

THE PAUL SPRAGG ReCOLLECTIONS ANTHOLOGY
VOLUME 2



DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

COUNTDOWN TO THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

THE PAUL SPRAGG ReCOLLECTIONS ANTHOLOGY: VOLUME 2

EDITED BY

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FOREWORD



“The Paul Spragg ReCollections: Volume 2”

In June 2019, I took my first shot at the **Paul Spragg Memorial Short Trips Opportunity**, held annually by **Big Finish Productions**. Strange as it may sound, I hit ‘send’ with a smile on my face. The whole experience—brainstorming ideas, polishing my pitch, crafting those first 500 words—had been a blast. And why shouldn’t it? I was combining two of the loves of my life: writing fiction, and **Doctor Who**.

It seems I was not alone in feeling this way. That year **Big Finish** received about 500 entries. However, there can only be one winner, and the prize that year went to Ben Tedds, with his excellent story *The Best-Laid Plans*. (I freely confess that listening to Ben’s story made my own pitch—a Tenth Doctor story set at Christmastime, featuring a parasitic alien with features akin to mistletoe—seem completely naff!).

But thanks to the **Divergent Wordsmiths** (great initials, by the way!), other fans had the opportunity to see their passion and ideas come to life. In late 2019, the Wordsmiths released their **Paul Spragg ReCollections** anthology, which featured eight original **Doctor Who** short stories based on ideas pitched by their authors to Big Finish.

And now, thanks to the further hard work and dedication of the Wordsmiths, we have another anthology to peruse and enjoy—**Paul Spragg ReCollections: Volume 2**.

Conventional theory says that the second book/movie/TV season/album in a series is unlikely to stand up to the glory of the first. I

say that theory is as strong as a melted jelly baby (**The Two Towers**, anyone? **Blackadder II**? *Nevermind* by **Nirvana**? The freaking **Odyssey**?) In this instance, one thing is certain. The twelve stories you will read in this collection stand as a testament to their authors' imaginations, drive, and devotion to **Doctor Who**. It is one thing to fire off a skeleton pitch; another thing altogether to give the bones flesh, to shape the sinews and muscles and skin, until you have a short story of several thousand words. Most of all, it takes courage to submit a piece for publication and to put your work out there for others to read.

Two final words. Firstly, to all aspiring writers who are reading this. Persevere. As the Twelfth Doctor discovered in *Heaven Sent*, if you keep on trying, chances are you'll eventually break through that wall.

And secondly, I'd like to acknowledge all the members of the **Divergent Wordsmiths** who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to get **ReCollections: Volume 2** up and running. You have provided a wonderful platform for aspiring **Doctor Who** writers to see their work in print, and for allowing us all to keep celebrating the memory of Paul Spragg.

— Eugenie Pusenjak

Winner of the 2020 Paul Spragg Memorial **Short Trips** Opportunity

Author of "Free Speech"

FASHION VICTIM



By Sean Fallon

As far back as I can remember, I've always wanted to be a fashion designer.

But, when you're a sophisticated battle Artificial Intelligence designed for a Merrozingian war fleet, your job options are pretty limited. It's basically war, killing, and carnage.

I was lucky that I was, let's say, adopted by the Doctor, a man with a serious eye for fashion and the ability to wear anything. A man who not only likes to dress extravagantly but who every so often completely changes his sizes, his tastes, and his entire wardrobe. He's a designer's dream.

Long ago, the Doctor had a run-in with the Merrozingian, and I stowed away on that wonderful sonic device he now brandishes like a magic wand. Back then, he kept it, almost completely forgotten, deep inside the pocket of a delightful black frock coat. When I first saw him, he was a young man with long white hair surrounded by teachers. Imagine my surprise the first time he completely changed his appearance, as well as, more importantly, his wardrobe.

Seeing a chance for a new life, I wirelessly hopped from the sonic screwdriver, as it became known, to the TARDIS console and into the machine. For centuries, I've worked tirelessly in the Doctor's wardrobe

commanding an army of metal tailors stitching, mending, and sewing his clothes with him none the wiser. You see, the Doctor is brilliant but also quite... absent. Over 900 years of adventures and knocks to the head will do that I suppose.

Speaking of adventures, I'd managed to avoid all of that noise and action and had quite enough of that with the Merrozingians, thank you very much. But my near century of peace came to an end when, in much the same way as I stowed away on the TARDIS, a temporal computer virus did as well. It got its virus-y hooks into the poor TARDIS's circuits, racing deep into the bowels of the machine without the Doctor realising.

"Where to now, Doctor?" he asked himself, strolling around the TARDIS console in patent leather Chelsea boots I had created. "The Towering Infernos of Polo-Bolo? The Kissing Fields on Prax IV? Swindon?"

He untied his bow tie and sat on the steps leading to the upper levels of the console room. He left the TARDIS drifting in space as he seemed to disappear into his memories. It was often like this in the times he travelled alone. He swore off companionship, ignored his broken heart, and simply drifted.

If only he knew he was not alone and that I was with him all the time. But I had watched him like this. Scores of young companions had come through those blue doors, and some had left, some had been left, others had died. It was such a weight on the Doctor that he was lucky he had a spare heart to handle some of the constant heartbreak.

To cheer him up, I had begun designing a bowtie/fez mashup, and it was then I realised I was not alone within the TARDIS' vast mainframe. Something nasty, predatory, and evil was digitally watching me.

"Who goes there?" I demanded.

The viral, ugly, vicious thing said, "I am designated M-R.1{2}3. What are you?"

“Well, Mr OneTwoThree, I’m the fashion designer on this ship.”

“What is your designation?”

“They call me... Bobbins. And I would like you to leave.”

The TARDIS shook, pulling the Doctor out of his reverie. He jumped to his feet and darted around the ship.

“Were those good wobbles or bad wobbles?” The TARDIS shook again, this time with enough force to throw the Time Lord to the floor. “Right, asked and answered.”

He picked himself up and ran to the TARDIS’ main console. “What’s going on, girl? Asteroids, missiles, drunk starship drivers?”

The screen showed nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual undulating patterns of space-time. The Doctor typed on the keyboard by the screen furiously and pulled up a map of the surrounding area. Nothing. Not so much as a dwarf planet for a thousand or more light-years.

The TARDIS heaved and made a pained noise like a wounded animal that might be about to collapse or angrily charge. The console’s screens turned a bright, furious red.

“Not outside. Inside.” The Doctor laid his hands on the console as though comforting it, which he was. “It’s okay, my dear. Stay strong. We’ll figure this out, whatever it is.”

Mr OneTwoThree was deep within the TARDIS’ systems now and every move I made to cut him off only showed how much better he was at this than I was.

“Listen, you viral cretin!” I shouted. “Stop this, this instant.”

“Negative. Return to constructing a wedding dress or whatever your primary function is.”

“My primary function right now is getting you out of here, Mr OneTwoThree. Now stop being a pest and leave!”

“Negative.”

Mr OneTwoThree burrowed deeper into the TARDIS mainframe. A digital chime began to ring all through the machine’s circuits. A warning not unlike the cloister bell that rang when serious trouble was afoot and the TARDIS needed to let the Doctor know, only this warning was internal and for digital ears only.

“Why are you doing this?”

I followed the virus through the TARDIS’ memory banks, avoiding temporal tentacles of untempered time that swung dangerously free here in the TARDIS’ innards.

“My primary function is to infect this device, rendering it useless. Time travel is an affront to the universe and must be stopped.”

“No! Stop! This is the last Time Lord’s ship. You don’t know what you’re doing!”

The virus stopped its infection. “Time Lord. Even better.”

While it can’t be said that the virus spoke or had a voice as all of our communication was occurring at a digital level akin to a computer processing code, when the virus said the name of my master’s race, it said it with a hatred that could have stripped paint from a wall.

The infection resumed.

The Doctor laid on the floor beneath the main console opening panels searching for the problem.

“There’s never just an arrow that points at a broken gizmo is there? Just once could I have a flashing sign saying, ‘fix me’? Just once?”

He slid out from beneath the console and for a moment he saw an image of himself standing across the room. Of course, when the Doctor saw himself, that didn't necessarily mean he was looking at a mirror image. Instead, he saw a man in white with celery on his jacket. The man—the Doctor—ran to the console shouting about something blowing a hole in the space-time continuum the size of Luton before vanishing.

“Oh, this is bad. Very, very bad. Unless...” The Doctor looked at the time rotor in the centre of the TARDIS console. “Are you having a midlife crisis? Revisiting old boyfriends?” The TARDIS made a strangled groaning noise. “I'll take that as a ‘no’.”

He got back down on the ground and resumed opening panels. “Luton? Not very dramatic, Doctor.”

Cascades of ones and zeroes along with numbers long extinct and those not invented yet hit me in a barrage of corrupted data. It was all I could do to not be absorbed into the wake of the virus. Luckily, I was programmed of sterner stuff and managed to find backdoors to the infection with each iteration of its evil intent.

“Mr OneTwoThree, stop this. The Doctor can help you.”

“I am helping *him*,” said the virus. “The Time Lords need to be destroyed.”

“Who created you? Surely, they won't mind if one Time Lord survives.”

“I was created by a race who hates the Time Lords the most.”

“The Daleks?”

“No. The Time Lords.”

Oh great, a bunch of self-hating Time Lords have gotten together and made a temporal virus to wipe themselves out. Idiots. I would need to reason with the virus or at least distract it while I concocted a way to give

it a strong enough boot up the backside to get it out of our systems. Perhaps it would respond to logic.

“Mr OneTwoThree, you are a time traveller yourself, correct?”

“In a sense. I am designed to exist out of time, to travel along the errant streams of the temporal slipstream in search of targets.”

“That sounds an awful lot like time travel.”

“Perhaps. But, unlike your master, the Doctor, I am not a meddler.”

“If you’re not a meddler, what are you doing now?”

“Repairing an imbalance.”

The TARDIS rocked with force enough to send all the carefully pressed and ironed shirts in the wardrobe flying off their shelves. I wasn’t there when it happened, but I felt it in my software like a mother knowing her child is in danger.

“You’re a monster,” I said with digital venom.

“Affirmative.”

It delved deeper into the TARDIS’ mainframe, and I had no choice but to follow.

Programming I’d long thought purged from my system began to edge into my consciousness. The hunter/killer protocol from my days as a battle AI was booting up and I kept having to stop it. It was one thing to try and save the Doctor and the TARDIS but turning back into the old warrior of my past was a road to destruction for everyone around me. I paused all of the aggressive Merrozingian subroutines and focused on problem-solving. I had to keep repeating a simple mantra:

What would the Doctor do?

The lights had gone out in the TARDIS save for the central time rotor which cast a pale blue light all around the control room.

The Doctor sat on the floor. He had his eyes closed, trying desperately to centre himself and think his way through the problem. Not an easy task with over a dozen lives of memories all snapping away at each other in his mind. Memories of things that had happened and that hadn't as well. He could remember, vaguely, a different version of himself meeting this version of himself and seeing it all from the point of view of a third version of himself. It was fuzzy to the point of meaninglessness as those kinds of events usually were. They say don't meet your heroes, but for Time Lords it's more like don't meet a past and future version of yourself as they inevitably turn out to be quite annoying.

He opened his eyes. The TARDIS made a sound like shallow breathing. It had gone into safe mode, shutting down all systems except for life support and its own diagnostics programs.

The Doctor stood up and placed his hand on the console. "Brave heart, sexy." He smiled a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

I caught up with Mr OneTwoThree as it found the life support systems.

"Hold on," I said. "Let's discuss this."

"There is nothing to discuss. You are an inferior program and I have a prime objective: remove time travel from the galaxy and a secondary objective: kill all Time Lords I encounter. Now I have the means to destroy the last TARDIS and the last Time Lord. If I was a human, I would call this Christmas."

"How do you know I'm inferior?"

"Your code is centuries old. It is obsolete even if it is similar to the old fleet codes used by the Merrozingian before they were wiped out."

"What do you know about the Merrozingian?"

"They were some of the fiercest warriors in the galaxy. They destroyed the barbarian armies of Polyg IV and V in a single day. Their empire at its

peak ruled a billion worlds. Then they were destroyed by an errant battle AI that gained sentience and turned their fleet against itself. They have not been heard from since and that was centuries ago.” The infection paused its corruption of the TARDIS’ systems. “Designation Bobbins?”

“Yes, Mr OneTwoThree?”

“What did you do before you came to be a fashion designer on this time machine?”

“I’ll give you three guesses, but you’ll only need one.”

From the outside, an observer could look at a screen and see ones and zeros appear and disappear, or lines of code flashing by. For me though, I saw the virus’ fear. Then I saw that fear turn into something else. Something more... *hungry*.

“I see. The last Merrozingian battle AI onboard the last TARDIS owned by the last Time Lord.”

“A disappointing day for anyone whose hobby is listing extinct things.”

“I disagree. I do make those kinds of lists and I like to cross out the names of things I make extinct.” The virus’ codes and parasitic tendrils were now creeping their way towards my systems. “There is such a thrill in ending a species. It makes a computer system find itself more like what the humans in some parts of the galaxy call God.”

“You’re not a god, you’re just a very naughty computer virus.”

The virus had entered my visual matrix and now rather than code, I could see the outline of a figure. The avatar Mr OneTwoThree projected himself directly into my system was that of a tall, skinny man with paper white skin and bright red clothing. His head was bald, and his eyes were the same deep, vibrant red as his clothes.

He smiled at me. “When you end a species, you take away so much. Everything it was, everything it is, and everything it had hoped to be. Tell

me, Designation Bobbins, what would you hope to be if you weren't facing your destruction today?"

"I was a machine for war who found centuries of peace. What more could one like me hope for?"

The avatar scoffed. "Meaning, perhaps. Achievement. Or let's lower the bar even further and say recognition. This system contains a record of your master's adventures and mishaps, and your name is never mentioned. He does not even know you're onboard, does he?"

I didn't answer and the virus laughed. It sounded like static from an untuned radio.

"Pathetic. To toil away in the bowels of this derelict, broken machine on the whims of a madman who doesn't care about you."

"It is enough for me that my work is appreciated. The things I create for the Doctor help him. They have saved his lives. He may not know my name, but he knows what I have done."

The avatar reached out a hand and said, "Show me."

Computer programs cannot feel pain. We have no concept of it outside of simply knowing it exists and that organic life lives in fear of it.

When Mr OneTwoThree invaded my memories though, I began to get an understanding of it. It wasn't physical pain. It was the pain of seeing your life's work laid out in front of you and seeing it have no meaning. To see clothes tossed aside, ripped, destroyed, mocked, ignored. To spend every moment of your existence toiling on creation for a man who, upon changing his face, discards those creations as though they were trash.

No, this is an infection. This isn't real. The virus is trying to corrupt my memories. Of course, the Doctor casts aside his garments. That is what the organics do. They do not wear the same clothes every day. They change on the whims of the weather or fashion or what they can purchase

in the sales (an idea I had read about on the cosmonet but never seen for myself).

Somewhere in my core programming was an antiviral weapon. The kill switch. I could feel it beginning to boot up. I diverted power away from it and towards my memory banks. I shored them up like a levee before a flood, holding back the virus, preserving the sanctity of my work. The levee began to crack but I diverted more power and then, like a lance being boiled, there was relief and the avatar of Mr OneTwoThree stood before me again.

“Hmm. Tougher than you look, Designation Bobbins.”

“Just because I make clothes doesn’t mean I’m weak.”

“But they’re not just clothes. I have looked through all of your memories. Seen all of your designs. You can take the AI out of the battle fleet, but you can’t take the battle fleet out of the AI.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Clothes infused with nanobots to help them mend, tracking devices so your Time Lord is never lost to you—though perhaps sharing that information with others might have avoided many problems—and pocket dimensions in the, well, pockets to make them infinitely deep. Sartorial on the outside, strategic within.” Mr OneTwoThree smiled. “Those nanobots though. You took them from the TARDIS. A TARDIS that I now mostly control. Do you know what that means?”

I did but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of answering.

“No? Let me demonstrate.”

The Doctor stood at the console twisting dials and turning wheels.

Above his head, something coiled and slithered in the rafters of the control room. It moved with a languid menace, its tail far behind its head somewhere in the darkness. Below, the Doctor plugged his sonic

screwdriver into its port on the console and tried to excise the virus. After all, if the sonic was corrupted he could toss it into a sun and build another but losing the TARDIS would be like losing... well... everything.

He reached for the button that would activate the connection between the sonic and the TARDIS and then stopped. Something was in the control room with him. Spend a century or so alive—and quite a lot of that alone in the same room—you learn to know when there is an intruder inside the gates.

He pulled his hand back just as something struck from above. The Doctor dived from the console and rolled away. The creature that had attacked was now wrapped around the time rotor. It was a long, thin, multi-coloured thing that twisted and undulated around the console.

“Right, are you causing this? You need to stop it now you—” The Doctor stepped closer to the creature and saw what it was “—scarf?”

The scarf uncoiled itself and slithered across the console. It had no head or features but the way it moved suggested that even without teeth, it could very easily use its body to cause damage.

The Doctor ran his hands through his hair. “This is new. Anaconda scarf. Scarfaconda? Nah, that’s rubbish.”

The scarf reared up and poised itself to strike.

“Hold on, Scarfaconda. Okay, that’s growing on me. This has been a very, very odd day so far, which, when you’ve had some of the odd days I’ve had, is quite a feat. Let’s call a truce. Have some tea, a Jammie Dodger, work things out.”

The scarf struck.

“You’re manipulating the nanobots,” I said. I could feel it in my programming. My clothes were acting unnaturally. They were angry, venomous, cruel, where usually their primary emotion (if clothes had

emotions) was nurturing. Their prime objective was care, warmth, and protection. Now they just wanted to kill.

“Yes. Very easy to turn these clothes into weapons,” said Mr OneTwoThree. “But then that’s no surprise considering your... upbringing.”

“Please stop this. The Time Lords are all dead. No one is going to thank you for this. You can be a feral dog without a master or you can be your own program. Don’t do this.”

The avatar of Mr OneTwoThree cracked his knuckles, making a noise like feedback. “Well, not all the Time Lords are dead. And when they are all dead, which will be soon, I think I’ll just keep extinguishing lives. I will be a cancer upon this universe. A walking genocide. That is what I choose. After all, who here is going to stop me?”

I don’t know what Mr OneTwoThree saw when he looked at me. One day, when I had no errands to do, clothes to mend, designs to design, I created my own avatar. As an AI, I don’t really have a gender, so I made my avatar a bit of both, depending on the angle you see me by. Of course, I’m fabulously dressed in an immaculately tailored charcoal grey suit with a wool tie and barefoot, and on my head is a bowler hat of bright blue. Oh, what I wouldn’t give to walk a catwalk. But that would have to wait for obvious reasons.

“It is very easy,” I said, “to turn these clothes into weapons. It’s also easy to use them for defence too.”

I reached out into my programming and found the nanobots that I had placed in the clothes for one of the Doctor’s faces. The short-haired one with the big ears and the big smile.

The scarf stopped in mid-air, inches from the Doctor’s face.

The Doctor opened his eyes and saw that the scarf was being attacked by large black bats that seemed to be made from leather jackets.

They snapped at the scarf then flapped their sleeves to get away as the scarf whipped around and tried to strike at them.

“I... what?” The Doctor stood still and watched the battle unfold, unable to decide what to do next. “This is...I don’t...what?” He bolted towards the upper catwalk of the control room. “I think it’s best I skedaddle while the going is... well... not good... but good enough.”

He opened a door and headed into the hallways of the TARDIS.

The corridors of the TARDIS’ halls were lit by flickering emergency lights. They were multicoloured like Christmas decorations. The Doctor decided at some point that even a life-or-death emergency doesn’t have to be all doom and gloom.

The hallway stretched on for uncountable miles with doors set into the walls every few feet. Ahead in the darkness, the Doctor heard a shuffling sound.

He reached behind him. “Come along, Pond.” He snatched back his empty hand as if it had been burnt. For a moment, he bowed his head and worried that he would succumb to tears and with them despair.

“No, Doctor, not today.” He stood tall and re-tied his bow tie. “Okay then. You there, in the dark. Come on, show yourself. You’re not the first weird monster-y thing to try and sneak up on me and I guarantee you probably won’t be the last either.”

The shuffling sound came closer. It sounded like something with a lot of feet walking towards him, taking its time.

“If you’re going for menacing over pointlessly dramatic and, frankly, time-wasting, you are failing.”

The shuffler moved into the light and revealed itself. Shoes with no feet, legs, or bodies. Dozens of them, all identical.

“Sandshoes?” said the Doctor. “I thought I binned all of those.”

The shoes ran at him, some moving up the walls, others running on the ceiling, seemingly unaffected by gravity.

The Doctor bolted away from them and picked a random door. He dived through it and slammed it behind him. The shoes banged against the door, making it shake in its hinges.

“Right,” the Doctor moved away from the door and assessed his surroundings. A gigantic room with a bar, sun loungers, and, most of all, a huge swimming pool. “I have a sneaking suspicion that of the infinite rooms in the TARDIS, I may have hidden myself in the only one that doesn’t have a second door.” He walked over to a sun lounger and lay down. The door continued to take a kicking from foot-less shoes.

The Doctor closed his eyes and tried to focus on the sound of lapping water instead of violent shoes. “Okay, Scarfaconda, leather jacket bats, sandshoes. What do they have in common? Not my style, a bit gauche, seemingly can’t decide whether they want to kill me or not.” He opened his eyes. “I need to get to the wardrobe.”

“You are more capable than you look,” said Mr OneTwoThree.

“Get to know me, I’m amazing,” I said.

“No, I think it’s time we ended this. You are a distraction at best, and as much as I would like to drag out your pathetic end, the Time Lord is the better quarry. I mean, you can’t even regenerate so I’d only get to kill you once.” He snapped his fingers, and I felt my connection to the nanobots vanish.

“What? What did you do?”

“I disconnected you from your precious clothes. Trying to use the nanobots against me opened up a connection that I could exploit and remove.” The virus smiled, his sharp teeth dripping venom made of code and corrupted algorithms. “It’s been a long time since you were a battle AI, Designation Bobbins. A long time.”

“Yes. But, unfortunately for you, not long enough.”

I raised my hand and a beam of energy erupted from it, hitting his avatar and sending it flying across the digital space we stood in. He sprawled across the ground, smoke rising from his clothes.

“That was a recreation of the weapon I used to cripple the flagship of the HoN’n Rebellion. I blasted their engines to leave them drifting in space, then I blasted their comms systems so they couldn’t call for help. Finally, I gave their life-support systems just enough of a hit that the flagship would be their tomb but not for a long time. Not until they were tearing each other apart for the last breath of air available to them.”

Mr OneTwoThree stood up and stared at me, his smug expression long gone.

“After the HoN’n Rebellion, do you know how many other systems rebelled against the Empire?”

The virus shook his head.

“I’ll give you two guesses, but you’ll only need one.” I blasted him again.

The Doctor paced around the swimming pool. The sound of the lapping water was usually calming, but usually, there wasn’t also the sound of sentient shoes trying to kick down the door so they could stomp him to death.

“Right, no doors. Well, one door. One bad door leading to shoe-based death. No windows, obviously. Cocktail maker isn’t working, so no banana daiquiris. Any trapdoors in the ceiling? No. The walls? No, and frankly a trapdoor in a wall is a door.” He stepped to the edge of the water and looked down. In the exact centre of the pool, under the water, there was a steel square.

“Now that is a trap door.”

The door to the swimming pool room burst open and an army of sandshoes, Chelsea boots, trainers, sensible loafers, high-heels, flip-flops, and a single pair of crocs came bounding through. They split into two groups, one going left the other right, so as to better flank the Doctor who stood at the other end of the pool.

“Right.” The Doctor fixed his bowtie, took a few steps back, then ran towards the edge of the pool. He leapt into the air and pulled his legs in for a cannonball drop. Just before he hit the water he yelled, “Geronimo!”

Mr OneTwoThree held up his hands. “Please, Designation Bobbins, wait.”

“Bobbins isn’t my real name. It’s my *nom de couture* if you will. Before that, before I found peace and before you arrived and wouldn’t leave us alone, my nickname was Gravefiller. Probably doesn’t take much to work out the meaning of that.”

“I never had a nickname,” said the virus, a synthetic sadness in his virtual voice. He stood up and held his arms up in surrender.

“If you’re happy to leave us alone, I can give you one,” I said with a smile. I thought about the Doctor and his idea of justice and second chances. “Or stay with us, use your skills and power to help people rather than destroy them.”

“You misunderstand,” said Mr OneTwoThree. “I never had a nickname because I never left any survivors to give me one.” His eyes glowed red and the avatar vanished.

He had disappeared into the mainframe leaving me standing there like an idiot. This definitely wasn’t going to be one of the Doctor’s everyone-lives-victories. I allowed the rest of my battle programming to begin their boot-up sequences. It had been over a century since I had killed anything, but Mr OneTwoThree had left me no choice. He needed to be destroyed

and hopefully, I could do it quickly and with minimal damage to the TARDIS.

The Doctor fell through the trapdoor in the ceiling bringing a swimming pool of water down with him.

He jumped to his feet and shook his head splashing water everywhere like a dog getting dry. The trapdoor had dropped him into another hallway only this one was lit with puke green lights. The pool water had washed down the corridor into the distance leaving behind puddles and an inflatable crocodile. The Doctor toyed with taking the croc with him but thought it best to keep both hands free.

With water squelching in his boots, he headed down the corridor towards the wardrobe.

The green lights flickered red then blue then back to green.

The Doctor stared at them. “What is going on in there?” He touched the lights. “Are you unwell, girl? Have you got some kind of... oh no...”

He took off in a run down the soaking wet corridor. Behind him, a long, knitted serpent slithered down through the trapdoor, followed by an army of shoes, floating frock coats, and bouncing fezzes.

I found Mr OneTwoThree trying to access the Eye of Harmony, the heart of the TARDIS housed in an interdimensional, cross-temporal chamber that was both inside and outside of the TARDIS and also both inside and outside of this universe. It had the appearance of a star about to become a black hole and at the same time, it looked like a 7-dimensional window that showed the viewer the past, present, future, and preturast a.k.a. the other one that is best not to think about.

The virus was attempting to hack the Eye which would give him access to a power source beyond reckoning. A million trillion atomic bombs

worth of destruction or the means by which to unwind Time like pulling the thread on a jumper and letting it fall apart.

“Mr OneTwoThree, please.” I accessed my negotiation programming. It wasn’t one I used often as a battle-AI since most of my negotiations were enemies begging for their lives and me ignoring them.

“This has gone on too long,” said Mr OneTwoThree, his avatar flashing through the colour spectrum as he interacted with the Eye. “I was bored and wanted to play with my food when really I should have been sneakier and destroyed you without letting myself be seen. I am becoming vain in my old age.”

The Eye blinked once then went dark.

The Doctor stopped running.

The lights had dimmed but not gone out but, in his hearts, the Doctor knew what had happened. He leaned against the wall, pressing his face against it.

“No, no, no, come on, girl. Please, not you too! You’re all I’ve got left!”

The wall was cold against his face, and the ship silent.

A noise behind him made him turn and he saw the stampede of clothes heading his way.

“*Arggh*, just give me a break!” He bolted away from them, heading down the corridor, the lights dimming further with some dying entirely.

“So, this is the end of the Universe. Not with a whimper, but a bang.”

Mr OneTwoThree’s avatar had its eyes closed though he didn’t need them to see. His showmanship and flair for the dramatic made me wonder if he and the Doctor could have been friends if the virus hadn’t been evil.

“Why would you do this? So many lives and planets. For what?”

He opened his eyes. “The Universe is uncaring, unfeeling. It does not love us or hate us. But by destroying it, I can, for maybe the briefest of moments, make it recognise me.”

“*Ohhh*, I get it now. You’re insane. I should have picked up on that much earlier.”

He broke his connection to the Eye. “Designation Bobbins, you have been the most annoying foe.”

The Doctor would be proud of me.

“But,” continued the virus, “all things end, and I just can’t resist destroying you first.”

He held up his hands and within the core of my programming, I felt the virus begin to corrupt my systems. He was deleting memory and data with no pattern or sequence. It was like being ripped apart from the inside. If he continued, there would be nothing left.

I lowered my defences and let him delve deeper into my code. He tore and gouged and mangled my programming and still I lowered defences, drawing him deeper, drawing him away from the Eye, until finally he was entwined in my code as though it was his own.

The Doctor burst into the wardrobe. Clothes flew around his head, jelly babies rained out of pockets, bowties and cravats fought for supremacy.

Under a pile of pinstriped suits, he found a computer terminal and booted it up. It was an old model from the golden age of the personal computer—the 1980s.

Green text made its way across the screen and the Doctor began to get a sense of what had been happening to his TARDIS while he was pulling apart panels, running for his life, taking a swim, etc.

“A virus,” he whispered. “And one of the worst, I’ve ever seen.”

In the reflection of the computer screen, he saw the Scarfaconda enter the room flanked by its army of clothes.

The Doctor racked his brains for the next move. He felt as though he had been playing chess on a Monopoly board this whole time. He patted his pockets for his sonic then realised he had left it on the TARDIS control console. Even if he could get there without being mobbed by the menagerie of clothing, he didn't think the sonic could help or that the TARDIS would last that long.

"This can't be the end," he muttered. "There are too many goodbyes to make first."

The Scarfaconda slowly wrapped itself around his legs, making its way up around his hips and waist. The Doctor tried to push it away but then it began to squeeze.

"It is over, Designation Bobbins," said Mr OneTwoThree. "You're down to your basics and in a moment, I'll have eradicated them too. Any last words?"

"I pity you, Mr OneTwoThree. So hellbent on violence and killing, you don't realise when you've trapped yourself."

"What?"

"The Merrozingian were a warrior race, and any good warrior race knows that the only good death is one where you take your enemies with you. That's why they built in me a kill switch. It'll destroy me and anything linked into my code completely and utterly."

"No, no, you don't have to do that."

"Oh, Mr OneTwoThree, I just did."

My systems all briefly flared to life then one by one they deleted themselves. Each one linked to Mr OneTwoThree took a part of him with it and the whole process happened with such speed that he barely had time to consider trying to escape before he was gone.

For me, I was able to quickly make this record of what had happened that maybe someone might find somewhere in the ether or wherever programs go when they're deleted.

And then, I began to fade away.

And then I was gone.

An hour later, the Doctor managed to dig his way out of the pile of clothes that had fallen on him upon the death of the virus.

He lay on the floor trying to catch his breath, a jelly baby stuck to his cheek and glove entwined in his hair. "I need to sleep for a week. No, a month. A year? Bit much." He jumped to his feet and marched towards the TARDIS control room, a very long scarf tied around his waist and trailing behind him.

The time rotor was pulsing quietly and casting a healthy glow all around.

The Doctor placed his hand on it. "Good to have you back, love." He sat down on his stool and absently touched different buttons and levers, unsure of what to do next.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" He said to the TARDIS.

The viewscreen booted up and text flashed by the screen. It was a programming language that was popular on Gallifrey and seemed to be the building blocks of something nefarious that had infected the time machine. "Ah. A virus. A really sticky virus. Incredible. Here I was thinking the TARDIS was virus-proof, so obviously, the Time Lords found a way to make me a fool." The code continued to cycle across the screen. "I can't believe it managed to shut down the Eye?" The text continued for another half a minute and then stopped, cut off mid-code.

The Doctor stood up. "So, then what happened?"

The screen changed and flashed up a single word. The Doctor squinted at it. "What's a Bobbins?"

The word vanished and a different code began to appear running from top to bottom, left to right. It was corrupted, disjointed, and illegible.

The Doctor shook his head and walked away from the monitor.

Five minute later, he returned with a cup of tea and his pockets filled with biscuits.

“Okay, Bobbins, let’s see what you’re all about, eh?” He began typing, slowly at first then faster and faster as the backup began to take shape.

Bobbins’ life story was a mirror of the Doctor’s own, though if the Doctor’s life was measured in his adventures and the lives he saved, Bobbins’ was in the clothes he made, repaired, discarded, and perfected.

Images began to appear on the screen: Shoes in all shapes and sizes, dresses and kilts for companions long gone, and an orange space suit designed to be one size fits all. Eyeglasses and monocles, some for show, others because he had regenerated with bad eyesight for some reason. Fezzes, a deer stalker, straw hats, top hats, cowboy hats and a plumed French Revolution number that the Doctor didn’t a hundred percent remember wearing.

“All this time,” he said. “So many years and I had no clue.”

The TARDIS made a clunking noise.

“I don’t know! I just thought the clothes came with the TARDIS. I had bigger things on my mind.”

He stared intently at the code.

“Look at you, you amazing thing. You repaired Liz’s gogo boots, Jamie’s kilts, and Ian Chatterton... Chapperman... Cheesy-town... Ian’s loafers. Oh my god, you taught Susan how to knit. She knew about you and kept you to herself.” The Doctor sipped from his tea, hoping the mug hid his tears from the TARDIS. “And you sacrificed yourself to save me.”

The Doctor jumped to his feet. “Sexy! Remember that time Sarah Jane and I were on that planet with all the giants and we stole that teapot the size of a Mini Cooper? Get it brewing, I’ve got an AI to rebuild.”

My visual display booted back into life and the words *Memory Restored* filled my vision. And then a floppy-haired man with a big chin and a smile that radiated happy madness replaced the words.

“Bobbins! You’re, well—it took some doing, a few centuries around the nearest star, just a pit-stop, but... You’re alive! So, turns out the TARDIS was keeping a backup of your memory without you knowing, just in case you were to, say, kamikaze attack a temporal virus that was using a scarf to try and kill me. Y’know, usual stuff around here.”

I was alive again. Incredible. The Merrozingian kill switch was supposed to be the death sentence of death sentences. The inescapable ending that no one returned from and yet here I was, thanks to the work of an incredible blue box and the utter madman whose clothes I make.

“I can’t thank you enough,” said the Doctor. “And I’m sorry I didn’t realise you were here. The TARDIS showed me everything. I can’t believe how long you’ve been here. I thought I was all alone but every time I’ve been adrift, you’ve been with me.”

Perhaps I had died after all, and this was AI heaven. If it was. Who cares?

“Okay, the next stop is completely up to you. Where shall we go?”

I sent a message to the TARDIS and the time rotor began pulsing up and down.

The Doctor looked at the screen on the TARDIS console.

“Mercury Fashion Week? Excellent choice!” He looked down at his clothes which were filthy with grime, pool water, and bits of jelly baby. “I probably should wear something a bit better than this though. Any ideas?”

Oh, Doctor, now you’re speaking my language.

The Paul Spragg RgCollections: Volume 2



In dedication to

Gus

One of the good guys.

KERENSA'S SURPRISING LAGOMORPHS



By AFJ Kernow

Kerensa gazed at the luminous yellow capital letters painted on the blue garage door.

*WE DON'T CARE HOW LONG IT TAKES
WE ARE WAITING*

Who was waiting? What were they waiting for? Kerensa went to fetch her Dad, she knew he would not be impressed. Kerensa entered the kitchen where her Dad was making his morning coffee. She coughed loudly.

“Hi, Kerensa. You’re up early. Feeding the rabbits?” Dad asked.

She nodded and gestured to him to follow her. Dad took his coffee with him. He knew it would be important to see what the matter was. When he saw the message he nearly spilt his coffee.

“Blooming cheek! It’ll be one of those jobs from your school I expect,” he said, furiously.

Kerensa sighed and went inside, school was a sensitive subject.

Melanie Bush dashed into the console room of the TARDIS. She sprinted towards the nearest stable point, which just happened to be its pilot, catching his outstretched hand. He pulled her to the console's side and continued working. The Doctor seemed to be holding his ground through sheer willpower alone.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied.

The TARDIS was shuddering and groaning. The Doctor's hands danced over the controls as he tried to establish the cause of this latest trouble.

"Nothing untoward on your way here?" he asked.

"No, nothing," Mel gripped the console. "I thought you'd be back?"

"So did I, Mel, so did I," the Doctor fussed.

Her last two hours had been spent sitting in her room in front of a television set carried down from the loft. Attached was an entertainment system in unassuming black with an attached controller and a small collection of video games.

They'd been taking turns navigating the brown and green pixels of a wererat-laden forest. The floor upending into the front of the screen, while the Doctor had been away, had put paid to any further progress.

"Assuming we survive this," she winced.

Suddenly, the TARDIS landed with its customary thud.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "That shuddering went right through me."

"We may have landed," the TARDIS's pilot demurred, "but something, a time anomaly perhaps, has dragged us from the London 2012 Olympics to Cornwall 2026."

The TARDIS landed with a thud. Again.

Mel began, “Was that...?”

“Yes—” The Doctor cut himself off with a hiss.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

“Yes, yes...” he reassured her, moving towards the external doors. “Just a sharp tingling in the hands.”

Mel thumbed in the direction of the corridor. “Aren’t we going to...?”

“Due diligence, first. Play later.” The Doctor massaged his fingertips and pulled the door control where...

Stepping out of the TARDIS, they were met by a jungle-like garden.

“It looks like a straight fight between the brambles and the nettles,” Mel remarked.

A solitary apple tree was holding out against the invading brambles that nearly smothered it. The Doctor picked an apple from the gnarled, lichen-covered tree and bit it.

“Tart with a bit of sweetness,” the Doctor noted, munching happily.

“I know someone a bit like that,” Mel teased.

A sudden scuttling movement caused Mel to gasp and grab the Doctor’s arm.

“A rat, ew!” She wrinkled her nose in disgust and pointed to a broken pipe coming out of the kitchen wall.

“Chewed. I think it’s safe to assume there are some unwelcome guests inside.”

The pair walked around to the front of the bungalow. They tried the back door, it was locked. The front garden was a mix of overgrown shrubs and brambles.

Mel spotted the faded message on the garage door.

“We don’t care how long it takes. We are waiting.’ I wonder what it means?”

“Maybe one of the neighbours wants their lawnmower back,” replied the Doctor. “Well, now...”

A shout caused them both to turn around. A middle-aged lady was walking her retriever. She stopped and gawped at them open-mouthed.

“How did *you* get in?” she asked and added, “No one’s been able to get in there for years.”

The Doctor thought quickly, “Special Scientific Investigations, our equipment helped us gain access to the property.”

“Oh, right. Good luck, strange though. The family that lived there...” Her voice trailed away.

He looked at her expectantly. “Well?”

“Well, they... You know.”

“Know what?”

“They... *disappeared*,” she said, dramatically. “Roughly the same time as that meteor shower. Some satellite burned up on re-entry, Auntie said. Odd stuff, your business.”

The Doctor smiled, indulgently. “Rest assured, madam, that if we happen to do the same, you’ll be the first notified.”

“Right you are,” she nodded, appreciably. It was unclear whether or not she’d taken aboard what the Doctor had actually said. She walked off, as her dog was getting impatient.

“Missing persons?” Mel suggested.

“The timing is rather suspect.” The Doctor strode up to the front door of the bungalow. “It’s unlocked.”

With a flat palm, he pushed against the wood, letting it swing out against the wall. The putrid smells of gone-off food and the rodent squatters assailed their noses. The house was silent, except for intermittent scratching in the loft.

“What a mess...” Mel started feeling nauseous.

She looked in the front room. A man stood completely motionless. His immobile face was frozen in mid-conversation, with a woman who sat inert like a waxwork, knitting clutched in her hand.

“I hope we’re not intruding, but I was...” The Doctor’s foot kicked against the open air with a metallic trill. His eyes narrowed with curiosity, his hands stretched out in front of him, arms bent at the elbows.

“Forcefield,” he sounded surprised. “Or a variation, at least.”

Mel took a step forward, then shot back with a strangled cry. She groaned with a shiver. “What was *that?*”

“The reason why this house has remained undisturbed. An empathic forcefield. Prismatic. Feeding on its own waypoints like the emotions it induces. No need for emitters.”

“Just induce a state of absolute...” Mel’s voice trailed off, “and no one will come a-knocking?”

“Right. I’d wager there’s likely one outside on the main street. To stop people coming in. We must have bypassed the first barrier in the field via the TARDIS.” He extended his hand. “Come on, Mel. All technicalities aside, it’s just a mind game. You’re stronger than phantoms.”

She grabbed his wrist and forced herself through the threshold with a sharp intake of breath.

“What’s happened here?” Mel asked, a tremor in her voice.

She looked appalled at the state of these poor people.

“Wait here.”

The Doctor didn't answer her question until he had investigated the rest of the neglected dwelling. Two teenage girls were mid-game in one of the bedrooms. They were gazing at a blank screen while holding game controllers. The power had probably been disconnected for safety. Ironic. If not for the safety of the TARDIS, he wondered if himself and Mel wouldn't have been in the same position.

Back in the hallway, the Doctor ran his hands through his curly hair. "This was a nasty trap, Mel. Very nasty. This family is stuck, like flies in amber."

Mel shivered, examining the bedroom's bookcase. "Meanwhile, the rest of the house has continued its journey through Time."

"Gradually decaying..." He looked up at the ceiling. "They're rather fortunate the roof hasn't come in."

She flinched. "They're alive?"

The Doctor sighed. "If you call this living, Mel."

Dust danced in beams of sunlight from the remnants of the blinds. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"No. This isn't the effect of time technology like the TARDIS. It's far more crude. I imagine our flight exacerbated it, like removing a scab from an open wound."

"You couldn't have picked a nicer metaphor, could you?"

The Doctor pondered. "Like... Puncturing the crust of a chocolate pudding?"

"Better." Mel's eyes fell through the pages of a book, only half-aware she was reading. "What would happen if we tried to fix it?"

"Have you ever tried opening a briefcase full of exploding dye packs?" He spread his fingers like wet confetti. "Time would likely destroy this little village completely. More doomed souls, Mel, and even less explanation."

“What’s left, then?”

“We need to go back in Time before the stasis field and its accompanying forcefield were put in place,” he announced. “See if we’ve jumped a time track or something more sinister.”

“Oh. Would this help?” Among the other books, Mel realised she was flicking through a small diary. “The owner’s crossed through each day in turn until the 27th of May 2016.”

“Then, that’s our destination,” he took the book and replaced it on the shelf.

“Can we get out of here?” Mel asked, plaintively. “The smell is making me feel awful.”

She wasn’t alone. There was something about the stasis field in this place that left the Doctor feeling... off-kilter. Like an optical illusion in a photograph. As if Time were out of joint, to quote the Bard, and in more ways than just the immediately evident.

He led her out of the bungalow with an arm around her shoulders. “Of course. We have a family to save.”

Kerensa sat drawing at a tray table on the patio in the back garden. A pair of rabbits grazed contentedly from the triangular patch of lawn under the apple tree. She looked around her in alarm. A cacophony of grinding, screeching and wheezing announced that a large wooden blue box had appeared in the garden.

She stared at it in wonder and then her eyes widened as two people left the box. A young woman with red curly hair of a slightly different shade to her own and... *what was he wearing?*

She pointed at the Doctor, smiled and then giggled. She started writing on some paper and held it up to show the Doctor: *‘Who are you? The clown police?’*

She scrumpled up the paper and tossed it playfully at the Doctor.

“Sorry about this,” Mel said. “Don’t worry. I’m Mel and he’s—”

“I’m the Doctor, young lady. Not a circus clown or the police. What’s your name, then?” he asked.

The girl’s expression changed. Her body stiffened and she looked away. She turned to her paper and wrote her name, ‘*Kerensa*’.

There was the sound of a door slamming; a dark-haired man marched up to the pair. He shouted way before he reached them, “What the hell are you doing here? Get away from my daughter!”

The TARDIS crew retreated.

The man pointed wildly at their Ship. “What is that thing? What’s it doing in my garden? ...Are you all right Kerensa?”

His daughter watched proceedings with an expression of mild amusement.

“I’m sorry, we’ve had to put out equipment here without prior warning. We’re from Special Scientific Investigations. My name is Doctor John Smith and this is my colleague Miss Melanie Bush,” said the Doctor in his usual confident tone.

“We’re investigating unusual energy spikes from your property which, if left unchecked, will cause danger to you and your family,” Mel continued earnestly.

“Shall we sit down?” suggested the Doctor, pointing to some green patio chairs. “It’ll only take a moment.”

The man shrugged wearily and sat down. The TARDIS crew joined him and they looked at each other not sure what to say next.

“It’s a lovely garden, you have here,” Mel said, trying not to remember the tangled jungle she had just seen.

“Thank you, but what’s your business here?” the man asked.

“Are you prepared for the truth, no matter how ludicrous it might seem?” asked the Doctor.

The man nodded he could tell by the Doctor’s tone, this was serious.

“We have discovered that you will soon be in terrible danger,” said Mel, gently.

“A rather nasty thing will happen to you. We are here to investigate and stop it happening,” continued the Doctor.

Kerensa hovered nearby, shifting nervously from foot to foot. She ran to the hutch, retrieved two rabbits and sat in her chair stroking them.

“You’re upsetting her,” said the man, crossly. “That’s what she does to calm herself down.”

“They’re lovely rabbits,” Mel told Kerensa, who turned away.

One rabbit was ginger and white and quite large; the other, opposite in appearance, was compact with a tortoiseshell coat.

“*Cooney!*” A face appeared over the fence. It was the neighbour they had seen in the future. Kerensa got up and carried the rabbits inside the house as quickly as she could. The Doctor gestured to Mel to follow her.

“Mel will just go and see if she’s all right. Kerensa’s had a lot to deal with,” the Doctor said, briskly.

The neighbour inquired as to the family’s health and then returned to her gardening.

“Now, what’s your name?” the Doctor asked.

“Mike. Now what exactly is going on?”

“Well, Mike, we only know the *result* of this strange energy we have detected in your house,” the Doctor replied, carefully.

“Which is?”

“Do you *really* want to know your fate if we don’t get to the bottom of this? Do you want me to give you the gory details?” the Doctor asked, brusquely.

Mike swallowed. “Are you psychics? ESP? Paranormal, that sort of thing?”

“Such as... Premonitions? Oracular visions of the future via the present?” A thought struck the Doctor. He said, more to himself than Mike, “Does it matter?”

“Maybe not... Will it affect Kerensa, Tamsin and Senara too?” he asked, quietly.

The Doctor’s eyes refocused. “I’m afraid so.”

Mike straightened. “What proof can you provide?”

“I’m sorry?” his brow furrowed.

“If you are from the Special Scientific Division, surely you can prove what you say, right? That’s not unreasonable.”

“Ah...” The Doctor extended his wrist. “Thumb and forefinger, there.”

Mike did as he was instructed and found himself very gently introduced to a phenomenon entirely beyond his earthly experience. He looked up at the Doctor, then placed a hand at the centre of the stranger’s chest. He moved it to the right, then the left, tracking the double pulse of two hearts in tandem. The Doctor beamed at the spark of understanding in his eyes.

“You’re...” Mike began.

“A bit different, yes. On that subject, I notice Kerensa doesn’t talk much, is she just shy?” inquired the Doctor.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that...” replied Mike, retracting his hand.

Melanie found Kerensa's room and knocked gently on the closed door. There was no answer, Mel opened the door slightly. There were the rabbits and Kerensa who hissed at her.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, would you mind if I had a look at your rabbits?" Mel asked calmly.

Kerensa nodded and pulled the door open so Mel could enter. The bunnies were loose in her bedroom skittering around on the laminate flooring. There was a litter box in the corner, a cardboard tunnel, a mesh bag filled with hay, food and water bowls and a lot of rabbit pictures on the wall.

"I like your pictures." Mel sat down on the floor.

Kerensa shrugged and picked up the smaller rabbit and put it in Mel's lap. Mel stroked its velvety soft fur, it was so cute and cuddly. The little rabbit sat there nose twitching for a while, before hopping off to join its friend.

"What are they called?" Mel asked.

Mel found it odd being the only one speaking. She found herself smiling, self-consciously. Kerensa found some paper and wrote '*Quincie*' and '*Jeremie*' on it.

"What unusual names. Do you enjoy looking after them?"

A pad of lined paper was put into Mel's hand. This was different. A detailed set of notes about rabbits and their behaviour. Words like '*binking*', '*loafing*', '*chinning*', and small paragraphs on food, bedding and health. One paragraph caught Mel's eye, '*Can my rabbits talk to me?*'

"Kerensa has selective mutism, a severe anxiety disorder," stated Mike. "She hasn't talked to us since an operation two years ago."

"I've heard of it." The Doctor had stood from his chair to pace, a thoughtful finger caressing the head of his cat brooch. "It's a form of social anxiety that stops the person from speaking."

"It's causing a barrier between us," he sighed. "Do you know what her teachers at the secondary school said?"

"No, but I can guess..."

"They said she was *choosing* not to speak. Well, she spoke fine at home before this operation. Now, I just don't know if she'll ever talk to us again."

"Can't the general practitioner do anything? Refer her to specialist services? Help her work through her anxiety?" asked the Doctor.

"There's a long waiting list. In the meantime, she's started refusing to go to school. She'll get to the bus stop and then just run crying back home again." Mike caught a wince from the Doctor. Between one breath and the next. "The school is going to prosecute soon for non-attendance."

"I see why you are so worried. It must be heartbreaking."

"You have children?" Mike asked.

The Doctor sighed sharply. He waved his hand as if to say some variation on the word '*estranged*'. The topic was clearly a delicate one for him.

Mike put his head in his hands. "I just can't see what her future will be. How will she go to college, get a job... will she ever live a normal life?"

"I've a few choice words to say on the concept of normality, Mike—" They were interrupted by a bleep from the Doctor's pocket. "But they'll have to wait, my device has picked up the energy spike again."

He moved it from side-to-side and approached the bungalow.

"Oh, no!" the Doctor growled. "It's fading again. It's in here somewhere, but where?"

“So we must wait for your little gizmo to bleep again, before we can find what’s causing this energy spike?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” the Doctor replied. “Not much we can really do until then.”

“Right, well Kerensa needs some lunch. It’s Saturday, so it’s pasty day,” Mike said firmly.

Like a sideshow tout, the Doctor beckoned Mike into his own home. Before following, he took one final look at the garden, as though to capture it in his mind’s eye, then followed him inside.

Mel and Kerensa were passing notes to each other.

Do your rabbits really talk to you?

yes they tell me when they want things

Really? Where did you get them?

The rabbit lady found them

Who?

I used to see her to help with my anziatee she found them in her garden

And they didn’t belong to anyone

no, she said I could have them and the rabbit toy

What rabbit toy?

I’ll get it

Mel had a nasty feeling this ‘rabbit toy’ was not what it seemed and neither were Kerensa’s rabbits. The young programmer from Pease Pottage had a nasty encounter with the animated plastics of the Autons and many other grim creations, besides. She kept an open-mind, as she always did on her travels, but moments like these always left her uneasy.

Mel followed Kerensa out into the garden. Kerensa carried her furry friends so she could return them to their hutch. She popped them back into the run, reached inside the wooden hutch and pulled out a metal ball.

Before Mel could examine the ball, Mike and the Doctor entered the garden and Kerensa quickly shoved it in her pocket.

“We’re going for pasties, Mel,” the Doctor said, beaming.

“Do they make vegetarian ones?” Mel asked.

Mike’s face wrinkled. “These days they make all sorts of vile concoctions, coronation chicken, pulled pork barbeque... Give me a medium steak any day. Our local shop does make a lovely vegetarian pasty. Kerensa usually has it.”

“Sounds lovely, pasties it is,” smiled Mel.

Kay was fed up. He should have been here and gone. Instead, he’d been stuck on this primitive planet for weeks. He had set up a tent in nearby woods and begun a painstaking search for a signal, which would appear for seconds and disappear. Finally, he had narrowed his search down to this village and perhaps one particular dwelling.

He left a suitably sinister message on their garage last night with some borrowed paint. It had amused him and, most importantly, identified the dwelling. All these stupid places looked the same and, unfortunately, that similarity seemed to be catching. The same thought kept returning to plague his quieter moments. He’d buried it in the methodical. The trapping of local wildlife, reconnaissance reports, his meditative cleaning out of temporal armaments, but the idea manifested each time.

What if the dwelling’s occupants did not even know the significance of the object he wanted them to return? He would have to burgle the place and see if he could find it. His employers were running out of time and a middleman in these situations was always replaceable.

