



DOCTOR WHO

UNBOUND IMAGININGS
VOLUME II

DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

UNBOUND IMAGININGS, VOLUME 2

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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 a mere universe astray, is purely coincidental.

Dedicated to the heroes of the year 2020, Doctors and companions alike.

<https://divergent-wordsmiths.weebly.com/2020/202-unbound-imaginings-2.html>

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FOREWORD

“Unbound Imaginings, Volume 2”

I was a solitary *Doctor Who* fan growing up. I loved it, but I loved it alone. Geek culture was different back then. There was no internet, so your friend group was limited to those people in your immediate vicinity, and in rural New Jersey, pickings were slim. I eventually found friends who shared my interest in anime, fantasy novels and *Dungeons & Dragons*, but *Doctor Who* was a harder sell. “It’s about a British spaceman and his pretty sidekick and sometimes a robot dog. They travel the universe in a phone booth and encounter aliens in cheap-looking rubber costumes. Also, it’s on PBS, so the program will occasionally be interrupted for twenty minutes at a time so they can sell you a tote bag.”

I think it was that isolation that made it so special to me. It felt like a secret that the Doctor himself had shared with me alone. I was the only one who knew about this treasure of almost inestimable value. It made me feel like I was special and what twelve-year-old doesn’t want that?

Time passed and the internet became more a part of public life, but still, I remained a solitary fan. Why? Because, and please excuse me if you were unaware of this particular piece of unpleasantness, people can be kind of mean on the internet. I didn’t want to associate *Doctor Who* with that kind of negativity.

The authors in this collection came together on the Divergent Universe Forums, the unofficial successors that arose from the ashes of the Big Finish Forum. I eventually joined the original Big Finish forums, where I lurked and if I’m not mistaken, made zero posts and answered one poll, incorrectly. (The question at hand was who was the best original Big Finish companion. I answered Hex, but the obviously correct answer is Evelyn.) They closed down about a week after I joined. I found the new big Finish forums a year or two after that, and I’m sorry I waited so long.

I’ve heard the perspective that *Doctor Who* isn’t really a time travel show in the way that *Back to the Future* is a time travel movie. The TARDIS is simply

a mechanism to get the Doctor and the companions to where the story is happening. Now, this is less true in the Moffat era, which did lean into the time travel aspect to a greater extent, but for the majority of the classic series, this was the rule. There's no going back in time to set right what once went wrong because all the interesting bits are fixed points anyway. (Or temporal nexuses, if you like.)

Waiting so long to join is one of the mistakes I would fix. Everyone here in this book is brilliant. They are the kind of fans that every community needs. Welcoming, inclusive, smart, funny, clever, so informed, and above all, infectiously enthusiastic. It's a cliché, but our diversity really is our strength. Nobody likes every aspect of *Doctor Who* equally. The aspect of life on the Big Finish forums that I appreciate the most is the culture, as exemplified by these authors. I love me some Ace and my Sarah Jane and my Romana and Nyssa and Tegan, but when I first arrived, I couldn't tell you a Susan apart from a Vicki. But I learned. Because these people taught me. They said, basically, "Check this out! This is why I love *Doctor Who* and I want to share that with you!" which as Doctor-ish a statement as they come.

Now you may be saying, "Okay Josh, you handsome devil, we know you would love to join these authors for a midnight feast of fish fingers and custard, but can they write?"

Can they ever! If you ascribe to the theory above that the TARDIS is a door to adventure, then think of this collection as your TARDIS. Every story in this collection is filled to the brim with excitement, and adventure, and really wild things! Every *Doctor Who* story is special, but these are stories of the Unbound Doctors, of times and places that never were, even more so than the non-existent times and places usually found in *Doctor Who*. Tales of never-were Doctors, of all the possible permutations the Doctor can exist, and some impossible ones too. You'll travel alongside these Unbound Doctor up and down and to and fro across entirely new universes.

Enjoy! Happy reading and happy exploring!

— Josh Wanisko

INTRODUCTION:

“ASK NICELY”

By Alan Camlann

Frobisher had been trying to bootstrap himself up from the economy tour when the shooting started.

In the grand scheme of things, the whifferdill thought he'd been doing quite well since Cordwairost Delta. He'd resisted all efforts to ‘*See Oskimentis and die!*’, passed up a prog sample cartridge of Immaterial Former's adamantstorms at the pop-up booth and swiped up his return ticket without even a hint of inspecting the brochure for the plasma-veined beaches of Ortega II.

Whatever impulse for wanderlust he might have felt this time, he was forging it in the name of peace, love and a long overdue rental agreement on Venus.

Penguin or no, as a whifferdill, he fit imperceptibly among the cosmopolitan clientele of the *Quasa*. Bipedes, tripedes, quadrupedes and some with no —*peds* whatsoever. It was a stellar vessel that had began life as a humble space freighter, been promoted to a passenger liner, lost those privileges in some low-brow scandal around a high-profile lawsuit involving narcotics trafficking, then somehow, through some noble deed in the Quintella War, regained its position as a liner.

The captain, her first with a favourable record in some years, intended to take her solar yacht racing when the ship reached her retirement years. Living an old sailor's fable, as she'd wanted. Damned if another would take the helm until then. Captain Adare van Zarat was apparently rather fond of her.

The bolt went over Frobisher's head and reduced one of the milkfly feeders to toothpicks.

He wish he could have said, *Captain, boy, do I feel the same.*

“Subtle as a brick, my lad,” the portlier of the two gunmen muttered.

His eye still in the scope, the taller man stifled a chuckle with a snort. “You did say to be expedient, Mr Glitz.”

“One day, my son, we’ll have to educate you on your phraseology. Times like this that one finds, ah, diction in fiction can soothe friction prompted by action.”

“Wot?”

“Gently, Dibber, gently...” He gestured him to lower the contraband rifle to a resting posture, still pointed at the passengers, and began to address the tour group in what he probably thought were honeyed tones. “Gentlebeings of all persuasions, I must bid you a moment’s consideration. Alas, my colleague here has acted in haste, when really it is only one among you who we truly seek to plunder.”

Frobisher and Captain Adare raised their heads from the floor. The latter scratched her regulation cut and took a deep breath. Between them, their collective four eyes had settled on the exterior hatchway leading from the Milkfly Room. They were separated from the group. Shielded from sight by another of the feeders and a resting table. They could make it and raise the alarm for Security.

“That’s not to say that our position could change given the right motivation,” called Glitz. “My colleague’s aim is superb. Show them, colleague.”

Another blast, kicking as many sparks as milkflies from the floor, stopped Frobisher and the captain dead in their tracks.

“Couldn’t you have waited until after the tour?” growled the whifferdill. “Some of us react very badly to bullets. Unsteadies the humours.”

Glitz’s face broke into a half-moon. “Captain, my captain! Who’s your little friend?”

“Should I know you, sirs?” Adare’s tongue ran across her teeth in distaste. She turned to Dibber. “Where’s Crewman...” her eyes scanned the nameplate on the stolen uniform, “...Pellum?”

The sour youth laughed at a private joke. “*Hu-beh*. Having a quiet kip on the MediSci Deck, ma’am.”

“I take it,” Frobisher raised his flippers, “he’s doing better than you’d first expect?”

“Sleeping like the perennial babe,” assured Glitz with a half-bow. He flicked his eyes almost apologetically to Dibber. “Despite initial efforts contrariwise.”

The boy visibly rankled, but said nothing.

“Aces.” Frobisher clacked his beak, unimpressed.

Glitz turned his back on the pair, as the saturnine youth kept them covered. “Dear travellers, I seek a very particular piece of carry-on luggage for an opulent client. Something innocuous, but quite precious. The size of a jellyslyther with the wisdom of a galaxy.” He leant closer with a worrying gleam, the showman no longer. “Anyone seen such gubbins?”

The tour group rippled uncomfortably like a broken net on the ocean. Faces. Old. Young. Tall. Short. Indignant. Terrified. There was one fellow, in particular, though, who seemed to stand apart from the rest in quite a real and permanent sort of way. At first, hidden behind the bulk of a Zetonian, one might have mistaken him for being quite bland. Ordinary. Hardly of note. But, this was a side effect of a more significant personal trait. It was there and yet... not. What a Romantic might have called a whisper of a man, but what a scientist like the Doctor—Frobisher felt a tug of surprise and sadness at the name—would have probably called a quasimaterialised polyform.

And it was very angry.

When Glitz’s eyes fell upon his objective, he lived up to his family name. He pressed a finger against his collar. To a small disc that Frobisher had missed earlier.

“We have it,” he reported into the throat-mike. “Not quite ripe to specs but manageable, eh, Dibber?”

“Where’s the stuff?” the young man interrogated.

Frobisher felt it necessary to point out, “Blasters and volatisers aren’t terribly useful against someone who isn’t all there.”

“Our client has unusual tastes. Trust me.” A hint of envy entered Dibber’s voice, as though he wouldn’t be allowed to keep the weapon.

Slowly, as if moving through a current of treacle, the polyform hissed an outstretched arm towards the overturned table.

Among the scattered matchwood of the feeder were the trimmings of a freely provided venue cut to ribbons. Glass condiments returning to sand amongst a slowly charring tablecloth. Frobisher and Adare had begun to smell them. From out one of the small expanding holes, fire lifting the dishevelled curtain, emerged a scattered box of teacubes.

The polyform's arm rested there.

"Well, now!" Glitz congratulated himself. "Simple when one knows how..."

He edged step-by-step close to the disarray, careful to keep his weapon on his mark. Dibber, a cool participant in the violence that had brought him his street cred, found himself in the rare position of having to pick and choose his targets. Not for the first time, Frobisher hoped that he was the least important person in this firefigt's intermezzo.

"Keep them covered, lad, as you're told," patronised Dibber's sponsor.

He resented the reminder. "Righto, Mr Glitz."

Frobisher exchanged another glance with Adare.

He turned to Dibber. "You let him talk to you like that?"

"Like what?"

Frobisher feigned deafness. "Pardon, best underling?"

"Don't be smart, like *wot?*" he took a step closer.

He murmured, "Well, I'm not going to be the one to say it..."

"Dibber..." warned Glitz.

And another step. "Why not share it with the class, 'uh?"

"If any of my bosses felt like chatting to me like that," gestured the penguin, "I'd have given them my marching orders on the spot."

"*Dibber,*" the portly mercenary tried again, to no avail.

"Too right?" He shoved the rifle under the bird's chin. "Say it, then."

The whifferdill appreciated, and not for the first time, the experiential practice he'd garnered from his time in the TARDIS. An ability to stay cool despite the pressure of persuasion.

"You could... ask nicely?" he felt his voice crack, despite himself.

“You’re so sure. Say what Mr Glitz thinks himself too high and mighty to say ‘imself?”

“In so many words, Dib?”

“You’re a clod,” Captain Adare clarified to Dibber and shoved both hands against the gun’s muzzle. The shot rang past Frobisher’s ear, but it gained him enough purchase, enough space and time, to duck and transmogrify a set of brass cymbals. The mercenary doubled over from being boxed around the ears, shielding Frobisher and the captain from Glitz’s own weapon. The passengers scattered into complete disarray. A mottled foam of panic that divided three-to-one against the would-be mercantile liberator with the slick tongue.

“Shape...” was as far as the dour youth was able to make it before a flat-voiced Glitz overtook him, “—Shifter, yes, thank you, lad.”

Glitz shot the door control through a narrow corridor in the passengers. Adare’s arms flinched back in front of her face. The repeated Judoon stomp of the laser rifle pounding against her skull as it fired. She spun sideways into the floor, dazed and off-balance, any semblance of wind knocked clean from her lungs. Concussed.

“We could use some help here!” hissed Frobisher.

The next moments of Sabalom Glitz’s *Quaza* operation were among the strangest he’d experienced since Malodar Scrubs. Inexplicably, unnervingly, and quite in opposition to his own dreams of avarice, his heart decided to lend a hand. Then, an arm. Up to the elbow.

Straight through his chest.

Had he been a man of weaker constitution, he’d have likely died from shock on the spot. As it stood, however, he felt the chill in his chest reach up to strangle his throat. An ugly rasping noise that fit the tenor of an overstoked cottage chimney. He stood, paralysed for a moment, then the polyform’s half-materialised arm went straight up through his internals and out the top of his head. Glitz fell to his knees at that point with the look of every conman who’d ever called for mother.

What hadn’t been anticipated was Dibber’s recovery.

“Op’s gone south,” the lad reported into his own throat-mike.

Frobisher grappled him, close enough to hear a silken, “*There will be other opportunities.*”

Something exploded in the whifferdill’s head like cracking ornaments.

One of the feeders was bathed in a swirling blue flame building like a thundercloud. Energy clapped in steady pulses through the Milkfly Room. Everyone, no matter their physiology, dropped, save the two mercenaries and the polyform. Nervous systems reacting like puppets with their strings cut.

Frobisher could taste copper and burnt plastic.

An existential Glitz and chagrined Dibber piled the teacubes into a pouch and disappeared into the infathomable space behind the screeching feeder. Frobisher wasn’t sure if he imagined the wheezing, groaning sound that throbbed beneath the attack mechanism of the object as it disappeared from sight.

Frobisher let himself just lie on the floor for a few minutes, cuddled by the soft thrum of the liner’s engines, while the world got its bearings once more. An Argolin and a Sigman jerked their heads like pecking hens at the edges of his vision.

“Not wounded, sire, but dead,” he hummed, reassuringly.

They left him in peace after that.

Eventually, someone forced open the door from the outside and began communicating with the clientele. Some were outraged, others were just grateful for the assistance, but all would be given appropriate compensations for such a ghastly experience.

A shape passed over Frobisher’s view of the ceiling.

“Is first-class really all it’s cracked up to be, Passenger Tarklu?” asked Adare.

“At least in first-class, captain, when this kind of stuff happens you get complimentary towels.”

Her eyes sharpened. “What was that?”

“I can’t say for certain, but...” He winced as she helped him to his two webbed feet. He must have pulled his shoulder somewhere along the line. “I can guess. I wonder what they were after?”

“And if they got it.”

“Yeah...” He turned his attention to the polyform. Gently floating and weaving through the air in unceasing and effervescent patience.

Waddling over, the detective opened his beak for his first question, but the entity simply shook its head and leant down to the debris by the table as if grateful for the mess. The scattered teacubes had been taken, but the two mercenaries had failed to take into account the unopened boxes. It reached through a blue container with a half-flattened lid and pulled out a small diamond, the size but not colour of its dissolvable peers, and passed it to Frobisher.

“Neat trinket,” he observed.

The polyform gestured towards what may have constituted its own eyes.

“You’re sure?”

It nodded.

The whifferdill squinted a beady eye through its translucent dimensions. At first, it was like looking through a kaleidoscopic eyeglass, but, slowly, it formed into a series of hazy images, all piled atop one another in their taciturn two-dimensions, the pages of a cosmic flipbook.

“What do you see?” asked Adare.

Frobisher was lost for words. “Well, see for yourself...”

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, MR JOVANKA

By Kevin M. Johnston

The venue was everything that she had wanted—one of those barns made up for modern rustic weddings, perfect for showing off on Instagram. She envied the kids these days—her own wedding had been an echo of the dying eighties—big hair, shoulderpads and chartreuse bridesmaids' dresses, in a grandiose hall of white marble.

Thirty years ago tomorrow, she thought, smiling to herself. As her party planner Marla showed her around the room one last time before the big day, she imagined the venue filled with friends and family—some they hadn't seen in years, all laughing and joking and sharing the wild stories that no-one else would believe.

Suddenly, a digitised version of *Psycho Killer* filled the room and she pulled out her mobile. She apologised to Marla for the sheer volume of the thing—her ears weren't what they once were. She looked at the display. *S. J. Smith*. Another fellow cosmic wanderer. Both of them had travelled through time and space with the same wide-eyed curly-haired madman, but only met once they had settled down back home on Earth.

“Sarah!” she said. “Will we see you tomorrow after all?”

“Hello, Tegan! But I'm afraid not, they've got me in Zimbabwe until next Thursday,” Sarah said. “A deep dive piece on the new currency. I just wanted to call and say I'm sorry I won't be there and to give you a message for that husband of yours.”

“Shoot,” replied Tegan.

“Tell the Doctor,” Sarah finished, “Happy anniversary, Mr Jovanka!”

A few miles away, at Smithwood Manor, a stately house in Kent, a tweed-clad man in half-moon spectacles pattered around his workshop.

While he might have appeared human, one conversation with the man was enough for one to see through that illusion.

Sometimes, if the fancy took him, he might tell you his story, or at least the parts of his story that he liked to tell. He was the Doctor—and, no, he wouldn't give you a proper name—a shape-changing time-travelling alien from the lost planet of Gallifrey. He was out of shapes these days, though, living his fifth and final life, and while he still travelled time and space, it was on more of a part-time basis. In the last thirty years, his waistline had increased and his hair had thinned and greyed, but he maintained the handsome dignity of his youth and a pleasant, crooked smile when it was called for.

The Doctor had been stranded on Earth after an attack by a cosmic evil entity with a pompous name and a taste for ostentatious feathered hats. That entity, the Black Guardian, had rendered the Doctor's timeship inoperable and it had taken him over a decade to rebuild it. During that time, he'd attempted to fit in on Earth, with the help of his travelling companion Tegan Jovanka. They'd bickered and fought as they always had through time and space... but then one day, something unforeseeable happened...

And on September 16th, 1990, they were married. It had been a Wednesday, but they had never been a conventional couple.

But just because the Doctor had settled, it didn't mean he didn't keep his Time Radio on at all times, much to his wife's chagrin. From this workshop overlooking his garden, the Doctor would search for adventures, some with Tegan, some without. Today was no exception, even if it was the day before their thirtieth anniversary party, so when a transmission came in, the Doctor was beside the radio in an instant, trying to catch every word he could.

“Alert, alert, mauve priorit—” —ZZXZzzz— “—Majesty Queen El—” —zZZxxx— “—usurper and an ingrate who will stop at noth—” —xZZszz— “—very urgent! Please, if anyone is receiving—!” —zZZz!

And the message ended.

The Doctor checked the readings on the dials and scribbled down a set of partial temporal multi-frequencies in the margins of a paperback copy of *From Russia With Love*. He stared at them for a moment, considering what they might portend, before his eyes drifted towards the text of the novel—a curious bastard quotation slipped from nowhere into Bond’s mind... *Those whom the Gods wish to destroy, they first make bored*. He turned the page. *Chapter 12. A Piece of Cake*.

“No, Doctor, time for that later!” he shouted to himself, roughly cramming the book in his jacket pocket.

“Is everything alright, sir?” asked one of the Smithwood footmen from behind him, a small Scottish man with droopy eyes and wild dark hair.

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine,” the Doctor said, “but could you phone Vikram and tell him I’m on my way to the HQ with some interesting readings?”

“Of course, sir,” the footman replied. “And if... *she* asks, tell her I’ve just popped out to return some library books. She won’t like me gallivanting off—not today—but I really should be right back. And for heaven’s sake, Douglas, don’t call me *sir*.”

“Yessir, er, Doctor,” he said with a chuckle. The Doctor patted Douglas on the shoulder and grabbed his old panama hat from a coat-hook on the wall, where it hung between a spool of copper wire and a single roller skate. The hat didn’t match the off-green tweed jacket like it had matched his old cricket costume, but wearing it always made the Doctor feel like himself again.

He strode with purpose down the stairs and towards the back garden, in which his timeship—still, as ever, disguised as a 1960s police box—sat next to a battered old shed. But while the shed was crowded and cramped, that timeship, the TARDIS, contained multitudes.

With only the back door and a short walk across the garden between him and infinity, he stepped out into the open air, and came face to face with his wife.

“Tegan! Ah.”

“Hello, love,” Tegan said, warmly, kissing him on the cheek. She stepped back and looked him over. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“The library,” the Doctor replied. “To return some library books. They’re very overdue, so I might have to, *er*, pop into the TAR—”

“I knew it!” Tegan exploded. “The hat gives it away, Doctor, every time! You’re sneaking out to the TARDIS and over to UNIT to pal around with Vikram and Suzie and fight lizard men from planet Zip Zap!”

“Technically, it’s not called UNIT anymore,” the Doctor corrected.

“And planet Zip Zap doesn’t have any—”

“I don’t care!” Tegan said, “I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you fly off around time and space and miss the party tomorrow. Thirty years, Doctor! That’s important to some people, at least the ones who measure their lives in decades, not centuries!”

The Doctor took a deep breath and clasped his hands on Tegan’s shoulders. “Tegan, please,” he said, forcing a small grin, “I will be back in two hours. Not two decades, not two centuries. I promise.”

Tegan rolled her eyes and pushed past him towards the back door.

“Fine,” she said, without looking back. “See you next Thursday, Doc!”

The Doctor sighed as she slammed the door, then went to his ship. Tegan watched him from the window, took out her phone, selected a contact and hit the dial button.

Outside an unassuming grey London office building, the blue shape of the TARDIS resolved itself. The doors swung open and the Doctor stepped out, now in a long grey overcoat with an elaborate black question mark sewn into the left lapel. He’d left the hat behind. Tegan’s comment had ruined it for him.

The Doctor examined his surroundings and sniffed the air, before checking his watch. “A forty-minute drift,” he noted, “I must remember to correct for that. That leaves me only an-hour-and-twenty to get back to Tegan...”

The office building was the home of the UK’s first defence against the strange and unearthly. The Doctor and his erstwhile boss, Brigadier

General Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, had brought together various organisations into one united front. It had been the Brigadier's idea, but the Doctor had been allowed to come up with the name. He had decided to honour an old friend with the acronym, dubbing the conglomerate as the Abnormal Defence, Response and Intelligence Commission.

He glanced at the side door of the ADRIC headquarters and was surprised to see two guards arguing with a short-statured girl, dressed in deliberately-torn clothes of neon pink and black. The girl had green spiked hair and enough facial piercings to make a metal detector explode. She had an ageless quality about her—to a stranger, she might have appeared anywhere from eighteen to thirty-five, but the Doctor knew her age exactly: twenty-three, four months and nine days.

Beside her sat a boxy robot dog with 'K-9' embossed on its side.

"I'm telling you," the girl exclaimed. "My Dad is in there and he'll vouch for me!"

The ADRIC guards, a man and a woman, just laughed at her.

"Why don't you make your dog do a trick for us?" the man asked and the woman added, "We could put it on that new one—Tic-Tac."

"Alright, you've had your fun," the Doctor called, striding over, "I'm the Doctor, and this is my daughter Rebecca—"

"Rex," she corrected him.

"My daughter *Rebecca*," the Doctor repeated, "and her dog, K9 Mark VII."

"Greetings, Doctor-master," said the dog, to the guards' surprise.

The Doctor pulled out his old UNIT pass, which had been stamped with the ADRIC star of approval. A note scribbled in the corner in biro read:

Allow up to 3 companions—AGL -S.

"This is expired," the female guard said.

He flipped it over to reveal another biro note: *This pass never expires—HM QEII.*

The guards shrugged as one and opened the door for the Doctor, his daughter and her dog.

As they walked the corridor, the Doctor asked Rex what she was doing here. “Mum sent me,” Rex replied, “to keep you from going off to who knows where with Shindi and Costello. I told her even *you* wouldn’t be stupid enough to do that before the big day tomorrow...”

“Nice of you to lie for me,” the Doctor said, with that crooked smile.

Rex returned the smile, a mirror image of her dad’s. “Any time, Doc.”

And they entered the lift to descend to the ADRIC command room.

While Rex had met some of the ADRIC leadership before, she had been in the ADRIC Command Level. She was surprised by the mundanity of it—were it not for the lack of windows and armed guards, she could mistake it for a telemarketing firm. In one room, soldiers and scientists that led the organisation chatted happily around a drinks machine, while in another, a green-faced man with cactus-like spikes on his face wiped the remains of his chilli off the walls of an old microwave.

They were heading to the end of the hallway, towards a code-locked door labelled: ‘SHINDI’. Brigadier Vikram Shindi, the current commander of ADRIC, came from the United Nations’ alien investigation team, UNIT. Most of the Doctor’s liaisons with the organisation were directly through Shindi, or his lieutenant commander, Suzie Costello, who had once led a special-ops team codenamed Torchwood. But when the Doctor punched in his access code and opened the door, both Shindi and Costello were nowhere to be seen.

“Er, hello,” said the Doctor, “Ruth, isn’t it?”

“Major Ruth Matheson,” she said.

American, Rex noted.

“Acting commander of *AEY-DRIC*.” Ruth hit a button on her desk and said, “Fitzpatrick, can you bring us some tea?”

Rex noted the way Matheson had said the name of the organisation—
“*Aey-dric?*”

“Abnormal Defence, Response and Intelligence Commission,” K9 explained, “American pronunciation: *ay-dric*. Correct pronunciation: *aah-dric*.”

“I see it’s Take Your Pet to Work Day,” said Matheson to Rex, “but we haven’t met, have we? A new companion, Doctor? From the eighties?”

“No, no,” the Doctor laughed. “This is my youngest daughter, Rebecca.”

“Rex,” she corrected.

Matheson was shocked. “You—I mean, we—we have files on you and Tegan, but they don’t mention any *children*...”

“And they will stay that way,” said the Doctor. The smile was gone from his face now. “The price of my continued cooperation.”

“Of course,” Matheson said. “We were trying to call you, but Tegan said you were out and wouldn’t tell us much more. So you’re not here about the disappearances?”

“No, I picked up some signals just on the edge of local timespace... What disappearances?”

“Five senior members of *AEY-DRIC*, no particular pattern,” Matheson explained, “Shindi, Costello, Oduya, Colchester, Malcolm Taylor.”

“Who’d want Malcolm Taylor?” the Doctor murmured. Rex held in a laugh—she’d met the wiry, jumpy head of communications when Smithwood Manor had been infested with sonic termites. She’d liked the man and his twitchy ways, but neither the Doctor or Tegan had any patience for him. Sometimes her parents could be so alike.

“The kidnappers left one of these at each scene.” Matheson produced five thin pieces of gold foil like chocolate wrappers, each adorned with two intricate silver swirls.

“Carduschi Numerals, don’t you think K9?” the Doctor said, showing them to the dog.

“Affirmative,” K9 replied.

“A time-space coordinate,” the Doctor continued, “but missing the last two digits. I’m afraid that there will be another disappearance before all this business is over.”

“A message for you,” Rex deduced. “Who else would know what *Cardookies* are?”

“Quite,” the Doctor said. “What do you think, Major?”

Matheson sighed. “I think Sergeant Fitzpatrick’s been too long with that tea.”



The tea room was empty but for an upturned kettle, a ripped sleeve and another foil message. The Doctor merely glanced at the last two digits, nodded to Matheson, then stalked off to the TARDIS, practically bouncing on his heels as he did so.

Pulling K9 behind her on a lead, Rex ran behind the Doctor and called to him, “Hey, Dad, slow down!”

Finally, at the threshold of the time machine, the Doctor turned and thrust his hands into his overcoat pocket. “Rebecca, you’re staying right here. What if this is a trap?”

Rex rolled her eyes. “Of course it’s a trap! It’s always a trap! You need someone to keep you focused, someone to get you back on time.”

“On time for what?” the Doctor asked. “Oh. The *party*. You may have a point.” He checked his watch. “Fifty-five minutes. I can probably stretch it to sixty if we bend time a bit, but anything else would be a breach of causality.”

“I’d be more concerned about Mum than the fabric of spacetime, to be honest,” Rex replied.

He didn’t give her the satisfaction of a response, just held the TARDIS door for her and ushered her and her robot dog inside.

Rex was perfectly at home in the TARDIS—she had practically been raised in here—but she hadn’t been inside in the last few months and the Doctor had been making some upgrades. It was a perfect dome these days—the walls, now gunmetal grey, retained their white roundels, but the Doctor had added two staircases along the edges leading to upper passages. Here and there, Victorian sconces and wooden coat hooks protruded from the walls. In the middle, the central console floated freely with a trio of short glass time-rotors extending from it. The scanner

hovered above the time rotors, a clear glass sheet when deactivated. The floor was uneven, soft and spongy like a golf course made of AstroTurf and plush velvet armchairs drifted around behind the passengers, eager to please.

“You’ve redecorated,” Rex said. “It’s amazing.”

“We’re going to Oskimentis,” the Doctor explained, setting the coordinates. “A legendary free-floating volcanic island in the middle of space. No atmosphere by the traditional definition, but the flowers there produce mass amounts of oxygen, nitrogen, pretty much every gaseous chemical a lifeform might wish to inhale. The lagoons go right to the edge of the island, with natural gravity wells that stop bathers from paddling off into space. It makes no sense and by all means, it shouldn’t exist, but I’ve been there twice now and it seemed real enough to me.”

“Sounds like a holiday,” said Rex.

“Oh, it’s all fruit stands and limbo contests,” the Doctor said, cheerfully, “The ADRIC agents are probably having the time of their lives.”

“Shame we have to rescue them,” replied Rex as the time rotors stopped abruptly and the TARDIS’s materialisation chime sounded.

“Yes, well,” the Doctor said, “it *is* a trap, after all, so K9, you stay here in case anything goes wrong. Watch my signal.” He patted the black question mark on his coat lapel.

“Affirmative, Doctor-master,” K9 replied. “This unit will remain in the TARDIS until something goes wrong.”

Rex checked the scanner. “All clear, oxygen-wise.”

“Of course, it’s Oskimentis!” the Doctor exclaimed, flicking the door switch and stepping into the impossible seaside air. “But no time to limbo, Rebecca! Tegan will be counting down the seconds.”

In fact, Tegan was trying very hard to *not* count down the seconds.

It was true that standing her ground came naturally to her, a product of growing up in a very loud home with very loud people, including her Aunt Vanessa, who’d had an answer to everything. Despite that, she was still rather self-conscious. She’d called herself a “mouth-on-legs” once but was

always wary of being seen as a stereotype: the brash Australian, the nagging wife, the crotchety woman going on sixty...

So instead of preparing a tirade to unleash upon the Doctor's inevitably late return, she brewed a pot of jasmine tea and turned on some trashy daytime television via the international satellite hookup.

"The Worrier Queen *with Dr Peri Brown will be right back,*" the announcer intoned. Tegan zoned out and watched the advertisements—shampoo, goldfish crackers, a new movie with Emilia Clarke—just the mundanity she needed right now, but when the programme returned, she felt her calm slipping away. The presenter was droning on in her American drawl with her two guests, married Brits living in California for the husband's music career.

"Mickey," the presenter said. "*You say that Rose doesn't listen when you talk about your music. What you mean is, you want her to be excited about your passions. To know you're a team. Relationships...*"—Dr Brown turned to the camera to make this point—"...*are about communication. When we keep things bottled—*"

Tegan locked eyes with Dr Brown, told the presenter to bog off and muted the television. The American was right—no more keeping quiet. She was going to give him a piece of her mind. She crossed the room to an old cabinet and swung the door open, fishing through the jackets and junk to find the exact tool she was looking for.

"Rabbits," she mumbled to herself, "I'm getting as bad as him!"

As it turned out, the Doctor had been right about the current condition of the kidnapped agents. He and Rex had found Malcolm Taylor sitting by a swimming pool in trunks and a linen shirt. Beside him were three empty glasses, each topped with a slice of a blue citrus fruit. In his hand was an enormous cannoli.

"*Dmctmr! Rmx!*" he said in mid-bite. He swallowed and continued. "Fancy meeting you here! Have you tried the pastries?"

"Yes, I have," the Doctor replied. "Although that time there was a bit of a mishap with the President of Patisserie-12, who was the spitting image of a chocolate éclair. Jamie hadn't eaten in a day and half, so while Zoe and I were away—"

“Dad,” Rex interrupted. “Do we have time for this?”

“Another time,” the Doctor agreed. “Malcolm, who brought you here?”

Malcolm replied, “Zebra-looking chaps called Borons. Ah, here they are now!”

The Doctor and Rex turned to see two tall cybernetic black-and-white-striped equines standing on their back hooves, with laser cannons grafted onto their left shoulders.

“We are the Bhor’dons,” said the first, in its computer-modulated voice, “and we thank you for accepting our invitation to Oskimentis.”

Then, the other zebra turned to Malcolm Taylor, aiming its shoulder cannon at the reclining scientist. Before Malcolm could even scream, the zebra had fired, leaving not an atom of the man behind. Rex suddenly felt very cold.

“Now, hold on!” the Doctor exclaimed. “That man was engaged in the defence of planet Earth. To kill him is to put your planet and his on track for war!”

But the other zebra was already aiming its cannon at the Doctor.

“Irrelevant,” the Bhor’don announced, and fired.

Both Bhor’dons turned to Rex, the sole survivor. No time to mourn her father now—all she could do was run. The TARDIS was not far away from the pool where they’d found Malcolm and Rex dared not look back to see if the Bhor’dons were following. She just careened through the door, nearly tripping over K9 as she did so.

As she hit the hovering console, she slammed down a few switches to bring some of the ship’s extra defences online.

“K9, he—he’s dead! They disintegrated him!” Rex exploded. “*Zap!*”

She slumped into one of the eager armchairs. Her dog trundled over to her and nuzzled his metal head against her legs. Absentmindedly, she reached down and tugged at one of his sensor-relay ears. What was she going to tell her mum?

“Hit the fast return switch, K9,” she said, her voice now a monotone. “We’re going home.”

“Negative, mistress,” K9 replied, “Doctor-master’s lifesigns still transmitting.”

“But—”

“This unit suggests that apparent disintegration may have been due to translocation.”

“He’s alive!” Rex said. “Good boy, K9!”

“Affirmative,” K9 confirmed, wagging his metal tail.

Rex jumped up and ran a hand through her green hair. She cracked her knuckles and held her hands out over the console, ready to flick the switches the way her dad always did, as if it were some grandiose pipe organ.

“Alright, K9, give me a fix on his signal, let’s go and find him.”

“Coordinates are seven-two-three—” K9 halted. “Incoming transmission, mistress!”

“Put it on the main scanner,” Rex ordered and cocked her head to the side as the screen above the console activated, revealing the long, strange face of an alien queen.

A cloud of swirling atoms coalesced with a pop and the Doctor slammed onto the plush carpet of a hotel room.

“Ah! A teleporter!” he called. His eyes took a second to adjust to the primitive teleportation ray, as the darkness in front of him formed into a green humanoid haze. Soon, he could make out the horse-hair-covered torso and arms of a muscular zebra-headed man with one mechanical eye. The Bhor’don looked incongruous sitting on the side of the plush hotel bed, looking down at the Doctor.

“You must be the big boss around here,” the Doctor said. “King of the Bhor’dons? That’s a king-sized bed, at least, but then it would have to be, wouldn’t it? Sorry, I do tend to babble whenever I’m abducted.”

“I am the Bhor’don Prime, purest of our great race. My planet, Bhorovk’l-7, was ravaged by a tyrant, Doctor, besieged with mutagenic toxins. Only Bhor’dons of the Prime Family are able to survive with minimal cybernetic enhancement.”

“Yes, I appreciate the exposition, but I’d mostly like to know what you’ve done with Malcolm Taylor and the other ADRIC agents.”

“Returned to their planet, at the coordinates from which they were taken,” the Prime explained. “Their only purpose was to bring Earth’s Champion to me.”

“Ah, bad luck,” the Doctor said, “I don’t recall Earth having one of those.”

“Have you not repelled Krotons, Chelonians, Shalka, Stenza...”

“Please. We’ll be here all day,” the Doctor said. “You have me. Earth’s Champion. But if you think that means Earth is undefended without me, you’ve got a few surprises ahead of you.”

“I have no interest in *Earth*,” the Prime spat. “It is a miserable planet with a single, dusty moon and a damaged ozone. No. I want Bhorovk’l-7. It has been a peaceful world for millennia. But now... we must take it back from the grip of the monstrous beast that poisoned our skies and mutated my people. To my shame, Doctor, even I cannot repel the invaders myself. So I ask for your aid.”

The Doctor stood up and dusted off his overcoat.

“Well,” he said, “I can’t say I appreciate your means of summons, but—” His next thought was cut off by a strange grinding noise, suddenly echoing from all corners of the room, as a blue rectangular prism formed out of nowhere around the Time Lord.

“No, no, no, no!” the Doctor called. Then, with a thud, the box became solid, leaving the Bhor’don Prime alone and furious.

“B—What do you mean, ‘*No, no, no*’?” Rex sputtered. “You wouldn’t see Nessie, Liz or Jojo flying the TARDIS like that. That’s a precision short hop! Even you have trouble with those sometimes!”

The Doctor stalked around the TARDIS console in a huff, his overcoat tails flapping behind him. “Rex, I was having a conversation with a very powerful alien warrior who won’t be pleased that the carpet has just been pulled out from under him, the carpet in this instance being me!”

“But Dad we—”

“Now, I am going to go back out there to speak to the Bhor’don—”

“Attention, Doctor-master,” K9 put in. “Advise you listen to mistress.”

“I beg your pardon, K9?” the Doctor asked.

“Dad. We received a transmission. Like the one you got at home on your time-radio! Except now it’s perfectly clear.”

“Oh,” the Doctor said, “I’m sorry, Rebecca, I can be quite an idiot sometimes.”

“You know, you called me Rex before, when you were shouting at me,” Rex replied with a grin.

“Alright, fine, Rex it is. Now! K9, can you play back that transmission?”

With an affirmative, K9 attached his nose-sensor to the console and fired up the clear glass screen. All three looked upon the long, slim, blue face of an alien woman with delicate features. Atop her head was a thin tiara of white crystal.

“Alert, alert, mauve priority. This is Her Splendiferous Majesty Queen Elexi VI of Cardusch. A vile creature claiming to be the Bhor’don Prime is on the loose. I am the true and rightful ruler of Bhorovk’l-7, as was my father before me and his mother before him. This so-called Prime is nothing but a would-be usurper and an ingrate who will stop at nothing to see me destroyed. My nieces and nephews have been driven into hiding, my most loyal subjects are being hunted and jailed. We need help to restore the peace that has reigned on Bhorovk’l-7 for two thousand years. Please, if anyone is receiving, do not hesitate to act. My people’s survival depends upon you!”

The message finished and the Doctor sighed. “It’s never straightforward, is it? Look, er, Rex, you and K9 stay right here. I’d like to have another word with—”

Then he saw it—the trio of time rotors on the central console, rising and falling. “K9, the TARDIS is drifting! Stop that dematerialisation!”

“Unable to comply, Master,” K9 replied. “Sequence has been triggered remotely.”

“Another trap?” Rex asked.

“Perhaps,” said the Doctor, “all this attention, it’ll go right to my head.”

Rex saw that cocky smile again and knew he just might have meant it. The TARDIS thumped to a halt and the Doctor flicked the door control.

“Let’s see who’s got us in their snare this time,” he said. He threw his overcoat across one of the moving armchairs and rolled up his shirtsleeves, ready for action. Rex was the first out the door, followed by K9.

“So who is it?” the Doctor called from the TARDIS, “Daleks? Sontarans? The Master?”

As he crossed the TARDIS threshold, Tegan replied, “*Worse...*”

The Doctor checked his watch—it had been two hours, five minutes and thirty-one seconds since he left the house.

Instead of arguing, he tried smiling at Tegan, but she just held up a metal rod with three gold prongs on one end and a disc on the other. “I got one of those TARDIS-remote-y things from Rodan last time we visited Arcadia Nova, just for moments like this.”

“A Stattenheim remote—”

“I don’t care what it’s called!” Tegan shouted. “All these doohickeys, and all this technobabble, it’s all the same. You can say you’re realigning the mandoscopulator to fluctuate the fluon quarks but all I hear is ‘*La-de-da-de-da, I’m the Doctor, a big smart clever Time Lord and I can’t be bothered doing the washing up tonight!*’”

Rex just hung back by the door, awkwardly, K9 hiding behind her.

“K9?” Tegan said. “You go inside that TARDIS and you keep it locked from the inside until Monday morning. Whatever space business you’re up to, Doc, you’ve got yourself a time machine, so it can keep until then!”

“Tegan, this is all rather childish,” the Doctor chided. “And K9, don’t you dare—” K9 trundled into the TARDIS and the doors shut behind him.

The Doctor banged on them. “K9, you unlock these doors right this instant—”

“Oh no you don’t,” Tegan said smugly. “It’s all fine and dandy giving all the girls robot dogs, but who do you think they’ll listen to? Who had to walk them and clean up their oil spills? Me! Isn’t that right, K9?”

A muffled “*Affirmative, mistress,*” came from the TARDIS and the Doctor knew that he had been defeated.

The morning sun crept slowly over the face of Smithwood Manor and found the Doctor still awake. For the Doctor, sleep was more a hobby than a necessity, so most nights, after Tegan was asleep, he found himself curling up in an armchair with a book, a strong pot of tea and Pushkin, their one-eyed tabby. That night, though, the Doctor avoided his usual routine, leaving the cat prowling around the house, mewing forlornly.

Instead, the Doctor had plugged an old Gallifreyan Matrix slice into his overclocked and anachronistic desktop computer and did some research on the Bhorovk'1 system and the Carduuschi Empire. When that proved fruitless, he had decided he would cook some breakfast and sent a set of text messages to the household staff, telling them to take the morning off before the party.

When Tegan woke up, it was to the sound of whistled opera and clanging pots and the smell of sizzling sausages.

Knowing it couldn't be Robert, the cook, making such a racket, she went downstairs and peered through a crack in the doorway for a moment before entering. She did like to see the Doctor at work, when he was enjoying himself, his hands moving from stove to kettle to sink as if he were flying the TARDIS.

"Well, this is a surprise," she said, pushing into the kitchen. "Good morning, Tegan!" he announced, "and happy anniversary!" He ushered her out of the kitchen and into the dining room and moments later emerged with plates of sausages, mushrooms, scrambled eggs, black pudding and French toast. He returned to the kitchen for tea and juice, then once more for a small plate of sausage pieces which he placed on the floor for Pushkin.

Finally, the Doctor kissed Tegan on the forehead and sat down for his breakfast.

"*Mmm*, Doc, this is delicious," she said between bites. "I figured it had been a while since I'd made a full breakfast, and with Robert and the rest working so hard for the party..."

“You never have gotten used to having staff. Me neither, a bit too colonial for my liking.”

“They do insist on it, though. In any case, they can’t object to a morning off once in a while,” the Doctor surmised, “and I do think better when I’m cooking.”

“Is this about whatever emergency you were looking after on *Oscar Mentos*? Rex tried to explain to me...” Tegan said, neglecting to add that she was just too angry to listen to anyone yesterday.

“Oskimentis,” the Doctor said. “Lovely place, a resort on an impossible volcanic island in space. I’d have taken you there on our honeymoon if the TARDIS had been working...”

“Doc, for the last time,” Tegan said, with a hand on his arm. “Greece was fine!”

“I just still can’t believe Colonel Crichton would only give me three weeks off!” the Doctor exploded, an old wound opened.

Tegan just laughed. “So, go ahead, tell me all about Oskimentis. I won’t mind.”

“Well, the way it is, we’ve got two rival claims to the planets’ leadership. The Bhor’don Prime, a zebra-headed brute with an army of cyborgs, and Queen Elexi of Carduuschi, an upper-crust emperor, all airs and graces.”

“Speaking of colonial...” Tegan put in.

“Quite,” the Doctor said. “But the claims don’t make sense—both sides claim that there’s been millennia of peace until now, but according to the information I was able to find, the whole Bhorovk’l system has been ruled by the Carduuschi Empire the whole time, and is supposed to be until at least the twenty-ninth century.”

“So is someone messing with time?” Tegan mused. “Maybe there was no Bhor’don Prime before?”

“But there’s no distortion, no artron feedback. And where does Oskimentis fit into all of this? It’s not part of the Carduuschi Empire, nor would it be in a position to deal politically with the Bhorovk’l system.”

“Tell you what, Doc,” said Tegan. “Tomorrow morning, after the party, you, me, Rebecca, K9, whoever else wants to come, we’ll go back to

Oskimentis, sit by the pool with the Zebra King and figure this out. It can't be as hard as averting the civil war on Trion, but we did that, didn't we? But tonight, all I want to do is have a good time with our friends and celebrate.”

The Doctor sipped his tea thoughtfully. “Yes, alright.”

She squeezed his hand across the table. “Love ya, Doc.”

Then Pushkin jumped on the table and all hell broke loose.



Rex and K9 stumbled into the party about half an hour late, the Doctor giving them a stern look as they did so. Rex winked back at him and put a finger on her mouth. He just rolled his eyes in return.

“Bless my soul. Rebecca, is that you?” asked a kindly voice.

She turned to see her godmother, Doris Lethbridge-Stewart, bounding towards her with open arms.

“Auntie Doris!” Rex shouted happily, “I didn't know you'd be here!”

“Well, I love your hair!” she said. “Very modern. Although if Alistair were still here, he'd throw a fit.”

“I wouldn't meet UNIT regulations, no,” Rex laughed. Rex glanced across the room to see her sisters Liz and Jojo chatting in a corner. Only Nessie seemed to be mingling, chatting with two people she didn't recognise. She was always the charming one—loved by everyone, even if she didn't have a clue what to do with herself in the real world...

Doris snapped Rex out of her thoughts. “Tell me everything you've been up to. I won't leave you alone until I've heard it all.”

Tegan walked over to her oldest daughter, Vanessa, and patted her on the shoulder. “See your Auntie Doris has caught up with Rebecca,” she said. “That's her whole night gone.”

Nessie smiled back and gestured to the handsome young man she was talking to. “Mum, have you met Ryan?”

“Course we've met,” Ryan said, “Tegan and the Doctor saw off this big lightning coil that attacked Sheffield. She saved me nan's life too.”

Nessie was eyeing Ryan quite intensely.

Tegan thought, *He's a bit young for you, isn't he?*—but she thought it a little too directly and Nessie coughed awkwardly, her part-Gallifreyan senses tingling.

“And I didn’t get your name,” Nessie said to the other person, a thirty-something woman with blonde highlights.

“Izzy Sinclair,” she said.

“Hey, that’s my last name,” replied Ryan. “Maybe we’re related, way back a hundred years ago or something.”

“Nah, mate, I’m adopted,” Izzy said. “Didn’t even like to go by *Sinclair* when I first met the Doctor, but Tegan took me under her wing. She was like a second mum, almost.”

Tegan was never good at taking compliments so she just huffed and waved her hand at Izzy as if to brush away the niceties. Then she noticed a white-haired woman in a denim jacket, with a ring on each finger and a shockingly large handbag, chatting to a rather cosy-looking elderly couple.

“Say, here come the Chestertons—and Jo Jones!” Tegan said. “She’s always got a great story to tell.”

Nessie had known this trio whole life—in fact they’d been among her heroes growing up. Ian and Barbara Chesterton had been her dad’s first real human friends. Then there was Jojo’s namesake, Josephine Jones née Grant, her dad’s old assistant, activist extraordinaire. But Jo didn’t feel like telling one of her famous stories today...

“This is a special occasion after all,” Jo said, happily. “Thirty years and do you know the story I’ve never heard? How you and the Doctor met!”

“Now this I’d like to hear as well!” said Ian.

