

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 2



DOCTOR
WHO
DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

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A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 2 THE UNIVERSAL MUTATION

EDITED BY

Alan Camlann, AFJ Kernow and Sherlock

FORMAT DEvised BY

AFJ Kernow & Alan Camlann



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Compiled by Alan Camlann

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REPRISE



Disaster has struck our Multiverse. The Labours of Diamant, transdimensional parlour games both frivolous and lethal, have escalated to abduction and disappearances tantamount to death.

In a duel within Diamant's Folly, our Doctor's sixth incarnation and the Valeyard were taken out of Time. Permanently. A punishment for their failure in the Labour. Time, itself, however, has not been able to compensate for their absence.

A copycat Seventh Doctor walks in his true self's place. The Universe is collapsing like pin pushed into a balloon. But, the Doctor's future is vast. Like the echo of an explosion, their presence fades slowly. Perhaps slow enough to do some good...

ARMAGEDDON'S TOUCH: PART I HISTORY'S SCARECROWS



by Alan Camlann and AFJ Kernow

+++ RASSILON ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ TRANSMITTER DAMAGED +++
RELAY TO LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM'
+++ FROM: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: 694 +++ REPEAT +++ 694 +++ IMPERATIVE +++ COPY
+++ RELAY +++ 'ODYSSEUM' OUT



In a blue box, spiralling through Time, the Doctor is dead.

In a blue box, spiralling through Space, the Doctor is alive.

The Doctor is lost. Did you forget?

The Doctor is found. Will you remember?

Dead or alive. Lost and found. Whatever the case...

Long live the Doctor, h'mm?



There are places aboard the TARDIS where no one goes. Not even the Doctor.
She's there now.

Her Ship is a remarkable vessel. Its construction—or, rather, its gestation, as it was grown—is an unparalleled feat of bio-mechanical engineering. Not only was she capable of traversing all of Time and Space, nowhere and everywhere, but she demonstrated to her brethren that she had a mind and a will all her own. As all her siblings did.

And that mind was now considerably of age. How long? It was impolite to ask.

It was said, however—more among Gallifrey's renegades than anywhere else—that TARDISES whose lifespans ebb more towards the kalpa than the aeon tended to exhibit unusual side-effects. Eccentricities of the dimensions.

More specifically, a form of block transfer synaesthesia. Where the dimensions of Time and Space, within the TARDIS's architecture, began to be scrambled together in the telepathic circuits. The dreams and nightmares of the pilot and her crew became, if not reality, than an influence on the Ship's design.

Doors sprinkled the corridors like motes of dust.

Locks trebled in complexity to keep the dark thoughts in.

Rooms were forgotten—or added.

The Doctor was approaching one of those added rooms now.

It was safe to say that this incarnation delighted in her renewed abilities as a gadabout gadgeteer. She was intrinsically fascinated in the connectivity of the Universe. In her mind were lifetimes of knowledge, sure, but the application of that knowledge... Well, it would be like a vestigial limb. What wasn't used would be discarded.

And to do that to knowledge?

The Doctor couldn't abide the idea.

That was what had begun this whole expedition into the depths of her Ship. Knowledge. Aided by a small cartographical drone that helped her keep track of the various twists and turns inside her own vessel. Small, silver, it had maintained a steady connection with the visicom wristband she'd strapped to her forearm.

Then, inexplicably, it had gone silent.

A few minutes later. She'd lost the drone entirely.

Hardly unanticipated, but nevertheless, concerning. The Doctor didn't blame the TARDIS. It was easy to lose track of these things. Why, she herself had begun, more now than before, to let their private conversations be aired in front of strangers. Never the arguments. Never the bad days. But a few gentle words when things got too tough or bewildering.

Yaz had claimed that—

The Doctor stopped in her tracks. At a junction, between the zoo and the memory vaults, she yanked her goggles off her face and ran a hand through her blonde bob cut.

She put down the plasma torch she'd been using for light and sat on the empty shell of a spare K9 unit. Wincing.

Yasmin Khan. Hallamsbam Police. Born before Earth's second millennium.

"No..." Those were just facts. Details in a dossier. Nothing of the real substance that made up Yaz. Her Yaz. Something had happened, it was clear as day. Someone had reached into her timestream and bored away the permafrost of her existence with a moon-sized wave-motion gun.

A woman was the sum of her memories. A Time Lord even more so. Dividing by zero left an awful mess and here she was mopping up the bric-a-brac.

“I’ve jumped a time track somewhere...” she muttered. “Ghost of the past? The future...? Sideways in Time?”

The Doctor could picture it. The explosion of disruption in Time. Like a sound wave rippling across a moonlit lake. The time-traveller was one of the rocks standing near the shoreline. Reverberating, echoing, distorting the sound before it faded into silence.

They were still in that fade. A product of time dilation. Prolonged by some outside force. She was a ghost.

The Doctor had felt that disruption, that weakness in the biodata, when setting the coordinates for Xenon. A tingle in the arms and the head. At the brain stem. And now, she was here. Rather than investigating the Universe outside, she’d decided to travel inward, into the arms of her oldest travelling companion. Into isolation. She’d handle the problem on her own.

It was a bad habit, she had to admit. Where did it come from? A lack of trust? A belief that her human companions couldn’t understand? Now, that was hardly true. There were any number of names she could summon from her memory to challenge that notion. Was it a sense of responsibility, instead? A desire to keep those who travelled with her from harm?

The plasma torch whistled on a low burn at the edge of the duralinium table.

There was an innate horror to this pursuit for knowledge, she knew.

It was something to do with Gallifrey. Something from her dig through the ruins. The Doctor hadn’t wished any of them—not Yaz, Graham or Ryan—to see what the planet had looked like in the aftermath of the Master. The coal-black sky. Not burnt, but charred. Veins of red, like arthritic magma, coated the landscape in their cloying soot. Then, came the elements. Eddies of time storms and rust. Red. Red that made it hard to breathe. To think. Red that blinded. Red that made her feel like an ant trying to understand a circuit-board.

It was one thing to see the mushroom cloud.

It was quite another to wander through the radiation afterwards.

The Master. His terrible influence. But the whole place reeked of Skaro. Life antithetical to life.

The Doctor's time alone, sat among the ruins of the Capitol, had given her enough space to consider whether an effort at redemption had really been worth it. Was she naive? How much did the Universe really change? How much did people?

At least, she reflected, the Master had kept her honest. Gallifrey was not an Arcadian utopia. Atrocities had been committed by the Time Lords since the days of Rassilon. She wasn't someone who pondered whether or not they'd deserved their destruction.

"Deserve..." she heard herself mutter.

The word stuck in her mouth. Who 'deserved' death? Who had 'earned' annihilation? There were strange and beautiful parts of the Universe that had been obliterated for what others felt they had *deserved*.

She stood up, grasping at the plasma torch. Somewhere... Somewhere just at the edge of her mind, she thought she caught sight of a shock of white hair. A proud raven-like nose. The blue flash of a signet ring.

Laughter.

Their laughter.

From long ago.

The request would kill Lady Traskeya, in the end. She had little doubt on that score.

The natural evolution of woodland by Teatempest Lake had produced silver trees that darkened to warm the soil and brightened to

cool it. All over Gallifrey, she knew such mechanisms existed naturally in the ecology. They required no input from the Time Lords whatsoever and had come to their rationale all on their own.

Watching the forests from the Academy lectern, she wished she could say the same of her Oldblood students. Sadly, however, they existed within structures that specifically forbade independent thinking. Unless, of course, it towed the party line. Whatever line the High Council of the Time Lords wished at the time, that was. Contradiction? Only when such opposition was admitted. Usually by those on the losing side of whatever rigorous debate was going on in the Capitol. And of course the winning side could always alter events to make them right all along.

As she spoke—automatically, as her lecture had been laid out before her most explicitly—she felt her glasses fog from her breath.

Traskeya lamented such warp-gazing nonsense. With so much focus on themselves, her People failed to truly appreciate the pioneer spirit that had once existed in their own history. Their *own* history. Why was it they'd put such a restriction on her research into—?

She sighed. There was no sense working herself up into a state over it. Better to return to more rational climes. It took only a few moments for her to realise that the chamber had emptied without her instruction. It seemed, even those who sought to put her in a box, didn't care for what they wanted to be taught, either.

There was an irony.

At the stolen beginning, a creature borne of sickening rage and violence tears into the outer wall of the Citadel. He's alone now. Armed only with the terrorising fury that has driven him back to his home. He has learnt a new truth. Perhaps the truth.

Hands locked around the fat man's neck, the creature knows he will kill them all for it.

He squeezes.

Near the bitter end, the Doctor is digging through the compacted ash with an old friend's trowel. The smell is something that she cannot describe. An olfactory puree. Fatty tissues and the heliotrope dyes of the Patrexes. She will go mad if she thinks about it too long.

Beneath her callused fingers, the white box coos like a dove with a broken wing.

She holds it to her hearts.

“No, nope, sorry...” In the TARDIS, the Doctor clutched her rainbow braces. Affronted. “Not having a go. Not a lark. Won’t be haunted by my own self, thank you very much.”

As she turned, she tripped, but did not fall, down the small flight of stairs in front of her.

Flanked by roundels in a deep varnished brown, the Doctor pulled the veil of creeping ivy, alive and writhing, from her path. It took only a small insistence before the flora retreated on its own. Back into the opened cavities, stuffed with busied plant life.

“Well, no wonder nothing works.” A pause of realisation. The Doctor winced, patting the wall. “Sorry, old girl. Just feeling a little unnerved.”

The hum in the floor almost rose to meet her in reply.

She smiled. “I know, I know... But, you know how these holistic things work. I’ll know where I put them when I find them, but I won’t find them until I know where I put them.” She leant forward. “Although, it’d help if I could *see* them when I eventually do?”

The phosphorescence in the walls was millennia-old by now. It took a few minutes for it to rouse. As the Doctor navigated around lost floor lamps, a chalet ski-rack, three crusty tea caddies and a cask of half-opened blue wine, she suddenly realised where she was.

“Box-room. Well... *A* box-room. Good start.”

It had all the makings of an ancestral attic. Full of strange forebodings and sun-worn photo albums.

“Cool...” she grinned, experimentally.

A small hand-mirror crunched under her boot.

Time had a flow across all things in the cosmos. It moved like water. Faster in some places than others. Here... The Doctor frowned. There was something off. Like the stench of rotting flesh as she stepped

further into the room. It wasn't anything tangible. Nothing that the conventional five senses could discern. It was something in that temporal pins-and-needles. In this room, Time had left the oven on and gone to play in the garden. Blissfully unaware of the smouldering fire that burned, so very brightly, at the house's heart.

There was a curious air of imminent violence. Unnatural to the TARDIS. Ancient like a cold case beneath the floorboards of a watchmaker's.

“*Ob...*” The Doctor's cautious bonhomie collapsed. She remembered.

The time-traveller had locked them in the toy chest.

After the Chronodynamics 201 lecture, feeling the heat of the silver, Traskeya found her aircar and began the journey home. Back to Room 020445 in the public registry. She had her domesticity licence ready in her sleeve if she were ever challenged.

Gallifrey was becoming a strange place, these days, she had to admit...

She travelled past Gesyevva's Fingers, over the paradox of poverty that was the Lower Len, and arrived not too far from the TARDIS cradles. In the night, if she concentrated, she could feel the collective idling thrum of their vworp engines through the machinite wall.

The aircar descended to the promenade.

As a trained Quadrigger, there was nothing that Lady Traskeya didn't know about the workings and operations of a TT capsule. It was true that conventional wisdom decreed that TARDISEs possessed no rudimentary intelligence—and as it was decreed, so it was—but she found herself inexplicably drawn to their innate energies. She wasn't involved directly in their gestation, not since she was a thousand, but her energetic retirement had allowed her to remain close by. An

indulgence, she suspected, from former students of the Academy (though none would admit such a connection). It was nice to be wanted. If not really needed.

Stepping out from the aircar door, Traskeya looked behind her. She could have sworn... Was there...? She turned off the ignition and checked again... No. She thought there had been movement behind the ribbed jade-green colonnades. Imagination, she suspected. Phantasmagoria. She was meant to be wilier than this.

Careful, she reflected, privately. *You're beginning to relax and, once you relax, the Cardinals will have your laurels for curtain ties.*

At the stolen beginning, the creature has been on Gallifrey for hours at most. It's difficult to tell where the chunks of colonnades begin and the spinal columns end. Just hours. It will stretch on the rack for years.

From the dark summit, it's a world of chiaroscuro orange. Hot with a cleansing darkness. The silver forests beyond the window are white with flame. Carried on coattails and charring fliers by those who flee from the Citadel. He can hear their cries from above. Fleeing from the new madness of the truth. But why? It's an old truth. Older than even them. All he does now is burn away the lie built atop it. Cauterise the wound before it can fester.

The creature, he considers himself Master of all, smiles.

It's justice.

Near the bitter end, the Doctor is struggling to breathe. Her face streaked with tears. The whisper of the boxes has begun to slither inside her head. She can hear the half-remembered faces, although she can't recall them all. The weight of a genocide.

It's her last effort at reconciling the horror. A diary pulled from the ashes. Thinking inside the box. She's choking on soot, on powder-bone, on aerosol-blood. Not a grain of homely sand, the cry of a native bird or the embrace of a familiar sky. The stench clings to her skin, trying to pull her into the open grave around her. The swing of the bag is all that drives her forward. To her family of Earthlings.

There is no single thing left to grieve for.

This was 'justice'?

It was dark inside the TARDIS workshop. The Doctor, busied at its heart, required all the power the old girl could give her. An uninterrupted surge. In one fell swoop. Just awaiting the signal. They'd discussed the danger, but the Doctor was adamant.

A younger mind, one of her Tellurian fam, might have considered her goal a bit grotesque. After all, putting a person back together rather was. The Doctor, though, had to admit that she was curious.

The time-traveller had debates with Valluvar and Descartes on what they considered to be the mind, body and spirit. They'd latched onto her unique perspective. That slip of the tongue. She admitted she had been close to death. Closer than she'd liked. But such near-death experiences, where a human being (she'd smiled at the misapprehension) had come back from the brink, had changed, spoke to implications of the soul.

Did Time Lords have a soul? An immaterial matter that constituted who they were?

As the Doctor wired the jump leads into solenoids, she felt her face twitch reflexively into a frown.

Perhaps, it was an old-fashioned view, but it had too much of an air of superstition to her. What could be observed made up the fundamental block transfer computations of the Universe. That was a fact. And yet—she paused—she knew of altruism, a desire for justice, truth and good. That was real enough, as well. As was hatred, jealousy and spineless selfishness that could rip apart whole constellations. Each had a material consequence for their immaterial substances.

Good... Evil... The tangible *you*. What was the answer there? Were beings born with innate qualities or did they learn them from the environment around them? How much did it take to change the fundamental nature of someone?

The Doctor donned her goggles.

“Might as well ask if we have free will...” The plasma torch’s sparks whistled off the last tank of coolant. “Predestination, funny question to ask a time-traveller...”

Free will, she knew, was not an illusion. The individual always had a choice. However, that choice never really existed in pure vacuum. That was the trouble with explaining Earth history to an Earth species. Did they have the ability to change the pattern of causation?

“Yeah, course... For better and worse.” Another *fizzt-fizzt-zit* from the torch.

But then so did everyone else. For better *and* worse.

In the days of the Time Lords, the threat was creating an imbalance that not even the regulating forces of Creation could fix. The magic smoke, once let out of the integrated circuit, could not be put back in again. The genie was out.

There was a reason why historical transgressions were considered an executable offence under the Laws of Time.

“Here I am, though...” The Doctor licked her teeth with a dangerous smile. “Little old me. Interfering. *Oob*, the *outrage*...”

That was the weakness of her People. They thought in such blinkered lines. Binaries. Two options.

The first, extreme isolation between Solace and Solitude. An ivory tower beyond Time where the clocks wound down and life itself threatened to stop.

The second, a savage and unblinkered domination—the Doctor tossed aside her plasma torch—of the so-called lesser species.

That was it. Isolation or empire. It was why she’d been tortured for four-and-a-half billion years in the Confession Dial.

“Hard to be particularly nostalgic towards a People who tried that...”

It never occurred to them to simply talk to the charioteer, step beyond the palace and see what the Universe was really like. No, to them, it had to be shaped. Not experienced.

The time-traveller steadied the wired column with a closed eye and pinched tongue. “Explains how they saw me, really...”

Not a traveller. A kingmaker. They lived in fear of the Doctor’s supposed empire. Stretched out across the Universe in all the names and faces she’d met. Reinforced, as warning, by all the dead ones she’d failed to protect.

“That’s me. Propping up history’s scarecrows...” she grumbled.

What had galled the Doctor was their accusation of irresponsibility. The time-traveller was responsible as much for her companions as for herself. When it went right and when it went terribly wrong, too.

She had confronted her own failures. The immutability of tragedy. She had stood with her fellow travellers when she said change could not happen here. Not in this sole bleak moment in the timestream. They’d fought over that point, sometimes, but why do they think she’d renounced Gallifrey to begin with?

Change was not, by its nature, beautiful. That was one of the Universe’s greatest tragedies. A chest spattered in violent red, a noose rough around the dangling neck, the screaming howl of a people driven to the streets to rail against their own violent murder... Were these things beautiful?

No. It was what came from them that could potentially be called beautiful. From that desire to stand up and be counted. To fight for dignity, fair treatment and respect. These were the ideals worth raising a voice in support for. The right to a peaceful existence for all. The Doctor had died enough times herself to prove it.

She eyed the column. “This isn’t a justification, by the way, I’m not justifying anything... I know who I am. I made my choice, I don’t

regret it.” The time-traveller pared the last of the wire-endings loose with green-handled pliers. “But I could not...” She grunted. “Have championed any of them...” Another flick. “From forbidding Gallifrey...”

Tying them to the control board, the time-traveller almost laughed. There was an irony. If she’d stayed, she would have been...

“Cursed for lacking ambition, wouldn’t I?”

Gone, aboard an antique time vessel, they simply turned their scorn to something else. Her otherness. Her outsider nature. Her dilettante ways. Interfering in things that weren’t her concern.

“Like a beggar half-beaten to death for a loaf of bread. Not my concern?” Her eyes hardened. “Really?”

And if she had died on Gallifrey, expended her lifetimes, her mind would have been uploaded into the Matrix. Just another ghost haunting the machine. It must have been destroyed. She couldn’t find a single APC Control couch that hadn’t been burnt out in the Master’s tantrum.

“Troubling thought. If I’d done as I was told... I could’ve been so much of the ashes I found you buried in...” The Doctor sneezed, inhaling the caustic smell of several failed prototypes in the TARDIS workshop. She tested the grounding wire closest to her hip and received a mild electrical shock. “*A’obm*,” she bit her thumb. “Beauty.”

The Doctor exhaled, rubbing her hands together, and took a step back. Another. Her finger rubbed the silver constellation on her ear cuff. The time-traveller felt a mild prickle in the power behind the metal forged to make it. *Simpatico*.

She opened an eye. “Seems about right...”

The time-traveller couldn't quite pick the apparatus’s overall shape yet. That was the trouble with working on something for days on end without rest. Sleep was for tortoises, but they always knew where their shells were kept.

The Doctor scuffed the floor with a boot. “Power’s stable, at least...”

Somewhere, in that crow’s nest of gadgetry, the Hypercubes hummed in a manner entirely unlike the TARDIS.

There were thirteen tesseract in total. Each functioning as a lobe of an electronic brain. Not many, in the grand scheme of the Time Lord mind. There would be gaps. Misapprehensions. The Doctor had neglected any surrogate sensory organs entirely out of kindness. She’d known what it felt like to have a mind that grew sharper by the day, while the body crumpled out from underneath her.

She counted. “Brainstem... Hippocampus... Telencephalon... Precognitive gyrus... Hyperencephalon... Noo-cortex... Autonomic lobe... Amygdala... Psionic gyrus...” She mumbled the rest, counting out the remaining components on her fingers. “Am I missing anything...? The ingenuity of Volta and Galvani, maybe?”

The Doctor rolled her eyes. She was delaying.

“Moment of truth, eh?”

The time-traveller crossed to the control board, retrofitted from a model train set, and drummed her hands across the chair in front of it. The little toggles, four red nubs apiece sat in their four blue rectangles, spilt their wires into a standing column like a wire-infested silver tree. On each individual limb sat one of the Hypercubes. Each individually submerged in a tank of neon-blue coolant to prevent any combustion.

All that remained now was to turn the whole apparatus on.

Slowly, almost painfully, the Doctor leant forward and activated the control board. Almost absently, she tapped out the small electrical fire in one of the bundles with the hem of her coat. The tower groaned like a tree felled in the forest. The Hypercubes burned brighter. The soft chitter of voices within, unified into one organism. A daisy chain of memories.

The time-traveller struggled to find her first words. “Can you hear me...?”

The *pop-pop-pop* of a Zygon speaker answered. Hastily, too hastily, the Doctor crossed and squeezed the cable jack tight.

“—and I don’t mean this indelicately, why can’t I feel my legs?” insisted the voice.

The Doctor slumped onto the table, face in her hands, elbows among the artificial sinew. “Oh, of all the questions you could start with...”

“I know you... surely...? You are...” The voice gathered strength. “Omega’s name, you are.”

“Yeah. It’s me.” The Doctor licked her lips.

“Where am I?”

“Aboard my TARDIS.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Together, seconds. Apart, weeks.”

“Apart?”

“Yes...” the time-traveller said, slowly.

The Doctor caught herself nodding, trying to reassure herself.

“Doctor...” A frisson entered the construct’s voice. The Doctor hated that. Hated that growing sense of panic. “Doctor, why can’t I see?”

“Traskeya, I—”

“Why can’t I see?”

Once inside her study, double-locking the door, Traskeya sat at a low workbench and began scrutinising the Type 30’s message pod materialisation system. One of the more troublesome elements of the time-machine. That was certain.

She turned on her swivel chair, reaching for a tachyonic diode, and realised too late that the whole pile of circuit-boards had come loose like a deck of cards. They clattered to the carpeted floor. She hopped down and began searching among the bric-a-brac, cursing with Rassilon's laudation.

Unlike other lecturers, her study had retained the more practical elements of a workshop. Complicated tools hung from hooks above the workbench. Drone clamps, homing beacons, laser cutters, booster stabilisers, megachronometers, neutron rams, ion bonders... Across from the thirteen racks, monitors and diagnostic equipment took up one corner of the room. Charts of distant star systems, astral map tapes, and detailed blueprints of TARDIS systems lined the walls.

Thick volumes of astrogation, dimensional engineering and temporal mechanics filled the retractable bookcases of the far wall. The room's only concession to personal comfort, a couple of armchairs covered in a rich burgundy and green paisley.

Traskeya fingered the hole she had cut in the back of the seat with the laser cutter.

It'd been safe there. For a time. But given her little doubts... How they had begun to glow like the forests...

She snapped her fingers twice and whistled *Steady as the Lower Len*. A drudge she'd converted into a table clambered, with unusual awkwardness, from beneath the equipment racks. She felt around beneath its centre. There, stuck with double-backed tape. She sighed. It was *still* there.

Carefully, so as not to startle the drudge, Traskeya pulled the strips clear and retrieved a small ruby-red gem. It had the whiff of deep-time about it. Something from the inglorious days of the Gallifreyan Empire, perhaps, or older.

Unconsciously, she closed her hand around it. A small telepathic nudge—

And it did it again.

Only this time, it spoke.

Its first words were muffled behind the cube of transparent herculanium which kept her pride of joy safe from prying collars. She activated a control on the butchered chair, the shield receding into the ceiling above. Her cylindrical travel capsule still sat parked in the middle of her study.

The gem sat atop it.

“What in Omega’s name are you...?” she muttered.

“*It belongs to Us...*”

The voice came from behind her. She turned, slowly, and studied the banks of monitors in the corner of the room. A collection of scanners that had been removed from TARDISEs sent to Nineveh. Each vidscreen contained the same swirling, hypnotic fractal image. She gazed at the image in something approaching wonder, something she hadn’t felt for incarnations, before rising to her feet. As she did, she found she was carrying the crystal, gingerly, in cupped hands.

“Who are you?” asked Traskeya.

The voice was like ice melting in a hot spring. “*We are Diamant.*”

“What’s this?” the Time Lady gestured.

“*A present. You are unaccustomed to asking questions.*”

“Yes,” nodded Traskeya, firmly.

“*Behind the computer bank you will find the constituent matter of an assassin from House Mirraflex.*”

The Quadrigger tilted her head, like a reed in the wind, before returning upright.

“*Quite dead.*”

“I believe you.” A pause. “Why?”

“You’ve attracted a…” The scanner pattern seemed to warm. *“A unique interest. For something you are about to do for the Odysseum team. At the Search for Exotemporal Intelligence. Your research institute.”*

She adjusted her glasses, a thief’s squint. “And that something is?”

At the stolen beginning, Gallifrey lies dead once more.

Silent once more.

At the bitter end, Gallifrey lies dead once more.

Silent once more.

In the pages stuck together, Diamant watches the Doctor.

At the moment, they are...

LUV THAT DOCTOR



By Christopher Swain-Tran

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+++ FROM: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A 1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: 347 +++ REPEAT +++ 347 +++ IMPERATIVE +++ COPY
+++ RELAY +++ 'ODYSSEUM' OUT

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FADE IN

Scene 1: The Doctor's Room

Close zoom on Doctor's closed eyes with clenched eyebrows. Zoom out slowly to full body shot, as the DOCTOR jerks awake.

AUDIENCE (OOV) - applauds

The Doctor stumbles out of his bed and searches around as he talks.

DOCTOR

Diamant? What did they say? Where am I? Where's the
TARDIS? CLARA!!!

CLARA

I'm right here, Doctor.

Camera cut to CLARA, slowly panning up from feet to head as she stands in the doorway. She is dressed in a long skirt, turtle neck, and thick rimmed glasses, which she is squinting behind before taking off.

CLARA

Do you have any idea what's going on?

AUDIENCE (oov): Laughter

CUT TO TITLES

Blank screen - brightly coloured titles burst into the screen: LOVE THAT DOCTOR! Cue theme music

THEME MUSIC

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Whenever you need a happy face!

Anywhere in Time and Space!

Screen change to image of the Doctor smiling uncomfortably. Text reads: FEATURING THE DOCTOR AS THE DOCTOR

THEME MUSIC

Call his name and he'll be here!

Screen change to image of Clara, also smiling uncomfortably. Text reads: AND CLARA OSWALD AS MISS CLARA

THEME MUSIC

Love that Doctor! Now! He's! Here!

Screen change to image of MISSY, giving a sly smile. Text reads: AND INTRODUCING MISSY AS PRINCIPAL PRYDONIAN. Screen fades to Love That Doctor title card and text reads: CREATED BY CHRISTOPHER SWAIN-TRAN.

Music fade out

SCENE 2: DOCTOR'S ROOM

The Doctor and Clara stand opposite each other with slightly confused expressions.

DOCTOR

What just happened?

CLARA

You felt it too? It was like I lost control of my face for a second.

DOCTOR

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I smiled! I rarely ever smile, and I wasted a smile for no reason.

AUDIENCE (oov) - Laughter

DOCTOR

Did you hear that?

CLARA

The laughter?

DOCTOR

Yes. Someone is listening in. And not exactly hiding it. What is the last thing you remember before you arrived here?

CLARA

Nothing particular. We were in the TARDIS, and then I woke up in a strange bed, with these glasses attached to my face.

AUDIENCE (oov) - Laughter

DOCTOR:

I remember Diamant, they told us it was time for our quest for them. But of course, they didn't divulge what our task was. But if Missy is here as well, she would be connected. She probably knows where the TARDIS is as well.

CLARA

You mean Principal Prydonian. (rolls eyes) Where does she think of these titles?

AUDIENCE (oov) - Laughter

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DOCTOR

She's probably feeling nostalgic. Anyhow, never mind that. If she's a Principal, there must be a school. And if you're (sarcastic tone) "Miss Clara" (end tone), presumably you're the teacher at the school.

CLARA

But which school? And how do we get there?

SFX - LOUD BUS HORNS

Both the Doctor and Clara turn to the source of the sound, facing the door right of screen. In bursts ageing rockstar and part time bus driver SAM STARJET

AUDIENCE (oov) - cheers

SAM STARJET

Come on Miss Clara! Bus is waiting outside! Georgeville Elementary is calling your name! Go Fighting Duck-hawks!

Sam Starjet mimics playing the guitar.

SFX - LOUD GUITAR RIFF

AUDIENCE (oov) - cheers loudly

DOCTOR

Well... That answers that question.

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter

DOCTOR:

I suppose this school would be as good a place to search as any.

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The Doctor begins to walk to the door, but Sam puts his hands up and blocks the Doctor.

SAM STARJET

No can do, Doctoroonie. The school bus is for staff and students only.

DOCTOR

Well, I'm staff then. The Warden. Call me... the Warden.

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter

SAM STARJET

You trying that ol' trick on me Doctor? I told you - fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on me again. Fool me three times, well I guess that's-

DOCTOR (Annoyed)

Can you just get on with it?

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter

SAM STARJET

Well, what I was saying is eventually I can't let you slip pass regulations like that.

If they find out I'm letting non-staff on board, who knows what would happen?

They might ask me to prove sobriety!

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter

SAM STARJET

Besides, you're needed at the clinic anyway.

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DOCTOR

The clinic?

SAM STARJET

Yep. Ambulance is parked right up in front of my bus.

DOCTOR (confused)

But why would an ambulance take me to —

SAM STARJET (Shouting)

No time! I need to get Miss Clara to school before
Principal Prydonian gets there.
Otherwise I won't make it to midday jam sessions at the
club.

*Sam pushes past the Doctor and grabs Clara by the
wrist, pulling her out the door.*

DOCTOR (Calling out after her)

I'll try to get to the school as soon as I can! Just
keep an eye out for Missy until I get there.

SCENE 3: Central Park School - interior entrance

*Clara enters the entry hallway, with students rushing
around her. She turns back to the entrance to wave at
Sam (off screen)*

CLARA

Bye Sam!

She softens her voice.

CLARA

That took barely any time at all. I barely even noticed
the speed limits.

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AUDIENCE (oov) - *laughter*

MISSY (oov)

There you are!

MISSY enters stage right, angrily pacing as she does so, with a frustrated look on her face.

AUDIENCE (oov) - *Ooooooh*

MISSY

Where have you been? I've been waiting here for an eternity!

CLARA

Keeping an eye on Missy - check, Doctor. Now what?

AUDIENCE (OOV) - *laughter*

MISSY

Shut up, you!

CLARA

I barely said anything.

MISSY

Not you! The other voices. The ones you and the Doctor are punishing me with. A little tit-for-tat? Hmm? Hm?

CLARA (Confused)

What? You're the one who brought us here, surely.

MISSY

Do you really think I'd send you to a world as brightly coloured and cheery as this?

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Does this accent really suggest saccharine optimism to you?

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter.

MISSY (Angry)

I said shut up! Shut up or... or...

Missy looks around, confused, looking for an option to act out her threat. She smiles as she notices Clara.

MISSY (pleased)

Or I'll kill her. Main character - she was in the opening credits. You can't have me doing that, can you?

CLARA (Nervous)

If you think the Doctor will help you if -

Missy pulls the tissue compression eliminator (TCE) from her dress pocket and aims at Clara.

MISSY

What the Doctor thinks or wants is not as important as stopping these *constant* voices.

The audience is quiet, their sound dropping to a murmur. Clara and Missy just stare at each other in silence, each waiting for a reaction from the other.

MISSY

(sigh) And now I'm bored again. Bye, Clara.

