

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 1



**DOCTOR
WHO**
DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

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**A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME I
THE LABOURS OF DIAMANT**

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INTRODUCTION: A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS



by AFJ Kernow and Alan Camlann

ASTRONOMICAL FEATURES OF N-SPACE LECTURE 10.

PRYDONIAN ACADEMY, THE CITY OF PRYDOS.

GALLIFREY.

On the planet of the Time Lords, across golden sands that sang in the early evenings, there lay a steep flight of stairs. Up them, beyond them, lay one of the largest repositories of academic knowledge in the unknown Cosmos.

It was customary in the inner sectors of the Capitol to attend its hallways in ceremonial garb. A millennia-old ritual of power, pomp and circumstance that rallied the otherwise antique Time Lords to action. The manner of dress, its methodology, was almost like watching the footage of that old starbreaker, the *Aeon*, taxiing for planetary takeoff. The physical movements wound-up the Gallifreyans to speed them onto their clockwork days.

This was another such day.

The students of the Prydonian Academy, in plainer garb for plainer existences, filed and sat in the huge lecture theatre. Ruminating and posturing on the nature of wholly Gallifreyan experiences. These

would become the Cardinals, the Councillors and some even advanced to the Presidency. Some, however, simply chatted. They were regarded as the riffraff, the Shobogan troublemakers and the Renegades.

A door opened with a resonant chime and their lecturer arrived. There followed a clatter of feet, a rustling of robes, as the students rose to their collective feet.

“Be seated,” said Lady Traskeyaragelosar, waving her hand dismissively as she walked.

Known as Traskeya by her students, the Time Lord Quadrigger was regarded as one of the more interesting lecturers at the Academy. Diminutive in stature, Lady Traskeya’s low, husky tones spoke with an enthusiastic confidence that was rare to her subject. At least, as far as the students were concerned. Unlike the dreary, verbose cloister bell of others, who rambled, babbled and droned to the tune of their own voices—she was eloquent, but concise.

Rarely employing her telepathic acumen, Traskeya seemed to possess an actual understanding of visual stimulus. She brought visual aids to illustrate the content of her lectures, prodding at the potentialities of the imagination. Cold and dusty though they were in the Capitol. There was an air of a Shobogan about her, though it was hard to say as those who maintained such positions as hers never, as the lesser species said, ‘dropped out’.

What made her lectures so extraordinary was that she used vidcast captures of time vortex phenomena, amusing caricatures of how not to operate a TARDIS and breathtaking holographic imagery of cosmic objects. She also, rather scandalously, liked to include observations from non-Gallifreyan sources.

There was a rumour—one of many—that she remained at the Academy as those in power had decided she could do the least amount of damage there.

After a general introduction about black holes, an elementary

principle in Gallifreyan society, Traskeya started to discuss their different sizes.

“Now, our astronomers have found one of the most massive black holes yet discovered. Simply gargantuan even by astronomical standards. Known to us as ζ3512, the enormous black hole weighs in at 34 billion times the mass of both our suns combined. ζ3512 is consuming the mass of a normal star on a daily basis.”

She paused to let the enormity of the information sink in.

“Even Humanian astronomers, from the Australian National University on Sol 3, in the Mutter’s Spiral, have spotted it. Listen to following audio extracts. Their colourful turn of phrase will, perhaps, stimulate your imagination more than mere facts alone.”

“Audiofile ANU1: Doctor Christopher Onken,” a robotic voice intoned. *“The black hole’s mass is also about 8,000 times bigger than the black hole in the centre of the Milky Way. If the Milky Way’s black hole wanted to grow that fat, it would have to swallow two thirds of all the stars in its local Galaxy.”*

There was a click as she adjusted the console.

“Audiofile ANU2: Doctor Christian Wolf,” said the robotic voice. *“As the Universe expands, space expands and that stretches the light waves and changes their colour. These large and rapidly-growing black holes are exceedingly rare, and we have been searching for them with SkyMapper for several months now.”*

“SkyMapper? What a daft name,” whispered Mortimus to the Prydonian student at his left.

“That’s nothing,” he stifled a winsome chuckle. “Good gracious me, I read somewhere they called one ground-based telescope array, the Very Large Telescope.”

“The imagination of these Tellurians.”

“Oh, yes! Quite so!” he waved an arched hand.

Mortimus started giggling, too, until a baleful glare from Traskeya,

circled by the two thick lenses of her glasses, silenced him totally.

The audio file continued playing. *“This black hole is growing so rapidly that it's shining thousands of times more brightly than an entire Galaxy, due to all of the gases it sucks in daily that cause lots of friction and heat. If we had this monster sitting at the centre of our Milky Way Galaxy, it would appear 10 times brighter than a full moon. It would appear as an incredibly bright pin-point star that would almost wash out all of the stars in the sky. Again, if this monster was at the centre of the Milky Way it would likely make life on Earth impossible with the huge amounts of x-rays emanating from it.”*

And there Traskeya was, standing at what felt like the epicentre of the lecture theatre. Beyond its event horizon, at its core. There was silence deep as death in the chamber. Except perhaps, the occasional sigh of relief, punctuated by palpable whispers from some students who were glad the object was nowhere near Kasterborous. Their memories of Qqaba, the star which brought the Time Lords their power over Time, was etched into the minds of everyone who lived on Gallifrey. Initiate or not.

Traskeya pressed a stud on the lectern. “Now, to conclude this lecture, we will—”

“My Lady,” a lone voice called out.

“You’ve already spoken out of turn, Prydonian.” She adjusted her glasses. “I’m sorry, but to speak again would invite recrimination on your record. You will instead sit and observe. You can do that, can you not?”

“But is it only—?”

“Down,” she gestured with finality.

The Prydonian student, who would later become known as the Doctor, opened his mouth to rebut. A pithy retort on the tip of his tongue.

The warning gaze from his lecturer, however, caused it to retreat into

the back of his mouth. That was the trouble with a telepathic intelligentsia. Unlike the non-active species who had yet to discover Time, all eyes in a room on Gallifrey were accompanied by their surface-level thoughts. Their judgements, their preconceptions... It was little wonder things seemed to move so slowly. If a thought escaped its hutch in a Castellan's consciousness, there was well-enough time to catch it before it made a mess of things.

The student sighed, nodded and sat back down. Humming and harrumphing.

“What was it?” Mortimus whispered.

“*Mmph?*” He wiped the bridge of his aquiline nose. “What was what?”

“The question you were going to ask?”

“Oh... Well, is the phenomenon exclusive to black holes?”

“Of course it is.”

“Why?”

“She said so.”

“No, she didn't,” the Prydonian noted. “The Tellurians of the planet Earth believe it to be so, but perhaps... Perhaps, it's something else?”

“Beyond Creation, you mean?”

“Yes. Something from...” he let his voice trail away.

Mortimus blinked expectantly.

His voice was a bare whisper. “From beyond the Fourth Dimension...”

The student was noted for his somewhat fanciful fascination with the elder lore of Gallifreyan life. His childhood hero had been Omega, as with many of his House and Chapter, but he possessed an interest in the past that may had considered macabre. Occult, even. Something

spurred on by such extracurricular texts as *Pelaton's Auld Mythology* and the now vanished *Book of the Old Time*. Oothering influences at the brink of understanding. Powers that turned the creatures of the time vortex into fantasy Gods. It was what Borusa had succinctly called, “*A dangerous preoccupation with the facetious superciliousness of chaos and misrule.*”

The Time Lords, after all, hadn't arrived to their seat of power without opposition. Their enemies had been some of the deadliest in existence.

Nevertheless, Mortimus bit his knuckle, stifling the urge to encourage him. “Let it go, you have enough trouble already...”

“Let it go? Just like that, *mmpb?*” challenged the Prydonian.

His fellow student smiled in sympathy and shrugged.

At the chime, the Prydonian was one of the first to leave the lecture theatre. He almost glided down from that ebony edifice in his robes. Muttering and harrumphing to himself.

Even as young as he was, a scant hundred or so years, the student carried himself with a wisdom well beyond their years. The trouble was, he never found an outlet that truly satisfied those musings. His home, such as it was, had other plans for him. Ambitious rumblings which the Prydonian ultimately wanted no part of.

He was, therefore, the only one to really see the forest for the trees. The student looked to the horizon. A smell of petrichor and the crackle of static in the air. Just in time to see a storm, moving in from Mount Cadon, begin to gather towards the Prydonian Academy...

PALINGENESIS



By Rob Nisbet

230 B.C. XI'AN, CHINA.

博-文

Steven pulled the Ship's door closed behind them, feeling the uncomfortable humidity instantly prickle over his skin. He pulled at the neck of his t-shirt, puffed out his cheeks and followed the Doctor onto the dusty street.

Flimsy looking shacks of stone and canvas lined the road, and, in front of each one, was an open fire pit where wood burnt adding to the heat. The thoroughfare was noisy with people in loose robes sweating in their workshops and over the embers they tended.

The Doctor had abandoned his usual long frockcoat, and in his rather formal waistcoat and

2023 A.D. XI'AN CHINA

蜀山

“Call yourself a history teacher?” Ian smirked playfully at his colleague, Barbara. They stood with the Doctor on a wide terrace outside the entrance to the Terracotta Army excavation. They were in Xi'an, China, beneath a glowing blue sky, and, so far as the Doctor could tell, it was late November 2023.

Barbara shook her head in wonder. “I had no idea this place even existed.”

The Doctor was peering closely at an information board near the wide glass entrance. Ian was impressed that he appeared to be reading the Chinese text rather than the English

cravat, he looked to Steven strangely underdressed. He was standing in the middle of the street; his white shirt sleeves shone in the sunlight as he gazed at the fires in one direction, then the other.

Wherever they had landed, Steven thought, it seemed incredibly primitive. Clay pots abounded; he reasoned that the fire pits were open kilns to bake the pottery. Then, in the embers of the nearest fire, he saw a glowing head.

“Where on Earth are we now?” Steven called, without much hope of a sensible reply. Despite the Doctor’s protestations, Steven knew he had very little control over his erratic time-machine.

The Doctor seemed to be getting his bearings from the surrounding landscape. He looked smug. “Remarkable! I’ve been here before. This exact spot.”

Steven raised an expectant eyebrow.

“China,” the Doctor explained,

translation. But then, he supposed, to the Doctor, both were alien languages.

The Doctor fluttered a hand towards the sign. “The Terracotta Warriors,” he said, “were discovered in 1974, a decade *after* you boarded the Ship.”

“Then it’s no wonder we hadn’t heard about them.” Barbara joined the Doctor at the information board. “It says they were created to protect the Emperor on his journeys in the afterlife. Emperor ‘Qin’—how do you pronounce that?”

A young Chinese woman joined them by the entrance. “The Emperor’s name is pronounced ‘Chin’,” she said. “He brought together many separate provinces to form China which was named after him.” She smiled. Her eyes were a gentle soft brown beneath her bob of jet-black hair. She had an unusually pointed nose and chin. “I am Yin-mai,” she added with a slight bow. “I am your guide for the excavation tour.”

She ushered them towards the

producing a handkerchief to dab at his brow. “That hill over there will become the tomb of Emperor Qin himself. And this,” he waved his stick to indicate the industry around them, “is the production of, what will be called, his Terracotta Army.”

“The emperor’s making an army of clay figures?” Steven looked again at the pottery head baking in the glowing charcoal; the face burnt red and had a grim countenance that could well represent a warrior. “Hardly practical if his enemies happen to have a sledgehammer.”

The Doctor tutted. “It’s a *symbolic* army. To show his status in the afterlife. He intends to impress. His tomb will include a magnificent lake of mercury. In fact, my boy, the TARDIS synthesizes mercury from a sample I took from this very site, in the far future.”

The Doctor and Steven were both startled. Without seeing him approach, a tall man now stood before them dressed in what appeared to be a soldier’s uniform of studded leather. He

glass doors, but the Doctor remained still. He had produced a slim, pen-like device which he waved in an arc at arm’s length.

“That’s new.” Ian rarely understood the science, but he was always interested in the Doctor’s technology.

“Hmm?” The Doctor held out the device. “Something I’ve been tinkering with. A multi-functional tool based on sonics.” He tutted as if with disappointment. “Long way to go, I’m afraid, but I’ve set it to detect mercury.”

“Any sign?” Ian asked.

“Oh, yes, yes my boy.” The Doctor was pleased. He swung the device to point at a distant hill and it emitted a shrill buzzing sound. “Quite a concentration to the west of here—at the Emperor’s tomb.”

“But the tomb hasn’t been excavated yet, it’s still buried.” Ian gave the Doctor a sceptical look. “Hey, this isn’t some ruse for you to go exploring, is it?”

The Doctor allowed Ian his suspicion; they trusted each

gave the two strangers a sweep of curious appraisal, then crossed to the nearest fire pit, addressing the young woman who knelt tending the flames.

“Is the head ready?” he asked.

The woman raised her face, the fire blushing the slightly pointed features of her face. Her eyes were shadowed with a deeper tear-streaked red. Even in her misery, it was a face the Doctor recognised.

Yin-mai! He thought. But that was impossible. What was the other name? He tried to force the memory with an irritated wave of his handkerchief; it had been something like Susan. Then he leant forward. “Can it be, my dear, that your name is Shushan?”

The young woman stood, shakily. Steven noticed that her hands trembled slightly as if shivering, despite the heat.

“Yes, I am Shushan.” She searched the kindly crags of the Doctor’s face for some recognition, then swiped at her tears. “The smoke stings my

other now; they’d come a long way together since the Doctor’s subterfuge on the planet Skaro. “I need just a small sample of mercury,” he said. “I’ll have the Ship synthesise enough for the fluid links, then we’ll never run out again.” He swung the device towards the excavation entrance. It buzzed. “There is mercury nearby, too.”

“Mercury?” The query came from their guide. “There are legends,” Yin-mai informed them, “which say that the Emperor’s tomb contained a lake of mercury, and indeed, soil samples taken by archaeologists at the tomb site do suggest that this is the case.”

“A whole *lake* of mercury.” Ian was impressed. “Dangerous stuff, though.”

The Doctor gave Yin-mai his most kindly old-man smile and slipped his pen-like device into his jacket pocket. “Lead on, my dear,” he said.

Inside, they crossed a bright, wide concourse to where many people were already gazing out over a railed gantry. The whole

eyes,” she added, without conviction.

“The head,” demanded the soldier. His outline appeared to shimmer in the heat haze. “It is needed at the tomb.”

The Doctor’s eyes widened at a further surprise, and he realised now why Shushan cried. The grim-faced clay head in the fire pit was also familiar. “How extraordinary,” he said. “Surely, that’s Bo-wen!”



From the ensuing conversation, it became apparent to Steven that the young woman, Shushan, was employed in the decoration of the emperor’s tomb, and the terracotta head was needed to complete one of the figures displayed there. Steven was taken by surprise, though, when the Doctor turned to the tall soldier and, indicating the TARDIS, offered to help supply mercury for the emperor’s ornamental lake.

“I must find out what is going on,” the Doctor whispered to Steven as they juddered along a

building was vast. Ian looked around; it reminded him of a high-ceilinged airport terminal. He looked around at the people too, then at Barbara. She, too, had noticed. Practically everyone, all the other tourists, held a palm sized glowing screen. People tapped and swiped at them with their fingers, some had them pressed against their cheeks as if speaking to them, some held them up, looking at the pictures on the small display. Ian allowed himself an intrigued science teacher’s grin.

They made their way to a space at the railing, and there, stretched below them, was the Terracotta Army. Wide trenches had been excavated to reveal the life-sized pottery figures of warriors and horses. Row after row of red-brown statues. The trenches narrowed into the distance; the scale was vast.

Barbara gaped down at the sea of pottery faces. Words couldn’t do it justice.

“Wow,” Ian managed.

Yin-mai seemed satisfied with

rough track in a cart pulled by a massive ox. The young woman, Shushan, led the beast, towards the truncated mound of the emperor's tomb. The clay head of Bo-wen rocked to the cart's motion; still hot, it smouldered in a protective nest of sacking.

"There is a suspicious amount of coincidence here," mused the Doctor. "This is a different time, but the *same* location. And the *same* people are involved." He glanced behind to where the uniformed soldier led a second cart bearing the TARDIS, held in place by many canvas straps. "I suspect the Ship is up to some mischief."

"I knew you couldn't control it," smiled Steven. "So, how do you know Shushan?"

"I don't," said the Doctor, then realised that his answer needed some explanation. "Many centuries from now, I met a very similar-looking young lady who had recurring dreams of Shushan—to such an obsessive extent that I suspected reincarnation."

Steven scoffed. "Reincarnation!

their reaction.

"Remarkable," said the Doctor. "I've never seen anything like it."

Barbara found her voice. "How many figures are there?" she asked.

"So far, about eight thousand figures have been unearthed. We suspect there may be many more to be discovered."

"And I hear each one is unique?"

"That is correct," Yin-mai confirmed. "Some of the torsos seem to be cast from the same moulds, then altered to make them individual. There is always a difference in the uniform, or the stance, or the position of the arms. It is the same with the heads. It is believed that they were modelled on actual people in the Emperor's army at the time."

Yin-mai's eyes, Barbara noticed, swung towards one of the glass display cases near the exit to the exhibition complex. Bright sunlight from outside illuminated the figure of an

Now, that's a little *too* far-fetched."

"Exactly, my boy." The Doctor's grey eyes darted to the woman ahead of them, her movements seemed uncoordinated; she stumbled slightly with each step. "Perhaps the Ship has brought us here to explain what *really* happened."

Steven followed his gaze. "She doesn't appear well, Doctor."

"Indeed." The Doctor's eyes were sad. "We must keep a watchful eye on her, my boy. Hers is a sad tale, and I fear, ends in tragedy."



The mound of earth had been excavated until there was little left that could be called a hill. The cart on which Steven and the Doctor rode, had entered a wide avenue cut into the landscape. It was lined with terracotta figures, painted in bright reds and browns, their eerie staring faces a deep beige, their eyebrows and moustaches picked out in glossy black.

"I feel like I'm being watched,"

archer, grim faced, its empty hand outstretched where it had once held a wooden bow.

"This is fascinating," said Barbara. Her history teacher's senses focused on a few of the figures where sections were broken, or limbs were missing. "I'm guessing many of the figures were discovered in pieces, then reassembled like a jigsaw."

Yin-mai didn't answer; she continued to stare, distracted, at the archer in the glass case.

"Are you feeling well, my dear?" asked the Doctor. He noticed a slight tremor in the hand that came up to Yin-mai's chest in an unconscious gesture of longing.

Barbara, Ian, and the Doctor exchanged concerned glances.

"Yin-mai?" Barbara tried to get the girl's attention, but she appeared to have drifted into a trance-like state.

"My name," said Yin-mai, "is Shushan." Her hand swept up to her mouth, her eyes suddenly wide with confusion. "I... I am

said Steven.

The Doctor gazed with fascination at each figure they passed. Though similar, he noticed that no two figures were the same. And each face too was unique—just like the face of Bowen that cooled in the sacking at their feet.

The cart reached a towering arched entrance where a cave-like opening led into the hillside like a dark tunnel. Shushan and the soldier spoke briefly with two sentries who flanked the entrance, then the two carts were allowed through.

The tunnel cloaked them in welcome but claustrophobic shade. An occasional flaming torch did little to dispel the sudden gloom but managed to illuminate the passage until it expanded, opening out into a vast glittering cavern.

The tomb of Emperor Qin, like the army of clay figures that would guard him, was in the process of construction—but to the Doctor and Steven it was already magnificent. It was like a high-ceilinged cave lit by more

sorry,” she stammered in her careful English. “Did you say something?”

Barbara’s expression was full of concern as she repeated her query about reconstruction.

Yin-mai instantly became the professional guide once more. “I can show you,” she said, “how the broken figures are made whole again.” She bustled her three charges to the left of the gantry where a raised walkway clung to the side of the building, stretching into the distance.

Ian raised his eyebrows to the Doctor. “What was all that about?” he asked.



Yin-mai gestured down from the walkway to where a group of workers gleamed in lab coats of pristine white as they bustled around half-assembled figures. “Originally,” she explained, “the heads, arms, legs, and torsos were sculpted separately, then luted together with a clay slurry, like glue. Unfortunately, time has broken them apart and many sections are cracked and

torches in sconces. Jade tiles glinted over the floor in every shade of creamy green, tapestries and murals coloured the walls and a central raised area was surmounted by ornate columns and the emperor's empty sarcophagus. Most impressive of all was that this raised area was an island in a lake of glittering silver liquid.

"You mentioned mercury earlier, Doctor," Steven prompted.

The Doctor, however, was more interested in the terracotta statues dotted around the cavern. Shushan was already issuing instructions to the many workers who swarmed about the tomb. The clay head was taken from the cart and, while still warm, was luted with a clay slurry into the hollow neck of a figure facing the tunnel entrance. The Doctor was not surprised that it was the figure of an archer, complete with wooden bow and a quiver of arrows slung over its back.

The second cart, baring the TARDIS, was steered with some difficulty to the side of the silver

damaged."

"This is all very impressive," said Barbara as she watched a finger being painstakingly fitted onto a clay hand. "And it must be so satisfying seeing these figures being brought back to life."

"It's like reincarnation," said Ian, with a smirk.

As if triggered by these words, the Doctor saw Yin-mai's face freeze again; she turned slowly to gaze back at the exit and the distant glass case that contained the archer. "I am here, Bo-wen." Her voice was a dreamy whisper. "It is me, Shushan. We have waited so long..."

The Doctor gripped the handle of his cane. Shushan? The name reminded him of his granddaughter, and he felt a rush of sympathy for this young woman.

"Yin-mai, my dear." He got no reaction. "Shushan?"

A shimmer appeared around Yin-mai's slim frame. It was, the Doctor thought, as if a shadow had been cast, but only over her.

lake where, at the soldier's command, it was tilted on its axle and the bulky blue box eased to the tiled floor by a throng of workers.

The Doctor watched the manhandling of his time machine with some apprehension. Perhaps it was the flickering of the flaming torches, or the cavern's gloom, but the Doctor found it hard to focus on the soldier. For a few seconds, his outline seemed to blend into the background and into his surroundings. The Doctor blinked, and, in that instant, the soldier's blurred appearance returned to normal.

The Doctor's eyes darted from side to side. No one else, it seemed, had seen anything out of the ordinary. He tapped his cane thoughtfully at his chin, then deliberately turned aside, and, with a sweep of his arm, guided Steven to where Shushan stood by the newly assembled figure of the archer.

Shushan placed a hand tenderly on the warrior's arm; her face was creased with grief.

An impossible shadow which somehow glowed rather than darkened. He blinked. The shadow was hard to focus on, its edges blurred, giving Yin-mai a hazy outline.

The others had seen the effect, too. "What's happening to her, Doctor?" Barbara asked in alarm.

"I don't know, my dear." The Doctor stared in fascination. "It's as if she's been enveloped by..." He flapped an annoyed hand, unable to find the words, "whatever that is."

The hazy shadow was altering its shape. With Yin-mai at its core, it spread out from her feet across the floor, forming the shape of a second person. Yin-mai knelt down. She now cradled a young man. He lay on his back, his head resting in Yin-mai's lap.

"I'm here, Bo-wen," said Yin-mai. "It's me, Shushan."

The young man appeared now in clearer detail, dark haired and moustached. His eyes sought Yin-mai's face. "Shushan?" His

“You and Bo-wen were betrothed, I believe,” said the Doctor kindly. “What happened to him?”

“An illness of the nerves, and of the brain.” Her face crumpled into tears. “Several of the Emperor’s staff have succumbed to the same affliction.” She looked down at the tremor of her own hands, and, as if to stop them shaking, she wrapped her arms around the figure. “He became weak and irrational, his thoughts as uncoordinated as his movements.” She shuddered. “He died in my arms, Doctor. His last words were that he loved me, and would wait for me in the realm beyond death.” She shuddered. “I can’t bear to be without him.”

The Doctor patted her shoulder. “At least you have his likeness, here. Something to remember him by.”

Shushan looked up at the stern clay face of the archer. She traced a finger across the figure’s grim mouth. “I miss Bo-wen’s smile,” she said with sadness. “I long for the day when he and I shall be

eyes flickered closed. He sighed deeply and appeared to deflate as if this small effort were too much for him. “I am so very weak, Shushan.” His voice was a whisper. “Know that I love you.”

Yin-mai stroked the man’s brow. “I know, Bo-wen. I know.”

Bo-wen never opened his eyes again. “I shall wait for you,” he said with the last exhalation of his breath, “on the other side.”

The shadow image broke apart, as if its outline, already hazy, dissipated into glittering fragments which flashed away, dispersing throughout the vast chamber. Yin-mai was left alone, kneeling on the floor.

“Yin-mai?” The Doctor placed a hand on her shoulder.

Yin-mai looked up at him, her eyes brimmed with sorrow. “Bo-wen is dead, Doctor. He died in my arms. I, Shushan, long to be with him.” Her face twisted towards the exhibition exit and the glass case containing the figure of the archer. “I cannot

reunited.”

“That’s no attitude for a girl of your age to take, is it now, hmm?” the Doctor gently admonished. He had intended to somehow sooth her grief, but he knew that to be futile. He knew how Shushan’s sad story ended, he could see it looming closer, both in the symptoms she already displayed, and in her excessive fixation with the terracotta figure. There was nothing he could do but observe and learn.

Again, without sign of his approach, the soldier had joined their little group. “The Emperor approaches!” he announced. He brought his hands together in an impossible, reverberating crash like cannon-fire. All activity in the tomb came to a standstill and the workers turned as one to face a dark recess beyond the lake, set deeper into the hill.

From nowhere, a jangling chime of bells sounded around the chamber. It was, thought Steven, the Chinese equivalent of a trumpet fanfare. Lights moved within the fissure and, accompanied by torch bearers,

bear to live without him, Doctor.” Her head snapped back, and she gazed up at the Doctor in pleading confusion. “Help me,” she said, then collapsed at his feet.



Between them, Ian and Barbara helped Yin-mai to a bench, where she sat with a dazed expression, but now breathing calmly.

“I apologise,” Yin-mai said. “Did I collapse? I—I can’t remember...” She hung her head in embarrassment and realised that she owed these tourists some form of explanation. “For some time now,” she said meekly, “I have had dreams. Dreams that I am a different person.”

“Shushan?” asked Barbara.

Yin-mai nodded, then gestured out at the rows of terracotta warriors in the excavation pits before them. “In my dreams, Shushan lived many centuries ago. She and Bo-wen were betrothed. They were both in service to Emperor Qin at the

Emperor Qin emerged into his tomb. He wore an elaborately embroidered robe which glittered with silver threads, he appeared to reflect the flame-shimmered surface of the mercury lake. He glanced with interest at the TARDIS, then strode straight towards the Doctor.

The Doctor reached instinctively for his lapels, but found only his waistcoat, so he placed his hands on the head of his cane and raised his chin as the supreme ruler of China approached.

The Emperor was tall and gaunt, his face sharp and angular, a long moustache hung down from each side of his mouth like short black pigtails and his dark eyes shone with curiosity and intelligence. “We welcome you to Our tomb, Doctor,” he said in a deep voice that rasped through the gloom. “You are most welcome: You, your companion—and your time machine.”



At a second cannon-fire hand

time of the preparations to his tomb, when these terracotta figures were produced. But they were both tragically ill. An illness that affected the nervous system causing shaking and uncoordinated movement. But it also affected their minds. Shushan was afflicted with an exaggerated longing for Bo-wen. He died first, in her arms, and, such was the injury to her reasoning, she longed to join him in the afterlife. I see through Shushan’s eyes; I feel what Shushan felt. That is the nature of my dreams.”

“Rather more than a dream, I think,” said Ian.

“They have become more vivid,” added Shushan. She sounded frightened. “Sometimes I think I dream when I am awake.”

“My poor child.” The Doctor was sympathetic. “Yes. I think we have just seen something of that nature.”

Ian sidled up to the Doctor, keeping his voice low. “But what exactly *did* we see, Doctor? That shimmering image of Bo-wen’s

clap from the soldier, the workers resumed their tasks around the tomb. In the sudden bustle around them, the Doctor and the Emperor seemed to occupy a frozen point of stillness. The Emperor seemed pleased by the Doctor's stunned expression; his moustaches curved with amusement. "We do like to make an impressive entrance," he said.

The Doctor saw no advantage in denial. He raised his chin still further. "You know the properties of my Ship?" he asked.

The Emperor made a depreciating face. "It is always cumbersome when mechanics attempt to emulate a force of nature."

Steven stepped forward. "You know a lot about us," he said with undisguised suspicion, "considering we've only just met."

"We have had a little time to observe and to evaluate," the Emperor countered. The soldier who had accompanied the TARDIS from the terracotta fire pits came to stand by the

death... Was that some echo of ancient China?" Ian's gaze switched to Yin-mai. "That poor girl believed herself to be Shushan—is she possessed, perhaps, by some spirit from the past?"

The Doctor considered the idea. "You mentioned earlier—*reincarnation*..."

Ian scoffed. "But that's bunkum, surely," he said.

"Physically, quite impossible," the Doctor agreed. "And yet there is a prevalence in Chinese culture—a reverence of ancestors. Yes, I wonder..."

With Barbara's support, Yin-mai rose from the bench. "I would like to show you Bowen," she said.



Barbara walked with Yin-mai back along the raised walkway towards the main concourse. The Doctor and Ian followed close behind.

"You still don't seem well." Barbara studied Yin-mai's face. "You seem—troubled."

emperor's side. "We are a single entity, but of multiple aspects." The Emperor swept out a hand towards his soldier and the Doctor saw again the blurring of the man's outline. He and the Emperor merged until the soldier was absorbed into the Emperor's gaunt imposing frame.

"Fascinating." The Doctor produced a monocle from his waistcoat pocket and fixed it into his right eye. He turned to Steven. "It's a question of scale. What appear, from our point of view, to be separate people, are, at a higher level, part of a single being." He leant closer to the Emperor. "Your outline is indistinct. I assume you are fractal in nature?"

The Emperor gave a small nod of appreciation. "We are impressed, Doctor."

"And I'm confused," admitted Steven, eyes wide. "What's going on? What on earth is a *fractal*?"

"A complex pattern," the Doctor explained, "repeated at different scales. We see Emperor Qin at a scale appropriate to our experience. But beyond that is

Yin-mai managed a brief smile. "My thoughts of Shushan have faded," she said. "But sometimes, when I have thought of her, I look around at all that is familiar, and yet I think that I don't belong here. Does that make sense?"

"Oh yes, absolutely," said Barbara. She looked around at the other tourists. Almost all of them held one of the little screens. They spoke into them, or held them up, as if using them as a camera. "Shushan was of the distant past," she said. "There is much in this modern world that would be unfamiliar to her. I think you sense an element of unease. You said you felt as if you could see through her eyes. The unfamiliar, I know, can sometimes feel quite daunting."

Barbara looked back at Ian, happily chatting with the Doctor. He took technology in his stride. He didn't seem concerned that these telephones had no wires. And the camera pictures seemed to be captured instantly—no film to be

something *infinitely* vast, or *infinitely* minute, depending on the direction of infinity you care to take.” The Doctor tapped at his monocle. “If you can see it closely enough, the Emperor’s outline appears hazy because it is made up of progressively smaller versions of himself. On a larger scale, the Emperor exists at such a magnitude that he may bleed through into our reality as several seemingly separate entities. Like a fish,” he added, “that might see separate toes dipped into a pond, without knowing that they belonged to a creature beyond its imagination.”

The Emperor laughed. “How well you attempt to explain, Doctor. We are impressed. A simplified explanation, but essentially accurate.”

The Doctor removed his monocle and waved it towards the Emperor. “With one or two omissions, I fear,” he said.

“Which are?” the Emperor prompted.

The Doctor became serious. “Who are you, hmm? And what exactly are you doing here?”

developed, and all in colour too.

“You *do* understand.” There was surprise and relief in Yin-mai’s voice.

“I’m a history teacher,” said Barbara, offering a plausible explanation. “I feel sometimes that I belong in the past.”

What date had the Doctor mentioned, 2023? *Sixty years*, Barbara thought. *Sixty years since I first entered the TARDIS*. She gazed out over the ranks of pottery warriors which had been discovered comparatively recently. *I’m the relic, here*, she thought.

Yin-mai led them across the concourse, near the exit, where a row of glass cases contained individual terracotta figures.

They should display me in one of these, thought Barbara. *An example of a 1960’s woman, confused and out of place, from another time.*

Yin-mai halted at the first of the glass boxes, allowing the Doctor and Ian to catch up. “These cases,” she said, “keep the figures in a controlled environment—at an ideal

The Emperor seemed disappointed. He gestured to the Doctor's monocle. "A polydirectrix lens, and yet still you cannot see."

The Doctor replaced the monocle in his eye.

"You see something of Our fractal nature, Doctor. But We fear that it is beyond your comprehension—like your poor fish in the pond—to know what We truly are."

Through his lens, the Doctor concentrated on the Emperor's outline, seeing how it subtly blurred into its surroundings. It was as if progressively larger versions of the Emperor rippled out, extending in every direction around the tomb chamber and beyond.

Realisation lit the Doctor's eyes. This shimmer was something he recognised. Some time ago, with Ian and Barbara, he had seen the same effect around their Chinese guide, Yin-mai.

The Doctor took out his monocle to give the Emperor his

temperature and humidity. They are the best preserved of all the figures we have."

A buzzing sounded from the Doctor's pocket. He retrieved the pen-like device and swung it towards the cases. The readings for mercury led him directly to the case containing the archer.

"This is Bo-wen," said Yin-mai.

The Doctor regarded the stern, clay face with its blank terracotta eyes—dry baked clay from so long ago. And, according to his sonic device, somehow imbued with traces of mercury.

Barbara, too, stared at the face. It certainly looked like the image of the dying man they had just seen. "I am surprised," she said, "that of all these figures, you have given this one a name."

Yin-mai gave an apologetic shrug. "From my dreams of Shushan, I know this to be Bo-wen. He was her betrothed. After he died, Shushan was consumed by despair. She had the head specially made, based on his features."

most direct stare. “I see more than you realise,” he said with sudden confidence. “I know who you are. You are Diamant.”



Steven dragged what looked suspiciously like a garden hose from the open TARDIS door. He pulled it across the jade floor of the tomb chamber and dangled it over the edge of the silver lake. The Doctor emerged from the Ship and seemed satisfied with the plumbing arrangements.

Steven had a hundred questions.

An ornately dressed assistant had appeared from the cave-like fissure at the rear of the tomb and had called the Emperor away, apparently on a matter of state governance.

Steven was suspicious. He jerked his thumb. “Hey, you don’t think that was another of his ‘aspects’ do you?”

“Hmm? Oh yes, quite possibly,” said the Doctor. “We’ve certainly given him something to think about.”

The Doctor studied the lock on the glass case. It looked basic and easy enough to pry, then the whole of one side would swing open. And... He drummed his fingers on the head of his cane. The dreams of this poor girl... The vision they had seen shimmer around her... He couldn’t help a suspicion that he was being manipulated somehow. He glared at Bo-wen’s stern expression. Was there more, perhaps, in this case than a trace of mercury? “Go on, my dear,” he encouraged. “I think it would help, hmm, if you told us a little more about him.”

“Shushan was obsessed by this figure,” said Yin-mai. “It was all she had left of Bo-wen, and she never left its side. She hardly ate or slept, and became very weak, always remaining within touching distance of this warrior. Eventually, however, her illness robbed her of reason, and she deliberately allowed herself to be with Bo-wen again.”

“What a sad story,” said the Doctor. He touched Yin-mai’s arm. She didn’t appear to notice.

The hose undulated on the tiles, and a trickle of mercury dribbled out into the lake, glistening in the flaming torchlight.

At this rate, it could take days to fill this lake,” Steven observed.

“Quite so.” The Doctor looked smug.

Steven thought he saw a delaying tactic in the plumbing arrangements. “You want to keep an eye on that Diamant, don’t you?”

“What?” The Doctor frowned, then seemed to dismiss Diamant with a flick of his sleeve.

Steven drew a breath. “So, Diamant is some vast intelligent entity, part of which exists here pretending to be the Emperor. Just who is this Diamant? What is he doing, ruling ancient China? And what has he done with the *real* Emperor?”

“Oh, that *was* the real Emperor, my boy,” said the Doctor. “He seems to be quite unharmed. Diamant has, shall we say, *enveloped* him.”

She was staring at the clay face, but her eyes were unfocused, as if, once again, she could see her dreams rather than the reality around her.

“Yin-mai?” Barbara had seen the change in her expression.

The Doctor spread a palm to prevent any interruption of what Yin-mai could see.

“Shushan looked down at the shining silver lake,” murmured Yin-mai, in a voice softer than her professional guide-book tones. “And she saw there a means to join Bo-wen in the realm beyond life.”

Barbara clasped a hand to her mouth, suddenly anxious of what might follow. She was glad of Ian’s reassuring presence at her side.