“Who wouldn’t want to know the story of the woman who made the Doctor stay put, for thirty whole years in the same place?” Barbara added.

“But not always thirty years in order,” Tegan replied. “Did you know he showed up to Jojo’s tenth birthday with a cake that said, *Congratulations on Your Engagement, Jojo and Jeremy!* It even had a picture of them on it. Now she’s going to have to act surprised when she meets him!”

Everyone laughed at that, but Jo Jones swatted Tegan's arm. "You're dodging the question, Tegan!"

"Well, it's not exactly an uplifting story," Tegan said. "A lot of good people died on that day... but I guess all of you know the kind of thing I'm talking about."

The guests all shifted uncomfortably and Tegan sighed. Despite the disclaimer, they were all still waiting on her every word.

She had told this story so many times to her girls that it felt more-or-less routine. It didn't even make her that sad anymore, even with all that happened on that day, to Aunt Vanessa, to Nyssa's father, to the thousands of planets that the Master had destroyed. It was just a part of her history. A part of her.

She felt a little silly as well. After all, this might be how she met the Doctor, but that had been Sarah Jane's version—it wasn't until the end of the adventure that she met *her* Doctor and even then she'd spent the next few months trying to get away from him, back to normality.

But it always felt too personal to tell the story of being trapped on Earth with him, the TARDIS all-but-destroyed, sharing a flat, arguing every day until they realised what they were fighting for. Then, that first kiss, so strange and so perfect... *that* felt like the true beginning of their story.

Everything else, all the strange worlds and hideous creatures, all the death and destruction, was merely a prologue, but she told it to her guest nonetheless: "My Auntie Vanessa and I were on the way to Heathrow Airport. I'd just gotten a job as a stewardess and she was taking me there in this little red convertible..."

The Doctor was feeling even less comfortable than Tegan. Sure, these were all his friends and he was glad to have them around—even Malcolm Taylor—but his mind couldn't help but wander back to Oskimentis and the Bhorovk'l crisis. He found himself forgetting what people had just said and just nodding along.

"Oh, yes, I quite agree," he said to one of his guests.

“You what?!” she yelled. “You *agree*?! How could you even *dare* to *agree* with something like that?!”

She stalked off and the Doctor considered if he might have made an error in conversation. But then, that one had always been tempestuous, right from the moment she’d materialised aboard his TARDIS in a wedding dress and accused him of kidnapping her. She would come around in the end. Probably. He tried not to think about that, instead approaching the only other Gallifreyan in the room.

“Lady President Rodan,” the Doctor said.

“Lord President,” Rodan corrected.

“Oh, I didn’t notice you’d regenerated. You look the same, other than the moustache.”

“Yes, it’s a talent. In my seventh regeneration, I only lost a few freckles.”

“How is Arcadia Nova?” the Doctor asked. “Living up to the Gallifrey of old?”

“Well, other than being in Cornwall, with point-five percent of the population and next to none of the technology...”

“Nigh indistinguishable, like you with your new moustache,” the Doctor replied.

Rodan smirked. “The security team you sent is excellent though. Well, Cwej is a liability, but that Roz Forrester? Best I’ve ever seen. Where did you find them?”

“Thirtieth century,” the Doctor replied. “Bona fide space police. I assume you came here by TARDIS, am I right?”

Used to the Doctor’s non sequiturs, Rodan nodded. “One of the new Type-104s.”

“That’ll have to do,” he muttered. “Listen. Have you heard of Oskimentis?”

“So I take it he never did get you back to Heathrow then?” asked Izzy.

“The long way round,” Tegan laughed. “And I left for a while, but ended up right back aboard the TARDIS. Destiny, I guess, if you believe in that stuff.”

Barbara Chesterton smiled. “We spent years, bouncing around, never quite getting back to 1963. I think he just likes to keep people around.”

Sometimes, Tegan thought, the Doctor was such an old sofie.

She scanned the room for him, but when she saw him, her contented smile faded. There he was, chatting to Lord President Rodan, gesturing wildly as if arguing for the fate of the world.

“Just a minute,” said Tegan to her guests, “I have to avert a crisis...”

She pounded the floor with her heels, the red sequins of her dress catching the dance-floor lighting. She hoped she looked terrifying, bounding towards the Doctor. She hoped she looked to him like all the Daleks and the Cybermen and the Zygons put together.

Then she heard the Doctor say to Rodan, “I’ll be back as soon as I talk to the Bhor’don Prime. You won’t even notice I’m—”

Tegan took a deep breath and shouted the Doctor’s full Gallifreyan name. Her pronunciation was impeccable.

The party went silent.

“Tegan, I can explain,” the Doctor said.

“I’m sure you can, Doc,” Tegan replied, “but I don’t think I’ll ever understand. Going behind my back? That’s not how we do things. We speak our minds, that’s how we got here, to thirty years married, with four great kids! When we have a problem, we say it to each other’s face! We don’t...”

And she paused for a second, as something clicked, then she finished quietly: “...outsource the issue.”

The room had resumed its chatter, trying to ignore the fight, and the Doctor asked, “Tegan? Are you alright?”

“Doc, we have to get to the TARDIS,” she said. “Right away.”

“But, Tegan, the party,” he replied. “You wouldn’t want to—”

“Oh, forget the party,” she said with a smile. “This is important!”

And away she dashed, her husband not far behind.



“Set the coordinates, Doc,” Tegan ordered. “The *Oskie Mento* space resort. No, no, I don’t care how to say it, I’m in too good of a mood for you to correct me right now!”

The Doctor did as he was bid. “Any other requests, given that you seem to be commandeering my ship?”

“C’mon, Doc, if it’s not *our* ship, what were all those vows for, eh?” Tegan laughed and, at the sound of the TARDIS chime, added, “Now, that’s us landed, right? Run a search for a signal matching the Alien Queen’s distress call.”

“But with that type of signal, I won’t be able to find it unless she’s within a lightyear radius.”

“She is, trust me,” Tegan replied.

The TARDIS pinged in agreement. The Doctor was amazed. “How did you—”

“I’ll explain later,” said Tegan with a knowing grin. “Now, the Big Zebra’s hotel room.” The second they’d materialised, Tegan slammed the door control with gusto. “After you, Doctor,” she pronounced, and again, he acquiesced, striding into the room of the hulking zebra who had just kidnapped him the day before.

“Doctor!” the Bhor’don Prime said, his white stripes reddening with rage. “You have the nerve to return, using the very capsule in which you escaped!”

“Er, something like that,” the Doctor replied, “I’d like you to meet my wife.” Tegan stepped out and leaned on the doorframe. “Get in, Bhor’don, today’s your lucky day, we’re gonna solve all your problems, just like you wanted.”

And in a second and a half, the TARDIS materialised in an almost identical hotel room. The Bhor’don Prime pounded on the doors from the inside and stumbled out as Tegan opened them.

“Witchcraft!” he cried. “You cannot make me re-enter that *unbhor’donly* machine!”

“You!” a voice replied. The Bhor’don Prime turned to see Queen Elexi, frantically pulling a wane from the folds of her pearlescent gown.

“I warn you, *Bhor’don*, this is a powerful weapon with no stun setting and I will not hesitate to use it!” she screamed.

The Doctor took in his surroundings as he and Tegan stepped out of the TARDIS.

“Sonic screwdriver?” Tegan asked the Doctor and he obliged. She pointed the machine at the hotel room door and it locked.

Elexi reacted, startled, and fired the weapon at Tegan’s hand, exploding the scientific instrument. The Bhor’don Prime fell to one knee and aimed his wrist cannon at Elexi.

Tegan staggered back against the TARDIS and nursed her hand.

“Tegan!” the Doctor cried.

“It’s nothing, Doc,” she reassured him, before adding to the aliens. “But I’ve had quite enough! You, Space Zebra, and you, Queen Alien, love the dress by the way, are going to stay right here and talk to each other. No-one is leaving this room until everyone can sort out their problems.”

“Tegan,” the Doctor replied. “This isn’t couples therapy!”

“Of course it is, Doc,” Tegan replied. “Don’t you see?”

The Doctor looked from Tegan to Elexi to the Bhor’don Prime and smacked his forehead. “Oh, I have been stupid,” he said. “How can one planet have two rightful rulers for years without bloodshed? Through marriage.”

“Some *marriage*,” the Bhor’don Prime spat. “She doesn’t care for me. Only power. Her ancestors released their mutagens on our planet when they first conquered our sector of space. She is just as bloodthirsty as they were, just as reckless with Bhor’don lives!”

“If I am reckless,” Elexi replied, “it is only in my mistaken belief that we could rule together. My emotions got the best of me, it seems.”

“But didn’t you have some good times?” Tegan asked.

Elexi and the Bhor’don Prime looked at each other—neither would be the one to admit it.

“So what went wrong?” she probed.

“She!” the Bhor’don exploded. “She betrayed me! She had an affair with the Duke of Ellundoriak!”

“What?” Elexi gasped, “I did not.”

“Well, you certainly had been spending a lot of time around him...”

“Perhaps, but only because you weren’t talking to me. I needed conversation,” Elexi said, “and you were always steeped in carbohydrohol whenever I got home.”

“Only because you made me so damned nervous!” the Bhor’don shouted, “I thought you were leaving me!”

“So you declared war on my entire people just to win the argument. Congratulations!”

“I accept your accolades,” the Bhor’don spat, “and your unconditional surrender.”

“The Carduschi will burn Bhorovk’l-7 to a cinder before we surrender to a rebellion such as yours, Prime!”

The Doctor stepped forward. “Look, perhaps we can find some common ground. A trial separation, a splitting of assets through a third-party negotiator. The Federation, perhaps.”

“*Ab-ab-ab*,” Tegan said, “How ‘bout the Bhor’don Prime just looks out the window, eh?”

“What trickery is this?” the Prime asked.

Tegan rolled her eyes and walked to the curtain of the room, flinging it open and revealing what she and the Doctor already knew would be there—the impossible landscape of Oskimentis. But the Bhor’don Prime had not realised where the Doctor’s TARDIS had taken him or where Elexi had been hiding out.

“Y-you,” he stuttered. “B-But I was... also on Oskimentis.”

Suddenly, without wanting to, Elexi smiled. It was, Tegan thought, a strange sight on her long, narrow face. “I thought you didn’t love me anymore. Why would you come back here?”

“Of course I love you,” the Bhor’don Prime replied, “I always have and I always will.”

“All this time, the place has barely changed,” Elexi mused. “We’re not those young up-and-coming warlords on honeymoon anymore, though, are we?”

The Bhor'don Prime reached out a hand and put it on Elexi's arm.

"I guess that's us off then," Tegan said. "Have a good life, you guys!"

"And remember," said the Doctor, grabbing Tegan's hand, "talk to each other. That's how you have a happy marriage."



Rex, ever the detective, like her father before her, had pieced together what had happened from speaking to Rodan. But rather than ruin a good night, she sat at the back of the room, watching the party continue. Doris Lethbridge-Stewart had left her and latched onto Jojo and Liz, who were glancing all around, trying to find a way out of the conversation. Nessie was still hanging around the handsome stranger she'd been chatting with all night, and seemed to be making some progress, based on all the arm-touching going on between them.

Rex smiled, lost in thought, and didn't even notice the man sitting down next to her.

"They've left, haven't they?" he asked.

She turned to see a lanky blonde man with bulging eyes, slicked-back hair and a wisp of a goatee. He wore a tuxedo that would have matched the Doctor's, with a bright red rose in the lapel.

"Er, yes," she said. "How did you know?"

"It's Rex, isn't it?" he asked. "Dad told you my name was Rex? He's full of surprises."

"Parents are a mystery," the man replied. "I simply can't imagine what the Doctor must be like as one. You have my sympathies."

Rex laughed. "Thanks. You didn't give me your name."

The man stood up and straightened his bowtie, before removing his lapel flower and handing it to Rex.

"No, I didn't, did I?" he mused. "You know, I'm sad I missed them. It's been so long since we had a chance to just chat."

"How do you... know my parents?" Rex asked.

The man smiled. "You might say I introduced them."

Then he was gone, walking away from the party, leaving Rex feeling entirely shaken.

With the flourish of a ballroom dancer, the Doctor spun Tegan into one of the console room armchairs.

“Alright,” he announced, setting the coordinates, “16th September, 2020, 1700 hours and 49 minutes...”

“Nah,” Tegan replied. “We have our whole lives to spend nights on Earth. Let’s go see the universe. It is a special occasion, after all.”

The Doctor smiled and ran up to Tegan’s armchair, grabbing her by the hand and leading her to the console.

“Your choice, anywhere at all!” he announced. Then he stood behind her, put his hands over her eyes and waited for her to set the controls. She waved her right hand around, searching for the dematerialisation switch and he guided her there with his. Then he spun her around and kissed her as the TARDIS took flight.



“Where do you think they are now?” Jojo asked, a piece of cake in her hand.

The four Jovanka girls were outside the venue, watching the stars. Hours had passed since the guests of honour had abandoned the party. The other guests had followed suit a while later and it was mostly just the staff left over.

“Peladon,” Liz guessed, “Mum always hated Peladon.” Rex laughed. “Maybe he’s finally taken her to visit Nyssa and the Queen of Trion.” Nessie thought about it for a second. “Brisbane. But it’ll be during the Ice Age.”

“Which one?” Jojo replied. “All of them, at once, due to some freak time anomaly,” Rex suggested. “It’ll be down to the Monk,” said Nessie. “Or the Master,” Rex muttered, more to herself than anyone else. “Or the Terrible Zodin!” Liz suggested. “It’s never the Terrible Zodin,” Jojo laughed, “I think he made her up.” They went silent again, watching the

stars, until Christopher, the Smithwood butler, cleared his throat to get their attention.

“Ladies,” he said. “We’ve packed up everything and are taking it back to the manor now. I’ll leave the keys with you.”

“Thank you, Mr Mawdryn,” Rex replied, and Christopher bowed to her. “I never got why the Mawdryn family stuck around,” Liz said. “Can’t be fun running around after Mum and Dad.”

Jojo rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ever listen, Liz? They all owe him their lives.”

“They owe him his *own* lives,” Rex corrected. Nessie smiled and put her arms around her sisters. “I don’t know, I think he did alright with the one he had left.”

And, somewhere else in space and time, a blue police box appeared. A middle-aged man in a tuxedo and panama hat, with his bride by his side in a red-sequined dress, stepped out to see where they had landed.

“Well, I’ll be,” the Doctor exclaimed. “Heathrow!”

THE CITY OF THE BAD WOLF

By Tim Bradley

For Trevor Martin and Terrance Dicks

The Doctor once again entered the TARDIS, joined by his new friends Jenny Wilson and Jimmy Forbes. They had previously met during an adventure where they fought the Daleks on the planet Karn. They defeated the Daleks using the Crystal of All-Power.

After this adventure, the Doctor invited Jenny and Jimmy to go with him to visit the planet Vega where a nasty situation was developing. Jimmy was against the idea, but Jenny was keen to help the Doctor. After arguing about it for a while, Jimmy agreed to go with Jenny and the Doctor. It was his responsibility to look after Jenny anyway. However, travel aboard the TARDIS was never straightforward. What initially began as a quick excursion for the Time Lords had developed into something else entirely.

Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor fiddled about with the controls to set the coordinates for the planet Vega.

“Right then,” he announced. “We’ve arrived in the Waqui galaxy, it’s only a matter of adjusting the spatial coordinates accordingly. We’ll soon be there in a few minutes. Hopefully this nasty situation with the Vegans won’t last long.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy began to scoff. “Like nothing bad is going to happen when we get there.”

“Have a little faith, my boy,” the Doctor retorted. “We survived Karn.”

“And Vathek II,” exhaled Jenny. “Jekkar, too.”

“And Gehenna,” Jimmy added, exhausted by the memory. “Goodness knows what else...”

The Time Lord twisted a dial, encouraged. “Exactly, exactly. We can survive Vega.”

“What’s the planet like, Doctor?” Jenny asked. “You’ve never mentioned it.”

The Doctor thought for a moment and said, “The Vegans all live underground. There’s a toxic atmosphere on the planet’s surface. Plagued by X-ray storms. The cave structures underneath have a lot of swampy areas and mud baths, so you’ll have to watch where you tread.”

“Oh nice,” Jimmy groaned, annoyed.

“We’ll have torches, don’t you worry,” the Doctor reassured them. “Besides, the Vegans are renowned miners. I’m sure they’ll be decent company. As I said, you’ll have to be careful and mind your Ps and Qs when you talk to them. Either of them. Or else they can squish you with their hairy octopus-like tentacles or trample you under their satyr-like hooves.”

“Oh, the agony of choice,” muttered Jimmy.

“You’d better do all the talking then,” Jenny suggested. “I’m sure your experience with these aliens will help us get in and out quickly.”

“That’s fine with me,” Jimmy said. “Don’t mind if the trip is boring, so long as we get out of there alive.”

“Oh, I’m sure there’ll be other interesting things for us to check out—” the Doctor said before he was suddenly cut short.

The TARDIS jerked violently whilst travelling in the time vortex. The central column, like a spinning Faraday cage encased in amber, pulsed unsteadily with transtemporal arrhythmia. The Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy were caught off-balance as they fell to the floor in a heap. Gradually, the Doctor got back up to the console unit, clinging to the zag of one of the insulated conductor wires leading from the console up to the ceiling light, and checked the instruments to see what was happening.

“Is everyone alright?” the Doctor asked over his shoulder. When he received no answer, he repeated the question. “I said, is everyone alright?”

“We’re fine,” Jenny replied, as she and Jimmy got up from the floor. “I’m sure I’ve bruised my sides but nothing worth complaining about.”

“What the heck just happened?” Jimmy demanded to know. “Is your socking TARDIS trying to kill us, Doctor?”

“Seriously, Jimmy, Jenny, I’ve no idea what caused the TARDIS to do that,” the Doctor replied. “The old girl has never done that sort of thing before.” Actually, she had, but the Doctor didn’t want them to know that.

“Could it be the Time Lords doing this?” Jenny asked. “Are we still going to the planet Vega?”

The Doctor checked the instruments. “I’m afraid not, my dear,” he answered.

“What?!” Jimmy exclaimed, exasperated. “I don’t believe this!”

“Where are we heading for then?” Jenny enquired.

“I’ve no idea,” the Doctor replied. “The TARDIS has gone out of control, the instruments are playing up and we’re being diverted to another planet. I don’t know if it’s the Time Lords who are doing this or not.”

The TARDIS whooshed and groaned before the ship eventually landed. A loud thump and a ding echoed once the TARDIS had landed. A moment of silence ensued between the three travellers in the TARDIS console room.

“We’ve landed,” Jenny said.

“That we have, my dear,” the Doctor agreed.

“So what do we do now?” Jimmy asked.

“Jenny, the scanner, please.”

She leant across to press one of the switches when a spark of energy shot out from beneath a nearby panel. Jimmy pulled her to a safe distance while the Doctor adjusted the power levels. His fingers swathed in his red neckerchief.

“Are you quite alright, my dear?” the Time Lord asked.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” Jenny sucked her fingers. “What was that?”

He looked embarrassed. “A minor fault. I’ve been doing some adjustments. There are components in this console which were initially intended to be used for another TARDIS, but, well...”

“Another...? Do you mean someone else’s TARDIS? There’s more than one?” echoed Jimmy.

“It’s no matter. He’ll hardly miss them now. More importantly, we’ve no idea what lies beyond those doors. Solutions?”

Jenny shrugged. “Nothing ventured...”

The Doctor thought for a moment before he said, “Well, we’d better go outside and see where we are, shall we?”

With that, the Doctor pressed the door lever controls and the TARDIS interior doors opened. The Doctor headed off outside with Jenny and Jimmy, momentarily hesitating, following him.

Outside, the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy found themselves in a street within a futuristic city. The tower blocks were beautiful. Silver glass-panelled walls were all over the buildings. There were also futuristic-like vehicles that appeared to have the ability to fly instead of being on the road. Jenny and Jimmy also saw numerous cafés and restaurants. However, one thing the three TARDIS travellers noticed was that the streets were deserted. No living being was in sight whether human or alien.

“This is a bit of a dump,” Jimmy moaned.

“Where do you think we are, Doctor?” Jenny asked.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor responded grimly. “I’d better check my sonic screwdriver to see if I can get any readings.”

With that, he fished out his sonic screwdriver and switched it on. As the sonic screwdriver buzzed in the Doctor’s left hand, Jenny and Jimmy saw how focused he was.

“It’s a wonder he can still hold it anymore,” Jimmy muttered to Jenny.

Privately, Jenny had to agree. What had initially started as a silver wand with yellow banding had, over their travels, become roughly the size and shape of a canteen bottle. Bound by wires, grilles and other minute components that wouldn’t have looked too out of place in the back of a modern television set. Occasionally, he would rifle through his pockets and replace its ordinary head with a ready substitute, testing it again and again.

After waiting a while, Jimmy asked, “Well, Doctor? Anything useful or helpful you wish to say?”

The Doctor soon switched off his sonic screwdriver and pocketed it back in his frock coat.

“No, nothing significant yet,” he answered disappointed, “There’s something jamming the sonic screwdriver’s scanning frequencies.” After thinking for a short while, the Doctor said, “Come! Let’s explore this place to see if we can find anyone who can help us.”

The Doctor walked on ahead with Jenny and Jimmy following him.

“Shut the door on your way out please, Jimmy,” the Doctor called back.

At that, Jimmy went back to close the TARDIS doors tight shut. Momentarily, he did consider staying in the TARDIS rather than joining the Doctor and Jenny, but he had a feeling they couldn’t cope without him. And Jimmy remembered he had a responsibility to look after Jenny. So, after checking the TARDIS doors were shut, he soon caught up with Jenny and the Doctor.

As they walked, Jenny said, “You must have some idea of where we are, Doctor. Don’t you recognise this city we’re in? Perhaps we’re on Vega after all.”

“No,” the Doctor replied. “Vega’s not renowned for having major cities.”

“Perhaps we’re on Vega in the future,” Jenny said. “Maybe we’ve been flung forwards in time.”

“Maybe,” the Doctor answered. “But I know Vega’s planetary history well enough and I don’t remember it having cities like this one.”

“Except you’ve no idea where we are,” Jimmy goadingly reminded him. “You can’t know everything about the universe.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” the Doctor gently told him off. “You’ve made your point.”

“How come this place is so deserted?” Jenny wanted to know. “We haven’t come across any city dwellers since we’ve arrived.”

“That is a good point, Jenny,” the Doctor remarked. “And it’s one I’m not sure about. But don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll find the answers soon enough...”

Jimmy interrupted and said, “*Ssh!* Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” the Doctor asked.

“There was a howling sound nearby,” Jimmy told them.

“You’re imagining things, Jimmy,” the Doctor told him.

“No, I’m not,” Jimmy insisted. “Listen!”

Jenny and the Doctor soon heard what Jimmy had heard. It was a howling animalistic sound. It did seem close by and not very friendly.

Jenny clung to Jimmy for comfort. “I heard that!”

“Phew, I’m glad you did,” Jimmy said relieved, holding Jenny tightly. “I thought it was just me.”

“It sounds like a wolf,” Jenny remarked.

“Yes, it does,” the Doctor agreed. “Perhaps there are wolves in this city. Highly intelligent wolves! I remember visiting a planet where it had highly-intelligent kangaroos...”

“Doctor, look over there,” Jenny cried, pointing in a far-off direction.

They looked and saw a ghostly apparition in a street corner nearby. It was a wolf. It walked on all fours and had evil red-glowing eyes. The ghostly wolf snarled ferociously at the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy. The TARDIS trio backed away nervously once they saw it.

“Is that one of your highly-intelligent wolves, Doctor?” Jimmy asked. “Because it looks like one of those dumb wolves I’ve seen at zoos wanting to eat us.”

“Jimmy,” Jenny hushed him up. “Don’t speak so loudly! It might hear you!”

The Doctor meanwhile advanced towards the wolf and said reassuringly to his companions, “I’ll handle this. Let me do the talking.”

“Be careful, Doctor,” Jenny warned him.

Taking heed of Jenny’s warning, the Doctor raised his right hand to greet the wolf. “Greetings, dear friend,” he began. “I’m the Doctor and

these are my two friends Jenny and Jimmy. We wonder if you could help us. We were on our way to the planet Vega and it seems like..."

The Doctor found himself being interrupted, as the wolf let out a ferocious angry growl that echoed throughout the city. Jenny and Jimmy clung tightly to each other whilst the Doctor realised he wasn't getting anywhere.

"I don't think your talking to it is helping much," Jimmy muttered.

"No, I fear you could be right, Jimmy," the Doctor said grimly.

"What are we to do, Doctor?" Jenny asked anxiously.

The Doctor thought for a moment as the wolf glared viciously at them.

"Well," the Doctor said gradually. "In these kinds of situations, I'd say we'd back away slowly. Eyes to the ground. Don't challenge it."

This, they did. The Doctor, Jimmy and Jenny backed away slowly whilst the wolf looked at them hungrily. Very soon, the wolf growled, realising what the trio were doing, and made its slow advance towards them.

"Doctor," Jenny shuddered. "It's starting to follow us."

"It knows we're trying to get away," Jimmy realised.

"Yes," the Doctor agreed, as he fumbled for a bit. "Err, Jenny, Jimmy."

"Yes," Jenny and Jimmy answered in unison.

"Basically... *Run!*"

With that, the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy ran as fast as they could back the way they had come. The ghostly wolf began to chase after them.



The Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy kept running until they were in the centre of the city. They'd been running for a long time, trying to get away from the ghostly wolf. They had a few close shaves, but the wolf was still persistent in its chase.

The trio managed to find themselves in an alleyway. They hoped that they had managed to dodge their predator. Soon, they came to a crossroads where they could go north, east and west.

"Which way do we go, Doctor?" Jenny asked anxiously. "We can't go back the way we came!"

“I don’t know,” the Doctor replied. “Difficult choice, this, isn’t it? I can’t seem to get my bearings.”

“Come on, let’s hurry up,” Jimmy said impatiently, “The wolf will nearly be upon us!”

They turned to see the ferocious wolf howling behind them.

“Left, we go left!” Jenny cried, making the decision.

“Works for me,” Jimmy agreed.

Soon the TARDIS trio headed off in the westerly direction which was left. But they were stopped in their tracks as another wolf appeared and charged towards them.

“What?! There’s another one?!” Jimmy exclaimed, not believing it.

“Most fascinating. It’s a pack-lead instinct, I believe. They’re corralling us like sheep,” the Doctor remarked, before he was pulled the other way by his friends.

“Back the way we came!” Jenny insisted. “Come on!”

Heading back the way they had come and heading in the easterly direction, the trio soon came across another wolf charging up towards them, appearing out of nowhere.

“A third one?!” Jenny exclaimed, dumbstruck.

“This is crazy! This can’t be happening,” Jimmy said. “There can’t be three of them.”

“Only one option is left to us, I’m afraid,” the Doctor declared.

Heading back the way they had come, the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy tried to head in the northerly direction of the crossroads. The result was the same. A fourth wolf came charging towards them out of nowhere. The trio were back to square one, cornered on all sides – north, south, east and west – by four wolves.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jimmy remarked. “There can’t be four of them!”

“What are we going to do?” Jenny trembled, as she clung to Jimmy.

The four wolves charged hungrily towards them. Jimmy held Jenny tight to his chest and spun around, his back to the attacking animal, shielding her. It struck. Savagely. Painfully. But rather than colliding as solid matter

does to solid matter, animal to animal, it went straight through him. The Doctor realised that all four wolves seemed to be ghostly apparitions. Could ghosts really threaten them whilst in the alleyway?

“I’m alright!” Jimmy huffed. “It was a glancing blow.”

“Oh, it’s more than that, dear boy. There must be some way out of this,” the Doctor said as they were running out of options.

“You’d better hurry up with some ideas then,” he said impatiently.

“Doctor, look out,” Jenny cried.

Very soon, the first wolf from the south leapt up at the trio, snarling viciously. The Doctor managed to fight off the first wolf, using his Venusian aikido. A pressure point above the shoulder blades. The trick worked as the first wolf was thrown back down the alleyway where it had come from on its own momentum. The Doctor was surprised. The wolf made physical contact whilst appearing to be a ghost. How could that be, he wondered? It was only a matter of time before the first wolf got back up on its feet.

The Doctor was soon fighting off wolves, left, right and centre with the second, third and fourth wolves from east, west and north leaping up at him and his companions. Venusians had five arms, five legs and twelve eyestalks. The Doctor simply had his own bipedal form.

“Hi-yah!”

With as much karate chopping and shoves as he could, the Doctor managed to fend off the wolves. The wolves were relentless however as they wouldn’t give up whilst the Doctor defended himself and his companions. His friends were untrained, but just as efficient. They kicked, stomped and snarled as best they could, but the wolves had an elementary advantage. Any pain he could inflict was a nuisance compared to the hunger he suspected these creatures had endured in the empty city. Soon, they would overwhelm the three. As pack leader and defender, with the Doctor dead, there’d be little competition from Jimmy and Jenny.

“I don’t think I can hold them off much longer,” the Doctor told his friends.

It was then that Jenny spotted something on the ground. “Jimmy, look,” she cried. “There’s a manhole. How come we didn’t see it before?”

“Fine time to spot it now, Jenny,” Jimmy complained as they knelt down.

“Yeah but, it’s like it appeared out of nowhere,” Jenny argued. “That can’t be!”

“Did you two say you’ve found a manhole?” the Doctor asked as he continued to fight the wolves with his aikido.

The manhole cover was real. Jenny felt almost giddy with excitement. She turned to Jimmy. “Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have!”

He laughed nervously. “All the better to—”

“*Oof! Aagh!*” the Doctor yelped as one wolf latched onto his forearm.

“Come on, Jenny,” Jimmy said impatiently. “Let’s get it open!”

With that, Jenny and Jimmy began to unscrew the manhole cover on the ground. The Doctor kept fighting the four wolves for as long as he could. The same red eyes. Again and again and again. His frock coat was gradually getting torn to shreds as he fought. Gouging and slashing with tooth and claw.

Eventually, the two youngsters got the manhole cover open.

“Done it,” Jenny cheered, relieved. She regretted it afterwards as a horrible smell wafted up from below. “Ugh! Might have known it was a sewer we were getting ourselves into!”

“Stop complaining,” Jimmy cried. “Get in there and hurry up!”

With that, Jenny got down into the sewer, helped by Jimmy. Soon, Jimmy followed into the sewer as he called out to the Doctor, “Doctor, get in here quick! Replace the manhole cover as you go down!”

The Doctor managed to get all four wolves down to the ground in a heap as he fought them off. Very soon, the Doctor made his way to the manhole to climb down into the sewer. Like Jimmy told him to, the Doctor replaced the manhole cover once he was inside. It was just in time as the wolves gradually got up from the ground. It was too late for them as the manhole cover was sealed shut once the Doctor and his friends were inside.

As they climbed down the ladder in the sewer, the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy took in their surroundings and coped with the smell. It wasn't pleasant being in the sewer, but it was far better than being in the city.

As they took in their surroundings, Jimmy and Jenny expressed what they felt after agreeing to help the Doctor and after all the visits they've had to alien planets since joining him in the TARDIS. The futuristic technology planted all around the sewer tunnel was unusual though. It wouldn't have been in the sewers in Jenny and Jimmy's time.

"I miss going back to my job," Jimmy moaned. "Why couldn't I have gone back there instead?"

"I wonder if skipping my A-Levels for this was a good idea," Jenny wondered.

"What I want to know is how come there were four wolves in that alleyway when we were chased by one wolf in the street earlier," the Doctor pondered aloud. "And how come they seemed to be ghostly apparitions when I fought them off physically?"

"And how come that manhole cover appeared out of nowhere for us to conveniently get into these sewers?" Jenny wanted to know. "Did we really miss seeing it when being attacked?"

"Who cares about the answers to these questions?" Jimmy complained. "Let's get out of this dump and hope we're still alive by the time we get back to the TARDIS."

"Quite right, Jimmy," the Doctor seemed to agree. "Let's throw ourselves into the deep end first before we get our questions answered."

"That's not exactly what I meant," countered Jimmy.

The Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy went further into the sewer. They explored for some time with the sewer tunnel being darkly lit, despite some flickering lights emanating from certain pieces of technology placed on the walls.

"Do you think it was a wolf that brought the TARDIS here, Doctor?" Jenny asked. "Could it be the ruler of this place?"

“It’s a likely possibility,” the Doctor replied. “But why rule a city when there aren’t any people about. Unless they’re all wolves and all but one of them died out.”

“Sounds lonely.”

“That could explain our pursuers. Rather than being apparitions of the once living now gone, they existed as city guardians and companion creatures.”

“Gone rogue?”

“Or functioning as intended—”

The Doctor was interrupted again as Jimmy said, “Hush! Listen, everyone! I heard something behind us!”

The trio heard the unmistakable howl of a wolf echoing behind them. They turned around and became afraid.

“Oh no,” Jenny quivered.

“They’ve followed us down here, haven’t they?” Jimmy realised.

“Well, that didn’t take them long, did it?” the Doctor remarked.

“Doctor, Jimmy! Look!” Jenny cried out as they saw a ferocious wolf appear in the sewer tunnel, with its teeth clenched and snarling ferociously. It advanced towards the trio.

Jenny and Jimmy were scared whilst the Doctor became puzzled. “Odd. I thought it was four wolves we were currently dealing with. How come we’re back to one? And how come it’s still a ghostly apparition before us?”

Whilst this was true, it didn’t concern the Doctor’s friends as Jimmy said, terrified, “Doctor, we have to run and get away!”

But the Doctor was unperturbed. “This is all very fascinating.”

“Come on, Doctor!” Jenny prompted him. “We have to run now! This wolf is getting closer!”

“It’s getting narrower up ahead,” Jimmy squinted. “Don’t get lost!”

Whilst Jenny and Jimmy began to run ahead in the sewer tunnel, the Doctor remained fascinated by the ghostly wolf coming towards them. After staying on the spot for a while and with the wolf howling, showing his horrifying teeth, the Doctor took his cue and began to follow after

Jenny and Jimmy in the sewer tunnel. The wolf pursued them whilst they ran on.



The Doctor and Jenny ran together for a short while in the sewer tunnel. “Doctor, can we stop a minute?” Jenny asked, panting for breath.

“Why, Jenny? What’s the matter?” the Doctor asked.

“The wolf isn’t chasing us,” she told him.

They came to a halt and looked but the wolf wasn’t behind them in the tunnel.

“Yes, you’re right,” the Doctor said. “There’s no sign of the wolf anywhere.”

“Where do you suppose it’s gone?” Jenny enquired.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor replied. “But as a ghostly apparition – and I don’t believe in ghosts for your information – it must have returned to its point of origin. I wonder where its power originates from? There must be some intelligence behind all this.”

Jenny then realised something. “Jimmy? Where’s Jimmy?”

The Doctor realised this too. When they’d stopped, they hadn’t noticed Jimmy wasn’t with them.

“I thought he was with you,” the Doctor said.

Jenny worked it out. “He must have tripped as we were running down the corridor. He did cry out, but I was too scared to make sure he was okay.”

“That could explain why the wolf vanished,” the Doctor said. “It managed to latch onto Jimmy when he tripped and fell in the tunnel.”

“You mean he could be dead,” Jenny became horrified. “The wolf couldn’t have gobbled him up, could he?”

“Now steady on, Jenny,” the Doctor consoled her. “If that were so, it would have doubled in strength and continued to hunt after us, surely? Perhaps Jimmy escaped within an inch of his life. He’s a strong lad, you know.”

“I hope you’re right, Doctor,” Jenny said, unconvinced.

“Well, let’s go back and see if we can find Jimmy, shall we?” the Doctor suggested.

But as the Doctor and Jenny were about to head back the way they had come, they were surprised to see a metal ladder appear before them. They were silent for a moment.

“This wasn’t here before, was it?” Jenny said. “It wasn’t here when we ran in the tunnel.”

“No, it wasn’t,” the Doctor concurred. “It’s most peculiar! First, a mysterious manhole cover, now a ladder appearing out of nowhere before us in the tunnel! It can’t be a coincidence.”

“It’s almost as if someone’s trying to lead us to a place he or she wants us to be,” Jenny deduced. “It’s like we’re being guided somewhere in the city via the sewers!”

“Yes, that intelligence I was talking about,” the Doctor pondered aloud. “I wonder why it would go to all that trouble. I’ve met intelligent cities in my time, but none so circumspect. Even on Exxilon. And why have a wolf chasing after us in the city and down here in the sewers? Like I said before, it’s most peculiar.”

“I’m more concerned about Jimmy,” Jenny told him. “Come on, Doctor! Let’s go and find him!”

Jenny took the Doctor by the hand. She became determined to head back the way they had come to find Jimmy, ignoring the metal ladder. They didn’t get far as the ladder materialised before them in their path. Jenny and the Doctor tried to dodge the ladder as they continued, but the ladder kept appearing in their path. It wouldn’t let them pass. In fact, the ladder seemed to be pushing them back. Like it was preventing them to head for where they wanted to go. After a few minutes, the Doctor and Jenny gave up.

“It seems we have no choice,” the Doctor said.

“Apparently not,” Jenny grumbled.

A moment’s silence ensued.

“Perhaps Jimmy will be wherever this ladder’s taking us upstairs,” the Doctor suggested.

Jenny thought about that and said, “Yeah, you could be right, Doctor.”
“It’s always worth checking out,” the Doctor encouraged her. “There is goodness behind just as many mysteries as evil, you know.”
Jenny didn’t want to go up the ladder to wherever it would take them. Eventually she said, “Shall I go up first or you?”
“Oh, ladies first,” the Doctor said obligingly.
With that, Jenny climbed up the ladder and the Doctor followed. They wondered what they would find at the top of the ladder.

Having climbed up the ladder, they found themselves in what could be described as a decontamination chamber. They were cleansed after being in the sewers. They then entered a reception room which was clean and bright compared to being in the sewers. They sat down on chairs and waited for quite a while.

“Perhaps it’s someone you know who’s summoned us here,” Jenny suggested. “Perhaps it’s an old friend of yours that needs help.”

“Or an old enemy,” the Doctor responded. “Anything’s possible.”

“Goodness, you said.”

“Well, I do like to be thorough.”

“Whoever brought us here, they like to keep us waiting.” It was then Jenny realised. “Our movements must have been tracked ever since we got here. I wonder how that was done and what technology was used.”

“Pretty advanced, I’m sure,” the Doctor remarked. “It could be mechanical drones with cloaking devices to prevent us from seeing them. I can check with the sonic screwdriver if you like.”

Jenny fidgeted with her thumbs, becoming anxious. “I wonder what’s happened to Jimmy. He can’t have been killed, surely?”

“Don’t fret, Jenny,” the Doctor tried to reassure her. “I’m sure everything will be explained to us once we’ve been attended to.”

Eventually, somebody did come to meet them. It was a blonde woman in a smart suit. She strolled into reception to greet the Doctor and Jenny. She put on a broad smile. It was almost fierce. The Doctor and Jenny stood up to meet her.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting,” the woman touched her scarf. “I had to prepare things for your arrival.”

“We were expected then,” the Doctor said.

“Of course,” the woman replied. “You’re the Doctor and Jenny, aren’t you?”

“You know us,” Jenny said surprised.

“Yes,” the woman said, smiling broadly again. “I know you both as well as your friend Jimmy. He’s currently in my office.”

Jenny was even more surprised. “Can we see him?”

“You shall have the opportunity to see your friend Jimmy again, my dear,” the woman answered.

“And who exactly are you?” the Doctor asked, becoming suspicious. “How do you know so much about us?”

The woman’s smile became sinister as she said, “All in good time, Doctor. If you and Jenny follow me, your questions will soon be answered.”

With that, the woman led the way to her office. Jenny and the Doctor were suspicious about this, but they didn’t argue. They could both feel it. Some... power. Drawing them into the next room. They followed the mysterious woman, wanting to see Jimmy again. After all, what harm could befall them in such pleasant company?

Upstairs, in the woman’s office, the Doctor and Jenny were asked to sit down. They were offered a cup of tea, but the Doctor and Jenny politely refused. Jenny just wanted to see Jimmy.

“Very well,” the woman obliged. “Here he is!”

With that, the woman pressed a button on a remote control, which she took out from her suit pocket. A curtain was unveiled and the Doctor and Jenny were horrified to see Jimmy trapped inside a glass cubicle.

Jimmy banged on the glass once he saw his friends, “Doctor, Jenny!” he cried. “Get me out of here! Help me out, please!”

Jenny ran over to Jimmy in the cubicle, trying to find a mechanism to open it, but couldn’t.

“I can’t, Jimmy,” Jenny said. “I can’t find a button to open it.”

The woman manoeuvred herself in front of Jenny’s eyeline. “Step away. Over to the cubicle with the Doctor and your friend.”

Against every conceivable impulse in her body, Jenny obeyed, moving back towards the Doctor. The Doctor himself attempted to intervene, but he could feel it in the blonde woman’s gaze. A power... Something that made him sick to his stomach.

“You will do as I say,” she said.

“Mesmeric bafflegab like yours won’t work on me...” he challenged.

“Stay, then,” she snuffled, an itch to her voice. “Your legs are like stone. Both of you.”

They tried moving and found they couldn’t.

“Let our friend go, whoever you are, dear woman,” the Doctor demanded.

The blonde woman laughed out loud as she said, “No can do, Doctor. Your friend will stay in that cubicle until you agree to my terms.”

Astounded, the Doctor calmly enquired. “Who are you? What are you?”

The woman laughed further before she said, “Haven’t you worked it out, Doctor? I’m the Big Bad Wolf! And you three have fallen into my trap!”

The TARDIS trio were gobsmacked.

“She’s the wolf?!” Jenny exclaimed. “How can she be the wolf, Doctor?”

“She’s a werewolf, isn’t she?” Jimmy deduced. “I guessed that when she teleported me from the sewers to here. It was dark... I thought she was you, Jenny.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jenny.

He shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

“And I suppose you’re using holographic technology to project an image of yourself as the wolf, as well as four wolves to chase us in the city?” the Doctor surmised. “Four or one, it was always the same face, wasn’t it? Your face.”

“Well guessed, Doctor,” the Bad Wolf said. “And very handy technology it is too.”

The Bad Wolf patted a black box on her office desk to show the Doctor and his friends her holographic technology.

“Congratulations on your feats of technology,” said the Doctor. “Most ingenious, I must say. I take it you’re in charge of this city here.”

“I rule everything that goes on in this city,” the Bad Wolf declared. “You will give me what I want in order to continue my existence. Otherwise, I’ll kill you and your friends.”

“What do you want from me?” the Doctor enquired. “You seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to get me and my friends here.”

The wolf pressed a button on her remote control. A nearby screen switched on. The TARDIS trio looked to see a number of people strapped onto a crude metal frame hanging on a wall. The Doctor absorbed every detail he could. Even the mundane could prove to be a vital clue.

“Is that... people you’ve got there?” Jenny declared, horrified. “What have you done to them?”

“That’s sick!” Jimmy said, angry and sickened. “They look... *drained* to me!”

“That’s precisely what’s happened to them,” the Doctor realised. He turned to the Bad Wolf. “You’re using them to drain their life-force to generate power for your city. Like... vampires draining blood from their victims.”

“This city used to be ruled by vampires,” the Bad Wolf said. “Before they died out, thanks to me, I managed to acquire their technology when I came to live on this planet. A city once stolen can be stolen again and it was amply established as a feeding ground already. I used all that was left of this planet’s society in order to sustain myself. Their... I suppose, they’d call them table scraps, mostly. I feed on the carcasses to generate my city’s power. Now I’m running out of bodies to generate my city’s power and preserve my existence.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the Doctor said, not meaning it, “but I don’t see how this affects me.”

“Don’t you, Time Lord?” the Bad Wolf said impatiently. “I sensed your presence when you were travelling in time and space.”

“That’s impossible.”

She unwound her scarf, just enough to show her neck. Raw and red. “Not to the ancient enemy. I need you, Doctor. I need your TARDIS to collect more bodies. To go to other planets and find the resources I need to maintain my existence and this city.”

“Passive resources? Livestock and such?”

“No.”

“No?”

She smiled. The same sinister, cunning smile from earlier outside the office. “No.”

“Don’t do it, Doctor,” Jenny cried out. “Don’t let that horrible wolf get what she wants.”

“Yeah, she’s a nut,” Jimmy joined in, whilst inside the glass cubicle.

“Don’t worry, you two,” the Doctor assured them, “I wasn’t planning on helping her. I cannot help you.”

“I’m honest,” she countered, that same itch to her tone. “I’d hoped that would be enough.”

“And yet, I still cannot trust you.”

“So brazen. If you don’t help me, Doctor,” the Bad Wolf said, her voice trembling, “then I shall kill your friend Jimmy in an instant whilst he’s in the cubicle. The rulers above this city were not an uncivilised society. They elevated the consumption of blood and vittle to a refined art. Even in their dying days where consumption was all...” she held her face. “All... What was I saying?”

“Don’t you know?”

She looked over at Jimmy and continued as if she hadn’t hesitated, “Chambers such as these were used to tenderise their meat. Quickly. Efficiently. All I need do is press a button on my remote control and...”

Electrical currents were sent through to Jimmy in his cubicle. Jimmy shook and shuddered whilst he was being electrocuted. Nose-to-glass, the Doctor was almost blinded. Jenny banged on the glass, horrified.

“No! Jimmy!” she cried.

Thankfully, the electrical currents stopped once the Bad Wolf pressed the button on the remote control to finish her demonstration. Jimmy slumped in the glass cubicle, weakened but still alive.

Jenny turned angrily to the Bad Wolf, “You horrid monster! How dare you do that to Jimmy?!”

The Doctor thumbed his lapel. “You rule here, but what rules you?”

“Unless the Doctor gives me what I desire most, then your friend shall die in an instant,” the Bad Wolf said to Jenny as she turned to face the Doctor. “It’s his choice, after all. Jimmy wants to go home, Doctor. He’s tired of the journey. Tired of the fear. I can scent it. Bring him home, Doctor, take him back—with me.”

“Maybe your threats would work on me to do your bidding,” the Doctor said, “but you’ve overlooked something.”

“And what’s that?” the Bad Wolf demanded.

Tucked against his chest, the Doctor took out his sonic screwdriver, swapping around its heads, and said, “I can easily disconnect the power cables that feed electricity into that cubicle with Jimmy inside. I can free him before we three can escape your lair!”

The Bad Wolf laughed out loud and said, “I haven’t overlooked anything, Doctor. If you attempted to free your friend from that cubicle, I could easily transform and latch onto you three, eating you up before you escaped. I have your ship, I don’t need you.”

“That is true,” the Doctor admitted. “But there’s something else you’ve overlooked. You have your remote control to do your bidding, whereas my sonic screwdriver *also* acts as a remote control! And with one button on my sonic screwdriver, I can summon the TARDIS here to prevent you latching onto us as we escape!”

With that, the Doctor pressed his sonic screwdriver. Very soon, the TARDIS echoed, whooshing and groaning, as it began to materialise around the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy, still in his cubicle.

Horried, the Bad Wolf cried, “No! You can’t do this! You can’t escape from me!”