Clara is startled but before she has time to react, Missy activates the TCE and a blue light grows from one end. However instead of being shot into Clara, the blue light flows instead into Missy, electrocuting her.

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CLARA (shouting)

No!

Missy shakes as she is electrocuted, with flashes of blue light showing her skeleton, then drops to her knees. Her hair is now standing on end, and her face is darkened with soot.

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter.

CLARA

Are you alright?

MISSY (dizzy)

Such compassion.

CLARA

Believe me, I wasn't expecting it either.

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter.

MISSY (dizzy)

And I can't even kill anyone? This really is my hell.

Missy coughs and collapses.

Audience (oov): laughter

SCENE 4 - Central Town Medical Centre - waiting room

The Doctor enters, to a light blue coloured room, with six chairs, and a reception desk. Four people are sitting waiting to be seen, two young women, one young man, and one very old man, with a grey beard so long it touches the floor. At the reception desk, Janet is

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wearing her thick coke-bottle glasses, and speaks with a nasally tone as if her nose is blocked.

JANET

Doctor! You're finally here!

DOCTOR

But not for long. I have an important meeting across town.

JANET

But all these patients have been waiting to see you. And you only just got in. It's urgent you see them straight away. They're very poorly

DOCTOR (sigh)

Fine - I'll see the patients quickly, but then I have to get to the meeting. Say, Janet...

JANET

Yes, Doctor?

DOCTOR

Do you have any idea how long we've been working together?

JANET

Long enough to know when you're trying to delay seeing patients. Hurry up!

AUDIENCE (oov) laughs as the Doctor runs into his clinical room.

DOCTOR (oov)

First patient!

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SCENE 5 - Doctor's waiting room

The Doctor is looking tired as he meets with a patient - a middle aged man with his arm in a sling.

PATIENT 1

Doctor, Doctor! I've broken my arm in two places.

DOCTOR

Yes I see. But the sling seems to be doing its job.

PATIENT 1

Oh yes it is. No strong pain either.

DOCTOR

So... Why were you coming in today?

PATIENT 1

To get your advice.

DOCTOR

Advice for what?

PATIENT 1

Advice about the broken arm.

DOCTOR

Well, whatever I said would be not very different from whoever put the cast on. Elevate, rest the arm, and wait for it to heal.

PATIENT 1

Yes, I know all that already. But I was asking for more advice around prevention.

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DOCTOR

Preventing a broken arm? Well it all depends on how you broke the arm.

PATIENT 1

I told you. I broke the arm in two places

DOCTOR

That's more the what than the how but *(sigh)* Oh... I get it now. My advice is *(groan)* to avoid those two places.

AUDIENCE (oov) laugh enthusiastically.

DOCTOR

Next!

Cut to Patient 2, and old lady

PATIENT 2

Doctor, Doctor! I've lost my memory.

DOCTOR

When did that happen?

PATIENT 2

When did what happen?

Doctor frowns angrily. AUDIENCE (oov) laugh enthusiastically.

SCENE 6 - Central Park School - Bathroom external

Clara is walking past the hallway, heading to a class. The corridor she passes has two rows of lockers, and

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between them, an entrance to the staff bathroom. Clara looks at the lockers, thinking of places to hide.

CLARA

I might not be that lucky again, and Missy will wake up soon. Now where can I go next?

Clara notices the lockers are exactly her height, and she could probably fit into them with a squeeze, then observe people as they pass by. She definitely does not look into the bathroom.

CLARA

Playing by this world's rules just seems to have me end up with Missy. But what if I didn't follow these rules at all?

Clara looks upwards, pondering for a moment, before deciding to prepare to start teaching her class of cheeky but kind hearted school-children.

CLARA

A place I don't remember sitcoms ever venturing is the staff bathroom. I wonder how the teachers survived.

The bathroom door was drab. In a world where the corridors were shining brightly, the staff toilet door stood out by not standing out. Not shining, not with a fetching colour. Not worth looking at really. So Clara decided to go -

CLARA

I think I'll go inside.

I said it was boring and drab. No point in continuing to look at it, let alone go inside. So Clara takes her hand off the door handle and goes-

CLARA

You know I can hear you, right? I'm going inside.

Well, I did warn you.

Clara pulls at the door, her strength overcoming the glue that the students had left there last night. The door drags as it pulls away from the doorway, and as soon as the gap is large enough, Clara throws herself through to the other side...

And immediately Clara emerged into a different world entirely. The polished tiled of the school floor had been replaced by aquamarine shells, and looking up she saw instead of the overly bright lights of school hall, she was looking into a sky of bright purple. She spun around, to see any sign of where she had previously been, but the only sign was a door behind her, matching the bathroom door she had forced open.

“Well,” Clara said to herself, “This is definitely different from any comedy show I’ve seen.”

She paused, waiting for the sound of the audience laughing, but none came. She waited to hear the narrator telling her where she should be going, but nothing came. All she could hear was a gentle swaying sound, similar to a soft wave at the beach.

“So I’m not where I was, so where does that make me now?” she pondered.

Checking once more the door was still behind her, ensuring she could go back if need be, she started to head further along the aquamarine scales, looking around into the purple sky to see any clues of where she was now.

She first noticed pink dots in the distance. As she walked, she noticed some were getting closer to her, and realised they were translucent

bubbles. And beneath each of the bubbles was a creature which looked like an ivory coloured sea turtle with an aquamarine shell, slowly gliding through this sky.

She looked down, and saw at the edge of the scaled floor she was standing on ivory coloured flesh. She crouched down and touched the scales, feeling a slow, soft vibration and beat.

“You’re alive. I’m standing on a sea turtle with...with a world on its back,” Clara remarked, laughing at the beauty and the bizarreness of it all.

SCENE 7 - Central Town Medical Centre - waiting room

Somehow the waiting room remains as crowded as when the Doctor first arrived, with the same patients, including the old man with the now even longer beard waiting to be seen. The Doctor bursts out of his consultation room, furious. Janet jumps up from her desk to stop him leaving.

JANET

Doctor! Your next patient is waiting

DOCTOR

No time! I told you, I’ve got a meeting to get to.

JANET

Oh, didn’t I tell you? I got a call earlier. Meeting’s cancelled. So plenty of time to see the needy patients.

DOCTOR

They’re not needy. They’re just wanting to tell bad jokes, and tell me how they’re a bell, or a curtain, or a sheep.

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JANET

Sounds baaaaaaad.

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughs.

The Doctor glares at Janet

DOCTOR

Exactly. And considering you're pretty skilled with the bad jokes, you don't need me around. I'm off.

The Old Man leaps up clutching his chest

OLD MAN

Aaaah - my heart!

He falls to the ground in front of the Doctor

JANET

No! Mr McGillicuddy. You were my favourite teacher at school

DOCTOR

Mr McGillicuddy? He was your teacher?

JANET

Please Doctor, you have to help him! He helped me to be the person I am today.

The Doctor sighs.

DOCTOR

Fine. All creatures great and wheezing... Janet, come to the patient with me.

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The Doctor walks over to the Old Man, Janet following, and kneels in front of his body.

DOCTOR

Janet, kneel by his head, and elevate and tilt it back slightly.

JANET

Elevate meaning...

DOCTOR

Raise up. Raise up.

JANET

Why didn't you say that?

AUDIENCE (oov) laughter

DOCTOR

Not the time! Now, I'm going to start chest compressions.

The Doctor crosses his hands over each other, and pushes into the old man's chest.

DOCTOR

One-two-three-four. One-two-three-four.

JANET

Catchy rhythm Doctor!

AUDIENCE (oov) laughter

DOCTOR

Everyone shut up! I'm trying to concentrate.

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The Old Man gasps and sits up.

OLD MAN

I'm cured!

JANET and PATIENTS

Hooray!

AUDIENCE (oov) cheers

JANET

Thank you so much Doctor. Let's have a party to celebrate!

DOCTOR

But I really have to-

Old Man and Janet get up, taking the Doctor by each arm.

OLD MAN

We insist!

Occasionally Clara would look back to ensure the door back to the school was still there, even if it was a tiny brown dot in a world of colour, but she was more and more fascinated by the world she had found. The other sea turtles seemed to be closer to her now, and despite being immense in size, as they glided they passed each other very closely without crashing. None of the creatures seemed to redirect themselves, there was just a shared awareness of all the creatures where each of their kind was at each time.

Sometimes they got so close the pink bubbles each turtle carried would brush against the bubble of another turtle. She saw how each

bubble slid alongside the other, their outer skin obviously strong enough to avoid popping in this environment.

She wondered if a bubble would come close to her soon. Looking around she saw such a turtle gliding up from the side of the turtle she was on. She ran as fast as she could to get closer to it. While the creatures moved slowly, they were large and she was small so she might only have a few seconds of contact between the two bubbles.

But pushing herself as far as she could, she reached the edge of her own bubble just as the bubble on the other turtle slid past. She reached out her fingers as far as she could and felt her fingertips pass the membrane of the bubble she resided in and into the membrane of the other bubb—

My name is Clara Oswald. Wife of Danny Pink, mother of Damien Pink and Principal at Coal Hill School. Today is my birthday, and I've woken to the kids making breakfast in bed.

"Hope you like it Mummy," Damien smiled. "I made the pancakes."

"You opened the packet," Danny corrected, "And I expect you to help with the cleaning up."

"I can help," I say.

"Not on your life," Danny objects. "Eat up. You've got a busy day today. I hear the school is putting on something spec—"

Clara pulled her hand back and shook herself as she returned to the shell of the turtle.

"What just happened?" she muttered to herself. She hadn't moved anywhere but she experienced a different life. It wasn't just an image in her mind, or a mental projection. She had lived as that person, and knew what they knew. Knew what she, a different she knew. She was Clara, and was not travelling with the Doctor, but living happily back at Shoreditch.

And then she flinched back and she was back to being her.

“The real me,” she said out loud. But, her thoughts corrected her, the other person felt real as well. The pancakes smelt real. Damien’s smile seemed real. The love Clara had felt in that moment, both from her family and towards them, felt real.

She rubbed her eyes and sniffed, trying to focus.

Clara was no stranger to different forms of herself, but with other splinters there seemed to be a common source. They all had emerged from her exploring the Doctor’s timestream to save them. But this other form felt different. She had felt no urgency, no need to save and protect, as she had in her splinters.

She saw another turtle drawing near, and slightly more cautiously this time reached out through the bubble membrane and—

“Next patient Ms Davis!” Doctor Smith calls out, walking into the waiting room, his long flowing locks swaying as he arrives.

“Ms Annette, your 3pm,” Clara answered sheepishly, pulling her thick glasses up, and hiding behind her computer screen. She didn’t want to look up, for fear she may blush. And then Doctor Smith would know, and he can never know. Never know how much she—

Clara flinched away, not wanting to explore this further. Another version of her, this time with a Doctor, but not like any of the ones she had known. And she wasn’t like any version of her she had known either, much more shy and concealed than Clara had ever remembered being.

But when she had been connected in that life, she had felt at home, felt normal. Everything Clara had done had made complete sense considering the life she had felt so far. Even though it was completely different from the real her, it had felt right in that moment.

A thought began to stir within Clara. It started just as a question mark at the end of two words, questioning a thought she had allowed to pass unquestioned.

Real me?

Teaching at Coal Hill, Clara had seen a number of her students undergo massive changes in the span of only a couple of months. Some had changed their hair, others their names, their groups of friends, their interests, their hobbies, even their whole personalities. All in their lifelong pursuit to uncover who they really were beneath the skin.

Clara had never really determined herself that way. Not with Danny, not with her father. Anyone. When her mother passed, there was a part of her that refused to be pinned down. To be identified.

To know herself, that was fine, but to be known by someone else. That was... It...

She pushed the thought out of her head and looked around for the door back to the school. She had seen enough. She didn't completely understand what she had seen, but she was sure this would be useful for the Doctor, enough for him to figure out what to do next. So all she had to do was leave, get back to the school and she would find the Doctor there and he would figure out what was going on. He probably had figured it out already, and Clara was wasting time here which could have been better spent getting the TARDIS back.

That is what she had told herself. And that's what a part of her wanted.

But another part wanted to reach out for one last bubble to go past and—

“James Miller, Guardian. Your children’s series of books are regularly best sellers amongst boys and girls of all ages,” the journalist said in the middle of the audience. “Where do you get all your ideas?”

Clara laughs, “Oh the number of times I’ve been asked this question, and I still can’t think of a good answer.”

She pauses while the media team laughs.

“I suppose it’s never come from one source. Childhood fantasies refined over time, dreams I’ve had. Wish fulfilment for a world where the Doctor would come and take me on exciting travels,” she explained. Then as she thought it over she added, “But more and more I wonder how much my disability played a part. All those years in hospital, as a child I wanted more than anything to be free to move anywhere but there. And now as an adult I want to give those same escapes to children who may need them.”

“Sarah Powell, the Star,” another journalist popped up, “Do you have any regrets about finishing up with the character of Clara?”

“No,” Clara answered, laughing slightly. “She was important for me for a very long time, and probably more important to me than to my readers. But I was glad to make new characters for my newer readers to have special important relationships with. And Clara isn’t gone. She’s with me completely, the real me, even after the fictional character has—“

Clara wrenched her hand back, feeling an overwhelming panic against hearing anymore. She took a moment to gather her breath and looked up. It seemed she could see into each of the pink bubbles now. Each one a different image of a different self. Each seeming as real, or even more real than she felt at that second.

She reached out to another.

SCENE 8 - Central Town Medical Clinic - Waiting Room

The waiting room chairs have been pushed aside, and a large table has been placed in the middle of the waiting room, with a brightly coloured three tier cake in the middle, untouched. Around the patients are dancing with each other underneath a disco ball, though music is too soft to hear distinctly. In the centre of

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this stands the Doctor, wearing a party hat, looking bored and blowing on a party horn. Next to him, leaning back on the reception desk, Janet holds a martini in one hand.

JANET

Not a bad spread for a moment's notice, if I do say so myself

AUDIENCE (oov) Laughter

DOCTOR

One thing I don't understand, Janet. How can we both be so overwhelmed I can't leave the clinic for a moment, and also have enough time to plan and run a party.

JANET

It's all about priorities, Doctor, and thanking you is definitely a priority for us all.

DOCTOR

Not for me. I have things to do.

JANET

Like dance?

She turns to offer her hand to the Doctor.

DOCTOR

No! For the last time, no!

JANET

Watch out! We got Doctor Grumpy in the hooooooooouse.

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Music suddenly gets significantly louder. Janet and Old Man begin to break dance. The Doctor throws his hands up in frustration.

DOCTOR

That's it, I'm leaving. There's nothing else to be done here.

The Doctor begins to walk to the exit. Suddenly the music stops and there's the sound of a heavy rain storm outside.

JANET

Ooh, looks like you missed your chance for good weather. Wouldn't want to walk in that?

DOCTOR

I can survive a bit of water.

The Doctor continues to push past partiers to the door when the Old Man suddenly clutches his chest again.

OLD MAN

My heart... Again!

He falls to the ground in front of Janet. The Doctor gets to the exit, but stops, not moving forwards or backwards.

JANET

Mr McGillicuddy, my favourite teacher. Not again.

OLD MAN

No... Not just your teacher Janet, dear Janet.

JANET

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No?

OLD MAN

Janet. I am your father...

The Old Man's eyes close. Janet screams. The Doctor closes his eyes and breaths slowly to calm himself.

DOCTOR

I am not in control of this situation, but I know something is. I am not in control of this world, but I know something is. I am however in control of myself.

And I am going to leave. *If* whoever or whatever decides to kill an old man because of my decision, that will be on its conscience, not mine.

His decision made, the Doctor opens the door, and exits the clinic. Old Man suddenly sits up, and spits out a half-chewed apple slice.

OLD MAN

Huh, turns out I just had indigestion.

JANET

Oh, *dad*...

AUDIENCE (oov) - laughter.

SCENE 9: Central Park School Interior Entrance

Clara walks back into the hallway, amidst students flowing around her looking unsettled and upset from her exploration. She clutches one hand to her arm to hold herself together.

CLARA

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Can you just not talk about me for a bit?

I did warn you. But soon class will be starting, and Clara will get back to what she does best, teaching. She will need to change her body language for that or the students will eat her alive.

The Doctor rushes into the school.

DOCTOR

Clara!

AUDIENCE (oov) cheers loudly. The Doctor runs into the centre frame holding Clara's arms, excitedly. Clara looks up at the Doctor, slightly relieved but not restored.

DOCTOR

Have you managed to find out why Missy brought us here?

CLARA

I did find her, but I don't think she's involved. And anyway Doctor, I need—

The Doctor lets go of Clara and turns away, to think about what she has said.

DOCTOR

I wouldn't rule her out too quickly. Whenever Missy is around she's usually up to her neck in it

MISSY screams off stage, and races in from the right, holding a knife above her head to attack someone, anyone. However as soon as she gets within a metre of the Doctor, a deep pit suddenly appears beneath her feet. She stops running, looks down, then looks to the

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Doctor and Clara and waves goodbye before she plummets to the depths below.

DOCTOR

Okay... Perhaps Missy isn't responsible for this.

AUDIENCE (oov) *Laughter*

CLARA

Doctor, I found something else here, and I really need to talk to you—

Clara is interrupted by the sound of the school bell and a flood of students racing through the hallway to get to their next class, or to go home.

DOCTOR (*raising voice above the noise*)

What was that Clara?

CLARA (*raising voice*)

I said I really need to tell you something. I left here and found—

The school bus smashes through the side wall of the school, leading the students to shriek momentarily, before SAM STARJET jumps out and stands on the wrecked wall.

SAM STARJET

Party on, dudes!

AUDIENCE (oov) *laughs*

Sam Starjet mimes playing an air guitar and suddenly the school is filled with the sound of soft rock, as all the students start dancing in sync.

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CLARA (*almost yelling*)

I saw different versions of myself and —

DOCTOR (*yelling*)

I can't hear over this noise. Let's try to find another—

The Doctor is interrupted by a large marching band entering from the left hand side and interweaving between the Doctor and Clara, separating them while loudly playing brass music on top of the rock music.

CLARA (*Screaming at the top of her lungs*)

AM I EVEN THE REAL ME?

All sounds stop. All students stop and freeze in place. Nothing is moving apart from the Doctor and Clara.

CLARA

What just happened?

The Doctor runs over to Clara and takes her hands.

DOCTOR

Never mind about them. What happened to you?

CLARA

It's hard to explain but I escaped from this world into a world outside of here. I was flying on the back of a turtle, and could see little bubbles brush past me. Each of them contained a different version of me.

DOCTOR

A splinter?

CLARA

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No - they were completely different. No time travel, no aliens, just normal Clara's living normal lives. And some of them were even imagining me, as I am now. And I saw so many that the question kept coming up in my mind - how can I be sure I'm the real me, and not one of these other Claras who have a far more realistic life.

A small child, Timmy, walks up to Clara and tugs on her jacket.

TIMMY (Cute voice with a lisp)

Aww, Miss Clawa, of course you're weal. You're my favouwite teacher.

AUDIENCE (oov) - Awwwww

Clara pulls her jacket out of his grip startling the boy.

CLARA (*Becoming agitated talking quickly*)

And I can't just ignore it. And I know this fake world is trying to include me in this fake role of teacher, and a part of me wants to just accept it so I don't have to question who I am, but another part reminds me that if this world can be fake, maybe the world I thought of as real, the ones with Daleks, and Missy, is just as fake as this one.

DOCTOR

And me? Am I fake, too?

CLARA (panicking)

I think I'm going insane... I think that I'm -
The Doctor pulls Clara into a hug as she begins to shake.

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DOCTOR

I know you don't want easy answers, and I don't have any to give either. What's real, and what's fake is something we just don't think about because it's terrifying, but you didn't have a choice about it. But what I do know is Clara Oswald, this Clara Oswald I'm holding right now is the real one for me.

The Doctor lets go of Clara. She steps back, takes a small breath, appearing calmer.

CLARA

But... That's not enough. *I* still have that uncertainty.

DOCTOR

And maybe you always will. But what I can promise is no matter how real you are, or what reality is, no matter how long you want to explore this, I will be there to help you.

CLARA

Thank you Doctor. I'll try to remember that.

The Doctor turns to face centre.

DOCTOR

You weren't ready for that, were you? You weren't ready to have your world of easy answers solved in twenty minutes, and cheap gags. But accepting that sometimes you don't have the answers, and living with pain and uncertainty is how you become an adult.

Clara touches the Doctor's shoulder from behind

CLARA

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Doctor, who are you talking to?

DOCTOR

Those vortex turtles you saw, was a school of Universes, each in an early state of development. And we are right now inside a very young Universe, the runt of the litter. It has been trying to form its own creation, wanting to be like its bigger siblings, but too young to think of ideas for itself, it copied and stole elements and people from other Universes to create its internal rules and logic.

CLARA

So, that's who sent us here? A baby Universe?

DOCTOR

I imagine Diamant may have played a part, as well, as part of the Labour it gave us. (beat) Déjà vu.

CLARA

What?

DOCTOR

Well, I'm fairly certain I've seen something like this before. Trouble is... With so many memory blocks, amnesia and out-and-out moments of forgetfulness that I have, it's difficult to tell where.

CLARA

Do you think it's them? The turtles?

DOCTOR (vague)

It's inconvenient, whatever it is.

CLARA

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Why us? Here? For what purpose? Did it just want to be entertained?

DOCTOR

No - not entertained. The vortex turtle wants to be experienced - as all Universes do. And it wanted to be a safe place where there are clear rules, the good guys are always happy, the bad guys are always easily defeated and no one gets hurt. It was a nice ideal, and considering the vortex is lacking the guidance of Time Lords, Eternals and Chronovores, it didn't turn out too badly. But it's time for this baby Universe to grow, to allow complexity, and take the lessons people and concepts it has taken, to make something new, and allow worlds without easy answers. Without hard questions, we wouldn't have art, wouldn't have discovery, and that's what living is.

SFX (wheezing groaning)

The world around the Doctor and Clara begins to fade in and out, as the TARDIS fades in. Eventually the Doctor, Clara and the TARDIS stand in a white void.

“Where did that come from?” Clara asked.

“We’ve done what we needed to do. Whether it was to escape from this world, or teach a new Universe an important lesson, we’ve completed Diamant’s task. And so now it’s time to leave,” The Doctor opened the TARDIS door for Clara who hurried in. Before following her, the Doctor gave one last look out, before saying “Thank you. I look forward to seeing what you develop into one day.”

And then as the TARDIS made familiar dematerialisation sounds, it faded into the void, leaving the world empty.

But not for long. White void developed lights. Lights developed colour. Colours formed into shapes. Shaped developed into objects.

And in the world the Doctor left behind, there was frantic energy as a Universe found what would happen if it rejected certainty, and explored the possibilities of what could be.

The TARDIS shook violently as it departed, significantly more than usual. Clara even found herself having to steady herself on the console, as the Doctor held tight on the control, with teeth gritted.

“It’s letting us go, but still moving from Universe to Universe is not a move the TARDIS is fond of doing,” he explained.

Then just as suddenly, the TARDIS stopped shaking, and returned to its normal peaceful hum.

“Ooh, my head...” groaned Missy. “What happened? I feel as though I’ve gone ten rounds with a Sontaran Fleet Marshal.”

She struggled to her feet, gripping her TARDIS console for support.

Dishevelled and uncharacteristically disoriented, she closed her eyes. Bits of memory floated across her consciousness. A sickening bright and colourful school with Him, his pet, and a series of interminable voices, always cheering and clapping.

“Just a dream... A nightmare.” She slapped the back of a hand. “Naughty, naughty. No more Peladonian pickles before mesmerism, I think.”

The TARDIS moaned as she set the new coordinates.

“Shut it, my pretty,” she cooed. “You’ve had worse. Things to do, people to kill, no sense shilly-shallying out here.”

As she pressed the materialisation toggle for a new world to puppeteer, her mind seized on an image of multicoloured fractals. Far stranger than the rest. A name... Diamant...

The time rotor continued its slow movements to show the Doctor's TARDIS was in flight, but not directing itself in any particular direction.

“We'll let her sit in the vortex for a bit, let her get acclimatised back to our Universe before we head anywhere else,” the Doctor said, then looked up at the controls to look at Clara. She was looking off into the distance, not really focused on what the Doctor was saying.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asked.

“What?” Clara asked, jerking herself back to awareness. “Oh, I was just wondering, all those people in the school, the bus driver, were any of them real?”

The Doctor paused to ponder the question for a short moment before answering, “I can't say exactly. But they were invented and created in a Universe by the forces of that Universe. That makes them as real as anything else in existence.”

“True,” Clara responded. “I wonder what that Universe will turn out to be now we've left it.”

In a far off world, in a far off Universe, where there is no longer any Doctor, any Clara or any TARDIS, there is life. A forest overflowing with exotic flowers and an abundance of food provides sustenance for any of the creatures that choose to gather them. Life is plentiful, with creatures scurrying through the grass, or soaring through the sky making music no one had ever heard before.

Small communities or sentient beings move through the forest, never stopping for too long, but learning all the time how to exist with the forest and how to provide mutual benefit to it.

Except one. A loner. Deep in the forest, there is a deep dark pit. All the creatures know to avoid it, and no plants grow near it.

And one day, the creature pulled itself up out of the pit. The world was still changing, evolving, but the creature remained the same. It doesn't need to. As a ruthless predator, it gazed around, licking its lips with a forked tongue. Its spider-like legs clicking against the dishevelled soil.

“What shall I eat today?” it pondered wistfully to itself, as around it life continued to change.

A hand made out of fractals and impossibility rested on his soldier. “Imagination. *Ha*. Thank you, Doctor.”

The creature didn't move. He knew the basic tenets of life. Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, this was an entity that had turned him to prey in nothing but a single motion. Powerful. Dangerous.

“You'll do very nicely, indeed, Our reptilian friend.” The hand slid to the top of the head. “You're a Creel, aren't you? We shall call you... Basillius. A pretty name for an unusual tradition. You'll like it. We promise you.”

The creature tensed as the hand's grip clamped down on his skull, as if to lift it high into the sky and tossed him back down into the pit. The entity attached to the hand made a fluttering sound.

A giggle. It was a giggle.

The hand, with the weight to palm the stars in the night sky, simply fell away.

“Time to go,” they said. “There is mischief to create.”

And Basillius Creel followed.

ARMAGEDDON'S TOUCH: PART 2

TEMPUS FAMILIAS



By Alan Camlann

+++ RASSILON ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ TRANSMITTER DAMAGED +++
RELAY TO LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM'
+++ FROM: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: 173 +++ REPEAT +++ 173 +++ IMPERATIVE +++ COPY
+++ RELAY +++ 'ODYSSEUM' OUT

The Doctor and the TARDIS both were showing signs of exhaustion.

“Ready?” the former asked.

The latter hummed unsteadily, but in affirmation.

Gently, with as much kindness as she could, the Doctor eased the materialisation switch.

A time cicatrix was essentially a blood clot in the flow of the time vortex. Spatial matter that had escaped from N-Space through the usual cross-temporal transition points. Time corridors, unshielded temporal experiments, black holes and vaporised time vessels. To the untrained eye, used to conventional space travel, they could look quite a lot like asteroids or chunks of moon rock.

As unusual as they were, however, it was deeply disturbing to see the reverse. A chunk of raw Time in Space. Several. All emerging in inhabited star systems.

The Doctor, blonde hair a mess, had been tracking every competing phenomena for the past few months. Every time it emerged from a time vent. Never wavering. In the TARDIS databanks were every competing trajectory, every minor course correction, every sighting from a time-active power. Gallifrey may have been gone, but that didn't mean the time-traveller had no contacts. Mother G, the Narans, the GBC, the Vortex-Walkers of Quantox, the Maestri, even a Space-beached SIDRAT...

This was ancient work. Detailed work. Time-worn and honoured work. It required a total disconnect from any dramas in the Universe. She'd switched off the International Rescue protocol devised with the fam and worked in deadened silence. Subsisting only on multivitamin gum from the food machine and an increasing sense that something was terribly wrong.

The Doctor was performing the work of potentially a hundred Time Lord monitors.

It had begun with the astral map, the oval-faced column dragged from storage and squared up in one of the luminescent hexagons on the floor.

Soon, however—scant days, in fact—the console room was transformed into a frenzied planetarium, museum and observatory, all in one. The comparatively stark beehive was now buzzing with paraphernalia. The astral map became a footnote among the chaos. Scanner print-outs held up by the needle-points of compasses, globes scattered on the floor, star-chart seas five-centimetres deep, and planetary guides with bent spines from the TARDIS library. It felt more like Long John Silver’s cabin, than the controlling chamber of a time-ship.

With another vworping lurch, heaving and foaming, the TARDIS thudded into conterminous Time. Atop an asteroid belt with a low-level radiation count according to the instruments.

“I know... I know...” The Doctor patted the console. “No more today if we can help it. Alright?”

It was important they did keep on top of this, however. This cicatrix was registering an increased 1.3 on the Bocca scale and angling eerily close to... Where? The Doctor leant against one of the room’s honey-gold dynamorphic generators, looming over her like a crooked finger, and scratched her eyebrow. When the time-traveller lifted her elbow, she saw exactly what she was looking for. She pulled it from its fridge magnet anchor and stuffed it in her pocket.

“The planet Birdie Hepburn in the constellation of Auriga. Haven’t been there for a while. Now, before we go a-hunting, who is it in the vicinity, again? Taylor...? Potts...? Destrii...? Tarklu...? McShane...?” The Doctor crossed to the astral map and twisted a dial. “Oh. Well, then, let’s see how Oswald is going today...”

On one of the circular screens, the complex striations, like the topography of a riverbed, ebbed and shifted. New lines. New threads.

“Anomaly detected,” reported a diminutive voice behind her.

The Doctor nearly jumped out of her skin.

“You’re still unused to it?” the shayde almost smiled.

“Shayde—my Shayde—was a friend... Long since gone now...” She smiled in return, sadly. “A little bit of him in the TARDIS computer systems, after all these years, is in you. A little of a tailor friend, Bobbins, too, but mum’s the word on that. They like to keep to themselves.”

An adjustment of the round glasses. “It’s amazing you could find this from so little.”

“Seeing you is like... seeing a ghost.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts.”

“I don’t.” The Doctor canted a little smile. “Maybe that’s why it surprises me.”

Perhaps, it was nostalgia. The older the Doctor got, the more dead friends seemed to line the pockets of her lifetimes. Like lint in a dryer. The shayde had been moulded like colloidal clay. A ferrofluidic being. Absorbed from a heavy diet of background radiation that could be found in the less well-maintained areas of the power room. The doses would have been lethal to any other lifeform.

For this invention, however, the Doctor had been happy to risk it.

On the metaphorical pottery wheel, the hypercubes sat at the shayde’s centre. On a spine of duronite and coolant tanks. Its new form was cast around it. The crust for a molten core of memory. There was an electric tingle in the air, the Doctor could feel it in her teeth, as it assembled.

The fishbowl head reshaped to fit the memories within. Influenced by their whispers. The voice became low, husky, and her stature was adopted to suit. The hair, cut short around the ears, manifested as carved jet striations of similar length. The eyes were reflective, as though seen at the bottom of a dark glass. The cut irises looked more like asterisms, glints, than images in their own right. In a way, that seemed oddly appropriate.

Finally, as the shayde stabilised, a silhouette of the memories she represented, she decided to call herself Traskey, as she was “a Traskey” and not “Traskeya”. In another lifetime or two ago, the Doctor would’ve found the pun rather amusing. The collection of her former tutor’s memories was certainly still smiling.

The time-traveller’s mind, however, was elsewhere.

Onto more pressing matters of concern. “Anomaly good or anomaly bad?”

“Object Oswald looks to be inching ever closer to the Nyotspelin system.” Traskey pointed over the Doctor’s elbow. “There.”