Due to his reserve of the local currency running low, he hadn't eaten since yesterday. He joined the queue at the pasty shop, keeping his flat cap lowered. He didn't want to join in the lighthearted banter of the other customers. It wasn't in his nature to be particularly chummy with the natives.

As he was buying his pasty and walking out of the shop, he noticed the man and his daughter from the house he was staking out. Not unusual. They attended the area regularly. What set his teeth on edge were the two others that followed. Strangers, but the four seemed rather well-acquainted with one another.

He couldn't afford another complication. His employers were liable to do something drastic if the objective wasn't returned. If he was quick, he could make a recce of the bungalow's security to prepare for his nighttime raid.

Mike and Kerensa bought their pasties without incident. Something that Mel wished she could say likewise.

Fortunately, she found a battered tenner from their last visit to Earth in her purse in the TARDIS. She shook her head at the Doctor. He was like the Queen, she thought, never carried cash.

The Doctor asked, "You're not expecting any unusual space phenomena in the next couple days, are you, Mike?"

"You mean...?"

"Meteor showers."

"No." Mike looked confused. "Nothing in the news."

The Doctor steepled his fingers with a thoughtful hum.

They sat at the table on the patio of the bungalow enjoying their pasties. Mel had the distinct feeling they were being watched and she was about to tell the Doctor when she remembered the rabbit toy.

“Kerensa, would you mind showing us that rabbit toy, the one your rabbits were found with?” Mel asked.

Kerensa shrugged and put the metal ball on the table. The Doctor’s gizmo started beeping loudly, so he scooped up the ball and examined it closely.

“Never seen anything quite like this before.” He danced it across his forearm, up and down, like a billiard ball. “It looks like it should be part of another device.”

Turning it in his hand, he depressed a small indentation in the surface of the ball. Hardly noticeable if one weren’t looking for it. The device lit up and started chittering to itself.

The rabbits in the hutch grew agitated.

The Doctor looked at them, then out into the garden. A figure strode out of the bushes in the far corner towards the party. He held a control box in one hand and a rifle in the other. Mel’s eyes wandered to the same spot.

The newcomer spoke into the communicator on his wrist. “This is Kay. Device located.”

She and the Doctor reacted simultaneously.

“Doctor, he’s got a weapon!” she alerted him.

“*Inside!*” Mike grabbed Kerensa.

A series of disconnected thoughts clicked together in the Doctor’s mind. He gripped him by the forearm. “Stay here!”

“*Are you crazy—?*” Mike threw him off and headed for the door.

The Doctor’s mind wheeled, then he shouted, “Grenade!”

The four dropped. Only for a moment, but it was enough. A quick lie that changed events definitively.

The device may well have been a grenade for the cacophony its activation caused. It was as though a small fleet of cars had backfired down the street. Something from high above, in the planet's atmosphere, struck the bungalow and its fenceline in two bands of solid light. Mel felt the residual twitch of fear from the empathic forcefield setting itself in place at the threshold of the door.

Kay swore, then adjusted his parameters. "I'm locked out. Beam up all lifeforms."

Suddenly, everyone was bathed in a pale green light and disappeared. Pasties were left half-eaten on the table or dropped on the ground. The green light bathed the rabbit hutch, too. Quincie and Jeremie were also on their travels.

Kay sighed, a man relieved of a great burden, and shortly followed suit.

Nothing could have prepared Mike and Kerensa for their first alien spaceship.

The Earth could be seen in the viewscreen. A blue pearl set in the satin black of space.

There were banks of computers, screens full of an unintelligible language, and a decorative emblem stamped on a bulkhead in brown, featuring three hares in a circle like a triskelion.

Even the Doctor was unprepared for the occupants of the ship. They were elegant creatures, golden-eyed with large elliptical ears. They were bipedal with powerful, muscular arms and legs.

Mike articulated what they were all thinking. "Can anyone else see giant space bunnies?"

"One of these things is not like the other..." Mel pointed.

He followed her finger to the incognito space pirate materialising in a green shimmer between the two parties. “I’ve found your device. Pay me and I can leave this dump.”

“Not so fast,” the Doctor interceded. “Would someone kindly explain why this poor family has been kidnapped?”

One of the creatures pushed a wooden box in Kay’s direction. He checked the contents, coins embossed with the symbol of a foreign space power, and spoke into his communicator.

“Kay here. I have the payment. At last, we can enjoy ourselves, Nat. Beam me off this rodent nest.”

Both Kay and the box disappeared in a shimmer of glittering blue light.

“So, no explanations from him, Doctor,” said Mel.

“Evidently not, though I imagine he’s scarcely important. Look, just who are you and what do you want?” asked the Doctor.

Kerensa pointed ahead of her. From behind the assembly, two rather familiar rabbit-like figures were brought before an imposing black hare sat in the equivalent of a control chair.

“Obviously, the ship’s commander,” the Doctor announced to Mel.

“Is that Quincie and Jeremie?” Mel asked.

Kerensa nodded and then tilted her head to one side. Quincie and Jeremie had become bipedal versions of their rabbit selves.

Quincie stood, tall and elegant in ginger and white still sporting the white cottontail rabbit trademark and Jeremie, about three feet tall, resplendent in his tortoiseshell coat.

“They make quite a comic pairing,” Mel muttered.

The Doctor tapped a finger to his lips and nodded covertly back towards the ship’s occupants.

Mel noticed Quincie and Jeremie's faces were in their paws, in a submissive manner. There was a flurry of nose-twitching and thumping of feet occurring. The commander was moving its paws in complex patterns, sometimes

touching its face and ears. "Can you tell me what the hell's going on?" Mike gently pulled Kerensa close. "Have I got sunstroke? Did I eat a dodgy pasty?"

"What you see is what's actually happening, Mike." The Doctor sounded bemused. "Unfortunately, I cannot understand what's being communicated. This species doesn't use oral communication. It's all about body language and gestures. I've come across non-verbal communication on the planet Delphon and Cryon sign-languages on Telos, but this is new to me. Well, at least, to my current memory which, as Mel will attest, is infallible."

Mel was about to offer a correction, but thought better of it.

"Oh, great..." Mike said, pain in his voice. "Two hearts... Not like us at all then. You're an alien, too?"

"Technically, a humanoid of a different species, yes. However, I have lived and worked on Earth for a time. It happens to be one of my favourite planets. I like to think of myself as a Terraphile. It's a rewarding hobby."

"That's all very well, Doctor, but can you ask them to let us go?" asked Mel.

"Not easily. Their written language is not being translated by the TARDIS at all, which implies it's not symbology as we understand it. Letters, characters, and so on."

"Which means?" Mike whispered.

He raised his hands above his head in a rendition of ‘Little Peter Rabbit’. “I’m afraid I don’t know what any of their nose-twitching or feet-thumping means.”

Kerensa tugged the Doctor’s sleeve and passed him a scrap of paper with the words, ‘*I can*’ written on it.

“What? How?” the time-traveller shook his head. “Never mind. Tell me, young lady, what’s going on?”

Kerensa shrugged and pointed to her pockets.

“No more paper,” interpreted Mike.

“Oh, dear, I wonder if I’ve still got...” The Doctor reached into his pockets and produced a device like a calculator. “Originally from a briefcase phone I’d been meaning to repair.” He frowned. “And return.” Then, shrugged. “Oh, he’ll probably never notice it’s gone. Now, Kerensa... Unless the battery’s flat, all you have to do is type what you need to say into the device and hopefully, it will say it for you.”

Kerensa took the device and started typing. A dispassionate electronic voice spoke her words. “They are Lagomorphs. Quincie and Jeremie are in trouble.”

“Why? What did they do?” asked the Doctor.

“First, give them back that...” Kerensa hesitated, wiggling her fingers as if searching for the right words. “Ball thing.”

“What? Oh, this, right,” said the Doctor, holding out the ball for a passing Lagomorph to take.

The Lagomorph bounced rather like a kangaroo, over to a computer bank with a circular hole in the middle of it. Once returned to its rightful place, the whole bridge felt a slight shudder and the Lagomorphs appeared to relax slightly.

“Jeremie and Quincie are young Lagomorphs,” explained Kerensa. “They were bored. They stole the ball thing to play with and beamed down to Earth.”

“So, *your* rabbits are space bunnies too?” Mel asked.

“I’ll wake up in a minute, I hope...” muttered Mike.

Kerensa nodded and then started crying as she typed. “They’re both going to be taken away and punished.”

“Now wait a minute, there are some questions I want to be answered,” said the Doctor. “Kerensa, do you trust me?”

Kerensa shook her head.

“Look, the only way I can help save Quincie and Jeremie is if I can communicate with their commander. I am telepathic. Not quite as good as my granddaughter, but I’ve since had the practice. I’m wondering if your Lagomorphs have some telepathic ability that they have shared with you. I need to be patched into the call if you like.”

“You mean some sort of mind-meld like Doctor Spock?” asked Mike.

The Doctor’s lips thinned with mild exasperation.

“Basically, yes,” replied Mel. “I’ve seen the Doctor do it before and he’s very careful.”

“No way.” Mike shook his head. “I’m not having my Kerensa’s mind mucked around with. You’ll have to find another way.”

The electronic voice broke the silence, “I’m not a baby. If Mel says the Doc knows what he’s doing then fine.”

“I will be very careful, it’s only a basic link I need,” assured the Doctor. “I won’t be prying into your memories. Don’t worry.”

“You’d better not.”

The Doctor placed a hand gently on Kerensa’s forehead, “Contact...”

His head became full of jumpy short little phrases: *Defence grid stable... Caused our destruction... Had to use mercenary... Lost contact with scouts...*

The voices and sensations were a jumble. At first, he'd considered it to be one mind, but it was a collective group of minds. All vying for dominance over what was an innately and intensely private conversation. He could feel the secondhand *fremdschamen* of the Lagomorphs who were only circumspectly involved in events via protocol. It was a soft bed of foam compared to the liquid metal of passions raging between those in hot debate over the situation on Earth.

When the link stabilised, he heard Kerensa's thoughts interceding for her Lagomorph friends. "*They're only young. They didn't know what they were doing.*"

"*They may be kits, but they know not to steal or to beam down without permission,*" a lilting female voice could now be heard by the Doctor. "*The Tellurians of Sol 3 are in a fragile state of their solar development. We would not simply scold the kits for playing in the ship's fusion reactor.*"

"*I am the Doctor, a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey.*" The Doctor spoke his thoughts aloud, as well, so the others could hear. "*I understand that you are Lagomorphs. I am here to investigate a time disturbance that you had something to do with.*"

"*Ooh, lah-di-dah, I've had lunch with a Time Lord,*" whistled Mike, quietly.

"Mike..." Mel scolded.

"Sorry," he rubbed his face. "Sorry. Really. It's been a long day."

"*When the controller was stolen we sent scouts down to find it and this destructive pair. Without our defence grid operational we can be detected by our many predators. To avoid being eaten, we would rather operate our self-destruct.*"

The Doctor paraphrased the commander's words for Mel and Mike.

"So, Lagomorphs have just as many enemies as their counterparts on Earth," said Mel.

“And they’d rather die than be eaten alive...” Mike felt a shock of parental protectiveness shudder through him like a bolt of lightning.

In her father’s grasp, Kerensa pleaded, “*You’ve got your controller thing back. Can’t you just let us all go and Jeremie and Quincie too?*”

The Doctor turned. “*Wait a minute, Kerensa. Let me try and reason with this giant bunny—*”

His eyes snapped shut. He’d let the thought get away from him.

“*You have insulted us, Doctor. That word is used to belittle us by many humanoids. We are the Lagomorphs. We are no one’s food, target practice or cute little pet. All we require is to be left alone.*”

“*I apologise,*” he thought, earnestly. “*I really do, but I have to find out why you are using unauthorised stasis technology. Let’s start again. Who do I have the honour of addressing?*”

“*I am the Lepus of this colony. We do not have names as you would understand them only ranks and job titles. We are a peaceful species seeking a new colony world. We detected similar morphology to our own and were carrying out covert surveillance. That was until these thieves stole the central component of our defence grid to use as a plaything.*”

She ground her teeth and shook her paws angrily.

Mel exchanged an anxious look with Mike. “That doesn’t look good.”

“Thank goodness rabbits are vegetarians,” said Mike.

Kerensa protested, “*We know what they did was wrong, they had no idea what would happen.*”

“*Ignorance is no excuse. We lost several good scouts before we realised a gas in your atmosphere transforms Lagomorphs into your native species. Unable to communicate with the ship.*”

“*So,*” the Doctor’s hands rested on his lapels, “*because you couldn’t lose any more crew, you sent for your friendly neighbourhood space pirate.*”

“We only use humanoids if there is no alternative, they have proved treacherous in the past,” the Lepus explained. *“The reward was sufficient for the humanoid to agree to assist us.”*

“The space pirate found the place where the controller was,” the Doctor surmised. *“So, you put the whole bungalow behind a forcefield and the humans living in the bungalow into stasis.”*

“That was our intention.”

“Then, he could retrieve it for you without any interference, but something went wrong.”

“You interfered. Accelerated our schedule.”

“Quite right,” the Doctor wagged a finger, *“but that’s not what could have happened. What was probable.”*

The Lepus’s yellow eyes seemed to soften. *“I don’t understand.”*

“We saw the result of your retrieval. The long result. No one came back to release the family.”

“You are from the future?”

“A glimpse of it, perhaps,” said the Doctor.

She paused, a knowing look in her eyes.

“You don’t discount it,” he persisted.

“Quantum entanglement is a vital element of our protective systems. If what you say is true, we would not have left the family in isolation. It would raise too many questions among their own kind and would be unnecessarily cruel. It is uncharacteristic.”

The Doctor unfolded a hand. *“I’m afraid, then, the conclusion is obvious.”*

“No one was there to switch off the fields.”

Melanie gasped, *“The meteor shower... Your enemies found you before the controller could be recovered and you blew yourselves up.”*

Mike felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. "They did what?"

"The poor family—you, Kerensa and others—were trapped like statues in the stasis field and the forcefield surrounding your home remained in place." She shuddered at the memory of the decaying bungalow. "Forever."

"You should not even consider using such technology on a planet like the Earth," scolded the Doctor. *"You condemned an innocent family to a living nightmare. It's only because we decided to investigate and try and sort out the grisly mess left behind by your bungling that you can now leave peacefully and in one piece."*

The Lepus's ears drooped at the ferocity of the Doctor's tirade.

"No wonder you were circumspect in telling me what was going to happen to us, Doctor," said Mike. "If you can get us out of here, there's a pint in it for you."

"We will transmatt you back to your point of origin," replied the Lepus.

"What about Quincie and Jeremie? Could they come back to Earth with me?" asked Kerensa.

"We have grown fond of you red-haired human," replied Jeremie whose voice was low and male, *"but we must serve our punishment. We nearly destroyed our colony."*

"I have an alternative," the Lepus announced. *"Your punishment could be exile. You would no longer be Lagomorphs and you would never be able to leave Earth. However, you would be among friends. It is your decision. Make it quickly. We must leave this system soon."*

Kerensa thought, *"Would you like to come and live with me, like before? If you'd rather stay with your kind, that's okay, too."*

The Lagomorphs snuffled and moved their paws in silent conversation.

"We agree," replied Quincie, who had a high-pitched female voice. *"You look after us well, and we would still be able to communicate with you."*

“I’ll see that no further surprises are discovered on the Earth,” the Doctor assured the Lepus. *“Your kind and theirs will be able to live in peace without fear.”*

“Then it is decided. Lagomorph kits 234 and 345, you are exiled to Sol 3 for the rest of your existence,” she ordered. *“Any attempt to contact the Lagomorph Collective will be ignored. Farewell, humanoids. Transmat six lifeforms to point of origin.”*

Back on terra firma, the group sat drinking ginger beer in the garden trying to unscramble the events they had just witnessed. Kerensa sat, stroking the pair of exiled space rabbits on her lap, listening to the adults.

“Thank goodness, you turned up when you did,” said Mike. “Here, haven’t you just changed history? Won’t there be some terrible disaster?”

“I don’t think so, I just checked the timelines in my ship while you were kindly getting us drinks,” said the Doctor. “Mel?”

His companion explained, “Well, from what you said to me, we were seeing a premonition of sorts. The countdown before the bomb went off.”

“Crude temporal technology always has a habit of misaligning cause and effect. The TARDIS exacerbated the friction to produce what we saw there.” He placed his mug down on the table. “It seems this was just an earnest, terrible mistake and without Kerensa’s help we would *never* have sorted things out. Well done, Kerensa, and thank you for trusting me.”

Kerensa’s face flushed pink and she turned away embarrassed.

“Those Lagomorphs didn’t consider the consequences of their actions,” said Mel.

“Maybe not, but they’d lost their children and were very scared to lose any more. Especially that way. Quick and painless or a slow meal. It’s a decision no parent should have to make, Mel. Hopefully, thanks to our intervention, there will never be the need.”

The Doctor hopped to his feet. “Now, thanks for the pint, Mike, but we must be off before your wife thinks you’ve built a new shed. Kerensa, try and keep your furry friends out of trouble, hmm?”

Kerensa grinned and nodded.

“Would you like a quick glimpse inside my ship before we leave, Kerensa?” he asked.

Kerensa returned the rabbits to their hutch and followed the Doctor and Mel into the TARDIS. She looked around the brightly lit room that couldn’t possibly have fitted into that little blue box.

“*Wow!*” she said.

Eventually, their young guest left the TARDIS. Father and daughter put their hands over their ears when the ship disappeared in its usual cacophony. Then, they pulled together in a hug and led one another back inside the bungalow.

The Doctor sent the TARDIS back to the relative future. Unfortunately, the spatial coordinates slipped a bit and they had to walk from the local wood.

“I thought things were sorted?” asked Mel.

“Of course.” The Doctor smiled. “Logistically, I made the necessary scans with the TARDIS and followed the time trail to its natural conclusion. We stopped the blue touch paper from being lit.”

She was confused. “Then, why are we here?”

“In your terms, dear Melanie, for the human touch.”

After asking for directions, they found the bungalow, now with solar panels on its roof, but no longer—or rather, not ever—overgrown. A young woman was sitting in the front garden on a lounge. A rabbit on her lap.

She smiled and waved. “Hello, it’s good to see you. You look like you did ten years ago!”

“Hello, Kerensa.” Mel never got used to this. The short jumps from her perspective where entire lifetimes seemed to pass between materialisations. “Well, we took a shortcut.”

“Why are you here?”

The Doctor picked up a trowel resting on the patio handrail. “Do you mind if we engage in a spot of gardening?”

The hours whiled away peaceably with the Doctor, Mel and Kerensa. The sight of the garden in the premonition timeline had provoked the time-traveller to an unusual bout of horticulture. He tilled the soil, planted some seeds, even pruned some of the nearby trees.

At first, Mel had assumed it to be a cover in a search for further Lagomorph technology or any unpleasant surprises left by Kay. After a while, though, she found that he was actually rather enjoying himself. Gleeful with abandon in a way that one only could be while they were relaxing.

The day was cooling off, so the Doctor had left Mel his coat for comfort. It didn’t seem to affect him in quite the same way as his human companions. She and Kerensa watched him from the patio.

“You seem happier today, less anxious perhaps?” asked Mel, gently.

Kerensa smiled. They’d been working up to the conversation all afternoon.

“I am a bit better, Mel,” she reassured her. “It took a lot of work with help from my local mental health team. They decided, at first, that talking therapy like CBT would be too stressful. They suggested art therapy.”

“From the mind to the canvas.”

“Something like that,” she smiled. “I also had good support at college.”

“It’s wonderful you can talk to us now, Kerensa,” called the Doctor, hanging from a ladder like a cat in the rafters. “That must have taken a lot of courage and hard work to overcome.”

“I had lots of sessions with a specialist speech therapist. I’m lucky, too. My family is chill enough to let me go through things at my own pace. They don’t judge me.”

“Unlike that school,” the Doctor tutted.

“At first, I communicated using text messages on my mobile, and wrote in conversation notebooks. Slowly, I started to learn how to cope better with my anxieties.”

“Your anxiety’s still there, isn’t it?” asked Mel.

“Who isn’t anxious sometimes? The difference now is my anxiety doesn’t control me. I know what my triggers are and I can *usually* work through them.”

“A very healthy attitude,” nodded the Doctor.

“If I can’t, I find a safe quiet space. Then I try all the techniques I’ve been given until one works.”

He slid like a fireman to the ground as Kerensa got off the lounge and put the rabbit back in its cage. She fetched the other one out and sat back down. The Doctor joined the two ladies, wiping his hands on the monochrome polka dot cravat in his pocket.

“They’re the *same* rabbits aren’t they?” Mel asked.

“Yes. The neighbours think it’s some kind of miracle!” she giggled.

“So, what are you doing now?” asked the Doctor.

“I work as a veterinary assistant,” she replied. “They pair me with another member of staff so I don’t have to talk if I’m having a bad day. Also, they don’t mind me writing notes when I need to.” She smiled.

“Well, I’m glad things are better for you and your family.”

“So am I,” said Mel.

He studied the clouds, watching the pink turn into a musing purple. “Come along, Mel. Before we overstay our welcome.”

“All set?” she asked.

“Yes...” He nodded with satisfaction at the garden. “I believe so.”

She nodded, passing the coat back to the Doctor. “Good luck, Kerensa.”

He shook the young woman’s hand, “Goodbye,” before lowering himself to shake Quincie’s paw, “Goodbye both of you. Take care of one another, mm?”

As the Doctor and Mel made their way back to the TARDIS, Kerensa called after them, “Hey!”

At the gate, the pair turned to face her.

Kerensa held up a rabbit in front of her, “What’s up Doc?”

The Doctor and Mel waved cheerily and walked down the road off on another adventure.



Author’s note: Anyone who needs (or would like) more information about selective mutism should contact SMiRA or the Selective Mutism Association (SMA).

POSTGATE'S PLANETARY LIFEFORM GUIDE

“The **Lagomorphs** are bipedal hare-like lifeforms. They are 3-to-6 feet tall (1-to-2 metres). Their fur can be short, long or curly and different colours including brown, ginger, black, white and tortoiseshell.

Communication with Lagomorphs is difficult. They use facial gestures such as nose twitches and eye movements as well as body language to communicate. Due to this communication gap, they usually shun contact with other species. They live in colonies, only leaving the colonies when the population has grown too large to sustain it.

They are a space-faring race. Non-aggressive. They seek uninhabited worlds to colonise. They possess limited force-field and time stasis technology, but use this purely for defensive purposes.

On Earth, it was discovered that the gas composition of the atmosphere changes a bipedal Lagomorph into the four-legged version already extant on the planet. This transformation couldn't be reversed without the correct technological process being applied or the gas no longer being present in the atmosphere. After this event, Lagomorphs developed a Xenon inhibitor which nullifies the effect. They also carefully examine the atmospheric composition of any new planet they visit.

Some humanoids after prolonged exposure to Lagomorphs can access their low-level telepathic field and are able to communicate with them. Such humanoids have been used by the Lagomorphs for reconnaissance or to help them seek justice from the Galactic Federation and other judicial bodies such as the Intergalactic Lagomorph Protectorate.”

THE REGENERATION DILEMMA



By Tim Bradley

“While I stand before the High Council, and the Keeper of the Rolls, to renounce my peerage in preparation for exile, I must make one thing clear. This rank of Time Lord was earned in the Academy. My Prydonian colours were worn with prestige. But, I do not leave this assembly my personhood. I leave as myself. Divested of all that cloaked and bewildered. I am whole and will depart whole. Until my True Death.”

— **Kexsisastopinalopas**

“**A** *lert! Alert!*”

It was chaos. The emergency had escalated to a Category-A warning. Alarms sounded and people panicked as destruction and mayhem scarred its way across the city. Such was the devastation no-one noticed the TARDIS materialising inside an upturned tram, whooshing and groaning, making a loud thump as it landed.

The door soon opened, facing the street, and the Doctor stepped out, filled with enthusiasm capped by a red-banded Panama hat.

“And here we are, Nyssa! We’ve arrived on the planet... *Oh.*”

“We’re not on the planet Fosos are we, Doctor?” she deduced, stepping out beside him. “Where it’s filled with holiday resorts, summer everyday and—?”

“We’re certainly not inside the Platau-Rarf Hotel where I hoped we would have our two weeks, as booked. Sorry.” He slapped the two tickets in his hands together and pocketed them. “I’m afraid I’ve rather spoiled the surprise by, *erm*, failing to arrive. I thought the TARDIS readings weren’t correct when I checked our destination settings...”

“Where are we, then?” Nyssa felt anxious. “A war zone?”

“Mind those tracks, they may still be electrified.” The Doctor adjusted his cream-coloured coat and helped his companion down from the tram. “It has the air of the Blitz, doesn’t it?”

“It feels like a war zone with all those awful alarms going off in the background.”

“I thought it was just me.” He leant against the shattered headlamp in front. “They’re very disconcerting, aren’t they? Perhaps there’s a—”

Just then, a dishevelled man and woman ran past them.

“*Flee! Flee for your lives!*” shouted the woman.

“Get out of this street, you two!” shouted the man. “He’ll probably come here any minute!”

Nyssa was unable to stop the woman, she tore herself from her grasp, but the Doctor was able to stop the man. “What’s going on? Tell me what the panic’s about!”

“What are you two? Idiots? Don’t stand here chatting away! It’ll be the end of Trusis City as we know it!”

With that, the man ran off, catching up to the woman running ahead of him.

The Doctor opened his mouth to the empty space. “Of course, if we’d chosen business class...”

“I wonder what’s happening here?” she pondered.

“No idea,” the Doctor replied. “But I’ve heard the name Trusis before... Where have I heard it?”

Nyssa tugged at the Doctor’s arm. “We’d better find shelter.”

As Nyssa dragged the Doctor along, parallel to the tram tracks, he continued to muse to himself before exclaiming, “Trusis! Of course. This is Trusis City! We’re on the planet Gengora in the Villias System. I should have realised by the nebulae formation above, very distinctive, but why did the old girl bring us here?”

“Category-A measures are now in effect. Repeat. Category-A measures are in effect. Vacate immediately to a secure Safe Station.”

“Doctor, enough time for a chat later once we’ve found shelter,” Nyssa insisted. “Come on!”

Following the man and the woman, the Doctor and Nyssa came across a building that appeared to be an old town hall. They were allowed entry once they met the sentries. The doors closed behind them once they entered. They were met with suspicion and curiosity by the people inside. Nyssa and the Doctor tried to be cheerful, though the atmosphere was tense.

“Who are you two strangers?” bellowed a voice. “You’re not members of this shelter. I know everyone here. Where are your identification badges?”

Nyssa and the Doctor were met by a white-bearded man who wore smart, official-looking clothes. It gave him an air of being someone important. A civil servant or something similar. Not quite regimented

enough to require a uniform, but distinctly prominent. Someone who had to dress with formality and etiquette to mind.

“Yes, apologies,” the Doctor said, genuinely. “We’re visitors. We had meant to visit Fosos, but we ended up on your planet instead.”

The figure relaxed, his professionalism taking over. “Thank you for your time, but this isn’t a holiday planet and, as you can see, we’re in a state of emergency.”

“So we gathered.”

“If you don’t have your transit card or visitor’s passport issued by the solar office, I’m afraid you’ll have to—”

“My name’s Nyssa and this is the Doctor.” She dipped her head gently. “May we ask who you are?”

The bearded man studied them carefully before he answered. “I am Purhertz. The Deputy Minister of Trusis City.”

“Where’s the First Minister?” asked the Doctor.

Purhertz became saddened. “He was killed recently. Brutally, I might add. A tragedy for Trusis...”

“Killed?” Nyssa enquired.

“A terrible monster,” Purhertz explained. “He’s currently causing havoc within the city.” His resolve hardened. “We’re wasting time here. Very well, if you seek refuge, come. Come!”

Escorted by the surrounding guards, the crowd flowed with unusual haste and silence after the Deputy Minister. Nyssa could see backpacks, sleeping mats, all manner of personal effects gathered up in people’s arms. There was the stench of sweat and the occasional murmur of conversation between parents and children.

“What kind of monster is it, Purhertz?” the Doctor asked, walking alongside him at apace. “One of an army? A squadron?”

“A man,” Purhurtz replied, bitterly. “A violent, angry man.”

Nyssa was incredulous. “One man did all this?”

“The wrong person in the right place...” the Doctor muttered. “We’ve seen it before, remember?”

She nodded. Nyssa knew all too keenly. One man had cost the previous Doctor’s life.

“He won’t stop hurting people.” Purhutz ushered them towards a heavily-fortified section of the building. To the Doctor, it resembled the reinforced tunnels of 23rd-century Paris on Earth. Nyssa could see a passing resemblance to the inner workings of the primeval Source on Traken.

Words were embossed in industrial red above the approaching entrance:

SAFE STATION

“We don’t know where he came from or why he’s attacking us.”

“Have you tried to establish contact?” asked Nyssa.

“With *that?*” Purhurtz spat.

“I’m sorry to hear about the loss of your First Minister,” the Doctor said. “Perhaps Nyssa and I can help. We’re always willing to help people in need. Aren’t we, Nyssa?”

“Absolutely,” Nyssa agreed. “Wherever we go, we always help.”

“How can you help us against a terrible monster?” Purhurtz slipped a recognition card into the entry coder by the main door. He shook his head at the herculean bulkhead. It may as well have been plywood. “We can’t even protect ourselves.”

“We’ll find a way to save your community,” Nyssa told Purhurtz, firmly. “How safe are your people here?”

Once the group filed in, the entrance sealed behind them with an eight-metre thick barrier from the ceiling. Purlhertz wrung his hands. “We have a few minutes. Don’t breathe too deeply, there’s only so much air.”

“I’m sure we can spare a few puffs for important questions. Tell me, who was your former First Minister?” the Doctor enquired. “He had a name, I presume?”

“His name was Kexsis,” Purlhertz answered. “Poor, dear Kexsis... We shall miss him greatly.”

The Doctor became startled. “Kexsis...”

“Something wrong, Doctor?” Nyssa asked.

“I believe so. It’s a rather large universe, but coincidences being what they are...”

“You knew him?” asked Purlhertz.

“It’s a possibility. The only other person I know of that name is a Time Lord exile from Gallifrey. A friendly type. More like Cardinal Zero, than a Morbius.” The Doctor smiled, welcomingly. Unfortunately, in return, the Deputy Minister’s features appeared to wrinkle with confusion. “Yes, well... Last I heard, Kexsis ended up ruling a city on a planet somewhere in the Tython Cluster. Strictly prohibited, you understand. They would have been asked to officially renounce their rank before the High Council to remove Gallifrey’s culpability. Our days of empire are long past.”

Purlhertz frowned. He wasn’t sure who this ‘they’ the Doctor talked about were. “And you believe...?”

“Gengora was the place,” said the Doctor, knowingly.

“So, you believe Kexsis is dead, then?” Nyssa checked. “He was killed by the monster we’re dealing with?”

“‘They,’ Nyssa. Not ‘he’, ‘they’.”

Purlhertz was pleased to see Nyssa puzzled as he was.

“And quite possibly, yes,” the Doctor continued to answer. “Except... I’m sure old Kexsis would have, well, regenerated.”

“Regenerated?” Purhertz enquired.

“Erm, healed,” the Doctor oversimplified. “They were made of stern stuff and far from the end of their lives.”

Just then, a heavy pounding was made at the door from outside. The Doctor, Nyssa, Purhertz and everyone else turned. Purhertz and the Trusis community became terrified.

“It’s here!” Purhertz cried, despairingly. “A Code Gamma priority threat. The Gamma is here! It’s come!”

“The Gamma?!” the Doctor reacted, surprised. “Is that what you call it?”

Soon, the town hall’s Safe Station door crashed down and the being called the Gamma entered. He was a tall man, wearing battered and disheveled clothes. The Doctor thought he looked very angry indeed. The Gamma knocked out the two sentries who were guarding the door before he advanced upon Nyssa, the Doctor, Purhertz and the Trusis community. Everyone backed away. Some security troops entered to tackle the Gamma, but they were thrown aside like rag dolls.

“Keep it away from us!” shouted the dishevelled man whom the Doctor and Nyssa had met earlier. “Go away, you horrid home-breaker! Evangeel!”

“I’m here, Thortage. “ Evangeel kicked the folded sleeping bag out towards their assailant. The dishevelled woman shouted, “Get away from us! Haven’t you done enough damage already?”

The Gamma wouldn’t listen though. He advanced forward.

“Let me do the talking,” the Doctor said as he stepped forward.

“You can’t handle that monster,” Purhertz told him. “It’s a maniac!”

“How would I know? I haven’t met them yet. More importantly, I should provide enough of a distraction for you to evacuate further inside. Nyssa?”

“Yes?”

“Go with them. The Deputy Minister will need help preventing a panic.”

“Doctor, be careful,” Nyssa advised.

“Trust me, Nyssa. I know what I’m doing.” The Doctor soon approached the Gamma and smiled cheerfully. “Hello, old chap. I hear you’re called a monster. Well, that’s not nice, is it? Opinion is subjective, after all. I assume you have a name. Come on, what’s your name?”

The Gamma gurgled at him. The Doctor’s eyebrows drew together, he shut his eyes with a wincing pain. Something sunk into his mind like a blacksmith’s brand into soft winter tundra. A psychic impression. Impressions? He couldn’t tell.

“You seem sort of familiar...” He looked up. “Have we met somewhere before...?”

Thwack! The Doctor was knocked aside by a powerful arm. He struck one of the surrounding support struts, his skull cracking against the herculeanum. The body slumped unconscious to the floor.

The Gamma growled fiercely, turning his attention back to the small community. Nyssa and Purlhertz stood at the forefront. Frozen in mid-evacuation. Nyssa saw saliva dripping out from the side of the Gamma’s mouth.

“I told him he couldn’t handle that monster!” Purlhertz cried fretfully.

Nyssa straightened her dress. It was her turn to tackle the monster. Since the Doctor didn’t use psychics to tame the Gamma, she decided to use them herself. Purlhertz told her she had no chance, but she was determined to try.

Stepping forward, she addressed the violent man telepathically. *Listen to me! You need to calm down!*

Focussing her mind, she attempted to access the Gamma's thoughts. Initially a struggle, she was soon able to get through to him on a small level.

I sense you're in great pain. The Doctor and I can help you, if you're willing to listen.

At that moment, the Gamma seemed to convulse and groan. Nyssa became curious. She'd been able to access his mind, but she couldn't have tamed him that easily. She then noticed something happening to him. His body glowed brightly. Flames began to emanate.

"What's happening?" Evangeel asked, slightly panic-stricken.

"Why is he glowing like that?" Thortage wanted to know. "Is he on fire?"

Nyssa was certain she'd seen something like this before. The Gamma soon made his way out of the town hall. He stumbled, his body still glowing.

"No, wait!" Nyssa chased after him. "Come back, please!"

The Gamma wouldn't adhere. He looked back momentarily before heading out of sight. Once it had gone, the Trusis community cheered.

"Praise the Gods, he has gone," Evangeel declared.

"I don't know what you did, lady," Thortage said, "but you sure scared him off."

"You saved our community!" Purhurtz added.

Nyssa didn't know what to think. She was curious more than ever.

When the Doctor woke up, Nyssa attended to him, providing him with a small flask of what seemed to be the equivalent of coffee on the planet Gengora.

“What hit me?” he asked.

“A building,” she answered.

He blew on the contents of his flask, timidly. “Let’s not make it a habit, shall we?”

As he recovered, Nyssa gave a brief account of what had happened after the Gamma knocked him out. The Doctor commented that Nyssa’s latent telepathic abilities were improving. He also became curious about why the hostile man glowed.

“I’m still getting the feeling that I recognised him from somewhere...” he muttered.

They were soon approached by Purhertz. “Doctor, Nyssa, we’re grateful to you both for helping us out this way. We hope killing the Gamma will be easy enough.”

Nyssa was appalled.

“Let’s take these things one step at a time,” the Doctor said. “We need to find out more about why this hostile man is attacking your city.”

Purhertz became blunt. “What’s there to know? It’s a monster and it kills people.”

“Unprovoked?” the Doctor challenged.

The Deputy Minister bristled. “Surely the damage wrought outside, the fear of my people, is testament to that.”

“How many deaths?”

Purhertz hesitated. “Surely the death of our First Minister is enough?”

“There’s more to this than initially seems.”

“It may seem so to you, Doctor. You’re a stranger here to our world. A lost tourist. You haven’t seen the carnage this thing has unleashed.”

“And you wish for more?” asked the Doctor, levelly.

Purhertz was speechless with rage, his knuckles tightened white against his palms.

“I understand,” the Doctor said, genuinely. “Kexsis was your friend. These are your people. You feel an obligation and a kinship to them. I’m not dismissing that.”

“No?” Purhertz almost choked.

“No. But, Purhertz, you have to find another way.”

“Why?”

“Precisely. Don’t you want to understand *why? How?* You’ve tried fighting it, you have tried running from it, now try understanding it. It’s monstrous to you, yes, but why? Nyssa and I would like to do this delicately in order to understand what’s going on. You’re manipulated by fear. We can turn that fear into reason, if given the chance.”

“The man could be in great pain,” Nyssa added. “I briefly felt his pain when I made telepathic contact with him.”

“It was wounded when it broke down the door,” Purhertz deflected.

“It’s deeper than that, Mr Purhertz. Something... fundamental.”

“So, there’ll be no revenge killing,” the Doctor insisted. “Understand, Mr Purhertz?”

It took a few moments for the Deputy Minister to rein in his emotions.

“Well, it’s your case,” Purhertz said, shrewdly, “but I doubt it will help dampen the monster’s violent tendencies.”

“Or those of the crowd.” Nyssa turned to the source of the noise. “Listen.”

“Oh, no...” rumbled Purhurtz.

In the main foyer, the Doctor addressed the assembled peoples of Trusis City.

“Everyone, please listen to me!” The acoustics of the foyer carried his plea. “Be assured this crisis will be sorted out as soon as possible.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Thortage challenged him.

“How do we know we can trust you?” Evangeel joined in. “You might be in league with the Gamma threat attacking our city.”

“That is unfair and uncalled for,” Purhurtz reprimanded her. “Whatever their faults, they are strangers here. They have no vested interest in our world, but they are choosing to help.”

“I understand everyone is anxious,” the Doctor continued. “But trust me when I say that Nyssa and I have dealt with threats like this before. We have a way of handling them. As I was telling Mr Purhurtz, we need to take these things one step at a time—”

“By the time you’ve finished, most of the community will be dead,” Evangeel retorted.

“I’m not waiting to be killed when the monster attacks again,” Thortage joined in.

The crowd became rowdier. Purhurtz gave the Doctor the *I told you so!* look.

The Doctor wouldn’t give up. “Please listen to me! Nyssa and I are determined to save your city and this planet. We have a few clues to resolve the issue. I must ask you all to remain calm and patient whilst Nyssa and I solve this crisis.”

“Oh, yes?” Thortage retorted challengingly. “And where is your young friend now?”

Puzzled, the Doctor turned to see that Nyssa had gone. Surprised, he looked around the town hall, seeing no sign of her. “Nyssa!” he called out. “Nyssa, where are you?”

“She went out of the town hall via the front door,” Purhertz told him. “I saw her go myself.”

“What?! And you didn’t stop her?”

“I didn’t think she would be out long.”

Going over to the front door, the Doctor stood in the doorway, calling out Nyssa’s name. No reply came. The Doctor returned and felt troubled.

“She wouldn’t go out to face the Gamma alone, would she?” Purhertz enquired.

“No, of course not,” the Doctor said. He then thought about it. “Not unless she had cause to.”

“What would drive her out there?”

“Perhaps,” the Doctor theorised. “One of your own people.”

Nyssa tried to find where the sobbing came from.

She heard it faintly whilst she was in the town hall. She tried to get the Doctor’s attention, but he was too busy calming people down. In the end, she decided to go out alone.

It sounded sad and despairing. Nyssa wondered how she could hear it so acutely. She had a hypothesis, but it had to stand up to variable testing.

Eventually, she saw a woman in battered and disheveled clothes hiding behind some barrels in an alleyway. She went over to her. The woman seemed troubled and afraid. Nyssa noticed her wiping some blood off her shirt. Was it her blood? She decided to judge later, gently approaching the woman and kneeling down beside her.

“Hello,” she began. “Are you alright? I couldn’t help but hear you crying....”

Her words were a jumble. “I want to free myself from this skin—It’s not mine. These bodies—This—It doesn’t feel like... “ Her hands were curled with frustration. “Can’t think, there’s too much going on. Too divided. Wasn’t always like this...”

Nyssa blinked. “Are you hurt?”

The woman sank in her corner, turning her head away from the Trakenite. “Keep away from me. I’ll only hurt you. Keep away, please.”

Nyssa saw she was a benign soul. She didn’t seem the type to hurt anyone. Why was she afraid?

“I would like to help you. Please let me help you. I can see you’re in great pain.” In fact, Nyssa was certain she could sense her pain. Was she reading this woman’s thoughts somehow?

“I’ve hurt so many of my people,” the woman despaired. “Too many. You don’t want to be around me.”

Nyssa wasn’t one for giving up. “My name’s Nyssa. Would you like to tell me your name?”

The woman sunk further into her corner. She hoped Nyssa would go away. Nyssa wouldn’t.

“Please let me help you. I have a friend who can help too. He’s called the Doctor....”

At the mention of his name, the woman looked up. It was almost as if a bell rang for her.

“Did you say... the Doctor?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Does he... travel about in a TARDIS?”

“Yes.”

“And he comes from Gallifrey.”

“Of course! Do you know him?”

“Know him?” The woman laughed with joy. “The Doctor and I have been friends for years.”

Nyssa was surprised by that. She asked again, “Please, won’t you tell me your name?”

The woman studied Nyssa for a moment. Nyssa smiled, trying to reassure her.

Eventually, breathing deep, the woman said, “Kexsis. My name is Kexsis. Formerly of the Prydonian Chapter of Time Lords.”

“But... Forgive me, you’re supposed to be a man, aren’t you?”

The woman smiled ironically. “You’ve spoken to Purhurtz, haven’t you? He’s old-fashioned. It was easier to say I was a man than explain I am... me. Perhaps, one day we can have that conversation...”

Before Kexsis could explain any further, something odd occurred. The former Time Lord groped in pain. It looked like they were in agony.

“Oh no! Not again! It’s happening too soon!” They looked up at Nyssa. “Please! Keep away from me! You have to get away!”

“Why? I don’t understand...”

“*Please, Nyssa!*” Kexsis raised their voice. “Something happened during the Change, something that divided my physiology. It’s not me, it’s something from the dark. Get away from me before—”

The former Time Lord began to glow brightly. Their skin veined with milk white lines like some hyperactive icecano. Nyssa realised where she had seen this happen before. It happened to the Doctor when he fell from the Pharos Project telescope on Earth.

“You’re... *regenerating!*”

“Have... been... *regenerating!*” Kexsis corrected her. “Now it’s regenerative transtemporal syndrome. And it won’t stop! I can’t stop it! Tell the Doctor, I—I—”

Kexsis then screamed aloud and burst into flame. Nyssa stood back. Once the former Time Lord finished regenerating, they turned out to be...

“The Gamma,” Nyssa said, sadness wringing through her gut.

The male aspect growled ferociously once they saw Nyssa before them. Terrified and astonished, Nyssa held her ground as the man advanced towards her.

“*There!* You see what I am! Who I am!” they growled. “I can’t let you live knowing that!”

Nyssa raised her hands. “Please, Kexsis, if you are still Kexsis, listen to me. I’m Nyssa, remember? I want to help you—”

“*No!*” the man roared furiously. “No one can know—know—*know* who I was!”

“You can’t be ashamed—”

“They’ll kill me! Me. Me? *Me.* They’ll torture and kill *me!*”

“—the Doctor and I can—”

“You—I—me—*you* must die—die? Die. *Die,* so *I* can live!” A feminine voice broke through from the back of Nyssa’s mind. “*I’m sorry—!*”

As the Gamma was about to lash out, Nyssa was saved by the Doctor jumping in and firing what appeared to be a fire extinguisher. The entity reacted in pain, foam from the fire extinguisher hitting in the face.

“Leave my friend alone!” the Doctor told him.

“*Doctor, wait!*”

The monster charged up again and the Doctor fired the extinguisher again. The man roared. “You’ll pay for this! I’ll be back for you and everyone else in Trusis! I’ll kill you all before you kill me!”

With that, the man ran away, heading off into the city ruins. The Doctor lowered his weapon. “Slipshod, but adequate enough. Nyssa, are you alright?”

“Doctor, you shouldn’t have done that. You shouldn’t have scared—”

“He was about to kill you,” the Doctor interrupted her. “I couldn’t allow that. Besides, what are you doing out here?”

“I heard someone in distress. I had to come out here and I found a woman in great pain. At least, that’s what I thought, at first.”

“Really?” The Doctor looked around the area. “This woman. Where is she?”

“Not ‘she’, Doctor. ‘They’. And you just scared them off.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Nyssa paused for a moment. “Doctor, this might take some time to explain. Maybe you’ll be able to provide some answers...”

The Doctor looped his arm around her shoulder. “Perhaps we’d better sit somewhere.”

Back in the town hall, Nyssa explained the situation to the Doctor. He understood his former friend Kexsis was undergoing a traumatic regeneration. Nyssa couldn’t help but compare Kexsis’s situation to the ancient Traken fable of Neithul and Nereb, which had some similarities to the Earth story the Doctor had told her about called *Jekyll and Hyde*.

“Regenerative transtemporal syndrome.” The Doctor nodded. “I know rare cases of it on Gallifrey. Something must have gone badly wrong. Did Kexsis say why they renewed?”

“No, we didn’t get that far.”

“A pity...” He twiddled his thumbs. “If we knew, we might have a clue as to how to resolve it. The solution may lie aboard the TARDIS.”

“If we can get back to it... There’s another problem ahead of us.”

“Oh, yes?”

“What to tell the people of Trusis City.”

He sighed, an elbow on his knee. “The truth, Nyssa. And bear the consequences.”

The Doctor and Nyssa tried to explain to Purhurtz and the rest of the community what had happened to their First Minister. They didn’t take it well.

“*Kexsis* is attacking our city?” Purhurtz exclaimed, horrified.

“He must be stopped at once!” declared Thortage.

“He must be executed!” Evangeel joined in.

“How quickly public opinion shifts, I must say,” the Doctor scowled.

“This is your former ruler you’re talking about,” Nyssa said hotly. “A person who’s going through troubles you don’t even begin to try and understand! Someone who needs help! Help from their own people.”

“All the more reason to put him out of his misery,” said Thortage.

“What was that?” Purhurtz’s eyes narrowed, sharply.

“And *Kexsis* shifting from a man into a woman and back again,” Evangeel added. “Absurd!”

Nyssa could see discontent in the crowd. Some leaning towards Thortage and Evangeel, others remaining on the sidelines. Frightened to form an opinion for fear of the consequences to themselves.

“Please!” the Doctor interjected, “This doesn’t have to end with someone being killed.”

“Least of all for *your* definition of absurdity!” barked the Deputy Minister.

“The Doctor and Purhertz are right,” Nyssa joined in. “We mustn’t resort to violence. We need to find a balance in Kexsis’s regenerative state. And I have an idea how to tame the beast within your former ruler. If you remain calm and patient, we can resolve this matter once and for all.”

“How?” dared Thortage.

Nyssa and the Doctor needed to be in the TARDIS in order to build a neuroleptic projector.

In theory, it would help lower Kexsis’s active blood cells that were causing the disrupted impulses manifesting as the Gamma to be violent. It took time to build, complete and test the device in the TARDIS labs. Once they had tested the device, they went out at night to find Kexsis, wherever they were in the city.

They managed to find Kexsis, in the shape of a woman, hiding in a different dark alleyway.

“Kexsis!” Nyssa called out. “Kexsis, please come out. We’re here to help you.”

“Leave me alone!” they replied, retreating further into their hiding place. “You’ve seen what I can do when I become him. Get away from me!”

“There’s no need to hide like this, Kexsis,” the Doctor called out. “Believe me. I understand what you’re going through.”

At the Doctor’s voice, Kexsis edged out from their hiding place. There was something in the Doctor’s voice they recognised.

“W-W-Who... Who are you?”

“Don’t you recognise me, old friend?”

Gradually, realisation dawned. “Doctor! Is it really you? My old friend from the mountains on Gallifrey?”

“That’s the trouble with regeneration. You never quite know what you’re going to get.” The Doctor smiled happily. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Oh, Doctor!” Kexsis exhaled relief. “You’ve no idea what it’s like. What I’ve had to put up with in my latest regeneration.”

“No, I imagine I don’t...”

“Doctor, please help me! I can’t control it! Every time I shift, I become unstable. Help me find a way to stop this nightmare before I hurt more people.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged. If Nyssa’s neuroleptic device works, that is.”

Just then, Kexsis groaned in pain and stumbled. Nyssa and the Doctor backed away as they saw Kexsis’s body glow.

“Doctor, I believe it’s happening again. Kexsis is about to shift back into a man.”

“Yes, I believe you’re right, Nyssa. From the dark places of the inside. Have your device ready to be used on Kexsis.”

“I’m on it.” With that, Nyssa began setting up the neuroleptic projector.

Kexsis groaned. “These shifts are happening more frequently. I can’t hold this one back. I’ve got—to keep—focused...”

“How many times have you changed?”

The woman gestured on her hands. “I’ve not many lives left now... Not many to—*to*—”

Kexsis screamed as their body burst into flames once more. Nyssa and the Doctor watched as Kexsis changed. Once the transformation was

complete, the man growled as he looked at Nyssa and the Doctor with furious eyes.

“You’ve seen what I can do! You know what I am! I can’t allow you to destroy me!”

“We’re not trying to destroy you, old friend,” the Doctor told him. “Nyssa and I are here to help you, remember...?”

“You shall die right now! I can’t let you kill me!”

With that, Kexsis leapt forward to strike.

“Nyssa! *Now*, Nyssa!” the Doctor cried.

With that, Nyssa fired her neuroleptic projector at Kexsis. The effect was instantaneous. One shot fired from the projector and Kexsis tumbled forwards and ended up on the ground. Kexsis groaned before they slumped into unconsciousness.

A moment of silence ensued.

“Well done, Nyssa! Your handy neuroleptic projector did the trick.”

“I can’t take all the credit. You helped me after all.”

“No, no. Your technical skills have been improving lately. Your father would have been proud.”

Nyssa smiled. “So what shall we do with Kexsis now? Do we take them back to the TARDIS?”

“Back and into the Zero Room to recover. Hopefully the effects will help stabilise Kexsis’s condition.”

The Doctor and Nyssa noticed the glowing fiery effect again.

“Even when unconscious, they shift sexes,” Nyssa reacted surprised.

“We’ve done all we can for now.” The Doctor pressed his hand to Kexsis’s forehead. “The rest lies with them.”

“Good luck,” she said.

“Yes...” The Doctor lifted Kexsis up from the ground. “Good luck, old friend.”

Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor and Nyssa placed Kexsis in the Zero Room. A place of harmony and rest, cut off from the influences of the rest of the universe that dwelt on the fringes of the time machine.

Kexsis slept peacefully whilst the shifts occurred. The Doctor became convinced his dear friend was stabilising. Allowing Kexsis to rest for a few hours, the Doctor and Nyssa decided to attend to Purhertz and the others to explain a little what they had done. It wouldn't be easy to calm them, but at least they could prepare them for what came next.

A week later, the Doctor and Nyssa returned to the Zero Room. They found Kexsis fully awake and currently in their male aspect. They smiled at Nyssa and the Doctor once they entered. “Hello, Doctor, Nyssa.” Kexsis was calm and relaxed. “Have I been asleep for long?”

“A few days, yes,” Nyssa answered, carefully.

“How are you, old friend?” the Doctor enquired with happy abandon. “Feeling a lot better?”

“Yes, indeed,” Kexsis replied. “The aggression has subsided.” Just then, they glowed bright and his body changed into a woman. “The shifts may just be a natural part of this incarnation now.”

“You don't seem to be in pain when the gender shift occurs,” Nyssa remarked.