As the TARDIS materialised around them, the Doctor used his sonic screwdriver to disconnect the power cables to Jimmy's cubicle.

"Sorry, my dear," the Doctor said. "But your time in this city has dulled your senses."

The TARDIS soon engulfed the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy and they were safely inside. The TARDIS soon took off again, whooshing and groaning to make an escape.

"No!" the Bad Wolf roared as she slowly transformed from the blonde woman into the wolf itself. "Come back, Doctor! I command you to come back!"

But it was no use. The TARDIS was already gone, leaving her alone in her office. The Bad Wolf growled angrily, getting into a tantrum as she smashed things in her office. It took awhile for her to calm down. She'd been stupid, she knew that. Instinct had overridden her best judgement as it had with the hunt. She'd correct that. Very soon, she knew where the Doctor and her friends would be heading. She left her office and headed for the elevator.



The TARDIS materialised somewhere in the centre of the planet. Eventually, the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy stepped out. The Doctor had freed Jimmy from his cubicle with the sonic screwdriver and there was no worry about him being electrocuted. Jimmy was getting stronger too. Still grumpy, but a lot better! The Doctor locked the TARDIS doors to make sure no-one could get in.

"Where are we now?" Jimmy asked. "What part of this city have you brought us down to?"

"We're in the heart of the planet," the Doctor replied.

"Why have you brought us down here, Doctor?" Jenny asked.

"We need to find the people that the wolf has trapped down here," the Doctor explained. "She said feed, not fed, remember? Present tense. We need to set them free. Let's take a look down this corridor, shall we?"

They were in a dark gloomy corridor and it wasn't very inviting, save a few lights on. The Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy treaded carefully as they made their way through another door.

The door electronically slid open as they found themselves in another room. Jenny and Jimmy were horrified by what they saw. The Doctor expected that what they were about to see would be horrifying. People were trapped on a crude metal frame to generate the city's power. They were drained, almost to the point of death.

"There must be something we can do for them," Jenny said. "Surely we can set them free!"

"Why bother," Jimmy wondered out loud. "They look dead that I doubt if we can do anything for them."

"On the contrary, Jimmy," the Doctor said. "There's a 25% chance that we can save these people before they are drained completely."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Jenny asked impatiently. "Let's rescue them!"

"It's not as simple as that, Jenny," the Doctor restrained her. "The metal frame is bound to be electrified. I don't want to damage these poor people unnecessarily. There has to be a control panel somewhere to power down the frame before we can set the victims free. Let's see if we can find it, shall we?"

With that, the trio had a look around. It was a challenge to find the control panel to shut down the metal frame, but the Doctor was determined.

Eventually, Jimmy came to a door marked:

GENERATOR HUB

And he called out, "Doctor, Jenny! Is this what we're looking for?"

The Doctor and Jenny joined him where he was at the generator hub door.

Pleased, the Doctor said, "Well done, Jimmy. This is exactly what I had in mind. Let's hope we're not too late to save the people on the metal frame."

At that moment, the nearby door slid open as the Bad Wolf charged through. She growled angrily once she saw the trio at the generator hub door and she charged straight towards them. Whatever thought of bargaining forgotten.

“It’s the wolf!” Jenny cried. “The wolf has found us!”

“We’ve got to get inside,” Jimmy joined in.

“Quick, you two,” the Doctor said urgently. “You go in first! I’ll lock the door once we’re in!”

With that, Jenny and Jimmy went inside. The generator hub door slid open electronically to allow the two youngsters inside. The Doctor followed them inside as he looked to see the Bad Wolf nearly upon them. He pressed the button to close and lock the door whilst he and his companions were already inside. Once the door was closed and locked, the Bad Wolf ended up crashing into it with a bump.

After getting up from the floor, the Bad Wolf scratched angrily at the door with her claws. Growling furiously, the blonde woman’s voice came through the wolf, saying, “Let me in! You can’t stop my power! Let me in at once! You’ll regret opposing me!” Her claws scraped against the metal. “Please...”

Inside the generator hub, the Doctor had his ear to the door. Listening. He shook his head sadly and scouted the place to find the controls he needed to shut down the metal frame generating the city’s power. Jenny and Jimmy watched. The Doctor pressed a number of buttons and switches at the control panel to work out what the settings were and what the safest procedure was to shut down the metal frame without harming anyone. Jenny and Jimmy looked to the door, as the Bad Wolf scratched it from the other side, trying to get in.

“Have you found the controls yet?” Jenny asked anxiously.

“Not yet, Jenny,” the Doctor replied. “I need to learn the arrangement. If only I had more time...”

“Yeah, well, you haven’t,” Jimmy said unhelpfully. “Get a move on, Doctor! That wolf will smash her way in here to try and get us!”

“Why only one?”

“What?”

“Why only one wolf in the sewer? That’s what’s bothering me...”

Jimmy tried changing mental gears. “Does it take effort to make these things?”

“Yes, it must...” the Doctor scratched his nose.

Just then, the scratching and the banging outside stopped. Jenny and Jimmy looked to the door confused before they looked back to the Doctor.

“It’s stopped,” Jenny declared.

“Why would it do that?” Jimmy wondered, disbelieving. “Is the door really hard to break down? Were we right?”

Just then, the Doctor had his eureka moment. “*Aha!* Got it! These controls are exactly what I’m looking for. They can power down the wolf’s energy supply since they’re connected to grids filtered throughout the city network. They link back to the metal frame that generates power.”

“So if we shut down the grids filtered throughout the city network...” Jenny began to realise.

“We’ll not only shut down the city’s power grid, but we’ll also cut off the wolf’s life supply too,” the Doctor finished for her. “She’s been alone for so long. Her prey, here. When was her last decent hunt?”

“Are you trying to tell us she’s out of shape?” asked Jimmy.

“The exertion is unusual to her. She’s using so much energy just for us. That’ll be our opportunity to stop the wolf’s reign of terror as well as find a way to resolve the issue without any bloodshed.”

“Well, get on with it then,” Jimmy said impatiently. “No use talking about it! Shut down the city and the wolf’s power before we get mauled alive!”

At that moment, a holographic projection of a ghostly-like wolf appeared in the generator hub room. Jenny, Jimmy and the Doctor reacted in horror once they saw the ghostly apparition.

“Too late,” Jenny cried, clinging to Jimmy in an embrace. “It’s already here!”

Jimmy held Jenny as he cried, “Do it, Doctor! Shut down the power!”
“I’ll huff and I’ll puff...” said the Doctor.

The Bad Wolf was about to leap on them before the Doctor declared,
“And... Blow your circuit in! *Voilà!*”

Once he pressed a button, the Bad Wolf soon vanished. The room eventually darkened. All the lights went out. A thump echoed from outside the generator hub room. The Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy became silent for a few moments.

“Did it work?” Jenny checked. “Has the wolf been stopped?”

“Yes, I believe she has,” the Doctor replied. “That thump outside was the wolf collapsing, you see. She lost her power once the city grid shut down. She’ll be out for a while, I should imagine. It was touch and go, but we managed in the end.”

“And you had to have the lights out where we are,” Jimmy complained. “Thanks for that, Doctor. How are we supposed to see our way out through the dark?”

“Must you complain about everything, Jimmy?” the Doctor remarked.

“I can still taste the mercury fillings in my teeth, Doctor.”

“Now, really!”

Jimmy was about to argue further before Jenny interrupted him, “Do you have any torches on you, Doctor?”

“Yes, I believe I have,” the Doctor said, as he fished out a few pocket torches, giving one each to Jenny and Jimmy. Switching their torches on, they could barely see their way in the darkened room. “Let’s see if the wolf’s been knocked out, shall we?” the Doctor suggested.

With that, Jenny and Jimmy followed. They made their way to the generator room door. They had trouble sliding it open since the power was out, but they eventually got the door open. They looked down to see the wolf sprawled on the floor. It seemed to be phasing in and out between a blonde woman and a wolf. The Doctor wasn’t sure if the wolf was originally human or not.

“So, what do we do with her?” Jenny asked. “We can’t just leave her.”

“We can always send her off into outer space,” Jimmy suggested. “She wanted more hunting grounds, let’s give them to her. On some barren rock somewhere.”

“Jimmy,” Jenny scolded him. “We can’t be that cruel!”

“Why shouldn’t we?” Jimmy answered back. “She was cruel to those people stuck on the metal frame to generate her city’s power. She deserves her comeuppance. Somewhere she can do no one any harm.”

Whilst Jenny disagreed with Jimmy, she asked the Doctor, “Is it safe to take those people off the metal frame now, Doctor?”

The Doctor, distracted by the Bad Wolf’s phasing in and out from animal to woman, used his sonic screwdriver to scan her whilst answering Jenny’s question.

“Yes, I think it should be safe,” he said distantly. “Though it’d be better not to take them off too quickly, as the metal frame is still emitting energy whilst powering down. Wait for an hour or so and we’ll take each person off one by one from the frame.”

“What are you doing, Doctor?” Jimmy enquired, puzzled by him being absorbed with scanning the Bad Wolf on the floor.

The Doctor eventually stopped scanning with his sonic screwdriver as he stood up to answer Jimmy’s question. “There’s a massive amount of energy flowing through the wolf woman’s body. As well as receiving power from the metal frame generated by the victims put on there, she’s also been feeding power back into the grid network itself. She’s like a powerhouse creating a feedback loop. The wolf currently has tonnes of excess energy inside her.”

“So, where does that leave us?” Jenny wondered.

The Doctor pondered a bit before a thought came to him and he said, smiling, “I think I have an idea on how to solve this city’s problems, satisfying both the wolf and the planet’s population.”



Hours later, the Doctor, Jenny and Jimmy were in the city streets, seeing the people, who had been prisoners of the Bad Wolf, roaming freely and being happy. There was a lot to be done and rebuilt in the city, but the

Doctor managed to persuade the city's new administrator that things would work out well if everyone worked together.

"Can't believe this city was once deserted," Jimmy remarked. "It's now bustling with activity."

"Yes," the Doctor chuckled. "Quite a turnaround, isn't it?"

"I like it. A city should have life to it, you know."

Jenny wasn't certain about the arrangement made in the city. "Are you sure putting the Bad Wolf on that metal frame was a good idea, Doctor? It seems rather cruel to do that."

Jimmy scoffed, "Only you would have sympathy for the wolf after all she's done."

"Remember, Jimmy, we still don't know how much of that behaviour was her and how much was the beast. She was alone. For how long, we don't know."

"Alright, Jenny, but she didn't start that way. She started," he gestured around, "from a place like this."

"The wolf will be fine," the Doctor reassured Jenny. "She'll have her moments of disgruntlement, but I've assured her that so long as she doesn't harm people, she can continue to rule the planet from where she is in that frame. At least, that's what she'll believe. In reality, they'll be allowed to get on with their own lives and she'll have that holographic technology embedded in her to provide simulations for her in order to stop her being bored."

"Suppose the technology runs out on her," Jenny suggested. "She won't like having to stay put on a metal frame without getting to hunt in the city like she normally would."

"Well, she's going to have to lump it should it ever happen," the Doctor said. "Besides, as I told her, if she's nice to the people who were put on that metal frame before her, maybe unlike the vampires before them, they can help her to cope with her animalistic tendencies whilst having to be put on the frame. They might come up with an alternative solution if she's good to them. It's not an ideal situation at present, I grant you, but it's the best I can come up with."

“I suppose so,” Jenny said disheartened before persisting further, “Will we come back to this planet? To check how it’s going with the Bad Wolf being put on the metal frame?”

“My dear Jenny, don’t tell me you’re afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”

“Not I,” she smiled.

“Oh I’m sure we’ll have ample opportunity to come back to this planet someday,” the Doctor said. “It might take a while for the TARDIS to get around to returning to this planet in say...a hundred years’ time, but...”

“We’re not in a hurry to get back, are we?” Jimmy interjected.

“Quite right, my boy,” the Doctor said. “There are more important things to deal with at present. Like our visit to the planet Vega. The Time Lords will get angry if they realise I haven’t been there yet.”

“Perhaps we should get a move on then,” Jenny suggested.

“Quite right,” the Doctor replied. “Come on! Let’s make our way back to the TARDIS. I’ll contact them from there and let them know about this former vampire colony. That should smooth things over quite nicely. It’s still down in the centre of this planet where we left it. I hope the wolf won’t be distracted by us whilst she sleeps.”

“And he said this was going to be a ‘short trip’ to the planet Vega,” Jimmy murmured quietly to Jenny. “A ‘short trip’? Yeah, right!”

“I imagine it’s going to take a while before we get to Vega,” Jenny said back. “I don’t mind that. I’m happy to have some more adventures with you and the Doctor.”

“That makes one of us,” Jimmy scoffed.

“Really?” persisted Jenny.

His face softened. “Maybe.”

“Incidentally,” the Doctor said to his friends. “I found out what the name of this planet is. It’s Florana! Funny that! It’s changed significantly since the last time I visited it.”

FALSE FLAG

By Chris Taylor

From an idea by Marshall Tankersley

The temporal egress chamber was sleek as it was spartan. A cylindrical chamber, silvery-blue and composed of curved wall segments that alternated in their distance from a central plinth. White strips of vertical light glowed from the gaps in the wall. Through the single opening entered a young woman. She was dressed as was in olive-green soldier's togs. A six-shot revolver was strapped to her side, a thin knife sheathed just before it. Her hair was blonde, chin length, and just a little bedraggled. She was lean of figure and sharp of face. Her eyes were grey and thin and took in everything around her.

On the opposite sides of the plinth, two men snapped to attention. One taller and stockier than the other. Strapped to the tall man's belt, a short sword and wide barrelled single-shot flintlock pistol. The short man carried a military-issue medkit, green burlap. The rank patches at the edges of the tall man's collar, stylized as rainclouds with two warbling lines beneath each, marked him a Major. The other fellow's, which were unaccentuated clouds, was shown to be a Lieutenant.

Her own, less stylized, patches claimed her a Chief Petty Officer, when in truth she was a Colonel and in full command of the operation. All part of the layers of deception that swirled around it. Bodyguards received enough respect to be kept well clear of by most people, but few ever really looked at their faces. Fearsome, yet anonymous.

She gave both men a final looking-over. Their hair was straight and a similar shade of golden-blond to her own, and had grown out just a bit longer than was military length. Their uniforms, like hers, were worn and patched in many a place. Carefully manicured to appear part of an army on its last legs, one that had abandoned its dress code due to exhaustion

of both morale and materials.

“You’re looking a little pale,” she told the big one, speaking in the language of those they were soon to be travelling among. “Do I need to replace you?”

“No, Colonel.” His mastery of the Thal language was superb, and he retained sense of mind to keep to its use. “It’s just a latent reaction to the beard suppressants. The med-tech says it should go away soon.”

“It might help him look like he’s just getting over a bout of radiation sickness,” offered the smaller one. “Considering where we’re going, it couldn’t hurt.”

She considered this. “Good thinking. Very well, then, are we prepared?” Two curt ‘ayes’ was all she needed to hear. She removed from the plinth a black leather wristband affixed to a flat metallic device covered in buttons, with one blinking light and a silent comm-screen. The device knew where to go, she only needed to wrap it about her wrist and tap her command codes into it. “Ten seconds.” More than enough time to clasp both of her fellow saboteurs by the hand and they to complete the circle. The air became dry around them, infused with the tang of ozone.

Irresistible, blue-white brightness invaded her eyes. She winced reflexively, but that did nothing to drive the searing light away. It permeated her, infused her, and left her just as quickly. Several blinks later, she determined herself to be in a more confined room than before. It smelled of cleaning compounds and old paint. Whoever had programmed the egress chamber to be so dim had known what they were doing: going from one dark space to another should have expedited a defensive posture. Too bad said individual hadn’t accounted for the effect of the vortex manipulators on their retinae.

Never a plan made that doesn’t get something amiss. Though I prefer it to take more than a minute, she mused, before ordering the tallest of the trio to secure the door.

Her eyes were plenty adjusted to the dim sights of a supply closet, with barely enough room for them amongst the shelves and tools, before the fourth member of their party made themselves apparent: four knocks

upon the door, which the big man answered in kind. Then two return knocks, spaced far enough and made with such diminishing volume that they could have been confused for footsteps walking away.

The tall one undid the doorknob's locking mechanism, and moved back far enough that he wouldn't be seen from the outside.

The door opened just enough for a rail-thin shape to pass around it. It closed and locked the door with equal speed. Then flipped on a light switch without looking for it. The shape's source was a doe-eyed man with a tool belt around his waist. He wore olive overalls over a like-coloured jumpsuit.

Sunlight had not met his skin in many a day. His smile shone all the brighter for it. "Hello, all."

"You're late," the 'Major' deadpanned, still squinting against the return of partial illumination.

The 'Lieutenant' was more heated, though to his credit he kept his tirade to a harsh whisper. "We could have been halfway to the target in the time you took! Or we could have been exposed just standing about here! Had to fight our way out! Blown the operation before it even—"

A raised hand from the commanding officer ceased his complaint. His shoulders remained tense.

"Couldn't be helped," the spy insisted, showing no offence. "There was a snap inspection at my duty station, I couldn't get out. Ever since this new weapon program started kicking into gear, all the brass can think to do is keep the help staff on their toes. And there's hardly any worry of being found out on *this* floor, I guarantee you."

"It's alright, gentlemen," the woman said. "We've plenty of time. That is, assuming you have our walking papers?"

The spy unlatched his coveralls and flipped the top outward. Revealing a secret flap from which he produced three black envelopes. "Took me a while to get the new barcodes on them," he said. "If you'd turned up here three days ago, I wouldn't have had them ready. Three days from now? Might not be any good."

One at a time, as well as the limited space would allow, the infiltration

team claimed their passports to the run of the Thal Defence Dome Four. “Lieutenant Dovix, Combat Medic.” The little fellow took his envelope. “C.P.O. Faran, Counter-Assassination.” The ‘Chief Petty Officer’ took hers.

“Major Cheyeth, Weapons Systems Analyst.” The big man took his.

The skinny man reset the clasps of his overalls while declaring, in utmost confidence, “And for those of you who’ve never met me, or did and never knew it, the name of the moment is Tivree. Lowly Maintenance Technician and purloiner of useful things.”

Faran allowed herself a grin at the spy’s bravado. It was best to let him feel clever before breaking the bad news. “I’ll be needing one more thing from you, Tivree. Your vortex manipulator.”

Tivree’s smile vanished. “Pardon, Ma’am?”

She held out her hand. “New orders from on high. I’ve already submitted your objections.”

Tivree bit his lip, but he acquiesced. As she unstrapped her own device, he took the more circuitous route of removing a bit of scrap from his belt, as well as one of his buttons, and also slipping something out of the heel of his left boot. Collectively producing the pieces of his own manipulator, minus the leather backing. Faran took the parts, wrapped them in her own armband, and tapped in another code. Streams of electric light enveloped the combined technology and faded away, taking the tools with it. On their way to a supply locker in the Fifty-Second Century, perhaps, if they ever re-constituted at all.

“If we survive this mission, we can rebuild them,” she told them all. “If not, that’s what our disintegration implants are for. I trust you don’t need any starker reminders of what’s at stake if we allow history to take its natural course on Skaro?”

Three heads nodded silently.

“Glad we won’t be wasting any time on that discussion.” Faran regarded the spy. “I take it that since you slipped us these time coordinates, that the anti-radiation boosters have arrived from Dome Five.”

“That they did. The Medical Commander is still clearing the containers

up topside, last I heard.” Dovix’s face reddened following Tivree’s statement. Doubtless livid about how close they’d come to losing their way in.

“Our names are supposed to be on that ingress list,” Cheyeth pointed out, in far calmer manner than the alternative. “Our arrival data will be checked once we get anywhere near the Target.”

“And they will be,” the spy assured. “We’re on Sub-Floor Three. Enlisted Barracks. Snug between the surface-level loading bays and the experimental warhead production floor. Which means we’re in position to squeeze you lot in between checkpoints. All you have to do is break into a moving lift and replace the occupants. Just another day at work, am I right?” He reopened the door, took a furtive look outside, and stepped through. “Come on. It should be safe. Well, safe as can be in a morgue.”



Cheyeth was the first of the three out, with Faran on his heels, already playing at guard. Dovix took up the rear. The corridor was thin, yet somehow oppressive in stature. Its ceiling reinforced with a ribbing of support beams sculpted to appear as conjoined cubes. It featured similar outcroppings of material, each darker than the surrounding walls, on the corners and along doorways as well. At a guess, protection against collapse due to bombardment from above. From the maps that Tivree had provided over his weeks of covert observation, the floors between the surface level and the lowest and most secure one were staggered in such a way as to prevent any ruined floor from collapsing into the next. Only untouched bedrock.

Dovix’s eyes fell on a door marked with a red ‘X.’ “So this really is where they’re keeping them? The dystronic toxæmia patients? I read it in your reports, but I didn’t believe it. I understand that these people are brutal to their enemies, but to be so cruel to themselves?”

“The price of war without end,” Cheyeth opined.

“Only the military and scientific elite are allowed up here to die in relative peace,” Tivree stated. “The slaves who are actually building the thing they drop in a furnace. At least, that’s the scuttlebutt. You hear the

wildest stories from people dying of fatigue. Dream-like, their last moments.”

As the team secreted through the dimmed corridors, Faran took note of numerous painted posters, pasted into place between doors and hallway intersections. In one, a yellow-haired woman with a finger over her lips implored the reader not to reveal state secrets. Another modelled an enemy Kaled in grotesque caricature: the skin withered and dark, sneering with squinted eyes and rotten teeth, a decrepit hand clutching at the viewer. Yet another depicted several children smiling upward at a proud Thal soldier, his eyes on the horizon. Words were emblazoned beneath:

EVER VIGILANT, EVER IN OUR DEBT.

And that was just for a start. Some were faded with age, others were newer but less visually appealing. They spoke of refinement of message in tandem with the loss of artistic talent.

The price of war without end.

A war that heralded one Faran was determined to keep from ever starting.

The skinny one sidled up to a wall and stopped at a hallway intersect. Hand up, he motioned them to line up behind him. They did so, and the team leader waited out a short moment of silence which became interrupted by the sound of soft footprints.

P'tap!

P'tap!

P'tap!

Faran's hand hovered over her holster. Her breath lodged in her throat until the sound faded away.

Tivree signaled the others to start moving again. Once clear of the hall, he whispered, “That was this section's other tech, so we should be alone from here on to the lift shaft. There's been a blackout on this level. Very sudden, very unfortunate. Comms are spotty, so the whole floor is on

lockdown. Started right after the inspection on Sub-Floor Two ended. I can't imagine how..." the rakish grin was plain in his voice.

Faran's training had included thinking in the Thal's time-frames as well as their speech. She estimated one hundred and thirty rels from their first and only stop to the moment when the corridor widened out significantly into an antechamber of sorts. Wide enough for ten humanoids to stand arm to arm. Support columns, fashioned in that joint-cube style ran from floor to ceiling not in a grid like pattern but along curved lines focused upon a pair of lift doors. One a standard service lift. To its left, a freight lift wide enough to allow eight men to stand shoulder to shoulder. In a firing line, among other configurations.

Faran's tactically-oriented mind noted that not only did the columns provide more defence against collapse, they were ideal for cover. Several of them were in fact armored up with slapdash bits of rusted metal. She turned back, to see the murder-holes slitted into the walls that tapered back into the singular corridor. For anyone coming down into this place when fully manned, either lift was a kill-box.

An image cemented by the thick mini-wall of permacrete armour positioned near to the lifts to one side. A command station? Pitted and scarred, metal foundations showed through in some places. Damage from live-fire drills? Or had some Kaled force managed to make its way this far at some point in the relative past?

She motioned Dovix and Tivree to line up against the leftward wall, nearer the control panel. Cheyeth followed her to the right, where they bunkered down behind said wall.

The spy took a look at the panel, and shook his head to the group. Next, he withdrew a radio-link from his chest pocket. "Hinok, this is Tivree. Do you read? Over."

A tinny female voice scratched back at him. "*Hinok here. Over.*"

"Are you on site? Over."

"*I only just made the first fuse box. Thanks for loaning me a torch that doesn't work.*"

Tivree made an innocent face. "My apologies. I'm almost to the south-

side generator. Stay put while I see how big a mess it is.”

“Not like I can do anything until you sort it. Over.”

“Out.” Tivree moved swiftly between the lifts, and the softly lit panel they shared. “We’ve got some fish in the barrel. Just passed Sub-Floor One.”

He produced tools enough to rotate the panel out of his way and start manipulating the jury-rigged mess of wires behind it.

As he did so, he told them, “I won’t be any help down there, getting you to the Target. Never could round up the clearances. But once we get our hands on an ident-tape, it should be clear sailing for you a set of sharply-dressed soldiers like you.”

“Lucky for us the checkpoints don’t do genome screenings,” Dovix stated. “Yet.”

“Not likely to start, either,” suggested Faran. “It would mean the locals admitting to themselves how similar they are to their enemies.”

“The last thing anyone in a perpetual cycle of war wants to concede,” Cheyeth noted. “Even more than territory.”

“Mind you don’t nick your fingers on anything.” The panel sparked. Tivree jumped back. Then, satisfied it was safe, waved everyone over. With all hands, they managed to quickly but quietly press the doors far enough apart to get themselves through.

Cheyeth poked his head in, peering upwards. “Lift’s almost here.”

“Still cutting it close,” Dovix grimaced.

Tivree merely shrugged. “Just be glad that those anti-rads and the new batch of medical personnel are earmarked for the bottom level. The lifts won’t be taking any stops on the way down.”

“Not here?” Faran asked, “Where the patients are?”

Tivree chuckled darkly. “Boss, this is where they’re putting the ones they gave up on saving. Once the lull in the fighting dies down, their bodies are marked to be deposited all over the front. All the action’s on Sub-Level Six.”

“The fools don’t know that improperly shielded distrionic warheads don’t kill with the standard spectrum of radiation. Yet they’re playing with them

anyway,” Dovix sneered.

“Or don’t care, depending on who’s packing them,” Tivree amended. “Oops, here she comes.”

“Ascension binders, everyone.” Faran had already pulled two pairs from a pouch on her belt: a pair of semi-metallic binders. She tossed two to Tivree, and slapped the other two around each palm. There was a series of clicks as they settled into place about her gloved hands, firmly hugging them. She double-clapped her hands together to activate them. They produced a brief, high-pitched keen. Duplicated when the three men did likewise.

She looked to Dovix. “Since you’re so concerned with time, give me a countdown to arrival at the lowest floor. Starting from the moment the car passes us.” Said task required counting the time back to the moment the lift’s arrival at the first floor was stated, the fact that their floor was two floors below that, and the knowledge from previously-poured-over maps that it was a further three to the bottom of the dome.

The uninsulated rumble grew closer. Close enough to set Faran’s teeth vibrating. The naked steel frame the lift car lumbered past the squad, ignorantly passing from top to bottom of the opening.

Dovix’s calculation matched her own. “Two hundred and ten rels.”

Faran was already leaping into the shaft, hands outstretched. When they neared the lift car’s central cable, they moved to it as though magnetically attracted. They locked into it upon contact. Inertia carried her legs past the cable, but she twisted herself to catch the cable with her boots. Her momentum arrested, she put her feet to either side of the cable. A series of like vibrations from above told her that the others had all made the jump as well. Controlling the magnetics via rolling her thumb over strategically placed control sliders, she slowly rappelled down the length of the cable. And set foot atop it without making a sound. Disengaging the binders, she crept to one corner. Beside the access hatch on the car’s roof. Which faced the side of the shaft that they had entered from. Dovix and Cheyeth took the corners opposite it, and Tivree the other side.

With a nod of consent from his superior, Tivree began unsealing the

hatch. With one bolt left to unseat, he placed a hand over the hatch.

“One-ninety rels,” whispered Dovix.

The last bolt away, the hatch remained in place until Tivree moved his hand upwards. Bound to his palm, the hatch ended its journey set atop his lap. Faran peered inside. Three figures, as Tivree’s secret missive had indicated. Always three there were, for reasons Tivree had never sussed out. All of them male. One with white and receding hair. Another with a youthful mop of bright yellow. The third bald, pale skin blocked brownish-red with radiation burns. She signaled the count to her fellows with her hands, then motioned her intention to initiate the take-down.

Dovix mouthed *one-eighty rels*. Cheyeth crouched for the pounce.

Faran plucked up one of the stray bolts and looked about for a good place to throw it. It clattered against a far wall, prompting a trio of surprised exclamations. The two closer figures turned towards the source of their surprise. She dropped behind them. Setting her bands to overload in mid-air. She hit the floor with an unavoidably loud *stomp!* The two closer targets, the youth and the old man, couldn’t get their backs turn or their sidearms up fast enough. The infiltrator rose, putting all of the potential energy of her landing into a forceful leap, and slammed her palms against their chests. Crackles of power left her bands and entered them. The pair dropped like sacks, and behind them the burned drew his blade. A long knife, thick and single-edged, crisscrossed with lines of wear.

There was murder in his eyes.

Faran ducked to one side, swung her hand to the other, deflecting the knife. He came swiping with the other hand, fingers clawed like the thing in the poster. She deflected that hand as well, then wrapped her hands over his wrists to hold him to prevent him blocking the boot she sent to his knee. Grimacing, he jerked back out of her grasp, coming back with a sideways swipe of the knife. She fell to her back, in between the fallen soldiers. Nearly hitting her head against the wall of the cramped space. From there, she sent both boots into the killer’s other knee. This time she earned a bark of pain, but he was undaunted in his bloodlust. He launched

downward onto a knee, knife in both hands. She rolled a quarter-turn right just in time, pressing her face into the old man. The knife-point scratched against the diamond-plate floor, and her elbow went into his face. He toppled over, and she was atop him in an instant. A punch to his throat had him stunned him long enough to get both hands around his skull and start driving it into the floor.

Three poundings, and it was over.

Cheyeth and Dovix had come down once she'd cleared the landing spot. Cheyeth made quick work of breaking the elder man's neck. Dovix knelt down and put his knee to the neck of the youth, barely more than a teenager. He died quietly.

"One-forty rels," Dovix noted coolly. He wasted no time in going through the attaché case the boy had been carrying. After removing a few non-essentials, he took the bag as his own. He wore it to the left, its strap crossing the one connected to his medkit. It was as threadbare as everything the youth had been wearing.

"Get yours out first," Faran told him. The man obliged by removing his ascension bands curling them around the wrists of his kills. From atop the box, Tivree moved his still-banded hands about like a puppeteer. The young man's corpse arose by his hands and hovered through the hole in the roof. To disappear to one side.

Cheyeth, meanwhile, was searching the old man. Within his jacket, he found a small length of magnetic tape, brown and thin, wound around a pitted metal reel. He pulled a small two-reel tape deck from a large back on the back of his belt and spooled the tape into it. It began whizzing from one reel to the other.

And Faran was waving a small hand-scanner. "Definite dystronic resonances. Right where we thought they'd be. Doesn't tell us precisely where the launch bay is, but we're past the point where the Vortex Manipulators would have been any help getting out."

"One hundred rels."

Faran re-sheathed the burned man's knife before applying own ascenders to him. *A keeper of a blade, but too many marks. This weapon has a history, and I*

don't want to meet someone who knows it. On reserve power, the devices only just delivered the body to the top of the car before giving out.

“Seventy rels.”

Cheyeth's corpse was the last to go up and out. His gadget had returned the tape to its original reel. “Codes and encryptions applied to our idents.” He pocketed it where the old man had, and threw the overwrite device up to Tivree. Who also collected the scanner and a few items the team hadn't had use for.



“Forty rels.”

The mission lead gave him a playful look, “That's top-of-the line Time Agency tech you have there. You know what to do with it.”

“Have I ever disappointed?” He smirked from above.

“Does that time atop the amphitheater on Sontar count?” she asked with unstated ‘yes’ left hanging in the air between them.

“Not the way *I'm* keeping score.”

“If you two are finished flirting?” Dovix grumbled. He pointed towards the control panel, which was quickly running out of floors to count down. “Twenty rels.”

“Close it up, Tiv.” Faran straightened her jacket. “See you on the other side.” From here on, they were on their own. No timely assists from the embedded agent. No gear that would grant them an insurmountable edge or bypass another technological issue. Just primitive sidearms, a re-worked identity tape, a bit of dross in some bags, and the mission.

Somewhere in this maze of a complex, the Thals were building a neutronic missile. And Faran and her team had to get it aimed in a particular direction. Preferably before the Kaleds started delivering their own weapons of mass destruction.

The walls of the lift car were designed in a way that any one of the four could open, should there be an appropriate opening on the other side. Following a short downward press of inertia, it was the wall counter-clockwise to the re-sealed hatch that began to grind itself free of internal

moorings. Cheyeth made a point of standing over the knife-mark on the floor.

“Five rels.”

One grind became another, and the elevator opened. A row of nine men and women waited for them, several of them in mismatched selections of tactical armor in addition to green battle togs were pointing rifles at them. Of a sort with ammunition clips set to the side of the barrel, semi-automatics at a guess. The lift was every bit the kill-box Faran had guessed.

Three rifles for every body in here. So that's why only three at a time. Kill one with each and, and the last fellow gets you. With room left for the guards to maneuver without bumping into each other.

The only thing that defined this chamber from the one they'd just left was the placement of the command barrier. It was back behind the first row of columns, and right of center. Standing at its center, between a guard and a young woman, both helmeted, was a man with a beakish nose and a slight stoop to his posture that hinted at childhood malnutrition. His collar lapels featured two rainclouds each. “I am Security Commander Lirrit. Forgive the theatrics, but we need to scrutinise every new arrival very carefully.”

Cheyeth straightened his back and raised his arms atop his head. His two ‘subordinates’ followed suit. “I am Major Cheyeth, Military Command. This is my associate, Lieutenant Dovix, and my bodyguard, Faran. Our credentials are located in my breast pocket.” The middle finger of his left hand flickered in its general direction. Someone came forth to relieve the item from him. And the weapons from everyone’s belts. Someone else came to collect Dovix’s cases and everyone’s papers. All were given freely.

“We understand the need for thorough evaluation, of course,” Cheyeth continued, speaking so easily as to have always been exactly whom he claimed. “No inconvenience is too much to bear for the war effort. We will of course offer our full cooperation. But time, I’m afraid to say, is of the essence.”

“And why is that?” the Commander asked, dark eyes narrowing. Clearly unhappy to be rushed.

Fast answers were Cheyeth's specialty. "Your Medical Commander is using anti-radiation treatments to battle an ailment unique to this facility. I'm here to tell you—that is, I'm here to tell a certain someone—why it isn't working." Faran noted that he didn't claim to have arrived with the meds. Why compound one lie with another when your mark can fill in the blanks for themselves?

The soldier who'd taken the tape reel delivered it to Lirrit, who nodded towards the young woman beside him. She bore an ensign's symbol of rank; the watery lines minus the clouds. The ensign inserted the reel into a reel-to-reel player mounted into the podium, listening to it via an earpiece so large she had to press it to her ear with one hand. A moment later, they nodded. "The codes check out. And the encryption is still good." Another soldier confirmed that the names on their paperwork confirmed they were who the tape said they were. Thanks, of course, to Cheyeth's little gadget.

Yet Lirrit seemed to barely be hiding her discontent. How much did he know or not know of the weapons program and its side-effects? "State your destination. Who exactly are you here to see?"

Cheyeth shook his head. "I'm afraid I am not at liberty to say any more around unauthorised ears."

"You question my authority?" Lirrit demanded. "Soldiers—"

Before Lirrit could finish her command, Dovix interjected, "We're here to save lives!" He pointed to the little circles within the storm clouds of his uniform: the marks of a medic.

"And whose lives would those be?" Lirrit asked with a schoolmaster's glare.

"Why, the only lives that matter. 'Thal lives." The lie was smooth as Silurian silk, and it came from Cheyeth's mouth. If Faran didn't know better, she might have believed the man standing next to her a true zealot. He was eyeing the Security Commander carefully. "I offer no challenge to your authority. But I do dare suggest that you may have a leak, or a mole somewhere on base. Word has spread to the other domes of the illness I speak of. It's escaped the local slave population, and has started spreading among the military personnel. The victims are being holed up in the

Enlisted Barracks. Walled up, perhaps, to keep word of their symptoms from getting out. Go check if you doubt my word.”

Murmurs spread among a few of the riflemen. They were quickly silenced by Lirrit, but her eyes now showed a hint of worry. “Come forward.”

The trio did so, and were quickly escorted to a side office, where after a thorough pat-down, Lirrit addressed them directly. “Let’s say I believe you. I still need to hear the name come from your lips. Who are you intending to see?”

Skaro was hardly the first world to develop dystronic weapons. But those who did tended to go down in their respective histories as either war criminals or great innovators. Histories the entire team had memorised. “Ghell. I’m here to speak directly to Master Scientist Ghell.” Cheyeth let slip just enough awe into his voice to grant Lirrit little reason to doubt his ‘altruistic intentions.’

The last trace of obstinance left Lirrit’s face. “Very well. Ensign Reaj will accompany you.” He opened the door and ordered the young woman to return all the confiscated items and direct the team to their goal. His last words to ‘Major Cheyeth’ were whispered ones, spoken closely enough to his ear that his ‘bodyguard’ couldn’t help but hear. “I shall look into your allegations.”

“Good hunting,” Cheyeth bid him. “Come along, you two.”

“Sir!” Faran and Dovix said in unison. They geared up, and followed the ensign, and their ‘commanding officer,’ through a series of corridors designed to confound and confuse any attempt at back-tracking the route. There were no posters, and some hallways ended in barricaded dead-ends or were sealed off entirely. There was no propaganda to liven the view, or provide breadcrumbs to the way they had come.

It’s a maze, but not nearly complicated enough to throw me. And not without markers. A bit of rubber sole scuffed on the floor by shuffling feet. Something incredibly hot brushed against that column there. A dash of coughed-up blood.

The greenish-brown spatter stood out well enough from the greyish concrete floors. Even lighting, was meant to complicate the journey.

Recessed into the spaces between ceiling supports, it casting bright circles with faded edges along the floor, but offered little in the way of showing the walls ahead or behind.

It didn't take long for the Ensign to fill the silence. "Don't mind the Commander. He's a good man, a fine officer. Just has a lot on his plate. No one knows how long the cease-fire will last. Or why the Kaleds have let it go on so long. Five days without an air-assault siren. That's almost a record!"

"She's doing her job so others can do theirs," Dovix said warmly, playing up the medic role. "How about you? How are you holding up?" He removed an anti-rad injector from the purloined case. "Need a booster shot?"

Good man, thought Faran. Any scrap of information may be useful.

Reaj sounded in good spirits. "No, I'm fine. Better than many, I suppose. I'm getting tired of seeing the same walls day after day, is all. but that's war, I suppose. I was supposed to rotate back up top a fortnight ago, but the paperwork or something is wonked up."

That, or somebody doesn't want the toxemia to be noticed by the general populace.

"Military bureaucracy is the same everywhere, I suppose," Dovix said. "Something important always gets overlooked. Just between us and the walls, what do you think is going on?"

The Ensign blushed at the question. Pride in a superior officer thinking her opinion on events was worth listening to? Or shame in not having much of an answer. "No idea, sir. Not my place to ask. I just worry that those slyther-loving Kaleds are using the time to slap up some new weapon of their own."



The group was obliged to stop at two more check points. In each instance, Reaj handed over a miniature tape reel of her own, which had to be played through a machine on the side of a thick and well-guarded door.

Simple data-locks. Not a problem to hack, in Faran's estimation.

Eventually, the party reached a double door sealed with a circular locking mechanism and bordered by four guards. Reaj's credentials again got them

through, though she lacked either of the twin reels needed to unlock the seal. Two of the guards kept their weapons at the ready while the other two opened it.

The room was unlike anything else the team had come across. Two stories tall, and at least as wide. It was bereft of the columns that had defined the other open spaces. Banks of reel-to-reel computers lined three of the walls. The fourth was a window. Beyond it, the vast expanse of a missile silo. Its tapered head in plain view, painted in diagonal stripes of olive green and pale beige. Before the window, atop an observation dais, was a long desk that itself was part computer.

Seated there was a woman whose relative age was nearly impossible to determine. The lines that ravaged her face, the streaks of white through brittle yellow hair, could have been from years or prolonged exposure to the toxic materials involved in neutronic warfare. One side of her face was thickly layered with makeup which didn't quite conceal the rash of boils that infested it. Nor the bags of fatigue under her eyes. Her outfit—rather, her full-body protective suit—was of a make Faran had not seen in all her intelligence briefings. Olive green, as was the standard for Thals. Lightly padded, with the arms and legs heavily ribbed in thick rolls of material. The collar was thick as well, round and all-encompassing. It circled her entire head with space to spare.

Aside from the woman's chair, there was no furniture.

Despite her frailty, the woman was all smiles. “New faces, come to my sanctum? Welcome. Come on up. Let me get a look at you.” she motioned them all forward with the weak wave of a blistered hand. Her voice was cracked, but not slowed.

“Thank you, Master Scientist.” Cheyeth offered a quick nod of respect. “I believe I shall.”

Hands began her back, Faran motioned Dovix to stay behind, with a subtle flick of a finger that indicated the ensign and the panel to one side of the door both. A tap of his heels was all the confirmation she required. Staying a step behind the ‘Major,’ Faran accompanied him up a short flight

of stairs to the observation deck.

“Major Cheyeth, just in from Defence Dome Five. Here on a matter of some urgency.” He stepped around the table to meet the woman as she was rising up, with the help of a wooden cane, to face the window.

“Oh, that can wait a moment. You came a long way to see this. You might as well enjoy the view. Please.”

It really was quite a view, if Faran was being honest. The silo went down, down, down, into bleak darkness only partially illuminated with wall-mounted lights that were more concerned with showing off the details of the missile than providing navigable sections of catwalk for the people who slowly moved about them. Two kinds of people: those moving heavy metal packets towards a lift-loader positioned directly below Ghell’s window, and those moving the movers. The slaves were dressed in rags, if even that. Their overseers were clothed in suits like Ghell’s, but topped with helmets whose mirrored face-shields hid the faces of those wearing them. Fearsome and anonymous. With whips and cattle-prods, they extracted more and faster effort from men and women who could barely stand. The ones that had any hair left were blonde, on and all. The creeping unease wavering inside Faran’s throat was only enhanced by the sickly-sweet smell of the ointments Ghell had coated herself with.

“The only one of its kind,” the inventor said proudly, looking only to her work and not the workers. “The first of many.”

“Assuming anyone survives to see the next wave of construction,” Cheyeth turned to face the scientist. “Yourself included, if I’m not being too blunt.”

“Oh, being here is killing me, yes. I knew it would before I finished the first set of schematics. Yet I pressed ever onward. For victory!” Ghell’s decrepit hand clenched tight around the cane’s head. Then she waved a dismissive hand at the scene below. “It’s killing them faster, of course. But there are always more slaves. Defectors. Dissidents. Pacifists!” She spat out the last word as thought was something that hailed from a different orifice. “We’re so very close the test launch. My only remaining wish was to see my creation take flight.” She tsked, and looked aside with a weary smile.

As if lost in a private joke. “I suppose that won’t be, now.”

A number of faint noises reached Faran’s ears from below the observation deck.

Dovix disabling the door.

From her own vantage point, the mission lead could tell that the computer he’d be wanted at was on the patriot’s desk. Monochrome monitors bisected numerous keypads, gauges, and signal displays. One of the more notable lights was of them flashing a silent green.

“What do you mean by that?” Cheyeth asked. If he stuck to the plan, he was going to maneuver her somehow into accessing her desk’s weapons telemetry systems and saving Dovix some of that time he was always worried about. But first, he would try to build a rapport with her.

There was no cooperation in Ghell’s voice. “I mean that I don’t know what lies you told to get here, but you did lie. So we’re all probably going to be dead soon.”

More noises behind. Reaj creeping back towards the door. Dovix moving to intercept. The hiss of an injector. Boots scuffing the floor as a body was dragged away out of sight. She could only hope they didn’t penetrate the withered ears of the scientist.

Whether she heard or not, Ghell went right on speaking. Her posture seemed resigned and accepting both. “I know everyone who knows anything about this project other than where to stuff the finished explosives. Personally.”

The light on the desk was flashing green. The colour of Thal blood.

“I see your guard has done the math. Yes, I tapped the silent alarm the moment you walked inside.” A boil-covered hand pointing towards one of the monitors. Surveillance footage from the other side of the door. “Spycraft works both ways, you know. I just wanted to buy time for more guards to arrive. A regrettably dwindling recourse, these days.”

“Still plenty of time for us to force you to help us.” Faran drew her gun and moved to flank the scientist. “Painfully or otherwise.”

“No, there isn’t.” A twist of her jaw, a crack of a tooth, and Ghell was falling into Cheyeth’s arms. Lime foam burbling from her mouth. Cheyeth

muttered a curse.

Fortunately, the control for the window screen was clearly marked. Faran pressed it, and steel slats started lowering themselves over the glass. She waved towards the other machinery. “Your patient, Doctor.” No use complaining about the new circumstances.

Dovix unceremoniously shoved Ghell from her seat and began typing. Tentatively at first, then with true vigor. “She set off some kind of cascade failure in the data network. This system’s being firewalled out of the main network.” But for the first time since they had arrived on Skaro, the man was enjoying himself. “Fortunately, what these primitives lack in knowledge of first aid, they make up for by knowing even less about computer science. I just need a moment to code up a backdoor through the bypasses. There! Almost got—*Arrrrgggh!*” A bullet to his shoulder had Dovix’s grasping a spasming limb. His team mates ducked under cover of the table looking for the gunman.

A second shot, point-blank to his head, ended Dovix’s pain. Any chance of Cheyeth talking his way out of this kill-box was just as dead. Dovix was bleeding red.

“Surrender or die!” Security Commander Lirrit and his retinue of riflemen filed out from behind a computer bank to the right side of the room which had rotated away from the wall. Because of course the mad scientist had a secret way in or out of her domain. In Lirrit’s hand was a weapon the likes of which Faran had been led to believe no longer existed on Skaro after ages of technological attrition. A plasma pistol was more primitive than a staser, but no less deadly. The glowing ball at the barrel’s center promising many more shots left. Triumph was smeared all across her face. “Weapons. On the floor.”

Cheyeth was to the right of Dovix’s body, closer to the warriors. Faran the right. In unison they removed their belts and tossed them to opposite ends of the dais and rose their hands. *There’s still a way. If I can just—*

Lirrit interrupted Faran’s thoughts, addressing Cheyeth. “I’m so glad I took you up on your suggestion to look into moles. Turns out there have been developments upstairs. Your defeat is total. Whoever you really are,

your scheme ends here.” Lirrit turned his nose up at the red lines dripping out of the corpse. “Or should I say *whatever?*”

“Well, that’s that, then. I surrender.” Cheyeth stepped slowly onto the stairs. Two soldiers were already coming to claim him. Five lined up along the back wall.

The remaining two came for Faran, as well. While Cheyeth and her escort moved off the stairs and further away, she stood firm. Looking for an advantage as the guards closed in. “I must say I hadn’t expected this. Mind if I ask what you meant by ‘developments’? Aside from our obvious attempt at sabotage?”