“First, Shushan pushed this figure of Bo-wen into the lake.” Yin-mai’s eyes seemed to follow this action. “The mercury was shallow, but deep enough to cover its face.”

The Doctor’s head bobbed with a small nod. That explained the readings on his sonic device.

“Typical.” Steven managed a lop-sided grin. “We come to China to find the Emperor possessed by an alien.”

“I didn’t see it for what it was at the time,” said the Doctor, “but I’ve seen this fractal enveloping before. Yin-mai, a Chinese guide in the future was affected in a similar way.”

“That’s the girl you suspected might have been Shushan reincarnated...”

“I suspect a family link.” The Doctor gazed across the lake to where Shushan was still slumped at the feet of the terracotta Bo-wen figure. “You are correct, my boy; I *am* taking my time filling the lake. But my main concern is that poor girl. I don’t think she should be left alone—not for an instant.”

Steven, too, gazed across the lake. “She hasn’t left his side. She’s eaten nothing, poor kid. And have you noticed her shaking? It’s getting worse.”

“A debilitation of the nerves and of the brain,” said the Doctor sadly. “The same

“Then...” Yin-mai closed her eyes and drew a breath as if preparing for some exertion. “Shushan leapt into the lake beside Bo-wen to join him in death.” Yin-mai sprang forward as if to mirror this action. She would have sprawled onto the tiled concourse if Ian hadn’t grabbed at her, keeping her upright.

Yin-mai shuddered in Ian’s arms and her eyes sprang open in alarm. “Help me,” she said. Her voice had lost its dream-like quality leaving a genuine, pitiful pleading.

The Doctor seemed a little vexed at the story’s interruption.

“I don’t understand any of this,” said Ian, gently releasing Yin-mai from his grip. “But I think it’s gone on long enough.”

“Yes, yes, most worrying.” The Doctor placed a finger thoughtfully to his lips. “I think, Yin-mai, that we are close to a conclusion. Now—I wonder...” He tapped at the glass case with his walking cane—a very precise tap on the lock mechanism.

symptoms as Bo-wen.”

Steven’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You say she’ll just— fade away?”

“It is hard to remember exactly the story I was told.” The Doctor’s brow furrowed in concentration. “I’m getting old. Old and forgetful.”

“Her obsession with her boyfriend’s figure isn’t exactly healthy either. That’s definitely *not* normal behaviour.”

“Evidence, I fear, that her mind is not working as it should. Chesterton reminded me that humans have a susceptibility to mercury; to its touch and its fumes. Shushan, I’m afraid, is displaying the advanced stages of mercury poisoning.”

“Mercury poisoning!” Steven drew back sharply from the lake.

“Oh, don’t worry, my boy. Gracious me, you don’t think I’d put us both in danger do you, hmm? It takes prolonged exposure to have any detrimental effect. It is, however, already too late for Shushan, poor child.” He looked with sympathy to where

There was a click and the side panel swung open a couple of inches.

Ian raised an eyebrow.

“I need to get at the mercury,” the Doctor explained in a whisper. “And I suspect... Well, we shall see...” He prodded the glass door with his cane so that it swung fully open, then, deliberately, he turned his attention to their young guide.

As he had expected, Yin-mai’s expression had changed again to the blank dream-like state and she was cloaked once more in that mysterious glittering shadow.

The Doctor’s eyes sparkled. “Shushan?” he queried.

But Yin-mai was too focused on the open case to notice the Doctor’s voice. She ran to the glass door and stepped inside.

“I have a feeling,” the Doctor told Ian and Barbara, “that Yin-mai’s dreams have been guiding her towards this meeting.”

In the case, Yin-mai carefully held up a hand to stroke the side of the archer’s grim features.

Shushan slumped at the warrior's square-ended clay feet. "She is obviously getting weaker. I think I remember a suggestion that she might do herself harm." He tapped a finger thoughtfully to his lips. "I just wish there was something I could do to help her."

"You're helping with the mercury lake," offered Steven.

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand. "A means to keep an eye on Shushan, and to pay back the emperor for the mercury I took from here in the distant future."

"Hang on..." Steven was looking puzzled. "This mercury you're synthesising now, comes from a sample of this *same* mercury you will collect in the future. How is that even possible?"

"There *is* a causal paradox," the Doctor admitted, giving the TARDIS an indulgent glare. "I blame the Ship. She's linking the events of now with the future—and, I suspect, in more ways than one."



Her face was sad. "Bo-wen, I have missed your smile."

The glowing shadow sparkled around Yin-mai, blurring her outline. It spread from her hand, glittering over the figure of Bowen too.

Barbara saw the Doctor's expression of wonder. "You expected this to happen, didn't you?"

Ian, too, was concerned. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said.

"Hmm? Dear me, no. I haven't the slightest idea." The Doctor watched in fascination. "I wouldn't dream of interfering. I'm simply letting events take their course, that's all. And collecting a little mercury along the way."

He held out his sonic device to the open door. It emitted a low screech. A sheen of silver seemed to seep to the surface of the mud-brown figure. The Doctor made a small adjustment, and a mist of mercury was drawn into his device which he then switched

“We have a measure of you, Doctor, that We should have seen at the beginning.”

The Doctor’s head jerked up with interest. “Have you, indeed?”

The Emperor’s gaunt face became serious. Under Diamant’s control, he gestured to the TARDIS. “There are laws of time, Doctor, that effect even me. But We have looked obliquely into Our future and have seen you there. It was appallingly obvious once We realised. From your point of view, you and We have met before.”

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand. “As you say, it is a little obvious.”

“Oh, there’s nothing obvious about you, Doctor.” The Emperor’s eyes narrowed. “We have looked to your future, Doctor. Like Us, you appear to be separate people, and yet the same.”

The Doctor did not respond. Instead, he watched as his companion Steven carried a bowl

off and placed into his pocket.

Despite losing its silver sheen, the figure of Bo-wen still sparkled. The glittering shadow enveloped both it and Yin-mai standing side-by-side.

Then Bo-wen moved.

His bow arm, outstretched, folded around Yin-mai’s waist, drawing her to him. No longer dry, brittle terracotta, Bo-wen was human. Yin-mai looked up into his stern face.

“I have waited for you, Shushan.” Bo-wen’s voice was strong and reverberated within the glass case. “When you, too, died, I knew that, with a twist of time, we would eventually be brought together.”

The Doctor, Ian and Barbara watched in amazement from outside the case as Yin-mai—no, *Shushan*—allowed herself to be wrapped by Bo-wen’s embrace. “I couldn’t live without you, Bo-wen,” she said.

They held each other tightly, still engulfed by the sparkling shadow. The light around seemed to radiate from them,

of rice over to the slumped figure of Shushan.

“You fascinate Us, Doctor.”

“You speak of yourself as plural, Diamant,” the Doctor said absently, still watching Steven. “Is that because you count yourself and the Emperor as one being?”

“You may think of Us in that way,” said Diamant. “But there is more to Us than can be discerned in this small realm of existence.”

The Doctor turned suddenly, locking eyes with the Emperor. “So, what are you doing here, hmm? The Emperor Qin is a man of great ambition and vision. He must be stifled, held somewhere inside of your enveloping presence.”

“On the contrary, Doctor. Emperor Qin is quite content. You know that he will be remembered for many achievements, far more than his human limitations would normally allow. Under Our guidance, he has already unified the warring states of this land and

attracting the attention and astonishment of every tourist in the excavation chamber. The light spread outwards forming larger and larger silhouettes of the entwined couple. A giant fractal image repeating itself seemingly to infinity.

A voice appeared in the vast excavation chamber. It tinkled like the musical sound of a flowing stream, somehow matching the sparkle of light. “Bo-wen and Shushan are reunited at last,” it said. “We trust that you are pleased, Doctor.”

Ian and Barbara were amazed. They turned to the Doctor for some explanation, but he stood in the bright glow as confused as they were.

“You will not know Us, Doctor,” said the voice. We have the advantage of time; from centuries ago, We looked into Our future and saw you there. Your extraction of the mercury is a causal link between us. It seemed an appropriate time and place to reunite the girl with her betrothed.”

standardised the systems of writing and measurement. He has begun the construction of a great wall to protect his borders and created irrigation systems to stop the devastating floods of his rivers.”

“Yes, yes. All very commendable, I’m sure.”

“And now, Doctor, you witness Our construction of a magnificent ornamental army. Thousands of figures to guard the Emperor into his afterlife.”

“And what then, hmm?” the Doctor demanded. “When the Emperor is dead, what becomes of you, Diamant?”

“We move on, Doctor. As do you. We are more alike than you realise.” Diamant had the Emperor gesture vaguely. “You flitter about in your time machine, Doctor. You land, you observe, you experience, but you maintain a distance.”

“And you?”

“We choose to take a more active role,” said Diamant. “Why stand back and observe the achievements of the Emperor

The repeating series of silhouettes began to fade outwards from their core as if Bo-wen and Shushan were ripples on a lake which dissipated out into the world and finally vanished.

“Where have they gone?” asked the Doctor, looking around.

There was a shrug in the musical voice. “To whatever is their idea of an afterlife,” it said.

There were cries and a general commotion throughout the excavation complex. Everyone had seen the light and the giant image of two people in each other’s arms. That light had been condensed now, contained within the glass case which had become opaque with brightness.

The Doctor turned to face the light which swirled with colour, oil-like patterns flowed and repeated, it was difficult to focus on. He raised his chin and clutched the lapels of his jacket. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Ah, yes, Our name,” said the voice. “That is something you

when you can *be* him—and achieve so much more?”

“You are meddling,” snapped the Doctor. “I’ve seen it before; you seek to change history.”

“It was a whim of Ours, Doctor, to rule an empire; We believe we have done so rather well.” Diamant had the Emperor shake his head. “But you are mistaken, We have not altered history. From your perspective, you have seen the future. We have *always* been here, ruling China, assisting the Emperor with those accomplishments which you have already seen and classified as an established past.” Diamant’s Emperor voice hardened. “And that, Doctor, is your dilemma. It is not *We* who seek to alter history—but you.”

The Doctor blustered. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your eyes betray you.” Diamant raised the Emperor’s arm to indicate where Steven was feeding Shushan with morsels of rice. “We have shaped a vast dynasty; set China to be a dominant power on this world. You, however, Doctor, seek to

will need to remember in the future. Our name is Diamant.”

“Diamant? Diamant?” The name meant nothing to the Doctor.

“For you, this is our first meeting,” said Diamant. “Though We have met you before.”

Ian had been trying to follow what was going on. “How is that even possible?” he asked.

The Doctor dismissed him with a wave of irritation, still speaking with the swirling patterned light.

“You manifested around Yin-mai as Shushan’s...” he searched for a word, “spirit?”

“They share an ancestral link,” said Diamant. “We found the appropriateness amusing.”

“But why, hmm?” The Doctor addressed the obvious power behind the swirling light. “Why go to all that trouble to meddle with the destinies of two long-dead people?”

“How you dig, Doctor. Always curious. As yet you know only

save just one life. And you know that is impossible. For the future you have already seen to exist, you must let Shushan die.”

The Doctor gazed across the mercury lake.

“It is not We who threaten history. It is you and your well-meaning companion. This is another of Our whims, Doctor. Events in the future are set. We would observe what you will do now.”

There was an anguished cry from the far side of the lake, then the sound of a dull splash.

Shushan had pushed the figure of Bo-wen into the mercury lake; it lay in the shallow metal, its clay features gleaming with rivulets of silver. Shushan’s hands shook uncontrollably; her eyes were wide and frightened.

The Doctor swung his stick and hurried around the lake to where Steven and Shushan gazed as if mystified at the figure of the archer face down in the poisonous metal.

“Her actions are irrational, Doctor,” called Diamant. “As

half the story. You intrigue Us. That is the real reason We are here. Not to *meddle*, as you call it, but to assess you, Doctor. And We are not disappointed.”

“Assess? Me?” The Doctor looked outraged.

“We chose to toy with the tragedy of Shushan’s death,” said Diamant. “With your involvement, We contrived to bring about a convoluted but satisfactory resolution to those involved. It was a whim, Doctor, no more than that, which you have just successfully unravelled.”

The Doctor tried not to look smug.

Diamant’s ripple-stream voice took on a more forceful flow and the light in the glass case flared in response. “But how will you fare, Doctor, faced with more of Our whims?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the Doctor said with some defiance.

“We will meet again, Doctor. We have looked into Our future and seen you there. Not just as

you suspected, the mercury has affected her mind.”

Steven tried to steady Shushan’s shaking hands. “Calm down, Shushan, you’re not thinking straight.”

“My only thoughts are for Bowen,” Shushan cried. “I cannot bear to be without him!”

Steven looked relieved at the Doctor’s hurried approach. “It’s the mercury, Doctor,” he said. “She doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

“Yes, my boy.” The Doctor paused to regain his breath. “Quite right.” He looked into Shushan’s eyes and recognised the mix of fear and resolve. He fluttered a hand at Steven. “Back to the Ship,” he commanded. “We must disconnect the mercury pipe immediately.”

Steven hesitated for a moment, then seemed to see the logic in this. He and the Doctor made their way around the shimmering silver lake. Behind them they heard another splash.

Steven turned; his face instantly transformed by horror. Shushan

you appear now, but in other aspects; our paths will cross many times.”

“Will they, indeed...” The Doctor leant closer to the glass, trying to determine something of the nature of the force within the case.

Suddenly the light faded. Behind its glare, Yin-mai was revealed, standing next to the immobile clay figure of the archer.

As if a spell had been broken, there was bustle all around. Ian and Barbara were nearest to the case. They swung open the door and brought Yin-mai out onto the concourse where dozens of people were watching, not knowing what was happening.

“Are you all right, Yin-mai?” asked Barbara.

Yin-mai looked dazed and bewildered. “Yes,” she said freeing herself from Barbara’s supporting arm. She straightened and glanced around, suddenly clear-eyed and sure of herself. “I feel fine.” Once more, she gave Barbara a look of

floated face down beside the figure of her betrothed. The toxic silver metal ran in viscous droplets through her dark hair. The only movement was of the ripples that spread out across the lake.

The Doctor didn't turn; not immediately. His eyes were fixed on the Emperor who watched with intense interest. He gave the Doctor a nod of understanding, turned, and glided into the dark fissure at the rear of his tomb.



The Doctor sat with his chin resting on the silver handle of his walking stick, while Steven pulled the hosepipe back into the TARDIS's console room. His eyes were so laden with guilt that Steven offered a small consolation.

"From the little you've told me," he said, "this tragedy was inevitable. Doesn't it lead into events in the far future? Events that you've already seen?"

The Doctor stood, crossed to the glass tank of the console, and operated the door control.

surprise and relief. "In fact, I feel better than I have felt for a long time."

The Doctor was thoughtful. "I think, my dear, that you will no longer be troubled by dreams of Shushan."

Yin-mai looked back into the glass case. The archer gazed impassively ahead. Its eyes were blank, its grim expression just sculpted clay. To Yin-mai's relief, she no longer thought of it as Bo-wen, it was just one of the thousands of terracotta warriors on display.

The Doctor followed her gaze—and heard the faintest ripple of a voice. "Remember that clay face, Doctor. One day, you will see it again, burning in a fire."

The Doctor swung his stick and determinedly turned away from the display.

Everything had now returned to normal. Staff and tourists had witnessed—something. A light show? Part of the excavation experience? Whatever it was had ended, and they transferred their

He nodded slowly. “Events which now make a lot more sense,” he agreed.

Absently he allowed the TARDIS to grate its way out of ancient China.

“Poor Shushan,” Steven mused. “To drown in mercury...”

The Doctor’s head sprang up, his eyes darting from side to side.

“Ah...” he said, with a suggestion of mischief. “But mercury that was synthesised by a time machine.” He patted the console. “I knew the Ship was up to something. She’s a sentimental old thing.” He stood, eyes unfocused, as if seeing the future. “I wonder... Diamant’s whim... Physical reincarnation may be an impossibility, but the *love* Shushan and Bo-wen had for each other... Perhaps that’s something that can ripple on through Time.”

awe back to the magnificent spectacle of the terracotta army.

Yin-mai frowned as if half remembering something, then turned to her three visitors. “I hope that you enjoyed the tour,” she said, her tone professionally neutral. She raised an arm indicating the exit, then added quietly as if unsure of herself: “And—thank you...”

As if in a daze, Ian and Barbara wandered towards the exit.

“What just happened?” Barbara asked softly.

Ian shrugged and they both turned to the Doctor.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” he said, his face beaming with wonder and curiosity. He turned, watching Yin-mai close the glass door of the archer’s case. “How extraordinary!” he said. On the clay figure’s face, there now showed the hint of a smile.

L'AMORE CI TERRA UNITI



By *Oscar Hampton*

The following is a transcription of the recently recovered journals of the great inventor and industrialist, Leonardo Da Vinci.

Discovered in the ruins of a villa on the outskirts of Florence, its pages were filled with sketches of various bizarre creatures and landscapes, the writing within it putting the most outlandish of children's adventure stories to shame.

This is just one of those tales.

DATE IN FLUX, LAST ESTIMATION THE 14TH OF MAY.

I do not truly know where to begin, dear journal. I do know where my previous entry ended, after I had finished recounting our rescue of those poor English princes from their tower. I had departed to go and paint Susan's portrait, as I had been promising to do for the Doctor for several weeks now, so perhaps it is best I start from there.

I had barely put brush to canvas, when the central pillar of the console suddenly gave the most terrible of screeches, so unlike its usual unearthly crooning. The Doctor and Susan were attending to the instruments in an instant, their expressions grave, while I stood to the side, hands cupped to my ears. The cacophony lasted for no more than a minute, before all was silent yet again. Susan questioned her grandfather as to what could cause such chaos, but before the old mystic could answer, the small

window mounted upon the far wall crackled to life, and upon it was displayed the most beautiful creature I have ever been blessed to witness.

It had the base shape of a man, but instead of mere soft flesh, there instead glittered thousands upon thousands of diamonds, radiating such light that if not for the screen, I am sure we would have been blinded. It was as we gazed upon this figure, gleaming so bright, that we first heard it speak.

And it was then that the nightmare truly began.

It had been a quiet day on the frontlines so far. The morning fog and smoke hung thick across the grey, blasted landscape of No-Man's-Land, the only sound being the ghostly whistle of wind through brambles of barbed wire. In its own way, it was almost peaceful...

Until, with its usual chorus of wheezing, the TARDIS materialized upon the summit of a hill, overlooking the battlefield. This time, its appearance took on the form of a destroyed tank, the metal rusted and worn, its main gun hanging inert. After a few moments, a hatch in its side swung open, and out from it stepped the Doctor, giving a little groan as he stood to his full height and surveyed their desolate surroundings. A worried frown came to his wrinkled features as he did.

“Oh my... This certainly isn't the prettiest place we've visited, my dears.”

Behind him, Leonardo and Susan clambered from the ship, the inventor giving the Time Lady a hand to help her up, which she took with a grateful smile. Together, they took their places beside the Doctor.

“Such devastation,” muttered Leonardo, stroking his beard furtively. “What could have done this?”

“A war, Leo,” Susan's voice and expression were grim. “A war that's lasted a thousand years.”

“A hellish concept, though one I think Signor Cesare might have found appealing...”

“Not just him, far too many of your species would have found a place like this their idea of heaven,” the Doctor said, with a despairing shake of his head. He began to clamber down the rocky hillside. “We’d better not dally any longer, come along!”

“Wait for us, grandfather!” called Susan after him, as she and Leonardo began their descent.

As they walked, he spoke up softly, looking warily around. “You spoke earlier as if you knew this place, Susan.”

“I *do*,” she replied softly, giving him a sad glance. “During my education, my people taught me of all the Universe’s most significant planets, and *this* was one of them: Skaro.”

“It’s also one of the Universe’s most *dangerous* planets, my dear Leonardo!”

The Doctor looked around, and the Florentine couldn’t help but shiver at the sight of the old renegade’s eyes. Where they had twinkled with mischief just hours before, they were now grave and serious.

“I can see how it earned such a reputation,” he replied, casting his gaze to the surrounding devastation, only for Susan to shake her head.

“No, Leonardo, this... this isn’t even close to the worst this planet gets. You see, it’s from this place that one of the most feared and hated alien races in the Universe emerged: the *Thaleks*. No one truly knows where they came from, not even our people, we had only just begun to send in temporal scouts to learn about it.”

“And that is what the sprite, that *Diamant*, wishes of us? To discover the origins of these... Thaleks?”

It was then the whistling started and all discussion ceased.

It was the closest to Hell that I ever wish to experience, a maelstrom of fire and smoke that engulfed the field all around us. It made the cannonade released of my own time look as puny as a child throwing pebbles upon the water, and made me wish, the strongest I ever had during my travels with that impossible pair, that I was home at my workshop in Florence.

But somehow, despite the raw power of the artillery, we had survived. But we had no time to catch our breaths, for in the next moment, the Doctor was pulling us to our feet. I was most perplexed at the old rogue a moment, until I heard it: the crunch of feet upon stone, the rattle of blades in belts, the harsh breaths of men on the march. Behind us, they came through the mist, soldiers! An army of ragged figures in green, muskets raised, clubs and spears held firm. They had the shape of men, but that did not make them any more inviting, and the Doctor was suddenly ordering us to run.

And run we did! I still do not know how a man as old as he can move so quickly, racing off like a hare with the hunters at its back, with Susan and I doing our best to keep pace. And it is there that my greatest failure came. For as we ran, the ground suddenly came away beneath us, down into a deep pit, no doubt created by those monstrous explosions. I managed to bring myself to a stop just in time to stop myself sliding down. Susan... did not.

I saw her, lying in a pool of brown water at its bottom, silent. Death is extraordinary in his terrible banality. I remember it still. Her face caked in soil like the death mask of Dante Alighieri. I know little of the Doctor and his granddaughter's birthright, but the barren end was accompanied by another shade. It moved in gemstone with light that dazzled like the rippling edges of a ship on the far ocean.

It claimed the fringes of her body like the unravelled edges of a carpet. Whatever it was, claimed Susan, a jealous mist pulling her from the firmament. She was fading, she was whole, she was gone, vanished, and then apparant, stilled in the trench. Every part of me screamed to scramble down after her, but I could hear our pursuers behind me, and in that moment, the cowardice in me won out. I left her there, to the mercy of the soldiers. Even as I write these words, my heart tightens with regret, as strong now as it was then.

I scrambled through the destruction, wondering what I might say to the Doctor, what he might do, if I would even see him again, in this accursed place. I need not have worried. For as I stumbled forward, I found myself pulled into some sort of fortified trench by a familiar gnarled hand. The Doctor urged me to stay down, using his surprising strength to clamp my mouth shut. It was as he did this that he seemed to realise that I was alone. Before he could question me, there came the sound of creaking metal off to our side.

Emerging from a squat grey stone building came more soldiers, these ones dressed in black, but still aiming weapons upon us. They barked at us to put our hands up and come inside. The Doctor and I looked to each other, and we both seemed to agree without saying a word: “Best not to fight”.

“Who are you? *Really?*” It was the third time that the soldier had asked them this, and the Doctor’s answer was the same.

“We are *travellers*, nothing more, nothing less.”

“It is true,” Leonardo spoke up, and the soldier’s eyes flicked to him across the table, so cold behind those spectacles. “We are not soldiers, for you or your foe.”

“Oh, really?” Their interrogator leaned back into his chair, the legs of it scraping across the hard grey floor, the sound filling the tiny cell. A ghost of a humourless smile tugged at the corners of his lips. His voice was nasal and level. It never wavered. “If you’re not with either side, then that would mean you’re *Mutos*. Do you understand what we do with your kind...?”

He left the question open, but its answer was obvious. Leonardo could practically *see* the blood in the Doctor’s veins boiling. He was preparing to unleash one of the verbal lashings he reserved for the worst scum of the stars, but before he could let loose, the inventor spoke up.

“I am a scientist!”

His words drew the gazes of both men, one confused and the other intrigued. The soldier leant forward in his chair slightly, narrowing his eyes at Leonardo.

“Really? Both of you?”

He looked to the Doctor then, who gave an offended huff, and held tight the lapels of his tweed jacket.

“Well, I dare say I know my way around the test-tubes and beakers.”

“And engineering? What about that?”

“Oh yes, one of my best subjects at school, I even got a gold star for my work on a Type-5 Velocite Engine.” The Doctor’s face took on a rather biting smile. “And Leonardo here built his own helicopter!”

“A prototype,” he added hastily. “But yes, I am an engineer as well, one of the best, *some* people have told me.”

“They would, wouldn’t they?” For a moment, the interrogator considered the two of them intently, before suddenly standing to his feet. “You will stay here, do not try to escape or you’ll both be killed.”

With that, he turned and marched out, jackboots clicking on the grey floor, the door slamming closed behind him, leaving them alone. The moment they were, the Doctor rounded on his companion, that righteous anger flaring up as he grabbed at Leonardo’s doublet.

“Where is she, Leonardo? Where is Susan!?”

“Doctor, please!” hissed Leonardo, glancing furtively to the door. “I-I am sorry, but the soldiers were hot on our heels, I couldn’t have got down to her, if I’d tried, they would have killed us *both*.”

His explanation did nothing to placate the old man. “After everything we’ve both done for you, you just left her to the mercy of those... those... *thugs!*?”

Shame flooded Leonardo for the second time, and all he found he could say in return was a weak, “I-I’m sorry, Doctor...”

The Doctor did not deign it worthy of a response, crossing his arms and looking off to the side with a scowl. An icy silence fell over the room until their interrogator suddenly returned.

“You will stand and follow me.”

The two travellers were marched silently through the grey corridors of the bunker, watched vigilantly by more black-clad soldiers, until they came to a thick steel door, which led into an area that seemed far more decrepit compared to the rest of the complex.

Along two rows of dusty desks, a few men in faded white uniforms milled about, working silently on various pieces of technology. Each seemed to visibly stiffen, as the interrogator stepped forward, and spoke in a crisp tone. “I’ve two new volunteers here for your ‘Travel Machine’ project, Chief Scientist.”

“Volunteers?” Leonardo whispered urgently to the Doctor, who in turn seemed far more interested in looking at the pieces of technology littering the desks. “Doctor, in the name of God—”

“Davros?” The interrogator purred once more, “Do you hear me...?”

“I hear you, Nyder,” came a low voice. Stepping out from a doorway came another figure in a black uniform, though his looked to be made of leather. What drew Leonardo’s attention the most, however, was the man’s face. Or rather, his lack of one. For covering almost half of his otherwise handsome features was a gruesome looking burn scar. Plaited as though the flesh were made of thatch. “Who are these people?”

“As I said, volunteers,” Nyder answered, with a cruel little smirk. “Scientists and engineers who wish to join your illustrious Scientific Elite.”

Davros was dismissive. “You understand the genetic testing process required to even begin assessment, Nyder.”

“I thought,” he interjected, calmly, “you might want to hear of their knowledge first.”

He gestured to the derelict room and its listless inhabitants, and Davros scowled, a perfectly horrible sight. “Is this some sort of a joke? Our time is limited. You bring two wastrels to me and expect me to welcome them with open arms?”

“Wastrels?” exploded the Doctor. “How *dare* you, sir.”

Davros turned his piercing blue eyes upon the old man. “And who are you to speak to me like that?”

“I...” The time traveller stood to his full height, about level with Davros, and clutched his lapels. “Am the Doctor. And I’ll frankly thank you not to use that tone with me, young man. You may, once you have earned it. Not before.”

For a moment, all he received for this rather grand display were stares from the two Kaleds... until, with a snort, Davros chuckled. Leonardo was not sure which unnerved him more, seeing the scarred man scowl or smile.

“Well, as my father may have once said, you’ve certainly got *spirit*.” He turned back to Nyder. “Alright, Nyder, you can go prancing off back to your masters now, let us get back to work.”

“You’ll take these two?”

“I will.” Davros squinted at the two of them. “I’m sure they can make themselves useful, even if it’s just making coffee.”

With a disgusted shake of his head, Nyder turned on his heel and strode out. It was only when the steel door closed behind him that Davros looked back to the Doctor and Leonardo. The Doctor, for his part, gave a rather relieved sigh.

“Well, thank goodness he’s finally gone, perhaps now we can all talk sense—”

Davros cut him off by pulling a pistol from his belt and aiming it squarely at his head. “Alright, start talking, the pair of you. Why did military intelligence send you in here?”

“I-I beg your pardon?” the Doctor stammered.

“What do you think we are, spies?” Leonardo asked, staring down the barrel and trying not to let his voice quaver.

“That’s exactly what you are! And honestly, I’m a bit insulted that you thought you could trick *me* so easily,” Davros sneered. “The Elite may rely on infantry to provide support against the enemy, but not when your juvenile games threaten our researches. Now, answer me! What do they think is going on here?”

Leonardo noticed none of the Elite moved to action. Indeed, none of them seemed to pay very much attention to the scene at all. Death, it seemed, even the threat of it, had lost much of its stigma on Skaro.

“We are not spies, that I can assure you,” the Doctor huffed. “Honestly, if we were, would we be dressed like this, *hmm?* Surely, we’d want to blend in.”

The scientist seemed to consider this a moment, the gun in his hand dipping slightly, before he lowered it completely. “I suppose you have a point. Who are you then, if not Nyder’s cronies?”

“It is as he said,” Leonardo spoke up. “We are scientists.”

“And how am I supposed to believe that? Neither of you precisely look the part.”

“Perhaps not to you,” the Doctor replied, with a haughty sniff. He turned to one of the desks, upon which sat what looked like a piece of large silver machinery. “Now then, do correct me if I’m wrong, young man, but would I be correct in saying that this is a type of plasma engine?”

“You would be.” Davros looked surprised, and Leonardo couldn’t help but smile at that. He had no idea what he was dealing with. “But how could you know that?”

“It’s still a prototype.”

“By what measure?”

“Yes... I could derive that from its primitiveness,” tutted the Doctor, kneeling to examine the machine. “*Hmm...* No, that’s not right at all...”

“What is it?” The scientist was by the Doctor’s side immediately.

“Yes, yes, just as I thought, you’ve got all this circuitry jumbled up, you’re diverting far too much power into this section here...”

His words attracted not just Davros, but the rest of the white-clad scientists as well, who crowded around the table to watch. Leonardo stood apart from it all, eyes narrowed. Even if he hadn’t pointed a gun at them, he did not trust this ‘Chief Scientist’, there was a skittishness to him, a shortness and aggression that he found usually only came when one was hiding something. He’d seen such attitudes on show in his rare visits to the court of the Borgias, that den of snakes.

Leonardo’s eyes flicked to the door that Davros had emerged through, and slowly, he began to creep his way over towards it, conscious of every scuff his boots made on the concrete floor. Luckily, it seemed as though the Doctor’s show had entranced the whole room, and he was able to slip through without anyone taking notice.

It was dark inside, the entire room draped in shadow, with Leonardo struggling to see anything at all through the gloom. His knee knocked against something, and his grasping hands found buttons and switches. Some sort of computer, like in the Doctor’s craft? He groped for something, anything to light his way, but then froze, as he heard a voice through the inky blackness.

“Who... are you?”

The voice was rough, gravelly, barely rising above a whisper, and tinged with a faint buzz. Leonardo squinted; his eyes having adjusted to the darkness just enough to make out a shape in the centre of the room. Its bottom half seemed to be some sort of chair, while its top was clearly humanoid, as it reached out a quivering arm.

“Who *are* you?” Its voice rose, sharply, and Leonardo instinctively answered.

“Leonardo of Vinci,” he breathed out, sticking close to the wall. “Who are *you*?”

“That is none of your concern!”

Davros’s voice cut through the darkness, and then there was blinding light. The first thing he saw when his sight returned was the pistol, back in Davros’s hand. He stood in the doorway, his scarred face now flushed red with incandescent rage. The Doctor was beside him, but his attention was not on his companion or the gun, but instead, the centre of the room.

Leonardo followed his gaze, and found his breath taken away. If he had thought the burn on Davros’s face was horrific, it was nothing compared to the figure slumped in some sort of technological throne. The flesh of its face seemed melted, cooked into a sickly brown pallor, and blackened around the lips. It lacked any sort of eyes, the skin seemingly fused over them, leaving its head to twitch around blindly with two stub like ears. What little hair remained hung limp and pale from its head, a sickly parody of blonde.

“Davros?” it croaked, grasping with fingers from which long, grey nails grew. “What’s going on?”

In that moment, the anger melted away from Davros’s face, as he looked to the disfigured figure. “Nothing, Tarran, don’t worry. These intruders will be gone soon.”

“That thing, what is it?” Leo asked, unable to tear his eyes away.

“*He!*” snarled Davros, rounding the gun back on him. “He...”

“Yes, yes, *he*, of course!” The Doctor popped up, looking desperate. “I apologise for him, he’s from a primitive world, unused to such sights.”

“It is alright, Davros,” Tarran suddenly whispered. “I understand that I am not... the man I was.”

“You are to *me*,” Davros hissed, glaring at Leonardo once again. “It doesn’t matter either way, I know what you two are now. Despite all your knowledge, you’re nothing but spies!”

“We are not,” insisted the Doctor. “I assure you, Leonardo just has a curious soul, one that leads him astray from time to time.”

“The Doctor speaks the truth,” Leonardo found his voice once again and drew himself up to his full height. He would not cower, not now, he would not let the Doctor see him like this. “It’s that curiosity that makes me the scientist I am. For without curiosity, there can be no drive for discovery. But I assure you, I am no agent of that... *Nyder*. But even if I was, I would not tell him of what I have seen in here.”

“Oh?” The hostility in Davros’s eyes was replaced, for a moment, with confusion. “And why not? I’m sure his dossiers on the Elite are brimming with useless trivia on our activities?”

“Because... because I see before me naught but a poor soul who has obviously been through such unbearable agony already, and I would not wish to bring more down upon *him*.”

This answer seemed to stump Davros for a moment, his narrowed eyes never leaving Leonardo’s. After a few tense moments, however, the pistol in his hand was lowered and then returned to the holster at his hip.

“Alright then, you’re not spies, but you’re not volunteers, either. So, tell me, truthfully, *who* are you two?”

“We are...” Leonardo considered for a moment. “We are but wanderers, who wish to put our knowledge to good use.”

At this, the Doctor piped up, “And judging by the state of things out there, sir, you need all the help you can get.”

Davros looked to Tarran. Though they exchanged no words, it was almost as if they had, in a silent, invisible language, for in the next moment, he let out a resigned sigh.

“And why should I trust you?”

“Because...” Leonardo dithered a moment, but then looked to the Doctor, to his once bright blue eyes, now dark with barely restrained grief. “Because I have failed one poor soul this day already. I will not fail another.”

The chief scientist considered him a moment, before finally giving a small, curt nod. “Very well then. You can assist us in our project”.

“Which is?” asked Leonardo.

“The preservation of the Kaled race.”

His words, as cryptic as they were, still stunned the two of us, the Doctor even more so when Davros ceased being coy and revealed to us what he and his fellows had been building. He called it a ‘Travel Machine’, and it was an apt name, for he told us its purpose was to act as an armoured vehicle, in which the eventually mutated descendants of the current generation of Kaleds would ride. I must admit, I found the notion intriguing, reminded of the travelling machine I had myself had once dreamt of. The Doctor, however, seemed far less enamoured.

In fact, as he looked over the schematics, it seemed to me his expression was... haunted. I did not know why, nor did he tell me, hiding behind the icy wall that had been erected between us in the wake of poor Susan’s fate. I must admit, I craved our old discussions, the long exchanges between us where we would discuss in exhaustive detail all the wonders of engineering and organics. The Doctor made himself scarce

though, seeming to be too busy poking his beak of a nose around the compound. In his absence, I sought after a different partner in which to converse, and to my surprise, found it in the form of our new commander...

“There must be extra plating around the midsection, keeping the main weapons platform intact is a priority.”

Leonardo shook his head. “I do not think that wise, that section is defended enough, it is the head that requires the most attention, the eye most of all.”

Davros eyed the schematics on the table closely, eventually giving a grumble of agreement. “I see... In that case, more energy ought to go into the shielding.”

“Not too much more, lest the rest of the machine’s functions are found wanting.”

“*Hmmph.*” Davros leaned back in his chair to regard the Florentine. “You adapt well, Leonardo. A few hours ago, you knew nothing of our technology, now you sit here discussing it with me as if you’ve spent your whole life designing radiation-proof casings.”

Leonardo chuckled at this, scratching at his beard modestly. “Susan always told me it was my *superpower.*”

It was a mistake to mention that name, so soon. Grief stung through his heart, and must have made itself obvious on his face, for when Davros spoke next, it was in a voice that was soft, perhaps even gentle.

“This Susan... she must have been special, to you and the Doctor.”

“Oh, more than you could ever know. I’d only known her a short time, really, but already, I thought of her as one of my dearest friends.”

Davros went quiet a moment, seeming to consider him closely, before speaking again. “Tarran and I were the same...”

Leonardo’s brow furrowed, “Who is he, Davros?”