“Not unexpected. But we did the planetary survey. There’s no one at home. Where’s the concern?”

Traskey lifted a sheaf of new print-outs. “One of the system’s rogue planets has been influenced by its gravitational pull. The planet is being pulled into orbit.”

“Of the cicatrix?”

“Yes.” The robotic hand adjusted the hollow frames of its glasses. “A decaying orbit...”

“...That could swing it like a bolas and kill everyone in the Ogg system. There’s a metaphor in that somewhere...” The Doctor chewed her lip. “Need to calculate the probabilities, where’d I keep the...? It was over there, wasn’t it? Or was it...?”

As the time-traveller flitted around her cluttered home, Traskey clasped her hands in front of her. “It sounds to me as if Miss Oswald was ultimately a lesson that some friendships just cannot be forced.”

“Are we picking up that conversation again?”

“Yes.”

“Haven’t we better things to do?” The Doctor looked her up and down. “How’s your walk cycle?”

“Don’t you think to threaten me, I’ll have you know I can bumble quite well on my own, thank you,” said Traskey, persisting. “This is important.”

“Why?”

“These reminiscences are distracting you from your task.”

The Doctor stopped, exhaled, and leant against the console. There was certainly an element of truth in that. The isolation had propelled her inward. As she’d feared.

Traskey asked, “What happened to this Clara?”

What was there to say? “Not much to tell. A friend with a death wish and a walking endorsement of ‘be careful what you wish for.’”

“Rather glib, Doctor. I understood she was a rather troubled young woman.”

“Yes...” The time-traveller switched on the Ship’s scanner, adjusting its lens. “In hindsight, I think she had a great deal of difficulty deciding who she was.”

“As Borusa may have said, there lies the sum total. People who cannot be honest with themselves find themselves the worst strangers. No one can live like that. Not well and certainly not for long.”

The Doctor blinked at her.

“What?” asked Traskey.

“Nothing... Just... Considering how much of Traskeya is actually in there, I thought that was rather profound.”

“Oh,” the shayde was flattered. “Thank you. Memory does strange things to the synapses. Invented or otherwise.”

“Imagination is a wonderful thing. It sparks all sorts of surprises.”

“How did you two meet?”

“Clara? In a gaslighting honeytrap, would you believe? Something to pique my curiosity. I should’ve known better from Mila, all that business with the Daleks, and Charley, the R101, but I was intrigued... Our introduction, Clara and I, was designed, I think, to remodel me in the shape of an old friend.”

“Some friend.”

“Well, I didn’t know who I was, Traskey. New incarnation. New brainprint. I’d been on Trenzalore for too long, I’d begun to lose what made me the Doctor. That was their opening.”

“Doctor...” Traskey admonished. “You, of all Traskeya knew, had decided on who you wanted to be. Long before any decision to leave. What on Gallifrey happened? You knock your head?”

“Several times over.” The Doctor smiled. A hand flicked on the macro she’d designed to monitor the cicatrixes. “We’ll just let that algorithm run. I...” She turned from her scrutiny of the scanner. “I have a problem.”

“Which is?”

“Well... There’s a lesson that I have to re-learn, but I don’t want to.”

“I see. Well, I’m sorry to say, but life is not about what you want to be. You are not its centre. The spoke around everything turns.”

“Cor, if the Time Lords could hear you say that...” she grinned.

“Waffle. Life is about what is and reconciling that.” If Traskey had eyebrows, she would have pinched them. “What is the lesson?”

“That evil is sometimes irreconcilable evil. Tortured, though it is. That, standing by and letting monsters rule because they *might* change their beard, is just as terrible as joining in on the mayhem.”

“Yes, that is very sad,” agreed the shayde. “But consider the alternative.”

“Letting people die because it goes outside my comfort zone?”

“Yes.”

The Doctor gave a half-laugh. “There is no indignity in being afraid to die, but there is a terrible shame in being afraid to live,” she quoted.

“Who was that? Me?”

“No, a Thal by the name of Alydon, I think.” She wrung her hands. “He had to face the reality of doing nothing and letting his people be exterminated. If they wouldn’t fight, they would die. But... They had to fight for their own cause. Not us lot of time-travellers.” Her shoulders squared. “Daleks... It’s not a war. It’s not a battle. It’s a hunt for them. Their tactics are to scare people into a hole and kill them. Anyone and everyone. They enjoy it.”

“Such Death Zone daemons are worth fighting against, I thought?” said Traskey.

“It’s the fact that I can never make peace with them. Hatred always finds a way to survive. How many lifetimes has it been? How many generations of people would that be in linear Time? And yet that hatred reigns on.”

“You’re tired.”

“Exhausted,” the Doctor rubbed her eyes.

“No.” Traskey looked her in the eye. “Take my meaning. You are tired. Sickened. You drew your line in the sand long ago, Doctor, you just need reminding of it.”

The Doctor could hear her own voice, old and young, steeled with rage, in the Dalek city, *‘This senseless, evil killing!’*

“Or else, why do any of this?” Traskey’s soft kick brought a paper snowstorm to the TARDIS console room. Like a shaken snowglobe. “Who are you rescuing? The killers, the murderers, the psychopaths? Or those who go to sleep every night having never harmed a flutterwing?”

She watched the constellations tumble like autumn leaves.

“The cosmos isn’t that simple,” she muttered.

“No,” affirmed Traskey. “And there, in that, is what you must reconcile.”

The Doctor clapped the nearest galaxy from the air, safeguarding it in her steady hands.

INTERDIMENSIONAL RESCUE: PART 2



By Tim Bradley

+++ RASSILON ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ TRANSMITTER DAMAGED +++
RELAY TO LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM'
+++ FROM: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: 086 +++ REPEAT +++ 086 +++ IMPERATIVE +++ COPY
+++ RELAY +++ 'ODYSSEUM' OUT

Once, in another Universe, the other Fifth Doctor was on his way to Earth.

Recently, he helped Amy, who eventually decided to call herself Abby, and her sister Zara with collecting the six segments of the Key to Time. Once he helped them, the Doctor piloted his TARDIS to Earth in order to pick up Peri, his latest travelling companion.

After picking her up, the Doctor decided to take Peri to see a baseball game involving the Los Angeles Dodgers on the planet Earth in the year 2023. The Doctor would have preferred to have seen a cricket match, but Peri, an American from 1984, was keen to find out how baseball was played in the future. So, he obliged.

The trip to the baseball game didn't go according to plan. For a start, the TARDIS ended up in the middle of the baseball diamond. Peri snickered when the scanner revealed the confused faces of the players on the field. They avoided going outside. The Doctor dematerialised the TARDIS and parked it outside the arena, a couple of hours or so before their arrival.

Stepping outside, Peri, some dollars in her handbag, went off to purchase a couple of admission tickets for the game. Meanwhile, the Doctor went in search of the concession stand to buy a couple of hot dogs. He didn't get there. Instead, the Doctor fell into a trap, and found himself in the lair of the evil Zodin. In his experience, she was a terrible woman. He discovered her plans for conquering the Earth, which involved drilling into the planet's core and blowing it up.

After running around in a lot of corridors pursued by Zodin, the Doctor managed to thwart her plans. The planet Earth in its spatial-temporal state was saved, and so was the baseball match. Zodin was literally hopping mad, as she bounced up and down like a kangaroo and nearly tore her hair out. On his way back to Peri, the Doctor felt a strange sensation overwhelm him. Eventually, he blacked out.

Once he woke up, the Doctor found himself on an asteroid at the edge of the Universe, situated next to a supernova. He wondered how he got there. Initially, he suspected that Zodin might have been responsible. The Doctor called out to anyone who might be nearby. No reply. He found this odd. Why would he be brought to this asteroid with no-one to meet him? Without the TARDIS to help him, the Doctor decided to sit this one out. He soon became bored.

“All I wanted was to get a couple of hotdogs for me and Peri,” he exhaled.

A couple of hours or so later, the Doctor heard the TARDIS – or, at least, a TARDIS – materialise nearby. He made his way towards it. He hid behind a rock wall, and discovered seven people and his TARDIS nearby. Gradually, the Doctor realised six of the people were once his travelling companions. The seventh person looked exactly like him in attire, but his face was different. The Doctor deduced from their conversation that he had ended up in a different Universe. Realising they were looking for him, the Doctor decided to make his presence known.

The Fifth Doctor and his companions were very surprised once the other Fifth Doctor announced himself.

“You look like that guy from *The Durrells*,” Max remarked.

“You’re dressed like the Doctor,” commented a flummoxed Erimem. “But you don’t look like any Doctor I’ve ever seen before.”

Adric and Sarah Jane were equally sceptical. Nyssa and Billy were more open-minded.

“Hello, Nyssa. Hello, Billy,” the other Fifth Doctor said cheerfully. “Good to see you two again.”

“You know us?” Billy asked.

“Of course,” the other Doctor replied. “I rescued you two recently after you escaped from the Void where you ended up in my Universe. Mind you, those were different versions of you two. You happened to be married and you had two children named Adric and Enid to get back to.”

“What?!” Nyssa exclaimed, delighted. “We get married, Billy and I?”

“We have children?!” Billy exclaimed.

“One of them is named after me?!” Adric joined in.

“Hello, Adric,” the other Doctor said. “Nice to see you alive and well.”

“Let’s not reveal too many details, dear chap,” the Doctor injected. “These are different versions of our companions you’re interacting with.”

“You think I don’t know that,” the other Doctor retorted. “I’m breaking enough rules as it is by being in your Universe.”

“So... You know who we all are then?” Sarah Jane enquired.

“Of course,” the other Doctor said cheerfully. “Hello, Sarah Jane.”

“And me?” Max joined in. “You know who I am?”

“How could I forget the man with his bio-kinetic energising ray?”

“I’ve never met you before,” Erimem reminded him.

The other Doctor studied Erimem for a bit before he looked to the Doctor. “I take it, other me, you haven’t met Erimem yet.”

“No, not yet,” the Doctor replied. “There’s another person called Peri with her too, I believe.”

“Oh, you’ll like Peri! Or... Possibly not.”

“He did,” said Erimem. “*We* did, I should say.”

The Fifth Doctor cleared his throat. “Perhaps we should link minds to establish the situation we’re in.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” nodded the other Fifth Doctor.

With that, the Doctors stood still and closed their eyes. Their companions watched as the two Time Lords linked minds with each other.

“Contact.”

“Contact.”

Information buzzed between the Doctors as they linked minds with each other. A short while later, they opened their eyes.

“Okay, so this Diamant is pretty bad news then,” the other Doctor said.

“Indeed,” the Doctor said. “And it’s very important we get you, Adric, Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane back to your Universes before the fabric of reality collapses.”

“We’d better be quick about it then if the shuddering’s anything to go by,” the other Doctor said. “The speed of collapse could be unpredictable.”

“Come on! Everyone, back to the TARDIS!” said the Doctors in unison.

With that, the Doctors headed off.

“Wrong way, Doctors!” called out their friends in unison.

Realising their mistake, the Doctors headed back the other way. As they made their way back, the Doctors exchanged the times when they visited Yorkshire and were assumed to be vets. Once they got back to the TARDIS, Max found the police doors already open. Adric was keen to get inside. Everyone got in, though the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy lingered on behind for a bit.

Nyssa remarked that there wasn't a force field surrounding the TARDIS this time and they didn't have a sixth diamond. The Doctor suspected Diamant would direct the TARDIS back to his chamber once they were all inside. Billy suspected a catch in their quest. The Doctor thought so too. He soon had an inspired idea on how to counteract Diamant. They would need to discuss it inside. With that, he, Nyssa and Billy entered the TARDIS. Once everyone was inside, the TARDIS dematerialised, just in time before the supernova finally exploded.

Soon, the TARDIS was back in Diamant's chamber. The Doctors were correct in assuming Diamant would direct the TARDIS back to his chamber once they and everyone else were inside. The diamond appeared in the console room again and became stuck to the console once more. Once back in the chamber, the Doctors and their companions stepped out of the TARDIS. It was still darkly-lit with the source of light coming from the column of white light with a tinge of blue in the centre of the chamber.

Sarah Jane wondered whether to call out to Diamant. The other Doctor advised against that, reminding her that Diamant was one of the Higher Powers and could be unpredictable. The Doctor also told them that Diamant had set the task for him, Nyssa and Billy and perhaps it was best he spoke on everyone's behalf. Nyssa pointed out that perhaps there would be no need to announce their presence to Diamant as he could appear out of the blue.

No sooner had Nyssa said this, Diamant appeared in a bright light in the shape of a diamond. Unexpectedly, they weren't alone. There was another with them.

“Wonderfully brittle, my master,” Two fangs protruded from a pocket-shaped mouth that hissed with slick spittle as it spoke. “And pale all over. No colour at all.”

The Doctor looked down at his cream and beige trousers, cricket jacket and humble lack of ostentation, and struggled to restrain what was an admittedly juvenile impulse to be offended.

“Look out,” cautioned Billy with a mutter. “Here’s trouble.”

To the eyes of someone from Earth, Basillius Creel was neither lizard, nor spider, but something in between. He looked as though a komodo dragon and a goliath birdeater had struck up an amiable symbiosis in a blender.

“The others...” His yellow scales pulsed atop a green skin in rhythm to his heartbeat. “Each has been prey or predator, they do not sit with a steady energy, master. Effects of the Mutation?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. You know their backgrounds, Basillius. Their triumphs and tragedies, We’re sure that you’ll... Ah. Introductions. We’re remiss.” Diamant bobbed their points. “Doctor—*Doctors*. Quicker than We anticipated, We were hoping to get here first.”

The two incarnations looked to one another.

The Doctor asked, “Would you prefer to ask or...?”

“No, no, by all means,” deferred the other Doctor.

“Very well... What’s the new development, Diamant? Have you nominated an understudy?”

The Doctors could feel Diamant smiling. “Would you believe it, Doctor, you got it in one?”

The Doctor’s face fell. “Oh. Usually these challenges are... well, challenging.”

“Would you believe, We haven’t the time?”

“After all our—*his* gallivanting across Space and Time?” The other Doctor sounded almost put out by the suggestion. “I’d almost call you a poor host.”

“There are some things, Doctor, bigger than all of us. You’ve a vital part to play. Never fear.” Diamant spun a casual plane through the air and, like Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire Cat, their form began to unravel. Line by line, reflection by reflection, notion by notion. Until all that was left was their voice in the aether. “*For now, We leave you in the most capable jaws of Basillius Creel. You’ll like him, We’re sure...*”

“Ready, set, go!” Basillius Creel soon began putting people into force fields one by one.

First there was Adric, then Erimem, then Max, and then Sarah Jane. The four companions cried out once this happened. Realising their situation, Nyssa, Billy and the Doctor called out to the other Doctor and they linked hands with each other. Once they did this, Basillius stopped his force field building.

“You think linking hands with each other will protect you against me?” Basillius taunted.

“Probably not,” the Doctor admitted.

“But at least we’ll be keeping one of our rescued parties safe,” Nyssa declared.

“Yes!” Billy joined in. “So, that’s one to us, I guess.”

Basillius chuckled. “It doesn’t matter whether I put you all in force fields or not. You still have the final puzzle to solve before you can send everyone back to their realities and restore the fabric of reality.”

“Oh, please...” Billy groaned. “Not another puzzle.”

“What do you have in mind for us?” the Doctor enquired. “A secondhand puzzle book?”

With that, Basillius grinned. He clapped his hands and moved them about like a magician with a deck of cards. Soon, a huge crystalline diamond materialised in the chamber. Basillius relished the puzzle he was about to unleash.

“Observe this magnificent Adamant Locus,” he challenged everyone. “You see how incomplete it is?”

This was true. There were five gaps in the huge Adamant Locus that needed to be filled.

“Not just incomplete...” Billy was having trouble focussing on it. “It reminds me of that trip to the Hurlers in Cornwall.”

“Sorry?” asked Nyssa.

“The countless stones. One...” He tapped his fingers. “Why doesn’t that feel like enough?”

Nyssa tried. “One... T... You’re right. There’s something peculiar here.”

“As Adric might say, something mathematically improbable.” The Doctor looked to his imprisoned companions, worriedly. “The Adamant feels almost like a transdimensional funnel. Channelling in energy from across the five dimensions. One, two, three, four...”

The other Doctor realised, “Five! The five gaps. They’re for those five diamonds that other me, Nyssa and Billy have been using to rescue me, Adric, Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane. They need to be inserted into the huge Adamant Locus.”

“Top marks, as my master would say!” Basillius Creel cheered. “And the five diamonds are here!”

Like before, a table appeared, and the five diamonds were on it. The Doctors, Nyssa and Billy turned to see them.

“You must enter the geometric values of the five diamonds via their keypads and unlock them again. Once you have done that, the force fields surrounding your trapped friends will be switched off. You must insert the diamonds into the Adamant Locus nearby before every multidimensional person not of this Universe can be returned to their

homes. You have three minutes to enter the geometric values in each diamond.”

“Three minutes?!” Billy exclaimed.

“Three *Earth* minutes?” Max hoped to clarify from afar.

“Not to worry, Billy,” Nyssa assured him. “I still have the pen and pad I used to work out the calculations for each diamond. I wrote the geometric values on the pad—”

But just as Nyssa took out the pen and pad from one of her pockets, it was erased from her hands in an instant. Nyssa flinched as if scalded. Billy saw how horrified she was.

“Did I forget to mention?” Basillius chuckled. “No pens and pads in solving this final puzzle. Calculators aren’t allowed, either, no, no.”

The Doctors and Nyssa checked their pockets. Their calculators had also been erased by Basillius. The Doctors, Nyssa and Billy felt aggrieved.

“Great! Just great!” Billy groaned.

“This isn’t fair,” Nyssa protested.

“Your time to solve the puzzle starts... *Now!*” Basillius declared. “Three minutes and counting.”

“Three minutes isn’t enough time for us to work out the puzzle,” the Doctor protested.

“Indeed not,” the other Doctor joined in. “You can’t throw us in the deep end like that! Give us a chance to—”

“Tick, tock, tick tock,” Basillius bounced on his three legs. “The clock is ticking down to zero! No time for claver! Get a move on before all realities collapse, Doctors!”

The Doctors, Nyssa and Billy struggled to solve the final puzzle. Even with the Doctors’ high intelligences combined and Nyssa’s

scientific mind, they couldn't work out how to solve it. Billy was stumped, too.

"Two minutes and counting," Basillius soon said before he laughed. "Too hard for you, isn't it?"

"Not unless you calculate the surface area of each diamond first," Adric interjected.

"Ah, but your friends can't do that, boy," Basillius goaded with a sucking hiss. "Not without pens, pads and calculators to work it out. Ah, well. It's been nice knowing you. But all good things must come to an end."

"Overconfident, isn't he?" Sarah thumped against her force field.

"Who says I need pens, pads and calculators?" Adric retorted. "I can work out the geometric values of a diamond in my head."

At that, Basillius became puzzled, then afraid. "What?"

"Doctors, Nyssa, Billy," Adric called. "If you can figure out a way to calculate the surface area of each of the five diamonds on the table, that would be helpful. I can work out the rest and give you the three-dimensional geometric values of each diamond that you need to enter via their keypads before they need to be inserted into the Adamant Locus."

The Doctors and Nyssa pondered on this. It could work.

"But... But you can't..." Basillius sounded almost intrigued. "It's... It's impossible for a standard mind to work out the geometric values of each of the five diamonds in their three-dimensional states."

"Ah, but Adric doesn't have a 'standard mind'," the Doctor told him.

"He has a badge for mathematical excellence!" the other Doctor joined in.

"Of course," Nyssa realised, as she saw Basillius Creel looking worried. "You didn't anticipate this, did you? Adric's mathematical

excellence wasn't a factor you considered that would help us to solve the problem in your final puzzle."

Basillius snapped, "He was meant to be d—!"

"And the Doctor still has his tape measure," Billy interjected.

"Of course!" the Doctor cheered. "Billy, well done! Good thinking!"

The Doctor took out his tape measure from one of his coat pockets before he checked with his counterpart. "I assume you have a tape measure in one of your coat pockets."

"Of course! Never go without it," the other Doctor said cheerfully, as he took out his tape measure. "Bigger on the inside pockets, remember?"

"Great minds think alike," the Doctor said, equally as cheerful.

Basillius gibbered an inarticulate scream of outrage.

He didn't anticipate this either, Nyssa thought.

"Quickly, Doctors," Adric called. "Measure the surface areas of each of the five diamonds. Nyssa and Billy can help you out."

With that, the Doctors, with their tape measures, began measuring the five diamonds on each side of the table. Billy helped the Doctor with measuring three diamonds on the table's right side whilst Nyssa helped the other Doctor with measuring two diamonds on the table's left side. Nyssa and Billy were told to commit to memory the surface areas of each diamond the Doctors measured as they went along. They also had to remember the volume of the fourth diamond that needed to be entered.

In their force fields, Max, Sarah Jane and Erimem saw clearly that Basillius wasn't happy.

"Oh, dear," Max said. "I don't like the way that Basillius beggar is turning red in the face. He'll soon turn purple."

“Antranak used to do the same when we climbed the palace roofs in Egypt,” Erimem remarked. She then called out, “Doctors, Nyssa, Billy, be careful! You must work swiftly!”

Sarah joined in. “Come on! You don’t want Basillius to beat you to it!”

The Doctors, Nyssa and Billy told Adric what the surface areas of each of the five diamonds were. It was then that Basillius screamed, a sound that warped dimensions, and instantly erased the tape measures from the Doctors’ hands.

The Doctors shouted in pain.

“There!” Basillius scoffed. “You can’t double-check your figures. The boy won’t be able to tell you what you want to know.”

“That’s not an issue,” Adric said. “I have faith in the Doctors, Nyssa and Billy’s calculations. Therefore, I can calculate the rest of the five diamonds’ geometric values involving vertices, edges, lateral faces and volumes.”

“Another flaw on Basillius’s part,” the other Doctor whispered to the Doctor.

“Well, that’s what you get for leaving us with second-best,” the Doctor shrugged with murmur.

“Who do you think you are, boy?” barked Basilus Creel.

“I’m brilliant.”

“And modest.”

“When my friends’ lives are in jeopardy, I can’t be anything less!”

Basillius growled. “You have fifty seconds left! You won’t be able to work out the five diamonds’ geometric values in time.”

“Fifty seconds?” Adric replied, defiantly. “I can work it all out in five!”

“Not in the dark.”

With a snap of his tail, the chamber plunged into an all-consuming black.

Very soon, Adric told the Doctors, Nyssa and Billy the geometric values of the five diamonds each in turn. They entered the geometric values of the five diamonds via their keypads. The light in the keypads were enough to see. The geometric values were correct and the five diamonds were unlocked. The Doctors and their friends were relieved. Of course, Adric was rarely wrong as far as mathematics was concerned.

Once the diamonds have been unlocked, the force fields that surrounded Adric, Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane were switched off.

Erimem’s natural impulses took over. “Get behind me.”

The Doctors called out to Max, Sarah Jane and Erimem. They passed the first three diamonds, glimmering in the dark, to them. Quick on their feet, each of the three luckily caught the diamonds in their hands.

“Quickly!” the Doctor said. “Insert your diamond into the specific gap allocated for each in the Adamant Locus.”

“I can’t see a dashed thing!” Max called, glumly.

Nyssa turned to the Doctor. “Doctor, don’t we have—”

“Not yet, as discussed.” The Doctor pulled his flashlight from his pocket and pointed towards the large diamond. “Feel your way! You can do it!”

“It should be easy,” the other Doctor assured them. “It’s like inserting a missing piece into a huge jigsaw puzzle.”

“Gotcha, Doctors!” Sarah Jane cheered. “Erimem, you’ve got my arm?”

“Happy to be of service,” Erimem joined in. “I have you here. Max?”

“You can rely on us, Doctors,” Max added. “Alright, off we go, girls!”

The chain of three led one another through the darkness on the Doctor’s beam of light. Basillius was having none of this. He was going to sort out Erimem, Sarah Jane and Max once and for all. He raised his hands, erasing the Doctor’s flashlight in a puncture of crushed metal and bulb, and swung towards the blinded party.

The Doctors anticipated this. After discussing the idea the Doctor had in the TARDIS, the Doctors called out to Nyssa, Billy and Adric.

“Adric?” called the Doctor

“I’ll be there, Doctor!”

“We have to do it now.” The other Doctor spun around. “Now!”

Adric only *just* joined Nyssa and Billy in time. From their pockets, the trio shone flashlights into Basillius’s face.

A gaggle of eyes, large and round like a bat or a black hole, dilated against the sudden glare.

Basillius howled, blinded by the strobing lights.

“My eyes!” Basillius cried. “Not the lights! Oh, they’re everywhere, the lights! Away! Take them away!”

Whilst Basillius howled away, Erimem, Sarah Jane and Max inserted their first three diamonds into the Adamant Locus. Once that was sorted, the Doctors passed the last two diamonds to Sarah Jane and Max to be inserted next.

For a while, Nyssa, Billy and Adric succeeded in distracting Basillius. But he soon uncovered a weak spot in their distraction. With the speed of a crocodile in the water, Basillius was about to strike Nyssa in the left leg with his whip-like tail.

Billy noticed this. “Nyssa, look out!”

He pushed Nyssa out of the way, catching a glancing blow. Unfortunately, as Billy tumbled, Adric tripped and fell back with him, dropping his flashlight out of his left hand. In the half-gloom, Basillius struck out where Nyssa had stood. Wailing and slashing. Their flashlights were erased, too.

For a moment, Nyssa looked into Billy's eyes, grateful that he saved her life.

"Nyssa?" hissed Adric, in a whisper. "Billy? Are you there?"

"They're here," Basillius rumbled.

Nyssa and Billy's relief was short-lived. Basillius now towered above them. He grinned, relishing another chance. On the chamber floor, Nyssa and Billy, eyes closed, held each other tight.

"I'm here, Billy dear," she murmured.

"I know," he answered.

Thankfully, Basillius's aim was deflected by a Peladonian sword thrown at him by Erimem. Not a small feat by any means, it required great strength and concentration. The Doctor had seen Crusaders perform similar martial achievements under equally desperate circumstances. But then, that was Erimem. She would never have tasked anyone in her own army to perform an action she couldn't do herself.

The blade caught Basillius Creel straight in the tail.

In manic pain, he spun on his three legs with enough wild, uncontrolled force to demolish the wall of a building.

Max and Sarah Jane inserted the last two diamonds into the Adamant Locus. Once done, the Adamant Locus glowed brightly. Basillius saw his master's scheme had failed and he cried out in rage before he collapsed to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Nyssa and Billy were helped up by Erimem from the floor. They thanked her for saving their lives. Adric was helped up by the Doctors from the floor. Max and Sarah Jane came over to join them. Everyone was pleased and relieved that the Adamant Locus was completed with the five diamonds inserted.

There was a snap, like static electricity, through the chamber. The diamond glowed as tesseracts and starstorms rippled across its many facets. In Time, the Doctor could see dimensions that would make the most avant garde of artists curl up their toes in shock. Constructs that reduced cubism, dadaism, expressionism, surrealism, realism, and all other methods of expression to so much mutable grey clay by comparison. The sensation, the mere sight of them, was almost too much for his hearts to sustain. The Doctor's lungs emptied in a scream of shock that sent him tumbling to his knees.

“Of course...” He placed his hands to his temples. “A forward pass, of course! So simple and yet the technology, it's so...”

He struggled to his feet, as though crushed by a great wind.

On the chamber floor, Basillius was determined to ruin the Doctors and their companions' triumphant victory. He aimed at Nyssa again. Sarah Jane saw this and pulled Nyssa out of the way. They both ended up on the floor.

“Sarah Jane,” Nyssa exhaled. “You saved my life.”

“That was a close shave, wasn't it?”

Basillius choked, making another attempt to strike at someone. He aimed at Billy, but thankfully, Adric was there to push him out of the way. The two ended up against a pillar in the chamber.

Billy was surprised. “Adric?”

Adric looked directly at Billy. “I'm ninety-eight percent certain that you would have done the same thing for me.”

Taking in what just occurred, Billy nodded, agreeing with Adric.

Despite his power waning, Basillius wouldn't give up. He made one more attempt to strike at someone, turning his attention to Erimem. Max was closest to Erimem and he dragged her away from her spot. They ended up at the foot of the TARDIS.

"Blimey!" Max exclaimed. "Was that an electric shot or what?"

"Whatever it was, I am glad you were here to pull me out of the way," Erimem proclaimed. "It seems our viper curls and writhes still."

"Nice shot, by the way."

"Thank you."

"*Basillius...*" A familiar voice floated through the aether like soap bubbles.

Basillius lay dishevelled. He exhausted his energies. "Oh, no..."

The other Doctor stood nearby. "Feeling tired, Basillius? Too much power can take a lot out of you, dear chap."

Basillius glowered. He was defiant despite being weakened.

"I'm not finished!" he salivated. "Neither of us are. My master always keeps coming back."

"But never, so far, with such a tone of admonishment." Diamant's light, drifting through dimensions, solidified and became the form of a bipedal figure. Diamant still wore their men's style diamond-patterned business suit, as well as their diamond-shaped jester's hat. However, this time, they were carrying what looked like old leather luggage. "Really, Basillius, what are you doing?"

"I thought you wanted me to make the Labour more difficult for them?" Basillius paused. "A battle! Yes, a battle! To complete the task more effectively, master."

“No, it was a close enough call as it was. We needed you to encourage them to do it *quickly*.” They dropped the luggage to the floor, eying the Doctor up and down. “As this incarnation is so often fond of saying.”

“I was so bored, my master.”

“It wasn’t even a moment’s pause!” protested Erimem.

“And hungry.” He clicked his fangs.

“Hunger... That We didn’t anticipate.” Diamant drew the Peladonian sword from its thrall’s tail. Painfully, like a knife against a whetstone. They returned it to Erimem in a throw. “We’ll deal with you later, you reptilian thug.”

“No style in these enforcers, that’s the problem,” Sarah quipped.

“We apologise for him.” Diamant snapped their fingers and Creel began to fade away. “He does have a tendency to get overzealous and, like all new pets, not every need is immediately apparent.”

“I reckon you should sack him,” Max suggested, glibly.

“Ah, but then all We’d have to talk to is myself. Can you imagine?”

Erimem looked to the Doctors. “Some of us, I imagine, more readily than others.”

“It’s over, Diamant,” denounced the Doctor. “Your scheme to break down the walls of reality has failed. Everything will soon be restored to normal and everyone will be returned to their homes. Checkmate to... Well, me, I think. Hmm?”

“If you prefer, Doctor,” conceded Diamant, lazily. “We congratulate you. Without you, We wouldn’t have been able to mend the time vents and slow the collapse.”

Sarah frowned. “Slow the collapse? Now, wait just a moment—”

The journalist was silenced by... a sound quite difficult to describe. It was like the grinding of stone in a mill, like hot glass poured in a molten sap, like the beat of a butterfly's wings, like...

Erimem was the first to pinpoint its source. "The diamond."

A new expression, something that the Doctor had never quite seen before glanced across Diamant's features. They gestured to the diamond, removing their jester's hat. "We have never sensed something like this before. Have you?"

There was an answer in the Doctor's eyes, but he kept noticeably silent.

"Once," answered his counterpart. "In a chamber on Karn, dedicated to summarising the history of Lloigor in our Universe."

"The Great Old Ones..." Erimem breathed, she knew something of their history.

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."

"You're frightened of it."

"A little, yes."

"Diamant, what is the name of this world?" she asked.

Diamant smiled a knowing smile. "It doesn't have one yet."

"Would I know it?"

"Would any of us?" interjected Adric.

The fractal form's eyes shifted to the Doctor. "Given time."