“I happened.” A new figure stepped forth into the line. Tivree. The front flap of his coverall pocket hadn’t been reset, but other than that he looked unharmed. Neither Faran nor Cheyeth betrayed any familiarity. He passed behind Lirrit to sand between the furthest guards on the line.

“You can confirm these are the people you saw?” The Security Commander asked.

“Yes,” Tivree nodded grimly. “I was working on the brownout in the Enlisted Barracks. I got tired of waiting for Hinok at the generator, so I went looking, I saw her talking to those three. Saying things I couldn’t follow. About an Agency they all work for. And kidnapping some inventor. I tried to sneak away and get out a warning to the duty officer. She chased me, we fought, I won. Or, events to that effect.” He winked at his true allies with the eye Lirrit couldn’t see.

Lirrit’s smile was cold. “You should be pleased to know that your friend died quickly, and she put up a good fight. She had already been wounded by Tivree, here. But we know how to extract information. One of my deputies kept her alive long just enough to record a confession. Extracted in fits and bursts amongst a bunch of babble and false trails.”

Faran pouted back at him. “For your sake, I hope her tale is being kept in a very secure area.”

“Oh, yes. By now, the printouts and recordings are well on their way to a deep-bore emergency archive well out of the destructive range of any weapon. Along with a number of the devices we found hidden on your

spy, and on our departed brethren. Whom we found lying atop the lift you managed to sneak aboard.”

Faran showed him no fear. “I wouldn’t be so sure about your archive’s invulnerability. My team got this far. The next will get further.”

The Security Commander sneered. “Few outside of Military Command even know of that archive. Fewer still know how to access it. Even I would be of no use to you on that account. Rest assured, your friend’s confession will survive this war. One day, the Kaleds will show their true colours, and we will end this war once and for all. On *our* terms, not yours! When that day comes, we Thals will be free to move out across the stars. And the secret of future interlopers shall go with us. Quiet as a whisper no other ear shall hear. When my distant descendants hear tell of some alien rabble forming a ‘Time Agency,’ they will be prepared to strangle it in the crib.”

Faran nodded respectfully. “Thank you for your candor, Commander. And your complicity. Now!”

From his secret pocket, Tivree produced the burned man’s knife. It went through the throat of the man to his left quick and deep. A thing of beauty. He got it into the gut of the rightward one before the first shot was fired against him by one of the others.

At the same moment, Cheyeth took a quick step backwards, grabbed the two men at his sides and slammed them into each other. He fell to the floor with them, claimed one of the rifles and fired at Lirrit. The soldier nearest their superior officer leapt into the shot and fell dead against him, sending them both toppling backwards.

It was all the distraction Faran needed to press forward, into her captors and too close for them to shot. She grabbed one soldier’s knife and buried it in his neck. Then rolled backwards just in time to avoid being fired upon by the other one. Her hand touched Ghell’s cane. She claimed it, and used to parry the rifle being levied against her. Rising to her feet, she circled her hand, leveraging the barrel of the weapon towards his foot. Grabbing his trigger finger, she squeezed. He screamed. She beat the strength out of his arm and turned the gun to the underside of his jaw. A shot ended him, but

the rifles were still strapped to their owners. No time to extract one.

In the instant it took her head to turn from the dead or dying men back towards the desk, she saw three things. First, a rifleman was aiming his weapon at her. Second, Lirrit was pointing at Tivree, who was busy with another guard and had his back to her. Third, Cheyeth, already oozing blood, had put his first two down and was rushing at Lirrit. Into the line of fire formed by two soldiers on bended knee.

Faran ducked under the shot coming for her, and dove at the console. In a quarter-second it took to reach it and knock Dovix's chair back out of the way, she mentally diagrammed the final computations. To the sound of continued battle—gunfire and tearing fabric, cracking of bone and cries of pain—she finished Dovix's work of hacking the launcher systems back around to the correct server. She sent the missile on its way, just as something hot tunnelled through her gut. Her legs betrayed her; she tumbled to the floor. She could not feel her legs at all, but she still had her arms. So, she could still fight. And there was no pain, so she could direct all her efforts at the Thal war machine.

Her belt, her pistol, was just on the other side of the dead riflemen. If only she could crawl her way there. Her team already won, but so long as one of her fellows was still on the battlefield, she would not be kept from fighting for them. Only, she did stop. When the sound of hell and fury beside her rose too high to ignore. It roared its way into her every cell. Instinctively, she covered her head with her arms to drown at least some of the some of the sonic battering. The metal screen did not hold back all of the heat of engine exhaust, or the rumbling of the glass shield as it cracked and vaporised. Prostrate on the bucking ground, Faran endured the sensory onslaught for a long, awful instant. When the ringing in her ears abated, she could hear only sirens. Sirens, and the rasping breaths of a single individual. Somewhere on the other side of the table.

Faran started straining against the floor again, putting one forearm ahead of the other to lurch herself forward. Shoving her way beyond a dead man. Upon getting past the table, so damned close to her belt, she could see what remained of the battle. Cheyeth and Tivree were both

dead. So too, all of the riflemen. Only the Security Commander remained, and he was limping his way up the stairs. One leg a bloodied mess. Coming to the dais to stare with haunted, greenshot eyes at the warped and heat-blackened steel curtain. The presumptive emptiness on the other side.

“We weren’t ready. We need more of them. More! What’s one dome gone when there are hundreds of Kaled domes? They’ll send everything they have at us. Our other domes will respond in kind...” Lirrit looked down at Faran. Perhaps only just noticing that she was still breathing. “What have you done? You’ve killed us all! The rightful rulers of this world! *Why?*” He did not wait for an answer. Choosing instead to rush over to the desk computers. “There has to be some way to recall it!”

“Wait! Look at me!” Faran pushed herself onto her side, and summoned up what little telepathic training she had. Reaching forward into the Security Commander’s mind. Ramming her way into it! She felt the touch of departed Cheyeth’s thoughts there, lingering in unconscious shadows. The gentle suggestions he’d implanted to guide the man towards investigating moles rather than stopping a trio of strangers, when he’d looked into his eyes and cast his net of lies. And Tivree’s too, impelling him to bring him closer to his co-conspirators, so he could help even out the odds of survival.

See you on the other side. The words had been less a phrase of parting, more of an order. Tivree had nailed his end of to the plan; he’d used his own cadre of psychic techniques to plant select words into the mind of a technician that he himself had set up to take a fall. Words, and artifacts, that would lead any future archeologists away from the true instigators of this triumph.

Where the men had used psychic feathers, Faran bore a cudgel. She *demand*ed that Lirrit turn around and look. *Turn, and stay!* And turn, she did. “Where are you going in such a hurry? The missiles are already on their way. Don’t you want to hear my confession before we die?”

Another internal command, short and blunt and irresistible. *Stay and listen.* Stay, and don’t try to undo your own execution. Listen, don’t act.

Stay and listen.

Lirrit did.

“For centuries now, your world has stood on the brink of oblivion. Mutual assured destruction just the press of a button away. Both sides crowded with fingers itching to press it. Yet, in the halls of Kaled governance there walks a man, a brilliant man, who can see that madness for what it is. He is driven to make others see it, as well, and has the will to see that quest through. In the history I know, he is successful beyond his dreams. The Thals and Kaleds step back from the precipice, and join together in an unprecedented era of unity. Both sides rebuilding Skaro together.

“But hate is such an elemental part of both of your races. You’ll never shed it, no matter how deeply you bury it under conciliatory speeches and ritualistic displays of mutual respect. To your bones, you *need* something to rally against. An enemy to vilify and throw yourselves at, lest you turn the daggers back on each other. And when that enemy is destroyed, you’ll need another. And another. And you *know* this inescapable truth, though you’ll never admit it. Not even to yourselves, let alone your neighbor.

“So you go to the stars, together. You kill and conquer your way across galaxies. Carving a bloody path all the way to the edges of the Fledgling Empires. You poke the eye of mighty Rassilon. Who, with a flick of his stylus, condemns the Thaled Hegemony to have never existed at all. Its founders swept under the rubble of a new Stone Age. Or, perhaps, mutated by radiative fire into slimy, mindless things that will lack the brains enough look to the skies and dream of murder. We, my squadron and I, are the maker of your desolate tomorrow.

“In *this* timeline, the architect of your alliance has just died. And those who would hear his words of peace soon will be. You stand before me the last Thal who will ever even begin to threaten my Homeworld. Gallifrey stands eternal!” Faran’s tongue was swimming in blood by the time she finished. It tasted like victory.

Lirrit’s answer was a terrified scowl, and pull of the trigger. The plasma bolt bore into the fabric of a Thal soldier’s tunic. And deep into the gut of

Colonel Alaynafaranix, formerly of the Seventh Prydon Brigade and very soon to be an ex-member of the Interventionist Division. No Time Lady she, merely a loyal soldier in Gallifrey's service, there would be no regeneration for her. Only a slow, painful death by shock; her innards both liquified and cauterised. And soon, a relatively merciful atomisation that would scatter her energies to all corners of Skaro along with those of her squamates.

But she rolled onto her back laughing as the sirens became louder and more urgent. Laughing, and praising Rassilon's name. While the Security Commander lost what little remained of his composure and began running this way and that. Throwing himself against emergency levers. Smashing his fingers into keyboards. Kicking Doxiv's chair over. Pounding impotent fists against the steel curtain. His desperate screams drowned out by the wailing of the sirens.

Faran kept right on laughing. "*Gallifrey—stands—eternal!*"

The sirens went quiet.

The noise was deafening.

THE INEVITABLE INVASION

By Noé Géric

PART ONE

V *worp, Vworp!*

Rocks.

Rocks everywhere.

As far as she could see, there was nothing else here.

Though she couldn't really see that far away. All around, mountains of gravel were blocking her sight. In the blue sky, the sun was impressively huge, the stifling heat making her not only sweat, but also very grateful she had dressed for tropical conditions.

The abandoned mining equipment nearby suggested that the large crater they'd landed in was hand dug; implying there may have been people hanging around.

'It's the third rocky planet this week,' she sighed. 'Getting a bit redundant, eh?'

Just behind, her time-travelling companion was busy looking for the right key among the twenty-one others for the TARDIS's lock. 'Only a matter of coincidences,' he assured, obviously unimpressed by the vicinity. 'Almost sixty per cent of the planets this universe is composed of are covered in rocks. Purely for strategically economical purposes.'

'OK,' she shrugged. That sounded plausible with what she'd seen on previous stony worlds. 'Let's get rocked, then.'

Joanna had been travelling in the blue box for years now, but she was still a novice. She couldn't tell a pile of rocks apart from another, not yet. For an untrained eye, they all looked exactly the same.

As his particularly interested demeanour suggested, the Doctor had most

certainly already been here before. Analysing every detail in the landscape; it was only a matter of seconds before he could mention four or five of his previous escapades here.

Lifting her sunglasses to her forehead, she squinted against the blinding sunlight, trying to get a clear view of the top of that gravel heap. She could swear she'd seen something move there, a shadow, a shape. And Joanna knew by experience that it couldn't be just a trick of the light. It never was.

'Orpelin IV,' the Doctor confirmed, finally able to put a name on the rocks.'Home to one of the most peaceful war-loving species in the known cosmos.'

'Friends, I hope.' Joanna had already climbed half of the steep gravel slope, missing to slip and break her neck half a dozen times, before she realised there were stairs hewn in the rock on the opposite wall of the crater.

'If you consider I saved this world from inevitable doom not less than twenty-two times and a half, I suppose we could pretend we're in some sort of friendly territory—'

But she barely heard the end of his sentence, drowned under the cackling sound of heavy weaponry being loaded.

Four bulky shapes rose from behind the rocky hill behind her, pointing what appeared to be laser rifles that certainly weren't just for showing-off. As any sensible person would do, Joanna raised her hands in surrender.

'Don't try anything that you might not have the time to regret!' commanded one of the helmeted figures. The guns definitely weren't just for showing-off.

With rifles still aimed at their targets, the soldiers ran down the slope and surrounded the travellers.

Closer, it felt like that under all these protections, they were made of bricks. That just by touching them, you could break all your finger bones.

As always when faced by death threats, the Doctor felt the need to engage casual conversation. 'Take us to the nearest person of authority.'



Appearances can be deceptive.

The planet wasn't as rocky as it had first appeared to be. The crater they'd landed in was one of the local quarries, from which the rocks were extracted and brought to the city, where it would serve as the foundations of new War Monuments.

Surprisingly, their captors had proved to be comprehensive when the Doctor explained it was a complete accident that they'd landed in the middle of a private governmental property. And now they were heading across green plains to the Capital City, an hour's walk away from the TARDIS.

These blokes were definitely members of a new alien species in Joanna's catalogue. One of them, The Captain, had taken his helmet off, revealing his perfect-cube shaped head. Were every single part of their body too?

After what felt like an eternity, possibly because of the terrible heat and stronger gravity, they reached the marble walls surrounding The Capital City.

Passing through imposing gates, they entered into the metropolis. The instant change in temperature was what struck Joanna first. It was stone cold there, she immediately regretted wearing only shorts and T-shirt.

Marble buildings of indescribable shapes she'd never seen before, and who certainly weren't following any logical rule of physics, lined the streets in a perfect formation. Distorted towers intertwined, with little people probably busy behind the black-tinted windows.

She was forced to put her sunglasses back on, as the reflecting sun on the marble road threatened to damage her retina permanently.

Passers-by barely gave them a glance. Busy city.

The Doctor had asked for a stop at what appeared to be a bowl-shaped bin, in which he picked up some local newspaper soberly named *The Local Newspaper*.

'The Thirty-third of Noctbram in the Imperial year of 50 083,' he confirmed to Joanna, before tossing the triangular printed paper back in the bin. 'I should have guessed from the New Tonian Architecture.'

Thirty thousand (or so) years into her own future. Time flies by.

The nearest person of authority on this planet happened to reside in a vast building they called The Office. With its three spire towers reaching far into the sky, almost scratching the clouds, it was known as the highest point on the whole planet.

They passed through another set of very large doors, that were more than half of the building's height, into a vast hall of even more white and luxurious marble.

Joanna was getting used to meeting important people and historical figures she'd never heard of. Having recently been knighted by the infamous Headless Queen of Drahva, she considered how to bring this topic on the table and prevent the Doctor from monopolising the conversation.

That nearest person of authority was none other than a tall, muscular, grey-bearded man, dressed in an important looking shiny armour and walking down the long stairs with an air of inherent superiority, that A Valet announced as The Great Chancellor.

The man stopped directly in front of the Doctor, completely ignoring Joanna's existence, looking the Time Lord down. A grateful smile flicked across his face.

'Welcome back, Doctor,' greeted The Great Chancellor, his voice almost shaking with emotion. 'I never thought I would see that face again.'

'Indeed,' the Doctor agreed. 'I, too, thought I would've regenerated since we last met.'

Joanna sighed. Another conversation she wasn't welcome to.

'It's been fifty-six years since your last visit, my friend,' the Chancellor recalled. 'But your presence is engraved, quite literally, in Orpelin IV's walls.'

And, as he said it, the sixteen guards present in the room saluted.

If he appreciated the gesture, or not, the Doctor didn't show it.

'My pleasure, The Great Chancellor,' he nodded politely. 'But allow me to introduce my latest time-travelling assistant, Joanna of the house of Johanson.'

Joanna bowed. ‘Nice to meet you, sir lord.’

The venerable figure smiled appreciatively at the girl, then turned back to his guest of honour.

‘Guards! Arrest him!’ he ordered, pointing accusingly at the Time Lord.

The guards executed at once. In seconds, half a dozen guards were surrounding the Doctor, ready to block any attempt to escape, even though he wasn’t trying to.

‘You, Doctor, are guilty of the second highest crime possible on our mighty planet,’ the Great Chancellor explained, his voice still calm and diplomatic.

‘Really? Might I be told what I’m guilty of?’ The Doctor kept his composure, not even fighting against the guards’ grip.

‘As the History Books will testify, Doctor, you have saved our glorious civilisation from extermination, twenty-three times.’ There was a hint of sadness in his accusations, as if he already regretted what he was about to say. ‘But it has been noted that you saved Nilepro VI, our sworn enemies’ homeworld, not less than twenty-four times.’

‘Which means?’

‘Which means you are nothing more than an enemy agent. A collaborator. A traitor.’ He raised an expectant eyebrow. ‘Do you want to deny it?’

A brief silence followed, the tension palpable. Joanna backed away slightly. She shouldn’t have been surprised, this was routine when travelling with the Doctor. But such a sudden change of atmosphere left quite an impact.

‘I won’t,’ the accused shook his head. ‘I did protect them against your Zetonian Missiles strike, as much as I rescued you from a full week of assassination attempt from their spies.’

‘Then, Doctor, you won’t deny either that you prevented six of our best biological superweapons from reaching their atmosphere?’

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor insisted. ‘Indeed, I won’t. But might I remind you, that had one of these biological strikes succeeded, your planet too, would’ve been annihilated by the resulting echo waves?’

The Great Chancellor smiled sadly. There was no animosity, no anger, between him and his prisoner. Just two friends talking about the good old days. ‘Indeed, Doctor, and I am infinitely grateful for it. But such drastic measures wouldn’t have been needed had you not stopped the deadly puppet theatre I had sent to kidnap their Annual President’s son.’

With a sigh, the Doctor resigned. There was nothing he could say that would change the facts. He did all this, and in some way, was more than guilty. Joanna was getting anxious. She wasn’t sure if it was okay to feel half-relieved that she wasn’t the one on the sacrificial altar of the Quarks’ god for once.

‘It really saddens me to say that, Doctor, you will be put on trial!’ the Chancellor shouted, so everyone in the room could hear properly. ‘...Before your execution.’

PART TWO

The cell was too small for the Doctor's genius.

Such a cramped room couldn't allow him to think properly.

The Guard on duty had taken the bed out, at his prisoner's request, claiming he had no need for it. That made Joanna remember she'd never seen the Doctor asleep, only unconscious.

One cell among thousands, lined along a corridor in The Office basement. Most of them were empty, but some were still hosting the ragged bones of their long dead occupants.

Through the heavy, marble prison bars, Joanna listened as the Doctor explained the genesis of Orpelin IV and Nilepro VI long rivalry: two planets trapped in a never ending technological race, one always trying to impress the other since the dawn of eternity.

'Nothing that would excite even a Mechonoid,' the Doctor concluded distantly, his mind too busy imagining an escape plan. 'No, I couldn't save only one planet and allow it to destroy its rival. That would've meant I value some lives more than others.'

Joanna raised an eyebrow. 'Then, you should try not to land on the planet you haven't saved as much as the other?'

A good suggestion that was worth consideration. But the Doctor wasn't in the mood to discuss it, more pressing things were on his mind. That uselessly overlong travesty of a trial, for one.

'I haven't saved Nilepro VI twenty-four times,' he revealed darkly, his hands clasped to the bars that separated him from freedom. 'Neither have I prevented the kidnapping of Nilepro VI Annual President's son, yet.'

'Time travel,' Joanna mused. That was another concept she had had trouble getting used to. The Doctor sometimes reunited with very old friends he still had yet to actually meet. A particularly disorientating experience when they'd stumbled upon future versions of themselves in the caves of the Dragon Paladala. And a really boring repeat when they had to relive that exact same adventure from the perspective of being the future ones meeting their past selves.

‘You know what,’ she began with amusement. ‘It’s cool, for once, not to be the one awaiting rescue. I would love to see it happen more often.’

In the absence of any proof that she was ever involved in the Nilepro VI business, she hadn’t been arrested, and as the ‘loyal assistant of the planet’s greatest legend’, was granted an all-inclusive stay in The Capital City for as long as she wanted.

Still, she had to find a plan and a good one, before the Doctor’s execution by Death Probe, next Wemernoday.

‘Don’t worry, my dear,’ the Doctor assured, passing his hands through the bars, reassuringly placing them on her shoulders. ‘I’ll come up with a plan so cunning that you could put a fake beard on it and call it the Master.’

Joanna shrugged, trying not to look too bothered. Even when she wasn’t the one in immediate danger, it was the *Doctor Who* had to find the right words to calm her. ‘Okay, then. The first of us to find a plan to take you out wins.’

That’s when the world ended, sort of...

DON’T PANIC!

THIS IS A PEACEFUL INVASION.

Those were the words that appeared all across the planet.

On every television, computer screen, communication device, electronic brain and connected breast implant.

Everyone could read the warning.

So, no-one panicked.

Even when twelve big, metallic saucers, obviously hung in the air by really thin strings, appeared above The Capital City. A diplomatic invasion fleet.

The whole world was immediately put on full alert.

Everyone on the planet was expecting Nilepro VI’s annual attack. Though it wasn’t strategic from them, not to say utterly stupid, to advertise their presence in such a gross manner. And those tin cans were quite different from the usual Nilepran VI warships.

Every man, woman and child in age to fight were to take up arms. The War Academy sent men to distribute guns in the street. Spaceships were made ready for any necessary counterattack. An Atomonium Cannon was installed on the roof of every single inhabited house, so its occupants weren't left defenceless. The Great Chancellor and The Generals scheduled for an emergency meeting of the Cabinet. And, through the walls of his cell, the Doctor could hear all the agitation outside. Now accommodating his plans to save the planet from the enemy, before saving himself from the planet.

Never cruel or cowardly.

PURSUANT TO THE 107th ARTICLE OF THE LEAGUE OF OPPRESSION'S INVASION CHARTER: WE ARE IN THE OBLIGATION OF ASKING THE CONCERNED PLANET(S) IF OUR INVASION FORCE ARE ALLOWED TO ENSLAVE YOUR POPULATION(S):

[- YES -]

[- SURE -]

YOU WILL BE GIVEN THE REQUIRED QUANTITY OF TIME TO ANSWER THE PROPOSITION.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION.

The following days had been a total mess.

The invaders hadn't made any other attempt at communicating, leaving the Orpelan IV government to deal with the dilemma. Members of the Cabinet had disputed such obscene use of the Invasion Charter, but the League of Oppression confirmed that nothing in the established code condemned this strategy. They had no right to interfere, now, as long as both parties were consenting to the invasion process.

Centuries of rivalry with Nilepro VI had turned Orpelin IV into a militaristic planet. The two worlds evolved in exact parallel since the dawn of everything, one always trying to outweigh the other in every domain, but none ever managed to be even slightly better than its rival.

— *Whatever they do on Nilepro VI, we do it better* —

Even the most powerful army couldn't go against The Creed of Oppression. If they accepted to be invaded in a common agreement, they would have no right to defend themselves against the invaders. Or, if even just a shot was ever fired, they would be banned from the Zarynxlox Alliance, and left with next to zero chances to beat their rival planet without the League's precious support.

Joanna found herself with twice as much problems. She'd spent the last days exploring the city, visiting some impressive monuments, numerous war memorials and quite a few anti-Nilepro VI propaganda Museums. Not as a tourist, but as someone who had a very complicated plan to elaborate. Though it hadn't worked as she'd hoped.

The government had politely refused the Doctor's help, the Time Lord still regarded as an untrustworthy traitor with barely a handful of days left before he was to be publicly executed.

'Let me guess,' Joanna rolled her eyes. 'You've encountered/fought those guys before?'

'Indeed.' The Doctor nodded, as he completed the Gallifreyan crosswords he'd been drawing on the walls for the last three days. 'The **𐌵𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌸𐌺𐌻𐌹𐌾**: terrible losers, unsatisfied tyrants, but also the most ruthless cheaters this side of the time vortex.'

Joanna chuckled, but the Doctor's serious expression confirmed that the alien name wasn't a joke. 'Who?'

'The **𐌵𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌸𐌺𐌻𐌹𐌾**, with an **𐌹**.'

'How the hell am I supposed to pronounce that?' Was the most humiliating thing she had ever had to ask. Usually, she hated asking questions, but for an ex-student in linguistics, it was insulting. The TARDIS already rendered most of her greatest skills useless. There was no need for an expert in Monoid Vernacular when you travelled in a universal translator. Though, sometimes, even the most powerful time machine couldn't render some of the most complex alien words/sounds

When he came back to see if the prisoner wasn't trying to escape, as they all usually do, The Guard found the traitor scribbling circles, with an indelible pen, on the floor of his cell.

Circles within circles, attached to other circles. Growing bigger and bigger. The biggest circle he'd ever seen drawn on a wall by a living being, probably because vandalising walls was punishable by death. It was fascinating to look at. Beautiful.

'It's my duty to warn you that you won't be allowed to leave until you've cleaned all that up!'

The Doctor barely acknowledged his presence, too busy to offer more than a quick glance. 'I wasn't planning to stay.'

FRIENDLY REMINDER THAT NO TIME RESTRAINS SHOULD INFLUENCE OR DISTURB YOU INTO MAKING A DECISION ABOUT THE FUTURE DOMINATION OF YOUR PLANET.

The corridors all looked the same.

As corridors always do. All that white was getting boring. Architects never bothered to build interesting corridors because people just walked through.

- RESTRICTED AREA -

'Not for me.'

She crossed another bunch of similar-looking white corridors. Who needed that many? The thought of that journey on Kodiro Zeta, the planet made of corridors, still gave her shivers. They'd saved the local population from some nameless tyrant, then found their way back to the TARDIS and taken-off to another adventure. Although it took them a full year to manage that.

All she could do now was find the nearest and highest person of authority that could be bribed. One of the first things she'd learned from the Doctor.

That was the hell of a long time ago. How old was she? Hard to keep track when you travel in time.

Thirty-nine.

Forty soon.

Nineteen years since that holiday trip on Vandragis, where she mistook a time travelling blue box for the local public conveniences. It'd been quite a ride since: she almost prevented Ecuador from ever existing, met her daughter from the future, was replaced by clones not less than three times, witnessed the destruction of Atlantis by a lone Pescaton, recorded the birth of a baby sun and the final episode of her favourite TV show, transmitted more than a century after her time. Though it hadn't been the same since Marxzimuz had left the TARDIS to help some rebels in a cardboard jungle.

Forty.

She'd barely thought about home since she left. Barely thought about her dads.

Perhaps travelling in the TARDIS had been her way of dealing with being a grown-up...

The maze of corridors ended on large doors, wide open, waiting for her to step inside. The temptation was too strong, she couldn't resist such an invitation.

'No guards around,' Joanna shrugged. That area certainly couldn't be more restricted than the rest, eh?

An inviting scent floated around, warmer than the rest of that city.

A (too) long table stood in the middle, surrounded by two dozen of not really comfortable-looking marble chairs. Some sort of dining room by the look of it. Paintings decorated the ever white wobbly walls, all representing what appeared to be the exact same two planets fighting against each other in a gruesome and detailed battle. The grey-coloured world always seemed to have the advantage over the pink one.

Steps.

Someone was approaching.

More steps... Not just one person then. A group.

She couldn't risk being found here. She had no reasonable way of explaining how she didn't see those thirty-three *Restricted Area* signs.

Joanna threw herself under the table, crawling toward the central marble leg. Once there, she crouched in a fetal position, hugging her legs, trying to be as small as possible. No tablecloth to hide her presence. She could only hope, fingers crossed, that no-one would have the ludicrous idea of looking under the table.

Conversations.

Too much at once, no way of distinguishing a word from another. Too many of them were approaching. If her capacities of deduction were good enough, they couldn't be more than twenty-four. The exact number of chairs.

Legs and feet appeared as people began to take their seat, narrowing her already limited space even more. These chaps must've been important ones, by the way their boots and shoes were perfectly clean, almost brand new.

An extra chair had been brought in. Twenty-five.

She could hear the *beep beep boop* of someone pressing buttons on a computer pad. No cutlery or people eating. That definitely wasn't a dining room. Of course, it was obvious now, why hadn't she thought of that earlier?

'I declare this fourth session of the Emergency Cabinet reunion, open.' That was The Great Chancellor, no doubt. 'Could The Small Chancellor read the report of yesterday's session?'

A man cleared his throat. At least, it was what she thought at first. The voice that spoke definitely was feminine. 'Yesterday, the Council decided that 'Yes' could be the most appropriate and judicious answer to the invading forces' proposition, while 'Sure' was voted too brutal and familiar. It was agreed that today's session would concern the tone employed to deliver the answer, and how it would impact the invaders' perception of our Civilisation.'

The chatting continued. Not too loud, not too quiet. Just people arguing for the sake of it. Typical reunion.

‘Has anyone anything to say about this program?’ asked The Great Chancellor, though from his tone it was obvious he wouldn’t tolerate any objection. ‘Excellent, we shall begin then.’

‘Peace has never been our way of dealing with enemies,’ an older woman’s voice began, authoritatively. ‘A firm and decisive ‘Yes.’ Make them understand that we’re not surrendering, that we are ready to counterattack, that we will never have resigned, had we been given the choice.’

‘We surely don’t want to admit that we’re powerless against these invaders,’ that was The Great Chancellor again. ‘But we don’t want to provoke them either, or the consequences could be disastrous if we happened to anger them.’

Joanna wanted to sigh, but in her current situation, she thought against it. Her legs ached, that was quite a delicate position, in every sense of the word. She was blinded by wild strands of her blonde hair, and missed to be kicked in the face twice.

The Johanson weren’t brave enough for politics.

‘I don’t think we’re powerless,’ said a calm, male voice. Or was it female? ‘We’re just at a disadvantage. The League of Oppression never said that we couldn’t rebel once we’ve been enslaved.’

‘That’s right,’ the old woman’s severe voice cut in. ‘But I don’t think anyone around this table would tolerate being enslaved, even for a single second. But maybe you would like to be the laughing stock of Nilepro VI?’

‘We could pretend that ‘yes’ in our culture means ‘no thanks?’’ proposed timidly another, younger man.

‘Or...’ It was the older woman again, her voice quieter this time. ‘We could rebel and claim that it was a spontaneous initiative from some pre-selected scapegoats.’

‘Animal abuse isn’t what this Cabinet stands for.’

That’s when Joanna stopped listening, every single one of her muscles suddenly straightening, the pain dissipating under a flow of adrenaline that rushed through her whole body, her mind now urging her to make a quick decision.

Someone had dropped their pen to the floor.

PART THREE

Some of the circles were now big enough to cover three walls at the same time. The Guard still had no idea what this was all about, but would be honoured to help, if the Doctor ever needed him.

He was exactly as the Twenty-Two Days War's novelisation had described: *'A fierce looking man with floppy long hair and a hint of romanticism.'*

His grandfather had fought in the sewers, alongside the Time Lord, to eradicate the Nilepran VI incursion. The most devastating chapter in the history books. Tales of courage and loyalty that had inspired him, his brothers, and a thousand others to join the Official Guard.

The Doctor was the reason he was here in the first place, officially guarding the official door of the official detention department in The Office.

His older brother hadn't been so lucky. Drafted to an outpost in the south pole, where Nilepran VI prisoners were kept, he died trying to prevent a convict from escaping. Years of training, wasted.

The Guard would do whatever such a cultural icon asked. Except anything that went against the established law.

'Are you finished soon?' he asked in a poor attempt to start a conversation.

The Doctor crouched, continuing his work on the floor. 'Later.'

The Guard had made a fool of himself. That's not how you were supposed to approach one of the greatest historical figures this world has ever known. No, he wouldn't make the same mistake twice, he should stay silent, as he has always been told, and stay on guard until further notice.

There was something unsettling about the sketches, like contemplating infinity. He was usually good at logic games, but those circles meant nothing. They were giving him a headache. A serious one.

'What do you think?'

The Guard almost jumped out of his body when he realised the Doctor was looking at him. He had to battle to keep his composure in the presence of his childhood hero. 'I'm a guard. I'm not supposed to think if

no-one orders me to.’

The floor was now entirely covered by a giant circle. The Doctor simply ignored his interlocutor’s previous remark, and proudly gestured at the room. ‘It makes me sad to think that I summed up your entire existence in a mere prison cell.’

‘My existence?’ The Guard gulped, not sure what they were talking about. ‘Are those circles the writing of ‘Time Lords?’

‘These are only random scribblings to help me concentrate,’ the Doctor explained dismissively. ‘Looking for ideas, I was able to remember the complete history of your civilisation in a matter of hours. Sadly, I’m still none the wiser about how I should prevent its end.’

‘Don’t you think we have any chance of finding a solution by ourselves?’

‘Should I consider myself lucky that I’ll be dead before I can confirm that the answer is no?’

REMINDER THAT OUR INVASION FORCES ARE STILL WAITING FOR AN ANSWER. PLEASE, IT WOULDN’T BE VERY RESPECTABLE TO DELAY YOUR REPLY EVEN LONGER.

‘They make me sick,’ The Communication Operator had snarled, unaware that the mic transmitting directly to the alien invaders was still open.

THIS INFORMATION IS ERRONEOUS: OUR SCANNERS INDICATE THAT YOU ARE PERFECTLY HEALTHY.

It stopped next to her leg.

As large and thick as a tin can. How anyone could properly write with that, Joanna didn’t imagine. Her fingers reached for the cylinder, missed a couple of times. It was lighter than she had thought, almost. Who’d designed such an ergonomic abomination?

She could still send the pen back toward its rightful owner, but that would pretty much give away her location if it landed in the wrong place or made too much noise. She pocketed it, as best she could, in her shorts.

It could be useful, but she had no idea how, yet.

The conversation was getting heated up there, the Cabinet still arguing whether ‘Yes...’ was more poetic than ‘Yes!’, or whether it wouldn’t be wiser to use ‘Sure!’ instead. Experts were brought in, but none of them could offer a satisfying solution.

Joanna was no longer listening to all the exposition, more preoccupied by the fallen pen and anyone that would be looking for it. She was sweating. That big sun hovering above the city and the heating set to maximum, didn’t make things easier.

What was she even doing here?

She had that bad habit of stumbling into rooms where terrible things happened. Back in the early days, when she was still young and impressionable, she would’ve screamed, waiting for the inevitable to happen. But, as time passed and repeated, you got used to it, and ended up wondering if you’ll still have any reaction whatsoever, if you kept travelling with the Doctor for another twenty years.

Ouch! Someone kicked her in the ribs.

She clenched her teeth, trying to hold back an agonising shriek. You never got used to pain.

‘The Communication Office informed me that the **アフェUSEEア** are getting impatient,’ the Great Chancellor’s voice cut in. ‘We need to be quicker in making our decision. We wouldn’t want to be rude, not yet. That’s why I propose we postpone this discussion until tomorrow. Except if anyone has anything strategically useful to say?’

Some had things to say, though none were strategically useful, so the Cabinet reunion ended. But Joanna wasn’t out of trouble yet.

Water splashed her back.

A sad figure was mopping the floor all around the table.

Even in a grey crumpled blouse, the unusual figure of an Orpelan IV native remained imposing. But this one was perpetually hunched, unable to stand straight after years of labor.

He had obviously been doing this his whole life. Not a warrior, unlike everyone else on this planet. Just The Janitor.

She couldn't see his face properly, only glimpses of tired cubic features and a faint smile that menaced to drop at any moment.

Holding her breath, she watched carefully as he danced around, grimly spreading bleach, switching his mop for a brush, dusting down the paintings and changing the dead lightbulb.

If he was a conscientious worker, he would soon find her under the table of a confidential reunion, in what was supposed to be a restricted area.

Her only option was to crawl, as silently as possible, out of the room. She couldn't even run, her ankle was in pitiful shape already, after all this running through time and space, and fighting was out of the question.

Joanna called on her lucky star, if she had any.

In a spasmodic gulp, The Janitor collapsed to the floor like a discarded doll.

Heart attack. Conveniently deceased.



The sun rose, perhaps for the last time, over a free Orpelin IV.

Deep beneath The Office, the Doctor had rolled up his velvet sleeves, busy cleaning up black ink from the walls and floor of the cell.

'Sure you don't want any help?' proposed The Guard.

Never meet your heroes, Joanna knew that well. Particularly when their execution has been scheduled for this afternoon.

'Don't worry about me,' the Doctor noted. 'I'm not the one whose planet is about to be enslaved.'

Half-true.

It was well-known, through the cosmos, that the Time Lords were in a particularly delicate situation with the Chumblyies since they'd tried to avert the creatures' existence, by travelling to the prehistoric era and crushing the silver-fish from which all life on the Chumbley world originated. The first link in a chain of temporal crimes that would inevitably lead to conflict. A part of the Doctor's near future history they'd tried to avoid at best.

‘You saved our world from certain doom so many times, Doctor,’ The Guard recounted with unconcealed nostalgia. ‘It took, literally, an entire library to list them all off?’

The marble shone so much now that Joanna could see her own reflection in the prison bars. In other circumstances, she would’ve clapped.

‘Come on, there must be a way of beating them?’

‘There always is,’ the Doctor said distantly, looking through the window. The streets were full of soldiers, most of them were still simple civilians just yesterday. ‘It’s only a matter of finding it before everybody dies.’

She couldn’t just stand still and do nothing, serious actions had to be taken, plans had to be made. She paced around the corridor, the adrenaline finally kicking in.

‘You said that every planet they invade died of sadness...’ she remembered.

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Some terrible cheaters, with no understanding of humor, eh?’

She imagined the life, the world and the pain of a race that couldn’t even smile. The saddest species that ever existed. Another thought struck her: how could you beat enemies that were ready to spoil their own plan just to make their victory certain?

‘What are you going to do, then?’ asked The Guard, a serious frown creasing his angular features. ‘Tell them a joke?’

The Guard had saved the world.

The funniest joke in the universe.

It wasn’t hard to pull off.

Although the Doctor’s plan proved perfectly viable, and would’ve saved a lot of lives in record time, The Great Chancellor had civilly refused any help from the fallen hero and walked away to the daily Cabinet reunion that had been scheduled.

‘Stop!’ The Guard howled. ‘Sonic devices are strictly forbidden!’

He pointed at the small tube-shaped metal contraption with which the detainee was playing, ready for a formal confiscation. Sonic gadgets had

been proscribed from the surface of the planet after being used for sabotage and terrorism by Nilepro VI supporters.

‘This is the Acoustic Screwdriver,’ the Doctor explained, adjusting some settings on the handle. ‘As the name might suggest, it’s acoustic.’

‘Oh, really sorry sir!’ The Guard apologised. ‘What is it for?’

Joanna spared the Doctor from answering the obvious questions that might interfere with his work. ‘The Acoustic Screwdriver can do everything the Sonic Screwdriver can’t.’

His brain dissected the information and its implications. As a servant of law & order, he couldn’t allow anything unethical.

‘Could you explain the plan, please? I can’t let you two do unauthorised/illegal things that would save our lives. My career is at stake.’

Joanna pointed at the Acoustic Screwdriver, its red nose glowing, emitting a faint fizzing sound. ‘The Acoustic Screwdriver will find the best frequency and transmit our joke to the Invaders’ ship. Well, that’s what I understood, but that’s not really how the Doctor explained.’

Simplifying technobabble. That was another skill she’d learned on her travels.

‘Except we have a small problem,’ the Doctor said gravely.

‘A problem?’ The Guard repeated. ‘What sort of problem, sir?’

‘You see, the Acoustic Screwdriver can transmit to anywhere and anywhen in the cosmos. Except it can’t actually deliver the message, only transport it to its destination.’

‘Now,’ Joanna sighed in exasperation, ‘explain that concept, using an everyday example.’

‘Think about a postman that would transport the mail all around the world to your house, but wouldn’t be capable of putting it in the box.’

‘What is a postman?’

Both ignored The Guard’s question.

They needed the Sonic Screwdriver, their only way of putting the mail into the box. A sonic device that, in the present circumstances, was banned by the same government they were trying to save.

It would’ve been far too easy.

‘As long as you don’t forget the pun...’ Joanna shrugged.

Still, that was only a minor problem compared to what was yet to come.

The heavy wobbly marble doors creaked open, dozens of armed soldiers flooding inside the large corridor, led by none other than The Great Chancellor himself.

They marched in perfect coordination towards the only occupied cell. Their blank expressions half-hidden by heavy cubic helmets. Even as they reached their destination, the squad continued to stomp furiously on the spot, until The Commander ordered them to stop.

The silence that followed was unsettling for both parties.

‘You’re late,’ the Doctor remarked, looking at his pocket watch whose hands were permanently frozen on a quarter past five.

‘I am really sorry that you have to be executed, Doctor,’ the Great Chancellor sighed, tears forming in the corner of his eyes. ‘You’re more than a friend, to me. There should have been another way...’

‘I’m sure this is nothing personal,’ the Time Lord agreed.

‘If there’s anything I can do, if you’ve got any last wishes,’ the Chancellor continued. ‘You shall have them.’

‘A last meal would be very welcome.’

The Great Chancellor turned to The Commander, exchanging some conspiratorial whispers, considering the demand. Two minutes and sixteen seconds of deliberation later, they both nodded in agreement.

‘And what delicacy would satisfy a Time Lord? Just ask, and we’ll have it brought in.’

The Doctor rubbed his hands together. ‘A telephone.’

A black telephone, cutlery neatly disposed beside, was brought from The Kitchen on a shiny silver plate. A precious artefact, almost impossible to find these days. Last remains of the not so long-lost Earthian Empire (49 981 - 50 049 A.D.), taken from The War Museum where it had stood for years as a trophy, to be prepared by The Finest Cook on the planet; a privilege even War Generals weren’t offered.

For his own reasonable comfort, a marble table and chair had been

installed in the Doctor's cell. He sniffed, as the meal was offered, taking in the delicate aroma of mushrooms and fines herbes strewn all over the telephone.

'My compliments to the chef.'

Still hot. The Doctor almost burned himself while planting his Acoustic Screwdriver on top of it. He turned the rotary dial using the tips of the fork and carefully picked up the handset with his other hand wrapped up in the napkin.

Would the phone still work after fifteen minutes in the oven? Well, these good old pre-XXIX Century equipment had proved quite a few times that what they didn't have in design, they had in efficiency.

The Doctor finished composing the code. What code, he didn't explain. Joanna thought of the Acoustic Screwdriver as some sort of intergalactic phone book that could contact anything or anyone in the known universe and beyond.

Now, he was just waiting for someone to pick up.

'Is this allowed, sir?' she heard The Guard ask his superior.

The Great Chancellor barely gave him a glance, fascinated by the prisoner's meticulous methodology. 'The way the condemned enjoys his meal is none of our business.'

They all waited, experimental Music On Hold buzzing through the silence, until the Invaders finally decided to pick up.

'Hello?' he asked, soliciting the other end of the line.

He waited politely for a few seconds.

A hoarse voice barked, but no-one outside the cell could hear what it said. The interlocutor sounded pretty angry, not because it had any reason to, it was just its usual tone of voice

'This is the Doctor, speaking on behalf of the Orpalan IV Government concerning your request for invasion.'

A short pause, for drama. Joanna was shaking, mostly because of the cold.

'What follows is the definite, official and authorised response to the previous demand emitted by the **ATEUSEJAI** diplomatic ship...'

Tension hung in the air, almost palpable. It was about to become a person.

The Doctor coughed diplomatically.

ƒʝ0ZV+? ƵZ0 ƵLƵ..-V'VƵLƒʝʝM//ռZ'V'VƵ V'V'σ—ƵL 0'V'σ—ƵLƒʝ ʝ+//V+ƵL!

Both literally and metaphorically, the effect was similar to that of a bomb.

The room burst into laughter.

The Chancellor, The Commander, even the guards.

Every single person that had heard it was splitting its sides, some so hard that the crushing of their bones echoed. The Medics had to be rushed in when men started collapsing to the ground.

They were taken away before anyone could injure themselves really badly.

Everyone, except for Joanna. She turned to the Doctor, as he ended the call, in total incomprehension. ‘I don’t get it?’

‘I’ll explain later.’

ƒʝ0ZV+? ƵZ0 ƵLƵ..-V'VƵLƒʝʝM//ռZ'V'VƵ V'V'σ—ƵL 0'V'σ—ƵLƒʝ ʝ+//V+ƵL!

The answer had been received by the diplomatic ship and was now being transmitted to the Invasion Fleet that was hovering above Orpelin IV’s atmosphere. They just had to confirm the Orpelin IV’s consent to the League of Oppression, then proceed to the mass extermination and enslavement.

Except no-one on board could tell what that answer was supposed to mean.

It was first assumed to be the Orpelin IV equivalent for ‘Sure’. But the League needed a definite answer, not dubious speculations.

The greatest language engineers of the **ՏԻԲԱՍԵՐԴՏ** civilisation,

were hired to study and decode the message. Some saw it as the highest form of communication ever attempted. The ultimate solution to every conflict. The greatest sentence ever spoken. Others treated it as a poor attempt to appear clever.

The words spread quickly, and soon, everyone was busy trying to decode the meaning of the Answer. It became an urban myth that, whoever understood those words, would be granted the secret of life (Although science had repeatedly proven that no such thing could occur.)

Nonetheless, the highest authorities confirmed that whoever found the meaning, would have his name given to the about-to-be-dominated planet.

The Answer soon became the **ATEUSEYAT**'s only priority. When they finally got it, sixty-million years had passed.



The time-travelling blue box, identical to the descriptions given in the old legends, had been transported from the quarry to The Office Hall by a group of devoted citizens.

There, hundreds of officers gathered to admire the stuff of legend. A sacred relic no-one dared to touch.

Guards escorted the Doctor through the dense crowd, to his parked TARDIS. Having prevented Orpelin IV's destruction for the twenty-fourth time, as many as their sworn enemies from Nilepro VI, the Time Lord had been immediately pardoned and regained his previous status as a planetary saviour.

History Books had been updated to include yesterday's events that would now be remembered for generations to come.

Everyone clapped as today's hero appeared on the marble dais set up for the occasion.

'Thank you,' he waved gratefully.

'No. It is I who should thank you, Doctor,' The Great Chancellor bowed, a little clumsily. 'I don't know what would've happened to us had you not been there!'

'It's been a pleasure, The Great Chancellor,' the Doctor agreed as they

shook hands. ‘Until next time.’

Joanna finally emerged from the crowd, her heart pounding. She was about to make the most important decision of her whole life. But, somehow, it felt like she was about to do something terribly stupid.

‘Come along, my dear,’ the Doctor announced as he saw her. ‘The Universe is waiting, but for how long...’

‘I’m not coming along, Doctor.’

An awkward silence followed, everyone gaped, staring in disbelief.

It sounded better during rehearsal.

‘What do you mean?’

She usually loved it when he was the one asking questions. But not when he already knew the answer.

‘I’m staying here...’ she trailed off, still hesitant.

‘What for?’

No sound came out of her mouth, no word could explain what she felt. Instead, she reached over, to a hand. The Guard’s hand. And that was all he needed to know.

‘Of course,’ the Time Lord quietly approved. She couldn’t tell if he was sincere or just keeping appearances. ‘I can prevent doomsday, defeat bug-eyed monsters, stop the catharsis of spurious morality...’

Gently, he pushed open the ‘TARDIS’ door, ignoring all those eyes that were watching, murmuring to himself. ‘But who am I against love?’

He stepped in, ready to disappear out of time and space, forever.

‘Before you go—’ Joanna stammered, fumbling in her pockets. ‘Here!’

