than a few points about yourself. I've been subtle where I can to enhance the mystery, but the basic beats are the same as you remember.

I was also able to give the hospital staff the contact details of her family. As organised as ever in the front of the address book, "...in case of emergency please contact: Husband: Mr Edward Fieldhouse, Sons: Mark and Ian Fieldhouse and younger sister Nancy Wilkins. Explaining how Margaret had ended up unconscious had required all my ingenuity. I told the accident and emergency doctor that I thought she had suffered some sort of seizure and fallen.

"And that, my dear Margaret, brings you up to date. I'm afraid I have to go as visiting hours are nearly over and the police have taken an interest in my part in our short escapade. I was the only one largely uninjured, you see. The young man we helped is just a few beds over. Resting peaceably. I think a member of your family is on their way, Nancy perhaps? You were very brave and somewhat reckless to try and protect me," I smiled sadly. "Thank you. Because of your courage, I think I was able to shut down the Phoenix pod. However, I do need to make some checks and let UNIT know. Hopefully, all will be well, and my 'horrid shed', as you call it, will disappear from your garden. I do hope you recover quickly. Take care, Margaret. Goodbye," the Doctor said, wearily rising from the chair.

As the Doctor turned and walked towards the door, Margaret's eyelids started to flutter. Her eyes opened and the first thing she saw was a brightly-coloured form leave the room.

Her voice managed to croak a single word.

"Doctor?"

IV: The Whirlpool of Despair

The Doctor felt guilty about leaving Margaret in the hospital, but he had no choice. He had to make sure that there was no trace of the Phoenix pod. Once back in the TARDIS, he did a comprehensive set of scans. No sign of the alien pod. It had vanished. He even walked back down to the site of pod in the woods for a visual inspection.

Having satisfied himself that it had gone, the Doctor set the TARDIS in motion. This time, there were the familiar sounds of the vortex.

“Feeling better, old girl?”

Imperceptible to human ears was perhaps a *vworp* of contentment. Patting the console he left the room and went to the galley to make himself a meal. He returned to the control room, a warm bowl of Manganesean soup, in hand, just as the TARDIS landed. The readouts informed him he was back on Earth.

He stepped out of the TARDIS. The surroundings seemed familiar. He saw a gravelled driveway leading to a large house with a conservatory. It was Mrs Fieldhouse's home. There were differences though. It was now autumn. Brown, red and gold leaves were starting to fall off the trees. The garden was looking a bit unkempt compared with his first visit and the glass in the conservatory door had been replaced. To the Doctor's surprise, Margaret Fieldhouse was waiting in the front doorway to her house.

“Hello, Margaret,” the Doctor said, gently.

“You had better come in,” she said in a voice devoid of its usual vigour.

The Doctor followed her into the house. It was untidy. Cobwebs had taken over in corners of the ceiling. Margaret walked into a comfortable but messy lounge and turned on the light. Something was very wrong with Margaret.

The curtains were drawn, a bag with the remains of a takeaway was on the coffee table and a duvet and pillow were on the sofa. Margaret slumped down on the sofa.

"I recognised that strange sound, saw that scruffy box and knew it was you," she said flatly.

The Doctor moved a pile of old newspapers and sat down in an armchair. He looked at Margaret with concern. She had dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was unbrushed and her dressing gown had a ketchup stain on it. She looked like a soul that had lost her *raison d'être*.

"Margaret, would you like a cup of tea?" the Doctor asked.

"Yes, please. Would you mind making it? I can't face that kitchen," she said covering her face in embarrassment.

The Doctor soon discovered why. There were dishes in the sink. Every surface had a mixture of dirty plates, papers and takeaway boxes. He found the kettle and started making tea. He had to use mugs as the teapot looked as if Margaret was cultivating new life inside it. He returned from the kitchen with a tray containing mugs, milk jug and sugar bowl.

"Sorry about the mess," Margaret apologised.

"Don't you worry, Margaret. How many sugars?" he asked.

"One, please," she replied.

It took some time for the Doctor to locate the sugar. It had been stored beneath the sink alongside the drain cleaner and dishwashing detergent.

"Oh, Doctor Smith. I have let myself get into a right state, haven't I?" she said, taking her mug of tea and holding it close to her.

"Just tell me what's been happening," the Doctor suggested.

"It all started when I left the hospital. My sons live abroad and so were unable to visit. My husband came in for brief and infrequent visits when he wasn't working. My younger sister, Nancy did what she could, but she has young children. I spoke to that young man you rescued, apologised to him. Then, when I left the hospital... On the coffee table... on the table..."

She placed her mug on the table and she broke down into uncontrolled sobbing. Her shoulders shook as the tears streamed down her pale face.

The Doctor produced a green and white spotted hankie from his pocket and gave it to her. "Don't you worry. Have a good cry, Margaret. Tell me what's wrong when you are ready," he added.

The Doctor sipped his tea uncomfortably, watching Margaret's misery as she tried to compose herself. *For a woman not used to showing weakness, she*

must have been mortified, he thought. He had to be delicate. Considerate. There was much to catch up on.

“I had to check that the Phoenix had really gone.”

“It's alright Doctor Smith,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I understand that you had a job to do. I went searching for it myself. Briefly. I couldn't find a thing. Perhaps, if I'd gone straight home, I'd...” her voice trailed away.

“Margaret, what's happened?”

“I came home from the hospital to find a letter on the coffee table. It was from my husband.”

“I remember we never did get to have that discussion.”

“What discussion? Oh. Oh, yes...”

“What did it say?”

“It was a letter informing me that he had moved in with a woman he had been seeing at work. The swine didn't even have the courage to tell me face-to-face,” Margaret concluded bitterly.

“To do that to a woman who had just been in hospital, by letter, how cowardly. So, your mental health took a turn for the worst I take it?” the Doctor asked gently.

“Not at first. At first, I was angry. More angry, than I'd ever felt before, even after the home invasion. I was like a hurricane of fury. I destroyed anything that still remained in the house that belonged to him. I threw it into black bags and put it out for the dustman. I left messages on his phone calling him all the names under the sun. Then when all my fury was spent, I sank into a whirlpool of despair. Nothing mattered, and the sun had vanished forever.” She dabbed her eyes, trying hard not to burst into tears again.

“What about your family? Can they help you?” the Doctor asked.

“All busy with their own lives. They are sorry to hear that my marriage is over, of course. However, none of them knows what say to me, so they just avoid me. Infrequent telephone calls from my sons with more awkward pauses than talking,” she answered with a resigned sigh.

“Right then, let's go out for a walk and stretch our legs,” the Doctor suggested.

"I'll go and dressed," said Margaret. She left the room and went upstairs.

After a while, Margaret came down the stairs feeling better for having had a shower. At first, she couldn't find the Doctor. She went into the lounge. The cleaning fairies had been busy and things were looking much better. She went to the kitchen and was faced with the sight of the Doctor at the sink wearing one of her flowery aprons.

"You look even more ridiculous than usual," she announced.

"Margaret..." he chastised.

"You didn't need to start tidying up my pity party," Margaret said, sounding uncomfortable.

"I just wanted to give you a little helping hand," the Doctor replied taking off the apron.

"Thank you, Doctor Smith. Shall we go?"

The Doctor followed Margaret, heading for the hallway. She fetched a blue wool coat and her green waxed hat from a wooden hatstand and put them on. Once outside, they walked down the drive and past the TARDIS.

"Would it hurt to give your shed a coat of paint once in a while?" Margaret asked.

"I leave such decisions up to her, these days."

Margaret hesitated as they reached the path leading into Crayfield Woods.

"We don't have to walk here, Margaret," the Doctor said, noticing her worried face.

"I will be fine, Doctor Smith. My father always said the best way to face a fear is head-on," Margaret replied, sounding more confident than she felt.

As they walked into the woods. They noticed something odd. The rooks and other birds were usually very vocal in their annoyance at being visited. Today, there was nothing, only an eerie silence. There was a strange smokey smell. It reminded Margaret of the incense that the local priest used during midnight mass.

As they entered a familiar clearing, there was the alien pod. It had returned. The pod was changing colour rapidly and smouldering giving off the strange scented smoke.

V: The Phoenix Reborn

I thought you said that pod had gone?” Margaret said, staring at the strange object in front of her.

“I don't understand it. I checked thoroughly, the pod had definitely vanished,” the Doctor said.

“Well, it's obviously got unfinished business,” Margaret said, totally entranced.

The pod's colour changing had increased in pace so that now, it just appeared as off-white. The smoke had also increased in quantity, the thick incense-scented smoke was now starting to obscure the pod from view.

What happened next would be imprinted in Margaret's mind forever. There was a sound like a rifle-shot. This was followed by a bell-like voice.

— THE PHOENIX ARE REBORN! It declared joyously.

The smoke cleared to reveal the shining golden bird-like creature, the Phoenix sitting in the remains of the pod. Maybe that's why their searches had turned up for nought. They'd been looking for signs of the machine, when they should have been looking for the creature inside it.

Its wings, gold velvet, curled with an almost formless grace. It moved like nothing on Earth. Stood like nothing on Earth. It was...

“It's beautiful,” said Margaret.

“Remember what I said about judging by appearances?”

Margaret took a step back.

“What are your intentions, Phoenix?” the Doctor asked. “This planet remains inhabited.”

— YOU ARE THE TIME LORD WHO PUT US BACK INTO HIBERNATION...

“I had no choice. Your pod had already injured my colleague. It would not listen to reason.”

— WE HAVE REVIEWED OUR RECORDS. OUR DEFENCE POD WAS DAMAGED WHEN WE LANDED ON THIS PLANET. WE COULD NOT INTERFERE WITH ITS DECISIONS, the bell-like voice sounded contrite.

“Would you have prevented it, if you could?”

— WE BELIEVE SO.

The Doctor’s voice lowered. “Did I damage the germination cycle?”

— IT HAS SLOWED, BUT IT IS ONGOING... IT EXISTS IN ME.

“Well, now that there isn’t an automated service standing in our paths... Would you like to come to my ship?” the Doctor offered. “I can take you to an uninhabited world where you can be reborn.”

“Don’t tell me, you have a boat docked at the River Severn,” guessed Margaret.

“Actually, I brought it with me when we first met.”

“You mean to tell me that... scruffy shed travels in space?” Margaret scoffed.

“Well, it doesn't roll along on wheels, Margaret,” the Doctor told her, gesturing to the pod. “Smooth arcs do not a timeship make.”

— WE CANNOT BE REBORN HERE. WE NEED AN EMPTY PLANET. YOU... WILL HELP US?

“Of course,” smiled the Doctor. “Follow us back to my Ship.”

He turned to walk back to the waiting TARDIS. Margaret stood watching in disbelief as the shining golden Phoenix floated away from the pod.

She studied the pod's disintegration after its occupant had left. Perhaps, she speculated, it existed less as a form of interplanetary aqualung and instead more a fundamental part of the Phoenix's life cycle. A protective shell, no different to a butterfly chrysalis, but augmented by alien technology to provide a defence against would-be predators.

She stood, staring after the Doctor and his new floating companion.

“Coming, Margaret?” the Doctor called back.

“Yes, Doctor. How are we all going to fit in that box?” She walked briskly up to the Doctor. “You are an alien, aren't you? This creature is normal to you. In some ways, more normal to you than I am.”

Her blue eyes stared at him with intense curiosity.

“Well... This particular species is actually unknown to me, but yes I am not an inhabitant of your world. I've an interest in protecting its infuriating inhabitants, but I am... different.”

“Extraordinary...” she breathed.

Margaret continued to follow the pair back to the TARDIS. Her thoughts were in turmoil. She had always dismissed the existence of aliens as the ravings of fantasists. Now, here she was, having her own close encounter with not just one alien but two. Her mind was already racing with speculations. What should she do? This experience had changed everything.

Once at the blue box, the Doctor let the Phoenix float inside and closed the door.

“Well, Margaret. This is where I say goodbye and leave you in peace. Take care.”

Margaret called after him as he turned to go. “Doctor Smith?”

The Doctor turned to look at Margaret. She was nervously wondering whether she could dare to ask him.

“Come on, Margaret. Out with it, I need to go,” the Doctor said briskly.

This was stupid. She wasn't that nervous little child anymore, frightened to ask her father to play chess with her.

“Can I... That is to say, would I be allowed to come with you too?”

The Doctor looked at this contradictory woman with a mixture of amusement and concern. She would annoy him and criticise him frequently, perhaps, but then all of his companions had that capability from time to time. He himself was certainly not immune. She had some ridiculous prejudices, but there was nothing like travel to broaden the mind and she had been entranced with her first encounter with alien life.

She'd shown the capacity for change, that had been most important.

“Come on then, Mrs Fieldhouse. Let's not keep the Phoenix waiting,” he said warmly.

Margaret was stunned into silence upon her entry to the TARDIS. She looked at the bright futuristic room she found herself in. The Phoenix was fluttering quietly in the corner near a door.

The Doctor had made straight for the six-sided object in the middle of the room. There were lights, dials and levers which formed six banks of controls around a central column. This central column started to rise upwards and then fall back again. This was coupled with that extraordinary noise. A screeching, rumbling noise that also rose and fell in volume.

Margaret put her hands over her ears. “What is that infernal racket?” she shouted.

“That fiendish wassail, as you call it, is my ship, the TARDIS starting her journey back into space,” the Doctor told her.

They took the Phoenix to its new home in the Hironde system. It thanked them and flew out of the TARDIS. Continuing her puckish mood, the Ship did not dematerialise as instructed, but went straight up into the air until it was hovering some distance from the ground.

He was puzzled by his errant time machine's latest trick. “What are you playing at?”

Turning on the scanner revealed the Phoenix exploding and producing thousands of pods. These pods disintegrated each revealing a new golden Phoenix.

The new inhabitants of Hironde-3 sang in their bell-like voices, in a variety of pitches. They repeated joyously several times — *THE PHOENIX ARE REBORN.*

“They certainly are,” Margaret remarked. “What do we do now?”

The Doctor pressed the fast return switch. “I am taking you home, Margaret.”

“I don't want to go home. There's nothing for me there, but a broken marriage and a broken house.”

“Margaret,” he turned to her, a hand in his pocket. “The dangers you've encountered. They're just as real out here as they were at home.”

“But here in this wonderful, amazing shed, the galaxy awaits... please Doctor Smith,” Margaret said desperately. almost child-like in her appeal.

The TARDIS landed for a third time outside Margaret's house.

The Doctor told her she needed to be sure about her decision. She left the TARDIS, extracting a promise from him that he would not leave until three days were up. The Doctor set a timer going, its luminous green numbers counted down towards his departure.

The Doctor used the time wisely.

After alerting UNIT to the matter, now resolved, he caught up on some reading and recalibrated some of TARDIS's control circuits. Margaret, likewise, spent it well. She ensured that there was someone to pay the bills for the next few months and keep an eye on the garden.

The Doctor ran his fingers through his hair, closing the external door behind him. It had been a brisk three days, but well-spent, he thought. Five minutes remained when there was a firm knock at the door.

The Doctor opened it. It was Margaret, carrying with two suitcases and a hatbox.

“Do I have permission to come aboard, Doctor Smith?” she said hopefully.

He flourished an arm towards the console. “Yes, Mrs Fieldhouse. You do indeed.”

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

AN EIGHTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

THE SPACE

BY JAMES D. COOKE

THE SPACE

By James D. Cooke

The world sat still. There was no movement. Not the glimpse of shadows dancing as people walked by, not the bodies of workers moving equipment around, not even a piece of paper caught in the draft of a vent.

Nothing moved at all.

In a place where you'd expect the hustle and bustle of excited activity there wasn't a single peep. The only sounds that could be heard were the low drone of the lights in the corridors as they shone off the dark metal of the walls and the gentle rattle of the air being pushed out of the vent system.

These sounds have found themselves centralised at the perfect place. The meeting place of four corners. It's the kind of location you would normally expect to occupy the high-end office of a chief scientist or architect so that they may look all around at the world they have created. But here, from where this place was joined, it was merely a crossroads from one place to another.

It would be difficult to tell how long this place had been silent and still but in this moment the air began to change. Everything was being pushed outward. The air moved with a different purpose to accommodate what was moving into the once empty nexus point of corridors. The drone of the lights was slowly and forcefully drowned out by the groaning sound of an old machine moving into place. The grinding sensation filled every available spot as a familiar blue box phased into existence.

With a satisfying thud, the TARDIS has landed.

It took a few more seconds for the world to fall back into place. Its shape was slightly new, but it somehow fit perfectly. The TARDIS actually locked into place in the nexus of corridors. No light or space could be

seen around it. Maybe just above it, abiding the flashing light on top, pulsing its calming pulse, but not even a Telosian dustmite could fit past the old girl.

Then, as if breathing life into the world, the TARDIS door swung inwards sending a bright stream of light out ahead. The familiar buzzing and whirling of ancient and powerful systems could be heard coming from inside as its occupant did his last few systems checks before, slowly and joyfully, his shadow made its way towards the open door and a familiar mop of curly brown hair appeared.

Even with the light coming from behind, the Doctor's eyes shone through the darkness of the corridor. They twinkled with an intense love for the unknown and the unexpected. He had a smile that could melt the hearts of most men, unless they were trying to destroy a planet or subjugate another species somewhere. Those men would end up fearing the Doctor. They always feared the wrath of a good man.

The Doctor took a step from the TARDIS door and into the silent world. He straightened up his velvet jacket, one that made him come across as perhaps a Victorian dandy rather than the cowboy his outfit was originally based on. An Oscar Wilde or a Lord Byron, perhaps. The confusion never bothered him, he just found it funny. Patterns in the unpatterned. You could always tell the nature of a person by how stubbornly they claimed you were something you weren't.

After taking in the corridor before him, he turned back towards the TARDIS's interior.

"Fitz, Trix, come have a look at..." He suddenly stopped. It wasn't the first time he had done this recently. He remembered there was no one there. Fitz and Trix had stopped travelling with him some time ago, both settling down together on Earth. He was happy that they were happy, but it was these times alone in his travels that things started to swim in his mind. The universe wasn't any fun if there wasn't anyone to share its wonders with.

"Well, then, back to it, I guess." He wasn't sure whether he was talking to himself or to the old girl. "While you get your newly minted relative

dimensions sorted, let's see what's going on here..."

As he took the first few steps down the long corridor, passing the first few sets of doors he'd seen that weren't Gallifreyan, he was struck by the unnatural quietness of the place. Somewhere like this should have been bustling with life or at least had a few people wandering around. He couldn't help but think that no one builds something like this and leaves it empty. Unless, of course, it had been decommissioned, but then why would it be still left standing?

Wherever this was.

The corridor creaked with every step the Doctor took.

"Air conditioning seems to be out." He tapped a dead advertising screen. "Well, it's not all bad."

It made a fizzling hiccup noise like a squeaky toy under a car wheel.

"Moving on..." he hummed nervously.

The lights above him pulsed in time with his steps. He cut the tempo of his gait in half to better absorb the atmosphere. He didn't mind these abandoned stations or compounds, it was just he didn't like them as much when he was by himself. He could be strong-willed and fearless at times, but to have someone with him to break to the tension was always a preferred option.

"Oh, Fitz, your jokes would come in very handy about now..."

After passing a few more closed doors, the Doctor finally came across an open one. The light inside was as dim as the corridor, but he could make out a desk inside and a computer running in the corner. Since the door was open, he wouldn't exactly be breaking and entering, so the Doctor decided to have a good old snoop around inside.

The Doctor could tell he'd entered an administrative office, due to the various cabinets along the wall by the door. Seemed very retro compared to the high-tech desk and the computer in the corner, but the Doctor supposed that was the niche of whoever used the room.

Within a few moments, he was over at the computer. The calculations that were running on the screen were exceedingly complex. The Doctor

found himself marvelling at the ingenuity of the computations, realising they were to do with dimensional transference and calculating the size of the walls between some realities. He examined the hardware with a hardening gaze. The type of computer he was looking at wasn't made for entering these figures. All the numbers were coming from another part of the station and someone was piggybacking the processing power of this computer to expand the original computations.

“Amazing work, but if your boss finds out I think you'll be in a lot of trouble for tying up resources.”

Managing to finally take his eyes from the computations on the screen, the Doctor decided it was best to root around the desk and see if that could give him any clues as to where he was. He traced his fingers over the top of the desk. It looked like a rich mahogany-styled table, but as his fingers slid across its surface, he found it metallic and smoother than it looked. Not true wood, then. Imitation, but of a very high grade.

He picked up a small placard that read Ingrozny Oberman.

This is definitely where the big man around these parts did most of his business, making sure everyone was in line, the Doctor thought to himself, but what business would that actually be?

His touch just skated across as he made his way around.

The calculations on the screen pointed towards this being a scientific outpost of some kind. Third Zoners, perhaps. Unless, of course, whoever those calculations belonged to had usurped this place for their own ends. But, if that was the case, then why would they want to know about the size of the walls between dimensions? What were they planning on doing? Temporal mathematics at this level wasn't something one bumped into on a day-to-day basis.

As these thoughts glided through his mind, the Doctor's fingers traced over a slight bump as he rounded the table. Instinctively, he felt at the groove and pressed down. He stopped as several sets of screens and different keypads then rose out of the table. The faux mahogany transformed into the sleek plasteel of a genuine workstation. The Doctor was certain information these screens contained could answer all his

questions. He briefly looked over at the metal cabinets and chuckled, wondering what secrets they held or if they too were just for show.

Seven screens formed in place and he took his seat in the leather chair that sat in front of them. He felt his sleeves rub against the upholstered skin. Least he knew one thing that was truly retro. He wasn't quite sure what that said about the character of whosoever owned the room or the people they employed.

The Doctor's smile dropped somewhat as three screens came up with **SYSTEM ERROR** signs and three more had the calculations running from the computer in the corner.

The slightly exasperated Doctor sighed and addressed the Oberman placard. "Well, that certainly helps. I'm afraid you've not all your ducks in a..."

He realised that the seventh screen on the low-most row had neither of these. His smile returned as he noticed he didn't even need a password to log-in. This kind of luck never came the Doctor's way this soon into an investigation. It was almost certainly a trap.

"Almost certainly," he hummed.

But what else could he do? It was time to take advantage and hope someone didn't walk in on him.

The Doctor cautiously typed away at a few of the keypads until he found the right one for the screen he needed and let his fingers fly. He looked for any history on where he was and who was meant to be here. Any information that made sense and wasn't corrupted. To anyone watching, the Doctor's movements would look quite random, but there was always a staunch method behind the apparent madness.

After more than a few minutes, he found at least some of what he was looking for. The details rolled up on-screen until they were in place:

**WELCOME TO VIEWPOINT STATION EST. 2877
UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE EARTH EMPIRE.
CURRENT LOCATION: AMARGOSA STAR SYSTEM, IN GEOCENTRIC
ORBIT AROUND THE SECOND PLANET IN THE SYSTEM.**

Well, that was the where and when sorted.

“Amargosa. Well, this is a long way from the hustle and bustle of galactic life. Few months from any inhabited system by conventional means.”

He brought up a tourist brochure in the main directory.

“The planet remains unnamed due to the Empire's inability to initiate planetfall. The landscape is too seismically unstable to land. The station must be the only inhabited point, then. Still...” he frowned at the placard. “Not as much information about here as I expected.”

Unless he accidentally reset the computer somewhere, but that didn't alter the fact that he had no idea what the purpose was of Viewpoint.

“Let's see, 29th century... A new Earth Empress has been crowned not too long ago, Kaldor's Blind Heart Desert hasn't yet gone into quarantine, the Sense-Sphere rehabilitation programmes are now being used for hardened criminals, humanity's long started to feel the pressure of generation ships adrift on their long journeys between the stars...”

He was about to continue his search when the three screens worth of calculations he'd come to see as part of the furniture suddenly shot up and ate away the information he had managed to gather.

“Anyone told you it's rude to snatch?” he chastised.

He tried fighting the system, but it was pointless, the computer knew its own processes far better than he did. Eventually, he chose to sit back and watch as the numbers matched what he saw on the other working screens. Once the calculations matched perfectly, it all began to run smoothly again.

The Doctor sighed. He knew it was time to move on and look for someone who could answer his questions now that the computer was out of business. He slowly rose from the chair and made his way towards the door, tapping the top of the cabinets as exited.

One of the cabinet drawers shot open, causing the Doctor to jump in fright.

It was empty. He burst into laughter at his own random terror. He was

getting too long in the tooth in this incarnation to be jumping at shadows anymore. He peered down. “No Quark hymenopteran or cyber-converted rats?”

The drawer didn’t reply.

“Well, I appreciate your honesty.”

He closed the cabinet and headed back into the corridor.

As he rounded another in what was becoming an endless supply of corners. The station was beginning to take on all the characteristics of a hedge maze. His hand, tracing the wall on his right, dropped into empty air. The corridor before him came to an end. He’d worked his way through all the left and rights to one side of the space station.

“No viewport,” he noted, disappointed.

There were no more doors on either side of him, meaning the music was coming from the door directly ahead at the end. Loud, but it had a somewhat clear melody. The Doctor was surprised he hadn’t actually heard the sounds a few corners back but with a clear end in sight, he found himself drawn forwards.

As he quickly got closer, he could make out the music more clearly and its catchiness caught his ear, but found he couldn’t remember who the band was that had created the song he was hearing.

Life. I might be able to actually talk to someone about what is going on here on Viewpoint.

Taking the plunge, he opened the door and stepped inside.

What he saw was a brightly-lit laboratory, probably the most brightly lit of all the labs he’d come across so far. It was filled with computers bursting with life, calculations streaming downwards with impressive speed on one side of the room. These were of a different make to those he’d seen before.

Completely different computations to the dimensional transference he’d seen earlier.

He had found himself transfixed by in the Main Office. On tables in the centre sat complex schematics and scribbles on scraps of paper, filled

from top to bottom and on the far side was an open door, from which the music was coming.

The Doctor paused. Friend or adversary?

“Hello?” he called out before he could answer his own question. “I don’t mean to intrude, but the music is pretty loud. The neighbours have started to complain. I’ve had to talk them down from calling the police.”

He waited a few more moments, then stepped further inside, the door shutting behind him. He scanned the lab, his eyes catching on the readouts on the other side of the room.

“Would those be the same calculations from earlier, Doctor?” Some of the running calculations came to their natural conclusion, shapes forming from the numbers, before starting up again. “I rather think they would, Doctor.”

As he rounded a table, he stopped in his tracks, spying a coat sitting atop one of the tables. It was a coat the Doctor recognised. A three-quarter-length brown leather jacket, slightly battered, but otherwise in great condition.

The Doctor let out a laugh. “Well, well...” He looked up as he heard the music turn off and a voice boom out as a large male figure walked through the doorway, not fully paying attention to the Doctor standing at the other end of his lab.

He was bold, confident, with the build of a bear turned blacksmith. “Gold is for the mistress, silver for the maid; Copper for the craftsman cunning at his trade. ‘Good!’ said the Baron, sitting in his hall—”

The man had short dark hair that sat just above his ears, his broad shoulders sitting tightly inside his brown jumpsuit as he took up the whole width of the doorway, though not its height. The Doctor could make out the Seal of Rassilon on the chest of the man’s jumpsuit.

The symbol of a fellow Time Lord.

““But Iron — Cold Iron — is master of them all’,” the Doctor finished, smiling.

The figure slowly looked up properly, taking in the Doctor with bright hazel eyes that sat inside the caring, yet work-worn face of their owner.

These eyes saw that the Doctor standing by the table near the man's jacket and the figure burst out into a huge smile.

"In the name of the Other, Sigma! What are you doing here?" He boomed, rushing towards the Doctor with his arms out wide.

"Mech," the Doctor responded gently, reciprocating and embracing his old friend. "How have you been you old tinkerer? Where's Kayleigh?"

The Doctor had always liked Kayleigh. She was a young Earth woman who he had met on Ganymede Station as she was hitchhiking 'round the universe. Likewise, on one of his rare sabbaticals from the Ship. It could only have been a few years before, relative to the TARDIS. On that occasion, the Doctor had departed with new friends, Todd and Rita, while Kayleigh went travelling with Mech, who had taken a leaf out of the Doctor's book and taken a companion of his own. At any other time, the Doctor may have chaperoned Kayleigh himself, but he found her and Mech and been a perfect fit.

"Oh, we're both fine."

The Doctor placed his fingers in his ears. "What?"

"*Fine!*" The two men smiled. "She's not here at the moment, I dropped her off back home a day or so ago, so she could visit her Olds."