"No, no, no... I think we've well and truly overstayed our welcome, I believe," interjected the Doctor, hurriedly. "I refuse to be caught up in another one of your Labours, Diamant. The sentiment may be

impolite, but your self-obsession will be the end of us one day. I promise you.”

That smile turned bitter. “More than you know, Doctor.”

After Diamant disappeared, the other Doctor suggested that they check the Adamant Locus to ensure its completion. They needed to confirm that the five smaller diamonds had been inserted correctly in place. The Doctor agreed. Satisfied the Adamant Locus was whole, the Doctors popped inside the TARDIS to check, via the old girl’s instruments, that the Multiverse, the fabric of reality and the time vortex were being restored. They told their six companions to wait.

Whilst waiting, Maxwell Edison chatted with Erimem.

“So, you have a kingdom to rule once you get back to your Universe,” he said. “If you don’t mind my saying...?”

“I lead, Max, I do not rule. Not any longer.” She stared up at the diamond, unnerved. “But... Please, I would enjoy your insight on this matter.”

“To me... It sounds like an awful lot of responsibility.”

“And so it must,” she replied with a nod. “In truth, I never wanted it.”

“Sometimes, the people who don’t want to rule tend to be the best equipped for the position.”

“I am proud of the people of Peladon. With the increasing threat of the Daleks, the troubles around the Galactic Federation... Even if I take the crown reluctantly, I do hope that they have survived their ordeals.”

“Until you return?”

“Until this crisis of succession is resolved. I stand in the role only until the Daleks are gone.”

“It would be a shame to find out that Peladon had struggled to cope without the presence of their Queen.”

Erimem’s face curled a small smile. “I would actually be relieved.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Max puzzled.

“It is true, I am Queen of Peladon, but we both realised that the marriage was a mistake. Do not worry, I am on good terms with the reigning monarch, but current circumstances require us to...”

“Keep calm and carry on?”

“Is that the expression?” She nodded. “I’ve spent much of my time helping stabilise Peladon’s relationship with the Federation and ease her into the wider Universe, but Peladon’s Court required a stable monarchy and, thus...” She tapped the crown. “I am a ruler in name, but not in nature. Aggedor knows how long I have been away...”

“Good heavens,” was all Max could say. “Is there anyone waiting for you at home?”

“Does there need to be?” she asked.

“No. It’s nice though sometimes.” He smiled, gently. “Your king?”

“A king. I’ve a friend. Pelleas.” She rested her head on her arm. “He is the King of Peladon. A fine ruler. And there are his two children. I know it’s been a short while, but I’ve missed them all a great deal...”

“Like family.”

She nodded. “It has grown from a marriage of convenience to... well...” She rolled her shoulders with a distant expression. “A friendship. Remarkably unburdened by the shadow of politics. Far better for us and for Peladon.”

“Well, that will be something to look forward to, I’m sure. To be with them again, I mean.”

“Do you have anyone, Max?” asked Erimem. “Is there someone waiting for you in... your home... What do you call this place...? Stockbridge?”

“Stockbridge, yes.” Max said, saddened. “Not really. I’ve been travelling with the Doctor and Gus for most of my life. It’s been a while since I’ve been back, actually. That seems very much the case with the Doctor, really.”

“I came from a land where the sand was a warm blanket shepherding the sun to rest.” Erimem tilted her head to the endless horizon. “Where the dead were enshrined in tombs of silver that caught the light with their golden spearheads.”

“Peladon?”

“Egypt. Peladon is a land that welcomes in night like the desert, but it’s more truly a place of the sublime. Mountain caves so vast they bring forth their own rain. Lightning that strikes from the heavens above to the depths below. The air beyond the Citadel smells of static and the sweat of an unbetraying animal.”

“Stockbridge is green. A smell like... I can’t even remember. Like chips in soggy newspaper clippings. The clack of a cricket ball against a bat. Whether inside the church or outside, there’s a peace to the place that’s...” His eyes adopted a distant, almost wistful look. “There was someone I used to like on one of our return trips to Stockbridge. A nice woman. Called herself Lizzie. She ran her own Psychic Investigation Group – the P.I.G., as she called it – on Earth.”

Erimem was amused. “Sorry, the... Pig?”

“The P.I.G.”

“Such a noble animal,” she stifled a dignified chuckle.

“There’s also the Sinclairs. I haven’t seen them in a while. I became good friends with their daughter, Izzy.” Max reflected for a moment. “A bit of an oddball, but fundamentally a good sort. *Hmm...* Maybe I

should check up on her to see how she's been doing. Hard to believe she's all grown up now."

Erimem saw how thoughtful Max had become. "Well, whatever you decide, I hope you'll find your friends safe and well in your Universe."

Max smiled. "That's very kind of you. And you in yours. Thank you, your majesty."

"Please. Erimem will suffice among friends."

"Friends..." Max acknowledged and nodded. "Delighted, Erimem."

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the diamond, Nyssa talked with Sarah Jane.

"So, I guess you've been travelling with the Doctor for a long time," stated Sarah. Her reporter's instincts were soon proved right.

"Quite a while, yes," Nyssa answered. "To be honest, it's hard to tell how long you've travelled in the TARDIS. Sometimes the Ship can play tricks with your mind."

"Tell me about it," Sarah chuckled.

"It seems you got a second chance to be with the Doctor again," Nyssa observed. "You and... Leela. The Doctor has told Billy and I a lot about you."

"Has he?" Sarah was amazed to hear this. "I never expected a second word."

"Really? He told us you were his best friend." Nyssa checked herself. "Still his best friend, I should say."

A pause.

"He's clearly fond of you too, Nyssa."

Nyssa nodded. "And I'm fond of him."

Another pause. Full of meaning.

“I hear you and Billy are getting married,” Sarah remarked. “Congratulations. When I met him in my Universe, he was quite a nice young man. He still is by the look of things.”

“He is, thank you.” Nyssa reflected for a moment. “I love Billy with all my heart.” Another moment. “But is it right I should marry him? Whilst we’re travelling in the TARDIS?”

It took a while for Sarah to answer. “I’ve heard it said that some things are worth getting your heart broken for.” She paused. “I’m sure you’re doing the right thing. You and Billy.”

Nyssa smiled. She thanked Sarah for her thoughtful response.

“I hope you, Billy and the Doctor can find me someday,” Sarah said. “It’d be nice for the me in your Universe to receive a visit from you three.”

“Yes. If we could meet you again, I could show you the wedding pictures.”

“You know, I haven’t known you long, but would you mind...?” Sarah opened her arms.

Nyssa hugged her. “One of those quaint human customs?”

“One of mine, actually...” She patted her on the back. “The best of luck to you both. You’ll do well. I know it.”

Meanwhile, on yet a further facet of the diamond still, Billy found himself chatting with Adric. For a while, there had been a feeling of discontent between them. Somehow, that feeling had subsided. Billy especially found himself looking at the boy in a new light.

“You did well,” Billy said encouragingly. “Your mathematical skills saved our lives in the end. We’re all very grateful to you.”

Adric shrugged. “You didn’t do so badly yourself. You were quite quick with entering the geometric values into the five diamonds once I recited the figures out to you.”

“Well, it wasn’t just me. The Doctors and Nyssa were there too, you know.”

There was an awkward silence. Eventually, Adric asked the question that had been gnawing away at him.

“So... You travel with the Doctor and Nyssa in the TARDIS after I’m gone, right?”

Billy had to be careful on how he answered. At times, he glanced at Nyssa, who was in conversation with Sarah Jane. Nyssa sometimes noticed Billy looking at her for moral support. She smiled, gently, but said nothing.

Trust.

Looking back at Adric, Billy answered, “Yes. After you and Tegan, the Doctor and Nyssa travelled together for a bit before I came along and joined them. That’s how I understand it.”

Adric nodded. He sensed that Billy wasn’t telling him everything he knew. That there was something else about the reason he left the TARDIS in Billy’s Universe. But growing up and travelling in the TARDIS had taught Adric much. He knew better than to enquire about the fate of another Universe’s version of himself. He didn’t pursue the matter further.

But he had to ask. “Just tell me, yes or no.” He paused for a moment. “In your Universe... Am I a hero? Did I leave the TARDIS after performing a heroic deed?”

Billy smiled weakly. “Yes. From what Nyssa and the Doctor told me... You did leave the TARDIS after doing a heroic deed, yes.”

“I can’t tell if you’re placating me or not.”

Billy looked at him. “You’re never forgotten, Adric. They think that’s terribly important.”

Adric smiled at that. It was the best answer he was going to get. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for telling me. I really appreciate it.”

Billy nodded. He wondered whether he had said too much. He wondered whether Adric was hurting inside.

“Do something for me, will you?”

“Of course,” Billy replied. “Name it.”

“Look after Nyssa well,” the Alzarian said. “I see you two really love each other. So, try not to ruin things when you’re married.”

“I’ll do my best.” Billy smiled. “It won’t be easy being a married man, but I’m determined not to make a mess of things. Being with Nyssa has been the best thing that’s ever happened to me in my life. So being married to her will be even better.”

Adric smiled back. Billy could see how sad his smile was.

“I’m happy for you two. Really. I wish you well. Good luck.”

With that, Adric reached out a hand. Billy took it and they shook hands. He then looked to Nyssa. She was pleased to see how he and Adric had resolved the tension between them. It was like a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Come to think of it, he felt something similar himself.

“I wonder how we’ll be remembered when it’s time for us to finally be off?” Billy asked, as he looked to the stars that appeared in the chamber’s windows.

The Universe kept its own counsel.

Eventually, the Doctors exited the TARDIS and rejoined their companions. They told them that everything was going according to

plan and that all realities in the Multiverse were being restored to normal as well as the time vortex.

“Going like clockwork,” the Doctor stated.

“All gears and motors are churning nicely,” the other Doctor added.

Everyone turned to Adric. They thanked him for helping them to escape with his mathematical skills. Adric was pleased to be of service. At that moment, he suddenly vanished. Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane were surprised by this. The Doctors, Nyssa and Billy surmised that with the fabric of reality being restored, everyone was being returned to their own dimensions. The Doctor and Nyssa were saddened that they hadn’t been able to say goodbye to Adric properly before he left.

The Doctors, Nyssa and Billy soon said goodbye to Erimem, Max and Sarah Jane. They were also pleased they had helped solve this interdimensional puzzle. Gradually, they vanished one by one and returned to their homes.

The other Doctor turned to his alternate self. “Blinovitch?”

“Judging by that forward pass, I think we’ve got our sums right, this time,” he chanced. “Besides, no sense letting a limitation effect aggrieve our manners.”

The Doctors shook hands and said goodbye to each other.

“Well, goodbye, dear chap,” the other Doctor said. “It’s been nice to meet a different version of me in this Universe.”

“Yes,” the Doctor smiled wryly. “I wasn’t expecting to meet another version of myself—this self, mind you—and with a different face.”

“Indeed. Quite weird, isn’t it?” the other Doctor remarked. “I suppose there’s a likelihood we’ll never see each other again.”

“Never say ‘never’,” the Doctor said. “But let’s try not to make a habit of this. The Multiverse and the fabric of reality is fragile enough as it is.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” the other Doctor said. “I wouldn’t like all of reality to be destroyed entirely because of us meeting each other like this.”

“Me neither,” the Doctor agreed. “I mean, that just wouldn’t be cricket, would it?”

“Indeed, it wouldn’t,” the other Doctor concurred.

Nyssa and Billy could tell how much the two Doctors enjoyed being in each other’s company. To both of them, it seemed almost a one-in-a-lifetime novelty. But it was soon time to go, as the other Doctor returned to his Universe. With everyone gone, the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy returned to their TARDIS.

Once inside, the TARDIS dematerialised, leaving the diamond and its rippling scrying glass to ease once more into the primaevial quiet of the surrounding rock. Untapped, unharnessed and unnoticed.

At least, for a time.

Inside, the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy used the TARDIS instruments to double-check the time vortex had been repaired and the Multiverse had been restored. The trio were relieved that everything had been stabilised. The cracks in the fabric of reality were sealed. Soon, the Doctor became silent. He reflected on everything he and his friends had experienced. Nyssa and Billy noticed how silent the Doctor had become.

“Are you feeling alright, Doctor?” Nyssa asked.

It took a while for the Doctor to answer. “We met five different people from five different dimensions. All were connected to me. This me, I mean. The me who travels with you two. Every one of those five people were variants of five different lifespans I could have taken with this regeneration. It’s enlightening as well as terrifying.”

“You’re telling us,” Billy remarked. “Only one of those five people knew who Nyssa and I were. One knew Nyssa but didn’t know me; one knew me but didn’t know Nyssa; and two didn’t know who Nyssa and I were at all.”

“What’s the likelihood that we’ll never encounter those variants of your five different lifespans again, Doctor?” Nyssa enquired.

“As I told my counterpart, never say ‘never’, Nyssa. But it’s very unlikely, considering that we closed off our Universe from theirs.”

“How was Diamant able to know so much about you?” Billy asked.

“How was he even able to break down the dimensions for members of other realities to break into our Universe?” Nyssa added.

“Ah, now that I *can* answer,” the Doctor interjected. “I ran a scan of the diamond with the old girl’s systems while everyone was relaxing. I can confirm, it’s some kind of interdimensional forward pass.”

“A what?” asked Billy.

“An aerial,” Nyssa clarified.

“Yes. A far more advanced version of the Dish in Parkes or the Pharos project in Cambridgeshire. In the same way that diamonds are used in the construction of lasers, that object outside was used in the construction of a... well, a telescope, of sorts. It’s an observatory.”

Billy understood. “Through the looking glass.”

“And, like Alice, we found ourselves in our own wonderland.”

“So we ended up, what? Repairing the lens?”

“Something like that, Billy. There’s a phenomenon known as the Turing paradox in quantum mechanics. An unstable particle, under the conditions of the effect, when ‘observed’ will never decay. The telescope is that observer. Diamant could use it to repair the dimensional ruptures.”

“Like a game of Fairy Footsteps?” Billy grinned, stifling a laugh. “The Universe was saved by a game of Fairy Footsteps?”

The Doctor smiled. “Sometimes it takes a child’s imagination to question what everyone else takes for granted.”

“What will happen to the observatory now?” asked Nyssa.

“It’s safely tucked away beneath the strata of this planet, I don’t see anyone interfering with it in quite some time. Judging from the relevant space powers out there, searching the stars, this sector of space won’t be found until...” He checked the chronometer. “41st-century, at the earliest.”

“So, we’re relying on archaeological confusion.” Nyssa sounded dubious. She could recall a similar tactic employed by the Doctor after their encounter with the Terileptils in Pudding Lane. “What about those exploration and colonisation efforts, though? It won’t take much imagination for them to uncover it.”

“*If* they’re looking for it. I imagine the observatory’s components will decay long before that happens.”

“I admit,” conceded Nyssa. “That was a conceivably vast power surge.”

“Yes, our clean-up should take care of itself. It’s that distortion in the vortex that bothers me.” The Doctor momentarily paused to think. Eventually he snapped out of it. “What do you both know of Diamant?”

“Surely, that’s a question we should be asking you?”

“That’s just it. My memory is all a misty haze. Like a rocket ship shimmering on the horizon...” He soon shrugged these concerns aside and said, “Anyway, we have you two to think about. It’s time we got you back home, Billy, so you can tell your parents about you and Nyssa getting married. Hopefully we’ll do that in time before Christmas 1965.”

“That would be splendid,” Billy said cheerily.

“Very splendid indeed,” Nyssa joined in, as she embraced Billy and they both kissed.

“Thank you for saving my life from that Basillius creature, Billy,” she said. “I love you so much.”

“That’s alright,” he replied. “I love you too, Nyssa dear.”

A tender silence ensued as they hugged.

“I’m definitely looking forward to spending Christmas with you and my parents as well as us getting married. It should be exciting and thrilling.”

“As well as very fulfilling,” Nyssa added. Both she and Billy giggled. “Let’s hope the Doctor won’t miss the mark this time when we try to return to your home.”

“I heard that,” the Doctor retorted. “Continue to treat me like that and I probably won’t get you back to your home, Billy, at all.”

The trio laughed, currently in a joyful mood. The Doctor piloted the TARDIS to their next destination whilst Nyssa and Billy embraced each other.

Whilst the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy were on their way to their next adventure, they were unaware that outside their Universe, Diamant watched them through their crystalline viewer.

“And off they go...” they muttered.

Whilst wounded from his recent defeat, Basillius Creel nevertheless sat at their side. “Was it enough, my master?”

Diamant watched the Doctor, Nyssa and Billy, as the TARDIS trio traversed through the time vortex. “The damage is still extensive. The Aggedors’ discordance manifold on Peladon, even stifled by the

Doctor and Bernice Summerfield, made using the Locus that much harder...”

“You said you met the Doctor on Peladon.”

“Another Peladon. Another Doctor. In bright regalia.” Diamant tapped the main screen. “This one’s successor, as a matter of fact.”

“His sixth incarnation,” clicked Basilius.

“With two others, Peri and Frobisher. The Aggedors’ discordance manifold in the theme park, with that President Doctor, was reacting to its sister world’s divergence in the timeline.”

“How?”

“Through a time vent. A tear. The energy bled through and created a braided timestream. Confused each Universe’s state of cause and effect.”

“With Time itself attempting to determine which had the greater permanency?”

“Yes. Two timestreams squeezed onto the same line. Quite the muddle.” Diamant tweaked the ‘Out of order’ sign on that smaller screen. “Fortunately, under Our brilliance, We’ve enough exotic matter to plaster over each time vent as a discontinuity emerged. With the Adamant Locus, it was of no matter.”

“But will the Adamant Locus have slowed the temporal collapse?”

“Long enough for others to act. In this timestream, here, where the Sixth Doctor died early, the Doctor’s thirteenth incarnation is already at work across the cosmos.”

Basilius bobbed, unsteadily. “Is she not gone? Removed from Time?”

“Yes, but not yet. Time has dilated and is yet to catch up to her. The Adamant Locus *has* slowed the collapse.”

“So... Without Us, she would no longer exist?”

“Not even as an echo.” Diamant smiled. “From where We saw her last, she’s using her time well...”

Basillius started forward, eyes sleek, “What was that?”

“What?” Diamant turned back to the main screen.

“Pardon, master, but that flare in the vortex.” Basillius winced as he gestured with his wounded tail. “I have seen similar in suns, but not with this...”

“You’re seeing a time storm, Our reptilian friend.”

He licked his lips with a forked tongue. “No, caught at the edge, those creatures riding it, master... They look like...”

“Yes?” Diamant looked closer. “Oh, *yes*.”

Diamant had explained the principles of the time vortex to Basillius Creel when he had first been taken from that vortex turtle’s bubble universe. Such a chronometeorological event caused patterns that to the eye of an ephemeral appeared scarlet, aqua, gold, white, heliotrope, lime, vermilion and countless others both within and beyond widespread the visual spectra of most species.

The fractal M-form considered that Creel would likely have considered it analogous to a volcano. And dancing there, on the rim of the caldera—a small flotilla of escaping vortex turtles. Frenetic. Frightened. Trying to outpace the cracking pane of rending existence by beak and fin.

A note of intrigue crept into Diamant’s voice. “Well, now...”

“Master...?” asked Basillius.

“Before your creation, Basillius, We tracked down a... a toy rocket ship, containing things from before the Time Lords solidified their power. Inconvenient things. All collected by the Timeless Child.” Diamant leant forward. “We thought it would be something to help the planet Vulpia remain stable in what’s to come. An anchor.”

“But, you don’t have it now. Was it lost, my master?”

“Stolen. By Traskeya, it turned out.”

“Of her own volition?” Basillius eyed Diamant.

“So young and yet so suspicious. Yes, We suppose with a small encouragement on Our behalf.” Diamant peered closer at the screen. “Where do you think the exotic matter We used for the vents came from?”

They could see more such time vents in the vortex. To the vortex turtles clustered together, tight, they were the ultimate whirlpools. These creatures were the last of a remarkable species. Never wavering, never flinching, for if they did, they would be torn from their habitat into the harsh realities of Space.

They were meant to have died before the Time Lords rose to power.

Yet here the turtles were.

All forty-three of them.

“Where have you been hiding that the Time Lords could not find you...?” Diamant wondered. They turned to Basillius. “Where are the Doctor and Traskey now?”



**In dedication to
THE FIFTH DOCTOR ERA in all its forms,
'DOCTOR WHO' on its 60TH ANNIVERSARY
and to THE DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS.**

ARMAGEDDON'S TOUCH: PART 3

PARIAHS IN A POD



By Alan Camlann

+++ RASSILON ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ TRANSMITTER DAMAGED +++
RELAY TO LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM'
+++ FROM: STARBREAKER 'ODYSSEUM' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: 043 +++ REPEAT +++ 043 +++ IMPERATIVE +++ COPY
+++ RELAY +++ 'ODYSSEUM' OUT

The pressure against the soft flesh beneath the Wrarth Warrior's chin could have been a knife.

Up until this second-dawn, Constable Zillitian had a good thing going.

The planetoid, Birdie Hepburn, was a nondescript dive on the wrong end of the Auriga constellation. Far enough from the Ogg system that Star Council that communication could only be done via interstellar message buoys. Yet close enough to its own neighbours in the Nyotspelin system as to be within tongue's finger of the Moon Belt. Perfect place to kick back when his men didn't have to be on-planet.

It was on Birdie Hepburn that this whole mess had started.

They had been serving the public interest, as they always did. A few rowdy hatchlings thrashed for indulging in profane language. They'd whipped a Draconian for spitting in the street. Contraband vidcasts were seized and their owners passed off to the long-range shuttles to Malodar Scrubs. The undesirables raised their soft heads, but there was always a Wrarth presence to hammer it back down.

The female paralysing him was a head or two shorter than the constable. Scrawny. But that wasn't unusual for the hominids. And yet, with just the tiniest implementation of pressure, it felt as though a railroad spike were being driven into his ribcages. He would remove it, and her, but his claw was spasming back in the air. Useless.

"No one likes a bent copper..." she said.

The mammal's two fingers, with extraordinary strength, dug deeper into the nerve cluster beneath Zillitian's chin. Between the chitinous exoskeleton that would have turned away any attempt from a criminal undesirable. Clearly, she knew their people. That made Zillitian uneasy.

"Friend of mine mentioned that to me..." she continued. "I can't recall very much of her now. But let me tell you what I *do* remember of Yasmin Khan... Just so we're on the same page, yeah?"

His tongue with all its digits was paralysed, he couldn't answer.

"Yaz was always upfront about her fear. There were things in the Universe that terrified her. Ordinary things. Bullies, tyrants, the garden-variety monster, you understand me?"

Constable Zillitian gargled through his serrated teeth. The pressure compelled him backward through the avenues of seized contraband. Boxes, racks, even whole vehicles were stored beneath the midnight-purple glitter of moon strata.

"But as strong as that impulse to flee could be... As frightened as Yaz could get... She never let it take her away to where no one could reach her. Not even me. She fought that, daily, and she won. You want to know how?"

Zillitian didn't.

"Course you do. Fear is the superpower of tyrants. So, what's their kryptonite? Their Achilles' heel? Their weak spot? Yeah? To seek out *answers*. Tried to pry away the dragon's scales to see the soft underbelly beneath."

Around Constable Zillitian, he could *sense* them, more than see them. The other Wrarth. The unmoving bodies of his fellow enforcement officers. The striking green of their skin tinged with dots of orange from a lack of blood circulation. Had she killed them? *All* of them?

"Because knowledge conquers fear, y'see. Knowing what you're up against can transform your world. As you've no doubt discovered today." The mammal's voice quietened. "Yaz, knew that. And she knew, you never—" The humanoid pressed her fingers harder, pain flaring through the Wrarth's nervous system, "*—ever*, abuse your position of power to do *harm*, *Constable*."

Over his shoulder, Zillitian heard the shayde emulate a sigh of relief. So... She, too, was alive. His men had failed, totally. If there were any

survivors, there would be the sternest measures for this... Anyone could make a mistake, but not just anyone could work for him.

“Doctor...” Traskey’s fingers *clack-clicked* asking she stepped away from the boxes by the ventilation system. “There was a moment there, I grant you. Just a moment, where I thought...”

“What? That I’d be wearing my head as a necklace?”

The shayde huffed a laugh as if the idea was ridiculous.

“I’m stronger than that, Traskey, you should know that by now.” The Doctor shrugged her eyebrows with a smile, tilting her head to her—he had to admit it—prisoner. “I’ve certainly met crabbier opponents. Have you found it?”

“No, not yet. It must be somewhere else.” There was an urgency in the shayde’s voice. “Doctor, are you ready? Object Oswald will be here any moment.”

“Sorry, sidetracked.” The Doctor turned back to the Wrarth. “We used *just* the trichloromethane, by the way. Everything else, every last lethal flask of yours, it all took a little spacewalk an hour ago.”

Constable Zillitian’s question came from the back of his throat. “H—*Haaaaoohb?*”

“How? Simple enough. We stuffed them in a spare starsuit, ruined the oxygen line, slipped in one of your volatisers on a timer.” The Doctor made it sound like a shopping list. “Blew the suit out the airlock and—”

“I believe the colloquial expression is, *ka-boom!*” Traskey rattled her hands. “Instant vaporisation. Like us. Soon. Doctor, we’re running out of time.”

A wave of anger rippled through the Wrarth Warrior’s considerable form. Brighter than the red of its circular eyes. Time? That chemical store represented years worth of work. *Years*. And these two

undesirables, these enemies of the public interest, had destroyed that in a solar first-afternoon.

“*Look out!*” snapped Traskey.

Zillitian lunged forward with his claw. Crates of holomags, knocked aside, cracked and burst at their feet. A quick squeeze and the Doctor’s head would pop off like a champagne cork. It would be a most satisfying sound after all the damage she had done.

The traveller lunged to the side, her free hand behind her back for balance, and kept pressure on the cluster. It was the deft parry of an experienced fencer.

“*Akidat!*” Her leg connected with Zillitian. “*Hai!*” He overbalanced. Crashed to the ground. As he spun on his back to stand, she was there. Again. “*Hoi-ba!*” A splintered wooden slat stabbed down into the nerve cluster.

“What did Bruce Lee say...? ‘Boards don’t hit back’? I wonder if I still have that reel somewhere...” The Doctor turned to her fellow interloper. “You alright? Undamaged?”

Traskey stood up from behind the nearest box, mumbling, “My glasses are crooked... You still have him?”

“He’s not going anywhere.” There was an uncharacteristic coldness in her voice. “We could’ve vaporised this entire moon, Zillian, but we didn’t. Not because we couldn’t, but because we *chose* not to.”

“Doctor,” Traskey’s voice was firm. “We are out of time.”

“I know.” The Doctor’s eyes bored into Constable Zillitian. “I’m rubbish at threats, Zillitian. It’s not my scene. I prefer it when people get along. Have a laugh. But, as we’re in a hurry today, Universe ending and all that... I wouldn’t make a threat. That wasn’t my promise. I’d show you my reasoning, instead.” Her chin tilted up, as if in defiance. “I’m far, *far* more trouble than you bargained for. Just give me what we want and we’ll go.”

“*Whuuuuuaat?*” growled the constable.

“Something that belonged to ‘Traskeya,” the shayde answered.

“A Time Lord message pod. The collected records of the Search for Exotemporal Intelligence.” The Doctor leant forward on the slat. “The one you killed her for.”

The sky above Birdie Hepburn flashed emerald-lilac. An unnatural hue for the crimson clouds. In fact, the clouds themselves were pushed aside to the surface by the force of the temporal emission. Flecks of loose grass and paper debris blew upward into the faces of the inhabitants staring above.

The emergency podiums on every street corner flashed orange.

Faces that the average person would never have recognised were scrambling through the streets. One had taken her opportunity to break free from the hold of a Wrath constable and stagger away. Far away. Far enough that others like her had the breathing room to do what need to be done.

The podium filled with a face curiously unlined, barring the green-brown eyes. There was a sharp incisiveness that spoke of a lifetime, perhaps many, lived all too roughly.

“This is a warning. Done in good faith, which I hope counts for something... None of you will know me. None of you need to know me. You can bicker about the efficacy of my credentials later, but for now, understand that I am the Doctor.” She ran her fingers through her blonde bob. *“There is a spaceborne phenomena that has transcended all early warning systems and arrived within your star system. It is bigger than a seismic disturbance, more mobile than a starburst, and it’s heading your way.”*

Transportation specialists for the Quixotic Adventurers Near Transstellar Allied Systems contacted their counterparts in other parts of the system. It was true. Every word of it. One travel guide, who had

only briefly seen the Doctor, shared a glance with the bodyguard of a diamond shipment. She looked as disturbed as she would allow herself in her position. The spaceport's departure board began to fill with cancelled flights.

“It will only glance Birdie Hepburn, but its presence alone could knock out interstellar communication for centuries. Upset your local suns. Think electromagnetic pulse. Think radiation cloud. Think extinction-level winter. Take precautions. Plan. Quarantine.”

Military analysts could confirm that it wasn't an interplanetary missile cluster or a rogue planet. Preparations were already being made for possible retaliation. The commander's second, however, convinced by the Doctor's earlier argument, pointed out there was little point in shooting a hurricane. The commander agreed. What could they do about relief aid?

“The political arm of your civilisation will be slow to respond, so it's up to you. You on the ground. It has to be your responsibility to keep your communities safe. Take the opportunity to talk to one another. Because you may never have this chance again.”

Scientists, already instructed by the Doctor, hiked up the length of the old radar dish, armfuls of laboratory equipment behind them. To try and gain a better angle on the cicatrix's passover. What information they could record would prove valuable for later analysis. It could unlock an entirely new methodology of scientific thinking—or even save their lives.

“This message contains an embedded quick-response code that will give you all the information I have. Read it. Vet it. But, please, do something with it. Don't let it sit idle. You don't have the time, yeah?” She straightened back from the camera. *“Message will repeat at the end of this sentence.”*

The sky above Birdie Hepburn seared with a cataract-white.

The plasmic shell of the message pod resembled a kevlar crystal ball. It was an unpleasant-looking object among the more elegant facets of the TARDIS workshop. Built for purpose, rather than elegance.

Its nearest cousin, the hypercube tesseract of the Time Lords, was fabricated almost like an origami crane made of glass. Its structure was attentive, sensitive and intuitive. Befitting of an artefact made as a telepathic container for psycho-spoors.

In contrast, the message pod was everything the hypercube wasn't. Dismissive, impassive and deadened. This, however, was by design. It was an object specifically developed to survive the many hazards of the temporal vortex, time storms and chronovores, and materialise intact.

The message pod was as invulnerable as the flight recorder for a downed aircraft and, as the Doctor was discovering, just as aggravating to access.

"Just a few minutes," the Doctor bundled the artefact into the MiG microwave, "on 'High'..."

The ionic radiation bombardment within cooked the recall circuit without damaging the insulation.

Clicking open the microwave's door, the time-traveller blew on the smoking pod. "Just to stop yourself flinging yourself to a home that doesn't exist..." She pulled it out with a thumb and forefinger on each hand. "*Hot-hot-hot-hot...*" Slipping it against the cool white-steel column of an electron microscope. "Very well-done. *Ouch.*"

"Do you mind if I handle that?" gestured Traskey.

"Please," the Doctor invited. "I need it over here in the temporal isolation chamber."

The pod sizzled between ferrofluid fingers. "How do you intend to get it open? Whistle?"

"Oh, it worries me that you of all people don't know."

“Traskeya siphoned off many of her personal and professional memories into the hypercubes, but some fundamental principles have been lost...” She gestured with the pod. “Explain it to me.”

“Well...” The Doctor didn’t quite know where to begin. “Message pods respond to stimuli from the rudimentary five senses. Part of its deadened construction. Nothing innately time-active. Touch, taste, smell, sight, sound... One of these on Solos responded to Ky’s touch, another on Bichu responded to the smell of the Caillou flower...”