She handed him a gold pen, the size of a tin, with sumptuous symbols spiralling on its handle. ‘Don’t forget me.’

He carefully studied it, taking in all the small details, before giving an approving glance. ‘I shall use it wisely.’

A sad smile flickered on his face as he vanished in his TARDIS. The familiar wheezing, groaning sound that echoed through the silent hall wouldn’t be heard on Orpelin IV for the next ninety-six years.

The Guard squeezed her hand.

And Joanna realised.

‘Wait! Doctor—!’ she called, as the blue box was gradually fading out of existence, disappearing into eternity. ‘You haven’t explained!’

Vworp, Vworp!...

DAVID TENNANT

CAITLIN BLACKWOOD

LUKE TREADAWAY



DOCTOR • WHO

F N A R G
PART ONE

BY ANDREW HSIEH AND TOM HANNAH-GOLDEN

FNARG

By Andrew Hsieh and Tom Hannah-Golden

PART ONE

It was in Leadworth, the year 1996. A gentle breeze swept through the starry night, outside a house with a very untidy and overgrown garden. The lights were all off, except for one window on the first floor, where a little ginger-haired girl knelt beside her bed; hands clasped together with her eyes closed.

“Dear Santa,” she began, in a Scottish accent, “Thank you for the vouchers, the typewriter, and a new school friend who can keep me company. My summer break has already started, so I hope you’ll be able to answer my prayers. But honestly, it is an emergency. My parents are still missing.”

The girl paused to swallow, trying to think of what to say next. “Aunt Sharon says they haven’t been gone for long, but it’s been two weeks since they left for Inverness, and I’m not sure if they’re still alive or not. So could you please, please send someone to let me know? Maybe a police officer? My Uncle Ross? Or...”

Suddenly, a faint whooshing noise caught her attention. She opened her eyes, noticing it grow louder into an unearthly sound of wheezing and groaning. Louder and louder and...

Crash!

“Back in a moment!” The girl got up and rushed towards the window, peering past the curtains to discover a blue police box standing upright, surrounded by the ruins of her garden shed. She looked up to the stars, thinking her wish had come true.

“Thank you, Santa.”

The girl put on her cardigan and boots, still in her pyjamas. Then she ran downstairs with her torch to leave the house. Approaching the police box in the garden, she was amazed by how barely damaged it was. One of its doors unlocked and slowly opened, instantly releasing steam from the inside. A hand suddenly appeared, then an arm, clutching onto the door. It was a tall figure, gradually revealing a spiky-haired man in a dark brown suit with blue pinstripes. Struggling to keep his balance, he appeared to be in pain from a severe injury. The girl couldn't leave him to suffer, she helped him up to his feet but suddenly became stunned when she caught a glimpse of his face.

“Uncle Ross?”

The man shook his head, figuring out what kind of response she would have. “I’m not him. I’m the Doctor. And I’m not ginger.”

“Ging—? Hang on,” she interrupted. “If you’re a Doctor, then why do you look like my uncle?”

“Long story—”

He collapsed and fell on his knees, suddenly noticing that his hands were releasing some golden energy. The fear of dying was already getting to him. He couldn't stop wincing.

“You alright, mister?” the girl asked.

“I was getting shot at. And I’m running out of time,” he grunted, resisting the pain as he tried walking. There were no signs of blood stains either. “Cup of tea?”

Puzzled, the girl couldn't tell if he was deluded or just showing symptoms. “I don't drink tea. Especially at night.”

“Sorry, I was asking if I could have a cup of tea. Poor choice of words.”

“Oh,” she was beginning to understand. “Well, we do have English Breakfast.”

The Doctor suddenly got up and felt normal again, probably motivated by the girl's suggestion. “English Breakfast sounds simple enough, despite having the accent myself.”

She looked at him quizzically.

“Joke,” he waved.

“Do you take milk or sugar?”

“Both, one teaspoon.”

“Of milk?”

“You got any biscuits?”

In the kitchen, the girl carefully poured some milk into a mug, followed by a lump of sugar. The Doctor, meanwhile, waited patiently at the dining table - still trying to contain the suffering.

“Here,” she said anxiously, placing the mug in front of him, along with a plate of custard creams. “These are all I have, I’m afraid.”

“No worries, a classic custard cream would do just fine.”

The Doctor took a sip, and felt suddenly refreshed. “Ahh, just what I needed, a good cup of tea!” And another, before munching on a biscuit. “Mmm, not bad.”

“Better?” the girl asked, also taking a bite.

“Maybe,” he replied. “What is your name?”

“Amelia Pond.”

“Amelia Pond? Nice. Bit fairytale... with a hint of Shakespeare. Met the guy once. Or did I *really*?” He slurped down the rest of his tea. “So where are we, Amelia? Scotland? I can tell from your accent.”

“No,” she sighed. “We moved down here to Leadworth. It’s rubbish.”

“And your parents?” He paused to have another biscuit. “Hope I didn’t wake them.”

“They’re missing.”

He went still upon hearing this, with the biscuit in his hand hovering in front of his open mouth. She felt his eyes upon her. Narrowed with interest. “What do you mean?”

“Both Mum and Dad. They went on holiday to Inverness two weeks ago, but I haven’t heard from them since then. No phone call, no postcard, nothing. So my Aunt’s looking after me.”

“Is she upstairs?”

“She’s out, speaking with my psychiatrist.”

The Doctor dropped his biscuit.

“And she left you all alone?” He couldn’t believe what Amelia had said.

“I’m not scared.”

“Course not.”

“It was the only thing she could do.”

“Quite right,” he agreed. Amelia failed to miss the lack of conviction in his voice.

“And my Uncle Ross is out of the country.”

He sighed and leaned over towards her, with the utmost sincerity. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Amelia. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You’re a police officer, am I right?”

“Not exactly, it’s just how my box looks.”

Amelia stumbled upon her choice of words before figuring out where exactly he was coming from.

“Private investigator?”

The Doctor hummed. “Well... Not exactly, but near enough, I suppose.”

“Find them,” she pleaded. “My parents. Make sure you bring them home as soon as you can.”

Taking a deep breath, he could think of one way to respond.

“I will.”

Leaving the house, Amelia helped the Doctor back to his police box. He took the key out of his pocket to unlock the door, as they heard a car approaching nearby.

“Sorry about the mess. Maybe you should call someone to build a new shed.”

She was distracted by the noise, it wasn’t good news for her. “Uh-oh, I think Aunt Sharon’s back.”

“Right, I better be off,” he pushed the door open.

“Wait, if that’s just a box, then what’s inside?”

“It’s more than a box. It’s a time machine, called the TARDIS. It’s my home... and my hospital bed.”

“Can I come?”

He paused to bend down, “Amelia, I really wish I could, but there is no way I can guarantee your safety. You’ve got a bright future ahead of you, and I promise we will reunite again - with your parents back home. Trust me.”

“Why?”

His eyes softened. “I’m the Doctor.”

It was hardly an explanation, yet his tone came with the conviction of an old family friend. She smiled, feeling confident that he could be trusted.

“*Allons-y* then,” he grunted, closing the door.

Amelia took a step back, watching the TARDIS vanish into thin air. Its wheezing and groaning noises roared across the garden, causing a strong gust of wind to blow across her long hair and making it flutter backwards. She remained standing, looking up at the starry night, hopeful that her new friend would keep his promise.



Daylight. A familiar blue box slowly materialised on the exact same spot where it crashed. It was the TARDIS, no signs of damage. Facing away from the house, one of its doors opened to reveal the Doctor, all fine and fully recovered. Looking around the garden, he didn’t appear to recognise where he had landed.

“Hmm, not what I had in mind,” he said, leaning his elbows on the doors with puzzlement. He craned his head to the fenceline. “But why here?”

A young woman exited the house, while he wasn’t looking. Early 20s with long ginger hair, bearing a strong resemblance to Amelia. Was it her, all grown up? She took a deep breath as she walked towards him, knowing what she had in mind.

“Doctor?”

He quickly turned, flabbergasted to notice the stranger from right behind. “Sorry, do I know you?”

“You’re him, you’re literally him,” she said nervously, in a Scottish accent. But her tone began to change. “Fourteen years! Where the hell have you been? I waited for you!”

“Whoa, whoa, easy,” the Doctor raised his hands. “I’ve never seen you before in my lives.”

“It’s me, Amelia Pond. Remember?”

He shook his head, “I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Well, I’m now Amy. But I have to admit, you still look a lot like my Uncle Ross.”

“You mean Colonel Ross Brimmicombe-Wood?”

“Yes,” she nodded, feeling a bit calmer. “He died in Hong Kong, a year after we first met. His body was never found.”

A pause. Amelia studied his features. The Doctor suddenly had a lump in his throat. “I know,” he gulped. “I worked with him briefly during the Handover. He was a good man.”

“Okay,” she began slowly, “so if you *really* have no idea who I am, then why did you end up here in my garden?”

“My TARDIS picked up a surge of a single word being uttered across the village, over many weeks, which has led me to this exact point in time. Like a trending social media hashtag of sorts. What’s today’s date?”

“Friday, 16th July 2010.”

“Yeah, I like Fridays... although I do prefer Saturdays.” (*Doctor, shut up! You’re getting carried away!*) “Something unusual, or perhaps nonsensical. Probably a code—”

“Fnarg. Could that be it?” suggested Amy.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows, astonished. “Fnarg? Sounds very Pythonesque. Where did you hear it?”

“From a pupil at a school I work at,” she explained. “It’s been gaining lots of attention since.”

He snapped his fingers, “So that’s where it originated! Wait, what’s the name of the school?”

“Leadworth Manor, a special school for children on the autistic spectrum. They love my skin-on chips.”

“Chips. Ah, so you’re a dinner lady?”

“Yeah, it’s practically good. Should be on my way now. They’re having their annual summer talent show this afternoon. Wanna tag along?”

“Erm,” he stumbled. “Let me guess, you’re inviting me?”

“You’re a Doctor, so we’d like you to do some inspection... about the word.”

“I’m not just any old Doctor, I am *the* Doctor.”

“The Doctor investigating Fn—?” Amy couldn’t do it. She let the remaining syllable burst through her nostrils in a suppressed giggle. “My boyfriend Rory will be there as well. He’s great. Strong sense of humour.” A snicker twitched across her face.

“Sounds a bit déjà vu to me,” the Doctor muttered under his breath, before readdressing her. “Fancy a lift?”

“Yes!” she squealed excitedly.

“After you, Pond,” he pushed the TARDIS door open and off they went.

Leadworth Manor didn’t appear to be what the Doctor envisioned. It was a single story building, situated on a cul-de-sac with a small car park, looking a bit run-down at the start of a new decade.

“Definitely needs an expansion,” he remarked, locking the TARDIS door.

“They’re working on it, should take a good few years. Perhaps four or five? Ah, there he is!” Amy waved to a gentleman in a suit, late 20s, waiting by the entrance, before running off. “Rory!”

“Oh, why do they always...” the Doctor grumbled, as he went after her.

“Amy,” said her boyfriend. “Didn’t expect to see you out here. I thought you’d already be inside.”

“Well, I brought a plus one along who kindly offered me a lift.” She suggestively pointed her finger at the TARDIS, as Rory turned to the Doctor.

“Erm, hi there,” he said sheepishly. “You must be Amy’s boyfriend—”

“Rory Williams.”

“Good to meet you, Rory, I’m the Doctor.” He was quick to notice a pin on Rory’s lapel. “Let me guess... UNIT?”

“UNIT Captain.”

“Ahh, Captain,” the Doctor smiled. “Known a few in my time. Long tour?”

“Long enough to be nicknamed ‘the Centurion’ by his fellow officers,” Amy gave a mock salute, which Rory returned with a half-hug. “Can I pick ‘em or what?”

“Don’t salute,” the Doctor muttered his annoyance.

“She sure can. I recently stepped down for health reasons—” Amy blew a raspberry, which he ignored. “Whilst being stationed aboard the Valiant.”

“The Valiant? *The* Valiant, similar to Cloudbase?”

“Where else? Managed to get myself elected MP for Leadworth. Down and up.”

“Coalition government, first since the early 1970s,” the Doctor assumed. “You’re a cabinet minister?”

“Just a backbencher.”

“Is a position in government really less of a stress than the military?” he asked earnestly.

“Well...” the lapsed soldier demurred.

“Right,” interrupted Amy, squeezing Rory playfully. “Twenty minutes. Shall we go inside?”

Amy took her fob and swiped it before opening the door. They went through to the lobby and addressed the receptionist.

“Afternoon, Stacey.”

“Hi, Amy. I see you’ve brought some guests along for the talent show. So here we have... Rory Williams.”

“It’s a pleasure to be here, on behalf of the entire constituency.”

“A pleasure indeed, sir.” She turned to the Doctor, “And you are?”

He flashed his psychic paper. “Josh Whitford, aide to Rory Williams.”

Rory gave him a puzzled look.

“Here you are, you two,” Stacey handed them visitor passes. “The hall’s just there.” She pressed the button for the other door, letting them through.

As the three entered the main corridor, they came across a small group of students waiting by the hall entrance. Their moustached teacher was looking through a script, muttering the dialogue without noticing the visitors’ presence.

Amy waved, getting their attention.

“Ah, Amy,” said one of them, in a tuxedo. “No wonder we didn’t get served today at lunch.” They all laughed. He immediately recognised Rory and went over to shake his hand enthusiastically. “Rory Williams, our newly-elected MP. A pleasure to meet you at last!”

“You too, erm...”

“Steven.”

“Likewise, Steven.”

As Rory greeted the others, Steven appeared to be surprised when he noticed the Doctor. “And who are you supposed to be?”

“Josh Whitford,” he flashed his psychic paper, grinning, while Amy tried to hide her laughter. “Any copies of the programme?”

“By all means,” he replied, passing a small booklet. The Doctor flicked through the pages, only to come across a title with a word completely alien to him. “*The Fnarg Show*,” he muttered aloud, before reading the cast list, but another name caught his eye first. “Stone the Crow?”

“Yes?” said a muffled voice, from right behind. It was a crow mascot, slightly below the Doctor’s height. All black and furry with wings and cartoonish characteristics, similar to those from Disneyland. The Doctor immediately burst out laughing. “Sorry, it’s rare that I get to see an honest-to-goodness caricature; some of the best I’ve yet to catch up with. So that’s your name, ‘Stone the Crow?’”

“Or just Stone,” he added. “It’s all part of the act. Here, let me show you what I look like from underneath.”

The mascot removed its head, revealing a man in his early 30s with a stubble.

“Hello there,” he spoke with a slight lisp. “I’m Russell the performer.”

“Like the actor?”

“Yeah, very punny,” he chuckled. “Actually the name’s Toby; part-time teaching assistant. We were originally planning to call the mascot ‘Russell’, up until Steven thought ‘Stone the Crow’ would be funnier. And then I figured ‘Russell’ could also work as the performer, which I’m portraying right now.”

“You guys are truly creative and imaginative, especially when it comes to puns,” the Doctor complemented. “Maybe you should become a permanent staff member next year.”

“Why, thank you. Really wish I could, but I also happen to be a TV and stage actor.”

“Anything I’d know?”

“Made a guest appearance on the BBC daytime drama *Doctors*, last December. You can check out my IMDb profile, Toby Binchy.”

“Binchy? You don’t happen to be related to the Irish author Maeve Binchy? You know, the one who was mentioned in that *Little Britain* sketch with Marjorie Dawes?”

“Distant relative,” he confirmed. “Haven’t met her yet, sadly. But let me tell you this: I love *Little Britain!*”

“So do I, always full of laughs. Hopefully you will meet her one day, Toby.” The Doctor looked down at his hand.

“Travel broadens the mind, they say,” the actor shrugged noncommittally.

“Mmn,” he agreed. He flexed his fingers, trying to rid himself of the static charge.

“Anything the matter?”

“Someone just walked over my grave,” the Doctor rubbed his hands together. “Excuse me...”

Meanwhile, Steven took a peek inside the hall where students, parents and other guests were already waiting. “Hey, Alan,” he tried to get his teacher’s attention. “It’s time.”

“Right, I think we should take our seats,” Rory made his way into the hall. “You go along,” said Amy. “We’ll catch up.”

Steven clapped to get everyone’s attention. “Alright, guys. Janet’s about to go on stage.”

“Who?” the Doctor joined them.

“Janet Ramsden,” Amy explained. “The school headmistress.”

Steven adjusted his headset microphone, while the Doctor and Amy peeked through the door to catch a glimpse of Janet addressing the audience. But someone swiftly got in their way and raised his arm like a barrier.

“Excuse me,” begged Amy. “What’s going on?”

It was Alan, deliberately blocking them from entering the hall. “Sorry. Turns out you and your friend are also part of the act.”

“You mean *The Fnarg Show*?” the Doctor inquired, distracted. “Hope you know what you’re getting into, I play audience participation to win.”

Amy waggled her thumb. “Why have we both been dragged into this?”

“Tell me, Steven,” said the Doctor with his hands in his pockets, “What does Fnarg actually mean? Where’s it come from? Roald Dahl, Lewis Carroll, Dr Seuss?”

“Just a nonsensical word I made up,” Steven explained. “A non-expletive expression of annoyance, just like Charlie Brown saying ‘rats’ or other minced oaths, serving as the theme for this year’s talent show. My very own dedication to the Year 11 leavers.”

“Like *Britain’s Got Talent*?” asked Amy.

“Not exactly. More akin to a children’s TV programming block on a Saturday morning. And it’s always nice to bring a guest or two along, which is why I’ve chosen the pair of you. Bit like a lucky dip, eh?”

“Right,” said the Doctor, rubbing his chin sceptically.

“Okay, here’s my cue...” Steven stood by the door, ready to take the stage as Janet concluded her speech.

“Now, would you please give a round of applause? For putting this year’s show together, Steven Wood!”

He finally made his way onto the stage, waving and listening to the ovations with confidence.

While Amy struggled to get a good view from the hall entrance, the Doctor went over to a couple of other students wearing smart suits. “You two,” he called, snapping his fingers. “Ant and Dec.”

“That’s who we’re meant to be playing,” said the curly-haired one, dressed like Dec. “I’m Tom, he’s Andrew.”

“It’s our Asperger’s,” the short-haired one, dressed like Ant, explained. “We’re not Thomson and Thompson from the *Tintin* comics. Just best friends since childhood.”

They each had shiny bow ties. Gold for Tom. Platinum for Andrew.

“Right,” the Doctor gulped, apologetically. “Wait... have we met before?” He scratched his head for a moment, while the duo thought of him as a complete stranger.

Tom looked at Andrew and gave a gesture of “Have you met him?” to which Andrew shrugged and shook his head, with Tom giving one as if to say “Me neither.”

Then the Doctor said, “Oh, never mind.”

“Steven dragged us along for *The Fnarg Show*, completely out of the blue,” Andrew whispered. “He wouldn’t explain why. I thought ‘Fnarg’ sounded Swedish, at first, when we kept hearing it every day.”

“Yeah, that seems to be going around...”

Tom pointed at a giant Christmas cracker, “That’s what he wants us for, telling jokes during the intervals under the names of ‘Gold and Platinum’.”

“Hang about, you wouldn’t mind if I have a look at the script?”

“Sure,” they both said, nodding.

The Doctor discreetly picked up a spare copy left on a chair and skimmed through. “Pre-recorded?” he noticed an inconsistency in the dialogue which has already been crossed out, putting the script aside.

“How come we’re waiting out here and not inside the hall?”

“Last-minute decision,” said Tom. “We all have to wait for five-to-ten minutes before immediately going next, therefore being unable to view a performance properly, like now for starters.”

“We had a drama teacher like that,” remarked Amy. “Said it was to stop the students on stage from falling about laughing from the antics of performers in the back yet to go. In hindsight, I reckon she had a point.”

“Well I think it sucks,” Andrew scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Having to wait in the corridor to do this *live* performance. And if we remove our bow ties for even a second or two, Steven would go mad and yell ‘Fnarg’.”

“We spent many weeks rehearsing but not filming,” Tom added. “Everything was normal until Steven came along last September.”

“That reminds me,” Andrew resumed. “The first time he used that very word was when we started reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, as part of our GCSE English.”

“Let me guess...” said the Doctor. “Was it to do with the excessive amount of—?”

“Yep, his way of ‘bleeping out’ the strong language. Not only it made us all laugh, we just followed along and spread the word across the school.”

“You know what?” The Doctor leaned closer towards the duo, about to whisper. “I think there’s something very special about Steven. Not because he’s more special than the two of you, which would be rude and condescending of me to say, he does come across as, well, a ‘senior’. You understand where I’m coming from?”

“Like a teacher’s pet?” the two whispered back, before speculating who it could be. “Alan!”

“That might explain why he’s been letting Steven get away with interfering and bossing everyone about,” Andrew added.

“Could well be,” the Doctor suggested. “From how manipulative he appears to be.”

“He’s not our form tutor, thank God for that,” Andrew sighed with relief. “It’s actually Tom’s neighbour, Chris, who’s in the hall with everyone else.”

“Former neighbour!” Tom playfully nudged him.

“He took over Dinelle who sadly had to leave last year, for personal reasons,” Andrew added. “Hey,” he picked up an *Alex Rider* novel left lying on the chair. “Looks like someone’s lost their copy of *Stormbreaker*.”

“*Stormbreaker?*” Tom wondered. “Been a while since we read it in class. Wasn’t really that keen on the film.”

“Same here. Hardly cinematic like the *James Bond* films, such as *From Russia with Love* or *Casino Royale* with Daniel Craig. After reading the first two *Alex Rider* books myself, I hope someday they’ll do a TV adaptation with a serialised format. That would work extremely well!”

“You can say that again,” agreed Tom.

“Quick, they’re coming back,” Amy interrupted, as Alan and Stone the Crow finished their comedic introduction. She overheard Steven mention the names of the Year 11 leavers who each received a round of applause, “...Rajah, Hussain, Julia, Benjamin, Salah, and Shane.”

Alan quickly turned on the SMART board to reveal a weather forecast while Jeff, the IT teacher and technician, got the camera prepared. Amy glanced at the Doctor, expecting him to be squirming awkwardly on the spot, but the stranger seemed far from it. The whole spectacle was completely amusing to him. Charming, in its way.

He caught her looking and tilted his head, “Believe me, I’ve seen weirder things than this. Amazing how humans can make something out of nothing.”

“It’s the school budget,” Amy explained. “Unable to afford all the sophisticated software and equipment.”

Steven exited the hall, while everybody turned to watch Alan perform his weather act.

“So you’re not?” she asked the Doctor.

“What?”

“Human, then?”

“Well, that’s a matter of opinion,” the Doctor quietly tapped Steven on the shoulder. “Excuse me. Could you tell me a little bit about what’s to come?”

“I’ll come back to you.” He turned as Stone the Crow was about to deliver his lines.

The Doctor noticed that Steven was holding what appeared to be a modified TV remote, with a big red button at its front. His mind pulsed

with alien static, like bees swarming a honeycomb, that same feeling of energy from earlier.

“What’s wrong?” asked Amy.

“Inhuman or human...” the Doctor breathed. “Ooh, it hurts either way.”

“Hey, I wonder what happens if I press the red button on my magic remote?” Steven pointed it at Alan who begged him not to. He pressed it, causing Alan’s trousers to fall down and show his pink knickers. There was an abrupt roar of laughter across the school, from the hall to the corridor. Completely hysterical.

“Alright, look away! Nothing to see here!” Steven addressed the camera, as Jeff quickly cut the feed.

“Hey,” called Amy, from the background. “This all sounds very familiar...”

But Steven was no longer there. He had already gone back into the hall, appearing on stage again. And everybody had stopped laughing. Rather abruptly, she thought.

“Tom,” Andrew urged. “We’re on.”

As the duo overheard Steven introducing them, they quickly walked through the door onto the stage while he headed back into the corridor. The Doctor was leaning against the wall as the pulsing crackle grew louder in his senses.

“Now then,” Steven began. “Before we set sail on a little adventure, feel free to have a look around at our wonderful displays of artwork and photos.”

“What kind of adventure?” asked the Doctor, quite tersely.

Steven answered, even though it should have been impossible for him to have overheard. A simple word. Common in the modern parlance. “Spoilers.”

That very term sent chills down the Time Lord’s spine. He had heard it before, from an archaeologist who sacrificed herself. He felt the ache subside somewhat. If he didn’t know themselves better, he’d have thought it was commonplace stage fright, but this... The boys’ reactions pointed to

a perception filter, but that wasn't all... This was more like fourth dimensional nausea. Space and time grinding together like plates in a spinal column.

Time sickness, he thought, as Amy tapped him on the shoulder.

"Basil Brush," she remembered. "That's it!"

"Sorry?"

"When Steven used his remote to make Alan's trousers fall down. He ripped the idea from *The Basil Brush Show*."

"Oh," he chuckled, trying to put on a brave face. "Don't think I ever watched the show, should try and catch up."

"What's up?" her eyebrows knitted together with concern. "Migraine headache?"

"Hey, these look fascinating." He noticed a display of Vincent van Gogh paintings right behind him, while Steven went back into the hall again.

"Quite an admirer of van Gogh myself, I might check out the exhibition in Paris at some point. Were they all painted by a class?"

"GCSE students, last year. A lot of the guys here deeply enjoy art. Helps develop their creativity."

"I'd give them all an Alpha Plus."

"Alpha Plus?"

"Only achieved Theta Sigma at the Academy of Time, back on Gallifrey."

"Gallifrey, isn't that somewhere in West Coast Ireland?"

"Yes, it is. Or maybe I'm getting it mixed up with another planet or somewhere... Never mind. Well, A* it is then. It's what I graded a GCSE Physics student during my first day at Deffry Vale; way beyond planet Earth."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Fine, fine," he tried. Amy gave him a look. "Alright, the technology could be benign. No more than a joke taken too far or it could be..." he let the words trail into obscurity.

Amy pressed him. "What, Doctor?"

Tom and Andrew walked through the door, with Steven following from behind.

“Remarkable bit of theatre, that,” the Doctor commented.

“Stage magic, Doctor,” Steven waggled the remote.

The traveller extended a hand. “May I?”

“Please.” He passed it across.

Slipping his sonic screwdriver down his sleeve, the Doctor did a discreet pass to unscrew the back. “Oh, dear, I’ve pulled it apart, hold on a ‘mo.’”

It was as the boy had said. Just a bit of stage magic. For all intents and purposes, its innards were just those of an ordinary TV remote. No more, no less. The Doctor passed the object back to Steven, feeling momentarily chagrined. “Hope it won’t affect the night.”

Steven began to bark impatiently at everybody. “C’mon, people, let’s go. We’re running out of time, chop chop!”

The classroom door was already open, with opera music coming from inside. It gave the Doctor the impression that the school was also hosting a historical-themed party.

“Right, everybody,” Steven announced, elegantly. “We’re about to begin the next act of *The Fnarg Show*. Enter, if you may.”

They all went through in a single file, with the Doctor and Amy going last. As Steven prepared to address the camera, by hiding behind the judges’ desk, everyone silently gasped with embarrassment at two teaching assistants, Nicola and Karen, awkwardly dancing to Mozart’s *Queen of the Night* aria in front of a colourful curtain.

“You’re joking,” the Doctor muttered, before whispering to Amy. “Is this *really* part of the act?”

“I guess so.”

“A momentary prop malfunction, ladies and gentleman,” Steven announced. “But one resolved with swift alacrity.”

He popped the two halves of the remote back together. Good as new. Steven mischievously pressed the fast-forward button on his remote. The

music was already speeding up, so were Nicola and Karen. Uncontrollably. None of this applied to all other surroundings in the classroom.

“I thought that remote might’ve been the key to all this,” he suggested, still whispering. “Gallifreyan tech, but it’s just a regular remote, innit?”

“Could it be something else?”

“Anything’s possible at this poin—”

But suddenly, Steven pressed another button, causing the music and dancing to slow down. “Has he been watching *Toy Story 2*?” asked Amy, while everything immediately resumed at normal speed.

“Wow, that was quick, eh?” the Doctor remarked loudly. “Literally.”

The other figures in the crowd looked at him strangely.

“Definitely a perception filter,” he whispered to Amy.

“Y’mean, the remote could have been more than what it looked like?”

“Yes,” the Doctor clenched his teeth. “And I just handed it back over to him, quick as you like...”

In a matter of seconds, Steven was already pressing several buttons. The music instantly changed to *Riverdance*, using the recording from the original *Eurovision* 1994 interval act. Nicola and Karen couldn’t do the Irish dance properly, so they resumed with the awkward moves from earlier. Five dancers appeared, behind the teaching assistants, doing the “Can-Can” manically and madly.

Steven turned up the volume on his remote, causing the music to blast across the room like speakers at a festival. Everyone covered their ears, so did Nicola and Karen who quickly got down on their knees.

“Harsh on the performers,” Amy commented.

The music quietly softened, the dancers lied down to rest like someone had eased shut the lid on their music box. Nicola and Karen slowly got up on their feet, not amused by what had just happened to them.

“That’s because they’re not performing...” As they demanded answers, the Doctor slid past to discreetly address Alan.

“Alan. It is Alan, innit? Tell me about your pupil. Bright kid? Fond of ventriloquist dummies?”

“Please be quiet,” he hushed, finger on his lip.

“But I insist—”

“Zip it!”

The Doctor sharply zipped his lips, fed up of having to tolerate Alan’s patronising attitude.

The volume increased again, forcing Nicola and Karen to resume dancing manically. The dancers also joined them, as the music gradually sped up. Steven kept pressing his remote until the scenery started falling; then the music, to an abrupt halt. Everything came crashing down on Nicola and Karen, literally, while the dancers danced off. The two were buried underneath the curtains. No movement, probably dead.

The Doctor tried moving forward to pick over the debris, move stage lights and sandbags, it was possible that at least one of them was still alive beneath that wreck, but their bubble of localised Time stopped him. It was like digging his way through one of the school’s concrete staircases with his fingernails.

He turned back to Alan, spending little energy attempting to contain his fury. “Your pupil just killed two of your colleagues.”

Alan blanched. Clearly, the filter hadn’t been strong enough to overlook this spectacle. That said, years of experience in the classroom allowed him to push that initial stab of panic down behind his eyes. Once composed, he cleared his throat with a casual roll of his shoulders. As if to say, *Accidents happen.*

All the Doctor could do was shake his head. He resumed whispering, “You’re really not a good example of a teacher,” then he leaned closer, “or did Steven somehow manipulate you... with his remote?”

“This isn’t *Ripping Yarns*...” Alan shook his withering head.

“Never had the chance to watch it, despite being a *Monty Python* fan myself, but I think—”

Suddenly, two pairs of hands managed to pull the curtains aside. It was Nicola and Karen, successfully making their way out of the mess. They furiously yelled Steven’s name multiple times while leaving the room. He peeked out mischievously from a desk to quickly address the camera, before heading towards the school playground through the back door.

Nicola and Karen returned, annoyed and exhausted, from searching everywhere.

Alan, with Tom and Andrew, sat down on the judges' desk and presented their negative review of the wild performance, which immediately resulted in Nicola and Karen angrily throwing two stones at Stone the Crow. Steven addressed the camera again and quickly led everyone out of the room.

Almost everyone.

“Captain,” the Doctor interrupted.

“*Who's there?*” Tom and Andrew called, via the live feed, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

The traveller addressed the camera. “Captain Williams!”

“Doctor...” warned Steven.

“Williams—oh, *Roy!*” the Doctor persisted. “These people are in danger! It’s only a matter of time before—”

Steven pressed the red button on his remote. The feed suddenly came to an abrupt end.

“Doctor who?” Tom and Andrew stood in front of the empty screen for a moment, trying to process what they saw.



DOCTOR WHO

UNBOUND

INTO THE DEATH-SPACE

BY TIM BRADLEY

INTO THE DEATH-SPACE

By Tim Bradley

Nyssa didn't like being the focus of attention. The Doctor was shocked by her decision. No one was more shocked than Billy though.

"You can't leave, Nyssa!" Billy protested. "We were having such fun, the three of us."

"And I've never regretted every moment of my time in the TARDIS," Nyssa interjected. "I'll miss you both! But here, I have a chance to put into practice the skills I learnt on Traken."

"Don't do this, Nyssa," Billy pleaded. "Please don't leave..."

"I'm adamant," Nyssa interrupted. "Please, let us part in good faith."

"You do fully understand the commitment you'd be undertaking?" asked the Doctor earnestly.

"I don't want to be parted from you at all!" Billy cried. "I... I love you. I thought we were going to be together forever."

"Billy, I love you too," Nyssa said, "and I don't wish to be parted from you either."

"Then why do this at all?" he challenged her. "Why end what we have and decide to stay here on a dreary space station without me?"

"Because I can't ask you to come with me, Billy," Nyssa said. "I can't force you to spend your life with me. Life will be hard here, you may spend months without seeing me, and I don't want you to struggle and suffer unnecessarily whilst I help to rebuild Terminus to become a proper working hospital again."

"I'm staying with you, Nyssa dear," Billy told her. "If you're staying behind, then I'll stay too."

"You don't know what you're committing yourself to, Billy," Nyssa said.

“Neither do you,” Billy argued. “You’ll be lonely here and I don’t want you to be lonely. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. You need me as much as I need you.”

“Billy, your parents...” she reminded him.

Billy turned to the Doctor and said, “Doctor, will you let my parents know where I am? Tell them I’m staying with Nyssa in the future somewhere and that I’ll be alright. They don’t have to worry about me.”

The Doctor was saddened by his two companions leaving. But gently, he said, “Of course, Billy. I’ll let them know about you and Nyssa. You can rely on that.”

“They’ll be upset and angry, especially Mum,” Billy said. “But tell them I love them so much and I’ll never forget them.” Pausing for a moment, “Tell them I’ll miss them greatly...”

“I’ll see to it that they’ll get the message,” the Doctor reassured Billy. “Travel in the TARDIS may be unreliable, but I’ll find a way.”

“I know you will.” Billy nodded before he turned back to Nyssa.

“I can’t ask you to stay behind with me, Billy,” she said. “Not like this. Not when life will be very hard.”

“I’m not asking you to do that, Nyssa dear,” Billy said. “I’d give anything to be with you, even if it means not returning to my home time. You’re my love and I’m sticking with you to the bitter end.”

Nyssa couldn’t help be moved by Billy’s willingness to stay behind with her. Eventually, she burst into tears and said, “Billy, you’re the most foolish young man I’ve ever known...” She gripped his hand. “And I’m so glad that you’re staying with me.”

The two embraced and kissed each other whilst the Doctor looked on. He was still sad his friends were leaving him, but he was happy they wouldn’t be without each other.

“You two are the bravest people I’ve ever met,” he said. “I wish you the best of luck.”

Nyssa and Billy looked to the Doctor, giving him a fond farewell. Nyssa kissed him on the cheek whilst Billy shook the Doctor’s hand.

“Will you be alright?” Billy asked, “Without us to travel with you, I mean.”

“Oh, I’ll be alright,” the Doctor tried to be cheerful. “Don’t worry, Billy. All will be well by the time I get back to the TARDIS. Hopefully, I’ll find Turlough there.”

“Look after yourself, Doctor,” Nyssa said, embracing Billy.

“I will, Nyssa,” the Doctor said. “Keep safe, you two.”

Nyssa and Billy smiled, despite being teary-eyed. The Doctor left his two good friends behind as they were about to spend the rest of their lives together. He paused in the corridors of Terminus, turned once to face his departed friends, a final thought moments from his lips. The traveller thought better of it and kept walking.



Many years later, a space shuttle called the *Churchwood* travelled in outer space. Inside were Nyssa and Billy. They’d just come from a medical conference on the planet Midgard. They were heading back to the planet Zarat.

“How long is it before we reach home, Billy?” asked Nyssa wearily.

Billy checked the ETA on the dashboard. “About two hours.”

“Good. I can’t wait to get back.”

“First things first: long shower after a long weekend, is it?” Billy teased.

Nyssa smiled. “You know me well, Billy.”

A ripple of amusement occurred before Billy said, “Fancy a glass of Tinkari juice?”

“Yes, please,” Nyssa answered. “And have one yourself.”

“No, thanks,” Billy replied. “I’ll stick with tea.”

Billy went over to fetch a glass of Tinkari juice as well as making himself a cup of tea. Nyssa relaxed in her co-pilot chair. Both were looking forward to returning home and reuniting with their two children Enid and Adric, but it was a bittersweet affair. They also hoped to use the time to commemorate the day of Tegan’s death. Tegan was Nyssa’s best friend who sacrificed herself to save her, the Doctor and Billy when fighting Omega in

Amsterdam on Earth, 1983. The Ergon reared from the shadows of the crypt, its gaping maw open. Teeth like a crocodile. Tegan screamed in surprise and pain, its claw now tight against her skull. It was a terrible day for Nyssa. The creature's jaw clamped shut across Tegan's neck. The Doctor's face went pale as chalk. Billy was there to comfort Nyssa that day.

Billy returned with a glass of Tinkari juice to give to Nyssa. Nyssa took the glass whilst Billy went to sit down in his co-pilot seat with his cup of tea. The shuttle was on auto-pilot, but Billy was on hand should the auto-pilot break down. He'd grown to be a good shuttle pilot over the years. Time had afforded him many talents, one of which was telling when something was bothering Nyssa. She had a distant troubled look. One steeped in memory.

"Did you get much from your time at the conference?" Billy asked, hoping to distract her.

"Don't worry," Nyssa's eyes refocused, reassuring him. "I took notes."

"Good. Mind you, some of the presenters at the conference were pretty dull."

"You don't have to remind me. The last couple of talks I attended had presenters that droned. I nearly fell asleep during their presentations. And that was towards the end of the second day."

"I liked some of the interactive workshops," Billy said. "The tutors were nice when answering questions. I'm glad they allowed me to take photos for our local news service on Zarat."

"Hopefully Valgard should receive the notes I sent him before we meet up with him again on our hospital ship, the *Traken*," Nyssa said. "He should be able to decipher some of the updates made to medicine for our sector of the galaxy."

"You'll know what he'll say though," Billy scoffed. "He'll say the updates 'don't adhere to company policy such and such' or that 'liquidation rights won't be met such and such.'"

"He has to point out those inconsistencies, Billy," Nyssa reminded him. "It's his job as treasury liaison to the *Traken* from his base of operations on Terminus."

“Yeah I know. It’s just... he doesn’t have to be so moody when he does his job.”

“I just hope our children have been safe since we’ve been away,” Nyssa said.

“Well, we’ve kept in contact with them this weekend, thanks to our new babysitter,” Billy reminded her. “As well as to the upgraded comm-link we’ve had installed recently.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right, Billy,” Nyssa said. “I’m fretting unnecessarily as usual.”

Billy shrugged. “There’s an awful lot to fret about.”

“Yes...” After taking a sip of her Tinkari juice, Nyssa looked to him and said, “Billy, I couldn’t have done this without you. It’s been a huge undertaking to rebuild this sector of the galaxy and its medical facilities. I’m so glad to have done it with you, you understand that?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I only...” she stopped herself. “I do consider sometimes...”

“That’s alright, sweetheart,” Billy said, pleased. “Listen to me; I’m glad to have helped out. I wouldn’t have missed this for anything.”

With that, both put their drinks down as they were about to lean in for a kiss. Just then, they were interrupted by a sudden jerk. Nyssa and Billy felt shaken. Their cup of tea and glass of Tinkari juice smashed to the floor. A distortion effect also occurred which slowly passed. Everything reverted back to normal before a moment’s silence ensued.

“What happened? Turbulence?” Nyssa asked.

“Don’t know,” Billy replied. “I’ll check the instruments.”

As Billy checked, Nyssa gradually noticed that he became astonished.

“Billy, what is it?”

“We’ve been diverted off course.”

“What? How did that happen?”

“I don’t know, but we’re not heading for Zarat anymore. We’re on a new trajectory.”

“Switch to manual control, Billy.”

He did so, switching off the autopilot. But that didn’t seem to work.

“It’s no good, Nyssa. The controls won’t respond. I can’t get us back on course for Zarat.”

“It must be some external force diverting us of course. A magnetic force perhaps?”

“The sensors aren’t picking up any readings to indicate what’s dragging us from our home destination,” Billy said.

“I’ll try reversing the shuttle’s engines,” Nyssa suggested. “Sit tight, Billy. Let me know if anything unusual happens whilst I attend to the engines.”

Billy soon saw something at the front window. “Nyssa!” he called. “Look! We’re heading straight for something!”

Nyssa looked and became surprised by what she saw. There was Terminus before them. They wondered how they got here. Had they travelled many light-years out of Zarat’s territory? The station seemed different. Like it was brand-new! It waited for Nyssa and Billy’s shuttle to arrive.

“We seem to be drawn to it,” Nyssa remarked. “Terminus must be the source of the magnetic pull we seem to be in.”

“How can that be?” Billy enquired anxiously. “We’re not going to crash, are we?”

They watched as the shuttle drew closer to the station.

“We’re about to dock,” Nyssa announced.

This was true. The shuttle soon clamped into one of the docking ports. But it wasn’t a standard docking procedure. For one thing, a phasing effect occurred around Nyssa and Billy. Another thing was there wasn’t the usual vibration that happened when a ship or a shuttle docked. The pair found this peculiar. They tried to make contact with the station, but there was no response.

“This feels unsettling, doesn’t it?” Billy remarked. For some reason, he was reminded of the time they took Enid to a fairground on the planet Valnor and she didn’t like being on the shuttle coaster ride. Nyssa recalled the day well since their daughter had nightmares after that.

They waited in the shuttle for a quarter of an hour according to the *Churchwood’s* time-log.

Eventually, Billy broke the silence. “Okay, what do we do from here?”

Nyssa thought for a moment. “I suggest we take a look outside and see what’s happening. Find out why the shuttle was diverted here.”

“Not meaning to state the obvious, but is that wise?”

“I’ve checked the readings. The atmosphere is thin, but we should be alright once we’re aboard the station.”

“Yeah but, this does feel creepy, doesn’t it?” Billy shuddered.

“Are you afraid, Billy?”

“A little bit.”

“Good, that makes two of us,” Nyssa acknowledged. “But it’s no good just sitting here. I’m going to fetch two flashlight beacons just in case we need them. Fetch some food and water supplies, Billy dear. Oh and fetch the medical kit. We might need it in case anyone’s injured or sick aboard Terminus.”

Gradually, Billy got out of his co-pilot seat.

The shuttle doors opened. Nyssa and Billy soon found themselves aboard the station. The corridor they entered was well-lit. Yet there was no-one aboard to greet them. In fact, they weren’t sure if the station had been completely abandoned. They ventured further.

“Let’s hope no bats come flying out of the walls and into our faces,” Billy joked nervously, slinging the strap of the *Churchwood’s* medical kit, which also contained food and water supplies, over his shoulder.

“Don’t joke about it, Billy,” Nyssa said. “I’m uneasy as it is.”

“Sorry, dear,” Billy replied. “You know I try to joke in an unsettling situation.”

“I appreciate that,” Nyssa remarked. “Let’s see if we can find any sign of life aboard the station.”

They walked on ahead in the corridor.

After a while, Billy wondered, “I don’t know if I’m repeating myself, but this does seem peculiar. How come we’ve ended up on Terminus?”

“I’m surprised no-one answered our hails upon arrival via the comm-link,” Nyssa remarked.

“Maybe this isn’t Terminus,” Billy suggested. “Maybe this is a figment of our imagination. We’ve had a tiring weekend after all. Maybe this is a dream we’re having...?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Billy,” Nyssa scoffed. “We’re wide awake, you and I.”

To prove her point, Nyssa took Billy’s hand and playfully pinched it. Billy winced and complained once she did that to him, causing them both to laugh. They did wonder whether they would reach a dead end in the corridor they were in.

As Nyssa considered options, Billy broke the tension and cheerfully said, “I wonder if we’ll receive another drawing from Enid of another sunrise soon. I like it when she sends us her coloured drawings from time to time whilst we’re away.”

“You’re trying to distract me,” replied Nyssa.

“Is it working?”

He heard her sigh, not unpleasantly. “I wonder if Adric’s doing well with his current biochemical project,” she said. “He’s meant to be doing a demonstration of it today at his school. I hope he’ll receive positive feedback...”

Just then, Billy interrupted Nyssa, hushing her as he did so. They both listened as they heard faint echoes nearby. It sounded like people. People talking! It indicated a hub of activity.

“Sounds like we were wrong,” Billy remarked. “Perhaps this station hasn’t been abandoned.”

“I’m not sure,” Nyssa became sceptical. “Let’s keep going and see what we’ll find around the corner. Hopefully things will become clearer to us.”

Nodding, Billy accompanied Nyssa as they turned around the corner to enter a new area of the Terminus station.



They soon found themselves in what used to be Terminus’ store yard. It was currently a hive of activity. Sick beds were placed on the lower and top sections of the hallway. Patients were attended to by doctors and nurses

examining them. People weren't stored away in tanks left to rot anymore. It was exactly what Nyssa hoped for when she and Billy rebuilt the station. Terminus had become a proper working hospital. It was fully populated, working as intended. A hospital for the sick and injured!

Yet no-one noticed Nyssa and Billy as they entered. Somehow, they seemed invisible to the doctors and nurses. Billy tried to chat one of the doctors up to ask what was going on, but it was no use. It came as a surprise to Nyssa and Billy when the doctors and nurses walked straight through them, quite literally. As if they weren't there.

"What's happening?" Billy asked anxiously. "Are we ghosts? Have we died and gone to heaven?"

"I've no idea, Billy," Nyssa answered. "I've no explanation for why this has occurred."

Billy was reminded of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* where Scrooge was merely a shadow visiting his past, present and future. Was this what was happening to Nyssa and Billy? Were they being shown their past, present and future by three spirits? Nyssa dismissed the notion, saying it wasn't scientifically proven.

Just then, Nyssa and Billy felt uneasy. They sensed a cold presence nearby.

"Is it me or am I hearing whispers all of a sudden?" Billy asked quietly.

Nyssa heard it too. A shuddery whispering sound echoed around them. The doctors, nurses and patients were oblivious to this however.

"I'm feeling cold all of a sudden," she said.

"Have we been infected by something?" Billy wondered.

"Scanner, Billy!" Nyssa requested. "Quickly!"

Billy was about to open the medical kit, but just then, they could faintly see dark wraith-like figures appearing before them. Nyssa and Billy shuddered once they saw the figures. There were five of them.

"Nyssa..." Billy struggled to say.

"I'm seeing them too, Billy dear," Nyssa told him.

Again, the inhabitants aboard Terminus were oblivious to this. Nyssa and Billy wondered why they could see the wraiths but not everyone else.

“They seem to be in a quantum state of flux,” Nyssa deduced. “Like they’re manifesting themselves into corporeal being but can’t due to the light source aboard the station.”

“You mean, they only exist in the darkness,” Billy realised. “I’m glad we can see them, if barely.”

“We might not be able to see them for a very long,” Nyssa said.

At that, it seemed to Nyssa and Billy as if the room was darkening all around them. As if the lights were going out. This didn’t affect the people working aboard the station either. Nyssa deduced the wraiths were causing this.