"And you?"

"Me? Well, I've been letting my mind come up with all sorts of crazy things as usual," Mech spread his arms wide again, showcasing the room.

"Leaving your doors unlocked."

"Needs must when the daemon drives, I'm on a streak at the moment."

"Great to hear," the Doctor playfully unblocked his ears. "Although you could think of a way to have the volume go down when someone comes in."

Mech let out another booming laugh, tapping the volume controls on a nearby tuner. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I'll add it to the list. Kayleigh has got me on kind of a Marillion fix at the moment, which is kind of ironic considering her name, it turns out." He slapped the Doctor's shoulder. "Come on, let me show you what I'm working on."

The Doctor picked up Mech's jacket. "Under here?"

“Over here,” he gestured. “It won’t suit you.”

“I’ll have it someday.” He tried putting an arm through one of the sleeves and chuckled at the thought of Mech ever parting with it.

Mech took the Doctor to the first set of computers he’d seen. Mech tapped in a few numbers and the computations slowly started to change. They took on the shape of limbs of a mechanical nature. Hands. Each digit moving naturally. Full arms that ran up to the shoulder, with joints that could link into place in the flesh to become indistinguishable. There were even schematics for faceplates.

The Doctor couldn’t quite take in what he was seeing initially. These almost seemed like they had been stolen from a Cyberfleet. “These calculations... This is a decryption algorithm?”

“That’s right.”

A shiver of fear ran up the Doctor’s spine. Were the Cybermen massing and preparing to become a greater danger to time?

“I know what you’re thinking, Sigma.” Mech’s voice brought the Doctor’s mind back to the moment. “And the answer is no. I am not working for those swamp rats in the Celestial Intervention Agency, I am not on a mission for the High Council and these schematics and calculations have nothing to do with any of the Cyberfactions. This is something better. Something experimental.”

Though Mech’s voice was calm, the cadence of it told the Doctor that he was excited about what he was talking about. Mech always got like this when he had one of his brainwaves. His mind raced at speeds unimaginable to most scientists, even amongst the Time Lords. Though his voice remained level, though that changed on only a few occasions, his ideas betrayed the depth of his real feelings.

“With you everything’s experimental... But this is too close to Mondasian cyberscience. Cybertechnology,” a trace of warning hung in the Doctor’s voice.

Mech heard it. “I get that Sigma, but the materials available to me would be way beyond them.”

The Doctor scratched the back of his neck. “Don’t be too sure...”

“They wouldn’t be able to handle it,” Mech insisted. “Just think of it. I know it’s going to sound crazy—”

“What’s crazy?”

Mech picked up a rudimentary mock-up from beneath the scrap metal of the table. A hydraulic prosthetic arm. “Replacement limbs for Time Lords not ready to regenerate. Powered by artron energy. The lifeblood of the regenerative process.”

The Doctor stood dumbfounded. This was the craziest thing he’d ever heard Mech say, and he once came up with the idea for a bank heist involving the Corsair and Iris Wildthyme. But as it all slowly sank in, the Doctor found himself intrigued by the audacity of it. Mech saw it starting to cross the Doctor’s face.

“There it is. I knew you’d start to see it,” Mech’s voice jumped ever so slightly. “Think of the Quadriggers at home or the builders under the Terseran Hivewrights caught in accidents. Injured in ways that would normally cause them to start regenerating. They could prolong their lives, by having limbs quickly replaced or augmented so that they didn’t have to change until they were ready. The energy in their bodies powering these parts, until their life’s work was done.”

The Doctor’s intrigued optimism was tempered by hard experience. “Gallifrey covers up its would-be mistakes, but it never fesses up. It could change so much, push them out of that, but there’d be elements in play who would not allow it.”

“Maybe not.” Mech’s voice returned to normal, but stayed calm and strong. He placed the prosthetic arm back down. “But with President Romana on my side, I’d have a strong case for getting this through to the Council. I’ve heard her government’s policies. You could have a word with her.”

“You mentioned the material you’d use. What do you have in mind that could withstand artron energy?”

Mech’s smile grew wider. “Dwarf star alloy.” He saw the Doctor’s eyes grow wide at this. “One of the strongest materials in existence.”

The tiniest amount could pierce the outer casing of a Dalek with the

slightest touch and large enough amounts allowed ships that used it to generate gravitational fields of their own. While the CIA and those more radically adverse to their biological nature may not like it, the Doctor realised that Mech was right. The High Council would jump at this opportunity to extend their lifespan. Well... Some members would for sure.

“Are you the only one with mad schemes here or is this a local custom?” the Doctor inquired.

“Viewpoint’s full of so-called crackpots. Apparently, the administrator collects them.”

“How in Rassilon’s name did you even conceive of something like this?”

“Follow me. I’ll show you how.”

Mech turned and bounded towards the open door to the next room. The Doctor quickly followed, needing more answers to new questions. The growing calculations on the other computers slipped from the front of his mind.

The Doctor entered a few seconds after Mech, neatly colliding with a cabinet, almost identical to the one that had scared him in the other office. He snatched it back to prevent it overbalancing onto its side. Getting his bearings, he was surprised by the size of the room. It looked like its own viewing platform. Stretching nearly fifty metres in front of him.

Two large viewports. A huge expanse of distant stars to one side. The other, swirling, blue storms, high in the atmosphere of the Amargosa system’s second planet. They collided in a dance of beauty and destruction.

“Had to be a few somewhere,” he observed.

The Doctor could have continued staring but he could tell by Mech’s tense shoulders that he was dying to tell the Doctor everything he’d learned here.

Mech stood at a console about twenty-metres away from the central window. He was typing in commands with an ease that the Doctor thought could have come in handy earlier. He turned his head and motioned the Doctor over to the console.

“Over here, this is the best place to show you.”

“Warn me if there’s anything at kneecap height.”

“Nothing like that, though,” Mech pointed at the cabinet, “try not to knock into my TARDIS again, will you?”

“I nearly tipped it over. Awfully humble exterior, isn’t it?” He spotted the cabling that ran from the console towards Mech’s disguised TARDIS and also from the other lab as well. “I’ve always been impressed by how much you could do at once.”

“What I’m about to show you is the reason I’ve come up with a few of my latest ideas. It has allowed me to see so many possibilities. Not of just what could happen, but alternate paths of what has happened. Different states, like ships in bottles. Each representing something but not being exactly the same.” Mech’s voice changed again. “It’s a beautiful sight.”

What had been going on and what was about to happen had affected him a lot.

“So what *wondrous beautiful* do you have to show me?”

Mech didn’t answer straight away. He looked down at the readouts on the console, and then raised his eyes to look out into space. “This.”

With that a bright flash of light appeared out in the expanse between the stars. The white light moved as if it had a life of its own, stretching upwards then retracting before stretching outwards. It was almost like a crack was opening in the fabric of the universe. It crackled in places like a line of electricity trying to touch ground. The Doctor stood in awe at what he was seeing, while Mech’s smile almost grew wider than his face.

“You found a rift,” the Doctor said, astonished.

“Not just a rift. A Houghton-Kine dimensional anomaly. This gap between realities seems to be thin here, but only when this rift, this crack opens.”

“A natural formation or artificially-induced?”

“Natural, by all accounts. Something’s keeping the wound open, like a surgical clamp, but what this has allowed me to see has been...”

“Both beautiful and horrifying?” It was like collaring a monsoon.

Mech grasped at the words. “I have seen things that are possibly meant

to come or I have seen past events turning off in different directions. Things that never happened to me and those I know, but somewhere they have happened to another version of me. A temporal brother or cousin, causally speaking.”

The Doctor didn’t take his eyes off the rift as it slowly settled into place, now looking more like a fissure. One that sat in the space around the stars. Something deeper than the hollows of outer space. Like an image seen beyond its vanishing point.

He continued to take in the sight as Mech spoke.

“It is through this that I’ve been able to come up with some of my latest ideas... It’s like I have been able to pull inventions from one place to here.”

“Like the limbs?” the Doctor guessed.

“During one of the openings I saw a terrible war. It was tearing through everything, altering the fabric of existence and I saw myself wearing an arm made from dwarf star alloy.”

“You’d been hurt.”

“Badly, but they’d been able to hold off regeneration by powering my new limb. Now, I can’t tell you if that happened in my future or that was happening to some other version, but the thought of being able to use that idea to help others... To help people continue, like my other self had. I had to take that chance.”

The Doctor finally spoke. “I take it, not everything you’ve seen has been that grim?”

“No, it hasn’t. It’s hard to explain, better to show you. Now that the rift has stabilised for the time being. It can show you—”

“How?”

Mech pressed a button on the console and the room was filled with an intense white light that just washed over both Time Lords. The Doctor found he couldn’t move, but it didn’t feel like he was held against his will. No malevolence. It was just the pure power of what he was now feeling. Like the current of the ocean when one alighted to the beach.

His vision swam as something formed in front of him.

He could see himself stood in San Francisco with Sam Jones, but she

didn't look as she did when they travelled together. She had a darker look about her, like her life had gone a different way without him. Like she had been lost somewhere along the way. He remembered. He reached out to her, but she scowled and turned away as his shadow disappeared from beneath him.

He then saw his hand slamming down on a button.

The world exploded into a kaleidoscope of butterfly moments. Names and faces. Some he could recall, some not. Dangers and delights. Above, below, the book of this life's journey spun with a casual thumb towards the final page.

In amongst the maelstrom of memory, a new vision tugged itself free of the swarm. A young woman in Edwardian attire stood before him. Her smile was infectious as she turned and ran ahead of him, he couldn't help but follow. He knew her and found her name was on the tip of his tongue. He could hear her voice faintly, but the joy behind it was unmistakable.

"Hurry up, Doctor!"

"Coming, Cha—" His response was cut off as the world returned to normal around him and the white light faded. The power that had held him in place slowly dissipated and the viewing room began to refocus before his eyes. He bent over and took huge deep breaths of air, as if his lungs had been emptied. As humans struggled to adjust to changing atmospheres in Space, so too did Gallifreyans in Time.

"I'm so sorry, Sigma, I should have warned you. That happened to me the first time as well." The concern in Mech's eye helped the Doctor to slow his breathing, return it to normal. "It's an intense experience."

"It sure is. I saw so much." The Doctor took a few more moments to let his thoughts catch up with him. Some of what he had witnessed was his past, some was his future, he couldn't recall what sat where. "And, you said, not all of it will happen?"

"No, most of what you saw will happen. It just might not happen to the version of you here. Or it might not have happened to you here anyway."

"And you've been taking readings and ideas from this thing to help your research?"

Mech patted the Doctor on the back. Knowledge filled his eyes with wonder. “Of course, I had to. The discoveries could help save billions of lives in our universe alone.” Mech’s smile slipped slightly. “I just wish I could help those other realities.”

The Doctor gently placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder, “I’m sure the other versions of us are doing everything they can.”

Mech’s smile slowly returned. The Doctor cared for his friends and also spoke the truth they needed to hear. It was one of this incarnation’s most enduring qualities.

“But, you do realise,” the Doctor began, “that your calculations on the rift have started to take up other systems on the station, right?”

The Doctor’s question perplexed Mech, whose expression, in turn, confused the Doctor.

“What do you mean? All my calculations and computations concerning the rift are funnelled directly into my TARDIS’s computer banks. Hence all the cables—”

“Well, somebody has been tapping into your research. Everyone here has vanished.”

“That’s not possible.”

“What’s the maximum capacity of Viewpoint Station?” asked the Doctor.

“250,000 souls,” Mech answered. “With a safety margin of 10,000 or so I was told.”

The Doctor counted the actual crew complement on a single hand.

“Mech, at this moment, you and I are the only people on this station that I know about.”

Mech stood dumbfounded. “Kayleigh...”

“Uh-oh. That’s not good. Well, actually it is. It’s amazing work, but the fact it has even started to take over half of my systems... They’re meant to be protected by safeguards. It’s very bad indeed.”

Mech’s worried, scanning eyes betrayed the calmness in his voice. There was always some physical tick that helped people read his mood. The light

in Mech's lab was dimming.

"So, what's it doing?" inquired the Doctor, innocently.

"Oh, I know you have an idea, Sigma, you always do and I'm sure it matches with what I'm thinking. It's growing."

"More than that, it's cannibalising its peers."

"What do you mean?"

"Beyond your lab, life support is nominal. Look at what it's doing to the infrastructure."

Mech opened up the digital monitoring services. "Transmat Distribution... Waste Reprocessing... Advertising Scraping..."

The Doctor started. "Reactor Control?"

Mech laughed nervously. "Not there yet. The calculations have taken on a life of their own and are working their way through each computer searching for additional power to run."

"Every time it infects the next computer," the Edwardian gentleman paced back and forth, "the calculations start again and race to catch up with the original programming."

"Which is?"

"It must be something along the lines of 'Seek additional resources'."

"Sounds about right." Mech was always happy when someone came to the same conclusions he had. "It's all about processing power, nothing else."

A line of code caught Mech's eye and the Doctor followed his gaze.

"There," Mech pointed. "A request for user input."

"Someone on the station turned it on and now isn't here to turn it off," the Doctor realised. "Was Transmat Distribution one of the first systems to go?"

"That and Shuttle Traffic Control. Funny to think, I saw Kayleigh off just below it in the Reception Promenade and never knew there was anything wrong..."

"We'll get her back, Mech," the Doctor promised. "When did the rift open?"

"Before 'reallocation'."

“Alright, so... They opened a hole in a wall of reality, using the rift, and... what?” the traveller hit upon something. “Is the transmat open or closed-ended?”

“Close-ended.”

“Combine that with Shuttle Traffic Control, Mech, and there’s only one place they could’ve gone.”

“Onto their ships. Out into space,” Mech realised.

“But *where?* There’s no help for lightyears.”

Mech was stroking his chin as he looked the problem over, trying to figure out which one of his hypotheses was the right one. “Do you think they managed to send everyone into the void? A slim chance in there is better than none out here.”

“Lifeboats adrift to escape the collapse...” The Doctor considered it plausible.

“Looking at this, I don’t know if they are frozen in time on the other side of the threshold or if they’re aware of what’s going on.”

“Either way, they’d still be alive. We’ve hope. We just need to find out which lab it all started in and shut it down. Then, everyone can return.”

“If it’s that simple. In the name of the Other, I hope it is, Sigma.”

Mech quickly went to one of the free computers and started scanning the code. The Doctor taking up position next to him, following what his friend was doing.

Two Time Lords working to block and track down the source of a powerful program is certainly a sight to behold. Gallifreyan computer science is so complex and intricate that its circuitry can be considered as vast and meticulously organised as the spiral arms of a proto-galaxy no larger than a thumbnail. The operators’ fingers moving with such grace as the minds behind them push on at great speed. Their own computations punching through the system, tracing backwards through each lab towards the source of the original program.

“Damn, I’ve got more system errors, coming from Oberman’s office.” Mech smacked his hand onto the keypad in frustration.

“Rings a bell. That wouldn’t be Ingrozny Oberman, would it?”

“He’s the Station Administrator, makes sure all labs are running properly and each experiment that uses Viewpoint’s computers — barring most of mine, of course — are authorised by him.”

“Genuine leather chair? Imitation mahogany desk? Filing cabinet with nothing in it?”

“Nothing?” Mech huffed. “Yeah, that’s the Oberman’s alright. Think that cabinet’s what the old boy copied when Kayleigh and I first landed here.”

“I’ve been in his office.” The Doctor let out a satisfied noise. “Speaking of replication...” Blueprints of the station came up and lined up with the path of the program. He pointed at the source of the experiment.

“This says the lab that originated the program is currently being run by a man named, Osias Gentic.”

“Should have figured. He’s as smart as I am, but trapped in his human mind, he rushes headlong into things and hopes it turns out okay. Actually, Sigma, that sounds a lot like you.”

The Doctor gives Mech a mock exasperated look as they both quickly stood from their seats.

“Not too far, just a load of corners to go round.”

“Well a nice bit of cardio never hurt anyone,” the Doctor chimed in.

“Depends who you’re running from.”

They both shared a quick smile as Mech grabbed a device from the main table in the centre of the room. “Dataport. May come in handy to freeze and reverse everything.”

With nary a moment to spare, they moved towards the exit. There was only one issue. The door wouldn’t open.

“Right.” The Doctor scooped up the half-made prosthetic arm from one of the tables, pulling loose one of the power cords. He connected it to an available socket and forced a manual release of the doors. “Keep an eye on Reactor Control. Once it hits the heart of Viewpoint, it’s all over.”

The two men raced out of the lab and made their way, the Doctor realised, back to his TARDIS. He must have passed Gentic’s lab and not

realised it. It must have been behind one of the locked doors. When they ran past Oberman's office, the Doctor saw the TARDIS dead ahead.

"Oh, come on, Sigma..." Mech actually sounded annoyed, which threw the Doctor for a second. "You parked Sexy right in the middle of the corridor! We haven't the time to get round her."

"Then, we go *through* and slip out the backdoor."

Mech scratched his face with the prosthetic arm. "*Backdoor?*"

"Well, a recently orphaned vent from the interior real world interface that won't connect to the outer plasmic shell as it should leading to a... door in the back."

"I forgot, she's an old Type 40, isn't she? You're lucky you stole the right type."

"Borrowed, Mech. Borrowed." The Doctor pulled out his key from his pocket and unlocked the door. "Race you!"

With that The Doctor vanished inside with a grin. Mech charged after him attempting now to keep up as both men ran like schoolboys through the grand Gothic console room of the Doctor's TARDIS. Mech saw the Doctor racing ahead as he then disappeared down a corridor hidden to the side. As Mech caught up with the Doctor, both men started to weave down the corridors towards a wall of red-black distortion.

Something instinctively held Mech back. "What happened here?"

"Some wounds take a longer time to heal than others, Mech," answered the Doctor, honestly. "We lost a console room, the old girl and I."

"I'm sorry."

The Doctor inhaled sharply. "Saving Viewpoint Station, weren't we?"

He pushed Mech, through and then himself. They exploded back out into the station on the other side through the sheer wood-panelled wall. The Doctor pressed a hand against the shell, feeling a static pressure beneath his fingers, but didn't say a word.

Mech was a bit out of breath. "The lab we need should be the first round the corner to the right. Doctor, are you alright?"

"In truth? Happy for the distraction," he beamed. "Come on, then!"

The Doctor raced ahead with his boundless energy and Mech jogged to

keep his breathing under control, though he couldn't help but laugh at his friend's exuberance. They turned the corner and found the lab door closed.

Mech entered a string of numbers and the door slid open with ease.

"Emergency codes," observed the Doctor.

"To get into the labs should anyone lock themselves in," Mech confirmed, "posing a danger to the station or themselves."

"Oberman doesn't know you have them, does he?"

"So, best keep that to ourselves."

The Doctor couldn't help but grin. He'd taught Mech some bad habits down the years, he realised, and he followed him in. The lab was as dimly lit as the corridors outside now, but the computers were running at speeds quicker than any of the others on the station. It proved they were in the right place.

Without saying a word, both men started going over the computers, looking for the original terminal. Mech scanned two computers at once as the process was gaining speed.

"How's Reactor Control looking?" urged the Doctor.

Mech took the dataport out of his jumpsuit pocket and checked the display. "Breached the first firewall. Two to go."

He slotted it into an available slot between the two. He quickly downloaded a section of the original code to peruse later and make improvements. He just hoped the Doctor wouldn't mind. Scientific curiosity and all.

The Doctor found himself over by the far wall of Gentric's lab looking at three computers. Not because he was scanning quicker than Mech, but because he noticed that while two computers were running the calculations of the experiment, the central one of the three would flash up an extra message every few seconds.

"Second firewall's down," Mech reported.

It took a few passes for the Doctor to read what the console was saying:

REINFORCING WALL OF ANOMALY X-09-BETA-3 DESTABILISING.

SEEKING ADDITIONAL POWER.

“Gentric must have been sucked into the pocket dimension before he’d had a chance to abort.”

“Reinforcing wall?” asked Mech.

“It’s keeping the door open.”

“The reason why the calculations are growing?” asked Mech.

The Doctor demonstrated with his hands. “The experiment’s trying to hold everything in place where it was.”

“Like forcing a hole into the eye of a cyclone?”

“Worse, keeping the storm in its place. Out of that glow you showed me earlier.” He pointed to the lab’s viewport. “It’s draining power from everywhere else on the station to keep everyone out there sane, never mind alive.”

The dataport chirped urgently. “The third firewall’s down. Sigma, it’s got access to the reactors!”

“What’s Oberman’s override code?”

“Good hunting’.”

He tried the keyboard. The screen went dead. “No, no, *no!* The power’s been cut.”

“Wait a minute.” Mech connected the power up to the prosthetic arm. “Try it now.”

The Doctor heard the mechanism of the keys nearly snap beneath his fingers.

Helped by Cybertechnology, who’d have thought the day?

With what limited access he’d been given, the Doctor typed in a simple command. *Abort. Return to factory default.*

ARE YOU SURE?

“Sigma, it’s going to—”

The Doctor tapped a key.

The calculations started to slow down, at this point. Power cut from the

room and the rest of the station completely. The Doctor went to the nearest viewport to watch the storm. They hung breathless in space, the Doctor, Mech, Viewpoint Station and the Houghton-Kine Void, for a few precious seconds.

Then, the lights in the lab slowly pulsed, very gradually growing brighter.

By aborting the experiment, the Doctor believed that it would return everyone back to the station. It would happen slowly, of course, as power was restored and the program pulled back. It wasn't intelligent as such. It was just waiting for an answer and growing as it waited to keep everything going.

Mech came up behind him and patted him on the back. "Nicely done, Sigma."

The two men decided to take their leave as the brightness of the lab grew and a human shape began to appear where the Doctor had stood moments before by the three computers. The process was finally, truly reversing and everyone would shortly return.

They made their way back to the other side of Viewpoint Station via the TARDIS's malleable outer shell. The old girl made their journey a bit quicker this time with fewer corridors before the console room. As they passed through, both men gently tapped the central console as if in thanks. They stepped back out through the front door and into the corridor again, now getting brighter, which was a very good sign.

The Doctor paused in his Ship's doorway, making a quick decision.

"I don't think I'll hang around sadly, Mech. I'll let you get on with things and hopefully explain to everyone what happened."

"You sure you can't stay, even for a few hours? Someone's got to man the Shuttle Traffic Control computers for those first couple dockings. Could hear quite a few interesting stories that way."

"Might not be a good idea, especially with the TARDIS parked where she is. People might complain," the Doctor chuckled.

"So, where are you planning to go next, Sigma? Y'seem..."

"Lonely?"

“Mmn,” said the larger man.

“Maybe I am. Big station, no people. Big TARDIS, no people. You can feel it. I think it’s time I went to Stockbridge, catch up with another friend.” The Doctor tapped the door of his TARDIS in readiness. “Maybe have a quiet few days of rest.”

Mech chuckled. “As if you know how to rest.”

“I can but try and can but hope.”

“I’ve got my fingers crossed, don’t you worry. And, I’ll speak to Oberman once everyone returns, which should be anytime now.” Mech tapped his wrist as if playing with an invisible watch. “We’ll both have words with Gentric about his unauthorised experiments.”

“Good, we don’t need that kind of thing happening again,” nodded the Doctor. “If the Time Lords come around asking what’s gone on...”

“Tellurians do as tellurians are,” Mech waved dismissively.

“Recklessly, right. Oh, and tell Kayleigh I said, hi. You have a good one there, my friend.” The Doctor flashed a cheeky smile as he stepped backwards into his TARDIS.

“Trust me, I know. Have fun, Sigma.”

“Look after yourselves.”

With that the Doctor slowly closed his TARDIS door. Mech turned and made his way back towards his lab, dataport in hand and a smile on his face. The slow groaning *worrrp* of the Doctor’s TARDIS filled the air, then slowly faded away onto another adventure.

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A TENTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



WELCOME TO
HANWELL W7

S H O R T T R I P S

NEGATIVE HELP

BY ANDREW HSIEH

NEGATIVE HELP

By Andrew Hsieh

For Dad (1966-1998)

And my dearest friend, Tom, who “made me better”

Northala Fields, one of my favourite parks in the borough of Ealing. I ascended along the spiral hill until I came across an empty bench, very near the top. Much to my fortune, this enabled a relatively reasonable view of some of London’s most iconic landmarks, from the Gherkin to the Shard.

Whilst inhaling the fresh air around the perfect clear blue sky, I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder. It wasn’t something, it was *someone*. So I looked up.

“Andrew!”

It was Tom Hillary, my one and only true friend. Same age, curly dark brown hair, blue eyes, freckles on his face, close-in-height but a few inches shorter, with a very cute grin. I smiled, for the first time in ages, before responding to him in my Mid-Atlantic accent. “Tom, my brother!” We embraced in a prolonged hug, “How are you?” He unveiled two cans of dandelion and burdock from his rucksack, which he kindly brought along. This was one memorable opportunity to open up.

“So, how have you been coping... since the funeral?” he asked, feeling cautious about his choice of words. “Still missing Dad every single day,” I opened my can and took a sip before I leaned closer towards him and whispered. “Which is why I brought you here – to tell you what happened four months ago, regarding my health.”

“Your health?” Tom began playing the air violin and mimicking a slow sad tune – it became rather squeaky to my ears. “No, don’t, don’t do that,”

I tried to hide my nervous laughter. “Oh, Andrew, I was only winding you up,” he exclaimed, giving me that very cute grin. “Why would I play the violin to deliberately ridicule what you’re about to tell me?” Then we bursted out laughing before each having another sip of dandelion and burdock. It wasn’t the first time doing this sort of comical act together. “Just like winding up the clock, backwards and forwards, to find the right place and the right time. That’s the thing about the Doctor.”

“*Who?*”

“Exactly.”

I found Tom’s reaction priceless, but thought containing it would be more appropriate for this case. There was so much to tell him about when and how the Doctor came along to save my life. Psychologically *and* literally, from the dangers of depression and death. The Doctor is not just some ordinary psychologist; he is a very empathetic and sympathetic man who understands the human mind, as well as experiencing all forms of loss.

“So this Doctor, how exactly did he save you?”

I had to elaborate, to help Tom understand the broader context. “My Mum didn’t phone him, nor my local GP; he just came out of the blue, as a matter of fact and perspective. Everything surrounding my Dad’s lymphoma, none of this kept me going – right until the Doctor came much later on during the most stressful situation in my life, when I received ‘negative help’; some oxymoron I believe to have coined not too long ago...”

Alastair Hall, my father, passed away in late March. I had no idea how much his cancer was going to impact my wellbeing and studies. As a result, I made the regretful decision to drop my A-levels, despite using up all the time and energy to prioritise my final exam preparations. “Tom, I’m so sorry.” That was the last thing I said whilst apologising and shaking my head. I didn’t feel ready to tell him why because I thought I’d let him down.

I lost my confidence in everything and immediately withdrew from social life. Two full weeks of depressive episodes at home: crying non stop

on the sofa, oversleeping in bed for hours, losing my appetite, and having repetitive suicidal thoughts every single day.

It wasn't until my mother, Glenda, found a psychologist named Dr Martin Gibbs who ran a private clinic, through the NHS. She was extremely concerned about my stress levels deteriorating, whilst having to take care of my father at the same time. I just couldn't cope with the depression anymore. The therapy sessions were my first collective stage of coming out of the blue.

It was ten minutes early. I decided to take a stroll near the Cuckoo Park Playground before heading over to the clinic. Suddenly, I spotted a young mother cradling and kissing her baby on a bench. She appeared to be sobbing; I thought I'd go and check to see if she needed help or something.

"Hello there," I said, as I approached them. "You okay?"

"No," she sobbed. "Been a widow for nearly five months now. Only got him to take care of, and I don't want to lose him."

"Dear God, I can easily picture what you're going through. My father's currently in hospital, he has lymphoma."

"Really sorry to hear that. I'm Carrie, Carrie Brennan. This is Harold, he's just turned seven months." She gave him another kiss. "My husband Benedict committed suicide, after being chased by a gang of youths one night; it really traumatised him for a couple of weeks."

"I'm not surprised. I know how suicidal thoughts can have such a widening impact upon *entire* families, even for both my parents. Name's Andrew, by the way. Andrew Hall." I checked my phone for the time.

"Have to get going, appointment starts in a few minutes."

"Appointment with who?" Carrie wondered, out of curiosity.

"Dr Martin Gibbs."