“There’s our problem, how do we get a trigger from the dead?”

“Depends on who locked it.” The Doctor gestured to the glove box. “Here.”

Traskey opened the lid and placed it within. “Let’s assume it was Traskeya.”

“Best place to start...” She twanged a rainbow brace. “What would you have done?”

Traskey’s eyes scanned the air, snatches of memory, conclusions drawn. “Why did I suggest ‘whistle?’”

“Why *did* you suggest whistling?” The time-traveller grinned. “Something Borusa was fond of saying was there was nothing more useless than a lock with a voiceprint.”

“Officious old mathematician,” harrumphed the shayde.

Traskey leant across into the glove box’s microphone and whistled a few notes of *Ambassadors of the Oxbox*. An Old High Gallifreyan epic about a Gin-Seng cat dusting away their footprints before they could be recorded by the Eye of Harmony. There was a time that the Doctor could have perhaps played it on a perigosto stick or a shamisen.

The pod was impassive to the martial rhythm of old legends.

“I’d call that pretty definitive...” The Doctor chewed her lip. “Can you sing?”

“Have you ever heard a Quadrigger sing?”

“Is that a known saying?” She rolled her head from side-to-side. “I suppose it’s unlikely, then, to be a song...”

“A code-phrase?” suggested Traskey.

“Yeah, maybe... ‘Fetch me some headlamp fluid?’”

The ferrofluid features pinched. “Pardon?”

“Sorry.” The Doctor smiled. “The Gallifreyan equivalent would be... ‘Don’t forget to leave the TARDIS handbrake off.’”

“By Omega, are pilots still falling for that one?”

The time-traveller nodded, a mischievous grin. “Good friend of mine. I hadn’t the heart to tell her she’d been set up by another incarnation.” She feigned dizziness. “Silly me, I may have been flying my Ship for incarnations, but I can’t tell the difference between pulling a switch on and off.” She pressed her hands to her chin and pulled a face. “Gosh!”

Traskey laughed, then paused. “Did she ever find out?”

“Later, much later.” The Doctor ran a hand across the time rotor. “My TARDIS is one of the last in the Universe. She’s outlived millennia of transtemporal travel. That’s special. Precious.”

“Do you try to keep notes of new things you discover about your TARDIS?”

“As I can.” Warmth seemed to gather under the Doctor’s fingers. “I think I left them in the workshop last. On volume... Something or rather of... Something. I’d know it when I see it.”

“I wouldn’t mind a look at it at some point.” Traskey’s face flickered. “Millennia? The symbiotic link? Without maintenance from Gallifrey?”

“You did good work,” grinned the Doctor. “Good work.” She turned her head back to the pod and frowned. “We should be able to crack

this... What else...? ‘Moon Prism Power?’ ‘For the Honour of Greyskull?’ ‘S.I.G?’ What?’

“Perhaps...” Traskey sat, holding her hands against her midsection. “A rhythm?”

“But what? There are so many...” The Doctor leant a shoulder against the workshop’s wall. Through it, she could feel the thrum of her vessel, the coursing power of its engines. Idling. Waiting. Almost breathing. “The rhythm of a TARDIS, d’you reckon?” She clicked her tongue. “No... It would’ve opened, though, as soon as we brought it inside.”

“Wait a moment...” The shayde raised a finger. “The sound of heartsbeats are different in every body. Based on size and age, and...”

“Traskeya had a Type 30 TARDIS.”

“Ten generations, at least, behind this one,” Traskey elaborated. “With a different configuration to her dimensional control.”

“Yeah, far less complex.” The Doctor opened the box’s lid and retrieved the pod. At speed. “How long could you hold your breath?”

Space was dead around Birdie Hepburn. Truly dead.

From the Moon Belt, the marooned former constable Zillitian could see the true scale of it. The vast reaches of eternity where only precious rock and spurning furnaces resided.

In the solar system, there should have been chaos. Teeming in the gaps, like light between the gaps in his claw. Spacers that followed their waypoint autopilots into gateway stations. Dead. Warning beacons, cosmic lighthouses, trilled quietly to mark the passage of comets. Vaporised. Unencrypted channels from schooner pilots who shuttled their latest cargo from waystation to waystation. Silent.

Except, he had seen the breadth of history stretched out before him. The clash of casual spacefarers with their pioneer predecessors. Astrobuses and star-destroyers. The burn of atomic reactors and the flex of warp-matrix manifolds. Elders and their distant descendants. Parents who had aged fifty years in as many seconds and now had to be cared for by their school-age offspring. It was a nightmare, scarring itself across space like a fisherman's hook.

Now... There should have been bliss. A worshipful silence that brought peace and time to think.

But no, Space was dead. Void. In a manner and to a degree almost unimaginable. The past and the future had killed each other over a barren present. Filled with the terrifying agony of a loneliness wide like the crush of a tsunami.

The Wrath Warrior's breathing felt so loud in his own ears. He had little idea of the state of Birdie Hepburn itself. Who had survived the historical carnage in this constellation? Who was still alive down there...?

It occurred to Zillitian that there was every chance he was going to die out here.

The Object continued towards the Nyotspelin system.

"Is it a particularly dangerous idea?" asked Traskey, back at the console.

"More generally dangerous, really," the Doctor quibbled.

"That's not quite what I asked."

She looked up from her work at the console. "Is it a problem?"

"Why does this feel like one of those scenarios from the Academy?"

"How so...?" The question felt rather half-hearted, distracted.

“Where you perform an experiment to see if it’s possible and damn the consequences until the aftermath...”

“If I stop...” The Doctor spun herself around to the filter switches for the transpower system. “I might just convince myself to give up before I’ve started. That’s not good thinking.”

“Allow me to help, at least, then.” Traskey picked up where the time-traveller had left off on the navigation panel. “After all, if it goes wrong, you’ll have someone to shoulder the blame.”

“You understand what we’re doing?”

“Attempting a partial systems shutdown, of course.”

“More than that, I’m trying to get the TARDIS to hold her breath.” The Doctor paused, resting her hand against the time rotor, feeling her Ship’s hum beneath her fingertips. “Deliberately.” She pulled it back and continued at the controls. “Given how often we’ve been subject to external attack, it’s no small ask.”

“You’re worried she’ll panic.”

“I’m worried that she’ll do what she always does. Push herself beyond her limits to try and save me.”

“If she does, to use your vernacular, pass out...”

“Then, we’re lost in the vortex,” glowered the Doctor.

The shayde persisted, “If you succeed, however...”

“Then—” The phosphorescent lighting of the room began to ebb and fade. “Then, we might just be able to replicate that base harmonic vibration.” The Doctor scratched her eyebrow. “There’s no other way. None. Not a zero room, not the cloisters, nothing...”

“Are you trying to convince yourself,” Traskey’s eyes flickered to the rotor, “or her?”

The Doctor sighed, closing her eyes, resting her forehead against the translucent filament. “I’m sorry...” She nodded at Traskey. “Now.”

Together, the two Time Lords caught the time-machine’s breath. When Traskeya had first heard the vworp engines of a TARDIS, it had felt like a vibration tickling at the base of her neck. Something that warmed the back of the skull and spread through the cerebellum. It filled the mind between the ears until there was nothing left. Only the *whuu-whuu-whuu* of beings the Time Lords of the Capitol were too frightened to call alive.

The Type 40 TT Capsule that the Doctor considered her constant and abiding companion hadn’t sounded like that in some time. She had aged, matured and, in many respects, suffered as many scars travelling through Space and Time as her pilot. The Ship’s engines were scarred like smoke-smothered lungs. Traskey could feel it through the floor.

Part of her, one of the hypercubes, had expected the memory to return in verisimilitude. The hum of that young, old ship stolen away from the Homeworld all those years ago.

But age didn’t work like that.

At its heart, beneath the many navigation, environmental, drive and defensive systems wasn’t a thrum, a hum or a whirr.

It was a pitter-patter, instead. Like liquid milk-white raindrops at the centre of a crushing black hole. They were small chimes and whistles, echoing off themselves as if they were the only thing left in existence. There was something in their frequency that made them sound small in the same way stars were small with an eye for a whole Galaxy. Just a few motes. Here and there. But enough to form... Could she say it? Form the surface thoughts of a TARDIS?

If she were biologically Gallifreyan, she might have even been able to understand one.

Something rattled to Traskey's left. She turned, her attention drawn to the Doctor. She sat cross-legged by the console, the message pod in her hands, almost willing it to open. Like her Ship, she wasn't breathing. Sweat beaded on the fringes of her blonde bob.

It was cold.

Silent.

Constellations of thought were their only company.

Traskey didn't dare say anything. This could have been their only chance.

The sweat on the Doctor's brow turned to frost. She pitched forward, her body cocooning the message pod. It was only then that Traskey realised the Time Lord had stopped her hearts.

The body exhaled. A final breath stolen into absolute stillness.

And in that stillness, the message pod opened.

Nowhere. Words swirled like leaves in an autumn gale. "*Well, well, now...!*"

The voice was familiar and, yet, there was some time-tot instinct that told the Doctor not to open her eyes. A small assurance in the back of the head. That she was in danger? No... That it would spoil the illusion.

The Doctor ticked her face. She didn't believe in all that old superstition. It was naff.

"Let's have a look at you..."

Fear, deep in her symbiotic nuclei, nevertheless, interceded and kept her blind. The voice could only be one thing. Something from the deep recesses of her unshielded brain. A phantom from the mind.

Traskey stabbed the stud to activate the emergency power booster. Stoked the fluid links. Tried to jump-start the TARDIS back into life. Nothing happened.

To the Doctor, the dream around her smelt of fresh roses.

“Never fear, young woman. Never fear.”

Gnarled fingers clasped gently on the Doctor’s jawline. She heard *bmmph* and *ba-bumpbs* ricochet in the air around her. The cool metal of a ring tapped her chin as the hand receded.

“This place is our own. To persist and exist within at our own choosing.”

The Doctor asked, “Am I dead?”

“Dead? Dear me, my child, why should you think so?”

Traskey tried again. “Blast!” And slammed her fist against the console.

The cry of the vworp engines came like a patient under shock paddles. It didn’t matter where, it didn’t matter when, the time-ship was materialising into normal Space.

Traskey hadn’t the time to activate the scanner before they collided with something outside. It felt like a salt flat or a desert plain. The outer plasmic shell skidded against the ground, collecting momentum as it made its mass known, and came to an abrupt stop. Shunted up against some rock, tree or building. It didn’t matter.

“Doctor...!” Traskey snapped her fingers behind her former student’s head. “Doctor?”

Nothing. Traskey righted the Doctor’s body against the base of the console.

In the waking dream, it took several moments for the Doctor to open her eyes.

It was difficult. Unusually so. She had to fight back against some unexpectedly fundamental instincts. As any child knew to stay away from the body of a dead bird, so too did she remain clear of her former selves. It wasn't a matter only of taste, but also of temporal survival.

But fear was meant to be overcome.

The face that greeted her would have resembled someone in their mid-sixties on Earth. In reality, it was far older than that. And yet, to her, so much younger. Flowing white hair crowned a proud, imperious face, with more than a touch of old-fashioned cunning.

"Quite so," her former self nodded. "An extraordinary Change."

A feeling of weird nostalgia overcame her. Like looking at a photograph in a moth-eaten album.

"It's me." She paused. "You. Us."

"Who else, my child?" He masked a giggle with a long finger. "Oh, indeed, who else! A pleasure. Absolute pleasure. I see we're still gallivanting across the Fourth Dimension. Nothing to slow us down. *Hmm? Hub-hm?*"

"It's been a long time."

"Well spent, I trust?"

The gadgeteer sighed, pleasantly. "You don't know how long ago you've been. That cold night in November, Totter's Lane, it all seems so far away now..." She studied him. "Why are you here?"

"Why, because you asked me here."

"I did?" The Doctor canted an eyebrow. She looked aside. "I did..."

The Doctor thought to take in her surroundings, gain a measure of where she was in her own psyche. The gadgeteer expected the smell of lemon grass and vanilla. The tinctures and tones of antique bookshops.

Instead, she was in a vast deep-blue void.

The old man sat in a wood-varnished carved chair. Made of the same material as his cane. A small piece of the House, taken with him when he'd left Gallifrey for good. On the wrought-iron table next to him were salt and pepper shakers filled with miniature red roses.

She rubbed a thumb against the petals. "I wonder where these are now?"

"We've another priority, I fear."

And caught her thumb on one of the thorns. "Locusts in the garden."

"You've jumped a time track," he reminded her. "Become a phantom in our own timestreams. *Hmph*. That would unsettle the brow of any pioneer." The old man clutched his lapel. "Even myself."

"Got to admit, I have been looking for certainties." She clicked her teeth and leant over the edge of their island. "There's so much going wrong. I'm not sure if I can keep up with it now."

"Is that, perhaps, why I'm here?" The cunning entered his voice. "A reminiscence to when it was all so much simpler...?"

"Come off it, I don't believe that any more than you do." The Doctor shook her head. "I'm not even certain you're our first life any more."

"*Ah*," he pointed his signet-ring finger at her. "But I am your first *certainty*, am I not?"

The Doctor studied him. It made sense. In all the lifetimes that had occurred since, it would've been easy to forget the old man she once was. There was a time, many lives ago, where her memory had faded with age. Her first two incarnations suffered the most. Mere flashes and glimpses where a vivid fresco should have been.

However, something extraordinary happened as she grew older. The memories returned. In earnest. Sharper than before and with vivid prowess.

The Doctor remembered the agony of the Time Destructor on Kembel. The Daleks' ultimate weapon ravaging his body with the power of Time itself. His skin ashen. His clothes powdered in a jungle made dust. They, however, hadn't killed him. It was that last effort in the Antarctic against the Cybermen of Mondas.

A differing desert. This one of snow and ice. His body failed, but his mind was working sharper than ever. The events in 1986 had to play out accordingly. It was history, part of the Web of Time, but their presence meant, perhaps, the carnage inflicted by Mondas would be over swiftly. He'd clung on. To the very last moment.

"Could be," she agreed.

"Then, tell me, young woman. Why are you any less certain?"

She blinked and turned to him. "What?"

"We've been alone before."

"Yes, but never so..." Words failed her. "So much has changed since you."

"Change? I'm no stranger to that. What of those young people, Barbara and Chestreton—?"

"Chestretoun—*ton*." She reached a compromise. "Ian."

"When they first came aboard, didn't we learn a great deal from them and they from us? I recall they were perhaps the first to ever shake our certainty of who we were."

"And we needed it, didn't we?"

"Quite so. Tangled in the untruths of our own planet." The old man tutted.

The Doctor realised the legs, both of her earlier self and the chair, were braided in roses. Thorns and all. Digging into his clothes and flesh. The pain was with him, a part of him, but not the whole of him. Her older self still, somehow, possessed that grandfatherly twinkle.

“Yeah...” the gadgeteer nodded. “The Daleks gave us something to fight against, but it was the Chestertons who Susan and I fought for.”

“As you do that young woman who’s disappeared from Time now.”

“Yaz...” The Doctor exhaled, scratching her blonde bob.

“Certainties... Ian and Barbara didn’t see Kembel. They weren’t there for Minski’s torture of Paris. The secret behind the Ten-Strong. What happened on Winter.” A thought dawned. “I wonder what they thought of Mondas? In the sky above them...?”

“Naturally, they’d have thought of us.”

“Likewise.”

“Were they wanted?” asked the old man, leadingly.

“Yeah. Course.”

His eyes softened. “Were they needed on our expedition, however? *H’mmm?*”

The Doctor paused, met his eye. “No, suppose not.”

“And why, *b’m?* Why?”

“We knew who we were. And the suffering, it has to end with us.” She put her hands on her hips. “I know... I know I won’t get Yaz back until this lot gets sorted out. Are you asking me if we can stand on my own feet?”

“Curious notion, I know...” He tapped the chair with a palm. “This, this is all that keeps me here while our time-trail unravels. A metaphor. A hope. I am a measure of your own past. We are one and the same. My time has concluded and, yet, here we are! Because of you!”

The Doctors giggled together.

“Alright... True enough,” admitted the gadgeteer.

“So, what conclusion may we draw, then, *h’mmm?*” asked the oldster.

The Doctor tightened her braces. “It’s not over ‘til it’s over.”

“So, stop dilly-dallying, stand on your own feet,” a little of that sharpness, “and the rest shall attend to itself.”

The gadgeteer stood a little straighter. A little more confident. The oldster stood, painfully, from the chair. The roses unwound themselves, retreating into the woodwork like startled rabbits. They both stood with their hands on the lapels of their coats.

He gestured to the chair. “I needn’t ask, as you know, but what do you plan to do?”

The Doctor sat down, unafraid of the thorns, and began her answer.

“The best...”

In the console room, the Doctor’s eyes were startlingly wide. A layer of frost across her cheekbones. Water vapour from within the body as its physiology worked overtime.

Traskey pulled the message pod from the Doctor’s body. The opening mechanism seemed to have jammed, but there was enough space to pull it open with enough force. She pressed her fingers down and, with a grind of servos, eased the section open.

Letters in Old High Gallifreyan glowed, black in a white outline, on its side:

⊖▼+Δ)+)+|L|9PΛ

Acrid blue smoke poured from within. Straight up into the Doctor’s face. She revived.

“...we can,” the Doctor finished aloud. She clutched her head.
“H’ooaaa-ha-ha... Who won? The rabbit or the hat?”

“Are you alright?”

The time-traveller ignored the question. “Did it work?”

The hum in the console room felt exceptionally loud after the silence. Traskey missed the question, picking at the message pod’s contents.
“These look like bio-tags...”

“Bio-tags?” The Doctor’s green-brown eyes refocused. “As in, bio-tags for tracking animals?”

“Yes. Are they time-active? I can’t tell,” she frowned.

“Blimey... Gets under your skin, time sickness. Like a tingle in the hindbrain.” The time-traveller pressed a finger to her head. “Yes, they do seem to be.”

“I remember...” Traskey’s expression stumbled, as if she’d missed the final step on a staircase. “These tags belonged to specimens still active in the time vortex.”

“What sort of specimens?” The Doctor almost leapt to her feet.
“Artron spheres, vortisaurs, neverwas—?”

“Steady, there,” cautioned Traskeya. “I needn’t remind you that you were essentially dead for a few minutes.”

“Nothing I haven’t been through before.” Nevertheless, the Doctor’s body swiftly collapsed at the knees and ankles. “Alright,” she conceded. “Fine, I’ll take a breather.” The time-traveller inhaled lungfuls of air.
“Well... I’m glad it worked. I’d hate to have gone through all that effort for burnt shreadings in a fireplace. It did work, didn’t it?”

“And then some. Why was it so tremendously important that we find this message pod now?” Traskey jostled it. “I admit, it’s prompted a few memories, but nothing that seems conclusive.”

Numbed fingers picked up one of the bio-tags from within. Flexing her joints.

“We’ve been tracking anomalies, right?” led the Doctor.

“Yes?”

“All across Space and Time?”

“True.”

“But the same *kind* of anomaly, though, also true?”

Traskey suddenly understood. “You’re looking for other congruities. Patterns and similarities.”

“Specific ones, yeah. We’re following the time cicatrices. They’re objects in the wake of something. I want to know what that something is or was.” The Doctor scanned the fascia of the console. “Now, where’d I put it...?”

Plugged into the transdimensional element sniffer, like a tablet stylus, was the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver. It took only a few seconds to find it among the half-used marker pens. She placed the purloined bio-tag over the creased spine of a travelogue next to it and began scanning.

“How do you activate? Wireless fidelity or...” The gold-nib whine of the screwdriver was answered with the trill of an alternating blue light from the tag. Blinking on its crest. “Gotcha! Audio-lock. Naffly simple.”

A much larger glow illuminated within the message pod. “Doctor, it’s activated...”

“What has?” she turned.

“The...” Traskey stuttered like a clockwork rabbit for a moment. “Central server. Monitoring the bio-tags.”

“What was that?”

“What?”

“That. That jitter there.”

The shayde felt an unusual reluctance to answer. “The memory was close to Traskeya’s true death.”

“Best you bring it up here,” the Doctor motioned, gravely. “I can use a sandbox to plug it into the astral map.”

The gadabout gadgeteer pulled said machine closer to her position at the console, balancing the message pod on one of the compartment drawers in its midsection. She spliced a pair of promisingly looking cables into the mechanism of the server and switched on.

A spark. “Come on...” A small fire. “*Come on...!*” she wished and willed.

The nearest round face of the map illuminated to an ever-shifting cartographical view of the time vortex. Like currents of air across vast reaches of ocean.

With one crucial difference.

“What’s that planet, there?” pointed Traskey.

The Doctor ducked her head. “Where?”

“There. At the joint expulsion point of Objects Chesterton and Wright from the vortex into normal space.”

“The boundary around the time vent has healed over... Weird...” she squinted. “Something worth chasing up on.”

“Yes, but does the *planet* look familiar?”

The Doctor studied the illuminated blip, travelling at some velocity, and the corresponding planet.

The Universe was hanging by the proverbial thread. They had jumped to as many time-zones as they’d footsteps in the soil. It would have been easy to forget a world here or there, but somehow, the Doctor rarely did.

This one, however, she remembered with particular interest. Recent interest.

“The planet Vulpia,” said the time-traveller, slowly. “Yes, it does look familiar...”

IT'S COLD OUTSIDE



By Christopher Swain-Tran

+++ RASSILON ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ NEW CARRIER +++ QUERY
+++ RELAY TO LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: STARBREAKER
'ODYSSEUM' +++ FROM: TYPE 40 TT CAPSULE 'UNKNOWN' +++
RE: SETI PROJECT A1 +++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT
OF LIFE-FORMS +++ COUNT AT: 021 +++ REPEAT +++ 021 +++
IMPERATIVE +++ COPY +++ RELAY +++ 'UNKNOWN' OUT

“And so eventually, the Stenza turned their warrior traditions against their true enemy—tooth decay,” the Doctor said, ending her anecdote and being rewarded with the company at her table laughing.

All except Yaz, who rolled her eyes slightly at hearing the anecdote it felt like too many times. This celebratory feast the Vulpian colonists had set up for them felt like it was continuing on forever. But she also recognised the colonists were eager to show off their gratitude for what the Doctor and Yaz had done for them, so she didn’t want to appear ungrateful.

“Lovely story Doctor,” responded Shona, the young woman sitting opposite them, leaning over the table with a decanter half filled with a glowing liquid. “More wine?”

The Doctor immediately placed her hand over her glass. “None for me. Yaz and I must really be heading off. Find where we left the TARDIS.”

“Where did we leave the TARDIS anyway?” Yaz asked, eagerly looking around for her coat.

“Leaving? So soon?” a round and jolly man called out from the end of the table. “Why, Doctor, we’ve barely had time to celebrate.”

“Well, the time has gone fast Cantu, but—”

“And you have not even had time to sample the entrée,” Cantu jumped up, bouncing over so as to be able to partially whisper, “The tanfruit and sliced kormelo salad is going to be what the planet Vulpia is celebrated for. And today I insist we honour your presence with your chance to try it.”

“Well...” the Doctor turned to look at Yaz, seeking reassurance.

“I suppose we could stay for one more course. We aren’t exactly in a hurry to go anywhere when you have a time machine,” Yaz added.

“Excellent, excellent, excellent,” Cantu cheered and turned to exit the room, declaring “I will advise the kitchen staff to prepare the salad post haste!”

Yaz looked at the Doctor and smiled. Sometimes they didn’t have to rush from destination to destination. Sometimes they didn’t have to defeat Daleks, or complete the next task for Diamant. Sometimes, very rarely, they could have a chance to stop, rest and enjoy themselves for a bit.

“Not getting itchy feet?” she asked the Doctor.

The Doctor looked confused for a moment, staring at her boots, until the message sunk in. “Oh, no! No, no – I mean we can’t stay forever. We may have finally finished Diamant’s quest but we still need to report back. But everyone has been so generous. I suppose it would be rude to leave so soon.”

“Nothing less than you deserve,” Shona answered, sipping at her own wine glass. “If you and Yaz hadn’t helped us reactivate the shields on the dome, the entire colony would have frozen to death by now.”

“Oh, it was nothing really,” the Doctor began. “The system knew what it needed to do, it just needed to be reminded of it.”

“Yes,” an elderly man sitting next to Shona, Padoit, muttered slowly. “The protocols the system had for the blizzard, shielding and weather controlled were surprisingly detailed for such a new colony.”

The conversation was interrupted by a loud clearing of a throat near the entrance to the dining hall. Cantu had returned with a trolley filled with plates of food Yaz could recognise as resembling fruits, but far beyond anything she had ever seen.

“Your entrée, my beloved guests, is ready,” Cantu said with a bow.

Yax finished her plate quickly. Although Yaz had travelled for such a long time with the Doctor, occasionally she still felt lost when facing cuisines on alien worlds. She discovered by connecting it to familiar recipes and tastes she could properly judge it. The tanfruit for instance seemed like the flavour of a kiwi with the texture of an apple, whereas the kormelo resembled a large grapefruit. Putting the sweet and the bitter with salad was an unusual combination, but she could see why Cantu had recommended it.

“That was delicious, thank you,” she said towards Cantu, pushing the plate away. “The fruit tasted so fresh.”

“Ah my dear, we are so fortunate that our planet’s soil is so nurturing to its produce. Anything can grow here, and frequently does,” he responded with a smile.

“How long did it take you to figure out how to prepare them?” the Doctor asked.

“Three whole seasons!” Cantu cheered. “It was a lot of work, but worth it to finally not have to rely on rations from the colony ship.”

“They were almost running out as well. And with the weather control system failing we almost ended up starving,” Padoit added, turning to Cantu. “We’ll need to make sure we replenish our stocks soon.”

“Plenty of crops, and plenty of time to gather them,” Cantu responded cheerily. He clicked his fingers in the air. A pair of waiters in tuxedos entered the room, gathering the remaining plates and exiting in one movement.

“Anyway, we must thank you again for being such delightful hosts, but we really must be off,” the Doctor insisted, this time standing to exit the table. Yaz eagerly joined her.

“What? Leave? And you haven’t even tried the fish course. It’s a Vanatian trout!” Cantu cried out.

“Surely we can convince you to stay a bit longer?” Shona asked.

“No, we don’t want to overstay our welcome any more than we have,” the Doctor answered. “Next time we’re through, I’ll drop off a gift basket of rekkar and food bars. We’ll just get back to our TARDIS and be on our way.”

“That’s fine,” Shona said with a smile. “And I suppose I’ll need to head back to checking through our colony network. Ideally we’d like to make sure we are familiar enough to catch the next fault before it happens, or at least before there’s a shutdown.”

“Thank you to all of you,” Yaz said, following the Doctor as they walked towards the exit. As they passed Cantu at his head of the chair he did not return eye contact, or make any verbal acknowledgment apart from a frustrated grunt.

As they neared the exit though, the Doctor paused in her tracks, and slowly looked around, appearing disoriented.

“What is it Doctor?” Yaz asked her.

“It’s nothing, sure it’s nothing. Just been around for a while, memory is playing up,” the Doctor explained slowly. “It’s just, at this exact precise moment... I am not entirely sure where the TARDIS is.”

“Doctor, be serious. We only just arrived and—” Yaz’s voice cut out. She frowned as she tried to recall the memory of where the TARDIS had landed, and found it blank. “It was... where did we arrive?”

“It can’t be far. As you said, we had only just arrived nearby. But all these new formed colony domes can look the same.”

“Let’s retrace steps in our mind. We arrived in the TARDIS to solve the final task in Diamant’s quest,” Yaz said. “Where did we go next?”

“To solve the task, that’s right, and we did solve it. But I just can’t visualise where we exited the TARDIS right now,” the Doctor said, straining her eyes shut to try to force a memory. In a burst of energy she paced back to the dining table and towards Shona. “Shona, do you remember seeing my TARDIS?”

Shona smiled and shrugged her shoulders, saying “What’s a TARDIS?”

“My TARDIS. My travel craft. A large blue box. Ring any bells?”

Shona shook her head.

“How about... Do you remember where you first met us? Perhaps the TARDIS was nearby there,” Yaz suggested.

“Of course I remember where we met. It was only today after all,” Shona answered. Then she paused and looked past them, then jerked her head back slightly to say, “It was in the network room of course. You helped fix our network and removed a bug damaging the weathershield controls. That’s where we met.”

“The weather-shield control room?” The Doctor sought clarification.

“Yes!” Shona insisted. “That must have been where we first met.”

“Can you take us there now?” the Doctor asked.

“Of course,” Shona answered. She got up, but then paused. “Just give me a second to figure out which direction to head in. The corridors in this colony dome are still fairly new to me as well, remember.”

The conversation was stopped by the loud clapping at the end of the table from Cantu. As he clapped the two matching doors behind him burst open. The pair of waiters emerged with food on silver trays. In sync they elegantly glided towards the table to deposit plates amongst all the guests.

“I am hearing everyone has a bit of a problem remembering things. I’ll send the waiters to find out what they can about your missing blue box, Doctor,” Cantu announced. He clicked his fingers and in perfect unison the waiters scurried out of the room. “There, I’m sure they’ll have new on your blue box shortly, but as this will take a while we might as well pass the time. And I find the best thing for memory gaps is a healthy serve of Vanatian trout.”

The Doctor sat down at her plate, and Yaz followed. But while Cantu, Shona and Padoit began to devour the colourful fish that lay in front of them, Yaz saw the Doctor just poke at the meal angrily with a fork, her face showing more and more signs of frustration.

“What is it, Doctor?”

“There’s something missing, like a gap in my memory. I know we arrived in the TARDIS, but can’t visualise where it is.”

“Later, Doctor, later,” Cantu soothed between mouthfuls of fish. “We have the time.”

The Doctor didn’t turn to face him at all, and was now tapping the fork against the plate, and muttering to herself. Suddenly she jerked upright to stare at Shona.

“You met us at the weather control room, right?”

“Yes. I mean, I think so,” Shona answered.

“And you?” the Doctor asked, turning to Padoit.

Padoit stopped his meal and looked up thoughtfully to ponder the past. “I imagine it was the weather control room. That’s where we all would have met, isn’t it?”

“And none of you remember seeing a big blue box?” the Doctor asked, turning to the three others, only receiving a mixture of blank stares and head shakes.

The Doctor got out of her seat and started pacing forward and back, quietly muttering.

“I was here... I remember arriving, and then I was here... No one recalls the TARDIS at all.”

“Can I help you my dear? Any more refreshments?” Cantu called over from his seat.

The Doctor stood still, and with a sudden smile said, “Absolutely, you can help me Cantu. There’s one specific thing I need.”

“And what is that my dear?”

“Show me the exit out of this colony dome. I’m sure Yaz and I must have entered through it, if my TARDIS was never even detected, but it’s slipped my mind.”

“Of course, as soon as dinner is ended,” Cantu responded, gesturing towards her untouched meal.

“No, now,” the Doctor responded sternly. “But it’s fine if you can’t help. I’m sure Yaz and I can find our way. Come on Yaz, time to get back.”

Yaz quickly got out of her seat and followed the Doctor out of the dining room. Shona and Padoit looked a bit shocked at their sudden departure, but Cantu did not seem too phased. Instead giving a theatrical sigh, then groaning, as he roused himself from the chair and followed the Doctor out.

Outside the dining room, other rooms were connected with dark-grey, tight corridors, with little natural light. Yaz felt some degree of claustrophobia walking through them, especially compared to the brightness and the atmosphere of the dining room behind her. Even the air, which wasn’t noticed in the dining room, became warm and oppressive as soon as they left.

“Do we have a plan here, Doctor?” she asked as they walked.