“Well,” Billy tried to be optimistic. “Maybe these guys are friendly.”

Nyssa raised her voice slightly. “We...”

At that, the wraiths drew out laser-like weapons and charged them at Nyssa and Billy.

“What have we done to them?!” Billy complained.

Nyssa took Billy’s hand as they tried to head back the way they came. They found their exit to the *Churchwood* shuttle blocked by four more wraiths that appeared. They also drew out laser-like weapons at them.

“Quick, Billy,” Nyssa said urgently. “We can’t get back to the shuttle. We’ll have to find another way. Let’s go!”

Without arguing, the two ran for it, heading out of the stockyard and into what used to be the Forbidden Zone. The wraiths snarled as they opened fire on Nyssa and Billy running away. Since they missed their targets, the wraiths pursued them. The black crow that flew in the air joined the chase.

Once they entered the Forbidden Zone, Nyssa and Billy switched on their flashlight beacons in their hands. They couldn’t switch on the lights in the Zone since nothing would respond to their touch or call. Venturing deeper into the Zone, they soon realised that the light was dimming in their beacons as the wraiths pursued them. Nyssa deduced the wraiths caused this to happen too. The wraiths kept firing as they ran in the dark corridor. There seemed no way for Nyssa and Billy to evade the wraiths.

“If only there was a gap in one of these walls we can climb into,” Billy suggested.

“Then find one, Billy,” Nyssa said sharply. “I’ll keep my flashlight on to show the way ahead.”

Doing as Nyssa said, Billy pointed his beacon towards the wall on his right. The wraiths continued to fire on them. The duo managed to evade the shots as they ran.

Billy soon called out, “Nyssa! There’s a gap in the wall close by. It should be big enough for us!”

“Let’s go then!” Nyssa said urgently.

With that, they both made for the gap in the wall on their right. Billy got in first before he helped Nyssa to climb in after him. The gap was quite narrow, but they managed to squeeze in. They soon went deeper into the gap itself. The wraiths attempted to fire at them from outside, but their shots bounced off everywhere in the corridor as they fired.

Once further into the gap, Nyssa and Billy stopped before they sighed with relief.

“Thank goodness we’re away from those wraiths,” Billy said, relieved.

“Be careful,” Nyssa advised. “I hypothesise this realm we seem to have ended up in, to coincide with Terminus, belongs to them. If there is a need on their part, the wraiths can easily find a way to get at us.”

“What exactly are they?” Billy wanted to know. “Are they ghosts or can we make physical contact with them?”

“I should have used my portable scanner you were about to give me to scan those creatures,” Nyssa said. “I could have identified their composition and atomic structure. Maybe I’ll get another chance when we’re in contact with them again.”

“Don’t wish for that too soon, dear,” Billy said. “We just narrowly got away from them.”

“I can’t deny that I have a scientific curiosity about these wraiths,” Nyssa stated.

“Yeah well, we still have a problem on how to get out of here without getting caught or killed,” Billy said. “Why would they want to kill us though? We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Maybe we’ve trespassed on their territory,” Nyssa suggested.

“Trespassed?! We didn’t want to be here in the first place,” Billy argued.

“There is more to this situation than it seems,” Nyssa said. “But you’re right. It is going to be difficult to get out of this place unless we go further into the gap.”

Billy looked around where they were when he spotted something that surprised him. “Nyssa, was this here before?”

She looked to see what Billy was looking at and she too became surprised. “It’s a metal door! A plain-looking metal door!”

“Has it been here all the time?” Billy wondered. “How come we didn’t notice it before?”

“There seems to be a light source protruding from behind the door,” Nyssa remarked as she noticed a light coming through the gap below.

Billy edged closer to examine the door before Nyssa held him back.

“Don’t touch, Billy,” she advised. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

Just then, the door suddenly slid open. A bright white light shone at them. They raised their hands to protect themselves against the dazzling light. A moment’s silence ensued as they grew accustomed to the light.

“Well, Nyssa,” Billy said. “What happens now?”

“I assume we’re invited to enter,” Nyssa declared.

Baffled, Billy said, “It’s not wise to accept this invitation.”

“I agree,” Nyssa replied. “But it will get us out of a tight spot with those wraiths pursuing us.”

“If you say so.”

“Trust me, Billy. Please.” Taking his hand and stroking it gently, Nyssa led the way as they entered through the metal door into where the bright white light came from. As soon as they entered, the metal door slid shut behind them.

Nyssa and Billy found themselves walking in nothingness. A blank white nothingness! When they looked behind them, the metal door had vanished. The two kept close together as they ventured further into the nothingness.

“I don’t like this place,” Billy remarked. “It’s so unnerving.”

“I don’t like it either,” Nyssa agreed. “It does have the Doctor’s mark all over it though.”

“You think the Doctor’s involved somehow?” Billy enquired.

“I hazard to guess,” Nyssa replied. “It’s been quite a while since we last saw him.”

“Well, I hope there’ll be something interesting whilst we’re in this place,” Billy said. “Even the Doctor popping up to tell us what’s happening would be welcome.”

“This place does put me in mind of what the Doctor used to tell me about the Void,” Nyssa said. “He called it the space between dimensions.”

“The Void,” Billy echoed. “You think that’s where we are? The place where... how did the Doctor describe it? ...where space and time don’t matter?”

“Where we’re outside our own dimension,” Nyssa elaborated. “Outside our own reality!”

“But how can that be?” Billy wanted to know. “How did we even get here? How come it was a metal door, inside a gap in a wall, aboard Terminus that led us to this place?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, Billy,” Nyssa said. “My only theory is that the Doctor is referring to a plane of existence beyond conventional understanding. But I’m pretty certain we’ve been drawn to something. We’ve been summoned somehow! It could be a person or something else that summoned us here.”

“Nyssa, look out,” Billy warned her.

She saw that they had confronted new monsters in the Void. They seemed to be wraiths, except these ones wore white robes! Instead of laser guns, they had swords which gleamed bright. Nyssa and Billy remained still whilst the white wraiths glared at them.

Taking out her portable scanner, Nyssa began to scan the wraiths – Voidwraiths, as she would later call them – in their path. After a few minutes, she said, “There’s no discernible composition to these creatures. There’s a certain atomic structure but the scanner can’t identify it. The wraiths seem to be in a state of flux, similar to the ones we encountered aboard Terminus.”

“And I thought we had seen the last of those guys,” Billy groaned.

“It’s most peculiar though,” Nyssa said, pocketing her portable scanner.

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it! If these wraiths exist like ghosts, phased between states like water turning from ice to steam, then it wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume that they have a limited awareness.”

“In dimensions alien to them?”

“Yes.”

“That clearly isn’t true. They understood us well enough to attack us.”

“Correct. Therefore, they must have a familiarity for both our dimension and their own. There are wraiths aboard Terminus and wraiths here in the Void! Both sets of wraiths are different but they must perform the same function. Like guardianship duty, perhaps.”

“What, you mean they might be aboard Terminus and in the Void to protect something?”

“It’s a likely hypothesis,” Nyssa answered. “The way they have considered us as a threat so far.”

Billy took an unconscious step forward to protect Nyssa. At that, the white Voidwraiths raised their swords high in the air and charged, ready to strike at Nyssa and Billy.

“Err, speaking of which,” Billy began.

“Agreed,” Nyssa said. “Let’s make a run for it while we still can.”

They ran for their lives as the Voidwraiths slashed their swords down upon them. Thankfully they missed, but they still pursued them into the Void. Joining them was a white dove flying high in the air, unnoticed by Nyssa and Billy.

“We don’t know where we’re heading though!” Billy pointed out to Nyssa as they ran.

“Just keep running, Billy!” Nyssa said urgently. “I’m sure we’ll end up somewhere soon enough.”



It seemed like forever as Nyssa and Billy ran away from the white Voidwraiths pursuing them. It had been only a short while though. Time meant nothing in the Void. They had a few narrow escapes. Billy did experience pain when one of the wraiths sliced him in the left leg with its sword. He was soon limping. Nyssa was also struck in the right arm by one of them. The wraiths were trying to slow them down, but they kept going.

Eventually, Nyssa and Billy came across a sight they didn’t expect to see.

“Billy,” she called out. “There’s a domed building ahead.”

“You’re right, Nyssa,” he said, as he limped. “Fancy that being here.”

“I guess we shouldn’t be that surprised.”

“I take it we’re meant to enter that building?”

“I don’t see us having much choice,” Nyssa answered. “If it will get us away from these wraiths pursuing us, so be it!”

With that, Nyssa and Billy ran towards the domed building.

They eventually entered inside whilst the wraiths were hot on their tail.

“Quick, Billy,” she shouted, urgently. “Close the door and lock it!”

Billy was onto it, but he struggled to figure out which button it was to close the door at the controls. The Voidwraiths were getting closer.

“Come on, Billy, hurry up,” Nyssa said impatiently.

“Hang on, I’m shutting the door now,” Billy said tersely as he pressed the button that he hoped would shut the door.

Thankfully, the door slid shut in front of the lead wraith’s face.

“*Now, Billy, lock it!*” Nyssa cried.

Billy searched the controls before he said “Eureka!” and he pressed the button to lock the door. Thankfully, the door locked. There was banging from outside as the Voidwraiths tried to break in; using the butt of their

swords to hammer it down, but it was no use. Once out of danger, Nyssa and Billy sighed with relief.

“Thank goodness for that,” Billy said.

“That was cutting it a bit fine,” Nyssa added.

Once they had recovered their breath, they took in their surroundings. They stood in the hallway of the domed building before they saw an archway that led into a dark room. It had a little light showing inside.

“I take it we venture into that dark room to find out more about this place,” Billy said nervously.

“I can’t help but feel the decision has been made for us,” Nyssa remarked.

“I still don’t understand how Terminus can be linked to the so-called space in-between dimensions,” commented Billy.

“There was a distortion effect when the *Churchwood* jerked violently, remember?” Nyssa reminded Billy. “Perhaps that was when we exited out of our reality and into the intersection that led into the Void.”

“You mean, a door opened for us to enter whether we liked it or not?”

“Essentially, yes! How it’s possible, I don’t know. Maybe another reality is having problems and it’s caused the barriers between realities, including our own, to break down.”

Billy became baffled as he said, “I’m sure it will be made clearer to us once we venture into that dark room.”

Within seconds, Nyssa and Billy found themselves in a control hub.

The little light came from the hub itself. Monitor screens displayed static images. There were also two globe spheres protruding from the hub’s base section. The technology that both saw was contemporary in the time and place they came from. They couldn’t help but be baffled.

“This isn’t what I expected,” said Billy. “They wouldn’t have monitor screens looking like the ones we have back at home here in the Void, would they?”

As Nyssa’s eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw a distortion effect emanating in the room they were in.

“I assume everything here is part of our perception of the known universe,” Nyssa deduced. “If we saw everything currently before us in their original state, it would be incomprehensible. Our perceptions are adjusting to satisfy our own anxieties whilst we exist outside time and space.”

“Wait, you’re saying we’re seeing these computer banks as they are now because our brains are helping to acclimatise to the weirdness of everything that’s going on in the Void,” Billy said. “That counts for the domed building we’re in too?”

“It’s a working hypothesis,” Nyssa replied, “but that’s the summary of it. It’s not one hundred percent feasible, but it’s the best to go along with.”

“Hey, trust me, I’m happy to go along with that theory for the moment,” Billy said.

As they mused for a bit, Nyssa approached one of the computer terminals. “Let’s see if accessing this terminal can give us an indication of what’s going on.”

Sitting down on a chair, Nyssa started pressing buttons. Placing a hand on her left shoulder, Billy stood behind Nyssa.

Nothing seemed to happen. Nyssa thumped her fist on the terminal, frustrated.

“It’s no good,” she said exasperated. “I can’t gain access. There must be some isomorphic link to these controls.”

“Or maybe a connection’s not plugged in,” Billy suggested. He looked around before seeing the globe spheres protruding nearby. Going over to them, he placed his hands on the spheres.

“Billy, no!” Nyssa cried once she saw what he was doing. “Don’t touch anything!”

But it was too late. As soon as he placed his hands on the spheres, Billy let out a pained cry. Eyes screwed tightly shut. Bolts of electricity surged through him. Concerned, Nyssa went over to him. As she did so, she noticed the monitor screens flickering to life, displaying various images. The images were of Billy in various alternating situations. Nyssa could see that the images were distorted though. They weren’t fully formed. It was then

that Billy took his hands off the spheres, reacting in pain as if they were burnt. The monitor screens reverted back to static.

“Billy, are you alright?” Nyssa asked.

“I’m fine,” Billy answered her.

Nyssa examined his hands. Blackened with burns. “No, you’re not.”

She unslung the medical kit from his shoulder, plucking out antiseptic solutions and bandages.

“Nyssa...”

“Please, Billy, hold still.”

“No, Nyssa, this is important, I saw...” His head stung for a moment.

“Me... Us... How is that possible?”

“Surveillance equipment?”

“It’s more than that.” His eyes widened in realisation. “The timelines...the alternative futures and realities I saw! At least, I think they were alternative futures and realities!”

“Wait,” Nyssa realised. “You saw what I saw on the monitor screens a moment ago?”

“Did something come up on the monitor screens, then?” Billy asked, surprised.

Nyssa looked back to the monitor screens which continued to show static. She thought for a moment. “Billy, what did you see when you touched the spheres?”

As Nyssa tended to his hands, Billy gradually replied, “Well, like I said, they seemed to be alternative futures and realities. Different timelines, whatever you wish to call them!” He paused for a moment. “I saw a version of me where I didn’t end up with you on Terminus. I saw an alternative reality where I didn’t meet you and the Doctor at all in Huttle, 1963.”

Nyssa massaged his hands. “Goodness, that’s depressing.”

“I saw an alternative reality where I ended up on a space station called Orionis and died.”

“That’s equally depressing.”

Billy nodded. “I also saw a reality where I ended up becoming...well, a web-slinging superhero on Earth.”

“On television?” She bound his palms. “You became an actor?”

“I don’t think so...” he said, uncertainly.

“That’s bizarre,” Nyssa commented.

“Yeah, that was weird,” Billy agreed.

“Maybe I should try it, Billy. Perhaps I should place my hands on the spheres to find out what alternative realities there are for me. There are insulating gloves in the kit.”

Billy dithered with concern. “I’d prefer...”

“I will be careful,” Nyssa said, resolutely.

Billy exhaled affectionately. “Only if you want to, of course.”

Applying her gloves, Nyssa soon said, “Alright. Let’s see how it fares for me. I’ll access the spheres and uncover what alternative realities there are for me.”

“Be careful though, Nyssa,” Billy cautioned her. “Don’t let your hands be burnt up like mine almost were.”

Nyssa nodded, reassuring Billy that her Trakenite immunity levels should cope with any pressure that her hands might receive when she placed them on the spheres. With that, Nyssa stepped forward before the spheres whilst Billy stood nearby. She breathed deeply before raising her hands to place them on the spheres like Billy had done.

Once connected to the spheres, Billy looked to the monitor screens and saw distorted images of Nyssa in various alternating situations. Billy couldn’t make out what the images were, in much the same way that Nyssa couldn’t make out what his images were. After a while, Nyssa took her hands off the spheres, feeling pain, but not with the same intensity as Billy had felt.

“Are you alright?” Billy asked, guiding her to a nearby chair.

Once Nyssa had sat down, she reassured Billy that she would be alright. After a moment; she asked, “Did you see anything on the monitors?”

“Yes, though the images weren’t clear enough,” Billy answered. “The monitors have gone back to static now. What did you see, Nyssa? In your mind, I mean?”

It took a while for Nyssa to answer. Eventually she said, “Like you, I saw alternative versions of my timeline – alternative futures; alternative realities.” She paused for a moment. “I saw myself as an historical technographer at a university on another planet. I saw myself ending up in E-Space and living out the rest of my days in that universe. And I saw myself ending up on Earth, living with Tegan in Australia.”

“Wait a minute,” Billy realised. “Ending up on Earth and living with Tegan?”

“Apparently she’s still alive in that reality,” Nyssa said. “Not dead as in ours.”

An imperceptible weight seemed to lift from the pair’s shoulders at the thought.

“What about me?” Billy asked. “Did you see me in any of those realities?”

Unable to answer at first, Nyssa gradually said, “I’m sorry, Billy. It wasn’t very clear. The pressure was too much so I freed my hands from the spheres.”

Slightly annoyed, Billy became anxious as he looked to the control hub.

“So, what does all this mean?” he asked. “Why is this strange equipment here as we see it in the domed building?”

Nyssa thought for a moment. “I believe this is some kind of quantum reality engine. It’s a device that produces various realities in other dimensions to coexist with each other. All the multi-realities coexist as one with this engine to generate them in the Void.”

“A quantum reality engine,” Billy echoed, baffled but still intrigued. “If this thing can produce alternative realities, then why have we been summoned here? Why did we come to this place? The tractor beam is on and nobody’s at home.”

“I don’t know at the moment, Billy,” Nyssa said. “We’re still no closer to comprehending what all this is about.”

Just then, battle sounds echoed nearby. Nyssa and Billy heard them clearly whilst standing at the control hub.

“Is there a war happening outside?” Billy asked. “What’s going on?”

“Come on!” Nyssa said encouragingly. “Let’s go and investigate, shall we?”



Looking out through the entrance to the domed building with the door slid open, Nyssa and Billy saw a battle occurring between two sets of Voidwraiths. On one side, there were black Voidwraiths firing with their laser weapons and filling half the Void with darkness. On the other side were white Voidwraiths fighting against the black wraiths with swords and filling their half of the Void with bright light. Ignoring Nyssa and Billy, the two sets of wraiths fought each other as darkness overpowered the light. The black wraiths were getting stronger, but the white wraiths weren’t to be defeated, slashing their swords against their opponents.

“Why fight each other?” Billy enquired. “They’re both wraiths! And how come we’re seeing half the Void in darkness whilst the other half is in bright light?”

“Chaos and disorder is currently happening, Billy,” Nyssa stated.

“What do you mean?”

“The black wraiths were the guardians in the quantum realm coinciding with Terminus, I believe,” she elaborated. “It must be a part of the Void in darkness. The white wraiths are the guardians in the centre of the Void where it’s all bright light – the other side of the coin, if you will. Two aspects of the Void where time and space don’t exist and they’re converging with each other! They’re conflicting with each other whilst the walls of reality are breaking down!”

“Wow, you deduced that rather fast, didn’t you, Nyssa dear,” Billy remarked.

“It’s amazing what you can pick up when travelling with the Doctor,” Nyssa said.

“Yeah I suppose it is,” Billy concurred, but then he thought for a moment. “So, wait! You’re saying that two aspects of the Void – darkness and light, are converging with each other because the walls of reality are breaking down.”

“And they’re fighting with each other to make chaos happen,” Nyssa continued. “Light is meant to stabilise the parallel universes within the Void whilst darkness is an entropic factor.”

“And that’s why we’re seeing two sets of wraiths fighting each other,” Billy deduced. “The darkness wants to control the Void whilst the light is trying to back it off.”

“I don’t admit to fully understanding it but that’s about the summary of it, yes,” Nyssa answered.

“How come the walls of reality are breaking down?” Billy demanded to know. “Was it us that caused it to happen when we got diverted to this place?”

“I wouldn’t like to think so,” Nyssa said. “But then, not everything has been made clear to us since we arrived.”

Just then, everything shuddered around them. This happened even as the two sets of wraiths fought each other.

“I didn’t like the feel of that,” Billy commented. “It felt like an earthquake.”

“Yes, it did, didn’t it,” Nyssa concurred. “And it’s getting worse by the second.”

This was true. The shuddering was becoming more violent. Nyssa and Billy held on for dear life whilst standing in the entrance way to the domed building. They saw the Voidwraiths falling down to the ground before they struggled to get back up again and continue their battle.

“I wish we were back with our kids,” Billy said.

“Me too,” Nyssa agreed. “I’ve no idea how we’re going to escape this realm.”

Just then, a male voice echoed inside the building. Nyssa and Billy heard it call out, “*Hello! Hello! Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me? Please answer me!*”

“What...what was that?” Billy wanted to know. “It’s coming from inside!”

“Billy,” Nyssa realised. “I recognise that voice!”

“Really?” Billy was surprised. “Who is it?”

“Don’t you know?” Nyssa was surprised that Billy didn’t realise who it was. “It’s the Doctor!”

Billy’s eyes brightened as they listened carefully to hear the voice call out again.

“Can anyone hear me?! Please answer me!”

“You’re right, Nyssa,” Billy said. “It is the Doctor. He must be contacting us from another dimension or something via the control hub.”

“Let’s go and find out what he wants,” she said encouragingly.

Nyssa and Billy went back inside the building, hand-in-hand. The Voidwraiths continued their fight outside. The pair missed seeing the black crow that stood in the dark of the Void as well as the white dove that stood in the bright before they changed into suited men.

The dove was white-suited. The crow was dark-suited.

They were the true Guardians of this domain.

They conducted the conflict between the two Voidwraith factions as well as watched Nyssa and Billy re-enter the building. The shuddering within the Void persisted violently. One pointed as did the other. Both silent. The chaos began to swarm around the hub like ants over honey. A pitched battle of attack and defence.

The shuddering continued as Nyssa and Billy returned to the control hub. One of the monitor screens had been switched on. They were surprised by what they saw.

“Nyssa,” Billy cried. “Am I getting double-vision or am I seeing what I’m seeing?”

“It’s us, Billy,” Nyssa replied. “Another us with the Doctor!”

This was true. On the monitor screen was the Doctor with another Nyssa and Billy beside him. They had urgent-looking faces.

The Doctor spoke, *“If anyone can hear us, please listen! There’s not much time to explain, but every reality is crumbling apart as we speak!”*

“If you’re like us,” The other Nyssa said, *“you may have found a control hub adjacent to your reality within the Void.”*

“That’s where we are too,” The other Billy said. *“In the Void, I mean. I’m sure it’s the same for other versions of us from different realities that have got into the Void somehow. It’s like all realities are converging together.”*

“The only way we can save every reality and stop the Void from collapsing is to momentarily shut down the Void simultaneously,” the Doctor said. *“Wherever you are in the Void, you should see a big red button.”*

At that, Nyssa and Billy saw a big red button that wasn’t there before at the control hub.

“This is the point where all realities converge as one,” the Doctor said. *“The big red button connects with the fuel on Terminus in our reality. A massive discharge of engines is big enough to potentially destroy one universe, but can save thousands of others if diffused through the Void. It’s vitally important all realities must be saved simultaneously when pressing the big red button. A choice that you must make! In a few minutes, I’ll be starting a 10 second countdown to zero. Please press your red button at the same time Nyssa, Billy and I press ours. This will ensure all realities are saved. We’re counting on your support. Please help us! Expect the countdown in a few minutes’ time.”*

In the Void where they were, Nyssa and Billy looked at each other anxiously.

“Nyssa,” Billy broke the silence. “This is a big task that the Doctor’s asking us to do.”

“Yes,” Nyssa replied. “He’s not even our Doctor. It’s a parallel version of him with parallel versions of us. That Terminus we were walking on must belong to their universe and we were walking in a transdimensional astral plane. And it’s not just us he talked to, Billy. He was talking to other versions of you and me as well as other Doctors receiving the call from other realities.”

“We haven’t even seen those other versions of you, me and the Doctor,” Billy remarked.

“They’re likely possibilities,” Nyssa reminded him. “Nothing’s certain. No-one’s to say which reality is correct.”

“I’m finding this baffling as it is,” Billy said, feeling a headache coming on. “So, if we press the red button, our universe will shut down momentarily.”

“That’s what the Doctor said.”

“But there’s a chance we might not come back into our own reality at all,” Billy pointed out. “Not every reality will be cooperative as the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy in that universe will hope. There could be a version of you and me where we want all universes to end. There could be a version of us where we’re selfish. Totally evil, heartless, monstrous and murderous!”

“Another likely possibility, Billy,” Nyssa said. “A universe where we did everything right and a universe we did everything wrong. With all the possibilities in-between.”

“Possibilities, possibilities, it’s always possibilities with this place!” Billy groaned despairingly.

“But no matter what situation we’re in,” Nyssa interjected, “the Doctor needs our help. Whether he has another Nyssa and Billy with him, we can’t let the Doctor down! You know that as much as I do, Billy.”

Billy began to get teary-eyed. Eventually, he said. “I just want us to have our life together. For you and I to continue saving lives across the universe! To continue our family life with our two children!” Pausing for a moment, he went on, “If this fails and we don’t come back once the Void’s switched back on...”

“Then that’s a possibility that needs to be accepted in order to save all realities,” Nyssa told him. She then pointed out, “But there’s a possibility that we won’t fail and we will succeed. You’ve got to keep that in mind, Billy dear.”

As Billy considered this, the Doctor turned back up on the monitor screen, saying, “*One minute left to countdown. Please have your hands ready on the big red button.*”

Nyssa placed her hands on Billy to comfort him. “Billy, I know this is difficult, especially at the last minute. But we’ve got to take a chance in order for all universes to be saved, including ours. Wouldn’t you share this with me rather than doing it alone?”

Billy thought about it for a little while. Little time was left and Billy knew it.

Eventually, he said, “Yeah! I’d rather press the big red button with you, Nyssa dear. No matter what happens, I’m glad to be with you to the bitter end.”

“And I’m happy to be with you, Billy dear,” Nyssa smiled back.

They both kissed before they got interrupted by the Doctor saying, “*30 seconds to countdown.*”

Gradually, Nyssa and Billy went over to the big red button. Nervous and terrified, they were both incredibly brave to go through with this. They maintained their faith in each other and continued to be strong for each other.

“Nyssa?”

“Yes Billy?”

“Thank you for saying ‘yes’ to marrying me.”

Nyssa smiled and said, “Thank you for asking me.”

As they embraced each other whilst standing over the button, the Doctor’s voice counted down to zero. “*Ten...nine...eight...*” Nyssa and Billy breathed deeply and placed their hands on the big red button.

“*...seven...six...five...*”

“I love you, Nyssa.”

“*...four...three...*”

“I love you too, Billy.”

“*...two...one...*” Both closed their eyes, bracing themselves. They had tears coming out of their eyes whilst their lids were closed. “*...zero!*” With that, Nyssa and Billy pressed the big red button. Darkness soon engulfed them and they knew no more...

INTRODUCING
JACOB DUDMAN
AS
THE DOCTOR



DOCTOR WHO

F N A R G
PART TWO

BY ANDREW HSIEH AND TOM HANNAH-GOLDEN

The Fnarg Show

A Leadworth Manor Production

by Steven Wood¹

Cast

- Steven – host, student
- Alan – sidekick, teacher
- Gold and Platinum – jokers played by Tom and Andrew, students
- Stone the Crow – school mascot played by Toby, teaching assistant
- Nicola and Karen – teaching assistants
- 1 and 2 – the Doctor and Amy, guests (ad-libs only)

¹

Written by Tom Hannah-Golden and Andrew Hsieh

Scene 1 – Stage

Enter Steven. Applause.

STEVEN: Hello everyone! Welcome to the pilot episode of... The Fnarg Show! I am your host, Steven, and I will be your guide throughout this ~~pre-recorded~~ performance. Now there are some students who are leaving Leadworth Manor this year. And...

Enter Alan.

ALAN: Hello there!

STEVEN: ALAN! I'm not ready yet!

ALAN: Oh, stone the crows!

Enter Stone the Crow school mascot.

STONE THE CROW: Yes?

Audience laughs. Alan hits him with a stone.

STONE THE CROW: OW! Why did you have to do that?!

STEVEN: Oh, Fnarg!

Audience laughs.

STONE THE CROW: It's not funny! And my head hurts - literally!

Stone the Crow leaves.

STEVEN: Alan, leave now before you cause more trouble!

ALAN: Sorry! As you wish.

Alan leaves.

STEVEN: So anyway, as I was saying, some students are leaving Leadworth Manor this year. All excellent pupils. Oh, by the way, did you know about the cross-eyed headmistress? She couldn't control her (*points to his eyes*) PUPILS! (*laughter*) Always falling over inside the building or whilst on an outing. That's right, a SCHOOL TRIP! Or rather a LOT OF THEM! (*laughter*) Okay! Okay! Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, may I present to you, the Year 11 leavers: Rajah, (*applause*) Hussain, (*applause*) Julia, (*applause*) Benjamin, (*applause*) Salah, (*applause*) and Shane. (*applause*)

The leavers enter one by one as Steven introduces them.

STEVEN: And now it's time to look at what the weather's like today. Over to you, Alan!

Everybody leaves.

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Scene 2 – Corridor

Screen switches on, revealing Alan in front of a weather forecast (SMART board).

ALAN: *(to camera)* Hello. ~~Now here is the weather for today.~~ In the south of England there will be showers of heavy rain, while a hailstone storm is expected in Scotland. And in Wales there will be heavy snow lasting a week.

STONE THE CROW: Wow! That's extreme!

ALAN: Don't blame me, I don't make it happen!

STEVEN: What the... he can hear us! Oh, Fnarg! This digital interactive board is getting better, isn't it! Hey, I wonder what happens if I press the red button on my remote?

ALAN: No, no, no, no, Steven, don't press the red button!

Steven presses the red button on his remote and Alan's trousers fall down, showing his pink knickers. Audience laughs.

STEVEN: Alright, look away! Nothing to see here!

Screen switches off.

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Scene 3 – Stage

Enter Steven.

STEVEN: Apologies for the technical difficulties, everyone. Here are some jokes to pass the time until we sort out this kerfuffle. Now, where are my jokers?

Steven leaves. Enter Gold and Platinum carrying a giant Christmas cracker. Applause.

GOLD: Hi! I'm Gold!

PLATINUM: And I'm Platinum!

GOLD & PLATINUM: Together, we're telling jokes!

They pull the cracker open. Several pieces of paper fall onto the stage.

GOLD: I don't believe it!

PLATINUM: Looks like this cracker was full of them.

GOLD: After you, Platinum.

PLATINUM: Why, thank you, Gold.

Platinum picks up a joke and reads.

PLATINUM: What do you call a dance with a box?

GOLD: I don't know.

PLATINUM: *(Texan accent)* Square dancing!

Drum and cymbal sound effect, continues for each joke. Audience laughs. Gold picks up a joke.

GOLD: My turn now. What utensil is used for digging in the sand?

PLATINUM: I don't know. What do you use for digging?

GOLD: A DESERT spoon!

Audience laughs. Platinum picks up another joke.

PLATINUM: Ah, an old favourite of mine! Where does a pineapple swim?

GOLD: I don't know. Where?

PLATINUM: In a pine-a-POOL!

Audience laughs. Enter Steven.

STEVEN: Knock-knock!

GOLD & PLATINUM: Who's there?

STEVEN: Ken!

GOLD & PLATINUM: Ken who?

STEVEN: CAN you please stop telling us these awful jokes, and let me carry on with the show, for Fnarg's sake!

Audience gasps.

GOLD: Awful? How VERY dare you!

PLATINUM: But this IS part of the show!

Audience boos.

STEVEN: Ha! I was only winding you up! Now, off you pop! Scram!

GOLD & PLATINUM: *(both start walking off)* Alright then.

STEVEN: *(turns to audience)* Apologies for that, folks, we'll be back in a tick!

GOLD: And a tock!

PLATINUM: Like the hands on a clock! That's how the song goes!

Audience laughs.

STEVEN: I said off! Now leave!

They all leave. Applause.

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Scene 4 – Classroom

Nicola and Karen dance together to Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria in front of a colourful curtain. Steven is hiding behind the judges' desk.

STEVEN: (*whispering*) Hey audience, I think this dance could go a lot faster than this!

Steven presses fast-forward on his remote. The music begins to play faster, Nicola and Karen dance a lot faster uncontrollably.

STEVEN: Okay, now let's see it in slow mo!

Steven presses slow-forward on his remote, and the music slows down to a very slow speed; so do Nicola and Karen.

STEVEN: Right, let's have it back to normal.

Steven presses play on his remote, Nicola and Karen and the music return to normal.

STEVEN: Oh, I've had enough of this! Let's have some REAL music!

Steven presses several buttons on his remote and the opera music instantly changes to "Riverdance" (Eurovision 1994 interval act). Five dancers come "Can-Can" dancing onto the scene and dance around MANICALLY and MADLY. As Steven turns up the volume on his remote, Nicola and Karen go down on their knees covering their ears.

When the music becomes quieter, Nicola and Karen get up on their feet and are mad at their song being ruined, but they don't know it was Steven. The dancers lie down and rest for a bit.

NICOLA: All right! Who did that?! Come on, come here!

KAREN: Who's responsible for this?!

STEVEN: *(whispering)* Oh, it's gonna get manic again!

Music instantly gets louder and dancers jump to their feet and start going manic again. Music starts to get faster.

STEVEN: Ohhhh, it's getting worse!

Dancers go faster and the scenery starts falling down. The music ends and everything crashes on Nicola and Karen when the dancers dance off.

NICOLA: All right! Where are they?! I reckon it was Steven! He always likes to mess up performances!

NICOLA & KAREN: Steven! STEVEN!

KAREN: Oh, where is he?!

NICOLA & KAREN: Steven! STEVEN!

Nicola walks out of sight looking for Steven.

KAREN: Where are you?! Come here now!

Karen walks out of sight looking for Steven. He peeks out from a desk he's hiding in.

STEVEN: (*chuckling*) Now that was certainly a great performance! If I hadn't come, it would have been boring for you all! Well, gotta go, before they come back!

Steven leaves. Nicola and Karen come back.

NICOLA: Oh, it's no use. We've looked everywhere!

Alan, Gold and Platinum sit down on the judges' desk.

ALAN: Right, since Simon, Amanda, and ~~worst of all~~ Piers are unavailable to lead the judging panel today, I suggest we should review on their behalf. So, first of all, I think it started well but then you went too fast, then too slow. Followed by an extra dance that is COMPLETELY off the subject of opera! I'm sorry, but you've failed. Which means you will not be going to the next round.

GOLD: I agree.

● PLATINUM: Me too.

NICOLA & KAREN: OHHHH! Stone the Crow!

Enter Stone the Crow.

STONE THE CROW: Yes?

Nicola and Karen hit him with two stones.

STONE THE CROW: OW! OUCH! Now that wasn't funny! I'm going to have serious words about this! You haven't seen the last of me!

Stone the Crow leaves.

STEVEN: Okay, I guess we should visit the next room. *(to camera)* Any of you a fan of magic?

Audience says yes.

STEVEN: Excellent! Now let's get going!

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Scene 5 – The Magician’s Room

Gold and Platinum unveil a large box.

GOLD: Okay, we are going to show a magic trick for you all.

PLATINUM: Now, as you can see, there is nothing in this box. But when I close it, *(closes the box)* I wave my magic wand and say...

GOLD & PLATINUM: KAZAM!

Box opens, Steven is inside and comes out.

STEVEN: Fnarg! *(pauses)* I mean... Surprise!

Audience laughs.

GOLD: Hey!

PLATINUM: Steven, what were you doing in there?

STEVEN: Well, there’s gratitude for you. FANG you very much.

Audience laughs.

GOLD & PLATINUM: (*groaning in annoyance*) Lame!

STEVEN: Now then, shall we let our guests try out my famous snake charmer act?

Steven gives a recorder to 1, then leaves. Alan brings in a basket.

ALAN: Alright, take it away!

1 starts playing his/her recorder softly.

ALAN: It's big, it's great, (*hisses*) it's...

STEVEN: (*suddenly pops out of the basket*) 'Ello, 'ello!

Audience laughs.

ALAN: Steven!

STEVEN: What? I thought I'd just have some fun! (*starts walking off*)
Anyway, you never know when I'll pop up! (*then reappears*)
Alright, it's back to our two jokers!

.....

Scene 6 – Stage

Enter Gold and Platinum. Applause.

GOLD & PLATINUM: Thank you, Steven!

GOLD: Now, let's see...

Gold picks up a joke and reads.

GOLD: Oh, you'll love this! Which players can't you trust in an orchestra?

PLATINUM: I don't know.

GOLD: *(picks up a violin)* Fiddlers! *(plays a silly tune)*

Audience laughs. Platinum picks up a joke.

PLATINUM: What UFOs do you get in a kitchen?

GOLD: I don't know, UFO.

PLATINUM: Unidentified FRYING Objects!

Audience laughs. Gold picks up another joke.

GOLD: Why didn't the astronaut go to the moon?

PLATINUM: I don't know.

GOLD: He didn't PLANET!

Audience laughs.

PLATINUM: ~~Well then...~~ That's all, folks!

GOLD: Thank you for listening!

Screen switches on.

STEVEN: *(to camera)* Apologies for another prolonged delay there, but it appears that someone has managed to sabotage the feed. And Jokers, you have one more joke to tell. So... Knock-knock!

GOLD & PLATINUM: Who's there?

STEVEN: Doctor!

GOLD & PLATINUM: Doctor who?

Steven presses the red button on his remote, causing the screen to switch off abruptly. No applause. End of show.

FNARG

By Andrew Hsieh and Tom Hannah-Golden

PART TWO

There was silence and confusion in the hall, as Tom and Andrew left the stage.

“It was live,” Rory muttered, getting up from his seat to find the duo. “It was live all along!” He caught up with them to ask what’s been happening behind the scenes; they explained that Steven’s remote had been playing a key role in the entire production.

“The Magician’s Room, where is it?”

“We’ll show you the way. Come on...”

The Doctor gave a stern look towards Steven, suspecting he had something to do with all this.

“Oh, Doctor,” Steven sniggered. “Had you fooled, didn’t I? You thought there’d be more chaos around the school. All I wanted was to make, well... a trap. I’m so glad the word ‘Fnarg’ successfully got your attention.”

“A nonsense word in one ear can be the name of a criminal in the next.” The Doctor had finally put the pieces together. “I’ll admit, it took me a while to catch on, you had me there.”

“Couldn’t make it too obvious, though you took a little too long, in my opinion.”

“Is that why we were deliberately handpicked to appear in your so-called show?” the Doctor demanded.

“I couldn’t just kidnap and bring you here all tied up and gagged. Heck, that would be too easy. So I spent weeks getting the word out, literally, without getting my hands dirty. And your friend, Amelia Pond, happens to be an excellent messenger.”

She gapsed, “Doctor, what’s he talking about?”

“He doesn’t know,” scoffed Steven. “The Doctor in the TARDIS doesn’t know.”

The Doctor canted an eyebrow. “You know me?”

“And of others,” he glided the remote control towards Amy. “Enough to pass judgement on you, Doctor.”

“Steven,” Alan interrupted. “I know you have been through a lot, I’ve turned a blind eye to a great deal, but you don’t have to do this.”

“It’s all part of the plan, Alan. Now hush, before I make you caught with your trousers down again. Or worse, I could turn you into a frog.” He adjusted the settings on his remote. “As for you, Time Lord, we have a lot to discuss.”

“You apparently know a lot about me, and my people. Is it me, or doesn’t your remote utilise the functions of a Tissue Compression Eliminator?”

“The power of names, Doctor. And no, I’m not that psychotic clown who devours people like the Big Bad Wolf.”

“So, you’re really not the Master then? Nor some manifestation of Bad Wolf?”

“You’re still not seeing the bigger picture. My mother took me on a trip across the stars, shortly after I was born here on Earth. We eventually got separated when we flew past a glowing crack in the midst of space. I’ve no memory of what happened afterwards, but they told me years later that it was the Time Lords who conscripted her when Gallifrey was at war. She was the only family I had before I returned to this godforsaken rock.”

“Not as Steven Wood,” the Doctor guessed, “who, in a manner of speaking, never existed in the first place. Did he?”

“No, but as Agent Zeerust Fnarg of the MINUS.” He pointed his remote at the Doctor, making sure he was aiming properly. “Now, for the record, you will tell me—”

But suddenly, Tom and Andrew came rushing through the door with Rory. “Steven!” The duo were just as gobsmacked to see their friend putting himself in charge of the situation.

“Oh, what is it now?” he complained. “Can’t you jokers see that I’m busy?”

“Let them go,” replied Rory.

“The MP!” Fnarg sounded amused.

“I also happen to be a former Captain of the Unified Intelligence Taskforce.”

“Ah, UNIT, the warmongering scum of the Earth. They always sacrifice their best.”

“Do as I say, and put down your weapon.”

“Come any closer, human, and I kill the nearest of your brood.”

“He means it, Rory,” cautioned Amy.

“Amy, are you alright?”

“Rory...” Fnarg repeated the name experimentally. “Lives are in danger. You were once a military being, you will assist in the interrogation. If the Doctor tells me about what exactly happened to Gallifrey, I will let them all go and reveal the whereabouts of Amelia’s parents.”

“My parents...?” she asked softly, slowly unpacking Fnarg’s words.

“Amy, no... What?” the Doctor blinked.

“If I don’t?” asked Rory.

“What?”

“You hardly matter. I’ll kill everyone here and find more permanent means to get what I want. I found one Time Lord, I can easily find another. This way, you keep your paramour.”

“What?” the Doctor interjected, “Her parents?”

“My Mum and Dad...” Amy choked on her words, nearly in tears. “Oh God!”

Rory went to comfort her, but Fnarg forced him back.

The Doctor stepped forward. “Fnarg, listen,” he began, taking his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket. “We can settle it without bloodshed if you deactivate your remote.”

“The Time Lords took my mother from me, and you still refuse to confess.”

“Please, I’m only trying to help. I think the MINUS, whoever they are, have been lying to you ever since—”

“That does it!” Fnarg growled, still pointing his remote at him. “Under Section 2.7 of the MINUS Syndicate Agreement, I hereby execute you, Doctor, for making false allegations against my superiors.”

“Steven, no!” yelled Alan.

The Doctor rotated his sonic screwdriver upwards in Steven’s direction, ready to press without hesitation.

Zap!

But it was already too late. Steven pushed the red button, firing a single red laser beam while Amy let out a terrifying scream.

“Doctor!”

He took the shot. He was already in agony. The Doctor felt the pain rushing through both his hearts, wincing and falling to the ground. A horrified Amy knelt beside him with Rory, completely unsure how they should save her new friend.

“Help me...” the Doctor struggled to speak. “Help me back... to my TARDIS!”

“Oh no, you don’t,” snarled Fnarg, pointing his remote at them. Little did he realise that Alan was ready to tackle him from right behind.

“Oi!”

Alan quickly grabbed him by the arms but struggled to reach for the remote, causing it to slip from Fnarg’s hand and fall to the floor. But it didn’t smash, everything was still intact. “Now’s your chance,” he called, whilst restraining. “Get going!”

Amy and Rory both lifted the Doctor by and quickly carried him out of the room. Dragging him through the school corridor, they were immediately followed by Tom and Andrew who both wanted to escape from Fnarg.

“Don’t worry, Doctor, we’re nearly there,” she said, as they approached the door to the lobby “Wait, I need my fob.”

“We’ll help,” Andrew offered.

Amy dug into her pocket and passed the fob to him. Andrew swiped and pushed the door open, letting them through before handing it to Tom who then did the entrance.

“Thanks, guys. You’ve both been a great help.”

They quickly went outside and headed towards the TARDIS. But suddenly, the Doctor managed to get some of his strength back, enabling him to stand.

His eyes closed, his face bloomed into a smile. “Hello, old girl...”

Amy and Rory released him, as he took the key out of his pocket and inserted it into the hole. Slowly levering himself through the doors, he was interrupted by a raging cry of his own name.

“This is all your fault, Doctor!”

Fnarg came running with his remote and fired a red laser beam, narrowly missing Amy and Rory who narrowly dodged. It hit the side of the TARDIS, causing sparks to fly.

“Now watch your friends get permanently axed!”

“Normal service will resume, Fnarg!” the Doctor rebutted.

He fired again, this time in Amy’s direction. Rory suddenly pushed her to the ground, getting struck in the chest to protect his girlfriend.

“Rory!”

He collapsed and fell on his side. A tearful Amy quickly rested his head on her lap, while Tom and Andrew were gobsmacked by what they had just witnessed. Fnarg fired a red laser beam at the duo who managed to dodge the blast.

“Quick,” said Andrew. “We must find Alan!” They both ran back inside the building and forced the door shut.

The Doctor couldn’t turn back, he was in too much pain to notice. So he snapped his fingers, making the doors close immediately. He struggled to make his way towards the console as his hands released some golden energy around the open space. The console absorbed it all, then began to operate the controls automatically, knowing that her dearest pilot’s regeneration was imminent.

“Amelia,” he moaned. “Amelia Pond.”

As the TARDIS began to depart, the Doctor collapsed on the chair and began to hyperventilate rapidly. The wheezing and groaning echoed across the room, while he slowly got up. But his ship suddenly went out of

control, like a plane hitting severe turbulence. Despite maintaining course, the Doctor checked the scanner to read its destination. “1996,” he gasped, realising that Amy was indeed telling the truth about meeting him when she was a little girl.

Then the TARDIS came to an abrupt halt. There was a loud crash from outside, causing the console to let off some steam - literally.

The Doctor felt too weak to repair the damages, so he gradually made his way towards the entrance. As he opened the door, he caught a glimpse into a familiar garden where a little girl stood there waiting.

“Uncle Ross?”

“*Allons-y* then,” the Doctor grunted, moments later, closing the TARDIS door.

He made his way back to the console and flicked a few controls and switches. They finally departed... but not at the normal speed. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

“Holo...” he struggled to give his command. “Hologram. Activate hologram!”

As he collapsed onto the chair, the console began to project a montage of holograms around the room. They were all archive recordings of his companions who each entered the TARDIS for the first time, from Rose Tyler to Amy Pond.

“*This is just... mad,*” the holographic Amy reacted, observing the interior with glee. “*That’s what my 7-year-old self would say.*”

Not what he had intended. A holographic projection of Earth’s local constellations. If his own people had taken the Ponds, there would be traces. Echoes. His connection with the old girl must have faltered.

She whirred sympathetically.

Or perhaps, in this moment, she knew what he wanted better than he did. It was nice to have the Ship buzzing with life again. The Doctor felt relaxed as the old, happy memories resurfaced; only to finish with all his companions helping him move Earth back to its original orientation, after defeating the Daleks and Davros.

“Oh, Rose,” he chuckled, with a tear falling from his eye. “Captain Jack, Mickey, Jackie, Sarah Jane, Martha, Donna... you all made me better.”

His hands were glowing brighter, this time including his head and neck. He got up and stood on the spot, raising both his arms. But the golden energy somehow extinguished, like a candlelight being put out. So he tried regenerating again. And again, and again, and again...

Unregenerate...

After numerous attempts, the Doctor couldn't feel a thing; not an instant change to a single cell within minutes. He felt numb and immune to regeneration for the first time ever, in all his lives. But he eventually discovered that Fnarg's remote had caused his own personal timestream to slow exponentially. Taking seconds stretched into minutes, hours, days, weeks and finally, years.

“Fourteen years of slow, everlasting pain. Will I be able to survive? Is this where it all ends?” It hurt to laugh at the irony. “For the Doctor?”

Slowly, the Time Lord released a volcanic blast of golden energy; without causing the room to explode or go ablaze. His cells gradually renewed one by one. His head shape and facial features morphed into a younger face. A longer hairstyle also emerged, quickly flopping to the side like a bunch of flowers appearing by magic. The golden energy dissolved into thin air.