"Dr Gibbs? He helped me a lot when I was going through bereavement."

"Oh, did he? Well, on second thought, I think my first session may not turn out to be as stressful."

"It was lovely to meet you, Andrew, and thank you."

“You too, Carrie.” The baby was still cooing, I gently stroked his hand.
“Bye–bye, cute baby.” I whispered.

Carrie felt amused.

“See you around.” I waved to them both, as I approached the gates and walked passed the Hanwell Community Centre.

The clinic was a modernised two–storey house, probably built within the past couple of years or so, situated along the stretched avenue of two rows of houses. Right on the doorstep, I pressed the buzzer. The door immediately unlocked and opened, revealing a tall man, late 50s, with round spectacles.

“Are you Dr Gibbs, psychologist?”

“I am indeed. And presumably you are Andrew?”

“Hall, Andrew Hall. Pleasure to meet you.”

“You too, young man. Please, do come in.”

I gave Dr Gibbs a rather sad smile, as a way of being polite instead of expressing too much sadness. From the look on his face, he appeared to show a lot of understanding with deep concern at the same time. Much to my surprise, as I entered the building, it didn’t look very much like a conventional home; similar layout and arrangements to my local GP but more clean and comfortable.

“Toilets are upstairs, but you can still use the sanitizer when necessary.” he said. I immediately squirted and rubbed some on my hands, while speculating that Dr Gibbs was probably a germaphobe.

“I’m mysophobic, by the way.”

“No harm done, Andrew. Just following NHS procedure.”

“Sounds sensible,” I sighed in relief.

We walked straight down the hallway, past the stairs, and through a door. His office was quite roomy and spacious: a computer desk at one end of the room with a few sofa–like armchairs some metres away.

“Have a seat. And, please, help yourself to some water.”

I sat down on an armchair which I found to be extremely comfortable but more solid than the sofa in my living room, and poured myself a glass of water from the jug on a small coffee table. Dr Gibbs took his seat and

placed his notepad and pen in front, making it easier for him to lean forwards without straining his back.

“So, tell me,” he began. “Your father, Alastair, was recently diagnosed with cancer, and that has been increasing your anxiety levels since then. Have no fear, there is no need to provide every single detail, in the style of a prolonged oral report. It’s up to whatever best suits you. I don’t mind if you ‘waffle’, or require short breaks in between.”

I knew where he was coming from, so I responded by saying everything I had in mind on this issue. “I’m worried about Dad, my poor Dad. The lymphoma has made him feverish every single night, along with various symptoms such as his nasty persistent cough and hair loss – leaving myself to struggle with daily life. Sadly enough, I am unable to remember any specific events of the two-week period, due to the heavy amount of anticipatory anxieties which has been affecting my thinking.”

He did not react in surprise or annoyance, he appeared to understand my point. “I think I might’ve also experienced depression during my early childhood, probably when I was about eight years old, but I can’t seem to recall any of it either.”

“Well,” Dr Gibbs wrote on his pad while listening. “I think what you might have is Asperger’s syndrome.”

“I’m sorry?” I paused for a moment. I did not know what was the best way to respond to what I had just heard. “You don’t mean... I am being diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, making me autistic?”

“Same with clinical depression,” he replied. “It’s going to take quite a while to kick in.”

I was lost for words, but I tried my very best to contain my feelings without breaking down in tears or losing my temper. “It’s okay, Andrew. Nobody, absolutely, nobody is trying to make you feel patronised or discouraged.”

“Thank you,” I felt more reassured. “This has really helped me a lot. And by the way, did my Mum mention anything about ‘medication’ on the phone?”

“Yes, even your GP has specified this in their letter.”

“So what would you be recommending?”

“Risperidone – most effective for treating anxiety and depression. Take one each morning, then you’ll be fine for the rest of the day.”

“Any side effects?”

“Of course. I’ll be monitoring you at these sessions. You’re safe here, Andrew. Everything we discuss remains confidential.”

“I fully accept your reassurance, Dr Gibbs.”

And that was it. A prescription for risperidone, done and dusted.

Over the following four weeks, Dr Gibbs not only explained more about autism and Asperger’s, in the context of my own diagnoses and how it affects the brain; he also came up with numerous strategies to distract myself from worrying too much about my father, as well as showing me some deep breathing techniques for whenever I started feeling anxious or depressed. But then came the worst which I did not anticipate at all.

“Dr Gibbs?” I pressed the buzzer twice before knocking multiple times. “Dr Gibbs, it’s Andrew Hall, are you in there? Hello?” I wasn’t sure whether to call the police or go straight home, so I tried again. “Martin, we were supposed to start five minutes ago.”

I sighed in annoyance, rolled my eyes and grumbled, “Oh my God.”

Then I heard the door being unlocked. It opened, revealing a woman in her mid 40s with ginger hair. I couldn’t tell whether she knew Dr Gibbs. Was she his colleague, girlfriend, fiancée, or wife? She spoke with a heavy Russian accent, “Yes?”

“Excuse me, but I’m here for a session with Dr Martin Gibbs. Is he in?”

“Err, no. Sorry. He’s currently on leave, so I’m covering for him. Don’t know when he’ll be back for sure.” She offered me a handshake, to which I accepted. Her hand, for some reason, felt rather cold as stone – quite bizarre at this time of year when it was already starting to get warmer.

“I am Dr Mary–Annette Stupin.”

“Erm, nice to meet you, Dr Stupin.”

“Good boy, lovely manners. Do come in.”

I could not believe what I had just heard, right from her mouth. How dare she use the role of a psychologist to utter such patronising phrases in front of an 18–year–old patient – not appropriate. As part of my

Asperger's, I had no choice but to go ahead and cope with this sudden dramatic change...

“She called you *what?*” said Tom, completely shocked. “A ‘good boy’?! What a nasty comment! You don’t mind if I play the air violin – for real – this time?”

“Yeah, sure, go ahead. I’ll continue with the talking.”

“Very well. I’ll vocalise as quietly as possible. Oh, if only I had brought my real fiddle along..”

He started playing, this time an extract of Mozart’s Requiem. I took another sip of dandelion and burdock, before resuming.

“So my mental health deteriorated once again, and I slipped back into depression. Coping with Dad’s illness wasn’t the only factor, it was the new psychologist, Stupin, who made my well-being ten times worse. There was something about her. She looked... anomalous. My efforts to distract myself from having intrusive thoughts were no longer working because that session with her turned out to be more than what I initially anticipated, thanks to her provocative and bigoted approach to the role. It felt like a tornado messing up my cognitive thinking. But why? Why was she doing the complete opposite to Dr Gibbs? He *knew* how to do his job, whereas Stupin didn’t. And what did all that remind me of?”

It was exactly a week later. I was wandering outside the Hanwell Community Centre, and my heart was already beating really fast with slight wind pains in my stomach. I didn’t even want to turn up for my session that day, I wanted to go home. Whenever I had glimpses of some of the nearby houses with my own eyes, I quickly turned away, just like avoiding eye contact with a stranger who suspiciously stares for no reason. None of this was helping, but that was the only thing I could do to temporarily remove Stupin from my head. Then suddenly, quick as a flash, I spotted *a man*, from a good distance, who was leaning on what appeared to be some rectangular antique painted in dark blue. It wasn’t there last week, so how did it get there? Did he have it transported from a junkyard? I decided to go up to him and ask.

The man was very tall and slim. He had thick modern spiky brown hair with long sideburns, and wore a dark brown suit with blue pinstripes. From the look of this blue antique, it clearly resembled a police public telephone call box from numerous decades ago.

“Hey,” I called out. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

I could tell he was stressed, quite likely to have been recovering from a traumatic experience and needing some fresh air. He sounded like he had an Estuary English accent, as he resumed speaking. “Been better. Been better than ever. No, that’s not it, actually been worse. Just finished watching Schindler’s List about five minutes ago. Brings back old memories.” It was at the point where I felt more motivated and ready to engage in a full conversation, when he mentioned the title of the very film.

“Same here. I watched it all in one go, last night. One of my absolute favourite heartbreaking epics ever done in the history of filmmaking. Kinda reminds me of when my father, then a news cameraman, got caught in the Siege of Sarajevo, 1992—”

“Which broadcaster?” he interjected.

“BBC.”

“Oh, right. Just asking.”

“Thankfully, he was saved by some random stranger. Never told me his name. They met again in 1997 during the Clinton visit, and also when Paddy Ashdown became High Representative for Bosnia in 2002. My father lent him his camera to take photos of himself with the Clintons and Lord Ashdown. But it was all over. Every single raw footage he captured were burnt down in a warehouse fire, several years later. No remains were discovered in the aftermath, which meant that my father felt he had no choice but to resign.”

“You can pass him my regards.”

“I will. But only when he’s conscious.”

“Conscious? What do you mean?”

“He has lymphoma. Diagnosed not too long ago. Gonna miss his homemade broccoli and cauliflower cheese casserole, even though my Mum’s now fully comprehended his typed-up recipe. Now that I’ve been

diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and clinical depression, I honestly don't know how I can cope with everything."

"I'm not surprised. I know what it's like for someone on the autistic spectrum to cope with losing someone very close, whether it's a parent or both, or even a dear friend. I've got no one left myself. I've lost everyone, all my friends whom I consider family. One of them lost her father when she was only a baby."

"How?"

"Got hit by a car."

"Dear Lord, I am so sorry," I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"She's managed to overcome it," he added. "But her mother later chose to remarry. Rewarding, but heartbreaking at the same time for the entire family. Nevertheless, she's now got a boyfriend of her own; met him through me."

"Heartbreaking indeed. I do hope you'll pay her a visit, when the time is right."

He took a deep breath and unveiled a small wrinkled paper bag of jelly babies from his pocket, while I observed the police box side-to-side.

"These always cheer me up. Like one?"

"Sure," I dug my hand into the bag and picked a purple one. "Ah, blackcurrant, my favourite," I took a bite and sucked on its sweet wobbly flesh. "Haven't had jelly babies since Christmas, nearly ten years ago."

"Oh, really?" he asked innocently.

"Yeah," I sighed. "I was very upset during the start of the holiday season. Probably depressed over the destruction of Dad's footages. It wasn't until Christmas Eve that I finally recovered, thanks to some eccentric social worker who went by the name of 'Mr Maverick'. Don't remember him well though, except for his really long scarf. And also his curly hair, thicker and longer than my best friend Tom's, but still brown. Tom is more than a friend to me... He's my brother, metaphorically speaking, and I trust him with all my life."

"Have you been in touch with him lately?"

"Sadly not. Currently revising for his final A-level exams. But he knows what I'm going through right now."

“That social worker you speak of, might have seen him once. Not sure. I meet so many faces in my travels. Please, have another one.”

I picked a blue jelly baby from the bag. “This is rare. Never seen a *blue* one before in my life. What is it? Blue raspberry? Blueberry? Bubblegum?”

“Taste it.”

I popped it in my mouth and chewed. “Mmm... Blueberry. Really nice. Fresh and fruity.”

“Try the green and yellow ones.”

“Try?”

“Go on, I dare you.”

I tasted the green one – it was apple. I tasted the yellow one – it was peach. “Man, these are better than the original Bassetts flavours! Normally, people smoke around here and nearby.”

“Doesn’t surprise me at all. Healthy souls are what I prefer to see in a human being.”

“Well, the good thing is I don’t smoke. Neither do my friends or family. The smell of tobacco is always toxic to my senses and breathing, just like CO₂ emissions polluting our atmosphere.”

He then smiled, hugely impressed with what I had just explained.

“I could even suggest that jelly babies are ‘healthier’ than cigarettes.”

“Can’t agree more,” he chuckled.

“But hang on a moment,” I became a little suspicious. “They don’t produce or sell these flavours.”

“That’s because they’re homemade.”

“Your *omm* recipe, sir?”

“Fresh from the catalyser.” He rubbed his nose. “People usually don’t call me ‘sir’. I’m the Doctor.”

“Andrew, Andrew Hall.”

“Andrew. It’s a pleasure.”

“Likewise.”

We shook hands.

“Mind I ask, Doctor, do you own this police box?”

He patted on its surface, “It’s no ordinary police box. It’s a time machine. Known as: the TARDIS.”

“TARDIS?”

“Time And Relative Dimension In Space.”

“Nice ring to it,” I placed my right hand on the front door to feel its wooden texture. Then suddenly, a glowing orange handprint appeared on its surface.

“This isn’t good,” the Doctor fished out some sort of bluey torch-like device which he waved all over my face and body.

“Uh, Doctor,” I stammered. “Is that some kind of toy?”

“Sonic screwdriver. Like a prototype medical scanner.” He resumed, as I kept myself still on the spot. He grabbed my hand and moved the buzzing screwdriver towards my palm, then over my forehead. Was he trying to extract information? He put the screwdriver back in his pocket and placed both hands against my temples. “What the hell are you doing?” I flinched.

“Just double checking..”

He closed his eyes and opened his mind. A brief instant. Then, he retreated.

“I should’ve realised sooner..”

“I’m sorry?” I asked.

“Andrew, I’ve been tracking an... outbreak. Trying to locate patient zero.”

“Wait, wait, you’re not saying... a virus?”

“Not bacteriological, but *psychic*, in this case. You’ve been *inflicted* with troubled thoughts. A psychospore targeted directly at your mind. It leaves a telepathic residue.”

I was completely stunned, didn’t know whether to take his word for it. Suddenly, my head began to heat up. “Oh God, it’s happening again,” it was the stress coming back to haunt me. “I have visions of last week’s session with a *psycho* psychologist. Don’t even know how I can cope today whilst bottling it all up.”

“They’re usually there to help that. Who is this psychologist?”

“Her name is Mary–Annette Stupin. She replaced Dr Martin Gibbs.”

“Do you know what happened to Dr Gibbs?”

I tried to take a deep breath. “Don’t know. His private clinic is just a few houses away from here. He was always understanding and extremely helpful. Stupin’s more intrusive, callous and patronising. She has planted

anger and anticipatory anxieties into my mind. Can't recall anything in particular she brought up last week – very hazy. As for that, I have been taking risperidone ever since *before* Dr Gibbs vanished.”

“Medication is one way of reducing stress, a combination of whimsy and humour also,” he paused, half-frowning. “Wibbly wobbly, timey wimey. That reminds me, I once had an ordeal with a clown. Well, only in virtual reality. Ludicrous numpty.”

I felt fine again, my head immediately cooled down. “I’m allergic to clowns. Hate their makeup. Always scares the living daylights out of me.”

“*Allergic*, eh?” he grinned playfully. “Think you’re trying to say that you’re *controphobic*.”

“Yes, that’s the whole point. Not everyone will understand the context to begin with. It’s jokey and figurative. I once shook hands with a clown who was invited to a classmate’s birthday party; was about five at the time. His hand was literally full of sweat, and I felt the awful stickiness.”

“The fear of the painted face. Sometimes the only way to unravel the truth is to get a closer look. How would you feel if I came along to your session, Andrew?”

“But... don’t I need a doctor?”

“Not to worry, *I am* a Doctor.”

The Doctor had a really good trick right up his sleeve, as we both turned up on the doorstep. He flashed some kind of blank white paper at Stupin which read, only from her literal perspective: “Brad Lyman, Trainee Psychologist.”

My anxieties were slowly coming back. I hung up my indigo hoodie on the coat rack, before sitting down opposite Stupin. The Doctor sat on the other side of the room, pretending to act as though he was observing.

“Right, Andrew,” she began. “I hear that you’ve been bottling up your feelings, since last week’s session.”

“Yes,” I gulped.

She looked to the Doctor briefly. Arms crossed, his brooding features stared back.

“Is your father’s health improving?” she asked.

“Afraid not, despite having chemotherapy.”

“Horrible. I am deeply saddened to hear that.” She sounded condescending from her tone of voice. I could easily tell she was pretending to be sympathetic.

I cleared my throat. “Thanks, I appreciate your response.”

“Might I ask, have you told anyone at *schooly* about what you’ve been going through?”

It was at that moment I cringed, when she uttered “schooly”; the Doctor was completely stone-faced.

“Well, before I dropped my A-levels, I wasn’t close to anybody in my *sixth form* tutor group. Except for Tom who I’ve known since primary school.”

“No, then? It’s very clear that Tom shoulders the brunt of your burdens, Andrew. You can’t just have only one friend, it’s weakness. Making friends with your other classmates would have improved your mood and relationships. Did you ever exchange phone numbers with them?”

“Of course not,” I said bluntly. “Why would I exchange phone numbers when I don’t know *any* of them?”

“Have you always been incapable of communication, Andrew? And why do you speak with *that* accent?”

“Mid-Atlantic. I visit America every summer with my family; mostly San Francisco. Grew fond of the accent over the years.”

“Well, the thing is, you’re not American.”

“Excuse me?”

“People would mistake you for one, even though you were obviously not born there.”

“How dare you!” I shook my head in disgust. “I have Asperger’s syndrome. I feel absolutely disgusted and patronised by your interrogative approach and your *negative help* because your behaviour right now isn’t just outrageous, it is ignorant and revolting.”

She was still as a statue, words pouring from her mouth. “You are blindly combative, like a stubborn sheep.”

“And *you* are not qualified to be in the shoes of Dr Martin Gibbs. He *never* asked me such intrusive questions, and he still *hasn’t* returned. So

where is he? Where the hell is Dr Gibbs?"

The Doctor got up from his seat. "Come to think of it, has there been any trace?"

Stupin raised her eyebrows. The air in the room tightened.

"He's my normal supervisor, see," the Doctor bluffed. "And he wouldn't just take time off for two weeks without any notice, no. That's the thing about human psychologists, Dr Stupin. They *inform* their patients in advance."

"It's negligent of Gibbs, I agree. He doesn't care for the boy at all." She straightened. "And aren't you supposed to be observing, Mr Lyman?"

"*I am* observing. And I know how you've been treating your supposed patient. I thought it might be malpractice, but it's more than that... You've been weakening him. Letting him suffer to the point where he can no longer cope. Andrew's right, you know. Dr Gibbs would never have the presumption to interfere with a patient's personal life."

There was a snap in the air like a static charge. Two minds met halfway in the room. "I suppose you'd know all about interference."

"Human psychology's hard yards, innit? You can hit the right pressure point, twist the right nerve, but every technique learned to harm comes at overlooking things like basic body language."

"Please..." she sneered. "Do you hush sweet nothings to the casing of a warhead while you work? Of course not. You *work*. It has no feelings to consider."

"You killed Dr Gibbs, didn't you?"

"To bring you here."

"You murderer," I furiously growled at Stupin. "You sick, deranged, authoritarian murderer!"

"Quiet, quiet!" she snapped at me, before facing the Doctor again. "What I am is a new beginning. I – the Worrier – am Axit's legacy, like a spare seed in a gardener's pocket. An infiltrator sowing dissension among the weak-minded."

"Whoever this 'Axit' is, creating a swathe of psychological time bombs and outbreaks in your wake," said the Doctor.

"You may have disarmed the others, but not this one. Not this time."

Axit means Axit.”

“These are people, Worrier. Not components in some soulless machine. *People!*”

“I am Axit’s vaporous creation, implanting the darkest thoughts and fears into one’s mind. Dr Martin Gibbs was the last to die. Interfere and Andrew Hall can easily usurp the title!”

Suddenly, she firmly grasped onto my upper arms and forcefully pinned me to the armchair. Her fingernails were so sharp, they were tearing through my shirt. It felt like I was being physically restrained by two police officers. “Get the hell off me! Damn you!” I screamed at the top of my voice. “Doctor!”

The Doctor moved forwards, sonic screwdriver raised to blow out the desk light.

“Move and the boy dies!”

He froze.

“You, Andrew, will suffer the consequences like you’ve never seen before!” she roared like a beast. “For you, Doctor. For your actions. Taste your own medicine!” Her eyes started glowing a bright orange light, like fire. I began to fear the worst – my death. But it was worse than that, the words began to crawl like maggots inside my head.

“Your father will die. You will only have your mother around to take care of you. Imagine her dying in your arms! Imagine yourself dying a slow and painful death! Imagine every single child and baby losing their parents and dying in vain, with their generations ceasing to exist! Alone! *All alone! The last!*”

“No!”

“And you will take that fear into your world. You will spread it to your kind. A forest, a swamp, an epidemic! *All across the universe!*” She squeezed my arms tighter. I literally heard the terrifying screams of children and crying babies, echoing right inside my head. They showed my darkest fear – becoming an orphan who’s the *last* in the family.

“You’re not alone, Andrew!” the Doctor protested. “You belong together with your family. The people who love you. Families belong together. Children and parents belong together. Babies and parents belong

together! *You are not alone!*'

I was screaming? Screaming? No, it was the room that was screaming. Every dark thought, every repressed horror, glowing like orange plasma. Her powers of fear were already burning my head. Twice the pain, twice the suffering.

"Medi—medi—cation!" I struggled to call out. "Doctor! My medication! My risperidone!"

The Doctor struggled to hear: "What?"

"Tablet! Hoodie! Side pocket!"

Although I couldn't see what the Doctor was doing, he found my blister pack and swiftly took out a tablet.

The Worrier continued to grasp my arms. "No one can help you now, not even your Doctor!"

I stuck my tongue out as wide as possible, despite the increasing pain in my head. The Doctor carefully aimed the tablet in my direction, then immediately tossed it in mid-air like a dart or a pebble. It landed on my tongue without bouncing or slipping, and started dissolving. The Worrier began to lose grip, as she spotted the white chemicals evaporating in our presence. The risperidone sizzled on my tongue, I was already screaming and burning. The chemicals transformed into a cloud of energy, like a ghost, and entered the Worrier's mouth. She released my arms and flailed like a dying fish out of water. Her screams echoed all over the room. The Worrier disintegrated into tiny specks of silver balls. They looked like atoms that resembled mercury. Scattered confetti. The Doctor held his hand out as though expecting rain.

I nearly fainted and collapsed on the floor. My head and tongue were still feeling painful.

"Andrew? Andrew?" The Doctor checked my pulse and patted my cheek. I moaned and opened my eyes.

"What, what the hell?" My voice was a bit slurred after sticking my tongue out for too long.

I got up and took a full glass of water from the coffee table. "Ahh, much better," I felt refreshed.

"Try and take a deep breath, Andrew. In and out. It'll help you regain

your strength.”

I breathed in through my nose, then out through my mouth. Continued the cycle a few more times; it was truly helping.

“Thank you, Doctor. Should do this more often. Good thing the risperidone also worked though. Presumably it was the compound that killed the Worrier.”

“The ultimate placebo,” he said. “Positive thoughts to banish wicked beings. Two minds think alike.”

My phone suddenly rang and I quickly answered. “Mum?” I couldn’t quite catch everything she said, as it was hard to hear from the other end. “Oh God... Please don’t tell me... I’ll be there as soon as possible.” I hung up. “My Dad’s deteriorated, I have to get to Ealing Hospital.” But suddenly, I began to feel faint for the second time. “Oh... Oh dear...”

“Andrew,” the Doctor caught me in his arms. “Allow me to give you a lift...”

I slowly opened my eyelids, and heard the closing lyrics to the hymn Jerusalem, before noticing my hand being stroked. “Dad?” I was pleasantly surprised but felt comforted to be sitting right next to my father resting on his hospital bed; he was already looking very pale. “Oh, Andrew, my special son,” he whispered. “I thought I would never see you again.”

Then, nearly out of sight, I noticed my mother helping him drink some water through a straw. “Mum, how did I get here?”

“You fainted just a moment after I phoned you, Andrew,” she said. “This kind gentlemen, he found you at the clinic whilst discovering that Stupin was an imposter who murdered Dr Gibbs. No need to fear now, he’s already explained everything.”

“Contacted some old friends of mine. They’ll investigate and deal with the fallout.” The Doctor was leaning against the TARDIS. “We’re very lucky, Andrew. You’re the last in the chain. Without the Worrier to activate the psychospore, your brain chemistry would simply dissolve it. Like a tablet of risperidone.”

My Mum gestured to the blue box. “He carried you out of this magic closet.”

“More than a ‘magic closet’, Mrs Hall.”

“I’m Glenda.”

“Good to finally meet you, Glenda. I’m the Doctor.” He shook hands with her. “And this is Alastair, my hus—”

My father slowly turned his head. “Doctor? Doctor John Smith?” He stuttered. “I haven’t seen you since... Sarajevo.”

The Doctor appeared to be puzzled; I figured he was hesitant to admit or deny ever meeting my father.

“Alastair.” He gave a very sad smile, knowing that Dad was close to dying.

“You’re him!” I was speechless. “You’re actually him! The guy who saved my Dad, and met again twice! And also that social worker – Mr Maverick! Oh my God! It’s already coming back! I – I remember! But... how’s that possible? How’d you... Were you wearing some sort of disguise?”

“I’m a Time Lord. I originate from another world. A planet called Gallifrey. That’s the thing about my people, we can physically change.”

“How does that work?”

“I...” he stuck out his lower lip equivocally. “Change. New cells, new body, new face. Good for the immune system.”

“Blimey.”

My father reached out for my mother’s hand and took hold. “Glenda, you will always be my beloved wife, even when I’m gone, and I will always be your beloved husband.” I then took hold of his other hand. “Andrew, I am proud to have a special son who has grown into a fine young man, and I know you will keep on going because you have the potential to find what’s right for you. Remain hopeful, Andrew... Hopeful...”

“Dad?” He closed his eyes. He was ready to sleep for one last time.

“Dad, don’t go!” I checked his pulse, his fingers were no longer moving.

“No, no, no, please, Dad,” I could not hear him breathing. “*DAD!?*”

He was gone. I collapsed on the bed and broke down in tears. “Dad... My Dad.” My mother also began sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

I was too upset to accept his deepest sympathies. He got up and made

his way for the TARDIS, as my mother sat down and comforted me for the rest of the afternoon.

“That was the end of the worst day of my life. And the Doctor was gone; never saw him again.” I took my last sip of dandelion and burdock, choking on my tears, before throwing the can away in the bin right next to the bench. “No idea where he is now. Really want to thank him for everything. But I can’t. I can’t even try to contact him.”

“Oh, Andrew, come here,” said Tom, about to give me a hug. “What am I gonna do without him, Tom?” I sobbed, desperately hugging him as tight as possible. “What am I gonna do?”

Suddenly, we both heard a faint sound from close by; a mixture of wheezing and groaning.

“Do you hear that, Andrew?”

“Yeah,” I got up from the bench and tried to listen. “Sounds very familiar.” The noise was growing louder, and louder, and louder.

“The TARDIS!” I exclaimed in excitement. “Come on, let’s go.”

I lead the way to the top of the spiral hill, with Tom following right behind. “Doctor!” I called out. “Doctor, it’s us! We had no idea you were coming! Doctor!”

We approached the top and saw the very police box literally fading in at the centre of the hill. “What on Earth is *that?*!” Tom called out. “*That*, my brother, is the TARDIS!” I could not believe that the man who saved my life was returning.

The TARDIS doors opened and there he was, wearing his same suit.

“Doctor,” I was overjoyed. “You came back!”

“Yeah, course I did,” he replied. “How’ve you been, since I last saw you?”

“Better. Ten times better. And please allow me to introduce my best friend: Tom Hillary.”

“It’s an absolute honour to finally meet you, Doctor.” Tom offered him a handshake.

“An absolute honour to meet you, indeed, Tom. He has frequently mentioned you.”

“Yeah, I know.” They shook hands, as Tom gave him that very cute grin.

“You have saved my life, Doctor,” I said. “I can’t thank you enough for everything, I *honestly* can’t.”

“That’s what I do, as *the* Doctor, save and help those in need. I’ve also saved countless innocent lives and they saved me too.” He pushed one of the doors in a bit further. “Care for a ride?”

I didn’t have to think of how to respond because I already knew what to say: “Sure, why not. Last time I was in there, I was unfortunately unconscious.”

The Doctor went back inside, as a way of ushering us both. We walked through the doors and stepped into a very different kind of world to ours.

“Oh my Lord, it’s...” Tom stammered.

“I know, right.”

“...Smaller on the outside?”

Then together: “Bigger on the inside!”

The Doctor smiled, taking our reaction as a compliment. “Welcome aboard the TARDIS, gentlemen. Please, make yourselves at home.”

The room was extraordinarily wide and circular. Its walls were covered with golden hexagonal roundels, bit like giant metal screws tightly fastened. All surrounded by coral pillars that each pointed directly at the main console, emitting a bright bluey-green light (probably cyan).