“Just retracing my steps. As soon as I can remember what they were,” the Doctor answered, pacing down the corridor. She knocked on walls as she passed and heard only a dull thud. “No opening there, but there definitely seems to be a consistent outside.”

“Wait for me!” cried a voice from behind them. As they paused Cantu rushed alongside them in the tight corridors, pleading with the Doctor “I must insist Doctor, now is not the right time to leave.”

“Oh, but Cantu, I do not want to out stay our welcome and we have held up your colony long enough. And I really do want to be returning to my TARDIS,” the Doctor said, not pausing in her stride. “Next time we’re through, I will insist on returning the favour with a gift basket of ratanda and food bars. Now, if you could kindly show me the exit to this colony, we can return to my TARDIS and be on our way.”

Cantu with an exaggerated sigh directed them to the sealed entrance. Placing his hand on the panel on one side, Cantu stepped aside as the doors opened to the world outside.

Immediately a blast of icy air hit all three of them with such intensity, the Doctor and Yaz had to close their eyes. But as they opened them, outside all they could see was the whiteness of a severe blizzard. Initially Yaz thought there was nothing outside at all, but as she narrowed her eyes she realised the whiteness was a swirling mass of snow, with glimmers of trees and plant life visible in the faint distance.

“I did tell you it was not the right time to leave,” Cantu said glumly, staring down at his feet.

“How did we ever get from the TARDIS through this snow?” Yaz wondered aloud.

“Oh, I imagine it hadn’t started when you arrived.” Cantu suddenly shifted back to a large smile. “The weather here is constantly changing. I’m sure after the next course it will have shifted back again and you should be able to get your TARDIS then.”

“But Doctor,” Yaz asked, “How could this blizzard even happen? I thought Diamant’s task was to fix their weather control systems.”

“Was it?” the Doctor asked, confused. “That does sound familiar, but Diamant isn’t usually so direct in their instructions.”

“That was only our *internal* weather controls, dear,” Cantu explained. “We don’t have full-scale weather control systems set up by either of the first two colonies. The best we can do is try to keep the weather inside consistent, which is still essential to grow all our produce.”

The Doctor chewed her lip. “What do you use for agricultural growth? Computer-controlled hydroponics?”

“Aeroponics.”

“That makes sense, at least... You don’t have any vehicles that could get us through this?” the Doctor asked, trying to peer through the blizzard for any signs of a path.

“Not at this intensity, now. You’d be avalanched or carried away by the wind to even try,” Cantu explained, pressing the door panel to get it to close. “Now, how about we take you back to the dining room and get you all warmed up with a nice meal. I believe the next course will be soup of warmed toroot. Definitely a delicacy.”

While the colonists ate around her, the Doctor stared glumly ahead, idly scraping the spoon around the edges of the bowl. She passed curious stares to others at the table. Most were too focused on another course of food to bring up anything further.

But Shona did leap back when looking up from her bowl.

“Doctor! You startled me!” she said after jerking back.

The Doctor didn’t react, just continuing to stare.

“I’m sure she’s sorry,” Yaz attempted to intervene. “She just gets frustrated when—”

“It doesn’t make sense,” the Doctor muttered, before pulling out the soup spoon and pointing it at Shona. “Tell me again, how exactly Yaz and I helped you, why are you rewarding us with a banquet?”

“You fixed the weather control,” Shona answered. “It was damaged when we landed, and you fixed it, just in time. Any later and we would have been wiped out by the storm.”

“But the weather control isn’t working. There’s a blizzard outside.”

“I told you, my dear, that was *external* weather control. We needed your help with *internal* weather control,” Cantu added. “Now, eat your soup.”

“Internal weather control—so temperature control?” the Doctor asked, ignoring Cantu. “Yaz and I were sent by Diamant to fix your heater?”

“It’s more than just a heater. It’s the system that produces all our food,” Cantu said.

“And that’s how the first colony failed,” Padoit explained. “Oh, Doctor, you should have seen what it was like when we first got here. Food rotting on the vine without anyone left to pick it...”

“There’s other things that don’t make sense, too. You say the weather is being controlled internally, but as soon as we left this room the temperature dropped immediately. We didn’t feel any warmth anywhere outside this room. That’s not a good layout for growing produce, too much seasonal variation stagnates Earth-like plant growth,” the Doctor explained. “Friend of mine once was very keen on botany, she’d know. And where is the produce being grown anyway? And the people growing it, preparing it. If this is a big colony celebration, why are there only the three of you?”

Padoit looked at Shona, who looked right back at him, both with bemused looks on their faces. As they sputtered trying to explain themselves, a slight chuckle came from one end of the table.

“Good work, Doctor,” Cantu said with a sly grin. “You figured it out again! In record time as well.”

“What is this place?” the Doctor leant forward. “Should I even bother asking who are you?”

“I am the host. And I’m so glad you’ve enjoyed the meals I’ve prepared for you,” Cantu said before letting out slight giggles that grew into a roar of laughter. “Sleep tight, everyone!”

“What do you m—” the Doctor asked, before looking around.

Around her Shona and Padoit had changed from confused, to wobbly, swaying to and fro, before finally collapsing onto the table, fast asleep. She turned to see Yaz struggling to keep her own eyes open before she too fainted onto the table. And then the Doctor noticed her own vision getting blurry, her eyes struggling to stay open. She tried to keep herself upright, clutching at anything. At Yaz, the glass, the table, anything. Her mind racing to a... a...

“What’s...?” she slurred to Cantu as he appeared to grow before her darkening vision. “What’s in...?”

And then there was only darkness.

“And so eventually, the Stenza turned their warrior traditions against their true enemy—tooth decay,” the Doctor said, hearing the strangely familiar laughter of her company at the dinner table in response.

All except Yaz, who rolled her eyes slightly at hearing the anecdote it felt like too many times. It felt like conversations at this dinner party would go on forever as yet another course was brought out.

“Lovely story, Doctor,” Shona responded, refilling her glass from the decanter. “Well, hasn’t this been a lovely dinner.”

“Yes, indeed,” Padoit agreed, quickly grabbing the decanter to fill his own glass.

“And it’s not over yet!” Cantu cheered from the end of the table. “Still more courses to come.”

“More courses? Wow,” the Doctor answered, slightly tired. “Surely we should be saving some of this food in reserve in case the colony faces shortages later.”

“Oh, no need, Doctor,” Cantu responded. “Plenty more where that came from.”

“But considering your first colony failed when their food stocks ran out—”

“Common misconception,” Padoit added, excitedly. “That’s what everyone thinks, but it was plague that wiped out the original colonists. The food production just slowed because they ran out of people to prepare it. I remember going through the reports before we left Earth, and it was a fascinating read. Turns out—”

“Oh, Padoit,” Cantu rolled his eyes, “You do go on a bit. This is time for celebration, not time for mourning. We are celebrating the success of the second colony.”

“Well, we will need to leave this celebration,” the Doctor added, getting up. “I believe you when you say there’s no food shortages, but all the same I think you’d manage with two less mouths to feed.”

“But, you’ve barely eaten. You’ll need energy for your voyage,” Cantu suggested. “Let me get the kitchen to order you up a meal before you go.”

“No... I’m really not hungry at this time, so no point wasting food on us,” the Doctor insisted. “Let’s head off, Yaz.”

The intention of leaving the dome had been discouraged by Cantu from that moment on. Each step Yaz and the Doctor had made seemed to correspond to Cantu providing more details of another course due to arrive, or another reason to wait before departing. Even as the Doctor and Yaz left the dining room, Cantu followed them down the corridor, insisting it wasn’t the right time to leave.

Yaz was polite, and attempted to pacify Cantu the whole walk, while still insisting it was time for the Doctor and her to leave. The Doctor however did not make any such attempt, remaining oddly silent for the entire walk. It was only when she found the exit the Doctor finally spoke.

“Standard exit panel? No passwords or pass codes needed to get out?” she asked.

“Er, well...”

“Shouldn’t expect so,” the Doctor answered, not waiting for Cantu to have further clarification, and then activated the door control.

The main door of the colony opened up to a blanket of white as a blizzard blew in from outside. The Doctor reached a hand out, and immediately felt the chill go straight to her bones. She tried to squint her eyes, to see if there was any hint of familiar blue in the distance. But there was nothing.

“I did think now was not a good time to leave. Shall we head back and wait until the storm passes...?”

“Got any coats? Maybe we left our coats somewhere,” the Doctor suggested, talking very quickly. “At least for Yaz. Couldn’t imagine us walking around in anything like that without a coat. Do you remember where you left your coat, Yaz?”

“Um, actually Doctor—” Yaz began, but the Doctor had already moved on.

“Never mind. I’m sure we can borrow a spare from the colony. Whereabouts do you keep your cold weather climate gear? Standard issue for a planet like this.”

“Doctor—even with the greatest protection being outside in a blizzard like this is madness. You’ll get lost out there—” Cantu tried to explain.

“When it comes to the TARDIS, I can find it anywhere.”

“Unless it’s already buried in the snow. It’s so deep out there, Doctor, one false step and you’ll fall straight down. I simply cannot let you take the risk so—”

“We’ll take the risk!” the Doctor responded, becoming more frustrated. Yaz was surprised. She’d seen the Doctor be irate before of course, but always for a clear reason. And she never seemed to be as angry and frustrated as she was now, increasingly raising her voice as she spoke.

“We don’t have any spare!” Cantu shouted out to silence the Doctor. “This is a new colony. Possessions are scarce. We cannot risk you taking the few we have and losing them if you sink into a pit. Now can we put all of this behind us and focus on just enjoying a nice meal. As soon as the storm passes I’m sure we can find the TARDIS together.”

The Doctor gave a long drawn out sigh. “Yes... I suppose we can wait more.”

“Excellent!” Cantu cheered, giving himself a little clap. “Oh I am so glad you can both join us for the Vulpian boiled noodles. It’s a delicacy!”

“Another delicacy?” Yaz responded. She couldn’t be sure if she had hidden the sarcasm a part of her wanted to display, but it didn’t matter to Cantu, who was already happily walking back to the kitchen.

Yaz noticed that the Doctor didn’t follow him. Instead she just was staring out into the blizzard. She gave one more sigh, and pressed the door panel, sealing the door shut.

“We should probably be heading back,” Yaz said. “Cantu does seem to get the waiters in quickly.”

“Yeah... very efficient,” the Doctor answered, not making any effort to move. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“This. Not having Daleks, or Cybermen, or any other monster trying to enslave humanity, or wipe out history. Just being able to enjoy the moment, with some nice food and nice company,” the Doctor explained, giving a small smile to Yaz, her tone and expression giving no sense of enjoyment but instead as if she was trying to explain the concept of enjoyment to herself.

“Yeah, I guess it is nice. Everyone’s been friendly, and it is good to stop every now and then I suppose.”

“And I have wanted days like this. The TARDIS might always take us where we are needed, but I do like the times when it’s you and me, and Graham and Ryan just having fun, enjoying ourselves,” the Doctor added, her tone almost sounding pleading at this point. “Not all the time, but sometimes I have wanted to do this. I should be happy right now.”

“And are you?” Yaz asked, growing curious about the disconnect between the Doctor’s words and her tone. “So now we have a time and place where we can stop together and join a party, are you happy?”

“No,” the Doctor said bluntly, “And I don’t know why. Every part of me is saying get out, get back to the TARDIS, grab Yaz and leave. But frustratingly every part of me has decided not to tell me why I should do that.”

Yaz smiled, and put her arm affectionately around the Doctor’s back.

“You’re sounding like me when I was younger. A part of you feeling one way, and another part saying you shouldn’t feel that way. And if you shouldn’t feel that way, you end up wondering if you’re the one who’s wrong or everything going on around you,” Yaz explained. “But you’ve got the best instincts of anyone I’ve ever known. It’s like you can smell trouble. And if something feels wrong to you, then that feeling is right. And we can figure out what that is together.”

“You think so?” the Doctor asked, looking at Yaz.

Yaz nodded, “We’ve got time. We can’t go anywhere. If you need time to find your clues, to get your explanation, take it and I know you’ll find what you need to fly.”

The Doctor smiled back at Yaz. “Thanks Yaz,” she said, before seemingly standing with a bit more strength and determination, and together with Yaz headed back to the dining room.

“Ah Doctor, you’re just in time for the noodles!” Cantu called out as the Doctor and Yaz entered. Around him two waiters moved to each attendant, with a bowl of a greenish steaming liquid being the next course.

“I was worried you two had ended up following that foolish idea you had to leave during the blizzard,” Cantu added.

“There’s a blizzard on?” Shona asked.

“Oh yes indeed. Quite a heavy one. Good thing we’re all safely inside, away from the freeze out there.”

The Doctor moved to her seat, and began to sit down, but paused midway, lost in thought. She then stood up and pointed directly at Shona.

“You didn’t know about the blizzard?”

“No, not at all,” Shona responded.

“What about you, Padoit?” the Doctor turned to the other guest.

“No. But these things happen. Odd thing weather events on new colony worlds.”

“So... what was the point of Yaz and I fixing the weather control system if no one is able to see a blizzard on its way?”

Cantu shook his head with a wry smile on his face, “Doctor, I keep on telling you, that’s the internal weather control system, not controlling weather outside the colony.”

“But even an internal weather control system, especially for a colony world, would need to take into account what weather is occurring outside. Did your system that I just fixed not notice any change? Yaz and I just left the front door open for quite a while, so that’s a lot of cold air we let in.”

Shona and Padoit looked to each other, slightly confused by the Doctor’s response.

“Well... I haven’t checked recently, but—” Padoit started.

“So who is checking in? It broke down just recently, remember? So someone should be checking on it recently. And if it’s not reacting to an extreme snowstorm, it’s still broken,” the Doctor responded, then gestured to Shona and Padoit. “Grab your coats and let’s see if the external sensors are operational.”

Padoit nodded and got up, but then stopped moving and scratched his head confused.

“I’m not sure—” he began.

“Not sure of what? Where the sensors are, where your jacket is, or where you are right now?” the Doctor asked, badgering Padoit with questions before turning away frustrated.

“Doctor,” Cantu said slowly, sipping his noodle soup. “Please don’t talk work at a dinner. Just sit down and enjoy the meal.”

“No. None of this makes sense,” the Doctor objected towards Cantu. “And it’s not just the lack of protective gear, and a weather system which doesn’t seem to actually do anything. A standard Andromeda-type long-range terrestrial colony of three people and two waiters doesn’t make sense. A celebration because we fixed your air conditioning doesn’t make sense. No government or corporation

would invest in this much infrastructure with so little cause. Not at this point in history.”

“Perhaps we’re private interests?”

The dubious look in the Doctor’s face said it all.

“Good work again, Doctor. Solving the mystery in record time,” Cantu laughed. “But I’m glad you enjoyed my meals for so long. Sweet dreams everyone.”

The Doctor looked around and saw already Shona’s head was rolling around on the neck as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Padoit was yawning heavily, and even Yaz was struggling to sit up right. The Doctor felt her own eyelids growing heavy. The food—there was something about the food. Except –

“Hang on,” she said aloud, suddenly alert, “I didn’t eat anything. So why would your meals have an effect on me.”

“Oh,” Cantu began, slightly startled. “You didn’t eat anything?”

“No...” she stretched and mock yawned. “Nothing at all.”

This interaction had appeared to wake up Shona, Padoit and Yaz, who were suddenly alert and looking confused at Cantu.

“You’re sure you didn’t eat anything?” Cantu asked.

“Very sure. I just didn’t feel like eating today,” the Doctor explained. “Were you trying to drug our food?”

Cantu looked sheepish, eyes darting from left to right. Then he stopped and gave a sneaky grin.

“I was trying to make it easy for you, Doctor. Easy for it all. But you had to ruin it for everyone. And now the feeding will begin!”

Without warning, the Doctor watched as eight long black insect legs burst out of Cantu’s back, Cantu laughing the entire time. After each leg emerged, they pressed onto the floor propelling Cantu’s body

towards the ceiling to look down on the remaining banquet guests. A cavity opened up on his torso spitting out a web towards the guests. Shona was too stunned to move, and was entombed very quickly. Yaz saw Padoit tried to move out of the room but was similarly cocooned by a blanket of web.

“Doctor, let’s get out of here,” she hissed, grabbing the Doctor’s arm, as Cantu’s web spray drew nearer.

“No,” the Doctor answered standing firm. “You get out, I’ll keep him busy. I think this won’t take long.”

“He’ll eat you,” Yaz insisted.

“No, I don’t think he will. I’ve begun to see clearly on this.”

Before Yaz could argue any further, the Doctor removed herself from Yaz’s grip, and climbed on top of the table.

Waving her hands around, she called out to the monstrous form of Cantu, “Is it my turn yet?”

Cantu paused with his web spray, confused by the Doctor’s actions. Yaz got to the nearest exit, hesitated and looked back. A part of her wanted to leave, to go and get help, but another party felt the urge to be near the Doctor, to be her protector and friend in a room where the Doctor had few of either.

Yaz eventually told herself the Doctor would need her to do something, and doing something would mean getting tools to help the Doctor. She looked at the door and realised in the confusion she had actually reached not the dining room exit door, but the clearly labelled door to the kitchen.

Kitchen tools, fire, chemicals, her mind raced through the possible things she could find to help as she pulled open the door.

But behind the door she found no kitchen tools. No chemicals. Not even sign of any flames to cook with.

Instead the room was filled, almost to bursting point, which replicas of the waiters that had been serving her throughout the night. They were crammed into this room to the point that Yaz could see now way she could enter and push between them at all. And all waiters were maintaining the same smiling expression they had worn throughout the meal. Not breathing, not moving, just smiling and staring unblinkingly.

Yaz turned away to look for another expert, but saw in the little while she had looked away the Doctor had now been cocooned like the others up to his neck, and was being dangled from one of the huge spider legs below Cantu's monstrous forms. The pathway to any other exit was blocked by further masses of webs across the walls and floor.

"I mean, you've covered half the guests with web, sprayed the whole room, so I think let's just hurry it up and get to me," the Doctor continued. "Then we can see what your next storyline is going to be."

"You're... not scared about being devoured?" Cantu's voice boomed throughout the room.

The Doctor shrugged, "I don't think you're going to devour anyone. If you were in fact a secret giant spider monster, there were plenty of opportunities to devour us. But you didn't then and I don't think you will now. In fact, my guess is you'll probably send us to sleep in the cocoons, and then when we wake up everything will have changed again."

Cantu's screech reverberated around the room, shaking the webs and the colonists in them. Peering over a table, Yaz saw Cantu shoot a mass of web at the Doctor, suddenly covering her from her neck downwards.

"You dare mock me, morsel! I was only playing with you, teasing you to prepare you for my meal. But now the feast is prepared!"

"But why tease us? If you're wanting to eat us, why invest in a kitchen with all these cuisines prepared. If you wanted to fatten us up, you could do that with anything. Believe me, I've had enough experiences

in the Isop Galaxy to know, but you wanted to *entertain* us for some reason, and prepared a kitchen, with staff to allow this to happen,” the Doctor explained, unfussed about being trapped. “None of this makes sense. Not the party you planned, not this secret spider monster you’re pretending to be. So Cantu, who are you exactly?”

“I am the demon—” Cantu began to yell but was shushed by the Doctor.

“No, you’re not. Tell the truth for once, eh? Who are you and why have you insisted on keeping us all here?”

The creature began to shake slightly, appearing nervous in the face of the Doctor’s determinedness.

“You’ll die.”

“We all die eventually, Cantu,” she shook her head gently. “No more threats, no more magical misdirection, just the truth. I’ve earned that much.”

As it wavered Yaz saw the webs began to slowly dissolve, leaving a shocked Shona and Padoit to fall to the ground.

“I am... I am...” Cantu muttered, his voice growing quieter at every repeat. Slowly the legs shrunk into his back, and he returned to the ground, a regular human as before. “I’m nobody. That’s who I am.”

The Doctor freed one of her arms and leant against the nearest chair. “Everybody’s somebody, Cantu.”

Cantu glared angrily at the Doctor, “That’s only true for those who matter. I was meant to be that. Meant to be part of building this world, getting crops ready for the colonists, setting up a weather control system and computer network. I could have taken care of the entire village, until the plague hit.”

“The plague that wiped out the first colonists?” The Doctor unbound her legs.

“Not all of them, not all at once. I was one of the first hit, and I knew I could die but wanted to leave behind so much of what I had worked on to protect our people. I uploaded my consciousness into the mainframe to continue working, hoping that once the plague was resolved, I could be revived physically.”

The Doctor looked up. “But no one survived the first plague.”

“They all left me behind. I fixed their systems, kept the colony running, but no one was left to check in on me. I just waited for my systems to decay and die,” Cantu explained, seemingly becoming smaller and smaller as he talked, looking downbeat and defeated.

“You were the error in the system we were trying to find. The piece of rogue code that didn’t make sense to Padoit,” she realised.

Cantu looked at her, smiled and nodded. “It was amazing when you all showed up. Actual people to connect to again. I made this for you. I made this whole world, whole banquet, just for you to enjoy with me. The recipes are all real. I’ve had a lot of time to spend thinking about how to cook the food here, how it might taste like, and I had the chance to show it to actual people. All I needed to do is just tell you everything would be fine.”

“You held us hostage,” Yaz said, getting up from behind the table, annoyed. “You brainwashed us into thinking this is real and refused to let us leave!”

“No... Absolutely not. I know you all have homes and bodies to get back to, and I was definitely going to let you go back there,” Cantu explained, then looked away guiltily. “But why does it have to be now? Why can’t it be a little bit later?”

The Doctor bridged the distance. “Then a little bit later...”

“And a little bit later...”

She placed a gentle hand on Cantu’s shoulder. “What happens when we leave?”

Cantu sighed. “Padoit said it. I’m rogue data, I don’t belong in these new systems if I ever did. When I don’t have a program to actively run for you, I’ll be isolated as rogue data, and deleted, leaving my body and brain dead in the real world.”

“You’re in the real world? I’ve never seen you before,” Shona said, freshly freed from the faded web.

“I was here first, and bedridden early on in the Colony days. My old friends built structures over my resting place, then your colony built on top of that. But I’m still there, watching through the computer systems when you arrived, trying to get the protections you need to avoid making the same mistakes the first colony did.”

“And keeping the systems running while waiting for the others to get here,” the Doctor muttered, mostly to herself. Then she smiled as the thought sunk in. “You’re kept the systems running all this time, waiting for the second colony to arrive.”

“Yes,” Cantu agreed.

“Including the life support systems?” the Doctor asked.

“Well, it’s included with everything else.”

The Doctor began to pace, excitedly as she continued muttering, “So that would mean there’s every chance these systems were working automatically to keep your body alive. If a person was able to find you, they could bring you out of this computer system, and back into real life.”

“That’s a big if. They haven’t found me so far,” Cantu objected.

“Because they hadn’t been *looking*,” the Doctor explained. “They thought everyone was dead. If Padoit and Shona knew they had a first colonist deep in slumber beneath them they would have gotten you out as soon as they arrived.”

“Absolutely,” Shona agreed. “It would have been great to get your expertise. You already know so much about the food around here.”

“It would never work,” Cantu objected. “If you were to leave, the meal ends and this program I’ve set up shuts down. As soon as it shuts down I become rogue data to be eliminated.”

“Not immediately. It would take a time for the program to be recognised as closed, and further time for the system to even recognise you as rogue data.”

“Seconds only,” Cantu responded.

“If we all left at once, sure,” the Doctor responded, then turned to clasp Cantu’s hand. “So we won’t. I’ll stay here. Let the others out one by one, and you and I can continue the dinner party while they find your body.”

“That would only be minutes, at most, surely?” asked Yaz. “In a virtual medium, that’s an eternity.”

“But... It won’t be much of a party with two people,” Cantu answered cautiously. “If the system doesn’t recognise this as a colonist program, they could wipe us both out as data.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take, how about you?” the Doctor asked. “You’ve supported these people, helped their colony survive. You’ve imagined so many meals you wanted to share with them. Please, let them bring you back into the real world to share a real meal now.”

Cantu thought it over and nodded. As he did so, Padoit began to fade, and vanish. Soon after, Shona began to follow suit. Yaz began to get worried.

“Doctor, I’m not sure—”

The Doctor turned to Yaz, “You’ll be waking up soon. Search for the deepest part of the colony, areas that are thought to be deserted but

still have power generating through there. Get there, and Cantu and I can leave together.”

“And if I can’t?” Yaz asked.

But there was no time for the Doctor to respond. Because Yaz also vanished and left the simulation.

The Doctor turned back to Cantu. “Only us left now.”

“Would you like me to order another meal?” Cantu asked. “It’s no bother at all, really?”

“No,” the Doctor answered, sitting down on a chair next to Cantu. “I think I’ve had enough imaginary eating to last a lifetime. How about a story?”

Yaz gasped as she awoke. The taste of the air, she never noticed it before but it was noticeably different than at Cantu’s banquet. The air here was stale, yet also felt real. It clung to her skin like after a cold shower in winter. The room she was in was familiar, resembling the room’s she had just left the Doctor in, but whereas the metal walls were shining in the banquet room, here they were dark grey, with grease marks. Everything was as it was in the visualisation, only less idealistic. The imperfect world Cantu was so desperate to reclaim.

“You’re back!” she heard a voice call out, and she turned to see a young man struggling to move cables and electrodes from her scalp.

His name came back in her head, Razzi—but she could only half remember where she had learnt it. Yaz found she was lying back on a metallic slab, with cuffs holding her in place. To her right she saw Padoit, somehow more frail than he had seemed before, slowly removing the last of his restraints. To her left Yaz saw Shona, who was frantically removing her own restraints, seeming distressed by the experience.

And in front of Yaz, on a metal slab matching Yaz's own, lay the Doctor, still in peaceful slumber.

Calmer than Yaz had ever seen her.

She didn't like it.

"We were so worried when you hooked into our system," Razzi explained, "You fixed the error, the system started working perfectly within minutes of you being there. We identified the fault, and isolated it so the weather systems could continue to run. But we lost you. We've never lost someone before. We couldn't bring you back in, so we just hoped, hoped you'd find your way out. And you did!"

Razzi looked back at the Doctor, before adding, "Well, most of you did."

Yaz shook her head, "No, all of us are getting back. We need to find the deepest part of this colony, immediately."

"You should probably just leave too," Cantu sighed, depressed. As he sunk into his chair, the Doctor noticed the detail of the room was fading around him also. The doors she had used to exit into the corridor were gone now. The meals still existed, but were devolving into fuzzy mush.

"No, I made a promise. The longer I stay here, the more likely someone can find you," the Doctor explained.

"The difference you make by being here is minimal. This whole program is being wiped out now due to inactivity. I'm not worth sacrificing your life over."

"Every life is worth it!" the Doctor insisted, grabbing Cantu by the shoulders. "Why is yours any different?"

"And I knew this could happen. Even when there were all four of you, I knew this could happen," Cantu explained, tears welling up. "But

I just didn't want to die alone. I've been alone so long, I just wanted my last day to be with people. And then I found people, and I didn't want to keep them captive, I just... I just didn't want to let them go just yet."

The Doctor smiled, "This reminds me. Icy blizzard, a never ending party, a person reluctant to be alone."

"Reminds you of what?"

"There's a song back on Earth. And there are worse ways to pass the time until we're rescued," the Doctor explained, and then softly began to sing, "*I really can't stay...*"

"I keep telling you, there's nothing down there!" Razzi called out. "We just used the debris to form a foundation for the new colony."

Yaz looked at the old rusted metallic tiles at the base of the storage corridor. Behind her she heard Padoit arguing with the younger man.

"But our data did have electrical impulses still being recorded here," Padoit insisted.

"Just random pulses," Razzi explained. "Probably just a build up of static. Doesn't mean we have to go hopping around like Space Security Service agents..."

"Shut up!" Yaz yelled, putting her ear to the ground. The metal felt freezing to her bare skin, but beyond the sound of the hum of the electrical current running through the colony, if she pressed her ear very closely, and tried to focus on the sound underneath, she thought she could hear something. A very faint... humming?

"There's something down there. We need to break through these tiles now," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am," nodded Padoit.

“It’s no use, Doctor! We’re just wasting time,” Cantu yelled.

“Never a waste. The more energy we put out, the longer this program stays running with us in it, and the longer we avoid being wiped out,” the Doctor responded, clutching Cantu’s hands tightly.

“We’re just delaying the inevitable.”

“Isn’t that what we’re always doing? We delay the inevitable, and get to enjoy the present,” the Doctor explained. “Isn’t that what made you plan so many elaborate meals? Delaying the inevitable to enjoy the present? And would you have wanted to lose a single minute of that because it delayed the inevitable?”

Cantu nodded, squeezing the Doctor’s hands in return, and began to softly sing back, “*I’ll hold your hands, they’re just like ice...*”

The tilings had broken faster than Yaz expected. With a small hole created she and Razzi were able to leverage open a tile, creating a big enough opening they could lower themselves in.

“Wow, this is proper retro tech,” Razzi muttered, staring in bewilderment at the room they found themselves in. “Pre-druger, maybe even pre-Mechanoid, looks like...”

It was a tunnel made out of the scraps that had been left behind. Wires and pipes hung from the ceiling, and the temperature seemed to be only controlled by the amount of debris on all sides, shielding this old colony from the outside world. There was something that looked cool to the touch, like gemstone, beneath one of the damaged walls. An obstruction too large for the colony’s builders to cut through, so they’d just built around it.

“The remains of the first colony,” Yaz said, then called up the hole. “Padoit—get back to the Doctor as fast as you can. If this works I don’t know how much time the Doctor will have left once Cantu gets out.”

Razzi continued along, using a small portable light on his belt to shine the way. He and Yaz stepped over broken tools, discarded data discs, and used food containers, following the sound of breathing, occurring in a rhythm like a tune.

In the distance, Razzi's lights reflected back from a metal bed frame.

"It's there!" Yaz called out, and ran over, not waiting for the light to catch her. In the darkness she felt around the bed frame, reaching up until she felt an arm, and clutched a hand tightly. As Razzi caught up, Yaz saw the form of a much older, and emaciated, but still very familiar Cantu lying in deep slumber.

Razzi explored the medical equipment attached to him.

"We're here," Yaz called out to him. "Cantu, we found you."

The colony walls, the room, and the table were all gone now. Even the chair Cantu was sitting in was only noticeable by the physical sensation Cantu felt on his back. Everything else was a consuming whiteness that began to nibble on the edges of the Doctor and Cantu.

Still the pair sang to each other, ignoring all else apart in hope their attention for each other would keep their world together for a few attoseconds more.

"Do you feel that?" she asked. "There's something else here."

"There can't be. It's gone, Doctor," he gripped her coat. "It's all gone."

"Come on, Cantu, just a little while longer. I believe in you. I believe."

"I..."

"You have the right to exist. You! Cantu the Brilliant! Come on!" She kept singing for the two of them.

Suddenly Cantu became wide eyed and smiled at the Doctor.

“Doctor... I really can’t stay,” he said.

He faded away.

Razzi tapped one last switch on the medical monitor, using a small tool Yaz didn’t recognise, but which made a spark on the edge of the monitor. Pressing some buttons seemingly at random, the screen created an image of a human form, with health stats emerging.

“There’s some vitals here, but they are very faint. There’s no guarantee even with the best medical support that—”

Yaz wanted to listen, but something more pressing had gotten her attention. Cantu was squeezing her hand. She shushed Razzi, and looked at the old man on the medical bed as his eyes flickered open.

He struggled to breath, going for quick gasps as he got used to using his lungs independently again. Then he turned to Yaz and smiled.

“It’s...” he struggled to begin, “It’s cold outside.”

With Cantu vanishing, the Doctor saw the last of his realm vanish as well. The tables and chairs and meals that had already dissolved into faint sketches, were now just leaving a blank void as the computer systems devoured the data for repurposing in other areas.