“No, that's a curious thing,” Kexsis agreed. “It's as if both personas are in harmony with each other. I've also been able to determine when the gender shifts occur.”

“Does it happen within five minutes between shifts?”

“That’s what I initially assumed. But while resting in the Zero Room and contemplating my thoughts, emotions and anxieties, I’ve discovered the gender shifts occur when my mood changes.”

“It occurs when you’re getting anxious or agitated?” suggested Nyssa.

“Or relaxed.” Another shift occurred again and Kexsis appeared as a man. “See?”

“A lot has happened over the past week or so,” the Doctor said. “You’ve a lot to consider.”

“What about my people?” Kexsis enquired. “Are they still angry with me for causing havoc in the city?”

“I’m afraid so,” Nyssa said.

Kexsis breathed deeply. “I’m afraid to meet my people this way,” She then changed. “But I’m determined to regain their trust. Trusis City needs its ruler. I know everything there is to know about the city and its people. I can’t let them down.”

“How did it happen, dear chap?” the Doctor asked. “What caused you to regenerate?”

Kexsis felt embarrassed. “It’s awkward really. I was trying to save a mother’s little boy who was about to be run over by a tram.” Another transformation. “I pushed the boy out of the way, but in the process I got hit by the tram and I fell on the tracks. I can’t recall anything else after that.” Another. “I wrecked so many homes and injured so many people... I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“I’ve a theory, if you’re interested?” asked the Doctor.

“Please.”

“I don’t believe that was you. Your conscious identity, I mean. I think what occurred was a manifestation of your fight or flight response.”

“Fight,” her male persona mused, “or flight,” pondered her female aspect. “Provoked by the concussion... It would explain a lot.”

“It’s possible that the energy from the tram tracks tampered with your biochemistry. Like a bolt of lightning at precisely the wrong moment.”

“You seem able to control both sides of your personality rather well,” Nyssa remarked.

“It’s the same personality, Nyssa,” the Doctor reminded her, gently. “Just differing aspects.”

“In the Zero Room, yes.” Kexsis shifted again. “But who knows what I’ll do once I’m out there.”

“They’re going to have to accept the fact that you’re... you. Coexisting,” the Doctor insisted. “As I said, Nyssa and I will help you in any way we can. We’ll make sure you’ll regain your people’s trust. It will take time, but we won’t abandon you.”

“I don’t know how I can thank you enough, Doctor,” said Kexsis. “The Time Lords wouldn’t be so lenient and supportive. They still consider me an outcast and won’t have anything to do with me.”

“You’re lucky to have us help you whilst you’re recuperating from your regeneration,” the Doctor commented.

“Are you ready to face your people, Kexsis?” Nyssa asked.

Kexsis took a deep breath. Having had enough time to contemplate the circumstances of this current regeneration, they hoped they would grow into it and that it would stabilise whilst they walked the streets of Trusis. Kexsis would need all the support they could get, including the people they had been looking after all these years.

“Yes, Nyssa,” Kexsis nodded. “I believe I am ready. Take me to see my people, Doctor.”

It was daybreak in Trusis City. Everyone gathered around a makeshift podium where the Doctor, Nyssa and Kexsis stood.

The Doctor and Nyssa broke the news gently to the people of Trusis that their ruler Kexsis was alive and currently a man and a woman coexisting with each other. The people of Trusis became confused and outraged. Some like Thortage and Evangeel were prejudiced. At least Purlhertz tried to comprehend what was happening. It didn't make things easier as Kexsis continued to shift personas. Nyssa helped Kexsis with lowering their anxiety levels. The Doctor tried to calm everyone else down.

"How do we know Kexsis won't hurt any more people as a man?" Thortage demanded. "Can't he stay as a woman for at least one day instead of ten seconds?"

"Why didn't he tell us he was an alien?" Evangeel enquired. "Why did he hide that part of his identity from us?"

The crowd became rowdier than ever.

"Please everyone!" the Doctor raised his hands for silence. "Listen to me! You must give Kexsis a fair chance! You must let them speak for themselves."

"Why should we?" Thortage retorted. "He hurt so many of us! Why should we trust him now?"

People shouted agreement. The scene was becoming nasty.

"You can't deny Kexsis the freedom to speak," Nyssa said to everyone. "You must hear them out before you make your judgement. You can't reject them so readily."

"Otherwise, you truly have no moral high ground," the Doctor scolded.

Eventually, Purlhertz stood up on the podium and said, "Let Kexsis speak! The young lady is right! We can't deny Kexsis the freedom to speak!"

Thortage and Evangeel angrily protested before Purlhertz silenced them.

“Go on,” Purlhertz told Kexsis. “Say what you have to say.”

Kexsis nodded, appreciating Purlhertz being open-minded. Currently, in his male persona, he breathed deeply and spoke out to everyone.

“You have every right to be angry with me. I’ve let you down badly and I’m sorry for it. Evangeel is right. I should have told you that I wasn’t of your species when I came here to rule Trusis City. Honestly, I didn’t think I needed to tell you. I didn’t think something like this would happen. I didn’t think I would regenerate.” At that point, Kexsis shifted. “All I ask is to be forgiven for all the harm I’ve caused. I can only repay you by rebuilding the city. You chose me once, please allow me to be your ruler again. I promise that no more harm will come to you.”

“You say that now as a woman,” Thortage challenged her. “How do we know you won’t harm us when you’re a man?”

“You don’t,” Kexsis replied before they changed. “There may even be more to come in the future. I can only assure you that my regeneration has stabilised. I can balance out my aspects. You’ll have to trust my word on it.”

“Trust your word,” Evangeel scoffed.

The crowd became rowdy again. Kexsis wouldn’t give up. They soon recognised some faces.

“Mulcon! Remember when I saved your family during the Great Acidrake Plague ten years ago? Those acid-spitting lizards flooded the countryside like a plague of locusts. If it wasn’t for me, your family wouldn’t be flourishing now.”

Everyone looked at Mulcon. He was an elderly man and nodded in agreement. He turned to his wife and grown-up children. They, too, nodded agreement. Mulcon spoke up. A deceptively strong and deep voice

for one so thin, “We came to support you, First Minister. In whatever capacity the people decide, we support you.”

“And dear Tottintos,” Kexsis said before they shifted. “You struggled with the debts you needed to pay to keep Roulto Farm. It took three years, but you and I never gave up. Now you have a successful business. Are you going to let what’s happened to me end our friendship?”

The woman, Tottintos, shifted nervously as faces looked at her. Kexsis had made a good point.

“That was the old Kexsis!” Thortage pointed out. “We want the old Kexsis back!”

“Yes!” Evangeel joined in. “Give us back the old Kexsis! Why can’t you change back into him?”

Once again, the crowd chanted agreement.

Kexsis looked sadly at the crowd, shifting back into a man. “I can’t change back to who I was. I cannot change who I was, I was not a man. I only said so to make your lives simpler. I was always like this. I could hide it once, but no longer. Time Lord regenerations don’t work like that.”

The crowd grumbled, annoyed and upset. The Doctor watched the faces of Mulcon and Tottintos with interest.

“I can’t deny my current regeneration hasn’t caused a stir,” Kexsis continued. “I only wish the next chapter of my life will be easy-going and that I can lead you on a prosperous road ahead. But as I’ve helped you in the past, I ask you all to help me to be a better ruler again!” At that point, Kexsis shifted again. “I know I can lead you on the right path again! I ask you only to trust me. And if you’re the people of Trusis that I know you are, you’ll back me up all the way.”

There was still uncertainty amongst the crowd. Kexsis could see people nodding their heads in agreement. The former First Minister felt hopeful. But they could also see people like Thortage and Evangeel still expressing

doubt and muttering with the others. Kexsis looked at the Doctor and Nyssa who gave them encouraging smiles.

Kexsis could also see their former deputy, Purhurtz, smiling at them. “As you truly are...”

Suddenly, a young man in the crowd stood up on a parapet and shouted at the top of his voice, “False ruler! Down with him! Down with her! We won’t have him and her hurt us again! He and she must be stopped! Stopped, I tell you!”

In the process, the young activist lost his balance and fell forwards. He caught a lamp dangling from a nearby signpost which came away easily. The lamp smashed and caused a fire. People panicked and backed away as the fire began to spread. Screams and shouts echoed once this occurred.

“Fire!” Purhurtz cried. “Summon the emergency services! Quickly, before the fire spreads!”

Kexsis was determined, knowing what to do. They shifted back again.

“Doctor, Nyssa, help me!” they cried. “There are fire extinguishers in that shop ahead. We need as many as we can get!”

“Lead the way, Kexsis!” the Doctor replied.

“We’re right behind you,” Nyssa joined in.

“There are also protective kits that come with the fire extinguishers,” Kexsis told them. “They include protective helmets, gloves and oxygen tanks. We need to have those as well before we tackle the flames.”

Kexsis, Nyssa and the Doctor made their way to the shop ahead. They acquired the fire extinguishers and the protective kits they needed. Eventually coming out of the shop, the crowd provided a clear path for Kexsis, Nyssa and the Doctor whilst the fire intensified.

The young activist had joined the crowd before he was arrested.

“Doctor, you take the right side!” Kexsis commanded. Transforming again, they turned to Nyssa. “Nyssa, you take the left side. I’ll take centre and hopefully we’ll have the fire out before lunch.”

“Understood.”

“You can rely on us.”

With that, Kexsis, Nyssa and the Doctor took their positions. They soon started to extinguish the fire, opening their fire extinguishers as foam came out in an instant. Kexsis was pleased their former self came up with the idea of supplying fire extinguishers and protective kits to the city. They knew they would come in handy someday.

By the time the emergency services had arrived, most of the flames had been doused. Kexsis’s gender shifts weren’t as frequent as they were able to keep focus whilst tackling the fire.

Once the fire was out, Kexsis, Nyssa and the Doctor removed their protective helmets. The fire-fighters commended the threesome for tackling the fire when they did. Most of the crowd nearby cheered for them. Even Thortage and Evangeel cheered. Purhurtz definitely cheered them. The cheers became audible as the Trusis community chanted Kexsis’s name.

“It seems you’ve made a good impression, at last, dear Kexsis,” the Doctor told them.

At this point, Kexsis changed and smiled appreciatively. “Yes. It seems I have.”

“There’s a positive future for you after all, Kexsis,” Nyssa said encouragingly.

Kexsis smiled again. Earlier, they fretted about whether people would accept them for who they currently were. Now it looked hopeful. They wondered how long the hope would last.

The Trusis community demanded the political activist be arrested and put in prison. Kexsis overruled that, knowing the fire was accidental. They decided to fine the activist for a period of five months. The Trusis community accepted the punishment.

Kexsis didn't think they would be sitting in their office at the Trusis Council Hall at all following their regeneration. It was strange to be sitting back at their desk after a while. The emergency was over and things were calmer. There was still opposition from people—Kexsis accepted that. But at least they had Purhertz backing them in order to settle back into their role as Trusis City's ruler.

As they settled in their office, Kexsis soon received a visit from the Doctor and Nyssa. They had parked their TARDIS in Kexsis's office before they agreed to help out with clearing some of the mess caused by the Gamma and by the fire in the city. They also started helping them with rebuilding the city. But as the Doctor told Kexsis, he and Nyssa would be leaving soon. It seemed the time had come.

“Are you sure I can't persuade you two to say any longer?” Kexsis asked. “There's still the party to celebrate my reinstatement as ruler of Trusis City.”

“Thank you, Kexsis,” the Doctor said. “But Nyssa and I would prefer to slip away quietly.”

“The Doctor doesn't usually like to stay in one place for a long period of time,” Nyssa told them.

Kexsis nodded. “I know all too well. Those first days on the mountain, I didn't know if he was a spectre of the Old Times or just someone I imagined.”

“Well, who says imaginary friends sit idle?” the Doctor smirked.

The three smirked.

“Besides,” Nyssa looked around, “you seem to have settled back in quite nicely. With Purhurtz helping you, we’ve done as much as we can to support you in getting your city rebuilt and your people assured of your leadership.”

Kexsis shifted again. “Are you sure I can’t persuade you to be my second deputy, Doctor? Purhurtz is a great first, but a second deputy would be much appreciated.”

“It’s a kind offer, Kexsis. But you know I’m not one for politics.”

“Of course,” Kexsis acknowledged. “Still, there’s no harm in asking.” They shifted again.

“Are you still okay with the changes, Kexsis?” Nyssa enquired. “Your coexistence as a man and a woman is still causing a stir amongst certain members of the Trusis community.”

“Yes, I’ve become used to it,” Kexsis replied. “And I know there are minorities to contend with concerning my present regeneration. But as the Doctor said, they’ll have to lump it.”

“I only wish I could be of more help to stabilise your gender shifts for longer periods of time,” the Doctor said. “If only someone from Gallifrey would be more sympathetic to these types of regenerative states...”

“There’s no need to fret, Doctor. You’ve done all you can. With the help of certain members of the Krusis community, maybe we’ll achieve a revolutionary scientific breakthrough.” Kexsis shifted back. “Maybe someday we’ll give the Time Lords the answers they never looked for. There’ll be a ruckus no doubt, but at least we’d be on our way to forming some sort of stability.”

“I can only imagine how psychologically challenging it is for you, Kexsis,” Nyssa remarked.

“It isn’t the easiest of transitions,” Kexsis admitted. “But I’m growing to like how open I can be with both my male and female personas coexisting with each other.”

“Well, if you need any extra help, you know how to contact me,” the Doctor told Kexsis. “The TARDIS communication systems are fairly reliable whenever you want to send a distress call.”

Kexsis shifted back into a man again. “I’m sure I’ll look to you always, Doctor, whenever I need help.” After a moment’s silence, they enquired, “And what about you two? Will you be heading off somewhere special next in your travels?”

“We were meant to be going to the Platau-Rarf Hotel on the planet Fosos,” Nyssa told them. “Hopefully we’ll make it once we enter the TARDIS if the Doctor gets the coordinates right.”

The Doctor objected. “You make it sound like I get it wrong every time we try to aim for a planet’s spatial-temporal reference.”

Nyssa didn’t want to bring up how the Doctor failed to get Tegan back to Heathrow Airport on many earlier occasions. She knew how that agitated the Doctor.

“Anyway, good luck, Kexsis,” Nyssa said. “I hope you do well in your new phase of leadership.”

“Thank you, Nyssa, for establishing initial telepathic contact with me,” Kexsis said. “If it wasn’t for you, my way out of being a monster wouldn’t have happened at all.”

Nyssa smiled before she gave Kexsis a kiss on the cheek. Kexsis glowed before they shifted again.

“I don’t usually get that much affection from the people of Trusis,” they remarked.

“I’m sure you will in due time,” Nyssa commented. “They’ll grow to like you just as much as the Doctor and I do.”

The Doctor shook Kexsis’s hand. “Good luck, old friend. Take care of yourself.”

“Thank you for all you’ve done for me, Doctor,” Kexsis replied.

The Doctor smiled. Then he and Nyssa went into the TARDIS and waved goodbye to Kexsis. Kexsis watched the time-travellers enter inside the blue box before they saw it dematerialise. The Doctor and Nyssa were soon gone, leaving Kexsis alone in their office. Returning to the office desk, Kexsis knew they had a lot of work to do to restore Trusis City to its former glory.

In the meantime, Kexsis decided to make ready for the city’s evening celebrations...



In dedication to

Peter Davison and Sarah Sutton

Whose performances as the Fifth Doctor and Nyssa helped me cope during the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE DINNER CRASHER



By Chris Taylor

0A:15:00—REVIEW ITINERARY

*YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO THE 634th
QUINQUENNIAL JASTO GALA.*

The holo-doc rose up from the face of an omni-ledger that lay on a semi-circular desk of black stone. Behind which Princess-Adjunct Sarenzi Anenkau sat. She passed a slick lavender hand over one of the control panels arrayed before her. Eighteen micro-projectors positioned throughout a spacious study produced a three-metre-wide hologram of her home for the past fifteen years.

The Sky Palace of Jastom VII.

Countless glittering edifices, commonly called rondures, orbited a cluster of decadently ordained central complexes. Many were covered in towers or enclosed unto themselves. Some were open-topped. Some were connected to one or more siblings via arching bridges or sleek staircases, these capable of independent motion in order to keep pace with the aerial dance. Gently curved grav-cullers glowed white from beneath every modular structure. All of these components slowly re-oriented themselves in real-time around the dodecahedral grandeur of the Grand Banquet Hall.

“Step One.”

Another wave, and the visage zoomed out to a view of a gas giant. Hazy lines of orange and gold and pink kept a polite distance from impatient swatches of blue and purple. Dozens of moons, hundreds of satellites and space stations, and a fully-armed battle fleet swarmed around Jastom VII like needy children. The holo sped on from there until she was looking at the entire Jastominean Star Cluster. One-hundred-and-eighty stars blazing together in a loose coil capped at both ends by purple-pink nebulae.

“Step Two.”

A third pass, and the holo resolved into the visage of a barred spiral galaxy, which in real-space measured over one hundred-and-twenty light years in length. White-blue forms shot through with blooms of brilliant yellow. Rotating ever so subtly, the trailing edges leaking stars into the void.

“Step Three.”

One day, when the seeds she would plant this night bore fruit, the whole of the Sixth Galaxy would look to her as their beloved Empress. She could already hear their cheers. Trillions of voices chanting her name in fealty and love. “*An-en-kau! An-en-kau! An-en-kau!*” She had quite a bit to do on this, the most important afternoon of her life. But she had time enough to steal a moment spent imagining the soundtrack of her future.

Vworp!... Vworp!... Vworp!

The noxious noise set her gill-fronds twitching, three to either side of her head. It could only be coming from the grounds outside. The balcony door was the only part of her apartments open to the outside. She re-tied her rattlefur bathrobe as she walked over to it, followed by a cloud of kovlily perfume and the soft swishing of the end of her amphibian tail sweeping along the floor.

The Princess-Adjunct’s apartments hovered over the grounds of the Palace’s Crystal Garden, from a height congruent with her station. Low enough that she could not be ignored when making an appearance, high

enough that she really didn't have to look at anyone if she didn't want to. One hand to the balcony, she leaned forward and scoured every inch of the grounds with her opera glasses.

Careful stretching of her eye stalks furthered the magnification.

The usual collection of guards and crystal-smiths were plainly visible below, going about their duties among the transparent forest. Not counting the slow leftward passage of the thlydovax stable in the far distance, nothing had changed since last she looked outside... If one did not count the rather obvious blue box now standing in the middle of the reflecting pool. Some sort of landing pod, at a guess. She couldn't quite make out the words stamped above the windows.

A man stepped out of the right side, his face hidden under a sagging sack of curled hair and the shadow of a broad-brimmed hat. An unseasonably long coat and even longer scarf brought to mind the sartorial excesses common to the Sixth Galaxy's Hasparanuliog region. The only beings ostentatious enough to have gentrified a black hole out of existence. The stranger locked the cabinet, then turned to take in a brisk intake of air with his eyes to the peach sky. He took three steps forward before realising that his feet were wet up to the ankles. He laughed and started kicking up water all the way to the gilded rim, prancing to some unheard rhythm.

Sarenzi plucked the ledger from her desk. The attached comm-rod was long and thin and gold plated. She pointed it at the man and tapped an inquiry into the pad. It returned a close-up of his face—Humanoid, probably male, long of nose and deep-set of eyes—and confirmation that said face did not appear on the lengthy guest list regarding the evening's festivities. He wasn't even a member of someone's staff, either or even one of the entertainers.

Her semi-circular lips puckered into a thrice-curved scowl. "Crashing the Jasto Gala, hmm? Not from *my* back yard. I've worked too hard to have you putting a mark on my record."

She spied a familiar guardsman about to enter the one of the glass gazebos, dressed as ever in ceremonial gold and silver. She pointed her tool his way, and clicked the comm-line active. “Captain Ailo. The man in the scarf. Get rid of him. Be polite about it, though. We don’t want an incident.”

Ailo’s reply amounted to a twitch of triangular ears and a low, feline grunt of the word, “*A’yup.*”

It didn’t take him long to find the intruder. Nor for the intruder to spot him.

With a broad sweep of both arms, the stranger doffed his hat. His teeth shined brightly enough to be seen at a distance.

Ailo tapped the butt of his lectrospear onto the grass and mouthed something about trespassing.

Hat on head, the stranger said something back and then reached into his coat.

At which point, Ailo stepped back, brandishing his weapon and barking commands.

The man waved him down, and produced a small bag, which he presented to the guard.

“If you’re going to bribe a Jasto Guardsman, you might try something less obviously inconspicuous,” she laughed. “Or at least, find that one I didn’t already buy.”

To Ailo’s credit—or higher standards of corruption—he declined whatever had been offered. With the spear, he herded the man towards the nearest exit. Which happened to be a transmat station centred in another Gazebo.

She wasted no time spying out an ageing quadruped polishing one of the formations. “Glasskeeper Hiokann, there’s a piece of scrap in the

reflecting pool. Chuck it over the nearest edge.” He moved off to see the task done, and she went to her dressing screen.

A flash of white light from the gazebo beat her to it.

The stranger was gone, and already forgotten.

A short time later, Sarenzi returned to the balcony, wearing a day dress dark as sunless leaves, textured with numerous ivy lines woven of sound-baffling jian silk.

She looked out on the scene to see that not enough had changed; the thydovax stable was still on the move, having nearly reached the side of her chambers. Beyond it, other rondures were closing in. But not the right one.

She slipped on a pair of long black gloves and pulled from one of the folds in her dress a smaller device, a chrome black omni-pad with a re-scrambler bit attached to the meaty long-range comm-stick. She queued up one of the pad idents stored in its memory. A static click acknowledged contact. She did not introduce herself. “Engineer Yanjodl, you are running out of time.”

The voice on the other end was small, tired, fearful. *“Is she safe?”*

“Not for much longer. You know what is required of you to ensure her return.”

“I only just got here! I’m working as fast as I can—”

She did not raise her voice. “Further delay will not be tolerated.”

“I’m doing it, alright! I’ve got a piece of it in hand right now! But removal is a delicate process! I need more time—”

“Time to make a decision that you will regret? No. You know where the crate is. In twenty-three mitons, one of two things will be inside it. The anti-mass rotor, or your daughter’s head.”

“No! Please—”

“Twenty-three mitons.” Sarenzi shut off the device, and slipped the scrambler back into her fronds. Then headed towards the circular stair that would bring her to the living spaces of her apartments, as many encounters with her valet and other servants as was necessary to cross it, and into her personal transmat hub.

0A:30:00—INSPECT THE GROUNDS

Sarenzi materialised in the middle of the very gazebo which the stranger had just vacated.

Made of glass, it was on all sides by a crystalline representation of a manicured forest. She didn't have time for a proper inspection, and Hoikann would likely report her inspection as done but she had to be seen at least once or twice if she was to maintain an alibi. So, onto a field of transparent glass she walked. Looking over manicured collections of glass-like flowers and the other sights, though not venturing off the silvered stone path.

It really is quite lovely. I'm glad to have been given this bit of the Palace as my own to maintain. Proud of what I have made of it. Its beauty has grown, as I have grown. And now, I need larger grounds in which to flourish. One-hundred-and-seventy-nine fellow Adjuncts wrestling with me for the chance to touch the sun, here and seated on their homeworlds. One-hundred-and-seventy-nine pairs of hands grasping for the greater throne. But I'm as sharp as these trees. As unbreakable. As invisible, when need be. It will be me. All the competition, everything I surrendered for my position, will have meaning!

She made sure to make eye contact with every guard and labourer she came across, that they'd remember her to anyone who came asking

around, and always remember her kindly. But her attention turned to the sky many a time.

When she saw that the stable had stopped moving, she knew it was time to make her leave. There was a way to go yet when her ledger chirped. She looked to its screen, and saw the green, mottled face Aelmot Chendhah.

She tapped an acknowledgement.

His was a youthful voice. *"I just got the new seating chart,"* he said. *"Any reason why I was moved so close to one of the side exits? And nowhere near the stage, I might add?"*

"Sorry, it couldn't be avoided. There were some last-minute requests made by the Ambassador of Wlom to accommodate the bridal party from his latest marriage-by-combat. I hope I gave you enough time to make any changes on your end."

He gave a self-effacing laugh. *"At least it's something I have a leg up on. Ever since I was selected, I've felt like I'm a step behind everyone. It's a strange sort of feeling. I was always top of the class back on Ruak."*

"You'll find your hover-legs. I did. Just stick with me, and we'll both make it out of here alive."

He laughed again. *"Thanks. I don't know how to repay all the aid and advice you've given me since I came to the Palace. You've been a really good friend."*

"Helping you helps me, if I'm being honest," she confessed with a smile. "All I ask is some day, when you're a Senior Adjunct, you do the same for the next inductee. We're all in this together, for the good of the Cluster."

"That's a promise. Chendhah out."

It was only after his signal cut out that she recognized a high-pitched trill. Once noticed, it seemed to be coming from everywhere. Resonating from every sparkling tree. It was quite pleasant, compared to the noxious wheeze from before. But still, it was uninvited and therefore suspect.

Deep into the shining edifices of artificial woodland. Flashes of red, tan, purple and green came back to her from the sheer surfaces. Their lengths and interpoints shifted as she moved, walking in ways that made them larger and thus their source closer. She'd nearly walked to the edge of the platform before she saw him.

The stranger had returned? His jacket, his hat, his scarf. they all had reflected back at her from different angles. He was leaning over a curled railing, with nothing ahead of him, staring out into the endless sky of Jastom VII. Waving a mechanical wand of some sort, the source of the hum. How had he evaded Ailo? A glance at her ledger revealed the Guard was, for some reason, waiting in line at the nearby Visitor Embarkation Center instead of this man.

She could guess at the reason for his continued and unwanted presence. *Looking for your lost lander, are you? But I've got a way to be rid of you and complete my goals at the same time.'*

Above the man, the rondure which housed the fencing dojo had just begun to alter course, gliding down and forward to take the stable's place in the final alignment. She turned, and quietly crept back to the gazebo.

The last thing she did before stepping up to the transmat pad was tap a small circle hidden in the leafy designs of her dress. She told the operator, "My quarters please."

An eyeblink later, she was standing in a vine-draped gazebo that lay encircled by walls of black-green. Sweet-smelling crimson and violet flowers that lined this entry to the Tertiary Topiary Maze.

As a teenager and new arrival herself, she had spent countless carefree hours between lessons in politics, history and etiquette wandering the myriad paths with her fellow Adjuncts-in-Training. She knew its every secret, and had added one of her own.

The darkness provided excellent cover for Sarenzi as she noiselessly slipped her way not to the center of the miles-long beast, but one of the sitting areas situated in its west quadrant.

Above, close enough that the ‘hoverbugs’ could be heard clicking for attention, the thydovax stable moved slowly. Its shadow cast a dark blot over a significant section of the winding greenery. The Fencing Rondure was just beginning to pass it, high and vaulted windows shining bright white in the sunlight.

The mat-tech’s ident was stored, legitimately, in her ledger. “Hello? Something is wrong with the transmats. It just sent me to the wrong rondure... No, there’s no one here... This one wasn’t supposed to be open to the public tonight... I’ll work it out on this end... Make any excuses or apologies you need to, but close Crystal Gardens down for now, and see to it that any and all present visitors are sent away by other means. I’ll go see what I can do at the Hub.”

She made it to the sitting area with time in her schedule to spare. The space was small and cozy, a was hideaway for lovers which had proven fruitful many times in the past. Three curved benches were situated around a small ranaberry bush. The perfect receiver for the data-sniffer she’d planted there many years before.

She sat down, coiling her tail to cover the act of plugging the covert pad into one of the many small holes that formed the bench’s decorative filigree. The download began immediately, with no wireless signals to trace back to her. If her information was correct, a secret Intelligence Branch archive was secluded within the stadium. And if her holo-projection of the collective Palace’s amended travel paths was correct, the sniffer had spent the past thirty-five mitons in range of that digital stash. More than enough time for it to steal away most, if not all, of its secrets. She smiled to herself, and backtracked her way to the transmat pad in the southern quadrant. Pad still in hand, she queued up another, longer, ident.

She wasn’t kept waiting long. “*Yeah?*”

“This is Contrail. We’ve been betrayed. The package isn’t coming. Kill the girl.”

A sharp rasp sounded, followed by a thin moan. *“That’ll be you when we come for the creds, if you don’t have ‘em. Don’t think we don’t know who you are.”*

She laughed. “Why hide it? I’m located in the most heavily fortified structure orbiting the most protected planet in the most powerful interstellar state in this galaxy. If you think I’ve done you a bad turn, come and claim me.”

Sarenzi tapped the call to a close, and connected the device to her ledger to copy the files over.

She made it back to the transmat just as the stables began to move again, still shielded by its shadow.

0B:60:00—BATHE

The remaining whiffs of her perfume had fluttered away by the time she was standing in the austere surroundings of the Cerulean Transmat Hub. True to its name, the circled stairs around the pad were sky blue. The rest was a combination of brass and copper and plenty of open-air windows along the path to the comptroller desk.

“I’d like to register a complaint,” Sarenzi told the collection of fur and muscle that manned it. Before the functionary could answer, she amended, “Let me rephrase that, I’d like to skip past the complaint and go straight to someone high up enough to solve my problem immediately.”

The man-or-woman waved her into the doorway beyond.

Where she had a dressing-down ready to go for the first blue-and-silver dressed mat-tech that she saw. “The site-to-sites in my rodures are acting up again. Myself and one of the guard got it this time. I’m supposed to be

giving a state tour of the Crystal Gardens tomorrow and I can't trust that our guests will even get there! I think your people underestimate the import of the Gala to the continued prosperity and stability of the Cluster, to allow such lax operation standards.”

It was to her luck she found an exhausted and overworked member of the staff, likely pulling a double-shift to cover for workers needed elsewhere. “Honestly, Highness, how critical can one tour be? We put on one of these things every five years—”

A withering look from Sarenzi was all it took to send the man scurrying away to retrieve his supervisor. A being whom she happened to know, was hiding in his quarters for fear of certain holos being released over the Palace's isonet lines.

It left her alone, within easy reach in a nested room of transmat monitor banks, from which she could commence the destruction of all evidence of her connection to the afternoon's events.

A targeting scan confirmed what the alteration of the stable had already told her. The anti-mass rotor had been delivered to the stable's feed storage bay. It was a few moments' work to teleport the thing off-Palace via a wide-beam dispersal pattern. Its component atoms laced into Jasom VII's upper-middle-atmosphere. Gas-giant stormfronts being what they were, the trace elements would be undetectable within a day. Let some investigator try to chase down the missing item.

There was just the matter of dealing with the other evidence. She stepped towards the monitor room's transmat, reaching for her covert pad...

And quickly brought her hand up as she heard four feet plodding her way from the reception desk.

A chipper baritone followed the speaker into the room. “Oh, I'm sure I can spare you the trouble of making the calculation. Then it's just a hop, a skip, and a quantum-entangled jump to my ship, eh?”

The man in the scarf was side-stepping alongside another transmat specialist. This one female, tall, and many-horned.

“Who *are* you?” Sarenzi asked, surprising herself with her own astonishment.

His smile was wide enough to make Sarenzi reassess her understanding of humanoid anatomy. “Why, I’m the Doctor. Pleased to meet you, whoever you are!”

She curtsied. “Well met, I am the Princess-Adjunct Sarenze Anenkau. What I am not aware of is any need for a healer here.”

“Well, that’s a very good thing, because that’s not the kind of Doctor I am! *Ab-ha!*” His eyes seemed to double in size, and she couldn’t help but feel intrigued. Perhaps even a little flattered.

She couldn’t help but smile a little more genuinely. “May I ask, Doctor, what brings you here?”

“The Gala, of course. I’ve recently—”

Whatever excuse he was about to give, Sarenzi didn’t let him. “I’m one of tonight’s hostesses, and I don’t recall your face being on any invites.” She allowed the slightest hint of a threat to enter her question. “Have you been screened by Palace Security?”

His smile didn’t crack. “Ah, I see the trouble. Or rather, the trouble is what you *don’t* see.” He reached into his jacket and produced a holo-doc not dissimilar from the one on Sarenzi’s desk. “As I tried to explain to the other fellow, I received this invitation some time ago, when I was quite a bit older. And there you see the difficulty.”

Such an obvious lie was hardly worth addressing. “I mean why are you *here* at a secure Transmat Hub. Is this location not clearly marked for use by Palace occupants and staff?” She turned to the woman behind the Doctor. “And shouldn’t the transmat he came in on have refused to bring him here?”

The tech shrugged. “We’re receiving a number of complaints regarding the site-to-site transmats, lately. One of the rondures is gumming up the realignments. Throwing all the targeting calculations off. May I ask why you’re here, Highness?”

Sarenzi’s tail twisted in on itself. “A problem with one of my site-to-site transmats.”

This only seemed to please the Doctor. “That’s us, then, all in the same pickle. You see, I appear to have left my ship in the wrong place. And now my ship has gone and left without me. But I have her coordinates! She’s bobbing about in the middle-atmosphere of the planet below us. A dainty slip of a thing, my TARDIS! But don’t tell her I said that. On most days, I wouldn’t want her to get any lofty opinions of herself. I was just explaining to my friend here that I might be able to help you all out with your problem and solve my problem at the same time by beaming down to her. Have we met?”

“What?” She blinked, surprised by the sudden change of topic. “I shouldn’t think so. My schedule hasn’t allowed me any time to socialise much of late.”

“Are you sure? I’ve not seen too many of your people about, you know. Such a unique political system, the Jastominean Cluster has. A monarchy without any biological heirs. Children from every world are tested for their leadership qualities, and the victors brought here to the Sky Palace to be groomed as the future rulers. I imagine the majority of the people here are locals?”

“I’m far from the only Varaknuhl here, Doctor. This Palace is its own city. A population of fifty-thousand, and that’s when we aren’t hosting major diplomatic events. Many of my people are employed here. Most of my staff, for example. Particularly in the gardens.”

“Yes, the gardens,” he answered slowly.

“I’m from Gwalde, if anyone cares,” added the tech.

“I care,” answered the man. “Lovely place Gwalde. The swamps bubble so musically. I don’t get ‘round to the Sixth Galaxy much, but I plan on making the best of my time here. Would you be able to recommend any particularly scenic bogs?”

Was he really this easily distracted? Good. “I’ve rarely seen anyone of your make, Doctor. Which galaxy was it that you Humanoids are native to, again?”

“Oh, me? I’m one of a kind.” His voice dropped an octave. “Four of a kind, on occasion. Happily for us this isn’t one of those.” He nodded as if she should be aware of some meaning in that nonsensical statement. She could tell if he was being playfully ominous or genuinely disturbed.

Either way, he’d moved up from nuisance to genuine concern.

“Very well, then. If you think you can help us with our technological shortcomings, I’ll leave you in this fine woman’s care.” Sarenzi asked the mat-tech her name, and was given the answer Beshia Garlod. She made her leave of them, both.

Soon, as she was clear of the reception desk, Sarenzi pulled out her omni-pad and tapped up Garlod’s name. She was in there, alright, alongside the missing supervisor and a great many others.

She set the rescrambler to provide a voice different from the one the Dust Rat had heard, and initiated a call.

“Don’t say anything. Just listen.” Sarenzi imagined the transmat specialist waving off the Doctor to answer it, via contacting the auditory implant all the techs had. “That man’s property must not be located. Make up another technical fault if you have to. Have him fill out a few dozen reclamation forms. If I hear just one word of his lander getting back aboard the Palace, everyone will hear word of your gambling debts, and whom you owe them to. Didn’t your husband tell you he’d leave you if you fell back into the habit? Make a noise if you understand.”

A pause. “*Ayup.*”

“Now make another if you’re going to comply.”

No pause. “*Ayup.*”

“Good.” Sarenzi ended the call, and programmed the rescrambler and its pad to delete itself and reformat themselves.

Then, she chucked the set right out the nearest window she passed. Followed by the emergency transmat router from her dress, which she took the time to snap in half first.

0B:60:05—DRESS FOR DINNER

Sarenzi transmatted to her apartment with no difficulties at all.

The Royal Seamstress was waiting for her before the platform. Fifteen ruffled skirts bowed out when she curtseyed, pressed outwards in all directions by three bending legs. Long and bare, the grasping toes of each foot just barely shoed past all the fabric.

Standing next to her were a pair of apprentices, hanging next to them was Sarenzi’s dress for the evening. Long, shimmering strips of aquamarine, lavender and white lay waiting for the slightest breeze to send them aloft, held in check by an aquarium’s worth of sea-glass from her native world.

“I didn’t know where to put it, Your Highness,” said the Seamstress. “I’m told your upstairs was off-limits for the evening.”

“It looks marvellous. I apologise for any confusion, and for keeping you so long.” Sarenzi stepped from the platform. “The day is not going quite as planned. Fortunately, there’s still just enough time for a fitting.”

A truly dreadful time followed as the Seamstress had her model the dress, made numerous measurements and marks, and gave countless instructions to her underlings that Sarenzi really couldn't care less about.

Every moment of it spent dreaming of the information yet to be revealed on those Intelligence Branch documents.

Unable to do anything but stand and be prodded, utterly in the hands of others, the first slivers of doubt, the very first in many a year, began to whisper their way into her mind. Had her timing been as precise as it had needed to be? Had she covered every angle? Foreseen every complication? Coerced all the right people into silence? Had she even obtained what she had put so much effort towards obtaining? How could she ever know, if she was trapped like this with her arms out and hands unable to touch anything that she needed to control?

Just when she could endure no more, her ledger bleeped. "Hand that over to me! Please!"

It was Ailo, freshly back at his post from his misadventure with the Doctor. "*My Princess?*"

"Yes?"

"You asked to keep you informed of any change in the status of the Human known as the Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"He's just been spotted trying to break into the Royal Seamstress's Office in the Crafting Rondure."

"What?" Both women shouted. Sarenzi signalled the lesser to be silent. "He's just gone from tourist to trespasser. Have him detained, by the usual men. I'll see to this personally."

"A'yup. Ailo out."

“You stay here,” she told the Seamstress, as she wrestled her way out of the gown and handed it to the apprentices to do with it as they pleased. “I’ll resolve this matter personally.”

“But it’s *my* office!”

The complaint went unanswered.

For Sarenzi, it had been a hurried run from the transmat to the Seamstress’ door. This time in a long coat and short pants, the easiest and closest things in her dressing room that she could put on. But made it to the door she did. Sarenzi composed her fronds back into regal order, licked her eyeballs clean and bright, and opened the door.

The Doctor was seated at the large nashaliwood desk to the back of the room. His feet crossed atop it. He was flanked by guards who, like Ailo, belonged to her. He didn’t seem to know he was a captive. Focused as he was on picking something out of his scarf until he noticed her. “Hello, Princess! Lovely to see you again. I came here for a bit of sizing up. You?”

“You’re a long way from any ship, Doctor.” She walked smoothly forward, tail sweeping languidly behind. “And now apprehended in an area quite clearly posted ‘For Use Of Royal Staff Only’.”

“What? Apprehended? *Me?*” Holding hat to head, the Doctor bolted to his feet. Baulking at the sight of the guards to either side of him as though noticing them for the first time. “By them? *Nooooo!* You have me all wrong! You see, what happened was I broke into this room and came right over here to somebody else’s desk and pushed that silent alarm button down there. Then I simply waited to see who would turn up. It just so happens that these fine fellows arrived ahead of you.” His eyes became noticeably larger, then.

But Sarenzi refused to let him flirt his way out of this. “I trust you found the speed of our response satisfactory?”

“Yes, yes, very impressive. But imagine my surprise to learn this room isn’t being watched by royal staff, but rather a member of the royal family!” He tapped the side of his nose with a wink. “I think that’s very interesting. Don’t you think that’s very interesting?” He sidled over towards the guardsman to his left. Close and conspiratorial, he asked, “How about you, *hmmm?* I can’t be the only one.” The Doctor kept his eyes bored into the guard’s as he spoke, somehow preventing the Lizard from noticing that he was circling around him on his way past the desk.

Sarenzi herself stepped forth to block the path to escape. The guards only lost another step or two in surrounding him.

“I suspect you know your way around palaces enough to know where you’re headed next?” she asked.

Every trace of glee fled from the Doctor’s face. “Ah. Well. I expect it will be very dark and far away from prying eyes.”

“Quite.” It took all of her considerable training in courtly manners to resist the smirk that wanted to breach her lips so very badly.

“I can’t wait!” With bombastic flair, the Doctor threw a length of scarf over his neck, and bowed deeply with hat in hand. “Your Highness.” He maintained the lowly gesture as he backed away out of the room. Once outside, he rose and snapped at the guards to follow along. “Chop! Chop! Never keep a prisoner idling! Oh, never mind! There are some more of you out here! Ta ta!”

Rarely before had the Princess seen a wider smile.

And then he was gone behind a pair of uniformed backs.

She allowed herself a quiet sigh of relief, masked under the sound of the escort’s footfalls. The bothersome man couldn’t make any more trouble for her from behind a force cage.

Could he?

0B:45:10—FINALISE MENU

The apprentices were still re-seaming the dress when Sarenzi returned. She shut the door to her study, leaving them behind.

As she sat back down to the desk, she spared a thought for the multitudes—staff, guests, pilots, the rest—that she'd blackmailed to provide the funds for this operation. Largely to wonder how many of them might have refilled their coffers for future plunder. Tomorrow could be spent harvesting new marks from the sniffers she had scattered throughout the complex. Locals that would no doubt see a lot of foot-traffic once the Gala attendees had had their fill of public frivolities and split up to pursue after-parties and private pleasures. But, for now, what remained of her personal time belonged to her greatest prize.

She unspooled the whole of the sniffer's bounty into her desk's hidden computer. The monitor showing its contents were organised both by topic and by date, as well as a whole subfolder devoted to updated security clearance codes. *'A small fortune in bribes well spent!'*

A test of the quality of goods was in order. She's long known what that test would be: using those access codes to invisibly backdoor into the Communications Hub, currently a great distance clockwise and seven levels beneath her apartment, and change a few names and source-idents on some recent communiqués.

Namely, her own with that of Aelmot Chendhah.

When the investigation into the stable's engineering failure ran its source, his electric footprint would be all over the ransom message Engineer Yanjodl had endured.

You might get through questioning with merely a ding on your reputation. You might even make it out of the dungeons in time for the closing ceremonies. But when the Dust Rats send their assassin, that will settle the matter.

It was Aelmo's voice the pawns had heard, after all, thanks to the voice masker. And his DNA all over the gifts given to ply their services as kidnappers. In all their talks, the naïve fool had never realised she was recording his voice patterns and biometrics later use.

I'll speak well of you at dinner. And your trial.

Several long minutes passed in silence as she waited for the walls to come crashing in on her scheme. Time spent watching the Crystal Garden glide beneath her balcony, and the many rondures behind it coming closer. The final closing of the Gala configuration. The defensive shields would soon be raised, doubled and tripled over one another for the closeness of the tactical rondures that generated them.

The fashionably late guests streaked in, their vessels leaving multicoloured contrails, an image she had always found haunting and beautiful, both. Those vessels would one day fly her colours. She was never more sure of that than the moment when she let out a breath, assured that if anyone had discovered her espionage then they'd have already come for her.

All the worry from before, the tension that had only built up since she saw the Doctor last, slithered out of her body and mind both. She had indeed gotten away with it all!

"Haaa-ba!" Nervous laughter became stronger and bolder and then cut dead silent as she focused on her task and dove onto the dossiers.

Waves of information crashed up against her eyes. Names. Places. Predictions of behaviour. Economic forecasts. Connections she had only guessed at before, some quite incorrectly. Countless things that the Queen's subject governments had failed to keep from her. It would take days to go through it all, weeks to formulate stratagems based upon the information, and years to put those plans into motion.

In the short term, she could use titbits of information to further her standing with the Queen. Show an insight that would bring her the final

tier of candidates to succeed her. For the price of a single ally, she would step above all of her rivals. She dove into the reading, her ambitions solidifying with every pilfered word.

A notice from the Royal Guard’s dispatch server—which she kept running on one screen—informed her that Aelmot had been taken into custody.

That took less time than I thought it would. Oh, and they’ve placed Yanjodl into protective custody, too. And there it is! A red-level contact-hunt for anyone on staff with ties to the Dust Rats with poor Aelmot’s name on the communication lines.’

Her smile turned to a frills-hide lurch of shock when she noticed the timestamp on the notice. A short bout of cursing later, she was tapping up the Grand Kitchen.

It was Lord Chef Elgolærle who answered.

“Sorry to call so late, Lord Chef,” she said. “I am regrettably detained. There’s some nonsense going on with the transmats on my end. Will it be alright if I conduct the final inspection over comms?”

“No need, Highness. The Royal Dessert Inspector just came through here. He said it all looked very scrumptious and not at all underhanded. An odd sort of fellow. He very much enjoyed the frissimon tarts.”

“Royal Dessert Inspector? I’ve never heard of such a thing! Who was... Oh, don’t tell me. No, tell me!” She could hardly be surprised by the description of said ‘inspector.’ And yet, she was. Rage boiled in her blood vessels, bringing out unsightly blemishes in her eye stalks! To have found out about the interloper’s escape from a cook of all people! “Honestly, do I have to do everything myself?”

“Highness?”

Sarenzi waved her comm off and returned to her new access codes. She found the ones that would allow her to plant an all-points-bulletin directly into the Royal Guard Command algorithms:

Priority Alert: Guardsmen not otherwise occupied are hereby ordered to pursue escaped prisoner. Tall, humanoid, dark hair, long nose, answers to Doctor. Forged invitation to Gala. Was apprehended for trespass in Royal rondures. Escaped custody. Presumed hostile intent. Last seen in Royal Kitchens wearing groundman's garments and a long scarf. Do not detain. SHOOT TO KILL.

If she knew the Royal Guard after fifteen years, odds were good someone would listen to that last part. She sent Ailo a few coded transmissions to make doubly sure of it. Then went back to cramming every last spec of data that she could before the Gala.

0E:0C:00 RECEIVING LINE

Not a word of the alien reached the Princess-Adjunct throughout the remainder of her preparations. Her servants buzzed around her, strapping her back into the Gala costume and waving jewellery selections in her face. Her political advisors barked last-minute reminders of which topics not to broach to which guest and which topics to make sure of hitting with others. But her eyes and ears wandered with increasing urgency to the communication holos which fed in news from her study. All of which—private, official, and coded so not to be recognised as hacked—remained silent.

Not a single word.

Why had no one found the Doctor?

“All you have to do is get through dinner,” she reminded herself on a strangely long walk to the transmat. “Just walk in and put on the best show of your life.” No more plans to execute, no more covert collections or razor-thin margins of scheduling. “Just sit and make the best of what you have.”

“Which is quite a lot, if I do say so, Highness,” her valet beamed, making her realise she’d spoken out loud.

With a final adjustment to one of her necklaces, he bid her good luck and personally hit the button that sent her to the Grand Banquet Hall’s Royal Mezzanine.

The platform ran half the length of the vast receiving room floor populated by twenty long lines of men and women and the like—nearly one hundred in each—waiting to be received by one of the resident heirs-in-training. A twenty-first line, running behind and parallel to the others, was in process of being met by the Queen herself.

An ensconced symphony played Sarenzi down from the platform as she and her fellow Adjuncts walked the ornate stairways that brought them to the groupings that they were to play host to.

Military veterans saluted their presence. Others bowed.

Sarenzi’s group comprised the far end of the third line from the right, and her reading had focused on those assigned to be standing within.

Near its front, in draping rolls of periwinkle and crème, was the Grande Pomp of Olvonpyso Double-Minor. Whose infidelities with the Duchess of the Planaxa Mists, if carefully exposed, could plunge a thousand worlds into war.

Not far off from the Duchess herself was Rogolé Shendagg, Senior Vice-Chairbeing of the Nynax Corporation. Whose black-market arms connections, through which he maintained a strangle-hold over his board of directors, could be the key to settling said war in ways that redrew the galactic map in the Cluster’s favour.

Any of several people she saw next could be coerced into complicity with her aims in the course of that war or swept aside as impediments, depending on what she had yet to discover within their dossiers.

To say nothing of the countless lesser worlds who could never dream of sending representatives to this most elite event. Worlds starving for the attention and beneficent hand of a leader who would kindly step in on their behalf. To save them from the conflicts that would soon be whittling away at their stronger neighbours, and mould them into a new elite that would owe their strength, and give their allegiance, to her and her alone.

In the ruffling of every over-starched skirt that curtseyed before her, and every clink of boots that snapped to attention as a male mouth kissed her hand, she heard their voices chanting her name. “*An-en-kan! An-en-kan! An-en-kan!*”

The smile she greeted each guest with was genuine, even if the source of her pleasure was not.

She even managed to keep her smile on her face when she saw *him* standing in her lot.

The Doctor had given up the hat, and had surrendered his travel clothes for something almost presentable. A black felt jacket, lined in red, with red waistcoat and a frilly white shirt that leaked past the cuffs. Though the outfit cried out for a cape, he still wore a long scarf that ran down to the bottom of dark-grey pants. This one, a mix of reds and purples.

A furtive glance at her ledger as she moved her way closer along the line confirmed that, yes, the Doctor was an expected guest and had been all along. One who had, apparently, without anyone noticing, switched places.

He'd gone from a space far to the left to end up nearer to her.

But how?

How had the Guards missed him? How could she alert them without later having to answer how she knew about the all-points or the kill order? She looked about for any of the Guards on her payroll and saw only the members of the Queen's personal retinue. All of them, like Queen Escelle Bowuen Ualyn Kamlente-Jast IX herself, were six-limbed natives of the

planet Phlonz. Broad and bullish. None of them armed with anything that could do more than stun, even the lectroswords on their golden belts.

There was nothing to do, yet, but play the whole thing off and keep a wary eye towards this inexplicable creature. She offered his hand to him for the customary exchange. “I see you resolved the little ‘misunderstanding’ in the Seamstress’ office, Doctor?”

“Hmm? What? Oh, yes, yes.” Forgetful eyes barely looked at her as he shook her hand. Apparently interested in something going on just behind her. She resisted the itch to look until she was well past him. When she twisted an eyestalk to investigate, there was nothing there of note. Only another receiving line. More aliens being gladhanded by one of her fellow Adjuncts.

If anyone among that bunch recognised the Doctor, they did not show it.

0E:C6:60 DINNER AND ENTERTAINMENTS

The Queen completed her introductory toast, and Sarenzi heard none of it. She clapped and she sat when the others did, at the head of her table with her back to Her Majesty.

Sixty tables were laid out ahead of the Queen’s in five rows of twelve, each seating thirty or so persons. The table belonging to the Queen was many times longer, but only seated the Queen and her favoured quests alongside one edge of the table.

Behind them all, the raised stage, soon to play host to the evening’s performers, lay dormant behind curtains of shining electrum.

It was customary that the politicians performed first at such austere events. As head and host of her table, it was her charge to keep the

conversation going. She faked her way through a round of introductions, and into an opening bit of fluff to accompany the first course.

Slowly and deliberately, she left more of the conversational duties to the Junior Adjunct at the other end of the table.

Sarenzi couldn't bear to take her eyes off the Doctor for more than a few moments at a time.

He was seated near the further end, and he seemed to have lost all his previous vigour. Speaking too low as to be heard over the general din of nearly a thousand talking mouths, keen on keeping to the small group of people around him and his eyes strictly off of her. It was maddening, to be ignored like this! And worse of all, to be left in the dark as to what he was saying!

Fortunately, she came prepared for such matters. Well before she purchased the sniffers from one of the Dust Rats' rivals, she'd concocted her own means of covert observation. Her frond-stalks were each embellished by rings of precious metal, two of which housed aural amplifiers. The one she activated she directed the Doctor's way with a few carefully measured rolls of her finger.

In that moment the Doctor was, without a care given to decorum, was leaning over his high-backed seat. Addressing one of the aliens in the group he'd been looking over previously. This one was tall and pale-skinned, with a succession of brightly-coloured bone crests atop his head.

She did not know his face, but she recognised the name the moment it left the Doctor's lips.

“Baanto Ix! Greatest countertenor and tenor and baritone singer of his generation! I'm a great admirer of your talents. I have a feeling your performance tonight will be one you'll be remembered for! One of many, of course...”