I observed all the console panels, but I knew that it wouldn’t be a good idea to touch any single control. “Fascinating work you’ve done here,” I commented. “Very spacious and futuristic, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Interesting decor,” said Tom, looking around. “Majestic and illuminating.” He did a little twirl and hummed a country dance tune, while I observed a coral pillar.

The Doctor brought something over from what appeared to be his treasure chest. “Here, made this for you.” He unveiled some kind of handheld device that looked like a portable hard drive with a small touchscreen. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

I gently grabbed Tom’s arm and moved out of the way. The Doctor pointed the device at some open space, tapped on its screen, and released a bright blue light of energy. Several outlines of round containers

appeared on the surface. They looked a lot like film cans.

I picked one up and spotted Dad's full name handwritten on its label. "Hang on," I gasped. "How is that possible? You saved them all!"

"After a fashion," he rummaged around in his pockets and produced a small panelled sphere; no larger than a Rubik's Cube. "Right before the fire incident, I developed this memory projector from some old weaponised junk. Yeah, that's what I call it. Memory projector. With the help of some Gallifreyan technology."

"Galli—what?" asked Tom.

"Gallifrey," I clarified. "The Doctor's home planet."

"Really long story about my people. All this..." the Doctor gestured, "Because we Time Lords are so clever, you can store as many possessions and belongings as you like. Although, if I were you, I wouldn't try storing anything the size of a sofa for the time being. Twitchy technology. High chance of complexities overall."

"Hey, what's this?" I found a USB stick among the lot and picked it up.

"That, Andrew, contains the digital copies of all the footages. I had an expert do all the transferring. Well, he actually offered to do it... for you."

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Spoilers," the Doctor replied, handing me the device.

I flicked through the touchscreen and tapped one of the buttons. The same blue energy of light flashed up and surrounded the cans before vanishing back inside, like a vacuum cleaner. I put the device in my pocket.

"All yours to keep," the Doctor resumed.

"Thank you, Doctor. I know what I plan to do with them all."

"Oh, do you?"

"Use some of the footage to produce a documentary film on my father's reporting in Sarajevo. Dedicated to his memory."

"Oh, that is just brilliant, Andrew. Just—"

The Doctor suddenly winced and placed his hand on his stomach.

"You alright, Doctor?"

"Haven't been myself lately." He tried to take a deep breath.

I felt puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"People have died trying to save me, people have died trying to save my

friends, and now *I'm* dying because I saved a friend. And to quote Oskar Schindler: 'I could have done more.' I felt that way then, and I continue to feel that way right now. Told David Lloyd George the same thing, when I last saw him; good ol' Winston Churchill was there too."

"Doctor," I began to respond. "We are grateful for everything you have done, no matter the lives you saved."

"Thank you, fellas. Now, let's get you two home. Short hop, just once around the park." The Doctor leaned forwards on the console and pressed a few buttons. "Hold on tight now..." He grinned and flicked a lever. "Allons-y!"

The whole area began to rumble. I fell backwards and landed on the seat, before Tom joined me and started clinging onto my arm.

"This is like being on a rollercoaster, Andrew!" yelled Tom.

"I know, Tom, I know!" I yelled back and cheered.

We both got up and grabbed onto the console. The Doctor pressed and flicked a few other controls, then the same lever – we suddenly came to a halt. "Here we are," he announced. "Not far from the borders of Hanwell and Greenford, or perhaps Perivale."

The Doctor walked towards the front doors and opened them. We both followed him towards the open air of the quiet street. "I don't believe it," said Tom, astonished by the complete change of scenery. "We've moved!"

"Here, catch." The Doctor tossed a couple of bags in midair. We caught one each. "Homemade jelly babies."

"Ah, excellent!" I cheered.

"You're joking!" Tom felt amazed, as he picked a green one. "Oh, wow, apple. Really nice!"

I opened mine up and picked a red one. "Fruit punch? Oh, so damn good! Why didn't I try this the last time?"

"Well then, comrades, I better be off."

"It's been a pleasure knowing you, Doctor, a *real* pleasure indeed." I gave him the warmest hug I could; Tom joined as well. "This wouldn't be the last, would it?"

"Afraid it will be, after this," said the Doctor. "But tell you what, look out for me."

“In another body?” I asked.

“Allons–y, you two.” He winked and waved for the final time, then closed the TARDIS doors.

The police box made those wheezing and groaning noises, as it faded away.

“So, what now, Andrew?”

“Wanna grab some fish and chips? Could also do a *Captain Scarlet* marathon. And begin our work on the documentary tomorrow.”

“Yeah, why not. Hold my hand.”

“What?”

Tom held out his hand, waiting for me to take hold. So I did. “Whoa!” I yelped. He dragged me along, hand–in–hand, and started running briskly. “Onward together! Literally!” he cheered and laughed. “Slow down, Tom, just slow down, please!” I tried to keep my pace without tripping over.

“Well, in that case...”

Then together, for the Doctor: “*ALLONS–Y!?*”

And that was the account of my soft reboot.

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A TENTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

THE POPIZ

BY TIM BRADLEY

THE POPIZ

By Tim Bradley

The TARDIS materialised inside the shuttle bay of a small space station. This wasn't the first time the TARDIS had done something like that. The TARDIS had landed in many space stations in the past. It was pot-luck that the Doctor got his TARDIS to land inside the shuttle bay itself.

The door opened and Donna Noble stepped out of the TARDIS. She was the latest of his companions, at this point in his 'tenth' incarnation. The Doctor stepped out in his brown pinstripe suit, with his signature trench-coat and white sneakers.

The two time-travellers looked around at their surroundings. The Doctor was in awe. Donna pouted.

"Aww, smashing!" he exclaimed with amazement.

The shuttle bay had a huge ceiling, which was ironic considering they were on a small space station.

Donna looked to him. "Doctor, what are we doing here?" she demanded to know. "You promised me a trip to see Robbie Williams at his live O2 concert in London, 2012. Now we're on a dumpy space station. Are you sure you passed your TARDIS driving test?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "Sorry, Donna," he said apologetically. "I can't help it if the TARDIS gets cranky and has moods of her own. The old girl is getting weary these days. Possibly needs an overhaul and a new makeover. Been meaning to do that for quite some time now..."

"Doctor," she interrupted impatiently. "Where are we? What is this place? What year are we in? What century? The 23rd? 24th?"

"Hey, hey, hey, slow down!"

Donna began to elongate her vowels. “What... year—?”

“Not sure,” the Doctor replied. “The TARDIS has been drawn here by some external force in space. The ship’s data systems and chronometers have been fluctuating since we arrived. They’re still fluctuating.”

“Oh, brilliant,” she said sarcastically.

“But it means that there is some presence aboard this space station,” the Doctor continued. “No external force grabs my TARDIS that easily. It must be something deadly. Something dangerous. Something that the laws of time can’t define on a large scale.”

“You always have to be so macho when saying technical or supernatural things that go way above my head,” she said teasingly.

The Doctor ignored the wryness of Donna’s remark and asked her, “Do you fancy exploring this station? To find out what it was that brought us here?”

“Not really,” Donna replied testily. “I was so looking forward to seeing Robbie on stage!”

“Oh, he’ll still be there at the O2 once we’ve finished here,” the Doctor told her. “Besides, you know I can’t resist solving a mystery as deliciously juicy and peculiar as this one.”

With that, the Doctor went on ahead to explore the space station. He left Donna behind standing at the TARDIS, without a word of approval from her for going ahead.

Donna smiled. “I suppose not,” she sighed knowingly. With that, she followed after the Doctor. She jogged at a certain pace to keep up with him.

It was a moment after they left the shuttle bay that the doors closed and locked instantly. The Doctor and Donna couldn’t get back in. She panicked. But he didn’t seem to be worried. As long as the TARDIS was still where they left it, they could return to the old girl at any time once they’d finished exploring.

The two continued to explore the space station for quite some time. They soon discovered the lifts weren’t working. Typical, thought Donna.

The Doctor found it peculiar. Even his sonic screwdriver couldn't get them to work. They would have to climb up the service ladders to get to different floors. She suggested going downstairs to switch the generator back on. But the Doctor was keen to find out what was going on in the main ops room.

They reached it a while later, getting off the service ladder to find the place deserted. Donna huffed and puffed whilst the Doctor was full of energy walking into the main ops room.

"Thanks for the exercise," she said satirically. "I won't need to pay a membership fee to my local gym anymore."

The Doctor ignored her remark. He had a look of concern on his face.

"This is worrying," he said. "Lifts out of power. No sign of any station personnel to tell us what's going on..."

"And yet the lights are still working," Donna finished for him.

The Doctor looked pleased. "So you've noticed it too, have you?"

"Kind of obvious, isn't it?" she hissed.

"Never assume anything is obvious, Donna," he advised her. "There's always something more than meets the eye about this."

"Don't go all *Transformers* on me, spaceman," Donna told him.

The Doctor accessed a nearby computer terminal. He applied his sonic screwdriver to it. Fortunately, the computer systems were working.

"Hmm," the Doctor observed. "Non-functioning lifts yet we still have good functioning computers." He turned to her. "Donna," he called. "See if you can use your whiz temp skills on this computer for me. Find out what's going on and what happened to the station."

Donna approached the computer terminal where the Doctor was, surprised by his request.

"I can't work wonders on this thing," she protested. "I'm not an expert on future technology. This isn't exactly H.C. Clements, you know."

"Oh, go on!" the Doctor encouraged her. "You're brilliant, you know that. Don't put yourself down, Donna Noble."

"Stop it, Doctor," she barked.

Despite this, she began typing away at the terminal. It seemed to be going very well for Donna, as she got the hang of accessing the files she never thought she would be able to do so. It seemed like second nature to her working on a space station computer she had never used before.

“Hmm,” Donna said, approvingly. “It seems to work like a treat this!”

“You see,” he replied. “What did I tell you?”

“You’re going to get a punch from me if you don’t shut up,” Donna told him, smirking away as she did so.

“Sorry I spoke,” he replied, equally amused.

As the Doctor began to explore more of the space station, she continued typing away like mad. It took a while though to locate anything useful.

“I can’t seem to find anything at the moment,” she said. “There are a lot of files here, but I don’t know where to start.”

“Try and find a diary log,” the Doctor suggested. “See who was using the computer before we came here.”

“I’ll try,” Donna replied, as she continued typing away very quickly.

As the Doctor explored further, he came to a stop. He spotted something in the far corner. Something that made his blood run cold! Quite ironic considering his two hearts.

“Can’t seem to find any diary entries,” she interrupted. “The equivalent of what I think is Outlook is security protected. Not even my super-temp skills can break the firewalls on this one.”

“Donna,” he began grimly.

She turned to the Doctor, seeing him distracted. “Didn’t you just hear a word I said?” she complained.

A moment of silence before the Doctor continued. “I think I just found out what happened to the crew members of this space station. You probably don’t want to see this.”

Puzzled, she came over to join him to see what the fuss was about.

“What are you on about, Doctor?” she asked. “What about the crew...”

But then Donna saw what he saw. She gulped and gasped in horror, breathing deeply afterwards. They both discovered the remains of the station crew... reduced to skeletons. The skeletons had tattered remains of

station uniforms on them. It was horrific and gruesome. It took a while for them both to speak again.

“Sorry you had to see this, Donna,” he said apologetically. “I’m so, so sorry. And I’m equally sorry for the crew who ended up like that.”

“What could’ve happened to them?” She wanted to know. “A disease? Space virus?” A terrible thought struck her. “Could it still be here with us?”

“I don’t know,” the Doctor replied. “But I promise you, Donna. I’ll keep us both safe whatever happens. We have to make sure no virus is present on the station. And if there is one, we must keep it from spreading out across the galaxy.”

Just then, a terrible noise blared out on the sound speakers aboard the space station. The Doctor and Donna held their ears once they heard the noise. It was excruciatingly irritating and painful. It was a pop song! She knew it was a pop song because of the repetitive, irritating pattern it had as well as the strange, eerie, surreal musical tones. The singer also had a Britney Spears vibe which confirmed its ‘pop-songness’, fitting for the teenage market according to Donna.

The lyrics weren’t great either. They just went in a repetitive pattern, going...

♪ *Popiz! Popiz! You’re gonna love the Popiz! Popiz! Get sucked in by the Popiz! Popiz!* ♪

As the Doctor and Donna held their ears, they went back to the computer terminal. They tried to see if they could find a volume control for the sound speakers. Fortunately, they did as she pressed a control to switch the song off instantly. They were relieved. They took their hands off their ears once the song stopped.

“Well done, Donna,” he said. “You saved our lives!”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t go all gushy on me,” she told him. “What was that song anyway?”

“Let me see if I can access the files on the computer terminal to find out,” the Doctor suggested.

He applied his sonic screwdriver to the computer terminal to access the information he wanted. The buzzing grew louder as he kept his finger pressing.

“Sorry for barging in,” he teased. “I know how much you were enjoying yourself using this computer terminal.”

“No sweat,” Donna shrugged. “It was getting rather boring anyway. I wasn’t getting anywhere with that computer terminal.”

The Doctor didn’t hear her as he found what he was looking for.

“Aha!”

“You’ve found something?” Donna wanted to know. “What is it you’ve found?”

“There’s information about the song we just heard,” the Doctor said brightly. Then he began to look glum, “But it’s not much.”

“*The Popiz*,” she read the computer screen. “That’s what was said in the lyrics. If you can call them lyrics, that is.” She then frowned. “Where did you find this, Doctor?”

“Under the music library,” he replied. “It’s the latest title in the music industry for this time period.”

“And what time period are we in?”

“Not sure yet”

“Not sure? What do you mean not sure?”

“I mean the song doesn’t have a year to tell us when it was published,” the Doctor explained.

“But that’s ridiculous,” she said. “All songs I know have dates attached to them.”

“Not this one! It doesn’t even have a vocal artist for it.”

“Pull the other one!”

“I’m serious! There’s no vocal artist attached to this song. It just says *The Popiz* and that’s it!”

“That can’t be right,” she stated.

“Agreed,” said the Doctor. Then he began to ponder for a moment. “It’s almost as if...”

He trailed off. A moment of silence ensued.

“What?” Donna prompted him. “It’s almost as if what, Doctor?”

No response at first. Eventually, he said, “Almost as if someone entered the song’s title into the computer database but didn’t have the time to record the other details because...either there wasn’t enough time or something terrible happened. Something that would’ve made the song to be played on all sound speakers....”

“...And kill all those poor guys and girls who ended up tattered and as skeletons. Is that what you were going to suggest?”

“It seems a fitting possibility, doesn’t it?”

“It’s horrible! Disgusting!”

The Doctor looked directly into Donna’s eyes, “How else would you explain what happened here? How the station’s crew ended up as skeletons? And how the song played the instant we saw the crew as skeletons?”

A moment of silence as she thought about it. Then something occurred to her.

“We may not be the only ones aboard this space station,” she suggested grimly. “There might be somebody else on board. A ‘he’ or ‘she’ who could possibly be a murderer. Who used the horrible *Popiç* song to kill the crew.”

“That’s rather dark thinking on your part, Donna,” he remarked.

It was some time before they spoke again after they considered all they’d discovered.

“Doctor, can we go back to the TARDIS?” Donna asked. “I’m a little scared about this.”

The Doctor considered her request for a moment.

“Yeah,” he then said, thoughtfully. “Let’s try that, shall we?”

“Really?” she was surprised. “We’re actually going back?”

“We should try to make our way,” he said. “Whoever or whatever it was that dragged my TARDIS to this station and is perhaps using this music track to kill people, it could mean harm to us if he, she or it is still here.

We want to be in a place of safety. The TARDIS is the best place for that.” After a moment’s pause, “Come on now! *Allons-y!*”

At that, the Doctor and Donna began to make their way back to the service ladders.

But just then, metallic walls came down and blocked their path. They couldn’t get to the service ladders. Metallic walls came down and blocked the entrances towards other service ladders in the main ops room. They both became anxious.

“Those walls came down!” Donna panicked. “We’re locked in here!”

“No, no, no, no, no!” the Doctor said irritably. “I’m stupid! I’m so, so stupid!”

“I could’ve told you that already,” she tried to joke.

“He, she or whatever force it was brought us here probably knows what we’ve been saying since we’ve been here! I said let’s go back to the TARDIS and this is what happens! Our chances of getting back via the service ladders are squandered!”

The Doctor began to shout out loud, gritting his teeth.

“What do you want from us?! *Tell me!* I know you’re here somewhere! *Show yourself!*”

“There must be something we can do,” Donna said. “Send out a distress call or something!”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” he asked her sharply.

“I don’t know,” she was out of her depth. “We can find a big red button that says ‘distress call’ on it! Either way, we must do something to get out of this place before we lose the air!”

The Doctor eventually calmed down. He saw the sense in her argument.

“You’re right, Donna. Of course, you are.” Checking himself, he brightened a little. “There should be a communications terminal somewhere in this main ops room. Let’s try and find it.”

She agreed as they both began to search for a communications terminal.

A short time later, Donna called, “Doctor, I’ve found it! Over here!”

He went over to her and saw she had found the right terminal.

“It had to have ‘communications desk’ written in big white letters on it, didn’t it?” she scoffed.

“Be thankful we found it,” he said, sitting down at the desk. “Let’s see if we can send out a distress call.”

As the Doctor began to use the keyboard, he and Donna soon realised it was all too good to be true. He tried using the keyboard again.

“It’s not working,” he said, aggrieved. “This communications terminal isn’t responding. Whenever I enter commands using this keyboard, it won’t respond.”

“It’s been interfered with?” Donna suggested.

“Oh, it’s clever,” he stated. “Whatever it is we’re dealing with here, it’s very, very clever.”

“You seem convinced that it’s an ‘it’ all of a sudden,” she observed. “Not a ‘he’ or a ‘she’.”

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with, Donna,” he replied. “It could be anything.”

Just then, the pop song — *The Popizx* — played out again on the sound speakers. Very loudly! The Doctor and Donna were surprised at the loud noise as they held their ears again.

“I thought we’d switched that off,” she said.

“So did I.”

“Use your sonic thing to bypass the controls at the communications desk,” she insisted. “Just do something!”

The Doctor tried as the song played away, going, ♪ *Popizx! Popizx! You’re gonna love the Popizx! Popizx! Get sucked in by the Popizx! Popizx!* ♪

As he buzzed his sonic screwdriver at the communications terminal, he sensed *The Popizx* song was getting louder and louder. He couldn’t block out the noise that was going in his one ear whilst he used the sonic screwdriver at the communications terminal.

But it seemed to be of no use. “I can’t bypass the controls,” he exclaimed. “They’re countermanding my attempt to bypass the system using the sonic. Whatever it is we’re dealing with, it’s relentless!”

“Don’t give up,” she said encouragingly. “You never give up! Remember that!”

It was at that point that the song became aggressive. Insistent! Demanding!

It continued to get louder as it went, ♪ *POPIZ! POPIZ! YOU’RE GONNA LOVE THE POPIZ! POPIZ! GET SUCKED IN BY THE POPIZ! POPIZ!* ♪

The repetitive lyrics throbbed in the Doctor and Donna’s ears. They couldn’t keep the noise out any longer. Their hands dropped from their ears. They felt they were going mad.

“Doctor,” she cried. “I can’t take much more of this!”

“Don’t give in to it,” he told her. “Keep—keep holding on!”

“It’s easy for you to say,” she began to slumber. “I’m not—not—so—so—”

Whatever Donna was going to say was cut short as she collapsed to the floor. The Doctor became concerned. He tried to reach out to her, but he began to pass out and collapse to the floor too. *The Popiz* grew louder as they both became unconscious before its lyrics became softer and less insistent!

♪ *Popiz! Popiz! You’re gonna love the Popiz! Popiz! Get sucked in by the Popiz! Popiz!* ♪

The song throbbed endlessly as it overwhelmed the station’s two intruders. It was satisfied.

Something *The Popiz* hadn’t expect was that one of the main ops room’s lift doors slowly slid open. A person climbed up out from the lift shaft before stepping into the main ops room. It was a woman, dressed in a body-tight tracksuit. She wore a mask that covered half her face — the right side. She stepped forward, unaffected by *The Popiz*’s throbbing sound as the singer went on.

The woman approached the Doctor and Donna. She found them unconscious on the floor. Without wasting time, she placed strange

hearing aid-like devices behind the lobes of each of their left ears. She pressed a switch on each of the devices once applying them.

Soon, the Doctor and Donna woke up. They struggled to sit up, disoriented before taking in their surroundings. They realised they couldn't hear *The Popiẓ* anymore. It had been blocked out for them to hear. This was a relief, although it seemed to them that there were faint traces of the song in the distance. But it wasn't excruciatingly irritating or painful anymore.

The Doctor checked on Donna. She reassured him she was alright. They then turned to their saviour, seeing a half-covered mask on her face.

"Whoever you are..." he began.

"Clara Watson," the woman replied, "Junior nursery assistant and part-time junior engineer."

"Thank you for saving our lives, Clara Watson," he said.

"Not even your sonic screwdriver could save us," Donna said ruefully.

At that moment, the young woman Clara went over to pick up what looked like a small crystalline cube-shaped object off a nearby 'science' terminal. She seemed satisfied once acquiring the object before returning to the Doctor and Donna.

"We have to get moving," Clara insisted. "Those inhibitors I've just placed behind your ears are meant to numb out *The Popiẓ*'s effect on you. But it won't stop it from trying to break through the inhibitors' interference."

"What is this *Popiẓ*?" Donna demanded to know. "Who built it? Why is it killing people?"

Clara looked at them both. They could see through her half-mask that she was surprised by their lack of knowledge.

"*The Popiẓ* is an alien," Clara told them. "Didn't you know that? Where have you two been? It attacked this place ever since it got into the station's computer systems a few weeks ago."

"We've been out of touch," the Doctor said distractedly. "So let me get this straight. This *Popiẓ* music track! It's sentient?!"

“Of course it is,” said Clara, “Though it took our *brilliant* scientists too long to realise that before it was too late.” She said the word ‘brilliant’ with a sardonic edge.

“Fascinating,” the Doctor replied.

“Now I’ve heard everything,” Donna said, gobsmacked.

“And you’ve been surviving all by yourself?” he asked Clara.

“Had too,” she told them. “I was able to block out the Popiz’s effect with sound numbing technology I created and built it into those inhibitors I’ve just placed behind your ears. Shame I couldn’t save the rest of the crew, but hey. That’s what you get with being too curious.” Clara pulled the Doctor and Donna up on their feet. “Now can we please get out of here? I can take us back to the nursery where we can be safe for a bit.”

“Lead on, Miss Watson,” the Doctor obliged.

“You said nursery!” Donna pointed out. “You had children on this station.”

“Yeah,” Clara said. “This is a family orientated station we’re on. Or it was. Fortunately, we evacuated the children with their parents before the catastrophe happened. One of the wisest decisions the station commander made.”

“Quite right too,” Donna concurred.

“This way down the shaft,” Clara said to them. She tugged at a rope ladder that was secured inside the lift shaft. “Careful as you go down, you two. The rope ladder won’t be sturdy for very long. *The Popiz* is clever and will soon find a way to cut through the rope ladder should it learn to act quickly whilst we’re inside the shaft.”

Taking note of her warning, they followed Clara down into the lift shaft.

Thankfully, their journey wasn’t hampered by *The Popiz* cutting through the rope ladder on their way down the lift shaft. At least it wasn't until the last minute. Donna managed to get off the rope ladder just in time before she, the Doctor and Clara were on the floor level they needed to be on. They saw the rope ladder collapse to the bottom of the shaft after a fiery cutting noise echoed from above. Presumably, the automated defence

systems inserted into the lift shaft had been generated by *The Popiz*. Clara led the way to take Donna and the Doctor to the nursery.

They entered the nursery, which was empty of course. Clara told them to be at home. She apologised for not providing them with any tea or coffee. It would have to be water rations which were used in emergency cases.

“Why do you wear a mask?” Donna asked.

The Doctor reprimanded Donna.

“No, no, it’s alright,” Clara said. “I’ve no secret about this.” She paused for a moment. “I wear this mask because I had a disfigurement on the left side of my face. I burned it after trying to repair a fusion coil. This was when *The Popiz* made its first attack. I didn’t want to frighten you two with my burnt face once I realised you were in the main ops room.”

Donna felt a little guilty. She should’ve known it was something like that. But she had every right to question Clara. She couldn’t help but be a little suspicious.

“I’m sorry,” Donna apologised gently.

Clara shrugged. “No worries. My face will repair eventually. I injected myself with nanobots to repair the damaged tissue. It does take a while though.” She winced for a moment. “And they can be irritating when I feel them inside my face.”

At that point, the Doctor decided to change the subject.

“You said that this happened a few weeks ago. How did it start? When did your crew realise the entity had got into the station’s computer systems?”

“Not sure,” Clara replied. “It just happened without warning. One minute the station was functioning superbly. Next minute, there were power failures and disruption to various station operations. It was chaos. It was only when the alien entity manifested itself into a recorded pop song that it started killing people. That was after the families and children had been evacuated.”

“And you’ve been here all this time and you’ve never tried to escape?” Donna asked.

“Oh, believe me,” Clara replied, “I’ve been trying to escape these past few weeks. But I need to obtain three energy units to open the shuttle bay doors and overpower *The Popiẓ*.”

“Energy units?” the Doctor inquired.

“Yes.” Clara began to explain. “They contain quantum particles acquired from the planet Demonta VII. They can send out energy boosts up to fifty trillion gigawatts either to overload or boost up power in a computer terminal. They’ve been put on recharge every hour. They should be fully charged now.”

The Doctor and Donna proceeded to explain to Clara that they have their transport in the shuttle bay. The doors were locked as soon as they were out of the shuttle bay. Clara reassured them that she’ll help them to get back inside the shuttle bay once they had found the three energy units.

“I obtained one energy unit before I met you two,” said Clara. “I’ve just collected the second one from the main ops room when I came to your rescue.”

“I was meaning to ask you about that,” Donna admitted.

“How exactly do these energy units open shuttle bay doors and overpower an alien entity like *The Popiẓ*?” the Doctor cut in.

“I’ll explain it all to you in good time,” Clara replied.

“Is it a parasite, this *Popiẓ*?” Donna enquired.

“A likely possibility,” the Doctor said. He addressed Clara again. “And I suppose the energy units are meant to prevent *the Popiẓ* from spreading out across the galaxy. To keep it contained on the space station or reduced to size to prevent it from getting out.”

“Yes,” Clara said, rather impatiently. “Now we must go. I have to go to engineering to collect the third energy unit. That’s where it’ll be. It’ll take me hours to break into engineering to collect it. *The Popiẓ* dead-locked the doors once it attacked.”

“If there’s anything we can do, we’ll be happy to help out,” the Doctor offered.

“Yeah,” Donna joined in. “Same goes for me too.”

“Very well,” Clara said satisfied. “Now, spit spot!”

With that, she led them out of the nursery.

Donna was critical and impatient as the Doctor buzzed away with his sonic screwdriver to open the doors to engineering. Clara kept her cool but was starting to get anxious.

Eventually, the doors slid open and they were able to enter engineering. They walked in and Clara eventually found what she was looking for — a cube-like crystalline object which was on an engineering table. She went over to pick it up, as the Doctor and Donna joined her.

“How exactly do you use that cube and the other two you picked up to open the shuttle bay doors to tackle *The Popiz?*?” Donna asked.

“Straight-forward,” Clara replied with a smile. “I connect the cubes with a power cable to a nearby computer terminal. It should all work smoothly.”

“You think or you know that, Miss Clever-Clogs?” Donna mocked.

“Now, now, Donna,” the Doctor interceded. “Let’s not doubt Miss Watson’s expert knowledge of these things. She is a station crewmember after all. Come on. Let’s help her to get off this space station before...”

Suddenly, an energy barrier surrounded them. They stood still as the energy barrier contained them.

“What was that?” Donna wanted to know. “Was I seeing things or did I just see blue energy?”

“No!” Clara panicked. “It’s *The Popiz!* It’s set up a forcefield to prevent us from escaping. It knows what we’re doing and doesn’t like it.”

“Like I said,” the Doctor commented. “The thing’s very clever. It can adapt pretty quickly.”

Suddenly, they could hear *The Popiz*’s lyrics singing through their ears. It caused them to take off the inhibitors from their ears as they heard it.

♪ *Popiz! Popiz! You’re gonna love the Popiz! Popiz! Get sucked in by the Popiz!*
Popiz! ♪

The trio held their ears once they heard the song repeating itself and getting louder.