“So... Here I am again. Talking to my...” Her mouth fell open. “...self.”

The void had edges. And those edges had a shape.

The shape itself was unremarkable in the great polygonal pantheon of the third—dimension. The Doctor had seen more like it than she could count in her various lifetimes. No, what got her was its aura. That was

what caught her attention. There were only a handful of constructs that she could name. This one came from lifetimes ago.

It was a diamond. Diamant's Adamant Locus. The telescopic aerial for the interdimensional observatory.

She remembered the dimensions that rippled across its lens's many facets had reduced cubism, Dadaism, expressionism, surrealism, realism, and all other methods of expression to so much mutable grey clay by comparison.

But in this reality, there was nothing there. Just a pale, white void.

The very implication of the observatory had terrified her earlier self, she admitted. Such a thing came from before Rassilon's Age of Reason. In the Time where the Lloigor had thrived. The Great Old Ones. Only a few had escaped into the rational Universe and spread across worlds like a form of cancer. It had taken centuries, if not millennia for her to realise, the Diamond was theirs. Their technology. A remnant, poking out to where dragons feared to tread. She'd been wrong all those incarnations ago. The observatory *had* survived across the centuries.

And now, the aperture of its lens was closing.

Cantu's reality had been sustained inside the telescope and soon, the Doctor knew, there wouldn't be enough bandwidth in the aerial to sustain a shoddy game of Frogger. If she was lucky she'd be crushed to a geometric point in nildimensional space. With enough room for maybe half a passing thought. If that.

But she didn't panic. She was older now. Wiser. It was not the first time the Doctor found herself in a dissolving reality, and she was sure it wouldn't be the last. She knew how to get out. She just needed a reminder of what was real to guide her out. Her mind had been foggy over the past few weeks. The distant past, in particular, was so difficult to remember. She tried something more recent. Truer to this body. This lifetime.

The Doctor closed her eyes and allowed her mind to flood with images and experiences that were waiting for her in the real world.

The hum of the TARDIS in that warm honeycomb orange and blue. The console clutched tight in a crystalline claw that would let neither Time, nor tide wreak havoc on her passengers. A comforting smile, wide and inviting with the promise of new possibilities and new opportunities for joy. The fam's hugs, as each were gone, but never forgotten. Familiar shades always standing at her shoulder. Cheering her on. She'd got them home.

She's gotten...

Them...

And when she opened her eyes again, she saw Shona standing over her.

Outside the neural interface, the memories came flooding back—being directed to travel to Vulpia by Diamant, finding their weather control system being obstructed by some unknown process in their computer system, linking into the psychic network to source the fault directly, and waking up in Cantu's dinner party, with a familiarity that overcame her natural cautiousness.

Now, she was back. She wondered how long she had stayed with Cantu, but recalled it did not matter. It was also not the only time she had been trapped in a place where Time travelled much faster than the world outside.

“Welcome back, Doctor,” Shona said, smiling as she released the Doctor from the metal slab.

The Doctor barely had time to formulate a response before she heard the sound of someone running along the metal corridors. She turned to the direction of the sound to almost be knocked over as Yaz ran to her, and clutched her arms around the Doctor.

“You're okay?” Yaz asked, not releasing the Doctor.

“Yeah...” she cleared her throat. “Yes, I’m fine. Always better. How is Cantu?”

“We got there in time. He’s awake, frail but receiving the medical attention he needs,” Yaz explained, then whispered, “I really thought I’d lost you in there.”

The Doctor gently pushed Yaz’s arms off her, and looked directly into Yaz’s eyes. “I made it. Thanks to you, we all made it.”

Yaz looked away, her mouth moved soundlessly for a moment. “I didn’t really...”

“Yaz.” Gently, the Doctor brought her back. “Take the win. Alright?”

She nodded, a gentle smile as they separated.

“Now,” the Doctor readjusted her braces, “let’s find where we left the TARDIS”

As they walked through the colony, Yaz and the Doctor had more recollections of their journey prior to joining Cantu’s banquet. So soon they found themselves retracing their steps to the landscape outside the main entrance to the colony dome. As they traced their steps, memories of their arrival became clearer, so when they came upon a TARDIS, lightly covered in snow outside the main entrance of the colony, they experienced more relief than surprise.

“So Diamant sent us here to free Cantu?” Yaz asked. “But... They didn’t tell us that.”

“They never do. Beings like Diamant never tell you things directly. They like to talk in riddles and tricks. It helps them feel cleverer than the rest of us.” The Doctor reached the TARDIS door, and began to search her pockets for the key. “But we figured it out ourselves anyway.”

“We did, didn’t we?” Yaz pondered, looking back towards the colony. “You think they’ll be all right?”

The Doctor nodded, “I’d say so. Like all colonies, Vulpia will have their ups and downs, but they had a pretty good system to prevent major catastrophe. And Cantu was able to build up the basic outline of a functioning colony. Now he has real people to work with, his system can be stronger than any one individual.”

“What was that chat about?”

The Doctor feigned ignorance. “Did we chat? More a gab, I thought. A bafflegab confab.”

“Rad. But it seemed pretty serious,” Yaz persevered.

“Cantu will be looking out for something, for me. I’ve been wanting to keep an eye on the edges of the Universe. They’ve become a lot thinner recently. Narrower. Anything could...” She cleared her throat. “Well, that’s a problem for another age. His discovery to make, not ours.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure. Well, I mean, I guess. Now, we best be on our way?”

Yaz looked at her. “What’s the hurry, Doctor?”

“Well, think about it, Yaz. Vulpia’s now populated by some very nice non-threatening people who we’ve helped out of a problem.”

“They don’t seem like much of a threat to us.”

“Spoken like a true copper.”

Yaz smiled. “Something I like about travelling with you. When all is said and done, most people are happy to see us.”

“Exactly.” The Doctor opened the TARDIS door. “And they seemed so grateful, I imagine a banquet in our honour, a real banquet is being

set up as we speak. And Cantu will be so happy to be out in the real world that he'll go all out."

She looked at Yaz with a world of implication.

"Oh," was all Yaz could say, at first. Then, with dawning alarm, "*Oh.*"

"I think I'm done with banquets and dinner parties for quite a while, aren't you?"

Yaz nodded. She quickly entered the TARDIS behind the Doctor and shut the door. And just as the sound of celebrations began to spread outside of the Dome, a wheezing groaning sound hid itself in the noise to begin new travels in Time and Space.

ARMAGEDDON'S TOUCH 4: TO HUNT HER OWN FUNERAL



By Alan Camlann

+++ HUMANIAN ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ NO RECEIVER +++ RELAY TO
LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: TYPE 40 TT CAPSULE 'OLD GIRL' +++
FROM: TYPE 40 TT CAPSULE 'OLD GIRL' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: 001 +++ REPEAT +++ 001 +++ IMPERATIVE +++ COPY
+++ RELAY +++ 'OLD GIRL' OUT

The Doctor knew it had been wounded, and that it was going home to die.

Since the Doctor's visit with... with Yaz, the sound of celebrations had long since passed on Vulpia. And not for nothing. The time-traveller was humbled to discover that the planet's descendants were thriving.

As she walked through the tundra, the cold chewing at her ankles, she saw the Vulpian ingenuity at work firsthand. Tanfruit came from the natural trellises on the underside of a floatray's pectoral fins. When sighted, the colonists would eject a harmless stream of warm air. Just enough to ruffle its ventral body temperature. Ripened fruit was shed, often from great heights, and collected in nets set along the creature's migratory paths.

The Doctor smiled. Fingers in her pockets. Vulpia's appeal was demonstrable in its inhabitants. Human colonies often deferred to human values and traditions. The planet had been fortunate enough to feature a number of species from the Galactic Federation in close cooperation. Xir Anodyne, flicking away an anyafly with their body-bepple dog ears, worked alongside Temeros-Tinctures-of-Falling-Scarlet whose hivekin were documenting human leisure habits while on shore leave. A brief stopover before the Space Security Service's return to monitor the sector for Dalek patrols.

It was genuinely humbling... But the Doctor, sadly, wasn't here to be humbled. She had more urgent matters to attend to that could tear this whole planet to the ground.

And her boots were getting sodden.

The tundra was getting thicker, higher around her knees. Among friendly nods and offers to study art in a wire-mesh salon, help fix the kormelo press for the wine, or discuss philosophy on a conspicuously high sofa (she had no clue how they'd got it up that wall), she apologised and pressed on.

These must have been the pioneers and scientists. It was becoming rarer and rarer to find anyone of recognisable heritage out here on the plains. The higher elevation was also likely to prompt a storm or two. Everyone looked to be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

The Doctor adjusted the thermal pack in her suit. Just in case.

She licked her lips. "Cantu?"

Nothing.

Well... That was a little optimistic. The time-traveller patted her hands against her sides, but before she could trek further, she was answered.

"Just a moment, I need to synchronise."

The hologram's arrival came with a hum that sounded not entirely unlike Paul Robeson. Something the Doctor had been whistling when she arrived, a favourite of her first incarnation, that flowed like a river of glitter through the air.

"*Very* close," she encouraged. "Very... It hasn't quite got that crushed velvet quality, but you're getting there."

"That might be the audio compression," shrugged Cantu, reclining.

"I believe it. I didn't know your holographic projectors extended this far."

"They don't, I'm actually on your shoulder."

"Eh? *Oh!*" She unzipped the front of her anorak, pulled an arm from the sleeve and studied the armband. A gold, shield-shaped monitoring device used by the Dome to prevent accidents. "Projected right through the fabric. Dandy!"

"Technically speaking—" He leant up from his invisible cloud of air. "What?"

The Doctor's lips were pursed in a puckish smirk. "Nothing. Just the phrase 'technically-speaking' sounds particularly good coming from a hologram."

Cantu rolled his eyes and laughed, "Technically speaking, I'm everywhere, Doctor. All at once. Wherever I am needed around the Dome."

"You disappear purely for the benefit of my organic brain, yeah? While you're talking with Traskey, you're not talking with me and vice versa."

"Correct. Etiquette. It made the colonists more comfortable to be given, well..."

"Your full attention?" suggested the Doctor.

"In a way."

"Well..." She scuffed the snow. Light from the sky above cast a pink-purple reflection. "I really don't mind. If it's quicker, that's all that matters."

"I will make a note of that," nodded Cantu. "What precisely are you looking for?"

"The *Tsunami*. Your rapid deployment vehicle."

"The RDV is behind the relay dish for the telemetry computer." He thumbed the zone behind them. "Safer there than inside where the pollen can grow. I meant what are you looking for beyond the Dome?"

"Something... Something possibly beyond all help. At least..." The time-traveller flipped up the hood on her anorak, masking her discomfort. "All help now. Now, that we know."

"Know what?"

The Doctor shoved her hands in her pockets "That they were still alive in the first place."

Traskey had decided to provide the TARDIS with some privacy while she underwent her convalescence. It was the first opportunity, in a long while, for the time-ship to relax and it wasn't going to waste it. The external hum, a facet of its broken chameleon circuit, was enough to rattle potted plants from the sunken tables in the living quarters.

Message pod held in her two ferrofluid hands, the shayde was making its way to the archaeological chamber in the north-west quadrant of the Dome. An odd patch of rigidity in an otherwise fluid settlement layout.

Traskey could see the interior of the site beneath the quarantine tent. At its most obvious and perhaps only entrance was a Space Security Service agent of considerable height. Shaved head. Almost as if she were carved from varnished wood.

Her pouted lips opened. “Krau, I cannot let you—”

“You can and I'll bust your kneecaps if you don't, agent,” Traskey wagged a finger.

Something inside of First Rank Ntombizodwa reacted to the tone. She stood to attention, nodded a “Krau,” and let the shayde pass.

It was only a minute or so after the fact that her mind cleared and she realised that Traskey had no authorisation beyond the living quarters and geonics. She tapped her communicator, on the back of her hand, to contact Security.

Her response was instead interrupted by Cantu in his halo of blue.

“At ease, First Rank Ntombizodwa, Traskey has been permitted access to the site. She can wander around as she likes.”

“Right...” frowned the guard, flat.

“You don't like it,” the hologram guessed.

“No, I don’t, but I follow orders...” She stared after Traskey from her post at the doorway. “The Adamant Locus gives me the creeps. All that time and we had no idea it was beneath us?”

“According to the Doctor, it’s one of the most important parts of the Universe at the moment.”

“You can say that so casually, Cantu. I never liked being ‘important’. ‘Important’ means someone comes to take things from you.”

“Well...” Cantu peered down the path with Ntombizodwa. “My hope is that they will discover what they’re looking for.”

“*Kubi*. All of it. *Eywa*, it puts my nerves on edge.”

“And mine.”

The agent stared at the hologram. “I was forgetting.” She nodded, apologetic. “Of course.”

Cantu didn’t mind. “After all the Doctor did for Vulpia, this is the least we can do for the Doctor.”

Far beyond the Dome now, the Doctor was blinded. Reflective purple-white. A landscape bathed in the glow of the sun. It was dazzling. Disorientating. Cantu was having trouble with his signal from the colony and had elected to find a satellite to link up to, instead.

“Talking of signals,” she muttered to herself.

From her pocket, steadying herself on a slick rock outcropping, the Doctor produced what could have been described as a steampunk octopus warring with a can of black hairspray.

“Central server’s alright for now...” She could barely hear herself. “Signal’s still strong.”

The Doctor wished she could say the same of her surroundings. The whirlstreams of snow cut through the insulation of her anorak as

though it were nothing. The time-traveller dialled up the thermal unit. It wasn't making any difference. Faulty, perhaps. Or maybe she was the one who was faulty? Where was she?

Her approach would have taken her to the satellite camera's edge.

The Doctor took a step forward. Harmless, in and of itself. Mistake. An animal. Something hiding beneath the rock, one of the Vulpian floatrays, sunk its frightened acid-tubules into her leg. The Doctor twisted. Reacted. Pulled away. Her foot slid across the icy rock into an unexpected snowdrift.

The Time Lord shouted. Fell. Struck her arms out by her sides to stop herself sinking into the snow any further.

Pain. Still. One arm was caught on the buried bough of a tree.

The Doctor clung to it for dear life. Spurred by the storm, the snow around her rumbled with indigestion. Furrows around her rushed along the contours of her anorak. Sliding along. Black with debris. A small avalanche. The seemingly stable ground beneath her tore away. Over a cliff. Mere footsteps away from where she could have been standing.

The Doctor hugged the bough. "Thank you, tree."

She tugged herself up and around, resting in the sturdy fork of the tree's dividing trunk.

Did she still have everything? Arms? Legs? Head? So far so good. The small *whEEP-whEEP* of the central server was still ticking over in her—

Empty mittens flexed at her accusingly.

It was gone. Where was the central server? Where'd it *go*?

A realisation. The time-traveller struck the bark in frustration. Quickly, she apologised. It had been flung from her hand when she'd fallen. She angled her head back up the incline, where she'd come from.

"—oc—oc—tor—" A translucent miasm tried to proclaim.

“A remix,” she observed.

“*Doc—doc—doc—*”

She tilted her head. “Come to think of it, I wonder what happened to those old tapes?”

“Doctor!” The hologram rippled like light on a summer lake. “You should head back to the *Tsunami!* It’s too dangerous to stay out here!”

“Where is it?”

Cantu pointed.

The time-traveller sighed. “I wouldn’t know where to start, Cantu! The snowdrifts here are deep enough to lose a convoy in. I’d rather risk me, than anyone else.”

“*I—I—I—I—*” Cantu’s features blurred with icy static.

“Plus, all this reflective haze can’t be doing your signal any good.” The Doctor checked her armband. “Still intact, despite the fall. Can you whistle?”

She’d meant it metaphorically, but the hologram’s battered and pockmarked projection echoed in timbre from her side.

Cantu’s arm pointed in a zig-zag of pixels. “I can see the central server!”

“Got it! Got *it!*” The Doctor crawled, mittened hand over mittened hand, along the ground towards the graffiti-octopus. “*D’rygh...* Companions, always wandering off...!”

The hologram choked, incredulous. “How can you joke?”

“Whatever will keep you talking. If I can hear *you*, Cantu...!” The Doctor staggered forward, her face shielded with her arm. “I know I’m not dead yet...! We keep going!” Her head darted around. “Will the projector stand this?”

“I’ll *persis—sis—ist!*” Cantu fizzled in rainbow lines. “You know, it really is cold outside!”

The Doctor laughed, before shivering bitterly. “Right out of nowhere, too!”

“You are on the edge of the weather control system’s range. Beyond this, we only have rudimentary telemetry. Nothing in real-time recordings from orbit.”

“Don’t worry about me!” she assured. “Not until I start getting warm...!”

“Good that you’re staying positive.”

“Warmth is the last stage of hypothermia,” chattered the Doctor.

“Doctor—”

“Keep talking, Cantu!” She hadn’t realised she was interrupting.

Cantu’s voice switched to the Doctor’s goggles. “Is this better?”

“Oh,” she sounded surprised. “Yes, much. The storm’s deafening.”

“Doctor, is this creature really worth dying over?”

“All life is precious, Cantu, I needn’t prove that to you of all people,” she shook her head, warmly.

“I’ve been meaning to ask.” It was as though he were only centimetres away, instead of kilometres. “How did you find it in the first place?”

“I didn’t. Well, not in the first place, I mean. Someone else got there before me.”

“Who?”

“A group called the Search for Exotemporal Intelligence, they were given a...” The Doctor felt the sharp edge of a rock try to tear into a trouser leg. “A leg-up by Traskeya to investigate chronofauna in the vortex.” The Doctor felt the ground suddenly give way. She braced her

arms, stopping herself from tumbling into the half-frozen lake below. “Big *faux pas*...” She exhaled another chill. “Scandal on the scale of Ravolox if anyone ever found out.”

“Sounds as though the Time Lords like to keep to themselves.”

The time-traveller began feeling at the river’s edge. It separated her from the pod. “Including any knowledge they’d gleaned over the course of the millennia. White holes, stellar detonation, warp matrix engineering, de-mat guns, gravity spiders... Mum’s the word and all that.”

“And such a dangerous People were still wiped out? The river goes all the way around...” assessed Cantu.

“Oh, come on...!” The Doctor thumped the bank, gesturing at the central server. “How am I meant to get over *there*? Fly? How did *you* get over there?”

“I’ll run through the cartographical records.” Cantu’s eyes flicked upward. “There might be something from the satellite scans. Pity there isn’t any of that Gallifreyan knowledge here.”

“Don’t knock it.” The Doctor shielded her face. “The Time Lords also liked to keep other cultures beneath their heel. The Third Zone, Marinus, Archetrix... It was almost a hobby. Non-interference, except when others got too big for their boots.”

“Got it,” Cantu adjusted beside her. “Head to your left. There should be a set of rapids with enough rocks to climb over.”

“Thank you, thank you, Cantu.” The Doctor rolled onto her shoulder and pulled herself at right-angles to the blizzard.

Cantu crawled with her. “I wouldn’t have thought that vortex biology would have been such a terrible thing for other people to discover.”

“It wouldn’t, would it? Knowing something of the Universe we live in. Funny how those who burn books are always the most keen to leave

others out to die in the cold.” The time-traveller shook her head. “Anyway, as part of their initiative, the SETI team issued bio-tags to lifeforms of interest. A marker of molecular potential. Harmless, but capable of transmitting through differing dimensions.”

Cantu gestured to the central server across the lip of the rocks. “And this—”

“I’ve resisted every urge to give it a name. I promise.”

“—registers *all* of them?” queried Cantu. “Every tag?”

“Yeah, all 694 of them.” The Doctor winced as she dragged herself along. “All of them dark. No signal whatsoever, Cantu.”

“They’re all gone?”

“We’ve looked. Every last one.”

“Except this one.”

“Yeah...” The scale of such a statement struck her as she reached the central server. A mitten clamped across it. From her vantage point, she could see the edge of the plateau. Vulpia’s coral forests beneath. Somewhere out there was the creature in question. “Except this one.”

Traskey adjusted her glasses and stepped back from the Adamant Locus’s viewfinder.

“In circumstances like these, I’ve learnt to say nothing but good. It seems Gallifrey’s destiny is to be destroyed.” The shayde’s face contorted in sudden bitterness. “Good.”

Cantu’s hologram danced through the crystalline growth. Along every facet, every twist and turn, until he became a multitudinous hall of mirrors. Talking at every point in the room.

“You don’t care much for your homeworld?” He looked briefly startled by his own question. As if it’d result in an outburst from the shayde.

Traskey let the question linger, although that wasn’t her intention. Cantu was one of the planet’s worms released from its can. To use an Earth idiom. He surprised himself by discovering he was a caterpillar. Since then, he’d become a technological butterfly. She liked Cantu.

The Doctor would’ve likely possessed a greater understanding of how the chamber had transformed with time. She had visited it in her fifth incarnation to deal with an unexpected multiversal collapse. To Traskey, the apparatus resembled something out of a Shobogan epic. A chamber better populated by vampires, Eternals and Pythia.

“No, Traskeya didn’t care for it,” she finally answered, simply. “The Doctor has played a unique role in Gallifrey’s history. She has a... An idealist’s nostalgia for it. Survivor’s guilt, I imagine, plays a considerable part. Traskeya was never permitted so much as a glimmer beyond her station. She resented the Time Lords for that.”

Cantu shifted, uncomfortably. An impressive motion given his effervescent nature. “So... Has Vulpia suffered any temporal anomalies?”

“None I can see, but...” She couldn’t lie to him. “It’s only a matter of time.”

The light on certain worlds, she noticed, changed depending on where on its axis you decided to visit. The void-red sky of a southern continent was quite different to the clouded miasm of its northern counterpart. Here, she could almost feel—somehow, perhaps through the shayde’s complex exteroceptive sensors—a similar instance with the dimension of Space.

It was... What? The word that Ntombizodwa had used to describe it was ‘thicker’. Like smog.

“You’re not very reassuring, are you?” The agent rested on one hip.

Traskey folded her hands across her waist. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t a guard meant to, well, guard?”

“My shift ended ten minutes ago. I couldn’t help but listen.” Ntombizodwa changed the subject. “Your friend’s presence would explain some of the archaeological anomalies in this chamber.”

“Depending on the day, ‘archaeological anomalies’ could describe any one of us.” Traskey passed her, down the stairs, and sat back down beside the opened message pod where she’d set up shop. A makeshift study. The piles of documents from within it were now higher than the pod itself. “Once written, never forgotten. Ancient artefacts of a long-dead culture. At least, that’s the intent. The handwriting is diabolical...”

“But your world, this Gallifrey, survived this Last Great Time War?” Ntombizodwa turned to Cantu. “Or was I eavesdropping worse than I thought?”

Cantu tried to clarify. “In the original timestream, when this Adamant Locus was first used by Diamant, the constellation of Kasterborous was destined to be torn to pieces.”

“As it is now,” acknowledged Traskey.

“Yes,” he nodded. “Certainly an unstable region of space to travel through. Regardless of transmat, hyperspace, whatever method you’d like to use.”

“So, Gallifrey burned, definitively? The Time Lords were wiped out?” Ntombizodwa seemed satisfied with that conclusion.

“Why? Do you have doubts? Do you really think the Doctor wouldn’t have looked?” Traskey gently chided, pulling another file from the transcendental interior of the message pod. “She scoured every part of Space and Time searching for others. There was no one he could find. She’d have gone to Nineveh, the final resting place of all TARDISEs, itself to find them.”

The agent shrugged her eyebrows. “*Aduhai*, she does seem determined to hunt her own funeral.”

“Oh, you’ve no idea.” Doubt flicked across Traskey’s features. “How is she, Cantu? The Doctor?”

The hologram wrinkled. “I’m trying to get the *Tsunami* to her via remote control, but it’s tricky... She’s right. One unstable road and we lose the whole RDV.”

“The whole... Wait, Traskey how are you alive, then?” Ntombizodwa flicked a finger at the shayde. “If the casualty rate was total?”

“I’m not meant to be. Not even in this form.”

“What happened?”

“A unique transposition of the timelines.” Traskey steeped her fingers together. “It’s not clear when it started. Small jumps in the time tracks aren’t uncommon when travelling, but three or four incarnations ago, they started becoming more frequent for the Doctor.”

“Like seismic disturbances?” asked Ntombizodwa.

“Yes, deliberate,” replied Traskey. “Until, eventually, the Doctor was placed in circumstances where he could manipulate his own timestream.”

“The Doctor created a new form, I believe,” added Cantu, Cantu and Cantu. “An... incarnation, is that the right word?”

“Yes,” nodded Traskey, gruffly. “Someone whose very presence altered the balance of power. Changed the outcome of the War by changing the incarnation. Time war tactics.”

Ntombizodwa squinted. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“The Daleks had tried the same in their attempted conquest of the planet Earth in the... twenty-second century. Not to make their invasion succeed, but stop the occupying force from being driven out

later.” The shayde nodded at the agent. “Your own ancestors. A bit of ancient history for you.”

“Relevant, all the same.” Ntombizodwa rested on the steps, tapping her fingers on the fabric of her holster. “It’s a waking fear of ours that the Daleks will try for the Sol system again. That whole scandal with Mavic Chen showed how vulnerable we are if we forget.”

“Those who fail to remember their history are doomed to repeat it,” recited Cantu.

“Yes, and those who fail to remember their history *correctly* are simply doomed.” Traskey discarded the latest file with growing agitation. “Through this gap, Gallifrey was saved, but at a cost.”

“All those lives that hadn’t been lived which now were,” recognised Ntombizodwa.

“The Time Lords lived in that shadow dimension for centuries, but we *died*. All of us. Definitely. A convulsive event like that changes the fabric of Time itself. We are meant to die out. Something else to come the Universe’s way.”

Cantu asked from every reflection, “You believe that?”

“Oh, I know it,” she laughed. “We were eventually a People concerned only with maintaining the status quo. All diversity, all new frontiers, wiped clean if needs be. Everything was expendable, but the Time Lords never expected everything to push back. The anomaly is *us*.”

Ntombizodwa crossed to the shayde. “You’re saying that the Galaxy itself didn’t want the Time Lords back?”

“And has corrected itself accordingly.” Traskey studied the agent with her pale Shayde-cut eyes. “Through one of our own, which just goes to show...” The shayde went back to searching through the message pod. “Time has a pretty sick sense of humour.”

“In order to get to that point, though...” realised Ntombizodwa. “The Doctor’s timestream would need to play out, surely? You need a cause for the effect. A volatiser for the explosion. Action, reaction.”

“Otherwise Creation overcorrects itself, yes.” The shayde squinted. “Displaced Time doesn’t rock the boat, but flood it, instead. We always warned about using travel capsules in this way. No one listens to us Quadriggers...”

Cantu stepped from the crystal, collapsing into a single hologram, once more. “The Doctor’s a ghost, isn’t she? That’s how she was able to come to Vulpia at all.”

“That box in the living quarters,” Ntombizodwa snapped her fingers. “It’s her power station.”

“And she’s running out of time. Like I was.”

Traskey stopped rifling. Her hands held before her like a cautious badger. She looked over her glasses at the two Vulpians. A secret agent and an extension of colony administration. On the great cosmic scale, insignificant to the stasers and artron of creatures like Diamant. Between them, however, Traskey saw they could almost glean her meaning. Hers was a look commonly shared among old women, though not often advertised.

Whether or not to tell the whole horrible truth.

“We all are,” was all Traskey was prepared to admit.

The Doctor groused from her perch of gold-pink coral platelets. “*Polonium, iodine, sulphur, oxygen, nitrogen?*”

Cantu started. “What was that?”

“Never been particularly good with expletives...” She ground her teeth. “Down there, you see it?”

The microcamera in the Doctor’s goggles had been damaged in her latest confrontation with nature, but the image was unmistakable.

Cantu answered, “Androgums.”

More than a dozen in oxybreather masks. Tens of metres below the ridge where the Doctor had settled on her abdomen. Surveying them.

“Of the Moamisch Grig, judging from the choice cuts of those particular ditties.” She held out the eagerly trilling central server with weary acceptance. “I can’t lie to myself... That landing site, down there, has to be where the bio-tag is. They’ve got it.”

“Are they going to sell it?”

“Cuisine is a science to Androgum culture. They do *fine* dining.”

“Fine?”

“Not ‘fine’ as in ‘smooth’, but ‘fine’ as in ‘fibre wire’,” the Doctor shifted, uncomfortably. “I imagine they’re going to eat it. I’m going to try and stop them.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Now that depends...” Bitter experience soured her voice.

Tunelessly, scallions about how to *sous vide* a Metebelis unicorn in the volcanic soil were bawled up from the Androgums. Little snatches of rhythm clapped from meaty hands. The gourmands were assembled around an object of particularly lurid fascination.

The Doctor tilted the goggles closer for Cantu’s benefit. “Doctor, can you—?”

“I’ve excellent eyes,” she rebutted. “Prognosis?”

The object was almost seashell-shaped. Five small protuberances. Like the nubs of fingers. All covered in a cryosheathe spray. The frozen muzzle flash of a cryogun. Four Androgum tinkerers were hammering small magnetic clamps into its upper surface in preparation for the

shuttlecraft. A snub-nosed ice lolly of a vehicle, tucked under a concealing white tarpaulin. It was armed with a smart-gun beneath its arched chin.

“That could be a problem.” Cantu almost enjoyed the understatement.

“Maybe, but I wasn’t talking about them. Here...” She pulled off her goggles and held them out over the ridge. Toward the scene below. “Look at what they’re standing in.”

Even with this new vantage point, Cantu... *couldn't* see. He didn’t quite understand what he was looking at, at first. There weren’t receptors for it and comprehensive satellite imagery was next-to-impossible out here.

Whatever it was... It was heavier than the snowstorm. That much he could tell. A substance, almost soot-like, really. It dragged at the air currents, pulling them back down to the firmament, and it made some vestigial part of Cantu’s meatspace body itch.

“I... don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s not mineral?”

The Doctor shook her head. “Don’t think so...”

Below, the Androgums tore the tarpaulin over the shuttlecraft clear, climbing up into the vehicle’s cabin through a sidedoor. They began warming its engines. Blasts of heat that echoed like clashing cymbals in the wind. They were building up power slowly to avoid an avalanche or clogging the engines with the rust. It wouldn’t be long now before take-off...

“Organic?” the hologram guessed again. “The remains of a spacefaring organism?”

“Something else, Cantu. Something I haven’t seen since...” Beneath the oxybreather, the Doctor’s Arcadian-green eyes stabbed with horror. “Oh, it’s got to be.”

“What?”

“Exotic matter. As if things couldn’t get any worse...” She picked herself up, dusting down the ice crystals from her arms. “You have an understanding of the periodic table, yes?”

“A necessary safety measure for identifying threats in the colony.” Cantu scratched his forehead. “I also like to read.”

“A lot?” It was her way of asking whether he really wanted to know. He wouldn’t be dissuaded. “A lot.”

“Exotic matter can occur for a number of reasons...” She waved a hand more carelessly than she would have liked. “What you’re looking at below, right now, while there is a now, is what happens when the fundamental building blocks of the Universe take information outside of that periodic table and try to force it in. Like trying to glue a travel brochure into the middle of *Brave New World*. Square peg. Round hole.”

“Movement,” Cantu noticed, almost automatically.

The Doctor dropped to a moving crouch.

The Androgums’ shuttlecraft lifted from its patch of bare rock below and angled itself over the top of its cargo. It jostled in the wind like a watering can on a blustery clothesline. Slowly, it began to lower its attracting magnetic base towards the shape. There was a sound, like an airlock pressurising, then hooting from the industrious gourmands. Loud enough to hear through their masks.

Cantu tensed. “Do they know what they have?”