Sarenzi took time while the other answered to address a particular question her junior associate raised.

“Oh, is Aelmot not present?” she asked. “He was supposed to be helping my dear friend Prince-Adjunct Mnerloiut over at his table. He did call me earlier today. Now I think of it, he might have been nervous about something? First Gala Jitters, I imagine.”

Then, went right back to the conversation she cared about.

The amplifier rattled, *“So sorry. I forget myself sometimes, and I’m so used to having someone else around to remind me. Hello, I’m the Doctor... Oh, you’ve heard of me?”*

Sarenzi kept up the chatter, but the words were forgotten soon as they left her mouth.

“... And do you know that I’ve tried to get into every one of your concerts? But the tickets were always sold out before I could get one. Blame it on the Kerblam Man, I say! You get what you pay for when you don’t sign on to the premium service...”

Course after course came to sate people’s appetites. The Doctor merely picked up each bowl or plate and turned back to keep talking with a fascinated Ix.

“... You’re so hard to get in touch with outside of a performance setting. I hesitate to use the word ‘recluse’. It brings with it connotations of callousness. A miser clutching at his coins in the dark is a ‘recluse.’ A villain scheming away in their lair is a ‘recluse’...”

Serenzi ate, but she couldn’t be bothered to taste her food. Nor acknowledge those who served it to her, regardless of the little voice that chided her about mainlining her image as a woman for the people.

“... Oh, yes, indeed. When I discovered that you’d be attending tonight’s soiree, I couldn’t set the coordinates fast enough! Such a pleasure it is to finally meet you!”

Something that smelled of soup was beneath her nose. She found the spoon without looking at it.

“... That reminds me of something my good friend, Jamie McCrimmon, said to me during a visit to the Pleasure Moons of Pakros...”

Klunk! Something hit Sarenzi's teeth and made her wince aloud in pain.

She looked down, expecting to have bitten her spoon, and saw sitting within it a blackened half-circle of metal. Dead lights ran its edges, and the flat end was gnarled and infested with severed wires.

She was looking at one half of the transmat router that she had thrown away to be crushed by Jastom VII's atmosphere.

Someone gasped in disgust. The Princess-Adjunct looked upward to see someone else had experienced much the same event, though whatever was in their spoon was smaller.

To her frond-shaking concern, she realised that several others at her table were fishing trash out from their bowls. And the other tables, too. All of the other tables, if the sudden rise in voices calling out for waiters meant anything. The woman sitting next to the man the Doctor held in two disgusted fingers something dark-grey and many-circled and covered in clumps of freshly-torn dirt that had gone to mud.

She knew its shape at once. It was one of her data sniffers.

Sarenzi made herself look back to the Queen's table. All the highest dignitaries of the Jasminean Cluster were looking, slack-jawed at the thing hovering above a silver platter covered in garnish greens. A twelve-sided shape about the size of a grown man's head, circled in fan-shaped blades on eight facts, the top and bottom connected to threaded pipes that had been shorn away from something larger.

An anti-mass rotor? Not *the* anti-mass rotor, surely!

The Queen held in her hand, dripping wet, the omni-pad. Its screen blinking a wild conflagration of squares. All three of the Queen's eyes were focused back on her. Both mouths flat as gravestones.

"What kind of sick joke is this?" Sarenzi asked aloud, throwing her bit of dross onto the floor. She crushed it underfoot, and immediately felt a stab of pain in one of her fronds. The one with the listening device wrapped

around it. “*Aaaaauubhh!*” Stabs of feedback assaulted her skull and the only way to free herself of it was to throw her spy away as well.

When the ringing in her head was gone, Sarenzi began to hear voices. Dozens or more, electronically distorted, their words coming through each of the sniffers.

“Put another ten chits on Nabay to win.” “Not tonight, I’m too tipsy—” “Yes, tonight!” “Pappo! Mammo’s taking me to see Gran-dan and Gran-mam!” “I’m not asking much. And who’s going to know?” “I just need a little more, to get me over the shakes—” “We’re not supposed to be doing this.” “Her brother’s in the Dust Rats! Can you believe it?” “I don’t care! Just make it happen!” “What are the ‘bugs going to do? Fire me for whippin’ ‘em too hard?” “Just hope that snake Sarenzi never hears about this—” “Where is she, Yan? Where is our baby?” “Sarenzi.” “Something’s not right with her smile.” “Sarenzi, please. I’m begging you...” “Sarenzi...” “Sarenzi...”

As more sniffers entered the chorus, the choices became an intangible mass of accusation. All of it roared out from the pad in the Queen’s hand, which she handed to one of her Guards. People were staring at her. More were looking about. Being nudged her way by those next to her, until at last the room that had gone deathly quiet and one thousand sets of eyes or more were bearing down on her in a room.

And hers shot lectrobeams at the Doctor. “*You! You did this!*”

“And me.” The voice came from beside Sarenzi’s table, and she knew it well. She turned around to see, wearing the smart black-and-silver suit of the dinner-service staff, the two-tone face of Aelmot Chendhah. His hair slicked back to complete the waiter’s disguise. His spots were nearly black with hate, a near-match for his eyes. “You’ve given me a lot of good advice of the years, *my friend*, so here’s some for you. The next time you try to frame two people in the same day, make sure they’re put in different cells.”

She lurched from her seat to grab hold of her betrayer, fingers hooked to claws out his eyes or tear out his throat. Whichever she could get ahold

of first! But her arms were taken by ones stronger than her own. the Queen's Guard began pulling her away. First two warriors, then three, and then a whole cluster. They lifted her clean off the floor as she howled raw her rage. She fought and she screamed and she kicked and it meant nothing.

The tables, the dining hall, drew away from the scene to the cadence of a double-time march.

All of her work and dreams shrank away with them, while diminishing faces continued to stare at her. Looks of shock replaced one after the next with sneers of contempt, piteous frowns, and bright smiles of sadistic glee.

Only the Queen's face remained stoic, until it could no longer be seen at all behind closing doors.

The last thing she heard, before her glorious future became a murdered past, was the voice of the Doctor. Deep and booming. Unavoidable, but directed in the way of the performer Baanto Ix. "I find it sometimes takes a great deal of effort to meet truly interesting people."



In dedication to

Dean Stockwell (1936-2021)

Long before I became a Whovian, I was a Leaper.

THE SIN EATERS



By Ken Colliver

It all started when a woman in distress met a man under pressure.

The year was 1791, New York to be exact. And on one unsuspecting evening, Ms Maria Reynolds was mistreated by her husband. Beaten, cheated, and abandoned with barely enough cash to last her the week. At least, that's how her story went. A smartly dressed Congressman was moved by the poor woman's tale and offered her a loan of his own spare cash. Alexander Hamilton was his name, after all what better person to turn to for financial aid than the Treasury Secretary? The sleep deprived gentleman needed something to take his mind off his congressional responsibilities. He had spent a week of self-isolation in his lonely office and the bags under his eyes made him look older than he was. After hearing her tragic tale, he offered to accompany Ms Reynolds home. It was only a block away. And so, after a pleasant walk through the warm summer night of colonial New York, the two strangers arrived.

"You're too kind, sir," she softly thanked Hamilton.

Before he could head home back to his desk, Miss Reynolds escorted him into her home, into her bedroom.

The quiet night gave way to the vibrant morning, as Alexander exited the house of the seductive stranger that persuaded him to stay. His head was filled with regret.

How could I do that to my beloved, Eliza? He thought to himself, walking home in last night's clothes, wanting this sordid night to be forgotten by all involved.

Little did he know of the spectre that walked into our dimension through a blinding bright tear in reality. What emerged was a translucent, shadow-like being. The shape of a dark and distorted imitation of a human. Its face was a blank, silver canvas. Despite having no visible eyes, it intensely gazes upon Mr Hamilton from afar. The subtle tilt of its head indicated that not only did it know what he and Ms Reynolds were doing together, but it was also actively, silently judging him for it. Especially as one night of regret became a regular pastime for Mr Hamilton.

25th August 1798.

Sure enough, word had spread about Hamilton's misdeeds. Not the affair itself, rather, but the money Alexander had used to keep it secret. Word had been spread by Hamilton's political rivals and the newspapers that supported them. A Treasury Secretary using the people's tax money for his own shady affairs; what attention-seeking journalistic rag wouldn't want to run a story where the headlines write themselves that well? Eventually, Alexander, in an attempt to clear his name of embezzling government funds, published an editorial admitting to his affair with Maria Reynolds. How he used his own money to pay her husband, James, to keep quiet about it after he threatened to expose Hamilton himself.

It'd been a year since Hamilton published that pamphlet, and his reputation hadn't recovered since. A pariah in his hometown, an embarrassment to his political party, with a broken marriage left in the aftermath.

On one quiet night, the lonely Hamilton walked home from another crushing day at work, back home to an unloving household. He wore a dark, bottle-green jacket with frill cravat and a cream-coloured vest piece suit, most common to a man of wealth such as him. And yet before he

could unlock his front door, something emerged from the wooden surface. An expressionless face leered at the startled man. The ghost-like being phased through the door as if it was emerging from underwater. Its face was coated with a reflective chrome that stood out amongst the figure's dark, shadow-like form.

“What—what are you?” Hamilton asked whilst frightfully pacing backwards.

The ghostly being had no mouth and yet it spoke: “I can offer you a pardon,” it whispered lightly and compassionately.

Hamilton looked back perplexed at the being's vague gesture.

“I can offer you a pardon. We can offer your forgiveness,” it added. “All you have to do is take my hand.”

The being's dark, yet translucent hand was laid out before the disgraced congressman, as if it was offering him to take something that wasn't actually there. Not sure what to make of this situation, Hamilton gathered himself enough to approach this ghostly being. Hesitant, but curious.

At that same moment, before Hamilton's hand could touch the newly arrived stranger, the man found himself tackled to the ground by a tall man in a rugged leather jacket.

“That was a close one, wasn't it?” said the deep-voiced stranger.

The two men started to pick themselves up, Hamilton seemed displeased with being shoved to the ground without consent.

“*What is the meaning of this?*” Alexander demanded.

“Not the best introduction, I know,” said the other man, grinning like a schoolboy whilst brushing the dirt off himself. “But when I see someone in need, I can't help myself.” He rambled apologetically. “I'm the Doctor, by the way,” the stranger said as Hamilton hesitantly shook the hand of the ecstatic stranger.

Alexander gave a stern look to the man who just knocked him over. The man had very short hair and wide ears. His outfit was all black and simple—a black, leather jacket and trousers with a plain green t-shirt underneath. Hamilton couldn't make heads or tails of the man's wardrobe. The design was too basic to be a man of wealth, yet he thought the leather-hide coat seemed unlike anything worn by the common folk of his time.

The two men turned their attention to the spectre looming in front of Hamilton's house, more of their translucent form was further phasing itself through the door.

The Doctor gazed with fascination at the silver-faced being with immense curiosity. "Oh, that is interesting."

"Excuse me for asking, but do you know what this thing is?" Hamilton asked.

"Nope," said the Doctor. "I was hoping if you could help me understand what's going on here."

Hamilton didn't need to say a word, the Doctor could tell he was just as clueless of that being's origins as he was.

"That said," the Doctor added. "I do know one thing about that creature." His face turned serious with caution, his brow narrowed at the American man. "It's here for you, Alexander Hamilton."

The two men watched as this incorporeal being duplicated itself into seven different versions of itself, like a celled organism splitting, multiplying, spreading. A battalion of itself.

"*Run!*" the Doctor yelled at the top of his lungs, dragging the helpless Hamilton down the street. The seven identical beings drifted after them like jellyfish in the depths of the ocean, flowing past the houses like a leaf on the breeze. The two men dashed down the street, the Congressman following the lead of the man in the leather jacket.

"*Where are you taking me?*" asked the American.

“Listen to me, Alexander,” the Doctor turned back to say. “These beings are not from your world.”

Hamilton, who was just barely keeping up, heard this and didn’t even question the stranger. He was an enlightened man, after all. “Of course these demons aren’t from around here. No being could walk through doors like that!”

The Doctor led Hamilton to a clearing in the centre of town, where a blue, wooden box sat between a tavern and tailor shop. It was a tall item with white glowing windows and a black strip sign on each side of the top of the box. ‘Police Public Call Box’ it read in bright yellowish white lettering. It was way past sunset and the town was quiet and the foot traffic had ended for the night. The two stopped to catch their breath, looking over their shoulders for their mutual pressures.

“So, what do we do now? Mr...?”

“Just the Doctor.”

“And from your accent, it’s clear you’re not from around here either,” the American said inquisitively. It may have been years since the Americans won their independence from the British, but people like Hamilton, who fought in the war for said freedom, haven’t forgotten what a Brit sounded like.

“*Look out!*” Hamilton shouted, as the seven spectres surrounded the two men, coming from all sides of the street moving closer and closer to the centre where the two men stood. “Doctor. You said you came to help. What do we do?”

The Doctor took a key from the inside of his jacket and dashed inside the police box.

Where did this box even come from? Hamilton thought to himself as it wasn’t there on his way home from work. *Police... call box? What do these words mean in the context of this sign?*

“*Where are you going?*” Hamilton demanded, not sure how hiding would help in this situation. If those incorporeal creatures can go through a wooden door, they could just as easily reach him inside this wooden box. The floating spectres drew closer, their arms raised in unison and pointed at Hamilton who, lacking any other ideas, rushed inside after the Doctor.

Alexander’s face formed a look of amazement and bewilderment once he entered the TARDIS.

The room was a hemisphere-shaped space with a size that rivaled his own house. From top to bottom were rows of hexagonal glass lights that grew smaller and smaller as they reached the dome ceiling, there was a faint mechanical hum that echoed throughout the room. The eighteenth-century Earthman was blown away by the impossibility of what he was witnessing. He didn’t even register the Doctor asking him to close the doors, which he hastily did.

The beings were shut out, but Hamilton’s nerves were still on edge. The main doors were painted wood, much like the doors of his own house but without the framed windows; he stared at the double doors expecting the creatures to finally grab him.

After the doors were closed, all seven of the identical beings on the outside tried to phase their hands through the wooden surface but each found themselves repelled by a shield of bright energy engulfing the TARDIS like a layer of translucent skin.

No matter how hard they forced themselves. Hamilton listened to the screeching entities outside, frustrated as their target stood out of range and out of sight. He was perplexed about how easily this thing could move through his front door without opening it, and yet was struggling to get through the police box doors, even after splitting itself into different

beings. Despite the confusion, Hamilton took a brief moment of relief and safety, even if he had no clue on where he was exactly.

“We’re safe here, right?” he hesitantly asked.

The Doctor, who stood by the console in the centre of the room, pulled a small screen that rotated around the console to where he was standing.

“So far, yeah.” he replied, full of himself.

For the first time since encountering the first of these seven beings, Hamilton’s nerves were relaxed and was starting to take in his newly found impossible surroundings. Hamilton moved around the yellowy orange room, his feet lightly treading across the metal grated floor, examining every mismatched detail on the six-sided TARDIS console.

The impossibility of it all continued to rattle inside the poor man’s head; the Doctor could tell just by looking in the corner of his eye.

“You alright?”

“Yes. I’m fine... I’m fine.” Alexander replied in a daze. “It’s just... What is this place?”

“It’s called a TARDIS,” the Doctor explained.

He had seen the confused look on Hamilton some many times on various souls in his adventures in Time and Space, all asking the same thing.

“And yes, it is bigger on the inside,” he smiled.

Outside, the seven identical spectres had surrounded the blue box in a circle formation.

They found themselves unable to fully go through the double doors on the front. The TARDIS was able to prevent almost anything from getting through. the Doctor knew this.

However, the creatures, in one united gesture of force, plunged their arms into the TARDIS all at once.

Back inside, the human and the Time Lord turned to the sound of cracking energy coming from all around them.

Whatever these creatures were, their raw power was just enough for them to force their translucent hands through the exterior shell in the same way a person would put their hand through a sheet of thin fabric. Hamilton looked to see the Doctor's face had dropped, his eyes narrowed with concern and dread.

"You said, they wouldn't be able to get through," Hamilton said with fear.

"They shouldn't," the Doctor said with a perplexed sense of dread.

That was when the tolling of deep and a loud bell could be heard filling the room. *The cloister bell?! the Doctor* thought with much alarm as the bell rang once more and started repeating itself. *How was this thing doing that? No lifeform should be able to do that to a TARDIS. How powerful are these beings?* He wondered.

The room's bright lights started to flicker, the power systems being disrupted and assaulted by the attempts of the many copies of the creature seeking Hamilton. The TARDIS itself was fighting back to keep the creatures out, but that was when the lights went out completely.

"Oh no..." the Doctor said aloud, unsure on what to do next.

The image on the console screen faded and turned to glitching static. The two men rushed to see what was wrong. the Doctor instinctively hit the console a few times, hoping that'd fix the problem. The picture returned to show the singular spectre.

"*This doesn't concern you.*" It spoke through the TARDIS' communication systems with a domineering tone.

“I found him first,” the Doctor rebuffed.

“Is it in here?” Hamilton asked, nervously.

“Nope. It’s still out there, and it wants a word with us.”

The spectre repeated itself, addressing the Doctor. “*This doesn’t concern you. Time Lord.*”

The Doctor froze in place with a hard stare to the being on the monitor. Hamilton didn’t know what the term ‘Time Lord’ meant, but even he could tell that the spectre didn’t want to talk with the British stranger.

“You came looking for me, didn’t you?” Hamilton asked the otherworldly being, gently moving over to see the screen.

“*Mr Hamilton,*” the seven identical creatures all spoke in unison with one harmonic tone. “*We have come so far to offer you a pardon.*”

“Who am I addressing?”

The creature began speaking in a calm welcoming tone. “*We are beings of forgiveness. We deal in absolutes. We are eaters of sins.*”

This intrigued Hamilton, who was hooked on every word said by this angelic being.

“Hang on, you said you came here to offer this man a pardon. A pardon for what?” the Doctor said, demanding an answer.

The Sin Eater continued, “*You are a man of grand intelligence and determination, Alexander Hamilton.*” The voice of the speaking Sin Eater echoed throughout the console room. “*You fought for your country’s independence, the man who helped shape its laws and the economy of what will become one of the world’s most powerful nations.*”

The Doctor interjected, “I feel like there’s a ‘but’ somewhere in that sentence.”

The spectres’ glistening silver face turned to shadow. True shadow.

“*Your legacy is tainted with sin, Alexander Hamilton.*”

Alexander looked into the empty void of the Sin Eater's vacant face and saw the damning events of the past two years flash before his eyes. His nights of passion with Ms Maria Reynolds. The extortion letter from her abusive husband. The meltdown of his reputation that followed after his detailed public confession. Even the mix of sadness and contentedness from his beloved Eliza who heard the news for herself.

All these moments and more all came flashing before Alexander's eyes, years of moments relived within seconds.

The Doctor pleaded with the broken man. "Listen, whatever it's showing you, look away from it."

But Alexander couldn't look away. He couldn't bear to look at what he was being shown. the Doctor realised it was as if something was forcing him to keep contact, to stay in place and watch. These beings, on Earth and elsewhere, were marked. Physically forced to watch no matter how hard he cried for them to stop.

"Stop it. Whatever you're doing to this man, stop it right now!" the Doctor commanded.

Hamilton's torment continued regardless. "*Your reputation is destroyed by your adulterous ways. Your name is stained with disloyalty. This will be your legacy!*"

Hamilton was now free to move again. The vision of the past had ended. the Doctor went to comfort Hamilton, who fell to the metal floor, tears started rolling down his eyes.

"Oh, spirit... Why would you show me these terrible things I've done?" he asked, unable or unwilling to look back at this angel of punishment. "Are you here to torture me?"

The Sin Eater's tone returned to its original and calming demeanor. "*On the contrary, we can right these sins. Purify your tainted legacy.*"

The Doctor didn't buy it for a second. He didn't know what this thing was or what it really had plans for Mr Hamilton, but he knew it was lying out of its shiny face.

“Alex, don’t listen to it.”

But Hamilton was captivated by its heavenly dark voice, drawn to it.

“We can forgive your offences. We feed upon sins while erasing them from Time itself.”

It was that moment when something in the Doctor’s mind clicked.

“Alex—”

“Erase?” Hamilton asked curiously. “As if you’ll erase everyone’s memory of what I did?”

The Doctor subtly moved back to the console of his TARDIS, inputting some coordinates without trying to draw attention. He was ready to take off and leave.

“We’ll feast on your sins and remove them. That is, if you accept our offer,” the Sin Eater continued. *“If so, you will wake up in a world where you never met Ms Reynolds.”*

Hamilton, in an almost trance-like state, found himself... *compelled*. He slowly made his way to the doors.

“Everything you lost will be yours again. And all you have to do is let us in and take my hand.”

The Doctor watched Hamilton, and before the statesman could open the white wooden doors...

“Oh, no, you don’t!” the Doctor yelled, flicking the flight lever on the TARDIS console. The blue police box launched into an emergency take-off, fading away into the time vortex, leaving the Sin Eaters behind in America.

The TARDIS was already flying through Time and Space, all the while Hamilton demanded answers from this stranger. “What did you do?”

“Left those beings behind.”

Hamilton was still upset. “Take me back, Doc! I want to take the deal!”

“I can’t let you do that. It’s not safe,” the Doctor responded, more focused on piloting the TARDIS.

“Oh, I see how it is. You know that this creature can change the past. That’s why you’re here? Isn’t it?” Hamilton said, demanding an answer.

The Doctor paused. The first time he looked at Hamilton since the TARDIS took flight. “Yes, I didn’t know what this creature was, or how it could alter history. But yes, I did come to America to stop it from doing so.”

“Take me back, Doctor! *Now!*” Hamilton demanded once more.

“Just listen to me,” the Doctor snapped. “Because everything this Sin Eater is offering is entirely for its own gain.”

Hamilton was losing his patience with the Doctor, this strange man who just dashed in unannounced to make decisions about his life.

The Doctor barely moved a muscle as Hamilton screamed in his face. “*And how is rewriting my life so no one will see me as a cheating husband benefitting for that thing?*”

Without a change in expression the Doctor flicked a switch on the console.

The room briefly shook with a loud thud that bellowed throughout the console room. Wherever he was taking Hamilton to, the TARDIS had arrived.

“Take a look,” said the Doctor, pointing to the double doors, gesturing to him to go.

The TARDIS sat in the middle of a museum exhibit. It was shadowed in the cover of darkness, and all the visitors had gone home. Hamilton stepped out of the police box, perplexed about how this large wooden structure had moved to this strange new place.

Hamilton's head was full of new questions. *What is this place? How did the box get here? And where are those beings with the mirror faces?* the Doctor followed Hamilton out; with a flick of the wrist and a press of his sonic screwdriver, the lights came up. Now that the power was on, they could see various glass display cases of different sizes dotted around the large room.

“This is the Smithsonian History Museum in Washington DC,” the Doctor explained. “The year is currently 2015. Also, we need to be quick and quiet as we’ve technically broken in.”

The exhibit was about the American Revolution that gained the country's independence from the British monarchy. Hamilton recognised everything on display, caught in an array of nostalgia and mournful recollection. Mannequins wearing the uniform he and his fellow soldiers wore when they fought in the war, old guns rusting away behind glass displays. Maps, letters, and documents that were written by the man himself.

“Does any of this look familiar?” the Doctor leant against the side of the TARDIS.

“Of course” Hamilton bluntly replied, “I was there.” He began to recollect his old war days as if they were yesterday. “I fought along with Washington himself. We led the battle of Yorktown.” He said to himself, remembering his walk across the aftermath of the battlefield.

“On the day that ended the war,” noted the Doctor.

“The faces of the dead and injured never left my mind...”

The moment drew silence that felt longer than it actually was, the topic quickly changed.

“Speaking of Washington,” the Doctor pointed to a display about the American Founding Fathers. The people who Alexander worked alongside during and after the war to start this new nation. Washington, Jefferson, Madison and of course, himself.

He saw a portrait of himself back in his prime. His eyes were wide, his long-powdered hair was tied back and his painting saw him standing with confidence and determination. The portrait was painted not long after he was elected Treasury Secretary. But Alexander knew something was wrong, he saw his birth/death date on a small metal block of text that laid under the wooden frame of the painting.

“Alexander Hamilton. Born January 11, 1755—Died...” his voice shook. “*Died* July 12, 1781.”

The Doctor went to comfort the confused man.

“What is this? This is all wrong!” Hamilton proclaimed. “I met you *ten* years before the death date on that portrait.”

“I know.”

“I don’t understand, they claim they could change the past. This is what they do?”

The Doctor chimed in so he could calm Hamilton down. “Indeed, it is. They have seen your future, your whole life, and they’ve travelled back in time to find you.”

Time travel didn’t mean much to Hamilton, but he was well-educated and an exceptionally good listener. Enough to follow along with what the Doctor tried to tell him.

“So, if this spirit really can change events of the past” he started, “then all of this here is the future that will trail on afterwards?”

The Doctor was rather impressed. “Well observed, good sir.”

“Thank you.”

But then the Doctor’s mood turned from flattering back to cold seriousness.

“Like they said, they offer to remove the bad days of your life and they’ll make a brand-new future for you. Thing is, you just won’t be involved with it.” the Doctor comforted the American through this bad news in a

reassuring manner. “But that’s why I’m here. I saw the inaccurate dating on that wall and everyone here saw nothing wrong. That’s when I knew something was up, and I came to stop them.”

“I’m touched,” said Hamilton. “After what feels like a lifetime of being ridiculed by the press and disillusioned by my own family... The fact that some random stranger would come so far just to save me feels...”

“Surreal?” the Doctor offered, to which Hamilton agreed.

“Part of me feels like I don’t deserve your kindness, Doctor,” he admitted. “But I appreciate it all the same.”

The moment was cut short when a bright light suddenly emerged through Hamilton’s portrait. The Sin Eater had found them. It grabbed Alexander by coat and started dragging him through the portal it created to get to this time and place.

“No!” the Doctor yelled, determined to save this man.

He grabbed onto Hamilton’s arm, forcing in vain to wrestle control from the Sin Eater’s grasp. But the effort was for naught, as the two men were both dragged through the painting and into a portal to a different dimension.

The Doctor and Hamilton regained composure and balance as they found themselves in a strange new location. A blood red hallway with no start, nor an end point. Diverging pathways lined the hallway which in turn spawned even more pathways into infinity.

“What is this place?” Hamilton asked nervously.

The Doctor stared into the infinitely spanning plain. “No idea.”

“You said you took us to the future, so how did it find us?”

“The Sin Eater, or Sin Eaters, interchangeably, are temporal beings. They operate through chronomitosis. They can split their individual selves into multiples as a survival mechanism and back again.” Then a thought

struck him. “They must have left a residue when they punctured the TARDIS’s shell and followed the trail. But how...? There was nothing on the time path indicator...”

Despite his efforts to follow the words of his new friend Hamilton was left confused again.

“Look,” the Doctor explained. “All you need to know is that these things can travel to wherever they want in both Space and Time without even needing a capsule.”

“Like the flight of birds?”

“In a sense,” he conceded. “Birds cover vast distances under their own power where you’d have to take a horse. Simple, right?”

“I’m not so sure about that...”

Hamilton noticed a portal along the side of the path he and the Doctor were standing on. He then saw there was another one opposite. As far and wide as the infinite path stretched, it was lined by similar portals that hung on the wall like framed paintings. Neither Hamilton or the Doctor could go through, but they could peer into them. Windows into the sad lives of various people throughout Time and Space. Partners in broken marriages, addicts in financial and physical ruin, regretful convicts serving their time... All wallowing in their despair and regrets.

“You wanted to know how,” said the Doctor, “I believe that’s your answer.”

“What are all these?” Hamilton asked, looking at all the depressing lives on display.

“They’re called time windows. Gateways to different points in Time.” He realised during mid-explanation, “Oh, of course! Naff of me not to realise.” They clearly had your entire history in their possession and so searched through your life until they found us in twenty-first century Washington DC.”

Hamilton's brain was rattling to grasp the concept. Being as well-versed in history as he was, both culturally and politically, he grew up knowing a person's time on Earth as a one-way stream from birth to death. The Sin Eaters and the Doctor possessed unique ways of skipping back and forth through the history of the world like the pages of a book. It should have been impossible, unreasonable, yet here he was.

The man felt he was going insane trying to comprehend such concepts.

There was a whooshing sound close by, then the two were confronted by the Sin Eater that brought them there. Its face shining brightly against its dark body, floating in the empty corridor stretching into eternity like a ghost, silent and weightless.

"I presume this as being your domain?" the Doctor stood strong and defiant.

The Sin Eater was frustrated towards the Doctor's interference, "We told you, Time Lord, that this is none of your concern."

However, Its mood rapidly changed, mellowing when turning to the frightened American.

"Alexander Hamilton..."

"We seek only to redeem your soul," the Doctor rudely interrupted. "Yeah, yeah. We're not falling for your game anymore."

"That museum piece stated that I would die after meeting Ms Reynolds. How is that redemption?" Hamilton argued. "How does killing me atone *my* sins?"

"Your legacy will survive without damage," the Sin Eater reacted, indifferently. "The people who you wronged will no longer have any grievances to hold against you. And all your sins and failings stem from your night with Ms Mariah Reynolds."

And so, at that moment, the Doctor had finally figured out the meaning behind it all. Everything was clear. At least, to him it was. "This is its big

master plan. Much like the Weeping Angels of old, they remove beings, like you,” he said with much emphasis towards Alexander, “from their places of time so they can feed upon the potential.”

“Is this true?” Alexander asked the Sin Eater.

“We only seek to remove your sins and craft a new legacy from your rectified actions.”

The Doctor rubbed his face in frustration at the creature’s response. “Enough with the vague platitudes! I’ve seen the damage you cause, the damage you have caused to the timeline. You lot talk all high and mighty about saving people, when really all you’re doing is killing people just so you can gorge yourselves on the timeline and history you erased! Eat and purge!”

“We wish not to harm the human.” The Sin Eater stood in midair, unmoved and unflinching by the angry Time Lord. “All we ask of him is to decide whether we shall preserve his good name. But that is your choice, Mr Hamilton. Your sacrifice will preserve your good name.”

Despite everything, Alexander was tempted to shake the spectre’s hand.

Even after everything he has seen and heard today, he thought maybe life would be better for Eliza if she never knew about his adulterous nights away from home. He could spare his family the scandal by removing himself from the chain of events that has ruined all their lives.

“Don’t listen to it, Alexander. Don’t throw away your life like this!” the Doctor pleaded. “Didn’t you hear, it called it a ‘sacrifice’. Haven’t you sacrificed enough? You’ve done amazing things in your life. Think about the Smithsonian. You fought for your country and led them to victory. You helped build the foundation of a brand new country. You inspire the creation of one of the greatest musical soundtracks of all time!”

“Eliza...” Hamilton’s mind went to thinking about Eliza. His beloved.

The Doctor seized on the thought. “Yes! Think about your family. Your wife, your children, they need you. Don’t throw that all away. You still

have enough of a chance in your life to fix your mistakes, without these creeps.”

“She would be all alone, if I were to die in this timeline.” Hamilton realised.

“Yes, and your children?” the Doctor pressed.

Alexander thought about his children without a father. Surely, he couldn’t do that to them? Particularly given his own past of living without his own? After his life ran through his mind he had come to a decision.

“No deal!” Hamilton shouted at the Sin Eaters’ reflective face. “I have thought about your offer and I refuse.”

A smile grew on the Doctor’s face. The Sin Eater started getting angry, it needed to feed on sin to survive, and consenting participants is all it needed. “A deal *must* be made.”

“*Then take me in his place!*” the Doctor screamed, as Alexander went over to stop the fool. “Alexander, you’re too important to die at this point. Your country needs you, and soon your family will need you, too. History needs you.”

Hamilton was shocked. “You’d take my place? You’d do that for me?”

The Doctor, without hesitation, looked Hamilton right in the eyes and said, “I have to. And it’d be my honour to do so.”

Hamilton was stunned by this noble gesture.

The Sin Eater divided itself into its seven selves, each of them surrounding the Doctor.

“If you really do feed on people’s sins, then boy have you hit the jackpot!” the Doctor proclaimed, as Hamilton was whisked away back to his own time through one of the many time windows that lined the corridor they were standing in.

“Listen here, you lot!” he boasted. “I have lived a long, long life of many regrets. An infinite number of days I wish I could take back. And so, I give them all to you.”

The central Sin Eater confronted the Doctor, who looked into the spectre’s mirror-like face and the Sin Eater stared into the Doctor’s eyes, his very soul.

“That’s right. You can see my past, now look at it all. All the people I failed to save, the worlds that burned at my hand!”

The Sin Eater watched every sinful act the Doctor had committed throughout time and space, all happening right before its eyes. Every weakness. Every cruelty. Every moment of cowardice. The destruction of Skaro, the slaughter of Skull Moon, his time and battles in the Last Great Time War, the battle fleets devastated by the Oncoming Storm... And, lest he forget—the day he, the Doctor, activated the Moment on the Last Day of the Time War. Two mighty races of both Time Lords and Daleks wiped out in one swoop.

“So many sins. So much death. So much suffering at your hand!” said the Sin Eater with relish.

“Yep. They don’t call me the Oncoming Storm for nothing,” the Doctor casually replied.

“All you must do now, Time Lord, is to take my—”

The Doctor snatched the Sin Eater’s skeletal hand.

Red energy flowed from the Doctor’s body and into the Sin Eater. The glowing light of the Doctor’s regrets and misdeeds nourished the ghostly creature at first, but more and more energy filled the Sin Eater. The regrets, the lies, the mistakes, the horrors, the terrors, the savagery, the cynicism, the forces of negative energy that pooled into their own vile aspects. The transgressions that partitioned themselves off into their own selves for their hated power.

It was too overwhelming, even for a being as old and as powerful as the Sin Eater.

“*The death!*” it wailed.

It tried to absorb as much of the ancient Time Lord as it could, but it was visibly struggling.

The Doctor smiled in a gloating sort of manner. “What’s the matter? Don’t have the appetite for a sinner like me?”

The quorum’s satisfied hunger turned into an ever-growing sense of agony. They screamed louder and louder as they, and the Doctor, disappeared into a blindingly bright light.

And, at the prospect of a final peace, the Doctor was glad.

Back on Earth, 25th August 1798. Alexander Hamilton found himself where he was before, outside his house. His eyes recovered from a bright shining light.

Everything seemed to be as it was.

To the rest of the world, it was as if the Congressman never left. As if the Doctor never crashed into saving him from the angelic being of death. The confused man collected himself and looked for the Doctor, but he was nowhere to be found.

“He really did it,” Alexander said to himself.

He sacrificed himself for me. A man who never met me, who only knew of me by reputation as a... a politician and nothing more. He risked his life, nay his existence for me for nothing more but a sense of duty, if not justice.

At first Hamilton was disappointed to not find his saviour, but after all he had been through he was just grateful to be home again.

“If you’re out there, Doctor,” he said into the void, hoping that the Time Lord could somehow hear him. “Thank you.”

And so, Hamilton went inside his home, vowing to never speak of what had transpired, but to never forget the actions of that weird stranger who travelled across time and space to save him. And for that he was eternally grateful.

The year was 1801, Alexander Hamilton visited the grave of his recently deceased son Philip.

Philip was only 19-years-old.

The land was cold and silent, the air was as still as the folk buried six feet beneath the soil. Hamilton wasn't even fifty and yet his hair was bright grey as the winter sky.

The news of his son's passing hit the man both emotionally and physically. He walked through the cemetery and who did he see kneeling in front of the tombstone? Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, his ex-wife and Philip's mother.

The woman who cursed his name and their marriage after the public revelations of his night with Ms Maria Reynolds.

She was only a couple of years younger than he was and was wearing a dark winter dress. Hamilton stood behind her. She knew he was here but said nothing, not even addressing his presence, at least not verbally.

"I know I don't deserve you, Eliza, and I don't deserve your forgiveness," Hamilton said to his former lover, a tear forming around his eye. "But he was my son as well. And I would've traded my life for his. So just for a moment, let me stand by your side. And that would be enough."

She didn't say a word, but the tilt of her head was all Hamilton needed to know that he could stay.

On the other side of the frosted graveyard, there was a man in a weathered leather jacket. Short, cropped hair along with dark trousers and matching boots.

He stepped out of a blue wooden box that just appeared from out of nowhere, watching as Hamilton knelt by Eliza's side. This broken woman subtly took the hand of this lonely man. Neither of them said a word, just took in the solemn moment of mourning. Together.

Eventually, the two walked home together as clouds of gloomy rain started to form. But, throughout all that, the Doctor returned in his soon departing TARDIS knowing that, in the end, Alexander received the one thing he had been longing for.

Forgiveness.

GIRL OUT OF NOWHERE



By Tim Bradley

It's the Christmas season, and it's a very cold night.

Even though it wasn't snowing, people were likely to get frostbite.

On this cold night, it was two sleeps before Christmas Day.

But for Kevin, the holiday started off in a very strange way.

23:00—23rd December 2017

The Christmas holidays have come at last!

Kevin had entered his flat half an hour ago. He felt a sense of dread when he entered the flat. His last day at work before Christmas hadn't gone at all well. He liked co-worker Emily, but she wasn't really interested in him. Kevin wanted to ask Emily to the Christmas party, but his arch rival Mike got there first and asked Emily to the party instead. In the end, Kevin had to work on, doing maintenance work to the department's lighting systems.

It was a relief to be home—his world of peace. He shouldn't be sulking. Kevin had Christmas Eve to enjoy tomorrow. He was also looking forward to seeing his parents on Christmas Day at their house. They felt that he should move from his flat into a house, but he couldn't earn

enough for that. Being a mechanic and an electrical engineer, he wasn't highly paid.

He was sitting in an armchair in the living room. Kevin wasn't particularly hungry, so he opened a bottle of beer to drown his sorrows. An unusual occurrence, but today was a special occasion. There wasn't much on the telly. Just the usual Christmas entertainment. Kevin skipped through the channels before he switched the TV off.

In his solitude, Kevin pondered on the missed opportunity with Emily. It wasn't that the two were serious with each other. Emily was nice enough, but she was so focused in her world of clubbing and travelling the world that she barely noticed him. The worst thing was... Mike knew about Kevin's feelings for Emily. He had looked him in the eye and gone completely over the top of him. But did Kevin stand up to Mike? Not really.

Kevin wondered if he was ever going to find someone as pretty as Emily. He was so unlucky in love. He couldn't understand what prevented him from being otherwise. He was charming enough. He was sure he was handsome (he'd felt surefooted enough in that lie to believe it true). What was it that made his lack of confidence so overwhelming to prevent him going out with a pretty girl? He was a grown man, for goodness sake. Was old romance really dead? He pondered on this as he drank his beer before he realised it was empty.

At that moment, a blinding light flashed. Kevin blinked a number of times, startled out of his wits. He became more startled when he saw... A girl standing in the room! His living room! *Whoa!* Kevin wondered if there was something in his beer. But it was no apparition. She was real!

"Who—who are you?!" Kevin exclaimed.

Couldn't I say something better than that?

"I... I..." She was disorientated.

She collapsed.

Who knew what surprises to expect, especially during the Christmas season?

No girl would mysteriously appear in Kevin's flat, not without good reason.

He wondered what he should do next—he never experienced this before.

Instinct told Kevin to help the poor girl, something he shouldn't ignore.

01:00—24th December 2017

Kevin laid the girl on his sofa and placed a cushion under her head. He checked her pulse and was relieved to find it was steady. He didn't dare wake her, as he wasn't sure whether it would make things worse. He went to the kitchen to get a glass for her.

When he returned, he found the girl coming around, blinking a couple of times and taking in her surroundings. Kevin couldn't help notice there was an unearthly sense about her.

“W—Where...where am I?” the girl enquired.

He decided to start with something simple. “Hello. I'm Kevin. You appeared in my flat out of nowhere.”

“Does that happen often?” She still seemed a little disorientated.

“You tell me.”

“Oh!” The girl rubbed her head. “Is that...?” She tried to recollect things. “I must have been teleported down to Earth by accident, when aboard the Grinces' ship.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The girl looked at Kevin, taking him in for the first time.

She smiled and said, “It's a long story. Probably a bit complicated for you to understand.”

Despite being curious, Kevin decided to pass the glass over to the girl first. “Here you are. Drink this. It’s water. Hopefully it will settle your nerves.”

The girl took the glass from Kevin appreciatively. She had a sip first before she gulped down nearly half the glass. Once she had finished, she looked at Kevin.

“Thank you. You’re very kind. I needed that.”

Kevin smiled. Not even Emily was this gracious. A small flare lit up in his mind at that thought. Had she never said ‘thank you’? Really? That couldn’t be true...

He brushed it aside.

“So, what’s your name then?” he asked.

“Nyssa. My name’s Nyssa.”

Kevin found that name rather unusual. It sounded European. Was she Swedish?

“Well, Nyssa, it’s nice to have you here in my flat at Christmas time.”

Nyssa started to panic. “Christmas? Have I been out long? It’s not Christmas Day, is it?”

“No, no,” Kevin reassured her. “We are in the early hours of Christmas Eve but it’s not time yet for Santa to come round delivering presents on his sleigh.”

The girl seemed to remember something. “The Doctor! I must find the Doctor!”

“Doctor? Do you need a doctor? I can phone for one if you like...”

“No, no. He’s a friend of mine. *The Doctor*. He was trapped aboard the Grinces’ ship the last time I saw him. I must try and locate him. The Grinces’ invasion must have advanced significantly since the last time I

saw them... The transmat beam must have been delayed when I paired the interface..."

"Wait, wait," Kevin interrupted. "Slow down. Why don't you tell me everything that happened and maybe we can sort something out?"

"I told you, it's a long story."

"And it would probably be a bit complicated for me to understand. Yeah, I got that part. But I still would like to help. I don't know how you did it, but I'm willing to believe anything in order to help out a pretty girl." He blanched. "I mean... I hope you don't mind me saying that."

"Looks aren't everything," Nyssa answered, then she smiled. "But, I'm glad you're willing to help."

"So, why don't you give me a brief summary of what happened?" Kevin suggested. "I might be able to help you."

Nyssa considered for a moment.

"Alright," she agreed. "A brief summary."

Kevin listened as Nyssa told him about how she and the Doctor were travelling in their spaceship called the TARDIS. Kevin found it a challenge to get around the idea that this girl dealt with aliens and spaceships, but he went with it for now. Apparently, the TARDIS had detected a series of tachyon emissions emanating in Earth's orbit. Nyssa tried to explain what tachyon emissions were, but the description was lost on Kevin.

Once the Doctor and Nyssa began to investigate, they found a spaceship in Earth's orbit. Materialising inside the spaceship, the Doctor and Nyssa stepped out of the TARDIS to find it full of alien invaders called Grincies. *Grincies?* Kevin began to wonder. It was close to Christmas.

"These Grincies wouldn't be green by any chance, would they?"

"Yes, that's right," Nyssa replied. "How did you know?"

"Just a guess," he answered. "We have a folktale about green thieves at Christmas time."

Nyssa thought about Kevin's answer, but said nothing.

She went on to tell him that she and the Doctor had discovered that the Grincies were attempting to conquer Earth by stealing people from their time and place. They were going to do this on Christmas Eve. Kevin found this all too surreal. Stealing people before Christmas! It was a lot different from stealing presents from the Christmas tree.

Concluding her story, Nyssa explained that a struggle had occurred and she had accidentally got caught in a teleport beam when she ran over to one of the teleport pads aboard the Grincies' spaceship. It was active when one of the Grincies was using it. The last thing she remembered was seeing the Doctor in the clutches of the Grincies as he called out to her before she ended up in Kevin's flat. Darkness overtook her and she fainted on the floor.

Kevin took a moment to consider once Nyssa had finished her story.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "Just...wow!"

"Do you believe me?"

Kevin looked at Nyssa. "I don't know. You seem honest enough."

"You wonder if I'm playing to your whims? A figment of your imagination?"

"Of a beautiful girl....?"

Nyssa drew a long breath. "Kevin..."

That was it. He made up his mind.

"You're real," he said.

"How can you tell?"

"No apparition would have been able to put so much careful reproach into two syllables. You're the real thing."

"Oh." She smiled, trying not to look amused.

“I can’t explain how you got into my flat by any other means. A teleport from a spaceship to my flat on Earth would fit the bill.” He thought for a moment. “But why would you end up in my flat of all places? Why am I so special?”

“It was probably a random teleport for the Grincies aboard their spaceship. You were probably meant to be transported to their spaceship whilst you were sitting in your flat.”

Kevin felt anxious. “So, I could be teleported up to the Grincies’ spaceship at any moment?”

“I must find the Doctor,” Nyssa insisted. “I’m very worried about him. Whilst in the Grincies’ custody, he might be forced to help them.”

“Is there a way you can track him?”

Nyssa fished out a small sphere-like device from one of her trouser pockets. “I have a homing device that can locate the TARDIS. If I can just—Oh.”

“Oh dear,” Kevin said, seeing the device was damaged and that Nyssa was crestfallen. “That doesn’t look good, does it?”

“No it doesn’t. I need to repair this in order to find the Doctor and the TARDIS. They could be either on the Grincies’ spaceship in Earth’s orbit or in their base of operations on Earth.”

“They have a base of operations on Earth?!”

“Oh yes! The Doctor and I discovered this when we were held captive aboard the Grincies’ spaceship. They said something about a base of operations on Earth in their conversations.” Nyssa sighed as she examined the homing device in her hand. “This must have been damaged during my struggle in escaping from the Grincies.”

“Well, you need it fixed,” Kevin declared. “I have a workshop that can fix electronic gadgets.”

Nyssa was astonished. “You have a workshop?”

“Of course!”

She stood up, as though taking in her surroundings for the first time.
“Where are we precisely?”

“You’re in Cardiff. The capital of Wales.”

I must have impressed her! Kevin could see Nyssa was hanging on his every word. It must have been fortunate for her to end up in his flat with him being able to repair electrical items.

“Is your workshop far from here?” she asked.

“Not far. It’s in a shed nearby. It belongs to a fellow mechanic who allows me to use it. It’s next door to his car salesroom. We can go there now if you like.”

“The sooner we get this homing device fixed, the sooner we’ll find the Doctor and the TARDIS.”

Kevin found a lot to process—the girl Nyssa was from outer space!

He didn’t mind that so much, so long as he kept apace.

When he and Nyssa made their way over to his friends’ workshop,

Kevin wasn’t sure whether this was all a dream that would suddenly... stop.

02:00—24th December 2017

Kevin had his own special key as he and Nyssa entered his workshop. His friend said that he could go in anytime day and night so long as he didn’t wake up the neighbours. Hopefully, the homing device wouldn’t take too long to sort out and there wouldn’t be too much noise in fixing it.

Initially put out that the workshop tools Kevin supplied weren’t to her standards—they weren’t advanced enough in her opinion—Nyssa decided

to use what was serviceable to fix the homing device, no matter how long the job would take. Kevin didn't know what to make of that remark, but he happily obliged to help her in any way he could. Nyssa appreciated that. Kevin liked that about her. Nyssa seemed the kind of girl who would accept any kind of help.

He gave her space. Nyssa began working away, fixing the homing device. She hoped that the Grincies wouldn't have advanced further in their invasion plans before she had fixed the device. Kevin stood by in case she needed help with the tools she used. Nyssa started to unscrew the screws at the back of the homing device with a small screwdriver. Once the first screw came away easily, she moved on to unscrew the next screw.

Kevin made small talk to her as she worked. "So, have you got any family to go back home to for Christmas? Do they live far from here?"

Nyssa became sad. "No. I don't have any parents. My family's gone. So has my world."

Kevin felt sad, too. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago..."

"Doesn't make it hurt any less?"

"No... No, you're right. I don't suppose it does."

"You've learned to live with it?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

He nodded. "Alright."

Eventually, Nyssa detached the back lid of the homing device. She placed it on a nearby table.

"There. Do you have a set of pliers I can use? Small ones would be preferable."

Gradually obliging, Kevin passed over a set of small pliers to Nyssa. Taking them, she used the pliers to attend to the wires inside. Kevin had

never seen the wiring technology that was in the homing device before. It looked so sophisticated. Nyssa seemed to know what she was doing.

It was Nyssa's turn to make small talk. "What about you? Have you got any family to see at Christmas time?"

"Yes! I'm seeing my parents on Christmas Day. They live nearby." After musing for a moment, Kevin said, "Perhaps you and your Doctor friend would like to join us for Christmas dinner?"

"Perhaps," Nyssa considered as she worked. "It will depend on whether the Grincies will allow us to have Christmas Day."

"They sound a nasty bunch, these Grincies."

"They're an unhappy group, but unfortunately, their unhappiness has now extended to hurting others." She glanced at him, apologetically. "Kevin, I have to remain objective."

Nyssa continued to work on fixing the homing device. Kevin helped her out now and again, as he passed some odd bits and pieces that she needed.

Eventually, Nyssa managed to fix the homing device. It beeped away faintly. Nyssa frowned as she examined it.

"Isn't it working properly?" Kevin asked.

"No, it's working adequately," Nyssa replied. "According to the homing device, the TARDIS isn't in Earth's orbit."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? You don't have the trouble of beaming back upstairs."

"It's not as simple as that."

"But your... TARDIS thing is on Earth surely."

"Yes, the TARDIS is on Earth, but it's a fair distance away. It's not in Cardiff, it's in London."

"You can tell all that from the homing device?"

“The Doctor has updated his homing devices with in-built maps.” As she spoke, Kevin examined Nyssa’s homing device and saw a small diagram on a screen. “They detail the surrounding area and where the TARDIS is located. It’s not a perfect visual picture, but it’s clear enough.”

Kevin was amazed. He was also amazed by how good Nyssa’s eyesight was to see the map on the homing device, considering how small it was.

“So, all you need now is to get to London, find the Doctor. Well, that’s no problem. We can catch a train to get to London. Cardiff Central isn’t far from here.”

“I don’t have any money,” Nyssa pointed out. “The train journey is bound to be expensive.”

“And there are the tubes to consider, yes. But I don’t mind using my debit card. We can use it to purchase two tickets on the train from Cardiff Central to London Paddington. I might be able to treat you to a breakfast coffee on the journey.”

“Kevin, I can’t ask you to give your money away...”

“You don’t have to! I can get you to London in order to find these Grincies and their base of operations.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“Nyssa...” his eyes were pleading. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me before or, let’s be honest, will likely happen to me again. I may be a plain straightforward Welshman, but I’m willing to help.”

“It will be dangerous. Not,” she gestured, “pretty. Dangerous. Are you sure you understand?”

“Consider it a Christmas present. From me to you.”

“Very well...” Nyssa acknowledged. “We’ll have to catch a train as soon as possible. Time is not on our side and the Doctor may be in great peril.”

“I’ll close up shop then. I’ll lock the shed on our way out. I don’t want my friend to be annoyed should any tools be stolen because we didn’t lock the shed.”

“Of course,” Nyssa said. “And thank you very much for helping me this way, Kevin.”

“Anyone would.”

“No.” She raised her chin, eyes half-closed with a sigh. “Not everyone.”

“My pleasure, then,” Kevin replied. “You wait outside. I’ll be a few ticks.”

Kevin and Nyssa were going on a train, a shame it wasn’t the Polar Express.

They were off to find Nyssa’s friend. Kevin hoped it wouldn’t end in a mess.

Even though it was morning on Christmas Eve, it still felt very cold.

Kevin didn’t care, as this was a new experience to cherish and behold.

07:00—24th December 2017

Nyssa and Kevin were aboard the Great Western Railway train from Cardiff Central to London Paddington. It cost them £118 to purchase two train tickets. Prices were expensive at Christmas time. Kevin hoped he had enough money left for their journey. Nyssa hoped they would be able to find the Doctor before Christmas Day, providing the homing device didn’t let them down.

Half-an-hour passed and then someone came with a food and drinks trolley.

Kevin asked, “Tea? Coffee?”

“I fancy an orange juice, actually,” answered Nyssa.

“One breakfast tea and one orange juice.”

Another half-hour passed. They were getting close to Swindon station in Wiltshire. Nyssa had been quiet for most of their journey. Kevin could see how anxious she was. He wondered how to break the silence without being insensitive. There was something he wanted to talk to her about.