“My friend.” The scientist crossed his arms, staring off into the grey walls of his bunker. “My *only* friend. He saved my life, you know, when I was just a boy. I’d found myself in a handmine field, alone, no one else around. I thought that was it, that I was destined to die out there... But then he called out, through the mist, guided me to safety. It was only as I got closer that I saw his... his golden hair...”

He gave a snort. “I had been terrified of the Thals my whole life, yet what I saw wasn’t some monster, just another lost child trying to survive, like me. And the only way we could, was to stick together. And we did, for many years, scavenging from the battlefield, two wildlings, making our home in whatever wreckage wasn’t too sharp. He was the only one who *understood* the vision that I had. The dream that we could go beyond the squalor, the desolation, that Skaro might rise again using technology undreamed of by our ancestors. He always used to... *smile*, whenever I told him of my plans.”

The look in Davros’s eyes, that warm fondness, was one that Leonardo was familiar with himself. He’d worn it many a time before, usually when in the company of his own apprentice. He wondered, briefly, how Salai was getting on without him.

“It couldn’t have lasted, of course, we were each dragged off to our own sides eventually. Before we were though, we met together, one last time. That was when it happened...”

Davros raised a hand and lightly dragged his fingers across his scar, giving a flinch just at that. “He saved me, again, pushing me out of the way as the shell came down. He *always* had to be the damned hero.”

There was silence, for a moment, as Leonardo took in all that had been said, before leaning forward. “Now it’s *your* turn to save *him*, yes?”

At this, a small smile broke out across Davros’s face. “That’s the idea. Not just him, though, these travel machines, they’ll ensure that all my people will survive what is to come. Despite the radiation, and the mutations, and the horror, they will mean that in the future, the Kaled

race will rise again, to reclaim Skaro, to remake it into the paradise it always should have been.”

“Only them? Not the Thals?”

“No! Not the Thals, never the *Thals!*” The anger exploded from Davros like a bomb, his eyes flashing with fury that rivalled the Doctor’s. “It’s thanks to them, their bombardment, that Tarran is like... *that* in the first place! It’s them sending in their spies that has got Nyder and his overlords in Intelligence so spooked about our project.”

“But they are Tarran’s people, surely he’d want them to survive as well.”

Leonardo realised his mistake the moment Davros turned his almightily angry gaze upon him. “If any more words like that pass your lips, you will wish I had shot you...”

“Bless my soul, I really wouldn’t recommend that, sir, you’d lose your best assistant.”

Both men’s heads whipped around, to see the Doctor come striding in, looking even more imperious than usual. “Doctor, where have you been? Not poking your nose around *more* of my bunker?”

“No, no, it was no mere exploration this time, Davros, rather, an *investigation*.”

“Into what?” Leonardo spoke up, confused.

“Why, the spy, of course, the one that’s got this entire complex so jumpy! It was rather simple, really, all I had to do was charm my way into the communications monitoring room and have a look at the signals being transmitted from here.”

Davros gave a derisive snort. “You think we hadn’t thought of that already? Every signal in and out of this bunker has been checked a hundred times.”

“Not *all* of them,” the Doctor’s expression turned grim. “There was another, encrypted to such an extent that it might as well have been invisible, but I caught it eventually, and do you know what it was, Davros? Hmm? Why... only the plans for these travel machines of yours, transmitted straight to the Thal base.”

The annoyance and anger drained away from Davros’s scarred face in a moment, replaced by complete and utter shock as he stumbled up from his chair. “Y-you can’t be serious?”

“Deadly serious, I’m afraid” the Doctor shook his head, the air around him suddenly tinged with melancholy. He seemed to say his next words only with great reluctance. “And that’s not all. There’s still the matter of the perpetrator, the spy themselves.”

In that instant, the fury returned to Davros like a raging demon, his face flushing a hellish red.

“Who is it? I’ll use them as my next test subject!”

“It was...”

“*Me.*”

That familiar, scratchy, buzzing voice drew all their gazes, each more dumbfounded than the last. Tarran emerged from the darkness of his room, his crippled form now revealed in all its horror in the fluorescent light. His blackened lips were twisted into a deep frown, as his flesh-covered eyes twitched to each of them.

“Why did you have to meddle, Doctor?”

“W-what is this?” Davros stepped forward, barely seeming able to find the words. “Tarran?”

“Oh, *Davros,*” Tarran shook his head, sending the last few threads of flaxen hair swaying. “This was the only way.”

“To do what? Ruin our plans?”

“No. End this war, once and for all.”

“But by giving the Thals the travel machines, you’ll just have ensured that it won’t end, it’ll go on, for centuries more!” Leonardo proclaimed, staring in horror.

“Perhaps... If I had *only* sent the plans for the machines. I also sent with it genetic material, through which they could create not just the war machines, but their pilots as well.”

“The genetic codes for the mutants?” Davros shook his head, disbelievingly. “Tarran, they weren’t completed, their programming—”

“Their programming is all it needs to be”. Tarran shook his head, fingers working at the controls on his chair. “I modified it myself. And not just them...”

With a whir, a door suddenly opened in the far wall, and in came gliding through something that made Leonardo stare in bafflement and the Doctor gasp out in horror. “No!”

The tall, bell-shaped machine moved with an unearthly hum, its single eyestalk scanning over the three men, the metal pipe extending from its midsection twitching over them all one by one. The Doctor suddenly clutched at Leonardo’s arm, trying to tug him away. “Get away from it, quickly!”

“WHO-ARE-YOU?” the machine suddenly demanded, in a grating, staccato voice. “ANSWER!”

“We are not enemies,” Davros stepped forward, staring in the eyestalk with equal parts wariness and reverence. “I am your creator. I am Davros. You will learn, you will understand and you will obey.”

“NEGATIVE.”

Davros’s face went slack with surprise. “W-what did you just say? I *am* your creator!”

“No!” Tarran hissed, lurching forward in his chair. “You may have designed them, Davros, built them, but I gave them their purpose, their destiny.”

“Their destiny? W-What is that?” Leonardo asked, even though he was already sickeningly sure of the answer.

“THE-ANNIHILATION-OF-ALL-LIFE-ON-SKARO!”

“Thank you, gentlemen, that’s all I needed to hear.”

From behind the bulkhead entrance to the laboratory, Nyder suddenly came marching in, flanked on either side by soldiers, with submachine guns in their hands. The spy-catcher eyed the scene coolly behind his glasses, his lips twitching into a disgusted grimace at the sight of Tarran.

“I knew if I only waited, you’d reveal yourself eventually”.

Davros hissed, “Doctor, did you—?”

“I most certainly did not!” the Doctor’s own sharp reply cut him off.

“Oh, please, Davros, did you honestly believe I’d send in anything as fallible as a real person.” Nyder shook his head pityingly. He leant down to one of the nearby workbenches. In his gloved hand, glistening in the light, was the answer. “Listening devices. I’ve had them planted all over your laboratory for the past several months. I thought these mutos would foster your complacency. That around your own kind, your vigilance would waver. And now, they’ve finally caught my prey.” He took a step forward, pulling a pistol from his belt, and aimed it at Tarran’s disfigured face. “*You*, whatever you are, will deactivate this little toy and come with me at once.”

There was silence for a moment, as Tarran gazed up with those sightless eyes at Nyder, lips tight. And then, he began to laugh. It started as a weak chuckle, before rising to a mad cackle that made even Nyder take a wary step back. Between his giggles, Tarran spoke, as he reached a hand down to the controls on his chair.

“No, no, I think not!”

With a flick of a switch, the Thalek’s eyestalk whipped around to Nyder, and his soldiers. This time, it screeched only one word, “ANNIHILATE!”

And then, for Leonardo, it was as if the entire world was suddenly swamped in a sheen of blue and silver, as an odd warbling sound filled the air, followed shortly by the stench of burnt flesh. Nyder crumpled to the floor, his icy expression finally gone, replaced by a look of utter terror. Any cry of anguish stifled beyond the brink of death. His men stared at his corpse for a moment in horror, before swiftly raising their weapons and unleashing a hail of lead upon the machine, upon the Thalek.

All for naught, their bullets ricocheting off the black metal, not even scratching it. The Thalek did, however, appear to be put off by being attacked for the first time, hesitating in its next blast. And that was all the time the Doctor needed to scream out, “*Rum!*”

Leonardo lunged for the door at once, scrambling into the hallway and grasping at the Doctor’s shoulder as he hastily followed. They both looked around, to make sure Davros was following. Their relief upon seeing him was replaced by dread, however, when they saw who he was hastily wheeling in front of him.

“Release me!”

“Afraid not, Tarran!”

“Davros, are you mad!?” Leonardo spluttered, as they all began to sprint through the grey halls of the bunker.

“No, Leonardo, he’s a genius!” The Doctor rasped, somehow managing to be faster than either of the two far younger men. “Now, I presume you’ve unleashed all your prototypes, Tarran? And sent a signal to the ones on the Thals side to do the same?”

“Yes.” His voice was so calm, so exacting. “The purification of Skaro shall begin now.”

“Then we haven’t a moment to lose. We must get out of here!”

Luckily, with Davros’s guidance, the befuddling maze of identical corridors was navigated swiftly, the distant sound of the Thaleks laser fire and the screams of their victims all the encouragement they needed.

With a cry of relief, Leonardo pushed the heavy metal door open, eternally thankful for the feeling of cold air in his lungs after the stuffy sourness of the bunker. This enjoyment was short lived, as the Doctor pushed him forward, up and out of the muddy trench, to the battlefield beyond.

It was little better than down below, as through the darkness and fog, Leonardo could glimpse more Thaleks, emerging from the earth, lances of blue fire erupting from their weapons and striking down many a Kaled. The screams of the dying and the screeches of the war machines filled the air.

Davros looked around at his world, his expression gaunt and haunted. “W-Why, Tarran? How could...”

“It is as I said. This is the only way to end this war, to stop the horror, to bring peace to Skaro.” Tarran rasped. “We used to speak about this, do you not remember, Davros?”

“No, no, not like this!”

“They would never accept us, Davros. To them, we are no better than mutos.”

“They let us live.”

“Only for your genius. Your superior intellect. I have heard what they say behind your back. What they believe.”

“No...”

“And one day, Davros, they will put you in front of a firing squad for reprocessing into concentrated protein. Food for the war effort. Is that your destiny? Is that ours? To be offal for the soldiers?”

“I cannot accept that, Tarran.”

“Then you deny what is real, Davros.”

“Tarran... Tarran, why—?”

“Now is not the time for all this!” The Doctor huffed, suddenly grasping Leonardo’s sleeve. “Come along, Leonardo, we must find the TARDIS.”

Leonardo didn’t move an inch, instead staring at his friend. “Doctor, you can’t really mean to just leave? We must do something!”

“We have!” The Time Lord suddenly thundered, blue eyes flashing dangerously. “This accursed planet has already taken so much from me. I won’t allow it to snatch anymore! Leave them to their war. To their fighting, their squalor, their murder and their death. Leave them, Leonardo! Now come along!”

“No!” Leonardo wrenched his arm free, sending the Doctor stumbling into the mud. “I am sorry, Doctor, for Susan, I can’t apologise enough, but your grief should not mean that you leave others to die!”

“YOU-WILL-BE-ANNIHILATED!”

The staccato screech brought their confrontation to a halt, as they all looked around in an instant to stare in horror as a Thalek, this one’s shell coloured a dark green with globes of gold, crested a nearby ridge. Its gunstick twitched, the lights atop its head flashing in time with its next word.

“ANNIHILA—”

Before it could even finish that, however, the machine’s war cry morphed into a howl of agony as it was suddenly enveloped in a huge

explosion, one that sent Leonardo and the Doctor diving for cover. When they at last poked their heads up and wiped the mud from their eyes, they saw that where the Thalek had sat, there was now only the smoking wreckage of its casing. Davros emerged from behind Tarran, to gape at the sight. “W-Who...?”

“Grandfather!”

And there, a voice that made both the Doctor and Leonardo freeze, and gawp in shock, as a familiar woman came stumbling through the dark, holding on her shoulder a still smoking bazooka. Behind were several blonde men and women in green uniforms.

The Doctor shakily got to his feet and stumbled forward, until he fell into his granddaughter’s arms, crying out with a voice thick with relief and elation. “Susan! Oh, my dear Susan!”

“It’s alright, grandfather! I’m alright! We’re alright!”

Leonardo joined them after a moment, hovering off to the side awkwardly, intent on leaving them be. It was only when Susan reached over and gripped him by his ruffled collar that he let the emotion overwhelm him, and wrapped his arms tightly around his closest friends, revelling in the sound of Susan’s joyful laughter.

After the initial euphoria had worn off and the tears dried, the Doctor demanded to know where Susan had been, if she had been hurt. She explained that the soldiers had done nothing more than take her prisoner, putting her to work as slave labour in a factory producing the same horrors that now roved across the land, until the machines began their rebellion, at which point she and her fellow prisoners escaped with the help of their former captors.

After explaining our own adventure hastily, I thought that the Doctor would take this opportunity to return to the TARDIS, wishing to get his granddaughter to safety before he could lose her again. But then I saw his eyes.

That twinkle had returned, as had that steely determination to end all this terror. His vigour renewed, the Doctor I knew and loved set to work immediately, beginning by fiddling with Tarran's chair. Despite the scarred man's protests and struggling, he eventually managed to discover that there was, what he called, a "distress beacon", which when activated would draw every nearby Thalek to rescue their master.

I spoke up then, suggesting that perhaps we could use it to draw the Thaleks into one confined area, to be destroyed, if only we had a weapon powerful enough to do so. At this point, a young Thal woman named Bettan, spoke up, telling us that before the Travel Machine project, they had built another super-weapon, a missile that it was said could destroy the Kaleds domed city in one blow. Before Davros could speak up, the Doctor clapped his hands together with a broad grin on his face. There was our plan, he announced, they would broadcast the signal all over the battlefield and draw the Thaleks in, to be vaporised by that bomb.

While I struggled to take in the concept that a single explosive could do so much, Susan asked worriedly, how exactly her grandfather planned to transmit the signal with its limited range? It was only after a few moments that I felt the Doctor's eyes, boring into me, that twinkle stronger than ever...

"ANNIHILATE!"

"ANNIHILATE!"

"ANNIHILATE!"

"Dear me, their vocabulary's rather limited. Now, just keep her steady, Leonardo..."

Leonardo gave an answering cackle, the wooden body and canvas propellers of his helicopter lurching to-and-fro through the sky as down below, dozens of black and green Thaleks made chase, screeching their eternal war cry and firing beams of superheated plasma skyward. The radio the Doctor had taken from one of the Thals and

rejigged into a transmitter was working flawlessly, broadcasting the distress signal far and wide.

“My helicopter! I knew this would fly!” Leonardo exclaimed, letting out a whoop, relishing the wind on his face. “Oh, Doctor, how can I thank you?”

“Just focus on ensuring we don’t crash, my boy!”

Once they had a veritable horde of the prototype killing machines below them, Leonardo turned his invention towards their ultimate target: one of the largest craters on this side of the planet, created a few decades before by one of the last remaining Neutronic bombs.

Deep down inside, the Thaleks creators waited, patiently...

“Why?” Davros’s voice was soft, almost pleading, as he stood before his old friend. “Please, just... Not in probabilities, not in statistics. Not in what you fear may happen... Just... tell me why.”

“You want evidence?”

“Yes.”

“Not a hypothesis?”

“No.”

Tarran did not speak at first, his blackened lips set in a deep frown, until finally he rasped. “The attack that did this to us, Davros, that scarred us... Do you know who ordered it?”

“The Thals, of course,” Davros said at once, only for Tarran to shake his head, chuckling mirthlessly.

“No, Davros, no... It was *your* people. A Kaled bombardment, one of a dozen they launched that day, each one in response to a Thal incursion.”

“No...”

“I found the dossier in the Central Computer. Countersigned by Nyder, and the Supremo he answers to, themselves. I have no reason to lie. Not now.”

Tarran almost felt Davros’s hand reach out to his face.

He spoke again. “Do you not see? The cycle of hatred, it would have never ended, even if the travel machines had only been provided to one side, the other would have survived *somehow*. The Thousand Year War would have turned into a million years, a *trillion*. The only way to make it stop, to end the pain and the horror and the *burning agony*... was to wipe the slate clean. Start anew, with *our* Thaleks.”

Tarran glanced to the cloudy sky, as the first of their creations crested the crater and began to descend.

“Pointless now though, all our work, for *nothing*. Skaro is doomed,”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. As we travelled here, I saw bands of Kaleds and Thals fighting side by side, against our creations. It seems all it took was a common enemy.”

“*Hmmph*. And I suppose your friends will be here any moment, in their flying machine, to rescue you?”

“No.”

The answer made Tarran stiffen, as did the feeling of a smooth hand slipping into his wrinkled own. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Davros knelt beside his oldest friend, as if deaf and blind to the encroaching horde of Thaleks. “I mean to end this as it began, so long ago. The two of us, together, Tarran.”

Tarran fell silent a moment before, slowly, a smile tugged at his lips. A true, genuine warm grin. “I suppose, if I am to die, I would not have it any other way”.

The two looked to the sky and went into the next life, together.

In truth I cannot know what their last moments were like. I can only pray that they were as peaceful as I imagined them.

The TARDIS looked as they had left it, the easel still standing beside the console, the canvas bare and white. Leonardo dumped the disassembled remnants of his helicopter beside it and promptly collapsed into one of the chairs scattered about the place, whilst the Doctor and Susan set to work dematerialising them.

“*Hmm*, I do believe that malignant sprite’s released their stranglehold on the Ship.”

”Their curiosity’s satisfied?” Susan shook her head with a sigh. “I do hope it was worth it.”

“Or perhaps their attention has been... diverted.” The Doctor thumbed his lapels ruminatively. “You never know, with beings like that.”

“Grandfather?” Susan hesitated, unsure whether to talk about her experience in the trench. “Something happened to me, before the soldiers found me.”

“What happened, my dear?” the Doctor crossed to her putting a conciliatory arm around her shoulder, as he always did.

“Well, I felt like I was being pulled away from Skaro to another place. I could feel the mud fading away, to be replaced by hard concrete.”

“Fading away, like a spirit,” confirmed Leonardo.

“Yes,” Susan nodded.

The Doctor clucked, “Where did you go?”

“I’m not sure I couldn’t really make out any distinct shapes. It was dark, I could hear people arguing. Then just for a moment I heard...” She hesitated, looking at the Doctor, concerned. “I heard a TARDIS dematerialise.”

“A TARDIS?” His features sharpened, a new urgency in his voice. “What next, my child?”

“I thought I heard Diamant say... What did they say? That ‘the Adamant Locus cannot retrieve her’? That ‘there isn’t enough power left in the..’” She wrinkled her brow. “The voltoscope? Telescope? Something like that.”

“Was it a transmat? A time scoop? Astral projection, *hmm?* What?”

“No, the energy in the chamber felt different...” Susan’s face rippled with expression as she tried to find the right word. “Older. If that’s possible. Far older than any means of travel we’re aware of, grandfather.”

“Just so?” Leonardo was entranced.

“The next thing I remember is the soldiers rescuing me back on Skaro.”

The Doctor strode over to the console and began to make adjustments. “And that’s all?”

“Yes,” she clicked her tongue. “I’m sorry, grandfather.”

“Never mind, child. Never mind. You’re safe now, that’s all that matters.”

Leonardo was conspiratorial. “The possibilities... Perhaps Diamant wanted you for some other purpose?”

Susan began, “Yes, I thought it—”

“We shall never know, now.” The Doctor’s voice suggested an unconquerable finality to the discussion. “Let’s hope we’ve seen the last of the miscreant, *hmm?*”

Leonardo’s hand gripped the dark varnished curve of the chair. His imagination racing with the frenzy of that wild horse the Duke of Milan commissioned to honour the memory of the Duke’s father. Another vessel that travelled in the shadows on the wall as easily as a galleon

through the waves? Another TARDIS? In the cradle of a power older than even the Doctor seemed? The very notion was incredible...

“Well, my dears, where shall we go now?” the Doctor bowed. “Leonardo?”

He broke from his reverie. “You’re letting me choose?”

“Ah, yes, I... rather feel you deserve it.” He gave a little cough, glancing between his companions. “I have been a rather horrid old goat to you, after all. Haven’t I?”

“You were grieving, Doctor, I wouldn’t expect anything less.” Leonardo’s voice was soft, his expression thoughtful, as he stepped up to the console. “I think... I would like to go a hundred years into the future of this planet.”

The Time Lords stared at him, shocked, as Susan spluttered, “You want to stay here?”

“I do,” Leonardo looked to the doors, and the rising mushroom cloud just outside it. “To see if they remember. If they have made a memorial, I wish to lay flowers. If they have not, I will build one.”

And despite the way he huffed, Leonardo could tell, the Doctor was proud of his choice...

And now, journal, I must be away, for I hear the wheezing has ceased, and the new world beyond beckons. Until next we meet.

Leonardo Da Vinci.

THE FUTURE OF PELADON or IT'S A PEL WORLD AFTER ALL



By Kevin M. Johnston

On the ceiling of the halls of the Universal Parliament, Valeevo Crinx oozed onward. She was still in awe of the grandeur of the building, even after all these months. Hewn from marble and dwarf star alloy atop the remains of the old Emporium, the Parliament represented a government dedicated to keeping the threads of a fraying reality from unraveling completely, and Valeevo reported directly to the man holding the needle. Sure, she might not be directly responsible for the continuance of the cosmos, but, as Universal Cultural Minister, she thought she at least contributed to the continuance of its high morale. And, yes, the President did treat her with utter contempt most of the time, but she expected that he had respect for her, deep down in his tubular ventricle, or whatever his species had.

At the end of the hall, in front of the President's office, Valeevo descended with a splash, straightened her mandibles and opened the door. The President was at his desk, a being of pure crystal standing beside him. Before Valeevo could announce her presence, the creature slid out of existence with a shimmer and the President stared at the air where it had been, glassy-eyed and contemplative.

“Excuse me, Mr. President,” Valeevo muttered.

“Hm? Oh. Yes, Crinx, what do you want?”

Valeevo burred, preparing the right words that would no doubt provoke the President to throw her out of his office immediately.

“There’s a planet called Peladon, your Presidentiality—”

“Crinx,” the President replied, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, “how many times have I said? It’s *the Doctor*.”

“Of course, your *the-Doctor-ness*. The people of Peladon, the Pels... of Peladon... have a very important task for you. They want you to open... that is... before you say no, it really is *very* important! So—”

“Not all of us are immortal jellyforms, Miss Crinx, please get to the point.”

“They want you to cut the ribbon at an amusement park.”

She cringed in anticipation of the rebuke.

“Lovely!” the President said, leaping from his seat. “I’ll get my coat. You tell Gordon to prepare the shuttle.”

Crinx’s fronds purpled in surprise, and then yellowed in suspicion. *Who is this person*, she thought, *and what has he done with the Doctor?*

The chain of sleek red carts tore its way across the early morning sky like a wild animal, its neon underlighting flaring randomly, revealing its gunmetal guiderails, as it spun around the eerie and majestic recreation of the three ancient moons of pre-industrial Peladon. Fitful claps of ragged thunder erupted from loudspeakers, while passengers cried in terror as the cart fell towards a great cavernous reproduction of a mineshaft, then whooped with joy as it rose back into the light of the day.

As they spilled out of the gate, one or two looping back around to join the queue for another ride, few of the park-goers even noticed the President of the Universe among them. At the entrance, waiting for the

President, was the park's manager, Bira Helsayn, a woman of about forty, dressed inconspicuously in a featureless navy pangsuit. The rust-red dye in her hair did not fully conceal the blonde-and-black badger-striped roots of her Peladonian ancestry, although her accent was a mismatch of different vowels and consonants from around the Universe. She was as nervous around the Doctor as Crinx had been—he had noticed a tremble in her handshake and a tremor in her fake laughter—but he pretended not to.

“And that’s Megeshra Mountain for you,” announced Bira. “What did you think?”

“Oh, yes, an accurate simulation of freefall and imminent death,” the Doctor mused, “Very familiar, I’m afraid.”

“Well, don’t worry, Aggie-World just might be the safest place in the Universe.”

“These days, that’s probably true,” the Doctor said. “Meanwhile, Peladon seems to be thriving. Though I’d never even heard of the planet before today, or its mascot, for that matter. What is it, again, *Aggie Bear*?”

Bira smiled. “Yes, Aggie Bear. Based on an animal that lived on Peladon many millennia ago. The Great Beast Aggedor. They even worshipped it, as a sort of protector, or god figure. But we did focus group testing and the name *Aggedor* just didn’t rate well among the general public. There’s one of our Aggies now!”

She gestured with her datapad at a clumsy teenager, adjusting the plush head of his Aggie Bear costume. It waved a soft paw at the Doctor, and its large round eyes rotated wildly with the movement. The ensemble was completed by a stubby pig-nose, buck teeth, unicorn horn and a pair of blue coveralls.

“Horrific thing, isn’t it?” the Doctor said.

“But popular with kids of all ages and species!” Bira pronounced. “You know, Mr. President, I’m surprised you’ve never heard of the Peladon Company! The largest media conglomerate in the known Universe?”

“Hm?” the Doctor asked. He put down his data-phone. Bira hadn’t noticed he had been on it in the first place. “Oh, I don’t watch a lot of television these days. Just the cricket highlights when I get the chance, or the news when I’m feeling particularly self-loathing.”

“That’s a shame,” Bira said. “Everyone should have a chance to put their feet up once in a while. It’s that kind of over-seriousness that led to the downfall of Old Peladon, you know!”

The Doctor reacted with a staggered scoff that Bira chose to interpret as ‘impressed’.

“It’s true,” she nodded. “A long time ago, this was a world of austere priests, severe monarchs and hard-working miners. And when the planet tried to become a part of the Federation, the main interplanetary power at the time, the priests knew their control might slip away. So they told the monarchs that the Spirit of Aggedor disapproved and Peladon became the laughingstock of the Galaxy.”

Bira glanced over at the Doctor, who was back on his phone.

“The miners eventually rose up and threw the priests and the monarchs to the Aggedors, and the mines were reorganised as the first iteration of the Peladon Company. When we mined out all the trisilicate, we sold the greenhouse gasses we’d created and when the gases ran out, we moved into entertainment. That’s around the time the Great War hit our area of the cosmos. We remained neutral, but made some wonderful films about it. Did you ever see *Bridge Over the Medusa Cascade*? Or *All Quiet in the Eleven-Day Empire*?”

“Entirely possible,” the Doctor said, not even deigning to look up from the screen anymore. “The War’s a bit of a blur for me.”

“Well, now we own just about every intellectual property the Universe has to offer. The Psychic Circus, the Braxiatel Collection, the Land of Fiction... we even hold exclusive image rights to the Daleks of Skaro! We like to think of ourselves as historians, protecting every valuable intellectual property under one safe roof, while the Universe is in a... state of post-growth.”

“Crumbling, yes. Quite rapidly. What’s the rest of Peladon like, anyway?”

“There is no *rest* of Peladon, Doctor, not to any significant degree. Over the years, our theme park empire has grown from several smaller Aggie-Lands, Aggie-Centers and Aggie-Domes, into this one Aggie-World. That’s why this Grand Opening is so grand, why we wanted you here. Did Minister Crinx not tell you that?” Bira asked, although she wanted to add, *or were you on your phone then, too?*

The Doctor jolted his eyes up from his screen, irritation on his face. Bira wondered if he’d heard her thoughts. His people weren’t semi-telepathic, were they? He smiled knowingly and she blanched.

“Of course. My apologies, Ms Helsayn.” He dropped his phone into his pocket. “I’m sure there are some giant scissors I should be getting acquainted with, if you’ll lead the way.”

Bira nodded politely and walked in front of the Doctor, as he slipped his phone back out and texted for the eighty-seventh time:

[SUMMERFIELD. WHERE ARE YOU?]

Earlier that morning, the Doctor had been at his desk, two hundred pages into *Finding the Apocalypse Clock*, a five-thousand-page tome about a device built on 20th century Earth that he believed could be the key to saving the Universe. Somehow, the author had accomplished the impossible and made the story of an near-omnipotent supercomputer

so mind-numbingly boring that the Doctor had, so far, used the book less as a reference and more as a pillow.

But when he woke up, he was not alone.

“Oh my, how the mighty have fallen.”

Startled, but too proud to jump or shout, he merely said, “Can I help y—?” Then he recognised the figure standing over his desk.

They were slender, tall, with an androgynous humanoid face. Their crystalline skin sparkled impossibly, implying light sources that weren't in the room. Looking close enough at them, the Doctor could see through the crystal and catch a glimpse of their skeleton, a flickering, spinning Mandelbrot fractal, kept just on the edge of the Doctor's native dimension. This was only one of infinite forms this creature wore, but to the trained eye of the Doctor, an eye that had studied *Pelatos's Auld Mythology* at the Academy, they all shimmered the same.

“Diamant. I had wondered if you survived the War. Higher beings are in short supply these days.”

“Such linear thinking,” Diamant laughed, clutching a leatherbound book in their hand. “We expect better from you, Doctor. But then, you are a slave to the timeline, breakfast before lunch, dinner before dessert, in this life more than in any other.”

“Light reading?” As he gestured, the Doctor caught the words *Property of Leonardo da Vinci* etched on its cover in gold leaf.

“How much does a life weigh?”

“Less than a feather, more than a memory?”

The book vanished into the fractal maelstrom. “It is an unfair question, We know. Even your memory is bare now, all your glorious adventures wiped away but for a few monochrome flashes. It's a wonder you recognise Us at all.”

“It’s infuriating,” the Doctor admitted. “I see you, and in my mind, I’m back there, in bow tie and braces, with you and Jamie McCrimmon, on the *Quandulent Yaralesce*, in the 50th century. But I can’t remember the name of the aliens who stole the Quandules’ weather machine, or the girl who was travelling with us at the time, or even what became of Jamie in the end. Even in this book I’m reading, look here—” He slammed the book in front of Diamant, jamming a finger at a footnote. “It mentions a mysterious Doctor who destroyed a computer called WOTAN. And I know I was there. But in what body? With whom? It’s a constant reminder that I’m not who I once was. And I never will be.”

Diamant hummed in response, then sighed. “The old man. You arrived with Dodo, but left with Polly and Ben.”

The Doctor furrowed his brow. “Are you softening, Diamant? Can’t be healthy for a crystalline entity.”

“You’re no fun when you’re sad,” Diamant explained. “We’ve just left you on a Wiard beach in the same mood.”

“Careful... I’m almost agreeing with myself.”

“So We’ve come to take you away from all this.”

“Pass. I’ve got a lot of exquisitely tedious work to do.”

“In two minutes, your cultural minister Valeevo Crinx—”

“Ha! Speaking of tedious...”

“In two minutes, Crinx will come in and tell you to go to the planet Peladon.”

“Never heard of it.”

Diamant turned their head, curiously. “Oh? Most Doctors, in most other Universes, are familiar with the planet. In Summerfield’s Universe, the Doctor went there almost once a lifetime.”

“Summerfield also says he played the spoons,” the Doctor grumbled. “So forgive me if I don’t take his travel advice.”

“You’ll take Our advice, though. There’s a grand opening at an amusement park. They want you to cut the ribbon.”

The Doctor scoffed. “Ha! I will not!”

“When Crinx asks, you will accept the offer. Enthusiastically. And then...”

On holoscreens, vidpads and mindcasters around the Galaxy, Zkssal, the Martian on-location reporter from IBC, addressed the public, a statue of Aggie Bear visible in the background.

“The Peladon Company isss known for itsss filmsss, gamesss and digi-ssscapesss, but today, they make hisstory asss the corporation behind the universsse’ssss largessst theme park in exisssstence. Taking up 99.95% of the sssurface area of the planet Peladon, Aggie-World aimsss to offer sssomething for every sssentient and sssemi-sssentient member of the family.”

“Here to open the park on thiss aussspiccioussss day isss the Presssident of the Universsse, the Doctor. We now go live to hisss ssspeech outssside the gatesss of Aggie-World.”

The view shifted to one of the Doctor using a comically large pair of scissors to cut the ribbon, before handing them off to someone in an Aggie Bear costume, all to thunderous applause.

“This day has been tremendous,” the Doctor said, almost convincingly. *“I have ridden the Megeshbra Mountain! I have eaten the fried Pela-Bites! I have seen the acrobatics of the robotic dolphin show! And I’m impressed. Really, truly impressed.”*

He paused long enough that Bira Helsayn was leaning over to take the microphone until the Doctor held up a hand.

“I’m so impressed in fact,” the Doctor said, *“that I’d like to ask you for a job, Ms Helsayn.”*

“O-Okay,” Bira stuttered.

“That settles it! Effective immediately, I am resigning my post as President of the Universe!”

And the crowd went wild.

“Resign?!” the Doctor shouted at Diamant, standing and waving his hands angrily. “For what, in Heaven’s name, would I do that?”

Diamant’s crystalline face creased, a parody of a smile. “Why, because We’ll demolish this whole reality if you don’t. And you seem to be working so hard to keep it in one piece.”

The Doctor slumped back in his chair.

“All We ask is that you work one simple little twelve-hour shift at this park. Do that, and everyone will forget you ever resigned. It’ll be worth it in the end, trust me. You might even thank Us.”

“Twelve hours,” the Doctor considered. “A day off from ruling the Universe. Not the worst hardship I’ve ever faced. But who will look after it while I’m away?”

A few hundred light years away, at the rusted metal counter of Honest Jxgskimmy’s Galactic Fill-Up and Chow-Down, an archeologist from another Universe lay on her folded arms. Bernice Summerfield was impatiently awaiting a ninth cup of coffee after a very long series of adventures involving time travel, arthropods and a wayward princess.

She raised her head groggily and waved over the fluorescent whatsit behind the counter. “Globbo, is it going to be much longer?”

“Sorry, Mister Bernie, still brewin’ back there,” the server replied.

Bernice sighed, but then noticed the old six-colour vid-screen flickering behind Globbo. There was the IBC reporter Zkssal, standing in front of a theme park, with a picture of the Doctor (and not a very flattering one) displayed in the upper right corner.

“Glob, can you turn that up a bit?”

“*For thosssse of you jusssst joining usss,*” the reporter hissed, “*Here are the presssident’ssss—pardon me, the former presssident’ssss wordsss onccce again—*”

“*Former?!*” Bernice shouted, making the rest of the truck stop very aware of her, then muttered to herself, “what’s he gone and done now?”

Onscreen, the Doctor gestured grandly to the crowd. “Effective immediately, I am resigning my post as President of the Universe.”

The crowd went wild. The Doctor hushed them with a wave, to add, “*and naming as my successor, the very competent—at everything but answering my text messages—Bernice Surprise Summerfield.*”

“Oooh,” said the server. “Congratulations!”

Bernice couldn’t even think of an appropriate swear word, so she settled on a weak “Thanks, Globbo.”

The time was 26:13. Three hours had passed since the start of the Doctor’s shift. *Nine more to go*, he thought.

The smell of the crowd was probably the worst part, given that the ride that he had been assigned to was in the humid equatorial region of the park-planet. It was one of the many mining-themed attractions in Aggie-World, a great wheel of carts that bisected a cliff-face and spun at greater and greater speeds, often relieving the punters of their lunch. It was known as-

“The Ferrous Wheel! That’s ferrous as in “iron” even though they only ever mined trisilicate on Peladon,” the Doctor muttered. He caught his boss, a human being named Jeremy, shaking his head. *No editorialising*, he’d said in the orientation. “Keep any non-replaceable appendages inside the ride at all times, and be sure to smile for the

camera when the ride completes its tenth and final loop. Are we ready to go?”

A family of hedgehogoids nodded, bristling in excitement, while a young Draconian yawned to show how unexciting he found it all. The Doctor pulled a lever. The auto-harnesses adjusted around the park-goers, and the cart climbed into the sky. Jeremy tapped the Doctor’s shoulder.

“Doctor,” he sneered, because everything he said was a sneer, “That’s not quite the Peladon Company-approved dialogue we expect from our cast members. The line in the script is ‘Who’s ready for a *mine*-blowing adventure?’”

“Yes,” the Doctor said, quite cheerfully. “You see the problem is, that’s asinine, so I don’t care to say it.”

Jeremy straightened the Doctor’s name badge. “I know you’re still new here, *Doc*, but this isn’t like being the President. You’ve got to say what’s on the focus-group-approved page. We’re performing magic here, building the happiest place in the Galaxy, and magic is a team sport. Do you understand?”

The Doctor considered a few mixed metaphors of his own, but settled on something between a grunt and a thoughtful hum. Something blinked on Jeremy’s wrist, causing him to panic.

“An emergency on *It’s a Pel World?* Another rogue animatronic?!” he exclaimed, “I’ll be back in half an hour, Doctor.”

As Jeremy shuffled away, the Doctor checked his data-phone to see if Bernice had replied to any of his texts. Eventually, he realised that if he wanted a response, he would have to do something he truly loathed. He’d have to make a phone call. And to his surprise...

“*Where the hell have you been?!*” Bernice screamed.