“I thought you said you perfected those inhibitors,” Donna complained.

“I did,” Clara replied. “*The Popiz* must have adapted past the inhibitor field. Like the Doctor said. It's very clever. I needed stimulants to keep me awake whilst I was working on the inhibitors beforehand.”

The song got louder as well as more impatient and demanding, trying to get through to its victims to take control.

♪ *POPIZ! POPIZ! YOU'RE GONNA LOVE THE POPIZ! POPIZ!
GET SUCKED IN BY THE POPIZ! POPIZ!* ♪

As they struggled to keep the noise out, the Doctor turned to Clara.

“Clara! Could you use one of your energy units to weaken *The Popiz* for a short while in order for us to get to the shuttle bay?”

Clara thought for a moment. It was a struggle with the awful song pounding in her head.

“I suppose I could,” she replied. “But I don’t know how powerful it would be. Whether it would be enough to drown out *The Popiz*’s effect on us once I connect it to a computer terminal.”

“Let’s not debate about it,” Donna said impatiently. “Just do it! Connect that box of yours to a machine, will you?”

Clara was hesitant at first. But she adhered. She began to apply a power cable quickly to the cube she found and connect it to a computer, whilst still holding one hand to one of her ears. The Doctor and Donna maintained their hands on their ears whilst they watched Clara at work.

Eventually, Clara finished the connections and tapped controls on both the computer terminal and the energy unit in order to send the power out.

“Right,” she said. “I’ve sent the power outage to cause an overload. That should short out *The Popiz*’s effect whilst it’s still in the station’s computer systems.

The trio waited patiently as the cube began to build up power whilst still connected to the computer terminal.

It seemed like nothing was happening though as the Doctor, Donna and Clara could still hear *The Popiz* singing away to them. Loudly and forceful this time!

♪ *POPIZ!!!! POPIZ!!!! YOU'RE GONNA LOVE THE POPIZ!!!!
POPIZ!!!! GET SUCKED IN BY THE POPIZ!!! POPIZ!!!* ♪

“It’s not working!” Donna remarked. “Your stupid cube doesn’t work!”

“It’s not powerful enough!” Clara commented. “The overload is not powerful enough even from one cube. *The Popiz* is heavily defended. I’ll have to use a second cube. I’ll need to act quickly...”

“No need,” the Doctor interjected. “My sonic will do the work.”

With that, the Doctor took out his sonic screwdriver and set it on a higher setting to buzz away, pointing at the energy unit Clara had plugged into the terminal.

As this happened, the overload from the cube became stronger as it shook and shuddered violently on the engineering table. Very soon, it exploded into pieces. Donna and Clara cried out, very startled from the explosion.

Fortunately, the overload did its work, thanks to the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver. *The Popiz* had stopped. There was no singer singing the awful, painful lyrics.

The Doctor and Donna were relieved.

“Thank goodness for that,” Donna remarked.

“Pity you didn’t suggest me using my sonic screwdriver earlier,” the Doctor joked with her.

“Oy!” Donna retorted before smiling and seeing the Doctor teasing her.

Clara meanwhile was dismayed. She looked at the shattered remains of the energy unit they had just used to go on overload and weaken *The Popiz*.

“Now I have two energy units to use,” Clara said. “One for the shuttle bay doors and one to tackle *The Popiz*. I hoped the third one would be a spare if it wasn’t enough.”

The Doctor tried to reassure Clara. “Clara, we’ll get you off this space station so that you can escape. I promise.”

“We should get going to the shuttle bay if we’re to take advantage of *The Popiz* out of action,” Donna suggested.

“You’re right, Donna,” he agreed. “Clara?”

She seemed lost in thought for a moment. Then she nodded. “Yeah, okay. Let’s get going.”

“Come on then,” he said to her with a grin.

With that, the trio made their way out of engineering to head for the shuttle bay.

Once they got there, they applied the same approach in using one of the energy units to open the shuttle bay doors. They connected it to a nearby terminal with a power cable and had set the cube to boost up the power in the systems in order to gain access. It was trial and error, but thankfully they managed to bypass the security net and the shuttle bay doors opened. They entered. *The Popiẓ* was still out of action which was a relief, but not for long they feared.

Clara was still dismayed. She examined the cube they had just used to open the shuttle bay doors. She saw how low the power was. It wasn't even half empty despite the Doctor's claiming it to be.

"This won't be enough to weaken *The Popiẓ*," Clara told the Doctor and Donna. "With half a cube as well as a full cube, we'll only send *The Popiẓ* to sleep. Not kill it instantly."

"I have something from my TARDIS that will help to recharge the cubes," the Doctor told her. "Just give me a sec. I'll be right back."

The Doctor made his way to the blue box and opened the TARDIS door with a key. Stepping inside, he told Donna and Clara to wait for him.

As the two women waited, Clara marvelled at the blue box standing in the shuttle bay.

"This is what you came in," she asked. "Your transport?"

"Yeah," Donna said enthusiastically. "It's pretty wizard inside there. And wonderful! Don't tell the Doctor I said that about his TARDIS. He'll go nuts after all the complaining about it not getting to the right place at the right time."

"But it's just a box," Clara insisted. "You two can't fit in there!"

"You'll be surprised," Donna told her.

Eventually, the Doctor came out, carrying a couple of cables.

"See," he said. "Told you I'd be a sec."

"I timed you," Donna teased. "You were above a sec."

"Okay," the Doctor retorted. "No need to get so pedantic, Noble."

Just then, a warning sound echoed in the room. This unsettled them as they stood in the shuttle bay.

“What is it?” Donna asked. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” the Doctor replied. “But I don’t like it one bit.”

Clara went over to check the readouts on a nearby computer terminal. What she saw chilled her blood. “Oh, no!”

“What is it?” the Doctor asked. “What does it say?”

“The atmospheric conditions of the shuttle bay! They’re lowering! We’re losing life support by fifty per cent.”

“You mean we’ll suffocate?” Donna enquired, panicking.

Just then, the faint sound of singing echoed in the background. The trio heard it. It was getting louder and louder.

♪ *Popiz! Popiz! You’re gonna love the Popiz! Popiz! Get sucked in by the Popiz!*
Popiz! ♪

It repeated itself as it was getting louder. Clara understood what it meant.

“It’s a warning,” she said. “And a threat.”

“A threat to stop us from killing it before it kills people?” Donna retorted. “Not much of a bargain it’s making, is it?”

“I’ll have to do this quickly,” the Doctor fumbled with the cables. “Clara, the two energy units! Quickly!”

Caught in her own thoughts for a moment, Clara hurriedly handed over the two cubes to the Doctor for him to charge up. He connected the cables into the cubes and they began to charge up nicely.

“There,” the Doctor said satisfied. “Shouldn’t take long. About a few minutes will do the trick.”

The Popiz was getting louder now.

♪ *Popiz! Popiz! You’re gonna love the Popiz! Popiz! Get sucked in by the Popiz!*
Popiz! ♪

“Doctor!” Donna complained. “I don’t like the way that song’s increasing in volume. It’ll soon give us headaches, knock us out and probably take over our minds.”

“Yes,” he said grimly. “I’m not sure if we’ve got enough time left.”

Clara realised the limited amount of time they had left. Even if she could connect the cubes into the station's computer terminals via the shuttle bay to destroy *The Popiz̃*, it wouldn't stop the entity completely. And there was no guarantee *The Popiz̃* would be destroyed entirely. She should've realised that.

She then came to a decision. It was a good one to destroy *The Popiz̃* entirely. But it would mean a big sacrifice."

"We don't," she told Donna and the Doctor. "We don't have enough time left." She breathed deeply. "But there is a way we can speed things up and stop *The Popiz̃* from spreading terror."

"How do you mean?" Donna enquired.

A moment of silence ensued.

"I can set the space station to self-destruct at the same time I set the energy units to destroy *The Popiz̃* completely. It'll give it two problems to deal with. Overriding the space station's self-destruct sequence and attending to the energy units that weaken it."

"But, that would mean having someone to stay behind and ensure *The Popiz̃* was confused," Donna stated.

"Exactly," Clara admitted. "I'm volunteering to stay behind. I'll make the big sacrifice. I'll see to it that the self-destruct sequence proceeds as planned whilst ensuring the two energy units do their job."

"No!" the Doctor rejected. "I won't have it! It's a stupid idea!"

"Doctor, I'm giving you and Donna the chance to escape," she told them. "If you escape in that blue box of yours, I can ensure the self-destruct sequence is underway and can monitor the energy units' progress on *The Popiz̃*'s deterioration without a hitch."

"We're not leaving you behind," Donna told her. "Not ever, ever!"

"But," Clara began.

"That is final," the Doctor interrupted.

The Popiz̃ continued singing, getting louder and louder

♪ *Popiz̃! Popiz̃! You're gonna love the Popiz̃! Popiz̃! Get sucked in by the Popiz̃!*
Popiz̃! ♪

“Doctor,” Donna turned to him. “It won’t be long before *The Popiζ* takes over our minds again.”

“I know that, Donna,” he replied. “I know.”

“So what do we do then?”

The Doctor thought for a moment.

“I can use my sonic screwdriver to distort *The Popiζ*’s sound frequencies in the station’s computers systems.”

“How long will that take?” Donna asked.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor shrugged. “A couple of hours maybe.”

“By that time we’ll probably be dead,” Donna said.

“Very probably,” the Doctor admitted.

“Well we’d better not use that idea then,” Donna retorted.

“Well, what else can we do? It’s got to be better than what Clara here suggested about sacrificing herself aboard the station...”

The Doctor got cut off mid-sentence as an electrical current hit him. He let out a gasp before collapsing to the floor. Donna was shocked to see him collapse.

“Doctor, why did you...?”

But before she could get down on her hands and knees to check on her friend, she too got cut off mid-sentence as an electrical current hit her. She let out a gasp before collapsing to the floor.

Both the Doctor and Donna didn’t realise that Clara had knocked them out with a tranquiliser shock pistol. Something she’s acquired nearby in the shuttle bay whilst the Doctor and Donna talked away.

“I’m sorry,” Clara told them whilst they lay unconscious on the floor. “But I had to do this. This is the only way to save you and stop *The Popiζ*!”

Clara then began to move the Doctor and Donna into the TARDIS. It was hard work carrying them into the blue box, but she managed to do it in the end. She didn’t know how to pilot their ship. They’d probably try to come out to stop her from whatever she was doing once they’d woken up. But somehow she knew that the TARDIS’ HADS would be in operation to take the Doctor and Donna away once the station’s destruction occurred. How did she know that?

Anyway, it didn't matter. Once putting the Doctor's cables away back in the TARDIS, she set to work on initialising the self-destruction sequence. Once that had been done, she got to work on connecting the energy units into a nearby computer terminal and geared them to overload the station's computer systems to confuse *The Popiz*.

She'd done it just in time as *The Popiz* screamed loudly in its singing.

♪ POPIZ! POPIZ! YOU'RE GONNA LOVE THE POPIZ! POPIZ!
GET SUCKED IN BY THE POPIZ! POPIZ! ♪

She could see that *The Popiz* was trying to slow the self-destruct sequence whilst attending to the computer systems energy units' overload thanks to the Doctor's handiwork. It still wasn't enough. There wasn't enough power in the energy units to ensure destroying *The Popiz* successfully. How come this flaw in her plan happened right about now?

Clara struggled to think of a way out of this and saw the answer right in front of her.

It was dangerous and it probably wouldn't work. It might be against the laws of physics. But she didn't care. She needed extra energy from somewhere to boost up the energy units and to confuse *The Popiz* long enough with both energy units and self-destruct sequence at the same time. She had to take the chance.

Clara began setting the opening sequence for the shuttle bay outer doors into space. She opened the valve for the energy units to take in the flow coming from the vacuum of space. As she did so, she looked at the TARDIS. Seeing the blue box felt like safety to her. Like home. But she didn't know why. But she knew he was in there. The Doctor.

Without knowing why she said it, she said, "Run. Run, you clever boy... and remember."

At that, she took off her mask that covered half her face. She was a beautiful woman underneath with barely a scratch on her. She wished the Doctor could see her like this.

She then made the big sacrifice. Within seconds, the shuttle bay outer doors opened and allowed the vacuum of space to enter. The space station began to explode instantly. The pressure was overwhelming. Clara smiled

before she exploded too. The TARDIS meanwhile began to dematerialise, knowing there was danger.

The Popiz sang defiantly, ♪ *POPIZ! POPIZ! YOU'RE GONNA—* ...before it was cut off. Knocked out, if you will. The explosion was tremendous in outer space. A distance away, you probably could've heard no sound. Like the incident didn't really happen.

It was a while before the Doctor and Donna woke up in the TARDIS, realising what had happened. The Doctor became bitter and angry whilst Donna tried to console him.

"She saved our lives. She probably saved the galaxy from *the Popiz*."

"But it was unnecessary and foolish," the Doctor told Donna. "There was no guarantee it would've worked destroying *the Popiz*."

"So it could still be out there, you mean?" Donna enquired.

The Doctor sighed deeply. "I don't know. Maybe."

He began to press away at the controls and switches at the TARDIS console, setting their new destination. Somehow he didn't feel like adventuring at the moment. He just wanted to rest.

"Shame," Donna commented. "I was beginning to like her. She seemed nice in the end."

"Every time I travel in time and space, I always bring death to people," the Doctor said bitterly. "Why does this keep happening?"

"Hey," Donna said gently. "I'm not dead yet. Am I?"

The Doctor looked at her. He had a stern look. But it softened as he saw the smile on Donna's face. He smiled weakly back before returning his attention to the TARDIS console.

"I wonder who she was," Donna remarked. "Where she came from."

"Perhaps we'll never know," he replied. "Not in this life or the next."

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A TENTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

STANDBY FOR DEPARTURES

BY ANDREW HSIEH

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A new day has landed at Heathrow Airport, already waking up to clear the heavy blankets of snow from overnight. Tegan Jovanka carefully wheeled her light suitcase towards the entrance of Terminal 3, trying to avoid the ice patches along the pavement. She was relieved to have arrived as early as possible, despite having to travel such a long distance in these freezing conditions.

No time to observe the annual Christmas decorations, she focused on making her way through the crowds. Many pushed their own trolleys, others just carried small luggage. The dim lighting of the check-in screens was the only thing not to reflect from the quicksilver sheen of the floor. Signs marked in yellow, service terminals in grey, there was a nondescript attitude that gave the airport's complex a perpetual sense of waiting and exploring.

Luckily for Tegan, the queue turned out to be much shorter than what she had anticipated. "Next please," a voice called. She dragged her suitcase along towards a young female check-in assistant, Lavinia, waiting at the counter.

"G'day," Tegan said, handing her passport. "Merry Christmas."

"Same to you, too. Where are you flying today?"

"Brisbane."

"A return flight?" Lavinia turned to the computer screen.

"What gave it away?"

"Your accent," Lavinia smiled. "There was a Brisbane family travelling from the Netherlands last night. Rushing home for Christmas."

"Brisbanites. We're certainly everywhere."

"Have you been travelling long?"

“You’ve no idea... Everywhere I’ve been, I thought of all the things this’d disappear,” she squeezed her throat gently, “But out of everything that happened, that’s what stuck.”

“You work, er, worked internationally?” She seemed distracted.

Tegan chuckled. “Don’t mind me. I was an air stewardess, a number of years ago.”

“Oh, were you—?” Some alarming news caught Lavinia’s attention on her screen. “Terribly sorry to say this, but I’ve just received confirmation from my manager that all scheduled flights have been delayed, due to a severe weather forecast of heavy snow — over the next few days.”

“Rabbits, not again,” exclaimed Tegan, rolling her eyes. “Wasn’t that long ago when we had the last snowstorm across England and all over Europe.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lavinia nodded in agreement, “But if you like, we can put you on standby.”

Tegan reluctantly accepted, collecting her passport, “Yes, I’d be happy with that...”

“Miss Tegan Jovanka,” interrupted a man, very tall and slim. “Could I please borrow you for just a second?” He swiftly flashed a piece of blank white paper at Lavinia and said, “John Smith. Security.”

“But what about my boarding pass?” Tegan snapped, wheeling her suitcase along as she followed the stranger. His thick spiky brown hair with long sideburns, and the dark brown suit with blue pinstripes — such an eccentric appearance for a security official, flabbergasted her. “And how do you know my name?”

“Security records.”

“Security rarely says anything, let alone my name with that kind of familiarity.”

“Plainclothes guard, ma’am,” he deflected. “Feigned casualness is our speciality.”

“I don’t buy it. It may’ve been a while, I might’ve got a wire crossed somewhere, but...”

She stopped. “Have we met before?”

He turned around to look at her in the eye, grinning with the utmost sincerity.

“Brave heart, Tegan.”

“Doctor?” A moment’s pause, her mouth agape, those words were all too familiar. “Is that *really* you?” She gasped with disbelief, shaking her head.

“Yep,” he said, still grinning. “You’ve lost none of your edge, Tegan, you know that?”

“Oh my God, it *is* you!” Tegan gave him the tightest hug she could, unintentionally causing him to wince. “Same man, several faces later,” the Doctor managed to keep the pain to himself, despite feeling the sensation of warmth and comfort from his former companion.

“What exactly are you doing here, Doctor? This can’t be a coincidence.”

“Well,” he began, looking at the weather conditions outside, hands in pockets. “The snowstorm is expected to last until after Christmas Day, which means that your flight to Brisbane is, factually, cancelled. But don’t worry, I am offering you the perfect alternative.”

“You don’t say.”

“Come see for yourself.” They both began to make their way through the crowds. Tegan managed to keep up with him, making sure that she didn’t release her suitcase by accident.

Slade’s Merry Xmas Everybody played as they boarded an escalator, keeping onto one side for others to slip past. “Here,” said the Doctor, grabbing the handle of Tegan’s suitcase. “Let me help you with that.” He lifted it up as they approached the first floor.

“Thanks,” she replied.

Trying to pass Security, the Doctor flashed his blank paper at an officer to alert him that Tegan was very close to missing her flight.

“Say, Doctor, what was that blank piece of card you showed him?”

“Psychic paper,” he explained. “Think of it as a psionic handshake between what I need and they expect. Handy and convenient for when and *wherever* I go.”

“What’d you tell him?”

He looked. “That we’re a UNIT secondment, probably. Christmases being what they are.”

“Lethal?”

“No, nothing like that this year. All taken care of.” Tegan didn’t like the look on his face. He seemed older, in that moment. Tired. “Christmas should be fun, eh?”

Tegan could hardly disagree with that.

The Doctor and Tegan walked through Duty Free, both resisting the urge to stop and browse at the luxurious goods for an hour or so. Even though Tegan had all the time to buy Christmas presents for family and friends, she was actually looking forward to enjoying her flight in the TARDIS.

She tried to keep up with him, but suddenly paused for a moment to do up her coat.

“Not far now,” said the Doctor, wheeling her suitcase as they entered the wide open departure lounge. The entire area was heavily packed, like a shopping mall during the busy holiday season, mirroring its layout and decor. Passengers were already laying out their sleeping bags on the benches, keeping as much of their luggage with them, in anticipation of a prolonged stay without the risk of going home in the cold.

“Doctor, wait,” she called. “I think I’m beginning to shiver.”

He stopped and turned, surprised to notice that she *was* shivering all over.

She blew into her hands. “Rotten terminal’s air conditioning must be broken.”

“Use this,” he drew a very long multicoloured scarf from his jacket, and handed it to her. Tegan quickly wrapped the scarf around her neck, making sure it wasn’t too tight. “So, what do you think?”

“Nice, very comfy. Where did you get it?”

“It’s my own. From way, way before meeting you, Adric, Nyssa, Turlough, Kamelion, and also Donna — I mean *donning* — the cricket outfit. Remember? All teeth and curls?”

“Hell’s teeth, I’d no idea. Lovely range of colours!”

“Well, things do come and go, now and then, even before having an existential crisis. Besides, you should get a hot drink or something, that’ll warm you up.”

Tegan opened her wallet to check if she had enough cash. “Yeah, might as well. Shouldn’t be long.” Keeping the scarf wrapped around as tight as possible, she walked towards a nearby coffee shop. The Doctor, minding her suitcase and quietly humming along to The Proclaimers’ 500 Miles, discreetly observed the surrounding passengers to see if they were also feeling the cold. He couldn’t tell from his own instincts, he didn’t want to jump to conclusions.

A few minutes later, Tegan returned carrying a hot drink with her name written on the side. “Just a hot chocolate,” she said, taking a sip. “Mmm, not bad.”

“Is it helping?”

She took another sip and placed her palm on her cheek, “Erm, no.” He placed the back of his hand on the side of her neck. Her body temperature didn’t warm up, much to the Doctor’s puzzlement. “No minor degree change, no convection, nothing.”

He gestured to her hot chocolate. “Open the lid for me.”

“Sure, but what—It’s...” she tried forcing it. “It’s not...”

The Doctor tried himself. It was now weighty like a block of plasticine. He could feel the blood rushing from his fingers into its outer surface. “Frozen shut.”

Suddenly, everyone began to shiver in exactly the same way as Tegan — passing along rapidly like a domino effect. The sound of whimpers and chattering echoed all over the departure lounge.

Tegan overheard a frightened little girl, close by, desperately clinging onto her mother. “Mummy, I’m cold!”

Startled by all the commotion, she accidentally dropped her hot chocolate on the floor. It smashed into chunks of milky brown ice, like an ice lolly, causing her to yelp.

“Doctor, am I doing this?”

“No, no, no, I don’t think so.”

“It can’t be the air conditioning, could it?” she wondered, staring at her shattered drink. “No, wait... something worse, something out of the ordinary. Aliens?”

The Doctor snapped his fingers with excitement, realising that his former companion may have found the answer. “Oh, Tegan Jovanka! What would I do without you?”

“You sound like him.”

The Doctor wasn’t listening. He took his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and pressed down on the button before waving in midair. It flashed a bright blue light, producing a whirring sound before switching to a continuous pattern of slow beeping. The Doctor removed his grip from his screwdriver, and noticed that it resumed beeping nonstop like an automatic sensor. He dashed off to locate for suspicious activity.

“Doctor, wait,” Tegan grabbed her suitcase and wheeled it along. “I’m coming with you!”

The building was already on the brink of becoming a freezer, matching the snowy conditions outside. Searching the entire floor, the Doctor concentrated on the screwdriver’s sensor with Tegan following from right behind. They rushed past numerous walkways, near to where he parked his TARDIS, but the beeping indicated that the source was much closer to them both. Tegan couldn’t stop shivering, despite wearing the Doctor’s long scarf.

The sensor rapidly increased, beeping faster and faster, the air colder and colder, as the Doctor spotted some dented air vents — probably damaged by the extreme weather conditions. “Over there,” Tegan pointed at a pile of snow, a few metres away from one end of the walkway. “Right, we’re on fire!” he said excitedly, analysing his sonic screwdriver beeping at its fastest. He tapped it on his palm, it finally stopped flashing.

Buried underneath was an oblong-shaped solid object that clearly resembled a snowball.

“Looks like an egg,” she remarked.

The Doctor knelt down to take a closer look at the object, “More like a probe, I think.”

He gently pressed it, but suddenly...

“*Yow!*” He cried in pain, reacting to an instant burning sensation on his fingers.

“Doctor!” Tegan screamed.

They were red as swollen bumps, frozen solid as icicles, he stared at his hand and kept a firm grip on his wrist, shaking in great agony. A golden glow of energy suddenly appeared on his hand, instantly healing the wounds and fixing his skin. It was the only thing the Doctor could do to cure himself.

“You’re not—” she gasped.

“I’m afraid I am, Tegan. It’s happening again.” He felt deeply ashamed of revealing the truth, but he certainly couldn’t help it.

“Oh, Doctor,” she laid her hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

“I’m dying.”

“From something so simp—?”

“No,” he flexed the injured hand. “I’ve been dying for a while. Thought I could keep it hidden for a quiet night out with an old friend, but...”

All his energy, his enthusiasm suddenly went out of him. That flash of age she’d seen at Security came down on him like a mountain. It had taken him a while to get to her, she could tell. He wasn’t quite at the end yet, but the risk was always there.

“Please,” said Tegan. “Try not to despair.”

He let out a humourless laugh. “Despair... Before you knew me, I spent ten years trapped in the TARDIS, lost in the vortex and dying from radiation poisoning. Unable to move, unable to do anything but cling to that last thread of life. My third life. I’ve got the opportunity to go out on my terms this time, but...”

“But?”

“It all feels so self-indulgent, Tegan. This face,” he gave it a one-two slap, “isn’t even the same face you knew from back then.”

“Changing faces still makes you the same man you are today, remember? Logopolis. Castrovalva. Meeting Rembrandt in Amsterdam. Seeing your past selves, and your granddaughter Susan. Being President of Gallifrey,

and reuniting with Leela. All those extraordinary adventures we've had? That is who you are, Doctor. The man who changed my life forever. You, him, them, you're all the same person. You deserve a chance to say goodbye. Who wouldn't honour a dying guy's wish?"

The Doctor closed his eyes for a moment, thinking of what Tegan's just said. "You're right. Whatever appearance I take, I'm still the Doctor." He gave her a rather sad smile, trying to hold his regeneration energy for as long as possible. The glow lingered in his hand before receding up his sleeve.

"You've not just been visiting me, have you?"

He shook his head. "All my past companions and friends."

"Did you try your family?"

"I tried... But it isn't possible," his fingers curled, almost unnoticed, into fists. "The attempt cut my time in half and..."

"And?" Tegan encouraged.

"And I've also lost my daughter, not too long ago."

"Your daughter? Susan's mother?"

"Matter of fact, no. The whole thing's rather complicated."

"When isn't it?" she recalled fondly.

A hissing sound came from the probe, it was already opening. Tegan stared at it in amazement, while the Doctor pointed his sonic screwdriver in case of potential harm. Steam or some other foreign gas poured from its seals, revealing four round tiny creatures sitting in a sealed cockpit. They were a family of four in different minuscule sizes. Two adults and two children. No arms *or* legs, just like edible silver balls or frozen peas. Ice cold, glacier-blue fur for skin with black beady eyes and thin line mouths.

"Hello, I'm the Doctor. And this is Tegan."

The creatures fretted, horrified by how gigantic the Doctor and Tegan appeared to them. "Don't kill us," they all protested. "We come in peace!"

"So do we," assured Tegan.

Unsure, both the smaller ones cowered back.

The Doctor knelt down gently for a closer look, without daring to touch them. He took a deep breath to hide his pain. "What do we call you?"

“We are the Minetta. The last of our species,” said the older male.

“Yes, but your names. Who you are, not what.”

“My name’s Peengj. This is my wife Gillyaroc, our son Neb, and our daughter Hazinna.”

“Tell me,” said the Doctor, crouching. “How did you four end up here on Earth?”

“You wish to know our story?” Peengji asked.

“I can tell it’s not a happy one. The pain, Peenji, tends to ease when you tell others.”

“Well,” he began. “A fleet of spaceships came descending and launched a full assault on our snowy planet, Mlabakou. They took down the government first, before dropping bombs simultaneously onto our villages. It was very hard to see through the black smoke, except for all the surrounding homes and people being instantly turned into ashes and melted ice.”

“We were lucky to be outside the radius,” Gillyaroc added. “None of us could concentrate on saving the injured or fighting the fleet, in case we ended up getting slaughtered.”

The Doctor asked, “Did any of you see what they looked like?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Neb. “Because the smoke was so entrenched, we never caught a good glimpse. Nor they revealed their names. All we know is that they were giants, like yourselves.”

“We heard them chanting *‘Minetts must die!’* whilst slaughtering our people,” Hazinna broke down in tears. “I think that was how they pronounced it.”

Peengj resumed. “By the time we narrowly escaped in this emergency shuttle, our planet ceased to exist.”

“All clouded by smoke and fire.” The Doctor knew the image well.

“We had no idea where we were exactly headed, so we just kept flying as far as we could from the fleet until we entered your realm. We couldn’t adjust to the winds. They blew us across the sky, damaging our controls, we ended up falling through the tunnel and crash landing.”

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor rubbed his eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“No...” said Peengi. “*We* are sorry. Our sorrows are such that they affect even that which is strange to us. Your world is so large, it is unfathomable to us.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do to help?” asked Tegan, shaking her head sympathetically.

“Merely listen,” said Gillyaroc. “Our plight does not seem unique.”