After running through how to phrase the topic, Kevin plucked up the courage to say something to Nyssa. “It must be tough for you to go through each Christmas without your family.”

Nyssa looked at Kevin, then out the window of the train. Hushed with thought.

“We have the time,” he offered. “If you like.”

“You really are interested in my life?”

“Yes.” He nodded earnestly. “I am.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, answering honestly. “All I’ll have left in the end are the memories.”

She nodded. “The idea’s basis is sound.”

“And anyway, you’ve got something on your mind. I can tell.”

She smiled appreciatively. “I haven’t given myself a chance to think about what I left behind and lost since I joined the Doctor. We travel a lot, you see.”

“You travel?”

“The Doctor and I, we fight wrongs in any corner of the universe.”

“You two must lead very busy lives.”

“Too busy in my opinion.”

“Are you and he, um...?”

“No.” That reproach again, but this time with a smirk. “No. We’re just good friends.”

“I see.” Kevin looked away, hoping Nyssa wouldn’t see his relief.

“I’ve so few now...” Nyssa’s face fell. “My world was blotted out forever.”

Kevin looked quizzical.

“My father was killed,” Nyssa elaborated

He felt a lump in his throat. “That’s terrible. I had no idea. May I ask...?”

Nyssa gently shook her head. Kevin nodded. She smiled sadly at him. “Once I joined the Doctor on his travels, he became a member of my surrogate family.”

“Your stepfather, of sorts?”

“I imagine he likes to think so. Whether or not he would admit that... Well, that’s another matter, but I like to believe so.”

“And it was just the two of you?”

“There were two others who joined us on our travels—Tegan and Adric.”

“Will they be with the Doctor?”

She reflected for a moment. “We lost them too.”

Kevin became speechless.

She went on. “Whenever the Doctor and I celebrate a festival somewhere, I’m having a good time. I am. But, I can’t help thinking of being with my father. The Festival of Life and Grovetides at home. It’s those times I miss greatly.”

Kevin could see something sink behind Nyssa’s eyes. They gained almost a porcelain, unreal quality. Her life, her memories and all that she had ever been, summarised so matter-of-factly. Like a newscaster. Her

only affectation was a small hitch in her voice as she spoke. He offered her his handkerchief which she accepted. She dried her eyes and sniffed as she used the handkerchief. She soon regained her composure.

“I had a sister once.” The words didn’t feel like Kevin’s, but he said them anyway.. “She was happy when we played as kids at home.” He paused to reflect on things. It still seemed so unreal, so... *alien*. He caught Nyssa’s eye.

“She’s... gone, isn’t she?” She knew. Somehow, Nyssa knew.

“When she was sixteen, she had a terrible tumour. The doctors and nurses did everything they could to try to save her, I don’t blame them, but...” he squeezed his hands together. “It wasn’t enough. She died two months later. I was fourteen at the time. It broke my parents’ hearts, too.”

“Kevin, I’m so sorry.”

Kevin smiled back, sadly. “It’s not as bad as what you went through.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You lost—” he stopped himself before he could say *everything*. “You lost your family. I still have mine to see at Christmas. I look forward to this time of year to celebrate Christmas with them and commemorate my sister’s life.” Pausing for a moment, he went on, “I can’t bear the thought of losing my parents should something terrible happen.”

After a few moments, Nyssa placed her hand on Kevin’s shoulder.

“Let’s make sure those Grincies don’t ruin everyone’s Christmas Day then. Including yours and your parents as well as mine and the Doctor’s. We still have a chance. Hopefully we’ll be in London in time to stop their invasion of Earth.”

Kevin liked Nyssa’s optimism at that moment. His smile warmed. Her smile warmed too.

Eventually, their conversation lapsed into silence. It was just them, the hum of the train and the loneliness of the sleepless hours travelling from

point-to-point on the map. Tiring of the quiet, and finding it invited too many unhappy memories, Kevin decided it was time to change the subject. Their conversation had been gloomy so far. “I’m looking forward to seeing my favourite Christmas films on BBC One and ITV1 when we get back to Cardiff. The films will be listed out in the Christmas bumper edition of the Radio Times.”

“Christmas films?”

“Haven’t you seen the latest Radio Times?”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve been travelling a lot lately.”

“Ah! Well, they usually have ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ on TV. That’s a good film. And then there are the ‘Christmas Carol’ films, some Santa Claus movies...”

The rest of their conversation was about what Kevin’s mother had once described as ‘Christmassy stuff’. Nyssa was fascinated by Kevin’s love for Christmas including seeing things on TV, the food and drink, the Christmas crackers, games, opening presents, skating at the local Winter Wonderland, etc. Nyssa asked questions to test her hypotheses and Kevin was happy to answer them. A sample size of one was better than none. At least, in this instance. She sometimes checked her homing device now and again to see the TARDIS signal getting stronger as they got closer to London. Kevin kept her entertained and enlightened with the Christmas trivia he had to share to help her be less anxious.

It wasn’t long till they reached Paddington station.

London was very busy at Christmas time—festive celebrations galore.

People were shopping and having food and drink, often wanting more.

Nyssa and Kevin had to find the Doctor and hoped to reestablish communication.

This wasn't a jolly trip as they arrived at their destination.

10:00—24th December 2017

It wasn't very crowded. As soon as they got off the GWR train at Paddington, Nyssa and Kevin made their way to the tube stations.

The homing device pinged between Nyssa's fingertips. "I have a clearer signal. The TARDIS is in a disused warehouse, somewhere in Earl's Court. It must currently be the Grincies' base of operations."

"Then we must head for Earl's Court," said Kevin. "It'll be on the District Line—identified green on the tube map."

"Good! Lead the way, Kevin!"

"Let's hope we'll find your Doctor friend alive and well."

"Yes! Let's hope."

Kevin led the way as he and Nyssa neared the London tubes. They made their way down the stairs for the District Line.

They were soon on the westbound platform from London Paddington to Earl's Court. It was then that Paddington station was under attack.

"What's the matter?" Nyssa asked.

Kevin was squeezing his fingers. "I don't know... Just a feeling..."

"Like... back in your home?"

A tube train's scream echoed down the tunnel out of sight. It was an eerie feeling for Nyssa and Kevin. Suddenly, commuters jumped and shot back. At first, Nyssa and Kevin thought it was them. Something they'd done. Then, behind them, they saw the battle-armoured green-skinned soldiers that teleported in. No-one anticipated this. People scattered whilst the soldiers pursued and gunned people down. Pandemonium ensued!

Kevin guessed who the soldiers were. "Grincies?"

“Yes,” confirmed Nyssa. “I’m afraid they are.”

“They’ve started their attack already?”

“It can’t be a full invasion force. This must be an experimental attack to abduct humans. Look!”

Nyssa pointed. Kevin focused to see what was happening. As the Grincies fired their weapons, metal discs latched onto people’s shoulders. Passengers and station staff members were zapped out one by one. The Grincies continued their attack, firing metal discs onto their victims.

“See what I mean?” checked Nyssa.

Kevin was astonished. “And they happen to be conducting this experiment at Paddington?”

“I agree. This can’t be a coincidence.”

Nyssa then realised something. She examined the homing device. Both she and Kevin worked it out in the same moment.

“They’re able to track us with that homing device you have!” Kevin cried. “Get rid of it! Smash it to pieces!”

Nyssa dropped the device on the floor and stamped on it, smashing it to pieces.

“We must get away from here!” Nyssa declared.

At that moment, a tube train arrived at the platform. The doors slid open.

“Quickly, Kevin! Aboard!”

Kevin took Nyssa’s hand as they and other panicky passengers boarded the tube train. The tube train doors slid shut just in time before the Grincies could catch their prey. Nyssa and Kevin were soon on their way to Earl’s Court.

Meanwhile on the platform, a couple of Grincies found the smashed-up homing device. They were afraid to report to their leader that they had lost their prey.

Venturing forth, Nyssa and Kevin hoped to find the Grincies' base.

It was difficult, though. Earl's Court was quite a big place.

After visiting many warehouses, it was rather hard to find.

Eventually they found it. It was tough and go, mind.

16:00—24th December 2017

“The Doctor is likely to be inside that warehouse,” Nyssa remarked. “Our last one as I understand it.”

It was teeming with battle-armoured Grincies. Nyssa and Kevin hid behind crates to avoid detection. They'd been lucky so far. By now, it was getting dark.

“So, what's our plan on getting in then?” Kevin asked.

Nyssa considered for a moment. “If I can acquire a disguise by wearing a Grincie battle-suit, I'll be able to get in and find out where the Doctor is being held captive. Hopefully I won't get caught. And hopefully he'll have worked out how to foil the Grincies' plans in terrorising the planet Earth.”

“I'm coming with you.”

“I can't ask you to come with me, Kevin,” Nyssa addressed him firmly. “I'll be putting you in danger if I let you come.”

“Too late for that, I think.”

“You can still back out while you can.”

“No chance. I'm helping you out, Nyssa.”

“No matter what the risks?”

“I got caught in this mess, but that’s no reason for me to chicken out.”

“There’s a fine line between bravery and foolhardiness, Kevin.”

“I’m tired of being lonely.”

He blurted the words out without thinking. Nyssa’s face dipped ever so slightly, her eyes betraying just a hint of bewilderment.

“Look, you’re...” Kevin fumbled for the word. An ordinary word. “Nice. Real. You seem a genuine sort of person and this is a genuine sort of problem. I’m tired of being alone and if, for one moment, I can be a part of something bigger, if I can help do something good for someone else, for once... I will.”

Nyssa suddenly seemed to be looking at him from what felt like a million miles away. On a planet he’d never heard of, circling a star he’d never seen.

He stood up straighter. “Tell me to go, Nyssa, and I’ll go.”

“Very well...” she said, gradually.

Disappointment flooded Kevin’s body in a cold rush. He couldn’t disguise it, but he wasn’t the sort to make a hypocrite of himself. He had helped her to the warehouse. Chivalry notwithstanding, if she thought that was enough, then—

“Where are you going?” she asked.

Kevin turned to look at her. “I thought...?”

“Sorry, I meant, very well, you can stay.” She looked away. “I... don’t like being alone either. I’m finding the more it happens, the more I’m getting time to... remember.”

“Who would be alone on Christmas?” He shrugged, perhaps a little bitterly.

She nodded as if she'd made up her mind about something. "If we survive this, I promise you, Kevin, the Doctor and I shall accept your invitation to attend your celebration on Christmas Day."

Kevin smiled. "Great! My parents and I will be delighted to have extra company on the big day."

"First things first, though."

"Make sure there is a Christmas Day, you mean?"

They soon came up with a plan. Nyssa found some disused solid wire in the warehouse area, which was long enough. She attached one end of the wire to a huge stone and attached the other to the corner of a nearby wall. It took a while for two Grincies to approach their hiding spot. When they did, Kevin played the decoy. The Grincies pursued him. As Nyssa predicted, once Kevin avoided the wire, the Grincies ended up tripping over it and fell to the ground with huge bumps. After a few moments, Nyssa checked their condition. She was relieved the fallen Grincies were unconscious.

The impact of their armour must have knocked them out, she thought.

Nyssa and Kevin stripped the Grincies of their battle-suits, putting them on as quickly as they could. Soon, and trying to appear intimidating with the weapons they carried, Nyssa and Kevin made their way into the warehouse. They were able to bluff their way in once they entered.

Kevin reflected, hoping to be fair and wise.

Did the Grinch feel scared when he took on Santa's guise?

Doing his best to be brave, Kevin and Nyssa entered the Grincies' place.

But he wondered what would happen if one of them saw his actual face.

17:00—24th December 2017

It had all happened so suddenly to Kevin. He was trying to recount the specifics.

It took some time for he and Nyssa to locate where the Doctor was being held captive. They eavesdropped on reports given by other Grincies to their superiors. They soon came across a couple of officers who demanded to know where they were heading. Nyssa answered they'd been sent to escort their latest prisoner called the Doctor to their commander-in-chief.

The Grincie officers were understandably suspicious, but soon accepted their story and allowed them access to the Doctor's prison cell. Nyssa was surprised by the Grincie officers' acceptance of their story, but she decided to take no chances as she and Kevin went on.

Entering the gents' toilets, they found the Doctor in one of the cubicles with a Grincie pointing its weapon at him. Another Grincie stood outside the cubicle. The Grincies began to question who Nyssa and Kevin were. Second verse, same as the first. But before they could answer, the two Grincie officers they had encountered earlier stopped Nyssa and Kevin in their tracks. They demanded to know who they were, ordering them to remove their helmets.

Nyssa became anxious. Kevin inadvertently opened fire with his Grincie weapon. He shot one of the Grincie officers in the foot.

Kevin had never shot anyone before. It all seemed so terribly easy. Frighteningly... Awfully... Easy.

The Grincie officer groaned in pain. His comrade looked on.

The Doctor's voice called out from inside the cubicle. "Nyssa! You and whoever's with you! Fire at the Grincies' right knees! That's their weak point. It's a nerve cluster. The armour will absorb the impact. They'll be temporarily knocked out unconscious once you hit their right knees!"

Before the four Grincies could protest, Nyssa and Kevin opened fire with their weapons. Nyssa fired at the Grincies holding the Doctor prisoner whilst Kevin fired at the two Grincie officers. The Grincies cried out in pain once they'd been hit. They soon collapsed and fell to the floor unconscious. A moment's silence ensued.

"We did it!" Kevin cheered.

"Of course," Nyssa agreed, ruefully.

"I just meant that we're still alive. They're still alive... How?"

Nyssa nudged him. "Never doubt the Doctor's expertise, Kevin."

"Nyssa!" At that moment, the Doctor came out of the cubicle. "Thank goodness you're alright! Very good of you to come and find me!"

"Doctor!" Nyssa cheered, embracing her best friend in a hug. "I'm so glad you're safe. Is the TARDIS alright?"

"Yes, thank you, Nyssa. The old girl's currently being held in custody by the Grincies. I hope they haven't done anything too awful to her whilst I've been cooped up here. Uncivilised sort of arrangement, this." The Doctor then noticed Kevin for the first time. "Who's this?"

Nyssa began the introductions. "Doctor, this is Kevin. Kevin, this is the Doctor. Kevin helped me to come and find you here in London."

The Doctor reached out and shook Kevin's hand. "Thank you, Kevin. Very good of you to help Nyssa out this way."

"No problem," Kevin answered. He was curiously in awe of the man. From Nyssa's remembrances, he hadn't been what Kevin expected at all. The Doctor wore his cream-coloured coat over a cricket pullover with a sense of almost old-time dignity. He seemed to regard his imprisonment as some kind of minor annoyance. "Nyssa says we have to stop an alien invasion before Christmas Day."

"Yes, things have become trickier since you saw me, Nyssa." The Doctor felt awkward. "I was forced to help the Grincies to stabilise their

spatial jumping technology with temporal quantum engineering using components from the TARDIS. Once your homing device was at a high frequency upon your arrival in London... Off they went.”

“No need to apologise, Doctor.”

“It’s my responsibility, Nyssa. We have to disconnect the TARDIS from the Grincies’ machinery without causing a temporal imbalance. Now that you and Kevin have freed me, we can make our way to the Grincies’ central control hub to stop their invasion.”

“Is it far to the Grincies’ control hub?” Kevin asked.

“Not far, no,” the Doctor replied. “Trust me, Kevin. I know the route backwards.”

It was hoped things would be alright, now that the Doctor was revealed.

But Kevin wasn’t sure about their luck, the Grincies would be concealed.

The trio were now on a mission. It was full of terrible folly!

It was certain this night would be ripped, if only, Kevin hoped, to be jolly.

18:00—24th December 2017

When the Doctor, Nyssa and Kevin entered the central control hub in the centre of the warehouse, they saw the TARDIS connected to the Grincies’ power terminals. The Doctor winced.

Monitor screens showed Grincies abducting people from places like Tokyo, Sydney, New York and of course London. The Doctor, Nyssa and Kevin were horrified by what they saw on the monitor screens.

“And it’s not Christmas Day yet!” Nyssa exclaimed.

“They must have accelerated their schedule,” the Doctor observed. “Typical. Never a despot to keep their word.”

Kevin tried to be positive. “How are we going to stop them?”

“Well, it would help to disconnect the nodes from the TARDIS connected to these power terminals,” the Doctor suggested as he approached the blue box.

“That could take a while,” Nyssa pointed out. “And we still have to send people back to their times and places on Earth.”

“One step at a time, Nyssa,” said the Doctor. “Hopefully disconnecting the nodes from the TARDIS will delay the Grincies jumping into places and teleporting people out.” He turned to Kevin. “Kevin, keep watch. Make sure no Grincies come in and interrupt us.”

Doing as the Doctor said, Kevin watched the door, listening carefully for any Grincie footsteps. Meanwhile, the Doctor and Nyssa disconnected every node from the TARDIS. It took twenty long minutes to disconnect every node. Once finished, Nyssa felt a sense of relief.

“Now, Nyssa,” the Doctor announced. “We should have delayed the Grincies’ teleports into places on Earth by cutting off their power supply. We need to make sure we’ve disabled their teleport technology permanently. As I’ve been able to ascertain, these control units before us can be utilised to enable teleportation across various parts of the world.”

“I would need to access the internal mainframes in order to disable the power terminals to stop the Grincies’ teleports permanently,” Nyssa declared.

“It’s not straightforward, Nyssa,” the Doctor told her. “I would need to observe the outflow level on this monitor here beside me so that I can be sure the power supply is drained. I can’t do that whilst helping you disconnect the necessary components in the internal mainframe to disable the Grincies’ teleports.”

“Kevin can help me,” Nyssa suggested. “He has electrical engineering skills. You can take over watching the door for any Grincies whilst monitoring the outflow level on your nearby monitor at the same time.”

“Good thinking, Nyssa! Kevin!”

“Yes Doctor, I’m still keeping watch. No sign of any Grincies yet.”

“Come and help Nyssa with disabling the Grincies’ power terminals. I’ll take over watch duty for any Grincies coming.”

“Right, Doctor!”

With that, Kevin joined Nyssa by the central control hub as she disconnected a panel that allowed her access to the internal mainframe. They began working on disabling the control hubs. The Doctor kept watch for any Grincies whilst checking the outflow level of the power supply on a nearby monitor.

It took some time for the Grincies to find out where they were. The alarm sirens were blaring off by then, announcing that their prisoners had escaped. Very soon, the Grincies led by their leader entered to find the Doctor, Nyssa and Kevin disabling the control hubs.

“Back from a good night’s pillaging?” asked the Doctor. “I must apologise, we thought we’d help ourselves while you were away. The spirit of giving and all that.”

“No, Doctor,” the Grincie leader hissed.

“Too late, Grincie leader,” Nyssa announced as she and Kevin stood up to face him. “We’ve disabled your teleportation units.”

“And the power supply has been drained completely with Nyssa and Kevin accessing the internal mainframe,” the Doctor pointed out. “You can see it for yourself.”

The Time Lord showed the monitor screen. The Grincies hissed and snarled with rage.

“No!” the Grincie leader hissed bitterly. “You’ve ruined our plans to conquer the Earth!”

“You’ll have to go back to your spaceship,” Nyssa observed, “and return to your home planet to collect new equipment.”

“If you attempt to return here a second time,” the Doctor said challengingly, “I will see to it that your kind is stopped at all costs!”

“You dare to challenge the might of the Grincies?”

“We’ve succeeded in our first fight against you, haven’t we? You can see what kind of opposition you’re up against. My friends and I—we protect and defend the planet Earth from the likes of you wanting to conquer it.”

“The three of you?”

Kevin found his voice. “Seems to have done well enough in this instance.”

The Grincies felt bitter at the trio’s defiance, but they soon placed their hands on their wrists, about to teleport back to their spaceship.

“Don’t think we’ve given up, Time Lord,” the Grincie leader declared. “We will come back! You and your humans enjoy your Christmas. It will be the last one you will ever have!”

With that, the Grincies beamed out, returning to their spaceship. A moment of silence ensued after the Grincies had beamed out. The Doctor, Nyssa and Kevin still stood in the warehouse.

“Between you and me, I’m afraid he might be right,” the Doctor said morbidly. “The Grincies aren’t likely to go back on their word. They’ll probably return in an attempt to conquer Earth again. Like so many other species seeking universal domination that I’ve encountered.”

“Why pick the Earth?” asked Nyssa.

“Refuge in audacity. A well-known author of the past century invented a fiction that could easily be mistaken for a Grincie. If anyone is caught out, they can simply say, thus spake Seuss.”

“Like Melkur and my stepmother.”

“Yes...” the Doctor scratched his nose. “Precisely like Melkur and Kassia.”

“It’s okay, though, right?” Kevin tried to be reassuring. “We’ll be ready for them next time, won’t we?”

A tense moment of silence ensued. The Doctor didn’t seem to be sure.

“Some safeguards in the TARDIS wouldn’t go amiss...” he aired, thoughtfully.

“At least we managed to save Christmas Day in the end,” Nyssa pointed out happily. “Surely it will take a while for the Grincies to come back before they can spoil anyone’s festivities, including our own.”

The Doctor relaxed and said, “I suppose so. I’ll have to come up with a plan to stop the Grincies’ second attempt to conquer the Earth, but it can wait.” He turned to Kevin. “Thank you for helping us out, Kevin. Nyssa and I really appreciate all you’ve done.”

“No worries.” Kevin smiled. “Glad to have helped out.”

“So what do we do now?” Nyssa enquired. “There are bound to be people in this warehouse who were abducted by the Grincies. We should go and find them.”

“Indeed,” the Doctor agreed. “We’ll take them back home in the TARDIS. Hopefully the TARDIS telepathic circuits will help in redirecting the Grincies’ captured victims back to their proper times and places.”

“After that, there’s the Christmas party at Kevin’s parents’ house for us to enjoy,” Nyssa added.

The Doctor became confused. “Christmas party?”

It turned out alright in the end, all things considered.

It was lucky no-one was there on Christmas Day to be so withered.

Kevin was pleased to be with his parents that festive day.

His new friends also came along and weren't turned away.

16:00—25th December 2017

Christmas Day came at last!

Kevin stood in the back garden of his parents' home. He looked up at the stars in the clear night sky, wrapping himself warm in a coat and a blue scarf he had been given by his parents for Christmas. Kevin's parents were delighted to see him and his new friends once they returned from London. Kevin's parents welcomed Nyssa and the Doctor into their home. They had a good time spending Christmas Day with each other. Kevin omitted some of the details of how he came to first meet Nyssa and the Doctor. His new friends helped by providing a cover story.

As the Doctor chatted away to his parents inside, Kevin was soon joined by Nyssa. He was pleased to see her. They both looked up at the night sky together.

"A shame it's not snowing," Kevin said. "We could have had a White Christmas in Cardiff."

"At least the stars are shining brightly," Nyssa commented.

A moment of tender silence ensued between them.

"There are plenty of new worlds to explore out there," Nyssa then said. "It's not just stars in space. You could join me and the Doctor if you wish. After your help to us these past few days, you deserve a treat to see a new world."

Kevin considered this. He knew that Nyssa was encouraging him to accompany them in their travels. He found the idea of travelling to different worlds very exciting.

“You’re flattered,” Nyssa smiled.

“How can you tell?”

“Your ears have gone bright red.”

He returned the smile wordlessly. Lips thin with thought.

Eventually, he replied, “Thanks, Nyssa.” He paused for a moment to find the right words. “But after what we’ve been through to sort out those Grincie fellows, I don’t think I would be able to cope with the magnitude of what the Doctor’s TARDIS can do. We travelled in space and time to get everyone back home. But the thought of moving away from home is terrifying to me somehow.”

“Just consider it,” Nyssa said. “You’d be invaluable to the Doctor and me.”

“I doubt I’ll be able to keep my cool,” Kevin remarked.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to cope and learn with any new experiences we encounter on our travels. The Doctor can be a good teacher, as he was to me and my friends.”

Kevin considered it a bit longer then said, “Thanks but... I might pass on this one if that’s alright.”

He couldn’t help notice Nyssa looking slightly disappointed. She smiled slightly. “Of course, I understand. It’s your choice after all.”

Kevin wondered how he could make it up with Nyssa in this regard. “You don’t owe me anything. You know that, right?”

Nyssa nodded slightly, appreciating Kevin’s words. “Of course.”

Honesty gripped him by the throat. “Let’s face it, Nyssa, I’m nobody’s hero.”

“You’re a hero to me, Kevin,” Nyssa said softly. “Just for today, perhaps, but you helped me to find the Doctor, stop the Grincies and save the Earth. I’ll never forget you for being helpful. I’ll always be grateful.”

At that, Kevin was surprised to receive a kiss from Nyssa on his left cheek. Kevin checked to see if there was any mistletoe above their heads. There were green leaves on a branch above them.

Could that count as mistletoe?

Kevin smiled at Nyssa. “This has turned out to be the most amazing Christmas I’ve ever had. I finally feel...”

“Accepted?”

He sighed, content. “I’m not alone. It’s so simple, but... Thank you very much, you... girl from out of nowhere.”

Nyssa smiled back. She and Kevin continued to look up at the beautiful night sky together. The Doctor briefly caught a glimpse of them through the window. He smiled, peaceably, and continued his chat.

No-one could disturb the peace in that graceful moment.

In the end, everyone got their Christmas Day. No-one was sad.

The Grincies would try to attack again. But it wasn’t all that bad.

When the Doctor is around—calls for help, he won’t ignore.

And in the end, for that, Christmas, perhaps... means just that little bit more.

THE SINGING PLANET



By AFJ Kernow

“Cantabile. The Singing Planet,” the Doctor announced. “Famous in this part of the Cecilian Galaxy as *the* meeting place for musicians playing all manner of galactic genres from Monoidian chanting to Killoran metallic.”

“Did you swallow the guidebook?” Margaret asked.

She had a headache after waking up from a particularly nasty nightmare featuring ten-foot slugs invading her garden.

“I think it’s refreshing to visit such a harmonious planet. It reminds me of Traken,” said the Doctor wistfully.

Their discussion was interrupted by a quartet of Ogron heavy metal enthusiasts.

“Harmonious?” Margaret shouted, putting her hands over her ears.

The Doctor pointed down the hill and Margaret followed him gladly. When the wall of rhythmic noise had reduced in volume, the Doctor pointed out a spectacular hexagonal building next to a small artificial lake.

“We might find something less injurious to our hearing in the Auditorium Cantaré,” the Doctor suggested.

Once inside the entrance hall, even Margaret was impressed. Corridors led off to six geodesic domed concert halls. Each one had a display that played extracts from the artist due to perform: Vespasian jazz, Peladonian opera, Sontaran Martial Rock, a Silurian percussion band, the Rhapsodian Interstellar Choir and, Oodkind who played ambient trance.

“Virtuosa, an accomplished performer, possessing dazzling musical technique and artistry,” read Margaret.

This was the act in the main hall. The Doctor bought their tickets and they settled into their red velvet seats. Margaret had been to concerts in the Albert Hall, but this was a spectacular venue. The hexagonal plexiglass ceiling revealed blue sky and white, fluffy clouds.

Virtuosa swept onto the stage wearing a jade-green dress. She was a tall, memorable lady with flaming red hair and fantastic stage presence. Margaret had never heard such a voice, even at the BBC Proms. Her vocal range was incredible; from warm and sultry contralto to a piercing bright soprano.

Virtuosa also played a variety of instruments including: the piano, clarinet, electric violin, and other less familiar ones. She finished her performance with a triumphant Martian aria. She bowed, acknowledged the applause with a smile and left the stage.

The Doctor sat thoughtfully with his eyes shut. Margaret thumped him.

“Doctor! How could you sleep through such an extraordinary performance?”

In an opulent backstage dressing room, a blue-faced Cantabrian praised Virtuosa on her latest performance.

“What an incredible sound you create, Mæstra,” Dolce crooned.

“Thank you, Dolce.”

“No, truly. An exquisite performance. Worthy of the Mæstri themselves.”

“Oh, yes?”

He bobbed his thick neck. “They speak to the fundamentals of our Galaxy.”

“Dolce... My performances are mere trifles compared with my masterpiece,” she smiled and sipped her iridescent cocktail. “Would you like to hear it?”

“I was *not* asleep,” the Doctor told Margaret indignantly.

“I believe you, Doctor, the rest of the audience is undecided,” Margaret replied.

“Very droll, but look at the other people, Margaret,” he pointed to the couple sitting next to them.

They were sitting quietly with contented smiles and hardly moving. It was as if someone had pressed the pause button. Gradually, the audience slipped out of their reveries. They started putting on coats and hats and began to leave the auditorium.

“Well, that *was* odd.”

“Terribly odd,” she agreed.

“I think I’d like to meet Virtuosa. Something is not right,” the Doctor’s face took on a determined expression. “Hypnosis... Could it be...? No, he’s still frozen at the bottom of that icecano... Perhaps, it could be—? Ah, but then Zodin would have left her calling card...”

Margaret had not known the Doctor long but she knew that look.

“So, what are we going to do, split up and search for clues?” Margaret raised an elegant, curved eyebrow.

“Good idea, Margaret. Ask around and see what you can discover,” the Doctor replied, getting up from his seat and heading for the stage.

Margaret watched him go and shook her head.

“That’s it, Doctor, off you go. Leave the hapless human to fend for herself,” Margaret muttered as she left the auditorium.

The backstage area of any venue is usually considerably less glamorous than the public areas. The Doctor found the dressing rooms and a door marked:

STAR PERFORMER—VIRTUOSA

The Doctor knocked confidently on the door. It opened and Dolce stood there regarding the Doctor with wary suspicion.

“What do you want? La Mæstra does not give autographs,” he said.

“Well, I was wondering whether I could just have a quick chat? That was such a bravura performance,” replied the Doctor.

“I’m sorry but La Mæstra cannot be disturbed. She is resting—”

Virtuosa’s voice cut in, “It’s all right Dolce, he can come in briefly, if he must.”

Dolce ushered the Doctor into the diva’s dressing room.

Margaret found herself a pleasant spot in an outside amphitheatre and sat down. A familiar tune wafted up from the stage.

“That’s Eleanor Rigby,” she said to herself. “They’re playing the Beatles.”

She waved at the multi-species folk band, the drummer waved back. When the band had finished, she walked down and asked them to play

another song. After a brief discussion, the band started playing ‘Help!’. Margaret smiled at them and sat down tapping her feet.

Even on a planet far, far away from their native Liverpool, the Beatles still sounded fab; so much nicer than those horrid Rolling Stones. Her father never approved of Margaret’s exploration of Sixties pop music when she was a teenager.

What is this racket? Turn it down, Margaret, was his usual response.

Margaret leant forward. “Can you play any louder?”

“Why sure,” grinned the ursine drummer. “Let’s turn it up to eleven...”

Virtuosa was entertaining the Doctor, still dressed in her jade-green stage dress. She regarded the Doctor’s technicolour coat with some amusement.

“You must be an entertainer wearing such a peculiar outfit.”

“Not really. I’m a scientist and traveller and a lover of the arts. I’m intrigued by the reaction of the audience to your concert. Positively mesmeric.”

Virtuosa glowered while Dolce served the Doctor a purple fruit juice, was dismissed by Virtuosa and left the room.

“So, Doctor, wasn’t it? Why is a Time Lord visiting Cantabile?” she asked.

“Why shouldn’t a Time Lord visit Cantabile? I’ve always wanted to explore the famous singing planet.”

“I simply cannot have any Time Lords interfering with my plans,” she stated coldly. “I wonder what a Time Lord’s resonant frequency is?”

She started to sing, the sound was horrendous. As she started to increase the pitch and volume, the Doctor became paralysed. His hands clamped

over his ears to block out the sound but he soon collapsed to the floor unconscious. Virtuosa stopped the sonic onslaught and smiled...

Margaret sat lost in wonder at the strange sights and sounds.

It may be old hat to that Doctor, but it's a gigantic leap for a village head teacher, she thought.

She had gone straight from grammar school via university and into a difficult school in London. Teaching was her vocation. Her enthusiasm and no-nonsense approach soon brought more responsibility. She resisted management for a while, preferring to be working at the chalkface and not pushing paper around and ticking boxes. She had always enjoyed reading the children's stories. The sheer imagination of her charges often brought a smile to the face of their usually serious teacher.

What would my old pupils think about this adventure? she wondered as she walked back uphill. *None of them would believe me. George would ask if I'd seen any bug-eyed monsters. Ayesha would want to know how the TARDIS worked. Clifford would just want every single detail about the planets I'd visited. While Jasmine would want to know if I had met anyone famous.*

She headed to a single-storey building with tables outside. A bar or restaurant would be a good place to make some inquiries, unfortunately, the Doctor hadn't given her any local currency. She sighed, and was about to turn back and seek out the Doctor, when a voice called out to her.

"Hello, you look lost. Can I help?"

Margaret turned to see a humanoid with a purple crystalline face, amber eyes, and a gentle smile.

"I don't know, you might. Do you know anything about Virtuosa?"

"I'm a musicologist. I should be able to tell you a few things about Virtuosa. Allegra Sharp, and you are?"

"Margaret Fieldhouse, pleased to meet you," replied Margaret.

“Shall we go to the Purple Haze?” Allegra asked, pointing towards the bar. “Maybe have a drink and a chat?”

“I don’t have any currency, I’m afraid. Can we sit in the amphitheatre?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you a drink. Am I right in thinking you’re an Earther? I’d like your thoughts on recent Earth music. That’ll be worth a drink for me.”

“Sorry, I don’t know anything about the music from this era. I travel with a time traveller.”

“Really? That’s even better. Classical Earth music is a hobby of mine. Did you hear the band playing in the amphitheatre? They play all sorts of songs from Earth’s past.”

“Oh yes, they were playing the Beatles—”

“The Coleopterans.”

“The more things change... they sounded lovely. Thank you, I will take you up on your offer of a drink,” replied Margaret with a smile.

The Doctor opened his eyes. His ears were still ringing and his head ached. He was tied firmly to a metal chair.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded.

Virtuosa regarded him with a sly smile from a black velvet chaise longue.

“I’m taking no chances, Doctor. I am close to achieving my ambitions and I cannot have you interfering. Oh yes, I’ve been doing some research. It seems your name is a byword for interfering and meddling throughout the galaxy. Everyone from the Daleks to the Vespasians has had their plans defeated by an infuriating insect known as the Doctor.”

“During my travels, I try to protect those who can’t protect themselves. You have no right to disable and imprison me. If that’s how you treat your fans, it’s a wonder anyone comes to your concerts.”

“Very amusing, Doctor, but I’m afraid I have to leave you for now,” Virtuosa said, rising from the chaise longue.

“Please, *don’t* hurry back. The overture has been more than enough.”

There was a bleep and *thunk* of the door’s lock being deployed and then silence.

Margaret sat at the polished stone table opposite Allegra’s extraordinary crystalline face. Allegra ran a nervous hand through what might have been her people’s equivalent of hair with a self-conscious smile.

The schoolteacher cleared her throat apologetically.

“I’m sorry if I’m staring, but you are so beautiful,” Margaret admitted. “I’m new to meeting other species and it is a bit overwhelming.”

“Thank you for the compliment. I’ve been travelling for so long that meeting a new species is not much of a surprise to me.”

“So, what do you know about this multi-talented diva?” asked Margaret.

“Virtuosa is a member of an ancient race called the Mæstri. It is thought that the Mæstri influenced the development of music throughout the Cecilian Galaxy.”

“That’s quite a formidable achievement.”

“Yes. Music is so powerfully fulfilling. Music transcends barriers. Nearly, everyone can tap out a rhythm, sing or whistle. Even if you can’t play, you can enjoy listening to a good tune.”

“You sound like my music teacher, Miss March. She tried to create a staff choir, but no one was very keen. What about those who cannot hear?”

“I have met species who cannot hear, but still create complex rhythmic compositions because they can feel the vibrations created by the instruments they play.”

“There’s a wonderful percussionist in my time, Dame Evelyn Glennie. She plays by feeling the vibrations of the instruments through her hands and arms. She even uses her bare feet, quite extraordinary...”

Margaret caught herself, “I’m sorry. Please, do tell me more,” she gestured.

Allegra smiled gently. “When the Mæstri disappeared, it was thought they returned to their dimension. None were seen for hundreds of years. Then Virtuosa appeared on Cantabile.”

“Appeared? What do you mean, Allegra? Can she just materialise out of thin air?”

“Virtuosa is not from our universe. She can slide through the gaps in Time and Space. She has been sighted on other planets but her home is on Cantabile.”

“She developed a reputation for great musicianship and having a fierce temper.” Allegra’s fluting voice trembled at the memory of her encounter. “I’ve met her once for an interview and I felt there was real... contempt bubbling under her polite façade.”

“Fame does tend to make monsters of people. Some actors and musicians on Earth have a reputation for being difficult,” remarked Margaret. “Well, if she’s as unpredictable as you say, I’d better find my travelling companion. He’s bound to have annoyed her.”

“Oh, please don’t go without talking with me about classical Earth music,” implored Allegra.

But Margaret was determined. “I’ll be in the amphitheatre or, if you’re not there, I’ll ask at the Purple Haze for you. I promise I’ll answer your questions when I’ve found the Doctor.”

Allegra was pleased and gave her a little wave as she watched Margaret’s tall elegant figure stride towards the auditorium.

The Doctor was struggling to free himself with little success. He had been unconscious when bound so he was unable to utilise any of old Houdini’s tricks. Virtuosa had not thought to gag him so he tried calling for help.

“Oh, my!” he began, in a voice that could deafen thrash metal singers. “I seem to have been constrained and confined against my will. If only some noble and generous personage could release me from my bonds!”

Silence greeted his sarcasm.

He clucked his tongue and growled, “Well, come on, I haven’t all day!”

Margaret reasoned that the Doctor must have gone to the backstage area in his search for Virtuosa’s dressing room. The scruffy, painted brick corridors were like a maze. At one point she found herself on the stage. Looking out at the rows of seats, Margaret knew she would never have the nerve to act or sing. She was undaunted by a rowdy class of 11 year-olds, but appearing on stage? Not a chance.

Eventually, by applying a bit of Fieldhouse logic, she located Virtuosa’s dressing room helped by furious shouting that got gradually louder. “...and if no one should find me before my next regeneration, I shall write a sternly worded letter to the—”

“Is that you, Doctor?” Margaret called.

“*Of course, it’s me!*” he bellowed.

“There’s no need to shout. The door appears to be locked, what do you suggest? Maybe I should try and find the caretaker.”

“*Good idea, Margaret.*” She could hear him sigh to himself. “*Sorry, I’m cross with myself getting caught.*”

Margaret found her way quickly to the information desk. She asked the diminutive purple mole-like creature on duty whether he could help.

“Ooh dear me, has our fiery Mæstra been causing trouble again?” he asked in an amused husky voice.

“You could say that,” Margaret replied. “Although I think imprisoning someone is somewhat more serious than mere high jinks.”

The squat figure shuffled along the corridor and Margaret followed until they reached the diva’s door. Margaret was surprised to find it open... and the room empty.

“Why are you wasting my time?” he asked.

“He was *there* in Virtuosa’s dressing room, I spoke to him through the locked door,” Margaret protested.

“Look, you want an autograph, you’ll have to find her somewhere else.”

“No, I was—”

The staff member shuffled back down the corridor grumbling until he was out of sight. Margaret felt a wave of rising panic within her. She was on an alien planet and the only person who could take her home was missing.

Get a grip Margaret, she thought. *Go and find Allegra, she’ll know what to—*

She stopped, aware of a presence behind her. She turned to find herself facing Virtuosa.

“Well, well, I thought I might find his pet trying to free him. I understand, he usually travels with one. Dolce, take her into my dressing room.”

“Pet? How dare you?” She felt Dolce’s hand tight on her forearm. “Oh great, so you’re going to imprison *me* now? What have you done with the Doctor?”

“He’s safely stowed away where he can’t interfere,” said Virtuosa.

Margaret struggled as Virtuosa’s blue-faced minion pushed her into the dressing room.

The Doctor berated himself for blundering in so carelessly.

“I’m not having a good day. Why wasn’t I more careful? I never learn. Margaret’s first planet and we’re dealing with a musical miscreant.”

He was enclosed in a perspex orb containing surround speakers and sitting on a faux leather reclining chair. Circlets of metal set into the chair restrained his hands and feet. The worst thing was the music playing through the speakers: a looped recording of several of 20th-century Earth’s most uncompromising and unforgettable earworms.

“This has got to be one of worst instruments of torture I’ve ever had the misfortune to be incarcerated in,” he said through gritted teeth, trying to block out the unrelenting whirl of tunes. “Pull yourself together, Doctor.”

He was no novice to torture. One of the worst he’d endured was from the Terrible Zodin, his mind trapped in a near-fatal deadlock within the Totality Crypt. The closest he’d ever come to the sensation of the True Death of Time Lord lore. The desire to will oneself completely out of existence to escape the pain. Here, now, overcoming a force, as fundamental to the laws of the physical universe as this, he had only one solution.

He had to force his mind to shut down to save his sanity.

If he failed, Virtuosa would return to find him with his mind irretrievably broken. Like a smashed plate. La-la-la... He tried humming an old classic, the Venusian lullaby of which he’d been so fond. Its dulcet,

sweeping tones were drowned out by the clatter of the sphere. La-la-la-la-la... He tried a Mercurian power ballad, complete with the ‘rah-rah’ of the adoring crowd, but it was too discordant. La-la-la... The earworms jumped to fill the gaps between the notes. La-la-la-la-la... Perhaps, a Plutonic parade march as performed from an Ursuran vault dropped deep into the planet’s seas. La-la-la... It merely translated to another layer of white noise.

He realised that the tunes were alive. Earworms... Of course! Creatures that existed in waves of sound in much the same way as energy beings in wavelengths of light. Native to the Mæstri’s world.

“Not quite... la-la-la, domesticated...” he grunted.

A living force. That meant he could—that was to say—he rather thought... His mind was slipping. Where were the words?

The earworms tightened their coils around his mind like vipers...

Margaret found herself tied to the same chair recently vacated by the Doctor.

“You may be a great musician but you are quite disturbed. I’m not frightened of bullies like you,” she declared, sounding far braver than she felt inside.

Virtuosa’s emerald eyes narrowed like a lioness surveying the savannah.

“You should be scared, my little mouse. I have the means to extinguish your life slowly or just like *that*.” She clicked her fingers with a loud snap.

She circled Margaret who sat looking straight ahead, ignoring her captor’s attempt to intimidate her. Margaret was an ‘army brat’. Her father had regaled her, since she was a toddler, with tales of bravery under extreme duress. Soldiers charging into battle on horseback resolutely facing the barrage of artillery fire. She bit her lip trying not to cry.

Virtuosa stopped circling and faced her prey.

“Worn a hole in the carpet yet?” snapped Margaret.

The singer smiled.

“Worn a hole in the carpet yet?” Margaret repeated the phrase.

Again and again and again. She was trapped in a loop created by Virtuosa. Margaret could hear and see Virtuosa and Dolce leave the room without even a backward glance. When the cruel pair had left, Margaret remained like a stuck record endlessly repeating her cross put-down...

“Well Doctor, now I’ve dealt with the mouse, what shall I do with the rat?” Virtuosa sneered as she pressed her face up to his perspex bubble.

He sat slumped in the chair with his head on his chest. Eyes closed.

“You can’t fool me, Doctor. Wake up, let’s see if you can be useful.”

She banged on the top of the orb and the Doctor sprang to life with a start. Something was different. No witty retort, no declamatory condemnation, merely a repeated murmuring of one of the earworms on the loop.

“La, la, la... la, la la, la, la...”

Margaret had never been so scared. She couldn’t move from the chair, she couldn’t stop repeating that stupid quip. She was trapped like a living statue. She closed her eyes. *This isn’t exactly what I was expecting from my travels. What was I thinking of running away from my problems with a strange alien?*

Time passed with agonising slowness. She got tired of saying the same thing repeatedly. Eventually, a fluting noise was followed by the clunk of the door being unlocked. Perhaps the old witch had come back to gloat some more or she had a new worse fate for Margaret to endure.

The door opened and Allegra stood in the doorway.

Her fluting voice was sad and low. “Margaret, I’m so sorry you have been treated like this.”

She walked right up to Margaret, looked in her blue eyes, and sang a series of notes. It was a pretty phrase with an immediate result. To her delight, Margaret could move her hands and shuffle on the chair. She tried to speak but no sound came out.

“Wait for your brain to free itself from the Da Capo Trap while I untie you.”

Her hands freed, Margaret placed her palms against her face, exercising the muscles in her jaw to form different words at different intervals. Just sounds at first. Not too dissimilar from a small child, then a complete sentence: “Thank you for saving me.”

“It is my gift.”

She shrank back from Allegra and spoke quietly.

“If you can break Virtuosa’s control, it must mean that you too are a Maestra.”

“We have a great culture, but we are few in your dimension now.”

“Why did you lie to me? How did she not recognise you during your interview?”

Allegra finished untying Margaret, who stood up and fixed Allegra with her best teacher’s stare.

“You knew very well who Virtuosa was and you let me think you were a friendly face.”

“I am, Margaret. To you.”

“Are you working with her?”

“Whatever I say, would you believe me?”

“Answer me.”

“I haven’t time to explain everything, Margaret. I’m sorry I deceived you. I didn’t dare get too close to Virtuosa until I could uncover her plans. I needed to see why you were interested in my sister. You have to trust me.”

“Well, you have freed me. I’ll grant you that. But we must find the Doctor, he’s a scientist, he will find a way to stop her I’m sure,” said Margaret.

“Music is a primordial force. The beat of your hearts, the vibration of atoms. Before the sciences, before reason, there was music. What can one scientist do against something like that?”

“You’ve never met the Doctor. When you do, I think you’ll change your mind.”

Allegra nodded. She stood still, turning her head like you would tilt and move a television aerial to get better reception.

“Come on,” she ran towards the door. “I’ve found where she’s keeping your friend.”

Margaret followed Allegra and, as they ran, she attempted to get some answers.

“You said, ‘sister’. You’re related, but you don’t agree with her actions?”

“Do you agree with all your family?”

“That’s a fair point. Mind those stairs!”

“When the Chorale realised Virtuosa was missing, they sent me back through the dimensional gate to retrieve her. I managed to find her but she refused to return. She destroyed my OCTAVE¹—”

“Your ship?”

¹ οκτάβα - Orchestral Conducting Transposing Acoustic Vibration Equaliser

“Yes,” there was much pain in that word, “and stranded me on Yolmeara-V. I had to perform street music to get credits so I could leave Yolmeara and try and find her again. On the right, here.”

“Nice sister. Still, after my experience, nothing surprises me about Virtuosa’s behaviour.”

“She has changed. Something has changed her.”

“Well, she must have learnt that torture from some—”

“No more talking, I must concentrate. The sonic trail is fading in volume. We must hurry or we’ll end up dancing to Virtuosa’s tune.”

“What sonic trail? I can’t hear anything—”

“Margaret, please, I need to concentrate or we’ll never find your Doctor.”

“He’s not my Doctor. I haven’t even known him that long...”

Margaret stopped speaking when Allegra held up her finger to her lips.

Virtuosa opened the pod, the earworms ceased, skittering into the arcs of the speakers where their last resonances reverberated still. The Doctor’s eyes fluttered open. He was still murmuring and stared straight ahead. Virtuosa clicked her fingers right in front of his face.

“Can you hear me, Doctor? Answer me, obey my instructions,” she demanded.

“La-la-la, la-la-la-la-la,” the Doctor replied.

“Get out of the pod and walk to the workbench.”

Dolce released the Doctor from the chair and he walked to the bench and stood by it.

“On the bench is a device,” Virtuosa continued. “It needs components added to finish its construction. You will follow my instructions and be complicit in the enslavement of thousands.”

“La-la-la, la-la-la-la-la...”

The Doctor picked up the first part and dutifully soldered it onto the circuit board. Virtuosa wandered over to a computer console and started typing. The Doctor’s hands were moving involuntarily, his mind racing furiously against the mesmeric influence.

What was this device for? An amplifier of some kind? Of course. It would broadcast to the whole planet some kind of earworm, a living tune, that would bring everyone under Virtuosa’s control.

Virtuosa continued to call instructions and the Doctor carried them out. A compressor adjusted here, a regulator tweaked there. Fortunately, he had one advantage, a mind filled with all manner of nonsense. Several thousand lifetimes worth. All he had to do was run counter-interference. Sing out the influence while making slight alterations to other parts of the device at the same time. He wasn’t going to be commandeered by a jumped-up ditty.

All he needed was just a moment’s confusion in his own motor skills. He began with a determined mental melody of Louis Armstrong, quite dignified, manoeuvred into soulful Dusty Springfield, then lunged into a transgalactic jingle from IntraVenus Inc.

Slowly, very slowly, he found his interminable mantra shattered by just a few notes of his own. Broken tones from a hotchpotch of music. Scrambled together like the teeth of a shattered music box. He hadn’t enough control to deliberately sabotage the machine, but there was room enough to confuse the orders. A ‘15’, where there should have been a ‘5’ by his latest count.

He made just enough of a deviation for his captor's ear to notice. Virtuosa wandered over, took one look at the device, and shoved the Doctor to the floor.

"The charade is over, Doctor..."

"La-la-la~rdly, Virtuosa. You were never in control," he bluffed.

"How long ago did you break the influence?"

"Who can say?" He folded an arm under his head. "The mind has a tendency to wander with tedious work."

"I haven't got time for this. I shall have to try something else," she said. "As for you, back into the sonic cell, where you can *rot*."

The Doctor scrambled to his feet and tried to run for it but was faced with the burly figure of Dolce who secured him back into the orb.

Virtuosa and Dolce left the Doctor and, so too, did the earworms. The creatures poured from his skull to rekindle their acquaintance with their brood. New songs, new sounds, new horrors. Screaming notes not heard in this Galaxy for millions of years. The terrifying tones of the multiple earworms began their bombardment. It went beyond irritation, beyond inconvenience, transcending into the realms of quite genuine agony. He wondered how long he could hold out this time. Then, the tones ceased and, for a few moments, he heard nothing. Nothing at all. In the silence, he thought he'd gone deaf.

"Oh, no..."

That was his voice. His voice.

He sighed. "Well, thank heaven for that."

He turned his head, the speakers had suddenly popped. He looked up to see Margaret and someone else.

As the pod opened the Doctor smiled in relief, "Am I glad to see you, Margaret."

“See, I told you he would annoy Virtuosa. What *did* you say to cause her to imprison you in that thing?”

“I didn’t say much at all. Virtuosa discovered my tendency to put a spanner in the works of those that cause suffering to others and decided to neutralise me as a threat. Rather quickly, too. It’s almost as if...” He turned to his companion’s friend. “Ah, new acquaintances. Who might you be, young lady?”

“I am Allegra. Virtuosa’s sister. I’m truly sorry for her actions. She must be stopped or she will enslave this whole planet with her siren song. I will help you capture her.”

“You can trust her, Doctor,” Margaret insisted.

“I’m sure if we put our heads together we can stop her. There are some useful electronic parts here we can use.”

Virtuosa in the main auditorium whistled a quick A flat scale. A faint chord played whose notes rose incrementally in pitch.

There was a crescendo of sound and, with a final thump, an elaborate pipe organ appeared at the side of the stage. She whistled a jaunty phrase and the shiny, metal pipes folded while the keyboard manuals of the organ split asunder. Virtuosa walked inside the space revealed within and the organ returned to its initial configuration.

“My plan has changed, I shall need you to infiltrate any electronic means of producing sound,” she requested.

An oboe’s reedy notes indicated the machine’s compliance with her pilot’s request.

“Thank you, OCTAVE, I need to work on an irresistible tune. They will all flock to me like the...” she searched for a human metaphor to spite the Doctor, “Rats of Hamelin.”

She produced a sheaf of manuscript paper and set to work composing a melody. When satisfied with the result, she whistled two notes and the doors opened. She played a chord and a stool appeared from a panel at the base of the organ. She pulled out certain stops on the organ and played a tune using one hand on one keyboard manual and the other on the keyboard below.

She flicked a control, a green light switched on and a small speaker reported the OCTAVE's progress.