“I’m sure there must have been about a hundred and nineteen texts that could have explained that. But nice to hear from you, as well. How have you been?”

“Doctor, those texts came in a week ago! Then I’m eight coffees deep at Honest Jagskimmy’s and hear you’ve resigned and left me in charge. Then that planet gets destroyed and it’s radio silence?”

“Planet destroyed? Summerfield, you’ll have to be a bit more specific. There’s a lot of that about. I—”

“Ahem!” Jeremy said indignantly, “I’ll take that data-phone if you don’t mind. You can have it back at the end of your shift.”

The Doctor guiltily hung up on Bernice without a word and handed the phone to Jeremy.

“The rogue animatronic—”

“False alarm. A real Alpha Centauran, not a robotic one. They got claustrophobic on the ride and jumped off the boat. Now, I hate to repeat myself but you can’t just...”

Jeremy continued speaking but the Doctor stopped listening, casting his attention to the blue glowing numbers on the face of a nearby clock tower.

26:15.

Only two minutes had passed.

The time was now 34:98 and the Doctor was exhausted. By his internal clock, which was usually infallible, it seemed like several days had passed, but then again, what was it Einstein had said? An hour with a pretty girl feels like a minute, but a minute working with the public feels like eternity?

He hadn’t even had much of a break—just enough time to dash to the nearest food stand, inhale something resembling a hot dog and

dash back. Jeremy hadn't given him his phone back, either. The Doctor knew where it was, though, as when he'd asked, Jeremy's eyes had darted to the hut next to the Chumbley-Go-Round.

"Twelve minutes," he sighed.

He noticed an Aggie Bear skulking around the recycling bins and waved at it. There was something off, though—its teeth were too sharp and tusk-like, its plush fur matted and dirty.

"Jeremy," the Doctor asked. "That Aggie Bear's a bit off-model, isn't it?"

Jeremy shrugged as the mascot shuffled out of sight. "They're always rebranding here. Probably an old design. Creepy one, though. Whoever's in that costume will probably lose their job being that far off-book..." Jeremy's default sneer became a genuine smile. "Maybe I'll go write them up myself."

Jeremy jogged off after the mascot and the Doctor looked at the clock again.

Still 34:98. No. 34:97.

The Doctor rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

34:96.

"Excuse me?!"

34:95.

He pointed with fury at the clock face. "Now, you go in the right direction this instant! I won't spend another minute in this park!"

34:94. Faster this time. Now 34:93. He blinked and it was 34:20.

"No! I won't do it! Not again!"

But the park shifted around the Doctor, visitors reversing through the park at great speed. Too fast to see now. Nothing but blue numbers, the minutes in constant flux, the hours ticking downwards

until the clock read 23:10. Then the Doctor blinked and heard Jeremy clear his throat.

“Doctor? I said I’ll be your supervisor. My name is Jeremy.”

“So you are,” the Doctor said. “You don’t recognise me, then? This is the first time we’ve met?”

“Right, I heard you used to be President of something. I don’t follow politics much, so you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t recognise you.”

“Oh, just the Universe. Nothing too grand, in fact, it’s collapsing as we speak.”

“Is it? As I said, don’t care for politics.”

“Yes, you said all this before. It’s a time loop.”

“No, the Time Loop is in another part of the park. This is the Ferrous Wheel.”

The Doctor sighed. “Just show me how to work the lever and then grimace at me for several hours, there’s a good lad.”

“Yes. They said you had a sense of humour. Best keep it to yourself while you’re on the job.”

26:13 again. The hedgehogoids bristled and the young Draconian sneered once more.

“The Ferrous Wheel,” the Doctor announced monotonously, “Keep any non-replaceable appendages inside the ride at all times, and be sure to smile for the camera when the ride completes its tenth and final loop. Who’s ready for a *mine-blowing* adventure?”

The youngest hedgehog giggled and Jeremy gave the Doctor an enthusiastic thumbs-up as the ride began. Re-living his shift had proven that it wasn’t just the agony of employment that was causing the sluggishness of the clock, but rather that minutes grew exponentially

longer throughout the day. Then at 34:98, time would be stretched to its limit and would snap back like an elastic band. It was no wonder the Doctor was the only one to notice, given his experience with time travel and biological advantage.

Of course, that meant the Doctor knew that Jeremy was about to notice a blinking indicator on his wrist.

“An emergency on *It’s a Pel World?* Another rogue animatronic?!” he exclaimed, “I’ll be back in half an hour, Doctor!”

If the Doctor’s math was correct, Jeremy would be gone for less than a minute of park time, which would give the Doctor about five minutes of real time to call Bernice.

“*Where the—?*”

“Summerfield, we don’t have time to talk. We’re stuck in a time loop. We’ve had this conversation before.”

“*What? When? The last time I spoke to you was six months ago, a week after you went missing. You said something about missing your texts, then someone interrupted you and you never bothered to call back.*”

“So the time loop is local to Peladon.”

“Peladon?” Bernice asked. “*Doctor, Peladon is nothing but dust in space. It imploded the day you resigned, an hour before midnight. You’ve been presumed dead ever since.*”

“Why didn’t you tell someone I phoned?”

“*I tried! They didn’t believe me! They thought I was pretending to be mentally unfit, to get out of my duties as President. They won’t let me stop, you know. I’ve survived ten votes of no confidence. At this point, I don’t even bother putting them forward.*”

“If the time loop is local,” the Doctor mused, “the source must be on Peladon itself, or from something directed at Peladon. Perhaps a business competitor? What do you know about the media industry?”

“Doctor, I’m not even from this Universe, I don’t exactly know what films people watch.”

“I hate to say this, but can you put Valeevo Crinx on? She is allegedly my cultural minister...”

“Crinx was blamed for your trip to Peladon. They sacked her whole department. What about—?”

“Ahem!” exclaimed Jeremy.

“Sorry, Summerfield. Time’s up,” the Doctor sighed, handing over his data-phone.

The Doctor had known his phone would be taken away, of course. He knew everything that was going to happen for his entire shift, including that one of the hedgehogs would leave their park map on the Ferrous Wheel when they came back for a second ride. The first day, he’d tossed it in the bin, but today he’d kept it next to the lever, something to glance at while the Wheel was in motion. Research.

Soon, he’d memorised the entire globe. Most of it was a pattern of repeating shops and similar rides, but one place stood out as intriguing to the Doctor. A tiny zone of black, with no label but “New Attractions Coming Soon.”

When he hadn’t been memorising the map, he’d been thinking about his lunch break, and not just because he was painfully hungry. On the first iteration of the day, his break had been over in a flash, even though time had slowed to a crawl. He’d thought it all mental then, Einstein’s colloquialism in action, but now that he knew something was properly wrong with the space-time continuum, he’d reconsidered that. Time had slowed only when he’d been standing still and operating the Wheel. But when he’d run to get food, Time had moved more or less the way it should have. So the Doctor did some calculations, planned a

route, and when lunchtime came, he walked as slowly and directly as he could to the source of the mystery.

As it turned out, the mysterious zone was protected by wooden boards, chainlink fencing and two customer service representatives handing out brochures. Both were wearing novelty hats adorned with Aggie Bear's unicorn horn and rat ears.

"Greetings!" said the left one, "Are you having a majestic—?"

"What's behind the wall?" the Doctor demanded.

"Nothing at all," the right one replied. "That's why no-one's allowed in. It's undeveloped."

"Ah, I see," the Doctor said. "99.95% of Peladon's surface belongs to the park. That's the .05."

"All of Peladon *belongs* to the park," Left explained. "We just haven't built on that bit yet. But if you're looking for the newest rides, the Cyber-Screamer is—"

"I'm not a tourist." The Doctor tapped his badge. "I'm a—what do you call it—*cast member*. So there's no need to keep me out. Step aside."

"No cast members past this point either," Right replied. "Crew only. You'll just have to go back to whichever attraction you work at."

"That would be the Ferrous Wheel," sneered a familiar voice, "in case you've forgotten."

The Doctor frowned deeply. "It can't have been that long. Perhaps my calculations were off..."

"Doctor," Jeremy hissed, "if you want to finish your shift with your employment intact, I suggest—"

"How did you find me?"

Jeremy grabbed the name badge off the Doctor's lapel and waggled it at him. "Tracking chips in the badges. Standard company policy, Galaxy-wide."

"That name badge you're holding?"

Jeremy's brow furrowed. "Yes. Why?"

"How very interesting," the Doctor said, then bolted away from Jeremy at top speed.

He heard a vague scream from Jeremy behind him as he dodged and twisted through the stalls selling Aggie Bear hats, umbrellas and funnel cakes. As soon as he'd taken a route he deemed confusing enough, he doubled back toward the restricted area and climbed a service ladder to get his bearings.

In the distance, he saw a familiar form, keeping to the shadows. The off-brand Aggie Bear, with its long snout instead of a pig nose, tusks instead of buck teeth and vicious claws instead of plush mitts. Now that he'd gotten a closer look, he knew what it was.

"Not an Aggie *Bear*," he whispered in awe. "A real-life Aggedor."

He clambered down the ladder and quietly followed the animal's path. Soon, he noticed the Aggedor was not alone—two more of its kind were lurking nearby, all moving in the same direction, towards the scaffolding of a roller coaster. The Doctor watched from across a thoroughfare as the first Aggedor lifted a patch of twisted fencing, so that it and its fellows could slide underneath. Only then did the Doctor notice the small hump of earth with a small dark opening, just big enough for the eight-foot beasts to climb inside. There was no secret as to where that tunnel would take the Aggedors. It had to be the restricted area.

The Doctor was about to move towards the roller coaster himself, until he noticed another familiar creature, specifically the one that

supervised him, skulking towards the area. *Better not risk it*, he thought. *There's always tomorrow. Or earlier today.*

So, instead of the restricted area, the Doctor investigated the hut next to the Chumbley-Go-Round. He picked the lock with skills he remembered from an adventure he'd forgotten, then located his phone and relaxed in Jeremy's office chair. He sighed and looked through the blinds at the clock tower. No wonder Jeremy had found him so quickly. It was already 34:88. He readjusted his mental calculations, then felt a wave of pride when everything clicked into place.

"So it's not motion," he muttered. "It's *proximity*. Here, time moves at a crawl, but faster the closer you get to the restricted area. Space and Time, inexorably linked, each stretching the other..."

He needed someone to explain it to, so dialled Bernice's number once again.

"Hello, Summerfield!" he said, uncommonly cheerful.

"*Hello, Doctor,*" said Bernice, sounding much the opposite. "*I was wondering if you'd ever call back.*"

The Doctor frowned. "How long's it been for you?"

"*Since you went to Peladon? Nine years and four months tomorrow.*"

"Oh."

"*So that's all you can say? Oh. As in 'Oh, no, I seem to have misplaced my friend Bernice,' or do you mean 'Oh, dear, is that the time, I could have sworn it was a decade ago?'*"

"As in, 'Oh, I'm so very sorry, Bernice,' the Doctor sighed. "I thought it would be a day.' They promised me—"

"*Who promised you?'*" Bernice asked.

"Diamant. A sort of—"

“—crystalline multi-fractal trickster god. Unfortunately, I’m familiar. But why would you make a deal with them?”

“They threatened the Universe. Plus they promised that I’d have a chance to save this planet. It seemed like the type of thing *he* would do. Your Doctor. Or the Doctor I might have been, if I wasn’t trapped behind that desk.”

“This desk needs you, you know,” Bernice replied. *“I’m not half bad at this, all things considered, but I’m not you. The whole Universe is spiraling down the plug-hole, whole planets tumbling out of existence. Monsters that once terrorised whole civilisations begging for help. Opportunists trying to turn misery into a nice nest egg for a future they’ll never see. Oh, and the Master, he came back, not long after we last spoke.”*

“He always does. I suppose he had some diabolical scheme or other.”

“He tried to gain control of the Universe, legally this time, but he couldn’t get the votes. Tell you the truth, I think his hearts weren’t in it. Not without you to properly challenge him. Even he needs you back.”

“I’m working on it,” the Doctor said, then he told Bernice everything he’d seen and done so far. Bernice told him about her own experience with the Peladon of her Universe, plus all that her own Doctor had related about the planet, and some research she’d done in the last few years.

“So it seems like whatever destroyed Peladon, or will destroy it from your perspective, originated from the planet itself. And it had a temporal signature. XA-3.”

“Rudimentary time manipulation. Strong infrared shifting. That means...”

He took his data-phone from his ear and tapped out a code on the keyboard, his thumbs moving at lightning speed. Then he swung the phone slowly around the room until it buzzed twice.

“As I suspected!” the Doctor said. “The restricted area. Whatever’s going on with time, it has to do with those wild Aggedors.”

There was a banging at the door. Jeremy. The Doctor had broken the lock on his way in, but had the foresight to jam a chair against the knob.

“Summerfield. I’ve got to go.” *BANG-BANG-BANG!* “I’ve got just over twenty minutes left here, then time should snap back to the start of the day.”

“Are you sure that’s how it works? It’s only happened that way once!”

BANG-BANG-BANG!

“Not at all. Just a hunch. But you know my hunches.”

“About fifty-fifty,” Bernice replied.

“Exactly! Flip of a coin. No need to worry. You just keep doing my job, and I’ll do this one.”

He hung up and pulled the chair from in front of the door just in time for Jeremy to bash it open with his next knocking. The manager almost plummeted to the ground but the Doctor caught him.

“You ought to be more careful, Jeremy,” he said. “A man of your age.”

Then he braced himself for the next few hours of Jeremy’s twenty-minute reprimand.

Time *did* reverse again, as the Doctor had expected, right on schedule. This time he’d given the clock a little wink when it started reversing, rather than yelling at it. He was remembering how much fun it was to have all the answers.

He said all the right lines to the hedgehogs and the Draconians and all the other strange patrons of Aggie-World, and when the false alarm

on *It's a Pel World* pulled Jeremy away, the Doctor didn't phone Bernice. He expected another five or six years would have passed outside. She'd be growing old out there. He might never see what she'd become...

No gloominess, he reminded himself. *This is the happiest place in the Galaxy.*

“Who's ready for a mine-blowing adventure?!” he exclaimed to a crowd of stocky chameleons, who whooped in reply.

“Lunchtime, Doctor,” Jeremy said with no real enthusiasm. “Go fuel up and get back to doing such a stellar job.”

The Doctor walked away, and took out his phone, activating an anti-tracking feature he'd coded in while Jeremy had been attending the false alarm. Then he slipped his name badge and phone back in his pocket together, and headed straight for the tunnel beneath the roller coaster.

Every few metres, he scanned for the temporal signature, to confirm that he was moving in the right direction, and glanced around for any supervisors or Aggedors who might be following him. When he made it to the fence without incident, the Doctor couldn't believe his luck, but noticed two Aggedors approaching from far away. He ducked behind the supports of the roller coaster and watched them enter, then counted to ten and followed.

At the entrance to the tunnel, he removed his shoes to soften the sound of his footsteps and dropped his data-phone inside one for safe keeping. Inside was a study rock tunnel, probably an old mining entrance, with paths leading off the main shaft in all directions. The Doctor was following the grumbling and shuffling of the Aggedors ahead of him, trying to keep his breathing and movements as close to silent as he could manage.

It wasn't long before he saw an artificial white light and heard the sounds of the Aggedors multiplied a hundredfold. He approached the

exit with caution and peered out of the tunnel with awe: he was inside a hollow mountain, lit by billions of floating white orbs.

Far below the entrance, in the centre of the clearing, an entire civilisation of Aggedors milled around. They argued and laughed and traded goods at stone kiosks. The exterior wall was carved with holes that must have been their homes, with metal handholds so they could move around. Some of the Aggedors hovered through the air on discs, while others at the centre of the town seemed preoccupied with a five-storey metal monstrosity emitting steam and red light.

The temporal energy source, the Doctor presumed.

“Non-Aggedor!” someone cried.

The Doctor turned to see two Aggedors—probably the ones he followed—pointing at him, and then heard a woosh as several of the Aggedors riding hoverdiscs sped toward him. Only at close range did he notice the hoverdiscs were armed with two sleek little laser emitters on each of their handlebars.

He shrugged and put his hands up. “You got me. Take me to your le—”

The lasers fired. The Doctor collapsed.

The Doctor awoke groggily, his head spinning, to the sight of an Aggedor rummaging through his jacket. He wasn’t in a cell, but rather on a soft couch in the corner of what looked like a conference room, complete with a long table, chairs and an enormous flat screen on one side. The Aggedor, finding nothing of interest in the Doctor’s coat, slammed it on the table in frustration.

“Be careful with that, it’s genuine Harris tweed, you know.”

The Aggedor looked him straight in the eye and ripped a sleeve off, before tossing the coat to the ground. The Doctor held back a rebuke, but it took some doing.

“All yours, Garrgren,” the Aggedor told another of his kind. “Nothing in his fabrics but a piece of metal covered in Pel shapes.”

He handed the Doctor’s name badge to the one he’d called Garrgren, and walked away. The newcomer was thinner and grayer than the destructive Aggedor, with a broken horn and dull tusks. When he spoke, it was with a smoother voice than the other Aggedors.

“Doctor,” he said, handing back the name badge. “Not a Pel name. But you speak their language fluently. Did you come to this world looking for work?”

“Something like that. I’m the last of my kind,” the Doctor replied. “Or one of the last. I see the reports of your extinction have been greatly exaggerated.”

“You’re familiar with Mark Twain.”

“Earth was my home from home, before the War. But how does an Aggedor hiding in a mountain on Peladon know about Mark Twain?”

“Who said we were hiding?” Garrgren asked. “We’ve been watching.”

He gestured with his massive paw at the viewscreen and pulled up a grid of security cameras. He poked at the screen with one claw to show an Aggedor skulking near a cotton candy stall.

“We keep an eye on the Pels, for their own good. We’ve evolved, you see. But they haven’t.”

“You’ve certainly advanced. They talk about the Aggedors as if they were nothing more than beasts.”

“Our ancestors were more intelligent than your kind would have recognised, but they were animals of very limited sentience. Afraid of fire, lulled by music. But the Peladon Company genetically modified us

to act as trisilicate miners, then enhanced us further to operate carbon extractors. We began escaping, a few at a time, to the undeveloped portions of the planet, and continued to grow in intellect and in number.”

“And now, what? You’re using time technology to take back the planet?”

Garrgren sighed. “We didn’t think that any non-Aggedors would have noticed.”

“As I said, I’m not your average humanoid. I’ve been around for millennia. Travelled back and forth along the timeline possibly more than any living creature. So yes. I know a time loop when I’m in one. And I also know your machine out there doesn’t have long left before it wipes out the entire planet.”

In fact, the Doctor didn’t know all that for certain, but it seemed like a reasonable guess. Garrgren was silent for a moment, considering his options, then simply walked out the door, and gestured for the Doctor to follow. He led the Doctor down a set of stone steps, revealing their location as one near the centre of the Aggedor village, and then pointed him toward the machine.

Two Aggedors standing guard looked at Garrgren with some confusion.

“Let him see the machine,” Garrgren told the guards. “But if he tries to touch it, take his hands off.”

“Yes, yes, you’re all very vicious and impressive,” said the Doctor. “Shall we get on with it?”

He moved towards the machine but was repelled by the heat of it. He wouldn’t have wanted to touch it even if he hadn’t been warned away. He paced around it, tutting and mumbling all the way, the guards matching his every step. Finally, he came back to Garrgren

“Where I’d come from, we’d call this a discordance manifold. The time loop is intentional, then,” the Doctor said, examining the machinery. “Not a side effect. So why are you trapping the rest of Peladon on the day of their grand re-opening?”

“This is the last piece of undeveloped land on the planet, but not for long,” Garrgren explained. “Soon, they’ll excavate the mountain and find us here. And by their laws, we’re an unrecognised extinct species, squatting on Peladon Company property. Trespassers in our own homes.”

“But this can’t go on. A device this small, no energy vented into the upper dimensions, so much excess red-form Z-decay... I’d imagine you have six more cycles before the time loop collapses completely. Seven if you’re lucky.”

“Can we fix it?”

“No.” The Doctor started at the machine, a new thought hitting his consciousness. “You should be able to, but there’s something... No, this is wrong. A device this small shouldn’t be leaking this much power into local spacetime. Heat is one thing. You’ll have a timonic fusion reaction soon.”

“A what?”

The Doctor clapped his hands together. “*Gnab!* A planetary implosion.”

“What can we do?”

“You’ll have to shut it down,” the Doctor decided.

“That is not an option.”

“If I’m right, shutting it down would reset everything to the way it was at the start of the loop, probably even an hour or so before. So I could talk to the company, explain your side of it.”

Garrgren laughed. A sad, sarcastic laugh. “We remember the Pels as they were, Doctor. We kept their names when they forgot them. Queen Thalira. King Peladon. King Peliak. All the way back to Erak and Sherak. And all that time, they have never shown any kindness towards any but their own kind. The royals were controlled by the priests. The miners were kept down by the royals. Now, the civilisations of the Galaxy are bought and repackaged by the Company. Even your beloved Earth, they’ve collected a complete computerised set of its greatest actors, put them in their movies as puppets, as if they’re celebrating its history. But where were they when it burned?”

The Doctor recalled the words of his old friend Padmasambhava at the Det-Sen Monastery. It had been a conversation about the future, though neither of them could admit it. About Tibet and what lay ahead for it. He recalled the High Lama’s words—of those who stared at history in the face and those who looked away. The righteous who bore the pain for greater wisdom and those who shrank from it for the sake of ego.

Garrgren spoke again, “As long as we and the Pels are both on Peladon, they will not allow us to thrive. And we will not give them this last parcel of land.”

“What good is letting another world burn?” the Doctor pleaded.

“Good if it’s their world,” Garrgren spat, then turned to one of the guards. “Arverren, take the Doctor somewhere secure.”

“But I can help!” the Doctor shouted, as Arverren grabbed his arm.

“We’ll try to fix the generator, Doctor,” Garrgren said. “But we can’t have you interfering, or warning the Pels what we’re up to. You must understand!”

Then they heard a cry from far away: “Another non-Aggedor!”

They all spun toward the mouth of the tunnel, to see another humanoid, staring confusedly at the civilisation he’d discovered. It was

Jeremy. Right on cue. Arverren's grip had loosened enough that the Doctor could slip away in one quick motion, and he did while tossing his name badge back to the guard.

The Doctor was more agile than the Aggedors, but slower and massively outnumbered. He had one advantage, of course—Jeremy was also running for his life and screaming while doing so.

Then there were the Aggedor's hoverdiscs, parked all over the streets. The Doctor had spent enough time around Daleks to know how to operate a hoverbout at dangerous speeds, and these couldn't be much different. He grabbed the first one he saw and tore at some wiring, randomly attaching cables until it rocketed into the air.

He aimed the disc towards the entrance, but then saw Jeremy being hoisted over the shoulder of an Aggedor, wailing in horror. The Doctor sighed, then swung the disc downward, aimed the stun-beam straight at the Aggedor and fired. Jeremy and the Aggedor fell in a heap and the Doctor dismounted the disc to help him up.

"I—I tracked—" Jeremy stuttered, "—tr—tracked your name badge and—"

"Yes, I know, get on and hold on," the Doctor said, awkwardly hoisting his supervisor onto the disc.

They took to the sky again, now with a whole civilisation's worth of Aggedors after one target. The entrance shot towards them now at high speed. There were a few Aggedors around it, ready to defend against their escape, but the Doctor expected the twin stun-beams would be more than enough to take care of them.

"This vehicle isn't going to fit through the tunnel, Jeremy, we'll have to make a run for it when we reach the entrance."

"*Mnuub*," Jeremy squeaked in reply.

Closer now, the Doctor fired the stun-beams and the Aggedors fell. More were climbing towards the entrance, moving as fast on the walls

as they had on the ground. The Doctor pulled up on the handlebars of the hoverdisc and slowed to a stop, then wrenched the laser emitters off of the vehicle. He handed one to Jeremy, but his shaky hands immediately sent it tumbling back to the ground below.

“One will have to do,” the Doctor said, then grabbed Jeremy by the wrist and ran through the tunnel.

At the first turn, they banked right and kept moving at top speed—but the Aggedors were gaining on them. The Doctor spun around and fired the stun beam at the first one he saw. The laser emitter burst into smoke and he threw it down to avoid being burned. One shot. Not ideal.

“Run, Jeremy! Run!”

They could hear the other Aggedors behind them, but they could see the twinkling lights of the park at night, and soon found themselves emerging from a hump in the earth behind a helter skelter. They kept running until they were in the middle of a footpath, surrounded by guests, then turned back to see two Aggedors standing at the mouth of the tunnel, unable to follow without being seen.

“Back to the Ferrous Wheel,” the Doctor said.

“What were those things?” Jeremy asked. “They weren’t Aggie Bears. They were real. Real Aggedors?”

“Yes, they’re not extinct after all. But you won’t remember that in about—” He glanced in the direction of the nearest clock face. “—ten minutes, so why don’t you let me ask the questions?”

Jeremy didn’t understand, but the adrenalin was wearing off so he just nodded, and stumbled over to the nearest bench, while the Doctor paced around him.

“The first parks must have opened back when the planet’s atmosphere was still fairly devastated, right?” the Doctor asked, to

another nod from Jeremy. “So at least some of it can generate its own atmosphere.”

“All of it can,” Jeremy said. “Peladon doesn’t have a natural atmosphere anymore. The park keeps the planet alive.”

“Aha!” the Doctor exclaimed, grabbing Jeremy’s shoulder. “You’ll never believe what I’m about to say, Jeremy, but I swear it’s true.”

“What?”

“I’m glad I saved you from the Aggedors.”

The Doctor patted Jeremy on the back and sat down for a few minutes’ rest. He closed his eyes and sighed. He had a long day behind him, and a long day ahead.

The Doctor snapped his eyes open to find he was back on his feet, standing beside the Ferrous Wheel. He must have been exhausted to not even notice the time slippage this time around.

“Doctor?” Jeremy was saying yet again, “I said I’ll be your supervisor. My name is Jeremy.”

“I’ve just decided I don’t care for amusement parks. I quit,” the Doctor said, and handed Jeremy back his badge before walking away.

“You can’t just quit. There’s all the forms!” Jeremy shouted. “And the exit interview!”

But he didn’t follow this time.

“I hope that quitting doesn’t violate the terms of our deal, Diamant,” the Doctor said to the air, ignoring any confused passers-by. “You probably enjoy watching me work a menial job, rather than watching me save a planet, but if you don’t like it, you can manifest yourself down here and say something.” He stopped walking and counted to three. “No? Then I’ll get on with it.”

He continued on his way to the Aggedor colony and dialled Bernice's number.

"After all this time," she greeted him, "I'm glad to hear you're still out there."

"How long has it been for you?" he asked.

"Twenty-one years," she replied. "You'd barely recognise me now, dusty old politician that I am."

"You sound as young as ever," he lied. "Are you still the President?"

"Why? Do you need a pardon?"

"I need access to the astronomical database. I was tracking suitable star systems for—"

"For the safe zone, right?" Bernice asked. "I read your notes. You were thinking about using the Apocalypse Clock to stave off entropy. If it wasn't mythical. But we never found it."

"We still might," the Doctor said. "If what I'm doing here is successful, none of this will have happened. You can go back to having improbable adventures and I can go back to that awful desk. At least until I can find a worthy successor..."

"Well, you picked a good one last time, so the history books say."

"Is that you volunteering your younger self for the job?"

"No. She needs to get back home," Bernice replied.

"And see her son," the Doctor said. "I haven't forgotten."

Bernice cleared her throat. *"I've got the database up now, Doctor. What are you looking for?"*

"Class-M planet, class G-star, maximum foreseeable stability. Whichever one would have been closest to Peladon twenty-one years ago."

“Zeroax. In the Denobi system,” Bernice replied, then read out the coordinates. “Is that all you need?”

“Yes. I suppose, one way or another, this is goodbye.”

“Best we hang up now, before either of us says something too mushy.”

“Best we do. See you soon, Summerfield.”

“Goodbye, Doctor.”

The Doctor slipped his phone back into his pocket and lifted the bottom of the fence near the Aggedors’ tunnel.

“One way or another,” he said to himself.

On holoscreens, vidpads and mindcasters around the Galaxy, a Martian reporter addressed the public, a statue of Aggie Bear visible in the background.

“Here to open the park on thisss aussspiccioussss day isss the Presssident of the Universsse, the Doctor. We now go live to hisss ss:speech outssside the gatesss of Aggie-World.”

The view shifted to one of an empty podium. Bira Helsayn was screaming into a headset to someone backstage, while an Aggie Bear mascot held a huge pair of scissors in its plush paws. Then the stage began to shake. The Aggie Bear dropped the scissors and grabbed Bira before she fell over.

She was standing close enough to the podium now that her words could be heard around the world.

“What do you mean we’ve moved? Moved where? Zeroax? How?! Alright, alright.”

Bira threw off the headset, smoothed down her hair and grabbed the microphone.

“Bit of an awkward question, folks. Has anyone seen the Doctor?”

But the Doctor was a few hundred light years away, at the rusted metal counter of Honest Jxgskimmy's Galactic Fill-Up and Chow-Down, sharing an elderberry kronkshake with an archeologist from another Universe.

"So, President Benny sends you the coordinates of a star, and then what happened?" Bernice asked.

"Well, any half-decent temporal manipulator is a spatial manipulator as well," the Doctor said. "All that excess energy had to go somewhere and the park was self-sustaining. So..."

"You moved the park off-world," Bernice realised. "And you didn't even stay to see that your sums were right?!"

"Oh, they're fine," the Doctor said. "Look!"

He pointed up to the vid-screen behind the counter. Bira Helsayn was being interviewed by the Martian reporter now, though they couldn't hear what she was saying.

"But what about the atmosphere on Peladon?"

"Absolutely fine. The Peladon Company was running its climate generators full-blast, but it didn't need to. The damage to the atmosphere would have reversed itself centuries ago. Maybe they just liked the minty-fresh smell."

"So Peladon belongs to the Aggedors again," Bernice said.

"It's not the neatest solution," he admitted. "Their planet was still devastated, the Peladon Company's greed goes unchecked, we still don't know what triggered Peladon's initial destruction..."

"I thought it was all displaced in space?"

"Nothing so optimistic that first time." He studied her. "You really think, after decades in office, you wouldn't have found me, Summerfield?"

“That’s a point,” Bernice conceded. “Was that Peladon’s original fate, Doctor? Destruction?”

“I read up on a few details before I came here.” The Doctor hunched his shoulders “No... The planet has too much of a preexistent temporal footprint for that to be the case. Too many history books that needed to be rewritten.”

“We’ll chalk it up to the discordance manifold going haywire, then.”

“Not enough energy on its own to go timonic,” he grouched. “There had to be an external influence. Transdimensional.”

“Diamant?” Benny suggested.

“No.”

“I’m getting awfully tired of that word.”

“Well, what do you want me to say? It’s not in character for them... Neither was that first threat of theirs, come to think of it. That bothers me, Bernice.” He hunched his shoulders. “But considering everything else... giving Peladon back to the Aggedors is a start, I suppose.”

Bernice ran her straw around the rim of the kronkshake, letting the thought sink in.

With uncharacteristic cautiousness, the Doctor added, “And I’ve gotten in touch with a copyright lawyer on Caliban. She’s drawing up a deal to get the Aggedors full rights to the Aggie Bear character.” He looked at her meaningfully. “I think he could be very popular, you know.”

The Doctor gestured up to the vid-screen again. In the absence of their special guest, it was Aggie Bear who was cutting the ribbon, to cheers of joy from the crowd. But Bernice was looking at the Doctor, who was smiling at his own cleverness.

Same as he ever was.



*In dedication to
David Warner*

THE TIME LORD ALL TATTERED AND TORN



By AFJ Kernow

The TARDIS landed, its triumphal roar echoed through the lonely house. The Doctor, in his sixth incarnation, and Melanie stepped out from their transport. The Doctor turned, locked the door, and without warning, the TARDIS faded from view.

“First piracy and now theft, Diamant?” shouted the Doctor to the empty room.

“Well Diamant won’t let us go until we’ve done whatever complex task they’ve devised,” Mel reminded him.

They were in an oak-panelled hallway. Black and white tiles laid in a diamond arrangement, similar to a chess board, formed the entrance hall floor. A square mirror hung on the wall above a half-moon mahogany table. On the other side of the enormous black front door, was a white hatstand with a battered, brown fedora on it. The only sound was the sonorous tick-tock from an ornate grandfather clock.

A child’s voice started to whisper, increasing in volume, until the voice became lilting, almost mocking in tone.

“This is the house that Diamant built... this is the house that Diamant built...”

The phrase repeated until it faded away again.

“If that was designed to terrify me, it worked,” said Mel, gripping the Doctor’s arm.

“Be resolute, my brave Mel, we’ve faced worse than spooky theatrics. Come on Diamant, what’s our task? Get on with it.”

“Look at the mirror Doctor,” said Mel.

“Intriguing, reminiscent of a Mandelbrot set.”

“Of course, beautiful fractal geometry, like oil on water.”

A smug, sneering voice boomed out of the mirror.

“Well now, intrepid adventurers. You must explore our haunted house and survive the terrifying obstacles within. Once twenty four hours have elapsed, we will calculate your score based on how successful your exploration is. A score below a certain number means you will be trapped in this house for the rest of your natural lives. Farewell. Think of us, enjoying your ordeal in our house of fun.”

The beautiful swirling pattern faded from view.

“Now what?” asked Mel, her face pale and solemn.

“We try to stay alive until our diabolical dictator gets bored.”

From the first floor landing, cold, grey eyes watched the pair open one of the doors leading off from the hall. Once the pair had left the hallway, the figure stalked down the stairs and hurled an object at the mirror in fury. The mirror smashed into hundreds of shards.

The figure smiled and retreated back upstairs.

“What was that?” asked Mel, looking anxiously towards the door.

The Doctor strode back to the door and opened it.

“Dear me, what a mess.”

Mel poked her head round the door and saw the floor covered in mirror fragments and what looked like...

“Is that a cricket ball?”

“Yes, someone is trying to unsettle me with objects from my past,” he stuffed it absent-mindedly into his pocket.

“*You* used to play cricket?”

“Indeed. When I was young and feckless, I enjoyed the gentle sound of leather on willow,” his voice sounded far away, as he remembered warm summers in Stockbridge.

“*This is the ball that smashed the mirror,*” the creepy child’s voice intoned, “*that hung in the house that Diamant built...*”

“Oh, not again. Just ignore it Mel, and let’s see what Diamant has waiting for us.”

They re-entered the room, the library. Mel gaped at the sheer volume of books, either displayed in glass cases or gathered together on huge bookcases. They lined the walls of the room, from the floor to the pale blue, plaster ceiling. Mel sat in one of the wingback chairs and immediately regretted it. A hardback book flew off a nearby shelf and flapped its way towards her.

She gave a shriek of alarm and dodged out of the way. *A Tale of Two Cities*, wasn’t going to give up and continued its pursuit. Mel was forced to seek refuge under a hefty, oval table. The Doctor pulled the cricket ball out of his pocket and pitched it towards the book. The ball knocked the Dickens novel out of the air, and with a flurry of pages it fell to the floor.

“Still got it,” the Doctor smiled but looked ruefully at the fallen book. “Sorry about that, Mr Dickens.”

Mel scrambled out from under the table and pointed in alarm as the glass cases started to open. Books started to take-off from their shelves and like a flight of geese, swooped towards the TARDIS crew.

“Time to go,” shouted the Doctor and tried the door. “Locked. Quick under the table.”

They cowered under the table as books thudded into their wooden shelter.

Some of the cleverer books managed to find their quarry and smacked into them.

“*Om!* We can’t stay under here forever,” winced Mel. “Can we make it to the other door?”

“I think we’d be knocked out before we get there,” the Doctor replied as he fended off a tenacious copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. “Get off, you. Jane Austen would not be impressed with your behaviour. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a library of books cannot fly off the shelves.”

The book ceased its attack and fell to the ground.

“I wonder if... The books were dead to begin with.”

There followed several thuds as more books returned to an inanimate state.

Mel tried one, “It was a cold, bright day in April and the books were striking the floor.”

More literary casualties, still the onslaught continued.

“There was no possibility of books flying through the air that day,” the Doctor shouted.

He popped his head above the table, saw more books hit the floor but suffered an almighty thwack from *Roget’s Thesaurus*.

“Are you all right, Doctor?” asked Mel when he returned to their sanctuary.

“Of course I’m not. A thesaurus just put a dent in my head. I’m aghast, appalled, agape... a... a...!”

“Awestruck?”

“Apoplectic.” The Doctor rolled up his sleeves and patted his companion reassuringly on the shoulder. “Oh, we’re not going to escape with a few book openings. We need a memorable closing line, one that’ll stop all the books in one fell swoop.”

“What, though?” mused Mel. “It could be *literally* anything.”

“Let me think, let me think,” the Doctor closed his eyes. His mind wandered back to that farrago of a trial. Of course. Diamant knew about the trial and probably enjoyed watching the Doctor’s tribulations.