And there he was: the new Doctor. Finally reborn with a brand new face.

Taking a deep breath, he looked around the room before staring at both his hands.

“Well, that's finally done and sorted. Hello, new body!”

The Doctor pulled a strand of hair and examined its length and colour. “Not bad. Bit on the long side. And still not ginger. Could dye it I suppose. No, no, *au naturale* for as long as my lives will carry me. Brown, blonde, silver... When did I last have ginger hair? Probably a life completely forgotten. Exile really does your head in. Now then. Where was I? Planning to watch that show created by the Pythons? No, that's not it... Oh yeah!”

He paced around the console, before reading the monitor, to check if everything was still functioning. As he flicked a few controls and switches,

the Doctor opened the TARDIS comms channel and began to make contact.

“This is the Doctor. Subject: *Fnarg*.”



Back in the present, a tearful Amy cradled her dead boyfriend. Fnarg enclosed himself within a shield using his remote, trying to call his superiors in an attempt to make his escape.

“Agent Fnarg to the MINUS, immediate evacuation now,” he demanded. “Hurry!”

Suddenly, Amy noticed a faint but familiar sound of wheezing and groaning. It was the TARDIS, materialising on the exact same spot.

“Doctor?” she gasped.

Fnarg quickly deactivated the shield and aimed his remote at the police box. “Ah ha,” he exclaimed. “Here is my victim!”

The TARDIS doors opened. The new Doctor stepped out of his ship to introduce himself.

“Doctor Blue of Spectrum, here to save the day. Turns out I’ve brought a few friends along to help. From the Shadow Proclamation.”

“Oh, I don’t believe this,” Fnarg shook his head, guessing who he had brought.

Then a booming voice announced, “*Sco! Bo! Tro! No! Flo! Jo! Ko! Fo! To! Do!*”

A platoon of Judoon suddenly teleported in, each surrounding Fnarg in a circle and hoisting their blasters. The Captain had already removed his helmet, unmasking the head of a ferocious alien rhinoceros with humanoid qualities. He scanned Fnarg before stating, “Criminal identified: MINUS Agent, Zeerust Fnarg. Sentence: whole of life imprisonment.”

Fnarg glared at the Captain, then at the Doctor. He could kill them both now, but he’d never outrun the platoon.

The Doctor recognised that look in his eyes, giving voice to that unspoken thought. “Fight and you will never see your mother again. Put the weapon down.”

He didn't dare to fight back with his remote or break free. Just remaining silent, he passed the remote to the Doctor and the Judoon teleported out, taking him back to their ship waiting above the Earth's atmosphere.

The Doctor crouched down to comfort Amy who was still weeping. She looked to him with bewilderment, knowing that he was a complete stranger. She didn't notice the click from behind her head, her face pressed against Rory's chest, and began to notice a change. He was already breathing.

"Rory?"

He slowly opened his eyes to regain consciousness and stared at his girlfriend. "Oh my God, Rory!"

"Hello, Amy."

The Doctor smiled, depressing the remote control, as the two laughed and exchanged a prolonged kiss.

"That takes care of that, I think," the traveller slammed the heel of his shoe against the offending object. "Prisoner identified, expedited under escort, and equipment recovered to its rightful owner. A minor fib, but everything in order."

"Wait a minute," said Rory, eyes on the stranger. "Where's the Doctor?"

"I am so sorry," he inhaled deeply, his face an impenetrable mask. "I was right beside him on his hospital bed. He didn't make it."

"So how come you're wearing his clothes?" asked Amy.

"He kindly asked me to wear them, as a way of indicating that I should never forget to honour his memory. That is a funeral custom you humans honour, isn't it?"

"Wait," she was beginning to realise. "You're him. You're the Doctor!"

"Am I?"

"I can see it in your eyes..."

The mask freed itself quite happily. He sounded quite surprised. "Yes, that's me. Same man, different face! Wouldn't mind some homemade chips. Say, is the school doing refreshments for the talent show? I'm *very* famished..."



After a whole school performance of the original *Lean on Me* by Bill Withers, the Doctor picked up a chocolate fudge brownie from the cake stall and began to munch. “Oh, these are luxuriously dense,” he said, with a mouthful. “Might have another!”

“It’s my recipe,” explained Amy. “Prepared them all on Wednesday.”

“And I have to say that was a heartfelt tribute you guys did for Steven, or so he called himself.”

“Thank you,” said Andrew, nodding. “We will remember him as a friend and fellow student, with needs and talents of his own. Feel sorry for him, I have to admit. He never had a family or a legal guardian throughout his childhood; that’s what he told us.”

“What do you mean?” the Doctor asked.

“Said he was taken to some boarding school, right after losing his mother. The Axit Academy, I heard.”

“Axit? Rings a bell.”

“You know them?”

“No... but I might have heard that name once or twice before. Can’t seem to recall who told me about this cult, and when exactly.”

“Nevertheless, we should also make sure that no one knows what really happened behind-the-scenes, if you’ll excuse the pun,” Tom added.

“Yeah,” grinned Andrew. “I was so close to exclaiming ‘Oh my God, he killed Rory!’ out loud, followed by Tom yelling ‘You scumbag!’ at Fnarg.”

Rory chuckled, “Certainly not the first time hearing that take on that *South Park* gag. Because my mates joke about it all the time.”

“Speaking of *South Park*,” Andrew resumed. “We’re planning to adapt an episode for the next Christmas production.”

“Which one?” asked the Doctor.

“*It’s Christmas in Canada*, a wonderful *Wizard of Oz* parody! Without all the rude words and stuff, of course.”

“Also a few extra songs not featured in the episode,” Tom suggested. “Such as *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* which sadly wasn’t spoofed.”

“And hang on,” Alan interrupted, turning to Rory. “Where’s that eccentric aide of yours?”

“You mean Josh Whitford?” The Doctor paused to swallow, trying to think of how to respond. “I’m actually him, not the other guy. He, er... stole my clothes in the local gym locker room, this morning, while I was taking a shower.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Rory smirked.

“Relax, he’s got this,” Amy nudged him.

“And...” the Doctor resumed, still eating. “I also left my ID in my jacket. Here it is.” He flashed a UNIT badge that Rory was certain didn’t belong to any Mister Whitford. Josh or otherwise. As the Doctor swallowed again, he began to talk aloud to himself. “Sorry, that was a bad joke. Or perhaps a rather unconvincing story. It was my psychic paper I was looking for. By the way, can I please check out the costumes?”

He opened the TARDIS door, stepping out into the sunlight to reveal his new outfit. A black moleskin waistcoat, underneath an eggplant purple frock coat; plus a fez. “So, er, what do you think? Not zonked, not travel-worn, not raggedy?”

Amy scratched her head, “Definitely not. I say you’re more—”

“Like a detective,” Rory suggested.

“Detective? Yeah, I like that. ‘Detective Doctor’ it is then! Now, I think there is something missing. Just one more thing I need.”

“Hey,” called Andrew, as he and Tom ran towards them from the school entrance. “Got something for you!”

They both presented their bow ties.

“Ah, forgot you two were wearing them earlier,” said the Doctor. “Which one is mine?”

“Both,” Tom explained, handing him his gold one. “Mine is to honour Steven.”

“And mine is to honour the hero who died saving us all,” Andrew handed him his platinum one.

“Why, thank you, gentlemen.” The Doctor couldn’t decide to choose which one to wear, as he felt the textures on each of them. “I was right, they’re not holographic. Not plastic either,” he exclaimed. “They’re both made with metal! Real gold and platinum! And you know what? They

should come in handy.” He grinned, putting on the platinum one.
“Definitely gonna switch now and then.”

Andrew checked the time on his watch, “I really wish we could hang around a bit longer, but we don’t want to keep our parents waiting. We must be leaving now. See ya!”

“Thanks for everything!” added Tom as they waved farewell.

“Goodbye!” called Amy and Rory, watching the two friends head back inside the building.

“Farewell,” the Doctor waved.

“So,” Amy leaned against the TARDIS. “What now, Doctor?”

“You could come with me, both of you. As gratitude for saving my life. The MINUS are still out there somewhere across time and space, whoever they are. They can’t run and hide forever whilst causing havoc. And I promise you, Amy, we *will* find your parents.”

“Oh, thank you, Doctor!” She smiled with relief and hope. “How about that, Rory?”

“Erm,” her boyfriend mumbled. “Yeah, why not.”

The Doctor excitedly pushed the doors open, ushering his two new companions. “Alright then! So... where to first?”

“Maybe the future,” Amy began, as she entered the TARDIS. “The past, then search for my parents?”

“And you know what I call it?” the Doctor grinned. “The long way round.”

The police box vanished into thin air, unnoticed, and off they went into time and space.

*This two-part adventure is dedicated to
all our friends at Springballow School.*

And wishing Cian Binchy, the real Toby, a very Happy 30th Birthday.

STARRING
JIM STEPHENS



I N B **DOCTOR
WHO** U N D

THE VICTORIOUS HEALER
BY CECIL J. FINCHLEY

THE VICTORIOUS HEALER

By Cecil J. Finchley

“It’s the only way for a series to remain vital, by reinventing its own mythology.”

— Jonathan Morris, *Controversial Continuity* (DWM 554)

Episode 1: An Uncommon Man

According to one account, the Doctor was originally born a human being named John Smith who lived an ordinary life in Shoreditch, 1963. A junior counsellor at Coal Hill School, under the alias of “Tony Halfpenny”, who showed genuine kindness for each student he worked with, whenever they felt the need to discuss personal issues.

22nd November, another school week was finally over for the Coal Hill students and teachers; except for Smith who had one appointment left. From his short curly ginger hair to the vintage waistcoat, Smith had a rather youthful appearance in which he could easily pass for a teenager. A fact that had brought him no small grief among the students and even some of the colleagues at Coal Hill. There were times where he felt trapped by expectations or, very simply, trapped. Tidying up around his small but spacious office, he suddenly heard four knocks.

“Come in.”

The door opened, revealing a girl walking through and closing it behind her.

“Susan Foreman, good to see you.”

“Mr Halfpenny,” she greeted back, taking a seat opposite him. “I was just finishing some history revision.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of notes for exam preparation,” he joked.

“No, it’s a book on the French Revolution.”

“Again?”

“Mmm.”

He mused privately. *‘Death to tyrants’ must appeal to the school age mind, I suppose.*

“Yes...” she laughed, as though the thought had occurred to her only then. “I suppose it would, at that.”

Smith looked at her curiously, but Susan was too busy flipping through the tome to notice. She said, “Looking out for historical inaccuracies is so tiring when skimming through each page.”

“I know how strenuous it can be, Susan,” he acknowledged, jotting on his notepad. “But you shouldn’t go looking for faults in the material. Your teachers know what they’re doing.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to...” she sighed. “Never mind, sir.”

“Did you take any short breaks in between?”

“A few times, actually,” nodded Susan. “Listened to *Three Guitars Mood 2* before and after Miss Wright came in, with Mr Chesterton, to lend me the book.”

“Yes, I heard it in the corridor. John Smith and the Common Men?”

“Fascinating, if somewhat antiquated. Also drew this to relieve stress.” She dug out a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. There were smudges all over, which consisted of ink blots surrounded by an incomplete hexagon. “Quite rubbish, I have to admit.”

Smith picked it up, appearing to recognise the pattern. “My goodness, that looks a lot like the Rorschach test! How did you learn about this at your age?”

“It’s only rudimentary pareidolia.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Mistaking familiar patterns in unfamiliar objects.”

Smith looked up, but Susan wasn’t maintaining eye contact, she was checking the clock on the wall. “Really sorry, Mr Halfpenny. Just remembered that my grandfather’s expecting me to be back home early, in case the fog worsens.”

A short session today, then. They seemed to be getting all the briefer these days with Miss Foreman. With all his students, come to think of it. The desire to talk seemed to be growing rarer and rarer as the year came to a close.

Susan shifted awkwardly in her seat.

“Your grandfather?” he asked. “Is it his birthday or something?”

She put the paper back in her pocket and hastily replied, “Er, yes, we’re just throwing a... small, quiet party.”

“Ah, sounds very relaxing,” Smith grinned. “Well, I hope you enjoy your weekend then, Susan. Safe journey home.”

“Same to you, sir.” She got up and made her way out, then finally said whilst closing the door, “Don’t take the distance to heart, Mr Halfpenny. There’s only so many places one person can be. Perhaps, if there were others...?”

“I...” he let his professional facade falter, just a little, “don’t know anyone else who could help, Susan.”

Susan’s face ticked with a sympathetic frown. “Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Miss Foreman.”

Taking a deep breath, with a sigh of relief, Smith decided that he should call it a day and go home.

It was already getting dark and increasingly foggy on the streets of Shoreditch. Walking very slowly, further away from the school, Smith was finally getting closer to his house on 13 Barnes Common. But he still kept his focus on the pavement using his literal perspective through the fog.

On the other side of the road stood what appeared to be an entrance to a junkyard. Smith spotted large letters painted on the gate which read the familiar, “*I.M. Foreman, Scrap Merchant, 76 Totter’s Lane*”. The same night as every night previous, bar one detail. He also caught a glimpse of a long-haired elderly gentleman smoking on a pipe by the gate.

“Is that Susan’s grandfather?” Smith muttered to himself, without trying to attract attention. What was it about the junkyard that intrigued him, when he should’ve been resuming his journey home?

The elderly gentleman turned his head to notice Smith, still holding the pipe in his mouth. He suddenly inhaled the smoke and began to cough. A concerned Smith watched with fear, thinking that he should run across the road to help him. But the elderly gentleman headed back inside the junkyard, continuously coughing into his handkerchief.

Smith remained frozen on the spot. He quickly shut his eyes and began to have disturbing visions flooding his mind, like a slide projector rapidly flicking through each image; all which appeared to be completely alien to him. There were notable glimpses of...

A 19th century cottage, situated underneath a blue sky...

Two familiar faces with ginger hair...

Three young people assisting him...

A silver pyramid hovering in midair...

He heard voices whispering his name, his real name, over and over again, slurring with each passing moment.

Dooclare... Dooclare... Dooclare...

Next Episode SHE LOVES YOU

Episode 2: She Loves You

For the first time in his career, Smith couldn't control his emotions. They were already causing him great pain until another voice began to interrupt the disturbance.

"Tony?"

He opened his eyes, everything was suddenly back to normal. A young woman with shoulder-length brunette hair stood right in front of him, to whom Smith immediately recognised. "Louise, how did you find me?"

"You weren't with Gary or Brimmicombe-Wood, so I went looking. Spotted you across the road when the old geezer went inside the junkyard," she explained in her native Blackpool accent. "Come on, don't want either of us getting lost on our own. Not after the '52 pea-souper."

"You saw no one else?"

"No?"

"Not an old man? Not... " he was going to say 'figures in cloaks,' but his mind caught up with his tongue.

Louise took him by the hand and exchanged a kiss, before resuming their journey through the fog. He felt comforted by her presence as they went further away from Totter's Lane.

"There's something about that bloke which caused me to have that headache," said Smith. "I think he might be Susan Foreman's grandfather."

"Man can afford decent clothes and good shoes for her, but lives in a scrapyard office. I can understand why you would."

"You've met him?"

"I've seen him at that café, Fowler's, once or twice. He dropped by the school to give me his home address, which I later handed to Barbara who was keen to do private tuition with Susan."

"Did he also mention his name?"

"Afraid not. The only thing he told me was that he's a doctor."

Smith couldn't respond, that very word triggered a small alarm in his mind. "A doctor..." he wondered inquisitively. "*Doctor who?*"

“Exactly,” Louise nodded in agreement, trying to contain her laughter through her nose. “All mystery, like a magic act. And before I forget, remember we also have that boring old quiz night at 7pm.”

“Right...” he gave a loud sigh, deliberately rolling his eyes with great annoyance. “Wish it were in a pub instead of the Coal Hill school building.”

But they soon turned to hear a faint sound of wheezing and groaning, coming from inside the junkyard.

“Did you hear that, Louise?”

“Yeah, it sounds like...”

“Something unearthly. Think I heard it once or twice before, probably a few months ago.”

Smith closed his eyes to focus on the noise, it didn’t seem to trouble him as much as seeing the old gentleman’s face. Was there something else about the junkyard which they both missed, and not just allegedly being Susan and her grandfather’s residence?

“We’ve only got a few hours, Tony, so do you want to investigate?”

“Better wait until tomorrow. I’ll walk you home.”

A few hours later, Smith and Louise entered the school corridors where nobody was to be seen lingering around. Nor could they hear any voices from nearby.

“It’s like a ghost town,” he suggested. “Reminds me of Woodline Central, you know, after the Blitz...”

“Do you want to leave?”

He rubbed his shoulders. “I’m fine...”

“Maybe we’re the last to be here, even though we’re already on time.”

As they approached the hall entrance, Smith noticed that the lights were off inside. “Couldn’t be any more suspicious,” he chuckled, pushing the door open. It was pitch black, just like an oblivion of darkness. But all of a sudden, the lights turned on...

“*Surprise!*”

A collective roar of cheer and jubilation echoed across the hall, while The Beatles began playing *She Loves You* on the radio.

“Ah, perfect choice of song,” cheered Smith. “Was this your idea, Louise?”

“How should I know?”

They were approached by the school headmaster Parsons who greeted, “Happy Birthday, Tony Halfpenny and Louise McGovern!”

She shed a tear in her eye, overwhelmed by the decorations and crowds of familiar faces. “This is not what I expected. We’ve only been working here for a few months, and I’m already chuffed.”

“So am I,” Smith added, gently cuddling her. “Ten times better than a quiz night.”

“Of course,” Parsons began. “Since the pupils told me how much they’ve appreciated your counselling, and that you both happen to share the same birthday, why not host a joint celebration?”

Smith grinned and shook his hand, “Why, thank you, Harvey. Our actual birthday is tomorrow.”

“Yes, we thought about it, but then considered the budget. Thought it’d be a waste of time and energy to open the school building on a Saturday. Nice as this is. Have either of you seen Ian and Barbara?”

“Not since they left the building together in the afternoon,” Louise shook her head.

“Maybe they forgot to read their invitations? It was only Monday when I distributed them in the staff room... Well, don’t want to keep holding you two up.”

“That’s alright,” said Smith. “We’ve got all evening.”

The radio switched to *Oh, Won’t You Please Love Me?* by John Smith and the Common Men.

“And here’s another favourite of mine!” he whooped with joy, jiving and mouthing the lyrics. Louise laughed hysterically as they were approached by a group of teenage students.

“Happy Birthday, Secretary McGovern,” said the blonde girl.

“Evening, Francesca! And please, call me Louise. Just for tonight.”

“Tony, as well,” Smith added.

“Well, Tony and Louise, that’s certainly fine by us! Right, guys?”

“Yep,” her classmate Brinn nodded in agreement, along with the other students. “I don’t mean to be rude, Tony, but you both appear to look more like sixth-formers.”

“How very kind of you to say, Brinn, but close-ish,” Smith began. “She’s turning 22, I’m turning 23.”

“And, Louise, is it true that you were actually born in Cumbria, and not Blackpool?”

“My parents were from Cumbria, but moved to Blackpool shortly after their honeymoon. How do you know?”

“Susan Foreman told us in Geography. Says she noticed it in your accent,” Francesca chuckled. “Speaking of which, hasn’t she turned up yet?”

“Susan?”

“Yes, she said she was going to make a special effort to drop something by.”

Smith laughed. “Sometimes I get the impression she knows more about my responses than hers.”

“You haven’t seen her this evening? She really was meant to be here.”

Smith gulped with surprise, hesitant to respond. “Parsons was wondering the same about Mr Chesterton and Miss Wright.”

“Can’t be a coincidence, can it?” Louise wondered.

“I don’t know, I honestly don’t know... I saw her grandfather, but...” he began to tremble.

Louise placed her hand on his forearm. “She must have been delayed. You know how it gets in the fog. I’m sure we’ll know better by morning.”

Smith’s head swam as though he were walking through the pale nowhere.

“*I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—*” the student began.

“*It’s his nerves...*” placated Louise, so very far away.

Smith paused to take a deep breath, until suddenly inhaling an aroma of refreshments from nearby, drawing him back. “Mmm, smells delicious! Isn’t that the café owner, Rosa, over there?”

“Taking over from Harry for a bit. She’s doing the catering,” explained Francesca.

“Now I’m already craving for her homemade babka and rugelach!” Smith said, grinning delightedly. “Surely there’s finger sandwiches and pizza slices, too, right?”

Louise smiled wearily.

“And don’t forget to catch the new episode of *Professor X*,” Brinn called. “Tomorrow at 5:15!”

“I won’t,” Smith smiled back, exchanging a thumbs-up. “Trust me.”

After feasting on the party food and chatting with other friends and colleagues, Rosa presented two birthday cakes she baked earlier in the week - both decorated with icing to spell out each respective age. One was chocolate fudge brownie, Smith’s favourite; the other was Victoria sponge, Louise’s favourite.

“Many happy returns to you both,” she said, with the faint traces of a German accent. “Whose cake would you like to slice first?”

“How about yours, Louise?” Smith suggested. “You know, ladies first?”

“We’ll do it together.”

“*Ooh!*” Some sixth form boys flirtatiously interjected, causing everyone to laugh.

Smith and Louise raised a knife and carefully buried it into the Victoria sponge. There was reddish jam and thick cream on each side of the blade, as they both listened to the cheering. Same with the brownie, there was gooey chocolate on the other knife. Placing two slices of each cake onto a single plate, while Rosa offered the rest to everyone else, Smith dug a fork into the brownie as Louise simultaneously dug hers into the Victoria sponge.

Taking a bite, he felt the dense texture and chocolatey sweetness melt in his mouth. “Oh, marvellously rich and fudgy,” he said with a mouthful. “I think this is, by far, the best brownie I’ve ever tasted.”

“So is mine,” Louise chewed on hers. “A perfect consistency of strawberry sweetness and creamy texture.”

“Wouldn’t have minded carrot cake, also,” Smith whispered to Louise.

“I thought you didn’t like carrots?”

“Only the cake, because of the cream cheese frosting. Raw sticks are too dry and extremely horrible for my taste buds. And pears, on the other hand, tend to go mushy very quickly, which is why I prefer sucking on pear drops.”

As the guests tucked into their slices, they all delivered complementary satisfaction. It was then that Smith and Louise tasted each other’s cakes, only to be interrupted by an emergency news broadcast on the radio.

“It is with deep regret that we announce that President John F. Kennedy has died at the age of 46.”

The room fell silent. A terrible, scraping acid void that seemed to stretch on for far longer than seemed possible.

“He was shot down as he was driving in an open car through the city of Dallas, Texas—”

“Is everyone alright?” Parsons asked. A strange question under any other circumstances. Only a handful of faces seemed to acknowledge it.

“I think it’s best that the children go home,” suggested Louise.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Smith felt the words tumble from his lips.

But the radio suddenly went static, causing the announcer’s voice to crackle. “Quick, someone find a telly!”

They were in luck. Carole, another student, found a small television set at the other side of the hall and turned it on. Everyone gathered around to watch the shocking bulletin.

“The identity of the assassin, however, remains unconfirmed at this time. We will bring in more updates within the next 24 hours. This is the BBC.”

A moment of silence. Nobody could openly express their shock and grief, except for a very few who were already sobbing. Closing his eyes, Smith took a deep breath and pulled a tearful Louise into his arms. He tried to picture Kennedy’s face. The rounded jawline, the distinctive chin and teeth, but... the image wouldn’t come.

“Who’ll step in?” Louise asked.

“Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, most likely,” Parsons suggested, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, but there weren’t any tears. Wouldn’t

be proper for a headmaster to display such wilful emotion. He'd never cried, not even as a boy. Now, all he felt was numb.

"Right..." Smith began, digging a piece of paper from his pocket. "I think this'll do quite nicely, as a distraction from current affairs."

Louise looked at him. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

He hesitated. "No... But that's the point, isn't it?"

He took to the stage and adjusted the microphone, causing a bit of startling feedback. "Sorry about that, ladies and gentlemen, I completely forgot that I was supposed to be delivering a speech tonight. And I'm sure Louise wouldn't mind, even though it's a joint birthday celebration."

Parsons adjusted his fogged glasses. "Tony, are you sure this is appropriate?"

"Let him try for the students, sir," Louise whispered.

Smith creased his half-folded paper. "Sir?"

The headmaster nodded, distractedly. "Yes... Yes, proceed, I suppose."

"So..." Smith pulled a wooden chair up to the stand and sat down beside it. Shaking and deflated. No better than anyone else in the room. "First of all, I would like to thank Harvey Parsons for offering me the chance to make a difference, after working for St John Ambulance. It's been a good few months since I joined Coal Hill, but there are some things I need to reveal about myself. Everything I say from this point on I intended to say..."

Pareidolia, that's what Susan Foreman had said.

He continued, "But seems all the more pertinent now. You all know me as Anthony Halfpenny. But that's not my real name. I am John Smith, John Brendan Smith."

A moment of silence. Some of the guests looked at each other in confusion. The only thing Smith could do was to resume delivering his speech.

"I was born in a village called Gallifrey on West Coast Ireland, to Anthony Smith and Delia Halfpenny, before growing up in Ealing. That, of course, makes me a very uncommon man with a very common name. And despite my fondness for their music, I am not associated with the band..."

He caught a very brief glimpse of Louise who was having a discreet conversation with a shorter, dark-haired man wearing a cabbie's overcoat, at the other end of the hall. Was he a friend of hers or just some complete stranger? Someone to telephone the families and let them know their children were alright, he suspected. As soon as they finished, the man quickly left the hall while Louise went over to one of the stalls to buy a raffle ticket strip. Life's great lottery...

He shook his head. "Never mind..." and exited the stage, repeating softly, "Never mind..."

"Tony—John," Parsons began. "I'm sorry we didn't wait until tomorrow."

"What?" Smith didn't quite see him. "Oh, yes... Yes..."

Parsons nodded understandingly and moved off to discuss the situation with his students.

Louise suddenly approached him and displayed the ticket.

"Got this for you," she said.

"For me?"

"Well, it can't be any worse than Kennedy's." Her laugh broke into tears, she nuzzled her head against his shoulder. "Oh, God, Tony..."

"I know," he cooed softly, closing his eyes. "It's a shock..."

He remembered October last year, the tensions between Cuba and America. That paranoia evolving into an etheric certainty that tomorrow the world would wake up in time to die. It all came rushing back in a wave. For everyone.

"Such a stupid..." she sobbed.

"No, it was brilliant, always love doing the raffle," he countered softly, kissing the top of her head. "Who was that gentleman you were speaking with?"

Louise stumbled upon her words for a second, then finally remembered. "Just some charming bloke, didn't give me his name."

They swayed together, gently. "Must have hit him particularly hard..."

"He said something about a battle which is expected to take place here in Shoreditch, next week, led by a fascist group."

“I don’t think it’ll be that extreme,” said Smith, not entirely certain if he believed it.

“No, they’ll be coming after you.”

“Me? What group?”

“Axit, I think they’re called. Does the name mean anything to you?”

“They’re a prosperity gospel cult who are using wealth to generate funds for some mathematical project called the Skasis Paradigm.” He pulled away from her to look her in the eye. “Was that the only thing he said?”

“We’re out of time. Everyone will want to go—I’m gonna bring the raffle forward and explain when Stan arrives to pick us up.”

“Stan?” A confused Smith watched her run off before going over to grab another slice of birthday cake.

“...507,” she announced with uncertainty, waving a ticket from the box. “Anybody have number 507?”

“Er,” Smith awkwardly raised his hand. “I do.”

He made his way through the departing crowd until approaching the raffle stall. Louise took his ticket and quickly taped it to a small, unopened present wrapped in gold paper. She snuck it in Smith’s pocket and off they went.

“Louise,” he stopped her briefly. “We should stay.”

“Do you think you can do anything here?”

He looked around, mouth working soundlessly for a few moments.

“No... No, I don’t suppose I could...”

As with Miss Foreman, Mr Chesterton and Miss Wright, no one noticed them leave.

“Louise, what’s all the hurry about?” asked Smith, rushing with her through the corridors. “We’re better off staying with the others this evening. And who is this Stan?”

“A cabbie,” she said, pausing to catch her breath. “He booked a ride for us.”

Hurried hands and all that. He couldn't blame her. She wiped the tears from her eyes and straightened her back. They immediately resumed walking hand-in-hand until approaching the reception area.

As the two exited the school building, re-entering the increasingly murky night, they spotted a black taxi waiting right outside the gate.

"That's our ride," said Louise, waving at the driver.

Smith turned his head back to see if anyone was following them. Nothing. He looked up to the sky... only to spot what appeared to be a triangular shape on top of the building.

"Do you see that up there, Louise?" He pointed towards the roof, as the fog gradually cleared.

"What the—" she gasped. "How did it get up there?"

"That's just what I was wondering."

Although they couldn't see its appearance in full, the silver pyramid had an ancient symbol on each side. Smith kept his eye fixed on it, knowing that there was something distinctive about the inanimate object. Something almost inhuman...

Next Episode

THE ONCOMING STORM

Episode 3: The Oncoming Storm

Smith began to feel faint, like earlier on in the evening. Unable to maintain his focus, Louise wrapped his arm around her shoulder and dragged him along.

Helping him into the taxi, Smith felt normal once again as he saw the driver turning around to check if they were okay. A shorter, dark-haired man wearing a cabbie's overcoat. They both exchanged surprised looks, much to Louise's puzzlement.

"John?"

"Wilf?"

"Hang on," interrupted Louise, "I thought your name was Stan?"

"That's my middle name, sweetheart," the driver gave them a salute.

"Private Wilfred Stanley Mott, at your service."

"An old family friend," said Smith, saluting back at Wilfred. "Stationed in the British Mandate of Palestine with my uncle in command."

"Always ranting about witnessing alien invasions, whenever we head to the pub with fellow army officers, Gary Jonathan Finch and Archie Brimmicombe-Wood. I'm sure you know the whole story, miss."

"Speaking of which, how are they doing?" asked Smith.

"They're well, thanks. Arch is, well..."

"A bit arch?"

"But no more than usual. Worries me a bit, that lad."

"It's a worrying world, Mr Mott," said Louise.

"So I've heard..." The cabbie turned to Smith. "Sorry, have I put my foot in it? She is with you, ain't she?"

He nodded.

"Everything I've said about them aliens is all true, miss. We were so busy fighting each other in the War, we didn't think about who'd come to pick up the scraps. Signs have been there since '53. That bleedin' Magpie electrical storm on the Queen's Coronation, which left nearly everyone, literally, faceless. Oh, will I heck! You probably think I'm a nutter."

"No, Wilf," she blinked steadily, "it's not strange at all."

He cleared his throat. "I'll drive slowly, if that's okay with the pair of you. That fog's already getting worse."

"As long as we're safe in here," nodded Louise.

"Righty-ho!" Wilfred put his foot down on the accelerator pedal and began driving.

"Now," Louise began. "I think we should take a look at your birthday present."

"Shouldn't we wait until midnight or tomorrow morning?"

"There's no time, honey," she quickly took Smith's present out of his pocket.

"Ah, course," interjected Wilfred. "S'your birthday tomorrow."

"And mine," she added.

"Well, a very Happy Birthday to you both!"

"Thanks, Wilf," said Smith, already tearing the wrapping paper. He noticed a wooden blue surface, all varnished around the sides.

"A carriage clock?"

Its hands were pointing at precisely 11:23, with the St John Ambulance logo engraved as the dial. He turned to the back and found an inscription on the bottom reading, *When the hour chimes, don't be afraid to make that first step.*

"Wait a second, this must be from my father. He's a clockmaker based in Sheffield. But... How did he manage to time it perfectly?"

"Don't ask me..."

"...Here we are, Totter's Lane." The taxi stopped a few houses away from the junkyard.

"Thanks for the ride, Wilf," he pushed the door open on his side.

"Anytime, me old matey. Free of charge."

As they got out of the taxi, Smith closed the door and together watched Wilfred drive off into the night. Spotting a policeman wandering outside the junkyard, the two quickly ran across the road to speak with him.

"Evening, PC Fred Rawlings..." Smith began.

“Apologies, guy, I’m PC Lance Cornell. My colleague Rawlings was on duty yesterday,” he pulled on his coat. “We bobbies take turns, you see. How may I ‘elp?”

“I was wondering if we could take a look inside the junkyard? My wife believes to have lost her ring in there, whilst helping the owner clear out some stuff the other day.”

“*Wife?*” she hissed.

The policeman replied with a grin, “Course you can.” He carefully pushed the gate open, letting Smith and Louise into the junkyard, then closed it slightly before resuming his duty.

Inside 76 Totter’s Lane, the two carefully walked past the old antiques and furniture, already covered in dust and cobwebs, only to find that some have been accidentally knocked to the ground. They neither paused to put them back into place, or observe the graffiti on the wall. “Killroy was here” and had lost a confrontation with the Big “Bad Wolf”.

“We should be safe in here, for now,” she said, keeping her fingers crossed.

“Hopefully. Wait... do you hear that?”

“*Axit means Axit!*”

He suddenly heard some infuriating voices chanting from outside. Aggressively repeating their slogan, the cult were already approaching, nearby, like an angry mob of hooligans and rioters.

“Hide!” Louise rushed towards the gate while Smith tried to take cover.

“You’re going to get yourself beaten to death,” he called.

“Cornell?” she shouted. “PC Cornell?”

But it was too late.

As Louise forced the gate shut to form a barricade, a series of unearthly thunderclaps began to roar across Shoreditch, causing the fog to suddenly intensify by rapidly spreading across the junkyard like a cloud of smoke. She could hear the crowd divide between herself and the constable as steel-cap boots thundered down the street.

Neither Louise, nor Smith could no longer see each other through the mist. The loud noise completely alarmed Smith. A doodlebug flash that left

him dazed. He stumbled blind through the mangled frame of a bicycle and a smattering of broken hand-mirrors.

She could picture him in her mind's eye.

"*Louise, are you still there? Louise!*" He took a few steps backwards, unaware that he was entering a perfectly square landing pattern. Left by an object beyond conventional understanding. "*God help me—*"

After another thunderclap, Smith's voice could no longer be heard.

His girlfriend released her hands from the gate, turning around to find that he was already gone.

"Miss? Miss!" DC Cornell came staggering through the gates. "Are you quite alright?"

Vanished into thin air.

"Come along, it's not safe to be on the streets. Not at the moment."

With a tear in her eye, and a few tiny bumps in her stomach, Louise remained hopeful for John nonetheless. And then... She began to sing. Cornell recognised it as a sad, old song from the War. It conjured up the girls that brought them flowers as they piled on the trains headed for the shore.

We'll Meet Again by Vera Lynn.



Smith was no longer surrounded by the fog. Much to his puzzlement, he began to notice that he was standing on a vast green hilly landscape in broad daylight.

Where... where am I? How did I end up here?

As he felt the gentle breeze swoop across his ginger curls, Smith looked along the horizon and spotted a figure watching him from a good distance...

Next Episode THE TROUBLESHOOTERS

Episode 4: The Troubleshooters

“Hello,” the figure called, running towards Smith. “Hello!”

They were close in age, with a very similar appearance. His curly ginger hair was slightly longer than Smith’s, but still relatively short. And despite having a heavy Irish accent, he wore an English police uniform dating back to the 21st century.

“Officer! Officer, by God! Thank heavens... There’s a riot—I’ve a friend—she’s in danger. I think they might kill—” Smith paused, fully taking in his surroundings. “Could you please tell me where I am?”

“You’re on Gallifrey, West Coast Ireland,” he explained, extending his arm to offer Smith a handshake. “I’m Cliff Dooclare, by the way. Clifford Dooclare.”

Smith stared hard at Cliff’s hand for a moment before his emotions, once again, overwhelmed him. “Ireland...? I can’t be in Ireland! I have to get back!”

“How?”

“*How?* I don’t know how! My friend—”

“You don’t recognise me?”

“Damn your infuriating calm, man! *My girlfriend—*”

“She did this for you. On the behalf of the family. Our family.”

“Our?” Smith heaved air into his raw lungs, shaking with fear he tried to mask as rage. He looked Cliff directly in the eye. Trying to offset him. The older man saw right through it. Smith said, “Your surname definitely rings a bell—Where am I, really?”

“This is your ancestral home, 4863, the 49th century.”

“Yes, I know that, but how exactly did I end up—?” He choked. “How did I...? Can I ever get...? Louise...”

“I’m sorry,” said Cliff simply.

Their conversation was interrupted, as two young women, both with brunette hair, suddenly approached them from behind. The shorter one, with a hair bun, was probably in her teens while, to Smith’s shock, the taller

one shared an identical appearance to his girlfriend; except for her bouncy curls.

“Louise?” it was like the sound of a mirror breaking in two.

“I am Lola Canning-McGovern,” she began, cautiously. “Louise McGovern is my ancestor.”

“No...”

Lola took a step back, but Cliff held a gentle hand on her arm. A gesture that said, ‘Only wait.’

“No!” Smith’s features cracked into elation as he gasped with delight. “No way! Then, she’s alive? She survived?” His head pulsed pain. “*Will* survive...”

“Else I wouldn’t be here.”

“She’s alive.” He looked around to the array of strangers and, for a moment, forgot himself. With a huge, tearful grin on his face, Smith embraced the woman with Louise’s face in the warmest hug possible. The other two also shed a few tears of joy.

“Well, that’s a good sign, I suppose?” murmured the shorter woman to Cliff.

“See? In his own time, as I said,” he answered. “He’s already coming ‘round.”

“He’s certainly not what I expected...”

Smith turned to the former and said, “Now, who might you be?”

“Bridget Findooclare, ‘Biddy’ for short.”

“Ah, there’s another familiar-sounding surname. Well...” He put on a brave face. “Since there are so many questions I have yet to ask, would you mind accompanying me to the village you mentioned? I’ll have to telephone, at least.” He stopped himself. “The 49th century...?”

“Everything you know and love, but more so,” shrugged Biddy.

“The village...” Smith began again. He was beginning to feel giddy.

“You’re standing on it,” said Lola.

He chuckled, nervously, “I’m sorry?”

“You are. Above the surface.”

“*This* is Gallifrey?” He pointed at the grass.

“I’ll explain when we get there,” said Cliff.
When the hour came, Smith took his first step.

The punt was already off shore, heading further away from the dock. Smith and Lola remained seated, as they watched Cliff do the rowing with Biddy directing him. Approaching the other end of the coastline, he raised the pole and knocked four times on one of the rocks. The cliff opened by sliding downwards, revealing a wide open cave hidden underneath the land. Smith couldn’t believe what he saw, gasping in amazement.

“Don’t tell me this is the *real* Atlantis,” he chuckled, as they continued rowing.

“Only deranged conspiracy theorists believe that Atlantis exists here on Earth,” replied Lola.

The cave was surrounded with transparent crystals that emulate colour patterns like a swirling vortex. They changed from purple to pink and yellow, blue and green, and also full red before going back to the beginning.

“Any sign of my ancestral home?”

“Look to your left.”

He turned and spotted a subterranean village, with 19th century architecture of shops and homes, situated underneath a projected blue sky to replicate daylight from overground. A tall monument stood in the heart of the town square, populated with citizens of all cultures and skin colour.

“This is all a bit much... for me... Lou—” His eyes softened with genuine apology. “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Lola,” she corrected gently.

A long and painful pause passed between the two of them.

“I’m not Louise,” she said.

“I know.”

“I couldn’t ever be—”

“No, no, and I wouldn’t expect you to be.” He didn’t let the next pause rest. “This, Lola, is all your world?”

Her eyes glided across the crowds as if truly observing them for the first time in a long while. “You see that pair, there?”

“The... “ Smith struggled for the word. “Birds?”

“Selling sand to spin glass across an alien sky. They are the furthest afield we can travel. Beyond that point...” she stopped, sighing, watching the punt.

“Tell me,” insisted Smith, gently. “I can’t stop being afraid, unless I know.”

Lola looked at him. “Beyond are great and terrible things drawing plans against us...” she put her finger to her lips. “You didn’t hear it from me.”

“So much is different, yet...”

It is with deep regret...

“...utterly indistinguishable in the shadows.”

“Is that bitterness, John?” she asked.

Smith sighed. “Lola, I don’t know what it is.”

“Time often moves in circles,” said Cliff. “It’s never quite certain just how small those circles are.”

The boat finally came to a halt by the docking point. In the brief step from ship to wharf, he saw what he’d expected to be water became, in reality, something quite more unusual. He looked up.

“My goodness,” Smith couldn’t help, but gasp with overwhelming delight. “It’s like a safe haven!”

“Welcome to Lungbarrow,” said Bidy, as Cliff lifted up the pole. “The hidden, underground capital of Gallifrey.”

“Lungbarrow,” wondered Smith, climbing out of the boat with Lola. “Where to now?”

Smith knocked four times on the door. He was waiting outside his ancestral family cottage with Lola, Cliff, and Bidy. It opened, revealing a middle-aged couple who both had ginger hair.

“John!”

He looked from one to the other.

“Mum? Dad?”

They all embraced in a hug. He didn’t expect to be reunited with his parents, much to his delight.

“A very Happy 23rd Birthday, our beloved son,” said his mother, shedding a tear.

“Come on,” his father added. “We’ve got a lot to tell you about your heritage.”

They all enjoyed a feast of toad in the hole, with meat and vegetarian sausages, before settling down on the sofas to discover a large haul of birthday presents surrounding them. All of which Smith immediately recognised.

“Wait,” he began. “Aren’t those from... 1963?”

“Yes,” his father replied. “They were delivered from the President himself, magically appeared like Santa swinging by on Christmas Day.”

“Pulled from the mists like me, I expect...” Smith pondered the pile. “And my signed photo with the Liberal MP Jeremy Thorpe?”

“Still in its frame,” said his mother. “Hanging upstairs in your bedroom.”

“Open some!” begged Lola.

“Alright then.”

Smith unwrapped a present, revealing a hardback edition of a novel. “*Melody Malone: Private Detective in Old New York Town*,” he read the title, before opening the first page to find an autograph. “This is one of my favourite classics. Okay, what should I open next?”

Lola passed him a letter, addressed to Smith’s other home in Barnes Common. He tore it open and unfolded it before quickly glancing at the handwriting.

“Ah, it’s from Ed Watkinson, my old science teacher at the Farringham School for Boys. Says he’s now living in Cardiff, good for him. And what’s this?” He spotted a P.S. underneath Watkinson’s signature and read, “*Your Uncle Tim says hi.*”

“Speaking of your maternal uncle...” his father presented a disc on the coffee table and activated a holographic family tree, dating all the way back to the Middle Ages.

“Dooclare,” Smith read the heading, then scrolled through the names underneath.

“Sometimes people misspell or, worse, mispronounce it as *Docclare*,” his father laughed, with everyone else joining in. “Because of how ‘c’ looks like an ‘o’ to some.”

“We can always wear it as a badge of honour or use it as a pseudonym,” Smith joked. “So, going back, are those our actual ancestors?”

“More than that,” his father pointed at the box which read ‘St John Dooclare’. “It’s your birth name. Look here.”

“*Sinjin* Dooclare—”

“It’s actually pronounced *Saint John*.”

“*Saint John* Dooclare? Oh, my God! Ten times better. *Sinjin* never made sense to me,” he chuckled.

“That’s why we chose it,” said his mother. “Because you’re our little *Saint*.”

He resumed reading, “Son of Sydney Dooclare and Verity Findooclare. Wait, wouldn’t that be the pair of you?”

“Anthony Patrick Smith and Delia Meg Halfpenny were just our pseudonyms for the 20th century, same with John Brendan Smith. And Findooclare is also my maiden name, which explains Bidy here - your niece.”

“And your cousin,” Cliff added, pointing at himself.

Then Smith asked, “But how come we don’t have middle names?”

“They are very much considered outdated in the 49th century,” Sydney explained.

“Different with me,” interrupted Lola. “My parents never married.”

“Hang on a moment...” Smith paused to think. “Was I really born in 1940?”

“No, son,” said Sydney. “Your mother and I had no choice but to send you back in time to live an ‘ordinary’ life, in the 20th century, with a fake identity and birth certificate.”

“What for?”

“You’re better off speaking to the President,” Verity suggested.

“The President?”

“He’s expecting you at the Citadel,” Sydney explained. “Tomorrow afternoon, inside the monument.”

“Well, guys,” Smith got up and stretched his arms. “I’m gonna need a nice long sleep, with some extra hours of winding down.” He walked upstairs and said, “Goodnight.”

The Council Chamber was rather wide for the monument’s interior, but at least it didn’t bother the President. Dressed in yellow robes, he sat around the conference table in preparation for his meeting with Smith. Then the doors opened, revealing Smith in a dark regal blue suit with a black shirt underneath.

“Welcome, young Dooclare,” the President’s voice projected effortlessly across the distance. “We’ve been expecting you.”

It is with deep regret that we announce...

The President wasn’t what he had expected. His features were that of a man with a high forehead, swept back white hair and almost woodcut cheeks and nose.

“Hang on a second,” Smith interrupted. “I saw you smoking outside the junkyard at 76 Totter’s Lane. Did you have a haircut... or put on a wig...?”

“Er, no,” snorted the President, retaining a grin. “He just happens to share my appearance, *bmm*. And that’s where you come in.”

“What do you mean?”

“The fog appeared in Shoreditch for a reason, which I sincerely apologise for initiating.”

“What about Louise?”

“Louise McGovern, your girlfriend?”

“Was she happy? In the end?”

“She got married and had a son.”

“To whom, do you know?”

“That’s the only information we have on her, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” Smith felt his heart beating rapidly. He could only hope that Louise lived a good life.

“May we continue?” asked the President, not unkindly.

He ran a hand through his hair and nodded with pained eyes.

“So, going back to my point. We created the Fog to transport you from 1963, without attracting too much attention from the general public.”

Smith took out his carriage clock. But he also spotted the winning ticket, which Louise taped to the back.

“507... is there something significant about the number?”

“I take it, you’ve yet to be informed of our local mythologies.” The President chuckled. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t, indeed.”

“Is... it the number of years I’ve yet to travel?”

“In a sense...”

“In what sense?”

“The future, dear boy,” the President began. “There are always other wars to fight. The difficulty is determining which will be yours. It is said that a Victorious Healer will save at least 507 people, who would each owe him their lives.”

“Like a doctor or something?” wondered Smith.

“Correct. That is how we define it on Gallifrey; borrowed from ‘healer’ and ‘wise man’, along with the Latin word ‘*docere*’.”

“And who would that be, this Victorious Healer?”

The President looked at Smith in the eye, grinning without winking for half a minute.

“Why...” Smith gulped. “Why me?”

“Your psychic healing abilities have successfully kept the human race at ease, during your ‘ordinary life’ in London. That is why we sent you to the 20th century, in order to prevent Axit from altering the timeline.”

“So, that means...” Smith interrupted.

“You saved the old man’s life. Without your appearance in the lane, Axit would have found him.”

“One man...”

He felt a sense of grief and shame, but the President was quick to reassure him that none of this was his fault. “Brave heart, St John. Brave heart. One man alone cannot alter the state of all Creation.”