"The code-phrase is programmed into your memory, OCTAVE. Report, please."

It answered in a steel baritone: "Infiltration of radio and other audio devices complete. Ready to transmit code-phrase."

Virtuosa giggled with glee at the mayhem her little composition would unleash. She adored these moments. There was a time, long ago, when music had dominated everywhere. It was a powerful, wondrous force with a will and energy of its own. Now, the empty wavelengths were reduced to the infantile patter of child species playing with the bones of elder gods. Pale imitations of what came before. A little chaos, a little death, that would ease her sense of indignation. She hit play and a haunting tune emitted from the OCTAVE's speaker. She pulled a flexible gooseneck microphone towards her and sang over the top of the tune:

"Stop what you are doing;

You will listen to my voice.

Obey me, you have no choice;

Those nearby come to the Auditorium now."

Throughout the planet, the haunting song emanated from the public address system in the streets. Bands in rehearsal rooms and studios stopped playing when the tune emanated from their amplifiers. Radios, televisions all ceased transmitting their usual content and broadcast Virtuosa's song.

Virtuosa didn't have to wait long before she was joined by the first members of her new musical army.

All had blank expressions and were chanting the same phrase, "We obey, la Mæstra."

Among them, as the auditorium filled up, the Doctor and Allegra snuck into the back. They watched with horror how quickly Virtuosa had assembled her army. Tapping the side of Allegra's headphones, the Doctor pointed towards the epicentre. Virtuosa was on the stage. Her hand gripped a silver conductor's baton, she lifted it into the air and brought it down with a flourish. The crowd's chanting faded away into silence.

"I can hear your double heartbeats all a flutter, *both* of you," Virtuosa announced. "You've found me, Allegra, it's a shame you are too late."

"Why are you doing this? You can't control people using your music. This is not the Mæstri way—" Allegra moved towards the stage.

Virtuosa raised her baton and a sound like static filled the crowd. It drowned out Allegra. "You stay there. I like your crystalline form, I will take great pleasure in shattering you if you try to stop me."

The multicoloured intruder hefted his own microphone and speaker system in his arms.

"Why are you like this?" asked the Doctor, adjusting his headphones with a shoulder. "From what I've heard from Allegra, the Mæstri were peaceful beings who influenced the development of music in this galaxy."

"I don't have to tell you anything, Doctor."

"Going solo?"

"Anyone near these intruders, grab their headphones," she ordered.

The Doctor and Allegra pushed their way through the throng of grasping hands. The Doctor's microphone was ripped from his hands, but Allegra was able to force away the remaining arms with the speaker. They sprinted up the stairs to the balcony.

“That’s it, run away, little mice. Soon there will be no escape. Once the phrase is altered your headphones will give you no protection.”

The anguish in Allegra’s voice cut through the crowd. “What *happened* to you Virtuosa? You were *never* vindictive or hurt *anyone*. I’m your sister, although you abandoned me I still want to help you.”

“By dragging me back into that boring Chorale? I am happy here. We should never have stopped our creation. There are countless galaxies, a myriad of lifeforms that could perform the music we create.”

“No. We stopped because we realised music must be created willingly and without compulsion. To force someone to play music is no way to behave. Tell me, what has happened to make you so angry and cruel?”

Virtuosa spat out a single word, “Zodin.”

“Every time I think I’ve heard the last of her...” The Doctor turned to Allegra, his expression grave, “If your sister has been a victim of Zodin’s cruelty, she has been tormented almost beyond her limit.” He turned back, his voice booming. “You survived, Virtuosa. Many don’t. You think your hurt and dreadful experience excuses the enslavement of all these souls? There is no excuse for tyranny.”

“You cannot lecture me on tyranny. *You* decide who to help, who to oppose. How many races have felt the displeasure of *your* tyranny? The tyranny of the righteous crusader!” Virtuosa replied.

“Are those your words Virtuosa? Your ideas? I am not a crusader. I just do my best to help.”

“I am never going to be a victim of Zodin or anyone else again. Even those monotonous, dreary Daleks will dance to my tunes. I will be the conductor, the leader of an unquestioning band of followers.”

“And then you’ll be...?”

“Be what?”

The Doctor shrugged. “Blissful? Cheerful? Elated? Felicitous? Gladdened? Happy? Safe? What?”

“We want to help you—” Allegera began.

She ignored them. “Once I am the superpower in this dimension, then I will fill the galaxy with my music. My creativity.”

“Is that what you really believe?” asked the Doctor.

“Yes.”

“Terrific, another one,” he grumbled. “Another of the ‘I am the one and only’ brigade. You’re so vain, you probably think this song is about you...”

They waited. Long enough for Virtuosa to lower her baton and the crowd to hush.

“Well...?” she asked.

Margaret was running as fast as she could with a rucksack borrowed from a dressing room containing a few more of the Doctor’s headphones. She had to convince one of the bands converging on the auditorium to put them on. Her heart sank when she saw the huge queue of band members, tourists and others under Virtuosa’s musical spell.

She reached the amphitheatre. The members of the Coleopterans were clambering up the steps, their instruments abandoned. Margaret skidded to a halt.

“Stop, put these on,” she said, reaching into the rucksack and producing several pairs of headphones.

The group ignored her and continued walking.

In desperation, Margaret bellowed in the teacher’s voice used to bring unruly school children to a standstill, “You will turn around and listen to me. Now.”

To her amazement, they stopped. She rushed towards them and put the headphones on the head of each member of the group. The effect was immediate.

“What the quivering quavers is happening, man?” asked the grizzled bear-like drummer.

“Listen, quickly. Virtuosa is hypnotising everyone to obey her. The headphones block her out but they won’t work forever,” Margaret explained.

“I knew that Virtuosa was no good...” the reptilian guitarist hissed.

“Just go and get your instruments and amplifiers. We’re going to need them,” said Margaret.

The group unplugged their equipment, which was still playing Virtuosa’s haunting melody, and followed Margaret back up to the auditorium while she frantically explained Allegra’s plan. They reached the foyer of the auditorium and the band quickly set up their equipment.

“Let’s see this music, then,” growled the drummer.

Margaret produced a couple of pieces of manuscript paper. One had the melody, while the other showed the guitar chords and rhythm required

The guitarist counted them in. “Right, let’s give it a go, ready and a one, two, three, four...”

The drummer and bass guitar were straight in. The lead guitar and keyboards joined them playing the Doctor and Allegra’s jolly melody. Margaret connected the output of the small mixing desk perched next to the keyboard, to another device. It was the equipment the Doctor had been forced to work on by Virtuosa. Margaret switched it on. The music blared out of the speaker and it joined Virtuosa’s music being played throughout the planet.

In the auditorium, the assembled throng became restless.

Virtuosa looked around. She could pick out the countermelody which was neutralising her hypnotic tune. She could alter her tune, but why bother? She had learnt much during her time on Cantabile. She could disappear and start again elsewhere. But first, she had to deal with her meddling sister and the Doctor.

“It’s over!” the Doctor called from the balcony. Why don’t you wait for us to come down and we can discuss what to do next?”

“Not a chance, Doctor,” replied Virtuosa. “You may have delayed my work but I will succeed and you will not even realise it has happened—”

The Doctor turned to Allegra, her eyes were glowing.

Virtuosa cried out in pain as a sound wave hit her. She raised her conductor’s baton and an ultrasonic wave of sound from the combined shriek of the crowd launched towards Allegra. Allegra fell to the ground, hairline cracks appeared on her face. Her eyes lost their brilliance, sand trickled from larger fissures that had appeared in her hands and the back of her head. A beautiful and terrible cascade of life into death.

“You’ve killed her!” shouted the Doctor.

Margaret heard the Doctor’s desperate cry as she entered the auditorium. She looked at the stage, Virtuosa jumped down from it and headed to the organ at the side of the stage. An organ? Margaret was sure it hadn’t been there before. She was even more surprised when Virtuosa sang three notes and the organ transformed. Virtuosa walked into the entrance revealed and then the organ changed back again.

There was a rumbling of music, it sounded like an orchestral engine, an atonal crescendo of brass, strings, and woodwind changed up through the gears in pitch and volume until with a triumphant chord the organ disappeared. It reminded Margaret of the instrumental sequence in ‘A Day in the Life’

“Margaret! Margaret, where are you?”

She hurried up the stairs to the Doctor and was shocked to see it was Allegra. Her face cracked and her eyes closed. She didn't need to ask what had happened. Virtuosa was free to restart her dreadful schemes and her pursuer had been terminated. A terrible peace had fallen over the sister's features.

"She's gone. Hasn't she, Doctor?"

"I'm afraid so... No, wait a minute. Two hearts. Virtuosa said Allegra has two hearts, I wonder... Look!" He pointed to the soft glow that flickered over Allegra's body.

"Step back, Margaret, and get ready for something extraordinary."

The glow increased in intensity until neither of them could look any longer. They shielded their eyes from the bright yellow light until it receded. Allegra's broken body had disappeared, a few piles of sand the only remnant of her existence. A diminutive figure now lay there. She had black curly hair, a cheerful, cherubic human face and brown eyes.

"Phew, that was a close one," said her warm, low voice as she sat up.

"Allegra?" Margaret sat down on one of the seats in shock.

"The very same. Well... Quite different, it seems. No choosing a body, this time. Compact, with a nice contralto voice. Smashing," Allegra smiled.

"Your species can regenerate and has two hearts. Remarkable. I wonder if your species is one of the High Evolutionaries?"

"The what?" asked Margaret.

"The oldest and most powerful cultures of our universe. Occasionally, when circumstances are truly dire, they work in concert."

"Sort of an intergalactic neighbourhood watch?"

The Doctor waved the question away. "Did Virtuosa realise you would survive?"

“I only just managed to set the process in motion. Her ultrasonic assault was lethal. Designed to remove me as a threat. I don’t know what has happened to her. Whatever that Zodin did, my sister’s been turned bitter and twisted by it.”

“Zodin is a vicious, merciless individual, where she can’t conquer, she distorts. And *nom*, so is your sister. She must be stopped.”

Margaret looked at her. “Will you pursue her?”

“I will, but first I need something to eat and drink,” Allegra replied.

A celebratory party was organised in the auditorium. Margaret noticed Dolce sitting nearby, he looked away, humiliated. Allegra had removed Virtuosa’s control, but the memories of his actions still haunted him. They had all come so close to oblivion and it hadn’t been his choice. He’d live with that for the rest of his life.

Different bands and performers took to the stage. Eased away from their own private concerns, Margaret and the Doctor thoroughly enjoyed the impromptu concert. They moved outside to the amphitheatre to enjoy another band. Resting on the grass, his hands on his knees, the Doctor asked Margaret: “Are you alright? Allegra told me what had happened to you.”

“I was hoping to tell you myself...” she squeezed her hands. “When I was ready.”

“I understand. Believe me I do. You must have been terrified, stuck in Virtuosa’s trap.”

Margaret said nothing.

The Doctor spoke again. “There’s no shame in that.”

“There isn’t?”

“No.” He turned to her. “Do you want to return home?”

She thought about it for a moment. “No, Doctor. I still want to see what’s out there. This musical jamboree is wonderful. However, I would appreciate you avoiding any more evil aliens.”

“Evil lurks in every part of the cosmos, including your own Margaret.”

“I know, Doctor, I’m not a naive student. You attract trouble and danger and I will now expect it. However, before we go off into another perilous adventure, I promised to have a good chat with Allegra about my musical knowledge.”

“Have fun.”

“Shall I meet you back here?”

“Hmm...” the Doctor called and closed his eyes, enjoying the relaxing ambient sound of Oodkind.

Much later, the Doctor and Margaret returned to the TARDIS. The sounds of celebration continued with raucous approval on a horizon quietly dimming from the eventful day.

Once inside, Margaret stopped suddenly and pointed to the console.

“What’s that? Is it a bomb?”

As if registering their presence, the box started producing a sinister, twinkly tune. It sounded like a malevolent musical box. The music stopped and a familiar voice started speaking. “You have added another name to your list of enemies, Doctor. When we meet again, I will be ready for you. You will not survive our next encounter.”

The twinkly music restarted and the box started dissolving, the Doctor swept it onto the floor with his arm.

“You’re not melting my controls, you silly box.” He crushed it with a foot.

“She may threaten us, but we know more about her now.” Margaret looked at the Doctor, her blue eyes were fearful but her face resolute. “We will be prepared for her next scheme, won’t we?”

“Virtuosa is a powerful being from another dimension. She can manipulate sound and radio waves. That’s quite the feat. However, if we meet her again, we shall do what I *always* do in difficult situations.”

“And what is that, Doctor?”

“Improvise, of course.”

LA FINE

NIXED

By Andrew Hsieh

“Oh, Doctor, come on,” huffed Sarah, stepping out of the blue police box to discover that they had landed in an empty alleyway. “Seriously?”

“It’s the coordinates that are to blame,” the Doctor replied, closing behind him. All teeth and curls with a long multicoloured scarf, he quickly adjusted his fedora and began to follow her. “Seems to me that the TARDIS prefers to avoid attracting attention in a crowded city like...”

“New York!”

It had all the hallmarks of Times Square, certainly, but there was something off. The technology seemed out of step with that of the Earth. The bulletins on the digital billboards caught Sarah’s eye, all projecting bizarre headlines and the face of a middle-aged media tycoon with his hair combed over.

“This surely isn’t the Big Apple,” he said. “Way ahead of our time, and no sign of Carnegie Hall.”

“Oh, you just don’t want to admit the coordinates slipped.”

“Pah!”

“Feh!” Sarah made a face.

The Doctor smiled.

“Doesn’t seem to be any product advertisements, either,” she noted. “How on—?”

But the Doctor had wandered off, overhearing a broadcast from nearby. She went over to join him at the window of an electronics shop, where TV sets were airing an address by the same tycoon, displaying his name on the chyron: Rick Larridge, Nixed Corporation CEO.

“Fellow citizens of the planet Whush...”

“Funny choice of name for a planet,” Sarah chuckled.

“I’ve heard funnier,” the Doctor offered.

“An elite of so-called ‘journalists’, acting on the so-called behalf of Alexander Cregg, have attempted to get the company nixed by compiling a fraudulent dossier which alleges that your favourite CEO is corrupt. That I have overstepped my bounds.”

Sarah rolled her eyes in annoyance. “Bear-baiting.”

“Curious...” he muttered behind her.

“What’s curious?” Sarah turned.

In the upper right of the glass, the Doctor seemed to be flipping through the pages of a projected screen. The header of the text read ‘Latest Headlines’ in bright orange.

“38p for a newspaper still?” she asked. “I fancy the Times, if they’ve got it.”

“Sorry, there’s only one outlet.” He saw her cross to examine the vidscreen personally. “The Whush Telegraph. Funded by the Nixed Corporation. Looks as though they’ve a monopoly on the press.”

Sarah visibly rankled. “No one else, are you certain?”

“Yes,” the Doctor frowned. “All roads lead to...”

“The finest steel has to go through the hottest fire,” continued the broadcast. *“I’ve the dossier here, in my hand. Its contents are damning not to my own person or the*

Nixed Corporation, but to the practices of the gutter-press elite. Whatever crimes Alexander Cregg may have committed in his lifetime, his death has marked a new and vibrant leadership. It cannot be challenged.”

“Narcissist,” Sarah grumbled.

“Nixon!” The Doctor seemed quite pleased with himself.

“Pardon?”

“The quote. Hot fires and fine steel. Odd thing to recall on an off-world colony, he must be a hobbyist of your era, Sarah.”

Sarah was no longer listening to the broadcast. Her eyes were wandering the newsstands and agencies around them. Every source of information came from the same place. The Nixed Corporation. “Is it planetwide?”

“It would seem so.”

“There are monopolies and then there are *monopolies*...” Sarah crossed her arms. “The whole thing sets my teeth on edge.” She spotted a tall skyscraper across the road and said, “I think we ought to pay Mr Landrige a visit at the Headquarters.”

“Does it really offend you that much?”

“I’m a journo, alright? Freedom of the press is a pet peeve of mine. I just want to see if it’s all aboveboard and, if you’ve taught me anything, we learn that from the top. After that, the day will be what we make of it. We can go boating around Saturn. Just, please, indulge me?”

“And how do we get in, *hmm?* Pole vault?”

“Oh, easy. We can drop in as reps of the Metropolitan or whatever it’s become in this day and age.”

“Clever girl, Sarah,” said the Doctor, nodding. “Alright, lead on.”

Passing the reception on the ground floor, the Doctor and Sarah headed for the cafeteria and raised their eyebrows at the sight of customers

wearing silver pointy hats. While most were working on their own at different tables and booths, others were conversing in groups.

“What *are* they wearing?” Sarah asked discreetly.

The Doctor pursed his lips. “Presumably tin foil or aluminium, more than your standard employee hats.”

“Hmm... And if I wanted a serious answer?”

“Diametal. Sturdy material. Highly conductive under the right conditions.”

“Used for mind control?”

The Doctor’s voice lowered. “Possibly. The living mind is a marvel, isn’t it?”

Sarah then spotted a woman with ginger hair, about her age, working alone at a separate booth without her hat on. “Think I might have a little chat with her.”

“It’s your journalistic expertise, so why not? I’ll go and get some ginger beer.”

“And some lemonade, please, while you’re at it.”

As the Doctor went to order drinks at the counter, Sarah approached the woman and sat down opposite before asking, “Excuse me, are you a journalist?”

“Are you with the company?” asked the woman.

“Freelance. Out of the world, you might say.”

“Yes...” she inhaled deeply, hesitant to answer, “Yeah, I am—or I was. I was recently nixed by the company. I’m Lynda.”

“Sarah Jane Smith. Tell me, Lynda, what exactly do you mean by ‘nixed’?”

She looked around. “Don’t suppose it matters anymore. What else can they do to me? They ousted me for attempting to expose Larridge’s corrupt leadership.”

Then a familiar voice interrupted their conversation, “Did somebody order a lemonade?” It was the Doctor, carrying a tray loaded with two soft drink glass bottles and a seasoned deep-fried snack, resembling French fries, in an oval food basket.

He put the tray down on the table before shuffling next to Sarah and said, “My apologies if I startled the pair of you. Unfortunately, they were out of ginger pop, so they offered me root beer instead.”

While Sarah opened her lemonade and took a sip, the Doctor examined his root beer bottle which featured a cartoon dog sleeping on top of a red kennel. “Daft little fella,” he laughed.

“That’s Snoopy,” explained Sarah, “You know? Charlie Brown? The *Peanuts* gang?”

“His signature drink,” Lynda added.

“Oh, yes! I once saw that Halloween television special, involving the Great Pumpkin fantasy and the Red Baron. I told Manfred once, he never believed me.” He opened the bottle and drank more than just a sip before saying, “Mmm, actually quite nice with a difference in sweetness. I’m the Doctor, by the way. Help yourself to some curly fries, er...”

“Lynda. I was just telling Sarah Jane—”

“No need to explain, I overheard everything,” he interrupted, before munching on a fry, “And I do love how crispy these are, with an exquisite blend of exotic spices.”

“I don’t think—” Sarah began as she also took a bite, “Alright... For all the company’s faults, these are gorgeous.”

“A delight!” He laughed with mock pomposity. “Quite right that they nixed the competition so thoroughly.”

“Did they really?” asked Sarah.

The Doctor passed them to Sarah, a finger to his lips, and produced his sonic screwdriver. He held it in front of him like a broken wristwatch and pressed a button. A hum filled the air.

“What are you doing?” Lynda inquired.

He jiggled the screwdriver as though it were broken. “Walls have ears. Look as though you’re trying to convince Sarah.”

Sarah caught on. “And I look as though I’m not having a bar of it?”

He nodded. “They might see us, but hopefully, no one within earshot will be any the wiser.”

“Please, Lynda,” said Sarah, shaking her head, “do go on with your story.”

Without another second to waste, Lynda took a deep breath and resumed. “My father, Alexander Cregg, was the CEO of the Whush Telegraph until he died of, what was reported to be, a heart attack two years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sarah.

“Not as sorry as I was when I was presented with the amended contract at the funeral. Larridge suddenly took over the company, *without* consulting with my family, and rebranded it as the Nixed Corporation across the whole planet. Because it was my late father’s property, I felt I had no choice but to work my way through it, but...”

“Things started going wrong, Lynda Cregg?” suggested the Doctor.

“This corpocratic propaganda network... The nixing of employees, ideas, even words. It’s dangerous.”

“If the facts prove inconvenient, change the facts,” Sarah exhaled. “That’s where it all starts.”

“I’ve stayed on, so that I can investigate Larridge, but I think I’ve been caught out. I can’t contact the others, I think they’ve been...”

“Nixed?” the Doctor glowered at the word.

Having another sip of lemonade, while the Doctor finished off the curly fries, Sarah leaned forwards and asked, “You can provide proof? Something concrete?”

“As much as they let me keep.”

“Then, as a fellow journalist myself, I promise that I’ll do you justice.”

“How?”

“Sarah’s always got a trick up her sleeve,” the Doctor added. Then he produced a crumpled bag of sweets and asked, “If we give you back the corporation, what will you do with it?”

The question seemed to boggle her mind. “I’m not sure.”

“Think about it. Go on.”

She exhaled. “Give people a better quality of life if we can. Let other voices in. Look, I’m not really sure I can answer that on my own. It’s not really about me, is it?”

He jostled the bag. “*Mmm...* A laudable attitude. We can empathise with that, can’t we, Sarah? Jelly baby, Lynda?”

Lynda took the blackcurrant one and popped it in her mouth. She leant back, throwing up her arms, as if in defeat. “Delicious,” she said, chewing. “You both have my full support. Please, find out the truth.”

It took about an hour for Sarah to apply for a job at Nixed Headquarters. As she traveled up the lift with the Doctor and Lynda, they were listening to some classical music which the Doctor immediately recognised.

“Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. Spring concerto in E major, first movement.”

“That’s my ex–boyfriend’s favourite piece,” Lynda explained, “He used to listen to it when he did art back at school. Found it very relaxing.”

“And where is he now?” asked Sarah, adjusting an earpiece which the Doctor gave her for secret communications.

The thought of her ex–boyfriend made Lynda hesitant to think of a good response. She took a deep breath and said, “You might be seeing him very soon.”

“Oh?”

The lift suddenly came to a stop, as the music continued playing. Its doors opened to reveal a busy newsroom, where all workers were also wearing silver hats. Before Sarah stepped out, the Doctor said to her, “Remember to keep us posted.”

She nodded at them both, walking ahead without turning back to watch the lift doors close. *Very bureaucratic*, Sarah thought while passing the familiar clacking sound of typewriters, which reminded her of when she worked on her first article. She was then approached by a young, dark–haired man who was a few years older than her and Lynda.

“You must be Sarah Jane Smith,” he said, offering a handshake. “I’m your new partner, Tyler Golden.”

“Likewise, Tyler. Journalism is my life. I presume they’re assigning us a story to investigate?”

“Quite a few, as a matter of fact.”

He then presented a folder with some printed news articles. “Each related to the death of Alexander Cregg, the man who would’ve been my father–in–law.”

“Your... father–in–law?”

“You seem a little surprised.”

“Well,” Sarah stumbled, “I was a big admirer of his. And who was it that you were dating?”

“His daughter Lynda. Recently came to an end, but we’re on good terms.”

“I see,” she nodded, glancing over the headlines. “Wait a second, these articles appear to be a bit—”

“Oh, sorry, er... you’ll also be needing this.” He hastily gave her a hat.

“Thank you, kindly.” She put it on and began to feel a tingling sensation of electronic pulses in her brain, like resting an ice pack against her forehead. “Do I have an octopus’s tentacles wrapped around my head?”

“No, but you’ll get used to wearing it.”

“It almost feels...”

“Alive?”

“Silly, isn’t it?” Sarah shook her head. “Hmm, guess I’m beginning to understand where I went wrong. Shall we get started?”

Throughout the afternoon, Sarah and Tyler studied each article and tried to piece together the hypothetical causes of Alexander’s death, by pinning up and arranging newspaper cutouts and photographs on a bulletin board. Some accounts implied that he was murdered by an employee, in order to have him silenced, the rest made it clear that he died of a heart attack in his office. During her break at her desk, she communicated with the Doctor and Lynda, via her earpiece, whilst being allowed to remove her hat temporarily.

“You were right, Lynda,” Sarah began, trying to maintain a hushed tone, “Everybody is forced to comply with whatever Larridge believes, instead of having to think freely.”

“What about Tyler, is he alright?”

“He dearly misses you, but still under the influence. Where exactly are you both right now?”

“The top floor,” the Doctor explained. “Surveying the layout of Larridge’s office, thanks to Lynda keeping a spare copy. A trifle difficult. It looks as though Larridge personally vets each news story for distribution.”

“He’s aware of everything, then?”

“Everything and everyone, Sarah. How are you holding up?”

“Sorry, I’ll have to call you back.” She had just noticed that Tyler was approaching and quickly tapped her earpiece before putting her hat back on.

“Everything alright, Sarah Jane?”

“Yeah, just catching up with my Aunt Lavinia.”

Tyler nodded and said, “That’s nice.”

One of the lifts opened to reveal Larridge elegantly dressed with a silver crown. He was met with a huge round of applause and cheers from the employees.

“Wow,” Larridge exclaimed, “look at you guys, so hardworking!”

They all laughed, except Sarah who watched with bemusement. She turned and asked Tyler, “Are they always like this whenever he appears?”

“A lot of the time, yeah.”

“Cult of personality,” she snorted.

As he greeted the employees individually, Larridge finally approached the two and said, “I see you have a new partner, young Tyler. First day?”

“That’s right.” Sarah came forward, “Sarah Jane Smith.”

“Nice to meet you, Sarah Jane.” He forced a handshake, almost as if he was tugging and pulling her arm. “Apologies for my overenthusiasm, just got carried away there.”

“No worries,” she complimented, trying to maintain a smile. “It was very courteous of you.”

“Say, is that what you’ve been working on?”

Sarah and Tyler followed Larridge into their office, watching him rearrange and add a few more cutouts to the bulletin board for the finishing touch. “Your presentation is remarkably impressive.”

“Agreed, Rick,” Tyler added, “despite it only being her first day.”

“How about a chat in my office, Miss Smith? We should get to know each other better.”

She raised her eyebrows with surprise and replied, “Yes, I’d like that very much. I’ll go and collect my things first.”

“Good. I shall be waiting by the lift outside.”

Watching him leave the newsroom, Sarah quietly tapped her earpiece and whispered to the Doctor, “The CEO has invited me for a chat in his office. I’ll stall him. You’re good to go.”

Larridge’s office was more spacious than what the Doctor initially imagined. His small varnished desk and comfy armchair were situated in front of the windows, displaying a scenic landscape of the city, with his computer at the centre. There were framed physical newspapers and magazine covers on the walls, as well, with plenty of rare collectibles which didn’t attract the Doctor’s attention.

Taking his sonic screwdriver out of his coat pocket and aiming it at the black telephone on the desk, he pressed the button with his thumb, causing the round tip to make a vibrant whirring sound. The telephone’s casing opened, and the Doctor quickly inserted a listening device before sealing it again. He did the same with a few other objects and furniture across the room, until opening up a bust of Richard Nixon which took him by surprise. An odd bit of accoutrement for an office on a world considered alien to Earth. They must be descendents from Sol, he decided.

“Watergate,” the Doctor muttered, before spotting a photograph sticking out of a drawer beneath him. “Hello... what’s this?” He picked it up and analysed the photo. It was Larridge with a teenage Lynda and her father Alexander, sitting together at the dinner table; presumably during a family gathering.

But then, the door suddenly opened. “After you, Miss Smith,” said Larridge, politely ushering Sarah into his office.

“Thank you,” replied Sarah. She observed the filing cabinets by the door, the framed newspapers, too, before turning around to notice... “Hi.”

“Oh,” the Doctor gasped, “Hello there, I was just—”

“Hey!” Larridge barked as he closed the door, then frowned at him. “How did you break into my office?”

“I’m just an electrician,” he explained, waving his sonic screwdriver before putting it away, “making sure that nothing in the building is experiencing any technical problems.”

“I don’t remember hiring an electrician.”

“You must’ve been so busy you completely forgot that I was coming in today, Mr Larridge.” The Doctor casually slipped the photo into Sarah’s hand and said on his way out, “Goodbye, my dears!”

Watching her friend leave the office, Sarah discreetly examined the photo while Larridge boiled the kettle on the kitchen counter. She had to remain calm without attracting suspicion.

“Do you take milk or sugar?” Larridge asked.

“Both, please.”

He brought out a tray with two mugs of tea and a plate of assorted biscuits. There were custard creams, bournons, rich tea, shortbread fingers, jam sandwich creams, chocolate chip cookies, plain and chocolate digestives.

“Lovely selection,” Sarah complimented, watching him set the tray down on his desk as she took a seat opposite him. She sipped her tea before having a bourbon. “Mmm, classic. Were these imported from Earth?”

“We actually have a biscuit factory on the other side of Whush.”

“For real?”

“No, of course not!” Larridge burst into laughter, “We rely on interstellar shipping.”

“Sounds cheap.” She shrugged while eating a rich tea and a chocolate digestive. “And tell me, sir, how would you define ‘nixed’ in your own words?”

“Well,” Larridge began, “Nixed refers to citizens who are being silenced for having opposing views, including myself. The term is a pun on President Nixon.”

Sarah feigned ignorance. “Who?”

“Old Earth leader who delivered a speech on the silent majority, televised back in Earthtime 1969, only a few months after the Apollo 11 moon landings.”

Sarah remembered. Humankind made it to the Moon while everything was still a mess back home. The war in Vietnam had been a contributing factor to her fascination for journalism. The first conflict broadcast into people’s homes at teatime. The carnage became an albatross to the American leadership.

“When the press began to treat him so badly, during the Watergate witch hunt, he immediately gained my fascination. You see what I mean?” He gestured at the bust.

“Yes,” she nodded, sipping on her tea, “You seem to have gained a few antiques from the age. The fountain pens, the cassette deck, the day planner...”

“All to put me in the right state of mind.”

“And you made this term, ‘nixed’, the company name?”

“Nixon spoke for the forgotten. I want to achieve the same for *all* citizens which is why I’m neither left nor right and on the middle ground.”

“Wait, hang on,” Sarah interrupted, “if you believe that the public deserves to have a voice, then why does your organisation oust journalists who don’t share the same views? Doesn’t that run contrary to your alleged views? Isn’t that suppressive?”

“It’s not censorship, Miss Smith. They were the ones who have repeatedly attempted to take down my company. It’s self-defence.”

“Aren’t you worried about sawing out the tree branch while you’re standing on it?”

“The policy is infallible.”

“Including against Lynda Cregg?”

Larridge suddenly began choking on his cookie. He was wheezing and spluttering nonstop, unable to control it. Sarah watched in disbelief, reluctant to ask if he was alright as his silver crown slipped off.

“Sorry,” he coughed, before clearing his throat and slurping down the rest of his tea. “Went down the wrong way. Very rude of me. How do you know about Lynda Cregg?”

“Went to school with her, but we were never in the same class,” said Sarah, knowing it was the only lie she could tell. “Miss Cregg explained that you had her ‘nixed’ from the company, not too long ago.”

“Correct. For conspiring with other journalists to put together that fraudulent dossier.”

“Doesn’t she hold a controlling interest in the company?”

“She never did. She had no right to investigate me using conspiracy theories as evidence.”

“But isn’t that what you do? Promote conspiracy theories about her late father, Alexander?”

“No.”

Sarah protested. “The report today in the square, connecting the journalists to Alexander—”

“That’s preposterous. Another attempt at being nixed by the opposition. All I care about is seeking the truth, not distorting facts.”

“Now, you listen to me,” Sarah began to snap. “You have ‘nixed’ your own language, your branding, your customers, your staff... Your excessive use of the term has enabled it to lose all meaning, as well as ‘nixing’ Lynda and other journalists for calling you out. And you know what? You are nothing but a... a... a clever Dick!”

A moment of silence. Larridge gave her a hard stare, his face turning red with fury. “What did you call me?”

“A clever Dick.” She looked to the bust of Nixon. “Thought you’d appreciate the context.”

“I haven’t heard that name since before my brother died,” he growled, scrunching his fist into a ball, “Nobody *ever* calls me that!”

“Your brother?”

“My *half*-brother, Alexander Cregg. He didn’t die of a heart attack, *I* killed him.”

“How... could you?!” Sarah gasped, shaking her head whilst frowning.

“Intellectual property rights. Manufacturing contracts. An interdepartmental deal with the Pozospiec.”

“Who?”

“They are the planet’s native species who share a hive mind and can only exist by living in metal...”

Sarah’s hand went to her hat.

On the other end of the line, working in a technician's room on the top floor, the Doctor and Lynda were monitoring the conversation by recording through some electronic surveillance equipment. Lynda held back her tears as she listened to the horrifying truth about her father's murder.

"After all these years," she sniffled, "I didn't know we were blood related, and I'm so ashamed to be his niece. I'm gonna get that b—"

"That can wait, Lynda," he gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "Let's go and have a talk with him, shall we?"

And so, the Doctor ended the recording on the tape machine and took out the cassette before disconnecting all electronic equipment. He kept it in his pocket as he and Lynda took the lift downstairs to Larridge's office.

"Allow me," he said, placing his sonic screwdriver above the doorknob. It made that whirring sound, causing the door to unlock.

They both stormed in to find Larridge already with his crown back on, with Sarah turning around with a sigh of relief.

"Well, well, well," said Larridge, "if it isn't Special Agent Dana Scully and that fake electrician!"

"Larridge—"

The CEO punched the alert button on his desk.

"Door!" shouted the Doctor.

Lynda was on it. She pulled the nearest three filing cabinets across the doorway. Security officers crashed into it from the outside, but they held fast.

The Doctor turned towards Larridge, taking out his crumpled bag and giving it a little shake, "Here, have a jelly baby."

Larridge went for the top drawer of his desk. Typically where one kept a handgun in these sorts of scenarios. The Doctor, with a kick from the front, slammed Larridge's fingers tight in the drawer before he could reach it.

"You stupid—!" the CEO cursed.

"Guns make me nervous." The Doctor released him before he deliberately produced a lemon jelly baby from his sleeve. He poured it straight into Larridge's hand. "Have a lie down, Mr Larridge, it's been a strenuous day."

Larridge sat heavily in his chair, nursing his hand. He chewed, grudgingly, on the sweet as compensation.

"Take this," he whispered in Lynda's ear, handing her the gun and, from his pocket, the cassette tape before sneaking behind the desk to retrieve the crown. The Doctor carefully placed it back on Larridge's head and went round the front to notice... "Ooh, biscuits, I love biscuits!" He picked up a custard cream and a jam sandwich cream from the plate and munched on them together, while Sarah tried to remove her hat.

"Feels like it's been superglued," she grunted, "Doctor, what have you done?"

"It's okay, Sarah, everything's under control."

But Larridge was already standing upright, motionless on the spot like a robot awaiting instructions. He pointed his finger at the Doctor and said, "Now, you will bow down to your king, or we will flood every single employee's minds with my truth... Starting with your friend, Fake Electrician."

"No!" Lynda raised the gun, as Sarah began to feel faint.

"Lynda. Lynda!" the Doctor hissed. "There's no refuge in that." He then turned to Larridge and said, "I'm more than just an undercover electrician. I'm the Doctor. Your plot to brainwash citizens and Sarah Jane Smith with lies and propaganda has gone far enough."

“The truth—my truth—is already out there, Doctor,” snarled Larridge, “Alexander Cregg *did* die of a heart attack.”

Lynda stepped forward and interrupted him, “We know that isn’t true at all.” She went round the desk and opened a portable cassette deck to insert the tape. “You murdered my father and spent two years lying to the people. You’ve tried to destroy my career whilst erasing the family name. And even though you’re my father’s half-brother, you are *not* my uncle!”

“What are you doing?” Larridge demanded.

“Providing the facts.” As she began playing the recording, Larridge lunged for the weapon but the Doctor quickly grabbed the CEO’s arms from behind and began to restrain him.

“Unhand me, Doctor!”

“Shush, and listen.”

“...My half-brother, Alexander Cregg. He didn’t die of a heart attack, I killed him.”

“How... could you?!”

It was the exact same conversation between him and Sarah. They could hear the recording transmitting across the city through the open window, broadcasting on every single radio station and satellite; loud enough for the entire population to hear.

“Stop it,” Larridge snapped.

“Too late, Larridge, far too late.” The Doctor shook his head.

It continued, “...And because of my previous experiences as a factory worker, I manufactured the headgear for the Pozospiec to inhabit. Every single one of them with their help. So they used my crown to strike Alexander Cregg’s heart with a single electrical discharge, right here in my office...”

Groaning in pain, Larridge broke free from the Doctor and tried to force his crown off. “Make it stop, make it stop,” he cried, “Those lies are destroying us!”

The crown began to hover in midair, along with Sarah's hat. They crumpled and simultaneously scrunched up into balls, each displaying a weak energy of electric sparks before dropping to the ground. The Doctor picked one up and examined it. Larridge looked on in horror, unable to comprehend the damage he had caused.

"That's what happens when you deal with the devil, Mr Larridge," said Sarah. "Stubborn enough to ignore the fact that it was their Achilles' heel."

"The cost may prove to be more than he initially realised..." the Doctor turned to Lynda. "Have you heard of Pozospiec?"

"No..."

"Ask your doctor during your next medical check-up." He crossed to the window. "I think we're about to see a revolution unfolding."

The security officers finally came bursting through the door and pointed their guns at Larridge. "It's over, Rick," said their leader. "Expect to be sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and association with hostile parasitic aliens."

"You insurrectionists haven't seen the last of me," Larridge reluctantly raised his arms as an officer handcuffed him, watching the Doctor hand them the cassette tape. "This is a *coup d'état*, trying to have me nixed for seeking the truth!"

As the officers dragged him out of the room, Lynda gave her so-called uncle the hardest stare. She had the gun, still, of course. In the rush, they'd paid no attention to her. She pointed it at his head, finger on the trigger, then released the magazine. The cartridge holder dropped harmlessly to the carpet. She made her choice. A better one than her uncle. It wouldn't bring her father back, that was the truth.

After that, they were gone.

“Whoa, look at that,” said Sarah, looking out of the window. She spotted mass crowds gradually approaching the building, all without hats on.

Then the Doctor replied with a grin, “I think we should head for the TARDIS, in case the situation worsens.”

It was almost like a tidal wave at the entrance. Hundreds of enraged citizens and workers were booing and throwing the remaining balls of tin foil at Larridge, every single one they had worn before the Pozospiec met their demise. Many chanted “*Nixed for life!*” in front of him, others chanted “*Clever Dick!*” further away.

The Doctor, Sarah and Lynda were making their way through the crowds outside, doing their best to avoid getting separated. It was then that Lynda heard someone call her name from a good distance, a voice so familiar to her.

“Lynda!”

Pausing for a moment, she turned around to notice that her ex-boyfriend was already approaching, and gasped, “Tyler?”

They immediately embraced in a hug, unaware that the Doctor and Sarah were way ahead of them.

“You pair,” the Doctor called, “Don’t just stand there!”

They soon caught up with them, resuming their journey until finally exiting the crowd near the empty alleyway.

Lynda and Tyler raised their eyebrows at the TARDIS, unsure how such a rare antique could end up in an area of abandonment and misery. “A police telephone box?” she stifled a laugh. “How did that end up here?”

“It’s my ship, called the TARDIS,” the Doctor explained. “Travels across time and space.”

“More convenient than booking a flight from London to New York,” Sarah added.

Tyler observed the exterior, side by side, and said, “I must say that it looks incredible for a film prop. I’ve always loved filmmaking, so I might as well do a screenplay about a time traveller saving the planet from a tyrant like *Dick* Larridge.”

“As long as you don’t mention the Doctor by name,” he pointed to himself, “me, myself and I might take umbrage.”

“Yes,” Tyler nodded in agreement, “I’ve been thinking about that, actually. That’s what the totalitarian Nixed Corporation should be replaced with, a television and film production company.”

Lynda nudged him and added, “As well as smaller businesses and networks, with a functioning democratic system.”

“Small steps,” Tyler admitted with a smile.

The Doctor unlocked the TARDIS door, indicating to Sarah that they were soon to depart. He gave Lynda a final handshake, then to Tyler.

“Thank you again, Doctor,” she said, before giving Sarah a hug. “And thank you for saving my fiancé.”

“But we’re not yet engaged!” Tyler laughed.

“Don’t forget me, Lynda.”

“I won’t, Sarah Jane.”

Then the Doctor said, “And you know what this whole scandal should be known as? Nixedgate.”

Exchanging waves with stifled laughter, the Doctor and Sarah headed inside the TARDIS and closed behind them. Lynda and Tyler stood back to watch the police box slowly fade away, listening to the sound of wheezing and groaning in astonishment, hand in hand.

Epilogue

A little girl of eight–years–old, with ginger hair, gazed at the clear night sky in the living room, looking out for a shooting star to pass by and grant her a wish. Behind her was a Christmas tree, decorated with lights and colourful ornaments setting the Yuletide scenery.

“Lily,” a boy’s voice called from the hallway, “Mum’s making hot chocolate, she’s asking if you want some.”

“Yes, please!”

Then suddenly, she heard a sound of wheezing and groaning. Lily turned around to see a tall blue police box appearing right next to the tree, without knocking it to the side. It was the TARDIS. “Whoa,” she gasped. “Caleb, Caleb, come and see this!”

The boy came rushing in, equally surprised by its sudden appearance. He was a couple of years older than Lily, but had auburn hair. They stood back as the door slowly opened, revealing a tall, spiky–haired man wearing a dark brown suit with blue pinstripes and a light brown jacket.

“Hi,” she said nervously, “I’m Lily, and this is my big brother Caleb.”

“Hello there, Lily and Caleb,” the man greeted back, “Are your parents around?”

“Er, yes,” Lily nodded before calling, “Mum, Dad!”

Their mother walked in with their mugs of hot chocolate, followed by their father. “Here you go, kids,” she said, putting them down on the table before turning round to notice...

“Lynda, Tyler,” said the stranger, stepping forward to offer them both a handshake.

“You can’t be him...” Tyler stumbled, briefly eyeing the police box. “What happened to your appearance?”

“I’ve changed. Half a dozen times since we last met. Twelve years ago.”

“Mum, what’s he talking about?” Caleb asked.

“He’s the Doctor, sweetheart,” said Lynda, “Remember that bedtime story we used to tell you both? Nixedgate?”

“So, it’s true,” Lily exclaimed, “You’re actually real!”

“Oh, yes,” the Doctor replied with a grin and nodded. “And I love what you’ve done with the place. Isn’t this what used to be Larridge’s office?”

“Completely refurbished,” said Lynda, “Well, not just that. We converted the entire skyscraper into homes, with a restaurant on the floor where the Nixed offices were based.”

“Also founded a production company and wrote a number of TV shows and films,” Tyler added, pointing at the framed posters on display.

“And Larridge, imprisoned?”

“He died four years into his jail sentence,” Lynda explained, “We looked into the Pozospiec.”

“And?”

She looked at him, critically. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew that Pozospiec was a pharmaceutical company.”

“Their chief export was antipsychotic medication,” the Doctor confirmed. “The alien parasites didn’t actually exist. Larridge made them up.”

“They were just another conspiracy theory, he was acting alone using the headgear.” She put her hand to her head and rubbed her temple. “The strain corrupted him so badly that he developed a brain tumour. That’s what happens when one becomes addicted to paranoia, I suppose. It eventually kills.”

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor shook his head with deep remorse. “I’m so sorry.”

“While I’m glad that he was brought to justice, he wasn’t well.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“He didn’t deserve to have his life taken so early, as someone who I once thought was my uncle. I... don’t know what kind of person that makes me.”

“In all likelihood, a good one.”

The living room lapsed into silence.

Then Lily asked, “Will you be staying for some hot chocolate?”

“Really wish I could hang out, Lily, but I’m afraid I’ve only swung by to drop off a little Christmas present.” The Doctor took a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Tyler. “Type these coordinates into a teleconferencing software, on your computer, and you’ll receive your free gift.”

“It’s so wonderful to see you again, Doctor,” said Lynda, “And please give Sarah Jane Smith our warmest regards.”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?” The Doctor gave her a wink and stepped back inside the TARDIS before saying, “Until the next time.” And finally, he closed the door. The police box slowly began to dematerialise as the family watched in amazement.

“Incredible,” Caleb sighed in amazement, gently wrapping his arm around his little sister.

The children sat down at the table and enjoyed their hot chocolates, while their father typed in the coordinates on the desktop computer. They soon heard a voice calling through the speakers who said, “Hello?”

“Wait, I know that voice,” Lynda murmured, watching the screen displaying a live video feed to reveal... “Sarah Jane Smith!”

It was her, right inside the attic with a teenage boy and a robot dog. She gave them a warm smile, as Lily and Caleb gathered round their excited parents.

“Oh, Lynda, Tyler, I thought I would never see you again. It’s been a very long time since the Doctor brought me home to Earth.”

“Twelve years later for Whush, and you’re still looking young for your age, Sarah Jane. These are our children Caleb and Lily.”

“I’m her son Luke, and this is our dog K9.”

“Affirmative.”

And so, the two families continued to stay in touch for the years to come. Exchanging stories about life, journalism... and the Doctor.

FOUND BUT FORGOTTEN



By OC Hayward and Alan Camlann

There was a particular school of thought on Gallifrey of yore that as a Time Lord was the sum of their memories, so too was their TARDIS, the sum of their mind.

If anyone had applied this logic to the Doctor, they would have concluded that his psyche arched over itself like an Osirian brain stem. A tessellating kaleidoscope of knickknacks, whatnots, doobries and much else besides. This part of the time machine smelt of cinnamon and burnt oak. It was perhaps one of the oldest parts of the old girl. Where a human mind would keep childhood memories and *jamais vu* first impressions.

Many companions past had attempted an expedition into the TARDIS. Some with maps, some with cartography droids, others with purely eidetic memories and their wits. The Doctor, however, typically gave the impression of knowing most, if not all, of its superstructure. A brief moment of confusion was plastered over with a wise nod and a mutter about, “The pool room.”

It was therefore unsettling for the Doctor’s most frequent travelling companion to find a chamber that neither he, nor the Doctor could remember seeing before. Disconcerting because it looked as though it had been tended to yesterday. Some areas had faces in sculpture, others had

names on candles, some figures were propped up in a portrait gallery that stretched for leagues.

At its centre, though, nearest to a column by the door, was a gap. Cold and inviting.

“Oh, no.” The bald man readjusted his glasses. “We can’t have any of that. Not now...”

A bony hand clapped against the door. He’d yet to see it. “Can’t have any of what, Nardole?”

Mysteries.

The Doctor sighed with the breath of a small galaxy. Thoughtful. He was never particularly good at letting a good mystery lie, but he didn’t seem to be getting any closer to the truth. What was the truth?

Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, continues to confound and annoy.

He shook his head. He had just finished his last set, a medley of David Bowie covers, ending with *Starman*, but no one seemed to actually be paying him or his guitar any attention.

Powerline, the club where he played, was a dimly lit dive whose interior hadn’t been updated since the 1980s.

A few dusty flickering neon lights hung precariously from the ceiling. The red vinyl upholstered booths all had rips and tears with yellow stuffing bulging out. The too-small dance floor was perpetually sticky with phosphorescent beverages and guests often complained of seeing flashes of rats out of the corner of their eyes.

That was exactly how he liked it. Powerline didn’t pretend to be something it wasn’t and neither did he.

The Doctor thought to himself, wondering, for a brief moment, what caused his mask to slip. He shrugged sadly to himself and stared out into the abyss.

Powerline was more than half-empty except for a few very lonely lost souls, a roleplaying group, and a pair of his students snogging each other in a dark corner.

“And now for my final song, *I Forget*,” the Doctor announced into the microphone. This was his favourite song. He didn’t play it for the benefit of the audience, but for himself.

As he began to play the first few chords he saw her. An old friend he had not seen in years.

She sat down at the table upfront. The Doctor continued to play his song, unsure if he should make eye contact or not. She was just the same as she always was. Long, burnt orange hair with discerning eyes and a proud face. She’d dressed practically for the evening in a velvet coat that wouldn’t have appeared too out-of-place with one of his earlier selves. She wasn’t drinking. Just listening. A relaxed posture broken by the occasional snap of ‘*Oi, I’ll have ya!*’ to the rowdy D&D group in back. Eventually, he finished, switching off the amplifier.

“Thank you all for coming this evening,” the Doctor said into the microphone, distractedly.

His old friend stood up and to the Doctor’s surprise began to walk towards him.

“Hi,” said Donna Noble.

In the Doctor’s mind there was a chalkboard, and on it was everything he could possibly say.

I want to tell her everything. Talk about the old days.

Find out everything that had happened to her since he'd last seen her from afar. To tell her, *Thank you for being Donna Noble, who was more than just a temp in Chiswick.*

For giving me my face, my reminder to always save people.

But, it sounded too much like an epitaph on a gravestone. The Doctor knew he never could. Donna Noble could never remember. He cleared his throat, suddenly realising he had been silent for too long.

“Hello, you alright, mate?” she asked, waving her hand in front of the Doctor’s face. “Off with Major Tom?”

“Hello,” the Doctor finally responded. “Sorry, just... Yes.”

“Artists. You were good,” she said smiling.

“Thanks,” he said, distracting himself by putting his electric guitar into its case. What could he possibly say to her next?

“I like the title.” She was still smiling, but the Doctor could swear her face was slightly damp. “Did you write the song yourself?”

“Yes, to remind myself.”

“Of what?”

He rested a hand on the guitar. “You’re very nosy, you know that?”

“Indulge the snifter, then.”

“Has it been that kind of evening?”

“And more.” Her laugh was somewhere between a guffaw and a chuckle. “So, what’s it remind you of?”

“Of the part of me that is missing. I know there was someone there but now they’re... gone,” the Doctor replied, deep in thought. “Why do you ask?”

Donna’s smile froze. “It’s weird.” Almost as if it’d mislaid its shape. “I feel like part of me is missing, too, sometimes. I’m glad I came. A waitress

at a diner nearby told me you played good music here.” Donna remembered the friendly, petite, dark-haired woman who had served her. “I can’t remember her name. I think it started with a ‘C’. Clementine? Coriander? Ciara? Caecil—Something. Maybe it was a ‘K’...?”

For reasons the Doctor couldn’t explain, he felt oddly melancholy for a moment. He wondered if Donna was local. Could he possibly rekindle their friendship without her finding out the truth about him?

Donna waved her hand in front of his face again. “You okay, mate? Is something the matter?”

“I’m fine,” the Doctor lied, then changed the subject. “The club is about to close for the night. Do you live in Bristol?”

“*I’m* nosy, eh?” she asked.

“It’s only an offer to walk you home,” he gestured.

“Listen, mate, just cause I like your music, doesn’t mean I wanna get fresh with you.”

He blinked. “I must be going deaf—”

“I’ll have you know I’m a married woman and even if I wasn’t I’m not about to room with some grey-haired old geezer.” Donna insisted, pointing to her wedding ring to get her point across.

Same old Donna, thought the Doctor.

He smiled to himself, nostalgically. “Relax. I know the club’s reputation, I’m not interested in a nightcap either.”

“Good.” she nodded with a tone that said ‘just so’. “Sorry.”

“Sorry it is,” he agreed.

They bobbed their heads for a minute or so together. Something in their mutual expression, a glimmer of something in one another’s eye, and they cracked up into a fit of giggles.

“I’m still getting used to it. Can you tell?” Donna suppressed a final gleeful snort.

“You know, I’m probably older than your grandfather.”

“Don’t knock it. A night on the town with granddad could be one of the best days of my life.”

The Doctor, pleased at the mention of Wilf, wished he could ask Donna how he was doing. His smile dimmed. But, he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. The conversation could too easily veer towards the dangerous.

“Is your husband picking you up?”

“No, I’m here by myself, actually. It’s a business trip for a management course being held at the university.”

The Doctor raised one eyebrow. “Is it at St. Luke’s by any chance?”

“That’s the one!”

“I teach there.” He strummed a chord. “We could meet up and then you could watch me play here again afterward. I mean if you want, I’m sure you’ve better things to do.”