“The undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveller returns,” he said.

Nothing. The books settled on a new tactic, they started to stack themselves, one on top of the other, around the circumference of the table. The light started to dim as the books created a book cave. They began to pile on top of the table too. Hundreds and hundreds, their weight started to cause the table to creak alarmingly.

“Doctor, we’re going to be buried in books!” shouted Mel over the noise of a deluge of books falling around them.

“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known,” said the Doctor and braced himself for the worst.

The book storm stopped. The Doctor and Mel pushed and kicked at the piles of books that had blocked them in. They extricated themselves from beneath the table, stood, and surveyed the scene.

In places, the floor was knee deep in books but now the far door was open. They skittered and slid over the books to the exit.

The next room was huge, it had two chandeliers hanging from decorative plaster mouldings. A polished herringbone parquet floor and a piano at one side, complete with candelabra, gave Mel a clue to the purpose of this room.

“This must be the ballroom,” she remarked.

“Certainly a fine place for a dance. A music room, too,” the Doctor replied and pointed out the glass display cabinets that contained a collection of instruments.

The door at the far end opened and a figure walked in. Mel admired the stylish Georgian outfit. A salmon pink jacket and matching breeches, cream brocade waistcoat and white neckcloth. The usual white stockings and... she gasped. A short grey wig was perched atop the dome of a metallic, oval, and featureless face. A Georgian robot? Anything was possible in this house of horrors.

The pair watched as the robot walked stiffly to the piano, sat on the stool and started playing. The candles on the silver candelabra flickered into flame, as the light from the chandeliers dimmed.

“Heavens, what a racket,” said the Doctor. “Can’t you afford a piano tuner, Diamant?”

“Sounds like a pub piano. The robot can play though, that’s Strauss isn’t it?”

“Johann Strauss the Second, to be exact. ‘The Blue Danube’, very pleasant, or it would be on a half-decent piano. I helped write ‘Die Fledermaus’ or ‘The Tafelshrew’ in the original Gallifreyan.”

“Name-dropper,” smiled Mel, but her smile faded as her feet started to move by themselves.

One, two, three, one two three, one two three, she started to waltz around the room. The Doctor tried to stop her, but found himself forced into a ballroom hold with Mel. Together they waltzed around the room.

The Doctor knew the steps, but unlike Mel, his steps were heavy and plodding. He tried to distract his dance partner, but she was spellbound by the plinkety-plonky sound of the piano.

The music changed, and sped up in tempo to a jolly Charleston. Mel let go of the Doctor and danced away, demonstrating the Charleston's characteristic toes in, heels out twisting steps and straight-legged kicks. The Doctor's version of the Charleston, showed all the right steps, but not necessarily in the right order.

Once again, the music changed, to the swinging sound of Glenn Miller's 'In the Mood'. The Doctor turned his head to see Mel jiving to the jazzy music. He joined in with the faster dance moves. Once again, he could jive with the best of them. Although, he felt clumsy and gauche compared to the dazzling footwork of his companion.

I must look like a galumphing, dancing bear.

The Doctor tried to focus instead on how awful the piano sounded. Gradually, the Doctor noticed his body was less affected by the music. He staggered over to the cabinets and began rooting around.

Poor Mel was struggling, her feet ached and she started to have difficulty breathing.

"Doc-D-D-oc-Doct...!" she tried, wheezing.

The Doctor found a black-and-white striped recorder and started playing 'Frere Jacques' very badly. The recorder squeaked and tooted and the music started to fragment. The robotic musician was holding a metal hand to its head. The Doctor continued playing long, squeaky notes on the recorder, like a child trying to annoy their sibling. Finally, the robot could stand it no more and switched itself off.

“Ding-dang-dong...” the Doctor smiled at the machine, liberated.

He ran to Mel and only just caught her before she fainted with exhaustion. Eventually, Mel came to, sprawled on a burgundy camelback sofa. She felt rather delicate.

“Doctor?” she croaked.

“You just lie there and rest. You very nearly danced yourself to death.”

“That explains my aching feet and legs.”

Mel stretched her legs gingerly, and grimaced a little in pain.

“There’s bound to be some sore muscles. Normally, you would warm up before engaging in such a dance marathon.”

“You’re not funny, Doctor. I’m simply gasping for a drink.”

“When you’ve recovered and feel ready for a gentle stroll to the kitchen, we’ll search for some water for you.”

He started playing a tuneless ditty on the recorder until Mel threw a cushion at him.

“You can *stop that* right now, I’ve got a bad enough headache already.”

They chuckled with one another. A quiet moment. Happy to be alive. Before long, however, the laughter faded into a cold nothingness, as the silence of the house leant forward and swallowed it whole.

Soon, the duo located the spacious kitchen.

In the scullery, the Doctor found a delicate porcelain cup and turned on the tap. What looked like water flowed into the large stone sink. The Doctor filled the cup, turned off the tap and sniffed it.

Seems safe enough. He took the tiniest sip and half-expected to collapse to the floor clutching his throat. However, as he suspected, Diamant

wanted his playthings to stay alive for as long as possible. He tried not to think about the consequences if Diamant got bored with them.

The Doctor finished the cupful of water and filled another cup for Mel to drink and replenish her fluid levels. Feeling refreshed, they left the scullery. Back in the kitchen, from inside the open pantry, drifted a high, fluting voice singing a song with a familiar air.

They couldn't resist peeking inside and saw the surprising sight of a singing spider, who performed its song with great gusto.

Will you walk into my pantry sang the spider to its lunch.

Try my playful palate test, with lots of lovely treats to munch.

It's a tasty, thrilling challenge, let me bite down to the crunch.

Are you brave enough or bold enough to come and have some brunch?

The spider started to spin intricate webs across the ceiling. It leapt joyously from thread to thread, singing the chorus faster and faster.

Will you, won't you, Would you, could you, dare to taste my best?

Do you, don't you, can you, can't you, win my little test?

After its song, the black and white striped spider hung in midair, its eight, glistening eyes stared at the two newcomers. Two of its hairy legs gestured at the small table in front of it. Two bowls, two plates and two cups sat on the table.

“Do tuck in,” invited the high-pitched voice. “The rules are simple. Identify the flavours, tell me what you can taste in the food in front of you. Everything is edible, nothing is poisoned. Although, *if you fail*, I will wrap you up to consume later.”

“Terrific,” sighed Mel. “This day just gets better and better.”

The Doctor squeezed her hand. “It’s alright, Mel.”

“Is it?” she asked, her hope strained by exhaustion.

“No...” He smiled, slightly and gently. “But it will be.”

Mel wanted to believe that, but she wasn’t sure she did.

She picked up a spoon and dropped the jelly-like substance into her mouth. She expected strawberry or orange but instead it tasted of cheese. She almost gagged, but despite the odd texture she could taste two distinct cheeses.

“Brie and Stilton,” she announced.

The Doctor’s bowl contained soup. The Doctor let the soup roll around on his tongue. *It was sweet and sickly, not tomato or chicken or even mock turtle. What is it?* A memory appeared in his mind. *A paper bag, a toothy grin and a disarming invitation...*

“Jelly baby and licorice allsorts.”

“A good start, beginner’s luck but the next is trickier,” promised the spider.

Mel’s next food was a cake and she had to list all the ingredients.

“Flour, eggs and butter, sugar and vanilla essence, milk and poppy seeds and ground almonds,” she said, as she recalled helping to put the ingredients into the bowl when she was a girl.

It reminds me of my Auntie’s seed cake. But there’s something else, something really distinctive.

She closed her eyes and pictured herself as a little girl, nervously holding a plate of cake in one hand, trying not to drop crumbs or screw up her nose at the strong, aniseed taste.

“Caraway,” she said. “Oh... and baking powder to help with the rise.”

The spider chattered in annoyance while the Doctor took a bite from the food bar on his plate.

A mixture of flavours, sweet and sour, bitter and savoury overwhelmed the Doctor's taste buds. This would need much concentration. There seemed to be three distinct meals combined. He tried to separate the flavours.

Cold, brr... potato and leek perhaps, vichyssoise. Next, a familiar taste, an old favourite, Venusian nightfish with Venusian savoury vegetation and finally... mmm... Oh how lovely, the most delicious chocolate cake. A sense of desolation, too, this is the last piece I will ever eat. And a name...

"Evelyn! Evelyn's special chocolate cake," he shouted before the vision from a possible future faded from his mind.

"And, what else?" asked the spider tapping its spindly foot.

"Oh, I don't know. How about vichyssoise soup, followed by Venusian nightfish accompanied by savoury Venusian vegetation?"

"Oh, flies!" cursed the spider. "These are emocktails created on numerous leisure planets by the Guild of Baronix Barkeeps. They created cocktails to flood the drinker with emotion. 'The Joyful Jamboree', 'The Angry Fighter' and 'The Bitter Twister' are just some of the concoctions designed to help their customers drown their sorrows or celebrate wildly. Drink up and tell me the emotion that's been mixed into your drink."

"Cheers!" Mel raised her glass and began to drink.

At once, she trembled with an overwhelming sense of fear and excitement. Then, she experienced indescribable elation and relief.

"I felt anxious but excited," said Mel, eyes closed in concentration. "Then, pure terror for what seemed like ages and finally, elation and a sense of relief. Can I have another?"

“Very perceptive, human. Your emocktail was the ‘The Rollercoaster Surprise,’” revealed the spider.

The Doctor gulped down his emocktail and soon regretted it. He sank to his knees and put his head in his hands. Mel tried to go to his aid, but the spider blocked her way. Fangs gleaming. After a few minutes, the Doctor got up, fetched a cup of water from the scullery and returned to the pantry.

“I felt despair and an overwhelming sense of failure. I was so ashamed, foolish and unlucky. I wanted the ground to open and swallow me up.”

“Oh, you have my sympathy. The Barkeeps whip this one up for any customer that is being lairy or a nuisance to others. It’s called ‘Losing At Cards’. Soon takes the wind out of their sails. But you two have passed my taste test. Well done, and close the door on your way out.”

No sooner did they step into the kitchen, then another trial began.

The teacups danced along the shelves of the dresser, followed by twirling plates and jiggling cutlery. This performance reminded Mel of the first time she saw the animated *Beauty and the Beast*. At first, she thought the idea of enchanted crockery quite charming. However, she became most perturbed later in the film, by the vicious force used by the household objects against the hapless villagers. It *was* self-defence, she decided in the end, but still rather unsettling.

Her reverie was shattered by the sound of spoons drumming on the pots and pans. She was aghast to see sharp kitchen knives had started to slash at the Doctor’s coat. The knives cut strips off it, like you would carve slices off a roast.

“Mel, get back!” he barked.

She seized a breadboard to defend herself from the plates trying to smash into her face. Unfortunately, the bread board jumped out of her

hand and rolled away. She spotted a dumb waiter on the side wall of the kitchen and pulled the Doctor towards it. They clambered inside and Mel thumped the button on the side. Gradually, they moved upwards away from the frenetic chaos of the kitchen.

At the top, they climbed out into a formal dining room. Mel felt shaken by the ferocity of the attacking kitchen equipment and alarmed by the state of the Doctor.

The Doctor's coat hung off him, torn apart by the slicing knives. The rips and rents in the multi-coloured patchwork revealed the yellow waistcoat beneath. This too, was ripped in places. Blood seeped through, where the knives had cut right through the fabric into skin.

“Are you okay? Is this nightmare ever going to end?” she asked.

“Thank you for your quick-thinking, Mel,” the Doctor replied, giving her a hug. “*Ooh*, not too enthusiastic please, I'm a bit battered.”

“But not bowed,” Mel added with a gentle smile.

“*This is the Time Lord, all tattered and torn...*” the child's voice was a venomous whisper, “*who hugged the woman all forlorn, who danced to the piano so out of tune...*”

“Let's get out of here,” said the Doctor and moved towards the door.

“Not so fast, Doctor, Miss Bush...” a blunt, baritone voice called out from a dark corner of the room.

A smartly dressed figure strode towards them.

“Must we always meet like this?” he asked. “On the cusp of your greatest failures?”

“I can hardly be held responsible for *your* bad timing, can I?”

The face twisted with contempt. “The past holds no guarantee of surety, Doctor.”

“Neither does the future, Valeyard,” the Doctor returned with equal bite.

Mel gazed at the Valeyard, a shiver ran down her spine. His words always had an edge of menace. She had last seen him in the robes of a Gallifreyan court prosecutor.

“Let us deal, then,” he said. “With the now.”

This time, the Valeyard wore a moss green, single breasted three piece suit. The jacket was accented with wine red lapels and a black and red paisley tie completed the ensemble.

A chorus of children began to sing in a mournful, minor key.

*This is the Valeyard all sour, full of scorn
That vexed the Time Lord all tattered and torn
That bugged the woman all forlorn
That danced to the piano all out of tune
That followed the quote that finished the book
Struck by the ball that smashed the mirror
That lay in the house that Diamant built.*

“You!” the Doctor snapped.

“You took your time. I was afraid my traps had terminated your existence.”

“Not a chance, Railyard. You have the audacity to think your twisted mind could defeat us.”

“To be fair Doctor, any one of those tasks could have killed us.”

“I don’t think so, Mel. He wants to gloat before our final end.” The Doctor’s eyes lit up. “Hang on a minute, I thought Diamant was in charge of this house.”

“Well, those creepy voices keep telling us so,” agreed Mel.

“Diamant came to me with a little offer.”

The Valeyard picked his fingers, as if recounting a trifling detour on a busy day. His eyes, though, were hard and unblinking.

“I prepare some difficult tasks and Diamant will capture the Doctor to try them out. Did you enjoy them? The flying books, the hypnotic music—”

“You sneaky, treacherous snake!” shouted the Doctor.

“Just doing my job, Doctor,” laughed the Valeyard.

The Valeyard’s good humour did not last long.

A suit of armour started clunking towards them. It stopped and Diamant’s oily sneer emanated from a speaker in the visor.

“Thank you for your assistance, Valeyard. However, your presence is for *my* amusement not yours. The traps you designed will now try and ensnare you too. Your task is the same as the Doctor and Melanie. Explore and survive. Oh, and one more piquant little twist. I want to see you two work together. Indulge me. The virtuous Doctor and the evil, shadowy Valeyard. Two sides of the same coin. Can you cooperate? I *shall* enjoy the fireworks. *How will you cope*, Miss Bush, stuck between these two enormous egos? *Bonne chance*, everyone.”

The knight tramped back to its original position.

“That’ll teach you, Backyard. Hoist by your own—”

“Spare me the tired, predictable lines, Doctor!” shouted down the Valeyard.

“If you hadn’t agreed to assist the devious Diamant. We wouldn’t be in this mess!” argued the Doctor.

“I will never work with such a bombastic prig.”

“Me! Bombastic! I am the very model of modesty and—”

“You sir, are a pompous, overblown windbag.”

“While you, Schoolyard are a conniving, calculating, cadaverous leech. *And*, you have an inflated sense of your own importance, you clapped out old Junkyard.”

“I shall destroy you, you pathetic creature—”

“*Enough!*” shrieked Mel “Stop arguing both of you. You’re like a pair of squabbling schoolboys. I should bang your heads together.”

The Doctor almost laughed at his friend’s threat. He thought better of it when he saw how cross she was. He dipped his head to his collarbone, nodding, acquiescent.

“You need to work together, no matter what you feel about each—”

“He tried to erase me from existence,” interrupted the Doctor.

“You deserved it. You squander the power and supremacy that could be ours.”

“I really don’t care. I’ve nearly died several times over in this wretched house. Concentrate on getting us all through this.”

The Valeyard turned his back and began to walk away.

Mel sat on the ground, her head in her hands.

The Doctor sat on his haunches. He gently removed Mel’s hands from her face and held them. He looked into Mel’s brown eyes and tried to reassure her.

“I’m so sorry, Melanie. He knows me too well. I’m afraid he gets into my head and knows where to jab the knife to unleash my anger and insecurity. Of course, we must work together. How about it, Valeyard?”

A truce? Combining our intellect is sure to beat Diamant's house of peril."

From the shadows, the Valeyard's cutting voice agreed, "However repellent I find you personally. Logic must bow to your suggestion, Doctor. A rope of three cords is hard to break."

"Very true. Onwards?" the Doctor gestured to a door down the corridor.

The Valeyard stepped out into the half-light. No word of agreement, but acquiescence all the same.

Mel glared at him, she didn't expect *any* apology from *him*. In an unguarded moment, the Doctor had told her that the Master had once been a *friend*. The dramatic intervention in the trial, while purely for the Master's own amusement, indicated a scintilla of respect for his former colleague. The Valeyard, however, really frightened her. How could he be a version of the Doctor? He wore his absolute hatred for her Doctor like a voluminous cloak. No chance of appealing to the Valeyard's better nature, it didn't exist.

The uneasy alliance walked into the corridor and the Valeyard opened the first door.

"Don't be so hasty, Shipyard, you've no idea what could be in there," warned the Doctor.

"It's the nursery. Surely, a room with nothing to harm us."

"Every room's been harmful so far," sighed Mel.

The room contained a single wooden bed, a rocking horse and an open wooden chest which contained some simple toys. The Doctor and Mel looked through them, briefly forgetting their deadly mission.

“Ooh, look a *bilboquet*,” the Doctor retrieved a toy made of a wooden handle with a spike and a wooden ball with a hole in it. “Now the aim is to land the ball on the spike.”

“Simpleton. It’ll keep him busy for hours,” said the Valeyard.

There was a bag of marbles, a ragdoll, a wooden spinning top, a toy drum and a handful of lead soldiers.

Mel picked up the marble bag, took out a few and rolled them around in her hand.

“Such pretty spirals and twists, I always liked marbles. Look, a solitaire board,” she said pointing to a circular, mahogany board lying flat at the bottom of the chest.

“You’re as bad as he is. Melanie, we haven’t time for childish games,” the Valeyard snapped.

Mel dropped the marbles which clattered onto the floor. A cupboard door had opened and a huge, stuffed teddy bear clamped his paws on the hapless Valeyard’s shoulders. It dragged the Time Lord back towards its den. The Doctor dropped his toy and reached for the wooden solitaire board. He flicked it with all his might at the bear’s head. The bear batted it away before the board had a chance to strike it. That was enough, the Valeyard wriggled out of his jacket, the buttons pinged off in all directions.

“I can handle him myself,” rebuffed the Valeyard.

The bear wasn’t finished, it lunged at the former prosecutor’s legs and brought him crashing to the ground.

“Oh no you don’t,” muttered the Doctor..

He tried to wrestle the Valeyard free from the bear’s grasp. Mel battered the bear’s head with the board while trying to avoid its flailing claws. Their combined efforts freed the Valeyard and they sprinted from the room.

The bear roared in disapproval and started to pound on the nursery door.

The trio collapsed in a heap on the floor of the half-landing. They carried out a brief check, to ascertain whether they still possessed the right number of limbs.

The Valeyard, now jacketless, rolled up his sleeves to inspect the cuts on his arms, “I told you two to stop playing around and go elsewhere. Now, I’ve lost a very expensive jacket.”

“We just saved you from being mauled by a gigantic, teddy bear,” said Mel, getting up. “We really should bathe those cuts, although I don’t know whether to bother.”

“Yes, show a *little* gratitude, Stockyard. Although, you’re slipping Diamant, teddy bears aren’t very Georgian, 1903, I think.”

“Thank you,” the Valeyard managed to say through gritted teeth.

“Now, up and at ‘em, Halyard. Let’s try and find the bathroom, hmm?”

Reluctantly, the Valeyard hauled himself to his feet and followed the others down the corridor.

The bathroom was sumptuous.

Black and white tiled with a polished copper bath at one end of the room beneath the window. Brass wall lights and a crystal chandelier illuminated the space. A dark mahogany dresser with two ceramic wash bowls, sat below two oval mirrors. The Valeyard bathed his wounds with a face cloth. In an enclosed corner behind a wooden door, Mel discovered a toilet with the traditional high tank and ceramic handle pull. It reminded her of the stinky outside toilets at primary school.

“Well, if your wounds are feeling better, shall we leave?” suggested the Doctor.

They all headed back towards the door. Unfortunately, the section of the floor they were standing on hinged downwards. They slid down the slope into darkness.

They landed on a trampoline-like surface, bounced a few times and came to rest. Water started to cascade down the slope into the room. A bright light beamed down from above. Mel looked around her, they were in a glass tank like an aquarium. She gasped at the pair of green crystalline cat’s eyes gazing at them from outside the glass.

“Come on!” she shouted. “We’re in real trouble now.”

The tank was filling up fast. There were steps carved into the side of the tank. She looked around for the Doctor, following her, but he couldn’t move. He was stuck fast, held by a crystalline paw that had arched into the tank.

A rough hand grabbed her shoulder. “Come on, Mel! Do you want to drown?”

The Valeyard scooped her up into his arms, waded through the waist-high water and deposited her at the foot of the steps.

“Do you think you can climb up to that ledge without falling back in?”

She nodded and began her careful ascent up the slippery steps. She turned back and was stunned to see the Valeyard following her.

He anticipated her obvious question.

“He’s done for, I’m not risking my neck...”

“Please. At least try, you can’t abandon him.”

“Why?” asked the Valeyard, severely. “What elementary purpose does the exercise serve?”

“Because... I don’t want to see him die...” the final word perished in Mel’s throat.

She realised her plea was useless and continued her climb.

Once at the top, she closed her eyes, shivering in her cold, wet clothes and waited for the Doctor’s inevitable demise. She heard a splash. She opened her eyes and sat up dumbfounded to watch the Valeyard’s rescue attempt.

He had, against his better judgement, dived back in and swum with a powerful front crawl to the struggling Doctor. The Doctor was trapped, held in the vice-like grip of the crystal cat. The cat had not attempted to retrieve its prey. Head tilted on one side, it was happy to watch the Doctor flail around in a vain attempt to escape.

The Valeyard had one chance. Hidden in his inside waistcoat pocket was a thin plastic vial. He dived down, unscrewed the lid and emptied the contents onto the cat’s crystal paw. Its reaction to the encroaching cloud of acid gold was instantaneous. The Valeyard seized the Doctor round the waist, as the cat relaxed its grip slightly, and pulled. Like corks shooting out of a bottle, the momentum shot the two Time Lords a short distance across the water.

Clear of the underwater cloud, the cat had recovered and tried frantically fishing with its paw trying to catch them. The two Time Lords swam like eels, weaving from side to side in an attempt to confuse the cat. To Mel’s delight they reached the side. A booming voice shouted down from above.

“Oh, Tiddles, you naughty cat! Playing with the peoplefish again? Come on, I’ve got a nice meaty Sontaran for your tea.”

The cat disappeared and the two Time Lords dragged themselves up the steps, breathing heavily. Once they were all on the ledge, the room went dark and they found themselves back in the bathroom again.

The Valeyard leapt to his feet and stared down at the bedraggled Doctor slumped on the bathroom floor. His counterpart was terribly still. Mel could see he didn't quite know how to feel about that. Elation? Satisfaction? And something else...

The Doctor's body shuddered, water ejecting from his lungs with heaving breaths.

The Valeyard tilted his head back, but said nothing.

Mel smiled at him as she dried her hair and put it up in a towel.

"Thank you," she said. "You saved my life and the Doctor's, too. What was in that vial?"

"HF, hydrofluoric acid." The Valeyard was still staring at the Doctor. "Diluted by the water it was like a sharp bite."

"I won't ask why you carry such nasty stuff around."

"It was intended to persuade a business associate to give me a better price."

"Sorry I asked," she muttered.

However, when Mel looked up, she had never seen such an expression of utter disbelief creep up on anyone's face before. The Valeyard could not comprehend the result of his actions.

The Doctor clambered to his feet. He held out a hand, "Thank you, Valeyard."

The Valeyard refused to take it and fled from the room like a scalded cat.

The Doctor held his palm open, as though excusing a problematic family member. "Too saccharine a gesture, it seems."

Mel hugged her soggy friend, "I thought I'd lost you, Doctor. We need to find some dry clothes, a place like this must have wardrobes full of them."

“Ever practical. Come on then, that water was freezing. Typical Diamant, not bothered about us catching pneumonia.”

The Doctor and Mel discovered a feminine bedroom that contained a rail of clothes and a dresser with a mirror on it. The Doctor stood guard outside ready to leap into action if needed.

Mel threw herself on the four-poster bed and dug her face into a nearby pillow. She could just about weep. From exhaustion, from fear, from *frustration*...

What a nightmare. I'm losing my mind in this madhouse. I'd rather be chased by Daleks, at least they don't play with their victims. It's the uncertainty. I've been on tenterhooks, afraid to face whatever the twisted imagination of that Valeyard and his cruel boss can create.

A knock on the door followed by a gentle enquiry brought her back to reality.

“I won't be long,” she called, thumbing away her tears before they could start.

Mel waited just long enough to stop the trembling in her hands and shoulders. The Doctor needed her. With the Valeyard so close by, her friend was vulnerable. Whatever she felt, it had to wait until they were away from this place.

If they could get away.

She was alarmed to find that there were only Georgian clothes. She pulled a shift out of a drawer and found a pale blue floral one-piece with short lace sleeves. She took a cream woollen shawl and tied it around her shoulders, glad of its comforting warmth. She sat at the dresser, brushed her damp hair, tied it up with a blue silk ribbon and tucked it under a white linen mobcap. She found some soft velvet slippers and returned to the Doctor.

“Not a word,” she warned him.

“No modern clothes?”

“No,” she replied coldly.

They found the Valeyard pacing around one of the grand master bedrooms. He had changed his clothes, too. He now wore a simple white shirt, a dark blue jacket with tails, a grey waistcoat and black breeches that ended at the knee.

“I can see your ankles, Coalyard,” teased the Doctor as he entered the walk-in wardrobe.

“Whatever he comes out in, it’ll still be more tasteful than that disgusting coat,” deadpanned the Valeyard.

“Oh, I know. When I first met him, I did consider wearing sunglasses all the time. It’s so garish, all those clashing colours.”

“I heard that,” shouted the Doctor from within the dressing room.

“You were meant to,” called the Valeyard.

“It must be an unfamiliar feeling, to know you actually rescued the Doctor. Saved a life instead of taking one. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Unlike humans, I do not feel the need to incessantly discuss my feelings. You forget, Miss Bush, I am not the sentimental old fool you are burdened with.”

“Worth a try,” sighed Mel.

“I’m afraid the Barnyard won’t change overnight.”

“Please, can you stop those yard quips, Doctor?” Mel asked. “It’s getting very tiresome. Shouldn’t you be above making cheap shots at someone’s expense? Makes you sound petty and childish.”

The Doctor looked suitably chastened by Mel's admonishment. The Valeyard nodded at her in a grudging show of thanks.

Then they noticed the Doctor's new apparel. He was resplendent in a peacock blue coat with a russett lining, its edges and pockets embroidered in canary yellow. His shirt had frilled cuffs. The silk waistcoat was green with a floral pattern. Around his neck, salvaged from his tattered clothes, was his red and white polka-dot cravat. His breeches were bright red and fastened below the knee. Perched on his head was a black tricorne hat edged with gold braid.

"It's very dashing..." Mel began to say and started sniggering.

"Who have you come as? Doctor Dandy?" added the Valeyard, before he too started to roar with laughter.

The pair of them continued giggling and guffawing until exhausted, their sides aching they finally stopped.

The source of their amusement was not amused.

"Now you've got that out of your system. Can we get on?" he grumbled and strode out of the room.

"How do you put up with him?" asked the Valeyard.

"I have a dartboard in my room with his face on it," answered Mel.

"In all seriousness?" he asked, and then the penny dropped. "Ah. Very droll, Miss Bush. Enough frivolity, let's see where the old duffer has got to."

They reconvened outside a door they hadn't tried before.

"Here goes nothing," said Mel, opening the door.

Inside was an austere study:

A dark wood pedestal desk, a bookcase, a couple of side chairs, and an armchair. The only incongruity was the bulky cathode ray monitor

and a squat cream box with black keys and a row of red keys along the top. Beside it was a smaller box with a slit in the front.

There was a two-tone beeping sound.

“I know that sound,” murmured Mel.

The screen filled with white type on the black screen.

The repeated phrase, ‘*Welcome. I am the Owl.*’ filled the entire screen.

“How basic,” said the Valeyard and pressed a key.

The screen cleared. A pattern of white circles built up from the base of the screen and formed a stylised owl. The Valeyard pressed the same key and a message in large, bright yellow letters appeared.

“Write a program that creates a cyan screen with a bouncing red-and-white checked ball. There will be consequences if you do not program this computer correctly.”

“I know what this is,” Mel said.

“*Shh*... Let me think,” snapped the Valeyard.

“Don’t you shush me, just for once listen to an opinion that’s not your own.”

The Valeyard ignored her and started typing. Satisfied, he pressed the ‘RETURN’ key. Nothing happened.

“Type run in capital letters, then press return,” sighed Mel.

The Valeyard did so. The machine started making alarming noises, the screen filled with a swirling black and white pattern and then cleared. The Valeyard was frozen like a statue, breathing and aware, but paralysed.

Before Mel could demonstrate her expertise, the Doctor started tapping the keys and lines of programming appeared on the screen.

“Doctor, let me do it,” Mel protested.

“Don’t worry Mel, I’ll soon have this sorted out,” the Doctor smiled.

“Why don’t you pat me on the head and tell me to make the tea. Typical patronising...”

He typed ‘RUN’ and pressed ‘RETURN’. “I am trying to keep you sa—”

The same thing happened to the Doctor.

“Finally!” cheered Mel. She grabbed a chair and sat at the keyboard. “For once you’re going to listen to the clever human female.”

She started typing and chatted to her captive audience.

“Watch and learn, boys,” she grinned. “Now, this is a BBC Microcomputer Model B from the early 1980s. My Mum and Dad scrimped and saved to buy me one when they found out how fascinated by computers I was. The BBC Micro is programmed using the extremely flexible, BBC Basic, largely designed by Sophie Wilson. I learned to program on mine and though I’m a bit rusty. I think I’ve got this.”

She finished typing in the program. Then she frowned in concentration as she checked her work. *I’ve only got one shot at this, otherwise it’s living statue time.* She scanned each line in turn and grabbed some paper and a fountain pen to ensure her calculations and coordinates were correct. She sent up a quick prayer to the computing gods, typed ‘RUN’ and pressed ‘RETURN’.

A huge yellow smiley face filled the screen.

“*We-ll done Mel-an-ie,*” said an eerie electronic voice.

She was tempted to put the five-inch floppy disc marked ‘Games’ into the drive but was satisfied with the apologies from two sheepish Time Lords.

“Sorry, Mel, I just blundered in. I should have listened,” said the Doctor.

The Valeyard began, “How typical of you—”

“Don’t you start on him. You actually had the nerve to shush me.” Mel put her hands on her hips. “I’m a computer programmer, this is my specialty, and you didn’t bother to ask for my advice.”

It was brief and under his breath but it was there, “My apologies.”

She felt like punching the air until the familiar voice turned her triumph into ashes.

“Time’s up folks. Can all explorers please make their way to the drawing room, thank you.”

They trooped downstairs and located the drawing room.

A striking, androgynous figure reclined on a silk chaise longue. A clipboard sat on a side-table alongside a glass of sparkling yellow liquid. They peered over half-moon spectacles at the gloomy team.

“At last...” Diamant luxuriated.

“Yes... At *last*.” The Valeyard stood by the door and pressed a button on the wall. Two transparent tubes appeared around the Doctor and Mel.

The Doctor banged his fist in frustration. “*Et tu*, Valeyard?”

“I have delivered the Doctor and Mel to you, Diamant. I have fulfilled my mission,” the Valeyard purred in satisfaction.

“I knew it,” shouted Mel. “I knew he couldn’t be trusted.”

“Of course not, you simpering dolt. My task was to see if I could win your trust and wait patiently until I could spring my trap.”

“You really had us going, then.”

There was a small flicker on the edge of the Valeyard’s lip. Almost a frown. Mel very nearly didn’t catch it.

Suddenly, the tubes disappeared and Diamant's avatar rose to their feet, clipboard in hand.

"No dice, Valeyard. Did you really think We would play fair? Your deadly Doctor traps were ingenious, while Our little flourishes enhanced them. However, your score wasn't high enough. We were expecting the Cyber-Screamer and We got the Ferrous Wheel, instead. You skulked in the shadows, didn't even engage with the Doctor and Miss Bush until they reached the first floor. You even saved the Doctor from Our cute little pussy cat. *And you smashed Our mirror.*"

"So, that was you?" He quirked an eyebrow. "Thanks for the cricket ball, it did come in handy. Surely, *we've* done enough to satisfy you, Diamant? We've escaped the traps you and the Lanyard devised."

"Your task was two-fold: to explore and survive. Yes, you survived, but you didn't explore. You neither visited all the rooms in the house, such as the orangery. Nor did you venture into the garden."

"You didn't tell us we had to, you perfidious M-form," bellowed the Doctor.

Diamant took a sip from their glass, "Why didn't you attempt to open the front door? How remiss of you."

"Where's the TARDIS?" Mel asked.

Diamant tapped what could have been their nose. "On a dimensional spectrum beyond your reach. Beyond the vanishing point of the Fourth Dimension. Far, if We can use that word, from you. Farewell, failures, enjoy the rest of your stay."

"This is your fault, you bungling, interfering—!" The Valeyard picked up a chair and threw it at the Doctor. It bounced off an invisible barrier and fell to the ground.

"Rule One. No housemate can injure or kill another," Diamant announced. "Be seeing you."

They vanished.

“Good. That’s something at least,” sighed Mel.

“I should have let you drown, *Doctor*,” the Valeyard growled, his face contorted with rage.

“But you didn’t,” the Doctor replied and smiled. “There is some good in everyone, *Valeyard*, even you. You may be the embodiment of my ruthlessness and malevolent intent, but you are *me* and a sliver of mercy remains. You *need* me, whether you like it or not.”

The Valeyard strode over to face the Doctor until their noses were an inch apart.

“I have no *mercy*,” he spat the word at the Doctor. “You are needed purely to facilitate my continued survival. I *shall* find a way to steal your remaining incarnations.”

“Not possible, Graveyard. I shall fight you with every fibre of my being.” His features softened. “Surely, you realise that we are stronger together than we are apart? In our lives that were, lives that are, and lives that might be? Why try to *rule* over it? Why not simply enjoy it? *Live* life.”

“It’s my life, Doctor. Why shouldn’t I live how I choose?”

“With tyranny and brutality, is that who we really are?” asked the Doctor, earnestly. “Is that what we will truly become?”

“You sanctimonious fool.”

“Unimaginative dullard.”

“Pollyanna!”

“Nihilist!”

“Oh, knock it off,” shouted Mel. She stood between them, her hands on her hips.

“You really don’t appreciate our predicament. *Either of you*. Our fate is to live in this dreadful house for the rest of our natural lives. At least, I shan’t have to endure your endless bickering forever. Doctor, Valeyard, just... grow up. You have a long time to spend together.”

She stomped out of the room, leaving the two Time Lords open-mouthed.

Sometime later, the Doctor found Melanie gazing out of the window in the library. The books were back on the shelves, but a few volumes had been hurled across the room. His hearts fluttered nervously, he could see she’d been crying.

What on Gallifrey can I possibly say to her?

He was unprepared for her vitriolic tone.

“You buried those verbal hatchets yet? Preferably in each other. I’ll never see my family again. You don’t even care. You’d much rather swap insults with that... that... I’m stuck like *Jane bloody Austen* in a Georgian house share. An unhappy rose between two *belligerent* Time Lords who can argue the toss about *anything*. Oh, and if you two think I’m going to cook and clean for you, like some kind of Georgian kitchen serf. *You can think again*,” she ended her breathless tirade and turned back towards the sash window.

He crossed to her and gathered her under an arm. “Melanie... Melanie...” he hushed.

“Go away,” she said, unconvincingly.

“Oh, Melanie, listen to me. I promise I’ll look after you, the Valeyard will, too, I’ll make him. I won’t let him upset you,” his face hardened before breaking into a smile. “We’ll sort out a rota for cooking and cleaning.”

“Can the Valeyard cook?”

“We can look forward to lots of burnt offerings. I’ll have to teach him.”

Mel recalled the Doctor’s own efforts at cuisine. “Good luck with that. And another thing, I can’t just keep calling him the Valeyard. ‘Doctor of law’. That’s a title, not a name.”

“You call me Doctor.”

“That’s different. Is he a Victor or a Vincent? Virgil or Vaughn?”

“Vicky the Valeyard?”

“Don’t be silly,” Mel gave a small chuckle.

“Maybe it’s time to stop fighting, Mel. Time to retire. We’re stuck here, the Valeyard can’t harm us. Perhaps we should wander the grounds, reread the classics in the library and try to learn to play billiards.”

“But we’ll never be free again, Doctor. We’re like songbirds in a gilded cage, Diamant’s unwilling puppets. You *never* give up, there must be a way out.”