Tegan moved her suitcase aside and knelt down. “I’ve recently been around here in London—”

“That’s what we call this area,” the Doctor elaborated.

“—to campaign for Aboriginal rights. Visiting school workshops and attending conferences. We believe that ethnic and religious minorities should be treated equally amongst others. Talking to end the fighting.”

“Amongst your own kind?” asked Gillyaroc.

“All species living across the universe. Big or small.”

“Were there disagreements?” Neb asked.

“I’ll say there were.” Tegan rubbed her eyes. “But we push on. We keep trying.”

“Why?”

“Because it matters.”

The Minetta felt comforted after hearing Tegan’s story. “That was a very brave thing you did,” said Peengi. “I seriously wish we could migrate, for the safety of our species, but would any human be willing to take us in as refugees?”

“Mlabakou had a stable weather system, correct? Single biome?” asked the Doctor.

“I don’t understand,” confessed Peengi.

The Doctor held his hands like a globe. “It was perpetual winter there?”

“Yes, we ourselves maintained it as such.”

“Elementary weather control system. Tegan, do you lot have that yet?” She looked at him strangely.

“Can you help us?” asked Hazinna.

“How many of you would there be?”

Hazinna estimated a figure, considering what she'd seen of human habitation on their plummet towards Earth. "Ourselves, but soon, perhaps many."

The Doctor felt rather hesitant, unsure about what would be the most efficient way to respond.

"Doctor," Tegan drew him to the side. "Why couldn't they stay comfortably in someone's freezer?"

The Doctor turned to Peengi. "How cold would your atmosphere have to be to sustain you?"

"In excess of minus five-thousand degrees."

"Consistently?"

"Any deviation and we would die." He placed an appendage against the seal of the cockpit. "We'd require the assistance of your people to sustain it."

The Doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid it isn't possible. Not now, not with the technology humanity has. They've only managed to reach artificial temperatures in the range of two-hundred and even if they could, they've no viable means of containment yet. They could achieve that temperature, but they've nothing to preserve it."

"Would you know how?" Tegan asked the family.

"Atmospheric sciences were not our forte," confessed Gillyaroc.

"Which would leave it down to humanity," said the Doctor. "Operating from a human perspective."

Tegan looked at him. "Doctor, one error, one misjudgement and the entirety of Earth's atmosphere would collapse."

"Yes... Natural weather systems on Earth tend to vary. From snowy blizzards to sunny heatwaves. So many people across Heathrow Airport right now are freezing when that's not supposed to be happening and they're trying so hard to adjust. Fighting. Striving to survive. There are no certainties, but they could certainly try. They've surprised me before."

"You're the last of your species," Tegan reminded them. "There'd be some humans who would grant you amnesty, others would oppose in the harshest conditions."

Tegan reflected that if she were the Australian Ambassador to the United Nations, she would call for a resolution to label them ‘Minettagees’.

“Either way, it will be a battle,” concluded the Doctor.

Peengj thought for a moment. He was grateful, yet infuriated. “You’re right, you’re *both* right. It was our own needs that have, unintentionally, caused this unfortunate mess here.”

“Only the fleet who destroyed our planet are to blame for all this,” growled Neb.

“Even so, we cannot stay.”

“Humanity can achieve some remarkable—” the Doctor tried.

“No, Doctor, it is a question of numbers,” Peengi decided. “I believe what you say, that humanity could help, but their habitats across this world stand in greater value than us. There are many more families here than ours alone.” He looked to his wife. “Hazinna?”

She placed an appendage in her husband’s own. “It is a shame, but my husband speaks well. We do not regret this choice. We’ve no right to endanger them. And to confess the truth, Doctor, we tire of war.”

The Doctor nodded. “I understand.”

“Now that the shuttle’s controls are badly damaged, we’re going to need an alternative form of transport off this planet,” said Peengi. “Could your humans provide us with the necessary materials, at least?”

“Actually, there’s a simpler option,” he grinned. “I’m not human. I have a spaceship of my own called the TARDIS, which can travel across time and space. How’s that for a flight?”

The Minetta all looked at each other, nodding in agreement.

“Alright, we accept,” said Peengj.

“For your safety, you’ll remain inside as I transport you to your new home. Now, mind the doors.” The Doctor pointed his sonic screwdriver at the shuttle and pressed it, making that whirring sound. It sealed, once again resembling a snowball. He placed both his arms underneath the shuttle and lifted it up with his coat. He didn’t feel any pain or ice burns on his hands. “Right,” he grunted. “*Allons-y* then.”

“Along what, Doctor?”

“Let’s go *en Français!*”

He carried it all the way to the TARDIS, struggling to maintain his strength at times. As she wheeled her suitcase, Tegan grew increasingly concerned about the possibility of her friend regenerating sooner than later.

The Doctor took his key out of his pocket and unlocked the TARDIS door, pushing it open. Tegan walked around his police box, observing each side and corner of the exterior. “Wow, looks different to how I remember it. Quite an update.” But he was already inside. “Doctor?” She walked through the doors, entering somewhere familiar she used to call home.

The warm air hit her immediately.

“Ah, you’ve redecorated... not bad for my taste.” Everything caught Tegan’s eye, from the main console’s cyan lighting to the coral pillars all pointing in its direction, but most of all the golden hexagonal roundels. “Still miss the round things, though, but this’ll do. And I’m no longer shivering!”

“I’ll take that as a complement,” he chuckled, placing the shuttle on the console. “With help from the TARDIS, she can instantly locate a suitable ice planet for the Minetta. Now then...” The Doctor flicked a few controls and switches before grabbing onto a lever. “Ready for takeoff!” He pulled and slammed it down. The room began to violently shake, causing Tegan to lose balance. She held onto the console, as her suitcase fell on its front, listening to the familiar wheezing and groaning noises from the TARDIS engines.

“Just like good old times, Doctor!”

He laughed, “I know!”

“You alright, Minettagees?” called Tegan. The shuttle didn’t move about. It was completely intact like a heavy boulder of metal, as though it was being plugged into the system. A loudspeaker rose out of the shuttle like a stethoscope.

“*We can’t feel a thing!*” boomed Peengj’s voice.

“Almost there,” the Doctor flicked a few more switches before pushing the lever forward, grounding the TARDIS to a halt.

“*Have we made it?*”

“Just about.”

He lifted up the shuttle and carried it towards the front door, opening it. Tegan left her suitcase and followed him out.

Blankets of snow have already settled on the icy ground, gusts of wind gently blew around the TARDIS. No voices heard, no footprints marked. Just emptiness and a couple of mountains along the horizon. The Doctor couldn't risk moving a few steps or metres away from his ship; it was still too soon for him to regenerate.

“Rabbits,” she exclaimed. “I don't think anyone has lived here for centuries. Looks a lot like the South Pole, but without that morphing Pingu and his mates.”

The Doctor looked bemused.

“You know,” she persisted. “The one who goes *meck-meck* and speaks in, uh, Swedish?”

“*Noot-noot*,” chimed the Doctor. “The show was originally produced in Switzerland, but the language they speak is officially called Penguinese... with the *occasional* hints of English slipped in. The TARDIS translation circuits occasionally make a word salad of it.”

“Yeah, I remember it being on the telly, in the 90s, in which one of his classmates refers to a fish as something that sounds a lot like ‘Uluru.’”

“Really? Like the rock?” he chuckled.

“I'm just thinking, the Minetta will have to get out of their pod eventually and those mountains look higher than Olympus Mons. You'd have to be a Cyberman to scale that.”

“Well, winter is here in perpetuity and winter means ice to climb and burrow through. But I seriously doubt they'll have to worry about anything like that on this planet.”

He shivered.

“Old memories?” Tegan asked.

“Regenerations stay with you. That trauma and release. The Cybermen were there when that old body of mine was wearing a bit thin.”

“You mean the same Cybermen who killed Adric?”

“Nope. These ones were more...” He mimed a cloth face, empty eyes and dissevered human hands.

“KKK-like?” she tried.

“No, those came later. Actually met some in Mississippi, wearing pointy helmets. Someone nicknamed them Silver Supremacists.”

“Sounds gross.”

“Much. All said and done now, though,” he squeezed his wrist. “There are some corners of the universe that act against everything we believe in and then there are those like the Minetta.”

“Just looking for a new home.”

“*Mmm.*” The Doctor carefully placed the shuttle on the snow and dug out his sonic screwdriver. He pressed it for a second, causing the shuttle’s lights to flash; its hydraulics roared with energy, already recharging. “Look at that,” Tegan gasped. “It works!”

The shuttle began to hover, slowly on the spot before gradually ascending. It turned around and activated the loudspeaker, fixating on eye level.

“*Doctor, Tegan,*” Peengj announced. “*The Minetta are grateful for everything you have done for us. We can now fulfill our pledge to preserve a new generation of our species — in memory of all the lives lost on Mlabakou.*”

“It’s more than a pleasure, Peengj,” said Tegan, she drew the Doctor off to the side. “They won’t survive for too long on their own here, Doc.”

“Tor,” he added, turning back to the Minetta. “I’ll ask the Shadow Proclamation to see what assistance they can offer. Until then, you’ve got a rich ecosystem here. Should keep you busy and well-fed for some years yet.”

“*Thank you both!*”

“Good luck!” cheered Tegan.

The shuttle immediately took off. As it disappeared into the blizzard, Tegan followed the Doctor back inside the TARDIS.

“There, that’s the Shadow Proclamation covered. And Heathrow Terminal 3’s now back to normal again.” The Doctor moved the console’s scanner aside, positive to have quickly resolved everything. “Home, Tegan?”

“Not just yet. Wouldn’t mind a little stopover on the way. If you have the time.”

“Always,” he might have fibbed.

“And I don’t mean Singapore — where it’s all humid like Kew Gardens.”

“*Hmm*,” he paced around the TARDIS, trying to think of possible alternatives. Snapping his fingers, it was the best idea that immediately came to mind. “Oh yes!”

“What? What is it?”

“I know just the place!”

He played around with the controls, pressing buttons and flicking switches. The room immediately began to rumble again, less violently than the previous flight.

“Where *exactly* are we going?”

“Brave heart, Tegan!”

The Doctor quickly pulled the lever. Everything came to an abrupt halt. He checked the scanner to see if they arrived at their destination. “Take a look outside,” he grinned.

Tegan went along with him and walked towards the TARDIS doors. She pulled them open, slowly, catching a glimpse of Christmas lights twinkling below upon the snowy grounds and buildings, all beneath the night sky. Wide open in full view, traditional street markets and vendors were packed with pedestrians and tourists walking past the frozen canals. There were also carols and hymns being performed by choirs, brass bands, and folk musicians.

“Amsterdam!” Tegan delightfully exclaimed. “You brought me back to Amsterdam!”

“Where else?” he smiled.

She remained standing between the doors, as the TARDIS kept at its lower altitude above the Dutch capital's joyful atmosphere. "So beautiful at night, like something out of a Christmas movie. Good thing we don't have to do all that running across the streets."

The Doctor chuckled, "Yeah, those were the days for us. And they *are* the days for me."

"Wouldn't mind taking a few photos. Camera's in the front pouch of my suitcase."

"Let me know when you want to head home."

"Where will you be?"

He smiled again, his eyes flicking up at the sky. "Around."

So Tegan stayed and watched the festivities for another hour. The Doctor continued to check on her, now and then.

Brisbane, 24 hours later.

With all the Christmas decorations and lights already on display, the city's atmosphere and temperatures was a sharp contrast to the snowstorm in Europe. Dry, hot and sunny in the Southern Hemisphere, at this time of year. The wheezing and groaning noises grew louder and louder, as the cuboid outlines of the blue police box slowly faded in, becoming an inanimate object. One of the doors opened. Tegan stepped out and dragged her suitcase onto the pavement. She closed her eyes to inhale the clean air, happy to be home at last.

The Doctor walked out of his TARDIS. He felt refreshed to be in a warmer environment. "Ahh, such a sharp contrast to the freezing climate in London. Well, Amsterdam seemed better."

"Glad I've managed to take some excellent shots from above," Tegan remarked. "Fancy celebrating?"

"Really wish I could, but... not this time."

"It's okay, Doctor. You are going to be alright. I know you will."

The Doctor stepped back inside, about to make his final farewell. "I hope so. And I'm sure this won't be our last. Well then. Merry Christmas, Tegan."

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Doctor.”

He closed the door. Tegan stood and watched the TARDIS slowly dematerialise, not wanting to miss it for the world. “Brave heart, Tegan,” she heard the Doctor’s voice echoing, figuring out that he put the console on speaker from the inside.

“Brave heart.”

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

A SIXTH DOCTOR ADVENTURE



S H O R T T R I P S

THE CAROL SINGER

BY A F J KERNOW

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By AFJ Kernow

Long ago, in his comparative youth, the Doctor had stepped into the main quarters of the TARDIS to find it festooned in secondhand tinsel wrapped around thirdhand mistletoe. He couldn't remember the specifics of the events, much of his first life was now a blur, but he could recall the tradition had been started by schoolteachers, Ian and Barbara. At the request of his granddaughter, Susan.

Since that day, he'd allowed the custom to make itself manifest as the occasion chose. The console room had become home to glitter and ornaments, and even the once sacrosanct dais of the console had gathered multicoloured presents beneath its canopy of instrumentation.

It had therefore been a source of consternation to him that the TARDIS had chosen this week, of all weeks, to slip her gravitational harmoniser out of alignment.

The Doctor watched Mel adjust the pair of gifts, one red, one green, so they sat snugly against the central column. There'd been no time to really invest in any decorations this time. A pity. He could recall the tableau vivant itself quite well. In the light of the Ship, it had all twinkled like fine crystal.

He felt a pang of nostalgia, shortly followed by a pang of electricity. A momentary lapse in concentration allowed the current to jump from the Card-A to Card-B and straight up his arms. The repairs were not going well.

"Now look," he sucked a pained finger, angrily. "Just so we understand one another—"

There was a knock at the TARDIS door.

"Don't answer it, Mel."

The knock persisted.

“I said don’t answer it.”

Before he could stop her, Mel had pulled the door control and was ready to greet their visitor. The Doctor joined Mel at the TARDIS doorway. A round-faced, middle-aged lady was outside. She opened her mouth and launched into a hearty rendition of *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

“Can you stop that?” the Doctor asked her bluntly. “This isn’t a good time.”

“Time? How about *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*?” she countered and started singing again in a jolly alto voice.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows at the audacity of this woman interrupting his delicate TARDIS repairs. “Shh! Stop it!” the Doctor hissed at her.

“I’d like to hear it,” chirped Mel.

“Mel...”

“I’m enjoying the singing, Doc. It’s a nice musical reminder of childhood Christmases back home.” She wondered if anyone else in the street outside could hear the loud, confident gospel voice.

“Melanie, kindly—”

“*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Alles schläft; einsam wacht...*” the lady’s cheerful singing continued. The Doctor stood glaring at the human jukebox before him. He waited until she had finished the entire carol in flawless, accentless German. She held out a collecting tin pointedly.

“Right! Right, that’s enough. *Thank you, quite enough!*” the Doctor said emphatically, knocking the tin down from eye-level.

The lady’s shoulders drooped as she muttered, “I’m only carolling for charity...”

An awkward silence passed through the TARDIS threshold.

Mel looked to the Doctor disapprovingly.

“Sorry,” the Doctor apologised, grudgingly. He placed a few coins from his coat pocket into the tin. “I’m a bit stressed at the moment. I’m busy doing some repairs. The results have been, quite frankly, rather shocking.”

“That was lovely music, though. What's your name? I'm Mel,” said Mel brightly.

“I'm Carol. Carol Singer,” Carol replied.

“Seriously?” Mel couldn't hide her amusement.

“I know. My dad was Harry Singer. I was born around Christmas, 1955. As I've never married, the name stuck,” she explained. Carol peered around Mel and noticed the TARDIS interior. “That's some shed you've got in there,” she said.

“Shed!” the Doctor exploded.

“Can I have a looksy?” she asked, smiling cheekily.

The Doctor melted under the sunny disposition of this infuriating lady.

“I'll do better than that Carol Singer. I'll take you on one trip,” the Doctor offered.

“A trip? You mean this shed moves?” Carol scoffed.

“Listen Carol. I am an alien to your world, known as the Doctor and *this* is my space-time machine.”

Carol blinked at him, a look of puzzlement on her face. “So, can your shed really go anywhere and anywhen?” Carol asked.

“Come on in and find out,” the Doctor managed a wry smile.

“Righteo! Let's go! By the way, nice coat Doctor. A real bobby-dazzler,” Carol laughed as she moved past the Doctor and Mel into the magic shed.

Mel smiled at Carol, who obviously couldn't believe the evidence of her own eyes. Was she going to faint? Mel moved forward as Carol reached a hand out towards the console to steady herself. Her crystal ring clacked against the metal.

“Oh, dear...I'm feeling a bit wobbly. Do you have a chair?” she asked plaintively.

“Should be one, just over... Oh.” Mel noticed that the TARDIS had neglected to provide one and the Doctor himself had already departed.

The Doctor went into the depths of the TARDIS to retrieve a chair.

As he carried out this task, passing boxrooms and boot cupboards, he felt uneasy. Why had he agreed so readily to give Carol a trip in the

TARDIS? His general sense of bonhomie, true, but there was something more to dissuade him than his bad temper. Something instinctive. Bubbling beneath his hearts. He'd yet to uncover what had caused the fault in the TARDIS and, if he was being honest with himself, he had no true reason to trust Carol. She was a stranger and he'd been duped by strangers before.

He decided. Better to play it safe for the time present. When he returned to the console room, he would ask her to leave.

“Are you feeling any better?” asked Mel.

“A bit, I hope the Doctor hurries back with that chair. Why isn't there a nice armchair in the corner?” Carol replied.

“This is like the bridge of a ship. The Doctor's usually rushing around the console trying to fly the TARDIS. Not always smoothly.”

Carol understood. “An armchair would get in the way.”

“Right. I guess that's why he got rid of it.” Mel looked under the console at the presents and a thought occurred to her. “Carol, why did you knock on the TARDIS door?”

“I've been knocking on doors all down the street, dear. But then I noticed you go into a strange blue shed and not come out again,” Carol shrugged. “I was curious.”

“Nothing wrong with curiosity, but it does get you into trouble sometimes,” the Doctor said cheerfully as he reentered the room carrying a wooden chair. Carol thanked him and sat down in the chair gratefully. The Doctor regarded her with concern.

“When you have had a rest, I'm afraid I'm going to have you to ask you to leave,” the Doctor said firmly.

Carol looked crestfallen, but got up to leave. Unobserved by everyone, the purple crystal on Carol's ring started glowing faintly.

“Doctor?” protested Mel. “You promised her one trip, surely that wouldn't hurt?”

“The TARDIS is not a transporter for time tourists. We don't know anything about her,” the Doctor replied brusquely.

“There's not much to tell,” shrugged Carol, fiddling absent-mindedly with her ring.

“No harm telling us, then,” Mel suggested.

“I'm a nurse who lives in a flat in town. I like singing in a gospel choir, knitting and cooking. I've never been married, not that there weren't any admirers. Trouble is, I like my independence too much.”

“Surely one trip wouldn't hurt?” said Mel.

“Please, Doctor. I'll be a model passenger,” Carol added.

The Doctor wanted to say no. However, as he looked at this earnest, cheery lady he found he didn't have the heart to turf her back into the street. After all, he could always use the fast return switch.

“Alright, I give in. Against my better judgement you can join Mel and I for one trip only,” the Doctor announced.

“Thank you so much!” said Carol, a broad smile appearing on her face.

“That's kind of you, Doctor,” said Mel, pleased to have some human company. “Where shall we go?”

“As you are so obviously a Christmas carol aficionado, *Carol*, might I suggest a visit to Oberndorf, Austria. We can visit Pastor Joseph Mohr on Christmas Eve 1818. We'll witness the first performance of 'Silent Night', in St. Nicholas's church, Oberndorf. How does that sound?” said the Doctor grandly.

“Can you really do that?” Carol asked.

“Hopefully,” said Mel raising her eyebrows.

“Definitely,” the Doctor replied as he programmed the coordinates. He threw the dematerialisation switch and the TARDIS shuddered into life.

“What's that awful racket?” shouted Carol over the cacophony.

“That, my dear Carol, is the sound of a new adventure beginning,” replied the Doctor.

Mel gave Carol what she hoped was a reassuring look. The TARDIS ground to a halt and with a tinkling chime announced their safe arrival in Austria. The Doctor looked at the readouts and displays.

“Oh, not again. I thought my service would improve things,” the Doctor told the TARDIS.

“Who's he talking to?” asked Carol

“Don't worry he often talks to the TARDIS. He treats her like a real person,” Mel replied smiling.

“The TARDIS is more than just a machine, Carol. It's like a sentient being,” the Doctor said.

“I'll take your word on it,” laughed Carol.

“So where are we then, Doctor?” asked Mel.

“Well, as far as I can ascertain, we're *not* in nineteenth-century Austria. We are still on Earth. England, I think, somewhere in the 20th century,” replied the Doctor.

“I don't care where we are. Can we go out and explore?” implored Carol desperate to see where the TARDIS had landed.

The Doctor answered her request by pulling the door release like a stage magician would a rabbit from a hat. The doors swung gracefully open. Once outside, after locking the door, the TARDIS crew started to take in their surroundings. The TARDIS had landed in the corner of a large kitchen.

No one was around. The only sound, a large pot of water simmering slowly on a large range. On the wooden bench in the middle of the kitchen were sliced vegetables on chopping boards. The Doctor walked over to the sink which was full of dishes, and dipped his hand in the cloudy water.

“The water's lukewarm, so it wasn't long ago this was a busy kitchen,” the Doctor told the others.

“Shall we find out where everybody's gone?” asked Mel. She walked over to the kitchen door and opened it. The Doctor and Carol walked over to join Mel by the door. They left the kitchen and went upstairs into small waiting room. From there, they opened a door that led into a large dining room.

“Wow!” remarked Carol, “It's like *Downton Abbey*.”

“Where's that?” asked Mel.

“It's a television programme about posh people, like *Upstairs Downstairs*,” replied Carol.

“Oh, I know *Upstairs Downstairs*, my mum used to love that,” Mel smiled.

“Carol, have you seen this?” the Doctor asked.

Carol turned and walked over to where the Doctor was gazing at the portrait on the wall above the fireplace. Carol gasped when she saw the portrait. A middle-aged lady with a round face, black curly hair and brown eyes stared back at her.

“But... but... that's me,” she stammered. “How can there be a portrait of me?”

“Maybe, you have well-to-do ancestors,” the Doctor said gently. “Or, perhaps, it's genetic reincarnation. Cases are rare, but it has been known to happen.”

“It's creepy,” said Carol. “Can we go somewhere else?”

“It's very odd,” Mel nodded and guided Carol out of the room into a corridor with doors coming off it. The Doctor tried the door nearest to them. It led into a vast, delicately ornamented study.

“Oh, now, I think you *definitely* had a wealthy ancestor,” declared the Doctor.

“Look! It's another portrait of Carol,” gasped Mel.

Carol sat down heavily in the study chair. The Doctor scanned the bookshelves, while Mel took a closer look at the portrait. “Doctor! This one's different. Its made up of little photos of faces. Like those photomosaic jigsaw puzzles.”

Carol looked at her portrait again. It was eerie. Closer inspection revealed that the entire portrait was made up of hundreds of faces. They stared out at Carol, frozen in time. Who were they? Who was her mysterious ancestor?

“Can we leave, Doctor?” Carol asked, desperate to leave this haunted house and return to her cosy flat.

“Yes. We can leave right now if you want,” replied the Doctor. “Or, we could get to the bottom of this mystery. What do you say, Carol? One more room and then home?”

“I thought you said curiosity leads to trouble,” Carol smiled wearily. “Come on then, but I get to choose the next door.”

“Are you sure, Carol? I can take you back to the TARDIS if you like,” Mel offered.

“No, it's alright, Mel. Truth is, I want to find out about my lookalike too,” Carol answered, getting up and going back into the corridor again.

The others followed her as she opened the door at the end of the corridor. A luxurious but tasteful drawing room was within. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. Floral print sofas and armchairs gave the room a less formal ambiance.

From the comfy-looking chaise longue, Mel sat and looked out onto the garden. The Doctor quietly examined the portraits of the various people hung on the walls. Pride of place above the ornate marble mantelpiece, was another large portrait. This time it featured a family. A mother, father and their daughter. The young girl had black, curly hair with a round, mischievous face and dark brown eyes. She looked precisely like Carol. She couldn't bring herself to look again at the portrait. Mel turned to see her obvious discomfort at this new and rather grand portrait and noticed something strange.

“Carol! What's happening to your ring?”

Carol stared at the glowing purple crystal on her ring. “I don't know. It's never done that before.”

The Doctor approached her carefully. “Carol... I need you to carefully remove your ring. Can you do that for me?”

“Alright.” She tried. “I can't, it's...”

The glow flared angrily. The Doctor darted over to her and attempted to pull the ring from her finger himself. At the latest tug, a thin purple ray of light emitted from the portrait. The two points connected in the middle and the Doctor was flung backwards into the mantelpiece, taking a rack of iron fire pokers with him. Mel rushed over to him as the ray enveloped Carol in a purple glow.

“Carol?” Mel called.

The caroller clutched her head, cried out in pain and slumped to the floor. The purple glow faded and the Doctor and Mel ran over to her prone body.

“Is she dead?” asked Mel.

Carol started stirring as the Doctor checked her pulse. “No, not too quickly, Carol.”

“You’re hurt.” She struggled to get to her feet.

“Mel, let's get her over to the chaise longue,” the Doctor ordered.

He winced as the fresh gouge in his shoulder flared up, but they managed to get Carol to rest on the chaise longue. Mel went to get some water from the kitchen. On her return, she noticed a difference in Carol. She had lost her jolly demeanour. She looked weary and upset. There was something else too, a grim and determined glint in her eyes.

“Thank you, Mel. That feels better,” Carol said, taking small sips of water.

“What's going on Carol? Have you been keeping secrets from us?” the Doctor asked.

“Doctor? She's just been zapped by some weird light,” Mel sounded shocked by the Doctor's tone of voice.

“No, Mel, it's alright. You deserve an explanation. You'll have to bear with me, though, I've just had a terrible shock,” Carol stated calmly. “A whole load of images and memories have suddenly appeared in my mind.”

“What do you mean? What is this ring you're wearing?” asked Mel.

“Come on Carol, we need your help to find some answers. Who are you, Carol Singer?” the Doctor asked, turning round to face Carol who was sitting looking completely overwhelmed on the chaise longue.

“Doctor, Mel... I've just discovered that I am not human. I'm Lamotragine,” Carol replied, sadly.

Mel mouthed the name to the Doctor who gave her a knowing look.

“You need to follow me, I'll explain,” Carol got up and headed for the other door to the room. “My mind is still a bit woolly.”

“Where are you going?” asked Mel.

“To get some answers,” Carol said briskly, without looking back.

“Do we follow her?” asked Mel.

“We'd better, if we want to get to the bottom of this,” said the Doctor.

They followed Carol into a grand hallway and up the stairs to a landing with an ornate balcony. From the landing, Carol, without hesitation, went

to the last door at the end of the corridor. Following her into the room, the Doctor and Mel found themselves in a child's bedroom. Toys were scattered over the floor, including a half-built Meccano tower.

“Metal Meccano!” the Doctor remarked beaming. “I helped Frank with the prototype.”

“Is it possible that you stayed in this house when you were a girl?” asked Mel.

“This was my bedroom,” Carol sat wearily on the single bed. “My first memory until today was a door closing. That image haunted my dreams as a child. Why was I trapped in a small room with a metal door?”

“Were you a prisoner?”

She shrugged. “I've still got more questions than answers.”

“I'm wondering if you're telepathic, Carol. I have some ability myself. I might be able to help you make sense of these new memories. Would that be helpful to you?” the Doctor asked, tentatively.

Carol nodded. “I trust you, Doctor. You put your life before my own, but be careful. My people were indeed powerful telepaths.”

“Were?” Mel asked.

“I believe I am the last member of the Lamotragine race. My people were hunted down and massacred. I don't know why yet, but I know... I am alone.” She started crying. Mel passed her a hankie which Carol took and dabbed at her eyes.

“Shall we go back to the TARDIS? Have a bite to eat. You've had a lot to take in,” the Doctor said.

“No, Doctor I need to sort this out. Do what you need to do. Help me solve this mystery,” Carol replied firmly. The Doctor placed his hands carefully on either side of her temples.