“Please, just call me John,” he replied. “And what exactly has Axit got to do with me, as an individual?”

The President stood up and began pacing around the room, “Axit, from my understanding, was the very Second God after Skasis, during the birth of Time itself. While Skasis constructed the building blocks of the universe, Axit’s agenda involved instilling hate and fear into creations that benefited him. War, vengeance, death, genocide - everything that we’re up against, including our own inner conflicts and emotions.”

“What happened to Skasis?”

“He made sure that every single creation, good and bad, had their own weaknesses; way before Axit came into existence. So to stop Axit from gaining his powers, he sacrificed himself by entrusting the Palladins to safeguard his own soul and knowledge - together in the form of a mathematical equation.”

“The Skasis Paradigm?” Smith suggested.

“Yes,” the President nodded, pausing to have a sip of water. “Only a Palladin can crack it, as it were.”

“Who exactly are the Palladins?”

“The first sentient beings in the universe, possessing psychic abilities to create matter and life.”

“Wait a minute,” Smith gulped. “You’re not suggesting that... *I’m* a Palladin?”

“Many generations removed. Some of their power, the essence of who they were, however, remains.”

Smith had no words, except for a nervous smile. He had so many questions about his own heritage, but didn’t feel ready to ask.

“Rather than having to explain everything, I need to show you something very important.”

The President raised his hand to summon a miniature object, right at the centre of the table.

Immediately recognising its appearance, Smith gasped and said, “That silver pyramid, I’ve seen it before. On the Coal Hill School rooftop.”

“I’m not typically one for signs and portents, but under the circumstances...,” the President mused.

“What does that mean?”

“This is, what the Palladins call, a Tesseract. You use your mind to record your memories as you go along. Only you would have access to your memories, unless you decide to grant permission to others.”

“Like chronicling memoirs or diary entries?”

“Exactly. Think of it as the Baggins’ *Red Book* but with psychic entries, instead of paper and ink.”

Smith couldn’t help but smile. “You read.”

“Of course, of course,” the President steepled his fingers.

“No, books of my era.”

“Antique literature can hold all manner of secrets. I used the pyramid as a tether, of sorts, to link your time with ours. It scented your biodata, but required a bit of fine-tuning to track down a suitable time trace.”

Smith studied the pyramid. “Does it have a name?”

“Whatever you feel would suit.”

“How does it activate or open?”

“Picture it, my dear friend.”

Following the President’s directive, Smith kept his eyes glued on the object. It suddenly began to hover in midair and spin clockwise. The ancient symbols on each side flashed a blue light, before landing gently on Smith’s palm.

“Wow,” he said. “My very own Thought Storage. Actually, that’s a good name, plain and simple.”

“The Victorious Healer is nigh,” he patted a hand. “We only have one thing left to do, but it requires your input and fundamentally your consent. I cannot stop you from returning to your place of origin, if you wish. But know that, if you do, you can never see Gallifrey again. Never, sir. The gap we have already made in Time for you is too dangerous to maintain for long.”

“You’re asking me to choose between Louise and my family.”

“Between a life in London or in Gallifrey,” he nodded. “You must decide who you are.”

“I can’t...”

“Hers, my boy, was already set out. You can try and interfere with that.”

“And deprive her of a future... a *son*, for my own sake?”

The President tapped a knuckle. “You see the dilemma. Who are you in the flow of Time, young man? Who?”

The past stared at the future.

Smith took a deep breath. “I, St John Dooclare...”



Over the next four weeks, Smith settled into the role by having weekday appointments with the townspeople of Lungbarrow. On weekends, he researched upon his family history and the origins of Skasis and Axit; especially logging all his memories into his Thought Storage. Then a few days before Christmas, waiting outside the Council Chamber, he sat down with Lola, Cliff and Bidy to discuss the future.

“I can’t do this alone,” he shook his head, taking a deep breath. “I’m tired, stressed, overloaded, working nonstop every single day.”

“Take it easy, John,” said Lola, hugging him tightly. “The villagers have been appreciating your support, since you arrived.”

Cliff offered him some advice, “If you need any assistance, you can always ask for volunteers.”

“Yeah,” nodded Bidy. “We are more than happy to help.”

“Wait...” Smith looked up, suddenly figuring out an idea. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“We could form a team, a team or administration of sorts to problem-solve and help others in need, while I fulfill my duties as the Victorious Healer.”

“The Troubleshooters?” Cliff suggested.

“Hmm,” nodded Smith. “Sounds brilliant. I like it.”

“Aye to that,” Lola agreed.

“Well, since we’re all happy with that, we might as well inform the President—”

They suddenly felt a blast, a mild shockwave trembling in their presence. Smith urgently pushed the door open to the Council chamber, then rushed past the armed guards who were already shielding the President and the eleven representatives.

“Sir, are you alright?”

“We’re under attack!” called the President.

The conference table activated a holographic projection of bronze-coloured drones descending from a purple wormhole above the Earth’s atmosphere. Rallying cries of “~~EXTERMINATE!~~” echoed across the sound systems, loud enough for the world to hear.

The President shook his head, knowing the terror and bloodshed they caused in the past. Everything was already coming back to haunt him, and his people.

“One of the most dangerous creations in the universe which shouldn’t need explaining...”

“Mr President,” Smith began. “Those pepperpot things, what are they called?”

“~~WE ARE THE DALEKS! YOU WILL BE EXTERMINATED!~~”

A shot rang out in the chamber.

Introducing JIM STEPHENS as THE INBOUND DOCTOR

“The very first inbound Doctor!”
— Steve Maggs

*With special thanks to Richard Bignell
for the Naming Day of John Smith*



DOCTOR WHO

UNBOUND

FACETS
BY CHRIS TAYLOR

FACETS

By Chris Taylor

Even the secret spaces of the Panopticon were vast. High vaulted corridors wormed between one mystery and the next, set apart by sharply curved arches which cast deep shadows that could go on for kilometers uncounted. And yet, the sound of the Lord President's boots barely carried a few metres ahead of her in any direction. Consumed by the greedy stone, as had been the footfalls of countless others. And even, perhaps, others being made in that very moment. So close, and yet utterly out of reach.

With steady tread, Kenossium I marched across the winding emptiness. The fringe of her robes of state, gilded white and heavily embroidered, trailed behind. To either side, the various walkways which presented themselves at uneven intervals reminded her that—even after several years occupying Gallifrey's highest office—there were countless secrets that she'd yet to learn. Ahead, questions about herself that she had precious few hours left to answer.

The lonesomeness of the sojourn was whittled away by the growing number of guards she passed along her chosen route. Each wearing a black-on-crimson variant of Chancellery Guard livery. Expressionless men and women, armed all with stasers and stun batons and any number of weapons meant to go unseen, saluted their leader as she passed. Their armor made not a sound. She saluted each in return, making her way to a small, squarish antechamber packed with guards to either side. Much better lit than the chambers behind. At its end, a small and unassuming door. The energy field before it, shimmering blue in the half-dark, not so much. A clean-shaven man stood ready to open it for her.

Castellan Ixtanundrius had transferred over from the Great Army of Gallifrey to assume the post as the head of the Chancellery Guard. Which

made his presence there in the makeshift brig office something of a surprise to the woman who had appointed him to that role. But there he was, seated pride of place, at the center of a large semicircular desk whose technological amenities set it apart from the space surroundings. His rectangular face was a mask of stoic concentration for the moment it took to realise he had a guest.

“My Lord President.” The man rose from his desk to offer a salute. The crisp polish of his armor reflected the colours of a dozen holographic screens. Cataloging biometric data, visual feeds, forcefield diagnostics, and the like. “I have relieved the Senior Watchman to other duties. I’ll be seeing to the prisoner’s interment personally from here until the transfer.”

As that was a Castellan’s prerogative, Kenossium saw no reason to question the decision. “I trust the prisoner is quite secure, then, under your watchful eye?” she asked.

The man was too proud to shrug. But the slightest wavering of an eyebrow gave away his unease. “As secure as can be, my Lord President.”

The head of state put her knuckles on the desk. “Are you telling me you aren’t absolutely certain as to the safe and unbreakable confinement of said individual?” Or was it ‘individuals?’

Ixtanundrius did not falter, to his credit. “I’m saying that I’m not going to make the mistake of ever assuming that *this prisoner* is ever truly at heel. It’s a mistake that has cost others dearly. You taught me that.”

She nodded. “Yes, I did. I shall trust to your methods while I speak to the prisoner. Disengage the linguistic bafflers.”

“Is that wise?” Ixtanundrius almost sputtered. “Given their role in your most recent regeneration?”

A single hard look was all it took to make her man swallow the question back. By way of recovering lost face, he removed the safety catch of his sidearm’s holster. “I must insist that I accompany you, to ensure your safety.”

She raised a hand to bid him sit back down at his station. “And I must insist you stay here. If I’m not the next person to walk back out the cell door, I expect you to keep the prisoner from getting to that one.” She

pointed at the door to the antechamber. The image of a grisly crossfire playing out on the other side crossed her mind. For all the skill her predecessors had at squirrelling things away, they hadn't been very thoughtful about dealing with whatever got back out.

“As you wish, my Lord President.” The man sat and flipped a couple switches on the desk's control panel.

Soon as she walked inside, Kenossium could tell that some ancient jailor or another had left nothing to chance in building the holding cell. The walls and everything else consisted of solid black granite, quarried no doubt from the Death Zone itself. The hollow that had been carved inside it—the space she now occupied—had been shaped into a collection of a hundred or more flat planes which came together in an almost-spherical arrangement roughly two stories high. Utterly seamless, and polished mirror smooth. Her own face stared back at her from several of these angled surfaces: dark skin, thin eyebrows, black hair cut close to the skull.

Part of the sphere had been filled in, or rather never carved down, to make a decent-sized floor. The room had a single piece of furniture, in the precise center of the chamber. A small rectangle of black granite, one of the longer sides facing the door. It appeared to be protruding from the floor rather than a decoration placed upon it, the empty space having been cut away and polished just as thoroughly as the rest of the chamber. The short edges curved downward into twin legs that practically poured into the floor. The table, thus immobilised, provided nothing to manipulate against one's captors. Nowhere to hide anything. Nothing to take advantage of, save for what the occupants themselves brought.

As for those occupants, eight were guards. Two at the door, two at the back, to either side. Their weapons, as all the others, had been set with isomorphic bio-locks. It stood to reason that there were holo-drones buzzing about in the canopy well above her head, hidden from view by a perception filter. Some sort of means of ventilation system as well. Kenossium refused to seek them out or even guess as to their location. To notice them was to reveal them.

Seated at the other side of the table, on a simple chair that was in point of fact another extension of the floor, were the Doctors. Their current form that of a short-statured woman, almost comically small against the surroundings. Artificially lightened hair, not quite shoulder-length, was being overtaken by the natural brown. The dull green prisoner's tunic they wore left both arms mostly bare. Said forearms and palms were bound to the table, some half a meter apart, by coiling lines of blue-white energy. Projected by some other hidden seen piece of technology. A tattoo of a striking snake lay on her right forearm, still red at the edges. The orange glyphs running down one side of her chest spelled out her many crimes in High Gallifreyan. The most recent and damning conviction took up the largest circle of the lot.

In spite of their unenviable predicament, the prisoners' face lit up with a broad, scrunch-faced smile. A grin whose reflection could be seen from the table and multiple wall sections. The back and sides of their head filled out more of the same. "Kenossium! Congratulations on the promotion!" She tilted her head quizzically. At least, Kenossium assumed this was the female member of the collective, based upon affect-free ease with which she spoke. "Or is it condolences? Long time, no see, either way! Hello! Here to get reacquainted with the Fam?"

"Is that what you're calling them these days?" Kenossium asked, bemused. "I've always considered the word 'family' to refer to the people you choose to make a part of it."

"And who's to say I didn't?" Waving fingers beckoned forward. "Come on in. Pull up some floor. I'm sorry I can't offer any refreshments, but it's for the best. These lot are all terrible cooks. You should have come second day of the week. That's when we get the bickies in!"

Kenossium suppressed a groan. *You knew it would start like this. Acting like they're in control, even in chains.*

She marched forth up a place on the table's opposite side. There was no chair to sit upon. Some of the black facets near the rear guards now reflected images of the two covering the door. There was a comfort in seeing everyone in the room without having to turn her head.

The Doctors' smile changed into something no less inviting but much more wary around the edges. Their voice changed too; the provincial accent replaced with one more refined to the Gallifreyan ear. Someone to smooth out a sticky wicket. "Let me guess. You're thinking you should like to do something similar to your office?" Warm brown eyes glanced lazily about the room. "I might have done, myself, back when I was in residence upstairs. But I ask you, where would you put your hatstand that you wouldn't constantly be seeing it in the wrong place and end up grabbing for a hat that isn't there when you leave? And what would happen to the—*Ah!*... Yes..." A modest sigh. "Well, if you don't already know about that yet, then perhaps I shouldn't spoil the surprise. Sorry to have brought it up."

The Lord President did not take the bait. "Actually, I am here to ensure that every avenue of justice in your case has been pursued."

The Doctors' voice took on a battle-weary rasp, and a more formal patter. "Justice on Gallifrey? Well, I suppose there's a first time for everything, isn't there?" The laugh they produced may well have been genuine.

She shook her head. "I did not come here to discuss the merits of the case. Merely the outcome of the verdict."

The Doctors pasted on a mirthless grin. Their voice dropped at least an octave, a leathery rounded sound, and their initial accent returned. "How many times do you lot need to hear the words 'I didn't do it!' before they get past those tiny little ears of yours?"

The smile faded. The prisoner's eyes went from bitter to merely melancholy. And their voice deepened further into a soothing contralto, while the accent dropped off. One for poetry, butterflies and well-tailored shoes. "Fourteen times in succession at a go, no less. Shall we make it twenty-eight more? Or let's be very clever and go for one hundred ninety-six?"

Next, their chin jutted outwards. And their words heightened in pitch and force as they wriggled their knees and elbows about in their seat. "Why stop there? Let's reach for the high notes, fellas! Five hundred and seven recitations of 'I—Didn't—Do—It!' starting on three and a-one, a-two—"

“Are you quite finished?” Kenossium asked, not wishing to grant the prisoner further opportunity to fluster her.

The Doctor let out a nasal, “*Hmph!* They’re never finished, my girl. And I should know! I’ve been around it the longest!” A sharp chuckle bounced along the black stone.

While simultaneously, their fingers danced about above the energy-cuffs. In breathy and ponderous words, the Doctor clarified, “Well, now, it’s a tie, really. If you want to get into the weeds about it.”

Nasal again: “I do not, sir!” The Doctors’ head had bobbed up and down and up again in the course of this ‘discussion’. The split-second divergence from one posture to another—from proud to impish and back again—was fascinating to behold, regardless of its pitiable cause.

One way or another, Regenerative Dissonance proved the ruin of everyone afflicted by it.

How the Doctors had even survived as long as they had—with the voices and physicalities of every one of their incarnations rattling about inside their successive heads—without going utterly mad was a matter of rampant speculation. Following the conviction, the Lord President had rejected several appeals to remand them over for psychiatric study.

To share a cell with a certain other, no doubt.

“If I may get to the point of my presence here?” the Lord President asked.

The Doctors’ eyes bulged partway out of their skull, lips separating into a rictus smile. This voice, even deeper than the contralto’s, deep as a youthful woman’s could go, was characterised by a peculiar way of pronouncing words. “Oh, I knew we’d get around to the pointy bit sooner or later. These sorts of proceedings do tend to end that way.” The prisoner leaned conspiratorially close. “Shall it be the guillotine or the chopman’s axe, eh? You can tell me. I promise I won’t spoil the surprise for the others.” The smile somehow got larger.

Despite herself, Kenossium glowered. “You know full well what the sentence is. If—”

“*Shaaaaaada?!?*” The Doctors roared the word loud enough to send it echoing about the angled stone. From all sides, the guards pressed forward, batons drawn. But their Lord President waved them back. The Doctors, meantime, had assumed a genial slouch against the back of the chair. Eyeing their fingernails casually, they picked something from beneath one with a thumb. “Well in that case, would you mind very much giving my scarf back, please? It was quite chilly enough for me when last I visited. And that was as a man. I can’t imagine how poor Romana managed—”

“*Oi!*” The Doctors re-acquired the natural voice for their current incarnation, and spoke with upturned eyes as though addressing something atop of their two-toned mop. “Right you lot, I’m back in the driver’s seat!” Facing her uninvited guest again, she demurred, “Thank you for your kind company, Madam Lord President. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

The soldier-turned-politician drew in a deep breath. “I came to see if there was any chance at being able to offer you clemency.”

“Clemency? *Clemency?* ***Clem-men-cy?***” The prisoner’s lips puckered into an indignant scowl. A smoldering sing-song screed issued from their mouth. “You abscond us away from our TARDIS! Subject us to a perfidious performance of the High Command’s own patented brand judicial malfeasance! And not for the first time, I might add!”

“Or second!” piped the breathy imp, to a march of eyebrows.

The change in accent did not in the least diminish the venom held atop the mutual tongue.

Their eyes beneath rolled in irritation. “Yes, thank you. As I was saying, even the Valeyard would have balked at stooping to the statutory chicanery that slithered along those benighted courtroom tiles. And the worst of it is to have been accused of the crime at all! Of murdering a friend! A mentor! A compassionate soul who never failed to offer soothing advice and a beneficent hand to us in our often-precarious situation. And now that the jury has read us its no-doubt predetermined verdict, you come down from on high to wave about an offer of *clemency?*”

“This is not an easy offer to make, Doctors!” Kenossium slammed a hand into the table. Regretting instantly this second burst of emotion.

“More’s the pity that we cannot accept, madam.” A crisp cadence punctuated by the surety of an exiled aristocrat. “In our experience, particularly my own, such promises as given by the High Lords come at far too high a price, and are rarely followed through upon in anything resembling an honest manner.”

The Doctors huddled, as much as they could, into a dark crouch against the table. Castigation dripped from her mouth between rolling *r*’s. “Also, there’s also the rudimentary reality that we... didn’t... do... it.”

Instantly back bouncing around. “That’s one down—no, two down! Five-hundred-and-five to go! Let’s pick up the pace! Oh, we didn’t do it! We didn’t do it! We didn’t—”

“Now, now, let’s hear her out.” Modest and quietly refined, practically telegraphing a backhanded compliment gilded in civility. An everyman, too easy to lose in a crowd. “She may eventually get around to something we want to hear.”

“Are you all insane on top of diseased?” Kenossium barked. “I come to you with the chance of not spending an eternity in eternal oblivion. Perhaps even at getting some much-needed assistance with your... condition.” And yet not a one of you can take that chance seriously?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” The Doctors’ eyebrows bunched up, and they were now speaking in a thick brogue. “A bit of oblivion might be quite relaxing.”

The crisp aristocrat returned. “You don’t get to make that decision for the rest of us, my good chap.”

Kenossium slammed both palms into the table. The echo across the sphere set her teeth aching, but it was worth it just to reclaim control of the conversation. “You don’t get to make any decisions at all! Not unless I give you leave!” The Doctors looked back at her defiantly. But for once, for blessed once, they held their tongue. “All of Gallifrey is still in uproar over Ohila’s death. The burning down of the Karn’s holiest site. The Sacred Flame extinguished for all time. Every single member of the Sisterhood condemned to slow demise. Theirs was the one piece of our domain untouched by the Masters’ rampage. Until you came calling. Your ‘situation’ hasn’t granted you any sympathies this time! Not from your fellow Time

Lords, or your former fandom among the gentry.” She put as much ice as possible into her next statement. “Your connection to the Masters has been far, far more at the forefront of everyone’s mind these days.”

The question of what inspired the Masters’ nearly genocidal attack years prior was still an open one. For all their insanities, the Masters had proven impossible to crack. Multiform psychoses reinforcing one another to form a devilishly effective combination lock. Merlin’s Beard, the best psionic surgeons on Gallifrey—those that hadn’t died when Olyesti fell—had yet to even lock down which of certain iterations preceded others. Answers to those questions, along with another far more personal, were within Kenossium’s grasp. If only, for once in fourteen lives, the Doctors would just cooperate with authority!

Instead, there came a sharp soprano squeal of malcontent. “*Weeeeeeelllll...* I’ll admit our relationship is rather...” The Doctors clicked their tongue in rapid succession. “Com-*pli-cate-ed*. But only if the one keeping track doesn’t mind ignoring two thousand years or so of us *thwarting them on a regular basis*.”

“And one very nearly successful rehabilitation.” The Doctors’ eyebrows bunched up again, this time into a fierce owl-like scowl. They were no longer looking at Kenossium. Rather far, far away. “In all that madness, a bright and beautiful spark of good. Bubbling up out of the dark.”

“Some rehabilitation.” Kenossium folded her arms and removed all pity from her face. For the first time in years, she was a General again. The guards behind her stood just that little bit straighter. “I was there when the Sky Trenches fell to the ground. And all the resurrected terrors of the Time War pressed further onto our soil than the Daleks ever did. I watched Arcadia become a new Death Zone. I saw legions of Gallifrey’s best soldiers die in ways that even the Racnoss could never have conceived in their sickest fantasies. I watched the holo-feeds that were broadcast across the planet and beyond, as the Masters toyed with and destroyed a High Council that was all too ready to surrender to him.”

“He did say *nearly* successful, old thing.” The bug-eyed one again. Pushing buttons.

She didn't let him. "Just as I *nearly* had a pleasant retirement coming. Instead, here I am wearing this ridiculous outfit. Working without rest or even meals for days, weeks at a time. Doing everything I can to rebuild what your childhood playmate destroyed."

Eyes that held sorrow and hope both looked up at the President. The second-deepest voice, the contralto, asked, "Have you ever considered that Missy might have held back her compatriots' hands at just the right moment? Or let you catch them?"

A withering glance was Kenossium's retort.

The Doctors didn't shy from it, but it chased the guards even further against the angled walls. "Such a consideration would be poor comfort for those mourning their dead. And reeling from the deaths of so many children. And where were you when the funeral pyres finally burned out and the hard work of living on with half a population was in progress? On Karn! Burning the whole planet down!"

"Still didn't do it. Five-hundred-and-one," The Doctors pouted, all gesticulation drained away from their most kinetic incarnation.

"Do you think we didn't see it for ourselves?" The cricketeer asked wearily. "In that final message Rodan sent to us before the transduction barriers imploded? Before her body was reduced to the size of a pound coin?"

The provincial male: "Do you think we haven't counted them? The children?"

The swaggering loner: "One billion, nine hundred and seventy-eight thousand, four-hundred and three!"

The rasp: "Do you think we will ever forget that number? In the name of sanity, I ask you, do you think we ever *could*?"

They were all but talking over each other now. The sing-song ingrate: "Do you think us so bereft of commiseration?"

The female gadgeteer. "Do you really think we don't feel any responsibility?"

The *mr*'s. "They're dead because we didn't know what was happening sooner! Couldn't act faster!"

The brogue. “They’re dead because we failed! Because we failed *her!* We failed all of them!”

The nasal one’s indignance shot their head up high and haughty. “No! *No!* I will not accept blame for those miserable creatures’ actions! We are, each of us, responsible for our own decisions!”

“Yes, we are! And we could have done more!” The brogue lurched up from the seat. Only to be held down from standing completely upright by the arm restraints, which extended their energies to force the rest of their body back into a seated position. Still, they lingered, hunched and hateful. Through the sparking agonies, they carried on.”*I could have done more! Yeeaaarrggg!*” They spasmed. “It was my body! *Yeeeaakk!*” Again. “My chance!”

The aristocrat, more pronounced through the pain. “We tr-tr-ried it in my time, and we f-f-failed then, too! There’s n-n-nothing to—”

The contralto: “Of course there is! I almost got through to one of them in mine-*ai—aaaaaaaaaiiiiiieeeee!*”

Their resistance shattered, the Doctors finally collapsed. Face down on the table, they took in a series of deep breaths. The bands, silent again, returned to merely holding their forearms at bay.

The guards moved in again to be sure this wasn’t a deception. As they’d been trained to do.

Kenossium’s raised hand stayed their advance. “Stand down. It’s only the expected result of fourteen separate adrenaline rushes stampeding through the same nervous system.” She studied the shivering, twitching specimen below her. This was her chance.

Strike while the target is at their weakest, always!

The Lord President leaned down, resting her forearms on the table. She was close enough now to see the sweat gathering in the part in the Doctors’ hair. She whispered words that only the Doctors would hear. The empty promise of protection from Ixtanundrius’ monitors. “The Masters called out your name in their rampage. More than once. Perhaps you could tell me why?”

The Doctor’s lower lip trembled. “We don’t show—*don’t know.*”

It stopped short, subsumed by a high-lipped sneer, a whiff of rotting celery.

“We didn’t even find out about that until it came out in testimony!” claimed the newcomer.

“Substantive evidence that somehow failed to reach our council’s ears in time to be conducive to our defense,” the second Doctor to have stood trial pointed out.

“I will take that oversight into consideration,” Kenossium promised. “Why did you go to Karn, if it didn’t involve the Masters?”

“Oh, but it did.” There were no *r*’s to roll in that statement, but all the inscrutability of the one who bore that tic was there.

When no further commentary was forthcoming from any other incarnations, the furtive interrogator pressed on. “How so?”

The Doctors stared at their hands. Their natural, contemporary vocalisation resumed. “We used to have friends to help us through the harder days. But the more faces we put on, the harder it is to keep hold of ‘em. Graham and Ryan, first trip back to Sheffield, off they popped. Yaz was a trooper, though. She held out longer than most do nowadays. But it was just us when we got Rodan’s distress call.”

Faraway eyes hovered above a mouth that spoke the rounded masculine version of the same accent. “Short version: The Masters are back, and they’re slaughtering everyone.”

The eyes remained as the jutting chin reemerged. “And you’re already too late to do anything about it. No stepping back over Gallifrey’s timeline.”

Then the swaggering loner with the heavy hearts: “Nothing we could do but count all the ways we couldn’t stop the Masters from being who they are. All over again.”

The chin again: “No one to ride the pain of it all out with but ourselves.”

The latest model: “I couldn’t have any peace myself, but I could give it to the others. It wasn’t my idea, exactly, but I agreed to it.”

“Meaning?” Kenossium let her head lean just a little closer to the Doctors.

Desolate eyebrows shot up at her. “Ohila’s home-brewed shuttity-up juice. It worked before, if only for a little while.”

“Not one of my prouder moments,” the contralto confessed. “I just kicked the can of tears down to the next fellow. I voted against it this time, if it matters.”

The rasping one scoffed. “It doesn’t.”

Kenossium allowed that one a sympathetic pout. “How so?”

He continued, “When he became me, I had to endure the old guard coming back, on top of sorting myself out. A Sisyphean task if ever there was one. It took most of my time at the yoke to muddle out who I was. If I even was a Doctor.”

Kenossium allowed herself a long, calming breath. “That is... unfortunate. Let me help you, all of you. Tell me what happened on Karn. Tell me what you saw. Just give me something I can take back to the Provisional Council. Please.”

“Come again?” The breathy imp, the first to endure Gallifreyan justice, had emerged from a notable absence.

“Tell me what you saw,” the Lord President repeated. Doing her level best not to make it sound like an order.

“What an odd question,” he said.

“I shouldn’t think so, under the circumstances.”

“It’s just that...” he tapped his fingers together. “I should think you would be more interested in what we heard.”

“What did you hear, then?” She had just gotten the answer she came for. She could afford to be curious.

“Ohila. She said ‘no.’ “

“What? Is that all?” Kenossium had half a mind to turn and walk away. But she needed to hear whatever might come next. Needed to believe it would lead to the truths she’d come to find.

“I’ve got this bit,” the contemporary Doctor chirped. “There we were, in the same place as the last time. Well, that was before my time, actually. It could have been the same goblet held in her hands.”

The high-pitched loner worked their jaw derisively. “The newbie had us on our knees. Imagine it. *Us*, begging for help.”

“That’s not how I remember it, bucko.” The previous speaker pantomimed a wince. “I had my hands over my ears, screaming to hear myself above all the voices. The arguing. The pain! So much guilt! And I could swear I heard laughter! As though the Masters were camped out in my noggin, too. Laughing at us or ever thinking they’d be anything but what they are. A chorus of them! Snide and cold and brutal, and every colour of barmy!”

The chinny one provided something other than commentary for a change. “The edge of Ohila’s lip twitched right about that bit, if that’s what you’re looking for. Ever so slightly. Just after we finished asking for her help.”

“Yes, indeed,” the wizened one huffed. “I noticed that as well. It really was quite plain to see. I’m surprised so few of us caught it at the time.”

“*Anyway*,” the female iteration raised their voice, by way of reclaiming the conversational reins. “Ohila pulled the goblet away all sudden-like. Turned and bogged off into the caves. We got up, and followed her to the Chamber of the Sacred Flame. She set the cup down, and took another out of a secret space behind some rocks. She lifted that one towards our face and said, ‘This will make you remember!’”

“Remember what?” Every hair on the nape of the former General’s neck was at attention.

“That’s what I was about to ask when *somebody else*,” engorged eyes shifted left to right, “made a play for the first cup!”

Angry eyebrows furrowed sharply. “And I had it too! But *somebody* didn’t want to go! Again!”

“What did you expect? For me to shout ‘Geronimo!’ and dive right into oblivion? *Hoab*, yes, I put up a fight!”

The polite one sighed, “Yes, well... At least he didn’t quote *The Court Jester* at us while he had it. Small blessings.”

The gentleman of the lot tapped a frilled tattoo with his foot in refined irritation. “Do try to keep on subject. Someone started waking us towards

Ohila. Reaching out for her cup. Someone else drew our hand back. It was all quite confounding, truth be told.”

The dancing fool had found their rhythm again. “I didn’t do it! Wait, I did do it! On second thought, I don’t remember!”

A distinctly feminine groan. “Can I just finish my own story, please? Thank you. One of us tried to throw our goblet down. I fought to keep it upright. It spilled onto Ohila. Into her cup. The draughts must have mixed. Next we knew, the room was alight, and she was... gone. Mostly.”

“Farewell to thee! But not farewell to all my fondest thoughts of thee. Within my heart they still shall dwell, and they shall cheer and comfort me.” There was no cheer upon the Doctors’ face, nor in words of their most verbose locutor.

The Lord President crossed her arms. Eons ruffled between the folds of her gown. “You said all of this in your testimony. There’s nothing new here. And nothing that explains away Ohila’s demise. Potent as they may have been, her brews wouldn’t have exploded on contact.”

“Obviously!” the bug-eyed one snapped. “Ohila was murdered. But not by us!”

Back to the featured speaker, her voice just as insistent. “And we couldn’t very well sniff about for clues while the very walls were burning down around our head! We found our way back to our TARDIS to begin investigating what had happened. Starting with a thorough scan of the Chamber for anything that hadn’t already been destroyed. We may very well have had the villain of the piece tied up in a neat little bow by now, if you hadn’t been chasing us up and down the Vortex practically from the moment she died!” A finger pointed accusingly at the Lord President. And folded back in on itself.

“You know,” interrupted the contralto, “I think I see where the little fellow was going with this. The clue we missed.”

“Care to fill the rest of us in?” asked Kenossium.

“When Ohila said ‘no’... I don’t think she was speaking to us.”

The sound of one mouth making several stunned gasps at once was a new one to Kenossium’s ears.

“Speaking to whom, then?” she asked.

She was answered by the woman. “No idea. The other Sisters had scarpered.”

“On Gallifrey, aiding in the rebuilding efforts,” Kenossium clarified. “Again, I ask, to whom?”

But the Doctors were busy answering their own question. “It was a trap!” announced the little man that Kenossium most thought of as a perpetual conspirator. In rapid reply, the various Doctors’ words collided into each other with such ferocity that Kenossium could barely keep up with who was saying what. “One she’d helped to set? Crumbs!” “That cheeky bugger!” “She wouldn’t!” “Of course not! Don’t be daft!” “Her? Never.” “*Hum, hmph*, quite unimaginable.” “She would if she didn’t have any other choice!” “Twist *Obila’s* arm? I’d like to meet that Dalek that would dare.” “The place for a trap was outside. Why bring us inside?” “Did she deliberately walk us into and out of the snare? Why?” A frustrated growl. “If only we knew with whom she was communicating!”

Kenossium had a distinct impression that she was being ignored. As someone long used to being noticed, she didn’t like it one jot. “What if I told you that the Masters said something else. Something that wasn’t entered into evidence at your trial.”

The chatter stopped immediately. “I would say that I am not surprised in the least. Are any of my younger compatriots surprised?” The first of fourteen nodded authoritatively. “No, *hmph*, I didn’t think so!”

Kenossium twisted her lip. Was she willing to throw a line further out to sea? Would she like what she caught? “Just two words. I heard The Masters say two words with my own ears, as they stood dancing over the burning corpses of the Academy’s graduating class. In between bouts of rambling about all of you. When my battlecorder footage was subpoenaed for your trial, I had to review it for military secrets to keep classified. Those two words were missing. I know I heard them! But they were gone. The fractions of a second it took the Masters to speak them—scream them—*giggle* them!—were gone. Not recorded over. Not cut out. Just gone. As if time in which they uttered them had never existed.”

The Doctors craned their neck back, to rub against the slightly-raised hem of the tunic's collar. "My dear Kenossium, are you really going to put us through the indignity of asking?"

Kenossium took a furtive look past the captive. Towards two of the guards, and six of their reflections. None seemed to be particularly straining to listen in. Regardless, she dared lean close enough to whisper directly into Doctors' ear. "Timeless. Child." She leaned back and away, to study the Doctors' face.

The Doctors shifted through various subtle variations of blank expressions. The modern iteration confessed, "Never heard of 'em." Their fingers flexed, one by one and then then three on the left hand repeated the motion. A tactile form of reaching consensus? "What do you suppose it has to do with us?" The whole of their face scrunched up considerably, lost in some internal assessment of data points Kenossium could only begin to ponder at.

The Doctor who had taken the first steps beyond the Time War, atop the ashes of his predecessor's Pyrrhic victory, "Was Ohila killed to keep the secret of this Child's existence secret?"

The Doctor who played chess with the universe narrowed their eyes. "Or was it the shadow of something larger? Much, much larger. Or perhaps something very, very small. A bluff? A distraction?"

The Doctor who ended the Last Great Time War pondered, "Could the Masters have an ally somewhere? Lurking in the shadows? Waiting to strike when the moment is right?"

The Doctor who outwitted the Valeyard barked, "If so, our very predicament could be a means of affecting their escape!"

The Doctor who ran away asked, "That is one possibility. But if so, whom, *bmm*? Whom?"

The Doctor who outlasted a Confession Dial shouted, "Who cares? Gallifrey could still be in danger!"

The Doctor who stood a thousand-year vigil over Gallifrey spoke words of ice. "Whatever their plan is, we need to stop it!"

The Doctors rattled against immobile bonds. The Doctor who was first to stand trial was one verge of tears. “But we’re stuck here! Unable to do anything at all!”

The Doctor who had endured exile directed their ire right at their interrogator. “Madam, this is unacceptable!”

The Doctor who’d stood an extended term in the Presidential Office insisted with all the regal bearing they could muster, “You have to let us out!”

The Doctor who hid from the Time War begged, “Let us help you!”

The Doctor who’d first outwitted Morbius fumed, “We will not abide this cage any longer!”

The Doctor who pulled a revolver on Rassilon himself bared unforgiving teeth. “We won’t let the killing start up again! *Never!*”

Tenacity, fury, and impatience all fought for real estate on the Doctor’s singular face. Only to be countermanded by a clench-jawed howl of multitudinous agony when one or more of them made the mistake of fighting against the arm-binds.

They shrieked.

Even Kenosium, with all she’d seen through a long and often horrific military career, had to count herself impressed at the pain the Doctors could endure through sheer willpower before finally succumbing to a ravaged nervous system. They crumpled limp against the table. Conscious, but panting deeply. A small puddle of drool extended from the border of two-tone bangs.

The guards stepped closer, drawing their weapons. This time, their leader allowed it. The time for sympathy, false or otherwise, had ended. “Be wary, my soldiers. It’s moments like this where Time Lords afflicted thus become maniacs.”

The Doctors raised their head. Looked up at the supreme leader of a world, with fire in their eyes behind the tears. Fourteen pinpoint flames, blooming into brilliance.

The contralto: “No. It’s moments like this where we remind ourselves who we are.”

The rolling r's: "Never cruel, never cowardly!"

The self-important sing-song: "It's moments like that we remember there are people suffering out there."

The bohemian: "Suffering everywhere. Everywhen."

The deep and dark provincial: "People who need help!"

The Doctors raised themselves up to proud posture. Their jaw set itself into a defiant smirk that was every bit the opposite of the smile worn when they'd first greeted Kenossium. The latest had returned. "And that's when we put a shift on. What have you done today?"

The Lord President drew in a deep, hissing breath. "I am the one who gathered the scraps of a dying army into a fighting force. I am the one who ended the Masters' blood-soaked reign of terror. I am the one who saved the life of every person left on this on this planet. Time-tots, Shobogans and all! Even Renegades like you! I am the one who built a functioning government from the ashes! Hammered stability back into place with my bare hands! *I am the one keeping it all from unraveling into chaos!*"

The most cantankerous Doctor flared accusatory nostrils. "And how many questionable choices have you made so far to keep it all from tumbling out of your fingers, *hmm?*"

Kenossium did not speak her answer aloud. *Oh, Doctors, you've already confirmed that I absolutely made the correct choice.*



Lord President Kenossium was dressed in white, as was becoming her norm. But for the first time in already too long a time, it was the comforting confines of a set of armor. The Seal of Rassilon engraved in triplicate across her chest. Hers to uphold and enforce.

All about her were the stark grey lines of a Battle TARDIS console room. One of the few left in existence. She was well aware of the irony that it was an outdated model originally headed for the scrapheap. Bypassed by the Masters as irrelevant, they made a jaunty sport of destroying the newer ones. Either side of the hexagonal console, multiple holo-screens bore blue-tinted visages of rock-hewn corridors. Two figures hurrying through these ran from one screen to the next.

An ungloved hand lay pressed against the telepathic circuits. Projecting her thoughts through the myriad veils of the Vortex. Her words were not meant to be heard by the

Doctors. Rather, the High Priestess whom they had come to see, and were presently chasing after. "Contact!"

A sense of patronising acceptance proceeded the reply. "Contact. My apologies, but there's been a change of plan."

"Dammit woman, what are you up to? Your role in this operation is to nullify the Doctors' earlier selves so that they will be easier to take into custody."

"Your operation, not mine. You've only just learned this secret. I have borne it far longer. Far too long."

Kenossium projected a sense of absolute refusal. "It is not your place to decide that."

"And how many millennia, or hundreds of millennia until it's another Lord President and another High Priestess right where you and I are standing? Dealing with another Doctor on the edge of another abyss? And another generation of Gallifreyans trampled under the weight of Tecteun's selfishness? The only way to end the cycle is with the truth."

Kenossium was already flipping switches and rotating dials. The obsidian spires of the central column began their slow vertical progression. "You don't know the potential costs! What you could unleash! They're unstable enough already!"

A mental sigh. Acceptance. Determination. "There, you are correct. But they will have me, and the Sisterhood, to ease the pain of reawakening. Or at least ensure they will not bear it alone. To guide them back to who they are. Who they have always been."

"All but a handful of your Sisters are on Gallifrey. You might not want to count on them being present for this insanity."

The psionic sneer that came barreling into Kenossium's skull was near enough to knock her off her feet. "You don't want to make an enemy of me, girl! Leave my mind. Attend to your own duties, and I shall finally attend to mine."

The door to Obila's mind slammed shut.

"Dammit!" She slammed a fist into a palm, and then set her eyes on the wrist communicator atop her armor. "This is Sphere One to Silver Leader. The operation is scrubbed. Withdraw your strike teams and pull out of Karn. Repeat, return home at once." She did not wait for her field commander to acknowledge the order before setting her vehicle into motion. It rematerialised, silently, within an orange-walled cavern. A glance at the scanners told her she was alone, in the moment.

On her way to the door, she opened an isomorphically-locked roundel and withdrew a long, wide-barreled pistol. Quite well-balanced for its blocky appearance, and graced with

a far more ergonomic handle than the standard-issue staser. It was a weapon crafted by a Renegade, by her command, and crafted for a very specific purpose. The door itself was whisper-quiet. A tap on the central seal of her armor changed its colouring from glossy white to matte black. Stealthy steps delivered her to the edge of a chamber august in its simplicity. The walls flickered red and yellow and black from firelight.

Ohila and the Doctors had beaten her to it.

“This will make you remember.” She was telling them.

The Doctor screamed, “Noooooo!”

Ohila backed away, blocking Kenossium’s view of them.

Then came a second cry. The Doctor’s footsteps stumbled closer, her small frame leaving long shadows on the rock beyond.

The Artisan’s masterpiece had but one shot. The whole of its casing was needed to contain a single round of quantum-inverted regeneration energy. In theory, an ordinary Time Lord stricken by it would regenerate over and over on the spot until their regenerative energies were expunged and a dried-up corpse collapsed to the ground. Kenossium hadn’t considered asking about what it might do to one whose immortality came instead from the alchemical flames of Karn.

But Ohila had the cup in her hand, and the Doctors could not be permitted to drink from it.

Kenossium took the shot.



She knew now that she could live with what she had done.

That the unintended sacrifice of Ohila and, eventually, her order was another in a line of necessary deeds. Because a Timeless Doctor, unfettered from the mnemonic leash that the Other had put on them eons ago, was a threat not just to Gallifrey, but to reality itself! The Doctor who had fought the Time War to its end had confirmed as much. If a handful of lives rushing up at once had nearly broken them, what effect thousands or more?

Yes, she could leave this prison with a clean conscience. And, having personally excised those two words from her battle-corder footage after her recent forays into the Matrix, no one else would ever know anything but the official version of events. The Doctors had confirmed that, as well.

She didn't realise she was smiling, ever so slightly, until she noticed how the Doctors were looking at her. Their eyes hardened into White-Point Stars, their fearsome vertices focused towards her very soul. It was the most recent member of their number who addressed her.

"It was you. How could you?"

"Clemency considered and rejected!" Kenossium turned and double-timed to the door. Inertia sent the trails of her robe swinging round to be kicked aside by an implacable foot. *The sooner they're on ice in Shada, the better! For me! For Gallifrey! For the entire universe!*

From behind, she heard, "We'll get out of this, Kenossium. We always do."

She could not tell which of the Doctors was addressing her.

A single drop of sweat traced down her brow. She did not let the prisoner see it. "Not this time, Doctors."

And that was the end of it.

She did not speak another word, did not even draw breath, until the cell door was behind her and closed tight and she was looking once more at a General who rose to meet his approach.

"Reactivate the linguistic bafflers," she ordered.

Ixtanundrius compiled with a short, "My Lord President."

Were her hands shaking? She put them behind her back, hidden under her cape, before declaring, "The Doctor; pitiful beings, all of them. You may rest assured that I won't be standing in the way of the Provisional Council's verdict. I'll be on my way now. Thank you for your indulgence."

"My Lord President." The warrior nodded and sat back down. Was that a smile fighting to break out on his face?

"Oh, and consider my visit here to be strictly confidential. Highest clearance." She made for the chamber door, which was opened for him by the duty guard. She hesitated before stepping through, to regard the Castellan once more. He acknowledged her just long enough to offer to offer a final nod, and reset his eyes in the cell's direction. The sight of the man, regal in his persistence, stayed with her as she began the long walk through the shadows and silence. Ixtanundrius was dedicated. He was

honorable. He was innocent of any wrongdoing that she was aware of. As spotless a record as any in Gallifrey's martial forces could hope to have.

But he had seen his Lord President enter the Doctors' cell and leave it with a drop of sweat on her brow.

Did she need to do away with him, too?

AFTERWORD

“Unbound Imaginings, Volume 2”

This afterword is set in the universe where Doctor Who is a fictional television show, as featured in “Welsh Davros.”

I won't say stories always start with a “What if?” Whenever you say Always, somebody always finds an exception and they're always right. Always.

But stories *often* start with a “What if?” Science fiction stories especially. “What if?” is the cornerstone of the genre: “What if a scientist made new life?” “What if a man could turn himself invisible?”

“What if there was a machine that could travel anywhere in time and space?”

That's the magic of *Doctor Who*, I think. It can be anywhere and anywhen and anything. That's what fans love about it. And that's what the Divergent Wordsmiths encapsulates so beautifully. From the start, the Divergent Wordsmiths stories have been full of imagination and brilliance.

They've been about “What if?”

The tone was set from page one of *Unbound Imaginings*, with an introduction that was a work of science fiction in itself, setting a wild, experimental tone for the whole volume. I am looking back over it now as I write this and I am still stunned by it.

Reading is a sort of time travel. You look back and see the writer as they were. Yet the story is happening now. If you read it again years after, it will be happening then too.

I remember writing “The Hollow Inside” with almost no publishing history, scribbling sentences into a leatherbound notebook behind the counter of the comic store where I worked, taking advantage of breaks between customers.

I remember writing “A Half Share in the Universe” with a couple more stories published, typing it at a time when writing was difficult to me. It was

the deadline for that story that meant I wrote anything in those couple months. I was worried my struggling would be evident in the story, but nobody mentioned it. Sometimes the flaws you think are enormous look small to everyone else.

I remember missing the third anthology. At the time, all I could say was that things came up. Now I can say one of those things was an email from Big Finish. The anthology was wonderful without me.

In years to come, I will remember writing this afterword in the midst of a pandemic. The skies outside my window are as grey as Skaro, the air almost as toxic. I am sealed inside like a Dalek and already considering universal conquest as a coping mechanism.

But I'm also writing in the month when a story I wrote was released by Big Finish, which is something that would give a silver lining to even the darkest cloud of smoke. I don't think I would be here if it weren't for the Divergent Universe message board and these anthologies.

Community is an underrated part of writing, always overlooked in favour of the image of the tortured lone genius, but good writers usually come from communities that support and motivate them.

The community on the Divergent Universe is a wonderful, welcoming one, so far removed from the cliché of the toxic Internet forum. When the idea was floated of doing anthologies in the vein of the long tradition of *Doctor Who* charity collections, everyone came together, providing stories, art, editing, and enthusiasm. I was blown away by the talent of everyone involved. The art was especially impressive to me as a person whose skill with photo editing might be generously described as 'beginner level.'

I am writing this without having read the stories for this volume. You are presumably reading this having read all of them, unless you are an unusual sort of reader who reads the afterword first.

Reading is a sort of time travel.

When I tell you, then, that these stories are good, I am telling the future, though for you it is the past (except you, hypothetical afterword-first reader, whose unique way of looking at the world I envy), and yet I am confident in my soothsaying. These collections are *always* good. (There's the word again, but this time the somebodies are wrong.) They are fan fiction in the best

sense of the word, bursting with enthusiasm and imagination.

They are what happens when people ask themselves...

“What if?”

— J.A. Prentice

‘What if...?’

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Adventure is sometimes only a mere universe astray...

DW-AN-05