“Diamant is an extremely mischievous and irritating Higher Power. If we try to kick out and rebel, they could make things unbearable for us. Let us freeze, starve us or let that crystal cat chase us again. Reluctantly, I must propose we accept our fate. For now.”

“For now has the terrible possibility of turning into forever...”

There was nothing the Doctor could say in reply. He felt ashamed for that.

“Just leave me here for a bit please, Doctor,” asked Mel. “I need some time alone.”

The Doctor awkwardly patted her shoulder, “Of course,” he said gently.

Melanie woke in the morning and wondered why she couldn't hear the familiar comforting hum of the TARDIS. She opened her eyes and stared up at the canopy above her four-poster bed. She sat up abruptly, terrifying images filled her mind.

When the smug voice of their jailer spoke, she slumped back into the bed and groaned.

“Day One in Diamant’s Folly. Hello, housemates, your task to win breakfast today is...”

Meanwhile, with the Sixth Doctor, Mel and the Valeyard taken out of Time, repercussions were inevitable.

The planet was known as Pyro Shika and somewhere in its midnight-blue sands lay the half-submerged body of the Doctor. His eyes stared sightlessly at the stars above. In too much pain to move, scarcely to think, he had been tossed from the crevasse above and left to die. A broken, discarded thing.

He couldn't recall if he had even won the day.

It had been hours or perhaps days until Peri had found him again.

“No...” Peri held him. “No—*no!* Not again. Please. I only just got to know you... Doctor, I can't *do* this again...”

“Yes, you can, my girl,” his voice was wheezing like the TARDIS herself. “You see... You...”

The Doctor's broad high forehead was bruised purple, the mop of curly blonde hair matted to his scalp. The cat-like eyes were dull. Near lifeless. The exertion had caused him to nearly go blind.

This really was his curtain call.

“Doctor?” she sounded so frightened.

His bloodied hand clutched hers. “For who beckons beyond the door, Peri, who knows?” He startled. There was a whisper. Not Peri, someone else. Not unlike hearing his voice at the centre of a crowded room. Suddenly, abruptly, he could hear everything they were saying. Every word. “Who’s there?”

And the voice answered. It was Change.

A milky-white glow appeared around the Doctor’s features. Slowly, at first. Like gold being poured from a smelter until everything, within and without, that made him the Doctor was gone. Melted away. His sixth self had never truly settled. Not really. But then, it had never been given the opportunity to do so. Three worlds and a death? That was cruel. Cruel, too, were the poisoned scars of Androzani. They remained, etched into his biodata, and resumed their devastation over the regenerative process. This next incarnation, they decided, would be something else entirely. A new kind of traveller in Space and Time. The regeneration coalesced, a million possible choices at their fingertips, and—

The Seventh Doctor sat up and saw Peri staring at him.

Tears still in her eyes.

A mercurial and happy-go-lucky character, the Seventh Doctor, with his bald head and winsome eyes, avoided trouble. Peri and later, Dorothy too, visited beautiful planets and enjoyed peaceful encounters with the life forms they met. Of all the incarnations they’d ever lived, the Doctor’s seventh self proved the most joyous. Life was a garden party and he’d no wish to venture beyond the trees.

It was paradise.

But it was a paradise for one.

Cloistered and contained as readily as any Time Lord scrutinary archive. Over all his lifetimes, escaping Gallifrey, it had taken only the instability of one regeneration for him to build the same prison bars for

himself. Aboard his TARDIS, if there were any circumstance that grew too dour, too Machiavellian, then he was away. His TARDIS, too. Together, they were giddy fools, wounded beyond sense, who never engaged in the worlds around them.

Once, long ago, displaced in a Time and a Space not his own, the Doctor was faced with the dilemma of a people doomed to die in fire. Their world, a place that rewarded cruelty and brutality, was to be annihilated by the very efficiency that had propelled it to the depths of its power.

He had told them, earnestly, that he would save all their lives if he could. No one deserved to die in such a firestorm. Not even the worst of them. To do so, however, would cause a cosmic disaster. It wasn't the first of such decisions he had made and it wouldn't be his last. At the behest of the survivors, he left them to die. He rode the crest of a temporal wave back to his own Time where he remained catatonic. Eventually, he overcame his shock—outwardly, at least—and put an end to the same meddling evil that destroyed that other, terrible world.

As all things are possible in Creation, there is an iteration of events where the Doctor never awoke or worse—never escaped the inferno and died with them.

These events, these worst-case scenarios, are cauterised by structures retrofitted to the pattern of history by the Time Lords. Other powers, just as old as them, also maintained the equilibrium in their own way. Together, the Axis, the Logopolitans, the Event Synthesiser, the Guardians, the Glory, they all formed their own hitching points for all causality. Bulwarks against the chaos of Universes that bore the cuts and bruises of time travel in all its forms.

Until the day that the life of the Doctor's sixth incarnation, alongside the life of one of his last, disintegrated.

The Doctor's presence, while notable on its own, was also vital to the cause and effect of several prominent Galactic events. Time sped on like an out-of-control locomotive, steaming and wild, jumping the time tracks to try and cross a bridge blasted to kingdom come.

It never reached far enough.

Even in the Doctor's fourth incarnation, there had been an urgency to restore the balance. A balance that was never rectified. Not really. The Doctor's Universe stood against the pressures of the Millennium Wars, the repeated scattering of the Key to Time, transdimensional bleed from the Dark Times, and only Gallifrey knew what else...

Even fail-safe mechanisms fail.

Something broke.

A facet of the tesseract that made up Time finally gave way to the pressure. The damage was too extensive and the Sixth Doctor's death, already uncertain, alongside the vanishing of the Valeyard, pulled that final King of Diamonds from the house of cards. The metaphorical hands that once moved planets and suns simply let the danger fall between their fingertips.

Time, scarred and bleeding, continued to oblivion.

And at TransAllied Inc., a new marketing campaign was launched by the Dalek sympathisers, Arnold and Lorraine Baynes, for bodily reclamation into foodstuffs at the hand of Davros...

And in a stolen Spanish *hacienda*, the Androgums usurped the Time Lords' symbiotic link from Second Doctor and the Sontarans and ran rampant, starved with bloodlust, through all of Space and Time...

And on the Galactic fringes, a mad Time Lord cartographer spearheaded a cleft of devastation to Mutter Spiral's core, as he fled Time after Time from the impassive Voyager...

And in the Natasia Tor sector, the hidden Weapon, revived by a Hylonomeide, was used to crush millions of worlds across the Affiliation and Tyrikan Resurgence...

And on Archetryx, the Daleks seized control of the Lord President's TARDIS, by guile and diabolical sadism, and used it to conquer Gallifrey with nary an alarm raised...

And...

These events, although dreadful in their own right, were limited purely to the interference of the abbreviated Sixth Doctor's lifetime. Abroad, the situation turned far uglier.

Between powers, across the stars, a tug-of-war frayed all of Time and Space. A melee that should have compelled and propelled every Higher Power, from Guardians to Lloigor, into some form of action.

But strangely, there was no one home.

Alone, truly alone, Diamant spun through the mad fractals of existence, tracing their contours and strange angles. It had been a game. A diversion. Easily created and restored by the Doctors themselves. They pored through the broken carcass of the metaphorical steam train with little understanding.

At least, at first.

Then, recognition and realisation dawned with a terrible certainty that could make even gods cry.

It is difficult to describe the breakdown of everything ever known. Perhaps, it's best described in the form of a metaphor: There was hole at the centre of everything and the hole was getting bigger.

“And there is no longer the Doctor to stop it.”

INTERDIMENSIONAL RESCUE: PART 1



By Tim Bradley

Billy Walker woke up first. After devouring a full English breakfast bar from the TARDIS food machine, he made his way into the console room.

No-one was about.

He walked up to the TARDIS console and pressed a switch to open the scanner screen. Billy gazed in wonder at the time tunnel the TARDIS was traversing through.

According to the Doctor, what he saw was actually the result of the human mind trying to contemplate negative space. Like how, at night, every sound and suggestion became twice as vivid as during the day. The result was some of the most stunning phantasmagoria he'd ever seen. Although, that wasn't to say that the vortex was empty. Far from it. At the bottom left of the scanner, he could just about see what he thought were a flotilla of turtles, catching a time eddy as readily as birds in a slipstream. Fellow travellers on the tides of Time.

He caught himself waving at them. The wonders of the Universe still enthralled him.

Nyssa embraced Billy once she entered the console room. Turning to face her, Billy smiled. She smiled back and they kissed. Billy wondered what their next adventure would be like. Nyssa hoped they would be

able to see Billy's parents in Churchwood Street, Cardiff for Christmas in the year 1965.

Billy was still coming to terms with his fulfilled dream. Nyssa agreed to marry him when they were holidaying in Cannes in the South of France in 2013 during the quest for the Coins of Deno. There was a lot to prepare in terms of their wedding. Billy was happy to have these intimate moments with Nyssa before they got to the serious side of their future together.

Eventually, the Doctor strode into the console room. He didn't look very happy.

"Billy, why didn't you keep your eyes on the scanner?" he said accusingly. "Can't you see that disaster is happening in the time vortex?"

"What are you talking about, Doctor?" Billy asked, confused. "There's nothing happening out there in the..." The young man trailed off, as he soon saw what was on the TARDIS scanner screen. Both he and Nyssa were shocked.

The time vortex had been shattered, like a smashed glass mirror. The trio could see glimpses of various times and places in the shattered fragments, bleeding through incoherently and often phasing in and out at unpredictable rates. It was a chaotic cataclysm. The Doctor piloted the TARDIS to a halt. He and his companions were currently safe, but he wondered for how long.

"Good grief!" Nyssa exclaimed.

"Exactly!" the Doctor retorted.

"I assure you, Doctor," Billy said. "It wasn't like that when I switched the scanner screen on a few minutes ago."

"Billy, I appreciate you and Nyssa need some time to spend together. But once in a while, can you make sure that—?"

“This isn’t Billy’s fault, Doctor,” Nyssa interrupted sharply. “He didn’t know this was going to happen. I didn’t either. Neither did you.”

The Doctor was about to argue further, but he stopped and thought better of it.

“No. You’re quite right, Nyssa. Sorry, Billy. That was rather harsh of me.”

Billy appreciated this event was more traumatic for the Doctor than it was for his friends. Nyssa wondered how the time vortex had ended up like that. The Doctor became anxious about how long he should keep the TARDIS in her holding pattern within the time vortex. He didn’t want them to linger.

Gradually, the Doctor noticed something on the TARDIS console. Nyssa and Billy saw it too.

“Is that... a crystal on the TARDIS console?” Billy asked. “It came out of nowhere!”

“It’s a diamond, Billy,” Nyssa told him. “And it seems to be glowing.” Thinking for a moment, she asked, “Doctor, it’s not the Zorbius crystal, is it?”

During their quest for the Coins of Deno, Nyssa and the Doctor became trapped in a mirror due to the presence of the Zorbius crystal at Cranleigh Hall in the year 1926. Billy teamed up with Lady Ann and her husband Lord Cranleigh to free the Doctor and Nyssa from their prison.

Nyssa recalled how determined Billy was to rescue her and the Doctor then. It endeared her to him more. Billy’s determination was one of the reasons Nyssa agreed to marry him.

“No, this is something different,” the Doctor answered Nyssa. “And yet...”

Silence ensued. Nyssa and Billy became anxious.

“And yet?” Billy prompted.

“I’m not sure,” the Doctor eventually said, frowning. “I recollect having seen a diamond like this before. At some point in my past, I think. Or is it in my future?”

Nyssa observed that the Doctor had become worried.

“Perhaps we should take the diamond off the console,” Billy suggested. “It’s glowing still, but we should be able to...”

Nyssa’s warning came too late, as Billy touched the diamond. He cried out in pain. Billy backed away and Nyssa examined his left hand, seeing it burnt.

“Are you alright, Billy?”

Billy gasped, recovering from the pain. “That diamond must be stuck to the console.”

“You’re always putting your foot in it,” Nyssa remarked.

Before Nyssa could go to fetch the first aid kit for Billy, a deep commanding voice boomed out in the console room, startling the trio.

“Doctor. We’re pleased that We have gained you and your friends’ attention.”

The Doctor looked around the console room. “Who’s speaking? Where are you? Where do you come from? Are you responsible for—?”

“One question at a time, Doctor,” the voice interrupted.

The Doctor looked at the diamond on the TARDIS console. He then realised. He remembered.

“Ah.” The Doctor dropped his head. “Of course. Sorry. I thought after our previous encounters, I’d try to get my first innings in.”

“You always do.”

“Call me a tired old traditionalist,” the Doctor smiled, flippantly.

“You’re anything but.”

“Doctor, who is that?” asked Billy.

The Time Lord indicated the diamond. “Nyssa, Billy, let me introduce you to—”

“Diamant.”

“Never heard of you,” Billy shook his head.

“We are forever, aren’t we Doctor?”

The Doctor smiled tightly. “Persistent, certainly.”

“This isn’t another Salvador type, is it, Doctor?” he groaned.

Salvador was another recent adversary that the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy encountered in their travels. Unbeknown to the trio, Salvador was on the planet Earth when they visited the city of Bath in three time zones. He reappeared on the planet Junglos where Nyssa and Billy found their love for each other.

“A little more playful, Billy, unfortunately,” groaned the Doctor.

“Playful?” Nyssa echoed.

“There is a crisis, Doctor. Unexpected and unmitigated. We will explain,” Diamant continued. *“But first, your presence is required.”*

“We’re not going anywhere,” the Doctor declared.

A hint of frustration entered their voice. *“There is not time—”*

“To a Time Lord? I think you underestimate—”

At that moment, the diamond on the TARDIS console grew increasingly bright before it enveloped the entire console room.

“Did We say required? We meant demanded.”

Sometime later, Nyssa was woken up by the Doctor and Billy.

Regaining consciousness, she refocused, as the Doctor checked to see she was alright. Nyssa assured both the Doctor and Billy that she was fine. Taking in their surroundings, the trio saw they were in a darkly-lit chamber. The source of light came from a column in the centre of the room. It was a white light with a tinge of blue. Nyssa noticed the TARDIS parked nearby and assumed that they were in Diamant's lair.

She enquired about Diamant and the Doctor guessed that they were one of the Higher Power beings like the Great Intelligence, the Guardians of Time and the Toymaker. Billy wondered if Salvador counted as a Higher Power. The Doctor told him "No," as Salvador came to Gallifrey by accident when he was a little boy from the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife on Earth in 1797. It was because of the Doctor that Salvador became a god-like being.

"Well, we're here," Nyssa said. "Wherever here is. And when."

"A terrestrial planetoid, I believe. The gravitational field here feels remarkably natural. Although..."

Billy halted where he stood, careful not to move. "Although, what? 'Although, we're perfectly safe? Nothing to worry about?'"

"Although, I imagine this place is on the edge of our own Universe."

"How's that?"

The Doctor gestured up into a small fissure in the ceiling. Just large enough for the three to catch a glimpse of the night sky beyond.

"The constellations... They're all scrunched up like a quilt," Billy realised. "All clustered together..."

"Like the Universe when the entropy wave struck Traken." Nyssa shivered and bowed her head. "Doctor, I don't like it here."

"Jitters?"

She nodded.

"No, I don't like it either," he admitted.

“It’s rather... unscientific, this feeling,” she demurred.

“Well, this planet doesn’t seem to have a local sun. It’s rogue. That means its course is most likely outside of the Gallifreyan noosphere.”

“Beyond the frontier of... what exactly?” she asked.

“Everything known.” He shrugged. “Everything unknown. We will soon be beyond the frontier of understanding. In short, travelling into the arms of a great deal to worry about.”

“Speaking of which,” Billy dusted off his hands. “Where’s our host when we need to see him?”

“Them,” corrected the Doctor. “Usually. Although, him, her or them is possible. It’ll depend on the...”

Just then, a bright light in the shape of a diamond appeared in the chamber. The light solidified and eventually, after several permutations, became the form of a man. As he came into focus, the man wore a diamond-shaped jester’s hat on his head. Nyssa observed he had diamond patterns on his business suit. The incongruity of the jester’s hat and business suit confused her.

“...circumstance,” concluded the Doctor.

“And here We are, at last!” Diamant declared. “Stabilised. For the time present. Your quest is about to begin, Doctor. You and your friends, Nyssa and Billy, are going to need every resource to solve the puzzles.”

“What’s this about?” the Doctor demanded. “How do you know so much—?”

“Come, come, Doctor,” Diamant interrupted. “No time to chit-chat. Your Universe is about to be crushed. You have to restore balance in the time vortex to prevent that happening.”

Smiling, Diamant clapped his hands and moved them about like a magician. A series of images appeared before the TARDIS trio. A variety of planets and cosmic events.

“As the time vortex is shattered, five people from five different dimensions have slipped through and ended up scattered throughout your Universe,” continued Diamant. “Your task is to return those five people to their Universes and to restore the cracks in the fabric of reality.”

“Not another quest,” Billy groaned. The experience that he, his fiancée and the Doctor had in the Deno system still gave Billy terrifying nightmares.

“How are we to rescue these five people scattered throughout our Universe?” the Doctor asked.

“Simple,” Diamant replied. “Pick them up in your TARDIS.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it!”

“Why them?”

“Why not? Is not every life valuable?”

The Time Lord sensed a catch. “Very well,” he said reluctantly. “Come along, Nyssa and Billy. Let’s not delay our rescue mission.”

The Doctor and his companions made their way back to the TARDIS. Before they could enter however, the trio ended up bumping into an invisible wall. Falling on their backs, the trio were startled by what they had experienced.

“You didn’t think it was going to be that easy, did you?” Diamant chuckled. “You have to unlock the force field around your TARDIS first. Let us see how clever you all are.”

“Parlour tricks!” scoffed the Doctor.

“Then, you should have no trouble, should you, Doctor?”

At that moment, a table appeared. The trio got to their feet and saw five diamonds on it.

“You need to unlock the codes in the diamonds before you can rescue your five people,” Diamant explained. “Once the first diamond is unlocked, it will free the TARDIS as well as provide spatial-temporal coordinates to locate the first person to be collected. The other four diamonds will function in the same way for the four remaining people to be saved.”

“It’s wonderful to feel needed, isn’t it?” Billy whispered ruefully to Nyssa.

The Doctor sensed there was something more to this. He was about to protest before Diamant interrupted cheerily.

“Again, this is no time for chit-chat, Doctor. Get to it! You and your friends have the fabric of reality to save. You mustn’t dilly-dally! *Ta-ta!*”

Waving, Diamant soon vanished in the diamond-light. A moment of silence ensued. The Doctor, Nyssa and Billy were troubled, looking at the five diamonds on the table before them.

Half an hour later, the trio struggled to solve the puzzle to unlock the code for the first diamond. Despite the Doctor and Nyssa’s technical expertise and Billy’s common sense, there didn’t seem to be many clues to help them out. The diamond’s digital display with its keypad underneath didn’t help much either. There also weren’t any chairs for the trio to sit on at the table to work this problem out. They had to sit on the floor.

You’d think this Diamant person would provide us with chairs, Billy thought.

Inspiration soon came to Nyssa, as she got up and went over to examine the first diamond on the table. After examining it for a while,

she asked, “Doctor, there are calculator functions on this diamond’s keypad.”

The Doctor and Billy got up to join Nyssa. They examined the diamond’s keypad in turn.

“Yes, so there are,” the Doctor remarked. “What about them?”

“I think the answer to our problem has been staring us in the face,” Nyssa replied. “We should be entering the values of the geometric properties of each diamond. The number of vertices, edges and lateral faces.”

“Vertices?” Billy enquired, baffled. “I’m afraid I wasn’t very good at O Level Maths.”

“Look at the five diamonds. They’re not identical. This one is not even a regular octahedron. Its faces are not all equal sided triangles.” She traced her finger along the edges and counted them. “Twelve. Let’s enter the number of edges, vertices and faces for this diamond via its keypad. We might be able to unlock the force field that surrounds the TARDIS before we’re given the spatial-temporal coordinates to rescue our five people.”

“I believe you’re onto something, Nyssa,” the Doctor commended her.

“I believe the Doctor when he says you’re onto something, dear,” Billy nodded.

They tried various combinations of twelve, six and eight, but the force field remained stubbornly in place.

“I had a feeling that my initial solution was too obvious. Let’s try to calculate the surface area. I’m confident this is our way out of this place,” Nyssa replied.

“Unfortunately, we can’t use the usual formula for an octahedron,” remarked the Doctor. “You see, the length of an edge squared is

multiplied by the square root of three, and the result multiplied by two.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said Billy. “But what formula *do* we need?”

“I need a tape measure, a pen and a pad to write down the measurements of the triangular faces,” Nyssa said. “Then I could work out the surface area of the first diamond quicker, and we’d be on our way out in the TARDIS sooner than expected.”

“I have a tape measure, pen and pad,” the Doctor said, rummaging through his coat pockets. “Bigger on the inside coat pockets, remember?”

“Anything I can do to help, Nyssa?” Billy enquired.

“Once I’ve worked out the calculations, you can enter them using the diamond’s keypad as I read them out to you.”

“Yes! Happy to do that.”

Once the Doctor had taken his tape measure, pen and pad out; Nyssa took them and used them to work out the first diamond’s surface area. The Doctor pitched in and helped. The method now revealed, Nyssa soon finished her calculations and handed the first diamond over to Billy, which he took.

At that moment, Diamant’s voice echoed. “*And one more thing.*”

In an instant, an impossible night fell in the chamber.

“Terrific...” Billy sighed.

The Doctor rummaged in his pockets. “I’ve my flashlight in here somewhere...”

Nyssa told Billy to listen carefully as she gave him the numbers for the first diamond to be entered via its keypad. The numbers had to be entered correctly, otherwise they weren’t going anywhere. By flashlight,

Billy understood and the Doctor double-checked each number before Billy pressed the enter key. Billy entered each value successfully.

Once the numbers for the first diamond had been entered, a mechanism unlocked. A soft click in the darkness. Soon, a sizzling noise occurred around the TARDIS. Gingerly, the Doctor made his way over to the blue box. Thankfully, he didn't end up bumping into an invisible wall. He checked the TARDIS exterior and fortunately it was tangible. He then used his TARDIS key to open the doors. It was a relief once he managed to open them. The TARDIS console room hummed inside.

"It worked," the Doctor cheered triumphantly. "The force field is down. We can enter the TARDIS and leave. Well done, Nyssa!"

Nyssa smiled. She checked the first diamond, which she gently took from Billy to see whether the spatial-temporal coordinates for their first person to rescue had come up on the display.

There was a brief moment in the dark where she thought she saw something. The light of the console room reflected on roe or pearls. Shining in the dark like a thousand eyes.

Thankfully, the diamond's display was engaged and she informed the Doctor.

"Splendid!" the Doctor said cheerfully. "We'd better get a move on then before reality collapses like Diamant said. Billy, collect the other four diamonds. We don't want to leave them behind."

Billy picked up the remaining four diamonds from the table before he followed Nyssa and the Doctor into the TARDIS.

The TARDIS ended up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the planet Earth in the year 1955. Entering the first diamond's spatial-temporal coordinates into the TARDIS computer was straightforward. It was dark when the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy exited the blue box. Fireworks

were going off and exploding in the night sky. The Doctor deduced it was Guy Fawkes' Night. He was reminded of the fire he had caused in London in 1666.

It didn't take long to find their first lost soul. He was hiding in an alleyway, away from Newcastle's busy streets. The Doctor convinced the young person that he, Nyssa and Billy had come to rescue him. Once they saw him, thanks to their pocket torches and the fireworks, the Doctor and Nyssa were surprised to see who it was.

"Adric!" they both exclaimed.

"Doctor! Nyssa!" the young Alzarian exhaled, relieved. "Oh I'm glad to see you two! What's going on? Where am I...?" It was then he noticed Billy. "Who's this?"

"Adric, this is Billy," introduced Nyssa. "Don't worry. He's with us."

"Is Adric the one you've been telling me about?" Billy whispered. "The boy who..."

Nyssa hushed Billy whilst the Doctor talked to Adric.

"It's, um... It's good to see you, Adric," he said nervously. "Listen, this may come as a shock to you but... This isn't your Universe."

"What?"

"You've ended up in an alternative reality. A being called Diamant brought you here. There are four other people from different Universes who've ended up here the same as you."

Adric took a moment to process everything. "I see. It makes sense."

"Does it?" Nyssa reacted, surprised.

"Yes. I felt a strange sensation before I came here. I couldn't explain it then, but it's logical I would end up in another Universe."

"What's the last thing you remember, Adric?" the Doctor asked.

Adric was initially confused by the question. “Well, the last thing I remember was when we three—you, me and Nyssa—completed the quest for the Coins of Deno.”

“But... But that’s not what happened,” Billy blurted out. “It was me, you Doctor and you Nyssa who completed the...”

Nyssa hushed Billy again before she added, “Remember, Billy! Time works differently in the Universe he comes from.”

Adric looked suspiciously at Billy. “Is there something I should know about? What is this...Billy person to you, Nyssa?”

“He’s my fiancé, Adric.”

“What?”

“Yes, I’m her fiancé,” Billy joined in. “Is that a problem?”

The Doctor interrupted, “Adric? Do you remember being aboard a space freighter with Cybermen on it.”

“Of course I remember! You rescued me from the space freighter before it crash-landed into prehistoric Earth. We did a... what did you call it? A materialisation flip-flop. We ended up in the Triassic period. It took you forever to repair the TARDIS.”

“I see.”

“You don’t remember?” Adric looked at him.

“And Tegan?” Nyssa asked. “You remember Tegan, Adric?”

“How could I forget Tegan? We dropped her off at Heathrow Airport after we got her back to her own time on Earth. The day after she left. She wanted to tend to some things regarding her aunt.”

“Vanessa,” the Doctor volunteered.

“Yes... You really don’t—?”

“Yes, well, we can’t stand around chatting,” the Doctor interjected. “We need to get you back to your Universe, Adric. Come along! The TARDIS isn’t far.”

The second diamond had to be unlocked to switch off the force field surrounding the TARDIS, which had been put in place once the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy exited into Newcastle in 1955.

All arranged by Diamant, no doubt, the Doctor thought.

Thankfully, mathematics helped again. Adric pitched in and helped too. Once the geometric values for the second diamond had been entered, the force field switched off and the spatial-temporal coordinates for their next destination were provided. The Doctor, Nyssa and Billy took Adric inside the TARDIS.

The next port of call was an alien desert planet called Ukkaj. A lawless waystation on the edge of the Isop Galaxy. Once the TARDIS arrived, the Doctor and Billy stepped out. Nyssa agreed to look after Adric. Billy was concerned about whether Nyssa would be alright with Adric in the TARDIS. He didn’t like the way he was giving suspicious looks at him. Nyssa assured Billy that it would be alright. She hoped to explain as best as she could to Adric about what was going on. She emphasised that the Doctor would need someone like Billy to help him search for their second lost soul. Nyssa and Billy agreed to take it in turns when they ventured out to rescue someone with the Doctor.

The Doctor and Billy walked in a barren desert. The sun shone all around and there was nothing but sand everywhere. Wondering who their second person to rescue was going to be, a spear was thrown at them, which thankfully missed.

“Cover!” the Doctor pointed to a nearby dune.

Billy pointed further left. “That one’s bigger!”

The two dived down and turned to see their attacker. A sharp sword was drawn and aimed at them. It turned out to be a woman with striking eyes, almost piercing. She wore an armoured cuirass better, which was suited to a colder climate. Although, Billy noted, the metal edges were lined with condensation.

“Speak swiftly!” she said. “Lest you’d prefer your heads severed from your shoulders!”

The Doctor implored, “We mean you no harm. We’re here to rescue you.”

It was then the woman seemed to recognise the Doctor.

“Doctor?” she gradually smiled. “It’s you! Thank goodness you’ve come. I thought I was going to be alone for a... a very long time, indeed. Are you well? Where is—?”

“I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“Doctor, you do not remember? It’s me! Erimem!”

“Erimem?” Billy echoed. “Catchy.”

“I am Erimemushinteperem. Former Pharaoh of Egypt and... and current Queen of Peladon.”

“Should we bow?” Billy asked the Doctor, earnestly. “I feel as though we should bow.”

“Egypt? Peladon?” the Doctor sounded intrigued. “Your majesty—”

“Erimem, please, Doctor,” she corrected.

He smiled, gently, and looked around. “Where is your retinue?”

“Gone.” She stared at the horizon. “My pilot underestimated the power of the storms in this region. Her specialty was Federation trampschooners. She was... unprepared.” That same piercing gaze returned. “I was hoping to chart my way back with a cartography robot from the shuttle, but it has not returned. Have you seen it?”

“Sorry to say, we’ve only just arrived.”

“Then it is lost.”

“You were one of my travelling companions, I take it?”

Erimem nodded. “You, myself and Peri.”

“Peri?”

The adopted Peladonian queen bridged the distance between them.

“We knew each other well, she was like a sister to...” She straightened.

“Your face, it seems—”

“What?” he asked.

Erimem held a hand up to his cheek, as if to dare him into turning into an illusion or mirage. The Doctor didn’t flinch.

“You are different,” she said.

“Not too different, I hope,” he answered.

She shook her head and lowered her fingers. “I cannot say more. You have warned me of such things. It is of no matter, I am grateful to see an old friend, even if he does not see me.”

Billy nudged the Doctor. “Is this like one of your future companions in the TARDIS? You know, after Nyssa and I have gone?”

“Possibly. Which means there could be a future for me. That’s reassuring.”

“For me as well,” smiled Erimem, wryly. “I shall have missed our travelling.”

“Of course, this young woman could also come from an alternate timeline where she and her friend Peri join you, me and Nyssa in the TARDIS.”

Billy addressed Erimem. “Do you know who I am... *err*... your majesty?”

“Erimem, please,” she examined him. “No, I do not know you.”

“And Nyssa? Do you know Nyssa?”

“Not... personally, no.” She frowned trying to recall the name. “At least, I do not think so.”

Billy turned to the Doctor. “Seems to be the former rather than the latter, Doctor.”

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions, Billy. Instead, let’s get this young woman into the TARDIS.”

“With haste,” nodded Erimem. “I would not wish for the storm to finish its work with us.”

This seemed to be the case, as a billowing sandstorm approached from a distance. The Doctor and Billy escorted Erimem back to the TARDIS.

Soon, the Doctor, with Billy’s help, entered the geometric values for the third diamond to switch off the force field surrounding the TARDIS to re-enter. Billy remarked how their current quest seemed to be easy.

Too easy, the Doctor thought.

Once the force field had been switched off, the Doctor, Billy and Erimem entered the TARDIS, just in time before the sandstorm caught up with them.

It was Billy’s turn to look after Adric and Erimem in the TARDIS, whilst the Doctor and Nyssa ventured out on the planet Xaos. Billy was anxious whenever he was in the same room with Adric in the TARDIS, but thankfully Erimem was there to ease the tension between them. Meanwhile, the Doctor and Nyssa saw quite a number of cliff ranges and water holes on the planet Xaos. The sky was also a mixture of blue and purple.

Quite a contrast to the planet Ukkaj, the Doctor thought.

The Doctor and Nyssa wondered who they were going to find on Xaos. Thankfully, they didn't have to ponder on it for long, as they soon met up with the person they'd come for. They were astonished to see him.

The voice came from the branches of a shadowed tree above a watering hole. "On behalf of the village of Stockbridge in the country of England," he fumbled, "belonging to the United Nations, an organisation of one hundred and forty-seven member states who represent almost all of the human inhabitants of the planet Earth, I send—*mbhoohoop!*"

The branch cracked beneath him and the figure fell. The Doctor and Nyssa rushed up to him, pulling him up by the sleeves of his sheepskin bomber jacket.

"Greetings, Max. I did warn you to keep it brief." The Doctor dusted him down. "Are you alright? No bones broken?"

"Doctor!" the spectacled man who wore a cap exclaimed. "Oh, blimey! I'm so glad you've come. Where the blooming heck are we this time? Venus?"

"Not this time, no."

"Max!" Nyssa exclaimed. "Maxwell Edison!"

"That's me."

"How come you're on an alien planet?" she asked.

"It's my natural habitat," Max looked askance at Nyssa. "Do I know you?"

It was Nyssa's turn to be surprised. "You don't know who I am?"

"No. Should I have, Doctor?"

Nyssa began. "We met in Stockbridge when—"

The Doctor interrupted. “Max, do you remember a mention of Althrace?”

“Yes. You told me about St. Justin and... Why are you making that face?”

The Doctor was wincing. “Laws of Time. It never does too well to know too much about one’s own future.”

“What’s the date where you come from, Max?” Nyssa asked.

“2023 by Earth’s Gregorian calendar,” the UFO enthusiast answered. “Getting older, perhaps, but my memory’s still sharp. At least, I hope it is.”

“We should definitely have met.”

“Then, you don’t remember seeing us again in Stockbridge in the year 2010 where the Sontarans attacked and you had the Book of Althrace?” the Doctor enquired. “We also met up with you a couple of years later and brought two schoolchildren from the 1950s for you to look after.”

“Billy was with us on both occasions,” added Nyssa.

“Billy...?” Max shrugged. “Sorry, all, but who’s he?”

Realisation dawned on Nyssa and the Doctor.

Max’s eyes widened behind his glasses. “Oh, no, have I lost my memory? My marbles? Am I infected with some hideous alien parasite?”

“Nothing a quick jolt in the delta wave augments won’t fix,” the Doctor reassured, pained.

He conferred quietly with Nyssa. “This Max is clearly from an alternative timeline,” the Time Lord sounded almost embarrassed with himself. “I should’ve recognised it sooner.”

“How long do you suppose he’s been travelling with you?” she asked.

“What difference does it make?”

“He might be of some help determining what Diamant is up to.”

“Good point. I’ll ask him.” The Doctor addressed Max again. “Max, how is it you know me, but not Nyssa and Billy?”

“We’ve been travelling in the TARDIS for months now, Doctor. Or is it years? Time flies when you’re having fun.”

“You’re... You’re travelling with me?”

“Yes. Ever since we first met when stars fell on Stockbridge.”

“You remember our first meeting?”

“Of course! You invited me to join you in your travels in that blue box of yours. I happily obliged. We three have had many adventures since.”

“Three?”

“Yes. You, me and an American soldier called Gus who we picked up from an alternative timeline. You remember him?”

“Of course, Max. Gus Goodman. I remember him.” The Doctor was saddened, then he realised. “Wait. Max, is Gus still alive?”

“Alive? Of course he is. At least he was the last time I saw him. Where is he by the way?”

Nyssa nudged the Doctor. “Who’s this Gus you and Max are talking about?”

“Adric hasn’t been the only one I’ve failed, Nyssa.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You weren’t to know.” The Doctor addressed Max again. “We’d better get you back inside the TARDIS, Max. Come on. It’s not far.”

The Doctor and Nyssa escorted Max back to the TARDIS. Once they had returned to the police box, the Doctor and Nyssa entered the geometric values of the fourth diamond via its keypad. This time, the volume of the diamond was required too. Soon the force field that

surrounded the TARDIS was switched off and the Doctor, Nyssa and Max were able to go inside.

The TARDIS' fourth spatial-temporal destination was a 12th-century medieval castle at night-time. Nyssa and Billy accompanied the Doctor this time whilst Max agreed to look after Adric and Erimem. The TARDIS trio assumed no-one could get to their rescued parties once a force field was placed around the Ship.

Upon exiting the TARDIS, the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy heard sounds of battle nearby. They assumed a siege was taking place. Nyssa was reminded of the medieval castle she and the Doctor had visited in Stockbridge. The trio hoped to find their fourth person to rescue very soon.

Thankfully, they found her. She was caught in a struggle with some medieval knights that captured her. They dragged her along whilst she shouted "Get off!" and "Let go!" Soon, Nyssa and Billy ran in to help the woman. It was a miscalculated manoeuvre, as Nyssa and Billy soon got captured by the knights themselves.

Fortunately, the Doctor had one of his sonic screwdrivers on hand. Ever since the sonic screwdriver he used in 17th century England on Earth was destroyed by the Terileptils, he built a new batch of screwdrivers to keep in one of the TARDIS drawers. Unfortunately, each lifespan of the new screwdrivers wasn't long enough. The Time Lord came to discover that fact when he used the first screwdriver of the new batch at the Rotenhend Hotel 360 in the 37th century. He hoped that the current screwdriver he was using would last longer than the previous ones.

The Doctor switched the sonic screwdriver on and it buzzed away. Waving the screwdriver around like a magic wand, the Doctor proclaimed a magic curse to scare the knights away. The trick worked. Nyssa, Billy and the woman were freed whilst the knights ran away in

terror. Everyone sighed with relief. Nyssa was thankful that the Doctor had his sonic screwdriver.

The woman soon recognised the Doctor. “Wait a moment. Doctor, you’re here!”

The Doctor was amazed to see who it was they had rescued. “Sarah Jane Smith! As I live and breathe.” He then became confused. “Wait a minute. How did you recognise my face?”

Sarah Jane didn’t answer the question. “Yes!” she cheered. “A familiar face, at *last!*” She then frowned. “I thought I was going to be alone for quite a long time. Where were you when I needed you?”