“Ready, Carol?” the Doctor asked.

Carol nodded.

“Contact!”

The Doctor wasn't ready for the barrage of images and information that assailed his mind. He nearly broke contact but managed to slow down the

flood of information he was receiving. He started experiencing events as if he were Carol.

There is the sound of laser rifle fire in the distance. Screams and shouts. Carol's parents take her hand and hold it tight as they run up the stairs. Once in Carol's bedroom, her parents shut the bedroom door.

"We can't wipe her memory!" her mother says.

"We must, Alroc. It's the only way she has any chance of escape. If she doesn't know who she is, neither will the Teroxat. Quick, give her your ring," her anxious father replies.

Carol's mother puts a ring on Carol's finger, it changes size to fit her finger perfectly. Standing either side of her they each put a hand on her head.

"We're so sorry. We love you, Coral. This ring will help you find the answers, but for now you need to forget. You must forget all you know. Forget who you are. We must hide you from our enemies." They are speaking in unison.

Behind a mirror is a control panel. Coral's father enters the code and the wall slides to one side. They guide Coral into the room revealed by the sliding wall. Alroc places a small cardboard box in the room.

Coral's eyelids start to droop. She's not sure, but she thinks she can hear them say one final time: "We love you."

The door slides shut. Her eyes drop and rise, it only takes a moment. In the cold, dark and alone, she runs to the door.

"Let me out! Let me out! Please!" Screams of terror. A dim light switches on illuminating the room in a pale glow.

She closed her eyes for a moment. Just a moment. They have to still be out there. Mother and father are alive. She knows they're alive, she's sure they're...

The door is like ice beneath her arms. "Oh, no... Don't let me forget, don't..."

They're dead.

She sinks to the ground.

They're all... dead.

"Please..."

They're... who...?

Sobbing.

The Doctor broke contact with Carol.

“Are you alright, Doctor?” Mel asked, surprised to see tears falling down the Doctor's sombre face.

“Do you want to borrow the hankie?” Carol asked with a weary smile.

“No, thank you, Carol. Your parents faced an unenviable choice. Keep you with them and face almost certain death or hide you so well that even you didn't know your true identity. They erased seven or eight years of your childhood,” the Doctor said wiping his face with his own green-and-white spotted handkerchief.

“Did you ever get any flashbacks, any hints of who you really were?” asked Mel.

“No, just the memory of a closing door. I found a food box, ate, cried and wondered why I couldn't remember anything about myself.”

Any further discussion was halted by an odd noise outside the room. A door not swung open, but slammed, followed by heavy footsteps. The three tried to hide but only Mel, ushered by the Doctor, managed to duck into a wardrobe before the door opened.

A soldier entered. “Don't move!” His tone was that of someone used to instant obedience. He was a tall, muscular figure in black combat uniform. He could have been any human soldier except for his face. It was red, an angry red with striking blue eyes set within it. “Now, put your hands on your head. Both of you. Now!”

The Doctor and Carol complied.

“Wesson!” he barked into a communicator just below his shoulder. “Get here. I've found the survivor and another unknown male. Help me get them to Grock.”

“*On my way, Kalash,*” a tinny voice answered.

The owner of the voice, Wesson, was soon at the door to the bedroom.

“Right, you lot, follow me,” Wesson told them. “Any tricks and Kalash here will shoot you.”

“Just the once, I hope,” the Doctor shrugged.

“Move, funny man,” he snarled.

“Are these soldiers your enemy?” the Doctor asked Carol, quietly.

Carol's face was like stone. She simply nodded. They followed Wesson downstairs to the grand entrance hall again. This time they went into a large reception room where a unit of twenty or so soldiers were waiting.

Mel waited for a long time until she was sure it was safe. She crept out of the wardrobe ready to go and find the others when she stopped and stared.

The bedroom wall moved outwards to the left, revealing a small room inside. There was a half-eaten sandwich, an apple core and a small Thermos flask on the floor. Curled up in the corner of the room was a young girl.

Seated in an ornate armchair, Commander Grock was waiting impatiently for his latest prisoners. Even seated, he was an imposing figure, ice blue eyes glared around the room. He tolerated no insubordination from his troops. He wore a scarlet tunic instead of the black tunic worn by the other soldiers.

His crimson face scowled as he rose and greeted his new prisoners. “So, Princess Coral, we've finally caught you. Though it seems that many years have passed for you stuck on this primitive planet. For me, it is merely a few hours ago since I gave the order to vaporise your pathetic race from existence,” his booming voice had a sarcastic edge to it.

“Pathos. As in, that which inspires pity,” said the Doctor. “You, old chap, seem to fit the bill a lot sounder than this lady here.”

“Who is your colourful friend, Coral? He must have brought you here in that blue capsule. Are you a clown?”

“I'd rather be a clown than a killer,” the Doctor replied angrily.

Ignoring the Doctor, the leader addressed Coral again, “You're very quiet, Princess. You know what I want. The Crystal of Lamot where is it? Don't say you don't know.”

“Maybe, she doesn't know,” said the Doctor.

The commander laughed: “I don't know what lies she's been telling you but the Lamotragine were a hivemind. They had no secrets from each other. You're familiar with psionocrystallography?”

“I’m familiar, yes.” The Doctor had encountered similar such artefacts in the past. His old signet ring for one. Elsewhere, perhaps most memorably, in the Vortex Crystals of Rdzu’phrul in Tibet.

“The Lamot Crystal was a powerful amplifier of the mind. You understand? With that Crystal, you can control a whole planet. No one will question Teroxat rule. Surrender the Crystal, Coral, and I will let you and your friends leave.”

“It is not a weapon, Grock,” Coral refuted. “The Crystal was made to heal the minds of our sick and to amplify our natural telepathic abilities. You Teroxat, you destroyed our world and pursued our escape ships to gain the means to enslave others.”

“Hello,” Mel said softly to the girl.

The girl was clearly the younger version of Carol. She had the same tight black curly hair and round face. She looked exactly like her portrait except her eyes were red from crying and her face pale and tear-stained.

The girl looked confused, “Who am I?”

“You’re Carol and you’re in danger. We have to get out of this house,” Mel told her as calmly as she could.

Any normal child would have questioned the words of a complete stranger but the telepathic memory wipe had left the child as a blank canvas. Mel held out her hand, “Come on Carol, let’s go somewhere safer.”

The pair left the bedroom and crept along the landing listening out for any sound of danger. No one was around. They passed the top of the main staircase. Mel suspected there might be a back staircase for servants. They made their way along another oak-panelled hallway. At the end of the hallway was a wooden door. Opening the door revealed a steep wooden staircase.

Mel released Carol’s hand so she could grip the thin wooden rail that ran downwards.

Servants in this house would be pretty fit walking up and down these stairs all day, thought Mel.

The stairs eventually reached the ground floor. Mel and Carol were now in the scullery. A door was ajar that led outside. They were about to head straight for it when a voice from the kitchen froze them to the spot.

Mel resisted the impulse to shush the younger Carol. Even that level of noise might give them away.

“Come on, Coltac,” a deep voice grumbled. “there's no food worth eating here. Grock wants to leave as soon as he's got the Crystal. Leave it for the underlings, they'll be along soon.”

There was the sound of heavy footsteps leaving the kitchen. Mel let out a sigh of relief. Hand back in hand, they crept to the outer door to freedom. The cold hit them immediately. As did the wide expanse of the estate.

“There's no cover between here and the gate,” assessed Mel.

“What do we do?” Carol asked nervously.

Mel looked behind them. The guards would be back any minute.

She squeezed her hand. “We'll go for a jog, okay? A bit of aerobic exercise.”

Once outside, they walked briskly down the driveway towards the main street. No cars, no sign of any people. Instinct told her it couldn't be too long from midnight. Suddenly, there was a shout from behind them. A soldier making his way back to the house had spotted them. Mel heard the whipcrack of a laser gun snap over their heads. She threw herself on top of the young girl, both hitting the ground.

“Carol, I need you to be brave, okay?”

“I... I don't...” Another bolt struck the gate, melting the iron with an angry hiss.

“I need you to be brave, for me. I need you to run. Don't look back. Just run and get away from here! Run, *run!*”

Mel's urgent voice triggered an instinctive response from Carol. She sprinted out from underneath her, down the driveway into the main road and away from sight. As Mel scrambled to her feet, leaf litter clinging to her arms, she was grabbed roughly from behind. She struggled to free herself from the soldier's grasp.

“No, you don't!” he growled. “Who was that child with you?”

“Just my brother from the village, scrumping for apples,” Mel lied. “I told him to go home, he listened to me for once. Who are you?”

The soldier seemed to believe her deception. Mel was surprised by his surprised by his scarlet face and bright blue eyes. “Come with me, Grock will want to talk to you.”

He led the reluctant Mel through the kitchen to the reception room. She could hear the Doctor's voice, carrying like a filibuster in an auditorium. She broke free from the soldier and joined her friends.

“Mel...” Coral sounded relieved.

“Just let us go, Grock,” the Doctor persisted. “Carol, I mean Coral's memory has been affected by a telepathic mind wipe. If she doesn't remember then she's of no benefit or harm to you—”

He stopped speaking. Like everyone else in the room, the Doctor, Mel and Grock and his men were bathed in a purple light emitting from Coral's ring.

Mel blinked as an image swam into view, she could feel a name, Lorca, pressing at the edges of her memory.

It is the same reception room with one important difference. A group of thirty unarmed people are facing down the weapons of Grock and his men.

“I am getting tired of this charade, King Lorca,” says Grock. “Give me the Crystal and I will leave you to your pathetic lives on the Earth.”

“You won't let us escape even if we do give up the Crystal,” Lorca replies wearily. “We thought we had found a safe haven here on Earth, but you Teroxat are relentless.”

“Grock...” a lady tries desperately to reason with Grock. (The Doctor recognised her as Coral's mother, Alroc.) “The Crystal of Lamot can only be used by our people. It was grown and programmed to respond only to the genetic code of the Lamotragine.”

“You're lying, Queen Alroc. Give me the Crystal or the consequences will be fatal.”

“We will not give you the Crystal,” the Lamotragine remnant speak in unison, their voices resonating around the room. “Neither will we use the Crystal's power to destroy your minds. It is not the Lamotragine way. Our race exists only to help those who need

it. If you wish to destroy such a positive influence on the universe, we shall not prevent your cowardly act."

"Right, you've just agreed to our own deaths," snaps Grock.

"No. We do not agree with your actions. We just choose not to assist you in the further torture of innocents."

"Kill the King and Queen last." Grock commands. The soldiers take aim and fire. The Lamotragine survivors disintegrate before they hit the floor, like snowflakes in the spring dawn, leaving no trace. Grock signals his army to transmat back to their transporter. The soldiers disappear leaving the room empty.

The image of the room faded from everyone's eyes to be replaced by the same room, complete with the same soldiers who carried out Grock's deadly wishes. The same two dozen murderers.

"You, spineless recreants!" the Doctor shouted. "Grock! You're like an overgrown toddler, throwing a tantrum and destroying things around you when you don't get your own way!"

"Why didn't your people defend themselves?" Mel asked Carol.

Coral did not answer. Instead she fixed Grock and his men with a vicious stare. The purple light bathed them once again. The result was instant. They fell to the floor clawing at their faces. Grock tried firing his weapon, blasting a hole in one of the ceiling supports. Mel took the opportunity to snatch it from his hand and turn the weapon against its owner.

"How does it feel to fear for your life, Grock!" Coral asked venomously.

"Coral..." said the Doctor. "Coral, you can stop now."

Her face twisted into a cruel smile. "No..."

"What are you doing?" Mel asked, suddenly afraid.

"They are currently experiencing their own worst fears."

"Where are my men...?" Grock mewled. "Where... Don't send me to the dark... No, no! Not the dark, I promise I didn't lie! I—"

"Carol—"

The Princess cut Mel off. "I am not Carol, she was a fiction created by my mother's ring. I am Princess Coral, the Lamotragine Avenger."

Turning to Grock, in a chilling whisper, she asked, “How about I put your mind in a permanent loop of your worst fears. Round and round. Fear, terror and unimaginable horrors until your weak mind snaps to escape the nightmare.”

“Not the dark... Not the dark...” he whimpered.

The Doctor looked appalled. “This is not what your people believed in Coral.”

“Where did their noble beliefs get them, Doctor?” Coral hissed.

“If you kill them. You become like them. A destroyer,” he said levelly.

“Your people's wonderful legacy would be wrecked forever by your actions today,” begged Mel.

Coral's focus was solely on Grock and his men writhing on the floor in agony.

“I may not know where the Crystal of Lamot is, but the Crystal knows where I am.” She addressed Grock and his men like a teacher admonishing an errant child. “Gradually, it has been restoring the knowledge and memories of my people. I am now the keeper of the Lamot Crystal and can use its power however I choose.”

“What will you do, Coral? Be like Grock,” he pointed at the prone commander, “a vicious killer who's destroyed countless lives or like your parents, brave and merciful, who sacrificed their own so others may live?”

“Coral, you have the power to make everyone in this room kneel before you. Please, think carefully. Use your new powers wisely,” added Mel.

“Not the dark...” whispered Grock.

Coral closed her eyes and the purple light faded. She inhaled the stale air of the reception room and considered her surroundings. For the first time in perhaps her entire existence. “I will never be like Grock,” she addressed him. “I had you at my mercy Grock, and I chose to spare you. What are going to do with the gift of life I have returned to you?”

Grock got shakily to his feet, face impassive, his response was sarcastic. “You are as weak and foolish as your precious parents, Princess Coral,” he bowed mockingly. “There's only one language all races understand. Brute

force, strike first or be wiped out. Wardog eat wardog. You can believe what you like.”

“That sort of barren philosophy puts you on par with the Daleks,” muttered the Doctor.

“What was that, clown? Am I too evil for your cowardly compassion to cope with?”

“Hardly.”

Grock laughed, pressing a button on his communicator. “We’re leaving. Beam up the men. I shall follow on shortly.”

Grock’s men, still recovering from the powerful effects of the Crystal, disappeared from view.

“You show great control and restraint, Princess Coral. I have no doubt that I, in your position, would have taken great pleasure in exacting an excruciating revenge on the exterminators of my race,” Grock said with a cruel smile.

“Go on, Grock, scurry back to your battleship,” the Doctor told the Teroxat commander.

“Sorry? Did the clown squeak?” mocked Grock.

“I am a Time Lord, Grock. I will be informing my people of your temporal interference and your genocidal act,” responded the Doctor. “They will deal with you.”

“Oh, I’m shaking in my boots, Time Lord. Never did a race squander their power by doing so little.” He turned to the princess. “Coral, there will be no survivors. My power is hidden from view too. Wesson, start the countdown after I beam up.”

Mel fired the gun, but it was too late, the beam passed straight through Grock as he disappeared.

“Countdown to what?” asked Coral.

“I’ve a feeling I know... *Look out!*” The ceiling support that Grock had struck earlier came loose. The Doctor knocked the princess out of the way as it slammed against the carpet. However, instead being bathed in wood pulp and sawdust, a cloud of crystalline dust shot out like a thundercloud.

“Of course... The Crystal’s not in the house, it *is* the house. It’s in the architectural skeleton.”

“The whole roof’s coming down!” shouted Mel.

“That’ll be the least of our worries soon! Everyone, run!” the Doctor ordered. “Back to the TARDIS!”

Mel ran after the Doctor, who was leading the way.

Coral, however, disappeared into another room.

Arriving back at the TARDIS, the Doctor and Mel tumbled inside. The Doctor slammed the door release before he realised that their party was one short.

The doors swung open once more. “Where’s Coral?”

Coral ran into the console room, out of breath, but looking triumphant. In her hand, was one of her portraits.

“Coral!” the Doctor admonished.

“Coral? You could have been blown to bits,” Mel said, shaking her head.

She smiled nervously, like a naughty child caught stealing biscuits.

The Doctor set the TARDIS in flight and the blue box disappeared as Grock's bomb ripped through the old house as though it were made of wet gingerbread. The force of the explosion reduced the grounds to ash, the shockwave shattering windows for miles and setting the local police and fire departments on alert status for the following week.

Unfortunately for the Teroxat, they had miscalculated the yield necessary to destabilise the Crystal of Lamont. They had expected the Crystal to be recoverable from the wreckage. Therefore, Grock had failed in his mission. His superiors would punish him by relieving him of his command.

Grock himself would spend the next week under the Attainted Iris for all to see. Standing, in shame.

Thanks to the fast return switch, the TARDIS returned the travellers to the same street. The trio were soon relaxing in the nurse's cluttered, but ultimately rather cosy flat.

“I’ve just remembered something, Mel,” Coral remarked. “When the door finally opened, somebody helped me escape. A young woman with red hair told me to run and not look back. I ran and ran until my lungs felt like they were bursting. When I couldn’t run any more, I started walking until I met...”

“Harry Singer, I presume,” the Doctor inferred.

She nodded. “Coming home from *Mutiny on the Bounty*.”

“That ring of yours influenced his mind and that of his wife when he brought you home. As far as they were concerned, you were their daughter, Carol. You always had been. You’d celebrated your eighth birthday just before that Christmas, as you had each year before.”

“That explains why I could never remember any Christmases before that first one,” mused Coral.

“So, your new life began in earnest,” added Mel. “That ring must’ve helped you to accept your life and influenced others to help keep you safe.”

“The crystal must have led me to you and the TARDIS,” Coral reasoned. “It interfered with your will, Doctor, and influenced you when you programmed the TARDIS.”

“Ahh... I had a feeling...” the Doctor mused, contented. “So what now, Princess Coral?”

“Just Carol, Doctor. The Crystal of Lamot was destroyed in the explosion. I wish to live out my days quietly, on the planet I call home,” Carol smiled wistfully.

“Would you really have killed Grock and his men?” asked Mel.

“Of course not... I am Lamotragine. We are—we *were* a race of healers, not warriors,” Carol answered. “I just wanted to see if being the victim would change Grock’s attitude. Unfortunately, he will always be a vicious, sadistic killer.”

“In my experience, such rogues usually meet their fate at the hands of someone more ruthless than they are,” the Doctor stated, sipping his tea. “The humiliation of that affair will lead to in-fighting as it always does.”

Even if no one starts it, Grock will likely try himself out of insecurity. He will destroy himself.”

Carol finished putting up the painting made up of the faces of her lost people. “This will remind me of my people. It’s a telepathic portrait. Those portraits in the house changed to show my face because the Lamot Crystal registered my presence and started to retune itself to my genetic code.”

“Carol, do you really want to return to your old life knowing that you don’t really belong here?” asked Mel taking a sandwich.

“I’ve lived here all my life Mel, I do belong here. I enjoy my work as a nurse. I have my friends in the choir...” she paused. “The choir! What time is it?”

The Doctor checked his fob watch. “Six o’clock?”

Later, in the local St. John’s Church Hall, the Doctor and Mel sat enjoying a mixed program of Christmassy music. Between *Frosty the Snowman* and *In the Bleak Midwinter*, they exchanged the gifts they’d left under the console. In the brief quiet leading from *Winter Wonderland* into the joyous *Mary’s Boy Child*, they’d opened them.

Then, just before the next song, there was a long, heavy silence. The Doctor clutched tentatively at his new zebra polka dot cravat. Mel at her red scarf. Both breathless.

From the second row of the choir, a familiar rich alto voice started singing a solo.

“*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht...*”

APPENDIX

Here you can read some of the original synopses and opening excerpts of the entries as submitted to the *Paul Spragg Memorial Short Trip Opportunity*. They provide insight into early story development, prior to revision by authors and editors, with grammatical and spelling mistakes intact.

A FLY IN THE WEB OF TIME (Chris Taylor)

Cast

- The Sixth Doctor
- Amara Kelf, Interstellar Propulsion Engineer

Synopsis

The Doctor has a way of inspiring acts of heroism from those around him. And not just his companions. These acts often come with a cost. This story delves into the life of one such person. A bystander caught up in the Doctor's adventures, whose decision to stand up and act in his name costs them ten years of their life. Ten years of standing still.

The Doctor arrives on Hermes Station, a deep-space engineering facility researching wormhole drive technology. Investigating odd energy signals coming from an experimental engine. Finding the place nearly empty, he comes across someone who blocks his way. She drops heavy-handed clues that he's already been to this place, in her past. And that she's not at all happy to see him again.

The Doctor of course, wants to hear none of it, fearing the consequences of knowing too much about one's own future. Consequences Amara Kelf knows all too well. For in order to play out her part in the adventure the Doctor is yet to have -- actions she saw her future self take -- she's been sabotaging her own career and social life for years in order to be sure of staying at this post. She has an appointment with a big, red button three years hence, and she can't let anything take her off course. She resents being chained to her destiny. She resents him.

"With every word you utter, you are building your own temporal prison," The Doctor warns her. "You are condemning me to condemn *you!*"

"You're damn right I am!" she counters, and unleashes the whole tale. If for no other reason than to finally make someone else share her pain. The pain of certainty. Seven years ago she was a fresh-faced and wide-eyed

rookie, pulled into terror when a future malfunction pulled her through time. Into a station inundated by temporal anomalies, drawing in beings from other times and realities. Some of them nightmare creatures threatening to tear everything and everyone apart even if the temporal tears didn't.

Into the maelstrom came the Doctor. Fighting the monsters. Being charming. Offering solutions. Young Amara listened, over the objections of a cowardly and indecisive station commander. She took it upon herself to enact one of the Doctor's plans, only to find herself on the wrong side of a security field. That was when she saw her future self emerge from hiding from within in the engine room and finish the job. The final memory she relates is the look shared between her past and future selves at the future-self pushed the button. "She looked so... angry." Realizing in that moment that she is exhibiting that anger herself. Maybe even becoming consumed by it. In preserving the future, she is losing herself. "I hate feeling like this, Doctor. What do I do?"

There are no easy answers he can give. He apologizes for the lies he will now be compelled to tell her upon their next meeting. Asks her to look past her future actions to the effect they will have. The lives she will save. And points out, from one time traveler to another, he really does understand what she's going through. "Though you must walk this path by yourself, you are not alone."

His words restore a measure of peace to Amara. The pair depart on good terms. He for the Tardis, and she decides to return to a crew party. Along the way, the memory of her future self's face begins to change. Now, she was -- she will be -- smiling.

Excerpt

Excerpt from the beginning of the story. Amara is composing a letter to someone she met at a party, one she can never deliver. Musing over yet another opportunity they have let pass them by, when she hears the TARDIS materializing.

“I saw you adjusting your hair in a toaster’s reflection before the party started. It was so cute, I couldn’t help but talk to you. I figured we’d get a drink, and see where things would go. Maybe we’d fall in love and get married. It would be fabulous. Until I got pregnant. Children change everything. We’d have to transfer to another station, maybe even a posting on Earth. No babies or kids around experimental technology, and all that. Lawsuit waiting to happen.” A wry laugh escaped her throat. “That’s why I disappeared on you, when you went to get us more punch. Because I might want to see where things might go between you and I. Only, you see, Craig, I have an appointment with a big, red button. And I can’t let anything, or anyone, stop me from keeping it. Especially my own loneliness. Yours in obscurity, Amara Kelf.”

She would never send the letter, of course. Or even write it down. She couldn't leave any clues that might have someone in Personnel deciding she wasn't mentally fit for service. They might transfer her. She'd miss her appointment. She would have stood there at the observation gallery wall, staring into space and feeling sorry for herself, a good while longer. Were it not for the sound that shattered her reverie. A scratchy, mechanical gasp. Which while barely noticeable at first grew louder and unmistakable. It was sound she'd been awaiting and despising for years.

“He’s early! What the hell?” She tore out of the gallery and scoured the corridors for any sign of that awful blue box. Muttering to herself all the while. “Why *him*? Why *here*? Why *now*?”

“Hello there! I say Heeeelloo!” His voice caught her like a punch in the gut. It was him alright. All curls and crazy clothes. He was wearing a silly grin and waving around a mad collection of spare parts with some lights attached. “You know, yours is the first face I’ve seen here? Odd to find such a capacious facility as this so bereft of occupants.” His voice lowered. “I dare say suspicious.”

“Everyone’s at the Christmas party,” she said coldly.

“Splendid!” he grinned. “I shan’t be a tick.” Walking right on by her he explained, “My ship picked up some rather squirrely energy readings from this location.

She leaned into the cold white wall, oddly tired. “So this is how it starts? All this time waiting, and I never knew it would be now.”

“All this time?” The Doctor repeated, his eyes narrowing as he turned back to her. They widened with realization. “No! No, don’t tell me!” He started backpedaling. “I’ll come back later. Or perhaps sooner.”

A flick of her wrist brought an emergency bulkhead slamming down, cutting off his retreat. “Why miss all the fun? Don’t you want to see what happens when the ‘squirrels’ get loose? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

The Doctor slipped his hands authoritatively into his mismatched lapels. “I’d introduce myself, but you already know my name. Don’t you? And I can only imagine that in our previous meeting, I expect I warned you about the consequences of revealing future knowledge of whatever this event is. Or, rather, will be.”

Rage prickled through Amara’s every cell. “You’re from *before* the inversion? Is *that* what you’re telling me? And now that you’re here you want to skip over to the end bit? *I* have to live this whole horrid thing out! Why shouldn’t *you*?”

THE CRIMSON LION (Tim Bradley)

Synopsis

'The Crimson Lion' is a short trip featuring the Fifth Doctor; Nyssa and Tegan. It is set between the TV stories *'Arc of Infinity'* and *'Snakedance'*, and after the Big Finish audio *'The Peterloo Massacre'*. It is to be a Nyssa-centric story and occurs at Longleat Safari Park in 2015.

The Doctor takes Nyssa and Tegan to enjoy Longleat Safari Park. Whilst in the park, tourists are attacked by the animals there. The trio soon discover that the animals are being telepathically controlled by an alien crimson-coloured lion at Longleat. The Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan must stop the spread of terror caused by this crimson lion.

The crimson lion is called Leos. He comes from the jungles of Zofaso on the planet Savar. All the lions of Zofaso are crimson-coloured and telepathic. They can share each other's thoughts within a pride of lions; control the minds of their prey during a hunt and travel through space from planet to planet.

Leos was with his family pride of lions, travelling the stars, back to Savar. During a meteorite storm, Leos accidentally got separated from his family and ended up on Earth in Longleat. Now Leos wants to re-establish the connection with his family pride while he's lost on Earth.

Leos is young and reckless. On the outside, he's terrifyingly fierce. But on the inside, he's very scared and insecure being on the planet Earth. Leos telepathically links with the wild animals at Longleat Safari Park in order to defend himself against the humans.

Leos tries to send a telepathic signal to his family to call them back and rescue him from Earth. But his telepathic abilities aren't strong enough to contact his family back home.

Due to her latent psychic abilities, Nyssa is the first person to hear Leos' thoughts and to feel his fears while at Longleat. She goes in search of the crimson lion without the Doctor and Tegan knowing. She finds him and tries to help him through his fears and worries.

Telepathically, Nyssa can hear Leos' voice when he talks to her. Leos isn't willing to listen to Nyssa and he won't stop his link with the animals at Longleat attacking tourists. Throughout the story, Nyssa tries to reason with Leos and to help him return home.

The Doctor can also hear Leos' voice via telepathy since he is a Time Lord just as Nyssa is a Trakenite. Unfortunately, humans like Tegan can't hear Leos' voice as humans aren't naturally geared for telepathy. Humans can only hear roars and snarls from Leos' mouth which causes easily provoked reactions.

Eventually, Nyssa and the Doctor help Leos to enhance his telepathic signal with his family on Savar via connecting him to the TARDIS. His family hear Leos' call and they come back to take him home from Earth. Longleat Safari Park is safe again once Leos returns home with his family and the Doctor; Nyssa and Tegan are able to enjoy the rest of their time at the park.

Excerpt

Nyssa didn't know what to make of it.

There were animals of every type wherever she, the Doctor and Tegan went. Both Nyssa and Tegan saw an elephant that they really liked. They saw giraffes, zebras, monkeys. The monkeys were always mischievous! They kept ruining the bonnet of any jeep they were jumping on!

It was the Doctor's idea of taking a daytrip to reward his two friends after the adventures they'd been having. The Doctor decided to take Nyssa and Tegan to Longleat Safari Park. On a gloriously sunny day, they all agreed to go on a tour around the safari park in a jeep.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Tegan?" the Doctor asked, anticipating criticism in any reply she gave.