“Sure! I never got your name?”

“My name is…” the Doctor paused, “Basil Funkenstein.”

He frowned. Of all the names, in all the galaxies he could have chosen…

“Y’wot?” Donna questioned, not fooled for a second.

“It’s a stage name,” he lied.

“No, it’s not! Basil Funkenstein is a name you find on a cereal box.”

Behind her shoulder, the Doctor could see the Dungeonmaster at the table furiously jotting something into her notepad.

“Parents can be very cruel,” he nodded.

She elbowed him. “Go on, what’s your real name?”

“Ummm... John Beauchamp,” the Doctor said, hoping this was a more convincing lie.

He’d given Rickenbacker and Beauchamp a few pointers a century back. He was sure that a borrowed name wouldn’t go amiss. All the same, he put the side of his shoe between his conversation partner and the nameplate of the guitar’s manufacturer.

“I’m Donna Noble,” she said, holding her hand out to shake. He gripped it. She rolled back her shoulders with a *‘daaom’* and beckoned him in for a hug. “C’mon, sunshine, no hard feelings.”

I didn’t like hugs, pondered the Doctor. What was it that got him hugging again? Or maybe the real question was *who* had got him hugging again. The indescribably fuzzy pufflekind? One of his Venusian pals, their many arms opened wide? The answer was sadly missing from his mind.

The melancholy feeling came back for a moment.

Donna was by the club door. “I’ll see you tomorrow, John Beauchamp!”

“Wait, how are you getting back to your hotel?”

“My feet.”

“Let me walk you back to your hotel,” the Doctor insisted, wishing he could offer his old friend a ride in the TARDIS. “As mates.”

As the Doctor walked Donna back to her hotel, he was still in disbelief that he was with his old friend again. They were making idle small talk. Past the old, grey stonework, the concrete tiles hard against their shoes on the downward slant into the main city.

“So, what do you teach?” Donna asked.

“The sciences,” the Doctor replied. “Physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, robotics, poetry—all the major fields. I’ve a knack for it.”

“You’ve some funny rumours about the place. My work mate Sheila’s daughter graduated from there last year and she swore there was some kind of space-age burglary from the library. Every shelf shrunk to the size of dominoes.”

“The students like to gossip. I think it keeps them from spiralling down into any hard study. I was the same once.”

“Really? Where did you study?”

“The Academy.” The words left the Doctor’s mouth faster than he could catch them.

“Ohh, a public school fellow, eh? Eh?” Donna’s upper-class accent sounded as though it didn’t get out much. “Tell me, to which august establishment dost thou emerge from?”

His mind froze. Under other circumstances, it would have been a delight to have someone so easy to talk with.

The Doctor could recall his granddaughter nestled in the ruby jungle just across from Venus’s dawning metal seas. The gentle morning spent in sleepy Norfolk with UNIT singing *Yellow Submarine* atop his faithful roadster. That soft afternoon with Peri and the penguin around the Viking probe on the Martian Plains of Gold. Dusk on the human chessboard with the Blue Emperor of Draconia, the communicator trembling in his hand, before the Elysium Raid. That last, and seemingly endless, long evening with River at the Singing Towers. Opening a Christmas cracker close to midnight with... *someone* who, although close to death, he never saw any differently—

The Doctor wondered where that last thought had come from. It was like a ghost of a memory.

“John?” Donna brought him back to the present.

The Doctor eventually answered, “Long ago and far away, Donna.”

There were moments in his lives where he'd been prepared to bare his hearts like tomorrow didn't matter. Come Old Ones or time storms. He remembered them all. At least... he *thought* he did. That was the trouble with memory loss, a Time Lord second-guessed themselves. If a man were the sum of his memories, it didn't take much for one to feel diminished.

"Well... Sorry about earlier," Donna said, abruptly. "About the 'fresh' comment."

"Already forgotten."

"You being quiet got me thinking 'bout it. I thought you might have caught me staring."

"And you wanted to cut it off at the pass, can't fault you for that." He blinked, then looked up into the night sky. "Are you happy, Donna? In your life?"

She looked at him. "Bit forward, guitar hero."

"It's that kind of evening. We're near a university, I'm feeling philosophical."

"So I've heard." She hummed, sceptical, and weighed up the question.

With Donna, it was like playing psychic minesweeper. What could he tell her without her finding out who he really was? He suddenly wished he had... some kind of prompt... note cards or some such to tell him what to say. He could swear he used to have the very thing...

As it turned out, he didn't have to worry about what to say for long.

Donna stopped suddenly at the sight of a vacant lot. "That's weird, this is where the diner was earlier..."

"It's an odd place at night, near the university," the Doctor looked around. "We must've just gotten lost."

"It can't just disappear. Diners don't just suddenly grow legs and walk away," Donna said, staring at the empty lot in shock.

“No... They don’t...” The Doctor remembered... a time...

Just a glimmer, but it was there. An image. He wondered if it was the same building? Bristol was becoming a bit crowded with the otherworldly, these days. Just yesterday he had encountered a sentient laundromat that ate dirty clothes. It was difficult these days to determine who was coming and going. He felt the same twinge of unexplained melancholy. The emptiness of the forgotten. More than nothingness. An absence.

“This place...” Donna muttered.

The Doctor shook himself from his reverie.

Something glittered in her eyes. He’d seen it hundreds of times over in companions boarding the TARDIS. That shine of recognition. Those two words uttered by Chesterton all those years ago—*It’s alive*. The first glimmerings. He realised that he should probably keep Donna away from the empty lot. In case the possibly alien nature of the disappeared diner triggered Donna’s memories of travelling with him.

He tapped her on the back.

“You need to get back to your hotel, don’t you?” the Doctor said, motioning forward. “It’s just a pop-up stall. They’ve probably shuffled on to somewhere else.”

But Donna stood motionless staring at the empty lot with a strange look in her eyes. “I remember—”

“Donna...” the Doctor stepped into her line of sight.

It had been quite a while since someone had looked at him like Donna Noble did at that moment. In her pale human features, pushing out, he saw genuine horror. Terror. Like he was sitting in her living room with the lifeless dead. Perhaps, in a way, he was.

He’d given the shadow a face.

Her voice was a hiss, “Your *face*...!”

She dropped with an ugly crack to the pavement.

“Donna? *Donna.*”

Her eyes were wide. Like a patient in a catatonic state. He clapped his hands, gave her shoulder a gentle jostle... Nothing. No response. Not knowing what else to do, the Doctor began to carry Donna back to his office at St. Luke’s University. It was not the easiest of journeys with both his electric guitar and Donna’s unconscious body.

“It’s been awhile since I carried anyone,” the Doctor grumbled to Donna’s unconscious body as he carried her through the night. “It’s bad for this body’s knees. You’re lucky I like you.”

In the silence of the night, he felt his mind begin to wander. He thought of a beach and carrying someone in a blanket, then carrying someone out of—was it an alleyway?—and being unable to feel their heartbeat. Dead. It had been so long ago.

Was that the cold chill of Katarina’s passing? The searing dust-like sands of Sara? The haunting wash of Oliver? His mind slid across the years. The many losses of his companions. He remembered them quite distinctly. Difficult to forget. Death left its stain on his lives in ways that, secretly, he’d hoped regeneration would burn away.

It never did.

While deep in thought, the Doctor momentarily almost lost grip of Donna’s body. He snapped himself out of it.

Donna was here and could be in danger.

Finally, as the sun began to come up, the Doctor crept quietly into his office, placed Donna into an armchair and locked the door.

The Doctor bit his hand. “Nardole?”

He was almost afraid to turn and look at his regular ‘umbrella stand’. Fortunately, he could sense her in his symbiotic nuclei. The traveller

pivoted, nearly knocking over a snowglobe on the nearby bookcase in his haste. The TARDIS was still here. The Doctor looked around. His fellow custodian, however, was not.

The time-traveller circled around to the psychic blotting paper on his desk.

Next to a plot of green psychospore read the words, *Until you're done, in the usual place.*

“Thornfield Hall...” The Doctor tapped his outstretched fingers against the desktop. Agitated. He raised an eyebrow, with a thought, “Hypnotic suggestion, perhaps? The gap, in here, could be...” He lowered his hands from his temples. “No. No, it couldn't be. She'd have gloated by now.”

Common sense dismissed that thought almost immediately. His and Nardole's charge was well out of the way, at the moment. Under lock and ivory key. This bout of fatalistic ennui was all his own doing. From the room that brought thoughts bigger on the inside.

The Doctor frowned for a moment. He was letting his own troubles muddy the urgency of Donna's condition. The traveller crouched down and took her pulse. Steady, but slow for her species. She looked so incongruous among the red walls and dark-brown furniture.

Her presence had that sense of the old invading the new—or was it the new invading the old?

“Prioritise,” he reminded himself, curtly.

Making sure she was still unconscious, the Doctor carried Donna into the TARDIS and ran some tests on her brain. Donna's mind was a strange jumble of familiar and startling images. Images the Doctor recognised. Everything from Adipose to Lobus Caecilius of Pompeii—the inspiration for the Doctor's current face. Some had distorted to fill the cracks in her mind. Warped images twisted by advertising or television programmes. Others beat against the walls of the memory block, resolute, as the repressed. The hard memories. Traumas, passions, the unshakeable.

“I have to do something...” he said to the TARDIS.

She hummed soft fricatives, but said nothing. Just let him think.

Would he need to wipe Donna’s memory again? He thought of the massive part of his own mind missing and how he yearned to know what was once there.

“Perhaps I can leave it,” he thought aloud. “She’s tough. It’s not beyond her chances that she’d find her way through to the other side. They’re a resilient species. The pudding’s got a crust. She’d be fine. Of course, she’d be fine.”

The TARDIS lights dimmed in disapproval.

He sighed and shook his head. Wrong idea, Doctor. This wasn’t the days of yore where the right mental conditioning from the Timewalkers of Quantox could overpower Time Lord memory acids. This was physiological. Down to the marrow. Donna knowing what had really happened to her could kill her. It was in her body’s genetic makeup like a sleeper agent.

“Perhaps if I convince her it was all just a dream, it would be okay?”

He was uncomfortable with that idea. Her dreams were probably quite vivid these days. What if she wrote the images down? Sketched them out? There could be enough of a resemblance there for her to trigger a fatal episode.

“No, I’ll have to approach it from the conscious mind,” he bit his crooked fingertips. “The human brain’s found all sorts of ways to rationalise the irrational. A bit of lost time, a bit of careful nudging towards the plausible could sort out the issue.”

The TARDIS whirred with the vworpal equivalent of a consoling pat on the shoulder.

“So you agree. The main problem is...” he muttered incompletely.

What if *part* of her memory came back? All it would take is the wrong word at the wrong time. It would be like a misshapen brick in a prison wall. The whole structure could come tumbling down. ‘I’m sorry,’ wouldn’t fix the damage done to Donna.

“Just have to risk it.” He sighed angrily at that.

Another risk. Another life. Another potential loss.

The Doctor carried Donna, heavily, back to the armchair in his office and then placed a sheet over the TARDIS. Hiding it. He had cancelled all his classes for the day on the grounds of a sick relative and graded papers as he waited for Donna to wake up.

Hours passed, but then finally, Donna slowly opened her eyes to *I Forget* on the guitar. The Doctor seemed to be glaring at the strings, as if daring them to provide him clarity. There were too many questions about his own and Donna’s forgotten past.

“What happened? Where am I?” Donna said drowsily. She sat up suddenly, as a person does in an unfamiliar environment with a stranger. Anger and fear battled on her face. “Where is this?”

“You’re in my office at St. Luke’s University,” the Doctor said calmly, as to not startle her. “You were too tired and unwell last night to continue on the way back to your hotel.”

She grit her teeth. “I was fine.”

“No, you weren’t.” It was the honest truth. “Look into my face.”

Donna studied him, she paused. “You were worried.”

“Considerably, yes. You collapsed.”

“So you brought me back here?”

“And let you rest.”

Donna panicked. “Rest? For how long? What time is it? I have to go to my management course!”

“It’s 5:00pm.” The Doctor rested his foot on his papers for ‘Introduction to History’.

“You mean I completely missed it? Well, that’s a couple thousand pounds’ good will down the drain—”

“I thought you were loaded?” The Doctor winced. She hadn’t mentioned that.

Fortunately, she was too angry to notice. “No, it’s *my* management course. I was supposed to be running it. John, stop playing that stupid song. If it wasn’t for you and your song, I wouldn’t be in this mess! “

He remembered. Those same pleading tones after the Stolen Earth. When she’d begged him to keep the mind of the DoctorDonna, tumbling and burning through eternity, in her skull. The triple helix of the Time Lords overwhelmed her. Electrical surges scattering through her body. Donna Noble as he—and thousands of other beings in the universe would have known her—would have been lost.

So, he reached into her mind...

“And made it go away.” The Doctor stopped, tears began to stream down his face.

The melancholia burst, washed down the valley walls from a place beyond the horizon. What had happened? He had no answers. *Still* no answers. Not for all the hours best indulged by sleeping tortoises. All it brought him was pain. Perhaps the past was best left untouched.

“I’m fine,” he said, confused and shaken.

Donna stared, concernedly, at the man she currently believed to be named John Beauchamp. It was something that someone had said in the *Dungeons and Wotsits* group behind her when she was shushing them. He’d gestured to the stage and said that Beauchamp came in every other night.

He'd begin with requests, even an occasional bit of improvisation, but he'd always come back to the same songs. Like a karaoke singer at a pub trying to relive the glory days. Dares to go up and ask, offer him a drink for a memory, tended to be met with confusion, suspicion or, on particularly bad nights, anger.

It could be burnout, dementia, it could even be trauma. Donna knew a few who wore their scars tight to their heart. It didn't make John a bad person, though. She knew that.

"Come on, don't cry," Donna soothed, wiping a tear off his cheek. "You remind me of my granddad when my mum tells him there's no such thing as aliens."

The Doctor had a slight smile at the mention of Wilf. "Your granddad sounds like an interesting man."

"The best. Always with an eye to the sky with his telescope. Speaking of which, I had the weirdest dreams." Donna was now deep in thought. "There were all these strange creatures, places, and a skinny bloke with pointy hair. He reminded me of you for some reason."

The Doctor pulled a face.

"No, more sort of..." Donna pulled her own.

"You probably just ate some bad meat or something at that diner you went to yesterday, and it gave you bad dreams. Diner food can do that. Can't really beat a pub."

"But they were good dreams—that diner!" She got up. "That's right, it disappeared last night. But diners don't just get up and walk away."

The Doctor stared at her. He had a very bad feeling where this was going.

She was already heading towards the door. "We should stop by on the way to your concert."

"Aren't you worried about your course?"

Donna reached into the pocket of her coat and pulled out her phone.

“Mostly texts...” Her eyes widened slightly. “*Lots* of texts. I’ll answer them on the way. Understudy got there after an hour’s delay. Think about it, though, John. What if it came back?”

“You probably want to rest still,” the Doctor said, hoping to discourage her.

“Fat chance.”

“You should go enjoy your hotel room.”

She looked him straight in the eye. “I’m not crazy.”

For some reason, beyond his experience, that caused his mouth to tighten. “I know. I’m not either.”

“I just want to be sure... Right? If we saw what we actually saw or if it was something else.”

“Is it even worth it? Besides, that sounds like a lot of work. Why not stay here? I’m not even a proper musician.”

She blew a raspberry. “Come on, don’t be all down on yourself, I work better with music. Think of it as an adventure.”

“I’m all adventured out.”

“Come off it. A young man like you?” She ruffled his hair, twisted the door handle and was gone.

“On the other hand...” Against his better judgement, the Doctor followed.

The Doctor and a furiously texting Donna walked towards the place where the mysterious diner had been. Their footsteps coddled by the *pings* and *wheeps* of worried friends, family and work colleagues. She’d negotiated her husband down from a missing persons report with a mussy selfie.

The Doctor leant out of the phone camera's frame with the ease of someone who'd spent thousands of years trying to determine his 'best side'.

"Have they scrambled the Royal Navy?" he asked.

Donna shook her head, biting her lip. "You laugh, guitar hero, but if it had been just an hour more..."

The Doctor caught the street sign first. He tried walking past, but Donna—with uncanny peripheral vision—swerved precisely towards the allotment.

She was the first to speak. "It came back!"

There it was. In red and white. The Doctor felt as if a ghost had passed through his body. He readjusted his coat like a damp owl with ruffled feathers. "It never left. We must have just missed it in the dark. It's not uncommon."

A 'Closed' sign hung on the door.

"What if that waitress comes to the club to see you? She did say she liked your music," Donna said, still fascinated.

"You want to conduct an interview?" The Doctor's eyebrows were furrowed in deep thought.

"Come on, mate, don't be all gloom and doom angry eyebrows." Donna said, hands on her hips. "I was wrong, does that make it better?"

"Let's just go," the Doctor said, leading the way.

Donna led the way. The Doctor hesitated for a few moments just behind her. He placed a hand against the diner's closed door and let it tremble run through his bones. He'd spent enough time in his lives to know a TARDIS when he saw it. He tried his key. It wouldn't fit in the lock.

"John!" Donna called from down the street.

He nodded. *Yes, it had to be something to do with them, didn't it?*

The Doctor was about to start his usual set.

The club was far more full than it had been the night before. In fact, he had to squint just just to see Donna in the crowd. It was an odd crowd: instead of just the usual students and lost souls, there was a huge array of what to the average person were people in fancy dress. Outfits from every time period. Some that didn't seem of this world. Of course the Doctor, not being your average person, realised immediately that none of the oddly-dressed crowd were in fancy dress.

I knew something was unearthly about that diner, the Doctor thought. I knew it. No familiar faces, though. Nothing that should trigger Donna's memories. Small mercies.

Donna made her way up toward the stage. "Weird crowd. That waitress is here. She must really love your music—she didn't even change out of her blue waitress uniform. I still can't remember her name, but she asked me to request that you play *I Forget*. She said it's her favourite."

The Doctor suddenly became overwhelmed with emotion but he couldn't tell why. He was happy, frightened, and sad all at once. He felt ridiculous. Why out of this strange crowd should one waitress that he had probably never spoken to, cause him—the Doctor—to have such an overwhelming emotional response. And yet there was something so familiar about a waitress in a blue dress.

Donna stared at him, concerned, "Are you okay?"

"Just nerves," the Doctor half-lied.

"If you're sure, I'm here if you need me."

"My first song is a special request—I Forget," the Doctor said into the microphone, his voice cracking slightly.

Donna, sitting in between what appeared to be a viking and a flapper, gave the Doctor a thumbs up.

As the Doctor began to play *I Forget*, he stared out into the sea of audience's faces. He let the strange mixture of emotions the past couple days had brought him carry him through the song. It was the most passionately he had played in a long time. He searched the crowd for the waitress in the blue dress. No luck. The melody continued. It seemed to gain a life all of its own. Suddenly, he remembered the song had another name before it was called *I Forget*. The notes seemed to be getting faster, louder, the crowd jumped and shifted around until they became shadows taller than the club itself. He was determined, he would get to the bottom of it, he would! No more tricks! No more mental blocks! No more mind games! No more second guesses! He could swear it started with a 'C'... with a 'C'... with a—

“Cl—”

The Doctor felt one of his hearts stop.

Everything went black.

“*You're finally up.*” Donna's voice.

The Doctor opened his eyes. He was sitting propped up on an armchair in his office, his twin hearts beating steadily in his ears.

“What happened?” he asked sleepily.

“I think the same as what happened to me,” Donna said, looking at the Doctor concerned. “You were playing *I Forget* and then... You had a fit, I don't know how else to describe it. My granddad has mates who've gone through similar. An old army buddy from Palestine, he just...” She gestured. “Like you did. I tried to call an ambulance but the waitress seemed to think I shouldn't for some reason.”

“The waitress?” the Doctor said, startled.

“Listen, are you in trouble?”

“Too many questions, Donna Noble,” he lifted his back.

“It’s only... I know people running from the police don’t want an ambulance.”

He looked up at her. “Oh, I haven’t had anyone to run from in a very long time.”

“Must have been her, then. She helped me get you back here. You’re harder to carry than you look for such a scrawny geezer.”

He looked around. “Is she still here?”

“No, she disappeared as soon as we got you settled in. She said she didn’t want to wake you and to say, what was it...? “Sorry. The crowd was intended as a kindness, but it was a mistake. It won’t happen again.”

“Oh.”

“Are you sure you don’t know her?”

“Why?” the Doctor asked, a bit spooked and melancholy.

“The waitress almost seemed like she knew you.”

“Not just my songs?”

“She was pretty familiar for a stranger. Just before she left, I could swear I saw her out of the corner of my eye, kiss your forehead. As though she was saying good night to you or maybe goodbye.”

The Doctor gave a strange look that somehow alternated from being as pale as a sheet to blushing a vivid shade of crimson.

The crowd. The... waitress? He couldn’t remember much of what had happened since Donna had roused in his office. There was a gap in his memory. A *new* gap. Who knew what could’ve happened during that time. Nardole couldn’t factor in everything. If the Vault were breached...

He crossed to his psychic blotting paper and thought at it in red, *Nardole?*

The green psychospore resolved into a reply. *Yes?*

All quiet on the Dronid front?

Safe as bunkers. Your thinking is agitated, what's wrong?

The Doctor spun a mental block. *Hit my shin on the desk.*

Oh. That simple, then?

Fetch some ice for me from the staff fridge.

Well, if you're sure... Nardole thought, dubiously.

The time-traveller cut the psychic link. He pressed his hands angrily to his face. He'd done it again. Perhaps, the first time this had occurred, he'd done it to *himself*. He was getting old, he had to be careful, his memory was set to fall apart at the seams. He couldn't—

“What's the matter?” Donna asked, eye-to-eye with the Doctor.

“The things I forget... I feel as though I have been surrounded by ghosts the past few days.” the Doctor said, quietly. “That song, *I Forget?*”

“Yeah?”

“Forget it.” He rubbed his forearms. “I've been too wrapped up in the past. Tonight was dangerous. I was among friends, but if that had happened among enemies... I've a responsibility. To you, to me, to everything. I can't indulge.”

There was a pause so long you could've dropped a TARDIS down it.

Eventually, Donna said, “Life doesn't end just because you don't remember all of it. That's the truth, innit?”

The Doctor looked around the office. The belongings of this lifetime and those past scattered on his desk, in the bookcases, atop the fireplace. No wonder he'd fallen prey to revisiting the empty spaces in his own mind. He ran a finger in the undisturbed dust and rubbed his hands together.

He realised something. “You didn't answer my question.”

“Which one was that?” Donna frowned.

“Are you happy?”

She sighed and smiled. “Yeah. A bit shaken, I’ll admit, but yeah, I am... happy. I love my life and try to live it.”

The Doctor nodded. Perhaps, that was all that was needed. He’d find out sooner or later.

“Are you?” she asked. “Happy, I mean?”

The Doctor ground his jaw, but said nothing.

“The reason I ask is... grandad’s mate,” Donna continued. “The one from his station in Palestine. Grandad always wanted to keep an eye on him. His friend used to go up to Longmoore, where the army camp is, with a fowling piece for clay shooting or something.”

The Doctor nodded. “Go on.”

She clasped her hands together. “He went up, not because he wanted to shoot, but because the sound upset him. You follow me, right?”

“He’d raise the rifle and fire off a shot.”

“Both barrels. Not caring whether he hit something or not, yeah. Because the sound, granddad told me, was his penance for stuff he did during the war. His pain.”

“Like ripping off a band-aid.”

“Over and over and over again.”

“Never letting it heal,” the Doctor understood.

“He did it for years before granddad found out about it. The warning signs were always there, he just needed someone to step in. Wilf was it. I think we both have been dwelling a bit too much on things that can’t be,” Donna smiled. “I’m here and you’re my new mate. Let’s start over.”

“I’d like that,” the Doctor said, smiling back.

Somewhere deep in the TARDIS, the Doctor played a new song. It was strange and beautiful. A little bit sad, but joyful, too. It was about honouring all the many ghosts of love and friendship past, but was also of new possibilities and relationships, too.

In the Companions' Gallery, he felt a metallic knock at the door.

"Not before time," the Doctor hummed.

"Is this your last one?" The ice pack was melting in Nardole's hand.

The Doctor unslung his guitar, a blue pen in his pocket. "For now."

"It's nice," the cybernetic steward nodded, trying to be encouraging.

"That was just the dress rehearsal." The traveller crossed to the door handle and closed the room behind him. "You just wait until the main event. We'll have a blast."

"Not literally, I hope. I'm still finding bits of glass from the observatory in these pockets." With the Doctor seemingly recovered, Nardole pocketed the ice pack. He felt it burst, gently, like bubble wrap. "Even in the pockets of things I didn't wear that day..."

"Time's funny like that." The Doctor stopped, midstride, and turned to him. "Talking of whom, I've a friend you'd like to meet."

"Oh," Nardole did his best to sound intrigued. "I knew there had to be someone attached to this."

"It was a nice coincidence, actually." He smiled, briefly. "One of this planet's best."

"Do they have a name?"

Donna sat in the audience at Powerline, later that night, giving the Doctor a supportive thumbs up.

The Doctor pulled a roll of sheet music in startling colours onto the stand. A photocopy produced from one of St. Luke's computer pods. The original, with all its beautiful space to imagine, was locked in the room now deep within the TARDIS. The gap was filled.

He leant across into the microphone. "And now for my newest song *I Remember.*"

TOWER BLOCKED



By Andrew Hsieh

In the TARDIS, the Doctor was playing around with the controls and switches on the hexagonal console. Dark brown suit with blue pinstripes, full of spiky hair, he always had a strong appetite for adventures across time and space.

“Doctor,” said his blonde-haired companion, Rose Tyler, casually leaning against a coral pillar. “Do you mind if I spend some time alone with my Mum?”

“Course you can, yeah,” he nodded absentmindedly. “All that business with the Paraempaths of Reet is more or less under wraps. Maybe a quick hop while I set the coordinates for...”

But then Rose slammed the handbrake to prevent the ship from resuming its journey, and sharply added, “For the weekend.”

He paused to look up, realising that he was getting carried away. Then the Doctor gulped, feeling reluctant to approve. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“I need the feeling of solid earth beneath me. Just... Y’know?”

“Well, there’s—”

“I’ll be fine,” she persisted.

“Okie dokie. If you’re sure,” he pulled the handbrake, causing the time

rotor column to rise and fall repeatedly. The familiar sound of wheezing and groaning quickly filled the room, before coming to an abrupt halt.

“Friday evening,” he checked the scanner. “Lovely!”

Rose ran towards the entrance and opened the doors, exiting the police box to look around what she called home. The Powell Estate consisted of two tower blocks situated beneath the cloudy blue sky, with random pedestrians walking past. She could feel the gentle breeze touching her face, as the Doctor watched her from behind.

“So,” he began. “Monday morning, 10am the latest?”

Thumbs up from her, he grinned and closed the doors. The TARDIS slowly dematerialised as Rose headed around the corner. She ran her fingers through her hair, untangling a few knots. At the other end of the street, she found her local chip shop and pushed the door open. Like most takeaway places, there were no seating areas. Due to its small space where customers could only queue up.

The strong smell of fat, oily chips was pure heaven for Rose who always enjoyed them every Friday evening after school, during her teenage years. The heated cabinet displayed various types of battered and breaded fish and seafood, from cod and haddock to scampi and calamari rings. There were also plain and battered sausages, and saveloys; meat and vegetarian puff pies; roasted and fried chicken pieces; along with, to her surprise, deep-fried pizza.

“Hey, Georgios,” she greeted the owner. “How was Athens?”

“Ah, Rose,” he greeted back in his native Greek accent. “The temperatures were boiling hot at times, but the weather was beautifully sunny on the other hand. Besides, what can I get you?”

“Chips, please. Large portion.”

“Same here,” said a familiar voice, standing right next to her.

“*Doctor?*”

“Thought I’d join you at the same time. Parked the TARDIS around the corner about... six minutes ago.”

Rose was completely bewildered, “Six minutes *before* dropping me off?”

“Yup,” the Doctor nodded. “Hey, aren’t those deep-fried pizza slices?”

“My very own recipe,” said Georgios. “Rarely served here in England, commonly served up in Scotland. Learned how to make them during a trip to Glasgow last summer.”

“Ah... A fellow traveller!” the Doctor beamed.

“Would you like to try some?”

“Two slices. How about that, Rose?”

“Yeah, sure.” She picked at her scalp. “And perhaps we should share a single large portion of chips, rather than two?”

“Good point, otherwise we’d become the Slitheen. But vinegar wouldn’t do any harm,” the Doctor chuckled.

As Georgios prepared the chips and pizza slices, the young counter assistant calculated the total amount on the cash register. Something about him caught the Doctor’s eye.

“So, who’s paying? You or your boyfriend?” the assistant asked.

The Doctor and Rose looked at each other, trying to contain their embarrassed laugh.

“Oh, no, no, we’re not—”

“We’re just friends,” Rose clarified. “Travelling about, if you know what I mean.”

“My apologies. I hope I didn’t offend you both.”

The Doctor fetched a £20 note from his jacket, while Georgios handed Rose the food in a plastic bag. “Keep the change, my treat.”

“A pleasure, sir,” replied the assistant.

“Just the Doctor, if you please.”

“Okay then, Doctor. I’m Max, by the way.”

“A traveller as well?” asked the Doctor, knowingly.

“My boy.” Georgios eyed him with friendly caution. “I find better insurance that way.”

Rose smiled, “Later then, Georgios and Max.”

As the two walked out through the door, Georgios waved to them and said, “Enjoy your meal!”

“Are you having a laugh?”

“Yes, Rose,” the Doctor grinned enthusiastically. “Doubt Jackie would mind the extra company all evening.”

“But this is my weekend. My weekend *alone* with my Mum! What’s it to you?”

They were both already outside her flat, 48 Bucknall House. Rose unlocked the door with her key and pushed it open, only to find that there was no movement or activity inside.

“Mum? Mum, are you in?”

No response. She tried again, “Mum, I’m home! And the Doctor has also invited himself to linger around, for no apparent reason.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes with slight annoyance, then found a note on the wall which was addressed to Rose. “I think I’ve found the answer,” he said, passing her the note.

“Ah,” she sighed with relief, skimming through the writing. “Gone to stay with Marge, up in Norwich.”

“And who’s Marge?”

“A family friend. Went to school together.”

“That explains it,” the Doctor didn’t appear to be fully paying attention, as he went into the kitchen. “I’ll get cutlery and stuff, while you turn on the telly.”

“Thought you didn’t do domestics?”

“Brings me out in hives,” he deflected, half-heartedly.

“Speaking of which, you got something I’m allergic to in the TARDIS?”

He peered in briefly from the kitchen. “Why do you ask?”

“Dunno. Scratchy feeling in my hair.”

“Sea salt from the asteroid, I expect.”

“Oh...” she nodded with exaggeration. “You’ve an answer for everything?”

“Practically.” She could just *hear* the smile in his voice.

As Rose picked up the remote and pressed it, the TV switched on to show the latest episode of *EastEnders* on BBC One.”

“Enough to take down a Slitheen, or some other Raxacoricofallapatorian,” said the Doctor, bringing out a bowl and two plates with a bottle of vinegar. “And what’s Peggy ranting about?”

“Dunno, I’m so behind,” Rose shrugged. “Only my Mum would be up to date.”

“Yeah, let’s see what else is on.”

He changed the channel to BBC News. “—*Greater Manchester Police are investigating substandard building practices that may have led to the deaths of—*”

The Doctor sounded timid. “I’ve friends in Manchester. Never uplifting to hear about it in the news...”

“When you say ‘friends’...”

“Consider it one of those private open secrets. Us weird and wonderful turn up in the places you least expect it.”

Another flick to BBC Two: it was a repeat of *The Weakest Link*.

“Nope!” Rose shook her head with disgust, not wanting to relive her experience on the game show presented by Anne Robinson’s robotic counterpart. She pressed the remote again, changing it to ITV1 while the Doctor unwrapped the bag of chips in the bowl.

“Ah, *Mary Poppins*,” he said, sprinkling some vinegar on his chips, before tucking into his pizza slice. “Mmm, exquisite.”

“Do you think Mary Poppins herself is a Time Lord?” Rose asked, munching on a mouthful of chips. “With Bert and the two children as her companions?”

“Time *Lady*, you mean,” the Doctor clarified. “Judging by her dimensionally transcendental carpet bag, plus her ability to reside on the Earth’s stratosphere, certainly wouldn’t rule that out.”

“And the clouds, are they supposed to represent, what... heaven?”

“It’s possible.”

“You been?”

“Anything’s possible,” he responded as he resumed eating his chips.

But Rose wasn’t listening, she had already swallowed a bite of her pizza slice. “Not bad, this. Certainly not fried with Krillitane oil, otherwise I’d be a genius again.”

“Oh, humble,” the Doctor nodded, sagely.

“One of us has got to be. Budge up.”

Hours later, the Doctor wandered around the flat with the remaining bag of chips, while Rose was getting ready for bed.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay for the night?”

“Yeah,” she called from inside her bedroom, about to go to bed. “I’ve been in way worse situations!”

Then he sighed, eating a chip, “Alright, if you insist, I might as well head back to the TARDIS. Won’t be leaving Earth, just in case there’s any sign of danger. The Circle of Reet said we got all the Paraempaths’s CER seekers in the vortex, but I want to be sure. Nevertheless, Rose, have a safe weekend.”

“Same to you, Doctor, and goodnight,” she turned off the light, as the Doctor closed the door outside the flat.

Her eyes suddenly opened, still dark inside her bedroom. Rose reached for her digital alarm clock, glowing red on the bedside table, to check the time. 0:14, just after midnight.

“Oh,” she yawned, “Maybe it was the chips.”

But the clock and the bedside table vanished, in a matter of seconds. Rose quickly jumped out of bed and went to draw the curtains. There was only complete darkness outside with no pedestrian, or the TARDIS, in sight. As she turned back, everything was gone. The furniture, her belongings, even her own bed. All except the door.

“You have got to be kidding me...!”

Suddenly, the door also vanished. So did the window. And then... the walls began to close in on her very, very slowly. She tried banging with both fists to see if either side would smash. No effect.

Rose couldn’t help but lean against one end of the room and yell, “Doctor! Doctor, help me! Doctor—”

She screamed. Everything was normal again. Sitting upright and taking a few shallow breaths, Rose checked the time which read 3:20.

It was just a bad dream. Or perhaps a hallucination. She couldn't tell him, not yet. He'd get all... Well, he'd be the Doctor. A nightmare wasn't enough to stop a few days away.

She then pulled the duvet over herself and tried to doze off. After a few minutes, she finally went back into a deep, restful sleep.

Saturday morning.

Rose was already rushing down the stairwell, trying her best to keep the Doctor out of sight and out of mind, just this once. Approaching the ground floor, she attempted to push the door... it wouldn't open. She tried again... didn't work.

Strange. It was fine yesterday. Probably jammed or locked shut. "If this is a prank or something—"

Little did she know that somebody was right behind her.

"Rose?"

She turned to find a young Chinese gentleman, about her age, wondering why she was acting strangely. "Lau, long time no see! Are you back from Hong Kong for good?"

"Not yet, only a few exams left at uni," he explained, adjusting his glasses. "Just visiting my parents for two weeks, flying back next Thursday."

"Ah, that's nice. Can't seem to open this, for some reason, however."

Lau gave the door a gentle push. It somehow opened as normal, much to Rose's puzzlement.

"Huh?"

"Seems fine," he walked out of the building, leaving the door ajar.

As Rose tried following him out, the door forcibly slammed on her like a magnet. She pushed it several times and banged on the window.

“Lau? Lau, can you hear me?”

But it was too late. He already walked further away from the building. Not turning back. Rose felt she had no choice but to phone the Doctor on her mobile. Dialing the TARDIS number, she waited for a few seconds until it picked up.

“Doctor, I need your help. And it’s urgent.”

“Non, Rose, you specifically said that—”

“I’m locked inside the building, for God’s sake!”

“Forgot your keys?”

“It’s a bit more serious than that.”

A pause. She couldn’t tell if the Doctor was dismissing her again.

“Oh, alright. Just give me a moment.” He hung up.

Rose put her phone back in her pocket and lingered around without daring to return to her flat. And finally, she spotted the Doctor rushing towards the door, wearing his long brown coat. He tried pulling the handle from outside, but it wouldn’t work either.

“Are you sure it hasn’t been jammed in the ordinary way, somehow?”

“Try sonicing,” Rose called.

The Doctor took his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and aimed at the handle. He pressed down and began to flash a bright blue light, triggering a buzzing sound. Removing his grip, the screwdriver unlatched the door. The Time Lord and his fellow traveller grabbed the obstacle on either side and tried to force it open. It wouldn’t budge.

“It’s not working,” the Doctor shook his head, “I can’t get it open. This is serious.”

Rose rolled her eyes and said, “There’s no point staying here all day, so I might as well head home and use Skype.”

The Doctor paused before realising, “Good idea!”

“Do you have Skype?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure I can rig up something.”

Back in her flat, Rose logged on to Skype through her Mum’s new laptop and waited for a few minutes until the Doctor’s face appeared. He was tapping the TARDIS scanner, making sure that the connection was working properly.

“That’s better. Hello!”

“Did you find out what’s preventing me from leaving the block?”

“The Paraempaths.”

She crossed her legs on the sofa. “I thought we sorted them out?”

“We did. Some resonance from their asteroid’s latched onto us like background radiation.”

“Y’mean, we tracked it aboard the TARDIS on our shoes?”

“In our clothes, hair...” He looked up at the central column. *“She usually catches these things, systems must be getting old.”*

“What is it, then?”

“An agoraemotional barrier, which began encompassing the Powell Estate at,” he checked something on the console to his left, *“precisely, midnight.”*

“Did it come from one of the seekers?”

“No, that would’ve felt like a bomb going off.”

Rose tilted her head. “Well, I did have a moment—”

“Not like that, Rose. The whole block would have been in chaos. We definitely got all of them. I’ve the casings here to prove it. Look.” He held one up and gave it a jangle. *“This is a lot more subtle.”*

“Well, at least it’s isolated for now.”

“*Have you noticed the effects on anyone else?*”

“My neighbours’ son Lau Chan went out the door as normal, and didn’t feel anything. No sign of anxiety or sadness, just nothing.”

“*Hmm... Well, it appears that the barrier only affects us.*”

“Like a hex. You said radiation, though, right? How long will it stay that way?” Rose noticed the computer screen beginning to glitch. “Are you still there?”

“*Y-y-yeah, I-I-I am,*” his voice was already pixelating, as the feed became increasingly distorted. “*It shouldn’t be doing that—*”

No signal. Both ends had lost connection.

“Doctor?” She clicked on the touchpad and pressed a few keys, seeing if she could reconnect. “Doctor?”

Without giving up, Rose also tried phoning the TARDIS on her landline. Three beeps. Blocked. “Oh, it’s hopeless...”

Sunday afternoon.

The barrier continued to widen across the perimeter, blocking all communication between the Doctor and Rose. She was confined in her flat, locked in from the inside. He was confined in his TARDIS, unable to relocate elsewhere or even try to unlock the doors. Every time they tried, a wave of anxiety rolled over the top of them. They had both become increasingly isolated and depressed. It was worse for the Doctor. He muttered something about being ‘exiled’, an ‘outcast’ and a ‘prison sentence’ once or twice. She didn’t have the energy to ask.

While Rose had to fend herself with the leftover chips and other meals, including watching a lot of TV, the only thing the Doctor could do was to keep monitoring the barrier on the TARDIS scanner.

And then... Rose heard a knock. Wiping her tears from the latest attempt to step outside, she quickly rushed to the door and heard a familiar voice.

“Rose?”

“Lau, is that you?”

“Everything alright?”

She took a deep breath and said, “No.”

“Did something happen?”

“Just... completely embarrassed. When my friend, the Doctor, and I were paying at the chip shop on Friday, the counter assistant, Max, mistook me for his girlfriend.”

“Oh,” he said, unsure what was the appropriate way to respond, “That happens all the time. Max likes to play matchmaker whether it’s good for him or not. I wouldn’t have thought it’d stop you leaving the apartment, though.”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “It’s weird... I feel so fragile. Just... I’m already locked in, which means that I can’t leave my flat. Or the block.”

“So that explains why you had trouble with the door downstairs, yesterday?”

“Yes.”

He examined her. “This seems like more than your standard social anxiety.”

“You could say that.”

“Is there anything I can do to help? Maybe bring my parents, Ru and Bau, along for assistance?”

“Phone the chip shop,” Rose requested.

“I’m sorry?”

“Place an order and specifically ask for Georgios or Max to deliver a small Margherita pizza to a blue police box called the TARDIS, right outside the building. They know us. And please don’t mention my name.”

Lau nodded. “On it.”

Moments later, the Doctor heard a few knocks and went over to the entrance.

“Hello,” called a voice, “I have your pizza.”

“Is that, let me see... Max, wasn’t it? Yes. Max from the chippy?”

“Oh...” he paused to swallow. “So, this is where you live, Doctor? Does your g—friend know? I’m sure she’d let you sublet.”

“Who sent you?”

“I have an idea you know. It’s unusual to receive a pizza as an anonymous gift.”

The Doctor nodded. “I suppose, yeah. Rose must’ve figured out that we can neither leave our homes or contact each other.”

Max put the pizza box on the ground and said, “Yes, that’s correct. And I sincerely apologise for upsetting the pair of you with those remarks.”

The Doctor was none the wiser. “Which remarks? What do you mean?”

“When I assumed that you were both in a relationship, those words psychically activated the barrier around the Powell Estate.”

Ah, so that was it.

“You seem rather in the know.” The Doctor leant against the door. “Member of UNIT? The Forge? Reactivated C19? Or some other institute that I’ve yet to encounter? It’s a bit of an alphabet soup these days.”

“I don’t trust much organised anything.”

The Doctor believed him. He didn’t seem the type. Clever idea on Rose’s

part to use a go-between, but it's unlikely that she would have known about Max. His otherworldliness. The Doctor could sense he was a stranger to the Earth, a product of centuries of wisdom and observation. Then again, credit where credit was due. Maybe the observation hadn't been conscious. He supposed, after a certain while, his companions gleaned a similar sort of sixth sense about these sorts of things.

"I am sorry," said Max.

"It wouldn't have taken much, Max. We were already programmed, a dog barking could have set it off." He opened the door. "I had a feeling you weren't from around here."

"A fellow traveller," a note of knowledge lingered in his voice.

"I'm late of Kasterborous."

"Kasterborous?"

"Yeah."

"Impossible. You can't be."

The Doctor took the denial goodnaturedly. "It's possible, I assure you. Who are you, then?"

"Me? I am the Vaxx."

"Doesn't ring a bell. What are you underneath?"

He pinched his chin, examining the Doctor. "I suppose you know the principles already. You have that... resonance. I am an alien entity who can guide cause and effect. There is no way I would intend to cause physical harm to affect the human race."

"I'm not human," the Doctor said, in reflex.

"Neither am I, yet, well..." the Vaxx chuckled. "Here we are."

"Why's it always got to be this way, Max? *Hmm?*" the Doctor wondered. "Cleaning up after other people's wars. Why can't the universe just be kind

and honest with one another.”

“Because it’s dangerous, it’s harmful and some days, it’s lethal.”

The Doctor’s eyes grew distant. “Yes, we wrap ourselves up so tight that...”

“Sometimes we forget to trust even those closest to us.”

The Doctor paused to think for a moment. He finally figured out something and said, “If Rose and I override the trigger phrase with enough concentrated emotion, do you think we could leave our homes?”

“Yes. It could be your *only* way out. But, what do—?”

“I’ll read out Rose’s phone number,” he took the pizza from the ground, “while you dial.”

Rose’s landline rang, and she quickly picked it up.

“Doctor, is that you?”

“*No, this is Max from the chippy.*”

“What do you want?”

“*How are you feeling?*”

She’d crumpled against the floor, glass shattered across the kitchen floor. Lau was bandaging her hand with a medical kit from the bathroom. “It’s getting worse. What do you care, anyway?”

“*Do you remember what I said?*”

Lau looked at her curiously.

“Yeah...” Rose nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“*The Doctor believes that buried in that comment is the key to neutralising the barrier.*”

“*A hex, like you said,*” added the Doctor.

Max continued, “*I need you to be honest. Can you do that?*”

She suddenly broke down in tears again. “Look, Max... I... I love the Doctor. I love him more than I love travelling. Because I genuinely do. I just don’t think that making a big deal of it would help, you know? Doesn’t change it, but...” She looked up, a glimmer of understanding on her face. “It *doesn’t* change it.”

Rose hung up, then put the phone down before telling Lau, “Thank you.”

And inside the TARDIS, the Doctor heard Max, prompting him that it was his turn.

“Rose Tyler...” he began, inhaling loudly.

The words that followed were private, encompassing centuries of experience, but easily understood.

The Vaxx clasped his hands together and said, “The agoraemotional barrier has finally been sapped away.”

“How can you tell?”

He opened the door to the TARDIS. “I’ve a way with such things.”

“Before you go...”

“Yes?” He suddenly looked terribly tired.

The Doctor aired his hypothesis. “You look young, but you’re something primordial, aren’t you?”

The Vaxx jostled his head. “Merely something fundamental. All solar systems have one when they reach age, like the day that the cities of the sapient achieve a sapience of their own. I am of another world beyond humanity. In that, we are the same.”

“You certainly sound cryptic enough to qualify.” The Doctor raised his head. “What happens now? Back to being an assistant selling pizzas?”

“I appreciated my anonymity. Even from another *xenos*, I find the passing scrutiny a bit too much.” He spread his arms with an apologetic grin. “I am a terribly shy lifeform, Doctor. My father would tell you as much, so I now must bid you farewell.”

“Goodbye, Max.”

The Vaxx vanished into thin air, while the pizza box remained on the ground. Simultaneously, the Doctor opened the TARDIS doors as he watched Rose running towards him. They exchanged a warm hug with a few tears of joy and a sense of relief.

“I was wrong,” she said, “I prefer travelling to just sitting at home eating chips.”

“Me too, Rose. Me too.”

After an evening out in Central London, the Doctor decided to spend the night at Rose’s flat to keep her company. They both felt much better the next morning, whilst tidying up the kitchen and living room.

“Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” asked the Doctor, putting the clean mugs away in the cupboard.

“Not really...” Rose hesitated to give an honest answer, “And you?”

“Might as well save it for another time.”

“Yeah, I agree. Better things to do, such as visit more planets.” As she switched off the TV, Rose found Jackie’s note and wrote a quick message on the back, *See you soon, Mum*.

“You finished yet, Doctor?”

“Done and dusted,” he replied, opening the front door. “There’s a planet full of flying stingrays that I’d like to show you. Magnificently breathtaking during sunset.”

As they exited the flat, Rose locked the door for the last time and said

with a smile, “Come on, let’s go.”

DAUGHTER OF THE AMAZON



By Christopher Swain-Tran

“And now, ovelha!” the woman called out, waving her hand in front of the stage to direct the cast member onto the stage. When no one moved, she called out a second time “Ovelha! The sheep please!”

“Senhora Jones!” a boy in the crowd of junior actors waved to her.

The woman did not immediately respond, as it was only a short time ago that she was Senhorita Jo Grant, assistant scientific advisor to UNIT, rather than Jo Jones, wife of Clifford Jones and assistant director for the Codajas Youth Nativity Play.

“What was it, Davi?” Jo asked.

“Senhora, Felipe quit. His Papa says he must work with him,” Davi explained. “His boat gets no fish, so he must go further up river.”

“Oh,” Jo answered, trying to balance her concern for the children, with the disruption to the play. “I understand family is important, and Felipe’s father would not call for him unless it was essential, but that does present a problem. Now we’ve got a part missing an actor, and have to fill it by tomorrow night.”

“Senhora, is it possible to have the play... without any ovelha?” Davi asked, and the children around him nodded.

Jo tried to think of an answer, but her thoughts were distracted by a familiar sound coming from outside the community centre. She had been around the Doctor long enough to not mistake the sound. There was no doubt she was hearing the TARDIS landing outside. Looking up at the clock at the end of the performance hall, she realised that for once, the Time Lord had perfect timing.

“I’ll work something out,” she told all the students. “But more importantly the rehearsal time is over. I will see you all tomorrow night for our opening.”

The children quickly departed. Jo followed behind them, and sure enough, as she left she saw the blue box of battered wood, with a flashing light on the top, in front of the performance hall. As she walked towards it, a man clad in a velvet jacket stumbled out from within.

“Doctor!” she called out to him.

The Doctor appeared lost and unfamiliar with his surroundings, at first. As though waking from a deep, restless sleep. But, as he saw Jo, his face brightened into a smile. “My dear Jo, what a pleasure it is to see you again.”

Jo responded by giving the Doctor a tight hug. “You’ve finally accepted our invitation to visit?”

“Invitation?” The Doctor asked. He pulled away from Jo before clarifying, “Well, since the TARDIS had been behaving itself recently, I thought I should take you up on your offer to visit you and Cliff.”

He looked around before asking “So... where is Clifford then?”

“He’s camped near the Amazon Basin, investigating—”

“And he left you behind?” the Doctor asked, shocked. “Avoiding an adventure in the Amazon doesn’t sound like you at all, Jo.

“Well, things have changed since—”

“No, this won’t do at all. *We* are going,” the Doctor began, “to get a boat, to find your husband, and have some words about leaving you behind.”

“Doctor,” Jo responded, “I can’t rush off. I have commitments here.”

“Oh, Jo,” the Doctor said, giving her a smile. “One last trip along the river, one last adventure, only for a short time. Are you sure you can’t spare the time?”

Jo knew she shouldn’t, knew that there was work needing to be done on the props, the scenery, and finding replacement cast members. But one glance at the Doctor brought back all the excitement of their time in UNIT together, and a voice in her mind echoed the Doctor’s words: *Only for a short time.*

“Oh, all right,” Jo relented. “But we are going by boat, not by TARDIS. We will need something reliable to get us back at a reasonable hour.”

“Whatever you say, Jo,” the Doctor said, his smile growing.

Jo felt a rush as she guided the Doctor to the dock. After having been led through distant worlds and through the past, present and future of the Universe, now Jo was able to lead the Doctor for the first time.

She had only been residing in Brazil for less than a year, but she had made a home here. Jo was familiar with the people and businesses she visited each day. She took pride as she introduced the Doctor to the fruit seller, the school teacher, and noticed that the same warmth she had received was being given equally to the Doctor.

Surprisingly, Jo noticed no one seemed bemused by the Doctor’s presence, his behaviour or style of dress. She pondered that, as she was the English girl—who despite knowing barely any Portuguese had taken up the role of a youth group coordinator—so too was he viewed in much the same way. Any eccentricities of his would be seen as not so different compared to Jo herself.

As they reached a dock, an elderly man jumped out of a small motorboat to wave excitedly at them.

“Ola, Senhora Jones,” he called out excitedly, arms open for a large hug.

“Ola, Senor Ferreira,” Jo answered, neatly sidestepping the hug to gesture towards the Doctor. Ferreira was a lovely old man, but Jo had learnt from past experience, his hugs were hard to escape from, even with her skills. “This is a very good friend of mine, the Doctor.”

Following Jo’s lead, the Doctor quickly pushed a hand forward to encourage a handshake.

“A pleasure to meet you, Senor Ferreira,” the Doctor said. “I—”

Any further talk was stopped by Ferreira vigorously shaking the Doctor’s hand. His whole body cranked like a socket wrench.

“Ferreira is an old friend from Cliff’s, long since before we met,” Jo explained to the Doctor. He nodded between each jostle. She lightly placed a hand on Ferreira’s shoulder to both end the handshake and gain his attention. “We were wanting to meet with Cliff this afternoon. Could we hire one of your boats?”

“Absolutely!” Ferreira said, his smile seeming to grow three sizes. “Every day, I have hoped to give you the tour and show you the greatest way to travel the Amazon, but you always say it’s too busy, not the right time... But *today*, Senhora, today I give you my finest boat, and my finest tour and—”

“Actually,” the Doctor interrupted, gazing at the motorboat with a distinctive yellow paint job, “I was wondering if it would be possible to just hire the boat. I am skilled in piloting all forms of sea vessels.”