“Sarah, this is going to be a challenge to take in, but... I’m not the Doctor you think I am.”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This is a different Universe you’re in. You were plucked out of your own Universe and put into this one.”

“What?! A different Universe?” Sarah Jane then noticed Nyssa and Billy. “And these two?”

“Oh, dear,” Nyssa sighed. “Not this again.”

“You’ve never met us then,” Billy clarified. “I’m Billy and this is Nyssa.”

Sarah Jane studied Billy for a bit. “Wait a moment.” Realisation then dawned. “Are you... Are you Billy Walker?”

Billy was stunned. “Yes. Yes, I am. You know me?”

“Oh thank goodness for another familiar face!” She then explained, “We met at that railway station in Huttle in 1963. The Doctor, Leela and I were in the console room when the TARDIS picked up a temporal anomaly. There was trouble caused by the Vegrons and a one-eyed alien called Sinroth—”

“Wait a minute,” the Doctor interrupted. “Did you say Leela?”

“Yes. We joined you in the TARDIS after we helped you with your regeneration. You fell from a radio telescope at the Pharos Project site on Earth after you had a tussle with the Master following that dreadful business on Logopolis. You don’t remember?”

“I recall the events, Sarah. They just happened differently compared to how you recall them.”

“And Nyssa?” Billy interjected. “You remember Nyssa?”

Sarah Jane studied Nyssa for a moment. She then shook her head. “Sorry, Billy. I’ve met you, but I’ve never met this woman before.”

“And Billy?” Nyssa enquired. “Did he accompany you and... Leela, was it...? In the TARDIS with the Doctor?”

“I’m afraid not,” Sarah Jane answered. “We dealt with the Vegrans, Sinroth and the railway of time, but we said goodbye to Billy once we’d finished.”

“I see,” Nyssa remarked, intrigued.

Billy couldn’t help being put out by this. He was troubled by the notion of another Universe where he never met Nyssa and the Doctor at a railway station in 1963. That he never travelled with them in the TARDIS. That first day where he first met them was the start of the best chapter of his life. Nyssa noticed how troubled Billy was. She took his hand in hers and gently stroked it to reassure him.

“Well, it’s nice to see you again, Sarah,” the Doctor told her. “But we need to get you back to the TARDIS. I’ve got an anxious feeling that time is against us.”

Soon, the four looked to the night sky to see the stars going out. Everyone was shocked by this. Nyssa was reminded of bad memories. Billy recalled when Nyssa told him that she witnessed the entropic destruction of her home planet Traken, which was caused by the

Master on Logopolis. He placed an arm around her shoulder to comfort her.

After switching off the force field surrounding the TARDIS with the geometric values of the fifth diamond entered, the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy took Sarah Jane inside the TARDIS.

Once the spatial-temporal coordinates for the fifth and final destination from the fifth diamond had been entered, the TARDIS soon ended up on an asteroid at the edge of the Universe.

The Doctor, Nyssa and Billy stepped out and saw the amazing wonder of a supernova occurring nearby.

Nyssa was anxious about whether they were safe, as they could get pulled into the supernova's gravitational field in the same manner a black hole would pull them in.

The Doctor shared Nyssa's concerns, hoping they would find their fifth person to rescue soon enough.

It was then that Adric, Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane exited the TARDIS to join them.

"What do you four think you're doing?" the Doctor demanded indignantly. "Get back inside the TARDIS at once!"

"Some of us have been cooped up inside the TARDIS for quite some time," Adric argued. "We need some fresh air."

"A Queen of Peladon and a former Pharaoh doesn't sit idly by," Erimem declared.

"If there's anything we can do to help, we'd be happy to," Max said.

"You can't expect us to wait inside and do nothing, Doctor," Sarah Jane joined in.

“Please,” the Doctor stressed. “It’s important you four stay inside the TARDIS whilst Nyssa, Billy and I look for our fifth lost soul.”

“Why?” Sarah demanded.

“Got it,” Adric snapped his fingers. “Dimensional instability, am I right?”

“You mean we’ll turn into a puddle of goo if we stay out here too long?” gulped Max. “Crumbs.”

“Nothing so melodramatic, surely?” asked Sarah, carefully.

“There are more things dreamt of in Heaven and Earth, Sarah...” exhaled the Doctor. “You’ll be safer under the state of temporal grace.”

“We also don’t know when that supernova will explode in space,” Nyssa pointed out. “We’re exposed to its gravitational pull already.”

“Yeah,” Billy joined in. “So if you four return inside the TARDIS right away, then we’ll have fewer people to worry about.”

“The asteroid isn’t that big,” Sarah Jane argued. “It can’t be difficult to find this fifth person you’re looking for.”

“Agreed,” Adric joined in. “He, she or they could easily appear at any moment and your rescue mission would be complete in a second.”

“Not necessarily, Adric,” Nyssa argued.

At that moment, a young male voice spoke. “I wondered when someone would show up.”

The Doctor, Nyssa and Billy turned to see who it was that had spoken. They as well as Adric, Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane were astounded to see who it was.

“It...can’t be,” Billy began before he trailed off. “He can’t be...well, you know.”

“It must be him,” Nyssa said. “He’s wearing the matching clothes after all.”

“Of course,” the Doctor realised. “It would have to be you, wouldn’t it?”

The person who appeared wore the same clothes as the Doctor—a beige frock coat, a V-neck cricket jumper, brown and beige striped trousers, and white trainers. He didn’t wear the Panama hat though and there wasn’t a stick of celery on the left lapel of his beige frock coat.

He also had a different face compared with the Doctor’s.

“Yes,” the young man beamed. “I’m the Doctor. But probably not the one you were expecting.”



Introducing CALLUM WOODHOUSE...

AS THE FIFTH DOCTOR...

A FAERIE TALE OF OLD GALLIFREY



By Chris Taylor

Hello. Welcome to my Undergallery. I'm the Curator. But which one am I, eh? For simplicity's sake, as our time is short, let's say I'm one that you were expecting. Tall as a stormcrow, with a short crop of snow-white curls perched above a beaky nose and Cheshire grin. A voice as deep as the lines on his face. Eyes blue and wild as the Untempered Schism. Possessed of a certain proclivity for cryptic statements and tapped noses. Yes, that's me. That's the one I am.

But I might not be that Curator come the end of your visit! Oh, no! You might not be quite yourself, by then, either.

And why should either of us expect anything different, eh? It's simply not possible to walk through a museum without being changed by the things you find within. Not if you're really paying attention.

Take, for example, this item here. A simple toy rocket, wouldn't you say? A bit tarnished with age, but well loved. See here, the long, dark cockpit nestled between two narrow wings. I first acquired it some time ago, while I was living under a different name. And no, not the one that I expect you were expecting, ha!

Before I was called the Doctor, I went by the name which my erstwhile mother coined for me... Oh, but you've not heard that story

yet have you? It's a cracker, I promise you! Sadly, that's not the tale which I came prepared to share with you today. I do encourage repeat visits, though. We're always open! The gift shop closes promptly at Six O'Clock, however. Plan your perusings accordingly.

For now, let us refer to my younger self as... Timeless.

Oh! I was such a darling little girl back then! Bright-eyed and wonder-smiled. My hearts filled to the brim with a drive to explore! My greatest wish in those days was to join my mother on her journeys through the cosmos. She was an explorer herself, you see. One of the first to break to venture past the Kasterborous constellation, or so I believed. Alas, young as I was, I had to make do with imagination. Something I possessed in ready supply as I wandered the forests near our home. It was easy enough to pretend myself treading the soft sands of some far-off shore while I trod the rocky earth beneath silver trees and orange suns. Red grass swaying against my ankle boots.

My constant companion in these flights of fancy was my little toy rocket. Brass was the chassis, given texture by scratches and fingerprints. The scars of a well-loved life. A long, dark cockpit sat nestled between two narrow wings fronted by ramscoop intakes. The back of the needle-formed fuselage was taken up with a single, large exhaust port which I could hear roaring through the skies with each sweep of my hand. *Wooooooossssbh!*

Once upon a time... You'll forgive me the cliché, won't you?... On a bright and sunny day, at the foot of an impenetrable forest long dead and gone, I was playing with my darling. Setting it to higher and wider arcs as I saw myself slingshotting Gallifrey's twin suns en route to escape their gravitational clothes. Up on my tippy-toes, my arm stretched out to its longest, I put the toy to its biggest circle ever. At the very moment, in time with the motion of my arm—following after it, you might say—the trees before me changed. Branches curled in on

themselves, and the trunks too. Bending back and around and against one another to form a passageway where they had once been a wall. From within, a honeysuckle wind blew forth. Beckoning me like a favourite song.

I ask you, if confronted with such a sight, would you dare to take the invitation? Venture forth into such an unknown, perhaps unknowable, mystery?

Would it help you to decide If I told you that such sights were, at the time, quite typical on my homeworld? Not this particular visage, mind. But sudden and seemingly nonsense changes in the world around oneself as a general everyday experience. What if I told you that reality as you understand it was hammered into place by deliberate design? The singular composition of a man named Rassilon?

I tell you that before he planted the flag of mathematics atop the universal hill, everything—*absolutely everything*—ran on the whimsical fundamentals of what you would call magic. Physics, chemistry, biology little more than the half-mumbled suggestions of a haphazard cosmos. Cause and effect the punchlines to a joke in need of telling. I'd grant you a third example of the ways by which the metaphysical substrate I was born to was not your own, but such trinuminate strictures were the very sort of thing which could deliver unspeakable beings the heights of power or drive whole civilisations to their knees all those many aeons ago. In the Time Before Time.

With that in mind, I ask again... Would you venture into these strange woods that my younger self saw before her?

Of course, you would! You're here with me, aren't you? You fancy an adventure!

I would too, naturally. And did! One foot ahead of the other until I was there. Holding close the sleeves of my embroidered robe so they wouldn't catch on any of the low-hanging branches. By way of first impression, I was taken by how the end of the corridor

seemed to get further away the further I walked towards it. Was it running away from me? The sweet-smelling wind picked up its pace, setting the trees to sway. Within the rustling of their leaves, I could have sworn I heard a voice. Soft as a whisper, serious as a storm.

“Doooooch... toooooorrrrrrr...”

I must have looked quite confused to the breeze, as I didn't quite connect the sounds to a name. It picked up the pace to shake the leaves about more quickly.

“Doc... torrr...”

“Doctorr...”

“Who?” I asked. You know, I've been told that is the oldest question in the Universe. I'm fairly certain though, that the *real* oldest question has something to do with a chicken and a road in terrible need of crossing. Unaware of the future ramifications of her particular phrasing, my younger self clarified: “Who are you?”

“Diamant...” The whisper called.

As names went, It was good enough. That reminds me, I once knew a wooden smith with a leg named Mann! The Cheem are such lovely people. Where was I? Ah, yes.

“Help... Doctor...”

“You need a doctor!” I asked.

“I.. need... you...”

I pointed at myself and looked about for anyone else the voice might be talking to. This Diamant fellow surely couldn't mean me. Could they? “For what? What can I do?”

“Rescue...” The leaves pleaded.

Oh! It was serious, then! The first rule of any space explorer worthy of their job: Answer any and all distress signals! I strained right up,

stuck my face into one of stern determination, and asked, “What do you need?”

Something moaned in the trees. Low, mournful, slow. I held my toy tight for the comfort.

“It’s... dying...”

“What is? What do you mean?” I asked.

“The Magic... Is dying... Was dying... Will die... Has already died... Hard to say... Came so far.... To find you...”

Me? “Me?—*oouuf!*” The wind had suddenly changed direction and pace. Politely nudging me towards the far side of the tunnel.

“Go!... Save something... Anything... Now...”

Wishing to save a semblance of dignity for myself, I planted my feet in the ground.

“What do I do when I have the magic?”

There came no answer save for the groans and creaks of settling trunks. Not for the minute or two that I could bear to stand around and wait for one.

I dared to ask a deliberately provocative question: “Can I keep it?” It was not for mere greed that I asked. If I were able to bring home to Mother some evidence of this place I had found, that I had gone there and come back again, surely she would judge it as proof that I was ready to fly away with her on her next voyage.

No answer.

Naturally, I took that as permission to do as I pleased with whatever I found. So off I went! Right down the tunnel, which had done me the favour of letting me catch up with the end. As I went forth, the leaves began to pale. Not all at once, mind. A cluster here, a solitary fellow

there. They hardened as they bleached, until they were as hard and strong as Ming's own porcelain, run through with veins of the softest blue. A darker blue was to be found in the limbs and trunks of the forest I now trod within. Specks of darkness twinkled at me from between the silent branches. The stones under my feet smoothed out into stairs. Stairs that headed down, down, down... towards what?

I followed them down into the clearing. No, a whole new realm altogether!

Above me stood a stark white sky teeming with black stars and sparkling silver nebulae. Before me lay a wide mesa of hard and broken land. Cracked like the driest of mud plains, baked hard as ceramic. In the space between the parched parcels of land, a river flowed. But one of light! Coursing streams of red, orange, purple, yellow, purest white streaming past my feet as water might. Warming me with a heat I could feel nestle into my bones like hot cocoa on a cold winter's night; peaceful and welcome. The light flowed in one direction; to the edge of the mesa some hundred feet hence. From there, it washed on into the horizon, heedless of the cliff that the land had become. Bending and rejoining and separating in countless ways, slowing arcing upwards towards the endless bounty of space. I stood there in awe of it, slowly and vainly trying to take it all in.

Rooted at the mesa's edge was a stone pillar, wider at the base than the top. Dark marbled slate in colour, its intermittently grooved form given long shadows by the under-light. From its general direction, I heard soft crying.

I looked to my toy, and my toy pointed its nose back to me without comment. I kept walking. Some of the light-streets were no more than a few centimetres wide. Others were so vast that they had bridges. It was little trouble to make my way to the stone. I had expected someone hiding behind it. What I found instead was a face carved upon it with a master's touch, not much higher than my mother's. I was looking not at a natural stone, but a statue!

Don't get ahead of me, now. The effigy was weeping, but it was no angel.

Her chiselled hair was so long as to roll over her dress, into the sort of high-bodied gown that would have looked quite fetching on Maid Marion. Her face was posed in a terrible frown, the very definition of sorrow. Her eyes were closed, and the crests of her highborn cheeks were wet with fresh tears. Where the course of her tears had run, moss had grown. All the way down to the barren earth. Line upon line of tiny, yellow-gold leaves. Not of living plant matter, as I knew it, but more porcelain. So many lines of this growth had worked their way into the lines of her outfit that if one were to assume a leaf of moss for every tear, then this artwork had been crying for a terribly long time.

Mine had been a happy life up to that point, so far as I could recall. For the life of me, I could not fathom a pain so terrible as to make a lifeless effigy bewail. I had to do something. Anything. But what could little old me do? I could offer comfort! If someone had walked up to my home in such a sort, I wouldn't hesitate. A guest could do no less.

I regarded my rocket, and prized open the tightly-sealed cockpit. Now, the toymaker had never intended anyone to pop the toy open, and so there was nothing in the way of a model bridge or engine room or little bronze men going about the business of keeping my imagination in fighting shape. Only a formless hollow in which I housed a kerchief for the specific purpose of wiping away any grime that dare mar the ship's outer grandeur. I retrieved said cloth and reached up to wipe the tears away. I withdrew my hand slowly, once the work was done. The pillar's eyes opened wide! Pitted pupils turned my way. With a gasp of shock, I jerked backwards. A tumbling of earth behind my foot warned me not to take another step!

The stone woman's head turned next, to the sound of an awful, gravelly groan. Bits of grit and stone rained away from her neck and collar. Far more gravel fell off as one hand, still of stone, broke loose

from its encasement beside the dress to touch a cheek which was already wet again to trace the sprouting evidence of her misery.

“Why are you crying?” I asked.

“My son is dead,” she told me, in words of granite.

I looked over the edge of the mesa for the first time. I could not see a bottom through the rainbow mists. Only more streams of light. A spider’s web of majesty. Far in the distance, more mesas, tall and dark, their light cascading down as would waterfalls. I looked back to the stone woman to ask, “Did he fall down?”

Her other arm freed itself: its contours were notably planar where they’d been sided by the dress, and more gravel fell from its obtuse vertices. With it, she pointed to the colourful sky.

“He got them all onto the ships. All of them! They’re safe, in a place where Time won’t touch them. Won’t wear them down, or make them tire of one another. I remained behind, to close the way. But the enemy was close, and he sailed into them. To buy me the time I needed...” Her voice collapsed into a wail of pumice, coarse and sharp. As I watched, heartbroken, more moss bloomed upon her face. All the way up to the very corners of her eyes. “It was only supposed to be me. But my son is dead and Time will not let me forget that he is in my past.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, patting her arm. Her stone flesh was as cold as the light was warm. It seemed so very rude to ask what I needed. But also more important than ever, in a way that I couldn’t quite explain to myself. “I’ve been sent to save some piece of this place, so it won’t be lost forever like your son. Is there anything you could offer?”

“There is nothing left here but my grief, and the fluorescence that bore my people to their new realm.” A grumbling hand waved to the light that flowed to my left.

Young as innocent as I was, it never occurred to me that I couldn’t scoop up a sifter of pure light. It did occur to me that I neglected to

bring a thermos, or anything else with which to take up a cupful of the stuff. Except... I stuffed the hanky into my sleeve, and made for the closest stream. I knelt down, and let my rocketship take up cargo of light. It splashed against the interior and settled into its new surroundings. Five-fold lines of cold washed over each other in the gentle tide formed by my own pulse beating against the container. I turned to thank the woman, but she had already turned from me to resume her weeping. Her sobs followed me back over the leaps and bridges and into the tunnel whence I came.

The trees became once more those I recognized from home. Though I confused their darker tone as having to do something with less light. I did not see how many thorns had grown up among them. I should have realised that that the tearing of my robe, just atop my right shoulder, was no accident. Particularly now that the wind was gone. But I was far too absorbed with the sight of a new opening in the woods. A second leg of this journey? Yes, please! I wanted very much not to leave my sojourn on such a sad note.

Into the new tunnel I went, double-checking as I did that the way home was still there. I was quicker to notice the change in the trees here. How the leaves took on dark edges while their leaves became more pale. Not in drops and drabs, as the other place, but a steady and gradual transformation from things of nature to sculptures of stained glass. The trunks comprised of twisted spools of metal.

I was so fascinated by this alteration that I failed to see that the ground was falling away beneath me. A split-second sensation of nothing under my big toe saved me from an unhappy plunge to a sharp-bladed lawn a half-a-meter lower. More glass. This feature was part of a whole other layer of ground. There was still a path ahead of me, made of a trail of floating stones levitating above other, larger ones. Which as I went forth became several layers comprised of free-floating ground all drifting lazily from one another. Boulders and

swatches of tilled earth, gardens and hedge-fences of glass. Each piece turned to different angles from its fellows.

The sky was a ghastly yellow, the clouds oily-wet and black as pitch. The air tasted of the soot I was stepping across. There was more in the air than stones. Pieces of battlements floated there, slowly passing one another. Homes and playground and see-through structures for which I had no reference as to function. Half a crystal dome rolled underneath me. More trees, their candy cane roots exposed through clumps of tenacious indigo soil. Tiny, unidentifiable dross. An endless horizon of levitating rubble. To the far left, the roof of a transparent tower collided into what might have been a three-story-tall chandelier, their mutual death spiral forming a slow-motion train of further debris.

There came a point where I dared go no further. The ground beneath my stepping stone was too far down, and too crumbled up to risk it. The next stone ahead of me much too far away for a little girl to jump.

“Hello?” I called out.

“Hello!” someone called back from far away. I spied a flash of motion to my right. A black sliver of a figure leaping towards me atop all and sundry between us. It hopped a hollowed-out boulder of sorts to a glass cannon to an abstract representation of some bird to a large cracked plate and so forth with night-unimaginable speed. Its graceful arcs carried it a good twenty metres or more to a leap. It came to a stop atop a stone no larger than my fist some three metres from me, perched there on the needle-sharp ends of footless legs. It was a figure formed of stained glass, propped up on veins of copper and gold. Dark blue and cerulean were its majority of panes, with the occasional swatch of aquamarine or lavender. The thinness of its legs compared to its boxy chest suggested a male countenance. Its head was small and was centred exactly atop its long neck. There was no face to speak of. In four fingerless hands it held a lyre that bore more strings than I could count.

“You're an odd-looking sort of person,” I told him. Ah, for the naive bluntness of youth!

The glass man strummed his lyre, the strings reaching out to him as though to grasp invisible fingers. The strings vibrated so fast forming a barely visible blur. Thus, the instrument produced words of a jovial timbre. “I'm not a person, young lady! I'm a song! Would you like to hear me?”

It seemed the polite thing to do, so I said, “Yes.”

The song leapt for joy and began playing with his right hands. The tune started slow and unsteady. Drips and drops of tone that came together into a slow march of multiple harmonies. Think *Duelling Banjos* by way of Leopold Stokowski. Around us, the sky brightened to a crisp lemon hue. The slick clouds retreated as, piece by piece, the floating garbage around us began to come together. Clustering into malformed vestiges of caravan trains. Many wagons being pulled by many, many more beasts in a row. Two of them, three, six, eight twelve. The lines swirled together into a great and interlocking circle as the player reached his crescendo, then came apart again to spend the coda spreading out in different directions. The last notes were as disjointed as the first, but no less lovely.

The song slowed to a stop and he took a bow to my grateful applause. The sky and clouds had resumed their ugly countenance before he rose. The debris that he'd called together began tumbling away on disparate trajectories.

“That was very pretty,” I told him.

“Thank you, thank you. I am a song of the ancient Wandering Bizarres, when the world was young and traders would go many long days without seeing their fellows. They would come together to trade goods and stories and histories and marriage partners. Before the world was covered in people.”

This confused as much as fascinated me. “But you said there weren’t any people here?”

“Not anymore, no,” he strummed. “One day, the sky was very beautiful, very briefly. And then they were gone.”

I considered the soot at my feet and shivered. “No people left? None at all?”

“None at all!” he played, not seeming at all chuffed about the loss. “There’s only us songs. But not all of them are happy songs like me! Some songs are sad. Some songs are angry. Some are very loud, very patriotic!” He stomped about his little rock surprisingly well. I couldn’t help but giggle. “It has been a long time since I heard any of them, but I’m sure they are still here. I look and I look for them. But I found you, instead! And I couldn’t be happier!”

I frowned, “I can’t stay here, Happy Song.”

He played, “That’s quite alright! I’m happy I met you!”

“I wish I could take your song with me. So that I can share it with others.”

“I’d be happy to oblige you.” The musical man ran his upper two arms across the lyre’s strings and produced a blurring ball of sound that leapt clear off the harp towards me. I caught it in my hand, which it hummed against vigorously. Before it shook my fingers off, I added it to the rocket’s cargo. My toy took on the vibration, softer, and for a moment the light inside took on the form of the caravans’ coming together atop a plain of shards as seen through a telescope. I smiled. I thanked him. I left.

Alas, my new friend was not quite done being helpful. He let out a discordant harmony—let us assume using his lower two arms—that formed a noisome wind which drove my piecemeal path together. At last I fell down, into the scattered ash of I’d rather not think what. I

wobbled my way upright and gave him a look of betrayal. “You’re welcome!” he said! “Come back any time!”

I grant you, he saved me some jumping. I spent a good bit of the walk back dusting myself off. When I looked up, I was back in Diamant’s wooded passageway. But it was not remotely the same. The leaves had gone ash grey, the trunks were weeping rust-brown sap. The light of a dimming burnt-umber sky was all but snuffed out by limbs that seemed to be reaching upwards to choke it off. The underbrush was covered in thorns that had not been there before. There were two openings before me, thick with shadow. The one that I knew as the way back to Gallifrey to the right, and one that had not been there before to the sinister left.

Something grazed my back. I yelped my surprise and sprinted for home. Only to see the shadows ahead of a pair of twisting branches. So I took the bait that had been laid out for me. Even here, the newly assertive forest gave me no leave. Exposed roots were there to trip me up. And the further in I went, the closer the trees seemed to close in. I squealed as I ran and didn’t stop until I had crossed the veil between worlds.

Here, the trees were real. The bark and the roots, too. And the rich, brown soil underneath. Fresh and earthy and, so very homey. Though it seemed to me that green was an awfully strange colour for leaves to be, and also the grass upon which I stood. I was on a hill, though a slowly falling one. Part way down and far away the earth gave way to a rough-looking sort of blue-green rock. No, a shell, the edge of which I could not see from my vantage. Far, far ahead of me, so very far away, the top of a head bobbed mythically in and out of view. Leathery and bald, its pale green wrinkles given a blue hue for all the distance—the vast quantity of air—between myself and it. And to either side of the horizon... were those flippers? Ages long, and flat, and paddling

through the sky itself? There were stars aplenty, countless more than could be seen in bright of day where I hailed from.

“I cannot see you, but I know you are there.” The words rumbled up from the ground at my feet. I jumped in surprise, and soon realised that I could hear the great turtle better if I kept myself planted on the green grass. “Why have you come to me?”

The terror in the corridor still fresh in my mind, I answered, “I was chased here.”

The vast creature rumbled an affirmative. “I am chased, too. They hunt me even now. They could not pluck me from my world, so they carved my world out from under me. So I left them to claim an empty void. And still they hunt me.”

“How awful!” I said. I shouted it, next, unsure if I would be heard otherwise. Followed by, “Why?”

“I am inconvenient. Are you inconvenient?”

“I suppose so. Sometimes. To some people.”

Another rumble. “I do not object to your presence. Though I should like to know how you came to find me.”

I bit my lip. Ouch! “I was sent here. Sort of. Not by hunters! Someone called Diamant has sent me to find other places, other things, that have been lost. And gather things to remember them by. If you would be so kind as to share something of yours.”

The sky-cutting flippers swooped in slow arcs high above my head and down below the horizon several times before I heard an answer.

“You are surrounded by all that remains of my world. The world I will establish elsewhere, in time. I do not object to your taking a small part of it.”

I thanked them most kindly, and set about looking for something that might fit in the rocket. How might this kind creature experience the

harvest though, eh? Would they feel me tear up the grass or pluck a leaf? If I pulled a strand of bark or lose coil of root, would there be blood instead of sap? The kindest thing to do seemed to be to find the loosest cluster of soil and pluck that up. The bit I took hold of smelled of old worms and rude beetles. It left a dampness on my fingers that was not at all unpleasant.

I opened the rocket ship, and sprinkled some of the soil inside. I should say I attempted a sprinkle. What I ended up with was six clumps of damp soil floating about in the light. But not for long! The light soaked into them. The sound of the harp, too. There was a terrible clattering of brass when that took place. As they took in the other bits of magic, the bits of muck changed around them. Within a minute, tiny little stones occupied the inner hull of my toy. Singing stones, that glowed with all of the colours of the stone woman's world. The song had changed from the one that harpsman had played; now it was a multi-part harmony in higher register. Almost too high for my ears to perceive, but lovely nonetheless. Where the harpsman had played but a single instrument, these stones gave me the sensation of a chorus singing to each other. Mirthful, bright, friendly.

“What’s that?” the turtle’s rumble sounded less than amused. “What do you have there? What did you bring to my back?”

“It’s this thing I’ve been making!” I said honestly. “I didn’t know I was making it at first! I think maybe it’s done being made, now!” What did I tell you about things that come in three?

“Whatever it is, it will bring my hunters faster. It is inconvenient to them.”

Oh, dear! “I didn’t know! I’m sorry!”

“I feel you meant no harm. Take the inconvenient thing and go. May peace find you.”

I’ve never been one to overstay a welcome. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise! I was in no hurry to leave, however. What sort of place

would I be going back to? As much as an excuse to stay a tad longer as a genuine request, I lingered at the threshold to ask, “Can I visit you again?”

“I do not expect that doing so will be safe for you,” they told me. “Perhaps, after I have built my new world, you may visit me there.”

I very much remember wishing I could do more for the poor chap. But leave, I did.

When I found myself once more in Diamant’s forest, I regretted it instantly. Every charcoal-grey leaf was lined with black and prickly spines. The open wounds of the trees had metastasised into large bald patches of naked, dead-white wood. Curled purpled bark barely clung to the rest. Dry black grass slapped at my feet. There was nowhere I could step without cutting my feet on the briar patch that draped over every open surface like a wet blanket. Red spears of light stabbed their way through the canopy to attack the brambles, my only means of sight. The air was muggy and constricting.

My first instinct was to back-peddle towards the relative, if time-sensitive, safety of the turtle’s realm. But the wheezing limbs behind me were already closing off that escape route. There were no others in view. There was nowhere to go.

Ahead of me, seven wizened limbs pointed at me accusingly. The roots of the trees they were connected to began to tear away from the ground. A terrible sound, made worse by the realisation that they were beginning to step in my direction! And all their friends, too!

“Eeek!” I ran like a shot! I had nowhere to go, but it was better to be chased than to be caught! The spines tore the back of my clothes and stuck in my hair. The grass and thorns tore at my shoes and slashed my toes. But I ran on! Turning away from every obstacle which suddenly presented itself. Ducking every clumsy strike of limb. Leaping over stampeding roots and swinging brambles. My options dwindling by the second until at last I was hemmed in in all sides. Reduced to a cringing,

covering thing clutching her chest in abject terror. Above, four piebald limbs twisted into each other to form a single, massive arm that reached towards me with covetous intent.

“Go away!” I launched the only weapon had at them. The rocket! It crashed against a nearby trunk and popped open. Five of the stones bounced along a succession of roots until they reached the ground. Where they nuzzled in deep. Their songs quieted the deeper they went.

The songs were dead, I thought. The evil ground had killed them!

And then I heard it. Music. Softly at first, but then loud as a hurricane. Playing from every leaf; the spines twitching like harp-strings. Within their melodies, I heard every emotion being discovered and explored. Love. Hate. Joy. Fear. Pity. Anger. Sadness. Whimsy. All the rest. A symphony of expression learning to express itself! The veins of the exposed wood shot through with silver light that silked its way into every branch and root. The remaining bark sloughed away, repelled by the light, to rain down on diminishing thorns. Every wound into those trunks was sealed by a gloppy plug of amber, pure and dazzling white. Shining bright as the stars! The leaves remained dark in colour, but became somehow brighter. The spines endlessly buzzing. Communicating.

The grove stepped back from me, seemingly to regard one another. The notes that they sang changed. Became nuanced. Cordial. I caught the distinct impression of individuals introducing themselves to their neighbours. Neighbourhoods worth of trees introducing themselves to other neighbourhoods. Towns of them to towns of them! Cities to cities! Country to countries! How far the reach of this phenomenon extended, I could only guess.

I stared in absolute awe, my tears from just moments ago already forgotten. The (figurative!) spell broken only when I realised that my discarded toy was about to be stepped on and crushed! I scuttled over and yanked it out from under a descending mass of wood.

That was when the forest took note of me again. Its gaze was no longer oppressive.

I stood, curtsied, and tittered, “You're a nice forest now, aren't you?”

A communal song was directed my way. The sky that it filled was pink. I was no musical expert, but the composition seemed somehow incomplete. I wasn't quite sure how. A note was being missed up front, perhaps. Or maybe the tempo wasn't quite right for the tricky bit in the middle. It could have been that the ending wandered on a tad too long. What, then, was missing.

Oh. Oh, no! I pulled from the rocket my final singing stone. This last evidence of my adventures, aside from a few scrapes that would not speak well of me. Was this what they wanted from me? This thing I so needed my mother to see in order to earn my place among the stars?

Then again, who was I to break up the set? I walked over to the spot where the five stones had buried themselves—the holes already filled by glimmering silver shoots—and plunked it down. Immediately, the trees lit up even brighter. Almost painfully so.

In my head, I heard, in all kindness, “You have brought meaning where all meaning was lost. The cause of that loss was lost alongside everything else. An endless void has been filled. We thank you.”

Filled with relief and indignation both, I scolded. “You didn't have to frighten me!”

“We are sorry,” The forest answered. Its sincerity was unavoidable. “We lacked the means to describe that which we were lacking. The knowledge of how to ask for that which we could not describe to ourselves. The closer it was to us, the more desperate we were for it.”

“Oh. Well. That's alright, then.” A distress call is a distress call, after all. Even if it's hard to make out.

“If you please, what is your name?”

I gave it.

“Then that shall be the new name of this place. A remembrance.”

I thanked them, most gratefully. I followed up by asking, “What will you do now?”

“We do not know. We shall enjoy discovering the answer.” The trees to my immediate right parted for me. Beyond them, a hedge of silver trees stood waiting for me. The centre bowed into a passageway from which came a soft honeysuckle breeze.

I shouted several goodbyes along my path to the corridor. The moment I stepped inside, I knew that I was headed back to land which I could surely call my home. In the rustling of the leaves, I thought I heard a voice. Diamant’s voice. It sounded so far away that I could not make out what it was saying.

I was not given the opportunity to listen more carefully.

“There she is!” someone called. A stranger’s voice, harsh and commanding.

“I see her!” That voice I knew. My mother. Tecteun. Not a moment later, she was cresting up a hill before me, flanked by half a dozen of Gallifrey’s finest. Rassilon’s sigil gleamed upon their chest plates. Their staser rifles were held high, sweeping the forest for threats.

The soldiers spread themselves out, their eyes alert for danger and their trigger fingers twitching to end it. My mother wrapped her arms around me, kissing and chiding and asking if I was alright in equal measure. She really was quite good to me, in the early days. “What were you thinking, coming all this way out here! Oh, your clothes are ruined! You’re lucky it wasn’t your skin and bones instead!”

I wrapped my arms around her, and my chin over her collar. In the light of two orange suns, something sparkled. My eyes shot right to my own left sleeve, what was left of it. To the polishing rag I’d

thoughtlessly put there. In one crumpled corner of it, golden moss had begun to grow.

Behind me, I heard the *zuh-zap!* of a staser beam boiling the bark off a root that had the misfortune to be in someone's way. Could it be me next, or my mother, should this artefact be spotted by some trigger-happy warrior? Would my mother—who had brought the soldiers—behave any differently towards so alien a thing? Would the soldiers give her any choice? What was I to do? I could tell her when we were alone. I could come back here, and try to sneak it to Diamant for safekeeping. I could hold on to it until I was old enough for my own rocket ship, a real one, and use it to find the stone woman again. Try to make her feel better.

I decided that I didn't know enough to know what to decide. Not there, not then. Withdrawing from the embrace, I made short work of hiding the cloth away within the rocket.

Mother caught the end of that motion out of the corner of her eyes.

"What was that you just did, daughter?" she asked me with a quick turn.

"Nothing," I answered. "Just putting my polishing cloth away. Can we go home now?"

We did precisely that. Hand in hand, leaving the soldiers to dart about looking for things which were no longer there, if they ever had been. There would be a grounding ahead of me, I knew. But also there would be a change of clothes, a warm dinner and a comfortable bed as well. For the stars, I could wait.

My mother and I did *not* live happily ever after, I'm afraid. But it all worked out for one of us in the end.

I expect you've already guessed that this little ship I have on display is the very one from my tale. You're right, clever you!

By way of an epilogue, I ought to tell you I was never able to open up the cockpit again. It was sealed tight as a Cyberman's heart from that moment at the edge of the forest. Of course, I didn't always have a sonic screwdriver on hand. Shall we take a gander inside, and see what's become of the enchanted polishing rag? Or, should I say, what it's become? Yes, let's! Just give me a moment to synchronise a few molecular resonances ... And... Here we are!

...What's that? It's gone! The rag, magic and all, has scarpered!

Oh, well! These things do happen, *a-ba!* I'm sure I'll find out what all that moss has been up to eventually. Who knows? Perhaps, some day, I'll come out of retirement and go muddle it out for myself. That's one of the most wonderful things about being me, you know...

The stories never end! Yes, my dears, yes!

At least... We certainly hope.

Good fortune, Diamant.

You'll need it.

THE STATION OF POSSIBILITIES

By Sherlock

Why? That was always the question Commander Theodore Davis had been asked for every day of his career as an astronaut. Why go to space? Why take the risk? What was the point of it all?

He'd gotten used to it and had well-rehearsed answers about science, inspiration and benefits for everyone. But now staring through the window of the Space Shuttle, he realised the answer had simply been for this moment. To stare into the void and imagine what more was out there. To be the frontline of exploration. A moment where he could finally escape—

“Enterprise, Houston. We’d like to start rendezvous manoeuvres.”

His moment of reflection shattered, Theo sighed and reached for the checklist. “Ready and waiting with the checklist. Let’s get this done.” For all his years of wanting to get to space, this was far from the circumstances he’d wanted. Half-trained and on some hair-brained mission for a secret organisation he’d only discovered existed three weeks ago.

As he prepared to go over the checklist with the CAPCOM, the Shuttle suddenly shook. Theo and his co-pilot Gus shared a look of

utter horror. As both knew all too well, there is nothing worse in spaceflight than a surprise.