But surprisingly, Tegan beamed appreciatively. "Too right I am," she replied. "I haven't had this much fun since I was a kid!"

"Well, that's good to hear," the Doctor cheered with surprise. "What about you, Nyssa?" he asked her. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Nyssa wasn't sure how to formulate her response. She then nodded and said, "It's err...very enlightening."

Tegan was appalled at Nyssa's lack of enthusiasm. "Nyssa!" she cried. "This is one of the best safari parks ever in Britain! It has every type of animal from zebras to long necked giraffes. It matches the equivalent of Africa. And all you can say is... 'it's very enlightening'?"

"Well it is," Nyssa replied. "I've never seen so many animals in one place. The animal life on Traken was nothing compared with what I've seen here today."

"You had wild animals on Traken?" Tegan said, surprised.

"Not exactly 'wild', Tegan," Nyssa told her. "The animals on Traken were much tamer and gentler compared with what I've seen here today." She then smiled knowingly. "Mind you, I've seen plenty of wild animals in my time travelling with the Doctor! It's a shame they can't all be situated in one place...like this safari park!"

The Doctor grinned. "I should take you to see Africa, Nyssa," he said. "You'd love it there! They've got safaris and game reserves teeming with animals!"

"Oh stuff that, Doctor," Tegan retorted. "The safari parks where I come from back in Australia are far better compared with these ones in Africa and the UK. They've got wallabies, koala bears and kangaroos."

"Yes Tegan," the Doctor sighed. "I've no doubt they have."

Suddenly, there was a loud scream! The scream startled the Doctor; Nyssa and Tegan.

"Cripes, where did that come from?" Tegan demanded.

"There," Nyssa pointed ahead. "It came from that jeep ahead of us! Look!"

They all looked to see. The Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan were horrified at what they saw, including the driver of their jeep.

"Yes," the Doctor declared, taking a deep breath. "That jeep and the people inside are being attacked...by a wolf!"

It was true! A grey-furred wolf was viciously attacking the exterior of a safari jeep with a father, mother and son inside. What's worse, the vicious wolf was managing to break in!!

THE PHOENIX (AFJ Kernow)

Synopsis

The Doctor is forced to talk to Margaret, who is none too pleased with the police's lack of response. The council too are unable to remove the unsightly shed from her National Garden Scheme garden.

Margaret asks the Doctor why he is really here. He tells her has no idea. Their conversation is cut short by a frantic man running towards their position in Margaret's conservatory. Margaret is repelled by the man who is a traveller and the Doctor has to rebuke her middle class prejudice.

The man tells them about a strange object in the local woods that, "got into me head...". He collapses with the shock. An ambulance is called and the pair are left wondering what to do. The Doctor informs Margaret to stay put while he goes to investigate. She says she will go with him as she wants to keep an eye on him.

They walk together down to the woods while having a lively discussion. In a clearing they find a large egg-shaped pod. Touching it their heads are filled with a voice that has an deep organ-like sound. The voice is disdainful, it bombards them with questions and threatens them with death if they do not cooperate.

The Doctor helps Margaret escape the influence of the pod. They run back to the house. The Doctor tries to phone UNIT but the phone lines, mobile and andline are not working. Reluctantly, the Doctor takes Margaret into the TARDIS to consult the TARDIS data bank. The TARDIS identifies the object as a Phoenix pod, which are virtually indestructible.

The Doctor has no choice but to try and reason with the ethereal voice of the pod. Traipsing back into the woods there is a strange, smoky smell. Once back in the clearing they see the pod has opened to reveal an eerie and terrifying bird-like lifeform.

The Doctor addresses the lifeform and tells it it must leave this inhabited world. The bird refuses. It starts the countdown to release the podlets that will populate the Earth with the Phoenix.

The Doctor tries to reason with the bird. It sends out a blast of electricity. Margaret moves instinctively to protect the Doctor. The Doctor is appalled, Margaret is still alive but out cold. The Doctor angrily tells the bird he will help it leave the planet and take it to an uninhabited world.

The bird agrees, stops the countdown and enables the Doctor to phone an ambulance. The pod camouflages itself. The ambulance men take Margaret away. The pod hovers to the TARDIS. The TARDIS finds a uninhabited planet. The Doctor, watches the pod fire its podlets throughout the planet.

The Doctor uses the fast return switch to go back to Margaret's house and gets the bus to the hospital! He says goodbye to Margaret, tells her she is a brave woman and that her family will arrive shortly. Soon after the Doctor leaves the room, her eyes flutter open,

“ Doctor?...”

Extract

“Margaret?” I nervously entered the side ward. A middle-aged women lay peacefully in bed.

Only the constant beeping of monitors disturbed the stillness. I sat in the armchair.

“Oh, Margaret, what a mess.” I looked at her round face framed with greying black hair.

Below her shrew-like nose, her small mouth, that usually fired barbs at me in strident tones, was silent. Her doctors had told me that me that she was in a coma following the accident. They had suggested a familiar voice might help bring her back from the arms of Morpheus.

Protesting that a family member would work better; I discovered that her husband was away on business, while her children lived abroad.

“Margaret, it seems I'm your best hope for recovery,” I informed her.

THE SPACE (James D. Cooke)

Cast

- The Eighth Doctor
- Mech

Synopsis

There are few occasions where the Doctor has found himself travelling alone. These are normally after his most trusted friends and companions have been forced to leave his side, due to death or the need to leave for a calmer life. This is where we find the Doctor at the beginning of this story, having been traversing the universe by himself for the past few months. Looking for adventure and companionship.

The Doctor finds himself landing on Viewpoint Station, a scientific outpost orbiting the second planet of the Amargossa Star System. The station seems abandoned and silent when the Doctor exits the Tardis. He turns back into the Tardis to shout to someone before he remembers no one is with him. His curiosity peeked, The Doctor decides to have a look around and see what's up.

After wondering down a couple of empty, dimly lit corridors, The Doctor comes across a single door from which is emanating loud music. Its music The Doctor has heard before on Earth. Passing through the door, The Doctor finds himself in a lab, with another open door at the far end, from which the music is coming. He spots a brown leather jacket, slightly battered, which he immediately recognises. The coats owner Mech, an old friend of The Doctor's from back on Gallifrey, enters the lab through the open door and upon seeing him, rushes over to embrace him.

As the two friends catch up, Mech shows The Doctor round his lab. Showing him all the little projects he has going on before, leading him into the larger back room, past his Tardis in the corner. The far side of the room is just one window with a console in front of it. Mech explains the

Rift which brought him here, which when opens allows people to see different times and realities. After a few moments the rift opens, filling the room with light and bringing the console to life as it soaks up information. Also it gives The Doctor glimpses of where he's been and possibly where he is to go, since it his first time watching the Rift in action.

As the Rift fades away and the effects subside, The Doctor asks why the Station is empty, which surprises Mech as he says it should be bustling with activity rather than empty. They both head into Mech's Tardis to scan the Station and find where everyone is. They discover that another experiment is running on the other side of the Station, which has transferred everyone, except The Doctor and Mech who were off the Station at the time, into another plain. The only hope of bringing them back is to shut it off.

The two Time Lords rush through the corridors, having to run all the way through The Doctor's Tardis and out the back door in the process, as he'd parked it in the middle of a cross section, to the centre of the troubles. After a bit of work, they manage to gradually restore everyone. After going back through the Tardis in the opposite direction, The Doctor decides it's time to leave. The two friends embrace again.

“So where you gonna go, Sigma?”

“I think it's time I went to Stockbridge, catch up with another friend.”

Excerpt

This excerpt takes place in the first third of the story, as The Doctor takes a look around the seemingly abandoned Science Station and comes across loud music emanating from a doorway.

The corridor creaked with ever step the Doctor took, the lights pulsing above him. He didn't mind these abandoned stations and compounds, it was just he didn't like them as much when he was by himself. “Oh Fitz, you're jokes would come in very handy about now”

As he rounded a corner, he could make out music coming from the door at the end. Drawn to the door, he could make out the music clearer but

couldn't remember who the band was. Taking the plunge, he opened the door and stepped inside.

What he saw was a brightly lit lab, filled with computers, schematics and scribbles on scraps of paper and an open door at the other end, from which the music is coming. "Hello" The Doctor called out, "I don't mean to intrude, but the music is pretty loud".

He waited a few moments, then stepped further inside, with the door shutting behind him. He scanned the lab, before his eyes caught what looked like read outs on the other side. As he rounded a table, he stopped in his tracks, spying a coat sitting on the back of one of the chairs. It was a coat The Doctor recognised. A three quarter length brown leather jacket, slightly battered, but otherwise in great condition. The Doctor lets out a laugh "Well, well". He looks up as he hears the music turns off and a voice booms out as a figure walks through the door.

"Gold is for the Mistress, Silver for the Maid. Copper for the Craftsman, cunning at his trade. Good said the Baron, sitting in his hall.

"But Iron, Cold Iron is the Master of them all" The Doctor replies smiling.

The figure looks up properly, seeing the Doctor and bursts out into a huge smile. "In the name of The Other, Sigma it's you" He booms, rushing towards The Doctor with his arms out wide.

"Mech" The Doctor responds, reciprocating. Embracing his old friend. "How have you been you old tinkerer and where's Kayleigh?"

"Oh she's fine, I dropped her off on Earth so she could visit her Olds and me well, I've been letting my mind come up with all sorts of crazy things as usual"

"Well that is great to hear, although you could think of a way to have the volume go down when someone comes in."

Mech lets out a laugh "Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I'll add it to the list. Kayleigh has got me on a Marillion fix at the moment. Which is kind of ironic considering her name" He lets out another booming laugh. "Come on let me show you what I'm working on. Oh and stop looking at my Jacket, it won't suit you."

NEGATIVE HELP (Andrew Hsieh)

WORKING TITLE: "OUT OF THE BLUE"

Synopsis

Andrew Hall meets with his true friend Tom Hillary on the spiral hill of Northala Fields. This helps him open up for the first time, after recovering from the loss of his father Alastair. With Tom being the only one he can trust with his personal life, Andrew recounts flashback memories of his stress levels, as well as, later on, being saved by a man who understands the human mind with the kindest empathy and sympathy; whom he calls, "the Doctor".

Four months earlier, Alastair was diagnosed with lymphoma. Fearing that he may not cope well with his father's ill health, Andrew drops his A-levels and immediately withdraws from social life and begins to have depressive episodes with repetitive suicidal thoughts. After two weeks of ongoing stress, he is recommended medication (taking risperidone) and therapy sessions with Dr Martin Gibbs, a psychologist who runs a private clinic in Hanwell. Dr Gibbs formally diagnoses Andrew with Asperger's syndrome and clinical depression, before mysteriously going "on leave" and being replaced by Dr Mary-Annette Stupin who turns out to be more callous-minded and patronising. He struggles to cope with the sudden change.

The Doctor appears outside the clinic and bumps into Andrew who is feeling anxious about going in for his next appointment. They both share their own experiences of coping with stress and loneliness, just as the TARDIS discovers that Andrew has made physical contact with an alien being. He has not been infected, he has been *inflicted* with troubled thoughts that cause him to struggle with containing his anger and anticipatory anxieties.

During Andrew's session, the Doctor, undercover as a trainee psychologist named "Brad Lyman", carefully observes Stupin. She 'helps' Andrew by asking him intrusive personal questions and concluding with

recommendations that, he knows, are very unhelpful. As soon as she realises that “Lyman” is not who he appears to be, Stupin firmly grasps onto Andrew’s upper arms and identifies herself as an entity called “the Worrier”. She feeds him all sorts of anxieties and traumatising visions of pain and suffering into his mind. Andrew screams for his medication; the Doctor tosses a risperidone tablet in midair which then lands successfully on Andrew’s tongue. The tablet dissolves, his tongue is inflamed and the Worrier, reacting to the chemicals, loses her grip of Andrew’s arms before disintegrating into atoms. Andrew, recovering from the Worrier’s attack, suddenly receives a call from his mother at the hospital.

The TARDIS materialises right next to Alastair, resting on his hospital bed, whose health has rapidly deteriorated; he delivers his final words to his wife and son before closing his eyes. Andrew collapses onto the bed in tears, and the Doctor expresses his deepest sympathies before leaving the family to mourn.

Back in the present, Andrew and Tom receive an unexpected visit from the Doctor himself who has parked the TARDIS at the centre of the hill’s peak. As Andrew properly thanks him for saving his life, the Doctor offers to give them both a lift home which they proudly accept.

Excerpt

The story is being told from Andrew’s perspective.

Northala Fields, one of my favourite parks in the borough of Ealing. I ascended along the spiral hill until I came across an empty bench, very near the top. Much to my fortune, this enabled a relatively reasonable view of some of London’s most iconic landmarks, from the Gherkin to the Shard.

Whilst inhaling the fresh air around the perfect clear blue sky, I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder. It wasn't something, it was *someone*. So I looked up. “Andrew!” It was Tom Hillary, my one and only true friend. Same age, dark brown medium curly hair, freckles on his face, close-in-height but a few inches shorter, with a very cute grin. “Tom, my brother! How are

you?” I smiled back. We embraced in a prolonged hug, before unveiling two cans of dandelion and burdock from his rucksack, which he kindly brought along. This was one memorable opportunity to open up.

“So, how have you been coping... since the funeral?” he asked, feeling cautious about his choice of words. “Still missing Dad every single day,” I opened my can and took a sip before I leaned closer towards him. “Which is why I brought you here — to tell you what happened four months ago, regarding my health.”

“Your health?” Tom began playing the air violin and mimicking a slow sad tune — it became rather squeaky to my ears. “No, don’t, don’t do that,” I tried to hide my nervous laughter. “Oh, Andrew, I was only winding you up,” he exclaimed, giving me that very cute grin. “Why would I play the violin to deliberately ridicule what you’re about to tell me?” Then we bursted out laughing before each having another sip of dandelion and burdock. It wasn’t the first time doing this sort of comical act together. “Just like winding up the clock, backwards and forwards, to find the right place and the right time. That’s the thing about the Doctor.”

“*Who?*”

“Exactly.”

I found Tom’s reaction priceless, but thought containing it would be more appropriate for this case. There was so much to tell him about when and how the Doctor came along to save my life. Psychologically *and* literally, from the dangers of depression and death. The Doctor is not just some ordinary psychologist; he is a very empathetic and sympathetic man who understands the human mind, as well as experiencing all forms of loss.

“So this ‘Doctor’, how did he exactly save you?”

I had to elaborate, to help Tom understand the broader context. “My Mum didn’t phone him, nor my local GP; he just came out of the blue, as a matter of fact and perspective. Everything surrounding my Dad’s lymphoma, none of this kept me going — right until the Doctor came much later on during the most stressful situation in my life, when I received ‘negative help’ (some oxymoron I believe to have coined not too long ago).”

THE POPIZ (Tim Bradley)

Synopsis

'*The Popiz*' features the Tenth Doctor and his companion Donna Noble. The setting's on a futuristic space station.

The TARDIS materialises in the shuttle bay of the space station. The Doctor and Donna step outside to find out what's going on. The TARDIS was dragged to the space station by an external force. The Doctor and Donna begin exploring before they come to the mains ops room. The place is deserted until they discover the station crew is reduced to skeletons.

They then hear a pop song blaring out from the sound-speakers. It's a song that irritates the Doctor and Donna. They're soon given information about the song on a computer terminal. It's called '*The Popiz*'. There's no vocal artist attached to it.

Donna asks the Doctor if they can go back to the TARDIS. The Doctor agrees but they find themselves locked in the ops room. They try to send out a distress signal but the communications have been interfered with. The Doctor and Donna sense that '*The Popiz*' is getting louder. They feel they are going mad and start to fall unconscious.

Thankfully, the Doctor and Donna are rescued by a young crewmember named Clara Watson. She gives the Doctor and Donna inhibitors to numb out '*The Popiz*'s effect on them. They recover and thank Clara for saving them. Clara tells them the space station was attacked by '*The Popiz*' when it got into the computer systems. '*The Popiz*' is an alien.

Clara has been trying to escape for weeks but has to counteract '*The Popiz*' first. She needs to obtain three energy units to open the shuttle bay doors and overpower '*The Popiz*' before escaping. She has one energy unit already. She finds another in the main ops room. Clara needs to collect one more from engineering. The Doctor and Donna offer to help.

They reach engineering and find the energy unit that Clara wants. They're attacked by '*The Popiz*' that uses a force-field to trap the Doctor,

Donna and Clara. Just as *The Popizx*' starts to affect them again, Clara uses one of the energy units to weaken it. The Doctor helps with his sonic screwdriver. They all escape to the shuttle bay.

At the shuttle bay, Clara is dismayed that she only has two energy units. This she realises won't be enough to weaken *The Popizx*' when opening the shuttle bay. The Doctor collects something from his TARDIS to help power up the two energy units. After a threat and a warning from *The Popizx*', Clara makes a big sacrifice to give the Doctor and Donna time to escape.

The Doctor and Donna protest but Clara insists. The Doctor and Donna soon leave in the TARDIS. Clara uses the two powered-up energy units to destroy *The Popizx*' with the use of the vacuum of space via the opened shuttle bay doors. The space station explodes as Clara says, "Run you clever boy, and remember..."

The Doctor and Donna wonder who Clara is in the TARDIS...

Excerpt

The TARDIS materialised inside the shuttle bay of a small space station. This wasn't the first time the TARDIS did something like that. The TARDIS landed in many space stations in the past. It was pot-luck that the Doctor got the TARDIS to land inside the shuttle bay itself.

The door opened and Donna Noble stepped out of the TARDIS. She was the latest of the Doctor's companions at this point in his 'tenth' incarnation. The Doctor stepped out in his brown pinstripe suit, wearing a trench-coat and white sneakers.

The two time-travellers looked around at their surroundings. The Doctor was in awe. Donna pouted.

"Aww, smashing!" the Doctor exclaimed with amazement.

The shuttle bay had a huge ceiling above their heads, which was ironic considering they were on a small space station.

Donna looked to the Doctor. "Doctor, what are we doing here?" she demanded to know. "You promised me a trip to see Robbie Williams at

his live concert at the O2 in London, 2012. Now we're on a dumpy space station. Are you sure you passed your TARDIS driving test?"

The Doctor held up his hands in surrender to Donna. "Sorry, Donna," he said apologetically. "I can't help it if the TARDIS gets cranky and has moods of her own. The old girl is getting weary these days. Possibly needs an overhaul and a new makeover. Been meaning to do that for quite some time now..."

"Doctor," Donna interrupted impatiently. "Where are we? What is this place? What year are we in? What century? The 23rd; the 24th?"

"Not sure," the Doctor replied. "The TARDIS has been drawn here by some external force in space. The data systems and chronometers were fluctuating by the time we arrived. They're still fluctuating as we came out here."

"Oh brilliant," Donna said sarcastically and aggrieved.

"But it means that there is some presence aboard this space station," the Doctor continued. "No external force grabs my TARDIS that easily. It must be something deadly. Something dangerous. Something that the laws of time can't define yet."

"You always have to be so macho when saying technical or supernatural things that go way above my head," Donna said, teasingly.

The Doctor ignored the wryness of Donna's remark and asked her, "Do you fancy exploring this station, Donna? Find out what it was that brought us here?"

"Not really," Donna replied testily. "I was so looking forward to seeing Robbie on stage!"

"Oh he'll still be there at the O2 in London 2012 once we've finished here," the Doctor told Donna. "Besides, you know I can't resist solving a mystery as deliciously juicy and peculiar as this one."

With that, the Doctor went on ahead to explore the space station. He left Donna behind standing at the TARDIS, without a word of approval from her for going ahead.

Donna smiled. "I suppose not," she sighed knowingly. With that, she followed after the Doctor. She jogged at a certain pace to keep up with him.

STANDBY FOR DEPARTURES (Andrew Hsieh)

Synopsis

Tegan Jovanka checks in at Heathrow Terminal 3. Unfortunately for her, and everyone else, all flights have been disrupted, due to a heavy snowstorm outside the airport and across the country. She is heading home to Brisbane for Christmas, and has no option but to be put on standby for an uncertain amount of time. But suddenly, a stranger who apparently knows Tegan escorts her out of the queue.

Although he doesn't reveal his name, much to her bewilderment, the stranger introduces himself by uttering an old catchphrase: 'Brave heart, Tegan.'

She immediately realises that he is the Doctor, overwhelmed by his new appearance. The Doctor offers her a lift to Brisbane in the TARDIS, to which she delightfully accepts.

Walking through the departure lounge, not far from the TARDIS's location, Tegan begins to shiver and the Doctor lends his signature scarf for her to keep warm. He also suggests getting herself a hot drink, so she buys a hot chocolate from a nearby coffee shop. But the drink has no effect at all; it doesn't warm her up. In a matter of minutes, the freezing temperatures also begin to affect everyone inside the building. Tegan speculates that it might either be the air conditioning, the heavy snow or — worse — alien activity.

The Doctor scans the entire floor with his sonic screwdriver, until he comes across a snowball-like probe which has dropped through the air vents. He carefully touches it and gets an ice burn on his fingers, quick as a flash, causing his regeneration energy to instantly heal the wounds; this is where Tegan learns he would soon be changing again. The probe opens, revealing a family of four tiny aliens whose body temperatures are as cold as ice. They explain to the Doctor and Tegan that they are the last of their species, after narrowly escaping the destruction of their home planet.

In an attempt to comfort the family, Tegan brings up the subject of her time in London campaigning for Aboriginal rights. The Doctor fears that the entire Earth's atmosphere would collapse if the family chooses to migrate, so he and Tegan take them to an uninhabited ice planet where they can preserve a new generation of their species.

Dropping her off outside a warm and sunny Brisbane, the Doctor and Tegan bid farewell and wish each other a Merry Christmas.

Excerpt

A new day has landed at Heathrow Airport, already waking up to clear the heavy blankets of snow from overnight. Tegan Jovanka carefully wheeled her light suitcase towards the entrance of Terminal 3, trying to avoid the ice patches along the pavement. She was relieved to have arrived as early as possible, despite having to travel such a long distance in these freezing conditions.

No time to observe the annual Christmas decorations, she focused on making her way through the crowds. Many pushed their own trolleys, others carried just small luggage. The dim lighting of the check-in screens was the only thing not to reflect from the quicksilver sheen of the floor. Signs marked in yellow, service terminals in grey, there was a nondescript attitude that gave the terminal's complex a perpetual sense of waiting and exploring.

Luckily for Tegan, the queue turned out to be much shorter than what she had anticipated. 'Next please,' a voice called. She dragged her suitcase along towards a young female check-in assistant, Lavinia, waiting at the counter. 'G'day,' she said, handing her passport. 'Merry Christmas.'

'Same to you, too. Where are you flying today?'

'Brisbane.'

'I can definitely tell by your accent.'

Tegan chuckled. 'Don't mind me. I was an air stewardess, a number of years ago.'

'Oh, were you—' Some alarming news caught Lavinia's attention on her computer screen. 'Terribly sorry to say this, but I've just received

confirmation from my manager that *all* scheduled flights have been delayed, due to a severe weather forecast of heavy snow — over the next few days.’

‘Rabbits, not again,’ exclaimed Tegan, rolling her eyes. ‘Wasn’t that long ago when we had the last snowstorm across England and all over Europe.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Lavinia nodded in agreement, ‘But if you like, we can put you on standby.’ Tegan reluctantly accepted, collecting her passport, ‘Yes, I’d be happy with that...’

‘Miss Tegan Jovanka,’ interrupted a man, very tall and slim. ‘Could I please borrow you for just a second?’ He swiftly flashed a piece of blank white paper at Lavinia and said, ‘John Smith, security.’

‘But what about my boarding pass?’ Tegan snapped, wheeling her suitcase along as she followed the stranger. His thick spiky brown hair with long sideburns, and the dark brown suit with blue pinstripes — such an eccentric appearance for a security official, flabbergasted her. ‘And how do you know my name? Have we met before?’

He stopped and turned around to look at her in the eye, grinning with the utmost sincerity.

‘Brave heart, Tegan.’

THE CAROL SINGER (AFJ Kernow)

Cast

- The Sixth Doctor
- Melanie Bush
- Carol Singer, a nurse with a secret even she doesn't know about.
- Grok, an alien killer.

Synopsis

Carol joins the TARDIS crew. The Doctor suggests they visit Switzerland to hear Silent Night's first performance. On landing, it is clear they are not in Switzerland. They are in an old house.

Even stranger, is the painting of a lady that looks like Carol on the wall.

Exploring further, they find the kitchen with a pot of water on the range. There are sliced vegetables on chopping boards and dishes in warm water in the sink. They move into the library.

Once again there is a picture of Carol. Mel notices that the picture is made up of hundreds of faces like a photomosaic jigsaw. They move on into a drawing room. Another portrait. This painting has an extraordinary effect on Carol. She collapses clutching her head. Mel and the Doctor help her to a chaise longue.

She tells them that she is the last of her kind. A vicious martial race have destroyed her people. She takes them upstairs to a small bedroom. Toys lie on the floor including a half-built meccano tower. Carol shows them the panic room her parents sent her into hidden behind a secret mirror.

Her past was buried. Her true identity hidden from her. The Doctor is able to use his telepathic powers to see Carol's last memories. Her parents had to erase her memory of her first seven years.

No memory of her past. Nothing, but the image of the closing door of the panic room remains to haunt her dreams. As he breaks contact, the Doctor has tears running down his face.

There is a sound from outside the bedroom. The Doctor opens the door. A uniformed soldier raises a weapon and pushes into the bedroom. He motions them at gunpoint out of the bedroom and downstairs to the Great Hall. There is a unit of soldiers waiting.

The alien killers have detected Carol's presence and returned to the house. They want to get hold of a crystal. Carol's people were a hive mind and the crystal was used to heal minds and maintain mental wellness. She tells the soldiers she doesn't know where it is.

The trio stand in front of Grok, the army captain. He gloats that just a while ago, he personally gave the order to vapourise the surviving remnant of Carol's species.

Carol discovers that her parents told Grok that only their race can use the crystal. It was grown to respond to their genetic code alone. In their final moments, her people used the power of the crystal to send their memories to a crystalline databank.

They faced their fate with courageous dignity. Carol chooses not to use the crystal's power to torture and kill the destroyer of her race. Grok tells Carol that he would not have been so merciful. Grok wants no survivors.

He tells them there is a bomb, before teleporting away. The Doctor and crew flee to the safety of the TARDIS. Mel and the Doctor go to hear Carol sing with her gospel choir.

Extract

There was a knock at the TARDIS door. Before the Doctor could stop her Mel opened it. A round faced, middle aged lady was outside. She opened her mouth and launched into a hearty rendition of 'O little town of Bethlehem'.

“Can you stop that, I'm trying to concentrate,” the Doctor called bluntly.

“How about God rest ye merry gentleman?” she countered and started singing in a jolly alto voice.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows at the 'audacity' of the woman.

“Shh! Stop it.” he hissed.

“Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht, Alles schläft; einsam wacht...”

The Doctor stood glaring at the human jukebox before him and waited until she had finished the entire carol, in German.

“Right. That's enough!” the Doctor said emphatically.

The lady's shoulder's drooped as she muttered, “I'm only carol-singing for charity...”

“Sorry.” The Doctor apologised grudgingly. “I am a bit stressed at the moment.”

“What's your name?” asked Mel.

“Carol. Carol Singer,” Carol replied.

“Seriously?” Mel couldn't hide her amusement.

“I know. My Dad was Harold Singer. I was born around Christmas 1955 and I've never married.” she explained.

Carol peered around Mel and noticed the TARDIS interior.” That's some shed you've got there.” she said.

“Shed!” the Doctor exploded.

“Can I have a looksy?” she asked, smiling cheekily. The Doctor melted under the sunny disposition of this infuriating lady and joined Mel at the doorway.

“I'll do better than that Carol Singer. I'll take you on one trip,” the Doctor offered.

“A trip? You mean this shed moves?” Carol scoffed.

“I'm an alien. This is my space/time machine. I am called the Doctor,” the Doctor stated calmly.

Carol blinked at him, a look of puzzlement on her face.

“Right... can your shed, really go anywhere and anywhen?” Carol asked.

“Come on in and find out,” the Doctor managed a wry smile.

“Righteo! Let'sgo!” Carol moved past the Doctor and Mel into the magic shed.

‘The inboxes were full of people who'd put themselves out there, who'd worked hard, who'd put their writing hearts on their writing sleeves and then sent that work to a stranger...’

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DW-AN-03