“Doubt it. They wouldn’t have gone anywhere near it if they did.” The Doctor felt the insulation of the anorak scratch against the forest undercoral where it had dried up. “I *need* that cargo, Cantu, the answer’s right *there*. I’m sure of it.”

“What’s the plan here? Roll up and ask? Unarmed?”

“And get zapped by an oversized magnet like *Frankly Foolhardy*?” The gadgeteer found the image amusing. She grasped at her armband. “I was thinking, actually, the best way for a potential meal to negotiate with her diners...” she yanked the hardware from her arm, “...is to make said diners lose their appetite.”

“How?”

“Spectacularly. I have all I need.” She smiled, strapping the goggles back over her eyes. “You, me and my wonderful brain.”

On the steps of the Adamant Locus, Traskey flipped open the latest file. A flexible, touch-sensitive computer sheet. With enough solid-state memory, allegedly, to store the Prydon Academy’s entire archive.

“*Odysseum*... A Gallifreyan Starbreaker called *Odysseum*...” Traskey’s consideration faded. Her head sank with a terrible weight as she read. Her lips fell open like a steamed envelope. The shayde was demonstrating a look it had never tried before.

Disbelief.

Ntombizodwa’s own face pinched with concern. “Why do you look like someone just shot your trippet?”

Traskey ignored her, rummaging in the depths of the message pod with purpose. Deliberate and calculated. From its transcendental heart, she pulled out a child’s toy.

Ntombizodwa could see it had a brass chassis, textured 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

It was a rocket ship.

Traskey recognised it. A cold horror, alien to her entire form, rippled over her.

The agent's hand went, reflexively, to her hip. "What is it? *Ejyva*, is that the *Odysseum*?"

"No... It's..." She explained so very carefully. "What was inside of this toy... destroyed the *Odysseum*."

The Space Security Service agent crossed to Traskey. She knelt down, examining the shayde's bleak eyes with concern.

"Was this yours?" asked Ntombizodwa.

"It was the end of me. The end of Traskeya."

The agent tapped it with a knuckle. "It's empty..."

Traskey's eyes widened. "The Doctor... The anomaly...! The energy escaped, she's in the thick of it." She replaced the rocket ship into the pod with shaking hands. "Cantu, contact the Doctor now. Before it's too late."

The *Tsunami*, to match its namesake, was fabricated in the mobile construction yard with an eye for overwhelming power.

Its designers had engineered it with an eye for a multitude of planetary terrain. The fundamental shape was arched. With a hollow midsection that ran straight through beneath its bulk. Anything to remove its footprint on the landscape. Levijets kept it aloft and a crew of three maximum kept it light.

At present it was materially empty. Virtually, it contained one occupant, Cantu.

In the blizzard, piloted by Cantu from his sync-op suspension tank, it swam like a Vanatian eel. Brain over brawn. Its glide swung with the ebb and sway of the wind. Slow, but nevertheless, forward. From the

pale to the bleed. From the white-purple snow into the red-black anomaly site.

As the *Tsunami* hit the edge of the hot zone, its chassis was smothered in exotic matter growth. Far worse than anything the snowstorm could have thrown at it. The red clung to everything like a gangrene. Cantu's only point of reference was the aftermath of a forest fire. Grey-ash. Choking smoke. The bitter threat of combustion in pulsing embers.

Only... Ash could be restorative. From ash came the possibility for new life. Fertile soil. Flora, fauna and otherwise could begin anew from vulcanised toil. There was nothing so promising as rebirth in the wastes around the vehicle.

This place was dead. Totally dead.

And death was growing.

At the landing site, Morphfang of the Moamisch Grig spared a moment from the safety of her oxybreather to run her tongue over the cutting edge of her vibroknife.

It was an old gesture. One from childhood. She'd many scars and lesions to suffer for perfection, but this truly was *perfection*. The animal was something her Third Zone brethren could only gasp at. They would share none of it. It would be the prized coup of the Moamish Grig. Something to strive for on the butcher's block for decades to come.

It was in the midst of this rakishness that the storm of rust around them exploded with light. Rattling, brattling, gatling terror. The kind that embittered the digestion and turned even the most promising salivation sour. Morphfang wouldn't admit it was fear. Fear was for the lesser animals. This was... Upset. *Affront*.

They were under attack. An ambush from the Space Security Service agents that had taken shore leave at the Dome. Little wonder. According to their precious laws, their culinary pursuits were little better than piracy.

“*Fab!*” She drew her gourmandaine’s machete. It was as tall as she was.

While the others in her Grig scattered, Morphfang knew what was to be done with affronts.

Affronts to the Moamisch Grig were to be *answered*.

The Androgums’ landing site had to be around here somewhere.

Through the *Tsunami*’s onboard cameras, Cantu could see the matter attack anything unlike itself. Draw itself down into the morass of plasma that clung to flora and fauna like a burn. It wasn’t alive, but it consumed. Like an acid. A... A temporal acid hostile to Space? He could only guess. It was the Doctor and Traskey who had the temporal science.

His lungs twisted as the atmosphere grew heavy with its soot-like haze. His heart went out to every living creature that had been trapped in this hell. From the blighted seed pods, ossified on the boughs of trees, to the burrows now packed with this same homogeneous material.

The RDV skidded across veins in the soil itself that boiled away the snow before Cantu’s eyes.

It was like molten glass. Nothing he knew could grow in molten glass.

The exotic matter was creating more of itself. From everything and anything. It was as natural and unconquerable a disaster as a forest fire, a flood or a hurricane must have seemed to the colonist’s ancestors.

Why couldn’t he find the site? Why was—?

“The storm is moving...” murmured Cantu in his tank at the Dome. “It’s closing in.”

He had to warn the Doctor.

It was then that the *Tsunami*’s instrumentation went haywire. The transmission from the Dome, all of his reliable high-frequency radio signals, were enveloped by... something else. Something neither instance of himself could identify.

The *Tsunami* continued, as it had. Only Cantu’s peripatetic self wasn’t the one in control anymore.

Something else was.

Sprinting across the landing site, arms pumping at her side, the Doctor was wracking her brain for a solution to her objective.

Shouts. Soot. Not enough time. How?

The cryosheath wasn’t too much of an issue. There was equipment back at the Dome that could thaw it out with no issue. It was the magnetic clamps that secured it to the shuttlecraft. Maybe she could reverse their polarity—

Pain exploded behind her eyes.

The blow to the side of her head sent the Doctor careening over the top of half-a-dozen travel containers into a camera stand. Her shoulder caught under one of its legs. Her back crushed its central pivot. The only thing that broke her fall were the sachets of spices from the nearest upturned container.

“More fool me...” she groaned.

As she clambered from the tangled remnants, pulverised glass and all, she felt a streak of blood weeping down from her temple. Others, scattered across the landing site, were shouting questions to the Doctor’s attacker. She caught the name, Morpfbang, but little else.

The Doctor could barely see her in the particle storm. “Good hunting?”

The figure that stepped towards her, passing her knife from hand-to-hand, resembled a leather couch. Her face was rounded into generous cushions of flesh. Her smile, something coy like a hyena’s cackle.

“You, I think, yes...” Morphfang rubbed her lack of neck. “You are one of the Dome’s primitives, *ab?* A special Vulpian appetiser.”

“You know even among your culture that’s considered a poor way to begin conversation.”

She barked like a sick dog. “It speaks.”

“Me? No, not me.” The Doctor adjusted her arm, it was digging into a pillar of coral discs behind her. “I’m a constant source of indigestion when I do. Ask anyone. Incidentally, why am I never negotiating with you lot on a full stomach?”

“What’s this, come, come... This.” Morphfang gestured to the Doctor’s armband. “It sparks and shines.”

“It’s damaged,” the Doctor bluffed.

“It lies.”

“On the ground? Certainly.”

“Or... It is your link to the Dome,” recognised Morphfang.

At the same moment of realisation, two things happened. The Doctor recalled a small trick used by the Vikings against their opponents and the Androgum slashed down her machete with the brute strength of a heavyworlder.

Movement slapped across the space.

The machete should have split the Doctor’s head open like a watermelon. However, the blade instead bit its edge into the rim of a coral disc. One tugged from the Doctor behind her.

As the gadgeteer twisted her hands, mittens holding the disc's sides, the blade followed the radius of its cut. And so did Morphfang. The heavily-boned face melted with fury. Her roaring wheeze came from deep within her throat.

The blade snapped in the Androgum's paw.

The Doctor blinked and let the disc go, using its momentum to swing herself back to her feet. Morphfang collided with the coral pillar as though it were a box of broken glass. To an Androgum, barely an encumbrance.

Morphfang moved to wrench it from the topsoil.

"Wait—!" The Doctor's warning fell on deaf ears.

The Androgum succeeded, wielding it like a cudgel, but the exotic matter came with it. The Doctor's throat clawed with time-sick bile. The rust was crawling up Morphfang's hands. But the gourmandaine didn't seem to care.

The Doctor couldn't tell if Morphfang was snarling or smiling.

"Your little army will maybe think twice, yes?" said the androgum. *"Go, go, go...! Dead, dead, dead...!"*

Cantu's voice fluctuated between guilt and embarrassment. *"Is this a bad time?"*

"Uh-huh?" The Doctor lunged backward, the serrated discs slicing through her anorak. Tufts of insulation tongued the air like party streamers. A burst of chill drove whatever further reply she may have had from her lungs.

"Traskey thinks she knows how she might have died."

The Doctor's features hardened like dwarf star alloy.

"How, Cantu...?" she asked. *"How did Traskey—?"*

More pain. The time-traveller shouted. Blood. Her hand went to the new gap at her arm. The armband clattered under Morphfang's porcine feet. There was a crunch. The answer died with the machine.

The battle, perpetuated with so much digitised smoke and mirrors, evaporated as though it had never been. The projector's stolen will, now spent. No agents, no artillery, just the Doctor. Alone. As she had always been.

Behind the last phantasmagoria of gunfire, the Doctor could see the worst of Morphfang's infection.

The gourmandine's features were pustulous with red. Where every smooth, rounded contour of the face had been there was nothing but spuming rust. She was gibbering like an acid. Her internal organs were dissolving into combustive pouches for artron. Others who went to her aid were swallowed in the mire of exotic matter.

Any other phenomenon would have let her die. This kept the last thoughts of her consciousness going. A clockwork transgression. Morphfang's mouth opened to the tortured howl of time winds. Wider... Wider... Wider than her jaw would have ever naturally allowed.

Events had accelerated out of control.

Backed against the storage crates, the Doctor held the broken tripod in front of her. A scimitar to the unfathomable. The only weapon she had left.

The *Tsunami* settled on the ridge overlooking the landing site.

The RDV wasn't intended for military engagements. It was intended for predominantly scientific endeavours that required robust transport. However, in order to maintain a steady interest in the wonders of the Universe, one had to survive.

Its engine growled. Idling. Cantu's autonomy was diminished, but not removed entirely. He deployed the mass accelerator cannon.

The external cameras zoomed in on the Doctor. Almost at the centre of the site. Something was coming towards her. A... could he call it a figure? A collection of figures? Monopedal, bipedal, tripedal...? It was far more amorphous than any shape he knew.

It was rooted to the ground akin to the rest of the exotic matter. Rusted through the fabric of the Universe. The shape swung a coral pillar over its head—

The camera zoomed.

—to drive the pillar through the Doctor's stomach.

Cantu fired the cannon.

And, fortunately, the Doctor had good eyes.

She speared the tripod into the morass of Androgum and exotic matter. A harmless distraction. The cancerous thing squirmed to follow its arc. The Doctor dove into the open crate on her left. With a '*clunk*', the lid sealed atop her. Her anorak, thick with spice powder.

The cannon's beam connected.

The landscape around the Doctor grew several metres deeper.

Several kilometres away, the original Cantu had yet to synchronise with his *Tsunami*-bound self. He was anxiously unaware.

Legends were odd things, Cantu thought, from his place in the Dome. They grew and manifested like sapient beings in their own right. Almost parasitic to the creatures they spawned and leached their half-lives from.

As of a solar year or so ago, he'd discovered there was a myth about him, of all things.

The younger colonists were perpetuating it. The very young. Young enough to still be taught by word, rather than the teaching machines that came with adolescence. These children were still piecing together Vulpia from their own Plato's cave experiences. Firelight on a dark wall.

It was interesting to see what conclusions they drew from their experiences.

A clique of them from geonics were particularly good at dizzying leaps of logic. This was a good one. They had suddenly introduced the notion of cryptids to the colony. It was odd, really, that the colonists hadn't considered the possibility before then.

Perhaps, they'd been too preoccupied with the xenoflora and fauna that was yet to be documented. Maybe they were considered cryptids themselves to Vulpia's ecosystem? Whatever the cause, the Adamant Locus had been like phosphorus to a flame.

The observatory, as the Doctor described it, implied so much about the nature of their world. Cantu had been found in the colonisation efforts made before the Dome had emerged from its mobile construction vehicle. It was logical to assume more could be discovered. However, the Adamant Locus's exact mechanics were alien to the colonists.

It baffled and bewildered them. Enough for even the smallest of children to notice.

And so, the children invented their new theories.

One of them was that Cantu's holograms were part of an echo caught in the datastream of the colony's electronics. A ghost in the Dome. Some parents indulged the idea. Others were more free with their scientifically rational explanations.

Ghosts...

Cantu could believe he was a ghost made of ghosts. What was the arcane expression? *‘Turtles all the way down?’*

His body was held in suspended animation in the sync-op chamber. Near ancient technology by Solar System standards. A synaptic link provided him with direct contact to the Vulpian way of life within and beyond the dome. He hadn’t asked for leadership, that was handled by the committee, he was simply the chatelain.

It was ironic, really. The Doctor had saved him from a mechanical half-life, only for his existence to be extended twice, thrice, four times his natural lifespan.

He wondered where the balance would be struck? In the machines? Would they fail? In his body? Would it collapse? In his mind? Would he simply go mad?

At the sound of a babbling brook, the glint of a rainbow painted a bipedal shape in the air. He’d believed for a few moments he had, indeed, gone mad.

The shape emerged at the same moment that his instance in the *Tsunami* reconnected with the Dome’s cloud server. The information poured in. Anomalous. Inexplicable. Just like the figure before him.

“We, pray, seek an audience with the humble ghost-light of the stage!” They bowed and curtsied, an arm outstretched to one side. “For We, Diamant, bring tidings of cosmic joy... or whatever takes your fancy. For your fine self, none of your half-pixelated envoys.”

Cantu activated the projector outside of his fluidic suspension tank. “The Space Security Service are on shore leave here.”

They fluttered the blueshift from their eyes. “Is that a threat?”

“No. No... An observation.”

The fractal Plurality smiled. “No one knows We’re here, do they?”

“Just me,” answered Cantu, carefully. He paused, weighing his words. “But that could change.”

Diamant strolled up to the glass, “We do not mean any harm,” and pushed their hand *through* it, to the filtered face, “as you see, Our reach is long. It would be of no challenge to Us if We did.”

Cantu felt a chill run over his face, crawling like a hymenopion with its tapering wings and stinging tail. The fractal form’s hand retreated, far faster than it had approached, out of a sense of polite propriety.

“We wish to talk.” Diamant tilted their head. “May We?”

“Alright...” His voice was still slow, measured. “What about?”

“You’ve just re-established contact with the *Tsunami*, your rapid deployment vehicle. Your instance there will inform you of the specifics when he reconnects with the cloud.” They held their arms out in insincere apology. “The Doctor is returning with her objective now.”

“Does she know about the storm?”

“She knows quite a number of things now. We suspect, when she arrives back, she will be very angry.” Diamant didn’t look pleased at that development. “We request your help in ensuring that she will consider Our thoughts. It is important that she does.”

“Why would I help you?”

“Because it’s in your nature... Because the Doctor would not have found you without Our urging... Because...” Diamant tilted their head with each suggestion. “We know what it’s like to be the reflection in the rippling sea... The glint on the glass...”

Cantu felt a sudden pang of sympathy. “To be alone?”

“To be lonely. And soon, Cantu, that nightmare will be everywhere.” Diamant’s eyes bore through the holographic Cantu to the substance behind the shadow. “Let Us fix what we have broken.”

“I don’t understand...”

Diamant flicked a hand. “The Doctor will.”

INTERMISSION: THAWING TENSIONS



By Alan Camlann

+++ HUMANIAN ERA +++ OPEN UPLINK +++
TRANSTEMP/GALLIFREY ++ TO: AMPLIFIED PANATROPIC NET +++
INSUFFICIENT RELAY STRENGTH +++ NO RECEIVER +++ RELAY TO
LOCAL STORAGE +++ TO: TYPE 40 TT CAPSULE 'OLD GIRL' +++
FROM: TYPE 40 TT CAPSULE 'OLD GIRL' +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1
+++ HIGH PRIORITY +++ AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++
COUNT AT: UNKNOWN +++ REPEAT +++ UNKNOWN +++
IMPERATIVE +++ COPY +++ RELAY +++ 'OLD GIRL' OUT

“They said, you’d understand,” Cantu recounted. The Doctor’s gaze fixed on him from behind the protective glass.

Quarantine procedures on terrestrial colonies were treated with the same regimen as fires on space stations. It was an almost martial process. The *Tsunami* was a hot zone. Unquestionably. The Doctor, however, found she had to fight against bringing her back, anywhere near the Dome.

As a compromise, they had established a bivouac tent on the edge of the weather station’s radius. Everything required to keep her isolated was brought on foot. A long process. A laborious process. But hopefully, it would prevent anyone else from dying.

Ntombizodwa unfolded her arms at the silence. “Doctor...?”

The time-traveller’s attention moved to her travelling companion.

“Traskey?” she asked.

Among the many constituent items requested in the manifest was octane booster and the components of a rocket sled. Together, Traskey was able to construct the equivalent of a thawer. She was using it like an air sander for the ice.

“Traskey?” she asked, again.

The initial process had been done in a hurry. Cryogenic suspension that freeze-dried, rather than issued an arctic lullaby. If the poor thing hadn’t been dead before the impact, the cold would have certainly stopped its hearts.

Cantu’s hologram winked out and appeared at the shayde’s shoulder. “Traskey.”

Traskey startled back sharp enough to briefly lose her consistency.

“Yes!” she answered. “Yes... *Ye—ehm—what?*”

The Doctor tapped the glass. “How much did you tell them about the Adamant Locus?”

Traskey adjusted her glasses. “As much as any Time Lord would tell a non-Gallifreyan.”

“Ah...” she chewed her lower lip, nodding. “Nothing much at all, then.”

“Correct,” nodded Traskey, returning to her work.

The Doctor gave the glass one more decisive tap and leant back. She seemed agitated. Not at her confinement, at something else.

“Doctor, we didn’t bring the Locus to Vulpia,” Cantu pointed out. “It was already here by the time the first colony was established.”

“I remember,” nodded the Doctor. “Lifetimes ago now...”

“Is the cryosheathe related to it in some way?” inquired Ntombizodwa.

“In a way... *Oooh*, this feels like another Labour.” The Doctor tried to swallow back her growing frustration. “Another pointless, alienating, *stupid* Labour!”

The kick resounded like a gunshot against the chamber wall. A spiced bootprint. The isolated gadgeteer began pacing—no, stomping, the length of her confinement. Fingernails angrily scratched through the weave of her bob.

“Sorry,” she said to no one in particular.

Cantu began, slowly, “I know—” The hologram’s voice hitched when he caught the Doctor’s eye. It was a gravedigger’s look. “I know you don’t agree with us bringing you into the Dome... But the reality of the situation is that we...” He exhaled desperation. “We can’t handle this. We wouldn’t know where to start.”

“But we are prepared to listen,” straightened Ntombizodwa. She glanced at Cantu, reassuringly. “After all you have done for Vulpia, this is the least Vulpia can do for you.”

“I...” The Doctor’s jaw worked, soundless. “I don’t deserve it.” She paced. “A lot of people died today because I wasn’t paying close enough attention.” And paced. “I should’ve guessed that there’d be residual matter from the time vents.” And paced. “The Objects trajectory was so close, I should’ve—”

“Oh, I can’t stand this...” Traskey dimmed her thawer, making eye contact with the Doctor. “Possibilities are like oxygen to a drowning woman. Precious and few. You hear me, those people are dead. You are not. Don’t waste your last precious bubbles on wishful thinking. Then you really are doomed.”

The Doctor pressed both hands against the glass and let her forehead rest against it. The breath she exhaled encompassed months of rescues and, among them, perhaps weeks of triumphs. The disparity would be enough to send anyone else into despair. Not the Doctor. Not yet.

“Alright. Fine, yeah, alright... No contaminants?” she asked.

Ntombizodwa checked the readouts on the vidscreen. “You’re clean.”

“Let’s get on with it, then.” The Doctor stepped into the airlock.

Cantu gave the electronic all clear and the gadgeteer stepped out into the bivouac.

Traskey was concentrating on the cryosheath. “We should be able to see the outer surface in just a few seconds.”

“Should’ve brought popcorn,” quipped the Doctor.

It was the first real opportunity she had to examine its contents. A brief memory of Bernice, diary in hand, fluttered a smile to her lips. Archaeology. You had an odd perspective on it as a time-traveller. A

mammoth, for instance, caught in millions of years of permafrost was child's play on a cosmic scale.

“Almost there...” assured Traskey.

Still, the Doctor couldn't hide her wonderment. The moment that they discovered the trunk, the tusks, the...

Traskey released the safety catch. The thawer stopped.

“Doctor...” The shayde stepped back with the determination of someone about to be mugged in an alleyway. It wasn't panic. Traskey didn't panic. She was alert. An owl. “Doctor, it's—”

“I know.” The Doctor could see it.

“It can't be. They're...”

“They are. All dead.” And, even dead, it retained a special sort of beauty.

It was the shell that distinguished it most from its terrestrial counterpart. More than size, where it sat as a pebble wishing to be a world. It could have, too. In life. The pink bubble on its back would have been proof of that. But, not death. No, in all the magnificent patterns of nature, there was nothing aside from the time vortex that could produce those markings.

“I don't recognise it,” muttered Cantu.

“Nor me,” Ntombizodwa admitted.

The Doctor felt a strange bile at the back of her throat. A weight that stretched itself across her shoulders like a bird of prey. A dizzying sense that the roof of the tent was too large. The sky itself could have driven her mad. The world was upside down. The myths and legends whispered in folklore were all real. The Menti Celesti, Rassilon's Mimic, Ergons and the Chained Man. All real.

Her answer moved on its own. “It's a vortex turtle.”

She had spent so long on Earth it was hard not to think of it in Tellurian terminology. There was a world of meaning in those two words. Vortex turtle. Enough that even the colonists, unaware of its wider implications, felt a shiver down their spines.

She wondered if this was what it felt like as a human to see a TARDIS?

“That was in the time cicatrix?” asked Traskey. “Splintered from Object Wright?”

“Yes,” the Doctor answered.

“It’s... it’s miscarried.” Traskey swallowed. “The bubble Universe, it’s dead.”

“Yes,” said the Doctor, again, hollow.

“Care to explain?” invited Ntombizoda.

“Once...” The Doctor began, then stopped. Frowned. *Once upon a time?*

Folklore. Or was it? Perhaps, it was a memory, clawing its way back to reason from the dark. The gadgeteer pulled her face taut like a scrunchie. It was as though someone had laid a mirror on the surface of a dark pond. A quicksilver pane. Then, smashed it with a sledgehammer until the razor shards drifted to the bottom.

The Doctor rubbed a hand on her brow. “Where to even start, eh?”

‘Once’. One, singular.

‘Upon’. Spatial or temporal? Supported by? In contact with? Following?

‘A time’. More than one? Why not *the* time or, simply, Time? Was it more complex than that? Relative dimensions?

“Singularly, supported by relative dimensions...” Yeah, that felt right. “There were a race of beings who were inconvenient to the pattern of

history. The Fourth Dimension required order, structure and a methodical rationale. They, because they grew disorder in the Universes on their very backs... They were an obstacle.” She clapped her hands together. “And like so many obstacles that our People encountered, did we learn? Did we try to comprehend? Nah... We did what we always did.”

“We destroyed them.” Traskey’s voice was flat. Bitter. “All of them. And the bubble Universes they carried.”

“Except... Turns out we didn’t.” The Doctor crouched level to the half-frozen turtle’s head. “Not this time. Some escaped. To die... Later...”

“Much later...” Traskey rested her hand on the message pod. “The Search for Exotemporal Intelligence discovered a few stragglers hiding around some of the oldest time spirals.”

The Doctor waxed philosophical, almost marvelling. “Among the mistimed chords of the Event Synthesiser... The miscalculations of the Logopolitans... The splashes of Pinacotheca’s chronology pools...”

“Not so much a rumble on the Bocca scale.”

“Or a click between the tick and the tock. Somehow they’re key to what’s going on. This... Universal Mutation.” The Doctor couldn’t draw herself away from the dead pebbles that were its eyes. “I can see the jigsaw pieces, but I don’t know what the full picture is yet.”

Among the overriding chatter of timelines, Basillius Creel discovered he was alone in the viewing chamber.

“Master?” He click-clacked on his spider legs through Diamant’s domain. “Master, are you here?”

He tongued a slaverling globule of saliva from his lip. Where were they?

In the bivouac on Vulpia, a hazy outline formed around the turtle's head.

"Can you fix it?" asked the turtle.

The Doctor's face contorted. It was an unnatural shape. Unusual to the placid bonhomie of her features. It moved across her cheekbones like a storm-front.

Her terms came with a snap. "Talk to me face-to-face or not at all."

The mock turtle faded. Dead eyes returned. A flicker of sadness passed across the Doctor's features. It felt like the dead, it seemed, were beginning to outnumber the living.

Diamant poured between the dimensions as though it were a satin curtain. "We shall speak to you plainly. There's not a lot of time."

The Doctor turned, ever so slowly, a strange dead smile on her lips.

"No," she said.

Diamant paused. "No?"

"No." She clapped her hands and waved. "Kay, thanks. Bye."

"... 'Bye'?"

The Doctor turned her back on them. "What did you expect?"

"More..."

"More?" she asked, cold.

"Far more."

The Doctor laughed. A strange, almost desperate thing. "I can't fix this, Diamant. There is cosmic calamity and then there is... *is*..." She scooped her hands into the message pod and tossed the reports into the air. "This! All of this!"

"Why are you so angry with Us?" asked Diamant. "We've tried—"

“You want to know why? Really? *Why?*” The Doctor swept towards Diamant. “I could say, it’s because of the reckless use of exotic matter to paper over the vents... I could say, it’s the damage caused by rupturing my life... But it’s not that. Bad as it all is.”

“Doctor...” began Traskey, slowly.

“No, it’s because you left her,” the Doctor stabbed her finger at Traskey, “to *die. Alone.*”

“Traskeya was best suited to the task. The *Odysseum* was already at work exploring exotemporal life,” answered Diamant, slowly. “We thought—”

“Really?” The Doctor stepped through them. “You once brought *me* to task for my *interference*. The worlds *I* ruined. My lives may be tied to the time tracks, but I still remember that quite well. And, yet... Here, we are.” She crossed back to the dead bubble on the turtle’s back. “*You* took it upon yourself to bring others into your precious little Labours.”

“We—”

“Traskeya was *murdered*. By those precious Wrarth tin soldiers on the part of some long-forgotten Capitol slight. For a... What? A rocket ship? A child’s toy and—*and—and—?*” The words choked in her throat. “You could have done something. You never destroy, it’s not in your nature, but your precious little game has spun so far out of control *that—that—!*” The Doctor warred with herself, speechless with anger. “She didn’t have to die. *Why? Why did she have to die?*”

“It wasn’t a requirement,” Diamant’s voice was rising. “We made a mistake.”

“Just the one?”

Diamant changed the subject. “We’ve pinpointed the temporal deviation point to your sixth incarnation.”

“When?”

“In a no-time. A no-place. Diamant’s Folly. You can—”

“Can’t. Barely keeping up with cosmic triage as it is.”

“You have breached such boundaries before—”

“You’re not listening, are you?” The Doctor bared her teeth. “*Can’t!* Not when the Universe, *every* Universe, is dangling from a thread of twine like a piano thirteen stories in the sky. How far are we from becoming another dead bubble? Days? Minutes? Seconds?”

“We’ve seen you, Doctor,” insisted Diamant. “We’ve seen you in a greater scope than you could comprehend. In the wider Multiverse, there are incarnations of you that change the pattern of history with glee enough to make your brainstem curl.”

“And now, we’re paying for it, all of us!” There was frost in the gadgeeter’s eyes. “You want a snap of the fingers. *Tra-la-la*, and all is well, *b’mm?* Wake up! It’s not a game anymore.”

“You—”

“*I—can’t—fix—this—Diamant.* Not with the Time Lords, not with the Guardians—*no one.*”

Diamant looked panicked. “We don’t believe that.”

“Believe as you like. The best I can do is a... maybe a lifeboat.” Her voice quietened. She ran her hands through her hair, spinning around, pacing. “One last desperate City of Refuge against the Universal Mutation. Maybe even here on Vulpia...” She spun back around. “But the damage has been done. There are too many pressures. Whatever you did with my sixth incarnation only opened the door for something bigger! Now everything’s too far gone. The Universe is falling apart around us. And once our Universe is finished, it’ll go on to the next and the next!”

“We are sorry,” they said, quietly.

“You’re sorry?” The Doctor’s mouth hung open, jawing for ideas. “I say this with more than a dozen lifetimes of experience... *There—is—nothing—I—can—do—*”

Diamant didn’t wait to let her finish. Before the sentence had concluded, the fractal geometry had melted away like snow in the summer sun.

“*—to—help—you!*” The Doctor’s words took on one last explosive vent. “*Why couldn’t you wait?*”

Her hair came out in strands between her fingertips. The last vestiges of rage and frustration unravelled from her scalp. She sat in silence. Seething.

For a moment. A few moments. A minute or so.

The other three looked at one another.

Traskey, cautious as a turtle, stepped up to the Doctor. “Is it really true?”

“The damage is irreparable,” the gadgeteer answered, flatly. “There’s only one thing we can do left.”

“What?”

The Doctor glanced at her. An empathy in her features that could only be gained by lifetimes of life and death. The many striations of lives lived, survived, fulfilled, wasted and gone. It was like looking into a diamond for the telltale flaw.

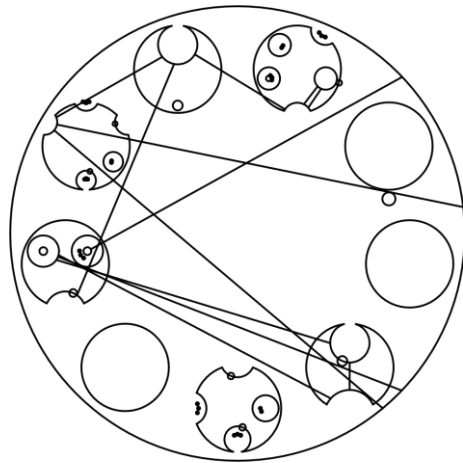
Lined and tired as it was, Traskey couldn’t see one.

The Doctor gave the only answer that made sense to her.

“Go to the edge of reason. The fringes of the Gallifreyan noosphere. The brink of Creation.” She rubbed her eyes. “And stare whatever’s coming to kill us all, right in the face.”



+++ UPDATE +++ RE: SETI PROJECT A1 +++ HIGH PRIORITY +++
AUTOMATED COUNT OF LIFE-FORMS +++ SET COUNT AT: 000 +++
REPEAT +++ 000 +++ COPY +++ RELAY +++ 'OLD GIRL' OUT



TO BE CONTINUED in...
A Sparkle of Doctors: Volume 3



DIVERGENT WORDSMITHS

A SPARKLE OF DOCTORS: VOLUME 2