As Gus reported the event to Houston in the calm manner expected of an astronaut, Theo moved to the back of the cabin to look through the rear windows. He was greeted by something impossible.

In the payload bay, exposed to the silent fury of space, stood a blue box.

The Doctor had a hell of a day already.

First, an interdimensional entity had broken into the TARDIS to bark cryptic orders, which was not a first by any means but they never ceased to annoy him. Especially as he'd dared to hope the War had scared off the last of these cosmic nuisances.

And then, the TARDIS took it upon itself to bounce off the destination the entity had sent him towards.

Not that it had actually *bounced* of course, the Doctor corrected himself, but how else could he describe the Ship being mid-materialisation and then suddenly crashing somewhere else?

The Doctor picked himself up off the metal floor and returned to the console side. "What was that all about, eh? I don't like this anymore than you do, but throwing a fit is a bit much."

He grabbed the scanner and was greeted by some garbled nonsense in Circular Gallifreyan. The best he could make out was it was a symptom of a massive malfunction somewhere, or the TARDIS really was in a bad mood today.

Finally, payback for all those mirrors he'd smashed, perhaps. It had taken some time. They'd jumped a number of time tracks on the way out of Kasterborus. The fractured panes had leapt back into their

unbroken reflections. He'd struck them again and again and again, and...

He ran his hands across his face, inhaling.

There was something in the Ship's telepathic circuits. He could feel it. Just on the cusp of their symbiotic link. That feeling of being stretched out. Unwoven. Pulled tight between the fingers of some cosmic being in a cat's cradle of timelines.

"You ever feel like someone's used you to knit a lopsided sweater?" he asked the room.

The TARDIS was silent, save a baleful hum that resonated every inch of her millennia alive.

"Thought not." He smiled. A wide, insincere thing, he felt. "Sometimes I wonder why we're even here at all... Why we didn't just die with—" He sighed. There wasn't any point. She didn't want to hear it and neither did he.

Banishing that thought from his mind, the Doctor began tapping a few keys on the keyboard beneath the console-bound scanner and narrowed down their position.

Low Earth orbit. July, 1979. Right time, nearly right place.

He switched the scanner to the exterior and was greeted with something impossible.

A Space Shuttle. In orbit two years ahead of schedule.

The Doctor sighed. A long deep sigh. Maybe one day he'd get a quiet life.

It had been a long time since CAPCOM had said anything. Theo and Gus just watched the systems and waited. They didn't need to speak to remind each other of the first rule of such situations. Stick to what they did know. Not speculate on what they didn't.

The blue box hadn't shown any sign of activity since it had turned up, and frankly Theo suspected they were in more danger from an old-fashioned malfunction than anything it could throw at them. After all, the Shuttle wasn't really ready yet.

"*Enterprise*, Houston." The woman's voice coming over the radio wasn't anyone Theo recognised and he guessed the same was true of Gus judging by his reaction. "I'm Colonel Granz from the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. Authorised by Geneva for intervention. We need to talk."

The Doctor had spent an age looking for a spacesuit.

The wardrobe had plenty of options, of course, but in scattered pieces from different designs, eras and purposes. Once he'd found the pieces of one, he'd then had to actually put it on—a task not helped by the lack of mirrors.

No regrets.

As the Doctor pulled a golf bag holding a Draconian sword from the nook, he felt his body flung back against a half-deployed music stand. He pressed his hand to his face again. The Time Lord felt sick. On a level fundamental to the physiology of his own People.

The room was too small.

Was it? Claustrophobia? That was a new one.

No. He shook his head. No, no, it was something much weirder than that. The room wasn't too small, it was its contents. The volume. Everything about him felt as though it'd been pulled too taut. Too little material pulled over too much surface. Like the last scraps of furniture in a Blitz-era stately home.

The Doctor looked around the room. There were lifetimes of memories in here. On many levels. From Earth's swinging sixties to its

digital millennium. And yet, it felt so *bare*. It had never felt this bare before. Why?

Where was his past? His memories? Where was *him*?

A fractal rainbow, far lovelier than anything left in the TARDIS, glimmered from some nearby boxroom. He leapt up to follow it, pushed open the door, and found himself looking into the browning ash of the garden grove. Wind chimes glittered from a coralwrought eave.

The Doctor barked disapprovingly at himself. He hadn't the time for this.

Banishing the thought from his mind, he clumsily walked back to the control room and prepared for the space walk outside. Times like this, he missed the simpler flat design.

The Doctor opened the inner doors and eased his way out into the shuttle's payload bay.

In the white half-open cylinder before him lay a small array of instruments, purely scientific he hoped, and a peculiar shaped module.

It appeared to be a docking apparatus—even though the Shuttle wouldn't dock with anything for over a decade. But then, he supposed, it wasn't even meant to be in orbit yet.

Something was wrong, so he should adjust his expectations accordingly.

Granz's briefing had been an eye-opener, but even her wild claims of a shapeshifting man—apparently known only as Doctor John Smith, travelling in a wooden box—hadn't prepared Theo and Gus for the sight of a man in a peculiar spacesuit hauling himself towards their airlock. It looked like something out of the *Nautilus* crossed with a brass planetarium.

The figure somehow opened the airlock from the outside.

Granz had told them not to resist, allowing him to properly pressurise the module and then glide into the crew cabin. The man didn't match any of the descriptions UNIT had offered, but then Theo supposed when dealing with a shapeshifting alien that was to be expected.

How had that thought suddenly become normal?

It occurred to him that he should probably say something.

The Doctor was greeted by two shell-shocked looking astronauts.

Aside from their current resemblance to goldfish, the two were quite alike, seeming to the Doctor to be about the same age, about the same height.

One with dark black hair looked like he was trying to say something but couldn't quite find the words. Not an unreasonable reaction, all things considered.

"Hello, I'm the Doctor. You two are a bit early!" he said cheerily.

The dark-haired man finally found his voice: "Theodore Davis, Commander of Space Shuttle *Enterprise*. I'm told we're supposed to trust you."

"Well, that's a refreshing start. Who by?"

"Your accent is... British?"

"I've been around," the Doctor admitted. "You were expecting something a bit more Soviet? A Kazakh cosmonaut from Baikonur?"

The expression behind Commander Theodore Davis's eyes indicated that the thought had crossed his mind. It occurred to the Doctor that the TARDIS might have looked like something out of Jules Verne's *From Earth to the Moon*. A pod shot from a Columbiad moon cannon

behind the Iron Curtain. It wasn't impossible for 1979, but certainly improbable.

The second man spoke, with a little more seriousness: "Our sponsors gave us the standard briefing."

"Righto. And they are?"

"The United Nations Intelligence Taskforce."

The Doctor's face darkened. "So that's why you're up here early," he murmured. Making an effort to appear cheery still, as he so often did these days, he turned to the second man. "Got a name?"

"Pilot Gus Tullamarine," said the second pilot. "Are you here to mess up the mission?"

"Blimey! You're to the point," the Doctor exclaimed. "No, I'm not. I'd quite like to hitch a ride to Skylab, though? I assume that's where you're going based on your orbit at least."

The astronauts looked at each other.

Theo spoke first as the most senior of the mission. "I take it you understand the situation?"

"My briefing was brief indeed, Commander," the Doctor slung his arm around his shoulder. "Why not give me the edited highlights?"

Theo nodded to Gus.

"If you're sure, Theo."

"I am. For now."

"Gus?" invited the Doctor.

"All sorts of anomalies, Doctor Smith," admitted the pilot, adjusting their heading. "Readings that just don't make sense, coming from Skylab. It's due to fall out of the sky soon anyway, but UNIT wanted to take a look first. So *Enterprise*, and us, got rushed through. Officially if

anyone asks, *Enterprise* was only ever a prototype and we were never here.”

It was not the circumstances Theo had ever wanted to get into space, and he suspected his tone gave that away.

“Good! Not historically accurate at all, but I suppose that’s military black ops for you.” The Doctor pulled himself into a seat. “Well, don’t let me get in your way. Always wanted to see one of these orbiters in action!”

Diamant’s orders had been both cryptic and specific, which would have impressed the Doctor had he not been the one stuck following them. “*Go to Skylab. Find the energies within and bring them to Us.*”

Specific destination, check.

Ambiguous energies... not so helpful.

And clearly whatever they were, the TARDIS didn’t like them one bit. So that was a good start. Didn’t narrow it down much, unfortunately, as the TARDISES were incredibly picky machines in the grand scheme of things. TARDIS singular, he reminded himself solemnly. After all there was only ever going to be one now. He wondered, would she ever be lonely—?

“We’re about to rendezvous,” said Theo towards the Doctor, breaking him out of his chain of thought. “When we dock, I’m to go inside and complete a short survey, to verify if the anomalies are real or just faulty hardware.”

The Doctor mimed the ward against evil for the Sevateem tribe and nodded in mock approval.

Theo looked at him sidelong, “Assuming you’re not proof of that already.”

The Doctor almost admired the cheek of the man. “Nothing like your own eyes for proof. I’ll come along, too.”

Theo didn’t argue with that. Not much point trying to restrain someone in zero gravity, and he doubted that would even work on an alien that could park a blue box on top of a spacecraft.

“Settle in, Doctor Smith. This may take a while.”

The Doctor watched the careful docking process with all the interest of a parent watching a child learn to walk.

The slowness of human spaceflight at this point was frustrating, especially the almost religious following of the checklist, but also somewhat mesmerising in its own way. Far as he could tell the docking module was cobbled together with hardware from the Apollo era and had been inelegantly crammed into the Shuttle’s payload dimensions. A charming mishmash of space history, he supposed. Or an act of desperation.

The humans were still learning.

The shiny new Shuttle had locked together with the older battered space station.

Theo opened the round hatch at the rear of the Shuttle’s crew cabin, from which the Doctor had emerged earlier, and entered the docking module. The Doctor followed, keeping a slight distance out of curiosity of what the astronaut was doing. He was gathering a variety of gadgets and strapping them to his belt.

“Oh, those won’t do any good,” the Doctor bemoaned, abandoning his subtle distance and floating in. “Earth tech this century won’t tell you anymore than if something’s what you already expect it to be. We need answers, not more questions.”

Theo's mouth ticked with the subdued patience. He added them to his belt regardless.

The Doctor moved towards the docking hatch. "Mind if I go first?"

"Why do I get the sense there's no point trying to stop you?" Theo replied.

The Doctor grinned and floated towards the hatch into Skylab. He suddenly paused, grabbing the side of the module. A fierce pain had just built up in his head, as if it was suddenly full to bursting.

"You okay there, Doctor Smith?" Theo asked.

The Doctor chaffed for a moment that the human was the one asking *him* if he was okay, but composed himself. "Fine, fine. Just... uneasy. Haven't felt reality out-of-sorts like this in a while."

"You say that as if these things happen all the time."

"For a time they did..." the Doctor muttered without thinking. "Anyway, come along, Joanna. Mystery to solve."

Theo almost spoke but decided not to even bother. Clearly he was not going to get a straight answer out of this man. Which in fairness, was what UNIT had told him to expect.

The Doctor had expected stale air but was greeted by a welcoming breeze.

Theo followed and began gawking in a manner the Doctor was quite used to. One thing he'd learnt from his travels was one human having their entire worldview shattered by the impossible looked much the same as any other. Just like Alison on her first alien world, he pondered.

His train of thought then came to a crashing halt.

He knew no Alison. Had never known any Alison. Yet for a moment the memory of her had been clear as day. As the Doctor tried to make sense of his own thoughts, he realised his headache had returned with a vengeance. He tried to focus by trying to make sense of what lay in front of them.

It didn't help.

Directly in front of them was as expected. A small chamber lined with the height of 1970s space technology leading towards a slightly larger one behind. The issue lay in the fact it wasn't the only Skylab in front of them.

To their right was an identical-looking structure. To their left was an identical-looking structure. Above and below were identical-looking structures. The Doctor and Theo floated, surrounded by variations of Skylab.

“What the hell is this?” Theo muttered, finally breaking the silence.

“Fracturing,” the Doctor said quietly. “Multiple timelines, maybe even other parallel realities... of Skylab. I think your gadgets might be a bit out of their depth.”

“It's like a web,” Theo remarked.

The Doctor opened his mouth to say something cutting but stopped himself. That wasn't a bad comparison. For a human perspective at least.

“Then what's the spider?” he pondered.

In what seemed a completely arbitrary choice to Theo, the Doctor moved purposefully towards one of the Skylabs. Just before crossing the threshold he turned back; “Come on then astronaut, time to explore. Don't learn nothing from staring.”

Theo followed warily behind.

Each Skylab had the same basic shape. A docking module giving way to a large chamber, all lined with the finest technology human spaceflight of this era had to offer. To the Doctor's long experience of space stations, it was like going from a flat to a stone age cave.

But there were subtle differences each time. Some Skylabs showed signs of recent habitation.

The human touch was present in bags of waste to discard, leftover mission patches, cameras for taking photos of Earth. Others looked like they had never had someone set foot in them, and lacked any pressured atmosphere, with only air present being that which had leaked through the portal from the main web.

The Doctor and Theo learnt quickly to identify these Skylabs.

The next Skylab they entered was insufferably hot. Even through the insulation of the spacesuit. The Doctor held out his arm to stop Theo floating any further. Within seconds Theo understood why, the air must have smelt foul. The pair swiftly retreated to the heart of the web.

"A Skylab which was never repaired," Theo guessed. "The first crew had to do repairs to stop it overheating and turning toxic."

The Doctor was only half listening. Still gazing at the myriad of Skylabs around them.

"I'll keep looking," he said, already gliding towards another Skylab. "Wait here, run some pointless tests on your gadget."

And with that, Theo was alone.

The Doctor found another empty Skylab. From a quick glance out of the window, this one appeared to have had a new module attached to its docking mechanism, perhaps delivered by another ahead-of-schedule Shuttle. A mere possibility in reality, he noted from his vague

memory of cancelled space missions. But somehow in this bubble as real as him or Alison.

No. Enough. Who was Alison? He dropped all other trains of thought and focused on this. That name—where did he know it? He'd met her on Earth, defeating the Shalka at the behest of his superiors. But wait, what was a Shalka? And why was he thinking of an Alison when he was travelling with Joanna?

“Joanna?” he called aloud. No, he knew no Joanna, he certainly wasn't travelling with any Joanna! But yet he could remember Orpelion IV... and before that, the Master, at odds with the Headless Queen of Drahva... He had to tell him about his new happy occasion... Well, of course, he had to *find* him first... But the Master was just in the console room waiting for him, surely!

The Doctor's head was feeling heavier and heavier. It was like his skull was filling to bursting with these unplaceable, incompatible memories. He hadn't felt pain like this since...

Since...

“Since the War...”

True to his training and his nature, Theo had not waited. He had run a few tests on his 'gadgets', as the Doctor had so dismissively put it, but all the results were useless. The Doctor was the only one even beginning to understand this chaos, so he needed to find him.

Theo tried to guess which Skylab the Doctor had gone to, and pushed himself towards it.

His eyes adjusted upon entering. Unlike all the previous Skylabs which had been quiet and empty, this one was alive with noise and light. And unlike all the previous Skylabs—there were people.

Theo and the Doctor had assumed the emptiness of the previous Skylabs was either because it was empty in reality, or because all the variants were in periods of time that it wasn't occupied. But in this Skylab, Theo was greeted by two astonished astronauts.

"Howdy," he said meekly.

"Theo?" came a familiar voice.

Theo looked up as Gus floated down towards him. He could feel his own features pinched in concentration, but his friend looked aghast. The Commander's eyes noted the patches, the variations in filtration systems in Gus's suit, even the NASA insignia was slightly different.

"Theo, my God..."

"Gus. What mission is this?"

Gus said, slowly, "Theo, I'm on Skylab... Skylab 7 mission, remember?"

"But that hasn't happened yet. It *can't* happen, that's why we're here..."

His Gus, he knew, was back at the Shuttle.

"I think it did. Otherwise I wouldn't be here... Theo..." The name sounded alien now. Unfamiliar and hostile. "How are *you* here? You're on Earth."

"Why?"

"Broke your leg stepping off a ladder. Your tibia snapped like a twig."

"Honestly... Sounds like something I'd do," admitted Theo.

"You real?"

"Are you?"

Gus straightened, "Tell me something only Theo Davis would know."

“I don’t know, I don’t know much...”

“Theo...”

“Did I ever tell you that story about the time I went up to BC, near Toronto? When I was,” he indicated, “knee-high?”

“With your aunt?”

“My *three* aunts, yeah,” he corrected. “What I didn’t tell you was I actually got that trapper while we were shooting for clay pigeons. Cuffed his leg while he was bending down. It was only rock salt, but I was so embarrassed. Never went near the lake again.”

Gus nodded, understanding. “You told me that at a bar in New York.”

“Jersey was mine,” said Theo.

“One of our ‘get-away-from-it-alls’.”

“When life just got too much.”

The two just stared at each other in mutual bewilderment.

“Alright, I believe you,” nodded Gus. “That still doesn’t explain how—”

One of the pair of astronauts floating further back in the chamber began to speak, but was suddenly cut off by a loud rumble and the station beginning to shake violently. The floating astronauts were flung around at random as the noise grew louder and louder. It was as loud as the Shuttle Theo had launched on at the Space Coast.

Theo managed to grab onto a wall and looked around. The room was buckling. No, not just the room. The air. The light. Everything in this Skylab crumpled before Theo’s eyes. Like a piece of paper screwed up by an invisible fist.

The walls. The equipment. The people.

Theo turned back to Gus, in time to see him, too, crumple into nothing. So fast his open mouth had no time to let loose a scream.

Commander Theo Davis was adrift in a void. Only the entrance to the heart of the web remained. He just stared in silent horror.

“And who are you?” said the void.

The Doctor kept bashing his head on the side of the abandoned space station. It hurt and wasn't helping, but at least it was something to feel other than the pressure in his skull. The blizzard of insight that burned like a white-hot fire poker.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asked.

He felt his skin burst.

“We'll take the risk!” the Doctor responded, becoming more frustrated.

Wet red mixed with torn scalp.

By way of acknowledgement, the Doctor elaborated, “We're only seeing part of it. The physical shell in our Universe. The remaining components are out there, beyond Space.”

Smearred against the bulkhead.

“I know!” the Sheriff confirmed. *“But that's the thing about traps. I never could resist a good one.”*

It wasn't enough. The pain was still there.

“Seems we're not long for this Universe,” said the Critic, solemnly.

He should've considered the anomalies he felt in the TARDIS. The strange sensation of sparsity in her dimensional infrastructure. If he had, he would've foreseen the danger. This went far beyond the blundering human race's fear of fire. This was a far more primal force to the Universe.

“Look at you.”

The Doctor's eyes snapped open to the voice he'd come to expect every incarnation. A languid crash of vowels and consonants down a bubbling stream. Diamant anchored their fractal legs, as if sitting on a cushion of air in the zero-gravity shrieking.

"We can't stay long," they added.

No time for dignity. "*Help me!*"

"Help yourself," Diamant answered, evenly. "The fact that you have this opportunity at all now is down to Us."

"*It's in my head! In... my—*"

"The result of a focussed dimensional beam from the Adamant Locus."

"*What?*"

"The telescope on Vulpia. It was the only way. There's very little of you left now."

Too many thoughts, too many memories.

"Focus! We are doing all that We can to maintain your existence. You will come to understand that."

Too many thoughts, too many memories.

"Or rather, you will have understood that."

Too many thoughts, too many memories.

"In time."

Roundaroundroundaroundroundaround—

"Don't waste this opportunity to live, Doctor. You won't get another one." Diamant leant in close. Close enough to touch the Doctor's nose. "Help yourself."

The Doctor stopped and screamed.

And then passed out.

How did that Universal Greeting go? *Hello from the children of planet Earth?*

“I’m—” Theo started.

“You didn’t belong to this reality, nor any permutation of this station.”

“Is...that... Why did that happen?” the words stumbled out of Theo’s mouth.

“You seem distressed.”

“He was my friend. Did you—?”

“No. We did that. We fed, quite well.” The voice was quite calm.

“The spider...” Theo realised.

“Spider? We suppose the analogy is fitting. But we do not catch our prey. We farm it. Much more efficient, as you’d know.”

“How... can you know that?”

“Your mind is open to me, Commander Theo Davis of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration on the planet Earth. A life of many possibilities. Oh, how we will enjoy those!” The last part was said with a disturbing relish.

Words drifted on the fringes of consciousness.

“...How are his hearts?”

“Happily beating their bicardial cha-cha.” The voice hummed a few admittedly melodious notes.

“Must you reduce everything to a joke?”

“Well, not all of us can have the tone and dress sense of the Grim Reaper. Oh.” The Doctor felt a set of fingers retract from his neck. *“I think he’s coming round.”*

“Maybe we’ll get to the bottom of this, then.” The other voice sounded wistful. *“Though things are seldom that easy, are they?”*

“Never know, there’s a first time for everything...”

The Doctor woke to a room of self-reflection. He was adrift in the Skylab variant still. Unusual for him to wake up in the same place he’d lost consciousness. Normally a cell, at least. He stifled down the autonomic question that he’d picked up by osmosis throughout his many centuries.

What happened?

“A great deal, I think you’ll find,” a dry, authoritative voice said. “Awake, at last.”

The Doctor manoeuvred himself around to look in the direction of the voice. Leaning against a wall was a tall man in a black, green-lined Inverness coat. He possessed a high forehead with a round mouth and quite startling eyes. He looked pale. Pale enough for the Doctor to wonder if he’d spent the majority of his lifetime beneath fog-choked skies that had never seen the sun. It was a face for late-evening operas seen through the curling smoke of hookah-imbibing caterpillars. Sharp, angular, but not cruel. Performative. Pensive.

“No need to gawp, this is hardly the strangest thing you’ll have ever seen,” came another more friendly voice. That came from a man dressed in an eclectic mix of clothing. Where the former man’s face seemed to broaden from his nose, his features instead pinched together. His eyebrows were thick and dark. With wide ears and a rounded sort of nose. It was the expression that brought the whole ensemble together. That teatime quizzicality. At the moment, he was floating above the Doctor, upside down from his perspective. At ease with his environment. Almost bored by it.

“Hello there, I’m the Doctor,” he greeted. “Charmed.”

“The Doctor?”

“Yes, he is. As am I,” added the colder man. “*The Doctor*. Not any other. We discussed this at some length whilst you slept.”

“Some length, it was only five minutes. I’ve seen Daleks take longer to aim.”

“Perhaps it was the company?”

The upside down man humphed in reply and spun himself around to be the same way up as the Doctor.

“Sorry,” the Doctor said. “You’re both the Doctor?”

“Yes. Not sure how. I’m sure an explanation will turn up later,” assured the rotated Doctor. “They always do. So who are you, sleeping beauty?”

“I’m the Doctor, too. Nine times over, at last count.”

“Oh, wonderful. The three musketeers,” bemoaned the tall figure. “I often wondered if Dumas knew what he was getting himself into...”

“But I don’t remember you...” persisted the Doctor, “and you clearly don’t remember me... Right, so—”

“It’s unlikely we’re from each other’s past,” interjected the relaxed man.

“Or, potentially, our futures,” added the man in the Inverness coat.

“That’s not a guarantee, though,” pointed out the Doctor.

“Agreed.”

“Memory is subjective, after all.”

“At the very least, I would imagine it, this conterminous presence of ours,” the warmer Doctor spun a cool hand, “has something to do with the obvious warping of reality going on.”

The aristocratic Doctor thinned his lips. “Oh, obvious is it?”

“Astoundingly.”

“Regale me with your fine vintage of knowledge, oh, scholar,” he faux flattered, thinly.

“Spoken like a true alcoholic.”

“I’d be a connoisseur over a clown, any day.”

“You must be terrific at parties.”

“I’ve a marvellous disappearing act, want to try it?”

The Doctor had forgotten what a pain variations of himself in such confined spaces could be. It was like rats in a box.

“Well?” asked the aristocrat.

The Doctor realised they were suddenly talking to him.

The other incarnation peered at him. “Can’t *you* feel it?”

“Of course.” The Doctor sniffed. “Time and Space are massively out of joint. Nothing feels right. Nothing up, nothing down. Not left, not right. There’s no anchor here. No...”

“Sticking post,” volunteered the other Doctor.

“Yeah. No port in a storm.”

“And we’re symptoms of that,” the aristocratic Doctor elaborated. “Whatever’s broken the backbone of reality, a side effect has let us coexist.”

“Probably through pure clumsiness,” remarked the relaxed one.

“Regardless, we need to get to the bottom of it,” the aristocrat shook a hand.

The Doctor nodded at them both. “Before *it* finds *us*.”

Theo was bombarded by noise. A blizzard of voices and visions. Some he recognised, and some he really wished he didn’t.

His childhood, on his parents' farm. His education, leading to piloting, leading to spaceflight. But more than the simple facts. Moments, people, places—and how they made him feel. Joy, frustration, stress, anger—an entire lifetime's experience within moments.

“Oh, such a life you have led. A man who ran away to space for fear of building a life on the ground!”

And the blizzard shifted. Similar events, similar experiences—but slightly altered.

Now, instead of fumbling his words, he said the right thing to his childhood crush, they had a relationship for years, and it ended just as school did. Years worth of relationship highs and lows—in seconds. Now instead of answering that exam question correctly, he made an error, he missed his chance at graduating college...

“So many choices, so much possibility!”

“Commander Theo Davis, astronaut, serial number 5118—No, 5227—5116—5—5—” he muttered, weakly. The bombardment was unending and it was impossible for him to string a thought together.

“Oh, we will, Theo. Your colourful little life is very, very tasty, but all things must come to us. Let's make some of those possibilities real, shall we?”

The Doctors drifted out of the empty Skylab into the heart of the web again.

“Blimey, what a mess,” muttered the scruffy Doctor.

“It's some kind of web,” explained the Doctor. “And entirely confined within the external dimensions of Skylab.”

“A web rather implies a spider,” the aristocratic Doctor added. “But it's not wrong, this is clearly deliberate. Something's generating alternate variations of Skylab. An experiment possibly, or a trap.”

“Or a larder,” muttered the scruffy Doctor. His counterparts looked at him alarmed. “Sorry, that came out darker than I thought it would.”

Their contemplations were interrupted by a scream.

“Theo!” exclaimed the Doctor, rapidly grabbing hold of the Skylab hatch from which it seemed to emanate and pulling himself towards the screams.

The other Doctors didn’t hesitate to follow.

The trio of Doctors found Theo floating in the void, screaming.

Around him were hundreds of ghostly duplicates of himself; some very similar to him, some sporting radically different clothes and hairstyles. All flickering in and out of existence rapidly. Above him floated a cloud of light, composed of a multitude of shifting colours.

“So many possibilities! Theo you are feeding us well. Your sacrifice will be a great boon to us!” cheered the voice.

“No! You won’t be killing anyone today!” the Doctor yelled, grabbing Theo and pulling him away from the entity looming over them.

The ghosts vanished.

The scruffy Doctor leaned over to the aristocratic Doctor. “Our other self is a trifle dramatic, you think?”

“Passion is as passion does,” he replied.

“No?! Who are you to say no to us! Feeble man of one timeline—”

“You know nothing about me, nor anyone on that planet below!”

“Then we will learn! You and this human came to see Skylab—so see it!”

With a flash, Theo and the Doctor vanished.

The scruffy Doctor pushed himself towards the entity.

“Hello there,” he said gently. “We appear to owe our existence to you, can we talk?”

The Doctor and Theo were in Skylab, the true Skylab. Untouched for five years, the empty metal shell was still lined with human touches, a bag of supplies left ready for a crew that would never come, an unlocked docking hatch.

The Doctor tasted the air. The sense of wrongness that permeated everywhere since passing through the docking module’s hatch had gone.

“This is Skylab, the original,” he said. “No tricks here.”

“Right,” said Theo. “But why did it send us here?”

The Doctor pulled himself over the nearest porthole and suddenly stopped still.

“Theo... Skylab should have started re-entry by now.”

“Yes? That’s why I’m here,” said Theo, slowly.

“The entity has just put us on a collision course with the atmosphere...”



[Illustration by ...]



TO BE CONTINUED...
IN 'THE CULMINATION OF A PEOPLE'...

INTERMISSION: WHERE REASON MET THE DARK



by Alan Camlann

There are hidden forces who work in the time vortex as divers do in coral reefs. Some exist as purely part of its ecosystem. Others are merely wanderers on their travels across eternity. Between the occupants of home and path, there also exists echoes of pure Time. Inanimate and interdimensional divers. Hard—if a geographical term could be used—enough to stand as analogous to the molten cores of planets in conventional Space. The space-time crust around the soft eddies. Like blood clots.

It took quite a lot to knock these time cicatrices apart.

Nevertheless, it was happening.

And someone was taking advantage of the break in the storm.

These moments, between the now and the now, allowed for conversations that never happened. Where echoes snatched away by the shift of the time tracks could still exist. Caught in the attractive properties of the vortex.

For a time.

Some can call it limbo. Others, call it a temporal form of stone tape. A further group still have far more colourful names for it. Scientific and spiritual.

One such conversation was happening right now. In a place where concepts were struggling to maintain their established shape. Such were the pressures. It was here, in this palindromic void—where echo met temporal echo—that Reason and the Dark played a game of mahjong.

“How long have I got left?” asked Reason, idle fingers resting on the question mark umbrella.

The Dark, with its many facets, hummed like a babbling brook. “Why are you so important?”

Reason’s face dropped. “Pardon?”

“We are still trying to understand historicity, indulge Us.” *Click-clack* of the tiles. “You exist in a linear causal pattern?”

“Cause meets effect...” Another clack of tiles over the calm voice. “Teatime follows elevenses... You’re aware of the sort, I’m sure.”

“Life is different beyond the veil,” the Dark rumbled, theatrically.

They were answered with light applause from Reason. “Very good.”

“Existing in as many instances as We can, there’s never any need to worry about who follows what.”

“Except in polite conversation,” Reason plucked a bonus tile, placing it aside. “Plum blossom.”

“We can take out a few of your lives, then put them back later.”

“Like pieces in a game.” He clicked his tongue. “Unfortunately, the Universe doesn’t work that way.”

“So linearity does affect you.”

“Yes. And no.” Reason’s brow wrinkled. “Do you still carry a legal hand?”

“How many is that?”

“Thirteen in total.”

The Dark suddenly frowned, distracted. “We think you have a great deal more than that.”

“No metaphors, *please*.” Reason rolled his eyes with a moan. “I’ve had enough for this lifetime. Besides, it’s been a while since I’ve played. My last would have been with Bernice.”

“With whom, sorry?”

“With Ace, as I said.” The eyes of Time’s Champion hardened. “I felt that.”

“You’re fortunate, We don’t think the rest of the Universe quite understands yet.”

“It will. In time.” He squinted closer at the tiles on the table. “These patterns are rather beautiful. Hand-painted. Qin dynasty, as when we first met?”

The fractal form’s face shifted to correct him before they nodded.

“Yes, as we first met,” they smiled, tightly. “I believe yours are from the dynasty of Kublai Khan? His capital in Shangdu?”

“Zhōngdū.” Reason smiled enigmatically, in return. “A far later visit than my first, I had some lost property that I needed to recover.”

“Did *you* take what was needed from the Curator’s Undergallery?”

“*Abhh...*” as he exhaled, filaments of grey pulled him into the vortex. “So that’s why I’m here. You’re lucky I answered your summons.”

“You know as well as Us that there is something wrong in the wider cosmos.”

“Something only the shadow knows...” he murmured.

“You’ve guessed.”

He gestured down at the mahjong board. “The game gave me time enough to think. Away from the pressures of Time. She’s kept me safe, as long as she can. But my TARDIS can only do so much. Even here.” He rubbed his lip with a thumbnail. “No. I took nothing. You’ll have to look elsewhere.”

The Dark fizzed across the blueshift.

“Temper, temper,” said Reason, lightly.

“We are searching the pages of Leonardo da Vinci’s diary, issuing instructions to your fifth self and urging your prospective ninth persona across the dimensional gap, as we speak. Your third—a third—incarnation will be dispatched once the Adamant Locus is activated.”

“Careful not to burn the candle at both ends.”

They flinched.

“An Earth expression,” Reason flipped a quiet hand.

“This means very little to you, doesn’t it?”

“So far. But only so far,” he smiled. “They’ll come for you, you know. My other selves. Asking questions...”

“So much sound and fury.”

“Yes,” he almost laughed. “Perhaps *that’s* why I’m so important. The noise.”

The Dark took the notion quite seriously. “As thunder is important to farmers.”

“Oh? *Oh...* For how it signifies rain. Well...” His lip twisted with sad chthonic mystery. “Quite...”

The game proceeded in silence for a few minutes.

“Diamant.” Reason’s tired grey eyes looked to the Dark at their core. “Am I *really* that important now? Surely, just this once, the Universe would go on without me. It has before...”

“Yes. And no. That’s why I brought you here. You were thinking of home.”

“Of retirement. It’s not quite the same thing.”

“And in another handful of lifetimes, you may do just that, but you’re dithering.”

“Living as fast and as hard as I do, it pays to stop and smell the roses, occasionally.”

“But this isn’t your time to stop.”

“I know. Too much unfinished business. Even now.”

“As do We.” The fractal arm gestured to the other side of the table. “Pure hand. You have seven *faan*.”

“Do I?” Reason feigned surprise. “Oh, so I do.”

“When you do, someone comes along and replaces you. It could be one of your little tourists. Human or otherwise. Creation abhors a pure state of vacuum. That’s how your People have engineered it.”

“Yes, it was something I—they, discussed often...” he rumbled. “What’s changed?”

“Sometimes there is too much damage to heal over.”

“An old tutor of mine, some lives back, had similar theories.” He ground his teeth in thought. “Lady Traskeya. The outcast too useful to destroy. She set up a research institute to deal with it, if I recall. I wonder if she ever got her grant funding?”

Click-clack-clack from the mahjong board.

“Am I distracting you?” asked Reason.

Diamant shook their head. “You’re quite a puzzle.”

Reason tapped his feet, rhythmically. “Crossword? Sudoku? Word scramble?”

“It’s never the same twice. Even with the same incarnation.”

“Curious,” his birr plucked at the enigmatic statement. “If we’re talking about a predecessor, I can only remember the once. Each time over.”

“Your memory isn’t what it once was.”

“My lifetimes aren’t what they once were. Someone has smashed up the crazy paving with a sledgehammer...” His voice sing-songed as he tilted his head impishly on the umbrella. “I don’t suppose you’d happen to know whom?”

“This won’t ever end, you know,” Diamant countered. “You are far too interesting to Us to stop.”

“Did I ask, Diamant? Did I even suggest—?” He held up what should have been a hand. “*Oh...* Well, that seems to be that, then.”

Diamant’s disappointed answer came through the translucent palm. “You won’t finish this Labour, then?”

“Not this time. For the first time, I do believe I’ve failed.” The hand couldn’t even rest on the umbrella.

The pause filled the void. “We don’t think you’re alone there.”

“I’ve told you all I can. About the Dark Times. What was known and left unknown... You know the tale, now you must fulfil it. Bring a little light of reason into the dark.”

“Play out the cause for the effect.” The words slipped like river rapids. “There’s a particular irony to this.”

“I’m sure. If I should ever become the Doctor, again, I...” The words faded with the hiss of chronons and dark energies.

The umbrella topped to the floor.

The prospective seventh life of this Universe's Doctor vanished over the cosmic waterfall. His understudy having taken his place. It was a temporal stalling tactic. Nothing more. However, Diamant had gotten what they needed.

Indulging their curiosity, Diamant plucked a tile from the drawstring pouch left by the Doctor. Before it disappeared, too. Painted upon it was an unusual pattern. If Diamant recalled their lifetime as Emperor Qin, so long ago, they had been gifted oracle bones by a pyromancer for divination.

Further curiosity had led them to see the creatures that the humans had fabricated them from. It was an aquatic species that lived within a carapace that shielded it from the elements of the Earth.

One of the many species on that favourite planet visited so often by the Doctor.

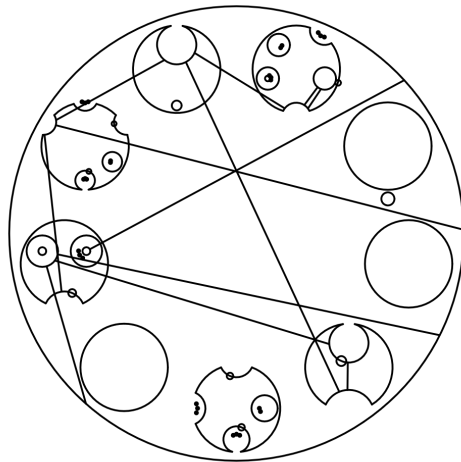
The planetary model for the House, Diamant's Folly.

The epicentre of this disaster.

Diamant rolled what the ephemerals might have called a neck.

Still, it was just the beginning. If all went well, there was far more yet to come.

Diamant raised their arms, "Our audience awaits..."



TO BE CONTINUED in...

A Sparkle of Doctors: Volume 2



DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 1