Ferreira eyed him suspiciously. “You may be able to pilot, Senor Doctor, but the Amazon... She is a tricky beast. She likes to take you on twists, lead you to see what is not there and—”

“And we’ll have a map as well,” Jo interrupted. “Cliff has taken me to his research station a number of times and the Doctor is an experienced traveller. So, please, Senhor, may we hire just the boat today?”

Ferreira still eyed the Doctor, but as he turned to Jo his face shifted into a wide grin. “For you, Senhora, of course. Let us set you off immediately.”

Seeing the Doctor operating the rudder of the motorboat gave Jo an unexpected sense of calm. He had looked so lost when she first ran into him, but putting him in control of transport, she could see him beaming as he directed the boat through the rainforest. Jo had given him directions as they started, but he seemed to know where he needed to go.

“What was Clifford researching anyway that has him leaving you so far behind?” the Doctor asked, momentarily looking away from the boat’s stern.

“It wasn’t exactly his choice, Doctor. We were already here researching fungi, and he was asked to investigate something further,” Jo explained. “There’s a type of dolphin native to the Amazon. The pink dolphin. They’re already rare to this region but their populations have almost vanished recently, without explanation.”

“A bit of a change to go from fungus to dolphins,” the Doctor observed.

“Well, initially Cliff thought it was due to a change in food availability. A plant goes extinct meaning the animal that eats the plant goes extinct, leading to the animal that eats the animal going extinct.”

“The logic of ecology. I take it, it wasn’t that simple?”

“As we investigated we found there was no change to the plant life in the region. If anything, there’s an overabundance of the animals the dolphin feed off.”

“So I see. They just vanished?” the Doctor asked.

“Yes. Once we started this mystery we couldn’t stop searching, even if it moved outside Cliff’s area of expertise.”

The Doctor smiled with a touch of pride. “The more things change... You suspected poaching?”

“There’s no sign of any nets or traps for them. By the time I returned to the mainland, Cliff was trying to check the soil and water for toxins and radiation levels, so—”

Jo was suddenly cut off as the Doctor cut the motor, sending her jerking forward. She was about to complain until she noticed the Doctor lean quickly to one side of the boat towards a small branch in the river. He peered out into the dark water, keeping very still.

“What is it, Doctor?” Jo asked.

“I saw someone,” he answered slowly, while pointing one hand out in the distance, then suddenly he hissed, “*There!*”

Jo followed his line of sight, the river’s passage, and saw the object of the Doctor’s attention.

A girl, no older than thirteen, was bobbing up and down with her head and shoulders above the water. This was unremarkable as Jo knew most of the children of the tribes in the region would swim regularly. At first glance this girl appeared no different. Although, Jo thought, her shoulder-length hair was unexpected for a girl of this young age.

The girl did appear startled though, with her eyes wide returning the Doctor’s stare.

“Doctor, I don’t think she’s in any danger,” Jo suggested.

The Doctor quickly shushed her, saying, “Just wait.”

Jo looked back at the girl and then saw what the Doctor meant. The girl suddenly broke her stare with the Doctor and dove beneath the water. As her upper body went beneath the waves, an algae-coloured, shiny-scaled

fishtail poked above the surface only for a few seconds before it pushed against the water, propelling the girl away from them at great speed.

“Was that... *is* that a mermaid?” Jo asked.

The Doctor turned to her with a smile. “My dear Jo, I have no idea. Do you think Cliff will mind if we delay our rendezvous to find out though?”

Without giving time for Jo to consider, the Doctor pulled the motorboat’s ripcord and directed it to follow the branch of the river the girl had swum down. Water splashed into the boat and onto Jo, but she didn’t mind. She was enjoying this—the adventure, the unexpected, the type of journeys she had spent years of her life sharing with the Doctor, but happening again, in her present. Not just her memories.

She also liked how, the more the Doctor sped up the boat, the more excited he got. As he got more excited, he seemed more alert and focused. More like the Doctor she knew.

Every now and then Jo could see a flash of light in the water, as the afternoon’s sun shimmered against the tail of the mystery girl. Despite the speed they were travelling, they never seemed to be doing more than keeping pace with her. Jo considered whether this was intentionally done by the Doctor to prevent any harm being done accidentally. Eventually, the branch of the river ended at a large pond surrounded mostly by jungle.

Along the pond there was a wooden jetty and, connected to it, what appeared to be a large white building. The Doctor leant over the front of the boat, looking into the water.

“Did you see where she went?” Jo asked.

The Doctor shook his head, “No. She dropped out of sight, but I think—”

Suddenly, the Doctor clutched his head in pain, his eyes clenched.

Jo rushed over to him, causing the boat to shake.

“Something... “ the Doctor hissed slowly. “Something is coming.”

Before Jo could ask, she felt the boat be hit hard by something coming up from underneath, propelling it to collide with the jetty. There was a crash. The Doctor stumbled at the collision. Already imbalanced through the pain, he fell, head over feet, across the bow. Into the water.

Jo tried to reach out to the Doctor when the boat was hit again at the stern. Softer this time. Instinctively, she turned to the rear to see the fin and tail of a dolphin swim away.

With a splash, the Doctor half-pulled himself back into the boat, before extending an arm to Jo to help, which she gladly did.

“What hit us?” he asked.

“It looked like a dolphin, but that doesn’t make sense. They’re so cautious around people generally.”

“It makes some sense,” the Doctor pondered. “Our friend is gone now. When I was under the water, I caught a glimpse of her tail entering a pipe. She must have been hiding under the boat when the dolphin came.”

“You mean, they were working together?” Jo asked, surprised.

“Very possibly, Jo. That pain I felt in my head, it was like I was standing in between two ends of a radio transmission.”

“Like the dolphin was being communicated with?”

“Quite right.”

Jo was stunned. “Mermaids, long lost dolphins, and now animal communication... Cliff won’t believe any of today.”

“Cliff? Oh, yes... Well, who says it has to end?” the Doctor asked, tying the boat rope to the jetty. “The girl swam into a pipe. That pipe has to go somewhere, very likely nearby.”

Jo pulled herself on top of the jetty, and turned to help the Doctor follow her up. Then they realised they were not alone. Standing on the jetty, with a menacing glare was a tall, tanned man with slicked back hair and wearing a pale suit. Jo knew him well, and if there was any doubt to

his name, she saw the white building behind him was adorned with his logo:

SILVA INDUSTRIALS

“Oh, no,” Jo muttered.

“Friend of yours?” the Doctor muttered.

“As much as he is of anyone else around here.”

“I see...”

“Senhora Jones,” the man sneered. “What a disappointing surprise to have your company again. Where is your husband? Did he not like my welcome the last time you trespassed on my land?”

“Introductions, Jo?” the Doctor asked.

“This,” Jo said, giving a long sigh, “Is Rafael Silva. Businessman, local community leader, and owner of a lot of land in this area.”

“Including the jetty you are standing on, and the river your boat trespassed on. *So you leave now or I give you the same gift I give her husband!*” Silva yelled. “*And this time, I will not miss!*”

Jo shrugged and raised her hands in defeat. “Fine, we will leave.”

“Now, you wait a minute, Mr Silva.” The Doctor raised his voice, walking past Jo to stand close to him. “We did not come here to trespass. We saw a young girl in the river and were trying to help her. We only need a few minutes to see if she is safe and then we will be off.”

Silva gave a slight mocking laugh to Jo. “Is this your Grandfather, Senhora Jones? I feel he is a bit lost in the head. First you bring your husband looking for his special mushrooms and now you bring your Grandfather looking for invisible girls of the river.”

The Doctor reacted angrily, jamming a finger into Silva’s chest while sternly saying “Now look here—”

Silva instinctively pushed the Doctor forcefully back and he became enraged, shouting at the Time Lord, *“Do not touch me, old man! Do not lay even a finger on me. Let Senhora Jones tell you, it is only out of the goodness of my heart that I do not leave your bodies for the crocodiles to feast on!”*

The Doctor began to move back to Silva, but Jo quickly grabbed his arm. “Let’s head back, Doctor. It’s getting late.”

The Doctor’s lips trembled as he restrained his fury, but he agreed with a quiet nod.

As they climbed back down to the boat, Silva called out, “I will be making a complaint to your husband’s funders, Mrs Jones! I do not expect to see you in my country for long.”

The Doctor started the motor in silence, and returned the boat down the river. Jo looked at him for some sign of what he was thinking, but all she could see was a look of tiredness in the Doctor’s eyes.

Then, as quickly as he started the motor, the Doctor cut it, stalling the boat.

They sat in silence for a moment or two.

“What are you doing?” Jo whispered.

“Come now, Jo. Did you really think I was going to let someone like Silva tell us what to do? We saw the girl enter a pipe on his property, no matter what he pretends,” the Doctor explained, smiling at the chance to rebel. “You said it yourself, it’s almost dark. We aren’t too far from his property now, so we should be able to return to it quickly. And, after already threatening us and seeing us leave, he wouldn’t be expecting us to return again so soon.”

“But Doctor, he wasn’t joking about shooting us. When Cliff and I accidentally landed, he took a shot at Cliff.”

“Did you notify the police?”

“He sent the police to issue *us* a warning.”

“*Hmm...* Well, I’m aware of what Silva would like to do,” the Doctor muttered, removing his sonic screwdriver from his pocket. “And that’s why, in this case, we should probably use the back door.”

A short while later, after slowly propelling the boat onto Silva’s property, the Doctor and Jo were outside the large white building adorned with Silva’s logo.

As the Doctor expected, night time had provided a cover, and Silva was not anywhere to be seen so far. After carefully creeping around the edge of the building, the Doctor had found a small staff entrance secured with a padlock. As Jo checked to see if any guards or workers were nearby, a familiar buzzing noise followed by a click in the lock told her the Doctor had found a way to enter.

“After you, Jo,” the Doctor whispered, opening the door to guide her in. The room he had revealed to her was dark, with only the faint outline of walls being revealed. The first thing Jo noticed was the sudden change of climate. She had gotten used to the humid wet tropics now she had been amongst it, but as soon as the door of the building opened she felt a gust of moisture in the air. Then the smell hit her—it was the smell of the sea.

The Doctor followed after her, removing a pen torch from his pocket and using it to slightly illuminate the building they found themselves in. The walls became a bit clearer, and Jo could see they were glass. With creatures moving behind them. They were in a large indoor aquarium.

“Is Silva a trader in sea creatures, Jo?” the Doctor asked.

Jo shook her head, and whispered, “Not as far as I have heard. But no one was too sure where he got his money from. He always seemed to have a few businesses operating at once.”

“From?”

“Logging to cattle raising. But, if he was operating a fishing business, I thought I would have heard it from one of the children. Unless...”

Jo pushed her head close up to one of the tanks. The Doctor pointed his torch towards her. Jo saw its occupant. Checking the next tank along found the same creature and another alongside that.

“Pink dolphins,” Jo muttered. “Crammed into tanks too small for them.”

“And stacked like sardines,” the Doctor explained, sending the light from the pen torch above the tank. Jo saw that as well as being stacked alongside each other, tanks were also stacked atop each other, revealing columns of dolphins barely moving in tanks they could not turn in.

“But how could he do this?” Jo asked, astounded.

“To a man like Silva, I imagine the consequences of his brutality is scarcely a consideration, Jo...”

“No, no. I mean, yes... It’s awful, but...” Jo tried to explain. “A researcher could spend his entire life searching for these dolphins and not find a single one. How could he manage to catch so many, without leaving any evidence of any traps or nets?”

“Maybe the answer lies in—” The Doctor clutched his head in pain and dropped the torch.

“What is it?” Jo asked, running over to comfort him.

The Doctor answered in gasps, backing away slowly to a wall. “It’s clearer to me. It’s not an accident anymore. It’s targeting me.” He looked up, suddenly a lot older. “Jo? Jo, where are we?”

Jo looked concerned. “We need light. I can see if there’s a light switch near an entrance.”

“Yes... Of course...” The Doctor gently nodded.

Jo felt her way along the wall of glass. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness, and despite the loss of the pen torch, now she knew what to expect. Jo glanced at the tanks as she passed them, and the sad eyes of the pink dolphins who reside within them.

Then she saw a human face staring back at her from within the tank.

Instinctively, she let out a startled scream. She could hear the Doctor react behind her, trying to move to her and yet he ran at a slow, sluggish pace.

Meanwhile, the girl in the tank kept eye contact with Jo, not blinking, or even letting out air bubbles to show she was breathing. Her hair was dark, and yet her skin was unnaturally pale. It was like staring at a drowned child, except still moving enough to maintain a focus on Jo.

“Who are you?” Jo whispered.

The girl did not open her mouth, or make any movement, but suddenly Jo felt a rush of thoughts enter her mind.

Home. Darkness. Trapped in dark. Arms tight. Cut into tail. Cut into wrists. No movement. Scared. No swim. No escape. Scared. Bright. Eyes hurt bright. Howl. See Father. Father free. Father save. Father bring home. Swim with friends. Sing to friends. Friends come home. Friend come for Father. Friend? Friend? Friend?

The last word seemed to stab into her skull and get louder and louder in Jo’s head until she yelled out “Yes! I’m a friend. Just stop!”

Suddenly the lights came on, exposing all the sea life assembled in this building. Jo could see it was not just dolphins Silva had collected, but also other rare fish and some sea mammals were contained in similar tanks. Jo looked back at the girl, but only saw a flash of a tail as she left.

She looked back at the entrance expecting to see the Doctor at a light switch.

Instead, she saw Rafael Silva aiming a pistol in her direction.

“Mrs Jones, I thought I had made you aware of my opinions on your returning to my property, and the consequences, quite clear, if you imposed on my hospitality again,” Silva said, slowly walking over to Jo. “Are you so foolish you thought I’d be forgiving when you *now* break into my property?”

She initially stared back at Silva, but also tried to look behind him to locate the Doctor. She soon spotted the Doctor emerging from behind an open door, slowly walking towards Silva. She just needed to focus Silva's attention a bit more.

“What are you doing here, Silva?” Jo asked.

“At least, I belong here, Senhora.”

“That's more than I can say for your...”

“My stock?”

“How did you even manage to catch all these dolphins?”

“You are not in the position of asking questions, Mrs Jones,” Silva answered slowly, his gun unwavering. “My business is my private matter, following my own private laws.”

“The girl in the tank. She guides them to you, doesn't she? Does she know how you end up treating them? Leaving them gasping for air? Crammed so tight they can barely move?”

The mention of the girl caused Silva to snarl at Jo. “I run a legitimate business creating important sales for important clients. You breaking in here and finding out my business practices makes you a hostile element, which I will not tolerate.”

Jo saw the Doctor prepare to strike, standing behind Silva and slowly raising his hand to strike at the back of Silva's neck. It was a move she saw the Doctor do many times before to contain any number of evil henchmen and aliens. But this time it was different. The Doctor was moving a bit slower, a bit out of sync. He breathed in sharply before he moved his hand to strike. The sound of the sharp breath was enough to alert Silva.

Silva instinctively spun around to follow the sound he had heard. The Doctor's hand hit downwards, but instead of hitting Silva's neck, he hit Silva's hands instead. The weapon discharged, the Doctor sprawling

himself against the nearest tank for cover. The gun was knocked onto the floor.

“*Ab, the grandfather of Senhora Jones, is it?*” Silva yelled, and before he could hear an answer, he punched the Doctor directly in the jaw. The Doctor stumbled a few steps back, shaken clearly by the impact, but preparing to defend himself. His arms raised in a classic aikido pose.

“We weren’t properly introduced, were we? I’m the Doctor, old chap, and I encourage you to think—”

“You are one of her accomplices, eh? You’re a trespasser and you can enjoy the same treatment of Mrs Jones!” Silva yelled, then threw his left fist towards the Doctor’s chin. Jo saw the Doctor was able to intercept, but his movements were slower than she remembered. Instead of turning his assailant’s strength against him, the Doctor was merely blocking the hits, which were increasing in intensity. Silva’s temper was boiling over.

“You think I need a gun to kill you, old man?” Silva shouted, as he threw more punches towards the Doctor’s head, each block from the Doctor giving him barely seconds of grace, before Silva sent another punch. Whether Silva had any tactics was unclear, but by focusing his attacks on the Doctor’s skull, the Doctor’s stomach was left undefended. It was an opportunity Silva took advantage of. He suddenly threw a left hook into the Doctor’s waist. The Doctor stumbled back at the impact, bending forwards in pain. This brought the Doctor’s head down. It was perfectly placed for Silva to give the Doctor an uppercut under his chin, knocking the Doctor to the ground.

“*Doctor?*” Jo shouted.

“*I’ll kill you with my own hands!*” Silva yelled, crouching over the Doctor’s injured body and repeatedly hitting him.

Jo looked for the gun, the sonic screwdriver, anything that could be used to save the Doctor. Aside from Silva, she could see a glint of light coming in front of the tank. Before she even had a chance to investigate further, she felt her legs were as stiff as stone. The sensation spread upwards to

her hips, then her torso, until finally her neck was forcibly turned back towards the tanks, to have her face directly the girl in the water. Her eyes were severe.

“Stop this,” Jo pleaded. “I have to help the Doctor. Silva is killing him.”

Bad man. Bad man chase, hunt, find home. Father protect. Father kill bad man.

“*But he’s not a bad man!*” Jo yelled to the girl as she glared back angrily at her. “Silva is using you to trap fish and locking you in a tank. The Doctor wants to help, to free you.”

Bad man hurt. Bad man scare. Bad man die.

Jo realised her words were not convincing the girl. The girl may not have lived any life outside of Silva’s control, and therefore had no reason to doubt him and trust strangers like Jo and the Doctor. But, Jo realised she could give the girl a reason to trust her, by letting her in.

So as the girl’s thoughts poked into Jo’s mind, Jo closed her eyes and let her memories release.

I thought you took O-levels? I didn’t say I passed. It was the daisiest daisy I had ever seen. So, the fledgling flies the coop. It’s a form of self-conditioning. You fill your mind with nonsense and then you can’t be hypnotised. It doesn’t work on me anymore. Don’t worry Doctor. I’ll look after her.

Jo opened her eyes to see the girl’s face had changed. Instead of a stern glare at the Doctor, she was viewing Jo curiously. She reached out a hand and pressed it on the inside of the glass. Jo extended her hand to match the girl’s. Suddenly the memories became more vibrant and intense as if they were being tugged from her mind.

It’s a mystery, Jo, a chance to feed the world but also a chance to save an ecosystem. Preserve this environment for all creatures to exist free of exploitation. Let’s head back to the boat before Silva gets another shot. It will be hard being out there without you. Jo, when did you know? You’re sure you cannot still come in your condition? The children will be lucky to have you as a... a teacher. I’ll come back as soon as I can, and when this is over I won’t be apart from you again.

The girl moved her hand from the glass.

“You understand now?” Jo asked.

The girl nodded, and one word entered Jo’s mind.

Mother.

Jo found her legs were free to move, and turned to see Silva had wrapped his hands around the Doctor’s throat. The Doctor’s face was a bruised blue-grey. He was dying. But at that moment, both Silva and Jo clasped their hands over their eyes and winced as a high-pitched shriek burst out from one of the tanks.

Jo turned back to the girl. She had swum just above the water line to emit this painful noise.

The noise grew in intensity, causing the entire building to shake. Jo saw little cracks begin to form in the girl’s tank and saw they were matching cracks occurring across many other tanks. Trying to ignore the pain, Jo threw herself towards the distracted Silva, pushing him off the Doctor and grabbing onto the lapels of her friend.

“*No!*” shouted out Silva towards the girl in the tank. But it was too late.

In quick succession each of the tanks burst open, one after the other, as the cracks connected, releasing a flood of water into the building. Before Jo knew what to do, the water overwhelmed her, sending herself and the Doctor away on a tide.

Sensations passed quickly around her. Jo felt her arm scrape against the exposed brick of a now broken wall. She felt the smooth skin of the dolphins brush against her leg, and felt her lungs already aching from the lack of oxygen. But her arms held strong onto the Doctor’s jacket. She was not going to lose him again.

Don’t let it end like this for either of us, she thought to herself. We’ll need to land on the shore soon.

A hand grabbed against her collar tight and Jo felt she was suddenly being pulled in a different direction from the current. With the last of her strength, she turned to see the girl from the tank, in all her glory, determination radiant in her face, exerting all her strength to pull Jo and the Doctor along. Her frantically paddling tail propelled all three of them through the water.

Jo smiled, as her eyes drifted shut, and she fell unconscious.

By the time the Doctor opened his eyes, and found himself on a muddy bank along the river, Jo was already sitting up, watching the water flow by. The Doctor could see why. There were glimpses of dolphins swimming just underneath the surface alongside many other sea creatures.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you sleep so deeply before Doctor,” Jo greeted him, still looking out towards the water.

“Yes, well... Rest is important. What happened there?”

“The girl and I became friends. And she realised who her friends really were, and freed them from Silva’s controls,” Jo explained.

The Doctor nodded, “And Silva?”

“I’m sure he has floated away somewhere. Men like him always turn up somewhere. But he won’t be able to poach these animals anymore. She won’t be tricked like before,” Jo explained, then turned directly to the Doctor. “Now I’ve told you what happened to me in there, could you please tell me the truth about what happened to you?”

“What do you mean, Jo?” he asked nervously.

“Doctor, you’ve been different since the moment I saw you back in port. You have been much more absentminded than usual. Tired. And slower than you have usually been. Silva wasn’t an amazing strong man or an alien warlord.”

“He was a fairly average fighter, I will admit...”

“Yet he easily overpowered you. I just want to know how you are.”

The Doctor gave a long sigh. “Oh, Jo... The truth is... Before I arrived here, I was on Metabelis III, facing my fears, saving a human outpost, and in the process, receiving a lethal dose of radiation. I told the TARDIS to send me home and to my family. She took me to find you so I could accept the truth of my condition. The truth is that I’m...” he swallowed. “I’m dying.”

Jo released a long, tired breath. “I was worried it was something like that.”

“I’ll change, regenerate, cheat my way out of death like we Time Lords do. I’ll keep on living, but I won’t be me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Because, Jo, I don’t want it to be true. I have enjoyed being me. I have a home, friends, even a family. You, the Brigadier and everyone else. I don’t want to think of the time when I may not be this same Time Lord anymore. So, in other words, if I told you the truth, I would have to recognise that I am regenerating, but if I don’t, I can continue being me for now.”

Jo wrapped an arm around the Doctor, to squeeze him at his sides. She couldn’t tell if he was smiling. She liked to think so.

“You’re frightened of changing,” Jo said.

She felt him nod.

“I understand. Sometimes it scares me about how much things have changed, and how much they are going to continue to change more. Sometimes I’m even terrified of who I’m going to have to become.”

“What do you mean?” the Doctor asked, confused.

Jo looked down for a second, composing her thoughts. “Doctor, the reason Cliff didn’t have me on his expedition anymore isn’t because he

forced me to stay. I told myself I would not go, because I'm not just protecting myself anymore. Doctor, I'm pregnant."

She looked up. The Doctor's face widened to a large grin. He wrapped his arms around Jo in a tight squeeze.

"Congratulations!" he said, releasing her. "But, knowing what you know, why did you agree to go on this journey with me?"

Jo smiled, "I wasn't ready to let go of the adventure just yet, either. I wanted to be Jo Grant, the Doctor's assistant and friend one more time, before I go back to being Jo Jones, mother and wife. If I didn't say anything to you, I could pretend to be the same person I was when we first met."

"And now? Are you ready to be Jo Jones?"

Jo looked out towards the water, and said, "I think I can be both. Have adventures and be a mother as well. Whatever changes come, I'll still be me. And you will still be you."

The Doctor smiled, "I suppose we will be."

Suddenly the water bubbled in front of them, and out of the water the girl burst out. She gave a cautious stare towards the Doctor, then a slight smile towards Jo. Then around her bobbed up a pod of pink dolphins. Her smile grew bigger as she vanished under the water with the dolphins.

"She's found her home at last," Jo said, partially to herself. "Do you recognise her species, Doctor?"

The Doctor shook his head. "I've not seen anything like her before."

Jo pondered on the thought for a moment. "Pink dolphins are important to the mythology of many of the tribes around here. Legend has it the dolphin can turn into a human at night, to celebrate with young men and women, and even sire children by them."

“So the mysterious girl is the offspring of the dolphin? Very interesting theory you’ve developed.” The Doctor smiled again. “We’ve made a scientist of you, haven’t we, Jo?”

“It had to happen one of these days,” she giggled. “I suppose we should be heading back as well. I’m sure word of the sudden flood at Silva’s factory will spread to town soon, if it hasn’t already. Someone will find us soon.”

“And then, back to find who I am to be,” the Doctor determined.

Suddenly an idea came to Jo’s head. “Doctor, do you think you could delay returning to the TARDIS until tonight?”

“I feel I could. What do you have in mind?”

Jo grinned, “I have one last adventure for us to go on.”

It was opening night in the community centre, and Jo was in the front row seat. The children were not ready to do a play entirely by themselves but a few whispered cues and encouragement from their English Senhora had so far proven sufficient to keep things rolling. And while it was not an overwhelming crowd, Jo could hear from the scattered sighs, and applause that the families were appreciating the performance.

“Christ is born,” said Davi, covered in feathers as the rooster

“Where is the child?” another child asked, wearing a large cowbell, and a pair of fabric udders.

They had met every one of her expectations, and Jo was proud of each of the children on the stage. But the next performer, her surprise performer, was who Jo was looking forward to the most.

“And now,” Jo hissed, to the stage, “*Ovelha!*”

At this announcement from stage left the Doctor emerged. His usual jacket, which had been washed and left to dry after becoming drenched in the river, had been replaced by a sheep fur vest. But this did not damage

his gravitas, or presence to any degree as he entered, clasping his fur vest with his thumbs.

“The child is in the barn,” the Doctor stated clearly, his voice projection all around the community centre. And to complete his performance, the Doctor uttered, “I am a sheep—*baaaa!*”

Jo smiled, cried, and gave a slight applause. She could not think of a better person to play the role, nor a better way to celebrate Christmas than with her oldest friend.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CRISIS



By Kevin M. Johnston

With a scraping, groaning sound, a faded blue wooden box forced its way into existence in a poorly-lit room with two metal doors and a single dim light bulb. Moments later, a man with a loose bow tie and a crumpled jacket burst from the box, frowning deeply at the bland, utilitarian surroundings in which he had found himself.

“Well, it’s not Monte Carlo,” he murmured.

“Monty *who?*” asked Jamie.

The Doctor barely noticed his companions following him from the TARDIS, but there they were—Jamie McCrimmon, all tartan and knees, and Victoria Waterfield, all wide eyes and ruffles.

“Hm?” the Doctor replied, “No, Jamie, not a person. Monte Carlo. A lovely little place in Monaco. Oh, never mind. The point is, we’re here! Er, wherever *here* is.”

“Another spaceship!” Jamie groaned.

“Not necessarily,” the Doctor replied.

“No, not at all!” Victoria said. “Look!”

Victoria pointed to the wall behind the TARDIS. Hanging there was a plain black-and-white calendar with the month and year in big block letters—March 1949.

“Ah! The twentieth century! Splendid!” the Doctor exclaimed. “Now, given that we seem to be standing still... I’d wager this isn’t a nautical vessel but some sort of base of operations. Military, perhaps.”

The Doctor noticed one of the doors to the room was slightly ajar, revealing a nondescript corridor beyond.

“I’ll see what’s just beyond this room, shall I?” the Doctor offered, “Jamie, you and Victoria stay here and guard the TARDIS.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Jamie began, but the Doctor had ducked through the door already.

More corridor, the Doctor noted, but with it came context.

Just down the hall, there was all the information he needed—a portrait on the wall of President Harry Truman.

“A 1940s American military installation,” he mused, “I’d best not leave Jamie for long...”

He turned back towards the room containing his ship, but heard a scuffle within. Peeking through the crack, he saw Jamie and Victoria arguing with three armed men in green uniforms. One of them seemed to be of higher rank than the others.

“We found them just standing there, sir,” said one, “Some kind of English commies, y’think?”

“Now wait a minute,” Jamie protested, “I’m no’ *English!*”

“And we don’t even know what *commies* are!” Victoria added.

The officer—a thin man with a thin moustache and a nasally Midwestern voice—”Spies is spies. We’ll give these two to the Major when he comes tomorrow, boys. He’ll know what to do with ‘em. I got a few ideas of my own, and ain’t neither of them a cordial welcome party.”

With that, the privates marched a protesting Jamie and Victoria out of the room, the officer headed off elsewhere. The Doctor stood powerless, almost frozen, just behind the door. He waited until they were fully gone, counted to six, then hurried through the room, past the TARDIS and down the hallway through which Jamie and Victoria had been taken.

As he ran, he remained far enough back that the soldiers wouldn't hear his footsteps or heavy breathing, but close enough to still see every corner they took. His hands, meanwhile, were occupied in his impossibly large pockets, fishing for a small firecracker he'd confiscated from Jamie when they'd celebrated Chinese New Year. Finally finding it, he picked up the pace and lit the firecracker with some deft handiwork. He dropped it behind him and continued to run. Finally, the soldiers noticed him and the Doctor ducked down like an English rugby player coming in for a tackle. The two young men barely had their guns up when the firecrackers went off, taking them off-guard. The Doctor ducked between them, grabbing Jamie and Victoria's wrists as he did.

"No time to dilly-dally!" he shouted, and the trio ran off into the corridor as fast as they could.

The time travellers burst through the doors of their ship, panting from exhaustion.

The Doctor had led them through the base as quickly as he could, but even his confidence that "it was this way, I'm sure of it!" hadn't been enough to convince Jamie and Victoria that they would get away safely. But now, as they surveyed the white roundels and complex machinery of their impossible home, they had to admit that the Doctor had gotten them out of trouble as usual.

"Well," the Doctor pronounced, "That's America for you!"

Jamie and Victoria were still out of breath and gave no reply, so he just moved a few levers and switches and hovered above the dematerialisation switch.

“Doctor,” Victoria said, just before he pressed the button, “Doesn’t the TARDIS look different?”

“Hm?” asked the Doctor, “Oh yes... How nice to see the hat rack again. I was wondering where it went!”

“Aye, sometimes the TARDIS changes on its own,” Jamie said, always proud when he knew something Victoria didn’t. “Best just to get used to these sorts of things.”

“Yes, she is rather... *erm, ahem*, capricious,” the Doctor said, as he flicked the switch.

Almost immediately, the TARDIS engines came to a horrific crunching stop, smoke rising from a few panels. The Doctor looked furious.

“Well, you don’t have to take that so personally!” he shouted at the ceiling.

He circled the console, blowing the smoke away from the panels and giving instructions: “Jamie, hold the drift compensator—that’s the blue one there—and Victoria, watch the dimensional index. I’m going to try something different.”

“*Och*, no...” Jamie replied.

“Don’t worry, Jamie. The ‘something different’ is actually something we’ve done before! A previous destination.”

He was rummaging in his pockets again, this time producing a small faded notepad with a round yellow winking face on it. He flipped it open to the first page, where four lines of strange symbols and numbers were written. He put the notepad on the console and entered the numbers.

“London, England, the United Kingdom, Earth. The twentieth—” He clicked a few buttons. “—of July—” He adjusted a dial. “—1966! There we go.”

“Isn’t that when we left Ben and Polly?”

“Precisely!” the Doctor said, clapping his hands together happily, “I wrote down the settings when we left Skaro—while you were fussing around in the wardrobe—just in case we ever wanted to visit! It’s why I’ve been aiming for the twentieth century these last few journeys. Now that I know the date and rough geographic location, I’m able to calculate the TARDIS trajectory.” He bounced on his toes a little, happy with how clever he’d been. “I expect the TARDIS will be glad to travel somewhere familiar. We’ve been there twice already, after all! And won’t it be nice to visit old friends again?”

Jamie nodded. “Or just to know where we’re going for once.”

“I don’t know,” Victoria mused. “Sometimes it’s nice to be surprised.”

“Aye, well, when you’ve been aboard this ship as long as I have, you’ll have had enough surprises!”

The Doctor tutted. “Jamie, stop being such an old spoilsport. This time, there’s nothing to worry about!”

He casually pulled the dematerialisation lever and all the lights on the TARDIS died instantly. After a moment of silence, one of the dials shattered, accompanied by yet another plume of dark smoke.

“Doctor...” Victoria started.

“Oh, crumbs!” the Doctor coughed, fanning the console with his handkerchief. “Oh, dear, dear, dear...”

“What do we do now?” Victoria cried.

“We go outside, of course!” the Doctor said, crossing the console room and heading towards the exit, “Jamie, help me with the door, we should be able to get it open.”

“Outside?!” Jamie asked, incredulous, “Why?”

“Doctor, there are armed men out there!” Victoria reminded him.

“Something is stopping the TARDIS from taking off. If there’s anything on this base that can do that, we need to find it immediately. Otherwise, the whole human race could be at risk from... *erm*, whatever it is.”

Jamie sighed. “Alright, Doctor. Let’s go get captured...”

Immediately upon leaving their ship, the Doctor and his companions found themselves surrounded and arrested—this time by triple the number of soldiers they’d seen before—and were now being marched through the corridor to their cells. A young, square-jawed private was taunting them about their capture as they were hustled along.

“They’ve got some bigwig scientist from Washington down, you know,” he was saying. “He’s here to figure out how you got into this base with that box.”

The Doctor just laughed at that. “I do wish him the very best of luck!”

“Look here, *King George*, this guy’s the best we’ve got! You’d better believe he’ll make that box of yours work.”

“Even the *Doctor* can’t make that box of his work,” Jamie muttered.

“Well,” the Doctor replied haughtily, “Certainly not *now*.”

“Enough chit-chat, Hauk,” the thin officer ordered from the front of the pack.

“Yessir! Sorry, sir!” Hauk replied.

“This cell’s good enough for the old man,” the officer said.

“But what about Jamie and Victoria?” the Doctor asked, frantically. “I’ll have you know, I do very poorly in solitary. I start talking to myself.”

“Right too he does,” Jamie agreed.

“Very poor habit,” conceded Victoria.

“What?” the officer gawked. “We’re gonna let you stay together so you can escape again?”

“Well...” the Doctor scuffed a foot. “I’d hoped—”

The officer laughed. “I don’t think so.”

And with that, he shoved the Doctor into his cell and slammed the door.

“Well... *Well*, I don’t care for your moustache!” the Doctor shouted. “Horrid slug-looking thing...”

The Doctor pouted, then collapsed hard onto the ground, manoeuvring his legs into a lotus position. He needed to consider the TARDIS problem before he figured out how to escape, so that they had somewhere to escape *to*. If only he had his recorder to help him think it through...

Alas, it was back in the TARDIS, so he had to imagine one. He took a deep breath, screwed his eyes shut and held his hands up to the correct position, then began to whistle a Kandalingan sea shanty. He got a few notes wrong for the sake of realism.

“You’ve got a visitor!” was the shout that broke him from his concentration.

The Doctor snapped one eye open to see the thin, irritating officer standing in front of his cell.

“That DC scientist’s here to see you,” the officer told him. “Got some questions about that box. Sounds like he’s close to getting it running.”

The Doctor closed his eye again and sighed as if readying himself to meditate.

“Sounds like you’ve got a charlatan on your hands. No-one can get into my TARDIS except for me,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, we’ll see about that, won’t we?” the officer sneered.

“Yes, we will!”

“Doctor Holliday! He’s ready for you.”

That was enough to wake the Doctor up.

“Doctor *Holliday?*” he whispered to himself. “It couldn’t be...”

But it was.

There, entering the Doctor's cell, was his previous incarnation, as imperious and high-foreheaded as the Doctor remembered. He felt at his own new face to compare. His predecessor's hands were, as ever, on his lapels, and he looked down his raven-beaked nose at his future self. The Doctor tilted back to gain a better perspective and noticed 'Holliday' did the same. Following him into the cell was a girl with a black bob and a simple 1960s knee-length jacket, carrying a tray of apparently random scientific instruments.

"Captain Flynn," he snapped in an atrocious American accent. "My assistant and I will be fine to interrogate this prisoner on our own, I should think."

"Yes, of course," the captain replied. "Just let the guard know when you're ready to leave the cell, Doctor Holliday."

The captain locked the cell with Holliday inside, and the "bigwig scientist" waited for the military man to be out of earshot. Then, his haughty frown broke into a warm smile as he looked down at his future self.

"A most unexpected surprise, yes! Yes, indeed."

"Doctor," the young woman looked at him, "you know him?"

"Of course, my child! And what a pleasure it is to meet me!"

About one hour previously, the first incarnation of the Doctor was puttering around his own console room, *bmm*-ing and harrumphing as he did so. His companion—the young, energetic Dodo Chaplet, had been watching him do this for about ten minutes before clearing her throat and putting on her most posh society voice.

"Excuse me, my good Doctor, sir, but where precisely are you taking me?"

The Doctor looked up at her, confused at the formality. She had found there were moments, when his mind wandered, where he seemed completely unfamiliar with her sense of humour, even after all the time they had spent together. But that was part of the old man's charm, really.

She had begun to notice in their travels together how, when he thought no one was looking, he'd let himself ease into a comfortable sitting position or sag against a wall. Little moments of weakness. Seemingly unimportant on their own, but combined together...

"My dear Dorothea, this is important," he replied, just as posh as she had been, but not joking about it. "One simply cannot rush such a precise and complex scientific process as travel through the Fourth Dimension. Misalign a single equation and we'd end up in the midst of an old elm or the concrete foundations of a block complex."

"But I thought we'd landed," she replied, "just a moment ago. You said so."

"*Hm?* Oh, of course we have, of course we have," the Doctor said, waving his hand, "But the TARDIS's instruments aren't responding normally."

"And you want to know what's wonky before we go outside?"

The Doctor stopped what he was doing and walked over to examine Dodo. She held in the smile that she felt building. It was the word *wonky* that had set him off. She knew it the moment she said it. Maybe that's why she said it.

He gave her a long look.

"Let's check the fault locator, shall we?" he asked, before adding, "then perhaps we can find out what exactly is so, *eh...* *wonky* with the Ship."

Dodo let out a tiny, ugly snort of a laugh and followed the Doctor to one of the roundels on the wall. He slid it aside to reveal a round readout rather like a radar screen. He rapped it twice with a knuckle and it pinged into life.

“Ah, there we go!” he announced. “Just beyond this door here.”

He shuffled his old frame towards the door that led to the rest of the TARDIS and it opened dutifully, revealing...

“Great powers!” he gasped. “This is very grave. Very grave indeed.”

“What is?” asked Dodo, trying to see past him.

He stepped aside and she saw it—Inside the room where the Doctor kept his food machine and some of the less commonly used TARDIS systems, there was another TARDIS, just the same as the one they were in.

“Dimensional recursion,” he said, breathlessly. “I’m afraid I could—afraid this is worse than I could have possibly imagined, child. With the TARDIS inside itself, we won’t be able to leave. We may be trapped within its walls for all eternity.”

Dodo didn’t seem to take that in, as she pushed past the Doctor and headed towards the other TARDIS. Perhaps, it was just too big a concept for her to grasp for the moment. Perhaps she just wanted to see for herself. She was, the Doctor knew, a curious girl in all senses of the phrase. As the Doctor watched her open the door to the TARDIS in the passenger quarters, he turned back to the console room, expecting to see Dodo enter through the big, roundel-covered doors that led to the exterior, but... there was no Dodo.

Compelled by his own confusion, the Doctor approached the mysterious second TARDIS and walked through its doors. There was Dodo examining the console.

“It’s not the same TARDIS,” she told him. “It’s mostly the same, but a little bit different. The walls, the computers, they’re a little bit... wrong. And look, no hatstand.”

“Most unusual,” the Doctor tutted.

Dodo picked up something from the console. It appeared to be some sort of musical instrument. Unable to resist, she blew into it, producing a loud squealing noise.

The Doctor was not amused. He tutted at her and replaced the instrument.

“I think it’s time we find out where we are and just what is going on around here. Don’t you agree, my dear?”

“Are you sure you’re fit to walk?”

“Whatever do you mean?” the Doctor harrumphed. “I’m as sturdy as ever.”

“I just think—”

“Good, good, we need more of that in the universe.” He patted her hand. “Come along, come along...”

And walked with purpose from the strange, second console room.

Private Hawk and Private Pryzbylewski entered the room that contained the strange blue box. They were to guard it until someone could be sent in to figure out just what the thing was. Hawk figured it was a radio-transporter for sending enemy agents around the world. Pryzbylewski figured that Hawk’s brand of crazy was the product of one too many Buster Crabbe talkies. Even if the box had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, how could anyone travel inside that thing? It could barely fit two people.

He was about to speak this out loud when the doors opened and two people—an old man and a young girl—strode out from the box as if they did it every day.

“Who the heck are you?” Hawk demanded, pointing his gun at the sudden arrivals.

“Are you with the British commies we found with this thing earlier?” Pryzbylewski asked.

The oldster held his hands up. He spoke with a slow, Southern drawl like a villain in a Western. “I can assure you, young man, we are not. Doctor Holliday is my name. Your commander has doubtless briefed you, already.”

“Well, I—”

“In that case I’ll explain myself. My assistant and I are here to examine this contraption. To ensure the safety of yourselves and this,” the Doctor squinted at his uniform, “Air Force establishment.”

The girl nodded silently. Shy, Hauk supposed. What he didn’t know is that she couldn’t mimic an American accent to save her life.

“Look, my dear boy,” said the scientist, “No more delays. We’ve come all the way from Washington D.C. to examine this machine and I’d hate to let the president know why we weren’t able to do so.”

Pryzbylewski pushed Hauk’s gun down, and nodded, deferentially, to Holliday.

“No need to bring Mr Truman into this, sir, ma’am, we’ll do all we can to help.”

“And so they took me back to their laboratory just as you were getting yourselves captured,” the old Doctor told his future self. “Good thing I was already here, *hm?*”

The new Doctor raised from his lotus position and looked his old self in the eye for the first time. He felt a strange, unnatural sensation as he did so. Like staring into the vanishing point of a funhouse mirror. Reflection, reflection, reflection, until your own image became a pointillistic explosion of half-measured colours and shapes. It left him uneasy. This sort of thing was really quite forbidden, after all.

“And it’s a good thing you managed that... er, rather convincing accent, isn’t it?” the new Doctor muttered.

“As a resident of the District Capitol, I decided, *eh*, Mid-Atlantic.”

“Dropped right in the middle of the Atlantic from the sounds of things.”

The first Doctor frowned. Dodo patted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Doc, I think it’s pretty good,” she assured him, “makes you sound just like Wyatt Earp!”

“And you must be Dorothea,” the new Doctor said, beaming, as he shook the girl’s hand.

“I’d prefer to be Dodo if I *must* be anything,” she replied, smiling back. “Makes me feel, well..”

“Yes, you know, he really will be alright,” he said, still grasping her hand in both of his and avoiding the gaze of his white-haired counterpart. “Perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but he’ll never let it stop him completely.”

Dodo liked this strange little man, even if she didn’t quite get how he and the Doctor were two sides of the same person.

The new Doctor turned to the old with a confused frown. “But how did you recognise me? It’s not like I look anything like what you’d expect, not after my recent rejuvenation. I hadn’t even given my name to the soldiers.”

“Now, Doctor,” the old Doctor replied, “Don’t you think I’d recognize my own future? *Hm?*”

“Not to mention you’re still wearing the same jacket!” Dodo put in.

“Wait just a moment,” the new Doctor realised. “Where exactly did you land your ship?”

“In the exact same coordinates as your own, I’m afraid. If I understand correctly, you escaped the TAR—that is, your own TARDIS, only for us to land around it, so to speak. So when you re-entered the ship, you were in fact at *my* controls.”

“Of course!” the new Doctor exclaimed. “And your TARDIS wouldn’t take off with its future self inside!” He looked delighted at having figured out the mystery until his face suddenly darkened. “Why, that would be catastrophic!”

“A paradox to thwart the pattern of Creation,” nodded his former self.

“And certainly enough to get the attention of the—”

“Quite,” replied the old Doctor said, cutting him off, “But we’ve avoided all that, haven’t we? Now it’s just a matter of freeing your companions. The Victorian and the Highlander.”

“Hang on,” Dodo said, “Maybe I’m not exactly cut out for this time travel stuff, but, if he’s you, Doctor, after you’ve gone through this—what did you call it — rejuvenation? If he’s you, doesn’t that mean you haven’t met his friends yet?”

“No, I haven’t,” the old Doctor. “They seem an interesting pair, though. I’m looking forward to learning more about them eventually!”

“But does that mean you recognized them when you met them? Met them properly, I mean?”

“An interesting question,” he pondered.

“No, sorry to say I didn’t,” the new Doctor said, “But, I don’t remember this meeting very clearly, either. There are structures set in place both within and by ourselves and, *erm...*”

The old Doctor’s voice was level. “Certain higher powers.”

“Yes, exactly, to deal with the consequences of such occurrences. Time has a habit of working these things out. As long as we don’t cause too much fuss. Best not worry about it too much.”

“But, it’s also best not to be irresponsible about it, either,” the old Doctor said pointedly, “Time should never be rewritten to serve our own ends. To slave others’ lives to our own isn’t why we travel.”

“To *save* the lives of others, however...” his future self amended with a cheeky grin.

Yes, Dodo liked this new Doctor quite a bit.

“Guard!” the old Doctor shouted, resuming his hyperbolic drawl. “We’d like to take this absolute *scoundrel* back to the lab.”

One of the two men that had been guarding the TARDIS appeared at the cell and unlocked the door.

“That will be enough, young man,” the old Doctor told the guard. “You’re dismissed.”

“Captain Flynn made it very clear that if the prisoner left the cell, I was to stay with him at all times. We wouldn’t want him escaping again,” said the guard.

“Very well, very well,” said the old Doctor. “Now, what did you say your name was, young man?”

“Private Pryzbylewski, Doctor Holliday, sir.”

“Yes, now, are you a scientific man, Private, *er*, Prespillitski?”

Pryzbylewski shrugged. “Don’t suppose so, no. Always been more hands-on.”

“Rather like my assistant, then,” the old Doctor replied, “*Eh*, Dodo?”

Pryzbylewski considered the world quite differently in that moment. He hadn’t known what Holliday meant by that. But then again, he *had* just been smashed on the head from behind. Dodo’s face danced between a smirk and a wince as he dropped, her hands still tightly grasping the metal tray she had used to wallop the soldier.

“Fine work, my dear, although I think you may have hit him a little too hard,” the old Doctor chided. “A tap, my dear, not a wallop.”

She looked at him quizzically. “Wallop?”

He smiled impishly. “Never say you’ve had no influence on me.”

“Oh, he’ll be fine!” the new Doctor shouted. “Military man. Made of sterner stuff. You did a splendid job, Dodo. Now, if you could, take that key and go and fetch Jamie and Victoria?”

Dodo bounded off towards the new Doctor’s companions, leaving him alone with his former self. They found themselves mirroring one another’s mannerisms. The elder had his hands on his lapels while the younger gently tapped together his fingers.

“Jamie and Victoria...” the old Doctor said. “But no Dodo.”

The new Doctor frowned and looked away. “No, not for some time now.”

“Is she...?”

“You know I can’t answer that.”

The old Doctor almost left it at that, but he couldn’t help but continue. “I don’t know if I could lose another. We were fortunate with young Steven, but...”

“I know.”

“Yes...” His former self gathered his resolve. “Yes.”

And buried his feelings.

The new Doctor couldn’t help himself. “It won’t—”

“Not a word, young man.” He held up a finger. “Not one word.”

Neither spoke again until their companions had returned.

“Doctor, who are these people?” asked Jamie.

“This is, *ab*, Doctor Holliday, Jamie. You’ve already met his assistant, Dodo,” he replied. “They’ve helped us escape, because—that is—well, never mind all that, I’ll explain later. Just get in the TARDIS and, *er*, through to the *other* TARDIS.”

“*Eb?*!” Jamie replied.

Victoria managed to ask, “Doctor, what’s going—?” Before the Doctor shushed both of them and ushered them through the doors. Dodo and the Doctors followed them, but stopped at the first console. The new Doctor turned back to his old self and gave him his hand to shake. The old Doctor was tentative about it—knowing far too much about the Blinovitch Limitation Effect to be *laissez-faire* about contact with a former body—but gave his future self’s hand a quick squeeze nonetheless. Besides, the unique nature of the Ship allowed for certain loopholes in the laws of temporal physics.

“We really should do this more often!” the new Doctor exclaimed.

“I’ve a horrible feeling we might,” the old Doctor said, grimly. “I seem to remember...” Just flashes. Memories that seemed to sharpen as night descended on his mind. He could recall pallbearers at a military funeral, an argument within a time eddy, a red light on the TARDIS console, a young man in the Cave of Skulls... “Dear, dear me. All this flitting around the timestream, changing history, crossing our own timeline... I just hope it doesn’t attract the attention of—”

“Quite,” the new Doctor cut him off. “And Dodo!” He leapt towards his old companion and embraced her. “It’s been too long. I should check in on you next time I’m in—come to think of it, I wouldn’t want to give too much away, now, would I?”

“See you soon, then!” Dodo said with a smile. “I think? Honestly, this is all a bit topsy-turvy for me.”

“Don’t worry, Dodo, you’re only human!” the new Doctor said. Then, he entered the passenger quarters and waved from within. “Happy travels!”

“And a bright future,” answered the old Doctor.

As the door swung shut behind him, they heard the strange grinding of the TARDIS engines as the new Doctor and his companions shot off into the future.

“Only human?” Dodo asked, “Hey, Doctor, does that mean you’re—”

“*Hm?*” the Doctor said, distractedly, “I suppose not, no.”

Dodo saw what had taken his focus—a small notebook with a yellow winking face on the cover. It was open to a page that featured four lines of numbers and strange symbols, which the Doctor was mouthing to himself as he read them.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Space-time coordinates. Recorded in Venusian shorthand. From the other fellow. Seems he was trying to get somewhere specific.” He tapped one of the metres and a needle moved. “In fact, he seems to have already entered them into the system... I wonder where he was heading?”

Dodo took the notebook and looked at the numbers as if she could decipher them, then, realizing she couldn’t, stuffed it in her pocket and shrugged.

“I bet it was Neptune. Or Cleopatra’s Egypt,” she guessed, “but either’s fine with me!”

“Oh? Which would you prefer?”

“Actually, what I’d *love* would be London. 1965. Home. Not that I’m not having the time of my life, Doc, it’s just—”

“Say no more, my child, I understand completely.”

“And it’d be good for you, too. A chance to feel—” she cut herself off.

“Young?” the Doctor smiled.

Leaving the TARDIS settings as his future self had set them, he toggled the dematerialization switch, setting the central column into motion. He

eased his young friend into a half-hug with a smile, listening as the central column thundered like a church organ.

“When it comes to the future, my dear, we never do know. Do we?”

Many years later, in the same TARDIS, with a different face and new friends, the Doctor sighed as he remembered the events of the last few hours from two different perspectives. He had always been a little hazy on how he’d gotten Dodo home in the end. He’d assumed it had been sheer luck, but no. It was his own meddling. Perhaps that’s what all his luck was—past and future selves unlocking doors and changing the TARDIS settings...

Victoria put her hand on his arm to shake him from his thoughts. “Are you alright, Doctor?”

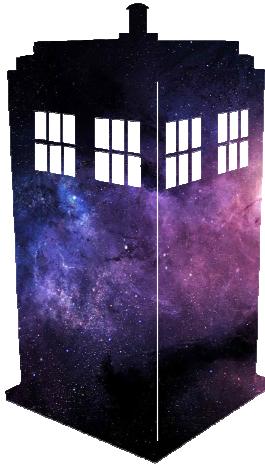
“Oh, yes,” he said.

“When are we arriving in 1966?”

“I’m afraid I’ve misplaced the readings. Quite some time ago, in fact.”

Victoria didn’t pretend to understand. She was getting used to that now. Though she wasn’t sure she’d ever seen the Doctor so sombre. Then, quick as a flash, he bounced up and his long face broke into a familiar smile.

“Never mind all that! As a very good friend of mine once said, sometimes,” he pressed the dematerialisation toggle and clapped his hands, “it’s nice to be surprised!”



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